Two months before his death, and despite the reoccurrence of his vitiating cancer, Johan van der Keuken came to Paris once again to give a final cinema class. Theoretician and teacher, he commented on the images in his films.

On 6 November 2000, Johan van der Keuken, together with François Albera, a professor of cinema history and aesthetics, gave a film class in a Parisian screening room that used as its point of reference a video compilation of clips from van der Keuken's films. This lecture again demonstrated (as though there was any need) the degree to which Johan van der Keuken was not only an excellent filmmaker, but also a subtle theoretician who so openly analysed and questioned his own images and obsessions, and how he related to the world. With this article, Cahiers du cinéma offers you the opportunity to experience this “Master Class,” complete and unedited, which was filmed by Thierry Nouel.

Johan van der Keuken: Before beginning, I must say that the idea of a “Master Class” is a little foreign to us, in the sense that what you are about to get is a little performance by two gentlemen which is limited in terms of time. It consists of a videotape of selections from my films, about which we will extemporise. Because it is improvised, it is not at all like what is usually meant by a “Master Class.”

François Albera: The sequence of clips was put together three years ago in 1997, right after Amsterdam Global Village was released. Has the fact that you have made two films since then changed anything?

JVDK: Of course, I could have added a number of clips to the compilation, and there is indeed a bit of a gap as a result— you will have to go and see the films for the missing pieces [laughter]. I think I would have added the 105 children filmed in a Sahel village, with each one in a separate shot saying his or her name. It is a moment in which the flow of the film kind of stops, and as a result reaches something that is more contemplative and meditative about the way in which people express themselves.

<< Flat Jungle >>
[1978]

JVDK: This is from Flat Jungle (1978), which is perhaps my most Dutch film, a landscape film in which the horizon line, which divides the image in two, becomes the reference point for the whole composition of the film.

FA: After you made this film, but before you put together the reel we are now viewing, another compilation reel was shown at Beaubourg in the exhibition on Time, in which this same character appeared. It shows the attention you pay to people’s movements when they work. The editing in the flow of his movements is rather jerky.
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JVDK: But there is also the approach to the character. He is never approached in a single line. Some shots back off, and there are lateral camera movements in which the character disappears from the screen and then reappears again. Everything is thought of in terms of a flat surface.

FA: Then suddenly, without any transition, we get this close-up of worms, the effect of which is to further emphasize the flatness of the screen and at the same time show us something that is small, whereas before, things were shot from very far away.

JVDK: Of course, it is also a film that has to do with scale. The worms are on a very small scale, but, on the other hand, there are shots of nuclear power stations. Here we can see how the same work passes through a mechanical phase, with two different people picking up the same fishing worm on the assembly line. The editing here is very classical.

FA: There was also a change in the sound. The person who was working the sea did so to the sound of wind. Whereas here, the noise is mechanical. The workers have to wear ear protectors.

<< Beauty >>
[1970]

JVDK: Here, using very simple editing, we get the same idea of blocked ears, of the senses cut off, of subterranean life. It is a kind of false history of a spy in which the character is carrying out a kind of investigation of the real. But whenever things have to do with nature, he cannot see it or feel it. This makes him increasingly violent. His senses are blocked. There is an obvious link to my film about blind people.

FA: The character is deprived of sight, sex, hearing, which may be references to the very parameters of cinema, namely sound and image. There is also this image, which is about to appear...

JVDK: For me, this was a very sexual image, this rounded interior shape within the rock.

FA: Compared to Flat Jungle, where the editing was tied to the locale, considerable liberties are taken in assembling objects and situations that are completely disjointed.
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**JVDK:** This film is almost a pastiche. It is not fiction, but rather artificial, which makes it possible to combine images that are not obviously related in any way. What I was interested in doing was to examine the role played by these images out of context, to make the signs stand out more clearly, so to speak, and to try to be able to see the relationships. I thought of him as having been a seagull in a previous life. The editing shows clearly that the space is in no way restrictive.

<< Herman Slobbe, Blind Child >>  
[1966]

**JVDK:** Here, we see blind Boy Scouts on a walking exercise over rough terrain.

**FA:** The way you edited these sequences, it is not immediately clear that the boys are blind (we see them from behind). People only gradually begin to realize that they are blind. Just a few minutes ago, in Beauty, we had a character who had become “blinded” because his senses were cut off, whereas here we see Boy Scouts, and realize that they are somewhat awkward, and eventually understand that they are blind.

**JVDK:** The music is important (Archie Shepp, the sound of an occasionally strident saxophone). Here, the music is really the most important thing. For the blind boys, there are no sounds reflecting off the sand or snow, which is why the terrain is so difficult for them. They do not “hear” the obstacles.

