Capital—The Formal Seat of an Informal Country

JOE KLEIN

No one appears to be very comfortable in Sarah Morris's film CAPITAL (2000). A lone jogger, trudging the Mall, wastes his energy with sideways glances—is he worried that he is being followed? Or worse, perhaps: that no one is watching? But someone is always watching in Washington. There are cameras everywhere, hidden ones and those that are all too obtrusive. There is a constant, purposeful police presence. That man, over there, behind the wrought iron gate—why is he staring so intently? And those men, over there, what are they carrying in those folders? They move in packs, in uniform, white shirts and dull ties—nothing too bright: maroon, mustard, gray, and blue (only politicians wear red)—and it is all too easy to imagine menace in their banality. Are there secrets in those folders? Secrets are kept, are warehoused, in Washington, and that is part of the power of the place. The illusion of covertness confers power: even the Metro stations, uniquely shadowy for such public venues, have a mesmerizing visual strength. Those two men over there, on the platform—aren't they a bit too studiously casual? Doesn't one of them look like the Cigarette-Smoking Man from *The X-Files*? But... what if they are only whispering about the vagaries of swimming pool installation in Fairfax County? And... what if the folders they are carrying are, figuratively, empty? What if these men are zealously guarding pasteurized data-heaps: crop yields in Kansas, ashtray regulations, papers to be shuffled, stored and forgotten? What if the watchers are merely staring off into space? What if nothing is really happening here? Emptiness is Power's doppelganger in Washington.

Sarah Morris has captured something I've long suspected—at least, I've suspected it about Governmental Washington, as opposed to the black city that surrounds and recedes from the public spaces: this is a spiritual cousin to Brasilia. There is a witless, numbing sterility to the concrete expanses, the pillars and plazas and squat, stolid buildings that are meant to convey some sort of imposing, authoritative officiality. Much of the city was built after architecture died. The dreadful Edward Durrell Stone did his most expensive work here. And then there are the less expensive, but narcolepsy-inducing bureaucratic structures. The Department of Health and Human Services. The Department of Housing and Urban Development (and, across the river—as if that would render them less obtrusive—the Pentagon and the

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SARAH MORRIS, CAPITAL, 2000, 16 mm DVD, duration / Dauer: 18 mins. 18 secs.

Central Intelligence Agency). Morris has located the spiritual nexus of the city: the Pentagon barber shop, where distinctiveness—the military's most persistent enemy—is routed daily.

Official Washington is a city of processes and preparation. It barricades itself against spontaneity. A presidential motorcade is a process: there are police motorcycles, there are several limousines (the president is shuffled between them like the pea in a confidence game), there are black sport utility vans bristling with secret service, there are press vans; there is an ambulance. Every day is a process, too. Elected and appointed officials live by the three-by-five cards the staff bestows at the end of office hours—tomorrow's schedule, to be carried in the breast pocket of tomorrow's suit. Public speech is a process; Washington is a city of prepared statements. Public officials are "briefed" for everything, including dinner parties: "Senator, on your left will be Mrs. Hodgepodge, a Federal Communications Commissioner, who will want to talk about broad-banding. On your right..." One senses that actual conversation only occurs in secure rooms, and perhaps not even there. A friend, lounging in a park one sunny spring day, overheard a familiar stentorian baritone just the other side of a clump of bushes: a prominent Senator was having a picnic lunch with his wife. It was, quite clearly, a scheduled event. "Well dear, would you care for some wine?" and "Well dear, how are the children?" and "We should do this more often."

Into this antic orderliness lands Bill Clinton. He lands by helicopter, propwash from the rotors doing violence to the plantings on the White House lawn—

a visitation, almost, from some other, more spontaneous plane of reality. He walks across the lawn, head down, pushing forward. Suddenly, he pushes out his arms—a stifled yawn and stretch, perhaps. But it also looks like an attempt to fly; more likely, he is pressing against the invisible webbing of the place. The city was never quite comfortable with him: he was a heart transplant that the bureaucratic-media-political corpus constantly tried to reject; he was seen as walking chaos, a rowdy gust of indulgences. But Clinton's was the most sophisticated of public projects: almost everything he did was prepared as well, but it was prepared for the purpose of seeming spontaneous.

