

ARNHEIM'S OBSERVATION AND THE EVOLUTION OF FILM THEORY

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I. THE ROLE OF OBSERVATION IN ARNHEIM'S FILM THEORY

The reading of the book *FILM as ART*¹ is a pleasant mental adventure in which the words sketch film images with ease. Rudolf Arnheim's genius as a writer and a theorist reproduce entire film sequences in his/her imagination. It is often difficult to remember the theoretical intent since the iconographic opulence absorbs our mind. Arnheim's theory of film is based on concrete pictorial units of analysis.

Arnheim's theoretical concern in *FILM as ART* gives the impression of following an ideal epistemological thread, step by step: an hypothesis about film forms defeating mechanical reproduction, the observation of images perceived as forms, the thesis on those aspects of form specific to film, and, the theory on film as art, which rather than being a realistic reflection of life, depends upon an aesthetic creation of cinematographic forms.

This linear epistemological process can be turned around. In fact, the question about which comes first, pragmatic observation or preconceived ideas, is like the parable of the egg and the fowl. Arnheim postulates that the mechanical reproduction of the real world is not sufficient to provide a work of art. Subjective creativity is necessary. The art film is determined by specific qualities of pictorial concreteness and coherence, formal beauty, original

viewpoint reinforcing symmetry and tonal balance. These basic concepts undergird Arnheim's iconographic approach. Therefore Arnheim's choice of which filmic images illustrate his theory is not neutral. Arnheim's film theory is empirically drawn from artistic images of visual pleasure which awaken subjective sensibilities in observation. In many ways his perception is culturally preconditioned. At other times, he is original. Arnheim gives expression and intensive attention to those filmic frames which correspond to his ideals on cinema as art.

Arnheim's specificity as a theorist is in the close pursuit of various paradigms which, in general, support his theory. The idea to emphasize about Arnheim derives from the richness of the "speaking images" within his writing and from the artistic beauty inherent to his observations. My point is to show that the selected scenes are not only aesthetically motivated. His observations also predetermined by a leading concept: art, for Arnheim relies on the architecture of the cinematographic forms.

Arnheim treats Chaplin's and Keaton's motion pictures as signifier forms. The signified content of the scenes as implicit satire, irony and comedy are mostly interpreted throughout the prism of their visual configurations.

The element of surprise exists only when the scene is watched from one particular position. (pp. 36-37)

This statement explains the viewer's surprise as a matter of changing figurative appearances on screen. The previous fragmented vision of the actor gives the impression of him being seasick. The following standing position of Chaplin holding a fish, surprises the audience. Arnheim's descriptive iconography reveals the denotative codes of the two images without interpreting in depth the connotative signs producing comic effects. Consequently, comedy is decoded partially, as a factor of surprise.

Umberto Eco in his article "On Contribution of Film to Semiotics" points out how incomplete it is to deal only with the iconographic denotation, by demonstrating that the difference relies on the connotative conventions. In the film *China-Chung Kuo* the sequence on the Nanking Bridge :

has the effect of privileging oblique angles, transverse perspectives, and asymmetric frames, as any western movie-maker does when he wants to suggest power and architectural impact. But present Chinese iconographic subcodes are obviously different. . . . Chinese iconography is based on symmetrical and frontal frames . . . they express power, stability, monumentality only by frontal and symmetric shots.²

Because of the divergence among western and Chinese subcodes the response of the spectators differs from place to place and from time to time. Arnheim, in his conduct, avoids possible multiple meanings by according more attention to the exterior signs.

Another visual effect which inspires Arnheim's aesthetic is the variation of camera angles. It is in relation to a code of normative angles and information. The dance shot in Rene Clair's *Entr'acte* is depicted in figurative terms :

The photograph has been taken from below through glass. As the girl dances, her gauze skirts open and close like the petals of a flower and in the middle of this corolla comes the curious pantomime of the legs. The pleasure derived from so curious a shot is at first purely formal and is divorced from all meaning. It arises solely from the pictorial surprise. (pp. 39-40)

This observation revives the ancient Hellenic idea of the arts as poetry and creation of forms whose beauty is due to harmony and proportion and rhythm.

Arnheim adores the variety in forms. The discussion sequence in Carl Dreyer's *The Passion of Joan d'Arc* is this time

criticized for an excessive use of pure forms :

... magnificent portraits, but lacking the slightest artistic meaning. . . . Form for form's sake—this is the rock on which many film artists, especially the French, are shipwrecked. (p. 41)

In this judgement, Arnheim's aesthetic response is subordinate to theoretical artistic values. Both Clair's and Dreyer's scenes correspond to Arnheim's idea on film as an art form. Although he criticizes Dreyer's sequences for lack of meaning, on the other hand, he is impressed by the poly-angle camera movements within a static scene :

The camera was most active. It took the Maid's head obliquely from above: then it was aimed diagonally across her chin. It looked up the ecclesiastical judge's nostrils, ran rapidly toward his forehead, took him from the front as he put one question, from the side. . . . (pp. 40-41)

Arnheim's sublimation of cinematographic configurations is one of the implicit motives in his observations. The other is his search for a symbolic significance within the art film. In Pabst's *The Diary of a Lost Girl*, he selects a scene to criticize the superficiality of the decorative camera movement :

The reason for the sequence of the two shots is wholly superficial and decorative. It is attractive to the eye to see the same scene first from within and then from without through the glass panel. . . . Here the device is insufficiently motivated and therefore artistically weak. . . . But even then the invention would be somewhat shallow inasmuch as it serves only to give a symbolic depth. (p. 50)

In this observation, Arnheim departs from his belief in the autonomous qualities of the visual forms. Up to this point in the essay, esoteric meaning and symbolic depth are the two essential mea-

tures of Arnheim's iconography.

