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Is Arnheim Just a Formalist?

Eyesight is insight

Rudolf Arnheim

In a recent book (Higgins 2011), a number of researchers reconsider the pioneering works of Rudolf Arnheim in the field of film theory and the visual arts. The book rightly highlights the fundamental cognitive contribution of these works, their illuminating and still relevant theoretical value and applicability to old and new media. Some of the essays in the book, moreover, referring to the claim often made against Arnheim that he is a formalist, attempt to demonstrate the unfounded nature of such a claim (Alter 2011; Dhir 2011; Rentschler 2011).

This is indeed a ridiculous criticism to make, as I will try to prove in the course of this article, after mentioning some of the theoretical assumptions that Arnheim makes. Furthermore, in my opinion, such a criticism is a symptom of an underlying misunderstanding which, in various guises, is apparent in the works of numerous scholars, when they refer to or analyse or evaluate the constituent constructs (and some of them in particular) of Arnheim's theory.

This misunderstanding can plausibly be seen as deriving from a certain habit of mind that might be called intellectualistic, academic, cerebral or speculative which, with its epistemological implications, is present and indeed widespread in scientific and psychological debates in general.

Its hallmark is, essentially, an attitude that Arnheim himself has summed up when he refers to the "practitioners of theoretical thought" who "like to think that their operations are beyond the senses", revealing themselves to be suffering from the kind of "deficiency diseases" that are caused by "a split between sense and thought" (Arnheim 1969, V-VI) and which, in the history of Western scientific culture, find a double justification, though not a legitimisation: on the one hand, the demand for experimentation and quantification, and on the other the tendency to pursue procedures that consist in logic or abstraction.

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In other words, it is an epistemological attitude that rests on deductive procedures, meant in a general sense, and which prejudicially rejects or fails to appreciate the value of an approach to study and research that is based on data coming from immediate experience. We are dealing, then, with a distinctively phenomenological approach, in the sense in which this was introduced, developed and upheld by Gestalt psychologists.

It is this approach that Arnheim follows in constructing, organising and validating his psychological theory. He himself justifies its use and draws an outline of it, for example, after using it in the analysis of a Chinese statue of the Sung Dynasty. Arnheim (1992, 181) replies in the following way to his own rhetorical question as to whether this kind of analysis can be considered scientific as well as psychological:

“An analysis such as this one is certainly psychological, but is it scientific? [...] The procedure I demonstrated is phenomenological. It presupposes some trust of the analyst in his own ability to view certain psychological appearances objectively and relevantly. His verdict, however, need not remain unchecked. It can and should be subjected to the judgment of other viewers, professional and otherwise. When, however, an object of research is too complex to be treated adequately with the experimental procedures now available, I have never been willing to reduce it to the level for which we now have the instruments. Without remorse I have settled for the most careful observation and description of which I was capable, this being my definition of science. The ostensive method, the pointing with the index finger, the ‘Don’t you see that . . . ?’ is not without risk, but, particularly in teaching, it has always been my choice”.

Furthermore, the mental processes implied in this kind of approach are also the distinguishing characteristic of how perception works. It is on the workings of perception that cognitive activity is based, and Arnheim uses a number of names to indicate its nature and features: “perceiving mind”, “perceptual reasoning”, “visual thinking”.

Visual thinking is also the title of a substantial work in which Arnheim (1969) illustrates the functioning of perception, in particular visual perception, attributing to it the same, though more prominent, cognitive value as the activities of thought, generally considered as being of greater importance.

The first chapter of this book explains the philosophical reasons for the current prejudicial discrimination between perception and thought – current both with respect to when it was written, the end of the 1960s, and also today. Then in the second chapter, entitled *The Intelligence of Perception*, Arnheim outlines with great conciseness and clarity one of the assumptions that are at the basis of his theory:

“The title of this chapter may seem to contain an obvious contradiction. How can there be intelligence in perception? Is not intelligence a matter of thought? And does not thought begin where the work of the senses ends? Precisely these assumptions will be questioned in what follows. My contention is that the cognitive operations called thinking are not the privilege of mental processes above and beyond perception but the essential ingredients of perception itself. I am referring to such operations as active exploration, selection, grasping of essentials, simplification, abstraction, analysis and synthesis, completion, correction, comparison, problem solving, as well as combining, separating, putting in context. These operations are not the prerogative of any one mental function; they are the manner in which the minds of both man and animal treat cognitive material at any level. There is no basic difference in this respect between what happens when a person looks at the world directly and when he sits with his eyes closed and ‘thinks” (Arnheim 1969, 13).

