Creased Surface, Open City:
Baroque Aesthetics and Withholding Resolution in Sarah Morris’ City Films

Jerina Hajno
Introduction

As if tired of lingering on well-defined office spaces, the camera frames an office window which in turn frames an almost tactile blue sky and lake outside. It leaves the office behind and closes up on the lake extending in the distance outside. Sails blow in the wind against the wrinkled surface of the lake and a balloon over the lake holds our gaze next.

The haptic takes over in this transition from Sarah Morris’ film Chicago (2011). In the nineties contemporary artist Sarah Morris turned to metropolises in her city films. In her first film she rendered New York City’s Midtown. Las Vegas, Los Angeles, Miami, Washington D.C. and Beijing each claim a place in the artist’s film work.

Morris’ film aesthetics lean towards the open and develop through process and performativity where the viewer’s and this reviewer’s own subjectivity are drawn in. Similar to the tension enfolded in paper as origami develops towards its final form, Morris’ city films progress through discord. This process guides the attention and builds expectation. The undercurrent of emerging closure, at times seemingly close and at others far is present beneath perpetual juxtapositions. This enfolded and unfolded tension gives rise to openness. Final resolution is promised and not delivered, but its constant reminder is a harbinger of processes yet to unfold.

This discussion suggests that Morris’ films build and sustain visually tense discords and a premise of resolution by weaving intricate baroque aesthetics and allowing enfolded narrative to emerge out of algorithm.

Morris’ films make frequent reference to architecture and urban design. This method of reference extends to other visual forms, including film, and lends itself to baroque aesthetics. Against this backdrop we look at the author’s films concentrating on Chicago (2011) and Beijing (2008).

While characteristics of baroque aesthetics guide the discussion that follows, the concept of the haptic will ground it in the art of film.

Additionally, this paper aims to address the author’s carefully selected visual materials. I suggest that algorithm and its relation to the visual information provide us with a tool to unfold the artist’s vision of ‘openness’ and understand how it holds together as a compossible universe.

Morris’ images of socially and politically woven metropolises are also suggestive of political activity, participation and their implications.

The films engage the viewer through performativity: the enfolding and unfolding characteristics of the film rely on the beholder’s active imagination.

Chicago opens with close-ups of graphics and other data representations on monitors. The following sequence reveals Chicago’s cityscape. Morris’ trademark is a method of heavily edited images, creation of visual discords, and framing of representations. Beijing opens with views of an industrial geese husbandry. The large flock of geese seems like a white feathery mass trying to find some unity of movement. The film swiftly cuts to a game of cards and then to a scene where little girls draw with chalk on a sidewalk. Although Beijing is filmed during the 2008 Olympics, the opening scene contrasts with the Olympics’ crafted glamour and spectacle.

Chicago contains a whole universe inside. There are, for instance, scenes of meat being sliced at a large scale industrial butcher. The film includes scenes of people eating, sewing, working in offices and outside in construction. Modes of production are important in these two films. Equally central are references to other visual forms and practices, such as Morris’ inclusion of a scene where a fashion photographer takes pictures of fashion apparel. Shots of framed ‘Playboy’ magazine covers inside the Playboy headquarters remind us of the now venerable institution’s presence on Chicago’s Lakeshore Boulevard. The film includes shots of planes flying above high-rises as well as scenes of street traffic. Morris does not miss the lake beach, and, lest we forget of the police and security guards, their presence is witnessed in several scenes. Reflections of light and images on glass surfaces and facades are indispensable to all of artist’s films.

Beijing has a slightly different décor and the film focuses on the Olympics that took place in this city in 2008. The inclusion of shots from everyday life in public squares and streets give insight of the city outside the event that the Olympics have become. The artist’s work through juxtapositions holds true for this film too and the aesthetics enfold and unfold in similar fashion. One sequence shows the various national Olympic teams parading at the opening ceremonies: we cannot miss a sense of crowd movement that overwhelms the individual. Each national team has its own colorful, or less colorful, uniforms that offer some haptic relief through fabrics and flags. If one missed the opening ceremonies of Beijing 2008 at the time this film documents all the glamour. There are shots of Olympians in competitions from acrobatics to swimming and more. The universe unfolded by Beijing interlaces scenes from the outdoors and indoors, with a particular focus on groups of people. Morris’ meta-reflection is present, such as in a sequence of shots of a large screen at the Beijing zoo showing footage of baby pandas, amidst others.

