

Reports - Berichte

ARNHEIM AND DISCOURSES OF ART HISTORY

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At the latest meeting of the College Art Association – the national organization of academic artists and art historians in the United States – I organized a panel called “Art and Visual Perception at Fifty” celebrating the fiftieth anniversary of Rudolf ARNHEIM’s major book of the same name. Three art historians were assembled, along with one psychologist to give a requisite overview of the currency of ARNHEIM’s psychological theories. Each showed resoundingly that there are resources in ARNHEIM’s theories that are yet to be tapped. The true lesson, however, was a very informative look at how ARNHEIM and Gestalt Psychology fit into the academy. For it is not so much the value of ARNHEIM’s book, and his theories in general, that was at issue, but the ways in which his seeming ‘modernism’ fit into postmodern, ‘formalism’ fit into post-optical, and ‘scientism’ fit into cultural discourses. As the fortunes of Gestalt theory depend as much on the validity of its theses as on the politics of scientific discourse, I shall focus on this aspect as I review the results of each panelist’s contribution.

It was my hope that having a psychologist present would suspend the quick dismissal of ARNHEIM by art historians based on the ‘datedness’ of Gestalt theory. It is an irony that much contemporary cultural theory has as much amnesia as does positivistic science. Fortunately, Tiziano AGOSTINI of the University of Trieste set about examining one particular aspect of ARNHEIM’s theory – the discussion of light and color in the visual arts – to discuss its validity. AGOSTINI could have pointed to the continued ineffectiveness of image-analysis approaches to lightness perception, and their inability to account for the global structure of a complexly illuminated scene, in the manner of Paola BRESSAN (2001). Or he could have shown the similar limitations of physiological contrast explanations, as Alan GILCHRIST (1990) has done. Instead, he relied on a phenomenological analysis written by ARNHEIM that points to the complexity of our ability to perceive light and color, and his own experiments on the problem.

ARNHEIM (1954/1974) wrote how, “I look at the small wooden barrel on the shelf. Its cylindrical surface displays a rich scale of brightness and color values. Next to the left contour there is a dark brown, almost a black. As my glance moves across the surface, the color gets lighter and more clearly brown, until it begins to become paler and paler, approaching a climax at which whiteness has all but replaced brown. Beyond the climax the color reverts back to brown. But this description is correct only as long as I examine the surface inch by inch ... When I look at the barrel more freely and naturally, the result is quite different. Now the whole object is uniformly brown” (p. 309). ARNHEIM is noting the difference between seeing brightness (achromatic) or unasserted color (chromatic) – the perceived luminance (or hue of the luminance)

of a gray or color sample – versus seeing the lightness (achromatic) or apparent surface color (chromatic) – the perceived reflectance or hue of a surface.

This is a phenomenological point with deep implications for theorizing the working of the visual system. AGOSTINI then reported some experiments he did with subjects who were asked to judge the brightness and lightness of buildings outdoors with various corners and shadowed areas producing a complex array of grays (AGOSTINI, 2003). When asked to produce a match of a shadowed portion with a Munsell chip, the subjects naturally compared the brightness. Then he asked them to match the lightness, and they then again complied. When faced with the contradiction of their responses, the subjects were surprised. Thus AGOSTINI showed the amazing lability of the human visual system in detecting very complex differences of response, as intuited by ARNHEIM. What is interesting about AGOSTINI's choice is that it addresses no positive result of Gestalt theory in the sense of a proposed mechanism or principle (relational determination). Rather, it points to the patient intelligence of one of its practitioners in interrogating the very fugitive effects of light and color. This of course dates an author least, and recommends that author for a thorough re-reading.

Laurie TAYLOR-MITCHELL (“Mind over Matter: Composing the Spiritual and Visceral Centers within the Human Figure”) of Hood College began the art historical discussion with a methodology that grew out of the work which supplemented *Art and Visual Perception* (1954/1974), namely *The Power of the Center* (1982/1988). This book is somewhat irritating to art historians in too coincidentally (or purposely?) invoking the challenging notion of the “center,” just at the time when both DERRIDA and FOUCAULT were discussing the ruptures constituting the contemporary world. ‘Center’ seemed to imply political centrism and ultimately fascism when postmodern discourse was all about dislocation. ARNHEIM made the bold claim that even if an artist tries to make a picture about disorder, he will have to use order to provide it.

