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van Rijn, I.A.M.J.

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Narrative Threads and Referential Explorations:

Keren Cytter's *The Seven Most Exciting Hours of Mr. Trier's Life in Twenty-Four Chapters*

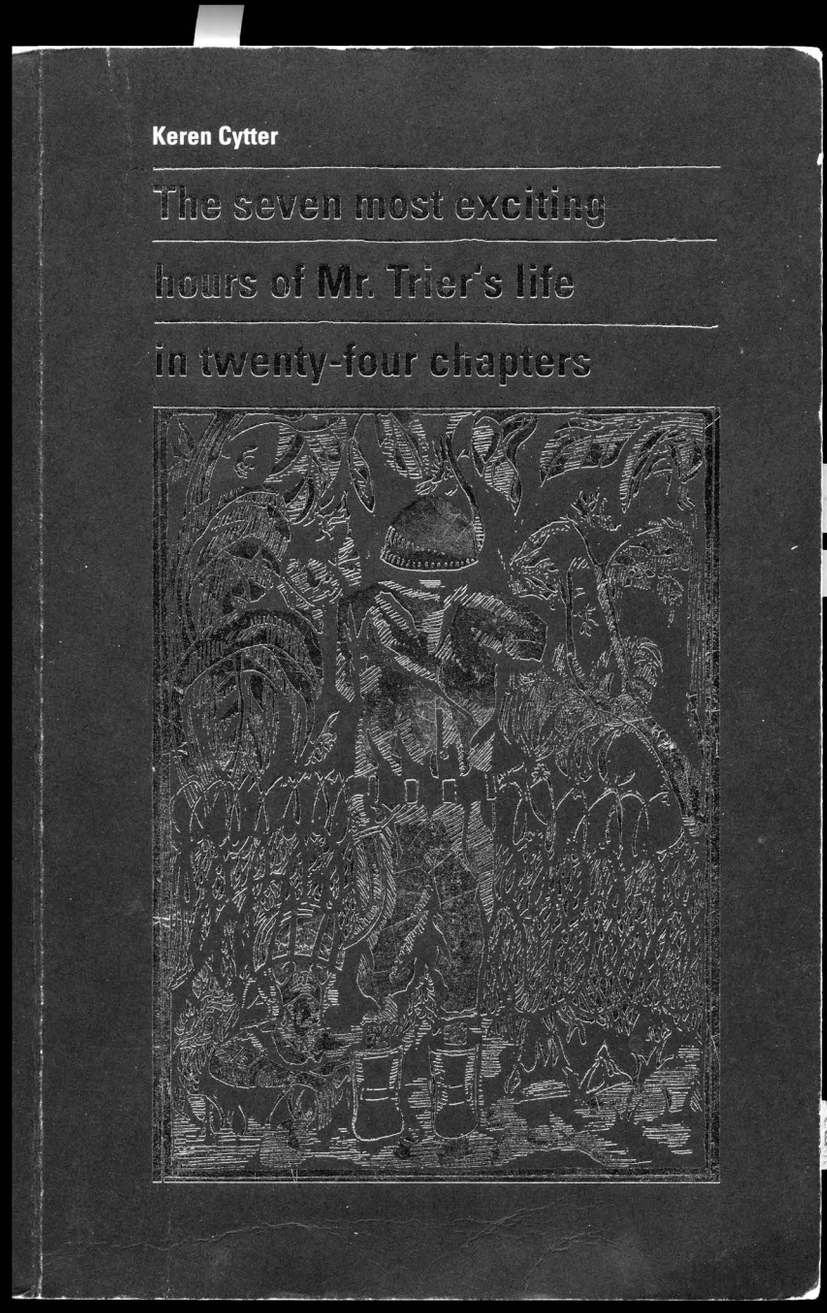

fig 1.1
Keren Cytter, *The Seven Most Exciting Hours of Mr. Trier's Life in Twenty-Four Chapters*, 2008. Cover.

Introduction

The artists' text starts with a dream. And, as it goes with dreams, it seems to resist a logical order. The dream in this case is Tibor Klaus Trier's, the protagonist of Keren Cytter's *The Seven Most Exciting Hours of Mr. Trier's Life in Twenty-Four Chapters*. In an initial state of panic, not knowing where he is, Tibor discovers he is surrounded by the impenetrable forests of wartime Vietnam. A tangle of branches and mud color the background. Fights and flying bullets define the scene. Tibor's best friend Martin, who, like Tibor, has joined the Danish forces, saves him from a foreign attack whereupon the two men take refuge in a nearby tower. The shelter resembles a lighthouse, its clear outlines and verticality contrasting with the jungle's darkness and density. The glass dome that marks the lighthouse is pierced by seagulls and causes the structure to fall onto Tibor and Martin. The "screaming and moaning" finally waking Tibor does not come from either of the two friends squashed underneath the dome's glass panes, but from Tibor's wife Margaret, nine months pregnant and lying by his side.

In this opening scene of *The Seven Most Exciting Hours* the story's setting unfolds and main characters are introduced, centering on Tibor Klaus Trier during some anxious hours while his wife gives birth to their son, or what he hopes is their son.[69] As the baby is about to be delivered in the hospital, he learns that he might not be the father of his future child. The rumor, the writer/narrator confides to the reader, is based on a real-life interview in which film director Lars von Trier revealed that his mother has told him he was the son of a relative of H. C. Andersen who worked in the Danish government. Cytter abstracts a story from this anecdote, having Tibor Trier chase his wife's lover, the government official Karl Friedrich Muller. Tibor, a cancer victim, is crushed in a car accident during the pursuit and ends up in the same hospital as his wife.

The last pages of the story are dominated by the suspicion that the Triers's unborn baby might not even be a human being. The hospital's role in these fears is investigated, the shady practices of its personnel, the ever more apocalyptic décor; nightmares, spiritual sessions, and ghostlike creatures dominate the narrative. As a reader you are taken along in this gloomy state of vertigo, losing the thread of what Cytter terms "true story" and what is not, fact and fiction twisting and merging into a Gordian knot.

The Seven Most Exciting Hours is based on Lars von Trier's TV mini-series *The Kingdom* (1994, 1997), which revolves around murky transactions and unresolved histories that take hold of a hospital and its staff. *The Kingdom* is the raw material of the story that, along with numerous references to film, architecture, and visual art, seep into Cytter's text in each and every scene. This intertwining of textual layers leads to the question: how can the writing's entanglement best be comprehended and approached?

The overt allusions to, mainly, filmmaker and director Lars von Trier, but also to Captain Benjamin L. Willard's (played by Martin Sheen) dangerous mission to Cambodia in Francis Ford Coppola's Vietnam War classic *Apocalypse Now* (1979) that underlie the aforementioned dream, seem to divulge the artists' text's indebtedness to postmodern literature: that is, the text's predilection for intertextuality, that "paradise of words." It is tempting to understand *The Seven Most Exciting Hours* as rejoicing in a comparable and typically postmodern playful, intertextual universe. On closer inspection, however, Cytter's work or *world* seems not protected by a sense of "general writing;" it isn't caught in a network of sheer "Text that does not stop at Literature,"[72] its discourse being all but conspicuously neutral. Compared to postmodern literature and the post-structuralist comprehension of text that underpins it,[73] so-called cracks in the structure of the artists' writing seem to appear, causing the once solid architecture of the text (or Text) to crumble. For Cytter's writing the Derridean adage that there is nothing outside the text subsides,[74] communicating in another manner and mode, construing an alternative pact with the reader. For instance, I doubt that the relatively vivid character of Tibor Trier could be understood as "just" another textual instance, part and parcel of the system, or a "mere" textual sign at a safe distance from the reader. His figure and maneuvers cannot be fully grasped as functioning in and as textuality, being composite and complex, engaging with his environment in various manners and finding himself in different milieus with their own dynamics.

In an attempt to untie what initially struck me as the chaotic universe of Cytter's writing, and studying what, seen through postmodern literature, appear as fissures in the artists' text, the following pages concentrate on the reference as that which was in postmodernism often kept at bay. By looking at the artists' text against postmodern literature I focus on how reference functions in the artists' writing, operating as a necessary building block instead of outside of the text. (Re)introducing the notion of reference, or the referent, doesn't imply that the text *qua* text is neglected. I rather understand the artists' text as composed of different referential registers conditioning its genesis. As a consequence, the artists' writing needs to be read in a transversal manner, traversing and linking the discourses of different domains, be they mental, social, or cultural, in order to grasp its functioning.

When I speak of the operative force of the artists' text, I take into account the production, meaning by that not solely its economic configuration enabling the text's material coming into existence and circulation. Production points to a wider contextual universe and interplay between the writing and its social, environmental, and subjective aspects.[75] Treating Cytter's writing as such a constellation helps distinguish three referential registers interlaced in *The Seven Most Exciting Hours*. Separating these for analytical reasons I attempt to point out the gaps in the textual structure, and trace the operative force of her text. Textual ruptures or inconsistencies emerge in three forms of reference as a form of relation linking the word to the world: 1) imagination's agency; 2) the function of images; and 3) the part played by the reader. The first form is dealt with in the narrative construction of the text, the second in its material constitution, rendered concrete in the handling of images in the text, and the third in writing's relationship with the reader.