Each week, he would hold a meeting in the White House solarium, appropriately enough, where he would be apprised of the latest polling data. Not just gross statistics—73 percent approve of your handling of the economy, Mr. President—but, more specifically, polling on the power of words: the public doesn't want you to r e p l e n i s h Social Security, Mr. President: it wants you to s a v e i t. C o m m u n i t y has resonance, Mr. President. O p p o r t u n i t y. R e s p o n s i b i l i t y. Clinton spent more money on public opinion sampling than all of his predecessors combined. He created new structures and processes—war rooms, instant response teams—to engulf and devour the bureaucratic corpus that was working to repel him. (In CAPITAL, the press secretary Joe Lockhart seems sweaty and intense despite the blue background and lighting, meant to convey calm; his eyes fairly bulge from the pressure of prepared locutions. This is, truly, a battleground.)

And so, Clinton's spontaneity was prepared and synthetic—in part. The words were prepared. The easy intimacy that informed the words was something else again—a dangerous, disorderly, truly toxic element, in a planned city. Clinton's genius (and genius is not hyperbole, in this case) centered on the emotional reach of his office: he understood the power of vicarious intimacy. He understood that even when the President addressed the entire Congress—a vast, rolling ocean of ambition barely contained in the House chamber—he was simultaneously, and more importantly, chatting up auto workers and waitresses and teachers and bus drivers in the closeness of their kitchens and family rooms. The actual words never mattered so much. His eyes, and his big hands—bear paws—draped casually over the lectern; the shoulder shrug and that thing he did with his lip: the body language mattered more. He had, it was said, a photographic memory and a very high IQ; but it was his Emotional Intelligence that defined the presidency—and challenged the straitened, linear procedural that is Washington. He could sense an audience, sense its needs, and adjust accordingly; his troubles came when he chose to focus on some audience other than the American people—at first, the Democratic leadership of the Congress; and later, the Republican leadership of the Congress; and often, the press; and finally, the audience of his own desires.

If America has an ideology it is informality, and informality is an outlaw attribute. It is disorderly conduct. And so Washington, where laws are made and procedures are followed, may well be the least American place. There is an existential uneasiness to the Capital: the formal seat of an informal country. Bill Clinton, a compendium of rowdy, creative American effulgences, was a constant irritant: he made the Capital self-conscious about its unrelenting, starched awkwardness. And Sarah Morris has filmed that irritation.

Almost Abstraction and Sarah Morris

MARTIN PRINZHORN

The unconscious, "early" processes of visual perception, which are primarily concerned with the physical properties of our surroundings—and not yet with the actual perception of objects or the meaning of what is perceived—typically do not work through single, successive parts of a total field of vision but tend to take it all in at one go, subjecting it to speedy, rough analysis. The totality and simultaneous speed of such processing is made possible, on one hand, by the fact that several operations are activated side by side, each responsible for distinct, separate tasks such as the perception of borders and transitions, of material qualities, of colors, of three dimensionality, and so on. On the other hand, the problem of "white noise" and excessive fluctuation is counterbalanced at this early stage of perception by the filtering of visual information. Thus, finding the edges in a picture not only involves identifying extremes (a minimum next to a maximum); at the same time, an average is calculated within a more or less local area, which ignores minor fluctuations. The larger the area, the wider the filter and the greater the smoothing. Such assumptions are motivated not only by the logic of the cognitive molding of vision but also by the presence of neurons in the brain, whose field of reception is responsible for precisely such "coarse" perception. Formally speaking, separating various levels of perception and filtering them is an act of abstraction. If one compares this act with the usual understanding of abstraction in art, the result is an inverted image. The canon of American art criticism, in particular, interprets abstraction as a kind of evolutionary development away from figurative representation and towards the "pure" picture, and in consequence, a move away from the ability to represent an external world and towards the representation of the picture as a pure work of art. But if we take the above-described molding of vision as our point of departure, abstraction is actually a prerequisite of any representation that communicates content, such as objects or their movement. It is like an immediate, initial reflex that gives the visual input a robustness without which we would not only get hopelessly lost in the jungle of details but also be incapable of reconstructing a whole three-dimensional