The visual processes are just like those of thought: active, constructive and regulated by principles, laws and working mechanisms of their own. For cognitive ends there is no difference in value between seeing and thinking – the two faculties of the mind; indeed from this point of view they are complementary and mutually cooperative. The difference consists both in how each of these faculties handles the information that it is called upon to deal with, and also – and this is another fundamental assumption in Arnheim’s theory – in the primacy of perception in processing information, deemed *cognitio inferior* in comparison with the processing potentialities of thought, in common culture and by the scientific community, psychologists first of all.

To quote again the words of Arnheim:

“Evidently then the mind, in order to cope with the world, must fulfill two functions. It must gather information and it must process it. The two functions are neatly separate in theory, but are they in practice? Do they divide the sequence of the process into mutually exclusive domains [...] Actually, [...] the collaboration of perceiving and thinking in cognition would be incomprehensible if such a division existed. I shall suggest that only because perception gathers types of things, that is, concepts, can perceptual material be used for thought: and inversely, that unless the stuff of the senses remains present the mind has nothing to think with” (Arnheim 1969, 1).

Perhaps it is affirmations like these that generate the misunderstandings I mentioned above, but they may also derive from what I would call *semantic fixedness* – similar to the functional fixedness that is identified as a negative tendency in problem solving – which consists in not being able to conceive and accept that a word can have connotations different from those in conventional use, thus contributing to the formation of the intellectualistic habit of mind I spoke of at the beginning. As a consequence, the “concept” cannot be conceived as a term that indicates the product of an act of perception, but only of thought,

that is fruit of the intellect. Rather the opposite is true. The use of this terminology is to express the precise intention that there is a “striking similarity” between the activity of the senses and that of thought and reasoning, but that such a similarity should not lead us to think, wrongly, that the act of perception is an intellectual operation. What happens is that similar procedures take place at both levels, the perceptual and the intellectual, “so that terms like concept, judgment, logic, abstraction, conclusion, computation are needed in describing the work of the senses” (Arnheim 1974, 46). Ultimately what Arnheim means is that:

“...perceiving accomplishes at the sensory level what in the realm of reasoning is known as understanding. Every man’s eyesight anticipates in a modest way the justly admired capacity of the artist to produce patterns that validly interpret experience by means of organized form. Eyesight is insight” (Arnheim 1974, 46).

There is another key aspect that needs to be clarified before examining the claim of “formalism” against Arnheim, namely the fundamental features of the functioning of visual thinking, the activity of perception upon which human cognition is based. There are, among others, two basic and interconnected principles that govern the process of vision: one that can be ascertained and verified through direct experience, and the other which pertains to the neuro-physiological level, about whose mechanisms we can as yet only formulate hypotheses that cannot be tested. The first concerns the dynamics, which are a characteristic feature of visual experience as a whole, while the second involves the neuro-physiological correlates implied in this experience.

Arnheim (1966*a*, 102-119) illustrates the essence of the two principles in question in his discussion of this perceptual experience that is common to all of us. This experience regards the sense of proportion – “one of the basic visual experiences is that of right and wrong” (102) – that causes us to be favourably or unfavourably impressed by the appearance of things, and to evaluate to what extent they correspond or fail to correspond to what they should be:

“... the shape of a house, a shelf, or a picture frame may repose contentedly or show a need to improve by stretching or shrinking. The sense of proportion is inherent in the experience of perception, and – like all other perceptual properties – is dynamic. Rightness is seen not as dead immobility but as the active equipoise of concerted forces while wrongness is seen as a struggle to get away from an unsatisfactory state of affairs. Well-balanced shape is a main source both of the harmony found in many products of nature and man and of the pleasure given by that harmony” (Arnheim 1966*a*, 102).