Reference and Narrative Construction

Dissecting the Title, Ambiguity

The title *The Seven Most Exciting Hours of Mr. Trier's Life in Twenty-Four Chapters* unambiguously reveals the artists' text's story and its narrative construction. It explicitly informs the reader that she will be told the story of the seven most exciting hours of Mr. Trier's life over twenty-four chapters. Looking more closely at its syntactical order, it communicates even more: suggesting the story is construed around a plot. Characterized as the most important part of the story, the mention of "seven hours" marks an implicit crisis. The added adjectival phrase "most exciting" not only enhances the critical quality of the time span, but also inserts a subjective comment. The qualification of a personal or lived-through perspective is what Gilles Deleuze called a manifestation, presuming an *I* who utters the proposition.[76] This confronted with the mathematically measured and coded "seven hours." Such a combination suggests that Mr. Trier's life is designated, evaluated, and described from another, more distanced vantage point, as if it has a signification of its own. The precisely calculated demarcation of linear time is confronted with a more cyclical experience of it. In *The Logic of Sense* Deleuze distinguishes between *Aiôn* and *Chronos*, respectively the essentially unlimited past and future, which gather incorporeal events, at the surface, as effects, contrasted with "the always limited present, which measures the action of bodies as causes and the state of their mixtures in depth". [77] However, whereas the theorist perceives these two concepts of time as excluding one another, in her text the artist reasons otherwise. Considering the construction of the first part of the title, in which the personal experience of time is embedded, put between, thus "embraced" by its schematic notion of it—seven-most-exciting-hours, following a-b-b-a—the confrontation between the two temporalities embodies an inclusion, at a syntactical level at least.

Whereas the question as to how precisely the "seven most exciting hours" relate to "Mr. Trier's life" remains open, their manipulation in the form of "twenty-four chapters" is clear from the start. Here, within the isolated phrase of the title, the placement of the number "twenty-four" at the end of the clause corresponds with that other cardinal seven at the beginning of the sentence. The "hours" specified by that last number are regulated and coded, mathematically precise, as are the composed and carefully calculated "chapters." The correlation between the measurable entities underlines their different modes, however, an hour being not the same as a chapter: the time of telling is contrasted with the time of the events.

The question remains as to what degree the syntactical concord between the quantifiable units in the title actually corresponds with the work's structure, its deployment and understanding of time in story and text. Is the artists' text's naming of the chapters a strict tautological gesture, repeating the work's "trivial" conventional partitions the reader can count for herself? The sheer mention on the cover makes you aware of the book's structure, of the written work as a structure, as well as the process leading to it. The title conveys that the work in your hands is *always already*: it is a re-presentation. This wake-up call is communicated otherwise through the prominent reference to what later appears to be the protagonist of the artists' text, sharing its name with the famous filmmaker, resulting in general ambiguity. As a reader you are confronted with the distance between word and thing once again, with the arbitrariness of a term. The question that arises, however, is whether the proper name as it is utilized in the artists' writing is innocent. The indeterminacy caused by the title draws *The Seven Most Exciting Hours* nearer to postmodern literary practices, its disputing unifying concepts (autonomy, authority, closure, etc.) and contesting a work's relation to experience.

With respect to this work, and in contrast to postmodern literature, there is no abyss to cross between word and world, nor between strictly separated paradigmatic and syntactical levels in the artists' writing. The notion of reference as constitutive of the chasms between narratological strata and largely excluded from structuralist thought is not questioned nor problematized in the artists' text, as in postmodern literature.

Conscious of post-structuralist conceptions of text and its use in projects designated as postmodern, the artists' writing varies with regard to the

strict oppositions, the negative widths between terms (sender-receiver, black-white, etc.) constitutive of the text and its implicit difference. In *The Seven Most Exciting Hours*, a vertigo or torsion occurs instead, nestling between terms, in terms, between a term and a state of affairs. A direct relationship between words and instances seems subverted, a private rendezvous, a one-on-one contact is disturbed. Chaos rules.

Torsion, or the Porous Strata of the Artists' Text

It isn't just the title that gives away the constructive rules of the game played out in the writing. More or less explicit deliberations on the manufacture of the text are numerous. They can be detected among paratextual elements, like the title, characterizing the textual threshold [*Seuil*] or "vestibule," that skirts the text constituting an "undefined zone" between the inside and the outside. So-called directions of use are intrinsic to the work, if one upholds the "hard and fast" boundary separating the inside (turned toward the text) from the outside (turned toward the world's discourse about the text).[78] Thus every chapter boldly states that the reader has reached its conclusion: "End of First Chapter," "End of Second Chapter," "End of Third Chapter," etc. Once again consciousness about the textuality of the universe is raised. The remarks are indicative of a discernable communicative pact between the writer and the reader: the reader has to turn the page, her gesture enabling access to a new stage in the story. The frame highlighted, representation is represented bearing the traces of its creation. The processes of writing and reading are actualized to the point of becoming indistinguishable. Like writing, reading is indispensable; becoming an act in *The Seven Most Exciting Hours*, the story needs execution, it has to be performed.

The liminal markers demonstrating the presence of the writer in the story and the active part played by the reader yield remarks like the following: "He [Tibor] goes to the kitchen, unaware of the fact that his steps are documented on paper. If he read this chapter he'd probably find it boring. By comparison, the dream from the previous chapter seems so interesting and exciting, and daily life hardly exists, like a thick fog in the brain" (16). The reader witnesses the musings of the author, or of the narrator acting as a writer. The presence of the character in the story is alluded to, and alongside this, Tibor's steps being "documented on paper," granting him the capacity to read. His is a multiple and complex, or at least ambiguous, presence, since one is left unsure as to whether his "steps" should be comprehended in a literal sense or not. Does the writer gather the indexical signs the walking figure has left behind, editing them? Or does she document while perceiving the protagonist's whereabouts remaining aloof from them? Within a single passage, writer (as the first reader) and main character interchange roles. The distance between them is minimized to the point of becoming null and void. Or what surfaces is the torsion in the narrative construction, the raw material permeating the story, while some serious doubts about the sequential ordering of that raw material are shared. Tibor Trier is treated as a real-life person and character simultaneously, thus being unreliable, like the author herself.

The cacophony of voices in which it results paradoxically silences the characters *qua* characters who are little fleshed out. Instead of round and living entities, they are merely objectively described like puppets in a scene, dominated by the author's vision and intentions pulling their strings. Descriptions often take the protagonist Tibor as their focal point: "Tibor could curse…," "He forgets…," "He looks up…," "His pupils dilate…" The importance of the author's determination is accentuated by comments like: "Tibor's fate has been set before this story was ever written" (33); he turns "a blind eye to all the signs and suspicions" the author confronts him with, the author states, indignant but also amused; the reason for this, however, might be that he "doesn't know … that the whole plot revolves around him" (58). But the other characters are also subjected to the author's will and the process of writing. Witness the technician repairing the heating system, referred to as "the man from the second chapter" (55). And Dr. Governor, for instance, who "left the morphine bottle in the archive and he doesn't pay any attention to it because he doesn't remember it yet" (151). The artists' text hardly shows, it tells.

The interpenetration of narratological levels in *The Seven Most Exciting Hours* results in ambiguity said to be immanent in the genesis of the story: "This is exactly what Lars von Trier said in the interview: after his father died, his mother told him that his father wasn't his real father and that she had slept with someone in the Danish government who's a relative of H. C. Andersen because she wanted her son to be an artist. True story" (150). One could hesitate over whether the last comment, true story, regards the story of this work, the interview on which it is said to be based, or the relation between the two. The reference to Andersen, a writer of myths and fairytales, mines the factuality of the statement, as does the unequivocal note, true story, and the subjective force of the interjection. The illusion of the story and its credibility are disrupted by the intervention, which paradoxically states the "truth" of the raw material construing the story we simultaneously read. The documentary evidence of the interview is thwarted by the fiction of the text; the indexicality of the document (the interview, the steps from the previously cited passage) is both supported (true story) and denounced, the artists' text rather setting out to tell the story behind the document. The wonderful

and unbelievable aspects of the inside information consequently breach the formality of the document. Mentioning the obscure lineage secures a preference for the 'otherworldly' fiction. Or, one could say that Cytter mingles a predilection for probable impossibilities (the interview) and improbable possibilities (the stories emerging from it), thus countering what Aristotle in the *Poetics* perceives as the poet's task: "the poet should prefer probable impossibilities to improbable possibilities" (1460a27), and: "the impossible must be justified by reference to artistic requirements, or to the higher reality, or to received opinion" (1461b10). She writes on the edge of the (im)possible and the obscure, letting imagination do its work where knowledge can't reach.

The overt references to the structuring devices of the narrative, suspending the story's illusion and unobstructed reading, might be recognized as a postmodern "convention." The remarks could be seen as a "rewritten … relationship between a *topic* and a *comment*," according to Fredric Jameson, writing on postmodern literary techniques. In postmodern art a "new hierarchy is established," he argues, between a fable and a mise-en-scène, between the anecdote, the raw material of the basic story, and the way in which those materials are told or staged. Or, as of video art, "signs change places!".[79] And, indeed, a foregrounding of the process of production in line with postmodern works can be witnessed in the artists' text. And like postmodern practices, Cytter's writing lingers on or makes ample use of the index, described by art historian Rosalind Krauss as "that type of sign which arises as the physical manifestation of a cause, of which traces, imprints, and clues are examples." Krauss then designates an indexical sign as a "message without a code." The relation of signifier and signified is quasi-tautological, unequivocal, the distance between them being reduced. Cytter transforms the functioning of the index, however, imposing doubt on the physical connection between the two parts of the sign, as we saw in the case of that "indubitable" index: the step. And in contrast to postmodern works, *The Seven Most Exciting Hours* has another way of addressing "putative messages, meanings, or content," taking them seriously. That is, the artists' writing faces the consequences of the postmodern strategic procedures with which it is familiar.

Acknowledging that a text is always already a construction and necessarily invented, it subsequently develops this agreed upon constellation in a quasi self-evident manner, testing what happens if the strategy is followed throughout. Thus rumor or hearsay is presented and treated as evidence, as in the case of the Lars von Trier interview. Or fiction is translated into fact, and vice versa. This textual strategy results in a form of writing that takes as its starting point the typically postmodern discontinuous form Jameson observes in Samuel Beckett's novels and plays, and which he discusses at great length in relation to Claude Simon's novel *Les corps conducteurs* (1971). In Simon's and Beckett's works, discontinuity is central to the fiction.