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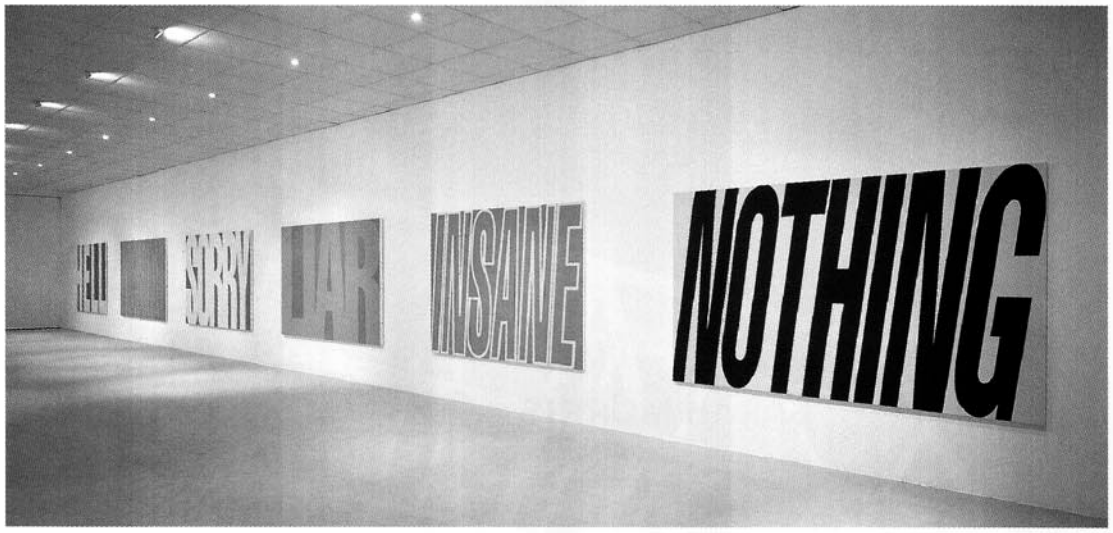
world out of insufficient input. It can here be described as a first step, as a meeting of assumptions about the world, without which we could not even begin to interpret it. In the sense that abstraction functions as a prerequisite here, it cannot be a reduction.

A first indication that reduction does not figure in the abstraction of Sarah Morris's paintings, photographs, and films lies in the immediate impression that there is no concentration or distillation of existing content in her work, despite its formal constraints. Often in the classical video art of the seventies and eighties, repetition or a specific angle of vision generates a (sometimes agonizing) contemplativeness, a calm circle in which we can or must immerse ourselves. In a film like MIDTOWN (1998) there also seems to be something like a rhythmic repetition of certain takes. But the whole piece hints at underlying subject matter that the visual material is trying to grasp. While watching, we begin wishing it would finally come into focus but the artist's rapid formal sequences deprive us of satisfaction. The single frames glide over details and become metaphors for something that hasn't really made an appearance yet, that remains unsaid although it is constantly being generated. People and their architectural surroundings appear in the same piece but do not connect with each other or with their surroundings to form a whole. The people remain just as mutually isolated as do the buildings and their details: neither the city nor those who live there are able to manifest themselves in the film. In CAPITAL (2000), the content is even more evident, the motif of the greatest center of power even more visible and explicit, but there is still not the least indication of linkage between the visuals and their content; the film is its own trailer, independent and yet relying on itself. Even the most loaded motifs like the Oval Office, the president of the United States, or the editorial offices of the *Washington Post* are positioned with the other scenes in a way that neutralizes them instead of placing them in a narrative context. But neither are we shown bits or fragments of content, as so often in modern avant-garde films. The scenes quietly fade into each other and have a certain automatist closure that only disappears again in the formal context. In both films, Morris processes the themes of urbanity and society in the preconscious sense described above: people and architecture are probed from the outside as physical objects not yet endowed with meaning; there are no protagonists in the conventional sense of the word, and the relations that would yield meaning have not yet been established. At moments her treatment of the theme can be read as an inversion of Benjamin's modernism: where, for him, technology and architecture invasively disrupt his biographical and extremely personal narrative, these same factors are for Morris the very sine qua non of the (possibly) narrative elements.

