

Les Cahiers Du Cinema

No. 517, October 1997

The Flow of the World: Johan van der Keuken's Amsterdam Global Village

by Serge Toubiana

Amsterdam Global Village. Johan van der Keuken's latest film, the 47th from this Dutch documentary filmmaker familiar to readers of the *Cahiers du Cinéma*, is likely to astound more than a few people. First of all by its sheer length, which well exceeds conventional documentary standards: four hours, during which a multifaceted, shattered time scheme ties and unties, loops, circles back on itself, to eventually give the viewer the impression of watching a fluid and essentially *musical* experience. An experience of the world. Confronted with time and space, JDVK's images are flat—one of the films that led to his reknown in France is entitled *Flat Jungle* (1978)—always frontal, but also conveying a great graphic and geographic plasticity. Images flat, frontal, graphic, but also images that unearth and record memory past and present: the Second World War, Sarajevo, Chechnya, the moral poverty of the excluded and exiled.

Amsterdam Global Village is, firstly, a magnificent travelogue. JDVK 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 center moving outward, then from the outside toward the center, that makes *Amsterdam Global Village* a fantastic global film. It is as though the film "peels away" reality, removes successive layers of representations and forms. The image toys with the various layers of this spherical world, increasingly touching on sensitive, poetic truths. The world according to JDVK 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.

A global film, but also a great *nomadic* film—JDVK is a seasoned traveler. Sensitive to movement, he knows how to look at, and listen to, his city. From the very opening shots, there is beauty in the rediscovery of his own territory. Amsterdam is a city like no other, conducive to wandering, to melancholic evocations, to a tracking gaze. From there, it's easy enough to set off for other lands...

Opening shots, a celebration: the faces of children and parent during the Feast of Saint Nicholas, shots of barges wending their way through the city. JDVK settles into the crowd, his camera easily capturing the rhythm and movement. The basis of his cinema is immediately obvious: a remarkable capacity to observe people move and live, filming them *à hauteur d'homme* by joining them in their space. JDVK belongs to the world he films. He himself operates the camera, personally conducts the interviews, which his

Les Cahiers Du Cinema

No. 517, October 1997

The Flow of the World: Johan van der Keuken's Amsterdam Global Village

by Serge Toubiana

wife, Nosh (Noshka van der Lely) records the sound. He is a virtuoso in capturing reality in its multifarious and contradictory aspects, all the while gently asserting the primacy of the *subjective gaze*. JVDK always knows where to put himself with regard to others, to find the right distance: neither too far, which would produce an excessive objectivity or neutrality, nor too close, which would create a distorted impression that the camera is only there to trap its subject.

But these qualities would not be enough to make *Amsterdam Global Village* a masterpiece if JVDK didn't also possess a gift for varying, within a sequence itself, the very intensity of the way he looks at the world. Each scene is characterized by a preoccupation, hardly discernible but always receptive and mobile, about finding the *form* of reality's multiple representations. JVDK's formalism is mainly graphical and musical; one gets the feeling he recomposes his film in the editing room, by playing each sequence, each block of images, then the entire film, like a series of variations based on a few themes. Like a jazz musician. And jazz happens to be another of the filmmaker's passions. Alongside photography, collage, travel, and a penchant for conversation.

Several themes, motifs, variations, make up *Amsterdam Global Village*. These themes are sometimes introduced by the characters. By a few significant encounters that give the film its structure. Roberto, the Bolivian settled in Amsterdam, married to a Dutch woman who, at the beginning of the film, is pregnant. Before the child's birth, then afterward, Roberto at home in Amsterdam, then his return to his Bolivian village: the film *narrates* the characters through the various states of his existence. Khalid, the Moroccan-born courier, a *bridging* figure who endlessly crisscrosses the city, creating a link between the various blocks of images. Borz-Ali, the Chechen exile-cum-businessman, who watches television coverage of the war that is devastating his country. JVDK films him at home, sitting on his couch, operating his remote control. His pretty wife sits by his side, listening. The man talks about his life, denounces the Russian atrocities, evokes the death of his younger brother in the fighting. *Cut*. A car drives along a bumpy road. Where are we? Borz-Ali is traveling with his fifteen-year-old son. Tanks roll by in the other direction. A frontier post. We enter Chechnya, a ravaged country that lies in ruin. "They've destroyed everything," says Borz-Ali. In Grozny, a demonstration, mostly women, angry women. "Free Chechnya! Allah is great!" An intense moment when the film suddenly becomes pure reportage, and the filmmaker and his "character" put themselves in danger, submit to the acid test of reality. Horribly mangled corpses are loaded on a truck. A weeping mother cradles her dead son in her arms. The image is sublime *and* unbearable. JVDK films the dead child because it is there, he must bear witness, but especially because the *mise-en-scène* is not of his making—he is simply recording it. These shots will linger in our minds for a long time, which says as much about JVDK's logic, his moral fibre: his way of not being satisfied just with words, his desire to join "characters" where History is in the making, their history but to some extent ours as well.

Similarly, JVDK joins Roberto on his journey back to his village in Bolivia, to see his family and bring badly needed school supplies. "One day, you help your neighbors, and

Les Cahiers Du Cinema

No. 517, October 1997

The Flow of the World: Johan van der Keuken's Amsterdam Global Village

by Serge Toubiana

the next day they help you. You feel closer," Roberto had said earlier during the interview. Standing at the window of his Amsterdam apartment, he blows into his Indian flute, gazing out into the distance. Slowly the image takes flight, we're airborne, and the camera glides over Bolivia. The journey is part of Roberto's reverie, of his exile's melancholy. The following shots are like their extension: Roberto on the village square, amid his people. The villagers seem distant, we sense his timidity as he harangues them, trying to make them see the danger of losing one's traditions. Then the music gives the ceremony a processional feeling. Finally the gifts of the schoolchildren are unpacked. JVDK doesn't let his character out of his sight, filming Roberto's poignant reunion with his mother. "Mama dearest, what was I like in the past? Let's go back in time." That's how the film itself moves: from present to past, from here to there, from a man toward his point of origin.