Distances between structuralist instances (Lyotard) or functions (Foucault) seem to be minutely measured and translated in diverse modes and forms of address in *The Seven Most Exciting Hours*. The rifts between writer and reader, author and character are transgressed through a presentation of the acting potential of what postmodernism kept separated and conceived as distinct roles. Thus the reader is confronted less with an artificial separation within and of the text, reminding her of its constructed character, than with a tentative filling out of it. The artists' writing occupies the blanks in the structuralist grid. Details and extensions are added where they weren't provided in the postmodern text, doubts, veering away from the postmodern predilection for clear-cut facts, are added and expanded on. This textual strategy does not imply a mournful return to realist illusions or naturalist decors, voicing a deep regret about a splintered totality of life, as I tried to demonstrate before. Rather details here entail the material and the musings as material in relation to the arrangement and manufacture of the story. The procedure probes and tests language's potential, as a material and a means, a point to which I will return in relation to the use of images.

Here already one can notice the artists' text's reflection on the possibility of a paradoxical *transitivity* of language as material. Cytter's work manipulates and modifies a structuralist fascination with language as *intransitivity*. The earlier preoccupation with language's intransitivity is testified to by the event scores or "word pieces" developed in the early 1960s by Yoko Ono and George Brecht, for instance. Their short instruction-like, sometimes meditative texts were initially written as performance instructions. However, the notations gradually moved away from realizable actions to the internal act of reading or observing. And whereas the mutability and transposability of the event scores, read in print as either poetry, performance

fig 1.2
Georg Brecht, *Word Event*, 1962. Score, designed by George Maciunas around 1963.

instruction, or score, could be understood as a corroboration of Barthes's plea for writing as performative, it having no other origin than language itself, this view obliterates the fact that these texts were often related to the production of an object as residue of the action performed.[81] Or as art historian Liz Kotz convincingly formulates in referring to Brecht's work *Word Event* (1961), what a word piece initiates is a chain of substitutes between "word, sign, object, action, and so forth, *all contained within just one word*".[82]

Juxtaposing 1960s word pieces such as Brecht's with the description or documentation of Tibor's "steps," for instance, it can be observed that the artists' writing scrutinizes the possibilities of "just one word" in language (other examples will elucidate this procedure shortly). In this strategy language does not shy away from textual techniques that inhere in *literariness*, that transformation of a word into a work.[83] Cytter's writing thus distinguishes itself from that of Conceptual artists' work, Joseph Kosuth in particular, fiercely debunking literature, judged too subjective for an art (and the designation thereof) that should be general ("not connected to an action or material"), yet specific (not mingled with "science, politics, or entertainment").[84] In *The Seven Most Exciting Hours*, however, a word is no stable, categorized, and categorizing entity: both literature and not literature, it travels instead, it mutates.

The tentatively reformulated contacts in *The Seven Most Exciting Hours* both between textual strata, and between what, for reasons of clarity, I will continue to term instances (the author, the reader) and their textual relations can thus very well be comprehended as an entry into myriad translations and possibilities, or what logicians call "possible worlds" introduced by "just one word." In other words language is understood not only in its paradigmatic and syntagmatic use, but in its formal manifestations, "without excluding amalgams and blends".[85] Like the earlier mentioned "steps," tracing the functioning of other single terms clarifies how the artists' text works.

The Seven Most Exciting Hours evolves what in relation to postmodern literature is called a chain of signifiers, operating in and of itself as if inattentive to the linearity of the sentences or the story's semantic logic. One of these terms is *cold*: "Tibor is conscious of the cold temperature," the hospital's secretary answers in a "cool, objective voice," "it's cold in the flat," "Many people think she [Margaret] 's cold…," "… he notices how cold it is outside." A peculiar universe is evoked in this manner, generated and maintained by a single term, creating a bizarre harmony and rhythm that transgresses borders between narratological layers and worlds. In a strange way, Cytter's textual procedure is reminiscent of

Raymond Roussel's, constructing his novel *Impressions d'Afrique* (1910) around the different denotations of words phonematically resembling each other (billard/pillard).[86] The attention Cytter pays to words seems quite different from Roussel's, nevertheless. The poet's carefully and precisely corresponding meaning with the words, extracts the most from them given their particularities and tensions; this conscious reworking of terms seems absent from the artists' writing, at first glance. The mostly casual phrasing and plain style of the artists' text rather point to Cytter's criteria lying elsewhere. On the one hand, *cold* and its variants allow for scenic contrasts to be played out, to contrast and bridge opposing states of mind and different worlds. Thus Margaret is cold, while also having a "hot" adulterous relationship, a lover with whom she reads poetry; Tibor is woken from dreams and heated situations by the cold; the secretary's cool voice contrasts with the pressing apocalyptic circumstances in which she finds herself. Yet the unembellished style of the artists' text corresponds well with the cold ambiance it invokes. A formal integrity is acquired. A conceptual continuity is built based on the plurality of possibilities within "just one word."

The artists' writing's textual procedures can then be said to both diverge from their postmodern counterparts and come closer to them. They bring "into prominence the fact that the *speaking* of language is part of an activity, or of a life-form," simultaneously breaking with the structure of what in relation to postmodern literature is conceived as a language game: an utterance can be defined in terms of rules specifying its properties and the uses to which it can be put, like in a game of chess.[87] Whereas the chapters' concluding remarks (End of First Chapter, End of Second Chapter, etc.) could very well be perceived as such rules of the game, as an explicit contract between the players (the writer and the reader in this case), the repeated crossing of boundaries between the narrative's layers points to the fact that no rule is observed as it is continuously traversed. Or following Jean-François Lyotard's observations: the rules being incessantly modified, the game is adapted time and again. Or, the artists' text does not satisfy the rules of the game, so does not belong to it.[88] The repetitive schema construed by the adjective *cold* in the artists' text does not introduce a self-sufficient pattern referring to language alone, and the *raison d'être* of language. The artists' writing does not invoke a Beckettian world, in which "nothing" but the writing "happens," thus typically indicating a referent that is "repressed."[89] In *The Seven Most Exciting Hours* the repetition introduces less a widening of the rift between signifier and signified, between word and world, than installs a non-hierarchical co-existence between raw material and story, between story and narrative text. Differences between and within descriptions of either characters or scenes are minimized: depth of field hardly

exists. Whereas postmodern writing upheld the immanent and integral structure of the text, safeguarding it against exterior influences through a continuous translation of those extraneous "threats" (Lyotard's "moves" in the language game) into textual forms, or designating them as such, the artists' text integrates so-called outer failures as failures, causing what once were strictly textual structures to potentially collapse. Thus protagonists *possibly* act like mouthpieces of the author's intentions; the inside and the outside world *possibly* stretch out and fold, *possibly* eliminating the frontiers between hospital and apartment, highway and hallway, public (reader's) area and private (writer's) room; the possibly smooth, unified domain of the anonymous town in which the characters act is split time and again, then unified once more through repetitious descriptions and returning words (cold).

These textual cracks or folds are ambiguous and filled with potential. Cutting through a once fixed, stable, and self-supporting textual spatiotemporal realm, the fissures do not necessarily cause a fictional universe to be broken down, crumbling and demonstrating the difference between text and world. Rifts, edges, and folds must be understood as saturated with directions the text does not necessarily provide. They are charged with dreams, chaos, unreason, ignorance, and imagination. They are the loose thread in the master's knotted carpet showing his unbridled craft and his control. As such the chaos pervading the artists' text could better be described not as the disorder or disorganization that initially seemed to define it, but as composed of an infinite speed causing forms to disperse. Chaos is a void [*vide*], in the words of Deleuze and Guattari, a "*virtual*, containing all possible particles and drawing out all possible forms, which spring up only to disappear immediately, without consistency or reference, without consequence".[90] Or as Margaret thinks out loud: "'What is this game?' But it is not a game—it's reality in her imagination" (116).

The gaps in text are consequently not postmodern negative ones. They are positive widths, as the repeated word *perhaps* in the artists' text reminds the reader. For now it's sufficient to posit that the artists' writing has a dynamic of its own. *The Seven Most Exciting Hours* is a text endowed with potential, in which nothing is concluded. As a result, the reader is far removed from the postmodern self-sufficient textual time-space Alain Badiou in relation to Beckett's writings once characterized as a rather paralyzed and irremovable "grey." Paradoxically, and no matter how "failing" the artists' text might appear from a postmodern, post-structuralist point of view—since there are no rules, there is no game. An unconventional linking of levels and terms draws attention to the writing's fullness. This is comparable, but not identical to the way the physicality of Beckett's characters was honored or recalled through their stumbling (*Film*), crumpling (*Endgame*), or filth (*Molloy*).

Perhaps and Potentiality

Considering the fullness of the artists' text in *The Seven Most Exciting Hours* allows me to delve into the idiosyncratic and ambivalent world that issues forth from this kind of writing. And comparing Cytter's work with postmodern procedures can sharpen what it is that gives way to the operative force of the artists' text, its functioning and its effects. A postmodern self-sufficient text is interrupted through unrelentingly shifting and often equivocal perspectives. A second reading of the passage mentioned above elucidates this incertitude: "He [Tibor] goes to the kitchen, unaware of the fact that his steps are documented on paper. If he read this chapter he'd probably find it boring. By comparison, the dream from the previous chapter seems so interesting and exciting, and daily life hardly exists, like a thick fog in the brain." The "previous chapter" introduces the dream that begins this chapter, in which Tibor is in a Vietnam based on the film *Apocalypse Now* that he had been watching with his best friend Martin before falling asleep. The cited excerpt "He goes to the kitchen … in the brain," begins from an external perspective and ends from the internal one. Or so it seems, since to whom "the dream from the previous chapter" is "so interesting and exciting" is not clear. From a narratological point of view it is only natural for the reader to switch to Tibor's state-of-mind, since it is from his perspective that the dream is perceived. But here she hesitates wondering whether these are Tibor's thoughts and experiences or those of the "documenting" writer/narrator's. This hesitation is born of the constructive role of the writer/narrator and her experiences percolating into the text. A possible double perspective is thus achieved by one character's combined internal and external point of view, the unspecificity of the narrator/writer's function simultaneously casting doubts on their complicity.

