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FILMING THE EBB TIDE

NEAR THE START of Robert Kramer and John Douglas's *Milestones* (1975), a panoramic docufiction that charts the unravelling aspirations of the New Left from Vermont to Utah, Ho Chi Minh's poem 'The Milestone' appears in full as text on screen:

Neither high up nor far away,
On neither emperor's nor king's throne,
You're only a little slab of stone
Standing on the edge of the highway.
People ask you for guidance;
You stop them from going astray,
And tell them the distance
O'er which they must journey.
The service you render is no small one;
People will remember what you've done.¹

The road, the distance, the journey, the memory, all evoked within a gesture of Third Worldist solidarity—immediately, the contours of Kramer's universe come into view. *Milestones*, with its sprawling portrait of a radical milieu in retreat, was the last film that the director made as a resident of the United States. From there, it would be Portugal, Angola, France, Germany, Vietnam; bigger and smaller budgets, video and television and commissioned works; the attempt to respond to the emergence of an era of no alternative, image glut, endless war. It was by listening intently to the 'rumble of the world'—to borrow the title of Serge Daney's review of *Route One/USA* (1989), perhaps Kramer's greatest film—that the director would make more than thirty films that take little heed of the documentary/fiction divide, some as short as four minutes and others over four hours long. Across them, no consistent stylistic signature emerges, yet they are united by something more

fundamental: the encounter, cruel and beautiful, between subjectivity and history. As Kramer suggested, ‘all the movies put together make one movie of a life’.²

Another milestone, this one a gravestone: Robert Kramer has now been dead for a quarter century, his life cut short by meningitis at the age of sixty in 1999. Although there has been little commemorative fanfare of the sort beloved by cinémathèques—how often institutions rush to justify programming choices with anniversaries—the year has been a significant one in the filmmaker’s posthumous reception. In March, Parisian festival Cinéma du réel hosted the premiere of *Looking for Robert* (2024), an essayistic tribute by Kramer’s longtime collaborator Richard Copans. Addressing his departed friend in voiceover in the informal second-person, Copans pays homage to a life’s work through its material remains: film rushes, videotapes, Polaroids, musical scores, maps, photographic slides and printed-out emails provide a mixed-media archaeology of his singular path. This year also saw the French DVD label Re:Voir release two further volumes in its ongoing effort to make Kramer’s filmography officially available to home viewers, and in October and November, the Viennale and the Austrian Film Museum partnered in a retrospective timed to coincide with the release of *Starting Places: A Conversation with Robert Kramer* by Bernard Eisenschitz.

All these initiatives share a crucial feature: none of them stems from the Anglophone world. There is likely no other American filmmaker whose domestic status is so diminished relative to the scale of their reputation abroad. The publication history of the interview that comprises the bulk of *Starting Places* is instructive in this regard. Conducted in English over three days in summer 1997 on the occasion of a retrospective at the Torino Film Festival, it was published in Italian (1997), French (2001), Portuguese (2000) and Spanish (2017), but is only now appearing in its original language—and under the editorship of a German film scholar, Volker Pantenburg, working with an Austrian imprint. Nor is this the only instance of Kramer’s English texts being published in translation

¹ There are very slight deviations in the text presented in *Milestones* from the text that appears in Ho Chi Minh, *Prison Diary*, fifth edition, Hanoi 1972. The published version is quoted here.

² Bernard Eisenschitz, *Starting Places: A Conversation with Robert Kramer*, ed., Volker Pantenburg, Vienna 2024, p. 21. Hereafter SP.

first. In 2019, the same year as a retrospective at the Cinémathèque française, an indispensable anthology of the filmmaker's writings edited by Cyril Béghin appeared as *Notes de la forteresse (1967–1999)*. Three major essays from that book—'Notes from Inside the Fortress' (1989), 'Going (Back) to Vietnam' (1991), and 'Snap Shots' (1997)—appear in *Starting Places* alongside a useful bibliography and annotated filmography, but most of the texts Béghin assembled remain unpublished in the language in which they were written. 'Facing this imbalance in Kramer's reception', Pantenburg ventures, 'it would not be wrong to say that he remains to be discovered in his native country'.³