At first sight Sarah Morris's paintings might seem to be indebted to Pop art, especially in her work of the mid-nineties. Motifs or lettering, reminiscent of the reference to everyday culture that prevailed in those days, place such great emphasis on surface that the autonomous plane relativizes content and sets up laws of its own. But the isolation and arbitrariness of the words on the paintings—JOHNNY, NOTHING—and the motifs—SUNGLASSES, HIGH HEELS (BLUE)—have nothing whatsoever in common with the facetious transgressions of, say, Indiana or Warhol. Once again the works yield no discourse on the level of content; at most one might read a historical reference into them as quotations. Nor, given their clean neutrality, would it seem that they wish to address any painterly problems; rather they deal in images apart from the medium. The lettering is not distorted or fragmented in any way but sits so solidly in rectangular space that it does not appear to be placed there but rather to be its support, to be holding it together. The pictures are not divided into foreground and background, the spaces between the letters are equal in value, the painting as an object disappears. The lack of edge is becoming more and more central to Sarah Morris's painting. The artist speaks of distraction as a means of getting at things that we don't ordinarily see. The structures and textures never coalesce into objects and yet they do not become mere ornament either because their arrangement never conforms to the format of the picture and, on second sight, always evokes a projection beyond the edges of the painting. Even in the architecture paintings of the late nineties, there



SARAH MORRIS, installation shot, London, 1998. (PHOTO: STEPHEN WHITE)

are never any objects; recognition can never move from the whole to the part, but only the other way around. The stripes are not simply paths of the brush on canvas, which merely constitutes painting. It is not a matter of suppressing meaning but, quite the opposite, of describing the path to meaning—the condition prior to it. If we do not really see the whole of a building in reflected light, we can at least draw conclusions about some of its features. Neon lighting inserted in spaces, billboards on facades, the reflection of another building in a glazed facade—all of that already tells part of the story without having a meaning of its own. Distraction does not mean dividing up a whole as much as it means defining its parts in order to make the whole perceptible. Las Vegas, which looms large in the artist's work, is a good example of this complex exchange. The entire city as an object with borders can only be recognized when driving towards it through the night desert, where it looks like a colony on some remote planet. Once we are in the city, it is almost impossible to tell discrete objects apart—everything seems to be linked with everything else. There are no gardens in which buildings have been placed; and the buildings themselves expand into gardens wherein the lighting effects and the ceaseless reflections merely heighten the impression of an all-embracing universe at the brink of amorphousness. As in the utopian architectural fantasies of modernism, nature and technology, public and private have merged into an indistinguishable, pulsating mass. It is precisely this form of perception that is found in Sarah Morris's paintings: networks that hint at a perspective—of what we cannot tell: slanting lines with no verticals to provide orientation, and colors, whose sources or goals remain out of "frame." The pictures evoke reflex-like associations but there is nothing to attach them to—at least in the picture itself. The construction of something that does not yet exist but that is not diffuse either, for it possesses clear and distinct structures. Constructions of wholes that possess great visual complexity, preventing us perhaps from seeing their clear-cut structures, but nonetheless essential to the perception of the whole. It is precisely in this sense that abstraction in the art of Sarah Morris does not lead away from figuration but, in fact, represents the path that almost leads to it.

(Translation: Catherine Schelbert)

To Sit with the Speed Addict

THYRZA NICHOLS GOODEVE

For the last 100 years perceptual modalities have been and continue to be in a state of perpetual transformation, or, some might claim, a state of crisis.
– Jonathan Crary[1)]

A work, no matter how recondite, specialized, or antiquarian, manifests a historical compulsion.
– Avital Ronell discussing *Madame Bovary*[2)]

Let this begin with a question. What notion of historical vision is presented to the viewer in the paintings, cityscapes, and films of Sarah Morris? Do we sense something different here or merely a vision of the same (meaning a vision so familiar as to appear to be the repetition of what has already been seen)? In other words, could one claim to see nothing in Morris's paintings precisely because they are not about vision, an activity which presupposes a someone who sees and a something that is seen? Instead, her work emanates from an eye that claims: *There is no frame of reference. I experience perception absent of intellection. All I see is surface and pattern. My ability to distinguish between background and foreground has disappeared. Although I walk through space with limbs still nimble—where touch, taste and smell continue to orient—my eyes reflect but do not see. Height is suggested, but it is height without sky or earth. In other words I see without context.*[3)]

Context, the ability to stand outside of a scene and view each element as a component of a larger whole, is very hard for us to grasp these days. We see in close up, or to rely on the language of cinema, we see without benefit of an establishing shot. We sit like the speed addict who appears momentarily in Morris's Las Vegas cinematic docu-spasm AM/PM (1999), eyes a tremble, eyes so filled with stimuli, we do not see, merely perceive through a body whose eyes seem to merely drive by, drive by, drive by.