Extra-diegetic sound is laid over muted footage in both films. The soundtrack comprises primarily repetitions, introducing subtle or less subtle variations in a manner that supports the tension in the visual. At times the music creates suspense or builds to a subtle crescendo.

The films fascinate with reflections captured on various surfaces and with the presence of tactile details against hard backdrops. Different forms of private and public spaces and inside and outside spaces are interlaced. There are spectacle, screens, politics and art. That Morris brings
these contrasts together with a sense of slight tension is to the credit of her vision and the intricacies of her method.

**Discord, Tension, Open**

Heinrich Wölfflin described the purpose of baroque aesthetics as follows: “The aim of this style is not to represent a perfected state, but to suggest an incomplete process and a movement towards its completion.”

While viewing Sarah Morris’ films a similar attention to movement emerges. The films also strive for a sense of completion, but withhold from delivering a ‘final’ closure.

In “*Renaissance and Baroque*” Wölfflin lists the following as elements of the ‘painterly’ style, the central characteristic to baroque aesthetics: painterliness, recession, unity, movement, and only a relatively clear point of view.

Let us consider the following sequence from *Beijing*: On the sidewalk, against the hard surface of a grey wall, some personal tension takes place between a young man and a young woman. The woman leans on the wall and the man shifts in and out of the frame. The woman has long hair and is crying, occasionally pushing the man away. On a closer shot we see the softness of the texture of her light hair against the coarseness of the wall behind. In ‘The world as a media maze’, Ágnes Pethö calls attention to this framing of haptic against the graphic images of architectural or other structured forms. Laura Marks defines haptic space as “a space that invites not distant contemplation but intimate involvement, the eyes moving over the surface as though touching it.”

Further, Pethö refers to what she calls the ‘drama’ between graphic and haptic, and Morris’ framing of soft hair, face, and tears in this scene easily lends itself to this interpretation. The contrast between the two brings about pause for thought and allows a sense of the open to emerge. This is also in line with Wolflin’s notion of baroque aesthetics, where ‘discords’ similar to that of haptic against graphic are brought together. Yet hardly had the young woman in this scene and her haptic presence reconciled with the structure of grey wall and sidewalk than Morris takes us along to other tensions. The editing is swift and the moments of resolution are transitory.

Another sequence shows an aesthetcian behind the glass wall of her shop. She puts make-up on a young girl. The camera lingers on the movement of the cosmetic brush on the girl’s face and the texture of her hair struggles against the glass surface. This contrast offers another fleeting

---

2 Ágnes Pethö, “The world as a media maze”, *Cinema and Intermediality: the passion for the inbetween* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars, 2011), 160 – 175 (Figures)
3 Laura Marks, *Enfoldment and Infinity: An Islamic Genealogy of New Media Art* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2010), 54.
4 Wolfflin, 68.
moment of a micro resolution, hence the perception of openness. In another scene we view
watermelons outside on the sidewalk by the entryway to a grocery store. Similar contrasts arise
in Chicago, such as when food is prepared in the kitchen and meat is sliced under mechanic
presses. Through repetition of this method the films build an undercurrent of ever-developing
resolution.

Other characteristics of baroque aesthetics can be traced to a macro level. To illustrate, in
Chicago there is a sequence of glass facades reflected on other glass facades. The camera pans
the buildings around a piazza in Chicago. This is a group of buildings whose borders and outer
frames seem to overlap. The camera shows the reflection of one high-rise on the glass façade of
another. We know this is a reflection because of the deformity of the image: it is wavy and
almost ‘soft’. Due to high concentration of structures in one place and all buildings having glass
facades it is unclear where one building ends and reflection begins. All this, combined with the
play of light and shade, creates a continuum between reflections and buildings. The surfaces
seem soft and the boundaries bleed into each other. It is an interesting sequence that gives the
impression of unity and interconnectedness with accents of light and shade dominating the
frame.

Wolfflin’s ‘recession’ is also traceable in the films. Here is another illustration from Chicago: A
car drives on the streets of Chicago in the evening. Morris’ camera follows closely behind. The
city is dark but there are shimmering lights in the distance and buildings emerge ponderous in the
horizon. It looks as if we are heading towards darkness deep within the city. The highway
stretches out and the perception of heading into a tunnel that goes through the depths of the city
arises. The view ahead seem to recede.