Other themes in the film have a resonant or echo effect. For instance, Thai kick boxing, filmed in Amsterdam and in a Thai village, delineates a kind of gesture of exile. Interbreeding, with scenes at an Ashanti funeral ceremony that ends with a dance, in an imperceptible trancelike movement in which every gesture has a meaning, a signification, in the face of death. Chinese children in an Amsterdam school learning the alphabet. A pretty Chinese woman practicing her calligraphic skills. A barefoot homeless person, filmed as he awakes, a citizen of the world who affirms his belief in the freedom of the press. Couriers who have an appointment to meet at a spot in the city, where young skaters practice their figures on a semicircular track. A young girl walking down an Amsterdam street, moving slowly, because she is carrying a heavy load: she's a disk-jockey in a nightclub and she's bringing the records. A young bell-ringer who plays the church bells. A photographer to whom Khalid, the courier, delivers an envelope. Hennie, a Jewish woman, a former communist and singer, who tells her son, a man in his fifties, about life in Amsterdam under the Nazi occupation. A moment of history, a moment of remembrance. She takes him to the apartment where they lived during the war, before her husband and her two brothers were deported. Today, a woman from Surinam who lives in the apartment kindly greets Hennie and her son, and we follow their conversation—"We lived here until Papa was deported to the concentration camp. We didn't notice the persecutions. Everyone was afraid. And we realized it...Our friends were arrested."—we sense the Surinam woman's presence just off-screen, her arms around her child. JVDK makes us feel this duality of the image, both as a conduit of memory and as a current installation of bodies in a space. The film admirably explores these dual images, receptive both to words and presences, to space and movement, gestures and thought. The eye sees, the gaze is at work, the filmmaker seems to say throughout his film.... It goes without saying that *Amsterdam Global Village* is also a great declaration of love to a city that knows how to welcome communities from other places, and tries to blend them in the same melting pot, respecting the differences or variations in rhythms and colors. In this regard, and this is saying a good deal, *Amsterdam Global Village* is a great political film that makes of the connection between the individual and the world at large, in a poetic and musical manner, the connecting thread of his narrative.

Les Cahiers Du Cinema

No. 517, October 1997

The Flow of the World: Johan van der Keuken's Amsterdam Global Village

by Serge Toubiana

Interview with Johan van der Keuken

Is Amsterdam Global Village intended to be the portrait of a city? Can one in fact portray a city?

-I don't think you can portray anything, but you can build a city through film, using both fictional and direct cinema techniques, which I purposely blend. The constructivist concept is very important to me. At the end of the film, there is a dedication to my friend, the writer Bert Schierbeek, who died this year. Bert Schierbeek wrote: "I always felt that life was made up of 777 stories going on at the same time." So I thought we could do 777 four-hour films about Amsterdam, even if it's a small city. But you have to make choices, take risks. When you film you have to disregard certain realities in order to recreate something physical on the screen. In that way, it's impossible to portray a city.

There are two narrative figures in the film: the circle and the lateral tracking shot. There are moments when you go from one world to another, or from one moment to another, in the musical sense of the term: there's an obligatory return to the water, to the canal, it's like a transitional moment that provides a means of approaching a new stage in the circle of life. And that circle of life takes us elsewhere.

-It's almost a centrifugal moment. The circle becomes a whirlwind and ejects us elsewhere. My need to do the film grew out of several things: the first ray of sunshine I see from my window reflecting on the water some mornings and then its glimmer on a magnificent blue barge. It's a cinematic moment, when something is projected onto the skin, the skin of the boat, it's like a physical sensation. The second element that spurred me to do this film was the time I arrived by bike on a square in a part of Amsterdam I wasn't very familiar with, where the inhabitants are of all colors. It was a beautiful summer evening, people were outdoors, enjoying themselves, drinking and talking, and I felt like I'd entered a different world only ten minutes away from my front door. For someone like me who claims to be open to all sorts of images and influences when I travel, ready to strike out along any path and respond to any request, I can be completely taken by surprise in my own town and feel slightly disoriented. The third reason was to try to create an urban space on the flat surface of the screen, then to create a sense of the weight of History without using historical images or archive footage.

The film seems to be searching for a heartbeat, the heartbeat of a city... It's like a heart that pumps and expels: blood circulates and the circulation leads us to distant places: to Bolivia, Chechnya, Sarajevo, Thailand. How did you construct this "here and there"?

-What I really wanted to do was to return to the roots of direct cinema. When I graduated from IDHEC in 1958, I saw Jean Rouch's first films: *Les Maîtres Fous* and *Moi, un Noir* which greatly impressed me in the way they blended direct cinema and fiction. I also saw films by Richard Leacock and Robert Drew. Those films had a very liberating effect on me. At the same time, what I missed—especially in the American work—was an awareness of form. What I saw in them was very classical dramaturgy of the American hero, but it was virtually unavowed. The films claimed to be examples of direct cinema, but there were very marked implicit choices that harked back to Hollywoodian dramaturgy.

Les Cahiers Du Cinema

No. 517, October 1997

The Flow of the World: Johan van der Keuken's Amsterdam Global Village

by Serge Toubiana

I also told myself that I also needed to work on form, Eisensteinian editing (as much as I knew about it at the time)—all sorts of techniques that I later explored in all my films: and always, that dosage of the synchronous and the non-synchronous cinema, what's set up and what's found, the fabricated conditions and the random things that result from them and to which we react later. For instance, in *Face Value* (1991), I began with a very strict formal postulate. This two-hour film is in fact 85% closeups. That was the challenge: describe a part of Europe after the fall of the Berlin Wall, in which the feeling of directness was put very much under strain, it was "conquered" so to speak, on the formal basis of the film. With all those close-ups, I had to find a way to create cinematic space that was imaginary, in motion, where you didn't feel closed in but where sometimes you also had to know where you were: Marseille, Prague, London, Berlin, etc.—without relying on a voice-over narration or other external devices. For *Amsterdam Global Village*, I wanted to do the opposite: acknowledge the direct cinema aspect, go with it, and let the form come later. Thinking about direct, I still feel I needed a basic structure. This structure was provided by the vast loop of Amsterdam's canals. I imagined the film as a long journey through the four seasons, following the circular form that the Provo movement around 1965-1966 called "the magic apple": Amsterdam as the magic center of the world. So in my mind I followed the outline of this magic apple, and it gave me the sense of always turning, as much as possible, to the right. I have to admit that in the film it feels more like a lateral tracking shot. But I'm glad you sensed the circle.

