

RUDOLF ARNHEIM: AN INADVERTENT AUTOBIOGRAPHY¹

*Compiled and annotated
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Rudolf ARNHEIM, a German-born psychologist and art theorist, has been described as “one of the great psychologists of this century,” whose writings have enabled him to make “seminal contributions to the psychology of art, aesthetics, art education, and media studies” (VERSTEGEN 1996, 199). With typical modesty, he himself has simply said that he is “a sedentary person,” who, were it not for political circumstances, “would still be sitting in Berlin and doing my writing in the language and the manner of what I did until 1933” (ARNHEIM 1991, 45).

Born in Berlin on July 15, 1904, ARNHEIM grew up in the declining years of the German Empire, while everywhere around him were signs of the rapid arrival of the age of technology. “Photocopying and word processors were undreamed-of achievements of the future,” he recalls, “headphones were needed to listen to the radio, and the silent movies were accompanied by a piano. In some respects, it was an age of innocence.” (ARNHEIM 1992a, 236).

¹ Around 1990, I wrote to Rudolf ARNHEIM hoping that I could persuade him to write an autobiography. He declined, because (as he explained) his memory is unreliable, but I suspect that he also believes it to be immodest to do so. Curious about his intellectual development and that of the other gestaltists, I corresponded with him for about twelve years, in the course of which I asked about his past experiences. In this article, I have arranged some of his answers and combined them with quotes from additional texts to produce what is, to some extent, an “inadvertent autobiography.” Reproduced above is a pen-and-ink drawing by ARNHEIM in which he portrays himself with angel’s wings and ascending into space. It reads “Always lightened by your ballast!” He sent this to me in December 1991, along with a small contribution, as a gesture of support for *Ballast Quarterly Review* (for Books, Art, Language, Logic, Ambiguity, Science and Teaching), a journal of verbal and visual wit that I have edited since 1985. Soon after, he began to send brief, amusing stories about his own experience for inclusion in the journal. The research for this article was partly supported by a faculty research grant from the Graduate College at the University of Northern Iowa. – RRB

His father was Georg ARNHEIM, who owned a small piano factory in Berlin, where “they made about fifteen pianos a month” (ARNHEIM 1984, 3). His father “was 37 before his first child, this one, was born. In those days you did not get married before you could afford a wife. You bought yourself a solid golden watch, whose cover snapped open and which you carried on a strap. It had the initials carved on the cover in elegant curves” (ARNHEIM 1995a). Faced with difficulties at work, ARNHEIM’s father often reminded his eldest child and only son (whom he hoped would take over his business some day) that *Nackenschläge muß man im Geschäft erwarten* (“thwacks in the neck is what one must expect in business”) (ARNHEIM 1996c). Born in 1867, Georg ARNHEIM survived the Holocaust by emigrating to the U.S., where he died “in Oakland, California, of a heart ailment at the age of seventy-six” (ARNHEIM 1989, 244).

His mother, née Betty GUTHERZ, was twelve years younger than his father. ARNHEIM remembers that she “knew French and Italian and with her sisters, as young ladies were supposed to do, took painting lessons. By Lovis CORINTH [a prominent German impressionist], no less. She also played the piano, one piece from memory, called *Sparrow on the Eves*” (ARNHEIM 1995c). She died of intestinal cancer in 1966 at the age of eighty-seven in Überlingen, Germany, “where she had spent her last years near my oldest sister, Leni” (ARNHEIM 1989, 244).

ARNHEIM was the eldest of four children. In addition to Leni (who later married the art historian Kurt BADT), there were two younger sisters, Marie (who married the photographer John GAY) and Hilde. While all three of his sisters married, only one bore a child. Before her death of tuberculosis in 1938, his sister Hilde gave birth to a son named Michael, who later became a physician in California [ARNHEIM 1992a, p. 244]. ARNHEIM himself fathered only one child, a daughter named Anna, who died of Hodgkin’s disease in 1940. Later however, in 1953, when he married his second wife, née Mary FRAME, he became the stepfather of her daughter from a previous marriage, named Margaret NETTINGA (ARNHEIM 1992a, pp. 244-245).

“My own childhood,” ARNHEIM remembers, “was as normal as they come. My parents were educated middle-class people. The father was a friendly, reasonable man, liked by everybody, and I never had any real conflict with him except when, at the age of about 25, I decided to leave the apartment and live with a girlfriend [Annette SIECKE], who became my first wife. My father thought that the departure was unheard of, unacceptable, even though he had long accepted my girlfriends as friends of the home” (ARNHEIM 1995c).

ARNHEIM’s ancestry was Jewish, but his family, “just like those of my Jewish and non-Jewish friends, had been detached from religious tradition for generations. Together we belonged to a liberal and educated layer of society, which distinguished itself most explicitly from a narrow-minded petite bourgeoisie, the future followers of Adolf Hitler” (ARNHEIM 1992a, 237).