This play of discords and the sense of openness rely also on the viewer’s engagement. In order
for the openness Wolfflin describes to take place the viewer’s active contemplation is important.

When discussing characteristics of openness in Islamic aesthetics and New Media, Marks states:
“[…] in Islamic aesthetics, the active engagement of the beholder is the subject of the work. This
aesthetics describes artwork that does not require interpretation per se, but holds out an invitation
to the viewer.” While Morris’ films require a degree of interpretation due to the social character
of cities, they also invite the viewer’s subjective participation. The focal point is on
performativity.

“Massiveness” is another characteristic illustrated by the artist’s attention to groups over
individual members. This unfolds in how individuals are framed within a larger structural form.
Let us consider the following scenes from Chicago: The camera closes up on small portions of
food. A large team of chefs and kitchen aides emerges from another angle. Now the focus is on
the whole team and their coordination, rather than on single items.

---

5 Marks, “Islamic aesthetics and New Media Art: Points of Contact,” Enfoldment and Infinity,
63.
Marks writes on the unity of the whole: “In The Origin of German Tragic Drama, Benjamin argued that in baroque theater, the ‘false unity’ of individual phenomena must be stripped away in order for them to ‘partake of the genuine unity of truth.’”6 The partaking of a unity greater than individual is characteristic of ‘massiveness’ in Morris’ films, where individuals are overshadowed by crowds. However, the films’ attention shifts between detail and ‘massiveness’ in order to further the narrative.

**Creasing, withholding, then forming, unfolding**

Morris’ films privilege a particular form of discord and process. The films don’t impose a final resolution. The artist’s method relies on advancing the narrative by creating discord at the micro level.

When Morris selects visual material from a plethora of possible combinations she frames key details against each other. In a scene in *Beijing* we view staff washing every single marble tile of the floor individually and the circular motion of their hands and washcloths is framed against the hardness of the tiles. Where the tiles offer geometry and a solid grey color, the washcloths and hands and their motions invite a softer and more tactile space.

This way of framing enables reflection on the images that flood our imagination. It also enables an inner search through imagination. That the camera’s movement in this scene slows down to an almost still suggests that particular care is taken to emphasize them.

Micro discords embedded in these films work similarly to how two, or more, streams come together to create a larger one. Haptic space draws the graphic and optical elements into a pool that is able to withhold and soften the undercurrents of tension. Something new comes about once ‘discord’ is overcome.

These accentuated ‘points’ of discord travel along the film’s narrative giving the impression of a continuous and slightly tense line. We can conceptualize this line as an analogy to what Marks (borrowing from Deleuze and Guattari) calls ‘abstract line’7. The line’s twists and turns can be traced along the films’ narrative.

Andrew Goffey describes algorithm as “description of the method by which a task is to be accomplished”, and adds that “an algorithm is an abstraction, having an autonomous existence.”8 Goffey explains that such instructions are intertwined with “material reality” and play a social

---

6 Ibid., 171.
7 Ibid., 54.
and cultural role. From this, Morris’ method is autonomous because it is used in all her city films regardless of differences in visual material.

Further, the films emphasize organizational forms and reveal the universality of ‘instructions’, including in art production. In *Chicago* and *Beijing* we see production in sports, in the food industry, in Olympics spectacle, in publishing and photography, in science labs and more. What becomes obvious is the similar way these organizational forms work: instructions, tools, and information are involved in all of these forms of production. There is also meta-reflection in Morris’ repetitive, highly edited, and structured approach.

Marks describes the unfolding that emerges from algorithm thusly: “When the algorithm is carried out, what is latent becomes manifest, for example, as a proliferation of pattern or a musical sequence.”  

What becomes manifest in Morris’ films is her process-based search for a final resolution that never suggests itself fully. The organizational forms and ‘instructions’ that Morris portrays mirror her way of building the films’ narrative.

Marks references C.S. Peirce's suggestion that “we humans, like the bees who somehow know to build hexagonal structures, are using our imaginative faculties to get in touch with the divine order.” In our case, the organizational and production forms portrayed in films are embodied to some degree by the societies in these two cities. Morris’ filmmaking method and films embody this not only in relation to other art forms she references but also in the very universal ‘instructions’ she depicts and reflects on. The films are echoed by the art of photography and spectacle when we look at frames of magazines depicting photographs and drawings of the honorable ladies featured in “Playboy”. Art making methods are embodied in art, and in the two films, as well as in the organizational forms of societies that unfold these art forms. To illustrate, in *Chicago* Morris includes a detailed sequence of the intricate processes that make publishing and distribution of “The Chicago Herald” possible.

