

1998

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Recommended Citation

Behrens, Roy R., "Rudolf Amheim: The Little Owl on the Shoulder of Athene" (1998). *Faculty Publications*. 8.
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Rudolf Arnheim: The Little Owl on the Shoulder of Athene

Roy R. Behrens

My life has been one of contemplation rather than action; and since I watch artists, who are contemplators, I am twice-removed from active life "perchè guardo quelli che guardano" [because I observe the observers]. I am, I told the interviewer, the little owl perched on the shoulder of Athene . . .

—Rudolf Arnheim [1]

In 1918, a 14-year-old Rudolf Arnheim was lying in bed at night in his parents' home in Berlin when a bullet crashed through the window. In advance of the armistice, the German Kaiser had abdicated, and there was fighting in the streets as various factions battled for control of the government. Dominating the struggle were the Social Democrats, who, in the following year, established the Weimar Republic. Today, nearly 80 years later, the distinguished psychologist and art theorist lives in retirement in Ann Arbor, Michigan, where he still has on his writing desk the bullet that came through the window that night [2].

Arnheim was born in Berlin in 1904, the same year as Salvador Dalí, Vladimir Horowitz and Deng Xiao-ping. It was the year that Frank Lloyd Wright designed the Martin House in Buffalo, New York; Paul Cézanne painted *Mont Sainte Victoire*; and Henry James wrote *The Golden Bowl*. Coincidentally, because he would later write the pioneering book *Film as Art*, it was also the year of the opening of the first formal motion-picture theater, near Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania [3].

His father, Georg Arnheim, was a Berlin businessman who owned a small piano factory, which he had planned for his son to take over. But the young Arnheim was determined to enter the university, and when he graduated from secondary school, his father agreed to allow him to spend half the week at the university, half at the office. "And as you can predict I went more and more to the university and less and less to the office," he recalls. "My father finally gave in, and so I started on my career at the university" [4].

At the University of Berlin, Arnheim's primary interest was in psychology, which was regarded at the time as a branch of philosophy. So he ended up with majors in two subjects, psychology and philosophy, and two minors, in the histories of art and music. Among the distinguished faculty there were some of the century's finest physicists, including Albert Einstein and Max Planck, and, in the area of psychology, two of the founders of gestalt psychology, Max Wertheimer and Wolfgang Köhler.

Wertheimer and Köhler had initially met in 1910 in Frankfurt am Main, where, in collaboration with Kurt Koffka, a fellow psychologist, they had investigated "apparent movement," the optical illusion that enables a still image to appear

to move in motion pictures. Their work was interrupted by World War I, but the gestalt psychologists were reunited in 1920, when Köhler became Director of the Psychological Institute at the University of Berlin, where Wertheimer was already teaching. While remaining in contact with Koffka (who continued to teach near Frankfurt), and joined at the Institute by Kurt Lewin, a German social psychologist, they established a graduate program and began a research journal called *Psychologische Forschung* (Psychological Research) [5].

The Psychological Institute was a half-mile from the university in, of all places, two floors of the Imperial Palace, which had stood empty since the Kaiser's overthrow in 1918. The resulting makeshift laboratories were "very picturesque," Arnheim recalls, "with angels painted on the ceiling, and the marble bathtubs of the court ladies standing in these rooms, and that's where we did our experiments. What was so good about that psychology department was that it was a real workshop. . . . All of us students served as subjects for our neighbors, and they, in turn, were subjects for our experiments, and so you sat there and didn't go much to lectures. It was learning by workshop" [6].

Life in Germany during the Weimar Republic, which began in 1919 and ended when the Nazis took control in 1933, was both exhilarating and precarious. It was an era of political and economic upheaval: "Anything that can be wrong with a society was wrong," Arnheim remembers, and "anything that could be right with a society was right" [7]. But there were also astounding opportunities: he remembers attending performances of the provocative plays of Bertolt Brecht, seeing the first exhibitions of German Expressionist art and interviewing the Russian film director Sergei Eisenstein. He also bought for 50 cents first-edition copies of Sigmund Freud's books, which he still has.

