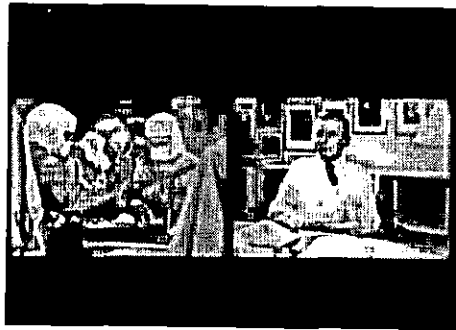
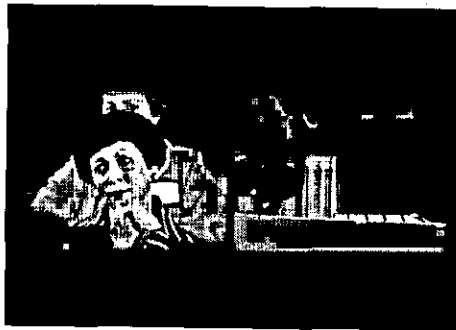


Rachel Hooper

Stories Told in the Shape of a Sphere

Amy Patton's films have a way of sticking with you. Years after first seeing them, I find myself still thinking back and trying to put together all the pieces of their dream-like fictions woven within tightly edited structures. One that I often return to is *A Satisfied Mind* (2005), which I first encountered at the space the Brooklyn gallery Pierogi operated at the time in Leipzig, Germany. In the film, the narrator is an anesthetized psychosurgery patient named Jeff Morrow. As Morrow is operated on, he remembers a Greyhound bus inspector whose relentlessly hyperactive memory drives him to commit suicide one day by blowing up the bus on which he is riding. The only person who can lead us to where it happened, we're told, is a woman with a severe case of amnesia. Inexplicably, the exploding bus is replaced by a crashing plane, exposing "a secret form of time."

Divided into two parts on a split screen, *A Satisfied Mind* is spliced together from pieces of 16mm footage that the Berlin-based, Texan-born Patton found tangled up in a garbage bag in Austin. The filmmaker essentially "hijacked," to use her term, the source material of amnesia studies, children traveling on a Greyhound bus, and aviation disasters to create her own story, using voiceover to pull together these fragments. The richly textured and color-saturated stock is scratched and sometimes jumpy; in contrast, Patton's slow



Stills from *A Satisfied Mind*, 2005.
Video (color, sound), 4:32 min.

and even editing creates a pace that allows for subtle connections between what is happening simultaneously on the two sides of the screen. The relationship between appropriated films and the artist's text raises an unnamed question or expectation that seems to drive the plot forward, even as the testimony of a woman without memory and the disturbance of plane crashes deny any logical progression.¹

¹ The questions that the viewer is prompted to ask may drive the suspense of the films as well. See Noël Carroll, *Theorizing the Moving Image* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 94–113.

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When I came to work at Blaffer Art Museum, a year after I saw *A Satisfied Mind* in Leipzig, I wondered how the film might be received in Texas, where it originated. As it turns out, when I moved to Houston, Patton had just written and directed another 16mm film with Texan connections, *Chronicle of a Demise* (2006). The measured, quiet atmosphere of this film brings out the formal composition of each shot, the dynamic beauty of trains in motion, roads receding in the distance, and rolling waves. The narrator explains that the film is a report by “the Center” on surveillance of “the poet,” who lives in his uncle’s basement outside Dallas, and that the Center is “reluctant to release the following images” given the charges against it. The charges are never fully explained. The narrator goes on to say that evidence has been tampered with, footage of the Berlin Zoo and a European port are mixed in with shots of homogeneous aluminum-sided homes taken in Hutto, Texas. At the end, the narrator explains that the Center will be dissolved and “no individual members of this organization will be at liberty to discuss the poet’s actions or whereabouts.”

The narrator’s speech in both *A Satisfied Mind* and *Chronicle of a Demise* binds the flow of images in each film into one story with beginning, middle, and end, as it would in a literary work. Patton’s characters are themselves derivations from published short stories and novels: the man plagued by a photographic memory in *A Satisfied Mind* is based on Ireneo Funes from the Jorge Luis Borges short story “Funes, the Memorious” (1942) and the narrator of *Chronicle of a Demise* on the protagonist of a Tennessee Williams short story of the same name (1967). As with their

literary counterparts, we trust the narrators in Patton's films to provide authoritative accounts of what they observe. Patton uses the narrators to represent what Michel Chion calls the "I-voice," the speaker inside our heads who tells us our own thoughts. As Chion explains, the "I-voice" is an off-screen performer speaking so closely into the mike that there are no reverberations and the voice resonates in us "as if it were our own voice, like a voice in the first person."² In Patton's two films, the narrating voice, along with the often static point of view of the camera, suggests this first-person structure.

