

ARTFORUM

The Now Futurism and the Then Zeitgeist

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J. Hoberman on Mike Kuchar's *Sins of the Fleshapoids* (1965)

Some artists see an infinite number of movies. . . .

—Robert Smithson, "Entropy and the New Monuments," *Artforum*, June 1966

THE ATOMIC WAR of October 1962 had been averted. There was a heady moment—presaged by the New York World's Fair that opened in the spring of 1964 and heralded by the appearance of Roy Lichtenstein's drawing *Great Rings of Saturn!!* on the cover of *Art in America* that April: Pop Art merged with Science Fiction, and the Future was Now.

This was not necessarily perceived as a Bad Thing. The celluloid harbinger of the Now Futurism was Michelangelo Antonioni's *Red Desert*. "My intention was to translate the poetry of [the industrial] world, in which even factories can be beautiful," Antonioni said of his first color movie—a chic, gorgeous, supremely alienated evocation of poison smog and toxic waste as filtered through Monica Vitti's ontological hysteria.

Red Desert won the Golden Lion at the Venice Film Festival in September 1964. Interviewing Antonioni for *Cahiers du Cinéma*, Jean-Luc Godard (who was particularly intrigued by the Italian director's research into cybernetics) wondered whether the contemporary world had altered his aesthetic. "Pop art is proof that we are looking for something new," Antonioni told him, hardly unaware that the Venice Biennale only just concluded had been dubbed "the Biennale of Pop art," attacked by the Vatican press and *Pravda* alike. "Pop art should not be underestimated," the director continued. "It's an 'ironic' movement, and a conscious irony is extremely important." In that sense, *Red Desert* was, at least for Antonioni, a hopeful movie. Echoing the Futurists of 1909, he maintained that, seen as "lines and curves," a factory chimney might be preferable to a grove of trees.

Antonioni was articulating something that Americans already understood. Technology had subsumed nature and repackaged it as a theme park or consumer commodity. General Motors' Futurama II, the most expensive and popular World's Fair pavilion, gave visitors a trip to a benign, macroengineered 1984 of total automation, undersea vacations, and moon trips—a universal, "more machined environment," as a writer for *Industrial Design* put it. The Futurama provided Andy Warhol with his most vivid memory of the fair (which had commissioned a mural from him, as it had from Robert Indiana, Lichtenstein, and James Rosenquist, and then, because Warhol's contribution represented the FBI's thirteen "most want-

ed” men, painted over it). “Sitting in a car with the sound coming from speakers behind me,” the artist recalled, “I got the same sensation I always got when I gave an interview—that the words weren’t coming out of me, that they were coming from someplace else, someplace behind me.”

Warhol’s experience of alienated automation notwithstanding, we might date the Now Futurism to the day in February 1965 that *Red Desert* had its US premiere at a posh Upper East Side venue, or to two weeks later, when, under the rubric “The Responsive Eye,” the Museum of Modern Art in New York endorsed Pop’s putative successor, Op, with an extensive survey of optical-illusion-based painting—both cited as happening events in the opening sentence of the *New York Times Magazine*’s March 21 zeitgeist piece “Not Good Taste, Not Bad Taste—It’s ‘Camp.’” Or perhaps the moment arrived that April when the Leo Castelli Gallery unveiled Rosenquist’s F-111, 1964–65, the monumental mural (tasteless triumphalism or deadpan critique?) that the onetime billboard painter wrapped around the gallery’s four walls. Certainly, the Now Futurism was official that September, when the Third New York Film Festival opened with Godard’s *Alphaville*, blurbled in the program notes as the “first successful incursion of pop art into the cinema.”