This indeterminate role of the narrator/writer and the ceaselessly adjusted double perspective are complicated by the world evoked by the artists' writing. You therefore do not become aware of the narrative's architecture as a result of the narrator's/writer's remarks, which are in line with postmodern literature that wants the reader to become conscious of the sheer textuality of the text. Instead, you experience doubt as to how to understand the chaotic and ever more supernatural events.

The artists' text brings into being what can be called a fantastical realm.[91] Disbelief remains suspended, doubt rules. Apprehension on the part

of the reader of this willingly suspended disbelief is characteristic of the fantastical as a genre and specific to an ambiguous perspective. It never turns into a postmodern critique of language encapsulated by "failed" representations, as Jameson contends in relation to postmodern discourse.[92] In postmodern literature representations are only seemingly "denaturalized," simultaneously "inscribing and subverting the conventions of narrative." As Linda Hutcheon explains, what is denaturalized is "both realism's transparency and modernism's reflexive response while retaining (in its typically complicitously critical way) the historically attested power of both".[93] The artists' text can be said to testify to another history, its legacy lying elsewhere. The fantastical acts, then, as an image or *art object* both hiding and unveiling this heritage. It draws on the fertile background, or it sketches the conditions of the writing's genesis. Through the fantastical the artists' writing's potentiality is signaled, in other words, what it is capable of. As a concept and breeding ground the fantastical operates in a way comparable to the term *cold* mentioned before, the latter demonstrating the vast array of manners in which "just one word" *can* function and be understood.

What is materialized in the text is the translation of the fabula or raw material into the story, the story into the narrative text, and the questions this reworking as a process provokes. (Postmodern) conventions are inverted and turned inside out; traditional borders safeguarding instances as integral are transgressed. Or as Margaret voices, musing about the story's structure, you could as well "construct [it] from the end backwards" (149). The artists' writing's transgressive behavior, running in parallel to the apocalyptic world the text conjures, is prefigured in Tibor's dream based on *Apocalypse Now* with which Cytter's work (and this chapter) opens. You could even say that the film, the dream, and the ensuing world outlined in *The Seven Most Exciting Hours* constitute the three tiers of the text's non-hierarchical model. The dream is median between film and story, overlapping sometimes, drawing a soothing veil over both while constituting their driving force.

This tiered partition can be recognized in the characters' names and features. Margaret reads Lewis Carroll's "nonsensical" poem *The Hunting of the Snark* with her lover Karl Friedrich Muller, who could as well exist only in Tibor's feverish mind, especially since Muller's position is equivalent to the "official in the Danish government" proposed as Lars von Trier's father in real life. This rumor is key to the basis of *The Seven Most Exciting Hours*, which seems rather close to Carroll's poem. This is not only due to the material construction of Carroll's and Cytter's work—drawings are inserted in both—but also in their questioning of the rational. For instance, a "talking frog" figures in *The Seven Most Exciting Hours* alluding

to a fairytale by the Brothers Grimm mentioned by "an anthropology and literature professor" in his "book called *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*," about "folk-story heroes all over the world." Fyodor Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment* is cited as well (one even recognizes traces of its protagonist Rashkolnikov's dilemmas and fights for justice in Tibor's mental struggles). Besides interpolating literary and cinematographic elements, descriptions are borrowed from visual art and architecture: "Spots warp and mix with Suzy's face and Sven's muscles and look like Marc Chagall's drawings" (23); "Then he [Tibor] looks down the hallway . . . blurred, airy and dark like a Rothko painting" (38); the metastases in Tibor's lungs are allegorically called Koolhaas and Gaudi (129).

The multiple allusions testify to the contingency of rationality's reliability, and thus of language as a trustworthy construction performing the translation from fabula /raw material to story to text. Appropriated references transform the artists' text into a hybrid, an accumulation of images that seems to arrest the reading's function within a horizontally constructed chain of events. The writing crosses the boundaries between visual and verbal, mingling horizontal (syntagmatic) and vertical (paradigmatic) axes of language. Through the synthetic collage-like fusion it describes, it seems to come close to what art historian Craig Owens defines as the allegorical impulse characteristic of postmodern art. In contrast to the allegorical inclination motivating postmodern works, reading doesn't come to a halt in this text. The text isn't a hieroglyph, a rebus composed of concrete images to be untangled, thus marking a typical allegorical "reciprocity between the visual and the verbal" (Owens mentions Lawrence Weiner's murals composed of large, clear letters to illustrate his point).[94] Nor is it a ceaseless piling up of fragments, "without any strict idea of a goal", comparable to Hanne Darboven's scribblings and appreciation of language as systematic quantification.[95]

Although a predilection for diegetic combination is present in Cytter's work, as shown above, a syntagmatic disjunction certainly leads what still can be called a narrative, instead of the counter-narrative subtending the allegorically motivated works, whose "essence is fragment".[96] What happens in artists' writing is still the "confusion of consecution and consequence, what comes *after* being read . . . as what is *caused by*," according to Barthes's definition of narrative in his "Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narrative" (1977). The most problematic aspect with respect to artists' writing then in Owens's use of the allegorical as underlying postmodern works is not so much the description of the allegorical per se. Incompatible with it are the strict oppositions that are upheld: between horizontal and vertical, between neurotic (paradigmatic) conjunction and rational, clearly ordered (syntagmatic) disjunction. In *The*

Seven Most Exciting Hours the choice either/or cannot be made. Barthes's argument in relation to narrative remains valid in this case: meaning runs across narrative layers and eludes all unilateral investigation.

Within the framework of my research, it is more fruitful to approach the artists' text in a transversal manner, taking into account the complex of universes that condition it and bring it about—allowing for variation and diverse combinations between the elements that constitute the text. It is precisely the so-called foreign elements in the text (the visual and the verbal, the "stammering" resulting from a combined disjunction and conjunction, or in the case of Cytter's work Gaudi, Rothko, and Dostoyevsky performing (in) the writing, the silenced, dreamed, or imagined) that define the work. One could say that Cytter's is a multilingual text, a foreign one, but written in its own tongue.[97]

The multiple references do not allude to a reliance on language, and the rational, conscious deliberation and agency associated with it, as is the case with postmodernism's preference for intertextuality. On the contrary, language is pushed to its limits in the artists' text, a pursuit thematically expanded upon through a recurring authoritative "madness" or "unreason." The fantastical as an art object, incorporating and mediating the oscillation between reason and unreason, between belief and its suspension, plays a pivotal role in the artists' writing's textual situation. The fantastical could be said to act as a demythologizing image, both concealing and revealing textual procedures. This is embodied in the characters themselves: the "supersensible" and demanding patient Mathilda, her visions of ghosts and spiritual sessions obstructing medical treatments at the beginning of the tale, is transformed into a soothsayer; Tibor's sister Suzy, initially emotionally troubled, is in the end a person on whom "a lot" depends: "Truth lands heavily on her—she's just a secondary character in the plot—who would have thought!" (160). Likewise, and perhaps as consequence, the story's is no infallible success, something of which it shows it is aware in lines like: "From that moment on they spiral away … until it is no longer dizziness but relaxing weights that stabilize the plot and provide a reason for every action" (95); referring to Margaret again, when "her consciousness leaves the delivery room and moves to the tiny bedroom with the flowery sheet:" "'What is this game?' But it is not a game—it's reality in her imagination" (116).

As of our hero Tibor, the double and ambiguous perspective (inner and outer, combining protagonist's and author's) in the passage cited above seems to stem from an incremental process of indecision characterizing both him and the story hinging on him. In relation to the protagonist the term "perhaps" returns:

> Perhaps the Triers' life had deviated from its course even before they made their way to the hospital, … perhaps the adventure had commenced when the phone rang. … Perhaps Sven is the talking frog. … Or perhaps it happened before the phone call - perhaps Tibor Klaus Trier set out on an adventure already in the first chapter, when he dreamt of the mosquitos buzzing. Maybe this book is the talking frog … (32).

Whereas these considerations could be read as the writer/narrator sharing her reluctance and doubt about the narrative construction, they could also be viewed as traces of the fantastical: that is, the reader's anxieties as to the story's ever more supernatural events are projected onto the protagonist.

In the artists' text imaginary, contingent, and rationally seemingly impossible representations intrude on the *progressive achievement* of the story. The variation on postmodern strategies springs to the eye once again, postmodern textual procedures making it the "failure of imagination that is important, and not its achievement, since in any case all representations fail and it is always impossible to imagine," as Jameson argues. In addition to a reevaluation of imagination's status and role, postmodernism's lesson borrowed from Walter Benjamin that "history progresses by failure" is taken as a source for the development of the artists' writing.[98] Fiction is reintroduced in the artists' text as a means celebrating imagination and its curative effects.