Sarah Morris's work languishes in the perceptual fields of late twentieth- and early-twenty-first-century capitalism. This world is made of flat grids which mimic perspective while denying the phenomenal experience of the referent (of which there is none

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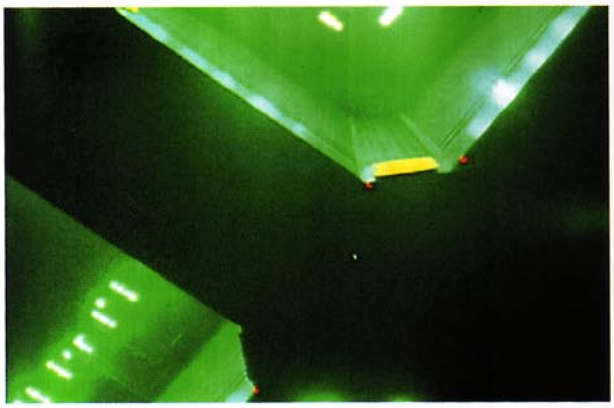
SARAH MORRIS, AM/PM, 1999, 16 mm DVD, duration / Dauer: 12 mins. 36 secs.

except codes and signals drawn from the language of geometric abstraction; modernist urban architecture; Op Art; the poetics of everyday life stripped of the experience of everyday life). How different from the following description:

Sloping downward like an amphitheater, drowned in mist, it (the town) sprawled out shapelessly beyond its bridges. The open fields swept upward again in a monotonous curve, merging at the top with the uncertain line of the pale sky. Thus seen from above, the whole landscape had the static quality of a painting: ships at anchor were crowded into the corner, the river traced its curve along the foot of the green hills, and on the water the oblong-shaped islands looked like great black fish stopped in their course. From the factory chimneys poured endless trails of brown smoke, their tips continually dissolving in the wind...[4)]

In the "pictorial" atmosphere of Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*, distance brings proximity. As Alan Cheuse puts it in his essay on narrative painting and pictorial fiction from which this passage is lifted, "The only thing that seems to be moving in the passage is Emma Bovary's eye, the surrogate for our own."[5)] One could just as well describe this as a cinematic moment. Narrative cinema is, after all, modeled on the structures of identification drawn from the nineteenth-century novel.

And yet, for anyone living in late capitalism there is little time for a distanced point of view. Vision exudes proximity. Everything is in our face. Can one stand above and look out at Morris's world? What is there on the other side of the aluminum fence? *There is no distance, no sense of foreground or background and certainly no flowers. I see only color and design. It is the same with the blinds in my room. They dart at me in strips of yellow and blue. There is nothing behind them. Color and line are the only means of expression my eyes are capable of recognizing. I have become a point of view without a person behind it.*



SARAH MORRIS, AM/PM, 1999, 16 mm DVD, duration / Dauer: 12 mins. 36 secs.

In his extraordinary essay on the Eiffel Tower, Roland Barthes describes the Tower's significance in terms of its instantiation of a powerful nineteenth-century shift in point of view. This edifice of pure line and space (as he puts it, "How can you be enclosed in emptiness, how can you visit a line?") is the embodiment of the nineteenth-century discovery of the panorama view. The Tower is in this sense a perceptual apparatus.[6] In other words, the place from which the Parisian can see Paris stretched out below. (The early stages of this new perception are, as Barthes reminds us, in the imagination, specifically in literature. For example, the description of Paris from the edifice of the cathedral in Victor Hugo's *The Hunchback of Notre-Dame* or as explored in Michelet's *Tableau chronologique.*) As Barthes puts it, "The bird's-eye-view, which each visitor to the Tower can assume in an instant for his own, gives us the world to read and not only to perceive...to perceive Paris from above is infallibly to imagine a history..."[7]