It was also the time of the Bauhaus, possibly the most influential European art school of the century, which had opened in Weimar in 1919, then moved to Dessau in 1927, where it was housed in the now-famous buildings designed by Walter

ABSTRACT

The author discusses the life of Rudolf Arnheim (b. 1904), the celebrated art-theorist and psychologist, professor emeritus of the psychology of art at Harvard University and author of 15 books about perceptual psychology in relation to art, architecture and film, among them *Film as Art*, *Art and Visual Perception*, *Visual Thinking* and *The Power of the Center*. The article is a biographical overview of Arnheim's life and work, including his association with the gestalt psychologists in Berlin in the 1920s, his pioneering work as a film critic, his flight from Nazi Germany and his subsequent immigration to the United States in 1940.

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Gropius. Arnheim visited the Dessau Bauhaus one weekend in 1928, when, after receiving his doctorate from the university, he worked for magazines as a film critic and cultural affairs editor. An article he wrote about his Bauhaus visit was published in *Die Weltbühne*, a liberal political weekly whose editor, Carl von Ossietzky, was later awarded the Nobel Peace Prize while dying from his earlier mistreatment in a Nazi concentration camp [8].

When the Nazis came to power in 1933, one of their earliest ominous acts was the dismissal of Jewish university professors, from Nobel Prize-winning scientists to graduate assistants. Arnheim's ancestry is Jewish, and the sale of his ground-breaking book about film, published only months earlier, was no longer permitted. Like scores of other intellectuals, he had little choice but to flee his homeland, in his case moving on to Rome, where he continued to write about film for the next 6 years, in association with the League of Nations. He also wrote a second book, an early study of radio [9]. With the outbreak of World War II, he moved to London, where he served as a wartime translator for the British Broadcasting Corporation.

Immigrating from England to the United States in 1940, he still recalls the autumn night when he arrived in New York. While living in London, that city had been completely blacked out to prevent nighttime bombing raids, and the British ship that brought him to the U.S. was also blacked out, for fear of submarine attacks. In stark contrast, it was an astonishing sight, he recalls, to arrive at New York harbor "with the buildings blazing up to the sixtieth floor" [10].

His arrival in the U.S. would prove invigorating. "It was, first of all," he wrote, "the end of exile. In a land of immigrants, one was not an alien but simply the latest arrival. Rather than be asked to abandon one's own heritage and to adapt to the mores of the new country, one was expected to possess a treasure of foreign skills and customs that would enrich the resources of American living. The foreign accent was a promise, and indeed, all over the country, European imports added spice to the sciences, the arts, and other areas. What one had to give was not considered inferior to what one received" [11].

By 1940, many of Arnheim's colleagues at the Psychological Institute in Berlin had already settled in the U.S.: Wertheimer was teaching psychology at

the New School for Social Research, Koffka at Smith College, Köhler at Swarthmore, and Lewin at the University of Iowa. In 1943, Arnheim himself became a psychology professor at Sarah Lawrence College, while also a visiting lecturer on the graduate faculty at the New School.

Shortly after arriving in the U.S., Arnheim applied for and was granted two major awards. One was a fellowship from the Rockefeller Foundation, in which he worked with the Office of Radio Research at Columbia University in analyzing soap-operas and their effects on American radio-audiences. The second was a Guggenheim Fellowship, received in 1942, to study the role of perception in art. For the latter, he proposed to write a book about the application of gestalt theory to the visual arts from the viewpoint of a psychologist and art-theorist. But the project was premature, and he delayed it in favor of further research. He became convinced, as he later explained, that "the tools available in the psychology of perception at that time were not sufficient to deal with some of the more important visual problems in the arts. Therefore, instead of writing the book I undertook a number of particular studies, mainly in the areas of space, expression, and movement, designed to fill some of the gaps" [12].