As a child, ARNHEIM remembers that he was able “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. It was a modest place. His elderly secretary wrote the bills for the customers by hand with a special ink that when moistened produced copies under a printing press” [ARNHEIM 1992a, 236].

The Kaiser abdicated in 1918, when ARNHEIM was fourteen years old. There was violence in the streets as vying political forces fought for control of the country. He recalls one evening that year when, as he was sleeping in his bed, a stray bullet crashed through the window of his parents' home. The bullet was retrieved, and when it was later given to him, he kept it on his writing desk for the rest of his life. In 1994, when he was interviewed at his retirement apartment in Ann Arbor, Michigan, for an ABC News documentary on this volatile period in German history, he brought out that infamous bullet. He recalls that "the cameraman admonished me to hold it up vertically, so that the audience can see it" (ARNHEIM 1994). Dominating the political struggle were the Social Democrats, who, in the following year, established the Weimar Republic.

The Weimar Republic began in 1919, with the end of World War I, and concluded in 1933 when Adolf HITLER became Chancellor of the Third Reich. ARNHEIM remembers that 14-year period as both exhilarating and precarious. It was "full of fighting parties, full of subversion of one kind and another. Anything that can be wrong with a society was wrong; anything that could be right with a society was right. It was a real state of turmoil and fermentation" (ARNHEIM 1984, 5). "To someone looking for an ideology to which to pledge allegiance," he once wrote, "the Weimar Republic offered a wide-open field. The doctrines were many, but none looked perfect. The socialists had been caught unprepared for the task of taking over the reign of an abandoned empire; the communists frightened and bored us by the otherworldly intricacies of their internal squabbles; the militarists repelled us; the Abstractionist and Expressionist artists greatly attracted us in spite of their yet unconfirmed validity, and so did the writings of the psychoanalysts" (ARNHEIM 1992a, 237).

When ARNHEIM completed his secondary education, it was his father's expectation that he would begin working full-time at the piano factory. But the restless son wanted instead to continue his education at the university. He discussed this with his father, and together they "decided that I would be going to the university half of the week and half of the week I would be going to the office and helping him with the factory. And as you can predict I went more and more to the university and less and less to the office. My father finally gave in, and so I started on my career at the university." (ARNHEIM 1984, 3).

In 1923, German society was hit by a crippling inflation. During that extraordinarily difficult time, ARNHEIM recalls that he "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" (ARNHEIM 1992a, 235).

At the same time, he also enrolled at the University of Berlin, where he majored in two subjects, psychology and philosophy [in those days, he remembers, "when you wanted to major in psychology you had to do that in philosophy, because philosophy was the major field, and psychology was a part of philosophy" (ARNHEIM 1984, 3)], and pursued a double minor in the histories of art and music. Among the distinguished faculty then at the University of Berlin 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 (who was a friend of EINSTEIN) and Wolfgang KÖHLER. One of ARNHEIM's regrets is that "I spent four years at the University of Berlin without ever listening to EINSTEIN lecturing" (ARNHEIM 1993c).

By his own admission, ARNHEIM as a student was not always easy to work with. He recalls that "with the college teacher in literature I had a covenant: you let me read under the table on my lap whatever I want; and I will leave you without my barbs. I got through college mostly through the generosity of the teachers. I had never attended gymnastics [physical education], for example, but when we had a graduation party with the teachers, he [the physical education teacher] remained after the others had gone, had some more to drink and accompanied himself on the guitar singing some off-color songs. Then sitting on the couch with a few of us in an by then advanced stage of drink, he looked at me in sudden recognition, took his arm around my shoulder and said, "ARNHEIM, you black pig [*du schwarzes Schwein*], you never came to class, but you are a good boy anyway!" I got to the final year's exam mostly because I had directed and played the main part in two performances at the school auditorium, ARISTOPHANES' *The Frogs* where I played, if I remember correctly, SOCRATES, and a German comedy by [Christian Dietrich] GRABBE, where I played the devil" (ARNHEIM 1997b).

As a freshman, he was also given another responsibility: "[Carl] STUMPF [a leading German psychologist, who had been the teacher of ARNHEIM's teachers], by then emeritus, had some kind of anniversary and in celebration, [Wolfgang] KÖHLER, the head of our department, organized a Fackelzug, groups of students with torches to make a procession to STUMPF's home. On the way, KÖHLER asked me to make a speech in honor of the 'Jubilar,' and there I was improvising at the head of the students yelling up to the fifth floor my improvisation. Then I and my girlfriend, also a freshman, were asked to go up to STUMPF's place for a drink. Those were my beginnings as a Gestalt theorist" (ARNHEIM 1999a).