Midtown Manhattan and the neon sprawl of Las Vegas are by no means Paris in the nineteenth century (although said Paris does appear as a character in the hall of mirrors that is the architecture of Las Vegas, the modernist "unreal city" taken to a state of Duchampian hilarity). As is well known, for Walter Benjamin, Paris embodied the sensual knowledge—and attention—of the flaneur or stroller. Strolling presupposes a body and a subject passing through three- (and four-)dimensional space. The stroller's perception is a product of deep space in the same manner that the panorama is a vision of said deep space seen by a subject from a distance; or in the case of the Eiffel Tower, from an aerial point of view. Vision emerges, as in Dziga Vertov's *The Man With the Movie Camera*, or Walter Ruttman's *Berlin, Symphony of a City*, as a swirling cacophony of visual perceptions fixed into a context. Context admits to the possibility, the necessity, of point of view.

Prologue to Le Flâneur, newspaper for the masses, published at the office of the town crier, 45 Rue de la Harpe (the first and, no doubt, only number, dated May 3, 1848): "To go out strolling, these days, while puffing one's tobacco...while dreaming of an evening's pleasures, seems to us a century behind the times. We are not the sort to refuse

The films function as an index for every painting I might have made and every painting I might make in the future.

– Sarah Morris [10]

all knowledge and customs of another age; but, in our strolling, let us not forget our rights and our obligations as citizens. The times are necessitous; they demand all of our attention, all day long..." (J. Montaigu). [8]

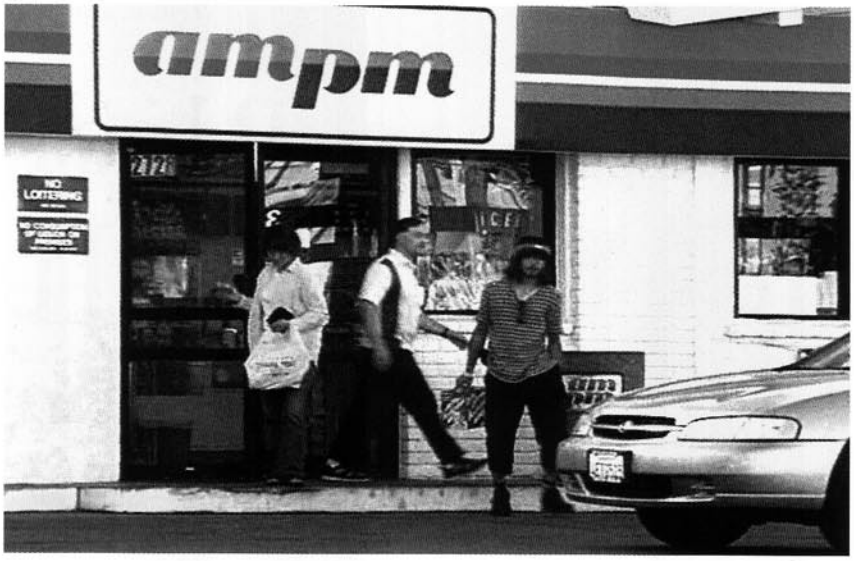
Panorama as it is described by Barthes, and strolling as celebrated by Benjamin, are forms of nineteenth-century attention which, according to Jonathan Crary are in the process of "an inevitable fragmentation of a visual field in which the unified coherence of classical models of vision was impossible... For it is in the nineteenth century, within the human sciences and particularly the nascent field of scientific psychology, that the problem of attention becomes a fundamental issue." [9] To sit from a composed position and look out onto the world below or to linger for an evening in a perceptual field developed from one's own passage through the city—the stroll as a continuous act of contiguous relations (like a film)—is to inhabit a particular point of view (even if the attention of this point of view is made up of a series of fragments). Narrative film—the historical manifestation of vision in the twentieth century—relies upon the ability of the mind to turn parts and sequences into wholes; wholes where a body (a vision) is implied.

What context is produced for the speed addict in AM/PM? Does he have the time for such a view? Do his eyes ever rest? Is he not seeing what Morris herself has been painting all along? He does not stroll. He has no attention. He sees nothing in long shot nor from an aerial point of view. He appears for a moment in a film that otherwise does not develop narrative space.