Militant beginnings

A voluntary exile who identified as a 'mid-Atlantic cinéaste', Kramer was born in New York in 1939. His doctor father and housewife mother were first-generation American Jews; each had spent time in Berlin—he as a medical student, she at the Bauhaus. While an undergraduate at Swarthmore College, Kramer harboured literary ambitions, writing criticism and fiction for student publications as well as plays. After graduating, he received a scholarship to study history at Stanford but dropped out to devote himself to literature. A 1965 trip to Latin America with a press card from *The New Republic* proved transformative. Returning to the US upon the death of his father, he became involved with Students for a Democratic Society and began working as a community organizer in New Jersey. 'As soon as I got to Newark I felt like I was back in Latin America again', he told Eisenschitz, 'This was a situation I knew very well. I understood the police as an occupying force. I understood the boundaries of this ghetto as the frontiers of a colony.'⁴ It was this work that led to his first, somewhat accidental foray into cinema, an appearance in Norman Fruchter and Robert Machover's *Troublemakers* (1966), a documentary charting three months in the life of the Newark Community Union Project. From there, he collaborated with them on his first film *FALN* (1965), a 30-minute work of agitprop made in solidarity with Venezuela's Fuerzas Armadas de Liberación Nacional. A voiceover written by Kramer accompanies an edit of footage supplied by the guerrillas, framing these images of struggle in relation to US

³ SP p. 6.

⁴ SP, p. 41.

intervention and investment. Already, Kramer recognized that here and elsewhere could not be separated.

Unlike many filmmakers of his generation, Kramer was no cinephile. In this period of his life, filmmaking was an embedded part of political action. Yet rather than producing blunt, ideological communiqués, he swiftly began to work in more creative and reflexive ways. In *Starting Places*, Eisenschitz notes that already with his debut feature *In the Country* (1966), Kramer is a filmmaker of ‘the ebb tide’, attending less to the rush of revolutionary sentiment than to disintegration and demobilization, whether real or feared.⁵ The first words uttered in the film are a voiceover, matched to images of a city street taken from a moving car: ‘He looked at how little he’d been able to do so far. Tried to make contact with other groups. What have I tried? Nothing.’ Shot largely at Kramer’s family house, up for sale after his father’s death and his mother’s subsequent move to Israel, *In the Country* is a claustrophobic two-hander that follows a couple as they seek to negotiate the relationship between political activism and personal life. Informed by Kramer’s experience as a community organizer, it looks forward to concerns central to *The Edge* (1967) and *Ice* (1969). This unofficial trilogy of black-and-white films, shot by Machover in a manner indebted to documentary, depicts milieus where violent action against the government is under consideration, yet which are beset by paranoia and internal dispute. Utopian visions of insurrection, these are not. Elizabeth Hardwick described *Ice*, set in a near-future in which the US is at war with Mexico, as being ‘as cold as its title, a glassy radical vision, austere, masochistic, longing for the “inevitable”’; a film that depicts activism as ‘not a replacement of deadening alienation but simply an addition to it’.⁶

If there is ebullient hope in Kramer’s 1960s activity, it is in his involvement in the counter-information collective Newsreel, for which he worked principally in ‘building the organization and worrying about starting other Newsreels’.⁷ *Starting Places* carries a reproduction of the two-page ‘Initial Statement of THE NEWSREEL’ which echoed the calls for ‘imperfect cinema’ emanating from Latin America, proposing an aesthetic of expedience and vowing to invent non-commercial

⁵ SP, p. 42.

⁶ Elizabeth Hardwick, ‘Militant Nudes’, in Darryl Pinckney, ed., *The Collected Essays of Elizabeth Hardwick*, New York 2017, p. 209.

⁷ SP, p. 30.