I believe that the reader can easily recognize these criteria of evaluation, since they have a universal value, they are not culturally determined, and, for example, they enable us to appreciate and understand works of art of other cultures and other historical periods, whatever our personal tastes might be. What is of interest here

is to note their adaptability, corresponding in general to the biological demands of human beings: we need clarity and simplicity to find our way, equilibrium and cohesion to live a tranquil life, tension and variety to satisfy our natural vitality. These are some of the qualities that reflect the dynamic nature of visual experience, the principle of dynamics, which Arnheim illustrates with an example and referring to the other principle of the neuro-physiological component:

“In the following, I shall assume that an optical stimulus pattern – produced, for example, by a drawing of a rectangle, at which the observer is looking – when projected on the pertinent brain field, will arouse in that field a corresponding pattern of physiological forces. Thus, the static stimulus pattern will be translated into a dynamic process governed by the principle of balance, and the resulting tensions in the physiological field will have their counterpart in visual experience. This theory explains how we can judge spatial relations without measuring the lines or planes involved. Intuitive judgment, based simply on the inspection of a pattern as a whole, is assumed to rely on the strength and directions of the tensions experienced in the perceived object. Such intuitive judgment can be most sensitive even to compositions of geometrically or numerically complicated structure because, instead of figuring out the single elements and their connection piecemeal, the mind can rely on the tensions resulting from the integrated action of all the forces concerned. More generally, this means that whereas *the calculating mind can only approximate the Gestalt by establishing a network of relations, the perceiving mind can fully realize it by relying on the field of interacting forces itself*” (Arnheim 1966a, 104, italics mine).

In substance, visual experience, in this case the experience regarding the sense of proportion, is dynamic because there is dynamism in the neuro-physiological processes that underlie it and which are stimulated by the arrangement from which it is generated, in this case the drawing of the rectangle. The force field that is brought into use, and which is the result of the energy and the directions of the tensions present in the stimulating pattern, that is by the elements of the arrangement, can be seen as the psychological equivalent of the field of physiological forces that are called into play in the brain’s centre of vision. This analogy is justified by the hypothesis of isomorphism maintained by Gestalt psychology, even if, as I have already stated, this is to be seen purely as theoretical hypothesis. As the excerpt quoted reveals, isomorphism postulates that our experiences and the processes underlying them have the same structure and, consequently, that processes occurring in differing domains can possess a corresponding structural organization. As a matter of fact, one interpretative hypothesis concerning the relationship between mind and brain, and very similar to the hypothesis of isomorphism, seems to be becoming more and more plausible in the field of the neurosciences, following from the results obtained in this field (on this subject, see the article of Eagle & Wakefield, 2007 and the comment on this article by Mechsner 2007).

The excerpt above is of interest for us also because it provides further information about the features of visual thinking or, as Arnheim calls it in this case, of the *perceiving mind*, since it draws attention to the procedural differences, rather than the similarities, and also to the prerogative to satisfy fully the task of evaluating the spatial relations present in a visual object, rather than the other, purely intellectual operation, the determination of quantity – the *calculating mind* – that the mind can rely on to form a judgement. The judgement that the perceptual mind is able to submit concerning the correctness of the spatial relations to an arrangement would tend to be a true one because vision is designed to grasp the pattern as a whole and evaluate the quality of the relationship between its components, while the calculating mind, through its measurements, dismembers any given pattern, isolating and transforming the spatial relations into numbers that easily risk being seen simply as numbers, without any relevance to the object that they refer to.

Another essay, very short but as always of great value from the cognitive point of view, offers some more elements that contribute to the task of drawing a simple but essential outline of the mind working with sense data. The theme is inspiration – artistic inspiration to be precise – which offered Arnheim (1996*b*) the opportunity to express his opinion on the construct of the “unconscious”, limiting its meaning to that commonly accepted; the unconscious is not a peculiar way of working of mental phenomena, nor even less the “place” where these phenomena supposedly occur, but rather an attribute: that is, it indicates if such phenomena, when they occur, are present or not at the conscious level.

