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### **The Long Ending of the Silent Movie: Remarks on Arnheim's Theory of Film**

In the literature on Rudolf Arnheim's inspiring work on film, four connected aspects have most often been mentioned: aesthetics, art, form, and the silent movie. One might come up with the following slightly exaggerated formula: within a *formalist aesthetic*, Arnheim devoted himself to the *silent movie* as an *art* genre. Regarding Arnheim's most extensive work on film, that is, *Film als Kunst*, written in 1932, these four aspects are very productive.<sup>1</sup> However, Arnheim did continue studying film after being turned out of Nazi Germany. Until the early 1940s he worked on film intensely and continued to do so sporadically up to 1999. And in these later texts you will find four complementary aspects, namely an inquiry into media theory and sociology, the documentary dimension of film, realism, and sound film.

In the first (longer) part of this paper I want to concentrate on the four aspects put forth in *Film als Kunst*, and in the second (shorter) part I will connect these with the four mentioned complementary ones, which unfortunately have been so often overlooked and slighted in the criticism on Arnheim's film theory.

### **The Film in *Film als Kunst***

**Aesthetics** In writing *Film als Kunst* Arnheim used primarily two sources: his own extensive work as a film critic and his reading of Gestalt psychology. These two aspects lead Arnheim to a concept of aesthetics that opposes both the contemporary philosophical concept and the psychology of the Geisteswissenschaften or humanities. He recognizes two corresponding mistakes that create the dilemma of academic aesthetics: it misjudges the self-organization even of the most basic perceptions and thus is incapable of grasping complex issues such as aesthetic quality or understanding artistic production on a theoretical level. What academic aesthetics does, according to Arnheim, is mystify artistic productions. In contrast, his own concept of aesthetics

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<sup>1</sup> Here and in the following I refer to *Film als Kunst* and not to *Film as Art*, which was published in the USA in 1957. Unlike the title suggests, the latter is not a simple translation of the former. In fact, *Film as Art* is a compilation including only an abridged version of *Film als Kunst*.

focuses on the connection between the ‘simple’ sensations and the art as a refined way of perceiving.

In *Film als Kunst*, Arnheim does not treat listening as an equal element of his film aesthetics. Therefore, only the connection between looking and film art needs to be considered here. Arnheim had sensibilities that he achieved through his study of Gestalt psychology. Following these sensibilities for the self-organization of perception, one notices the two retinal images. In other words: It is the *two* eyes that see these images—it is not the human being. Those *two* images are modified in the following process of perception and are transformed into *one* three-dimensional image. And it is only this image that the human being can see, it is the image of the physical world: the “Weltbild” or “Wirklichkeitsbild” of every day life. On this basis Arnheim develops the difference between seeing everyday instances and seeing photographs or films. He emphasizes that the image of the world and the image of the film have different characteristics. It is important to notice that, according to Arnheim, all images of the film—not only the artistic ones—vary necessarily from images of the world.

But then where is the specific difference between an artistic and a simple film image? Arnheim makes out a difference in the treatment of a film image, a treatment which consciously stresses the peculiarities of the medium. Against this background, the relationship between film art and seeing can be summarized as following: The artistic image of the film is already an image of the fourth order—it is mediated firstly by the simple film image, secondly by the image of the physical world, and thirdly by the retinal image.

Due to the high value that Arnheim puts on film images, the concept of *Film als Kunst* often and correctly has been called a material aesthetic. However, this has often led to a misunderstanding that I would like to clear up. At first glance, a material aesthetic seems diametrically opposed to a formalist aesthetic—and a formalist aesthetic is exactly what *Film als Kunst* wants to be. But Arnheim does not talk about the material shown *in* the film but rather the material *out* of which a film is made: the exposed filmstrip of the camera.

**Art** In *Film als Kunst*, Arnheim attributes film to the graphic or plastic arts. He explains the existence of art on anthropological grounds: the graphic or plastic arts are founded on two human drives that have been refined over the course of history. One of those drives is the representational drive that has to do with the representation of a particular object. The other drive is “deeply rooted in the biological area” and concerns the “natural feeling of symmetry and balance”: it is the ornamental drive.

One would be mistaken to understand these two drives as symmetrical. Arnheim uses these drives to establish something like two classes. When Arnheim speaks of directors and

directors of photography, he does not see that partisans of the representational drive are capable of producing art, they are merely able to represent and to tell stories. This is to say: they only offer some ‘content.’ According to Arnheim, these directors satisfy the needs of a dubious group, namely the masses. In contrast to the masses, Arnheim poses the category of the “art lovers,” a category he explicitly holds on to at least until the late 1930s. This small group of the “art lovers” has a conscious use with the characteristics of the film material. Without pointing it out Arnheim lets the reader connect this use with the ornamental drive.