Still from *Ice* (1969), © Keja Ho Kramer, courtesy of Re:Voir Video.

distribution circuits that would allow their films to circulate as widely as possible.⁸ They produced scrappy, electrifying shorts that documented the activities of the New Left: student uprisings against the war in Vietnam (*Columbia Revolt*, 1968), feminist protests (*Up Against the Wall, Miss America*, 1968), and the Black Power movement (*Black Panther*, also known as *Off the Pig*, 1968). Together with John Douglas and Norman Fruchter, Kramer made *People's War* (1969), shot in North Vietnam at the invitation of the Hanoi government. Whereas in *FALN*, Kramer's narration, spoken from the perspective of an American, had dominated, the bulk of the voiceover of *People's War* comprises first-person testimonies from Vietnamese, translated into English and read by Americans. The images betray no trace of the visiting filmmakers' presence. Some of the footage was second-hand, as the images of *FALN* had been, in this case supplied by the North Vietnamese and the National Liberation Front of

⁸ The 'Initial Statement' was given by Kramer to Eisenschitz in 1967 at the Mostra Internazionale del Nuovo Cinema in Pesaro, a festival that was an important meeting place for advocates of radical cinema, and where *In the Country* was showing.

South Vietnam; and yet if none of the film had been shot by Douglas, Fruchter and Kramer, one would scarcely know the difference. Despite being the result of on-the-ground experience, the film admits no reflection on the process or position of the directors—something that would later become an indelible feature of Kramer’s cinema.

As Kramer puts it, the ‘Initial Statement’ ‘defined Newsreel in terms of trying to define another reality—in other words, that the media is defining the world.’ The question of how to intervene in a reality constituted through images would remain with him for decades. In ‘Notes from Inside the Fortress’, a 1989 text that attempts to peer through the pervasive fear and ‘polluted fog’ of the preceding decade, he asks:

How do you work with images, the manipulation of images, at a time when the image itself has become the principal vehicle of confusion? To the degree, in fact, where you might be tempted to say that we no longer have the world around us, only impoverished, categorized, limiting images of that world.⁹

Kramer spent his career attempting to fight against this from within the implicated domain of cinema—but despite his many collaborations, he would do this largely as a sole author. It was around the completion of *People’s War* that Kramer broke with Newsreel, which had refused to distribute *Ice*. ‘I suppose I don’t really feel comfortable with collective filmmaking, I never did’, he tells Eisenschitz.¹⁰ Following this, he ‘just completely dissolved into different kinds of political activity until 1974/75, until *Milestones*’. The 195-minute film was both a reemergence and the beginning of a protracted farewell. It presents dozens of interconnected people, friends of the filmmakers playing versions of themselves in a fiction so fragile it is often easy to mistake it for reality, as they try to figure out how to live on when emancipatory horizons are shrinking. Kramer and Douglas also envisioned it as a response to the bloody origins of the United States, a country founded upon indigenous genocide, the destruction of the land, and the trade of enslaved people—in their rendering this past is not past, but inflects the present of the nation and its inhabitants in large ways and small.¹¹ Presented in the Quinzaine des

⁹ SP, pp. 29, 35.

¹⁰ SP, p. 30.

¹¹ John Douglas and Robert Kramer, ‘Milestones’, in Cyril Béghin, ed., *Notes de la forteresse (1967–1999)*, Paris 2019, p. 73.

cinéastes at Cannes—a far cry from Newsreel’s no-festival policy—and praised in a lengthy *Cahiers du cinéma* round table, the film took Kramer once more to Europe.

There he made *Scenes from the Class Struggle in Portugal* (1977, co-directed with Philip Spinelli), an anti-fascist, anti-colonial film shot in the immediate aftermath of the Carnation Revolution. The film ultimately proved dissatisfying to Kramer. Although it was bookended by sequences in which the filmmakers reflect on their position as foreigners, he felt it suffered from a confused address—was it for Americans or for the Portuguese?—and from its adoption of a rhetorical form that eliminated what he saw as some of the best footage (of drunk Communists, for example) for the sake of maintaining an ideological line. It is a film of rapidly delivered information more than it is one of bodies, places and affects. Kramer’s disappointment was likely compounded by the political arc the filmmakers witnessed: he and Spinelli went to Portugal, in the words of Whitney Strub, to ‘record the extension of the 60s liberation dream and instead returned with a chilling view of the emerging neoliberal world order that only intensified throughout the financial neocolonialism of the 1980s’.¹² Escaping to Portugal turned out to be no escape from the creeping disillusionment at home. *Scenes from the Class Struggle in Portugal* would mark Kramer’s definitive break with militant forms; thereafter, he would seek a different voice and a different relationship to the material, one that was looser and more poetic.