Nearly a decade later, in 1951, he received a second fellowship from the Rockefeller Foundation, enabling him to take a leave from teaching. During the next 15 months, he produced a definitive 500-page book, *Art and Visual Perception: A Psychology of the Creative Eye*. "I wrote it essentially in one long sitting," he remembers, "looking up only rarely to consult resources beyond those stored in my head, and I let the demonstrations and arguments follow one another as they presented themselves to my mind" [13]. Completely revised in 1974, the volume has sold steadily since its initial publication. Translated into 14 languages, it is one of the most widely read and influential art books of the century.

In that book, Arnheim intended to narrow the gap between scientific and artistic knowledge, to use scientific findings to better understand the arts while preserving the equally pivotal role of subjectivity, intuition and self-expression. In a subsequent book, titled *Visual Thinking*, published in 1969, he challenged the age-old distinctions between thinking and perceiving and between intellect and intuition.

Contending that "all perceiving is also thinking, all reasoning is also intuition, all observation is also invention" [14], he attacked the established assumptions that words, not images, are the primary ingredients of thinking, and that language precedes perception. Rather, Arnheim argued, "the remarkable mechanisms by which the senses understand the environment are all but identical with the operations described by the psychology of thinking" [15]. Like scientific discovery, he wrote, artistic expression "is a form of reasoning, in which perceiving and thinking are indivisibly intertwined. A person who paints, writes, composes, dances, I felt compelled to say, thinks with his senses" [16].

In 1968, when Harvard University established the Department of Visual and Environmental Studies, Arnheim was invited to join its faculty as Professor of the Psychology of Art. He remained in Cambridge for 6 years, then retired in 1974 to Ann Arbor (his wife, née Mary Frame, had been raised near Detroit), where he taught for 10 more years as a Visiting Professor at the University of Michigan.

In 1982, he produced an ambitious, significant book on the interaction in art and architecture of two fundamental spatial patterns, one concentric, the other a grid. In *The Power of the Center: A Study of Composition in the Visual Arts*, he argued that form and content are inseparable, and presented an inclusive theory about "the patterns conceived by painters, sculptors, architects, and dancers as revealing statements on the nature of human experience" [17].

Arnheim has been active in the American Society for Aesthetics, serving twice as its president; and, for three terms, he was president of the Division on Psychology and the Arts of the American Psychological Association. He was elected a Fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences in 1976.

Throughout his long life, he has written 15 books on perceptual psychology in relation to art, architecture and film. The most recent, a collection of 28 essays titled *The Split and the Structure*, was published in 1996. Today, at his home in Ann Arbor, he continues to write essays, to correspond and to study the writings of Dante in their original Italian.

At age 93, he is anything but idle, and yet he once modestly summed up his life with the following: "I am by nature a sedentary person, and if the twentieth century had not buffeted me around in Europe, America, and Asia, I probably

would still be sitting in Berlin and doing my writing in the language and in the manner of which I did until 1933" [18].