Yet why does Arnheim devalue the representational drive in this extreme fashion? The decisive factor is his opposition to the contemporary argument that film could never be art because it only reproduces reality in a technical or mechanical manner. Alongside Hugo Münsterberg’s work *The Photoplay* (written in 1916) and a few Soviet theoreticians, it is Arnheim’s credit to have vehemently fought this exclusion of film. Thus, the title *Film als Kunst* is more than a title; it is the main part of his agenda. Against this backdrop, Arnheim’s extreme attack against the representational drive becomes strategically plausible. Of course, he is aware of the fact that film is close to reality, but film is not—or not necessarily—simply a reproduction of reality.

**Form** Analyzing images (from the retinal to the artistic film image), Arnheim continuously connects elements of the gestalt psychology with questions of materiality and above all with form. According to Arnheim, the crucial factor in these analyses is the material characteristics of the image of the film that are—in contrast to the image of the world—most often distinguished by a number of limitations. These limitations, however, contain possibilities for the creation of genuine artistic film images. The following six limitations are of great importance:

- 1) Even for the most simple projection of solids upon a plane surface, a perspective must be chosen from which the object can be filmed. When projecting a cube, the simple film image might try to show a characteristic view, which at least shows three sides of the cube, thereby characterizing it as a spatial shape. Contrarily, in an artistic film image the perspective can be used to charge an object semantically.
- 2) The spatial impression and depth of the image of the physical world is based on the slight difference between the retinal image of the right and the left eye. In the film image, however, depth *is reduced* and flatness increased. Thereby, the artist can use the film image as a rather abstract ornament. The reduction of depth also involves a loss of the constancies of size and shape. While the image of the world unconsciously adjusts dimensional differences between objects or even contortions of forms, this is not the case for the film image (or the retinal image). In the artistic film image this can be used for example as a symbolic stylization such as portraying an extreme difference between people’s power position.

- 3) The black-and-white of the film image obviously contains a loss of colors, producing a palette between pure white and black. The hereby created explicit contrast simplifies the artistic and decorative split between figure and background.
- 4) In everyday life, the limitations of the image of the world are broken by the movement of the eyes, head, and body. In contrast, film images are defined by such limitations as the screen which cannot be influenced by the viewer. In the artistic film image the attention of the viewer can be focused on details, for example, through the use of close-ups or by only showing 'half' of a presented scene—let's say only the future victim and not the perpetrator—which creates suspense and sets up a moment of surprise.
- 5) The image of the world is coupled with the space-time continuum. The impression of movement in the film image is based on an unnoticed editing of static frames. In the artistic film image the editing becomes a perceptible quality because it makes jumps in time and place possible.
- 6) The image of the world is entwined with other senses. Above all, the sense of balance and touch help the seeing person orient himself or herself in space. In art, this loss of the non-visual world of senses therefore lends itself to an intensive play with the expectations of the viewer in terms of spatial coordination and movement.

**Silent movie** By means of these aspects Arnheim's *Film als Kunst* has systematically shown the formal acquisitions of the silent movie. The fact that Arnheim published *Film als Kunst* after the sound film had been established created a somewhat ambivalent status for the silent movie. On the one hand, it is *the* embodiment of film art to which no alternative can be found. On the other hand it is just the beginning of an inevitable development (and therefore the analysis of the silent movie can be just a model for the analysis of this development.)

The silent movie can be understood as *film art* par excellence for two reasons: Due to the missing sound it is both less realistic and richer in limitations. In contrast, the sound film becomes part of Arnheim's polemic critique of the representational drive. And on account of the distance to reality it is the silent movie and not the sound film that counters the pivotal objection against film as being merely a reproduction of reality. Moreover, Arnheim points to the fact that the silent movie is only a *beginning*. He indirectly stresses this by also analyzing the material characteristics of radio plays and the sound film. He furthermore directly stresses the transition between the silent movie and the sound film: "One has to learn to apply old rules to new material. And this retraining is certainly much more difficult than learning something new."

## Later modifications

**Sound film** Despite his ambivalent attitude to the sound film in *Film als Kunst*, Arnheim clearly concentrates on the silent movie as film art par excellence in his later works in the 1930s.<sup>2</sup> The most radical polemics against the sound film can be found in 1938 in his *New Laocoon*. Arnheim emphasizes the incompatibility of spoken words and moving images. Hereby he builds upon Gotthold Ephraim Lessing's *Laocoon* (written in 1766). I would argue that Arnheim misjudges Lessing, who *did* think such two different media could be connected and even *should* be connected. Lessing makes this very clear in his treatment of the theatre in the *Hamburgische Dramaturgie* (written in 1767 and 1768). In the *New Laocoon*, Arnheim does not recognize this potential of the theatre, which he identifies mostly with literature. Accordingly, a "real drama" does not need to be "performed." On this basis he constructs an abstract dilemma in which either a sophisticated dialogue hinders moving images or a strong image degrades the spoken word to a simple device.

In later years, Arnheim himself revised his radical and one-sided view with respect to sound and changed his conception of the silent movie. It is no longer the movie par excellence but can be linked again to other types. In 1999, in *Composites of Media: The History of an Idea*, he emphasized the freedom of film in dealing with such aspects as color or black-and-white, sound and silence. His revision could be described something like a '*New Hamburgische Dramaturgie*.'