European exile

Kramer’s decision to relocate with his family to France in 1979 inaugurated a new period in his life and work. It was a time of intense creative activity which brought several decisive shifts in his practice. The first of these comes with the production of a pair of French-language films, *Guns* (1980) and *Diesel* (1985), which brought Kramer first into and then largely out of an industrial mode of production within which he could no longer ‘make movies with the same confidence in my whims or my instincts’, since he was ‘no longer in the same relationship to a mass of people who are articulating a body of ideas’.¹³ A sense of loneliness becomes a palpable feature of the director’s work. *Guns* is an anti-thriller

¹² Whitney Strub, ‘Scenes from the Class Struggle in Portugal’, *Screen Slate*, November 2024.

¹³ SP, pp. 57, 59, 56.

about journalism and arms dealing that verges on incoherence. A film of 'geometric iciness' with a steely palette and ample imagery of shipping containers, it is characterized by grey situations in which it is impossible to tell the just from the unjust. As Kramer describes it, 'there is no way to penetrate that big world anymore. It's completely opaque and it's lifeless. . . The intrigue goes nowhere. The actual *enjeu* is never clear.' His assessment might be read as a list of shortcomings; yet *Guns* also responds to a changing global system, to a new time of uncertainty and opacity, inventing, as Kramer so often did, a form appropriate to the subject.

If *Guns* is an underappreciated art-house work awaiting reassessment, *Diesel* presents a more clear-cut case of bloat and failure—a cautionary tale of what happens when an independent filmmaker is caught in the net of commercial production. Three years after *Blade Runner* (1982) and the same year as *Mad Max Beyond Thunderdome* (1985, the third in the series to appear since 1979), Kramer came as close to mainstream trends as he ever would, wading fully into the waters of genre with a dystopian science fiction. The world presaged in *Guns* here reaches its poisonous telos: it depicts a sunless, subterranean existence on an uninhabitable planet, lurid in its cartoonish cruelty and cheap sexiness. Kramer does not shirk from admitting the scale of this disaster. It tanked at the French box office; in a long essay about the experience, included in *Notes de la forteresse*, he concludes that, 'A success would have been much worse'.¹⁴ This is true, because it would have meant that his subsequent work would likely have taken the same industrial path, rather than that of the film whose production overlapped with it, *Notre Nazi* (1984).

This unclassifiable work is an exercise in cinematic parasitism, made on the set of *Wundkanal* (1984), a film directed by Thomas Harlan, whose father Veit Harlan had been charged with crimes against humanity for directing one of Nazi Germany's most infamous films, *Jud Süß* (1940). *Wundkanal* features Alfred Filbert, a former SS officer sentenced to life in prison for the murder of more than ten thousand Jews (he was released in 1977 for health reasons). Filbert plays a version of himself in a fictional scenario in which he is interrogated about his (real) past after being kidnapped by members of the Rote Armee Fraktion. Harlan is oedipally cruel to the old *genocidaire*, who later called the shoot

¹⁴ Robert Kramer, 'Les années de la taupe: Compte rendu personnel de la fabrication d'un film mineur', *Notes de la forteresse*, p. 193.

the greatest moment of his life. Kramer uses a handheld video camera to film Harlan filming this perverse scenario, heightening the angst through a score by Barre Phillips, an American jazz musician living in France whose compositions lend so many of the director's post-1980 films their emotional tenor. Kramer conducts interviews with crew members, offers commentary and refilms off monitors. He smothers himself in a plastic bag.

It was Kramer's first video work as well as his 'first real experience of living the situation through the camera', at a vast distance from the scale and budget and artifice of *Diesel*.¹⁵ He tells Eisenschitz that he likes *Notre Nazi* because of the contradictory, labile nature of the situation it portrays. Something 'more straightforward would have bored him: 'If I master it, it's too dumb', he explains. There was little risk of that in the mire of Harlan's set, where 'there were nervous breakdowns. There were crises about morals.' As he elaborates elsewhere: 'This film is certainly a document of his [Filbert's] participation in the Nazi nightmare. But more than that, it is a kind of testament to the weight and density of European history, to the cycles of recrimination and vengeance, to the tangible continuity of "historical guilt".'¹⁶ It is a film without certainties, without a stable message, one of immense risk. A queasy fascination besets Kramer and, in turn, his viewer.

