

7. Form, Punch, Caress: Johan van der Keuken's Global Amsterdam

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After many years of travelling the world with his camera, in the early 1990s documentary filmmaker Johan van der Keuken expressed his surprise at the many changes that had taken place in his hometown of Amsterdam: 'To tell the truth, I didn't recognize all the cultures that had settled there in the past few decades, nor the subcultures and "gangs" that had sprung up'. At the same time, he realized that 'my city, Amsterdam, was the place where everything that I could see everywhere else was represented', and that in order to understand the world, all he needed to do was direct his camera to his own neighbourhood (van der Keuken, qtd. in Albera 2006, 16). This is when he decided to make *Amsterdam Global Village*, a four-hour documentary filmed in Amsterdam in the mid-1990s. He made it in his characteristic fashion, travelling through the city with his camera, visiting some of its inhabitants in their homes, listening to their stories, and sometimes following them to places elsewhere in the world – but always to return.

Johan van der Keuken captured Amsterdam with his camera from the very start of his career, following his studies at the Institut des Hautes Études Cinématographiques (IDHEC) in Paris in the late 1950s. As he regularly applied his camera to Amsterdam through several decades, his work forms a rich – and very personal – archive of historical impressions of an ever-changing city. Looking at some key films situated in Amsterdam, such as *Beppie* (1965), *Four Walls* (1965), *Iconoclasm – A Storm of Images* (1982), and *Amsterdam Global Village* (1996), this essay presents a double portrait of the Amsterdam corpus within van der Keuken's oeuvre. On the one hand, it charts the development of van der Keuken's different camera eyes, looking at how he cast in turns formal, angry, and loving gazes on the city, and exploring the social and political implications of these different stylistic registers. On the other hand, the portrait to be presented here is that of Amsterdam itself and its inhabitants in their development over time, with a special focus on the increasing intrusion of the 'global' in the everyday life and culture of the city. In the final part of this essay, van der Keuken's vision of Amsterdam as a 'global village' will be considered in terms of a number of formal aspects, including the interest in 'mosaic narration' which is now a salient feature of many transnationally oriented films, and which van der Keuken was one of the first filmmakers to explore.

First, however, let me say a few introductory words about Johan van der Keuken's style and about the different phases that can be distinguished in his work.

To begin with, it is noticeable that as a documentary filmmaker van der Keuken always defied any strict distinction between realistic and fictional representation. While he always turned his camera on the 'here and now' – in a strictly thematic sense, many of his films come close to a form of social realism – he never made a secret of the fact that he often asked people to perform their role for him, that he sometimes restaged a scene, or that he used the presence of his camera to provoke a 'coincidence'. A documentary about van der Keuken's work, *Living with One's Eyes* (Ramón Gieling, 1997), exposes this method explicitly. It follows van der Keuken during the shooting of his beautiful short film *To Sang Photo Studio* (1997), a portrait of a Chinese photographer who was asked by van der Keuken to make family portraits of several shopkeepers and retailers in his own street, the Ferdinand Bolstraat in the vibrant, diverse neighbourhood of De Pijp. In succession, we encounter the shopkeepers of Hollywood Hair, a Kurdish restaurant, a Dutch grocery shop, and a Pakistani clothes shop as well as a Surinamese travel agent and a jeweller from Hong Kong. They are all portrayed by van der Keuken in their own store and then followed into To Sang's studio, where Mr. To Sang takes their picture. Both van der Keuken's filmed portraits of the shopkeepers and To Sang's photographs of them are clearly staged, and the doubling of those different acts of staging self-consciously foregrounds the constructedness, the *mise-en-scène*, of what the viewer gets to see. Nonetheless, van der Keuken's film succeeds in offering a fascinating insight into the multicultural Amsterdam of the 1990s. This play in the border territory between fiction and reality, between staging and spontaneity, but also between control and coincidence, was always part of van der Keuken's style. 'Reality is not something that can be captured in images', he once said in an interview, 'but you can create a kind of structure, and claim: within this structure I can have a notion of what reality could be. In this sense, this Amsterdam is my reality'.¹

