

Keren Cytter

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By Amanda Coulson in frieze June/July/August 2005 issue 92

Keren Cytter's videos have a distinctly literary flavour. Although her medium is tape and she makes countless references to cinematic and televised forms, her scripts often involve long soliloquies and multiple voice-overs, that would seem more comfortable unravelling over the pages of a novel. Cytter, who writes all her own scripts, deliberately uses an over-poetic and non-realistic spoken language to enhance the artificiality of the film making process. This eloquent and expressive speech is at odds with the videos' documentary style, which includes lots of wobbly, hand-held, out-of-focus shots, culminating in the camera getting knocked over. The subject matter of her work is the stuff of relationships - loss, loving, longing, friendship, betrayal - much of it culled from her own or her friends' lives. While the language may be bookish, the topics are pure soap opera, and the disjunction between the words and images adds to the melodramatic flavour.

The male and female protagonists in *Tal and Naamah* (2001), for example, compare their platonic friendship to 'a random meeting that doesn't end' or 'a flare of endless passion in a dead mind' (before breaking into song and dance). In *Natalie and Raz* (2001), while the girlfriends make coffee in their kitchen, one proclaims her exhaustion by ostentatiously stating, 'at the end of the day I find myself empty of all feelings, like a heavy parachute landing after a long fall'. Like someone reading a novel with a first-person narrative, the viewer is given a glimpse into the characters' heads as we watch them act a certain way while being informed of their thoughts by a voice-over.

Cytter also uses language as a way of illustrating disengagement or misunderstanding, so often the basis of problems in personal relationships. In *French Film* (2002), while all the images depict scenes from the character's life in Israel, the narrative is entirely in French: the protagonist is a Tel Aviv native, describing what he'll miss when he moves to Paris (paralleling Cytter's own relocation from Tel Aviv to Amsterdam). His use of the language of his soon-to-be adopted country signals his initial psychological distancing from his homeland. Elsewhere multiple languages are also used, although the characters respond and react as though they are all speaking the same tongue: the woman in the couple on the rocks in *2/6/04* (2004), for example, speaks French while the man answers in German; in *The Milkman* (2003) the main character - who has committed suicide and discovers in a postdeath conversation with his mother that the milkman was actually his father - speaks in both Dutch and English. The changing language denotes not only the point that we have reached in the story - before or after his death - but also whether what we are watching is reality or fiction, since at times we hear the sounds of the actual filmmaking process, accentuating the ambiguity between real life and storytelling.

Repetition is another important factor in Cytter's work, both in language and montage. Phrases are stated more than once, sometimes slightly altered, and particular shots are occasionally repeated. People re-enter the same room several times, although the plot seems to move forward normally. More layers are added visually by the use of colour, whether by stripping it away entirely to black and white or by accentuating and saturating it. Cytter also uses solid frames of colour - with or without text - as a way of re-setting the stage or connecting disparate scenes.

Overall, the concept and scripts are compelling and, taken together, the films are noteworthy

for their experimentation with the deconstruction of conventional narrative forms. However, the earlier films are less professionally produced, and the unevenness of the actors is a constant irritation, with some accomplished but also some stilted performances by Cyttter's friends. While this naivety is at first engaging, it will be interesting to watch how this develops as her materials and players mature with time.