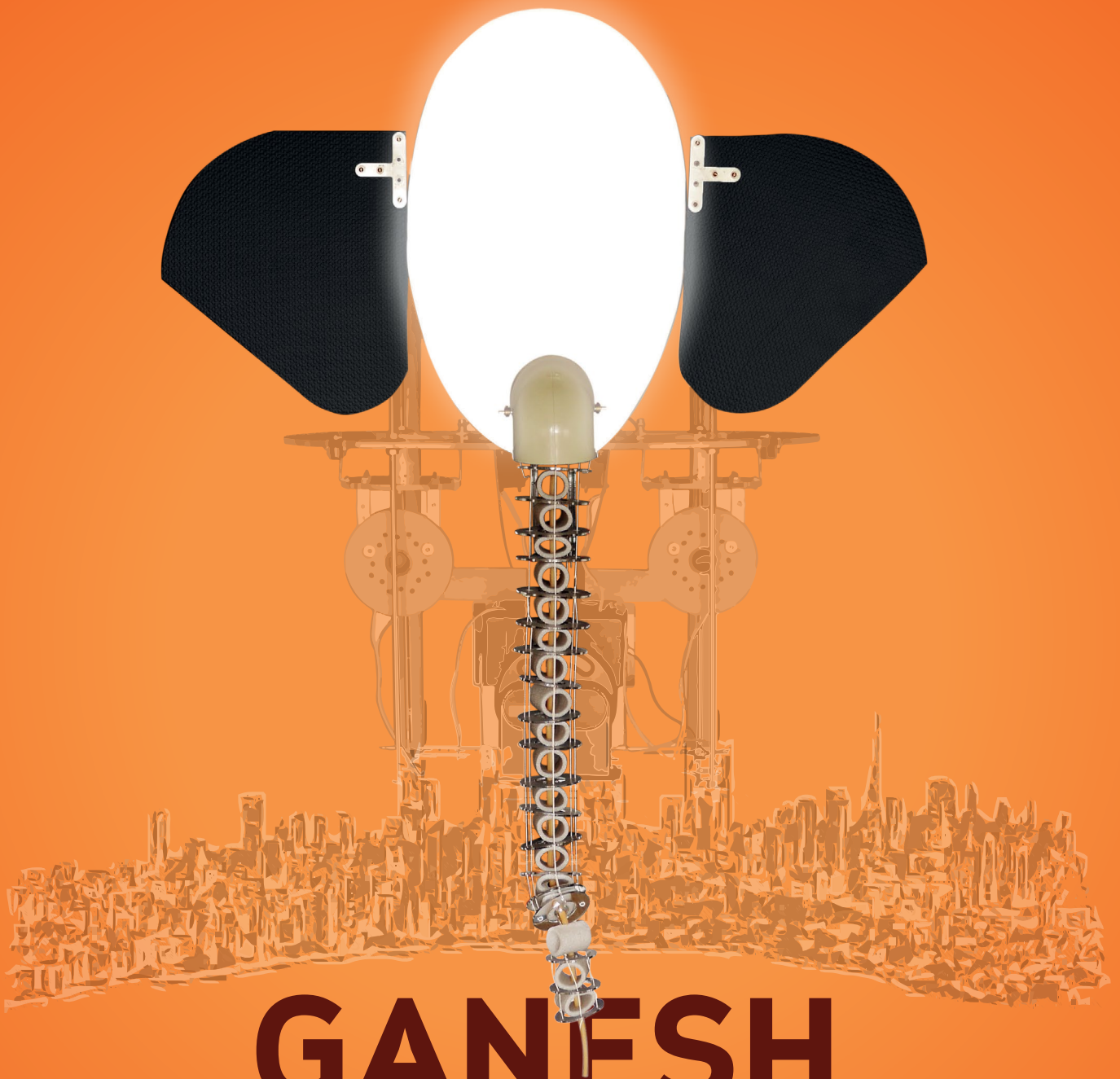


ROUGE INTERNATIONAL & ARTE FRANCE
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What if you were a God ?