At this point, there is a shift in the story. Just as we were about to begin feeling sorry for them, we realize that life goes on (the shot in which they are walking without any difficulty and singing). The film is constantly changing direction in this way.

Here is another sequence showing feet walking, in tactile contact with the earth. A long lens was used for these shots in order to get as many different types of shots as possible within the space of the feet. Laid over this is a sound montage of six or eight sound and music tracks, even including a little bit of Shōenberg, I think.

**FA:** How do you explain your special relationship with music? When the worms appear in Flat Jungle, the music accompanying the shot is almost plaintive.
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JVDK: I would say that the image is the screen, it’s a projection on a surface plane, whereas the music is in the audience’s space. The music does not go from the screen to the rear of the hall following the logic of perspective, but rather the space begins at the border that is the screen and projects into the theater. That is why the sound is often in front of the screen when it is used. There are very strong contrasts in the sound. Sometimes the sound acts as a dam, keeping the image in place and distancing itself from it. In other instances, we are enveloped by the sound.

<< The White Castle >>
[1973]

JVDK: Here again we have a shot of people working (workers viewed from above the catwalk in a plant). These are typical of the types of shots condemned by Serge Daney. The shot of the kapo, the supervisor, seen from above. Sometimes I use this point of view precisely to highlight the dividing line between those who work and myself, someone who does another kind of work, but who nevertheless got in the door through the boss. What we see is a form of technology that is not very common in the Western world now, but which for the most part has been shifted to other parts of the world.

FA: We see this woman knitting. You contrast handcraft motions with industrialized ones.

JVDK: These are things that get mixed together in the story of this film. We see how wheat is milled using a mule that goes round and round, and then later, using a tractor that follows the same pattern, the same movement, but with a different technology, with different sounds. Here, in the slaughterhouse, there is the mixture of the conveyor belt, which transports the animals, but there is still the fact of individual death.

FA: And then, in the middle, this shot that seems to intimate the sheep to come...

JVDK: Here we will resolve the little story which, through a series of dissolves, in a very linear and classical pattern, runs counter to the non-linearity of the film, in which everything gets mixed up and intertwined. Here we have a bit of story line. It is a bit like a mood change. Now we have the non-documentary shot par excellence, because we are in place before the character who is arriving on a motorbike. Leacock and other filmmakers who deal with the real would never do this. They would get angry [laughter]. You can see that it was set up, because the guy on the motorbike is looking to see if the take was all right.
Here we are looking at a transformation, and not necessarily a very subtle one, through the use of music. The music subtly signals that the sheep becomes human and we identify with her. This has to do with individual killing.

FA: *What is administered is a gentle death, unlike the industrial killing of the pigs that we saw earlier.*

JVDK: But the funny thing is that this gentle death is difficult to watch. It is easier to look at mass death than a single death. Indeed, this whole section speaks about that, of the need for work, the possibility of both individual and collective work, and of individual and collective death. In a sense, things have been completely turned upside down in our thinking. There is a certain sentimentality that has become very characteristic of us. We feel distressed, clearly because the throat that is being cut is our own. This feeling is heightened by the music.

FA: *Here we see the checkerboard pattern, which you use very frequently in your photographs and your films.*

JVDK: This is what I call the zero surface—a flat surface, which is extended here. It refers to God. The lowered head, nothing left. Even God cannot escape.

<< Beauty >>

[1970]

JVDK: This is the same spy as before, who gets lost in the real. He is unable to put the two ends together, and the sound does not really go very well either. It is a short film about paranoia, about the state of being separated, from the world and hence from oneself. Each shot elaborates upon this idea.

For example, here, nature is behind bars, and he is behind other bars. He is never in the place shown in the image. In this film, the abstract aspect of things is emphasized. But, generally speaking, I believe this abstraction needs a kick in the pants. It is an extreme film, one of several I have made that were against the idea of the documentary, because there was an overly facile assumption about the transmission of the real by means of the image. Now there is a terrible thing, because he is looking at this injured bird, but it is I, clearly, chasing after the bird with my camera. It is a shot that I would not do now. The bastard is no longer he but me. You can even see that it is the camera making this movement behind the injured and panicky bird.
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FA: At the same time, there is a shot followed by a reverse angle shot, which is typical of fiction. Where is the cameraman located when Spielberg is filming the reconstructed concentration camp? In fact, it’s the same kind of question that is involved here. The fictional construct puts the act of filming in parentheses, whereas here...

<< The Way South >>
[1981]

JVDK: The sin I believe is in the act of filming—which is what I assume, rather. Filmmaking is the result of a large number of small and not so small messy details. Here, we see multiple images of an imam speaking (on the many monitors in the shot), saying that God gave us free will precisely so that we would fail to use it [laughter]. That’s very astute.