ARNHEIM was a student at the Psychological Institute at the University of Berlin for five years, graduating in 1928 with a Ph.D. As a graduate student, his *Doktorvater* (major professor or dissertation advisor) was Gestalt psychology's founder, Max WERTHEIMER, but he also worked directly with Wolfgang KÖHLER (Director of the Psychological Institute), and completed other coursework with Kurt LEWIN, Johannes von ALLESCH, and others. Throughout his life, ARNHEIM's fondness and respect for WERTHEIMER and KÖHLER has only increased. Thus, in 1992, when I sent him my brief but supportive review of a book by Ronald LEY (1990), in which the author postulates that KÖHLER was a German spy during World War I, he responded sternly (although ending with a joke) that he greatly resented my having recommended the book. "My teacher [KÖHLER] was one of the few truly upright, uncorruptible people of his generation. He resisted the Nazis, who much wanted to keep him, and gave up his position when they tried to coerce him and his staff. The cheap spy stuff has been refuted in authoritative documentation by Nicholas PASTORE and Mary HENLE. Repent, repent!" (ARNHEIM 1992b)

Among his fellow graduate students in Berlin were such now-familiar names as Tamara DEMBO, Karl DUNCKER, Kurt GOTTSCHALDT, Herta KOPFERMANN,

Wolfgang METZGER, Maria OVSIANKINA, Hans WALLACH, and Bluma ZEIGARNIK. ARNHEIM had particular admiration for DUNCKER, who he describes as the son of “an inveterate Marxist revolutionary” and who, he remembers, “had an aggressive streak” (ARNHEIM 1998b). “We were close friends and colleagues of the same generation in Berlin. He was the most gifted among us at the imperial castle in Berlin” (ARNHEIM 2002). As for METZGER, ARNHEIM remembers him as “KÖHLER’s assistant... When I met him again [after World War II], I was startled to see that in appearance and behavior he imitated WERTHEIMER” (ARNHEIM 1999b).

One time I asked him if he knew that Austrian novelist Robert MUSIL had studied psychology under STUMPF, earning his Ph.D. in 1908, as a classmate of Kurt KOFFKA. He replied that “I never met MUSIL and was fascinated to learn that he was a student of STUMPF,” then added that he had “often wondered where MUSIL took the ‘ARNHEIM’ from [for a major character in his book, *The Man Without Qualities*], but the name was not all that rare. I remember that, for example, *ein ARNHEIM* was the name for a bank safe, and that was surely not my father’s business” (ARNHEIM 1999a).

The Berlin 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 overthrow of the Kaiser in 1918. ARNHEIM remembers that the makeshift experimental laboratories were “very picturesque, 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” (ARNHEIM 1984, 4). For the most part, the students learned not by going to lectures but by conducting actual research in perceptual psychology, using their fellow students as subjects, then preparing formal papers for publication in an affiliated research journal, called *Psychologische Forschung* (Psychological Investigation).

“What was so good about that psychology department,” ARNHEIM recalls, “is that it was a real workshop. We were the kind of obsessed addicts [as art students also sometimes are], where you don’t go to anything else if you can help it, and you just sit there and you do your experiments. All of us students served as subjects for our neighbors, and they, in turn, were the subjects for our experiments, and so they sat there and didn’t go much to lectures. It was learning by workshop. We built the experiments which our professors were interested in and then published these things under the names of both people, the professor and the student” (ARNHEIM 1984, 4).

Elsewhere, he has also said that the students and faculty at the Psychological Institute “were a group of co-workers... Our professors were engaged in a certain kind of research, the way it is in the natural sciences, and our dissertations fitted into the work they were doing. So we saw our *Doktorvater* every day, not as we sometimes have it in this country where someone gets a subject for the dissertation and then he comes back with it all finished two years later” (PARISER 1984, 179). His own dissertation, titled *Experimentell-psychologische Untersuchungen zum Ausdrucksproblem* (Experimental-psychological investigations into problems of expression), which was published in *Psychologische Forschung* in 1928, was a study of “the expression of human faces and of handwriting and the correspondence between the two.” That document, ARNHEIM

remembers, was “the beginning of my lifelong study of expression, which I then applied to the visual arts” (ibid.).

In 1996, in a book of essays called *The Split and the Structure*, ARNHEIM remembers his coursework in art history at the University of Berlin. There were three art historians on the faculty at the time — Adolph GOLDSCHMIDT, Edmund HILDEBRANDT, and Hans KAUFFMANN — all of whom taught courses in a Neoclassical building that the students had nicknamed *die Kommode*, because, as ARNHEIM recalls, “it looked like a chest of drawers” (ARNHEIM 1996a, 104).

