1998

Rudolf Amheim: The Little Owl on the Shoulder of Athene

Roy R. Behrens

University of Northern Iowa

Copyright ©1998 The MIT Press

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.uni.edu/art_facpub

Part of the Art and Design Commons

Let us know how access to this document benefits you

Recommended Citation

https://scholarworks.uni.edu/art_facpub/8

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Department of Art at UNI ScholarWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of UNI ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact scholarworks@uni.edu.
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 "perché 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 Dali, 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 Gropius.
Wertheimer was teaching psychology at York. While living in London, that city was also blacked out, for fear of submarine attacks. Moreover, the latest arrival. Rather than be asked 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” [15]. 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, 1980) p. 306. 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).


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.”


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.”


16. Arnheim [15].


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: The Making of an Archival Documentary Film als Kunst 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.”


21. 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.”


25. 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.”

Manuscript received 21 April 1997.