Ruined kingdoms

Notre Nazi marks a further turning point in the director's oeuvre in several respects. In the years that followed, he would return repeatedly to the mode of the first-person essayistic video, as in *Berlin 10/90* (1990), a single 60-minute take commissioned for French television in which he confronts the *Wende*, the advent of a post-Cold War world, and ponders why his father never spoke about his time as a medical student at Berlin's Charité hospital in the early 1930s. The weight and density of European history are there once more, still without answers. Even when not adopting a strictly first-person mode, the notion of 'living the situation through the camera' remains a priority. The shift of medium also led Kramer to do the filming himself and offered an increased agility, not just during the shoot but in the edit; VHS freed him from the need to complete

¹⁵ SP, pp. 96, 75, 67.

¹⁶ Robert Kramer, 'Dr. S.', *Notes de la forteresse*, p. 155; translation mine.

the montage of a film under professional constraints, enabling him to experiment with multiple cuts and to work at his own pace. He explains to Eisenschitz how crucial it was to preserve this liberty in *Doc's Kingdom* (1987) and *Route One/USA* by shooting on film, editing on video, and then printing on film when the cut was finalized.

With *Doc's Kingdom*, Kramer returned to the English language; he also returned to Portugal and to the character of Doc from *Ice*, played once more by Kramer's old friend Paul McIsaac. 'Being back in English again', Kramer said, 'it was like one of those experiences where you train for long-distance running with lead in your shoes and you take the lead out and you feel like you're flying'. Paulo Branco, the legendary Portuguese producer with whom Kramer had worked while collaborating on the screenplay for Wim Wenders's *The State of Things* (*Der Stand der Dinge*, 1981), came 'down out of the sky sent from Central Casting as an angel' and made the film possible.¹⁷ McIsaac plays a former militant who has spent time in prison and in Africa before arriving in Lisbon, where he works as a doctor, nursing his alcoholism in a shack near the port. A son he has never known, played by Vincent Gallo, arrives in search of his father. It is a film of locations that opens onto questions of generational responsibility, ageing and care—soaked in a melancholic weariness that is, through the figure of McIsaac, forever contrasted with the youthful militancy of *Ice*, made nearly twenty years before. Its empty, run-down spaces are exemplary of Kramer's post-1979 films, in which landscapes are more likely to be industrial or post-industrial than residential. Kramer's is not a cinema in which the notion of home figures much; Doc's is a ruined kind of kingdom. Like a less programmatic version of the 'landscape theory' advanced in the late 1960s by Japanese filmmakers such as Masao Asachi, Kramer's images offer so many glimpses of how power is inscribed in the built environment.

Then comes *Route One/USA*, Kramer's American odyssey, his journey back to a home that is not a home. Shot over five months and more than 3,800 kilometres of road, from Maine to Florida, it places the fictional character of Doc in real situations, coming and going in relation to the presence of Kramer behind the camera. In *Milestones*, Kramer and Douglas travelled across the country but 'never talked to anybody

¹⁷ SP, pp. 109, 71.



Still from *Route One/USA* (1989), © Keja Ho Kramer, courtesy of Re:Voir Video.

who is not one of us'; now, in this atlas of late-Reaganite America, 'it's exactly the opposite, it's like, we are there only to talk and listen and learn'.¹⁸ An abortion clinic, a soup kitchen, monuments to histories that Kramer never stopped contesting, churches, the plague of HIV/AIDS, Pat Robertson, a Black marine disabled by exposure to Agent Orange: the disunity of the United States unfurls across 255 minutes. 'We're living a trip', Kramer says, 'and the form of the film is the form that we can make out of our voyage, including fatigue, including chance'. He would ask people what they wanted to talk about or what they wanted him to film. 'This is not out of some idea of giving back the right to represent their lives in image or giving back the right of speech to the speechless', he said, in seeming acknowledgement of the problems of such documentary clichés, 'but because, it seems to me, that's how you start with people: "Tell me what you want to tell me."' He saw the dangers, too, of drowning in his own subjectivity, something he calls the 'Jonas Mekas syndrome'. Through the character of the doctor and a commitment to the observation of reality, *Route One/USA* manages to be both intimate and expansive, lacking any trace of the narcissism and relativism that would seep into some postmodern documentary practice. Kramer would reflect on the experience and his friendship with McIsaac in *Dear Doc* (1990), a short video essay in which he revisits his return to

