

THERE IS NOTHING TO SEE

Notes from a pseudo-spectator on Boris Charmatz's *héâtre-élévision*

Jeroen Peeters

Since August 2003, the project *héâtre-élévision* by the French choreographer Boris Charmatz has been touring European dance festivals and arts centres. As the title betrays, it is hard to define precisely the artistic medium of what is being presented, a confusion that is even enhanced by the label "pseudo-performance" (or in French: "*pseudo-spectacle*"): precisely the proliferation of media undermines the "live" aspect of what we usually call "performance" to make the latter happen elsewhere. Still, we are speaking about theatre: a single spectator is asked to leave his coat in the cloak-room, show his ticket and enter a darkened square room without windows, where he will attend a private performance. The spectator is invited to lie down on a large black volume that resembles a piano, to find himself facing a television screen hanging right above his head. For exactly 52 minutes, the monitor shows images supported by a sound and light design in the space itself. Afterwards, the visitor leaves the room, can have a drink in the lobby and even write some comments in the visitors' book. A whole theatre ritual is being performed, but at once easily forgotten, because the central television set demands so much attention, and our desire for plain images appears to be strong. What follows are notes on *héâtre-élévision*, made by what must be called a "pseudo-spectator", wondering about the desires, detours, and origins of his looking. The fragments in italics are quotes from Charmatz himself, taken from the program sheet and the "Notes of intention" printed in the press material.

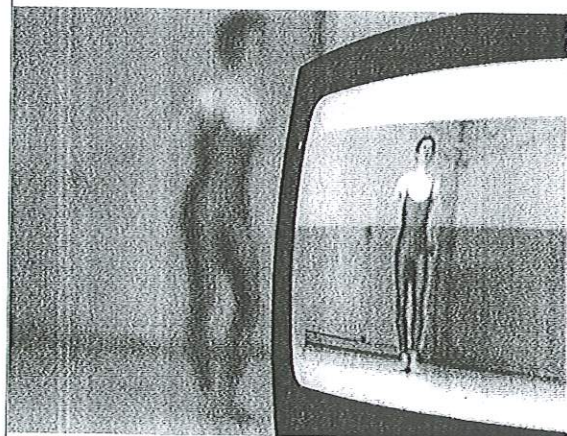
A choreographic piece in the manner of Russian dolls, héâtre-élévision is a performance reduced to a film, which is itself reduced to a television and shown in an installation. It is a kind of decoction, perhaps as a suicide of live performance: what will be left of the smell of the work of the dancers after the anaesthesia of the screen and the pixels?

On the television screen, people in tight fitting ballet suits perform abstract dances in several spaces. These include a studio and a theatre stage, but the performers mainly move in rather small boxes and confined spaces. As often in Charmatz's choreographic

work, the movements have a rough physical character, remote from classical and modernist aesthetics. But there is more at stake, as the material in *héâtre-élévision* has a rather obscene aspect: in these boxes, the dancers behave like little dogs, jumping about and sticking out their tongues; a pregnant woman lies down, panting and moving restlessly. The performers look back bluntly at the spectator, as if to say: "What are you looking at?"

The shape of both the television set and the filmed boxes recalls a peepshow, which directs the gaze in a particular way, stimulating its longing for intimacy and even to know the "truth" of the other, which will never reveal itself. In *héâtre-élévision*, the spectator is not simply a voyeur, but his gaze lives from a denial of certain desires and therefore risks becoming obscene in confrontation with the exposed images. Charmatz is not without irony in making his bold images of caged dancers coincide with our retinal desires for a "nice dance", a "speaking image", and so on. Although the television perpetually calls for a central focus, there is actually nothing to see, no truth to be unveiled. Our strong visual desires explode at once.

You often see dancers on TV, don't you?



To whet your appetite – it should be mentioned that a rabbit will be killed (for the ritual aspect) and that it will sometimes be as amorphous as the spectator.