Patton's work is also informed by the legacy of structural film, as well as structural and post-structural theory in general. Two of her earliest films—*I Have Two Dreams* (2000) and *Dream of a Contraption* (2000)—show her interest in the psychological intensity of structural filmmaking techniques such as mathematically determined edits and extended mise-en-scènes. At the University of Texas in Austin, where Patton made these films and earned a degree in art history, the Polish filmmaker Bogdan Perzynski introduced her to surrealist films, Sergei Eisenstein's montage technique, Michael Snow's experimental films, and videos of Bruce Nauman's early performances. Once she moved to Germany she continued studying experimental film and media design at the Universität der Künste Berlin with Stan Douglas, Heinz Emigholz, and Maria Vedder. Her films continue to reflect the tradition of what P. Adams Sitney has

2. Michel Chion, *The Voice in Cinema*, trans. Claudia Gorbman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 51.

described as "a cinema of structure in which the shape of the whole film is predetermined and simplified, [which gives] the primal impression of the film."³

Patton's films thus have a distinct, predetermined shape established by the voiceover and the use of found and documentary footage. Their set shape is reinforced by her tight editing and slow, steady shots. However, this ostensibly straightforward structure is interrupted and subverted by narrative overlaps, slippages, and echoes. Three-quarters of the way through *A Satisfied Mind*, the narration changes from a first-person recollection to a direct address of the viewer, who is told that the woman with amnesia is "the one who can lead you to the spot where it happened." At the very end of the film, the narrator describes the events as belonging to the distant past: "Historians maintain that the pilot and the dreamer had nothing to do with each other, but I imagine they're just trying to cover the fact that these parallelisms between a certain pilot's fate in 1929 and the fate of that bus in 1968 could suppose a secret form of time: a pattern of repeating lines." These shifts subtly undermine the coherence and authority of the narrator, as does the sometimes disjunctive relationship between what he says and the images we see, as when a plane takes off inexplicably on the right side of the screen as the woman without a memory leaves a secretarial school on the left. Likewise, *Chronicle of a Demise* begins with the narrator describing the images we are watching and how they relate to the subject of his investigation, the poet. But once we are

3. P. Adams Sitney, *Visionary Film: The American Avant-Garde, 1943–2000* (Cary, NC: Oxford University Press, 2002), 348.

into the film, the narrator explains that his documentation has been tampered with, and that "it is not our material, but that of an impostor."

Breaks in the direction established by Patton's narrators create a tension as the stories progress.⁴ We are compelled to watch the films again and again in an attempt to resolve their incongruities. Raymond Bellour has written about the "repetition-resolution effect" of Hollywood cinema, in which rhyming and parallels in a film are used to resolve the narrative. For example, many Hollywood films end in the same place where they started. As Bellour explains, such conventions carry "narrative difference through the ordered network of resemblances; by unfolding symmetries (with varying degrees of refinement) they bring out the dissymmetry without which there would be no narrative. . . . [The film] is constantly repeating itself because it is resolving itself."⁵ Although Patton's films also incorporate repetitions and parallels, her work does not offer a tidy sense of resolution. Instead, we are left searching, watching the looped films, and waiting for the repetitions to deliver an answer.

As *A Satisfied Mind* moves from memory to dream logic, and as the authority of the narrator is gradually dismantled in *Chronicle of a Demise*, we wonder whether the films are documentary or fantasy, fact or fiction, dream or reality. Patton has said that she wants to create confusion to prevent the viewer's suspension of disbelief: "I want the viewer to remember that I might

4. Barthes would say that the suspense in the film relates directly to its structure: "Suspense, therefore, is a game with structure, designed to endanger and glorify it." Roland Barthes, *Image-Music-Text* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), 119.

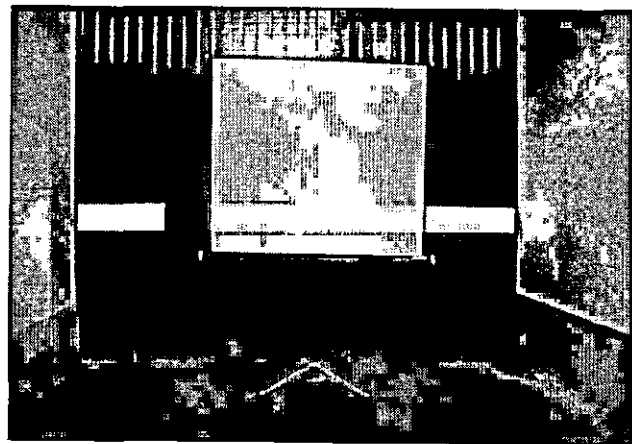
also be an unreliable narrator, and everything framing the work might also be untrustworthy."⁶ Ultimately, we are left to determine for ourselves what truth there is behind the films.

