Reviewed by Ryan Pierson

Cartoon Vision: UPA Animation and Postwar Aesthetics

by Dan Bashara
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In a 1923 essay, critic Élie Faure argued that cinema's aesthetic and political potential lay in its status as a plastic art. Faure claimed that film did not arouse our deepest feelings through characters or plot; rather, he wrote, we are most moved by the patterns of tonality and volume that shift over time before our eyes. Faure called this quality of film "cineplastics": the expression of movement or change itself as a pictorial value.[1] By fixing visual movements into rhythmic shapes, cinema could offer its audience an impersonal collective spectacle. According to Faure, collective spectacles like Greek tragedy, religious ritual, and architecture—and now the cinema—have the power to help a population define itself, "developing in the crowd the sense of confidence, harmony, [and] cohesion."[2]

For modernist critic Annette Michelson, Faure's essay marks an apotheosis of what she calls the "radical aspiration": a dream that the movies could bring together the possibilities of formal experimentation and social utopianism.[3] According to Michelson, this radical aspiration was soon quelled with the consolidation of the film industry and the advent of sync sound. Revolutionary programs for film did crop up again after World War II, but these had to be carried out in fierce defiance of industry and popular taste.[4] Michelson's story of cinematic modernism will be familiar to

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1 Élie Faure, "The Art of Cineplastics," trans. Walter Pach, reprinted in *Screen Monographs* (New York: Arno Press and the New York Times, 1970), 1:9–45.
2 Faure, 1:44.
3 Annette Michelson, "Film and the Radical Aspiration," *Film Culture* 42 (1966): 36.
4 Michelson, 36.

film scholars. It upholds a now-standard modernist canon as running from the 1920s European avant-garde and the Soviet montage movement through the French New Wave (particularly Jean-Luc Godard) and the American avant-garde.

But what if cineplastics—not Faure's to-the-letter definition of modeling in time but the underlying cinematic dream of using pictorial values to organize a population—didn't really go away? What if it changed its form instead? What if the radical aspiration became *cartoony*? This is the question driving Dan Bashara's book *Cartoon Vision: UPA Animation and Postwar Aesthetics*. To be sure, linking animation to modernism is hardly a new gesture. In fact, it is probably *the* characteristic gesture of animation scholarship within film studies.[5] Bashara's innovation here is to connect the radical aspiration to a particular American cartoon studio, United Productions of America (UPA), under the aegis of a particular kind of modernism, the New Bauhaus school of postwar design, spearheaded by European émigrés György Kepes and László Moholy-Nagy.

UPA has a distinctive visual style. Its major traits are pretty well agreed upon by animation scholarship: simplified graphic forms, bold colors, an aggressive use of the two-dimensionality of the screen, and human characters (rather than animals). In other words, UPA cartoons liberally mix together elements of abstraction and representation. This mixture is easy to read as a kind of light formalism or kitsch. Bashara insists, though, that UPA's style is not reducible to a compromise between high modernist technique and mainstream sensibility. Rather, the principles that UPA took from the world of Kepes and Moholy-Nagy constitute their own specific modernist program, with its own aesthetic and political goals.

The chief goal of the Kepes and Moholy-Nagy program was to train citizens in a new way of seeing, one that was more in keeping with the modern world.[6] The task of the artist was to streamline a viewer's sense of vision by offering images that reduced forms to their essential qualities and reduced spaces to simple structures. UPA, Bashara argues, was as much an active participant in this modernist project as Charles and Ray Eames, Paul Rand, and other towering figures of postwar American design.

Scholars have long noted that UPA stylized its cartoons in a design-like way, but no one before Bashara has clarified UPA's relationship to postwar design with such depth or specificity. Crucial here is that Bashara takes figures in design culture, instead of the work of other animation studios, as his primary reference points. Consequently, about UPA, he writes mainly as a visual studies scholar rather than an animation historian. In so doing, he avoids the risk of reducing the UPA style to a checklist of easily identifiable features. To summarily list the major visual features of UPA cartoons—flatness, bold colors, human characters—does not really help us perform close formal analysis. Bashara is able to conduct such close analysis admirably by borrowing methods of description from design and

5   For examples, see Kristin Thompson, "Implications of the Cel Animation Technique," in *The Cinematic Apparatus*, ed. Teresa de Lauretis and Stephen Heath (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1980), 106–120; Esther Leslie, *Hollywood Flatlands: Animation, Critical Theory and the Avant-Garde* (London: Verso, 2002); Paul Wells, *Animation and America* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2002); J. P. Telotte, *Animating Space: From Mickey to WALL-E* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2010); Hannah Frank, *Frame by Frame: A Materialist Aesthetics of Animated Cartoons*, ed. Daniel Morgan (Oakland: University of California Press, 2019); and Ryan Pierson, *Figure and Force in Animation Aesthetics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019).
6   Dan Bashara, *Cartoon Vision: UPA Animation and Postwar Aesthetics* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2019), 12–15.