The third factor in his observation is theoretical predispositions. Arnheim describes a motion picture of *The Immigrant*, in which the formal similarity of two movements indicates his preference for camera angles which trick the spectator :

He (the Chaplin character) is standing with his back to the camera by a table on which is his wife's photograph. His shoulders are heaving, he is apparently sobbing bitterly. The next moment he turns round. The heaving of his shoulders reveals itself to be the result of his manipulation of a cocktail shaker. (p. 51)

Arnheim likes also those scenes of suspense in which the actor is trapped in an illusion. The evaluation is that cinematographic viewpoints make us see things better than we can see them in reality.

Arnheim's fascination with artistic angles and shapes is especially striking in shots of reflections. Clair's ballet sequence in *Entr'acte* is seen through a glass. Pabst's kissing scene in *The Diary of a Lost Girl* shows the couple kissing through a glass door. In Jacques Feyder's *Les Nouveaux Messieurs* :

She is sitting in front of the looking glass making herself up. Her face is seen front view in the glass, and beside is that of the man who is tinkering with something in the background and stealing covert glances at her. (p. 56)

Within the three images, the mirror has a psychological function to fetishize the beauty of the dancing legs, or the lovers' desire for each other. The mirror can be interpreted as a Platonic medium of an ideal love without texture, distancing carnal reality from spiritual values. (*Les Nouveaux Messieurs*) It can be seen as a device evoking sexual narcissism and identification with the image. (*The Diary of a Lost Girl*) It can be seen, besides the first

mediation on of the lense, as a second level mediation increasing the pleasure of voyeurism. (*Entr'acte*) Arnheim's observation seems to underestimate the psychological connotation of the image. Referring to Clair's ballet sequence he writes :

It arises solely from the pictorial surprise. If in addition it had some significance, its value would be all the greater. The erotic element of the dance, for instance, might be brought into prominence at will by such a position of the camera. (p. 40)

Another significant scene of reflection is the suicide jump off the boat in Joseph von Sternberg's *The Docks of New York* :

The woman is shown indirectly by her reflection in the water. The next moment, however, the woman herself is seen falling into the water, at the very spot where her reflection has been. (p. 78)

What captures Arnheim's attention is the formal originality of conveying a suicide by showing both a reflection and the reality in mirror-like waters. Contemporary criticism, and especially the feminist film theory of the 70's, would have accorded erotic significance to this image. However, Arnheim's theory reflects the preoccupations of the first generation of film theorists, especially the concern to legitimate cinema as an art. From this example, we can conclude that not only observation contributes to the elaboration of film theory, but also that innovation in film theory opens new horizons in observation. Cultural and historical factors generate new ways of sensing, perceiving and decoding films.

It is proper to close this section on the theoretical implication in the film observation, by presenting the most relevant image, in which Arnheim's basic principles on metric proportions, frame architecture and ambiguous dimension within cinema, are clearly implied. Arnheim uses Walter Ruttmann's *Berlin* to show that the cinematographic art form involves two-dimensions and three-

dimensions simultaneously :

Anyone watching this scene realizes, first of all, that one train is coming toward him and the other going away from him (three-dimensional image). He will then also see that one is moving from the lower margin of the screen toward the upper and the other from the upper toward the lower (plane image). (p. 12)

II. AN EXPLANATION OF THE REFERENCES IN ARNHEIM'S FILMIC OBSERVATION

Arnheim is unique, among the film theorists, to be deliberately hostile to the use of color in cinema. He considers that colors give a naturalistic quality to motion pictures and consequently prevents them from being an art. Arnheim's preference for black and white film results from his theoretical predisposition approving those filmic effects with the least realistic reference. Concerning Sternberg's *The Docks of New York* he says :

The white face, the white dress, the white hair of the girl are in visual contrast to the black figure of the ship's stoker. . . . It is obvious that the same effects could not be achieved with color film. (p. 67)

The composition of the film image is intelligible and striking chiefly because only black, white, and gray masses, black lines on a white ground, or white lines on a black ground, provide the raw material. (p. 68)

In our days the artistic possibilities of the black and white scale are revitalized by filmmakers such as Woody Allen in *Shadows and Fog* or Steven Spielberg in *Schindler's List*. Arnheim's argument on the exclusive artistic effect of the black and white can be compared to his compassion for the "golden age" of the silent film. Being aware of the historic borders that restrict Arnheim's

film theory to a certain period of cinema, we realize that his observations are strictly enclosed within these borders.