Where Rosenquist turned a slightly larger-than-life-size image of a jet bomber into an airbrushed field for tire treads, lightbulbs, a cake, a plate of canned spaghetti, a mushroom cloud, a scuba diver, and a smiling child beneath a hair dryer, Godard extrapolated the ready-made cinema icon Lemmy Caution (played here, as in a long-running series of French detective flicks, by American actor Eddie Constantine) into a future populated by comic-book characters. An assemblage of pop-culture artifacts, *Alphaville* was shot like a documentary on high-speed black-and-white film with available light; it unfolded almost entirely at night in an assortment of “new” Paris locations, including hotel lobbies, office buildings, shopping plazas, and the four-lane *périphérique* that encircled the city. “We are already living in the future,” Godard had told the press.

Alphaville was neorealist sci-fi, or, as Andrew Sarris would later describe it, “science fiction without special effects.” Cinema itself was the special effect. Godard represented everyday objects as futuristic gadgets. A Wurlitzer jukebox was a surveillance device, a Zippo lighter a secret radio transmitter; Alpha 60 (the computer that controlled the city of Alphaville) was, per the filmmaker, “a little three-dollar Philips fan, lit from below,” while the computer’s croaking voice was supplied by a man with a prosthetic larynx.

But really, the Now Future arrived in late ’64, when Castelli showed Andy Warhol’s “Flower Paintings” and David Bourdon began his *Village Voice* review of the show with a lengthy account of Wesley Barry’s *Creation of the Humanoids*, a sci-fi cheapster nearly as color-coded as *Red Desert* and more impoverished than *Alphaville* that hadn’t even been reviewed in the *New York Times*:

In “Creation of the Humanoids,” the survivors of World War III solve their labor shortage by creating humanoid robots. These “clickers” are blue, hairless, and often dangerously good-looking. Narcissistic women fall into programmed “rapport” with their humanoids. The big problem comes when the R-70s steal other robots off the assembly line and further humanize them into R-96s, which lack only four points to be human. The R-96s are sent out to infiltrate human society. The denouement comes when the heroine and the hero (a militant anti-humanoid who goes around throwing bombs at uppity “clickers”) discover themselves to be machines. This is the happy ending of what Andy Warhol calls the best movie he has ever seen.

And thus Barry’s movie became a Warhol film.

Sins of the Fleshapoids *is my most movie movie.*
It is a monument assembled to glorify Hollywood
and the "star" image that people can radiate.
 —Mike Kuchar, 1965

AN ENIGMATIC PIECE OF WORK that bears a 1960 copyright but officially opened in Los Angeles during the summer of 1962 and seems to have circulated for several years at the bottom of various double bills, *The Creation of the Humanoids* was directed by a former child star of silent pictures from a script by Jay Simms, who soon after wrote the more hysterical postapocalyptic American International thriller *Panic in Year Zero!* (1962).

The Creation of the Humanoids was entirely devoid of exteriors and, for the most part, action. The set was thrillingly barren, partaking of a style that might be termed Moldy Danish Modern. As Robert Smithson wrote of the new shopping malls, "the lugubrious complexity of these interiors has brought to art a new consciousness of the vapid and the dull." *The Creation of the Humanoids* was shot by a distinguished cinematographer, Hal Mohr, but the camera seldom moved. Rather, it considered performances that were at once utterly perfunctory and weirdly bursting with conviction, underscored by a looped, wailing sound track that suggested a soprano's impression of a theremin.

Barry's opening montage of mushroom clouds and persistent analogizing of the Order of Flesh and Blood's vigilante hostility toward all clickers (particularly in matters of "rapport") with racial hostility and the struggle for civil rights imbued *The Creation of the Humanoids* with a measure of social criticism; yet, scarcely more than a series of conversations, the movie offered satire without affect. The clickers were smug enough to be denizens of the Factory ("Don't put me on," one deadpans), and the dialogue was often hilarious. "I've given you a negative feeling—I must apologize. . . . Shall I turn myself off?" a gallant clicker asks his human mistress; the anti-clicker threat "I'll have your memory pulled so fast you'll never forget it" is worthy of Sam Fuller. A social call is paid at 3 AM ("I really just came by to apologize for being so late") in a picture that might have been made to be seen at that hour on TV.