¹⁸ SP, pp. 93, 102, 107.

the United States, exploiting a commission for French television station Arte to make what is perhaps his most straightforwardly autobiographical and touching work.

Starting Place (*Point de départ*, 1993), the film from which Eisenschitz and Pantenburg's book takes its name, was another return. Kramer went back to Vietnam to conduct a filmmaking workshop and to take stock of the distance travelled, by himself and the country, since the making of *People's War*. He was 'determined not to be guided by the way in which world history was revised in the 1980s', something that Eisenschitz suggests might have fuelled the chilly response the film received: 'The reactions at the time were pretty negative . . . possibly because of the lack of political correctness in regard to what Vietnam stood for'.¹⁹ The complexity of this question, the mutability of what Vietnam was—for different people, at different times—is precisely what Kramer seeks to confront. In 'Going (Back) to Vietnam', an essay written in the TV glare of the Gulf War before *Starting Place* was made, Kramer asks, 'Acts done, ideas thought. Things we believed in. And how does it seem now?' He knew that the end of the Cold War marked an epochal shift, not only geopolitically. *Ghosts of Electricity* (1997), a short commissioned by the Locarno Film Festival as a reflection on the future of cinema, is an elegiac tribute to earthly beauty—to Kramer's wife Erika and their daughter Keja, to rustling leaves and rippling water, and to film itself. Set against them are lifeless images of war, sports, pollution and pornography, all refilmed off a television. When Kramer appears onscreen, removing his sunglasses to reveal two eyes bruised black, he tells of a future of cyborgian evolution and uploaded consciousness. 'We will be everywhere at once', he says in voiceover, 'This body—this fallible, frail, flimsy and dying thing . . . this meat won't be necessary'. A new regime of the image, a new, derealized world—one that he knew was coming but which he would not live to see.

Open endings

The interview with Eisenschitz is an essential resource, offering a career overview sketched by Kramer himself in bold, broad strokes and coloured with compelling anecdotal detail. Eisenschitz, well known for his studies of Hollywood, German and Soviet cinemas, had been acquainted with Kramer for more than three decades when the interview took place,

¹⁹ SP, pp. 121, 124, 154.

having both written about the director's work as a critic and subtitled his films.²⁰ 'We've gone the whole road together, from the start to here, wherever that is!' Kramer wrote to him in 1998.²¹ As such, the exchange is marked by candour and mutual understanding; it is devoid of flattery, clean of the puffed-up promotional language that now so often infiltrates filmmaker interviews. Eisenschitz intervenes only occasionally, but when he does so is unafraid of stinging honesty. 'I told you how embarrassed I am with *Guns*', he says, 'I'm ill at ease with the bodies of those people. The bodies don't fit.' Elsewhere: 'I had a strong feeling of rejection on seeing *Notre Nazi* yesterday'. In a preface written for the 2001 French edition, Eisenschitz explains the dynamic of their dialogue: "Trust or, to put it better, speed, came from the fact that we had a common political language that always remained with us, even if we had travelled different paths. And that we were talking about cinema.' Cinema, yes, but not only. *Starting Places* shows how filmmaking was, for Kramer, a relation to the world. Making a movie was a 'battle to try to figure out, "Where can I wander the most?"'"