It's also a mental circle: at a certain point you come home, knowing you'll be taking off again.

-The idea of a tracking shot in the same direction was supposed to supply the basis for the moments of direct cinema. In this tracking shot, you meet up with characters both major and minor, with events. And sometimes these encounters create whirlpools that send you flying. This leads to a new start, a new journey.

When you meet Roberto, for instance, the Bolivian living in Amsterdam, did you want him to take you to Bolivia from the start, or was it by talking with him, doing his personal portrait, that you realized you had to go there with him? In the film there's a magnificent moment: the landing in Bolivia. He's at his window in Amsterdam, his flute to his lips, and we sense that he wants to go home. It's like a haze, a fantasy. It's like we're in a dream, in fact.

-Asymmetry is important to me. You don't travel with just anyone. With an ethnologist friend, Fred Gales, with whom I'd already worked, I'd gone around the city in the early months of 1994. He's someone who knows many people from different cultures, and he introduced me to two people, the Chechen and the Bolivian. He told me he knew a Bolivian who was married to a Dutch woman, a musician who made his living as a cleaner in supermarkets, and he was preparing a music festival in his little village in the Andes. There you had a concentrate of all the tensions: being a cleaner here, a cultural hero there, and making money with his music to buy something for his community. I saw a story in it right away. I met him shortly after and found this man to be almost angelic.

Les Cahiers Du Cinema

No. 517, October 1997

The Flow of the World: Johan van der Keuken's Amsterdam Global Village

by Serge Toubiana

Did you spend a lot of time to "construct" his life?

-I'm not one for going to live with people for six months. I think that's often just a farce. It's important that I emphasize that I'm also outside their life, to clarify this position. That's why at times there's a certain artificiality, when you're aware of the filmmaking process. But all that can be overcome by simple intuitive moments when you get a feeling of a person. With this couple, for instance, the very happy fact that they're expecting a baby. It's a very classic beginning. There are very classic elements in the film, especially in the construction of the first two thirds. Pregnancy, for instance, enables me to introduce the idea of the screen, of an ultrasound examination. There's a whole thematic of screens in the film, electronic images, other levels of communication, simultaneity... And that allows you to perceive things in depth, through the screen, inside the body. In Roberto's apartment we watched tapes about Bolivia, because his wife had already been there with him two years earlier, and it was the first time Roberto had returned to his country after being away for ten years. At that time I had noticed the very clean, very Dutch neatness of their apartment, and everything in it announced the arrival of a baby; as well as certain of his personal belongings—the Indian flute hanging on the wall, for instance. I told myself I had to create an ellipsis and have the baby arrive directly into this world. I was lucky to be able to be able to shoot virtually the same shot of the little bath, with the same dreamlike lighting, but with the baby suddenly there. With the sound of Roberto's flute. It's a structural device that belongs to a long tradition of fictional films, whose possibilities I suddenly saw during the shooting. I was very glad to be able to insert the film into this tradition and to make this transition from the objects to a new human being. It set the tone. The other structural devices, with regard to Roberto, stem from this: for the occasion he played the flute to create a breeze. After the interview, I asked him to blow in front of his window—and it was like an instant screenplay: we were able to fly away. These connections are either extremely premeditated or extremely accidental. It may be due to my feelings about improvised music, which is important in Holland and which underscores the question of moving from one thing to another, of quickly finding a structure. Then, of course, it takes a lot of work in the editing room to secure that structure.

During the Bolivian section, the camera is very close to Roberto, but the other villagers are far from him. So he has to raise his voice. You didn't approach the others, you stayed by his side, from a subjective viewpoint. Why are the villagers so far away?

-The village has a very austere square shape with practically nothing behind it, it's just a square in the landscape, in a basin. The people themselves huddled against the walls until the dancing began. Roberto had brought in bands from ten villages, each with its own style, costumes and masks. There was a procession that described a circle inside the square and it was almost unemotional, the people were withdrawn. Both emotionally and cinematically, the space was a hard one to grasp. For me the only natural thing was to stick with Roberto. Naturally, the sound tended to be scattered. And you can feel that Roberto has to strain his voice.

And he's moved.

-Yes, and at the same time he too has to conquer this space. It's virtually beyond his physical means—that may be what one feels at that point. Then the truck arrives loaded

Les Cahiers Du Cinema

No. 517, October 1997

The Flow of the World: Johan van der Keuken's Amsterdam Global Village

by Serge Toubiana

with gifts he brought to distribute to the villagers, supplies for the schools in the region that lack just about everything: notebooks, chalk, pencils, etc. At first, I rode around in the truck to get high-angle shots. I have an anecdote about the shooting that may be significant: when the truck came back the second time, I did a long-sequence shot that I later cut up, and during this shot, the music had started up and the people began to dance before the mayor could make his speech to introduce Roberto so that he could start handing out the gifts as we'd planned. But that became impossible. The dancing had started and it would last until dusk. I'd learned in India that you can't stop a process once it's started, a movement once it's taken off. It's considered a bad sign. But I asked them to stop the music, anyway. As a filmmaker, I was in conflict with reality. Roberto was terribly torn—at the same time he'd complained about sometimes feeling very ill at ease in his native culture, in this society where he had enormous trouble organizing things. I told Roberto: we came for this moment and everything we've shot until now will be useless if we don't do something right away. He really panicked. We talked to the mayor, requesting that he ask the band leaders to stop the music. It was a very tense moment. Finally the mayor did it and we were able to shoot the gift distribution scene. Then the music started up again and everything was fantastic. To my knowledge there was no magic punishment handed down by the earth goddess. I'm a little wary of the ethnological approach that says you always have to have the right distance with regard to things, to cultures. You often have to transgress to show something.

So you think the cinema has a right to interfere?

I don't know about a right. But good intentions at that point don't count anymore. You have to go in there, you have to be able to do what you set out to do.

Retrospectively, for you as a filmmaker, wasn't the moment with Roberto and his mother more powerful? When she tells him how much she suffers, it's a very powerful, intimate moment: did you understand what they were saying?