“In fact if, for simplicity’s sake, we assume that what we call creativity is a kind of reasoning, and that such reasoning can be either intellectual or perceptual – and, of course, is mostly a combination of both – then we find that intellectual as well as perceptual problem-solving can take place either consciously or unconsciously” (Arnheim 1996*b*, 287).

That this is true is shown by the ample confirmation that the mind can operate beneath the level of consciousness even when it is dealing with exquisitely intellectual problems, for example those that lead to amazing scientific discoveries; this is just the same as happens in its own way when the artist operating with perceptual data comes to choose a theme or subject as representation, without being aware of the reason for his choice. In addition to this clearly acceptable point of view, Arnheim goes further in his argument. After making it clear that by intellectual reasoning he means “the handling of abstract concepts”, he gives his definition of perceptual reasoning, which is of particular interest to us here.

“By ‘perceptual reasoning’ I mean creative work that involves the handling of relations between sensory qualities, such as size, movement, space, shape, or color” (Arnheim 1966*b*, 287).

And to give an example of this kind of reasoning, he refers to what Albert Einstein said about his own form of scientific thinking, describing it as a “combinatory play” of “certain signs and more or less clear images”, either visual or muscular, the results of which were then to be with some difficulty transformed into words or other abstract symbols. Intense initial activity, then, which presumably came about unconsciously seeing that Einstein himself affirmed that “full consciousness is a limit case which can never be fully accomplished”. There are many other representative texts in which Arnheim attempts to illustrate the kind of thought that he is mainly dealing with (see for example Arnheim 1986; 1996), but I believe and hope that the comments given so far are sufficient for our ends.

To sum up, abstract logical thought and visual thought operate cognitively following similar procedures – active exploration, selection, grasping of essentials, simplification, abstractions, analysis and synthesis, completion, correction, comparison, problem solving, as well as combining, separating, putting in context. They are both functional for the understanding and interpretation of the world, and are complementary and cooperative. This is where the similarities lie. They are however markedly different from other points of view. Compared with logical thought, visual thought is of a more primary and essential nature, in the sense that perception elaborates and then gives the intellect the chance to take shape, develop and function, that is, the latter is always dependent on the former to exist. It is only in virtue of the fact that “perception gathers types of things, that is concepts”, that it can “be used for thought”, but if “the stuff of senses” is not present, “the mind has nothing to think with” (Arnheim 1969, 1). The perceiving mind has then the prerogative to grasp phenomenal data, pieces of the world in which we live, as they manifest themselves in relation to one another as part of a whole – that is wholes that have been dynamically structured – that does not, then, belong to the analytical and quantitative mind. Finally, visual thinking has its own way of reasoning – which is creative and which involves the handling of relations between sensory qualities – which enables it to obtain particular results.

Taking into account all that has been said, we can now return to the claim that Arnheim is a formalist.

If by formalism we mean the tendency, common to many art theorists, even with differing formative backgrounds and methodological training, that directs most of its attention to the formal aspects of a work of art, in order to describe and understand the work itself, then Arnheim is without doubt a formalist.

If, however, by formalism we refer to the conception according to which the identity or *raison d'être* of a work of art lies in its formal values, with no or little regard for the meaning that it possesses, then Arnheim cannot be said in any way to be in agreement with this position.

Arnheim is certainly a formalist according to the first definition of the term, because his whole extraordinary work, explaining how artistic phenomena come to be, originates and develops from a continuous analysis of the construct of *form*.

In his *Art and Visual Perception*, for example, after illustrating in the first chapter the psychological principle of perceptual balance, to give an account of the functioning of perception and of the existence of precise organisational and compositional factors of artistic form, Arnheim dedicates the second and third chapters precisely to a thorough discussion and examination of the theme of form, distinguishing between *Shape* and *Form*, titles of the two chapters in question. Briefly put, *shape* refers to the structure of a perceptual object, including those structural elements that might not be manifestly present, but which perception takes into account all the same:

“We conclude that in speaking of ‘shape’ we refer to two quite different properties of visual objects: (1) the actual boundaries produced by the artist: the lines, masses, volumes, and (2) the structural skeleton created in perception by these material shapes, but rarely coinciding with them” (Arnheim 1974, 93).

