

# Documentary and ecosemiotics: Frames and faces in the work of Johan van der Keuken

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**Abstract.** This article argues that the work of the late Johan van der Keuken offers a contribution to ecological semiotics, and that it also defines the relationship between the semiotic animal and nature in ways that avoid glottocentricism. Taking from the recent work of Kalevi Kull, Jesper Hoffmeyer, and John Deely amongst others, I will argue that van der Keuken's documentaries offer a view of ecology that is broader than a study of bio-physical processes that might reduce ecology to a narrow political issue.

In order to support this argument, I will be looking at two contrasting films from van der Keuken – *Flat Jungle* (1978) and *Face Value* (1991). The first film examines natural habitats within a confined coastal area in Western Europe, while the second film looks at human beings in the different urban environments of late-20th-century Europe. I will then argue that van der Keuken does not collapse the vital distinctions between *umwelt* and *Lebenswelt*, yet his films also succeed at reminding us of their constant interdependence.

**Keywords:** ecosemiotics; semiotic animal; *umwelt* theory; documentary; immersion; van der Keuken

This essay is loosely based on my recent monograph, *Semiotics and Documentary: The Living Sign in the Cinema* (Tsang 2013), in which a substantial section was dedicated to an analysis of the work of the late Dutch filmmaker Johan van der Keuken. On this occasion, I will be arguing that van der Keuken's work anticipates many of the issues that are relevant within current ecological semiotics and that he also defines the relationship between the semiotic animal and nature in ways that are not narrowly glottocentric. I will be looking closely at *Flat Jungle* (1978), which is a film that describes the ecology of the Wadden Sea – an area between Germany, the Netherlands and Denmark that the filmmaker saw as being unique because of the diversity of its species and its status as one of the last natural habitats within his own

homeland. Many years later, *Flat Jungle* was described by the distinguished German film critic, Thomas Elsaesser as a film which is “aware of the fragile nature of the ecosystem [...] awaiting to be rediscovered in the age of globalization and ecological sensibilities” (Elsaesser 2005: 195).

I will also be looking at a few key moments in a slightly later film, *Face Value* (1991), which is a portrait of over fifty European faces and ostensibly much more anthropocentric. My attempt to link two very different films might be seen in light of a few observations made by Jesper Hoffmeyer. In his attempt to define biosemiotics, he makes a distinction between a more traditional approach that attempts to “bring people close to Nature” and a more novel one that brings “Nature close to people” (Hoffmeyer 1996: 24). Roughly speaking, *Flat Jungle* corresponds to the first approach and *Face Value* the second. Both approaches are nevertheless complementary, once we see ecology in semiotic terms that are broader than a quantitative account of the distribution of bio-chemical energies (Lestel 2014) which would reduce ecology to a narrow political issue (Cobley 2007; Kull, Maran 2014).

Furthermore, it should not be forgotten that when van der Keuken originally made *Flat Jungle*, the filmmaker decided after much discussion and deliberation to make a film that was not solely about the place in its unspoiled “natural” state, but would also describe “the people who live in this region and earn their living there, who in one way or another, depend on economic relationships with the environment. Only from this starting point could nature be described again. Of course, it was a humanized nature (another type does not or hardly exists)” (Daney, Fargier 1978: 66; my translation, H. T.). In other words, this is a semiotic account of nature that does not pretend to give us direct access to what Kull (1998: 355 fn. 12) has described as “zero nature” – “the untouched nature, which, in an absolute sense, is even untouched by our knowledge”. Nevertheless, van der Keuken has also implied that we are potentially aware of the different relationships and translations between various degrees of mediated nature ranging from artefact, materially transformed nature and nature as we see it, which are identified by Kull (1998: 355) as third, second, and first nature respectively. Furthermore, an awareness of these different relationships is inevitably tied to an emergent sense of ethics that is part of what Elsaesser has described above as a set of “ecological sensibilities” in “an age of globalization”.

Elsaesser’s observations hint that we might see ecology not simply as a single issue, but one which above all considers all forms of life in broader relational and possibly even semiotic terms. But this also incorporates an acknowledgement of human temporality that is rooted and embedded within practice. It hints strongly at an awareness that we are borne into a socially constructed historical world, whose contradictions often exceed the provisional workings of a living community of inquiry (Colapietro 2004, 2005; Ventimiglia 2005, 2008). Such a process, which

demands existential honesty in the face of often brutal instrumentalism, is fallible, fraught, and sometimes even tragic, it might be noted. In this regard, Jesper Hoffmeyer (2008: 325) has recently reminded us that “to accept an ethics of vulnerability, justified by the fundamental irreplaceability of life, must be seen in this light, to be as much a bodily need as it is an intellectual decision”. Nevertheless, our capacity for inquiry, self-transformation, and semiotic freedom are subject to constraints that are both cultural and biological. Our awareness of the status of the sign *qua* sign, and even the real existence of relations that lie outside direct perception<sup>1</sup> might arguably also be seen as coterminous with a unique species-specific awareness of the temporal limitations of any single individual life cycle. This also incorporates a sense of mortality that is arguably less readily available to non-human animals yet is an integral part of our emergent self-awareness. Indeed, Colapietro’s (2006: 146) recent observation that “[a] sense of finitude is here conjoined to an acknowledgement of our capacity for self transcendence and self-transformation” highlights the trajectory that this essay will attempt to follow.

### Multiple umwelts/one semiosphere

This brings me to the intricacies of van der Keuken’s *Flat Jungle*. Notwithstanding Elsaesser’s emphasis upon the somatic and experiential nature of all of van der Keuken’s practice (Elsaesser 2005) and Daney’s description of the interconnection between life on a micro and macro scale (Daney 1978), this highly complex film can also be seen in the context of work within contemporary visual anthropology that has attempted to integrate culture and nature by rejecting the idea of a distanced spectator standing outside nature.<sup>2</sup> In his recent attempt to integrate Umwelt Theory’s coupling of perception and action, the British anthropologist Tim Ingold tells us the following:

But the open world that creatures inhabit is not prepared for them in advance. It is continually coming into being around them. It is a world, that is, of formative and transformative *processes*. If such processes are of the essence of perception, then they are also of the essence of what is perceived. To understand how beings can inhabit this world means attending to the dynamic processes of world-formation in which both perceivers and the phenomena they perceive are necessarily immersed. (Ingold 2011a: 117–118)

<sup>1</sup> See Deely 2002: 68–109 for a thorough account of how relations are not directly obtained through direct perception.

