

# Justus Nieland, *Happiness by Design: Modernism and Media in the Eames Era*

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“Mid-century modernism” is a rather capacious term to describe a design aesthetic applied to a wide range of household objects, graphic design arts, and architecture from the late 1940s through to the mid-1960s. The visual markers of this moment in design history continue to be delineated in interior design magazines, Pinterest boards, and eBay listings today. In its own time, the style was often rebuked as “de-fanged and banalized” modernism by its critics (Nieland 2020, 8). This middlebrow modernism was seen to infiltrate everyday life through the American discourse of “good design for everyday objects,” a push to improve public taste through consumption that was found in all manner of media including motion pictures, print advertising, and exhibitions at museums and fairs. The underlying message of this good design rhetoric held that consuming modern design would enable one to attain the happiness that modern capitalism affords. Thus, Justus Nieland explains, “[t]he mid-century has been often viewed as the moment of modernism’s institutionalization and the domestication of its utopian demands on the senses” (1). In his latest book, *Happiness by Design*, Nieland traces a different narrative of mid-century modernism, one which highlights a series of vital projects en-

trenched in a pedagogical impulse.

Extensively researched and richly illustrated, *Happiness by Design* is a fascinating and inventive approach to the transformations of modernism at mid-century. Rather than focus on the established role that discourses on good design played in the transformations of the American domestic sphere, Nieland turns attention on the creative and broadly interdisciplinary projects of designers. By the mid-twentieth century, design had become a profession imbued with new social and cultural prestige. In the United States, designers like the Eameses, Eero Saarinen, Morton and Millie Goldscholl, Buckminster Fuller, and others repositioned themselves as not only designers but as *managers* of a “epochal change” in an era marked not only by the birth of the Information Age but the growth, at large, of a managerial society. As such, Nieland situates his study at an intersection of modernism and media studies. The interdisciplinary of his approach results in a lively narrative woven through unlikely sites and understudied objects. These were sites, Nieland explains, of creative production blending art practice and technoscience as designers grappled with the demands of the Cold War world.<sup>1</sup> Nieland shows how designers refashioned themselves in this period

as cultural administrators of a sort, galvanized by the possibilities art and design held for the communication of ideas. Beset by a world of technological saturation, these designers sought to contend with the increased media and data flows of the early Information Age. Nieland surveys the varied sites at which designers experimented with modernism's "materialities of communication" including film, material arts, furniture design, and visual art conferences (Nieland 2020, 11).

Design powerhouse couple Ray and Charles Eames are the central figures in this period of exuberant design experimentation and collaboration, hence Nieland's use of the term "Eames-era"—the book is less a discussion of the Eameses' work in the period alone as it is more holistically a survey of media experimentation between the years 1950–1970, especially the use of film technologies as what he calls the "defining media" of postwar happiness (Nieland 2020, 2). The mid-twentieth century saw a kind of communications boom, in which the "scientifizing" of communication, a project begun by social scientists in the 1930s, reached a peak.<sup>2</sup> The idea of a happiness "by design," Nieland explains, asserts the idea that a subjective well-being was attainable within a careful system of "necessary limits or rational constraints" (31). This happiness, then, was one carefully engineered by planners and experts, evidence of the very technocratic ambitions at the core of this managerial project (31). It was within this paradigm of a technical and often technocratic agenda of postwar, liberal well-being, then, that designers invented new uses for film and moving image media. Future-oriented

in its scope and operation, this form of the American pursuit of happiness was both nebulous and practical: designers undertook to solve problems through design.

Modernism, by the 1950s, had become refined into so-called "high modernism," within the postwar demands for communicative efficiency, transparency, and human expression. Characterized by an unwavering belief in the function of technology to re-order society, for critics like Herbert Marcuse and Meyer Schapiro, this integration of a new modernism, mired in the happy face of the domestic everyday, resulted in an institutionalized modernism in what Nieland terms their "death-by-communication" thesis (11). Nieland offers up this view by way of staking his own claim. He argues that such a view "downplays the role of modernism in the midcentury administration of culture" which was taking place in many arenas including philanthropic institutions, universities, and at the governmental level (11). Thus he acknowledges modernism's entanglement with managerial projects in this period, but instead of condemning it suggests this is a useful way to consider modernism at this period through pedagogical impulses and the quest for "happiness" (a quintessentially American pursuit) rather than through a perhaps now stale genealogy of modern design aesthetics.

