

THE BOZIC PARADOX

Performance: *Nothing Can Surprise Us*, director: Andrea Bozic

Seen on: 24 October 2008, Frascati, Amsterdam

By: Catherine Somze in Corpus Kunstkritiek

How do people relate to images in the overmediatised environment? And what is the power of images and imagination? *Nothing Can Surprise Us* played in Frascati last October. In this performance, Croatian choreographer Andrea Bozic continues her research into the „grey area in which imagined experiences create or have already become ‚real‘ experiences.“¹ The performance borrows its name from the so called ‚Nothing Can Surprise Us‘ day which used to take place every year in former Yugoslavia. On this occasion, a national catastrophe would be simulated with participation of not only the police and ambulance but also common citizens. When the war broke out, these exercises turned out to have been of little use: no one knew what to do. With this historical given as a reference point, Bozic conceptualised a dance performance together with her long term collaborator video artist Julia Willms, where they play with „the strategies of fictionalising life and ways in which these (scenarios) become reality through the process of rehearsing them.“² Contrary to what happened in former Yugoslavia, catastrophe exercises in *Nothing Can Surprise Us* do have a serious consequence – even though paradoxical: they cause precisely that which they try to avoid.

In *Nothing Can Surprise Us*, a group of three dancers (Guillem Mont de Palol, Hendrik de Smetd, Sarah Vanhee) are filmed while they imitate catastrophe exercises from Wolfgang Petersons' *Das Boot* (1981). In the foreground is Willms, sitting with her back to the audience filming the actions on stage: three dancers copying what they see on a television monitor, the images of which are not visible for the audience. Diagonally across the three dancers there is a screen with their performance projected live on it. This broadcast is constantly interrupted by fragments from other films, including *Dr. Strangelove* (Stanley Kubrick, 1964), *the Birds* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1963) and *The Day After Tomorrow* (Roland Emmerich, 2004). In the back of the stage there is another larger screen with film remakes projected on it, performed by the same dancers.

At the beginning of the performance, *live* actions, film fragments and remakes can still be distinguished from one another. This becomes increasingly more difficult as the performance develops. The images are increasingly frequently exchanged and mixed by other types of images. Gradually, the dancers do not copy the scenes any longer and instead react on what happens on screens. Characters cross from one screen to another. The dancers disappear behind the screen and come back into the film. The images seem to start leading a life of their own. „As they (the dancers) try to figure out what is going on“, Bozic writes, „the catastrophe that they have rehearsed seems to have come true already.“³ The film characters have in the meantime become more independent and more

¹ Jowi Schmidt, [An interview with Andrea Bozic](#)

² See [online Nothing Can Surprise Us flyer](#)

³ [Announcement](#) of the performance on the Gasthuis website

aggressive. They shoot from the image. One of the dancers falls dead on the floor: fiction has won.

Nothing Can Surprise Us develops according to the principle of repetition that slowly derails and leads to an (anti)climax. It is a jammed, spiral-like mechanism. In their attempt to prepare for a catastrophe, the three people actually cause one. This is what Freud described as trauma. Those who suffer from it try to exercise control over a traumatic past by constantly recalling the memory of it – or the problematic impression.⁴ One of the films in *Nothing Can Surprise Us* is characteristic of this fatal logic. In *12 Monkeys* (Terry Gilliam, 1995) the main character tries to find out the meaning of a traumatic memory from his youth. For this, he needs to time travel and he causes the traumatic incident in which he finally gets killed. The cause of that fascinating memory seems to have been his own death and his obsession therefore fulfilled the prophecy.⁵

This is also the core of tragedy as a literary genre where the plot leads to a fatal end. In Sophocles' *Oedipus* the main character of the same name leaves his alleged parents in order to avoid a prediction of the oracle. However, precisely by running away from them he does what is prophesied – he first kills his father and later has intercourse with his mother. This is exactly the way the characters from *Nothing Can Surprise Us* cause precisely that which they tried to avoid with their actions. It is a „self-fulfilling prophecy“, as Bozic describes her own performance: a pre-written script.⁶

Just like in Bozic's performance, the power of imagination has a central place in Freud's psychoanalytical theories. When he took *Oedipus* as an example for the workings of the human psyche, he modernised the tragedy as a literary genre. The subconscious and the Father dethroned the old Greek gods. The modern man became a man that has to fight against his own fantasies, passions and memories; a man who finds his biggest opponent inside himself.⁷ This struggle forms a recurring motive in the films that Bozic has chosen. In Andrei Tarkovsky's *Solaris* (1972), a strange planet actualises unconscious fantasies of people: in this case, a sudden appearance and immortality of the main character's late wife. In Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968) machines are the ones that try to take the power over and in *Blade Runner* androids fight until the bitter end. Memories, doppelgangers, zombies and androids embody the Uncontrollable, everything that is mysterious and that stays outside of human control; the monsters of their own fantasies. In her earlier multimedia-choreography *Still Life With Man And Woman* (video) images embodied the desires of the characters. In *Nothing Can Surprise Us* they are an expression of a disastrous role pattern.

In our present society, films and other mass media have acquired an uncontrollable character. They seem to be present everywhere and to keep us in check. This apocalyptic vision of the corrupting power of images, recently formulated by Baudrillard and other

⁴ See Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920), London: Penguin Books, 2008

⁵ Terry Gilliam was heavily inspired by Chris Marker's *La Jetee* (1960).

⁶ See [online Nothing Can Surprise Us flyer](#)

⁷ For an analysis of psychoanalysis as literary criticism, see Jacques Ranciere, *Het esthetisch denken*, (Amsterdam Valiz Uitgeverij, 2007).

catastrophe lovers, is really as old as the history of Western philosophy itself, with Plato as the first iconoclast *avant la lettre*. In *Nothing Can Surprise Us*, the three characters try to protect themselves against a certain image of future by imitating it. Their ritual repetition is both an evocation and exorcism. With multiple projections, film images and audiovisual effects, Bozic makes these ritual dealings visible but also goes a step further where the ritual bites its own tail: the realisation of that which we want to avoid. In her effort to show that the films themselves „play a certain mythical role in today’s society“, that they are even „a sort of a preparation for possible future situations“, Bozic brings the traumatising power of fiction and images to life.⁸ Thanks to the extensive use of films and video projections, she does not only show the danger but she plays with that danger too. This is a paradox, an apparent contradiction since, in order to prove something, one must first make their hypothesis tangible.

In *Nothing Can Surprise Us*, Bozic does not only speak about trauma but causes one, too. In comparison with *Still Life With Man And Woman*, where the source reference of the performance was simple, *Nothing Can Surprise Us* is complicated. The system of projections is multiplied, film references innumerable and there are more dancers. However, the complexity of the performance setup seems necessary. In order to demonstrate the traumatising power of fiction and images, Bozic sets up an audiovisual system together with Willms which, together with the choreography, overwhelms the spectator with references, images and actions. The result is the crossing of the border between fiction and reality which characterises and stigmatises both trauma and the catastrophe exercises of the ‚Nothing Can Surprise Us’ day.

⁸ Jowi Schmidt, [An interview with Andrea Bozic](#)