According to Hutcheon the way in which postmodern fiction plays on historiography's question of reference, is complicated in two ways: it is ontologically confused (text or experience; and it "overdetermines the entire notion of reference (we find autoreferentiality, intertextuality, historiographic reference, and so on)."[99] However, whereas postmodern fiction never succeeds in "fully resolving it [the question of reference]," as Hutcheon claims, the artists' text does not need to resolve the question—since there isn't one. *The Seven Most Exciting Hours* does not exceed in the number and kinds of allusion as a critical, textually "closed circuit, a strategy to state and imply the problem of reference, real or textualized."[100] There is no question, critique, or problem of "or" conceived within neatly structured linguistic outlines. Cytter's writing progresses through at once bulimic and exuberant "and." Articulating the issue from an ontological point of view, philosopher Levi Bryant claims: "'to be' is to make or *produce* a difference" [emphasis mine], and: "we will not proceed like Hamlet, demanding that everything be clear before we act."[101] It remains to be seen whether Bryant's ontological alternative suffices as a response to a postmodern textual perspective. For now, it

casts a light on other, unforeseen connections between textual positions and relations between terms, providing substance to the relata, that remained empty and ultrathin from a postmodern point of view.

Mr. Trier, or the Function of a Name

In *The Seven Most Exciting Hours* failure and imagination, chaos, the uncontrollable, and the rationally "inconceivable" form a constituent part of the story, however radically "different" and "nonsensical" the outcome might appear. Post-structuralism and postmodernism's fascination with language as a code (and with that ultimate script: DNA[102]) is transformed into a constructive device, both on a semantic level (the work's obsession with descendants and origin exemplified by the interview with Lars von Trier) and on a narratological plane (fabula and story, story and text, narrator, writer, character, and reader intertwine). Language as coded functions like a trampoline in the artists' writing, as a subcutaneous fertile ground or virtual to be varied and potentially deployed. The structuralist language, a set and closed circuit, is translated into a more open and malleable one. So-called entry points are created in Cytter's text, administering unforeseen access to what seems foreign or strange. The alien implies the *fait divers* of the interview, on the one hand. But on the other it also languishes in the word "perhaps," suggesting a potentiality immanent in the writing, the possibility of something *not* made explicit in the text.[103] Think of the possibility of the Triers' unborn child not being a human being. Witness Tibor's pursuit of what he *imagines* to be Margaret's lover. Thus instead of blocking a referent enabling speech, treated as a clear chain organized into a system, the alien, and exotic, the imperceptible is welcomed with open arms.

The artists' writing reconsiders the former solidity of the chain of speech via different approaches to language. "Perhaps" a "strange" element is allowed in its midst, introducing a panoply of modalities in a language structuralists organized as a grid composed of clearly defined and opposite pairs. In *The Seven Most Exciting Hours* the referent is simultaneously real and textualized, virtual and actual; the writer AND the reader participate in the text, the visual AND the verbal. Those referents "problematized" by postmodern approaches, defined as Different, explicitly Other domains are conjoined in the artists' writing, in other words, breaking up and coalescing again, constituting what could be called an assemblage.[104]

This procedure can very well be demonstrated in focusing on the way the name, that "rigid designator,"[105] can be comprehended in the artists' text, comparing its functioning to postmodern works. Since it is a name that figures prominently in the title of *The Seven Most Exciting Hours*, as we already saw, it being associated with the protagonist of Cytter's tale: Tibor Trier. Tibor is the red thread in the story: the reader shares in his musings and follows his whereabouts, she traces his intimate thoughts, faces his visions, and is witness to his accidents. Tibor's capricious performances sketch a vertiginous realm. Cytter's variegated references or referents from cinema to architecture to literature to painting attempt to contextualize his transgressive behavior, leading to his hybrid constitution.

Whereas proper names become "textual entities" in postmodern works, in the artists' writing Trier isn't reduced to its textualized form. As of typically postmodern practices "a significant difference in allusive resonance" between two names is drawn out, between "Duke of Windsor" and "Mauberley," for instance - the names' "allusions are to intertexts," Hutcheon explains, be they historical or literary.[106] In the artists' writing the allusive resonance is rather taken as a starting point in lieu of a result. The connotation, the unofficial, hearsay, or the rumor prevail. Any description (a = b), even the marginal and unpredictable ones play a decisive role in the story. Here the presumed rigidity of the name (a = a) enables both the play with words and the weight of them, the materialization of the words born of the often hazardous, diverse, and contingent descriptions. This functioning of the proper name in the artists' text and its materialization contrast with postmodern subjects and objects as remaining a function of language: "descriptions" showing "rather the breakdown of description and the failure of language to achieve the most obvious things it has been supposed to do."[107] Or: a ≠ b.

For postmodern works, which presuppose the textual playground, that area where the "rules of the game" are set in advance, names allow for "shallowness" to take form. The name thus exemplifies and is a special case of a postmodern abstention from "things." Language's referential potential fails not only in the use of proper names but in its deictic potential: that demonstrative manner and textual modulation communicated through words such as *here*, *there*, *now*, *so it seems*, and also: *perhaps*.

Jameson can help us further elucidate Cytter's writing, its repetitive use of "perhaps" and its implications in contrast with postmodern textual procedures. To point out a postmodern refraining from "things" Jameson refers to the opening section of Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*, known as the chapter on what Hegel calls "sense-certainty." In it, it is argued that there can be no unmediated identity between language and sensory experience in the present. Language is a universal and part of

consciousness, unable to actually reach the sensuous. As such, it presides over a multiplicity of distinct kinds of content. Or, "language, as we see, is the more truthful; in it, we ourselves directly refute what we mean to say, and since the universal is the true [content] of sense-certainty and language expresses this true [content] alone, it is just not possible for us ever to say, or express in words, a sensuous being that we mean". [108]

Juxtaposing this passage with the artists' text, it can be provisionally concluded that language's deictic potential is (re-)installed through its ominous use of the deictic "perhaps." The use of proper names in Cytter's work possibly escapes the "ruse of language" or language as a code. An inversion of a Hegelian dialectic takes place: language's synthetic unity is spelled out demonstrating its potential, carrying with it not only its own negation but also its positive form, modulating what was formerly known as a distinctive gap between the sensuous and language. Witness once again the difference between artists' and postmodern texts. For the latter there is no regulation that makes it possible to locate an object or a name in "other possible worlds," every otherness being reduced to an overarching principle called language. But in the artists' writing it remains possible to talk about someone, "Trier," in some "counterfactual world" through the simultaneous description and creation (or suggestion) of that counterfactual world. Language, and the name as a specific case of language being filled out at will through description as diverse, it is all but deprived of what could be called its "transindividual" character: it reveals itself as relational, characterized by a movement between internal and external forces, these relations being not necessarily functional: some things are *not* being said, as I mentioned before. [109] Or it is stipulated that language is an amalgamation, an assemblage, through "Mr. Trier."

Reference: Image and Text

I have suggested that the distance between textual layers is minimized in *The Seven Most Exciting Hours* to the point of being negligible: textual strata contaminate or permeate each other, descriptions vary and spread causing names ("Mr. Trier," "Martin") to cross the thresholds of "their" worlds. In the artists' writing the fantastical acts as an image or "art object." What is more, these acts simultaneously conceal and unveil the textual strategies that transform the fabula into the story into the text. Trier's transgressive behavior is illuminated and camouflaged by the fantastical. The fantastical, then, masking the maneuvers of ceaseless textual conversions, the image is also a transparent one pierced by hesitation. These doubts are both caused by the writerly process and immanent to the fantastical as a genre. Whereas the difference between narratological layers is addressed in a negative manner in postmodern works of art, it is positively valued in the contemporary artists' text: so-called gaps between the structuralist predilection for polarized terms (black versus white, night versus day), these are modulated and filled with potential in the artists' writing (the frequent return of the word *perhaps*). Silences and the alien (the Triers's unborn child) are present without them being directly expressed. As a consequence the notion of reference, which draws on an understanding of difference, is conveyed in another manner in the artists' writing as compared to postmodern works. It is marked by fullness, instead of lack. Thus Trier acting in every possible world while creating these realms he, or "it" becomes a hybrid, his name the descriptive container modifying his traces. A typical postmodern textual convention like intertextuality is inverted; difference between worlds is not questioned or problematized; every possible world is rather generated and put to work.

Having unearthed the fantastical realm in *The Seven Most Exciting Hours*, one must turn to the drawings. Concentrating on the connection between drawing and text, [110] from a postmodern perspective, their relation can be comprehended as an extreme form of intertextuality since the text both marks the difference from the drawing while ironically inserting difference into it. Approached as an ensemble, the combination of text and drawing can be viewed as an appropriation of a poem cited in the text, Lewis Carroll's *The Hunting of the Snark*. Carroll's work offers an interplay between woodcuts and text, the only difference being that Carroll did not make the woodcuts himself, [111] while Cytter drew her own drawings, something I look into further in the following pages.

The Cover as Ambiguous Entrée

The juxtaposition of the title with a drawing by the author on the cover page both underscores and gives nuance to the separation between terms. Whereas the heterogeneity of drawing and text is predicated on a recognized visual difference between them, sharing an author dissimulates or at least alters this gap. The drawing itself seems to focus on the centrally positioned soldier seen from behind (**fig. 1.1**). A mask renders the figure anonymous, and the hesitant and slightly clumsily drawn lines combined with the simplified outlines turn the character into a type. He (she? it?) is put in forest-like surroundings, pointing backward it seems, away from the reader, at a hidden target with a gun. Next to the figure's feet, in the left corner at the bottom of the drawing, a smaller second soldier is visible. In contrast to the first, he seems to be looking forward, his gaze concentrated on the spectator or reader, or on a point behind the onlooker aiming at a distant future. The story engages in a

double perspective taking up Tibor's point of view as well as an external one, reflected in the visual components seen from without and within, and underscored in the title. The title connotes *Aiôn* with *Chronos*, creating a synthesis between an unlimited past and future (*Aiôn*), the ordering of time in a straight line as *seven* in *The Seven Most Exciting Hours*) with a limited present (*Chronos*, the "explosive" characterization of the seven hours as *most exciting*). The reading is complicated by the anonymous figures in the drawing, so that Tibor could be confused with the depicted soldiers. This double perspective once more reflects the text and a potentially intimate mirroring of textual and image procedures.