architecture. This approach even enables Bashara to clear up some critical misconceptions about the UPA style. For example, contrary to popular belief, the visuals of UPA films are not exactly "flat." While the films do use flat shapes and unmodulated colors, they also often use diminishing perspective. When these qualities are used together, they create effects of startling depth—effects that we cannot account for if we call UPA cartoons "flat."[7]

By taking seriously not just the visual qualities of design culture but its philosophy, Bashara is also able to avoid characterizing UPA as a simple act of resistance to Disney's cuddly realism. This is an especially tempting move for animation scholarship. It allows us to neatly transpose a story of high modernist development from the history of painting onto the history of animation.[8] This characterization is partly correct, in that UPA was started by former Disney employees in the wake of the 1941 animators' strike. But thinking of style as resistance ultimately risks dooming UPA films to irrelevance next to more canonically "radical" works by Harry Smith, Robert Breer, and Stan Brakhage. In comparison with these exemplars, any "resistance" by a cartoon studio cannot but be seen as already compromised—especially by one that made sponsored films for training and advertisement.[9]

The problem with that line of reasoning, of course, is that it judges one kind of modernism by the standards of another. It was never the point of midcentury design to be rebellious or autonomous. As Bashara argues, the point was to educate the public in a way of seeing that was more fully aligned with the forces of the modern world. This often meant working with those very forces: governments, advertising agencies, unions, museums, and so on. As Bashara takes pains to show, this tendency toward commissioned work was baked into UPA's mission from the beginning. This not only was a matter of the studio paying its bills—it made only sponsored films for several years before turning to the theatrical market—but also reflected a company ethos in which the animator was seen as a kind of public servant, improving the world through visual education.[10] As Bashara notes, however, this philosophy does not make UPA immune to critique.[11] After all, a utopian project of a more fully streamlined society is, by definition, a project of social engineering. When this utopian project, originally a socialist fantasy of central planning, met with the forces of late capitalism in the United States after World War II (as it did with UPA and design culture at large), the question of complicity became even more fraught.[12]

Bashara arranges his material essayistically, clustering studies of films around topics, concepts, and analogies. The first chapter argues for a stylistic homology between UPA and Precisionism, a movement of American painting in the 1910s and 1920s that worked in simplified representational forms and strong colors. Chapter 2 argues for a similar homology between UPA and postwar architecture, in their shared goals of producing movement and metamorphosis in the viewer (or inhabitant)

7 Bashara, 31–33.
8 Esther Leslie makes this move in *Hollywood Flatlands*, wherein UPA's "flatness" marks a revenge of turn-of-the-century avant-garde sensibility against Disney conservatism. See Leslie, *Hollywood Flatlands*, 289–300.
9 The American avant-garde did dismiss basically all of midcentury animation for precisely this reason: it was not modernist enough. This assessment was key to the dismissal of animation from the study of film. See Pierson, *Figure and Force*, 152–153.
10 Bashara, *Cartoon Vision*, 3.
11 Bashara most frequently characterizes UPA's brand of modernism as "rhetorical," drawing from Robert Genter, *Late Modernism: Art, Culture, and Politics in Cold War America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010).
12 Bashara, *Cartoon Vision*, 15–18.

by means of color and directional vectors. Chapter 3 links UPA to graphic design, arguing that communication was a problem shared by both fields and to be solved by what he calls, loosely following Freud, "condensation," or the "transforming [of] thoughts into visual images."[13]

This approach contains some risks, especially of redundancy; Bashara returns to a few key texts in every chapter, like the manifesto "Animation Learns a New Language" authored by UPA figures John Hubley and Zachary Schwartz. The reader sometimes gets a treadmill effect from this repetition, but the net gain across these three chapters is a satisfyingly wide scope of inquiry and a precise sense of the studio's visual style. We get close studies not only of animated films but also of paintings, buildings, and book covers. Bashara takes lessons from these other works to closely describe visual movements, spaces, and symbols in cartoons. The book's remarkable success lies in how well it leverages the former to bolster the latter. We learn how to look at things that don't move, then use that knowledge to learn how to look at cartoons that do move. These descriptions are the most rewarding parts of the book. Bashara has considerable gifts for fine-grained analysis and a keen ear for the rhythm of a sentence.