An important clue regarding van der Keuken's style is provided by the filmmaker's own comparison of his camera action with, successively, a musical performance, a boxing punch, and a caressing touch. First, as musical instrument, the camera allows the player to play a part, to improvise, and to transform reality into abstract forms. But the camera can also give a punch in the face, produce an angry gesture, or denounce injustice in response to the hardships and painful scenes to which it is a witness. Finally, the camera can be gentle, caressing what it films, especially when it zooms in on the human figure or the face (van der Keuken 2001, 99). These three different functions of the camera – each a blend of aesthetic, political, and human values – always interact in van der Keuken's work and form the basis of his style. For the purpose of this essay, it is important to add that in different periods of his career, one of these camera functions could be seen to prevail. In the first period of his work, in the late 1950s and 1960s, he used film predominantly as a formal and aesthetic medium. Then, from the 1970s until the mid-1980s, the 'punch' function prevails; not coincidentally, this is also the most directly political period in his oeuvre. In the last period, which stretches right up to the filmmaker's death in January 2001, the human touch and the 'caressing' camera are the most salient features. In focusing on images of Amsterdam from those different phases in his development we will see that van der

Keuken's camera eye captured and constructed different cities – even if the 'form, punch, and caress' functions always combined in different ways, the distinction between them not always being crystal clear.

Form: Cramped Spaces, Cramped Minds

In the early years, the 1960s, van der Keuken's dominant concern was with the formal aspects of film. In this period he made several television films that have become classics of Dutch cinema, such as *Blind Child* (1964) and *Herman Slobbe*, *Blind Child 2* (1966), where he seeks to render the world of blind children in dynamic images and sounds. At the end of *Blind Child 2* van der Keuken comments in voice-over, in his characteristic thoughtful voice, that everything in film is form. Saying farewell to his little protagonist he says: 'Herman is a form. Bye bye, dear form'. Films of this period that are shot in Amsterdam show the same interest in formal aspects. Most famous at the time was *Beppie* (1965). *Beppie* was one of van der Keuken's girls next door on the Achtergracht, where the filmmaker then lived. In the film he follows the lively and talkative girl as she walks to school, rehearses multiplication tables, hangs out in the street, and plays ring and run with her friends; we also see her in the swimming pool and at the hairdresser's.² Important here is that everything is told through the dynamics of the film, including the rhythm of the framing and cutting of the images. The film is also a good example of how van der Keuken fashioned his own role as filmmaker and interviewer, quietly drawing attention to the 'outsider' role he played in the lives of those he filmed. *Beppie* lives with her mother and seven sisters in a very tiny apartment. While the girl talks freely about how they cope in their small and overcrowded rooms, *Beppie*'s mother would not allow the camera to enter the house; she speaks with van der Keuken outside, visibly ill at ease.

The cramped spaces in *Beppie* point to the persistently bad housing situation in Amsterdam in the 1960s. Following the war there was a serious shortage of social housing residences, and the quality of the available units was poor. In 1969, a memorandum on 'urban renewal' would conclude that of a total of 260,000 social housing residences in Amsterdam, no fewer than 100,000 stood in urgent need of renovation while another 44,000 would have to be demolished – telling figures indeed (de Liagre Böhl 2010, 84). The problem is addressed head-on in another short film of this period, *Four Walls* (1965). *Four Walls* opens with some drawings, scale models, and sketched designs by the Dutch structuralist architect Herman Hertzberger. Van der Keuken's voice-over comments emphasize the utopian promise held out by those beautiful forms: 'There is a world of forms, human and rich in imagination, within our reach. But most people live in gloom, countless of them in misery, without protection'. At the last sentence the image cuts to a door that resembles the squared windows in some of the architectural sketches. As it turns out, however, this is the door of the Social Housing Office. We see people walk busily in and out or line up in front of a desk, while the soundtrack offers snippets of conversation between city dwellers and office staff: accounts of bad living conditions, complaints about the absence of a heat-

ing system, requests for ‘certificates of urgency’ that would entitle one to a place on a waiting list. A long scene halfway through the film shows how desperate many of those urban residents are, how without hope, apparently resigned to the situation. While the camera shows them passively waiting, van der Keuken lets Cliff Richard’s song sum up the prevailing attitude: ‘Pretend You’re Happy When You’re Blue’. From a present-day perspective, what is striking is the strict, even exclusive focus on local issues and problems as well as the absence of any form of protest on the part of the urban dwellers. This narrow perspective and introspective approach can be seen as characteristic of Dutch film generally in the post-war years. (Another important documentary of this period, Bert Haanstra’s *Everyman* of 1963, shows a similarly narrow focus on national and local concerns, be it in a more humoristic and friendly way). Van der Keuken however does offer an implicit protest against the conditions his camera sees. He depicts the harsh urban reality of the 1960s by steering the camera through some of the inner city’s neglected houses, many of them small and cramped. Towards the end of the film, a girl on a squeaky swing in a narrow corridor symbolizes how the limitations of those physical spaces also constrain one’s mental space. The swing squeaks angrily as the camera rests on it to let the sensation of discomfort sink in (Figure 7.1). It is a great example of how van der Keuken’s ‘formal’ camera eye in the early films was uniquely equipped to register both the spatial and mental ‘narrowness’ involved in the contemporary urban experience.