Thus TAYLOR-MITCHELL used ARNHEIM's analysis to show how in paintings the vertical placement of the head and abdomen in turn expressed harmonies and conflicts between the human and animal natures of humanity. In countless examples, she showed how the placement of the head relative to the visceral centers responded to the demands of artistic composition of two visual centers – the head and the body – and furthermore how these competing visual weights developed an appropriate thematic meaning for the work. The lesson to be learned from her work is that ARNHEIM's theory of artistic composition can be highly useful in understanding issues of gender and sexuality, because it provides an essential analytical toolkit for explaining exactly how the artist communicated these ideas of gender and sexuality.

The next paper, by Roger ROTHMAN (“Arnheim's Lesson: Cubism, Collage, and Gestalt”) specifically takes off from a paper by the Harvard art historian Yves-Alain BOIS (1990), called “Kahnweiler's lesson,” after the great dealer and friend of the Cubists, Henry KAHNWEILER. What this man intuited, and what BOIS and his colleague Rosalind KRAUSS codified, was a semiotic theory of Cubism according to which the early Cubists invented a language-like visual art of a fundamentally new nature. Thus, by punning with symbols and letters they showed the way in which the manipulated signs evoked objects. Any sign could reference anything (‘the arbitrariness of linguistic symbols’), and this PICASSO taught to the art world.

Departing from ARNHEIM's strangely-ignored writings on Cubism (ARNHEIM after all knew PICASSO from the writing of his book, *Picasso's Guernica: The Genesis of a Painting*, 1962), ROTHMAN showed how Cubism instead showed nearly the opposite truth, namely that representation is such a fundamental affair that even these various objects are recognizable. As he said, it is not that images can function as a language but rather that certain linguistic elements can indeed function like pictures. Thus far from being different from all preceding varieties of art, Cubism was really little different from it. ROTHMAN took ARNHEIM quite seriously and in so doing, uncovered some of the weaknesses of the BOIS-KRAUSS theory.

The last talk was by Kevin PARKER, of the University of North Carolina, reassessing "Arnheim and Contemporary Film Theory." After decades of semiotic, psychoanalytic, and feminist analyses of film, ARNHEIM's early *Film as Art* (1932/1957) has been regarded as little more than of historical interest. The approaches have stressed the ideological elements found in film at the expense of the formal, even though ARNHEIM always stressed that even an ideological analysis requires a good visual analysis. One factor changing the situation and calling for a reassessment is the unusual theories of Gilles DELEUZE (1983/1986; 1985/1989). Emerging from the French school of poststructuralism with a brand of psychoanalytic semiotics, DELEUZE moved toward a frankly materialistic, Spinozistic worldview.

Of course, this is very favorable for Gestalt theory, which has been inspired to a certain degree by SPINOZA's ideas. DELEUZE's interest in film in his twin *Cinéma studies*, *The Movement-Image* (*L'image-mouvement*) and *The Time-Image* (*L'image-temps*) has brought film studies back to the image per se, and its ability to suggest movement and time. DELEUZE has even paraded the materialistic slogan, "The Brain is the Screen." Here PARKER begins his analysis, and reasons for reconsidering ARNHEIM in a similar light. However, PARKER arrived at ARNHEIM's psychological approach in a circumspect way, in suspicion of the absolutism of the Cultural Studies in which DELEUZE finds a home. In other words, one must be suspicious of either a purely psychological or purely cultural theory, and that brings us back to ARNHEIM, although PARKER still felt that ARNHEIM's theories might be too psychological in this same sense.