<sup>2</sup> For more on new forms of experimental and phenomenological anthropology that provide strong alternatives to positivist and structural models, see Grimshaw and Ravetz 2009, Grimshaw 2011, and Jackson 1996, 2007.

Ingold's comments serve to explain both the structural complexity of van der Keuken's film which consists of seemingly unconnected sequences that do not follow either the tropes of character-based narrative or the didacticism of more traditional journalistic television practice.

A rather strong alternative is immediately offered by the filmmaker. The very first image of the film consists of the filmmaker's shadow being cast upon the wind-blown grass before fading away as the sunlight fades. We see the shadow and the outline of a camera on van der Keuken's shoulder, but the absence of the face hints that the image is in a sense standing for something else. In other words, not only does the first image suggest immersion in a physical sense, but it is also an overtly semiotic image. It recalls Peirce's well-known definition of the sign, whereby a "sign [in the form of a representamen] is something which stands to somebody for something" and the "sign stands for something, its object" producing meaning or what is famously called the "interpretant" (CP 2.228). The representamen, as constituted through the hand-held shot, hints at an extended cultural history of nature, reminding us both of our primary senses and its refraction through artifice. The "object" here is something much vaster in scale than either the grass waving within the frame or the shadow of the filmmaker, suggesting that this first single fragment of nature (the interpretant) is also part of far more extensive forms of semiosis that run throughout the film's many different living textures and landscapes.

This might provide some clues as to why the filmmaker's use of self-reference should be seen as something more than a textual device that simply reifies some kind of authorial stamp or (Cartesian) mastery over its material. This image, which is at once personalized but also anonymous and arguably more general, suggests improvisatory practices that embody incomplete and provisional knowledge and occur in an environment which is continuously changing. It also foreshadows the formal maneuvers of much of the rest of the film, where the camera is constantly probing and responding to new environments in ways which, as I will later attempt to demonstrate, are analogous to the ways the many different animals in the film respond to both friendly and hostile habitats. The environment has already been portrayed as something which is not simply "out there", as it were, but instead links "perceivers" to the very phenomena in which they are "immersed" – through constant movement that works against traditional binary divisions between subject and object.

It is only after this first self-referential image of an individual but nevertheless general human organism, responding and being literally shaped by an environment, that we are presented with the credits of the film and a scale model of the Wadden Sea. We now hear van der Keuken's own voice when he describes the region in the following terms:

The area between land and sea. A territory ruled by the tides. At high tide: sea. At low tide: land. Extending north of the Netherlands, past Germany, and then up alongside Denmark. Open space ruled by tidal streams moving the sand, carrying microscopic plants and tiny creatures as food for other living creatures who all eat each other. People try to make a living here. Birds from all over the world stop here, and the refuse of Europe floats in. (Van der Keuken 1978)

This works against the facile divisions easily made between natural and cultural history. Instead, the idea of self-contained nations or cultures is undermined by van der Keuken's contextualization of what we would otherwise consider to be "human history", which is now being (re)presented as conterminous with the many types of (semiotic) relationships that continue to emerge between individual species and their environments as much as between different species.

Furthermore, this is augmented by the rapid montage of images that prefigure more extended sequences in the later sections of the film. In the space of three minutes, we see fishermen both in close up and also dwarfed by their surrounding landscape, worms that exist in "wild" habitats but are nevertheless used as bait for fish by human beings, wide shots of landscapes that appear uninhabited from afar, holiday homes used by tourists, plants that are growing both spontaneously and within human dwellings. As well as highlighting the co-existence of different animals and plant life, the montage serves as a reminder that what we perceive is never an unmediated or non-semiotized (zero) nature. In the terms set out by Kull (1998: 355–359) in his work on ecological semiotics, these images embody first, second, and third nature which correspond, respectively, to nature perceived, materially transformed, and represented in cultural artifacts. We are also reminded of their co-presence and even integration within everyday human experience, which is defined through the movement of the body, so that perception takes place through the integrated use of all our senses.<sup>3</sup>

Here and indeed throughout the entire film, van der Keuken reminds us that there is no such thing as a single vantage point outside an evolving and interconnected lifeworld, shared by different individuals, cultures, and species. The activities of human beings are located alongside the activities of tiny creatures, birds, and microscopic plants so that any of these myriad living forms might be seen to be subjects as well as objects for one another. Amongst these images we also see the fossilized remains of a two thousand year-old man, surrounded by peat, water, and small green plants. A reminder of our shared evolutionary heritage in the context of imagery, which constantly traverses different species-specific habitats, serves to show the inter-relationship between what Hoffmeyer has described as horizontal

<sup>3</sup> Also see Ingold 2011a: 72–75 for a more detailed account of immersion and embodiment and Sheets-Johnstone 1998: 278–292 for an account of kinaesthetic proprioception.

and vertical semiosis. While the former is spatial, and may involve communication amongst the same and different species across a variety of habitats, the latter is more obviously genealogical in nature, and is thus part of more mainstream biological explanations of evolution (Hoffmeyer 1996: 32, 59).<sup>4</sup> Arguably, it is the integration of both horizontal spatial semiosis and vertical temporal semiosis that makes van der Keuken's film highly innovative. This is also manifested in playful terms through camera movements that pan across landscape and also tilt upwards and downwards across individual objects and wider landscapes, revealing different habitats and niches, as well as contrasting water, earth and sky. And our awareness of the presence of a person behind the camera suggests the integration of sight and touch through bodily movement.

Indeed, the filmmaker's position is further clarified in a later intervention, some seventy minutes into the film. Here we are presented with a montage of images that show sunlight shining upon water, wind blowing on plants, ladybirds climbing on plants, flocks of birds flying in the sky, and human habitats used for farming, fishing and even observation of both cultivated and "wild" nature. These images suggest not only an immersion in a landscape but also serve as a repeated reminder of the continued co-presence of different *umwelts* that are never static or fixed. Borrowing loosely from the work of Uexküll (1992), it could even be argued here that the plants are in a sense ladybird-like, the sky bird-like, as much as the land and fish are human-like. But just as importantly, these individual landscapes are simultaneously home to some creatures, but empty or hostile to others, and are thus the subject of different and changing semiotic relationships. Throughout this, it is the effects of wind, water and sunlight that constantly shape and reshape the landscape. Inevitably, the film also introduces us to the myriad forms of plant life that characterize the Wadden Sea.