Professor GOLDSCHMIDT, who was an authority on medieval book illustration, was, in teaching, “the very opposite of a flamboyant performer, but he captured the attention of his students by the wealth of his material. He was a small man, his nose buried in the papers from which he had lectured for decades. He had no need to raise his eyes to the screen, because his assistant had run the slides from him forever, and when the professor said, ‘In the lower left corner we see the figure of the Evangelist,’ it would have amounted to the unthinkable collapse of preestablished harmony if the Evangelist had not held his appointed place on the screen at that exact moment” (ibid.).

It was the art historian HILDEBRANDT who administered ARNHEIM’s graduate oral exam. “He was a specialist in the Quattrocento and had agoraphobia, so that for his lectures the students had to squeeze into a small auditorium, where people fainted for lack of oxygen. He remains in my memory because in the orals he asked me to describe, without the benefit of illustrations, the stylistic differences between the tails of the horses on the equestrian figures of DONATELLO’s *Gattamelata* and VERROCCHIO’s *Colleoni*” (ARNHEIM 1996a, 105).

The third art historian, KAUFFMANN, was “a young lecturer, pale and intense, who had just published a study on which he called the style ornament in the portraits of REMBRANDT. Those portraits, he asserted, were composed on the basis of a rosette or star pattern of rays, issuing from the lap of the figure in all directions. In those days, however, the discoveries of Sigmund FREUD were fresh in our minds. We bought the first editions of his writings for a few Marks; and if someone insisted on the sexual area as the generative center of the human figure, we youngsters looked at one another with a knowing smile” (ibid.). When I visited ARNHEIM in Ann Arbor, Michigan, in the early 1990s, he still had those first editions of FREUD on the bookshelf in his study.

During the period of the Weimar Republic, ARNHEIM and his fellow students saw the first theatrical performances of the plays of Bertoldt BRECHT, “and we went to see the first exhibitions of the German Expressionists—of [Oskar] KOKOSCHKA, and [Lyonel] FEININGER, and [Ernst] KIRSCHNER, and all those sorts of people. For instance, I remember the exhibition in *Der Sturm*...[which was] *the* art gallery for the Expressionists; it was directed by a man by the name of Herwarth WALDEN in Berlin. And you could go there and you saw the KOKOSCHKAs, and you saw the FEININGERS, even though I never met the artists themselves (somehow I didn’t meet them, but of course they were around). Those were the works I grew up with and with which I still have a certain affinity — I guess my taste was very much informed by that early experience” (ARNHEIM 1984, 5).

As early as 1925, while still a university student, ARNHEIM began to write film reviews for various progressive magazines. “I went to every new film every week,” he recalls, “and I will tell you, for those of you who are writers, that at that time I had the firm persuasion that I could only write when I was walking in the street. I could not imagine that anybody could write when he was sitting at a desk. I was sure that I couldn’t do that. So what I would do was I would go to those first performances in the evening, which would be through by ten or eleven o’clock, and then I would walk home, which was in a very different area of Berlin, about a two hours’ walk away, and by the time I arrived at my home I had written the entire article, word by word, with every comma, in my head, so that I could sit down and simply dictate it to me, and for years that was the only way I ever conceived of writing” (ibid.).

In 1927, while both a graduate student and an editor for *Die Weltbühne*, a leftist journal edited by Carl von OSSIETZKY and Kurt TUCHOLSKY, he visited the well-known Bauhaus school in Dessau and wrote a short article about it. The essay, he remembers, “was mostly about the buildings since it was in the summer and nobody, either famous or infamous, was around that I remember” (ARNHEIM 1993b). He wrote of this celebrated structure (designed in 1925 by Walter GROPIUS) that “it shows more clearly than ever that the practically useful is at the same time the beautiful. Even from the viewpoint of aesthetic composition it feels good to see how railings, chair legs, door handles, or tea pots can be made of the same metal tubes. The old ‘unity in the complexity,’ which up to now could be applied only to architecture, statues, or pictures, acquires here a new meaning. One can now comprehend a building, which contains a thousand different objects, as an organized whole” (ARNHEIM 1997a).

The following year, having completed his Ph.D., he was “a little fed up with academics.” So he left academic life and worked instead as a journalist and film critic, frequently contributing to *Die Weltbühne*. He recalls that he interviewed Sergei EISENSTEIN, the great Russian film director, whose *Battleship Potemkin* he had witnessed when it first came out. “EISENSTEIN was coming back from Mexico,” ARNHEIM remembers, “he had done a film in Mexico, and he was in Berlin on the way back to Moscow, and we met at a hotel and talked for a while. He talked, he was not somebody you could interrupt — he talked to himself” (ARNHEIM 1984, 6).