<< Brass Unbound >>
[1993]

JVDK: We cut to a burial in Surinam. The film records the voyage of a large tuba, which goes from Christianity toward animism. But what interests us here is the trip itself. Once again, the sound editing is relatively complex. I had the idea of asking the tuba player to sit in the back of an open truck, with me sitting on a chair facing him and going through the whole journey with him. What we get with this shot from over the shoulder is the character’s throat, which breathes in, absorbs the real. As for the actual world behind him, all we ever see of it is in the corner of the screen. The sound of the tuba is doubled, it becomes two tubas.

FA: At the same time, it is an eye.

JVDK: Yes, it is an eye, it is a throat, it is the idea of the cinema as something that eats reality. Instead of making it the subject of a documentary, it is inserted into something else, on the edges. Here, for example, one sees the word “strange” on the sign. This little shop has “Strange” as its name. For me, it is always about differentiation. You might say that these shots are much too long, because we could have covered the voyage of the tuba in a minute. But what interests us are things like, for example, the guy who says “fuck you!” to the camera. These are the things that we are very happy to catch. In a sense, it is movement itself that interests us, in its length, and not only the summary of things. Also over to one side, behind the tuba,
we can see the poverty in the surroundings. All these things are recorded by means of a pretext.

<< Herman Slobbe, Blind Child >>
[1966]

FA: The child, the head of the child, is shot a bit like the tuba.

JVDK: Yes, that is correct. But what also comes into play is the idea that we never know what is inside someone’s head. This is very touching, because we know full well that all kinds of things are going on in this guy’s head. Earlier in the film, Herman said that he did not want to go to see the auto races, that he could watch them on television. But, in the end, there he is. We also move forward by means of unexpected turns and changes of direction (shot changes in which Herman imitates the sound of cars in a microphone, sounds heard at the racetrack). In retrospect, we understand that the car sounds we heard in the earlier shots were made by Herman.

<< Velocity: 40-70 >>
[1970]

JVDK: This is another sound: a bomber squadron. Like Beauty, it is a short film I made for the 50th anniversary of the Liberation. We worked with a poet on contemporary images. The film is called Velocity: 40-70 and not 45. It begins with the start of the war and goes until when the film was made. We see what really happened on earth, the traffic island, and these flying matchboxes. Of course, these special effects are not as good as what we could do digitally now. But never mind. Because the shot is held so long, we end up contemplating the matchboxes.

FA: This, too, is one of your abstract, demonstrative films, which alternate with films that are closer to real life.

<< Sarajevo Film Festival >>
[1993]

JVDK: This is Sarajevo in the middle of the war. I filmed a young female architecture student who was at the film festival being held at the time. All of these scenes are directed. And then we noticed her father, who is blind. Naturally, I reacted immediately. “My father is blind, he has not gone out since the beginning of the war,” said the
young student. The war began two and a half years ago. That was one of those moments when there was a loss of control and staging. There is always a moment when constructs give way, when the real gets the upper hand again. [In the film, shots are fired; everyone, including Van der Keuken, dropped down waiting for the attack to end.] Then, she said something completely unexpected, “I’m sorry, I thought it would not be dangerous.” She says she is sorry for what is happening, and takes responsibility for it, as though it were her fault, and then a very bitter smile appears on her face. These are things that we could never direct, because, when all is said and done, it’s completely crazy.

And from there we go back to this head watching the film, the underlying structure of this small film. Everything happens before these games, it is a film festival, and behind these games is everyday life in her neighbourhood. She says that her life is worse than a movie, and that she could never have believed that she would lose her mother, her friends, that she would have to fight for food and water, or that she could be killed or paralysed for life. Then she adds, “It’s awful.” We decided to end with that word.

<< Amsterdam Global Village >>

[1997]

JVDK: This segment is a musical subject. A conductor is conducting his orchestra. As you will see, it is a sequence about the change of the seasons, from Debussy’s La Mer. There is a transition from autumn to winter. We always do two things at the same time, as we did with the tuba, namely describing what the tuba player could see and at the same time, describing the movement and brilliance of the sounds. Here, too, we combined several things. For me, it was important to film this music the same way we would have done with jazz. For example, I filmed the conductor very physically. This is in contrast to the usual way in which concerts are filmed, with several cameras and changes of points of view. Here, I sat in the middle of the violin section; you can even see the bow, excuse me, the bow crossing the frame... I remember being moved when shooting this. There is intensity about this guy, but he [the conductor] also charms the orchestra. And now the camera begins to move. For me, there always has to be someone’s point of view. Here, we are going from warmth to cold. Now we are in winter and we happen upon this Christmas tree. You have to take advantage of these signs. This is followed by a partially obscured view of things.

<< Sarajevo Film Festival >>

[1993]
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FA: Yes, there is concealment, we see this a lot in your films. The screen is not an open window on the world, for the window is not as easy to open as André Bazin claimed.

