BRIGHT LIGHTS, BIG CITIES

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Sarah Morris starts *Midtown* (1998), her film about New York, with a shot of lights up close. Flashing triangles of different hues fall down the screen, subsequently grouping into a pattern of lines that shift and rearrange with a methodic rhythm. The brightness of these first lights burns in our minds throughout the film, despite the fact that an enormous bottle of Budweiser soon swings into view; their networked geometry finds echoes in shots of crisscrossing streets and the mirrored panels of corporate office buildings. In *AM/PM* (1999), Morris’s film of Las Vegas, lights dominate as well; they run up the facades of buildings and surround people as they head down moving walkways. The viewer does not see much of the iconic signs of the Strip, which Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown celebrated for their communicative powers in their landmark work of postmodern architectural theory, *Learning from Las Vegas* (1977). Instead, one witnesses close-ups of neon tubes, light bulbs, and LEDs—the seduction of pure light. Most of the film
takes place at night, in fact, and in a certain sense the lights burn despite the night, if not in spite of it. (The film’s title, borrowed from the name of a convenience store, points to a similarly aggressive sense of homogenous, sleepless time.) Lights in Las Vegas—as elsewhere—do not communicate as much as they encapsulate. They create an empire for the senses that seemingly overpowers the world of signs.

In his seminal book *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1990), Fredric Jameson imagined a type of postmodern architecture that shares something with the ambience of Morris’s films. In opposition to the “decorated sheds” championed by Venturi and Scott Brown—big boxes with billboards on top of them—Jameson imagined a kind of environmental architecture that he found encapsulated in John Portman’s Bonaventure Hotel in Los Angeles (1974). Created out of reflective glass cylinders, the Bonaventure does not have a clearly marked entrance or exit, an inside or an out. Full of plants and water features, visiting the hotel feels a bit like entering an exhibit in a zoo, except that here the natural environment includes shopping balconies and is outfitted with a concierge. Glass-paneled, nature has been brought indoors to create a space that is less architecture than microclimate.¹ If the Bonaventure brings the outside in, however, other varieties of postmodern space take the inside out. Public sites like New York’s Times Square mark off interiors in a similar fashion, without feeling the need to call themselves architecture as such, creating tight zones of affect where passersby absorb information distractedly.

Many of Sarah Morris’s films take their cue from this new variety of space; they go beyond the realms of architecture and urbanism to examine the environments and networks that sustain them. Indeed, her films take a cue from the global cities on which they often focus. *Chicago, Los Angeles, Capital, Miami, Midtown,* and *Beijing* all form part of the same network; they are connected not only by