He was also acquainted with other famous people from that period of Berlin society. “I knew the wonderful actress [Elizabeth] BERGNER personally as well as [Carl] ZUCKMEYER and [Lotte] EISNER. EINSTEIN played music with my teacher WERTHEIMER. His violin playing was known not to be very good nor was the piano of my teacher. But WERTHEIMER often used the piano to deal with expression by improvising personalities” (ARNHEIM 199d). (From this same time period, there is a wonderful story about a violin recital given by EINSTEIN for an audience that included the musician Gregor PLATIGORSKY. Afterwards, when EINSTEIN asked him “How did I play?” PLATIGORSKY thought for a moment and said, “*Relatively well.*”)

One time, he also talked about another memory of his Berlin days: He was preparing for publication in *Die Weltbühne* “an article by Karl KRAUS, the famous polemicist and linguist, known for his meticulous pedantry, when it came to words. Now

reading his manuscript we were not sure whether at one point a comma was needed or not. We inquired from KRAUS in Vienna and received promptly a telegram *Kein Komma Kraus*. It had a peculiar poetical beauty of its own” (ARNHEIM 1996e).

While still working in Berlin, he decided he should write a book about film as an art medium. He says this came about in part because the prevailing assumption was that photography and cinematography could not be art, for the reason that they were literal, mechanical records of life, whereas art was a form of expression. In 1932, ARNHEIM published in Germany a book called *Film as Art* (ARNHEIM 1957) in which he argued that film images are (and should always aspire to be) vastly different from reality. He also contended that film’s aesthetic potential was impaired by efforts to increase its resemblance to daily experience, by adding sound and color, with the result, as he himself admits, he is now sometimes unfairly dismissed as “an old fogey.”

This was also unfortunate timing. Soon after ARNHEIM’s book on film was published, Adolf HITLER was appointed Chancellor, and the sale of his book was no longer allowed. It quickly became apparent that he had no choice but to leave Germany. Perhaps one explanation for his departure is in an interview he gave in 1984, in which he explained that he had published an essay in 1932, shortly before the Nazis came to power, in which he compared the moustache of HITLER with that of Charlie CHAPLIN. “CHAPLIN’s humor consisted in his trying to pretend that he was aristocratic and one of the higher classes, when he was actually a tramp,” explains ARNHEIM, “This, in relation to the Führer was an unfortunate observation to make in public print and so when, three months later, I talked to a friend who had a connection to the Nazis, he said, ‘You know that article of yours, they have it in their files. So you better get out of the place.’ And then, fairly soon I did get out” (PARISER 1984, 179).

In 1933, ARNHEIM moved to Italy, where he remained for six years. There he continued to write about film for various periodicals, while also working with a team to compile an encyclopedia on the history and theory of film for the League of Nations (forerunner to the United Nations) in Rome, in connection with its Institute for the Educational Film. Meanwhile, he also wrote a second book, titled *Radio: The Art of Sound* (which was translated by Herbert READ, and published in England in 1936), in which he considered the attributes of radio in much the same way that he had earlier looked at film.

ARNHEIM loved Italy, its customs and language, so much so that he felt it was his *casa propria* (his own home). “The privilege of spending decisive years of my development in the Eternal City gave me standards of what is noble and lasting in Western culture,” he wrote in 1991, “it created a kind of internal home base that remained with me wherever I went to live thereafter. The language of Dante and Petrarch has been a cherished possession of mine ever since” (ARNHEIM 1991, 46).

In one of his memories of Italy, he recalls how he “arrived in Rome and took a room near the piazza di Spagna. It was August and very hot. The old lady showed me my room and asked me not to put lemons on the marble top of the chest and not to disturb the turtle egg she had put up for incubating it. ‘I have put it in this room because the hot water pipes run through it, and so it is the warmest room in the house!’” (ARNHEIM 1993a).

He has also said that “One of the nice things about Rome is that one never knows exactly what time it is. No two clocks ever agree. One perceives the moment through a soft focus, in which the edges of all duties are commitments are happily cushioned” (ARNHEIM 1989, 228).

Unfortunately, in 1938, the Italian dictator Benito MUSSOLINI withdrew from the League of Nations, and adopted racial policies that mirrored those of Nazi Germany. With some reluctance, ARNHEIM considered emigrating to the U.S., and went so far as to apply for an American visa. But the quota was filled, so instead he moved to England in 1939 (the year in which World War II began), where he was offered a position with BBC radio.

There, he became part of an international news service, he recalls, which broadcast “about twenty different languages all over the world, twenty-four hours a day. What we had there, and it was really an extraordinary sight, was that in the British Broadcasting Building, the one in the center of London, there was a room for each nationality, which had about ten or twelve people who were doing the translation from the English texts which we had to use, and they were also doing the announcing on the microphone. What was so extraordinary was that when one looked into one of those open doors, one really walked into a different civilization. That is, you have imagine, there were the Arabs, and here were the Yugoslavs, and here were the Russians, and the Germans, and the Greeks, and so forth. Everyone bringing his pictures to put on the wall, wearing their own costumes, things like that. The smells were different from room to room” (ARNHEIM 1984, 8).