7.1. The squeaky swing in *Four Walls* (1965).

Punch: Global Parallels

Van der Keuken’s focus was soon to expand dramatically. Towards the end of the 1960s the situation in Amsterdam changed, and so did the mentality of its residents; likewise, the filmmaker changed his style and opened his work to the outside world. *The Spirit of the Times* (1968) brings together two significant

international trends of this period: on the one hand, the widespread yearning for ‘inner liberation’, expressed in the sexual revolution and the hippie movement; on the other hand, the desire to liberate society from injustice and social constraints, which found expression in political manifestations, left-wing student revolts, and emancipatory struggles of all sorts. In this film, formal images are intercut with more directly political images that take on global issues. The film starts with pro- and anti-America demonstrations held in Amsterdam during the Vietnam War and following the death of Martin Luther King, Jr. (Figure 7.2); it also features music and theatre performances and staged street and office scenes – some of a hallucinatory character – to underline the desire of the hippie movement to break with traditional lifestyles. But we also see more abstract images: clouds, raindrops falling in water, a field of waving grain, empty streets, rocks, iron bars. Thus poetry and politics are interlaced in this film, which van der Keuken saw as transitional within his oeuvre. An anecdote, told many years later, affords some insight into how the filmmaker’s political consciousness was developing. Remembering the summer of 1968, van der Keuken recalls how at that time his house in Amsterdam was always full of people ‘from the scene’. One day in August he received a phone call from the VPRO broadcasting company with the request that he join a film crew as cameraman to make a documentary about the war in Biafra, Africa. He took the advice of his hippie friends that you can take your ‘free internal universe’ with you wherever you go, and accepted the job: ‘After eight days of witnessing the famine and the panic, I understood what was going on in the world. During my absence [my wife] Yvonne had a cosmic experience with some sort of guru. That was the end of our marriage. She left, first for London, and then for India, where she had a baby with this guru ... I found Nosh, with whom I’m still together. And I found my way to a much more directly political type of filmmaking, which then seemed absolutely necessary’ (van der Keuken 2001, 100).



7.2. Street demonstration in *The Spirit of the Times* (1968).

What followed was a period of politically engaged filmmaking, in which van der Keuken took on the power imbalance between ‘North’ and ‘South’, between rich and poor, between sustainable development and capitalist exploitation and abuses. This often resulted in harsh, even grating images, filmed with a lot of anger. He went to Palestine to express support for the Palestinian cause (*The Palestinians*, 1976); he filmed the fishermen of the Waddenzee, in the north of the Netherlands, to raise awareness about ecological problems and the exhaustibility of natural resources (*The Flat Jungle*, 1978); he also travelled to South America, Africa, and elsewhere to denounce poverty, inequality, and other kinds of social injustice. While his interest in questions of form clearly never waned, what prevailed in this period was the ‘force de frappe’ of his camera, leading to politically outspoken images. Van der Keuken’s interest in Amsterdam during this period changed accordingly: in his films of the 1970s and early 1980s it becomes a place of transition, a place that is connected to the world in its own typical ways – or one that simply runs parallel to other places, but without directly intersecting with them, in ways that can only be evoked through a kind of loose juxtaposition.

The Way South (1980), the record of a long journey from Amsterdam to Egypt, is a case in point. The opening scenes of this film make an interesting comparison to the treatment of Amsterdam’s housing problems in *Four Walls*. While the people in *Four Walls* suffered mostly in silence, the generation of city dwellers that is portrayed in *The Way South* no longer accepts the housing situation, challenging the fact that many large, expensive buildings stand empty while numerous people go without a decent place to live. This leads to the squatters’ movement that has become such an integral part of Dutch cultural memory of the 1970s and early 1980s, and to the violent riots that marked the coronation of Queen Beatrix in Amsterdam on 30 April 1980, and in which the housing shortage figured as an issue (*‘Geen Woning, Geen Kroning’*, ‘No House, No Crown’, was the much-heard slogan). Van der Keuken films the squatters from the day of the coronation onwards, regularly returning to them in subsequent months in between his extensive travels abroad. In June 1980, he interviews a squatter who has newly joined a community he has been following, a recently divorced elderly lady who is welcomed by the collective. She expresses her admiration for the fact that the new generation no longer accepts to endure the city’s dismal housing policies; admitting how easily her own generation was pushed into a rut, she is in awe of the squatters, and feels inspired by them to do and speak as she wishes. The spirit of the times that van der Keuken captures, then, is one in which revolution, resistance, and protest have become meaningful concepts. What stands out from a present-day perspective is how idealistic the squatters’ motives are, how well they manage to operate collectively, bound together by solidarity, and how they get support from others such as lawyers who offer *pro deo* help to deal with legal issues.³