A recurring image on the screen is a blind man tuning a piano: he is not even able to

héâtre-élévision
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héâtre-élévision
CHOREOGRAPHY BY
BORIS CHARMATZ
WITH
NUNO BIZARRO, BORIS CHARMATZ,
JULIA CIMAN BENOÎT LACHAMB,
MATHILDE LAPOSTOLLE, MYRIAM
LEBRETON AND PHILIPPE BAILLEUL
FACE
YVES GODIN
ARTISTIC COORDINATION
DIMITRI CHAMBLAS
LIGHTS
CÉSAR VAYSSIÉ
DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY
MADJID HAKAMI
VOICES OVER
DALILA KHATIR
SOUND MIX AND EDITING
OLIVIER RENOUF, WITH MUSIC BY
GALINA USTVOLSKAYA COMPOSITION
NO. 1 (DONA NOBIS PACEM, 1970-
1971) AND PHILIPPE BAILLEUL
PRODUCTION
ASSOCIATION EDNA
HEÂTRE-ÉLÉVISION WAS REALIZED
DURING A RESIDENCY IN LA
CHAPELLE (SAINT-DENIS)
PREMIERE
EDINBURGH INTERNATIONAL
FESTIVAL, 9TH OF AUGUST 2002.

look back in order to resist the gaze of the spectator. Perhaps he has different means to divert attention away from the screen, since the sound opens the space. The sound design of *héâtre-élévision* is diffused via several speakers: in the television set, closely linked to the image; at the ears of the spectator, as if with the sound the very image is happening in his head; under the object the spectator is lying upon, as if it were a real piano. The images on the screen double themselves and start to travel through the choreography of sound, seeking for a different space of existence. A twofold dynamic stems from this displacement: although potential images may emerge and stimulate the imagination, the desires and limitations of the gaze are displayed when the travelling image points to the cortex as its ground. Not only the image, but also the related look has to be unmasked, before an almost unlimited imagery can appear. At the turning point, a critical area comes into play: a space explicitly to deal with the presuppositions of visual culture and the relation between eye and image.

To compensate for the absence of a live performance, or rather to make this absence crucial, the apparitions of the artists on the screen will take shape inside the head of the spectator, finding there a new projection space infinitely more open than it appears.

In between and at the end of the performance, the television screen shows a test card. The observation that there is "nothing to see" is taken literally here: a test card is indeed the mere ground of television, an empty image. Being not even a surface for projection, it calls for a paradoxical spectatorship: a hypnotic contemplation – a suspension of visual desire?

We intend to become idle here, sustained only by a dance that does not stop at its incarnation.

At a sudden point, the image on the television shows a theatre stage, in long shot from one of the rear seats. The scale of both space and gaze explodes, the distance of the theatre disrupts the intimate relationship of the

spectator with the television: *héâtre-élévision* is not only a choreography of vision, but also of the spectator as such, and thus involves his body. The fact that one is lying down whilst watching the show is not too unfamiliar in relation to the television: the comfortable recumbent position of the viewer on a sofa appears also in an everyday context. Moreover, this position underscores the private relation to the world within the living room, a fiction of intimacy with reality created by television. Both the privacy of the single spectator and the (impossible) intimacy with the images are at stake in *héâtre-élévision*, but the horizontal position of the spectator somehow does not allow itself to relate to the theatre. Indeed, through its spatial typology, the theatre frame can be regarded as an analogue of the upright human body. It is a bodily presupposition of vision, which the detached eye tends to forget.

*Gravitation. The idea of lying down comes from the fact that it is impossible to watch a western when you're lying down: you can't identify properly with the rider on his horse. Unless the horse and rider are lying down – this is what is proposed by *héâtre-élévision*. And then? (The rider shows off less.)*

Near the end, a spotlight casts the shadow of the television set onto a wall. This quadrangle is a shadow of a box, but also a peepshow, of a prosthetic-like technology that has replaced our body since the renaissance and Brunelleschi's invention of the camera. Although they provoke different perceptual modes, the cubical spaces to which eye and body relate in *héâtre-élévision* are manifold: a filmed dance studio, a filmed theatre, several filmed boxes, a television set, an imaginary living room, the actual room itself, the lobby, and so on. Sound and light direct a choreography of spaces that enable vision, to turn the aesthetics of disappearance of these vision machines inside out: since there is nothing to see, one starts wondering about the gaze and its "cameratic" character.

What masochistic desire attempts to dance in such confined spaces as these?

So, finally, what is a "pseudo-spectator"? Possibly someone who behaves like a rabbit staring at a flashlight in the woods, unaware of what is actually going on.

Jeroen Peeters was trained in art history and philosophy. He lives and works in Brussels as a freelance critic, essayist, and dramaturge. His writing focuses on contemporary dance, improvised music and aesthetics, with a special attention for issues of (meta)criticism and visibility. He is editor of www.sarma.be, an online platform for dance and performance criticism.