We are reminded by the filmmaker's own voice-over that: "Plants are everywhere. Only plants can retain the sun's energy and turn it into nourishment. All living creatures on earth from single celled organisms to people depend on plants' energy production. Mineral fuels are also the remains of plants of millions of years ago". The voiceover accompanies images of algae, small plants, and larger-scale landscapes, thus reminding us of what Krampen has described as "a base semiotics which cuts across all living beings, plants, animals, and humans alike (1981: 203).<sup>5</sup> Elsewhere, the

<sup>4</sup> Also see Stjernfelt 2001 for a very important essay that places Uexküll's work in a broader evolutionary framework while also allowing for temporality within the organism's functional cycle.

<sup>5</sup> Much debate has arisen as to what degree an equivalent of the Uexküllian functional circle exists within plant life (Krampen 1981, 2001; Kull 2000, 2009). Unfortunately, there is no space here to summarize the existing arguments except to draw the reader's attention to recent work by Affifi who challenges the idea that "plants are autotrophic and animals are heterotrophic" (Affifi 2013: 8).

film draws distinctions between plant life, existing both within and outside human culture: as well as images of plants flourishing and literally moving in relatively unspoiled habitats, we can also see plants that are grown as crops, cultivated for grazing by domestic animals, or even used as ornaments within human habitats. Somewhat kitschy-looking flower pots are directly contrasted with plants growing across larger stretches of marshland and coastland.

Nevertheless, while the film does not pretend to resolve the thorny issue of semiosis within plant life (phytosemiotics), numerous sequences in the film suggest the presence of subjectivity in species whose *umwelts* are seemingly simple. Initially, this is explored through images that emphasize individuation within species themselves. Van der Keuken juxtaposes close-ups of human faces with images of baby plaice, eels, dabs, and shrimps. Almost frontal views of the mouth and eyes of each animal make them more than just representative types of a general specimen. It should also be noted that the creatures are presented to us through shots that show fishermen holding the creatures, either in their hands or on their fingertips, thus suggesting the role of tactility in inter-species communication and reminding us that our knowledge of our relationships with other animals takes place within daily experience itself rather than at a remove.

Yet it is when we are taken underwater to the bottom of the sea, that we are given a full dramatic sense of the fact that even relatively simple life forms are both subjects and objects. A solitary clam is seen taking in food through its siphons and ejecting it before a baby plaice approaches it and devours its siphons. The baby plaice then withdraws nervously in the presence of a predator shrimp, who – as a subject – senses the presence of a new object. This sequence, whose emphasis on antagonism refuses all sentimentality, can also arguably serve as a framework for how we view later sequences which describe animosity between different human antagonists. In other words, van der Keuken provides a highly dramatic tone to the basic self/non-self distinction that is essential for all living organisms to distinguish what is relevant in their environment and is also part of their growing capacity for anticipation and long-term survival (Stjernfelt 2001; Hoffmeyer 2008; Wheeler 2006).

This serves as a further reminder of the strongly improvisatory nature of van der Keuken's wider account of human ontology and epistemology which is reflected in the formal experimentation of his film practice. He was opposed to the knowingness of scientific ethnography and the abstractions of French semiology, emphasizing instead that documentary film was not so much an instantiation of fixed codes or a priori knowledge but a "way of placing things in a context and renewing our ways of seeing thing" (Van der Keuken 1998: 39).<sup>6</sup> He also describes his way of framing and reframing as based on a desire to suggest that life was constantly on the move and was

<sup>6</sup> All direct quotations from this French-language book are in my translation, H.T.

therefore outside as much as inside the frame (Van der Keuken 1998: 42–44). This led him to film objects and people in ways that were compositionally slightly off-centre, so that his shots reveal the world through a series of shifts and displacements that show the provisionality of the movie camera's response to new environments, playing off the contrasts between flatness and depth, certainty and uncertainty (Daney 1978: 72). It is a form of improvisation that gives room for moments of uncertainty, rupture, and dissonance.<sup>7</sup> This is also reflected in the repeated use of an abrasive and strident musical score composed and performed by the avant-garde jazz musician William Breuker. The shrill sounds of brass and an aggressive rhythm section are constantly counterpointed with the movement of natural elements and that of simple and complex life forms.

Nevertheless, human improvisation is also rooted in practices that abound throughout the biosphere. This can be seen in a sequence where van der Keuken juxtaposes close-ups of miniature plaice larvae swimming under the water with wider shots that show a vast sea and a seemingly infinite horizon. Here, the plaice larvae are seen changing direction mid-trajectory, as if they have anticipated new dangers in their environment and are forced to change their behaviour accordingly. The uncertainties and the existence of the unknown are also reflected in the use of sound and composition. Silence co-exists with loud ambient sound in a way that is analogous to our loss of a sense of scale. Furthermore, these shots of the sea and sky, which might otherwise suggest a “scopic” mastery over the landscape, are filmed from the perspective of a boat in continual motion rather than from the stable vantage point of a fixed position on the land.<sup>8</sup>

Elsewhere in a sequence which would otherwise be a straightforward interview with a local person whose brother has left the area, shots that precede and supersede the speaking human subject are characterized by vastly different scales and panoramic movements across land and above the land. Here, it is difficult to discern whether we are seeing close-ups of terrain or wider panoramic shots, and only the presence of objects, such as a woman's stiletto heel or the traces of a dilapidated and

<sup>7</sup> Stjernfelt (2001: 87, 88) also speaks of “the ability to act in a changing environment due to general purpose perception and actions, not tied to specific umwelt functions” which is then linked to both dissonance and “continuous improvisation” as way of modifying Uexküll's notion of a “harmonious symphony”. Aside from the fact that these observations move Umwelt Theory closer to the experimentalism of Peircean semeiotic and pragmatism (Colapietro 2005), this might also be seen in the context of van der Keuken's (1998: 33) emphatic defense of improvisation. Van der Keuken compared his own practice as being closer to Cubist painting (Van der Keuken 1998: 44) and jazz improvisation (Elsaesser 2005: 200).

