Eclipse

2006, DVD video, 10 minutes, Edition of 5
Courtesy Galerie chez Valentin, Paris, France

Laurent Grasso's Eclipse appears at first to be a beautifully photographed astronomical film. For ten minutes we see a total solar eclipse from its first moments to the reappearance of the sun. The dark, nearer shape of the moon appears oddly tangible as it passes between the earth and the distant, bright sun.

The sun and the moon appear to be equal in size when seen from earth despite their difference in actual size. This cosmic coincidence means that the moon perfectly blocks the solar disk, leaving a series of glowing crescents during its traverse. A total eclipse reveals sublime lights usually hidden in the sun's glare. An eclipse is one of nature's most awesome events; and it has always been invested with tremendous significance. The optical effects that eclipse chasers become a significant part of its meaning.

Eclipse was inspired by the ability to manipulate primal fears: Grasso found a website called UFOs The Military Unmasked,4 which is devoted to exposing false UFO sightings and other miraculous events. He was particularly intrigued by a detailed analysis of how the Marian apparitions at Fatima in 1917 may have been created using the rather simple technologies of the time, when three shepherd children experienced monthly visits from the Virgin that only they could see. However, astronomical and meteorological effects surrounding the event were testified to by many of the crowd that had grown to 70,000 people by their final meeting. The Church was wary of certifying miracles, but did declare the children "venerable."

The cloak-and-dagger aspects of this spiritual event grew as the Virgin revealed secrets to the children that they could divulge only when the world was ready. Two of the children died in a flu epidemic in 1919 and the third became a nun and took a vow of silence. When the secrets were revealed, they were of a political nature appropriate to the 1917 era: one involved the restoration of the church in the Soviet Union; another mistakenly declared the immediate end of World War I. Grasso describes Eclipse as dealing with "the rumor of the construction of false miracles by the (Portuguese) army more than the eclipse itself.

I decided to make my own false miracle, mixing a sunset and an eclipse to make something very rare, and a little bit supernatural. I created this eclipse as if I were a group trying to gain power by manifesting a very strange phenomenon."

Whether or not the Fatima apparitions were faked is a moot debate at this late date and for the faithful their belief is proof enough. Filmmakers routinely create impossible events to use for their cinematic and metaphoric purposes, and suspension of disbelief is crucial to the functioning of filmic apparitions as well. In Westerns, directors would use telephoto lenses to photograph sunsets in order to make the sun appear gigantic relative to the landmarks on the horizon. Remembering spectacular sunsets, the sun seems to fill the sky yet the sun really takes up a very small fragment of the heavens. Grasso also makes this unrealistic cinematic device his own.

The lines between gullibility and belief and between joyless suspicion and healthy skepticism are obscure, and in the media world of increasingly sophisticated special effects the requirement that we view even natural phenomena as potential manipulations is very real. Grasso's works play off that edge, seducing and alarming viewers in equal measure.
1See www.eclipse-chasers.com
3Edward Everett Hale, *The life of Christopher Columbus: from his own Letters and Journals*. See
   http://www.gutenberg.org/dirs/1/4/9/1492/1492.txt
4See
   http://www.ovnis.atfreeweb.com/5b_fatima_apparitions_sun.htm
5From E-Mail correspondence with the artist, 19 August 2006.

**About the Artist**

Laurent Grasso was born in Mulhouse, France in 1972, and lives and works in Paris, France. He has had solo exhibitions at Espace Paul Ricard, Paris, France and Villa Medici, Rome, Italy (2006); Galerie Extraspazio, Rome Italy and Galerie chez Valentin, Paris, France (2005); Cinéma des cinéastes and Boutique Agnès b, both in Paris, France; Halle au poisson, Perpignan, France; Crédac, Ivry-sur-Seine, France; and Galerie Agnès b., Hong Kong (2004). His work has been included in group exhibitions at Palais de Tokyo, Paris, France, and Witte de With, Rotterdam, The Netherlands (2006); W139, Amsterdam, The Netherlands; Swiss Institute, New York, NY; and Galerie du jeu de Paume, Paris, France (2005); Glassbox, Paris, France; 57 festival internazionale del film, Locarno, Italy; La Fabrique, Shanghai, China; and the Busan Biennial, Busan, South Korea (2004); Art Basel, Basel, Switzerland (2003); and Musée d’art contemporain, Marseille, France; and Smack Mellon Gallery, Brooklyn, NY (2002).

The Media Test Wall, an ongoing series of contemporary video, is located in the Whitaker Building (21 Ames St., Bldg. 56) on the MIT campus.

Viewing Hours: Daily 24 hrs.

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