Form, on the other hand, consists in the meaning that the shape transmits. Again in the words of Arnheim:

“Form is the visible shape of content’, wrote the painter Ben Shahn. This is as good a good formula as any to describe the distinction between shape and form [...] Under the heading ‘Shape’ I discussed some of the principles by which visual material, received by the eyes, organizes itself so it can be grasped by the human mind. Only for the sake of extrinsic analysis, however, can shape be separated from what it stands for. *Whenever we perceive shape, consciously or unconsciously we take it to represent something and thereby to be the form of a content*” (Arnheim 1974, 96, italics mine).

This definition alone of form is enough to exclude categorically that Arnheim can be considered a formalist, in the second sense of the term indicated above.

Without doubt, as I have already stated, he analyzes and deals at length with the perceptual characteristics of form; in particular of visual form – pictorial, sculptural and architectural – but also musical, poetic, “pantomimic” (Verstegen 2005), and so on. The analyses and argumentations that Arnheim carries out, though regarding artistic form, can be applied to any kind of form, and *concern the function of understanding the meaning that the form itself conveys*.

Understood in a psychological sense, the construct of form, which is fundamental in the world of art but also in numerous fields of science, as it is in language and in its everyday meaning, can be fully assimilated to that of *Gestalt*.

Gestalt, like form, is

“... a field whose forces are organized in a self-contained, balanced whole. In a Gestalt, components interact to the extent that changes in the whole influence the nature of the parts, and vice versa” (Arnheim 1988, 226).

The “forces” interacting with one another that are present in Gestalten have similar features to those in physics, from which the term was borrowed: there is magnitude, a base of attack and one or more directions; these are not all necessarily present in the retina, in other words they are not all physically present; finally, they are induced according to the principle of dynamics and are made comprehensible through the perceiving mind that I mentioned in previous pages: “whereas the calculating mind can only approximate the Gestalt by establishing a network of relations, the perceiving mind can fully realize it by relying on the field of interacting forces itself” (Arnheim 1996a, 104).

Yet, how can the use of a term like “force” be justified to describe the phenomenal experience of Gestalt perception? Being able to answer this question means understanding, at a more profound level than I have outlined so far, the pre-eminently dynamic character of perception itself and also the inescapable relationship that exists between a correct perception of form – of the Gestalt – and a full understanding of its meaning.

Essentially, visual experience is dynamic because dynamism is a feature of the neuro-physiological processes that make it possible and which are stimulated by the shapes which generate the experience. In other words, the field of forces that is experienced when we observe visual objects, Gestalten, can be seen as the psychological equivalent of the field of physiological forces that act in the brain’s centre of vision. This is the interpretative hypothesis to explain why we can speak of perceptual “forces”; it is a hypothesis that is not as yet experimentally verifiable, but nonetheless it appears plausible in so far as it corresponds with the outcomes of the phenomenal experience of vision of which we are aware and which we can share with our peers. In addition, theories from physics and the results of recent research into the neurosciences seem to give credence to this hypothesis.

In an essay (1968) dedicated precisely to the contribution made by Gestalt psychology to the definition of artistic form, Arnheim offers a simple example to illustrate this hypothesis, with the premise that vision cannot be explained solely according to the properties of the observed object but that it depends on the activities of the brain:

“Think of a red triangle in the centre of a rectangular grey ground. ‘Objectively’ we have nothing but two areas of different colour, situated in the same plane, independent of each other, and at perfect rest. If we scrutinise the observer’s experience and consider at the same time what is going on in the neural

mechanism of vision, we realise first of all that we are dealing with a highly dynamic process” (Arnheim 1968, 198).