<sup>8</sup> Here, I have borrowed loosely from Ingold's attempt to critique spectator theory and notions of a “scopic regime”. According to the British anthropologist the etymological terms ‘scape’ and ‘scope’ have long been conflated (Ingold 2011b: 126).

moss-eaten staircase, provide perceptual clues as to the dimension and location of what is filmed by the camera. These perpetual clues arise from a combination of capabilities that are the product of both biological inheritances and the flux of an ever-changing cultural history. Van der Keuken's disorientating use of the film frame highlights the improvisatory nature of all forms of living semiosis, but it also suggests that the human *Lebenswelt* is semiotically richer than the *umwelts* of other species, allowing us some (fallible) access to the inter-related but different semiotic worlds of other animates.<sup>9</sup>

Even more so, it is reciprocity and inter-relatedness that characterize the relationships between human and non-human animals. The former is sometimes seen as a predator in the many sequences devoted to the gathering and consumption of worms and fish, in which we also see adult plaice being gutted in a fishing school, eels being barbecued, and then eaten during a family meal. At other times, the relationships are defined more in terms of "partnerships" (Sebeok 1991: 22–35/106–108; also see Maran 2010: 84–85), whereby non-human animals are nurtured within habitats that we would otherwise see as distinctly "human". Images of cows, kept by expansionist farmers, as well as images of sheep, fowl and domestic pets are repeated constantly throughout the film. The highly affective nature of some of these relationships is eventually brought to the foreground. In a sequence, which is later marked by sardonic animosity on the part of the filmmaker, we see a father playing with a child on a settee. This is juxtaposed with images of both parents helping a young cow give birth, thus suggesting that we may even recognize the individuality of non-human animals in a way that is not dissimilar to analogous forms of recognition within human sociality. More importantly, both intra-species and inter-species communication involve the use of non-verbal signs and high degrees of tactility. Animals and infants are caressed and stroked, while the duration of the images ever so slightly hints at the role of olfactory senses during our close contact with other animals both non-human and human.

Still, moments that might seem highly anthropomorphic or even sentimental are contrasted in an important sequence in which different species of birds are seen flying around a human observation point. The sequence is shot in a way that highlights the fact that in certain situations, the human animal is of no relevance, either as subject or object, within the life cycle of many other animals.<sup>10</sup> Here, the birds are at the height of their breeding season and are filmed in extreme close up, in

<sup>9</sup> Also see Deely 2010: 99–125 and Hoffmeyer 2008: 318–326 for complementary accounts of the "semiotic animal" and "semiotic freedom".

<sup>10</sup> This might also be seen in the context of Uexküll's work where the Baltic German biologist presents us with drawings of the same landscape seen by different creatures and we see very disparate distributions of information (Uexküll 1992: 334–342).

a way that individuates single faces and eyes. Different species of birds, their eggs and their offspring, are then contrasted with a wide shot that dwarfs both the observation tower and an even smaller solitary human figure, wandering around aimlessly below.

In other words, van der Keuken's methodology embodies a form of inquiry through film, where the camera is not aloof and knowing, but is constantly probing an environment – in a fashion that is roughly isomorphic with the exploration of other animates within familiar and unfamiliar environments. It could be argued that van der Keuken's probing of the landscape – or what Ingold suggestively renames as a 'taskscape' (Ingold 2011b: 194–200) – is mirrored in the way that we engage with the film. The film's non-linear structure disallows a fixed central vision, so that we are constantly making (abductive) connections between seemingly disparate shapes and flows.<sup>11</sup> The shape and movement of the clam's siphons are constantly echoed throughout the entire film, allowing us to see similarities between the airbags on a runway, eels that are part of a family meal, different types of tubing in the farm of the married couple, and the tubing of the milk-making process. Even in a very late sequence where we visit a fertilizer plant, we are not only aware of the similarities in shape between the chimneys emitting smoke and the siphons of the clam, but van der Keuken then inserts an image of waste pipes leading back into the sea.

We might also see parallels between the movement of human groupings in the form of tourists, trainee army cadets, and sailing boats and different animal groupings of fish, sheep, and flocks of birds. Nevertheless, there are differences between the lifeworlds of non-human animals and human animals that I would now like to analyse with close attention to the types of semiotic relation which are perceived through the situated temporality of the human animal.

## Temporality and contingency

It should not be forgotten here that van der Keuken's practice was very much politically engaged, often displaying anger towards social and global injustice, even if he was extremely distrustful of idealistic abstractions and facile political voluntarism (Elsaesser 2005: 200–201; Tsang 2012: 410–428). In this sense, his film reminds us of our status as "implicated" somatic human agents living in a historical world that

<sup>11</sup> It is Peirce's definition from 1903 that is perhaps most relevant here:

The surprising fact, C, is observed;  
But if A were true, C would be a matter of course.  
Hence there is reason to suspect that A is true. (EP 2: 231)

As has been noted by Michael Ventimiglia, new hypotheses and new generalities are created by abduction (Ventimiglia 2008: 661; EP 2: 231).

is not of our own making (Colapietro 2004, 2006). As well as revealing the different *umwelts* of the region in a highly experimental and improvisatory fashion, van der Keuken also repeatedly shows us the ravages of modern capitalism and technological instrumentalism.

Early in the film, almost lyrical visual descriptions of small-scale family fishing enterprises give way to a sardonic portrayal of a larger-scale chemical factory, while shots of tanks and airplanes taking part in a military exercise on a previously unsullied beach, establish a connection between the modern rationalization of technology and global militarization. Even two isolated sequences, which might otherwise provide an indication of possible alternatives to contemporary capitalism, are undercut by the sly use of irony. One of these sequences describes a small ecological field which uses local compost for the production of clover in order to restore and augment natural processes of photo-synthesis through what Kull (1998: 360) has termed “balance through humility”. Yet it also includes bizarre images of clogs walking across the clover, thus reminding us that a more holistic relationship between the human subject and the environment remains a somewhat distant possibility. Similarly, a seemingly elegant and nostalgic black-and-white sequence describing a group of well-intentioned middle-aged tourists who return every year to the region because of their love of the local fauna and different life forms is deflated once we can see images of cars and litter strewn upon a desolate beach.

Nevertheless, in a way that is similar to the constant interplay between images of macro and micro *semiosis*, images that embody large-scale technological instrumentalism are also interspersed with more intimate portraits of individuals living in the region. Because the two are interrelated, van der Keuken’s portraits of individual people are not entirely flattering. Although we gain a sense of the subjects’ agency and personal identity, these encounters are also marked, at times, by antagonism and confrontation. Here, we meet firstly, a nominally Christian husband and wife team who are expansionist farmers; secondly, an elderly worker in the chemical plant; and thirdly, a trade unionist who has abandoned his socialist ideals.