The inept, mechanical quality of the movie's meditation on the quality of robot and human love is hardly inappropriate to its subject and almost poignant in its earnest irony. In the winter of 1964–65, even before *The Creation of the Humanoids* was listed, along with feather boas and Warhol's *Sleep* (1963), in a random list of things the *New York Times Magazine* deemed as "generally agreed" examples of "Pure Camp," Mike Kuchar—a twenty-two-year-old photo retoucher living in the Bronx—conceived his own 16-mm version of Warhol's favorite movie.

An amateur effort starring the filmmaker's friends and shot, without a script, mainly on weekday nights in various Bronx and Brooklyn apartments, *Sins of the Fleshapoids* (1965) has the effect of making *The Creation of the Humanoids* seem as monumental as a Cecil B. DeMille superproduction and itself seem merely the idea for one. Like Kenneth Anger's *Scorpio Rising* (1964), *Fleshapoids* has the look of a home movie, having been shot on the amateur reversal stock Kodachrome II and all the more richly saturated for having been printed on Kodachrome as well; no less than Antonioni's in *Red Desert*, Kuchar's "specific aim," the filmmaker maintained, was "to bombard and engulf the screen with vivid and voluptuous colors."

Set "a million years in the future" and chronicling the conflict between indolent humans and their robot "fleshapoid" slaves, Kuchar's epic is in essence a silent movie with a tremulous voice-over narration (supplied by Bob Cowan) and a more or less continuous montage of movie music (also compiled by Cowan and including, among many other things, snippets from Bernard Herrmann's score for *The 7th*

Voyage of Sinbad [1958]). The action is punctuated with strategic sound effects and occasional superimposed speech balloons, the movie directed as a silent movie would have been. “Intensive rehearsing was not necessary,” Kuchar recalled in an early interview. “In fact, sometimes what I did was to yell out directions of what the actors should do while the camera was on and the film was rolling.” Decor is all. *Fleshapoids*’ true ancestor is *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*.

Kuchar’s vision of a fully machined environment was primitive yet au courant. In the recent tradition of John Cassavetes’s *Shadows* (1959), another movie embarked on without a scenario or an ending, Kuchar assembled his narrative from scenes of people swanning about or striking poses. Where Cassavetes used eager acting students, Kuchar employed exhibitionist friends and their friends in an atmosphere of friendly fooling around: “Love is in the air, not only for the humans, but for the Robots too.” Eventually, the film coalesces into a narrative contrasting the decadent humans—the sneering Prince Gianbeno (George Kuchar); his unfaithful consort, Princess Vivianna (Donna Kerness); and her equally voluptuous, if less expressive, lover Ernie (Julius Mittelman)—with a pair of pure-hearted fleshapoids, Xar (Cowan) and Melenka (Maren Thomas), who have sex through the exchange of electrical charges (represented by scratches on the film emulsion) rather than of bodily fluids.

Like *Alphaville*, *Fleshapoids* repurposes ordinary objects, but Kuchar’s substitutions are more pragmatic than programmatic—Christmas-tree ornaments augmenting Vivianna’s jewels, a light meter doubling as Melenka’s internal-control mechanism. The sole instances of sci-fi modernism are supplied by Cowan’s herky-jerky constructivist moves, suggesting those of the Martians in the 1924 Soviet space opera *Aelita*, and his headgear, which appears to be a fascist military helmet.

Just as the fleshapoids struggled for their right to an erotic life, so the Kuchar brothers’ earlier 8-mm movies had asserted every American’s right to be a public spectacle. There are no bad performances; everyone has the opportunity to live in a garish Hollywood melodrama. Their characters’ amorous adventures are imbued with cheesy glamour. (*Fleshapoids*’ copious seminudity, play of textures, use of turbans and scarves, and omnisexual display recall Jack Smith’s *Flaming Creatures* [1963].) In a similarly democratic spirit, Mike Kuchar coaxes Egyptian-Greco-Roman motifs out of lower-middle-class furnishings—leopard-skin throws, bowls of wax fruit, fat candles, plaster busts, plastic goblets, giant urn-shaped planters. The characters are garlanded with artificial flowers. The murals drawn on the whitewashed walls would not be out of place in a neighborhood Greek taverna.