References and Notes

1. Rudolf Arnheim, *Parables of Sun Light: Observations on Psychology, the Arts, and the Rest* (Berkeley, CA: Univ. of California Press, 1989) p. 369. In observing the observers, Arnheim is like his teacher, gestalt psychologist Max Wertheimer, whom he once described in the following way: "A friend gave me an old photograph of gestalt psychologists taken at a professional meeting. Köhler, Lewin, Katz, Michotte, Heider—they all face the camera. Wertheimer is the only one looking at his colleagues, watching how they behave when they have their picture taken. He was always the psychologist" (p. 172).
2. For writings about Arnheim's life and influence, see David Pariser, "A Conversation with Rudolf Arnheim," *Studies in Art Education* 25, No. 3, 176–184 (Spring 1984); "The Work of Rudolf Arnheim," *Salmagundi* Nos. 78–79 (special issue; Spring–Summer 1988) pp. 43–143; "Essays in Honor of Rudolf Arnheim," *Journal of Aesthetic Education* 27, No. 4 (special issue; Winter 1993); "Rudolf Arnheim" in Jane Turner, ed., *Dictionary of Art* (New York: Grove Dictionaries, 1996); Leslie Van Duzer and Kent Kleinman, eds., *Rudolf Arnheim: Revealing Vision* (Ann Arbor, MI: Univ. of Michigan Press, 1997). For autobiographical fragments, see Rudolf Arnheim, "My Life in the Art World" (Ann Arbor, MI: School of Art, Univ. of Michigan, 1984); Arnheim [1] throughout, but especially pp. 244–245; "Rudolf Arnheim" in Vineta Colby, ed., *World Authors 1980–1985* (New York: H.W. Wilson Company, 1991); "In the Company of the Century" in *To the Rescue of Art* (Berkeley, CA: Univ. of California Press, 1992) pp. 236–243; and "A Maverick in Art History" in *The Split and the Structure* (Univ. of California Press, 1996) pp. 104–110. Various other Arnheim-related documents, including diaries, correspondence and other papers, are on file at the Archives of American Art (Smithsonian Institution, Washington DC) and the Archives of the History of American Psychology (Univ. of Akron, Akron, OH). In addition, a 58-minute video-documentary, *Rudolf Arnheim: A Life in Art*, was produced in 1994 by two of his former students, José Sanchez-H. and Tina Michelle Datsko, and is available from Gypscat Productions, 550 Orange Avenue, Suite 339, Long Beach, CA 90802, U.S.A.
3. His pioneering book on film was first published as *Film als Kunst* (Berlin: 1932), then translated into English as *Film as Art* (Berkeley, CA: Univ. of California Press, 1957). In Arnheim [1] p. 236, he writes that he was born "in time to see Emperor Wilhelm II lead his yearly parade on horseback, with his plumed helmet gleaming in the sun. The parade happened to pass the narrow street on which my father's office was located."
4. Arnheim [1] p. 3.
5. For background information on the history of gestalt theory, see Mitchell G. Ash, *Gestalt Theory in German Culture, 1890–1967: Holism and the Quest for Objectivity* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1995); Fritz Heider, "Gestalt Theory: Early History and Reminiscences" in Mary Henle, et al., eds., *Historical Conceptions of Psychology* (New York: Springer, 1973); and Roy R. Behrens, "Art, Design and Gestalt Theory" in *Leonardo* (forthcoming).
6. Arnheim [1] p. 4.
7. Arnheim [1] p. 237. He writes: "A profound sense of unreliability was the prevailing mood of the time. Its most ostensive symbol was the catastrophic inflation of 1923. During that year I spent part of my time helping my father at the small piano factory he owned. Every Friday, he and I had several suitcases filled at the bank with stacks of million mark bills to pay our workmen, who were forced to spend them the same day if they were not to lose half of their value."
8. See R. Arnheim, "The Bauhaus in Dessau (1927)," *Print* 51, No. 6, 60–61 (November/December 1997).
9. R. Arnheim, *Radio: An Art of Sound*. Margaret Ludwig and Herbert Read, trans. (New York: Arno Press, 1971).
10. Arnheim [1] p. 9ff.
11. Arnheim [1] p. 241.
12. Arnheim, *Art and Visual Perception: A Psychology of the Creative Eye: The New Version* (Berkeley, CA: Univ. of California Press, 1974) p. 9.
13. Arnheim [12] p. ix.
14. Arnheim [12] p. 5.
15. R. Arnheim, *Visual Thinking* (Berkeley, CA: Univ. of California Press, 1969) p. v.
16. Arnheim [15].
17. R. Arnheim, *The Power of the Center: A Study of Composition in the Visual Arts* (Berkeley, CA: Univ. of California Press, 1982) p. xi.
18. Quoted in Colby [2] p. 45. In addition to those listed above, other Arnheim books include (all are published by the Univ. of California Press, Berkeley, CA, unless otherwise noted) *Picasso's Guernica* (1962; reissued in 1973 as *The Genesis of a Painting*); *Toward a Psychology of Art* (1966); *Entropy and Art* (1971); *The Dynamics of Architectural Form* (1977); *New Essays on the Psychology of Art* (1986), *Thoughts on Art Education* (Los Angeles, CA: Getty Center for Education, 1990), and *Film Essays and Criticism* (Madison, WI: Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 1997).

Manuscript received 21 April 1997.