He would do so across landscapes both internal and external, as well as across cinematic forms. In the spaces between here and elsewhere, fiction and documentary, Kramer embraced risk and *dépaysement*, producing a singular body of work of striking heterogeneity. How to square the beguiling naturalism of the wandering characters of *Walk the Walk* (1995) with the decision to cast three actors of very different appearance in the same role in the posthumously released *Cities of the Plain* (*Cités de la plaine*, 1999–2000)? 'The one thing that I think is consistent with all the movies is that none of them close at the end', he said, 'All of them open at the end. It's an attitude towards life.'²² When, in the preface to *Starting Places*, Pantenburg asks Eisenschitz how he would describe the specificity of Kramer's films, the latter responds by quoting Daney: he 'invents cinema with every shot'.²³ Restless change and

²⁰ For an account of Eisenschitz's activities, including his affiliation with the PCF and expulsion from the editorial committee of *Cahiers du cinéma*, see 'Bernard Eisenschitz: Cinema, Communism and History' in Daniel Fairfax, *The Red Years of Cahiers du cinéma (1968–1973)*, Volume I, Amsterdam 2021, pp. 359–83. Fairfax's book was reviewed in a previous issue: Michael Cramer 'Wind from the East', NLR 138, Nov–Dec 2022.

²¹ SP, p. 19.

²² SP, p. 72.

²³ The reader will search Daney's texts on Kramer in vain for the source of this remark; it was made in conversation with Eisenschitz. SP, p. 11.

creative responsiveness win out over fidelity to convention or the branding of auteurism. One might say that *Ice* prefigures a film like Lizzie Borden's *Born in Flames* (1983), that *Guns* is a 'second first film' in the manner of Jean-Luc Godard's *Sauve qui peut (la vie)* (also made in 1980), or that his predilection for the video essay form and experimental science fiction in *Ghosts of Electricity* brings him close to Chris Marker. But what would that accomplish?

Though his name is too rarely uttered alongside such figures in the pantheon of political modernists—particularly in the Anglophone world—the landscape of contemporary experimental documentary is replete with tendencies that testify to Kramer's enduring importance. First-person expression, essayism and docufictional hybridity are among the prevailing forms of practice today, in a moment when a reflexive documentary impulse has asserted itself as the most vital of the cinematic avant-gardes.²⁴ It is not for nothing that an annual seminar of screenings and discussions taking place in Portugal since 2000 is called Doc's Kingdom. Yet in one crucial respect Kramer is out of step with present custom. From his first film, *FALN*, he was committed to traversing cultures and distances—something that happens much less these days, in part because of anxieties concerning who has the 'right' to tell what story and a misguided faith in the notion that belonging to a group is a guarantee of representing that group in an ethical way, a failsafe against aesthetic 'extractivism'. Kramer's position was that there were stories and events happening far away but in which he was implicated, and which were thus worth trying to approach—carefully, humbly, undogmatically—through the production of images. For him, 'the bonds that hold have more to do with shared experience, with shared ideas and desires and ways of working, than with Blood or Nation.'²⁵

He made films in many contexts and had plans, in greater and lesser states of advancement, to make them in many more. One in particular bears mentioning. 'I have to deal with Israel', he says in *Berlin 10/90*. His mother had lived there, and he had visited the country multiple times. In 'Snap Shots', an autobiographical essay of sorts, he tells of his visit

²⁴ On this contemporary landscape see, *inter alia*, Scott MacDonald 'Avant-Doc: Eight Intersections', *Film Quarterly*, vol. 64, no. 2, Winter 2010, Nora Alter, *The Essay Film After Fact and Fiction*, New York 2018, and T. J. Demos, *The Migrant Image: The Art and Politics of Documentary during Global Crisis*, Durham NC 2013.

²⁵ SP, p. 168.

there in 1967, soon after the Six-Day War. 'I had visited Jerusalem under protection of the guns of the new occupiers. I had my doubts. As soon as you start to question policy, someone sticks out their arm with the tattoo of numbers. The arm trembles there in the white desert light, time stands still, the numbers mark a final authority of suffering.' In the conversation with Eisenschitz, the same episode appears again in a slightly different telling, with a query appended: 'How far does the authority of suffering go?' This is the question today, in relation to a genocide that must be named as such. 'Things to say about Israel? Yeah. It's there, maybe I'll get around to it, maybe I won't.'²⁶ He didn't. But in the films and writings he leaves behind, to return to Ho Chi Minh, the service he has rendered is no small one. Will people remember what he's done?

²⁶ SP, pp. 163, 127.