In his interview with the expansionist farmers, van der Keuken probes both husband and wife about their personal motives behind their continued business expansion. The husband emphasizes that it is important to possess a sense of life purpose, and he defends this by contrasting his lifestyle to what he perceives as the aimlessness of people who work in a factory. Nevertheless, the married couple also admits that their dairy farming is part of artificially produced demand and contributes to the surplus production of the 1970s, then more commonly known as the “Butter Mountain”. Both husband and wife follow the accepted trends of the market economy in an uncritical and unreflective fashion, while still apparently holding on to their ideals of community and Christian life.

Bitter irony underlies the portrayal of an elderly worker in which the claustrophobia of his present work place and drab suburban home is contrasted with the freedom of life at sea. We are presented with an oil painting of a fishing boat in which the worker used to go fishing with his father-in-law. Van der Keuken's hand-held camera tilts up and down, imitating the movement of the rocking of the boat. This is a highly ambivalent moment, which to some extent indicates dashed hopes, impoverishment of life experience and an abandonment of communal ideals. The use of the subjective camera also echoes the abrupt juxtapositions found in earlier sequences, where we moved from views of miniature life forms beneath the sea and views of the sea's vast infinite surface, filmed from the perspective of a person sitting in a small boat. However, the worker also admits that he lacked the courage to lead the life that he desired, as we see him standing beside a boat which is now used for purely recreational purposes, so that in a sense, what Kull (1998: 355–357) describes as “third nature” has replaced and decontextualized second and first natures.

Further states of alienation are described in a sequence in which van der Keuken meets a trade unionist who is now working in a chemical plant and has abandoned his socialist ideals. Upon being challenged by a rather angry van der Keuken, he stresses a new instrumentalist position in which economic realities take precedence over political ideals. A reminder of unrealized human potential occurs when van der Keuken visits the trade unionist's elderly parents and his mother speaks about the pleasures of sharing family meals in the garden before going to feed the chickens. During the car journey, the trade unionist also sings the lyrics of a local song, telling us “How dark are the skies, I see no moon, no stars, the girl I love, she is so far away”, reminding us of possible alternative life-narratives which were never lived out.

What becomes increasingly evident in these three portraits of personal development is an awareness of the limits of the individual life cycle, in which only so much can be achieved. Contingent solutions, which are marked by complicity and fatalism, are accompanied by different degrees of disappointment, bitterness and self-deception. But while this is undoubtedly tragic and recalls Peirce's stark statement that “no son of Adam has ever fully manifested what there was in him” (EP 2.255), what is also presupposed is the existence of norms that would aim for a fuller integration of human and non-human *umwelts* in the long term. In this regard, Deely has spoken of a capacity on the part of the semiotic animal to distinguish “the difference between objects related and the relations as such, intelligible but invisible to sense” (Deely 2002: 109), which, in turn, constitutes an emergent “awareness of the very process that ties us into nature as a whole” (Deely 2010: 103). These sentiments are tacitly acknowledged even in moments of quiet desperation and resignation and may even inform how we engage with the bleak tone of the film's conclusion.

We are now taken to a demonstration outside a nuclear power station. Rather than a Manichean confrontation between noble demonstrators and oppressive police that would climax in conflict and resolution, the camera pans away from the youthful demonstrators and focuses upon a few leaves on one of the trees alongside the road. This should not be seen as a skeptical attitude towards ecological activism, but, rather, it suggests a broader semiotic approach that takes into account all relations between different umwelts across the biosphere and thus refuses to reduce ecology to a single decontextualized issue (Lestel 2014: 320; Kull, Maran 2014: 47).

Yet *Flat Jungle* literally ends with images of darkness. Black water is seen flowing through a sluice gate into the sea, and the filmmaker's voice-over lists a whole series of fish, birds, and mammals which have disappeared from the area and which he regrets not being ever able to see. What is highlighted here is a loss of semiotic diversity, especially in the context of a film that has emphasized both the interdependence of different umwelts and the living and lived quality of all animate life forms. What we can now name but no longer perceive is a testament to semiotic impoverishment, whereby the human umwelt is irreversibly damaged and its development has been arrested.

Nevertheless, my attempt to produce a rough sketch of van der Keuken's semiotically flavoured ecology is incomplete without reference to a later film, *Face Value*, which is a film entirely concerned with the human face and composed almost exclusively of close-ups. Fifty portraits of different individuals, young and old, male and female, native and immigrant, take us to different suburbs and cities in the Netherlands, Belgium, France, Czechoslovakia and Britain. This indicates that this is a highly anthropocentric film, where we see but few traces of the open wilderness of *Flat Jungle*.

To start with, it should be noted that neither the people nor the different places and environments are ever named. No commentary or titles are used. This entails that we also bring to the film our own lived experience and previous knowledge of different faces, accents, and human customs. In relation to this, Hoffmeyer has spoken about a notion of "semantic memory",<sup>12</sup> which is further defined as "the ability to remember meaningful relations without these being linked to any specific situations" (Hoffmeyer 1996: 105). This indicates that the film provides us with a general account of anthroposemiosis that is more than the sum of the film's individual faces, or even the different European locations and the specific episodic events related to war, mediatization and citizenship in the last decade of the 20th century. In this sense, the film is complementary to *Flat Jungle*, but rather than bringing "people closer to Nature" through an examination of a specific place, *Face Value* might be seen as an attempt to bring "Nature close to people" through the use

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<sup>12</sup> Hoffmeyer's use of this term is taken from the work of Tulving 1983.

of geographically dispersed locations and a greater emphasis on the processes of individuation that occur through our recognition of the face.

Furthermore, specific sequences in *Face Value* develop a notion of temporality for the human animal that makes the human *Lebenswelt* substantially different from the *umwelt* of non-human animals. This later film also incorporates an acknowledgement of mortality, which, as I shall attempt to demonstrate, is ultimately part of a wider vision that locates anthroposemiosis within a bio-cosmic context.

### **The semiotic animal: semiotic freedom and self-control**

It is also worth noting that van der Keuken's multi-faceted portrait of Europe's changing demographic,<sup>13</sup> was dedicated to his friend and fellow photographer Ed van der Elsken, who died just before the completion of the film. A personal and authorial touch is especially evident in a self-portrait of the filmmaker at the beginning of the film.