JVDK: We are speaking about windows... and presto. We are still in an anti-documentary situation par excellence: we see this young woman behind the façade, then there is a link from the exterior to the interior, which filmmakers committed to reality cannot do. Here, I am setting up a physically multi-sexual love scene. Things are going around in circles, and the replacement of one body by another is taking place as things rotate, and I am clearly part of the action, not filming from far away. For me, this was very dicey. Everyone has commented on the scene. Either they say that it was awkward, politically correct or, on the other hand, done to shock people. For me, what was involved was showing physical love without the use of any violence. It was a “counter image” of a sequence filmed in Chechnya, in which we were watching the terrible death of a child. I wanted to do it almost as a personal presence in the film.

FA: After what you experienced while making your last film, in which you were involved with shamans, what do you think of that scene you had previously shot? You were on the outside in that one, much less

JVDK: This film was made in India. Once again, the editing is cut into by little bits of the building, walls, and screens that limit the field of vision. Here once again, sound is very important (we hear regular knocks outside but do not know what they are). We see young Brahmins reciting millennial texts, singing cosmological songs. This is a very conservative class of Brahmins. They recite nine hours a day for several years. The head movements were a mnemotechnic system. There is very beautiful sound outside which is mingled with the song. In this shot, we show the outside wall, and then go to the other side from a different angle. It is a reverse angle panorama that enables us to segue organically from one angle to a close-up. These effects are a technique for speedwriting while shooting. The final editing also depends on things one thinks of along the way. This requires a feel for editing in your head. I wanted to use this somewhat transparent screen, this wall, this separation from the external world, to go from the window side to the shot where one then sees that this movement was not only artificial but also internalised in the boy’s neck.

FA: After what you experienced while making your last film, in which you were involved with shamans, what do you think of that scene you had previously shot? You were on the outside in that one, much less
involved than in The Long Holiday.

JVDK: There, too, I was subject to the actions of the shaman, which came from a desire to film. At that moment, the window became the subject. It was a spatial element, and then it became something through which we looked. Through this screen, we see women beating laundry. This rhythm remained throughout the film.

FA: At the moment when they were shaking the students’ heads, laundry was being beaten outside.

JVDK: Yes, the nature of this rhythm is revealed fairly late in the film.

<< The Spirit of the Times >>
[1968]

JVDK: This is one of my first films, highly political. It is a trip to Biafra during the war, when I was working as an assistant to another Dutch filmmaker, Louis van Gasteren, who, for me, played a key role in my choice to become political rather than merely “mental”. One must participate. This scene shows a pile of signs, done with pretty simple special effects - the assassination of Robert Kennedy, Martin Luther King, some key moments from 1968. The idea is to indicate political upheaval around the world. There we have a shot of me in Biafra. (We hear the drum roll of a military march and then suddenly it switches to rock music.) The idea of that music, of the way in which it was presented, was to indicate that order was breaking down.

FA: However, not long afterwards, you made a film about the counter-culture in Amsterdam, in which the hippies come out rather well.

JVDK: I think it is somewhat more complex than that. These are people who are trying to create another identity. The idea here was to ask whether it was possible to turn one’s back on society and pursue other interests of a more psychical nature, etc. This counter-cultural center inherited the idea, but there were also politicised people, squatters, immigrants... Here we again have this obscured view, the surface of the screen, with a soundtrack that is in front of the screen, and a shot that lasts for a fairly long time.

FA: In this glimpse of the wall, there is a crevice in the rock which for you had an erotic meaning, and which is seen throughout the film until we reach scenes that are indeed erotic. It could be the image of a woman’s vagina.

JVDK: Yes indeed! At that time, I hadn’t thought of that at all [laughter]. That’s the house in which I lived at that time.
FA: There’s this strange thing of a window that opens to the outside...

JVDK: But the outside is again a wall, and we don’t know what lies behind it. In any case, this goes hand in hand with my discovery at the time of the films of Straub and Satyajit Ray, both of who are interested in the lasting nature of things, and who attempt to bring duration into existence.

FA: Given your experience as a photographer, do you feel that long shots bring you closer to photography?

JVDK: No more than close-ups. There are some shots that are more photographic in nature. Extreme close-ups can give that effect. There, the focus is on feet, but at the same time the body is attempting to concentrate on the frame. Perhaps it’s true that familiarity with photography makes such a shot possible. You can see the things that I have written: “Cinema is OK, too.” [laughter] There, that’s it.

This material, recorded in Paris on November 6, 2000, was transcribed by Jean-Sebastien Chauvin. Our thanks to François Albera, Carine Gauguin, Thierry Nouel, and Suzanna Scott. Translation: Terrelysian/Metaphrase.