In explicitly approaching the cover as a montage, breaks between fragments can be understood as constitutive of the page, constructing the cover and simultaneously disrupting the illusion of the image being composed of both text and drawing: fragments of "reality" are inserted into the whole (Trier, "most exciting").[112] The jumbling of drawing and title emphasizes the different representative functions of words and images. As their distinction highlights their mutual explanatory force, sharing space alludes to the design of the cover regulated by conventions "that form part of the complex mediation between book, author, publisher, and reader" in this case.[113] Due to this context text and drawing seem both freed from a referential relationship and bound by it. If the formality of the cover design hides that one sees words and images differently, as René Magritte's famous (non-)pipe reminds us,[114] or *The Treachery of Images* (1928-1929), as his painting is officially called, it also provides a common ground allowing for their so-called opposition to melt away.

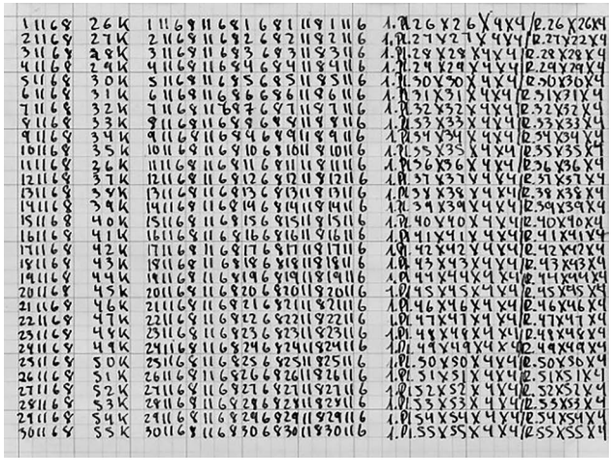

fig 1.3
Hanne Darboven, from *Sechs Bücher über 1968 (Six Books about 1968)*, 1968.

Do text and image function in a manner comparable to Magritte's painting, their stable relationship torn apart, the "calligram unraveled", words and drawing or painting only referring to themselves in the end?[115] Following my provisional conclusion that it is possible for Tibor to exist in every possible world (be it textual or drawn), while producing it, the mode of connection between text and image needs to be concentrated on. Or, how is *perhaps* visualized? What form do non-verbal effects of interrelations, both internal and external take?

More Drawings: Enigmatic Image-Text Relationships

The Seven Most Exciting Hours is composed of two parts: the first consists of thirteen chapters; the second contains eleven. The text is cut through by four drawings. The first drawing repeats the image on the cover page suggesting continuity between what is traditionally conceive as the paratext and text. The repeated image printed on black and white paper differs from its cover version, with its shiny gold lines carving out the image and text on the thick black jacket. The second drawing is positioned between the eighth and ninth chapter; the third drawing opens the second part of the artists' text; and the last drawing is inserted after the end of chapter nineteen. From their number and placement, no regularity can be deduced: the drawings do not relate to the story or impinge on either the narrative text or the story inflicting a reading that neglects a logical narrative order.

fig 1.4
Keren Cytter, *The Seven Most Exciting Hours of Mr. Trier's Life in Twenty-Four Chapters*, 2008. Drawing.

The distance between image and text is minimized or rephrased through the repetition of the first drawing. The emphasis is not on their being identical, but similar. A conflation ensues wherein the inside and the outside of the artists' text combine at an intermediary stage, actualized by turning the cover page. The narrative seems to start with the cover,

fig 1.5
Keren Cytter, *The Seven Most Exciting Hours of Mr. Trier's Life in Twenty-Four Chapters*, 2008. Drawing.

a procedure reminiscent of Stéphane Mallarmé's poem *Un coup de dés jamais n'abolira le hazard* (1897), which also started on the jacket, thus inquiring into where and how the writing begins and differentiating the cover as paratext.[116]

The second drawing shows a living room (a television set, a couch, a plant) where someone seen from behind is seated in front of a computer screen, shoulders strained, a light bulb dangling above his head.

The third image presents two hands clenching a steering wheel, the highway just about visible through the front window. Its perspective is that of the driver's, the rear-view mirror demarcating the top of the visual field; the wrists form the image's bottom. Next to that a license plate is visible, numbers between an exclamation and a question mark.

The last drawing shows a person in a room or an archive, the door and the exit sign above it mark the right side of the image, the left edge framed by an open bookcase. The figure is facing shelves on which numbers are inscribed: 1815, 1814, 1821, 1820. The shelves carry folders of files, those corresponding to the year 1814 in front of him or her, however, are not there. The figure's position is slightly twisted: we see a back, a half-open apron revealing naked buttocks, a face hidden by shoulder-length hair.

The drawings seem to be illustrations, tautologies even of the paragraphs preceding the images that exactly describe what the images show. Or so it seems: "… he is obliged to open the mail. A second before he opens the message, he listens carefully and makes sure no one is watching …"

(second image); "… he hears a honk …. He presses the gas … and simultaneously moves into the right lane." (third image); "… by the dust marks and the small dustless squares he [Dr. Grovenor] understands the folders were there and that someone has stolen them" (third image). The clauses juxtaposed with the drawings leaves the reader at pains to identify the images. Inconsistencies occur, causing the necessary connection to subsequent phases of the story to fail. Who are these characters hiding their faces? Identically drawn, they lack outstanding features. In the story "properly speaking," the characters are little fleshed out, being overruled by the narrator's/writer's prominent tone and role. While proximity links the immediately preceding scenes—not unlike a medieval emblem, in which an image with a title (*inscriptio*) is joined to a lengthier explanation (*subscriptio*)—they lack a didactic overtone.

Against text and image in postmodern writing, the image in *The Seven Most Exciting Hours* does not seem to be "added to" the text, as Hutcheon describes the "text-image border tensions" in postmodern photography.[117] There is no text "anchoring" an image, designating it within the textual domain where it can be comprehended as language. The text does not explain the image nor the opposite, thus

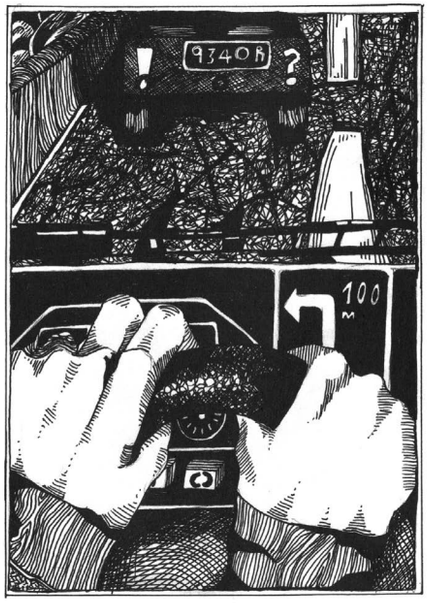

fig 1.6
Keren Cytter, *The Seven Most Exciting Hours of Mr. Trier's Life in Twenty-Four Chapters*, 2008. Drawing.

fig 1.7
Keren Cytter, *The Seven Most Exciting Hours of Mr. Trier's Life in Twenty-Four Chapters*, 2008. Drawing.

generating a certain awareness of difference in the viewer. Nor does the text "hail" the viewer, something the image, according to Hutcheon, is only implicitly, not explicitly capable of. Contrary to this view, I would argue that the image in the artists' text explicitly poses questions. It invites the reader to partake in the "game" and to find answers. To whom do the naked buttocks in the last drawing belong? The narrative immediately preceding the image does not offer a sufficient answer, since upon entering the archive Dr. Grovenor seemed to have been fully dressed. Would the nakedness then belong to the "light-minded" hospital's secretary, Lucy, who in a scene detailed in the first lines immediately following the image makes love to Adam in Dr. Hoffman's office? Or do the buttocks belong to the *sensible* patient Mathilda, who exorcises spirits, hears voices and, at the beginning of the chapter preceding the drawing, is ushered in by a supernatural presence to go to the archive to find "the last clue of the puzzle"?

Like the proper name ("Trier") the image is an assemblage, a montage of different scenes and types, or a rebus to be deciphered like Magritte's calligram. The images thus continue the chase in the story. The drawings reframe it, articulating dramatic moments or undermining the climax of the tale by inserting so-called inconsistencies. The means with which they draw on the story express the distinction of Cytter's work from the interplay of image and text conceived as a typically postmodern boundary crossing.

In sum the drawings are traced in the same unstable, capricious strokes that mark the cover image. Confronted with its black and white version its horror vacui springs to the eye, reminiscent of the chaotic world the artists' text describes and creates. Regardless of their depiction, image and text seem to coincide in this frantic moment prior to their actualization, sharing madness and disorientation. In this light Cytter's work suddenly

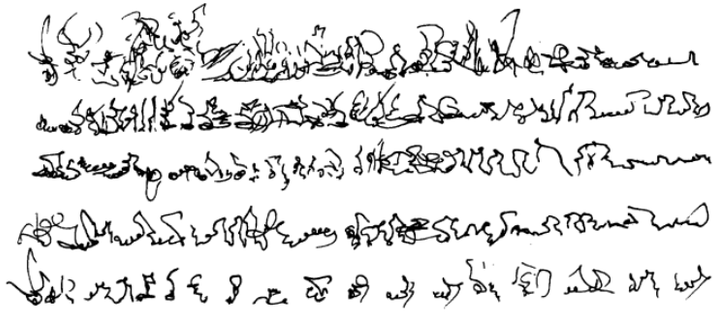

fig 1.8
Henri Michaux, *Narration*, 1927. Drawing.

comes close to the calligraphic experiments of poet and painter Henri Michaux in his *Narration* (1927). Begun after his travels to Asia, the text reminds you of Chinese characters but equally points to the abstraction of image and text seen as a drawing resembling an indecipherable script. The immanent gesture of writing is clear in Michaux's work, the pre-linguistic movement of writing, which visibly dissolves once a text is mechanically or digitally produced.