We are presented with a full frontal view of the filmmaker's face, while being aware that he is unclothed because the lower half of the frame includes part of his bare torso. Gently smiling and looking directly at us, van der Keuken removes his glasses and the camera goes out of focus so that we see nothing more than an indistinct flesh-coloured blob against a black background. It is here that we also hear van der Keuken's commentary about his intentions behind the making of the film. As what is expressed points us towards an embodied account of the semiotic sign that is also poetic and cosmological, van der Keuken's words are worth quoting in full:

I don't see myself without glasses. Without glasses I don't see myself. I can see the others. To look at the other people is to desire the unattainable. I see the others and desire the unattainable. I can't see the others. The camera has gone wild. It looks behind the eye. It doesn't see thoughts. There are no thoughts, only things. People come together. People leave. A multitude winding down the roads. Ribbons of planes in the sky. It must be a feast.

Behind the eye there's a thought. In front of the eye, there's a face. The face sees other faces. It sees things. There's love, why is there love? I'm a God, like everybody else. Not the God which crushes the others. Without a lens, I don't see myself. I don't see myself without a lens. I will be born tomorrow. I will make music with my lens. And I won't see myself. (Van der Keuken 1991)

The presence of a human face, looking at us directly, highlights the importance of a form of empathy in which we place ourselves in the shoes of other individuals

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<sup>13</sup> See Tsang 2012 for an account of refugees in van der Keuken's work from a post-colonial perspective and Hoogland 2012 for a Deleuzian interpretation.

and gain a sense of the temporal narratives of their lives. This has been described by Jesper Hoffmeyer (2008: 326) as a form of “corporeally felt necessity” through which individuals have “learned to see themselves reflected in that other person, to see the other person as a creature just like them” (Hoffmeyer 1996: 132). It should also be noted here that we quickly discover that van der Keuken’s reference to “ribbons of planes in the sky” is more than a poetic metaphor. His self-portrait is ruptured by stark grainy black-and-white video images of bombs being dropped on an unidentified target. We are immediately reminded of the mediatization of wars that are now fought at a distance and represent a logical extension of the different types of modern instrumentalism that featured in the earlier film. Furthermore, the human face, once individualized, also points us to a much wider landscape, which is both violent, reflecting the global politics of the time, but also lyrical, as already exemplified here by van der Keuken’s reference to love, music and the loss of self.

Yet van der Keuken’s account of the self insists on alterity, without presupposing some kind of Cartesian transparency. This is articulated through words, some of which express poetic and cosmological sentiments, but whose shared and communicable nature is presupposed from the perspective of a living body. Similar sentiments have been expressed by Hoffmeyer, who has described language as a form of empathetic sharing which allows for a “collectivization” of individual *umwelts* (Hoffmeyer 1996: 112). He also associates language with a notion of “external (extrasomatic memory)” which is characterized by “first and foremost the written word in the form of books, but also the legacy of sculptures, pictures, buildings, tools and, these days, computers” (Hoffmeyer 1996: 106). Hoffmeyer’s observations also serve as a description of what we see in many of *Face Value*’s other sequences. Both figurative and abstract painting, primitive and modern sculpture are displayed for the public in a Dutch art auction. Elsewhere, exterior and interior views of bookshops and press offices are accompanied by views of fully-stacked bookshelves and the flickering of television and computer screens.

Nevertheless, it should also be noted that our access to a semiotically rich lifeworld, which is imbricated with memories of the cultures of the past and representations of possible non-existent worlds, is renewed and augmented through the presence of the body. Close-ups of faces of individuals working in places associated with art, literature, and mass communication remind us of forms of inter-corporeal empathy which are part of our sociality and contribute to our emergent and often very diverse ethical and political outlooks. This is further augmented by other sequences which feature the face in the context of a mobile body. We thus see a German burlesque dancer using her own body as a plastic object, as she bends and manipulates her own legs. In the suburbs of Southern France, young and old people dance enthusiastically to Portuguese popular music at a working class wedding. Elsewhere, football fans jostle and break through a fence and burly boxers and

wrestlers grapple with one another. In all of these sequences, social habits, whose histories precede and exceed the life of any single individual, are renewed through bodily activity that involves both movement and looking.

It is here that I would like to draw our attention to a sequence shot in Great Britain, where van der Keuken looks at a social institution that might otherwise be narrowly conceived in terms of class and parochial cultural history. We are taken to a polo club, where the executive officer mentions the names of rich patrons such as the Duke of Kent, as well as acknowledging the exclusivity and power of this privileged institution. However, this is also accompanied by shots of the man's face enraptured by the game as he runs amidst the movement of the animals. This is paralleled by the compositions and the movements of van der Keuken's camera that intersperse joyful human faces with the galloping of horses and the movements of the players' limbs. Here, human language is intertwined with a more general account of biophilia that is both con-specific and alter-specific. The sequence ends with shots of Queen Elizabeth, delivering prizes to some of the polo players. Significantly, we do not hear her speak. Instead, a series of rapid whip-pans which run across, away, and down her body now make her an instantiation of human animality which is heightened not diminished after the advent of speech and its accompanying cultural manifestations.

Yet the film is also concerned with the commemoration of death, which is treated by van der Keuken as a pan-cultural phenomenon.<sup>14</sup> It is notable here that the rituals surrounding the individual dead body are also associated with various uses of language, not just speech but also different types of autobiographical and fictional writing that contribute to collective memory. This is evident when we are taken to a Holocaust memorial in Prague, where many people are laying flowers at the graves of the deceased. It is here that we also meet a rabbi, whose pensive face is shown against the doorway of his home near the Jewish cemetery. He recounts how his entire family died in the concentration camps and that he inherited an optimistic attitude to life from his father, who died in his arms in Buchenwald. In his later life, the young survivor would become an academic researcher who preferred skiing to the novels of Kafka which he found far too traumatic to finish. A section of Kafka's *The Trial* is read over images of graves in another cemetery in which the German-language author was buried, thus presenting a view of anthroposemiosis where actual and imagined events from both individual and collective pasts are part of what allows the development of personality.

