

## Robert Kramer: *Ice*

What is a revolutionary movement and how does it develop? How is it assembled and distributed? Three weeks into the new movement for social justice sweeping the U.S.A. and moving across the world, these questions are becoming more urgent. The movie *Ice* (1970), by the American film director Robert Kramer (1939-99), based on the insurgent politics of the late 1960s, offers a fascinating fictional case of movement growth and dispersion.

The National Committee of Independent Revolutionary Organizations, an underground decentralized guerilla movement allied with the Black People's Army and the Mexican Revolutionary Front, works to convince white urbans that they can and must free themselves from the oppressive state, and that armed struggle is their only means of liberation. So long as the ruling class propagates its ideology and sustains its empire, people do not comprehend their un-freedom and their actual role in society, and instead rationalize their exploitation and oppression on the basis of false consciousness. The revolutionary task is to transform this consciousness into true understanding and emancipatory action. For example, throughout the movie, the guerillas make and screen propaganda films.

The Committee condemns terrorist activity aimed at increased repression. All insurrectional activity must be seen as political tool for the transformation of people's consciousness. It is time to launch such activity on all domestic fronts, leading to a popular uprising. "Power to the people." "All evolves through struggle." It is time to take up arms against the state, destroy imperialism, end exploitation, negate the present in all its forms, take collective control of resources, and create new human relations. Power, freedom, and imagination belong to everybody. Revolution is coming. There are no models or maps. Revolutionaries make the future together.

In anticipation of a Spring national offensive in six months and the formation of a provisional government in exile, the militants are about to launch a regional offensive of coordinated individual groups. By taking over a "precinct building," a kind of housing project, they expect to reach a new level of organization and action. This first step towards

seizing power will make their presence felt, expand their community basis, and keep building a national movement. As they prepare, they discuss whether they are ready and whether this local initiative may alienate other groups. For example, both the Black People's Army and the Spanish group can commit only certain gangs and will choose their own targets and actions. In the end, the regional offensive fails on every level, with the targeted whites unwilling to understand, let alone join, and the militants still thinking, despite their loss of lives, that they are attracting growing numbers of supporters.

The movie *Ice* is a powerful study of collective revolutionary formation. The members of the Committee are militants who conceptualize politics as war and are engaged in armed struggle to destroy the state and build a new world. They envision a radical beginning and talk about new communities but they do not discuss the coming society. They focus on the deployment of constituting power. They are deeply involved in the self-constitution of their movement, debating who belongs to it and in which terms, how the collective operates and with whom it cooperates. Indirectly they are also involved in self-authorization, debating what legitimizes their positions and decisions, especially the violent ones. As they prepare and launch their local offensive, they mobilize their practices of freedom among themselves and with the rest of society -- an on-going negotiation of space, time, norm, value, and identity. The movie traces the antinomies of founding autonomy, the compromises that freedom makes with necessity, as matters of agency, strategy, and synergy claim principles and affects.

The story of the occupying plan and its failed execution is told cinematically in a constructivist fashion that uses many angles simultaneously and challenges viewers to piece together several plot lines. The formation of the revolutionary collective is rhizomatic, not organic, which undermines the teleology of their plan. In vain do they argue that their work is validated by historical necessity. Nevertheless, the orientation of the movement is passionately messianic, with the militants expecting, even in the midst of defeat, the coming of the revolution.

The task of militants is also the subject of a trilogy of one-act "learning plays" which explore the work of movements to spread their message and ignite local insurgencies. Brecht's [\*The Measures Taken\*](#) (1930), Müller's [\*The Mission\*](#) (1979), and Negri's [\*Swarm\*](#) (2004) seek to teach movements how to constitute, legitimize, and police themselves so

that they may grow and prevail. With its intense theatricality, Kramer's *Ice* too may be considered a filmic "learning play" whose participants seek to learn how to be militant members of a revolutionary movement. All these works experiment artistically and politically by dramatizing revolution as a historical tragedy. They offer valuable lessons to the growing movement of Spring 2020.