This focus elucidates Nieland's argument for the interdisciplinary of modernist design where the designer's "communicative zeal" makes clear a commitment to the idea of using mediatic design as a form of communication and problem solving (Nieland 2020, 6). The humanistic angle of this pursuit is,

Nieland explains, a desire on the part of designers to rectify a splintered field of specialized knowledges—an impediment to the ideal of free-flowing discussion and knowledge sharing in the pursuit of communication. Moreover, though, it sought to reposition the human agent as “a response to the scale and power of postwar technics” and the pressure those brought upon the human agent in the period (22). For the Eameses, and their contemporaries, communication was the vital stuff of social organization, and “happy-integration [joining] human society and nonhuman processes” (21). As such a central attribute of these projects is the “expansive liberal optimism” which runs throughout a multimedia pedagogy whose spaces extend from the domestic to the geopolitical (96).

Yet despite the grand ambitions and scalar breadth of these projects, the form of modernism Nieland attributes to the Eames-era is “human-sized”—this is user-friendly, humanistic modernism which bridged mid-century media ecology with evolving notions of lifestyle in the postwar era (7). To be sure, there was a pervasive humanist sentiment in mid-century thought, in part a reaction to the shadow of fascism and destruction of the Second World War. Yet Nieland’s assertion represents a departure from previous accounts that typically frame the high modernist period as one of broad-scope technocratic projects which did not necessarily attend to the messy realities of human existence. One might consider, for instance, the austere building projects exemplified by Bauhaus architecture and the discourse of houses as “machines for living.”<sup>3</sup> These and other projects controlled by sys-

tems of central planning and geared toward human progress through scientific or technological innovation have been critiqued for their blanket-solution approach to problem-solving in the sociocultural arena.<sup>4</sup>

Yet, Nieland wants to approach the work of these Eames-era designers with a specific focus on their human-driven pursuit of happiness. Nieland sets out to counter an argument about the Eameses design projects as so-called “bad objects,” artefacts of a time in which the idea of happiness was tied to a project to normalize politically motivated discourses of the “Good Life” in the American century. This project, examined elsewhere by Castillo (2010), and Turner (2013) carries with it a cultural-imperialist dimension within what Castillo refers to as a “soft-power” paradigm (2010).<sup>5</sup> Thus, Nieland explains, Cold War pedagogy enacted the age-old narrative of the pleasures of consumption and the promise of happiness which it promised (Nieland 2020, 14).<sup>6</sup> Yet while acknowledging the accuracy of this explanation, Nieland suggests that “Eamesian happiness” is rather a model of production, a process of working with objects and images which is more rightly a form of “midcentury media pedagogy rather than the reified promise of any good” (15). Thus, rather than offering users the end product of good happy living, Nieland wants to suggest the Eamesian model instructed the constant process of making of that happiness, of solving problems which would impede that happiness, a constant pursuit rather than a static end-goal.

The first two chapters focus on Ray and Charles Eames’s projects

and experiments with film (especially their “furniture films”), their furniture designs for Herman Miller, and pedagogical collaborations. Nieland suggests the films used furniture to allegorize the conditions of the happy postwar life, “its new media environments and the forms of humane, technophilic production” that it seemed to call for (Nieland 2020, 39). The Eameses furniture, especially their chair designs, were touted on their release for their functional organic design. The designs featured moulded plywood, fiberglass, aluminium, and steel, highly engineered and traditionally *industrial* products now moulded for comfort of the human body.<sup>7</sup> For Nieland, this is perhaps the most powerful allegory of a humanist modernism: modern techniques of manufacture are literally moulded to the human body for comfort, style, and aesthetic pleasure. In chapter two, “The Scale is the World,” Nieland explores how the Eameses used moving images into a “Cold War pedagogy of the senses,” guiding citizens in a new era of superabundant information (98). Opening up the cinematic medium to more flexible configurations, like multimedia display, Nieland’s narrative here aligns with recent focus on cinema’s usefulness in the classroom.<sup>8</sup> The mid-century film pedagogical experiments were but one facet of the designer’s enthusiastic deployment of media practice for a “sensory utopianism” aimed at global communication (102).