However, *The Way South* only uses Amsterdam as a starting point and home base in the larger narrative of the filmmaker’s journey. From Amsterdam, van der Keuken travels via Paris, the south of France, Rome, and southern Italy to Cairo and finally southern Egypt. ‘I go from face to face, in the treadmill of over-

production, madness, and profit for the few', he comments in voice-over. Apart from the individuals he films and the stories he collects while making his way south, he also pays constant attention to housing conditions, turning this into a unifying theme of the film: in successive order, the viewer gets to see neglected immigrant apartments in Paris, an old peasant shed in the south of France, the high staircases which an elderly Eritrean woman in Rome needs to climb to get to her apartment, and the overcrowded shelters that house the Egyptian poor. In all those cases, dismal housing conditions or sheer lack of space jeopardize the chance of a fulfilling life. The people in Egypt, however, do not complain. One man maintains that in spite of everything, the government is beyond reproach; in a family that lives in abject poverty, we see family members sustain the fiction that everything is OK ('Let's keep the truth between ourselves', we read in the translation of the Arabic they speak among them). The contrast with the protesting, rebellious generation in Amsterdam around the same time is striking, raising the question to what extent those highly different situations and struggles are comparable. *The Way South* resists easy answers to this question. The film ends with a scene in a crowded Cairo street, showing a family on the pavement in front of a grocery store, eating bread. The camera then zooms in on the abstract figures painted on the outside of the shop (recalling the opening shots in *Four Walls*). 'Back in the city, I think it is rather difficult to touch reality', van der Keuken says in voice-over, while his hand reaches out to the wall to touch it. Then the film cuts back to a wall in Amsterdam which shows the punk slogan 'No Future'. While the soundtrack continues with traffic noise from Cairo, more cross-cutting occurs between images from Cairo and Amsterdam: we see another wall text, saying 'Doorgaan' ('Carry On'), then the busy street in Cairo again. By means of this restless, shifty montage, van der Keuken seems to ask what connects the subversive and revolutionary subcultures of Amsterdam and the marginalized and dispossessed in the southern parts of the world. One may conclude that there is a connection, on some level of experience, in how one's agency is always constrained by larger structures of power; one may equally conclude that those cultures run parallel without ever really meeting, as if separated by a kind of global 'disjuncture' which is also difficult to overcome in the medium of film.

Other films of this period deal separately with Amsterdam and with instances of injustice and inequality elsewhere in the (non-Western) world. The rebellious countercultures of the north are portrayed more extensively in *Iconoclasm – A Storm of Images* (1982), which is centred around the Amsterdam club De Melkweg (The Milky Way) (Figure 7.3). Here van der Keuken follows a young punk girl who lives in a squat and who talks to him about her choices in life, her resentment against the establishment, and her dreams. He films her in the streets of Amsterdam, in her room, and at music performances in De Melkweg. Together with the other artists and visitors who frequent this famous former milk factory, this yields a portrait of an Amsterdam generation which differs significantly from that of the 1960s; especially when seen alongside other films of van der Keuken, *Iconoclasm* registers profound changes in the life of the city and a new mentality, a new 'spirit of the times', in which the filmmaker shares. The trilogy *North-South* – consisting of *Journal* (1972), *The White Castle* (1973), and *The New*



73. De Melkweg in *Iconoclasm – A Storm of Images* (1982).

Ice Age (1974) – explores the differences and parallels between various forms of injustice that can be seen around the world, using a camera or montage that punches the viewer in the face but never forgets to look for the beauty of a form or the softness of a touch. In *The New Ice Age*, van der Keuken films exploited mine workers in Peru, parallel to a strand in which he follows three sisters and a brother who work in an ice cream factory in the north of the Netherlands. Images of the two worlds are often cut together to reveal stark oppositions: the cold in the ice cream factory versus the heat of the ovens in the Peruvian mines, relative security versus poverty and everyday struggle for survival. At the same time the filmmaker looks for parallels, primarily on the formal level of a rhythm, a visual pattern, or a movement: the elevator taking the miners up and down corresponds to the movement of the factory machines, for example. An interest in aesthetic, formal beauty here expresses political anger and commitment, with the balance of power between North and South, but also within the North and within the South, being questioned. Generally speaking, in this middle period of van der Keuken's oeuvre, the global is increasingly articulated as the defining horizon of the political, also *within* the Netherlands. (Not coincidentally, a similar development is notable in the so-called VPRO documentary school of 1970s Dutch television, a school that sought to counter the narrow-mindedness of Dutch public opinion by means of satire and contrary historical perspectives on, for instance, the Dutch colonial past in Indonesia).⁴