The triangle breaks the homogeneity of the grey background and seems to counter the tendency of the latter to regain its uniformity and chase away the invader. In other words, faced with a pattern of this kind the fundamental rule of perception of distinguishing between figure and ground comes into play: “the triangle appears suspended in front of the grey plane thus permitting the ground to continue ‘behind’ the triangle and to maintain its wholeness” (Arnheim 1968, 198). In its own right, the triangle itself is far from static:

“It is dense, compared with the looser texture of the ground. Its pointed corners stab outward in directed, centrifugal movement. Also the red, being a more active colour than grey, shows the property of long wave-length hues to appear closer to the observer. It attacks him [...] Red is warm and radiates across the ground” (Arnheim 1968, 198).

What is more, thanks to its central position, the triangle appears to be well balanced, yet all the same it is no more at rest than would be a rope that is held still because it is being pulled at each end by two men of equal strength: “the antagonistic forces happen to balance each other. Nevertheless, their power remains perceivable to the sensitive eye” (Arnheim 1968, 198). Yet, this is not all. The shape and the size of the figure and of the background define each other reciprocally: the smallness of the triangle determines the largeness of the background; the stability of the vertical and horizontal lines of the rectangle is reinforced by the obliqueness of the sides of the triangle and vice versa; also the chromatic values of the two parts of the pattern interact with and influence each other.

To conclude the description of this example, which is “simple” but, as anyone imagining it is able to grasp, phenomenally multifaceted, Arnheim claims to have analyzed it

“....with some detail in order to show that any description of form in the static terms of sheer geometry, quantity, or location will fatally impoverish the facts. Only if one realises that all visual form is constantly endowed with striving and yielding, contraction and expansion, contrast and adaptation, attack and retreat, can one understand the elementary impact of a painting, statue, or building and its *capacity to symbolise the action of life* by means of physically motionless objects” (Arnheim 1968, 199, italics mine).

The visual form, then, possesses the capacity, through phenomenal perceptual forces that it displays, *to symbolise the action of life*, that is, as we will shortly see, to convey meanings.

Arnheim then proceeds with further observations to describe this example, and attributes responsibility for this visual dynamics to the hypothetical principle of

isomorphism, which I have previously mentioned and I believe is worth referring to again:

“Since visual dynamics is not inherent in the physical object – where are the forces which constitute it? Gestalt psychologists refuse to describe them as an effect of empathy, that is, as a mere projection of previously acquired knowledge upon the percept. They assume that the sensations of push and pull are the counterpart of the physiological processes which organise the percept in the neural field of the optical sector, that is, the cerebral cortex, the optic nerve, and possibly the retinae of the eyes” (Arnheim 1968, 199).

Whatever happens – and wherever it happens – in the nervous system and the brain, the forces that we perceive in objects are experienced psychologically, above all, as natural or authentic – that is, really existing – properties of the objects themselves.

“If a wall looks vertical in a picture, it is vertical; and if walkable space is seen in a mirror, there is no reason why images of men should not walk right into it, as happens in some movies” (Arnheim 1974, 17-18).

If we were to consider these as physical forces, that is energy sources of the kind to move something, we could call them illusory, but the fact is that they are genuine components of all that we see; perceptually they are utterly real. A painter cares little, for example, that these forces come from the colours or from the canvas, because his expertise enables him to control them in function of what he wants to represent with these physical substances, that is, generally speaking, meaningful aspects of human experience.

The principal subject of artistic form, the essential meanings that it conveys, deal, indeed, with the human condition, portrayed in its many characteristically dynamic features: events, behaviour, interactions, contexts etc. Artistic form, being based upon the dynamics of perceptual forces, reflects the same play of forces which, through our senses, our body and mind, we experience day after day.

Human experience is dynamic in just the same way as are perceptual and mental activity and just like the products of these two kinds of activity: it is thanks to this mirror effect that we are able to grasp in a phenomenal sense both the form of things and the meaning conveyed by this form.