Production modes in *Chicago* and *Beijing* also serve the aesthetic purpose. They create geometric patterns and ways of organizing and structuring space. The complex architectural arrangement of space is manifest at the Olympics opening ceremonies and sports competitions in *Beijing*. The coordination of elegant movements in synchronized swimming and the fireworks over Beijing are awe-inspiring. They result in what Marks describes as “extremely complex interrelationships that ultimately stymie a rational response.”

---

9 Marks, 163.
10 Ibid., 162.
11 Ibid., 172.
narrative and withhold final resolution. The resolution is beyond the narrative and the aesthetics guide the viewer towards this ‘openness’.

**Art and artifice in *Chicago* and *Beijing***

There are further implications to Morris’ algorithmic method. Goffey suggests viewing algorithms as a combination of ‘logic + control’ and writes that algorithms act: “but they do so as part of an ill-defined network of actions upon actions, part of a complex of power-knowledge relations, in which unintended consequences, like the side effects of a program’s behavior, can become critically important.”

Let us consider the sequence at Fermilab science research in *Chicago*. It shows various forms of capturing and representing data through graphs and on monitors. Morris highlights the relationship between data and representation by emphasizing visual constructions. She places her camera as a filter on Fermilab data monitors, unveiling relationships between several filters.

The meta-reflective quality in Morris’ films highlights the inadequacy of the distinction between form and content. Pethö’s notion of ‘metalepsis’ clarifies some of the complexities. Pethö defines metalepsis as “a crossing of the boundaries between the possible diegetic levels of a narrative [...] : breaking the frame between ‘reality’ and ‘fiction’, between authorial narration or commentary and the ‘world’ with that frame.”

Metalepsis is important to the films’ aesthetics when different art forms are overlaid or juxtaposed to each other. They cause a breakdown in narrative and offer pause for reflection. When the artist inserts something ‘foreign’, such as a framed photograph of JFK, she creates and changes meaning simultaneously. A large screen mounted on a building in *Chicago*, for instance, shows clips of the David Letterman Show. Another screen in *Beijing* shows footage of the Olympics swimming competition then the camera pans from the screen to the swimming pool and reveals that it is taking place ‘in real time’. Another sequence shows Olympic swimmers being interviewed and the camera pans to show the swimmers ‘live’ while they are giving the interview. Editing clips of another medium (TV) onto film introduces the ‘foreign’. It causes the viewer to withdraw temporarily: one pulls away from mere viewing and becomes more active in participating and reflecting.

The withdrawal is at work in another sequence: A clip from *Chicago* is a close up of a small metal statue on a flat surface. There is an encased pair of scissors on a shiny flat surface in the next shot. The consequent shots offer glimpses of framed awards standing on table surfaces and mounted on walls. We recognize portraits of iconic American figures, such as Robert Kennedy.

---

12 Goffey, 16.
13 Ibid., 19.
14 Pethö, 128.
The camera then focuses on framed magazine pages of ‘Ebony’ featuring advertising and text. These scenes reference sculpture, photography, spectacle, and magazine publishing. At the meeting point between film and other art our imagination withdraws from the narrative to reflect on these foreign insertions. These moments allow a new understanding to emerge simply by overlaying the various screens of arts. The ‘foreign’ arts facilitate reflection on the construction of meaning.

We may tie juxtapositions of different media, TV and camera’s viewfinder, to the difference between translation and the original. Marks describes this difference thusly: “the distance between them is marked by folds”. What mounted large screens enfold is later unfolded by Morris’ viewfinder. The filmmaker records clips of the “Oprah Show” off of a large outdoors screen in Chicago. And yet this unfolding is incomplete as the images are selected for us by the artist. When the camera zooms out we realize that the show is being played on a screen atop city buildings.

There is a perpetual doubling and multiplying of the actual in the films. The multiplicity of forms of light goes from sunlight to artificial light indoors and on the streets, and includes fireworks in Beijing. The public space of the Olympic venue has a counterpart in the outdoor piazzas, the zoo, airports and more. The buildings and other elements of the city are infinitely replicated on numerous surfaces, from glass to water and TV screens. The original forms are tied to the notion of ‘translation’, but are unfaithful translations separated from the original through folds. Hence, form and content are tied aesthetically and the same is true of Morris’ filmmaking.