Caress: The World Nearby

The period of Johan van der Keuken's 'punching' camera concludes with *I ♥ \$* (1986), a film about the abuses of global capitalism set in the Netherlands, Geneva, Hong Kong, and New York. In retrospect, *I ♥ \$* marks another turning point in the development of the filmmaker's style and perspective on global relations.

During the shooting he fell ill, and after a slow recovery his vision of the world had changed. This is not to say that his political concerns receded to the background; yet his camera became more open to the flows of life, more 'caressing', and also less angry and less certain of the truth it wanted to tell. The first film of van der Keuken's final period, *The Eye Above the Well* (1990), neatly illustrates this: shot in India, it employs framings and reframings that are less strict and formal than in earlier work. The camera follows what it encounters, without insisting on a revolutionary ethic or any other message. As van der Keuken explained in an interview in 1997:

I have the feeling that over the last few years I have learned a lot about the camera. I used to reframe very often: not to make a completely new shot, but to make variations on the same shot, with something remaining just off-screen, just outside the frame, waiting to be discovered. ... Right now, I no longer have the feeling that I'm the one in charge of the framing, but rather, that I simply need to follow the camera. It goes its own way, and I follow. The Dutch are great ice skaters. When I was a child I had these wooden ice skates which one had to strap very tightly underneath one's shoes. But the great ice skaters in Friesland wore those skates just underneath their socks, only very loosely strapped. The moment I really got the knack of ice-skating, I understood that it is indeed better to loosen the straps ... When one has found the right balance, one does not need tight straps. The same goes for the camera. The last few years I've been able to just 'slide' with the camera ... following the rhythm of what the camera gets to see. (van der Keuken 2001, 99)

This organic and fluid way of filming is also evident in *Amsterdam Global Village* (1996), the great achievement of van der Keuken's final years. It has already been pointed out that in the early 1990s van der Keuken became aware that the city had changed quite drastically: it had turned into a 'global village', absorbing people from a range of cultural backgrounds. In consequence, his construction of Amsterdam in respect to the global no longer took the form of tracing parallel or contrasting developments between North and South, 'here' and 'elsewhere', focused on neocolonial power imbalances; rather, he started to bring the global into focus as having entered the city itself, where it invited him to be globally engaged 'at home'. Van der Keuken's new camera style was highly suitable for articulating this new vision of the city: a camera that is a passive receptacle, 'following' rather than leading, is well equipped to register the global in all its localized manifestations.

The complex structure of *Amsterdam Global Village* has been compared to the circular shape of the city's seventeenth-century canal belt, to the movement of the water, and even to the layeredness of an onion. There are many shots in which the camera literally slides over the surface of the canals, observing the houses and the life of the city from that low level, so particular to Amsterdam's geography. From this basic movement, the camera pauses for several people the filmmaker encounters and whom he follows into their homes and sometimes to their home countries far away, connecting Amsterdam to other parts of the world within the

film's flowing rhythm. Film scholar Serge Toubiana elucidates the film's structure and rhythm very eloquently in his description of it as 'a magnificent travelogue':

Johan van der Keuken lets his gaze drift over the surface of the world. From his home town of Amsterdam, he takes in its movement, its visible and secret currents. The film's movement is therefore circular and lateral, conveyed alternately through tracking shots, along the canals and streets, and in successively wider circles that end up rendering a sense of the world. We are taken to Bolivia, Chechnya, Sarajevo, Thailand in the course of encounters; motifs and stories develop in a film that, despite its length, maintains an incredible sense of lightness as it constantly drifts toward the outside world, interspersed with homecomings. There is grace in the way the film ceaselessly pivots on its own axis to embrace new horizons, then returns to its departure point from where it strikes out in new directions. It is this perpetual motion, from the centre moving outward, then from the outside toward the centre, that makes *Amsterdam Global Village* a fantastic global film. It is as though the film 'peels away' reality, removing successive layers of representations and forms. ... The world according to Johan van der Keuken could thus be described as an onion, and his film saga allows us to see the peelings. The circulation of images resembles the canals that weave through Amsterdam and lends the city the aspect of a rhizome. (Toubiana 2001, n.p.)