-I understood certain things, and the rest I sensed. In cinema there are tough moments that you have to endure, when you intervene and sometimes push people. At the same time, I noticed that film also allows people to deal with things. By filming Roberto with his mother, I was afraid it might also be too emotional, that they'd regret having opened up in this way. I asked Roberto about it, and he reassured me right off. And, translating the scene, I realized that it happened in such a way as to give them a sense of relief. People let it all out, which they might not do if they were being filmed. For instance, the old Dutch Jewish woman in the film told me a number of times that she would never have had that talk with her son if we hadn't filmed them. I think something similar happened with Roberto and his mother. I knew that she'd lost four of her twelve children. And I thought that it was something particular to the third world, the living conditions, the problem of accepting the life to lose a third of one's children. And during their talk, it turned out that it was a smaller problem compared to having been abandoned by her husband, having to

deal with the loneliness and the marital problems. It also broke with the idea that in

Les Cahiers Du Cinema

No. 517, October 1997

The Flow of the World: Johan van der Keuken's Amsterdam Global Village

by Serge Toubiana

so-called simple cultures, those that live off the earth, there are supposedly fewer relational problems.

When you filmed the conversation between Roberto and his mother, were you expecting something to happen?

-I try to anticipate things: for instance, by telling Roberto that I'd like to see how she feels about her son's twelve-year absence.

Could we say that you began with a European, somewhat ethnographic vision of things, and that suddenly the filmic outcome turned out to be much more dramatic?

-I often say that I work against ethnography. It's always the moment when the model shatters, when representativity no longer functions, that things get interesting. It's half-way between something representative and something that's not representative at all.

... You mean when people suddenly become individuals.

-Yes, the absurdity of life, the singular experience. Serge Daney wrote an article in the *Cahiers du Cinéma* entitled "*La radiation cruelle de ce qui est*" ("The Cruel Radiation of That What Is") in which he noted that the handicapped characters in my films are often there to break with representativity. The rather marginal position with regard to normality gives them a more penetrating view of what is normal, what is real. This explains the thematic of blindness, deafness, obstructed senses, that to me seems to be one of lucidity with respect to a fractured, fragmented perception that needs to be reconstituted. One can't see or hear, but one has to live with it.

With regard to Chechnya, it seems to begin with a meeting with an individual, and the film takes you to the country during a historic moment, the war. How did you construct the Chechnya episode?

-Retrospectively, during the editing, I thought a lot about Hitchcock's *Torn Curtain*, where there's a journey to a totally unfamiliar country—East Germany—which becomes more and more hellish. A journey into hell, with a problem of getting back. For my film, the problem was getting back to Amsterdam and maintaining interest in what was to follow. I had written a draft of the project in May-June 1993 and that's when the ethnologist told me about Chechnya. I asked him where that was (*laughs*). He told me about a businessman from the Caucasus, Borz-Ali Ismaïlov, who had been Gorbachev's body-guard—which isn't mentioned in the film because he hasn't the right to talk about it or he doesn't want to talk. What interested me most of all was that he lived *in* communications and media—the telephone, the screens, the video—like a modern nomad. It was one way of taking a distance from the standard psychological description, which made the character a bit more mysterious. Once we became better acquainted, I asked him why he had agreed to do the film. He said that he wanted to do something for Chechnya, to show that Chechens are not all gangsters but active people who know how to do things. We went to see him on December 18, 1994. He was sitting in front of his television set with his Russian companion and his son. They were tuned in to the Moscow state channel, they'd been watching it all night because the Russians had just invaded

Les Cahiers Du Cinema

No. 517, October 1997

The Flow of the World: Johan van der Keuken's Amsterdam Global Village

by Serge Toubiana

Chechnya. We asked their permission to film them and we went to fetch the camera and the tape recorder. That was how we began shooting with Borz-Ali.

Had you already planned to go to Chechnya?

-We always kept in mind that we should try to go. In July 1995, there were a few weeks of truce and negotiations. A sort of calm. At that time, the war was undeclared, it was more a sporadic guerilla warfare, unpredictable but very violent.

But did you always intend to have Borz-Ali go with you?

-Yes, we discussed the possibility of going together from the start. It seemed important to me. As with Bosnia, it's all due to a radical geographic change since 1989 and the fall of the iron curtain. What was so interesting was to have a businessman who didn't come from either Japan or North America, but from the heart of the Caucasus, with other lines of business, other developing economic and cultural ties.

Was sympathy toward the person an issue for you?

-I find Borz-Ali a very impressive, enigmatic character. He sometimes talks about things that are very remote to us, with the martial moral standards typical of his people, when he talks about young people going together into the mountains on a six-month survival course without food...There's also something of the gambler about him: after Perestroïka, he had the capital he needed to move...And when he talks about the war, I film him in close-ups.

At one point he says that a Russian mother and a Chechen mother have the same tears, that tears are the same color...

-In our slightly more cynical, better informed mindset, it sounds almost like overkill, but you can sense there's a poetic side to the Russian culture and soul, which also exists among the Chechens. His face expresses his state of mind. And he tries to situate the problem on an international scale, saying the tragedy is the same for the Russians, that the Russians are conscious of it. I found that very moving, and I tried to get close to him with my camera. When he's in the streets of Chechnya watching a women's demonstration, he is there, simply as a portrait watching all this destruction. At that moment, when he's taking it all in, I can sense how vulnerable he is.

When you arrive in the car, there's a sense of danger. It's practically filmed clandestinely. Is the boy we see his son?

-Yes, his son, whom we see in the first scene with the invasion on the television. I was unable—and this could be a weakness of the film—to develop a relationship with his son. Simply because the son wouldn't have anything to do with film (*laughs*). In that culture, a child, as soon as he's six or eight years old, can deal with the same information as adults—except, I suppose, for sexual matters: so the child's outlook is partial. But as tradition would have it, everything that has to do with the war should be shared with the children—and probably all the more so with male children. So the child was calm, despite the often threatening presence of all sorts of Russian mercenaries at the road

Les Cahiers Du Cinema

The Flow of the World: Johan van der Keuken's Amsterdam Global Village

by Serge Toubiana

blocks. As for the clandestine aspect of the filming, it's actually due to the fact that the camera was in my lap.

When Borz-Ali is reunited with his cousins and his grandfather they have a very elegant gesture of greeting: a half-embrace. But the mothers, aunts and female cousins cry, say things, lament.