I first met Amy Patton when she stopped in Houston in 2008 on her way home to Austin for a visit. At the time, she was working on *About the object*—a project involving voice and a videotaped performance—for CCS Bard with Christina Linden (who two years earlier was working at Pierogi where she introduced me to Patton's work). Patton explained that she had started working with actors, using voice recordings, improvisations, and reenactments to engage the artificiality of theater and film. As the Cynthia Woods Mitchell Center Fellow, I invited her to work with actors from the University of Houston through the Mitchell Center, where she was in residency for the month of January 2010: the UH School of Theatre & Dance not only collaborated with her creatively, but also served as an invaluable partner and resource for production of the resulting film, *Oil*. Patton shot the film in a black box theater in the School of Theatre & Dance, where she built a simple set—a raised platform, a black table, and a few black chairs—and worked with a cast of six actors to develop characters and choreograph scenes built on brief quotations from Upton Sinclair's novel *Oil!* (1927). *Oil* plays with the discordance between Sinclair's material and the

5. Raymond Bellour, "Segmenting/Analyzing," in Philip Rosen, ed., *Narrative, Apparatus, Ideology: A Film Theory Reader* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 66.

6. Amy Patton, e-mail message to the author, April 4, 2010.

experiences of the actors and artist in making the film. It is part filmed theatre piece and part documentation of the making of the film, a sort-of pseudo-rehearsal shot with a single Steadicam. Memory and self-determined identity and perception are important themes in this new work, as they were in *A Satisfied Mind* and *Chronicle of a Demise*. Patton's excerpts from Sinclair's



Untitled (Bergmannstrasse), 2005. Projected photograph on screen, C-print, 17 3/4 x 23 5/8 in. (45 x 60 cm)

book describe the involvement of "Dad" and "Bunny" in the oil industry, their relationship with the neighboring Watkins family, and Bunny's rejection of the oil industry and embrace of the Socialist movement. Patton was struck by how far removed we are from the history being described in Sinclair's novel, particularly its socialist agenda, yet how intimately related our current values and political realities are to those at the onset of the Great Depression. The film, exploring the reinterpretation of historical material as it has been

organized to fit our present self-identity, manifests her interest in appropriation as a function of memory. In *Oil*, she not only repurposes a historical text, Sinclair's *Oil!*, but refers to another contemporary production derived from it—Paul Thomas Anderson's *There Will Be Blood* (2007)—which the actors subtly reference in their performances.

Patton's solo exhibition at Blaffer brings together her three films—*A Satisfied Mind*, *Chronicle of a Demise*, and *Oil*. Layering images and narratives that continually double-back and intersect, these works together ask: Is there such a thing as objective observation, or is the construction of fictitious identities an essential part of perception? We are tantalized by the illusion of objectivity, but Patton reminds us repeatedly of its impossibility. As we write our own stories about what we see, what are we inventing and what are we omitting? Do our explanations and rationalizations conceal as much as they reveal?

Patton had addressed these questions in a series of photographic "studies" she made in 2005 at the same time she was working on *A Satisfied Mind*. The images in the photographs are banal—the tile wall at an airport, translucent curtains on a floor-to-ceiling window looking out onto the street, the striped wall of a subway station. Though the locations are places where people meet, conversations take place, and episodes of all sorts occur, the photographs record moments when nothing was happening. After some event did take place, Patton installed a portable screen at the site and projected onto it the image of her original photograph. She then photographed the projection, thus presenting "before" and "after" without giving any evidence of the intervening

occurrence. A new series of photographs that Patton is creating for the exhibition at Blaffer—showing a bright spectrum of colors refracted on the surfaces of pools of oil—abstracts this idea even further. The oil, created through a process of refinement, could be interpreted as a metaphor for memory, a repository of ephemeral images that constantly reinvents and redefines itself.

Consulting my own memories to write this account of Amy Patton's work, I sense my overlapping experiences of time. As when watching Patton's films, I feel that I am going in circuitous paths and am left wondering if what I've omitted in my story might be just as important as what I've recorded. Life is fraught with coincidences, and in many ways this book and exhibition at Blaffer and Patton's residency at the Mitchell Center have been an amalgamation of accidental, or perhaps intuitively motivated, intersections. What you read here and what you see in the galleries is a result not only of Amy Patton's hard work and distinctive vision, but also of her collaboration with Blaffer and Mitchell Center staff, contributors to the book, and makers of *Oil*.

We each offered our subjective takes on what we were experiencing and making, and we constructed and unraveled connections between us as we worked together to achieve our common goals. To me, this is the secret form of time that Patton's films disclose, one in which experience is created as much as it is passively taken in.

The title of this essay was inspired by Sergei Eisenstein's statement that "I dream of creating a book in the shape of a sphere," quoted by Anne Nesbet in her *Savage Junctures: Sergei Eisenstein and the Shape of Thinking* (London and New York: I. B. Tauris, 2007), 206.