Insofar as the film can be said to have a separate Amsterdam narrative, it privileges the young Dutch-Moroccan delivery boy Khalid, sometimes seen as van der Keuken's alter ego. Khalid crisscrosses through town on his moped in ways that supplement the film's 'canal perspective' with another intense and very physical rendering of Amsterdam's rhizomic geography. The result is a four-hour long, dynamic and multifaceted portrait of Amsterdam as 'global village' in the mid-1990s. Among the numerous places the viewer gets to see are a Chinese school in the city centre, a Thai boxing school, a Ghananian community centre in the Bijlmer (the scene of a funeral ceremony), nightclub Escape on Rembrandt Square, city parks where the homeless spend the night, and many other spaces that people share in this 'smallest of world cities'. Taken together, the stories and encounters constitute a 'mosaic narrative', a form now often seen as typical for transnational and global storytelling structures (cf. Pisters 2011).⁵

In regard to the 'global consciousness' that is articulated in *Amsterdam Global Village*, three strands in the narrative are particularly revealing. At the beginning of the film we meet Roberto, a Bolivian musician and cleaner, as he and his Dutch wife get an ultrasound scan to check on the wife's pregnancy. Later on, van der Keuken visits them in their apartment in the Bijlmer. An ambitious city development project in south-east Amsterdam, the Bijlmer was developed in the late 1960s and 1970s to alleviate the pressing housing problems that we remember from *Four Walls*. Although conceived as a modern and comfortable residential area, the plans for the neighbourhood were compromised and it soon gained the reputation of a problem area and no-go zone. What is beautiful about the encounter with Roberto is that van der Keuken looks beyond the external

harshness so often associated with this part of the city. While Roberto is holding his baby son Ayni, he talks about the experience of becoming a father, the hospital, the differences between life in Amsterdam and in the small Aymara village where he grew up and where, he recalls, there was no hospital, no tap water, no opportunity to attend pregnancy classes. Roberto likes the ethnic and cultural mix of the Bijlmer, but he misses the neighbourly spirit which he associates with Bolivia – a longing underlined by the meaning of his son’s name, which means ‘mutual help’ in Aymaran. In a beautiful transition sequence, Roberto plays the flute, and the sound of the air becomes the wind that then takes the viewer to Bolivia through the sky (Figure 7.4). This aerial perspective connects Amsterdam with other parts of the world, not as a parallel structure, but rather on an affective level, making us consider the pain and unsettlement involved in transnational stories of migration and separation. In Bolivia, we meet Roberto’s grief-stricken mother who talks about the hardships in her life. She is filmed just as van der Keuken films her son: mostly in close-up, with a loving and respectful camera eye that almost touches or strokes the faces of the people it encounters. Although the setting is far removed from Amsterdam, the story of Roberto’s Aymaran roots plays an integral role in the film; it underlines how the spaces and people of Amsterdam can be points of departure for opening up fresh perspectives on the world at large, potentially including every individual and community. In this sense, *Amsterdam Global Village* is a globalized response to the line from Dutch poet Bert Schierbeek which it quotes as its motto: ‘I always thought that life was 777 simultaneous stories’.



7.4. Roberto in *Amsterdam Global Village* (1996).



75. Khalid in *Amsterdam Global Village* (1996).

The second strand to be considered revolves around Khalid, the Dutch-Moroccan courier who speeds through the city to bring rolls of film and photos from professional labs to studios and editorial offices (Figure 7.5). I have already pointed out how Khalid's movements contribute to the film's structure and rhythm; he is an important formal and rhythmic element in van der Keuken's *Amsterdam*. In voice-over we get to hear his dreams and thoughts about the city, his work, and his friends. Two scenes connected to Khalid are very touching and revealing. In the first, van der Keuken films him in his small apartment. While we hear the beat of house music in the background, we see Khalid in close-up, his face bathing in low-key light against a sea of darkness; some of his friends, too, occasionally pop into view, their faces also key-lit. Part of the interest of the *mise-en-scène* here is intertextual: it recalls some of van der Keuken's earliest work, the photo albums *We Are 17* (1955) and *Behind Glass* (1957), in which he portrayed youngsters in Amsterdam in the 1950s. These photographs were controversial at the time because they did not conform to the dominant post-war mentality in which hard work and a spirit of 'rebuilding the country through united effort' were crucial components; instead, they announced a generation and a youth culture intent on finding its own path in life; staring out of a window, smoking a cigarette, doing nothing, those youths resisted the call on them to fit in. Khalid seems a modern update of these other youngsters in van der Keuken's work. With a gentle, lightly Moroccan-inflected voice he talks very openly about his life: about how he lived in a home from the age of nine, how he had to go to Morocco at the age of fifteen when his parents wanted to return, how he missed Amsterdam until he was allowed to come back, how he found a living, learned to drive a moped, deliver pizzas and now film rolls, working eleven hours a day, and how he looks forward to building a life for the future. In the other important scene, van der Keuken observes the daily gathering of a group of couriers