-The men folk must never show their emotions. It's an Islamic culture—within which I think the war tends to increase a feeling of pressure towards fundamentalism. But at that moment, the women expressed themselves freely, we were able to talk to them. They were actively involved, although there was a real division of labor. The women prepared the meals and remained in the background, but after dinner they came over to relate their experiences of exile, flight, and destruction. It's been described as pragmatic Islamism, being allowed to drink, etc.

Regarding that dreadful shot of a mother holding her dead child in her arms, did you ask yourself if you should shoot it and at what distance?

-I absolutely wanted to film it. The problem was getting to the scene because there was a demonstration, when the Russians started firing on the protesters from the rooftops, wounding several people. Then Chechen troops arrived on the scene, as well as police. Borz-Ali went over as an envoy. The police set up barriers, so I figured traffic was going to be re-routed. I went to have a look, without my camera. People came and stood the dead, crying, and groups danced around them, with Chechen fighters protecting them. But the Russians were still on the rooftops. People had taken the situation in hand, so I went to get my camera.

In Chechnya, your wife wasn't on sound?

-No, she didn't make the trip to Chechnya or to Bosnia, afraid she would remain depressed for a long time. And since neither she nor I have heroic inclinations, we figured that two related people shouldn't go. In Sarajevo, it was my friend and colleague Frank Vellenga who came along, and in Chechnya it was my producer Pieter van Huys-tee who did the sound recording—which I find pretty amazing for a producer. In both cases we hardly spent a week in the war zone, which is nothing in comparison to real war correspondents, whose work I can't help but admire, even if they only rarely exercise any control over its representation. In most film coverage of war, the combatants are described in great detail, whereas people in flight are always a vague mass which is quickly dispensed with. I thought it was important to show the singularity of suffering and death. So there was no doubt in my mind. And I sensed that I had to shoot, to film, to frame it almost meditatively—which might sound narcissistic—in other words to remain serene. You can make out a kind of circular movement around the dead, you see more and more bodies until you suddenly realize there are three generations of dead.

The dead are more than just dead, their faces and bodies are disfigured, gnarled.

-Yes, but the child has a near-perfect beauty, which makes him even dead.

Les Cahiers Du Cinema

No. 517, October 1997

The Flow of the World: Johan van der Keuken's Amsterdam Global Village

by Serge Toubiana

His mother caresses his face, and you think she's going to bring him back to life. Were you sure you would be able to show these images? Did you have any doubt about it?

-I've always thought you have to come to terms with beauty. In the militant phase of documentary cinema there was the notion that things had to be somewhat ugly, shoddy, so that they would seem more real. I've never accepted that point of view. In the case of this dead child, looking at the images again with the sound, I was really overcome by the unimaginable beauty of the scene, which only makes the sorrow greater, reminding us what we could have become if he hadn't lost his life. So I feel that you have to accept beauty, but beauty that's pertinent, not irrelevant.

What you do there, television can't do: take in an entire movement, from Amsterdam all the way to Chechnya, that consist of entering a certain reality and at a peak moment, the climax. What does it feel like attaining this state of fluidity?

-When you're disposed to it, you can take in lots of things to which you must respond in the most fitting manner possible. But sometimes you fail, and in the film there are still moments where I'm not up to snuff, but that's the human side of the film.

In this film there's a rhetorical figure: the homecoming. There is also the notion of exile, and the idea that sons are reunited with their mothers.

-It's quite amazing, because it was never planned. While working on the project I was very sensitive to binary relationships, particularly male-female relationships. The idea of interviews quickly imposed itself. In the past I've often filmed interviews frontally, with me speaking from behind the camera. It creates a sort of flat surface from which a space is created, which is the space between the screen and the spectator. In the last few years I've grown tired of this filming method. For this film, the character's gaze isn't directed at the camera, but off to the side, as in a television interview. But in the place of the interviewer, I cut in shots of the wife listening, as with Roberto for instance, simply by matching gaze-directions within the 180 degree axis between shots. That's something I've always enjoyed doing. Because, apart from chase scenes, the shot-reverse shot is the ultra classic movie device that joins two spaces together. If a shot is taken in France and the reverse-angle shot in China, you can splice them together and get them to look at one another. It's the fictional motif par excellence, and therefore the anti-documentary motif par excellence. In the conversation between the Jewish mother and her son, everything is done with the reverse-angle shots. I show them separately, by cutting out the rapid pans I make from mother to son and vice-versa. Only when things become more personal with the question of guilt do I link them spatially and temporally by maintaining the pan shots. This moment of transition also corresponds to a change in camera position, which changes the axis between the two characters. In other conversations, with Roberto, Borz-Ali and Khalid the messenger, which are actually interviews, I replaced the interviewer with shots of their respective wives in the same axis. Thus they appear in fake reverse-angle shots with regard to their man and I lit them in a somewhat artificial manner to subtly point up the device. Over this slightly "disoriented" image, I added the wife's off-screen voice each time. He speaks on-screen and his words are heard in the fake reaction shot of his wife. It was interesting to see how warmly these women spoke of

Les Cahiers Du Cinema

No. 517, October 1997

The Flow of the World: Johan van der Keuken's Amsterdam Global Village

by Serge Toubiana

their men; it seems to run counter to a certain convention of non-communication, as for instance in the plays of Edward Albee or Lars Noren.

There's a wonderful moment when you film the Chinese children at the school in Amsterdam. This sequence stems from a strictly poetic idea, or more than that...I was going to say, a political idea.

-It's deliberate, but I'd hesitate to say that it's a political film, because discourse has changed today; we've become more modest. One day, a Quebec newspaper wrote that I made political films in the civic sense. I liked that. I understand "civic" in the sense of what you deal with every day. For China, my idea was both weak and strong. It's a sequence about writing, something that I've done several times in other films. For instance in India, in *The Eye Above the Well*, where the kids write letters in the sand that are then erased. It's a gesture that's both ecological (*laughs*) and artistic.

A complete synthesis. And you always take great pleasure in listening to other languages, other words that are also spoken in your city, in you neighborhood. The Other is there.

-Yes, and I can understand two or three things, but I can't make them my own. Also, it may be the pleasure of seeing things and arranging them artistically or temporally, without placing a screen of comprehension—which is often a phony screen, except maybe for linguists, for instance.