The artifice is present in sequences such as photoshopping of fashion photographs at “Ebony” offices in Chicago. Visual information here exemplifies Byfield’s observation that: “[…] the common experience of what is often called information is indirect, distinguished from some notional immediate or immanent experience by mediation […].” Through this metalepsis via photoshopping Morris points to inserting new information. It has implications for Morris’ method and highlights the indexical quality of film. This links back to the problematic relation between form and content, instruction and data, medium and what the medium represents.

As Deleuze explores in The Fold, at times we find ourselves looking at the medium and data as their underlying complexities unfold, and at others we travel along the façade with no access to the invisible. The concept of time too warps differently depending where in the folding/unfolding of narrative knots one stands. Through folds we travel through places whose ‘mode of time’ either enfolds all others (as in facades) in a large, macro scale, or unfolds the individual long seconds onto details and seems to impress a much slower rhythm. The last one is characteristics of Morris’ haptic scenes.

15 Marks, 187,
The data/algorithm predicament of complexities befalls Fermilab’s headquarters, where carefully captured and crafted information is intertwined with organizational and representational aspects. Hartley is correct in stating that “information is something that can be transmitted but has no specific meaning.” Meaning is inseparable from how information is organized and represented. In this context, algorithm can be viewed as combination of logic and control, implying action.

Action emerges when subjectivity is called on to participate through folds and layers of complexity. In participating we find a sense of openness and an emerging understanding that shifts our perception continually. The filmmaker acts as an enabler of a particular way of creating meaning through her own way of selecting and representing visual materials.

**Final Folds and Conclusion**

The films are rich in images and settings. They enfold ‘compossible universes’ in Deleuze’s interpretation of the Leibnizian term as “the totality of monads that convey the same world.”\(^{17}\)

The films’ baroque aesthetics demonstrate this compossibility through forms and structures built on the same logic and control principles and ways of selecting and organizing information. Morris’ algorithmic method partakes in the universe it builds as it embodies the form of ‘instructions’ she invites us to reflect upon.

It would be interesting to explore further the multiplicity of original and reflected forms in Morris’ films. Reflections on mirrors and surfaces could be tied to the concept of translations and originals and analyze how similar structures replicate, including political power structures or organizational forms. Another avenue would be to look at reflections as the phenomenological ‘other’. Reflections offer a deformed image and limited understanding of the other’s ‘actual’.

The films’ architectural model lends itself to Deleuze when he characterizes baroque aesthetics as "the severing of the façade from the inside, of the interior from the exterior, and the autonomy of the interior from the independence of the exterior, but in such conditions that each of the two terms thrusts the other forward."\(^{18}\) Severing of the façade and travelling from inside to the outside and vice-versa are features of Morris’ filmmaking.

One of the concerns we may raise in looking at these two films side by side is that Beijing seems too centered on the Olympics at the expense of including other algorithmic forms outside media and spectacle. It is possible that the author’s lack of immediate personal experience combined with possible censorship in filming other organizational forms in China may lend this film to an analysis not quite in touch with visual materials and structures, especially political, in the city of

---

\(^{17}\) Deleuze, *The Fold*, 60.

\(^{18}\) Ibid., 28.
Beijing. Indeed Beijing may appear one-dimensional when compared to the more personally rendered vision of Chicago in *Chicago*.

It is also important to keep in mind that the author uses fast paced editing as her main method of creating structure, narrative, and meaning. Morris reflects on this throughout the films, especially through metalepsis, however we should note that due to this the rendered images of these cities may wonder slightly away from the ‘original’ Baroque aesthetics. This is pertinent where this discussion elaborates on the notion of ‘openness’ and a more nuanced notion of ‘openness’ should be noted.

Both films end subtly. *Beijing*’s memorable ending is an almost idyllic sequence of a man and a woman in sun hats biking on the streets of Beijing as the camera pans the stores to their left. In *Chicago* the end comes at night, when Morris’ camera closes in on a spider web seemingly laid over the moon far in the distance. These finales do not offer a totalitarian resolution. They don’t force a resolution and imply that the ‘ending’ is not necessarily an ending. It is a work in progress.

**REFERENCES**


Marks, Laura. *Enfoldment and Infinity: An Islamic Genealogy of New Media Art* (Cambridge, MA, USA: MIT Press, 2010).