ARNHEIM’s work as a radio translator was not only difficult, it was also an expedient way to become proficient at English. He recalls how challenging it was to translate instantaneously: “Imagine Winston CHURCHILL making a speech. To translate Winston CHURCHILL into German is a major feat, because the better the writer the harder the translation. And so we would get the speech as it was going on, as he was talking, page by page. And we would be translating page by page, and while I was translating the second page our man on the microphone was already sending the first page all over Europe. And if I had hesitated on a adjective, he would have been without a text; you see, he would have had to wait until I was ready to send up that piece of paper. And so we were under a tremendous pressure and, I assure you, you don’t learn writing better than when you’re under pressure of that kind. I’ve never had a writer’s cramp in my life after that; you just do it” (ARNHEIM 1984, 9).

Just as when he had lived in Berlin, he recalls he also walked at night through the streets of London, at a time when all the lights were out (to prevent German bombers from knowing the location of the city). If there was moonlight, he remembers, “you could see those famous Georgian colonnades around the park [Regent’s Park] in the moonlight, the way nobody, I guess, has ever seen them—at least not for a hundred years. You walked for two hours in the dark, and there was no such thing as fear of crime in the city; there was no such thing as fear of crime in any city in Europe in those years. You walked for two hours in the dark with no human being around, and you were as safe as you were in your own home” (ibid.). With regard to this habit for walking (he has never driven a car), he once wrote to me that dynamics “has been the

key concept of my own work for so long. So this keeps me involved. The Chinese ideograph for seeing is an eye on a pair of walking legs” (ARNHEIM 1998a).

While in London, he lived in a section called Hampstead, where “practically around the corner” lived Sigmund FREUD, although he never met him. He rented a room from a Mrs. DUTTON, who was “as British as they come.” In her backyard, “a subterranean air raid shelter had been dug, where when the air raid alarm called we sat playing chess, the only distraction that kept me from the screaming of the sirens. One night, I remember, when the alarm sounded, I knocked at Mrs. DUTTON’s bedroom, and she said: ‘You go ahead, I am coming.’ A while later, properly made up, she appeared in the shelter with a tray with cups of tea for all of us. This British manner helped them to stand the Nazi war and its bombs” (ARNHEIM 2001b).

ARNHEIM left England for the U.S. on an ocean steamer in the fall of 1940. “Now imagine,” he remembers, “somebody who has been in a big city, completely blacked out for about two years, on a boat, an English passenger boat, which went from England to New York, the boat also completely blacked out because of the submarines, the German submarines. And you arrive in the harbor of New York, with the buildings blazing up to the sixtieth floor, and you see all those lights up in the sky (and remember, I hadn’t seen any buildings higher than four or five floors, with very few exceptions, even), and my friends were at the harbor and they picked me up with a cab, which was twice as long as any car I had ever seen. And it was driven by a black man, and that gave it a kind of Aïda flavor — something completely exotic — because I hadn’t seen many black people in my life. And here he was, in charge of that car, and they took me along Riverside Drive to the apartment of my friend, whom I was glad to have, because I arrived there with ten dollars in my pocket — all the money you were permitted to take out of England. And that’s the way I started out” (ARNHEIM 1984, 9-10).

As soon as he had set foot on American soil, ARNHEIM remembers, it was “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” (ARNHEIM 1996a, 241).

Shortly after his arrival, ARNHEIM was invited to join the psychology faculty of the New School for Social Research, where Max WERTHEIMER, his former *Doktorvater*, was on the graduate faculty. At the same time, he also applied for a fellowship from the Rockefeller Foundation to work with the Office of Radio Research at Columbia University. Years later, in an informal talk to students, he recalled what it was like for an emigrant, who had arrived only recently, to be interviewed for a grant application “somewhere high up in Rockefeller Center.” After taking the elevator to something like the seventy-second floor, he “went to see the gentleman on whom my destiny depended. It was a very correctly dressed man with a little moustache (very English, sort of) sitting at the desk, and when you looked out of the window you saw that everything in Manhattan was covered by clouds except for a few steeples looking

through the clouds, and it was as though you were visiting God the Lord up in the sky. And here was God the Lord, sitting there, in charge of the money—in charge of those millions of dollars which he could say yes or no to; either you would be starving or you would get all the money you needed for a couple of years. It was quite an experience” (ARNHEIM 1984, 10).