Another memorial sequence, dedicated to the memory of Jan Palach – a Czech student who burnt himself alive after the Russian invasion of 1968 – is introduced through the songs of the Marta Kubišová, whose work was banned for twenty years until the Prague Spring in 1989. A Sikh funeral in West London is testament to both

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<sup>14</sup> Also see Lestel 2007: 186-191 for distinctions between human experience of mortality and animal experience of death.

Britain's colonial past and the continuation of cultural habits in new contexts. It is the incantations of the mourners that we hear before a black limousine takes the body away. Because the film draws our attention to rituals which mark mortality as something that is endowed with social and collective meaning, it is defined as something much more than a physiological phenomenon. Human mortality is (re)-presented in broader semiotic terms,<sup>15</sup> pointing us towards our wider ethical commitments in a changing historical world.

Still, both mortality and human meaning are also placed within a vast bio-cosmic context in one of the film's most lyrical sequences, portraying the ailing photographer, Ed van der Elsen, a close friend of the filmmaker who would die shortly before the completion of the film. The sequence is almost celebratory in tone. Accompanied by his girlfriend, and barely able to move as he lies on an improvised bed in a forest, the photographer speaks of love and beauty. He exclaims, "But I think life is so incredible, that Paradise is already included in it. People who say: Why are we on earth? Dammit we're here to enjoy creation!" (Van der Keuken 1991). These sentiments are mirrored in van der Keuken's use of camera which pans up from the embracing couple towards the trees and sky, in a way which reminds us of the camera movements and the inter-communication between different habitats in *Flat Jungle*.

It is indeed the concerns of the earlier film that are now re-iterated in four short sequences that further highlight the role of zoosemiosis, as a form of non-verbal communication between different individual human umwelts and across species-specific umwelts (Sebeok 1990: 48–75; 1991: 57).<sup>16</sup> In the first of these sequences, we are taken to a wooden bird loft, where direct visual connections are made between the human face and the features of the individual birds. Individual close ups of decrepit human faces are initially juxtaposed with shots of pigeons perched in their boxes, so that in broad Uexküllian terms, the face is bird-like as much as the individual birds are human-like. Just as importantly, the soundtrack is mixed in such a way that the noise of the birds increasingly drowns out almost all human language. Extreme close-ups of human mouths and tongues wagging give way to the silent expressions of elderly human faces some of which are looking directly at the camera. It is as if van der Keuken has reminded us of the roots of human language within animal inter-subjectivity. Indeed, it is the latter that continues to flourish as an integral part of human culture and everyday communication.

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<sup>15</sup> Sheets-Johnstone (2008: 52–53) ventures as far as to present mortality as foundational for human ethics. There is not the space to critique her arguments in detail, except to note the importance of fallibilism and error within Peirce's overall account of synechism (CP 1.171).

<sup>16</sup> Also see Tsang 2011 for an account of this film which attempts to integrate a broadly Darwinian description of human emotion with contemporary developments in the neurosciences.

For it is here that the silence and sullen expressions of the elderly men give way to a highly animated conversation between two young deaf-mutes. Bright afternoon sunlight illuminates the faces of two second-generation immigrants who are seated upon the grass in an unidentified meadow in the South of France. The boy and girl recount simple events that have occurred during their day. They express their wonderment at such things as watching a viper in the grass, seeing mushrooms growing, and experiencing the feel of water upon the skin, which they then compare to the delight of seeing fish swimming in water. It is worth noting that the majority of the conversation is carried out using sign language, and that it is the highly gestural and physical nature of language that is brought to the fore as they attempt to utter individual words. Indeed, there is a proportional relationship between their excitement at the sight of natural phenomena and the rapidity and frequency of their individual tongue movements.<sup>17</sup>

Van der Keuken also draws further connections between miniature portraits of human faces and vast bio-cosmic landscapes. We are brought to an unidentified beach in Eastern Europe, where semi-naked bodies bask in the heat of summer sunlight and individual whispers are drowned out by the sound of waves. Fingers explore and caress the face and chest of a three-dimensional figure that has been carved in the wet sand at the same time as lovers kiss and parents embrace their young babies. Haptic sensibility, body-to-body inter-subjectivity, and sensuality are united in a way that harks back to a distant evolutionary past while suggesting an ever-continuing cosmological context for human development.

A major part of this is due to our own very species-specific awareness of the status of the sign *qua* sign which is presented by van der Keuken in both humorous and poetic terms. As we leave the beach, we are presented with images of two road signs, prohibiting the presence of dogs on the beach and the consumption of ice cream. Each object is crossed out by red lines, indicating our more general awareness of relations that is not tied to individual instantiations of either a dog or an ice cream. Thus, distinct species-specific *umwelts* coexist within a single semiosphere but are also qualitatively very different in terms of shared and ever emergent meaning. This is made more apparent (albeit through poetic means) when the footage from the beach is projected over the faces of a young couple in a photographic studio.<sup>18</sup> As they

<sup>17</sup> In this sense van der Keuken is providing us with a view of language that is primarily kinaesthetic, recalling much of the work of Sheets-Johnstone. The American philosopher and dance teacher tells us that babbling of infants is a “continuation of a sensory-kinetic process already underway” and that “the tactile/aural tongue becomes witness to a preeminently visual world” (Sheets-Johnstone 1990: 161; also see Hoffmeyer 2008: 303–304).

<sup>18</sup> This might also be seen in the context of Sebeok’s notion of tertiary modelling, where “nonverbal and verbal sign assemblages blend together in the most creative modeling that nature has thus far evolved” (Sebeok 1991: 58).

embrace and kiss each other, the shadows of human flesh merge with the reflections of sunlight upon the waves, so that two individual faces have become one with a vast cosmological landscape. This was the promise made by van der Keuken in his self-portrait at the start of the film and is fulfilled again at the end of the film when an image of a newborn child gives way to a very wide shot of a sea bathed in crepuscule light. This last image echoes the landscapes of *Flat Jungle*, but a warship enters the frame, reminding us of Dutch military intervention in the Balkans during the 1990s.

It should be evident from the above that van der Keuken's images are highly sensuous but also extremely complex. I will attempt to state succinctly the main points that emerge from this which might stimulate future inquiry.

(1) The sign is presented in a way that highlights the fact that human animals are much more aware of the status of the sign *qua* sign than non-human animals. This is evident even in simple conversations amongst young children about the wonders of nature, where language is used to describe objects that are not part of a perceived immediate environment.<sup>19</sup> The same is equally true of other images that incorporate cultural objects such as painting, books or direct self-reference to the artifice of cinema and the person behind the lens.