And so Morris's notion of vision is different from the vision that fell in love with the precipices of the Eiffel Tower or the activity of the urban stroll. In other words, as we pass from the dark enveloping spaces of cinematic storytelling into the brightly lit "0" and "1" signals of the digital age, an alteration of the components of vision and storytelling—a shift in historical compulsion—can be detected. In this sense, Morris's work sits with, not as, the speed addict in AM/PM. A position "...within modernity" where "vision is only one layer of a body that could be captured, shaped, or controlled by a range of external techniques..." A body evading, flipping channels and time zones, continuously looking for a way "of evading institutional capture and inventing new forms, affects, and intensities." [11] This is a world consumed by proximity; forever smooth; utterly lacking perspectival comfort. [12] A world where "...we no longer exist in a way that renders manifestation possible: we have lost access to what is manifested and even to manifestation itself." [13]

Coda

The teenage boy, who up until this point has been complaining about his vision, turns to his mother and says, "I hardly recognize the kind of space you describe. I see with eyes which no longer tell me the story of where something comes from or where it is going." He is speaking to his mother who has just told him a story, a memory of a film she saw as a child. They sit in a hospital by the bedside of an ancient man, his grandfather, who until this moment has been utterly still; a body wrapped in the neverland of a coma. The grandfather stirs opening his mouth for the first time in decades. He addresses his daughter and grandson with what appears to be a non sequiter, "Did you know when Erik Satie wrote the first background music for an opera intermission, he found himself forced at his first performance to keep telling his attentive audience not to listen?" As he finishes his statement, the old man's eyes glaze over, his body loses all the tension which consciousness has brought. He lies there once again, a body utterly still, eyes wide open. His daughter and



SARAH MORRIS, AM/PM, 1999, 16 mm DVD, duration / Dauer: 12 mins. 36 secs.

grandson do not move. Their attention is fixed on the man's eyes, which are fluttering now at twenty-four frames per second. When his eyes finally stop, an image rises from the dark center of the pupils coming to rest on the yellow gauzy surface of the eyeball. It is the image of a city shot in long shot in which the cityscape is stretched out against a horizon. Slowly, imperceptibly, the perspective inside the image begins to zoom in, passing through and by the buildings. Soon the traces of this journey are utterly erased. The scene is replaced by a perception of FLAMINGO HILTON (LAS VEGAS) (1999), painted with bold colors of common house paint. The city in his eyes has nothing but lattice patterns hanging in the air without history, pure grids of pink. A point of view lacking consciousness. The daughter and the grandson sit attentively watching as this cinematic transition from panorama to Polaroid unfolds within the pupil of the elderly man. The process takes some time, quite slowly in fact, about a century to complete. When it stops, the world comes to rest as pure staccato. A view of line and shape absent of space, of perspective; a world presented in a painted image, a geometric close-up absent of frame, caught in the eye of the now dead man.

1) Jonathan Crary, *Suspensions of Perception: Attention, Spectacle, and Modern Culture* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, MIT Press, 1999), p 13.
2) Avital Ronell, *Crack Wars: Literature, Addiction, Mania* (Lincoln, Nebraska & London: University of Nebraska Press, 1992), section: 20.21.
3) This statement, and other italicized sections, are quotes from a fictional character that lives in the world of Morris's paintings and films.
4) Gustave Flaubert, *Madame Bovary* (1857), book III, chapter 5.
5) Alan Cheuse, "Traces of Light: The Paradoxes of Narrative Painting and Pictorial Fiction" in: *The Antioch Review*, Volume 55, Number 3 (Storytelling), Summer 1997, p. 282.
6) For an elaboration of this point, in relation to René Clair's 1923 film *Paris qui dort*, see Annette Michelson, "Dr. Crase and Mr. Clair," *October*, Spring 1980.
7) Roland Barthes, *The Eiffel Tower and Other Mythologies*, translated by Richard Howard (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, Inc., 1979), pp. 9, 11.
8) Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, translated by Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999), p. 448.
9) Crary, op. cit., pp. 24, 13.
10) Sarah Morris in conversation with David Daniel, cinematographer of AM/PM, published in the catalogue for Morris's Kunsthalle Zurich exhibition, June 7–August 13, 2000, p. 66.
11) Crary, op cit., p. 3.
12) Paraphrased from Diedrich Diederichsen's catalogue essay "Updown-Downdown" in: *Sarah Morris* (Kunsthalle Zurich, 2000), p. 36. He continues, "Sarah Morris employs precisely this Satie effect..."
13) Ronell, op. cit., section: 20.21.