Reviewed by Dan Bashara

Happiness by Design: Modernism and Media in the Eames Era

"Do designers ever sleep?"[1] In *Happiness by Design: Modernism and Media in the Eames Era*, Justus Nieland highlights the tirelessness of Charles and Ray Eames, their commitment to design as a force for social transformation, and their conviction that work is play and play is happiness. But this isn't just a book about the Eameses; in invoking the "Eames era," Nieland conjures an ensemble of designers, filmmakers, theorists, artists, and other cultural figures who contributed to the development and the texture of the American midcentury. At the core of the invigoratingly dizzying array of ideas in this book—communication, transparency, democracy, techno-philia, organicism, and, yes, happiness—is film, and more specifically, film's role in the development of an interdisciplinary design discourse promising the good life. And we can't talk about any of these ideas, or any of these people, without talking about Charles and Ray Eames. Not for nothing does Nieland refer to the postwar power couple as "the happy protagonists of midcentury lifestyle media."[2]

Nieland has done mind-bogglingly exhaustive research into this moment, and the result is a dazzling intellectual history of a period marked

---

1   Justus Nieland, *Happiness by Design: Modernism and Media in the Eames Era* (Min-
      neapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2020), 66.
2   Nieland, 44.

by creative ferment and interdisciplinary collaboration. One of the book's greatest strengths is the way it situates the Eameses within a vast network of transdisciplinary figures; far more than merely fleshing out the history of the titular couple, Nieland conjures a widespread and intricately connected milieu. Reading these microhistories often feels like finding out two of your closest friends knew each other independently of you, long before you met them. Eero Saarinen, Billy Wilder, and Norbert Wiener appeared together in a public affairs TV segment devoted to the Eameses? Maya Deren hung around with László Moholy-Nagy? Jean Baudrillard joined environmental protestors to interrupt Walter Paepcke's design conference? Nieland's talent not just for finding connections between far-flung figures, but also for transporting the reader to the places where they connected, brings this deeply theoretical work of historiography to immediate, tangible life. Through these stories, *Happiness by Design* develops a divergent, design-oriented film theory "shaped by a modernist aesthetics and ideology of information that crossed a range of disciplines and institutional agendas."[3]

Part of Nieland's project is to challenge the dominant idea of modernism at midcentury as willfully difficult, obsessed with medium specificity, and devoted to the personal expression of the artist. He foregrounds a modernism running parallel to this old story, one that is in almost every way its opposite: transparent instead of obscure, televised instead of cloistered, promiscuous instead of pure. It is a modernism of toys and chairs, of serious ideas expressed in whimsical photographs. It is not a modernism of austere contemplation; it is a modernism of happiness. Yet in all this discussion of happiness and the good life, Nieland doesn't shy away from the Eameses' complicity in larger and more overtly ideological projects of nation-building and corporate hegemony. If happy modernism was envisioned for everyone, it was also swept up in burgeoning technocracy and corporate managerial logics that threaten to discipline as much as they aim to liberate. He follows these tensions into design studios, conferences, and schools, tracing the development of a film theory that is rigorously interdisciplinary and immersed in the language of design.

Chapter 1 is about chairs. But in exploring the Eameses' work in furniture, Nieland embraces the Eames ethos in his own scholarship: if you're talking about chairs, you're actually talking about *everything*. In his inventive readings of Eames furniture, as well as the films about that furniture, Nieland hits upon the core of the Eameses' worldview: they didn't care about things. They cared about the *variety* of things, the networks those things reached out to join, the permutations that arose when chairs and sofas met the people who sat in them. The chapter masterfully traces the web of connections that turned these chairs into communicative objects, part material and part media, or, as Nieland puts it, "another site of media convergence: chair, television, film."[4] "To talk of these designers," he writes, "is to talk of their chairs, which is to speak of their house, which is to say something of the things in it, which is to marvel at their curious assemblages and thus work to

3   Nieland, 292.
4   Nieland, 69.

make connections. To speak of the Eameses is to enact a cascading logic of interrelatedness and connectivity."[5]