at Museum Square, most of them Dutch-Moroccan, Khalid among them. While they arrive on their mopeds or can be seen to smoke a joint, another group of youngsters, skaters, are engaged in their performances. Different worlds co-exist on the same square, in a choreographical ensemble of different bodies, musical preferences, and interests that simultaneously inhabit this public space. Not only do these two scenes counter the many clichéd negative images of Dutch-Moroccan boys seen in contemporary Dutch media discourse, they also universalize this multicultural group. As van der Keuken commented in an interview with *Cahiers du cinéma* conducted in 1996: ‘When we [first] tackled the idea of their group [of Khalid and his friends], I was unable to grasp what it was made up of. In fact, what mattered to them was simply being together, with their bikes, touching one another, smoking joints, in other words being part of a group’ (Toubiana 2001).⁶ He even compares them to the group he belonged to when he himself was seventeen. Even if van der Keuken and his peers were preoccupied with rather different things (existentialism, poetry, bad red wine, heavy tobacco, jazz, French *chansons*), the basic pattern is the same: spending time with one’s peers, speaking a kind of coded language, being caught up in a group dynamic. Again, then, van der Keuken is looking for resonances with his earlier work and his own life. In so doing he affirms the universal dimension of the global city, emphasizing how it is of all times and places and how different generations can connect in it in spite of cultural change.

The themes of generational change and intergenerational connectedness also inform the third and final strand in the film to be considered here. It centres on the Dutch-Jewish Hennie Anke and her son, who are followed as they visit the apartment where they lived during the German occupation some fifty years before. They lived there until Hennie’s husband was called up to report to a work camp, which eventually led to his deportation; the mother and her son survived the war in hiding. In the mid-1990s, when van der Keuken was filming, the apartment turns out to be inhabited by a Surinamese mother and her son. While the Surinamese lady shows the former occupants around, she explains that the apartments in the block have all been renovated and enlarged; in her case, two former apartments were converted into one – living standards having improved significantly since the time of *Four Walls*. Usefully, with reference to the same scene, Thomas Elsaesser has proposed the term ‘double occupancy’ to describe the contemporality of different generations, the contemporaneity of different archives of memory and experience, within the spaces of the city:

As Hennie recalls the terrible years and the deportation of her husband, in this space we sense the lingering presence of two generations who have nothing in common either culturally or ethnically, and yet, whose succession and coexistence in memory and spoken record illuminate in a single image Dutch history of the twentieth century, from occupation to deportation, from colonialism to post-colonial immigration. Even if the fate of a Dutch-Jewish ‘*onderduiker*’ (a person in hiding during the Occupation) and of a Dutch-Surinamese immigrant are not strictly comparable, but amount to another asymmetry, the gesture of their farewell embrace shapes a fragile bond across

the cultural differences, establishing an image of double occupancy, as well as of life's transience that lends an almost utopian hope to these stories of exile, migration, and necessary homelessness told in *Amsterdam Global Village*. (Elsaesser 2005, 210)

Thus, while nothing in the apartment recalls the difficult lives of its former occupants, the space, as the scene of the emotionally charged encounter, creates a link between multiple historical events that function as temporal layers in the global city.

