

Eclipse

by Laurent Grasso

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Media Test Wall

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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 cherish—the naked eye visibility of the solar corona and dramatic, explosive flares—are mesmerizing and shown in exquisite detail in Grasso's work.¹ If one watches this work believing it is a scientific document, the experience is still memorable.

However, Grasso's work as an artist always reveals the mechanisms that mediate reality in modern life. One of his best-known works shows a soccer game in which all the action is frozen and the camera weaves around the immobilized players. In another, a rolling cloud of smoke moves through the streets of Paris, threatening but not disrupting anything. Grasso enjoys altering reality using the film director's bag of tricks; and he meant *Eclipse* to be seen as a staged semi-miraculous event. The artificiality and contrivance of the event become a significant part of its meaning.

Many world religions have origins in sun worship, as the sun is the source of life on the planet. The sight of the sun disappearing was interpreted in many cultures in India, Asia, Europe, and the Americas as the sun being devoured by some malevolent beast. In Norse legend the sun was swallowed by a fierce wolf named Sköll.² Drastic, noisy measures needed to be taken to assure the sun's return. When European astronomical progress allowed for the prediction of future eclipses this ability proved very useful. On his fourth voyage, Christopher Columbus obtained food for his crew from indigenous peoples frightened by his seeming ability to "cause" a lunar eclipse.³

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."⁵

The website Grasso found sought to explain one of the events called "the miracle of the sun" described by a witness thus, "the sun has made some brusque movements, unprecedented and outside of all cosmic laws...the sun has danced according to the typical expression of the peasants."⁶ The website shows how a simple projection on clouds could cause the effect. The website's generalized free-floating paranoia lists all the different parties that could have benefited from the hoax.

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 viewer 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

2Philip S. Harrington, *Eclipse: The What, Where, When, Why, and How Guide to Watching Solar and Lunar Eclipses* (New York: J. Wiley, 1997), 2.

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.

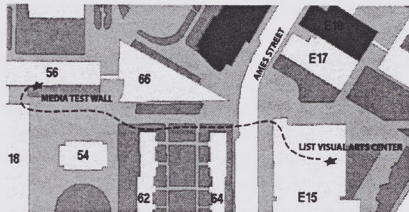
6William Thomas Walsh, *Our Lady of Fatima* (New York and London, Image Books-Doubleday, 1954), 147.

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 cineastes 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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