GANESH & YOURSELF

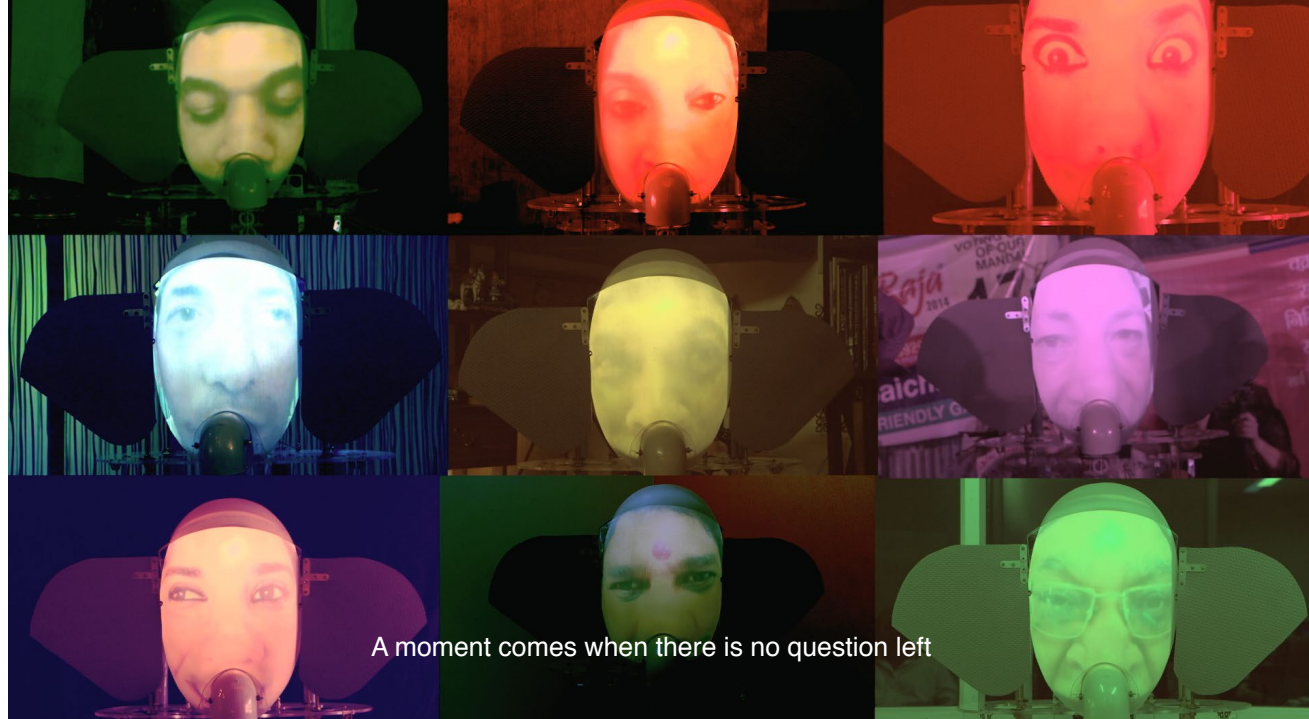
A FILM BY
EMMANUEL GRIMAUD

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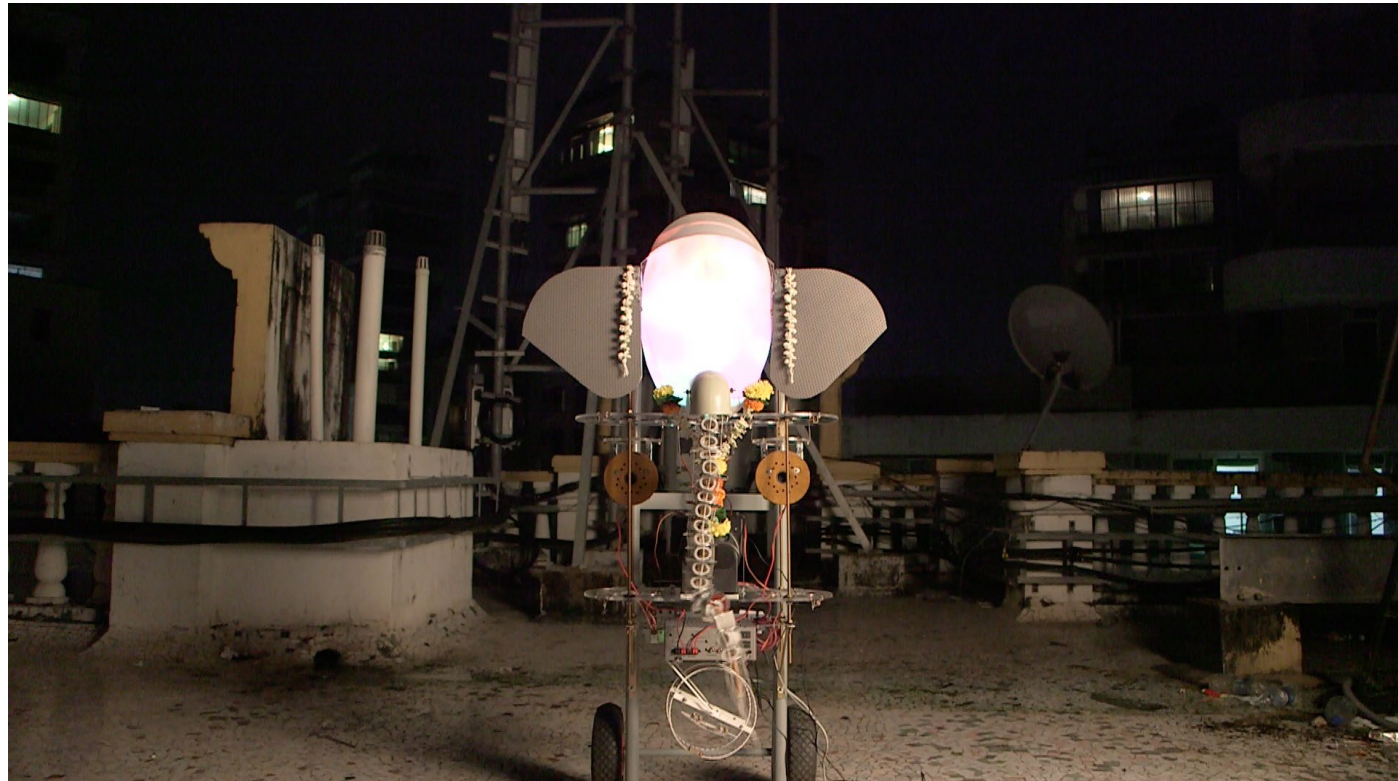
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GANESH YOURSELF

A FILM BY
EMMANUEL GRIMAUD

67' - France - Color HD - 2016



SYNOPSIS

In the tumultuous city of Mumbai, a strange robot appears. Its name is Bappa, and it looks like the god, Ganesha. Anyone can volunteer to control it from a distance, and so to take on the voice of God. Bappa soon becomes a convincing interface for broadcasting ideas and opinions. As the Ganesha festival is at its height, Hindu priests use the robot to transmit their incantations, astrologers make predictions for their customers, and militants speak through the mechanical deity to propose social reforms. For the first time in the history of religions, it is possible to take the place of God, and for those who believe, to converse with Him or appeal to His wisdom.

INTERVIEW WITH THE DIRECTOR

- Where did the idea for the « Ganesha Yourself » project come from ?

The idea was to carry out a limit-experience in the psychology of religions, a little like a chemistry experiment, that creates a certain phenomenon which allows you to see things differently. I'd been interested in robotics, and working as an anthropologist in India for some time. That's where the idea of making a Ganesha robot came from. But along with Zaven Paré (robot designer) and Arnaud Deshayes (DOP) we had no idea how people would react, and if they would cooperate. Fortunately, it worked well beyond what we could have anticipated. Initially, we held auditions to cast people to embody the robot, and we had a wide range of profiles: religious people, political activists, astrologers... There were a lot of people who wanted to participate and we soon realised that it was possible to sit down with the robot for hours, to talk to it openly, or discuss metaphysics. We therefore transformed the house where we were living into a consulting room, and we wrote on the door: « Ganesha Yourself ».

- Who is Ganesha, and why did you choose this specific deity?