**The documentary dimension of film** In *Film als Kunst* Arnheim already stresses that art is an important, but certainly not the only, option while making films. Until the late 1930s, his insistence on the documentary dimension of film continues the hierarchical opposition between representation and ornament. The logic of the documentation is a mirror image of the logic of art. Arnheim claims in 1935 that everything harming art serves the documentary. This is *because* sound and color can produce the impression of an 'exact' image of reality. In light of the technical development in the *New Laocoon*, Arnheim therefore speaks of the 'victory' of technology over art. (Unfortunately, he leaves very little room for an appraising reflection of artistic means *within* documentaries.)

**Realism** As said before, in *Film als Kunst*, Arnheim did not ignore the closeness of reality and film but fought against this conception by emphasizing form. In his later years, however,

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<sup>2</sup> This ambivalence significantly did not find its way into *Film as Art*, wherein Arnheim's attitude towards the sound film is clear-cut and negative.

Arnheim became increasingly open-minded in terms of realistic positions. This includes not only the mentioned concession to the documentary but also film as art.

Major remarks of this sort of openness can be found in *Kunst heute und der Film* written in 1965. Here, in his anthem on Jacques Cousteau's underwater-documentation *Le monde du silence*, not only is silence of great interest, but the central aspects of his analysis of form in *Film als Kunst* also reappear, such as the annihilation of spatial coordinates through the floating in the water or the pure ornament of shoals. Moreover, he is not only deeply impressed by the "optic commotion and colorful hurly-burly" but especially by the Janus face of the underwater creatures, which are monstrous and real at the same time. As Arnheim claims, Cousteau's "Nouvelle Vague under water" corresponds—if unintentionally—with the pivotal merits of contemporary film art because it is able "to interpret the ghost-like of the visible world with the authentic appearances of the world." Yet how do we have to imagine this above sea level? In *Film als Kunst* Arnheim still saw the limits of editing—the jumps through space and time—in the action of the film. Especially in the works of the directors of the Nouvelle Vague he makes out a transgression of this borderline and sees a commitment to a "new reality," namely to the "reality of mind." Accordingly, like the traces of memory, this new editing follows the model of association and affinity and can combine everyday life with nightmares.

In the case of *Kunst heute und der Film*, Arnheim's concession to realism is still restricted. Above all, he accepts a 'psychic' realism. This changes, at the latest with the preface to the new German edition of *Film als Kunst* in 1978, in which he explicitly underlines Siegfried Kracauer's insight that the specific dimension of photographed and filmic images lies exactly in the *combination* of realism and form.

**Approaches to sociology and media theory** Arnheim did not write a systematic sociology of film or media theory that is as elaborate as his aesthetics in *Film als Kunst*. But after the end of the Weimar Republic and the consolidation of the sound film, he did put forth a sociologically oriented pamphlet in his *Der Filmkritiker von morgen* published in 1935. The main purpose of this film critic—who could also be called a "critic of television"—should not be the appraisal of individual film art but rather the analysis of the rules by which society operates. This means not only recognizing film as a commodity but also its ideological dimensions. In his *Das Kino und die Masse*, written 14 years later, one even finds a requital with the function of the film artist. At that point, Arnheim sees the function of the film artist within the framework of economic calculations, trying to please the audience and giving an individual 'touch' to the standardized film product.

In Arnheim's sporadic comments on media theory, one finds remarkable overlaps with contemporary media theory and even more astonishing similarities with the media theory of the last few years. A rich source for finding such surprising elements is, for example, *Ein Blick in die Ferne* from 1935. Arnheim's doubt of the visualization of political and economic contexts can be read as an echo to the Brechtian notion that "reality slipped into the functional." And also Benjamin comes to mind when Arnheim locates a devaluation of the original in the possibilities of television. Arnheim's further thoughts on the general relationship of media evolution and spatial dimensions transcend the date of origin of this article by far and in a number of ways. First of all, it already names motives that in the 1960s became a buzz phrase through Marshall McLuhan and his characterization of media as an "extension of man." Secondly, it alludes to the functional relationship between the transport of persons and data, which, for example, has been thoroughly analyzed by Paul Virilio since the 1970s. In concluding, one must mention that Arnheim does not judge media euphorically. For the future under the sign of TV he draws a somewhat ironic image of the "in seinem Zimmerlein hockenden Einsiedlers"—the recluse sitting in his room, who has given up all social interaction in order to fulfill his role as a spectator. As part of a distinct cultural criticism these traits of a recluse reappear 20 years later in Günter Anders' critique of the "mass-recluse."

Let me come to an end by slightly modifying two terms from gestalt psychology. *Film als Kunst* might continue to be the dominant *figure* in Arnheim's discussion of film. Yet, for the historically adequate and thorough understanding of his treatment of film, a close look at the *background* is essential, a background whose priming Arnheim has continued working on for the last several decades.

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