

ERIC BAUDELAIRE

Hammer Museum | Los Angeles

Locking in at well over an hour, Eric Baudelaire's *Sugar Water* (2007) is a glacial experience, but well worth repeated watching. Shot on a Paris set, this HD video shows a professional billposter, the only non-actor among the cast, pasting an advertisement on the wall of an underground Métro station. Upon completion he starts the process all over again, resulting in time-lapse variations on a theme. Nothing else happens except for the odd commuter strolling by, none of whom pays him the least attention.

Yet *Sugar Water* (through September 26) is nowhere near as bland as it sounds. It begins with the guy setting up his equipment alongside an elaborate picture frame or billboard, its interior decked out as the "blue screen" of movie magic fame, on which he proceeds to affix an image of cars parked in the street. This revelation soon gives way to another, and so on, thus establishing, as a form of slow reveal, a course of action in which one of the cars unaccountably blows up and burns to the ground. While all this is going on in the background, on-screen or over-the-air, some of the commuters in the distance pass through into the foreground and disappear. In fact, during each scene change we encounter the same group of individuals, as if caught in a loop.

Whether the incident is due to a car bomb, mechanical fault, or random accident, we don't ultimately know. In this utopian space and time, everything recurs, but with varying results, like the billposter's own creative act. The same goes for the ambient train sounds and wisps of conversation. Every now and then a hard-to-hear phrase, perhaps a departure time, cyclically punctuates the background noise, signaling yet another round of instant replay. This episodic atmosphere undermines certainty and all sense of temporal linearity. The cycle completes itself as it began, with the man leaving the station as he found it.

Much of *Sugar Water*'s considerable charm derives from

all the animated pasting, folding, overlaying, and splicing. But what also shows through this parable of media shock is the formal similarity between billposting, montage, and blue-screen technology, by means of which the image progressively integrates and collapses the passing of time. Another, perhaps subliminal, reason for its impact is the video's apparent *No Exit* strategy, linking it to movies like *Last Year at Marienbad* and *The Exterminating Angel*.

But what mostly explains the video's appeal are implied connections to masterworks like *Las Meninas* or *Arnolfini Portrait*. Since the station billboard could also be a painting in progress, it's possible to view *Sugar Water* through the lens of Michel Foucault's remarks on Velázquez's picture, and thus, altogether, as a representation of itself, a commentary on the illusion of representation, a mirror reversal of power relations, and an instant rewind of what transpired when the sitters were being put on canvas, thus anticipating our present era of total recall and circular, foreshortened time—a confrontation of enormous technical and evolutionary moment. Fast-forward to now, where Jan van Eyck's "mirror camera," the iPhone of its day, has become an instant poster image.

In his treatise on the current media juggernaut, Baudelaire frequently betrays his French heritage and pool of ideas. The title recaps Henri Bergson's concept of "duration," a mostly intuitive state in which, like sugar dissolving in water, the line between passage and simultaneity is blurred. Even the station identification is borrowed from Samuel Butler's *Erewhon*, a nineteenth-century satirical novel that has influenced generations of French philosophers. One of the more recent figures to mine Butler's fable, in which the idea of artificial intelligence first appeared, is Gilles Deleuze, whose *Difference and Repetition* (1968) describes the utopian simulacrum, as opposed to universal categories, as a nomadic multiplicity or "erewhon." By revealing the news event as "not only a disguised *no-where* but a rearranged *now-here*," Baudelaire gives Deleuze's formula a deliciously heady spin.

—Paul Foss