Ganesha is one of the most popular deities in Hinduism, and is a hybrid, with an elephant's head on a man's body. We can see him as both a type of transhuman and a transanimal. As it happens, someone in the film says that he's «transgender». He's a wonderful embodiment of metamorphosis and the creativity of polytheism, which plays with the idea of creating composite forms using various human and animal body parts. He then has a very particular function. He comes down to Earth in September to purify the world and to help people get rid of all their difficulties. He's invited into homes, and fed, and when the purification rituals have been done, he's immersed in water and he takes away everyone's problems. With his trunk, he's like a divine vacuum-cleaner. We talk a lot about ecology today, and it seems to me that Ganesha is an interesting case study. We could have chosen a goddess, there's no shortage of them in India, but maybe that's for another time...

- Why did you decide to enable people to take the place of a God, through a machine?

It's the very essence of the concept. We had to be able to put ourselves in God's position; to enable someone to experience the difficulties involved in adopting God's viewpoint. After seeing the film we can understand why, in most religions, gods never speak, or only rarely or indirectly, via intermediaries in highly ritualized situations. Embodying God is the hardest thing there is! We also wanted to test something else: to what extent can God be personalized or embodied by someone? In the film, there is an elephant that says: «God is not a person, the personality disappears, and what's left is divine». That's one opinion among many, obviously. Others say that God is everywhere, in every person and every thing. This happens to be the most common notion, supported by many of the film's contributors, for whom the film «Ganesha Yourself» meant something like: «Prepare to face God in person, in all things, and at all times».



- How did the collaboration with the artist and designer Zaven Paré work out? Did he have an influence on the film and the way it developed?

We've worked together for some time now. He's an artist and a researcher, and our exchanges have always been very stimulating. In fact, we wrote a book together on robotics, called «Le Jour où les robots mangeront des pommes» (The Day Robots Eat Apples). Zaven introduced me to Japan. I introduced him to India. The only constraint was to make a machine that was robust enough to survive all manner of terrain and climate conditions. And generally the simplest ideas are the best. That's how we ended up with Bappa : an elephant mask with an internal projector which transmits the image of the controller; with a trunk that moves randomly, and the whole thing linked to the operator via a webcam!

- Why didn't you show viewers the way the Ganesha robot was designed and built?

That's our internal business, and it would have weighed the film down unnecessarily. You'll have to wait for the «making-of» to see everything! But once we'd decided not to start the film with the design of the robot, an interesting question was raised : how do we introduce the robot? We talked about it at length at the editing stage, and finally decided to have the robot appear out of nothing and nowhere, respecting the impression it made on people, as if it were a UFO; it might look like Ganesha, but it was like a UFO. The decisive moment in the film was then the ritual performed by a priest to breathe life into the robot - the «opening-of-the-eyes» ritual, like with any other idol. The priest said : «you'll have to immerse it in the sea, like with any other idol». From that point on, we knew that the robot had been adopted and would live its own life, independently from its creators.

- How did you choose the places the robot was installed?

We had an astrologer with us, who would say: «set it up here, facing north-west». No, I'm joking... During the Ganesha festival in Bombay, local associations - called mandals - set up idols everywhere that people can come and visit. It's said that a devout believer has to visit 21 idols in a day! So we were spoilt for choice for locations, knowing that people would come to see it. Many mandals gave us a warm welcome, realising that our Ganesha would permit a new form of dialogue. Perhaps we made people want to interact with the gods in a different way.

- How did you choose the participants? Was it just at random, or were there actors involved?

What struck us when we held the auditions, was that the people who came didn't see the experience as an ordinary acting performance, but as a very serious act of spiritual metamorphosis. In fact, we eliminated most of those who said they were actors and only kept one, and we only used him for one or two interactions. We saw that he wasn't able to answer people's questions, he didn't have the skills for that, and so we set about finding people who weren't actors but who were able to respond. We had an ecology

activist, a human rights activist, astrologers, and others who showed up as we went along, including a lawyer and a militant feminist. The idea was not to limit ourselves, but on the contrary, to multiply the number of incarnations and confrontations with people. Each time, it was a real test for the people embodying the God, as well as for those who came to consult him. We only kept for the film a very small part of the 200 hours we shot!

- In your view, what needs are answered through exchanges with a God in the form of a humanized machine?