AGOSTINI, who received his training at the University of Trieste under Paolo BOZZI, Riccardo LUCCIO and Walter GERBINO, is sympathetic to Gestalt theory. Laurie TAYLOR-MITCHELL was a doctoral student of ARNHEIM at the University of Michigan. Each has a 'sentimental' attachment to ARNHEIM. ROTHMAN and PARKER, on the other hand, emerge from an external viewpoint to reconsider ARNHEIM's theories in a new light. Together, the two groups show a balance of representing what was convincing in an old theory and discovering what is newly convincing in an old theory. AGOSTINI and TAYLOR-MITCHELL have the advantage of knowing the complexities of the thought of ARNHEIM, from familiarity with it over several years. But ROTHMAN and PARKER have the advantage of understanding the discourses of art history into which we might wish to place ARNHEIM.

In all cases, this difficulty is in the perception that somehow ARNHEIM's concerns do not jibe with current concerns. As I noted, ARNHEIM's discussion of Cubism is quite plausible but might seem to have something of Romantic hyperbole in it. In any

case, to make Cubism not different than any other art would seem deflating to an art historian trying to dramatize its decisive break with the past. In art history, heavily influenced by Cultural Studies, there is a strong emphasis on Culture at the expense of psychology. As PARKER points out most clearly, the natural suspicious attitude of Cultural Studies ought to be vigilant at the improbability of this model of art, simply for its exclusiveness.

Another difficulty is the very language of discourses. This is not a problem for AGOSTINI, for whom we either adopt the discourse of psychology or we do not. TAYLOR-MITCHELL made the surprising claim that ARNHEIM's 'formalism' could undergird the discussion of the sexuality of Christ, by pointing out issues of visual competition between compositional centers. But the most striking example is DELEUZE. Although DELEUZE is talking about 'movement,' 'time' and the 'brain,' little that he says will be recognizable to anyone incorporating psychological arguments into their art historical work. Indeed, one might argue that its strength lies in its ambiguity, for it is purely suggestive, and DELEUZE never has to deign to propose an actual model of the brain, which he calls the screen. This result suggests a more pessimistic conclusion. Since ARNHEIM was a psychologist and wrote in a language recognizable to practicing psychologists, the gap may not be bridgeable between psychology and Cultural Studies. Surely, it will take some patience from practitioners from both camps.

To conclude, the panel was a fitting American tribute to both ARNHEIM himself and to his influential book, *Art and Visual Perception* (1954/1974). It brought much-needed attention to the status of not only ARNHEIM's particular Gestalt-inspired theories, but also to the very role of psychological insights in the writing of art history. Perhaps most important has been the realization that this important methodological issue is as much about theory, rigor and fruitfulness as about institutions and their predominant discourses. ARNHEIM's theories will continue to live on, suited to changing needs of the discipline, phrased in a slightly different way, and as in any Gestalt context, changing slightly its meaning along the way.

Summary

To celebrate Rudolf ARNHEIM's one hundredth birthday, a panel at the College Art Association was proposed, entitled "Art and Visual Perception at 50." Various contributors discussed the continued art historical significance of ARNHEIM's ideas today. While they showed compelling reasons for ARNHEIM's continued importance, each also in subtle ways reflected on the position of ARNHEIM and Gestalt Theory in the American academy. Intellectual fashions are changing and are making ARNHEIM once more relevant, rather than the intrinsic value of his theories.

Zusammenfassung

Zur Feier von Rudolf ARNHEIMs 100. Geburtstag wurde an der *College Art Association* eine Veranstaltung unter dem Titel „Kunst und visuelle Wahrnehmung mit 50“ angeboten. Viele Referenten stellten die bleibende Bedeutung von ARNHEIMs Ideen für die Kunstgeschichte

vor. Während einerseits zwingende Gründe für ARNHEIMs bleibende Bedeutung dargestellt wurden, wurde andererseits auch die Stellung ARNHEIMs und der Gestalttheorie in der akademischen Welt Amerikas reflektiert. Über den intrinsischen Wert seiner Theorien hinaus scheint der Wechsel intellektueller Moden ARNHEIMs Relevanz im Augenblick zu begünstigen.

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