As it turned out, he did receive a Rockefeller Fellowship, with the result that he began to research American soap operas on the radio. Specifically, the project looked at the degree to which listeners were influenced by such programs. In addition, he recalls that “the Office of Radio Research sent me to Milwaukee [a stronghold of American Socialists] to listen to the German language broadcasts to find out how the beerbrower Germans responded on their radio to the Nazi army in their battles. My hotel room [at the Pfister Hotel on Wisconsin Avenue] in Milwaukee had to be equipped with a radio, a luxury not common in those days; and so I spent several days spying on the Germans” (ARNHEIM 2000).

In 1942, he was also given a two-year Guggenheim Fellowship to research the application of perceptual psychology to the visual arts, with the plan that he would write a book. But the project was premature (“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” (ARNHEIM 1974)), and he delayed it in favor of further research. In 1943, he was hired to teach psychology at Sarah Lawrence College, a well-known undergraduate school for women in Bronxville, New York, where he remained on the faculty until 1969. It was during those 25 years as a teacher of undergraduates at Sarah Lawrence, he remembers, that “I learned whatever I’ve learned about teaching” (ARNHEIM 1984, 12).

Among his experiences at Sarah Lawrence, he recalls the day when American architect Frank Lloyd WRIGHT was asked to deliver the commencement speech. “Harold TAYLOR, the President, and WRIGHT walked in [attired in] their pompous costumes on the terrace and sat down in front of us faculty,” he remembers, “But after a few minutes, WRIGHT whispered something to Taylor, and they both walked out. TAYLOR returning explained to the audience, ‘It is not that Mr. W. had to go to the bathroom; he just does not want to listen to the other speeches.’ After those were all done, he did return and [then] began, ‘I see before me the flower of American womanhood. A few years from now everyone of you will build a home, and to do that you will hire an architect. The other day I was in San Francisco and happened to look up the names of the architects in the telephone book. There was not an architect among them.’ And so on” (ARNHEIM 1993a).

He also recalls a charming moment at a faculty reception at Sarah Lawrence, when Harold TAYLOR’s “mother-in-law, a British lady, taught me how to tie my shoes with a double knot so that they keep tied more securely and still come apart in a jiffy. Kneeling on the floor in the midst of the chattering sherry sippers she tied my shoes. I remember her twice a day ever since” (ARNHEIM 1996b).

As it turned out, his completion of a major book would wait until the early 1950s, when, having received a second Rockefeller Fellowship, he took a leave from teaching for 15 months, and wrote a pioneering book titled *Art and Visual Perception: A Psychology of the Creative Eye*. (ARNHEIM 1974). “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” (ibid.). Completely revised in 1974, it has been translated into 14 languages, and is one of the most widely read and influential art books of the past century.

In 1968, when ARNHEIM was 64 years old, he might have retired from teaching. But he had just written a pivotal book titled *Visual Thinking*, (ARNHEIM 1969) and instead he accepted an offer from Harvard University to become a Professor of the Psychology of Art at its newly-founded center for Visual and Environmental Studies, which was, as he remembers, “an ambitious attempt to put studio work in a broad social, psychological, and historical context” (ARNHEIM 1991, 46).

While living in Cambridge, Massachusetts, he became acquainted with the German-born Bauhaus painter Josef ALBERS, who had retired more than a decade earlier from his post as head of the art department at Yale University in New Haven, Connecticut. Mostly, he and ALBERS met whenever the latter was asked to appear as a guest lecturer at Harvard. In return, ARNHEIM was invited to speak at Yale. “There was a big audience filling the auditorium,” ARNHEIM recalls of that event, and then “ALBERS got up and said: ‘My students mostly do their work in the studio. But unfortunately they also write papers. And in those papers they always quote Mr. ARNHEIM. I got so sick and tired of it, I thought we might as well get it over with and so here he is!’” (ARNHEIM 1995c).

He also remembers that ALBERS (who was well-known for his abstract works called *Homage to the Square*) once told him that “When I came to Yale, the first thing I said, was, ‘No more naked women, only squares’” (ARNHEIM 1995b).

It was also at Harvard that he renewed his friendship with the Hungarian-born painter György KEPES, whom he had known earlier in Berlin, where KEPES had designed the dust jacket for ARNHEIM’s first book, *Film as Art*. After coming to America in 1937, KEPES had taught with Laszlo MOHOLY-NAGY at the New Bauhaus in Chicago, and had written a groundbreaking book about art and perceptual psychology called *Language of Vision*, in the opening sentence of which he admits his indebtedness to the writings of the Gestalt psychologists, WERTHEIMER, KÖHLER and KOFFKA (KEPES 1944).