When you give a god a voice, you suddenly have lots of things being said that weren't said before. The exchanges are sometimes very violent, even if they remain respectful. And the fact that we're dealing with a god, a human and a machine at the same time makes the conversation both multi-faceted and ambiguous. We can reproach God for his inability to solve man's worldly problems, but we can also reproach the Man playing God for not being up to the part, while the operator can always hide behind the possibility that the machine has a bug. But as one of the children in the film says: «God never bugs!».

- The film tackles a range of subjects that people raise, as well as subjects like faith and organised religion. Was this a deliberate choice on your part, or did these subjects just come up as people asked their questions?

We had no intention of controlling the subjects that were raised, quite the opposite. The idea was to set up a system whereby people could talk, and then let things happen. We let people talk about anything they wanted, and above all, allowed the «incarnations» to handle whatever questions they were asked as they saw fit. They were much better placed than us to respond!

- Do you think that the concept of a god-robot communicating with people could be exported to other countries and cultures, representing other versions of God?

I think we could quite easily have experiments with a programme that reproduced a transcendental or spectral voice, to see to what extent and in what conditions it may be interpreted as the voice of God, in many contexts, including monotheistic contexts. But experiments involving an incarnation of the god, such as this one, could only happen in a polytheistic context. This is the case in India, where the gods are forever being embodied in the form of various avatars. The question is therefore: «how do I judge whether what I see before me is really God or not?». This then entails a whole series of tests, the same test process that people undergo when they're faced with the Ganesha robot, to test its ability to embody the figure of God.

- Was there an intention to deliver a message of tolerance through this process, particularly as you're in a society that is prone to discrimination?

The film is full of messages; people fill the machine with messages to be transmitted by God, on every subject imaginable, to the extent that it finally explodes! So we didn't need to add too much... Ecologists, notably, took advantage of the machine, realising that taking God's voice



was a good means of being heard and of protesting against the immersion of plaster idols in the bay of Bombay! To start with, the film was an experiment in the psychology of religions, and much to our surprise, it became a political adventure, a stage for redistributing public platforms. It was unavoidable. That particular god would be what people wanted him to be.

- Would you say that the «Persona: strangely human» exhibition at the Quai Branly museum, for which you are the general curator, is an extension of the film? In what ways can the two complement one another?

Persona brings together primitive arts and artificial creatures around the question: «What do we want to surround ourselves with?». We've designed a show-house filled with various entities, and we have to ask ourselves if we're dealing with an object, a person, an animal, a machine or even a god. So Bappa would be right at home!



EMMANUEL GRIMAUD

BIOGRAPHY

Emmanuel Grimaud was born in Clamart (France) in 1973. He is an anthropologist, a director, and a research associate at the CNRS in Paris. He has studied a wide range of subjects, including robotics, eye movements, astro-morphology and techniques for measuring the aura. He started making films after working as an assistant in India to Sanjay Leela Bhansali (*Hum Dil De Chuke Sanam* - 1999). For several months, he accompanied a Ghandi lookalike (*Le Sosie de Ghandi*, 60' - 2001); he set up his camera in a workshop manufacturing robotised gods (*Cosmic City, L'Archange Minotaure* - 2008), he filmed beetle fights in Thailand (*Kings of Khwaang*, with S. Rennesson, CNRS/Artmap - 2009), a conversation between a man and a doll in a bar in Kyoto (*Miss Fiberglass*, with Zaven Paré - 2012), and the rather disturbing exchanges among Thai gamblers in front of fish bowls (*Eau Trouble*, with S. Rennesson, CNRS/Artmap - 2013).

He is currently working on another robot named Durga which measures the vital energy of those who consult it. He has written several books: *Bollywood Film Studio*, 2004; *Le Sosie de Ghandi*, 2007; *Dieux et Robots*, 2008; *Le jour où les robots mangeront des pommes*, 2011; *Robots étrangement humains*, 2012; *L'Etrange encyclopédie du Docteur K*, 2014. He is the chief coordinator of Artmap, a platform for collaborative arts/science projects (www.artmap-research.com) and of the Expérience-Limite workshop (2014-2016, UPO). Bronze medal winner, CNRS in 2011. He has exhibited installations at the CAC, Enghien les Bains), KCPA (Washington) and MEG (Geneva) and is General Curator at the Persona, Strangely Human exhibition at the Quai de Branly museum, Paris, 2016.