Tacit acknowledgment of how close the world came to mutually assured destruction, nuclear war is a given in the Now Futurism. *The Creation of the Humanoids*, *Alphaville*, and *Sins of the Fleshapoids* are all explicitly postapocalyptic. That the *Fleshapoid* Future, basically imagined in terms of Mediterranean antiquity, is Now is reinforced by the various brand-name snacks (Clark Bars, Wise potato chips) lying casually around the set, as well as by the toy robot to which, enthusiastically writhing on the palace floor, the female fleshapoid gives birth in the movie’s climactic scene.

As befits its punning biblical title, *Fleshapoids* is essentially a gloss on the book of Genesis. The title card represents the s in SINS as a snake. The humans are said to “live in a true paradise.” The first shot is a close-up of a woman taking a chomp out of an apple. Still, it is not the humans who learn to procreate but the fleshapoids. Kuchar’s narrative is the precise opposite of *Alphaville*’s. In his world, the robots prevail: “Where the humans failed to find love—the machines have succeeded.”

Alphaville and *Sins of the Fleshapoids* were in near-simultaneous production during the winter of 1965. Kuchar’s film appeared first, unveiled April 15 at the City Hall Cinema in New York on a bill with Rudy

Burckhardt's bucolic Frankenstein riff *Lurk* ("World premiere of two BEAUTIFUL AND SHOCKING SCIENCE FICTION MOVIES like never before," per the ad that the Film-Makers' Cinematheque took out in the *Village Voice*), even as *F-111* went on display and some ten weeks before Godard won the Golden Bear at the 1965 Berlin Film Festival; it was revived in August at the Players Theatre on MacDougal Street, showing there intermittently (sometimes at midnight) into October. By that time, *Alphaville* had opened the New York Film Festival, to a mixed response, and even the Film-Makers' Cinematheque was showing old Flash Gordon serials.

Was it thanks to Warhol or Kuchar that *The Creation of the Humanoids* was name-checked by Susan Sontag? Her canonical essay "The Imagination of Disaster," originally published in the October 1965 issue of *Commentary*, cites the movie as an example of what she deems the "most fascinating" of science-fiction-film motifs: dehumanization. Not even nine months later, *Creation of the Humanoids* (identified as "Andy Warhol's favorite movie") headed the list of landmark sci-fi films Smithson included in "Entropy and the New Monuments," the definitive articulation of the New Futurism that he detected in the work of Donald Judd, Sol LeWitt, Robert Morris, and Dan Flavin (who might have supplied the lighting for *Alphaville*): "Many architectural concepts found in science-fiction have nothing to do with science or fiction," Smithson wrote; "instead they suggest a new kind of monumentality which has much in common with the aims of some of today's artists."

Judd's "pink-Plexiglas box" struck Smithson as "a giant crystal from another planet." The "obstructions" of LeWitt's first one-man show projected "an ersatz future very much like the one depicted in the movie 'The Tenth Victim,'" Elio Petri's comic adaptation of Robert Sheckley's science-fiction novel, which, set in a world where assassination is a spectator sport, had opened in New York in December 1965 (in that film, 1960s New York and Rome represent the Future, as '60s Paris did, if more programmatically, in *Alphaville*). "LeWitt's show has helped to neutralize the myth of progress," Smithson claimed. Time similarly stood still, he thought, in Morris's lead-embedded sex organs ("mixing the time states or ideas of '1984' with 'One Million B.C.'") and Claes Oldenburg's "prehistoric 'ray-guns,'" not to mention the Museum of Natural History, where "the 'cave-man' and the 'space-man' may be seen under one roof."

Progress was also liquidated in the postatomic world of *Sins of the Fleshapoids*—made by an individual who, as Smithson approvingly noted of one artist he considered in "Entropy and the New Monuments" (sculptor Peter Hutchinson), rather than go "to the country to study nature, will go to see a movie on 42nd Street, like 'Horror at Party Beach' two or three times and contemplate it for weeks on end."