It is the dynamics of writing, disorienting or not, which is conceptually retained in the artists' writing. The text and image may differ, even contradict each other. But the storyline combined with the capricious drawings suggest a consistency: a conceptual kernel is maintained in each, only deployed differently. Alternative strategies are developed from that kernel, illustrating it and exploring or even exploiting it. Although the narrative and visual abundance of *The Seven Most Exciting Hours* are far removed from Conceptual Art's predilection for lists and records, catalogues and bare rules, Cytter's work seems to answer its manifesto, Sol LeWitt's *Sentences on Conceptual Art* (1969) in the plainness of her writing. But reading LeWitt's first sentence, another, unexpected indebtedness of the contemporary artists' text to its predecessors becomes clear: "1. Conceptual Artists are mystics rather than rationalists. They leap to conclusions that logic cannot reach".[118]

Like Lars von Trier's *The Kingdom*, Conceptual Art's legacy defines the artists' writing in an important manner. Regardless of their matter and means, these histories are appropriated, adopted, and adapted. Next to the misconceptions that resonate in *The Seven Most Exciting Hours*, the madness and lack of logical clues that define the artists' text result in what I call a thickness of the artists' writing, reminiscent of the "inherent thickness" of what is given in nature according to Lyotard in *Discourse, Figure*.[119] For Lyotard, "thickness" is appropriate to designation, "to that distance that makes what one speaks of something on which we have our sights, something on which to keep one's eye, something to be looked at, something one seeks to approach".[120] Designation is contrasted with signification, which is translucent, "marked by the immediate presence of the signified and the transparency of the signifier." No matter how one twists and turns the structuralist conception of language, Lyotard comes to the conclusion that the structuralist linguist measures signification against other equally "transparent" significations, eventually incorporating them in the signified. Every form of signification—Lyotard tests how a vertical axis of value could partake in horizontally oriented relations of opposite terms—is flattened by the structuralist grid: visual presence is ousted. In *The Seven Most Exciting Hours* neither a conflict between the seeable and the sayable nor a Hutcheonian tension between text and

image is at stake: the reader is not urged toward an awareness of different planes of visuality immanent in text as opposed to image; the text does not necessarily explain the image; the narrative does not explicitly draw the reader in while the image does not. The thickness of the artists' text is a thickness of writing as articulated matter developed and developing in the process of creating a story. It conceives of word *as* world, thus implicitly inverting the famous postmodern dictum conceiving the world as text. The thickness of the writing process as articulated matter is constituted by the fabula explicitly being translated into a story out of which a text is constructed, in narratological terms. Or, an *inventio*, a *dispositio*, and an *elocutio* being simultaneously conflated, deployed, and reflected upon, communicated, staged, and expressed. This occurrence of the creative phases inside and as the work does not "problematize representation" in a postmodern way, since in the artists' text the "last stage" of the creative process as representation is contextualized, articulated as produc*ing*, not as *always already* produced. It is actively representing, thus presenting the representing, instead of a postmodern positing of the text as always already represented in advance, thus immobilizing the reader and blocking any possibility to act upon the text and intervene.

Yet postulating the artists' text as this very *thickness* of the writing process as articulated matter, it seems to diverge from the notion with what in relation to postmodernist representations is often called its ultrathin surface. Discussing postmodernism in Dutch and Flemish novels, literary theorist Bart Vervaeck mentions the predominance of narrative conventions generating meaning, as opposed to psychologically drawn social realities. In these novels human beings only exist as images, metaphors, he argues, referring to Stefan Hertmans's *Naar Merelbeke* [To Merelbeke], in which meaning collapses through an image of a crushing meteor.[121] In *The Logic of Sense* Deleuze develops this notion of "surface effects," composed of incorporeal events resulting from a mixture of bodies. He links these to an infinitely extending past and future (*Aiôn*), in order to "revert Platonism": what was hidden and indistinguishable, escaping Platonism, "returns to the surface" and becomes manifest in images that strongly differ from Platonist models. These simulacra, consequently, "cease to be subterranean rebels and make the most of their effects". [122]

So how can this postmodern superficial, completely external and aesthetic simulacrum, that produces an *effect* of resemblance, be elaborated in the artists' text in order for it to be stipulated as *thick*? The consequences of writing conceived as thickness rely on the reader.

Reference and Reader

Drawing the Reader In

In investigating the reader's status in artists' writing, I return to the first drawing in Cytter's *The Seven Most Exciting Hours*. Looking at postmodernism's distribution of roles allows me to hone in on the (pre-)determined division of tasks in artists' writing. It is difficult to apprehend the unique hybrid position of the artists' writing. It is a position epitomized in Cytter's first drawing, endowed as it is with a double perspective with two soldiers, one pointing backwards, the other aiming at a target in front of him. That double perspective is formally mimicked in the narrative. The question is how the position of *the* reader, if there is one, is accounted for in the artists' text.

Denying the drawing a center, however, insisting on a double perspective in both drawing and text, my reading could seem to comply with a postmodernist approach, wherein the image described contains a "paradoxical doubled positioning [of centers and borders] to critique the inside from both the outside and the inside," following Hutcheon on the ambiguous situation in postmodernism. She also addresses postmodernism's refusal to "invert the valuing of centers into that of peripheries and borders," referring to Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1981), in which "Padma, the listening, textualized female narratee … pushes the narration in directions its male narrator had no intention of taking".[123] Do artists' writings structure textual space this way?

In *Midnight's Children*, protagonist Saleem Sinai tells his own story, inextricably linked to his nation (India), or so he thinks, born at the stroke of midnight on August 15, 1947 at the precise moment of India's independence. History is reduced to autobiography, India to consciousness, but contingency rules: the story is unable to catch up with life, life unavoidably invalidating the story's script. In her analysis of the novel, Hutcheon refers to the "coded oppositions" (male-female, narrator-narratee). While fruitful in considering the formulation of the narrative, it also flattens its illusion or, if applied to Cytter's drawing, its depth of field. All initiative is stifled, remaining enclosed in this narratological grid. Every potential is shunned due to unremitting categorization. Hutcheon's method envelops Rushdie's narrator and narratee in their private rendezvous, classifying them, limiting them: no time or space other than theirs exists. No occasion to escape the situation, a "chance encounter" between the couple or either one of them introducing something "strange" seems out of the question: everything happens in their textual universe. The unintended directions of the tale stumble upon the limits of the world of the text,

there being nothing outside it [*il n'y a pas de hors-texte*].[124]

Padma's active contribution to the story remains restricted, in other words, and controlled by Saleem. He cannot satisfy her desires, offering her his stories instead. Whereas Saleem's tales subvert historical continuity, challenging the limitations of continuity and linearity, hierarchy is reinstated in *Midnight's Children*, if only through Saleem's authoritative voice. Hutcheon's analysis overlooks the consequences of the dichotomy it helps to maintain. It is precisely this hierarchy, between centers and borders, that the analysis of *Midnight's Children* proposes to undo.

The centers and margins in the book are not those of Cytter's writing. The "'enabling' differences" in Rushdie's "ex-centric" 1981 text,[125] constituting the conditions for its being granted value, veer away from Cytter's work, appearing thirty years later, and in another context. Transposing the postmodern analysis onto Cytter's work, however, shows that a domestication of apparently contradictory positions obliterates a functioning and an understanding of the artists' text. What is missing from the postmodern reading if applied to Cytter's text is an introduction of difference not as opposition,[126] but as variation. Padma's unspecified and unexpected suggestions would have been followed throughout if she had a role in the artists' text. The narratee would not only be granted the possibility to push the narration, but also to step out of her role. The enunciative situation loosens, becoming more malleable and accessible, activating not only the narratee but also the reader. The enunciative situation in Cytter's work is heterogeneous. In it the notion of difference is modified. The "addressee" of the story is simultaneously implied and expulsed from it. In order for the narratee to be rejected, she is communicated to, introduced, and participatory in the story.

Returning to the drawing, the admittance of the narratee takes place in its very structure: the two soldiers are opposed to each other while side by side without their relationship becoming clear. Following the "two senses of their apparent distinction throughout" implies that the reader simultaneously arrives at a suggested past and foreshadowed future, without being sure whether these moments will be realized or which figure impersonates which moment in time. It is as if Walter Benjamin's angel of history, looking at the past while being blown into the future, is split in two. A linear conception of time immanent in Benjamin's allegory is subtended: presence is visually inserted into the drawing through the ambiguity (of perspective, of the characters) it implies, which one tends to resolve. This uncertainty is made concrete in the separation of the visual plane: a fissure between the two types invite the reader to partake in the construction of the visual field. The addressee, the reading, and the moment of reading are simultaneously made responsible for the functioning of the artists' text.

The reader being called upon within the confines of the text breaks an apparently consistent narratological time-space. And although the procedure brings to mind the postmodern fictionalizing of the barriers between writer, text, and reader, here, the addressee is not translated into a someone reminiscent of Padma, quietly listening to the voice of a single person, the author confiding in her.[127] The extension of time as interacting with the reader's present time while oriented toward a future and altering past acknowledges that difference subsists, but not as a stark opposition between time frames excluding one another, expressing a preference for one instead of another. The artists' text's potential is explored in expanding time and its conception so the reader might participate in the text.