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IN ASSOCIATION WITH
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WITH THE SUPPORT OF
THE CENTRE NATIONAL DU CINEMA ET DE L'IMAGE ANIMEE
COSIP
NOUVELLES TECHNOLOGIES EN PRODUCTION

CAMERA
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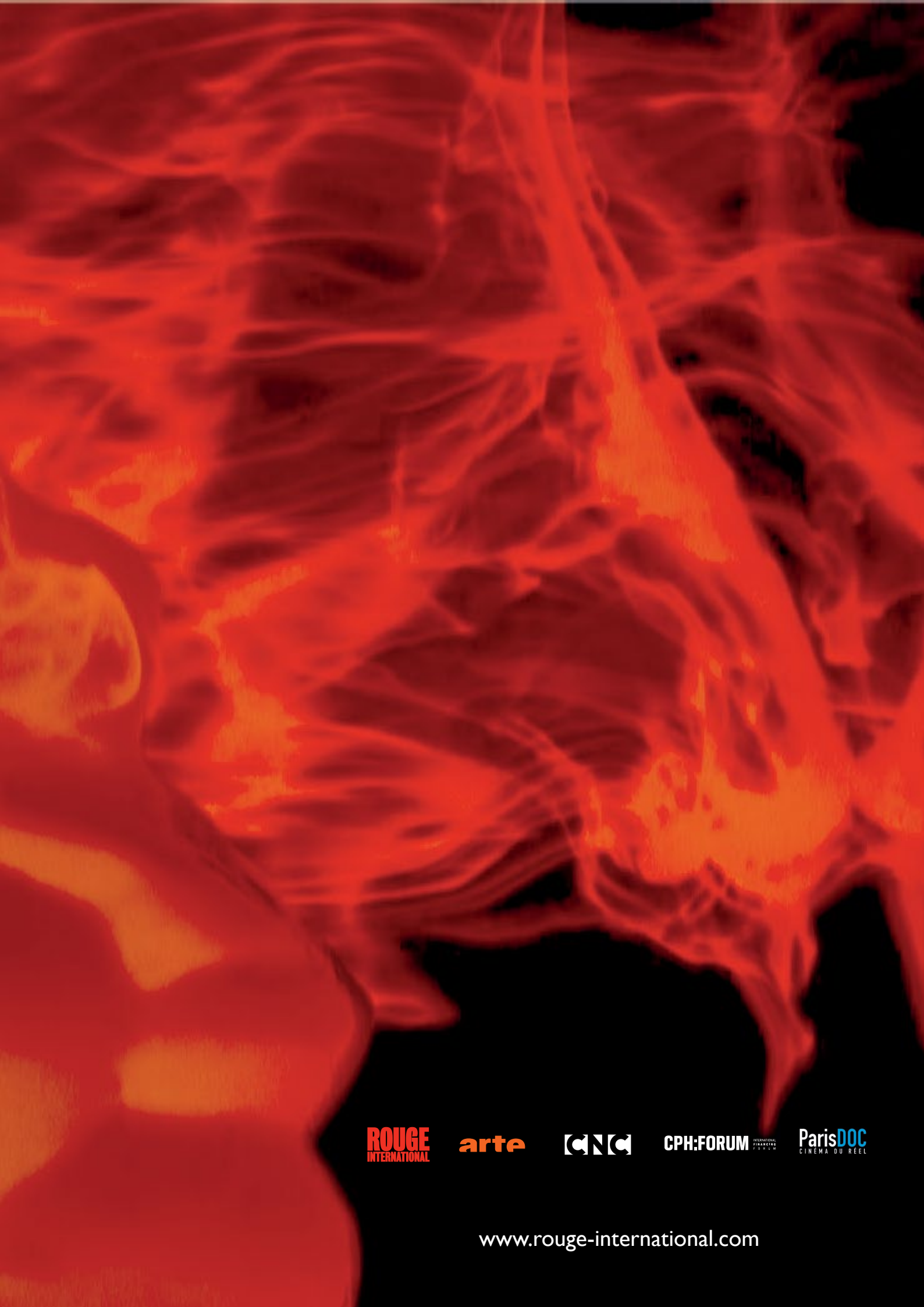
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