The middle chapters broaden the scope, examining moving images and communication at international design conferences like the International Design Conferences in Aspen (IDCA)

and the Vision Conferences. This is Nieland’s most unique contribution in the book, and he argues that they constituted techniques of happiness in their own right (Nieland 2020, 28). International, interdisciplinary conferences were a form of communication media, Nieland argues, which themselves became the object of theoretical investigation, what he calls “mid-century conference theory” (28). The experts that congregated at them framed their participation in them as “a way of managing the pace and global scale of change” thereby reckoning with postwar happiness as “a volatile, unpredictable landscape of human needs and satisfactions” (29). Films made at the IDCA serve as examples of corporate *Bildung*, or becoming, *cinema verité* forms of utility cinema capturing the proceedings of the conferences. These factor into Nieland’s discussion of the IDCA and Vision conferences as components in a broader collection of knowledge, discourse, and material practices which emerged in this period to confront the challenges of the postwar world (151). For Nieland these were crucial spaces of knowledge production for designers and social commentators alike: the spaces in which techniques and technologies of management would be hashed out (152). Importantly, the range of *experts* present at the conferences enabled a cross-fertilization of knowledge. Rather than elitist and closed-off realms of high-minded academic debate, Nieland characterizes the conferences as humanist in focus, and while perhaps utopian in many respects, nevertheless an integral part of a bold midcentury “world-to-be-engineered”—a testament to the exuberant and forward-thinking spirit of the

period (161).

In the final chapters, Nieland discusses the idea of a “designer film theory,” a concept which emphasizes practice and process. Film and a nascent film theory were sussed out at the conferences, as Nieland suggests, as another form of knowledge work. Here he suggests that the beginnings of film theory in the nascent field of film studies coincided and productively overlapped with the media-crossing experiments of designers at mid-century. This suggestion is provocative, since the formation of film theory is in itself a quest for a medial purity—to delineate the specifics of the film medium as distinct from those of other media. The film-based experimentation of designers at this time were, Nieland explains, “fomented as overt challenges to specialization and fragmentation of knowledge regimes” (Nieland 2020, 247). Thus, echoing a range of revisionist film histories of recent years, Nieland sets out to seek a deeper history of cinema, attendant to its multiple genealogies and variations (248). In these final chapters, Nieland returns to the 1940s and an emphasis on pedagogy and “therapeutic media” as exemplified by Moholy-Nagy and the New Bauhaus.

The link between these case studies is their engagement with a humanist discourse in a world beset by technology saturation that needed management. Nieland calls to understand the designer in the midst of all these as an interdisciplinary artist, creative, and social commentator. Nieland shows how designers worked *across* disciplines at this period, forming collaborative partnerships with government, industry, higher educa-

tion, and the arts. *Happiness by Design* perhaps best evinces a certain mode of academic inquiry at the margins. Weaving techniques of classic film studies textual analysis with extensive primary research, archival documents, and perhaps the most unusual, analysis of conference proceedings, Nieland constructs a robust picture of an intellectual history long overshadowed by its tangible objects, what Lynn Spigel has called the “cheery products” of mid-century modern design.<sup>9</sup>

At a dense 348 pages, Nieland certainly succeeds in his goal to complicate and add nuance to scholarly understandings of mid-century modernism. The text sometimes suffers because of this density, as Nieland relies on such a broad range of texts that to follow up with each reference at times makes following through the argument difficult for the average reader. Much of this is a result of the sheer variety of sources examined here, including the Eameses’ own extensive back catalogue of short films, conference proceedings, and lecture series. It might be considered a highly specialized text, but is one that lays Nieland’s claim to this field of research.

#### Notes

1. Mary Ann Staniszewski provides an excellent history of the Museum of Modern Arts’s “Good Design” exhibition series, from which this discourse emerged. See also Pulos (1988) and Hayworth (1998).
2. See Turner (2013).
3. The failure of the Pruitt-Igoe house development, a project of urban renewal in the form of modernist

apartment blocks, has been widely cited as they key example of the failure of the modernist International Style of architecture to attend to the real-world beyond its designers' society-changing aspirations. See Jencks 1984.

4. See for instance Tanya Li, "Beyond the 'State' and Failed Schemes"; and James Scott, *Seeing like a State* (1998). See also Herbert Marcuse's contemporaneous critique *One Dimensional Man* (1964).
5. The period saw the fulmination of new sites and new techniques of media pedagogy, for instance on television—a medium whose final format as a commercial form hadn't yet been solidified in the mid-1950s. See, for instance, Anna McCarthy, *The Citizen Machine* (2010).
6. See Ahmed (2010).
7. Charles Eames developed techniques for the manufacture of moulded plywood and in 1942, began work for the United States Navy, producing form-fitting wooden splints for wounded servicemen.
8. Dana Polan, *Scenes of Instruction* (2007); Devin Orgeron and Marsha Orgeron, and Dan Streible, eds., *Learning with the Lights Off* (2012); Charles Acland and Haidee Wasson, eds., *Useful Cinema*; Lee Grieveson and Haidee Wasson, eds. *Inventing Film Studies* (2008).
9. From book cover.

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