In chapter 2, we see just how far that cascading logic runs. Moving beyond the Eameses' immediate production and circulation contexts, Nieland follows the couple into the brave new postwar world they were busily helping to invent. The cast of characters widens here—Buckminster Fuller and György Kepes loom large, George Nelson and Gene Youngblood leave their mark—and this increasing complexity is by design. Charting the "dizzying scalar movement between the domestic and the geopolitical," this chapter explores the direction of Eames-era modernism toward the question of global, ecological consciousness.[6] Nieland places the Eameses within an array of modernists who viewed media in utopian terms, seeking "the forms of belonging, community, and citizenship it might offer in proposing a human sensorium scaled to the world."[7]

Chapters 3 and 4 operate as a pair, examining the conference circuits of the postwar era where a new model of communication was collaboratively built. The annual International Design Conference in Aspen (IDCA) and the 1965 and 1967 Vision Conferences form the backbone of this history, in which a new ideal emerges as the basis of all realms of production: "Underpinning all of them was communication, that master category of the Cold War semiosphere."[8] The accounts of these conference proceedings are painstakingly detailed, forming an indispensable history of a movement and the milieu in which it coalesced. Nieland's ability to conjure vivid moments from these seminal gatherings of the who's who of the design world is breathtaking; if only every conference offered the rollicking energy of these accounts. Across these two chapters, the design conference takes on many guises: therapeutic session, interdisciplinary melting pot, corporate sellout, political protest, even a design interface in and of itself. Linking them all is the idea of "the technique of the conference as a mode of knowledge work and an instrument of organization at the dawn of the information age."[9] But most compelling is Nieland's argument that these conferences, occurring before film studies had solidified as a discipline, served as a crucible where a competing model of film studies—pedagogical, genre-agnostic, mostly non-theatrical—was taking shape. The final chapters of the book explore the possibilities of this parallel discipline.

Chapter 5 balances two modernisms: the medium-specific modernism of the fledgling Society of Cinematologists (now SCMS), which was establishing a pure identity by severing ties with the rest of the humanities, and the transdisciplinary modernism of the IDCA, which Nieland calls "designer film theory."[10] In this persuasive account, designer film theory was there at the birth of film studies proper, and its contributions have until now been overlooked. Kepes and Moholy-Nagy appear as shepherds of an interdisciplinary

5   Nieland, 78.
6   Nieland, 96.
7   Nieland, 103.
8   Nieland, 170.
9   Nieland, 195.
10 Nieland, 246.

moving-image program at the Institute of Design, but it is a revisionist reading of Deren's writing that forms the chapter's most surprising and illuminating hook. Deren emerges as a filmmaker steeped in design thinking and a regular collaborator with the luminaries of the postwar design scene: Kepes and Moholy-Nagy, to be sure, but also Alvin Lustig and Rudolf Arnheim. The recuperation of this missing moment in midcentury film theory is complex and fascinating; Nieland traces the broad theoretical connections between useful cinema, experimental film, democratic uplift, and anti-fascism while also zooming in to capture specific faces in the crowd, and the result should change the way we think about our own disciplinary history.

Chapter 6 and the coda grapple with the ambivalence of designer film theory and its designs on happiness, crystallizing the contradictions and paradoxes of the previous five chapters. Is art still art when its methods are quantifiable? Is modernism's job to frustrate by capturing the incommunicable or to communicate by making everything transparent? What does it mean to think ecologically without considering the ecology of the planet and its resources? Can designers design for democracy while answering to corporations and governments? Is technophilia really the answer to sensory overwhelm caused by a rapidly technologizing world? What if happiness is merely surrender? At the end of the story, as at the beginning, are the Eameses, for whom "the expansive network of liberal choice and decisionism involves individuals *and* collectives *and* corporate entities equally."[11] Their question, which is also the question at the center of the midcentury American design scene, is a question about how to live in an increasingly mediated and technologized world. Nieland gracefully allows the paradoxes to remain: "There is no position outside of this material field of mediation. One can only aim to be happy within it."[12]

Dan Bashara is an instructor of cinema and media studies at DePaul University. He is the author of *Cartoon Vision: UPA Animation and Postwar Aesthetics* (University of California Press, 2019).

11 Nieland, 346.
12 Nieland, 279.