ARNHEIM remained at Harvard for six years, until he retired from teaching in 1974 and moved to Ann Arbor, Michigan, the region his wife was originally from. There, as a visiting professor at the University of Michigan, he taught several courses each year until he was 80 years old. But the pace of his writing continued, and in a twenty-year period of retirement (from 1977 to 1997), he published no fewer than eight new books and completed a major revision of one.

ARNHEIM was devoted to his second wife Mary, as she was as well to him. A librarian by training, she proofed and typed the written drafts of his books and articles. “I call [her] my Rumpelstilskin,” he once told me, “because she turns my straw into gold, by typing and alerting me to what English will not tolerate” (ARNHEIM 1995a). “There is no freedom quite like marriage,” he also wrote, “it is the true liberation. We have been together since 1953, and I would not be on this planet without her” (ARNHEIM 1993d).

In June of 1998, the night before they planned to leave for a summer at their lakeside home, Mary ARNHEIM became seriously ill. After being hospitalized, it was confirmed that she would have to have major surgery. The operation was successful. She returned home, and for months, she appeared to recover. The doctors are pleased with her progress, he wrote. Then on December 13, 1999, two weeks in advance of the century's end, she died. She was 81 at the time, while he was 95.

In the years after the death of his wife, ARNHEIM has continued to correspond with friends, and to write short essays even, but he has been gradually forced to slow down, not from mental confusion or a shortage of determination, but because of the rapid decline of his sight from macular degeneration. In May 2001 he wrote that his eyes are "worsening constantly, and I'm looking forward to a test for possible improved glasses. I see the visual world in a dim Impressionist light, which has the consequence of equally dimming my thoughts, of making me reason in generalizations" (ARNHEIM 2001a).

If asked to name a single book by ARNHEIM from which I have gained the most, I would have to say *Art and Visual Perception*, from which I learned so much about the nuts and bolts of graphic design and art-making. At the same time, I have also gained as much from one of his later and lesser known volumes, a collection of brief but indelible thoughts from his notebooks called *Parables of Sun Light: Observations on Psychology, the Arts, and the Rest*. In the final entry in that book, he reveals that he sometimes envisions himself as a little owl who sits patiently on the shoulder of ATHENE (the Greek goddess of war, peace and wisdom, and a patron of the arts and crafts), that his life is "one of contemplation rather than action" because he only "observes the observers" (ARNHEIM 1989, 369). Struck by that image, I once wrote an article-length biography of him called "Rudolf ARNHEIM: The Little Owl on the Shoulder of Athene" (BEHRENS 1998a).

As I write this, Rudi is 99. We still correspond on occasion, but his letters, while warm, are increasing brief. He can no longer see well enough to write, so he dictates the contents to a friend, which he signs with his initials. With each letter, his hand is increasingly shaky. Each time as I send off a letter, I cannot help but wonder if he will still be alive when it arrives. He too must be amazed to find that his life has been so uncommonly lengthy and full.

I also often think about a beautiful passage he wrote in his notebooks about death, when he was only 68. It reads: "As one gets older, it happens that in the morning one fails to remember the airplane trip to be taken in a few hours or the lecture scheduled for the afternoon. Memory does return in time, but the suspicion remains that in the end dying will consist in simply forgetting to live" (ARNHEIM 1989, 156).

Summary

Rudolf ARNHEIM (1904-), a German-born Gestalt psychologist and art theorist, is the last surviving student of Max WERTHEIMER and Wolfgang KÖHLER at the Psychological Institute at the University of Berlin. Professor Emeritus of the Psychology of Art at Harvard University, he has authored fifteen books and scores of articles on the subject of art in relation to perceptual psychology. Despite his long, eventful life, Arnheim has always been reluctant to write an autobiography. In this article, passages from his letters, in which he talks about his life, are combined with quotes from additional texts to produce what is, to some extent, an "indavertent autobiography."

Zusammenfassung

Der in Deutschland geborene Gestaltpsychologe und Kunsttheoretiker Rudolf ARNHEIM (geb. 1904) ist der letzte noch lebende Schüler von Max WERTHEIMER und Wolfgang KÖHLER aus der Zeit des Psychologischen Instituts an der Universität Berlin. ARNHEIM, Professor Emeritus für Kunstpsychologie an der Harvard University, hat fünfzehn Bücher und eine große Zahl von Artikeln zum Thema Kunst und Wahrnehmungspsychologie veröffentlicht. Obwohl sein langes, ereignisreiches Leben dies nahelegen hätte können, hat sich ARNHEIM nie dazu entschließen können, eine Autobiographie zu schreiben. Passagen aus Briefen ARNHEIMS an den Autor, in denen er aus seinem Leben berichtet, werden im vorliegenden Beitrag mit Zitaten aus zusätzlichen Texten zu einer Art „unbeabsichtigter Autobiographie“ ARNHEIMS verflochten.

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