In other words, the book seeks to train us in new ways of looking at these films (not unlike how the films themselves sought to train viewers in new ways of looking at the world). This goal comes into clearest relief in the book's final chapter, which is not about cartoons at all. Instead, Bashara theorizes what he calls the "design gaze."[14] Modeled on Martin Lefebvre's landscape gaze, the design gaze is an aesthetic vocabulary and set of concerns that Bashara takes from the design elements of postwar visual culture (such as unmodulated colors and flat shapes) and applies to live-action American cinema of the midcentury.[15] This strategy allows for a new way to see cinematic images more generally. What Bashara ends up detailing is closest to mise-en-scène, but the qualities of a shot take on a different tenor when they are viewed as components of a designed image (rather than as things placed before an upright camera). Thus, Bashara describes instances from other categories of postwar film—musicals, American avant-garde cinema, and film noir—as if they were UPA cartoons. He notes how musical numbers from *The Band Wagon* (Vincente Minnelli, 1953) and *Singin' in the Rain* (Stanley Donen and Gene Kelly, 1952) compress three-dimensional space into two-dimensional color fields.[16] Similarly, he writes that even avant-garde films like Pat O'Neill's *7362* (1965–1967) and Shirley Clarke's *Bridges-Go-Round* (1958) occupy a middle ground between representation and abstraction.[17] Most daringly, he claims that the deep shadows and silhouetted figures in films like *D.O.A.* (Rudolph Maté, 1949) participate in visual culture's broader logic of dematerialization, turning bodies into streaks of shadow and shafts of light.[18] These new descriptions, Bashara argues, allow us to see midcentury film as being in conversation with the ubiquitous culture of "good design" and its imperatives of rhetorical modernism.

13 Bashara, 122.
14 Bashara, 168–175.
15 Martin Lefebvre, "Between Setting and Landscape in the Cinema," in *Landscape and Film* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 6–18.
16 Bashara, *Cartoon Vision*, 175–189.
17 Bashara, 192–196.
18 Bashara, 196–206.

How convincing will the reader find the design gaze as an analytic tool? This will depend on how compelling the reader finds the descriptions that result from its application and how fertile the reader finds the attendant connections from film to design culture. In my case, I found the descriptions thinner and less satisfying once the book moved to live-action film. After being so commandingly present in the previous chapters, Bashara's specificity in detailing what our eyes do when faced with particular movements or images starts to recede here. For example, he never spells out what happens to Gene Kelly's body when it dances before a field of color beyond noting its "contrast with flat backgrounds."[19] After the earlier descriptions in the book, which are revelatory precisely because they do not settle for a checklist of broadly "modern" characteristics, observations like this feel unfinished. As for the issue of the films' connections to design culture, I found myself wondering how I was supposed to take the notion that the visual style of film noir is inflected by the culture of good design. If postwar design thinking, as Bashara argues, is so fervently utopian, with its desire to simplify the human sensorium and make the world into a frictionless surface that is free of contingency, what happens when it is placed in films that are so riven with nonsensical dream logics, capricious characters, and fatalism? That I was even led to ask this question is promising. Putting such seemingly opposed sensibilities together, as Bashara does, is the beginning of a fertile account. But it is only a beginning, and we are not given much hint as to how the rest of the story might go.

Yet the underlying thrust of Bashara's gambit with the design gaze, and with the book more generally, pays off handsomely. With cinema's digital turn, film scholarship began to offer a flurry of theoretical speculation on the new nature of the moving image, and much of it was some variation on the question, *Is digital cinema more like analog photography or animation?* Missing from all this theory were sustained accounts of what "animation" looked like—especially different kinds of animation.[20] In keeping with much of the best recent work on animation, Bashara's turn to design culture offers a way out of this problem of overgeneralization.[21] He makes no strong ontological claims about the animated image. Instead, he offers with deceptive humility one sustained way of looking at a particular iteration of it. In the process, he points out the limitations of the concerns and analytic procedures that film studies has inherited as a discipline, mostly from literature and theater. What would film scholarship look like—what would it look *for*—if it kept design in mind?[22]

Bashara's work confirms how appropriate it is that Faure made animation a crucial part of cineplastics in 1923. Faure imagined a future of film in which the actor has disappeared from the screen altogether, to be replaced by an art of moving

19 Bashara, 188.
20 For examples, see Lev Manovich, *The Language of New Media* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001); Mary Ann Doane, "The Indexical and the Concept of Medium Specificity," *differences* 18, no. 1 (May 2007): 128–152; D. N. Rodowick, *The Virtual Life of Film* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007); and Dudley Andrew, *What Cinema Is! Bazin's Quest and Its Charge* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010).
21 For examples, see Thomas Lamarre, *The Anime Machine: A Media Theory of Animation* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009); Donald Crafton, *Shadow of a Mouse: Performance, Belief, and World-Making in Animation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013); and Frank, *Frame by Frame*.
22 Bashara's book forms part of an emerging trend in scholarship that is interested in this question. See Michael Cowan, *Walter Ruttmann and the Cinema of Multiplicity: Avant-Garde—Advertising—Modernity* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2014); and Julie A. Turnock, *Plastic Reality: Special Effects, Technology, and the Emergence of 1970s Blockbuster Aesthetics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015). Not coincidentally, these other works also engage with animation in a sustained way.

shapes and tonalities; hope for such a future, he writes, can be found in the technique of the animated cartoon.[23] Inasmuch as Bashara's work makes clear the debts of midcentury animation to the New Bauhaus school, it also hints that the intertwining histories of design and film, in their mutual desire to make a world with all the artificial perfection of an image, run much deeper. They are there, waiting to be written.

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23   Faure, "Art of Cineplastics," 1:42.