The science fiction film (like a very different contemporary genre, the Happening) is concerned with the aesthetics of destruction, with the peculiar beauties to be found in wreaking havoc, making a mess.
—Susan Sontag, "The Imagination of Disaster" (1965)

WITH ITS HOMEMADE COSTUMES, thrift-shop clutter, comic violence, grotesque sexuality, and mix of desultory and hamming performers, the *Sins of the Fleshapoids* mise-en-scène is analogous to Sontag's 1962 characterization of the Happening style—"its general look of messiness, its fondness for incorporating ready-made materials of no artistic prestige, particularly the junk of urban civilization."

Kuchar himself linked *Fleshapoids* to another form of avant-garde theater by employing the phrase "cinema of the ridiculous" in a press release, when, a year after its initial screenings and now billed as an "underground classic," his "legendary and lavish" movie enjoyed a commercial run at the Bleecker

Street Cinema on a bill with Jock Livingston's *Zero in the Universe* (a low-budget science-fiction "head" movie, made in Amsterdam in 1966 and most notable for its Don Cherry score). This was followed by a move to the Gate, a hippie hole-in-the-wall on lower Second Avenue.

Thus *Fleshapoids* was the junkyard analogue to a cycle of European films that, in addition to *Red Desert*, *Alphaville*, and *The Tenth Victim*, includes Antonio Margheriti's mid-'60s "Gamma One" movies; Joseph Losey's *Modesty Blaise* (1966), which, Monica Vitti and extensive Op art furnishings notwithstanding, may be less an instance of Now Futurism than of Austin Powers retro mod *avant la lettre*; and two tawdry outliers, veteran exploitation producer David Friedman's low-budget soft-core porn film *Space Thing* and Roger Vadim's even smarmier Jane Fonda vehicle, *Barbarella* (both 1968), the latter dismissed by Jonas Mekas in the *Voice* as a "rich man's science fiction movie," as well as a *Fleshapoids* rip-off.

As if to prove Mekas's point, Kuchar's exercise in sci-fi *povera* was revived again in New York, the very month that *Barbarella* opened, on a bill of "Underground Exotica" at the Gate, having established itself alongside *Scorpio Rising*, its partner in ultrasaturated Kodachrome II, as a perennial underground crowd-pleaser. Indeed, *Fleshapoids* left an impression sufficiently strong and favorable for the *New York Times*' senior film critic, Vincent Canby, to use it as a stick with which to bash *Krakatoa, East of Java* in June 1969 and *Pink Narcissus* two years later. But not all critics were amused.

In fact, Mekas's colleague at the *Voice* Andrew Sarris, who wrote briefly on the occasion of *Fleshapoids*' 1966 release, found the movie worse than distasteful. It struck him as physically disgusting, the product of "that generation of New Yorkers that grew up in the foul incense of movie theatres without ever really outgrowing the fantasies on the screen." *Fleshapoids* seemed to Sarris both decadent and self-loathing. "The spoofing is so sickeningly serious," he sniffed, "that what starts out like satire degenerates into the documentary of an addiction." (The same could be said of *Modesty Blaise*, a movie to which the critic was far more generous and that he took far more seriously.)

Sarris allowed that, as in earlier Kuchar films, this desecration was *sui generis*. "We are now in the age of the moviepoids," he lamented, "the strange creatures who flaunt their own ugliness in the very medium that once transformed the ugliness of the spectator into the stuff of redemptive fantasy spectacle." Wreaking havoc, making a mess, *Sins of the Fleshapoids* was something far worse than science fiction without special effects. Scarcely a utopian fantasy, or a movie in which Hollywood's consumers took the fantasy mechanism into their own hands, it was the nightmare intimation of a post-Hollywood future.

J. Hoberman's most recent book, Film After Film: Or, What Became of 21st Century Cinema?, was published by Verso last year and is due out in paperback this fall.

- J. Hoberman