In your film, I get the feeling that you record two sorts of people: those who move fast and those who move slowly. The homeless move slowly, slowly, the world is too big for them, which makes them take smaller steps. And there are those who move fast, for instance Khalid, the young Moroccan courier, on his motorbike, whose job it is to go fast and transport images. Do you think we can divide the world today between those who move fast and those who move slowly, those who are involved in communication, who deliver photos, envelopes, and the others?

-Yes, that's quite true. There's something very disturbing about the constant acceleration of information. Everyone, theoretically, can have access and we can cross combat lines. In ex-Yugoslavia, for instance, Serbs, Bosnians and Croats communicated with each other via Internet discussion groups throughout the war. What's striking is that in our country there are former squatters who now use the Internet as a political tool. Others, such as the American philosopher Mark Dery, say that the "cyberculture" is based on an age-old rejection of the body, and that it serves to eliminate the bodies of millions of humans to make way for the global ascendancy of multinational corporations. The great economic powers have an interest in making us forget the work of the body, which is always located at the beginning of the production line.

I get the feeling that as a filmmaker, you blend two dimensions: slowness and speed. You

Les Cahiers Du Cinema

No. 517, October 1997

The Flow of the World: Johan van der Keuken's Amsterdam Global Village

by Serge Toubiana

often film people just before they take off.

-It's the passage from ponderousness to the state of lightness. Traditionally, information was heavy, you had to carry something, but now it becomes more and more volatile, air-born. I made a film—in which I failed to get things across, where I didn't understand things myself—about money, *I Love \$* (1986), in which the people we finally understand the best are those who don't have money. Those who handle money embody both dimensions because they are totally in a volatile realm, in electronic movement every which way, like a great big floating mosaic of funds and deficits. They seek an equilibrium on earth, and always try to grab something in the flow of things. When there's movement, you can, like a current, fish something out. Whereas people who are poor carry their bodies. But those who are out in the floating, volatile world, express their motivations with metaphors involving meat, blood, sex, war, daggers—things of a visceral nature. Their imagery is archaic, so they too are dramatically living at two speeds or in two states of gravity. If I could reshoot the film, I'd have placed more emphasis on that aspect. By doing *Amsterdam Global Village*, I thought a lot in terms of two axes: speed and body, body and dream. With variants, combinations: the fast-moving body, the pleasure-taking body. That's the point of the lovemaking scene, a scene that I'd been somewhat worried about ever since completing the film because of its incongruous, staged, directed nature; but the more the film gets shown, the more I feel that it has its potent, irreducible place. It's the moment when the remaining vestige of symmetrical "documentary" construction is shattered. It's also the point when we make a radical shift from outside, from a façade into a bedroom. And I'm there in that room too, with my own desire. I'd conceived the scene as a sort of reaction, two hours later in the film, to the sequence of the dead in Chechnya: a multisexual embrace free of power struggles. Certainly, things answer one another very often over a great distance, but what's interesting here is mainly the fact that I am there, in the flurry of those naked girls and boys.

Why is the love scene multisexual and not multiracial? All of a sudden everyone's white?

-The thought occurred to me, but I wanted to avoid it being "politically correct." I must say that I've since changed my mind and it perhaps proves that once again I've done too much thinking.

There's a long sequence in which you film youths on their motorbikes performing remarkable feats. It's as if you were seeking a cinematic expression of their agility, their freedom of movement in the balancing game they play. That you're looking for the musical and cinematic form that allows you to join them, to form a bond with them.

-When we tackled the idea of their group, 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. And I remembered that I myself at age seventeen was part of a non-conformist group including students from two Amsterdam high schools, and we were very drawn to Paris, existentialism, or at least what we saw of it, poetry, painting, drinking rotgut red wine, smoking brown tobacco. There were young people who painted, girls who went to the theater, the songs of Mouloudji and Brassens... That was around 1955. In the group, I was the photographer.

Les Cahiers Du Cinema

No. 517, October 1997

The Flow of the World: Johan van der Keuken's Amsterdam Global Village

by Serge Toubiana

So when I was seventeen, I did my first photo album, which was called *We Are Seventeen...* So our group was like theirs to some degree. We had cultural objectives, but the main purpose was for guys and girls to get together on a daily basis and to discuss certain things in a coded language, things that were also coded. Describing what it was about—we talked, we listened to Ravel, Charlie Parker—was what interested me. But the main thing was to be together, to touch one another. And to experience the changing hierarchy of the group, the positions. For those contemporary youths, who belong to a courier service, it's exactly the same thing, but with other symbols: house music, big parties at night where they take pills to get high. They meet under the Rijksmuseum in winter. And next to it, behind the museum square in the summer when the weather's nice. They see each other five times a day. Every time they have an errand to run, they manage to come by and hang out there for ten minutes, without the boss being the wiser. So it's stolen time. I was immediately interested in these ace bikers, who were able to ride on their back wheels. Then I felt that the skaters represented another social class of high school kids, a higher class. So I decided to do a sort of parody of class struggle, like a medieval tournament between two lords, two nights: the bikers and the skaters.

A major question runs through the film: what is otherness and identity? How can you film the other, who is he, how can you get close to him, discover him, and at the same time what is identity: who are we, who are they, who is Roberto?

-The question is: who am I? It might be too selfish.

But at the same time you are interested in others, you're capable of spending time...

-Yes, but maybe also to find out if I exist. I say in the film that life is a dream. And yet, I'm more of a materialist...I think that we exist in a body, are determined by what we eat, or by changes in the climate. I feel very concerned about the ecological state of the world. But there's a vestige that somewhere seems essential, which to me has to do with dreams. When I was in Sarajevo for a few days during the war, then in Chechnya, it was as though I'd sent a proxy of myself there. But had I been hit by a bullet or a grenade, the idea of a proxy would no longer have been valid, because the pain would remain with me the rest of my life. One day, I wrote a short piece about a fighter pilot who gets shot down. And in his fall, before he crashes, a thought comes to him: that there was nothing in him, he was just an empty container. I'm someone who likes good food, who has a tendency to overeat, and I think the fact of working the camera myself saves me somewhat...As though there was an excess of materiality counterbalancing the empty container, the volatile. For me, the search for identity involves trying to fill the space between these two things, to create a link between them. So maybe it's the quest for wholeness. And in the so-called multicultural society, one must realize that juxtaposing and cohabitating is already an enormous feat. Integration exists as well, but it occurs over generations, in pioneering situations.