For this reason, *art* can be defined as

“...the ability of perceptual objects or actions, either natural or man-made, to represent, through their appearance, constellations of forces that reflect relevant aspects of the dynamics of human experience. More specifically, a ‘work of art’ is a human artifact intended to represent such dynamic aspects by means of ordered, balanced, concentrated form” (Arnheim 1988, 225).

This definition, taken from the *Glossary* at the end of the book *The power of the center* is an example of how Arnheim throughout his works makes his position completely clear. This is equally true of the following statement:

“A work of art must do more than be itself: *it must fulfill a semantic function*, and no statement can be understood unless the relations between its elements form an organized whole” (Arnheim 1966c, 170, italics mine).

I believe that this final assertion is a sufficient conclusion both to my attempt to demonstrate how groundless are the charges of formalism made against Arnheim and also to the basic outline I have been trying to give of the meaning of form, on which his theory is founded and from which it was developed.

There are, however, some further observations to be made on this point. It is easy to state that Arnheim cannot be a formalist insofar as he is a Gestaltist. Such a statement in no way means that he “applied” the Gestalt theory to the analysis and illustration of the world of art: without doubt he made extensive reference to Gestalt theory, but also relying upon a solid and wide-ranging heritage of knowledge – in continuous development – he made a prolific and innovative cognitive achievement.

The contribution that Arnheim made throughout his works and left for those who want to understand its essential ideas was the outcome of a formidable and original effort of research, for at least two reasons: (1) because it led to the conception and the proposal of a theory that outlines and illustrates the indispensable structural and procedural basis of the functioning of the mind; a theory of mind that is certainly alternative to those like the behaviorist theory, when it was at its peak of popularity, and nowadays to cognitivist and neuro-physiological theories; (2) because this theory was worked out and proved primarily through observation and the analysis of the most diverse manifestations of art, that is considering the arts as objects of study of cognitive processes.

In this way he carried out – and showed others how to carry out – a proper psychological investigation of art that, on the one hand, contributed and still contributes to an understanding of artistic phenomena, and on the other helps to understand better general psychology.

In point of fact, without going into the cultural and social reasons why this has happened, Arnheim’s tremendous achievement has not always been well known and recognized as such. There is no doubt that a number of people have benefited and are still benefiting, in whole or in part, from Arnheim’s legacy: artists to a greater extent than theorists, very little in the case of psychologists of art, hardly at all it seems to me when it comes to those who practice psychology. There are some exceptions to this, for example that of Ian Verstegen (2014, 9) who, supported by Arnheim’s theory, proposes “a new discipline, ‘cognitive iconology’,

which is intended to be the study of cognitive mechanisms in historical art”.

There is another observation that I feel I must make and which refers back to what I presented in the first part of this article, when I attributed to the habit of mind that I called intellectualistic the reason for a possible failure to understand Arnheim, which has manifested itself in the charge of formalism laid against him.

In order to accept and acknowledge a theory like that of Arnheim, to grasp fully what it is about, it is indispensable to adopt the same cognitive procedures that he used to construct his theory and that he recommended should be followed in general whenever one wants to explore and get to know the world in which we live; this is to say that

“...all cognitive exploration, whether it takes place prevalently in the intellectual realm, as in science or philosophy, or in the perceptual realm, as in the arts, must rely on organized structures of concepts, which are derived from the congealing of sensory raw material. Both means, the resources of direct experience and the instruments of concepts, are needed, whether by a scientist or an artist or indeed any person curious about the world where he or she is living” (Arnheim 1996, 23).

For example, to grasp fully the meaning of the concept of *form*, understood as “a field whose forces are organized in a self-contained, balanced whole” or as “constellations of forces that reflect relevant aspects of the dynamics of human experience”, means to subject to intellectual analysis the nominal, categorical and abstract content of such claims, but at the same time and inevitably it means that it is necessary to verify their cognitive value through observation and direct experience, in other words what we experience through our senses. This means, for example, observing in a spontaneous and unprejudiced way a pattern that presents “a red triangle in the centre of a rectangular grey ground” and verifying personally through the senses the phenomenal presence of those forces and their interactions (Argenton 2008). If it so happens that we are not initially aware of them, we should let ourselves be helped by the suggestions of those who have some experience in such observations. The aim, in any case, is to exercise or reactivate the sensitivity that the eye naturally possesses and which – for reasons we cannot go into here – influenced by our cultural and educational environments we tend to lose. The goal of all this is that “eyesight” should become “insight”.