The Implicit Act of Reading

If the reader is called upon in *The Seven Most Exciting Hours*, not as an always already sketched postmodern, clear-cut, listening, passive character, but as an active *functioning* agent instead, there are at least two consequences. First, the artists' writing opens the road to a contingency that leads to a nuanced comprehension of meaning and its implications; second, the reader plays a part in the appreciation of the work: reading is not a passive textual absorption or consumption, thereby generating meaning and transformed into an act. In Barthes's words, "the reader is the space on which all the quotations that make up a writing are inscribed without any of them being lost; a text's unity lies not in its origin but in its destination".[128] Once again, the question arises as to how the reader of the artists' writing distinguishes themselves from a postmodern, post-structuralist one. She seems taken into account in another manner in *The Seven Most Exciting Hours*, her being contrasted with the Barthesean "space" to be "inscribed." Is she really still participating in a "social utopia" while reading, witnessing a pleasure without separation, a "jouissance" of what Barthes called the text? Does the artists' text require the reader to be a "practical collaborator" in the textual production, and by the same token, incorporate a component in that *network* the text was metaphorically called?[129] The openness of Barthes's textual space is a relative one, however, defined by horizontal linguistic mediation. It is a calculated and constrained space. The position of the reader in artists' writing seems articulated otherwise. In order to define the functioning of the reader I compare her status

with the reader's typically postmodern "labour" described by Jameson.[130] His analysis of Claude Simon's novel *Les Corps conducteurs* (1971) seems to endorse Barthes's "propositions" on the activity of reading of that object called the text.[131] Simon's novel, Jameson underscores, "renders reception (or consumption) indistinguishable from production";[132] it requires a discipline of the word by word; and, recollecting Barthes's statement that "'what happens' [in a narrative] is language alone, the adventure of language, the unceasing celebration of its coming," Jameson observes that

> we are occupied with our various tasks—identifying this or that fragment of a gesture, making some preliminary inventory of the various plot strings as they appear one after the other—when suddenly we also become aware that *something is happening*, that time has begun to move, that the objects, even as imperfectly identified as they are, have begun to change under our very eyes; the book is actually getting on with it, getting finished.

This new, "schizophrenic" mode of place and time characteristic of the postmodern moment, according to Jameson,[133] this "extraordinary feeling of aesthetic relief" he adds "has very little in common with the Aristotelian emotion that accompanies a more traditional mimesis of completed action." The postmodern novel is "no vehicle for imaginative experience."

Contrary to the postmodern novel, then, imagination is revalued in the artists' text. The reader's labor is another labor consequently. I have already stressed that she does not necessarily re-experience the illusory, realist moment of which she was deprived in postmodern literature. Postmodern literature wanted to research, instead of express an external reality and its views on that world. It sought to research research, in the words of Alain Robbe-Grillet: "le roman n'est pas un outil du tout. Il n'est pas conçu en vue d'un travail défini à l'avance. Il ne sert pas à exposer, à traduire, des choses existant avant lui, en dehors de lui. Il n'exprime pas, il recherche. Et ce qu'il recherche, c'est lui-même.[134] If the transparency of language typical of realism is not regained in the artists writing, how, then, does the author materialize her universe and find a way to communicate ideas? By what means is the reader drawn in and embedded? Compared to the postmodern novel, the artists' writing renders the act of reading more definite and defined by giving the reader a more prominent place. In what sense does her place and function vary with respect to those laid out in Jameson's interpretation of postmodernism?

In what Jameson calls a "reading of 'reading'" in the postmodern text, the reader is "alerted" that she could "possibly" read someone else's reading.[135] In relation to *The Seven Most Exciting Hours*, what was once judged

"scandalous" in the writer is now both intrinsic to the artists' text, and transferred to the reader: having opinions about her own *metier*. Robbe-Grillet still had to oppose the critique of his third novel, *La Jalousie* (1957), disliked for its implicit demonstration of the premeditated character of the book.[136] But here, in Cytter's text, not only the author but also Tibor's wife Margaret—unable to follow the poem her lover reads to her—is highly informed about the reader's interpretative task: "she tries to read it too but the story doesn't make sense, and she doesn't find it funny. Of course she mentions none of this to Karl and after two weeks she even manages to think that the story is original, the use of language virtuous, and the author—a literary genius" (114).

Jameson points out how little postmodern artists were "bothered with Being itself … in their conviction as to the weightlessness and textualization of multiple social realities."[137] These textualized, theoretical entities "are the very locus of *interpretation* today." In the artists' writing the distance between the highly theoretical, the always already "textualized," and "Being," between the theorized and the act of theorizing is minimized. Or variation is introduced in the structuralist strictly divided, opposed, and opposing realms: narrator contrasts with narratee, signifier with signified. Margaret isn't a "robot-like figure caught in a linguistic structure that transforms reality," like the neutral narrator of *La Jalousie*.[138] Margaret's conscious reading unequivocally hosts an awareness of a rationalized world and its mechanisms. She interprets, fluently using literary jargon to manifest a well thought-through instrumental efficiency. What is striking, however, is that she counters this overt instrumental awareness, an awareness that Jameson would relegate to postmodernism, by referring to "old interpretative values," like "originality" and "geniality," deemed mere "temptations," all proven "unsatisfying and frustrating" from a postmodern point of view.[139] Thus in Margaret at least two visions meet: a postmodern conviction of the opacity of the medium always already created in advance is coupled with an avant-gardist belief in originality. Next to that, she is cursed with romantic notions of artistic geniality. Margaret's diverse stances are both mystifying and revealing. Their interchangeability allows you to qualify them as many masks. Her views and beliefs function as possible readings as well as potential constructive devices. Narratological layers seep into each other; positions are porous. The postmodern adage is reversed once again: in the artists' writing, the text *qua* text gains gravitas. It is imbued with its own construction, discovering the flexibility of the writing process as it progresses. The reader witnesses this process, she participates in the text's genesis. Or, text becomes world.

Another form of reading Jameson identifies takes place in the materialization of the textual signified in postmodern writing through "words becoming mere typography." The inclusion of newspaper clippings or foreign languages is alluded to. In Cytter's work, textual cuts are mostly smoothed out, the borrowed fragment fully appropriated and incorporated. Karl's poem, for instance, isn't literally transplanted to the artists' text. The interview with Lars von Trier is reported on, it is handed over. The reader is not so much confronted with this report as a material entity estranging them from the story, than presented with a "chance encounter" (in relation to Rushdie's Saleem and Padma). The interview is both contingent on and functions as an initiation, following the nineteenth-century topos of the found book or piece of paper becoming a ritual first encounter with the world of writing. The interview, like the poem *The Hunting of the Snark* has a transitional status: found footage has a life of its own, comparable to rumors, or anecdotes exchanged by word of mouth. The artists' writing elaborates on experiencing rumors (Tibor *accidently* stumbles upon the e-mail exchange between Karl and Margaret), experimenting with forms of transformation initiated by the *fait divers* (in contrast to the postmodern predilection for facts), involving the reflection as well.

This reflection on transformation through the interjected and appropriated "other language" or cultural artifact takes a form similar to the following: "He [Tibor] parks the car and rests in his seat and thinks of why he said that sentence ['I want to see you dead']. He's very embarrassed about this childish hallucination because he thinks he copied it from a movie" (83). Tibor *doubts* whether he copied his words from a movie, the reader *potentially* reading a quote from a film. In contrast to postmodern fiction, the procedure of quotation and appropriation in *The Seven Most Exciting Hours* does not result in the reader gradually discovering that the narrative has been a mere image, be it a painting, novel, or movie, as in the case of the tropical expedition in Simon's *Les corps conducteurs*. The reader already knows she is reading an image, and the writer knows the reader knows. There is no need for the story to ironically and explicitly state its own scenario, as Vervaeck states of postmodern novels.[140] Neither does the reader have to be confronted with a ritually foregrounded cliché. Clichés rather function as raw material in the construction of the story, instead of results. Or the reader is already informed about the literary topoi, there being no need for them to be explicitly laid bare.

Conclusion

One could conclude that the referent, the "most important" characteristic of postmodern hypertextuality, according to Vervaeck, is not absent in *The Seven Most Exciting Hours.* It is not erased, since in the artists' writing the story coexists with the referent it rewrites. Tibor Trier and filmmaker Lars von Trier are both involved in the artists' text that intermingles narratological strata and worlds, without problematizing what in postmodernist discourse was accounted for as a barrier between different textual layers. This particular textual strategy of translation—given it returns generally in artists' texts—cannot be viewed in line with a postmodern intertextuality that uses and abuses former texts. The locus at the junction of drawing and text that simultaneously refers to film following a recursive mode might render impossible the association of the artists' text with one single signifying system. Yet like postmodern literature, the artists' text's inclination to follow *faits divers*, instead of linguistic facts, its predilection for events and rumors, setting into motion an imaginary world, makes it impossible to perceive these worlds as separate systems. They can be equated and encapsulated in an all-embracing discourse, as with postmodern literature. Text and image, like reader and writer, do not rely on the word, they *create* a world thereby diminishing what postmodern literature comprehends as a distinction between word and world to be questioned and problematized within text. The sharp line demarcating the difference between reader and writer, narrator and narratee, sign and the referent excluded from the text in postmodernism is further nuanced in the artists' writing, through variation, modulation. The ambiguity and possibility in which this result (*perhaps*) can be considered positive and filled out, contrasts the negative postmodern conception of difference as gap. This results in the thick world of Keren Cytter's *The Seven Most Exciting Hours of Mr. Trier's Life in Twenty-Four Chapters*, where the thickness of writing is the materialization developed and developing in the process of creating a story. The artists' writing conceives a word, in all its aspects, *as* world, thus inverting the postmodern dictum of world as text. One could then come to the conclusion once drawn for postmodernism in relation to modernism: the artists' writing has "won," as a tradition at least, it having largely absorbed postmodernist textual strategies.[141]