At the same time, your film deals more essentially with otherness, which is the big politi-

Les Cahiers Du Cinema

No. 517, October 1997

The Flow of the World: Johan van der Keuken's Amsterdam Global Village

by Serge Toubiana

cal question of the day: aggression, expulsion, acceptance, understanding, etc... And your film is very useful, because it describes a fluid, multi-faceted, multi-layer world.

-I think that the main thing is to try, daily, to overcome one's own fears of the unknown, to realize that the unknown contains much that's familiar. It may be as simple as that. Of course the moment I described, when I arrived in the square where everyone seemed foreign to me, was still a moment when a small fear is the result of feeling left out. My filmmaking is not direct cinema, but almost always the fruit of a collaboration. Even with the homeless person I film for about thirty minutes, there's a collaboration. Almost nothing is totally done on the spur of the moment. First there has to be a minimal understanding, and then we can build on it. It also helps me overcome the fear that I often feel in situations where I don't feel up to the task. When I'm alone, for instance, in cafés in Amsterdam, which are much more closed than Paris cafés, when I'm alone and it's dark out, going into one of those cafés really takes getting up my nerve. In *The Man without Qualities*, Musil says that men are motivated both by a very strong desire to meet and make contact, and at the same time by an absolute horror of meeting someone else. I think that's fundamental...and it goes well beyond racism.

When you talk about this neighborhood, and you say that you yourself don't exist or that you're an empty container, isn't that a way of coping with that fear? Because you feel like a proxy of yourself, isn't it a way of saying: the solution is to vanish into thin air? And the fear can vanish thanks to cinema.

-Cinema is the exact opposite, since it's totally physical, so you have to implicate yourself. I don't see how to bring it together properly.

But for instance, when you have your camera, aren't people ever aggressive toward you?

-The first given for a mise-en-scene of reality is: how to cross the 30 yards that separate me from the other, how to enter the same space. So if I'm in a street and there's something going on across the street, I can't start filming. Otherwise I'm an outside observer, and people sense that. You have to get across that street, reach the other sidewalk and gradually get involved. If I'm close enough for people to hit me, everyone is on an equal footing. If I'm at a distance, I can capture the image and take off. I've been in situations where people got threatening, so I put the camera on the ground, knelt down beside it and then defused everything. Normally I film from a position where I can touch and be touched. That enables people to refuse, which of course happens.

The only time where History is mentioned is when the Jewish mother talks to her son: she talks about the war, and her story delves back into History. And you use a formal, flat, lateral option: first there's a tracking shot, then we hear voices before seeing the people, and the past is evoked. Do you mean that evoking the past involves a sort of moral tracking shot? How did you consider the question, and why did you want this story?

-As shooting progressed I felt the need to have an elderly person in the film, someone who embodied the history of the century. The other characters were rather young. We immediately thought about the history of the deportation of the Jews, which left such a

Les Cahiers Du Cinema

No. 517, October 1997

The Flow of the World: Johan van der Keuken's Amsterdam Global Village

by Serge Toubiana

scar, because nearly a seventh of Amsterdam's population was exterminated, a community that played a major social and cultural role. It was Nosh (Noshka van der Lely) who suggested that we find some elderly musicians—we know that some who had retired from the Concertgebouw symphony orchestra, who continued to perform in trios and quartets, a more intimate musical activity, often linked to the Jewish community. (I should say something here about Nosh, who has not only recorded the sound on all my major films in recent years and with whom I've lived and traveled for over twenty-five years, but who also contributes many ideas along the way).

Through friends, we found Hennie Anke, a former operetta singer who represented the political tradition of left-wing, often atheist, Jews which was very strong in prewar Amsterdam and which produced eminent artists, intellectuals, and politicians. Hennie with her son, Adrie, had lived through separation, clandestinity and the deportation of her husband. And they'd never really talked about it. Adrie had avoided confronting this painful past. It seems nearly incredible, but for them our film was the opportunity to broach the subject, and that's why I arranged them—after a short sequence in which they visit the apartment they'd lived in during the war, in which everything is confusion, disorder, and roaming—in this formal shot-reverse shot conversational set-up that I've already described. It's a conversation that recalls Roberto and his mother, but there, one could still give an impression of beginning spontaneously, whereas with Hennie and Adrie, you really sense that they've been set up, so to speak. In that sense, this sequence also constitutes the first "stylistic break" which introduces the instability of composition, the asymmetry, that dominates the whole last part of the film.

When I did my Palestinian film (*The Palestinians*, 1975), I used images that warranted, or justified, a historical viewpoint. And I felt that I had to distort those images. Using historical footage—stock shots—I systematically reprinted each frame five times to create a jerky motion so that viewers would know that the image had been recently tampered with, so that it would lose its factual value, but could still serve to guide or orient us. A hypothetical image. In *Amsterdam Global Village*, there are beautiful shots of Amsterdam that recall its aquatic past. We could have used war footage. But I figured memory functions differently. What we often remember are filmed or photographic images. Images virtually rob us of our memory, because they replace it. Remembrance is more painful when we try to retrieve the sensations behind the images. In that sense, I spent a lot of time thinking about whether or not to include a picture of Hennie's husband, Adrie's father.

You show it at the end. Do you mean that it's an artifice?

-It's the only minute in the entire film when you see an image of the past. So it's very focalized.

That's because of editing. The photograph wasn't there in fact.

Les Cahiers Du Cinema

No. 517, October 1997

The Flow of the World: Johan van der Keuken's Amsterdam Global Village

by Serge Toubiana

-Yes, I intercut the son's hand holding the picture, which then fills the screen. Adrie and Hennie told me they were very impressed by that moment. You see the father, who at that time was just 30 years old. I filmed the neighborhood where it all happened and maybe that shows that even the real place cannot reveal history. It's only one of the reasons I wanted to see Sarajevo. Ten years from now, when everything will have changed physically, will we still *know*? There are things that are revealed, but just as many that are hidden, about the past. And finally, only the spoken word can awaken it, confronting it with the walls, the sidewalks, windows, trees. So for me, in the cinema, the dimension of not knowing is always enormous. That's also why I'm anti-ethnological, if not anti-knowledge.