(2) This is because what is seen by the camera is above all a semiotic object in contradistinction to what Deely (2010) has called a "thing". The latter is part of the contingency of non-human animals perceiving and acting in the immediacy of an environment. By contrast, van der Keuken's presents an account of human environments which is defined by meaning and the social habits and cultural expressions of many past generations, so that the semiotic object can now be seen as any combination of present, non-present, pre-existing, existing and non-existing objects (CP 2.230). It would also seem that a major part of human agency is informed by our capacity to distinguish between these different relations.

(3) Biophilia, which can be seen as a form of empathy and curiosity towards the agency and vulnerability of all animate forms (Hoffmeyer 2008: 324–325), might now be seen as a pan-cultural phenomenon. It has been manifested across a variety of different human habitats with scant regard for traditional demarcations between town and country. It would also seem that biophilia is with us from our early childhood, irrespective of the accidental nature of the cultures we are born into or are attempting to come to terms with. It may even be part of our potential for self-cultivation and self-transformation, which was described in almost celebratory and ecstatic terms in *Face Value* especially.

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<sup>19</sup> This is essentially similar to Deely's (2010: 107–125) argument. Also see Hoffmeyer 2014 for a brief article that expands Peirce's aphorism "All thinking is by signs" (CP 5.534) and emphasizes the links between semiotic freedom and self-control.

(4) Van der Keuken's account of biophilia also takes into account both the finite nature of human life and the infinite, unfinished nature of semiosis. It is finite in the sense that van der Keuken draws our attention to the contingencies of a historical world which may force unwelcome compromise upon individuals. Paradoxically, however, it is the act of mourning, accompanied by cultural rituals and artifacts, that reminds us of semiotic relations that exceed the limits of individual life cycles and are part of the infinite nature of semiosis (Deely 2002; 2010).<sup>20</sup> Ritual and cultural expressions revive and renew many centuries of social habit, but they also reflect the sensual perspectives of somatic agents living in the here and now of a particular historical moment whose future remains open (Colapietro 2002, 2004, 2006).

All in all, this makes *Flat Jungle* and *Face Value* two very complementary films. In the first film, a previously neutral or zero landscape was humanized through the use of a probing inquiring camera that gave us access to the living textures of the land and sea and allowed us to become acquainted and engaged with the individual people living by the Wadden Sea. In *Face Value*, an emphasis upon inter-corporeal empathy rooted in forms of sociality that are shared with other animates, naturalized the human face. Yet our felt identification with different faces also pointed us outwards to the wider historical, political and ethical landscapes in which we are all implicated participants. This should not be surprising if we subscribe to the view that life and semiosis have always been co-extensive (Sebeok 1991: 22).

This also entails that van der Keuken's work reminds us that a more semiotically orientated account of ecology cannot be reduced to a purely physical account of the distribution of bio-chemical resources. It must also take into account the multiple semiotic relationships between con-specific and alter-specific animates as well as their relationships with ever-changing umwelts. The consequences of ignoring this are brought into sharp relief through the images of militarization that recur in these two films and indeed elsewhere in van der Keuken's vast oeuvre. A fuller semiotic account of ecology would also need to take into account the wellbeing of individuals and communities. In both *Flat Jungle* and *Face Value*, we see numerous moments of frustration and fatalism in the context of a brutal materialistic culture, but we are also privy to moments of joy and happiness that hint at our human potential for creativity. Although there is no guarantee that such potential is ever realized, these moments draw our attention to inter-corporeal empathy and a sense of identity with other species – all the forms of animate life that constitute the semiosphere.

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<sup>20</sup> Also see Petrilli and Ponzio 2005: 535-558 for a further elaboration of semioethics and human responsibility in the semiosphere.

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### Filmography

Van der Keuken, Johan 1978. *Flat Jungle*.

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## Документальный фильм и экосемиотика. Кадры и лица в произведениях Йохана ван дер Кекена

В статье исследуется творческий вклад Йохана ван дер Кекена в экосемиотику, определяются отношения между семиотическим животным и природой в аспектах, позволяющих избежать глоттоцентризма. Отталкиваясь от недавних работ Калеви Кулля, Йеспера Хоффмайера и Джона Дили, я считаю, что документальные фильмы Йохана ван дер Кекена предлагают более широкий взгляд на экологию, чем просто исследование биофизических процессов.

Для обоснования этого аргумента я рассматриваю два контрастирующих фильма ван дер Кекена – «*Flat Jungle*» (1978) и «*Face Value*» (1991). Первый фильм исследует естественные среды обитания в ограниченной прибрежной зоне в Западной Европе, в то время как второй фильм рассматривает человека в различных городских условиях в конце XX века в Европе. Хотя ван дер Кекен не устраняет существенного различия между *Umwelt* и *Lebenswelt*, однако его фильмы успешно напоминают нам об их постоянной взаимозависимости.

## Dokumentaalfilm ja ökosemiootika. Kaadrid ja näod Johan van der Keukeni teostes

Artiklis käsitletakse Johan van der Keukeni loomingut panust ökosemiootikasse ning väidetakse, et selles defineeritakse semiootilise looma ning looduse vaheline suhe, vältides keelekesksust. Lähtudes muuhulgas Kalevi Kulli, Jesper Hoffmeyer ja John Deely hiljutistest töödest, väidan, et van der Keukeni dokumentaalfilmid pakuvad ökoloogiale vaatenurka, mis on avaram, kui seda võiks pakkuda pelk biofüüsikaliste protsesside uurimine, mis võib taandada ökoloogia kitsalt poliitiliseks probleemiks. Toetamaks seda väidet, vaatlen ma van der Keukeni kaht vastandlikku filmi pealkirjadega “*Flat Jungle*” (1978) ja “*Face Value*” (1991). Esimene film uurib looduslikke elupaiku ühel piiritletud Lääne-Euroopa rannikualal, samas kui teine vaatlleb inimesi erinevates 20. sajandi Euroopa linnakeskkondades. Seejärel väidan, et van der Keuken ei kõrvalda küll olulist eristust maailma ja eluilmaga (*Lebenswelt*) vahel, kuid ühtlasi tulevad tema filmid meile õnnestunult meelde nende kahe kestvat vastastikkust sõltuvust.