Multimedia

Jason Cohn and Bill Jersey, directors
Eames: The Architect and the Painter

In the face of this perplexing film, perhaps it is best to begin with a syllogism: scholarship is made with documents, yet documentary is not scholarship. The film or video documentary is inarguably the dominant genre of mass-media facticity today. From swift boats to supersizing, the documentary performs two key functions in contemporary Western society. First, it animates an archive through filmic technique, allowing an archive to circulate discursively in the form of entertainment; second, it provides a reductivist narrative that has become a primary instrument of contemporary politics. There is a logic of substitution at work in the documentary—documents for ideas, aphorisms and anecdote for history. Yet the documentary—as anyone who has sat through a Ken Burns film knows after they’ve seen the camera slowly panning over the same photograph for the fifth time—also substitutes the quick for the dead. Everything must be set in motion.

The very best practitioners of the genre of documentary film are keenly aware of its fundamental character as polemic. Indeed, what makes them the best is the fact that they make their self-awareness the very edge of documentary’s capacity for transforming statements of fact into statements of judgment can the filmmaker begin to search for techniques to suspend temporarily this tendency and call the very idea of facticity into question—such as Errol Morris’s use of the Interrotron, to such uncanny effect.1

So the problems with the luscious, slick, and obviously loving film Eames: The Architect and the Painter do not proceed from its failure to provide an adequately scholarly account of the work of the Office of Charles and Ray Eames. Indeed, in refusing most such pretensions, it finds itself in ample (if not necessarily good) company. There is, in fact, almost no scholarship on these titans of mid-twentieth-century American design. I can count on one hand the number of substantive entries in the literature.2 In lieu of critical histories of their crucially important practice, there is instead a massive catalog of near-hagiographies.3

It would be a simple matter to catalog the litany of inaccurate or misleading statements in the film. There are some unbelievable clunkers (not helped by the fact that many are uttered by the film’s narrator, the actor and faux academic James Franco), such as the claim that it was the 1958 USIA exhibit in Moscow that made them into “communicators.” Really? Not. A Communications Primer, popularizing Shannon and Weaver’s communications theory five years earlier? Not their sustained collaborations with figures such as Reyner Banham, Alexander Girard, George Nelson, Eliot Noyes, Paul Rand, and a small army of scientists hailimg from every corner of the military-industrial-academic complex? And what was being communicated? To whom? But such a catalog as this would be mere pedantry. The main thing is that the film manages to get almost everything about the Eameses backward.

This backwardness happens for a very precise reason, which is that the filmmakers are attempting to emulate the Eames aesthetic without an understanding of the Eames ethic. All of the clutter and whimsy of the Eameses is right there on the screen. All of the rapid cuts, hypertight focus, and animation, too—even photographs of original drawings are made to dance and draw themselves. To the lay eye, all of this is surely marvelous. Look, the film seems to say, since the film looks like the Eameses, it must surely capture the truth about the Eameses!

But this animation runs the work backward: In re-presenting the Eameses’ film The Information Machine: Creative Man and the Data Processor (IBM, 1957), the documentary recuts the film and shows portions of it in reverse order. In its rush to reanimate the Eameses, the film destroys its subject matter and closes off any possibility of insight into the work’s technique, content, and effects.

But why have the Eameses and their work remained so impervious to scholarship? Given the incessant flow of Eames imagery on television screens and in print, it is certainly not the inaccessibility of the archives. One might be tempted to blame the exhibition industry, which has a serious financial stake in upholding the value of the Eames office’s work. One sequence in the film, with commentary by Richard Wright, shows Eames furniture at auction, with dollar amounts popping into view as dealers and curators and auctioneers vie with one another for their livelihoods. This is a redundant message: the work is of value. Yet any threat to this value is nonexistent.4

But I suspect that the true structural impediment to meaningful scholarship on the Eames office is that we don’t seem to want to know how it worked. The
of communication, and moreover as a mode of instruction. The Eames office’s work was expressly pedagogical, and even propagandistic, but it successfully concealed this aim through the use of the circus ethic and aesthetic. This was what made the office so appealing to states and multinational corporations concerned with burnishing their image. The Eames office produced—with exceptional rigor and technical acumen—what it called “heuristic environments,” in which the pupil is immersed in a world of overwhelming visual and spatial complexity, producing the illusion in the pupil that (s)he can explore that environment freely even as every move is overdetermined by the logic of the closed system. Charles Eames called this a “trick,” and it’s an old trick. Plato and Aristotle used it, and they learned it from Socrates.

For all of the rhetorical emphasis that the Eameses placed upon clarity and simplicity, the true aim of their designs is to suspend disbelief through complexity. In other words, the Eameses naturalized everything they touched. The genuine wonder that we experience in an encounter with their work is produced precisely by forestalling a concrete understanding of the message embedded in the work. This is perhaps clearest in their most famous film, *Powers of Ten* (1968), which seems to provide a string of profound insights into the scale of the universe right up to the very end, when instead it informs us that such things are “beyond the limit of our understanding.” The world of Charles and Ray Eames is one in which everything is simultaneously natural and magical, rational and irrational, under and out of control.

These core ideas saturated the work of the office. One can still hear echoes of Charles Eames’s condescending attitude ventriloquized by his former employees in the film, meant to dispel the idea that Charles and Ray Eames exploited their employees and stole credit for their designs: “if you are not stupid,” one argues, you wouldn’t mind having your labor exploited by such a master as Charles. That’s just the kind of Freudian slip that makes something like *Eames* truly worth watching. The Eames office supposed that you were stupid, and that it was smart; pay no attention to the Wizard of Oz pulling levers behind the curtain.

The Office of Charles and Ray Eames, far from being sullied by insight into its flawed characters, rigorous if unsettling theoretical outlook, and exploitation of multimedia techniques, is made richer and more wondrous by a fuller understanding of its complex work.

**John Harwood**

Oberlin College

**Notes**

1. This is, in fact, the entire point of Morris’s documentaries, the most pointed of which is his *The Fog of War: Eleven Lessons from the Life of Robert S. McNamara* (2003).


4. For instance, Pablo Picasso and Vincent van Gogh have survived quite a lot of scholarship, even scandal, and buyers and sellers of their works have seen record prices even in a depressed international economy. See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_most_expensive_paintings (accessed 31 March 2012).

5. For Charles Eames’s most provocative public statements on this matter, see *Qu’est-ce que le design?* (Paris: Louvre, 1969); Eames’s statements were in response to a questionnaire, which is republished in English in Neuhart et al., *Eames Design*, 4–5. Also useful for understanding Charles Eames’s theoretical outlook is the special issue on the Eameses by *Architectural Design* 36 (Sept. 1966), 432–71.