You mean that for something to happen, you have to be in a disposition of expectation, receptivity, and a little innocence, of not knowing?

-What I mean is, you can't know. The scourge of documentary films is the attempt to explain the world, without the huge gaping doubt, of not knowing. With regard to my film, *The Palestinians*, which makes extensive use of voice-over narration, I sometimes asked myself: how do you know all that? Fortunately, certain elements of the narration are reiterated by the people's comments, based on their own experience. In my political approach it was important to apply my know-how to a theme that at the same time was very difficult and painful, especially in Holland. But I still find the film unsatisfying, because there's the notion of knowing something. I'd like to reduce things to a minimum. Of course we know horrible, atrocious things. But our comprehension can never exceed the experience of a person who tries to grasp it in exchange with other people...And for such an exchange to be possible, you have to wait fifty years...

Godard also said that things take fifty years...

-Yes, before we can admit that things happened like that.

There's a very disturbing moment when Hennie and Adrie go back to the apartment and they're greeted by a black woman from Surinam who lives there now. Suddenly, there's the feeling that the woman is completely forgotten, as though the effort of remembrance excluded the present. But in the end, Hennie kisses the woman. Do you think that means something with respect to coping with a possible menace today?

-With regard to a husband's photo, I realized that it had to be placed next to the Surinamese woman's porcelain knick-knacks. These are two types of images that make for an appropriate juxtaposition, where you realize that the little porcelain dog cannot really see the photo. Only the mother and the son can see it. The Surinamese woman can't see it because she lives in another world which is represented by these objects: a world of a certain beauty in which she can say that she has been through the same thing. These are essential devices of editing, where you figure out how to go from one woman to the other without violating the frontier of not knowing.

Throughout the film there are a number of patterns of translation: leaving one space to

Les Cahiers Du Cinema

No. 517, October 1997

The Flow of the World: Johan van der Keuken's Amsterdam Global Village

by Serge Toubiana

go to another... With purely cinematic, or musical patterns: which are usually lateral, meaning not horizontal. There are layers of knowledge, layers of history.

-We look at things as though we are looking at a wall, but we want to see behind the wall. And we don't know if there's anything behind the wall. It's another way of talking about the empty container. We want to get behind the surface, and at the same time create a space in front of the surface. Maybe that's the most human thing of all.

How long did it take you to make the film?

-I first drafted the idea in June 1993 and I registered the script in April 1994. The shooting began in November 1994. We started editing in September 1995 and finished in August 1996. But we continued shooting until June 1996: the last scene was the one in which Ayni, Roberto's son, who was born early in the film, kicks a soccer ball for the first time, thus bringing to a close, rounding up to the theme of soccer which also runs through the film. Meanwhile, in 1993 and 1994, I shot a short film in Sarajevo, *Sarajevo Film Festival Film*, in which you were involved as director of the cinema broadcast, *Extérieurs Nuits*. Then another short, *On Animal Locomotion*, with the composer Willem Breuker, and the last part of my triptych about the painter and poet Lucebert, *Lucebert, Time and Farewell*.

Was the film expensive?

-The final cost of the film was 1.8 million florins, including the cost of blowing it up to 35mm, which costs a lot of money for a four hour film, \$1,100,000. I shoot in normal 16mm. Since I had television backing, I find it unpleasant to have those Super 16 bars that create a greater distance on the TV screen. But the film is projected in 1.66 in theaters. Technically, blown-up 16 is very good, there's a rough quality to it that I like, a texture close to photography. So we edited for nine months, after two months of synchronizing dailies with the editor, Barbara Hin. The film was supposed to be three hours long, but ended up running four hours and forty minutes. In fact, I wanted it to last four hours, to have the time to travel within it: to make the extensive trips within it and cover two winter seasons. So I had to cut 40 minutes. As I've done for a number of years now, I showed it to people who know how to look at a film or who had an interest in it. It's rough because you can easily go overboard in criticism. You have to know how to listen and analyze. Then we took ten days to rectify things and finish. First, we had edited all the scenes in detail and reassembled them at the end in three weeks. So you edit the film in great detail for eight months, then you go back to it as something new, distribute the scenes, cut out half of them. So you really have to be tough on everything that you've already carefully put together so as to find an active, instinctive attitude, as though you'd only just come across this material. Although it was already fine-tuned, the contact of the elements with one another required radical cuts. Juxtaposing two sequences to some extent takes away the center of each to create a new core between them. Rhythmically everything is different. This was the heartbeat I was after at every level.

One of the characters says: You feel like a member of nature's orchestra. It's a very

Les Cahiers Du Cinema

No. 517, October 1997

The Flow of the World: Johan van der Keuken's Amsterdam Global Village

by Serge Toubiana

powerful statement about what it means to be a film character.

-Yes, that was Borz-Ali, the Chechen. That's also why he impresses me so, why I like him so much.

Isn't that also the definition of the filmmaker: someone who orchestrates nature but who also plays its score?

-I've often drawn the comparison with playing the saxophone, or the trombone when it comes to zoom shots. For me, the camera has three features: the musical instrument aspect, in which you play your part, improvise, when you're directly implicated; the second is boxing, with the camera's striking power; and the caress, because the slight movements that graze the skin of beings and things interest me a lot. I feel I've learned a lot about a new shot, but another variant of the same shot. It's a way of telling yourself: there'll always be something outside the frame, something off to the side to go and explore. The frame is always something approximate. Nowadays I increasingly get the feeling that it's no longer me who decides on the framing, all I'm doing is following the camera. It takes flight, and I follow behind. I belong to a nation of great skaters. When I was a child, we had wooden skates which were tied slightly to our shoes with ropes. But the great skaters, up north, wore these wooden skates very loosely tied with rope to their stockinged feet. When I finally learned how to skate well, I realized I had to loosen the ropes, that the skates had to move freely under your feet. The balance is such that they needn't be tied. It's the same with the camera. I've felt over the past few years that I can just let it glide. I feel much more relaxed about focus. I leave the image unfocused for a moment, then slowly correct it. It's as though it weighed less, and maybe that's the heart-beat you were talking about that lets the pace of things come to the camera.

Interview conducted in Paris on November 20, 1996 by Serge Toubiana.

Revised by Johan van der Keuken March 3-4, 1997.

Translated from French by Lenny Borger.