There is another sense, however, in which the notion of 'double occupancy' bears on van der Keuken's work. According to Elsaesser, the notion has a second sense that is specifically media-related: it refers to the way in which we increasingly occupy both the real, physical world and the world of the mediated image that adds so importantly to the layering of global and local connections in contemporary urban space. In the first half of the 1990s, new internet and screen cultures were slowly 'occupying' the city. While this new media reality was not of direct interest to van der Keuken when he was filming *Amsterdam Global Village*,⁷ it forms an important subtext that allows us to clarify one important way in which the film may speak to us today. As Elsaesser indicates, by the early twenty-first century, following the events of 9/11, the new media reality had become all-pervasive in its 'performative dimension of ... acts of barbarity deliberately staged to produce shocking media images'; in this sense, 'modern media spaces have acquired the force of a first-order reality, by comparison with which the world of flesh and blood risks becoming a second-order realm, subservient to the order of spectacular effects' (113). It needs no arguing that this statement applies to the Amsterdam context, too: global politics after 9/11 changed the local Dutch situation, which saw the brutal murder of filmmaker and journalist Theo van Gogh in an Amsterdam street by a young Dutch-Moroccan Muslim fundamentalist in November 2004. It is precisely because the image, the spectacular, has gained such exuberant prominence under conditions of media globalization that it is worthwhile to revisit van der Keuken's films of the 1990s. The image of double occupancy in *Amsterdam Global Village* is part of the utopian dimension of his work – a dimension one may link to the tradition of tolerance for which the Netherlands historically is famous – and in this sense it offers a perspective on the globalized city that can counter some of the more stereotypical images of migrants, strangers, and other 'others' in the urban environment today.⁸

Conclusion

Van der Keuken's mild, mellowed camera eye in *Amsterdam Global Village* shows that behind the many faces one sees in the city, behind the façades, windows, and closed doors, the global has entered the local: an intertwinement which he uncovers and picks apart by listening to a mosaic of stories, some of which he traces to their origins elsewhere in the world. By way of conclusion, it is worth considering the recent television series *A'DAM & E.V.A.* (2011) – directed by Norbert

ter Hall from a script by Robert Alberdingk Thijm – as an example of how van der Keuken’s legacy continues. Each episode follows the love story between Eva (a typical Amsterdam city girl) and Adam (a man in his early twenties who has moved to the capital from provincial Zeeland). Along the way the series drifts off to reveal the stories of other residents in this global city: an Antillean public servant who lives in the Bijlmer, elderly amnesiacs in a retirement home, Polish construction workers who mourn for a lost colleague, a pregnant Chilean woman and her boyfriend who work as cleaners in a hotel, a well-to-do gynaecologist who crosses the borders of medical ethics, and many others whose paths intersect with Adam and Eva’s in the streets and spaces of Amsterdam (a narrative device that is nicely captured by the pun in the title: A’DAM is short for Amsterdam, while E.V.A. stands for ‘*en vele anderen*’, ‘and many others’). The camera follows all these characters during one day in their lives, offering the viewer intriguing glimpses of the rich store of life stories which the city contains: touching, caressing, and celebrating in the form of a fictional mosaic the evolving reality of Johan van der Keuken’s global village.

Notes

- 1 Johan van der Keuken, qtd. from an interview in 1996 on the website of the International Forum of New Cinema (see www.arsenal-berlin.de/forumarchiv/forum97/fo03e.html).
- 2 In *Living with One’s Eye*, Beppie, now an adult woman, is interviewed to look back on the making of *Beppie*. She explains how she was promised ice cream or potato crisps as an incentive to perform her actions.
- 3 In the following years, the squatters’ movement would fall apart because of infighting and loss of idealism. Its pending collapse however is not yet evident at this point.
- 4 The VPRO school mentioned here includes documentary makers such as Hans Keller, Cherry Duyns, and Roelof Kiers. For discussion of the Dutch documentary tradition and the role of the VPRO in Dutch culture in the 1970s, see Cowie (1979), chapters 5 and 10.
- 5 In ‘The Mosaic Film: Nomadic Style and Politics in Transnational Media Culture’, I argue that mosaic narratives and multiple, fragmented storylines in contemporary cinema typically articulate different perspectives on transnational connections (Pisters 2011).
- 6 Serge Toubiana’s interview was first published in French. A Dutch translation is included in van der Keuken’s *Bewogen beelden* (2001, 87-99). An English translation was published by MoMA on the occasion of its Johan van der Keuken retrospective in New York in April-May 2001. For information on MoMA’s tribute to the filmmaker, see www.moma.org/interactives/exhibitions/2001/jvdk/.
- 7 Drawing on Elsaesser’s work, Jaap Kooijman observes an Americanized transnational style at work in modern Dutch cinema (Kooijman 2008). Van der Keuken, however, does not follow American narrative and media formats, even if the American ‘mosaic style’ has emerged very prominently as a general cinematographic style in the years following the production of *Amsterdam Global Village*.
- 8 In ‘Altijd maar schrijven over Marokkanen’ (2010), Joanne van der Leun argues that the Dutch media report very one-sidedly about criminality among young Dutch-Moroccan men.

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