Summary

This article takes its cue from the ridiculous claim that Arnheim is a formalist. Such an accusation is clearly a symptom of the fundamental misunderstanding that appears, in various guises, in a number of studies that try to analyze, evaluate or simply refer to the constructs that go to make up his theory. This misunderstanding can plausibly be seen as deriving from a certain habit of mind that might be called intellectualistic or speculative which, with its epistemological implications, is not only present but indeed very often to be found in scientific and psychological debates in general. Without doubt

Arnheim is a formalist, if by the term we are referring to the construct of *form*, upon which he builds most of his theory. The construct is not an abstract one; it does not belong to the realm of intellectual logic, but corresponds to a dimension of the senses and as such can be understood only in sensorial and phenomenological terms. This is true of the whole of Arnheim's theory, which is not of value exclusively to the study of artistic phenomena, with which most of the theory is indeed concerned. Reliable and well founded, it possesses all the features that are needed to allow it to be suitably applied to illustrate the workings of the mind in so many of its manifestations.

Keywords: Formalism, visual dynamics, psychoneural isomorphism.

Zusammenfassung

Dieser Beitrag bezieht seine Stichworte aus der absurden Behauptung, Arnheim wäre ein Formalist. Ein solcher Vorwurf ist eindeutig Symptom eines fundamentalen Mißverständnisses, das - in verschiedenen Erscheinungsformen - in einer Reihe von Studien auftritt, in denen eine Analyse oder Evaluierung versucht wird, oder die sich einfach auf die Konstrukte, auf denen Arnheims Theorie aufbaut, beziehen. Dieses Mißverständniss kann plausibel aus einer bestimmten Denkweise abgeleitet werden, die man intellektualistisch oder spekulativ nennen könnte, und die mit ihren epistemologischen Implikationen in der allgemeinen wissenschaftlichen und psychologischen Debatte nicht nur gegenwärtig, sondern tatsächlich ziemlich häufig zu finden ist. Ohne Zweifel ist Arnheim ein Formalist, wenn wir uns mit diesem Ausdruck auf das Konstrukt der *Form* beziehen, auf das er einen großen Teil seiner Theorie aufbaut. Dieses Konstrukt ist nicht abstrakt; es gehört nicht in den Bereich intellektueller Logik, sondern bezieht sich auf eine Dimension der Sinne und kann als solches nur in Sinnes- und phänomenologischen Begriffen verstanden werden. Das gilt für die gesamte Arnheimsche Theorie, die, auch wenn sie sich hauptsächlich mit künstlerischen Phänomenen beschäftigt, nicht ausschließlich zur Erforschung nur dieser Phänomene wertvoll ist. Seriös und gut begründet, besitzt sie alle notwendigen Eigenschaften, um in der Veranschaulichung der Arbeit des Geistes in vielen seiner Erscheinungsformen entsprechend angewandt zu werden.

Schlüsselwörter: Formalismus, visuelle Dynamiken, psycho-neuronaler Isomorphismus.

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Alberto Argenton, b. 1944, from 1990 to 2014 was Professor of Psychology of Art at the University of Padua. His research interests chiefly concerned the study of artistic phenomena in their motivational, emotive, intellectual, perceptual, and representative implications. He devoted particular attention to the phylogeny and ontogenesis of artistic and aesthetic behaviour, to the construct of "style", to aesthetic emotion, to the golden section, to the functional role of the visual arts, and to the Psychology of Literature. His most recent research concerned visual rhetoric, the use of obliqueness in pictorial representation, the perceptual phenomenon of contour rivalry, the relationships between theory and practice in Restoration and the Psychology of Art, the dynamics of perception and expressive qualities, and last but not least visual narrative. Alberto Argenton died on the 23rd of May 2015.