Another major artistic concern of the theorist is lighting conditions. In Ruttmann's *Berlin* :

They are seen in black outline against the gray sky ; and these figures in the somewhat lighter street help to emphasize the mystery of the dawn, the strange intermediate state between light and darkness. (p. 69)

By the help of clever lighting, irregular features can be made to look harmonious, a face can be made to look haggard or full, old or young. It is exactly the same with interiors and landscapes.
(p. 70)

Arnheim's praise of Cecil B. de Mille's decision to light only half the face of the spy, suggests a preference for an unnatural use of lighting, emphasizing symbolic details.

Sound, like color, is a technology reflecting the need to imitate reality. Arnheim's observation, motivated by his preference for the exclusively visual film, does not include scenes of sound films. Favoring the pictorial character of the cinema, he proposes two types of images which can substitute for sound :

(1) A visual metaphor :

In Joseph von Sternberg's *The Docks of New York* a shot is very cleverly made visible by the sudden rising of a flock of scared birds. (p. 34)

(2) a performance :

The spoken word in Chaplin's films is as a rule replaced by pantomime. He does not say that he is pleased that some pretty girls are coming to see him, but performs the silent dance, in which two bread rolls stuck on forks act as dancing feet on the table (*The Gold Rush*). (p. 106)

An expert in observing the various possibilities of camera angles, Arnheim describes the scenes of significant architecture which distinguish the part from the whole. Such is the staircase sequence which gives first a vigorous perspective of the crowd, and then reveals as a little boy climbs the top of the stairs (*The Crowd* by King Vidor, p. 63). Describing an image in *The Camera-man*, Arnheim reveals the subjective element in Keaton's long shot :

Suddenly the camera is shifted a little, and now a hitherto invisible corner of a waiting room comes into the picture, and there sits Buster Keaton, staring stupidly in front of him. . . . This shows that even a long shot may actually be, in a sense, nothing but a detail shot. (p. 77)

Fragmentation within a scene of Chaplin in *Smart People* suggests Arnheim's fascination with the part/whole frame construction.

Here again the part that is shown (the upper part of the body) suggests a complete picture (smartly dressed man). (p. 78)

Closeups are seen as significant parts of the whole which the theorist emphasizes, have great potential because of their symbolic meaning. Referring to a closeup in *The Docks of New York*, Arnheim remarks on a powerful effect of carnal love :

she lustfully strokes his naked arm with indecent tattoo marks all over it as he ripples the muscles on it for her amusement. . . . this woman sees nothing of the man but power, nudity, muscle. (pp. 80-81)

When Arnheim analyzes the elaboration of closeups by the Russians (on Pudovkin, p. 81), he does not place them within the dynamic of dialectical montage, but only refers to the character

of the part, as representative of the whole, and to their symbolism. Arnheim unlike André Bazin, valorizes montage as a first-class artistic, formative instrument of film. Arnheim simply borrows Russian theoretical arguments :

Pudovkin begins his book *Film Technique* with the statement that montage is the foundation of film art. . . . a single shot is in no sense a simple reproduction of nature. (p. 87)

It is interesting to note that Arnheim's concern with montage is mostly theoretical. He does not provide the same detailed iconography, as the rich pictorial material given to prove his viewpoint on mise-en-scene.

Sometimes, too, shots are associated by montage whose connection is not realistic but conceptual or poetic. (p. 89)

Montage is by his definition a vehicle of cinematographic unrealist forms. However, this part of his theory does not affect his observation, as much as his preoccupation with the composition of the frame.

Arnheim's unit of observation is the image in its dichotomy of angles and not attractions in their dialectic unity, or abstracted scenes from films, providing a thematic significance.³ Christian Metz says that what we observe on screen is the absence of a presence ; and consequently his writing is an absence of a present observation. Bazin favors observations with a realistic continuity of action. Early feminist filmic observation centers on stereotyped images. The analysis of feminine roles on screen, is motivated by and responding to Freudian psychoanalysis, or to the bourgeois structures within society. Recent feminist film theory includes the address of the film and consequently focuses cinematographic observation on more ambivalent models, reviewing and decon-

structuring stereotypes.

All these differences in observation, imply diverse theoretical projects which preoccupy the theorist's mind even before he/she starts dealing with examples. Certainly, the accumulation of filmic observations helps to renew the theoretical methods of analysis. On the other hand, film theory assimilates methods already experienced in other fields, which provoke a new dynamic within filmic observation. Film theory has evolved by introducing factors exterior to film, methods within social sciences, psychoanalysis, linguistics, cultural history on media and on the arts. Consequently, filmic observation varies, according to how broad each author is in his/her theoretical references.

For instance, Arnheim's main interest is the experimentation with form which distances art from reality and surprises the spectator by introducing an original viewpoint of perception. For example Arnheim, like Jean Epstein, emphasizes the mediated, controlled visual appearances on screen, due to the different forms of cinematographic movement. Cinema challenges the non-mediated, unified visual perception of the everyday routine. For instance, when we see a trotting horse in reality, our vision is continuous, giving a three-dimensional sense of movement within a system of visual reference. The eye cannot reverse, accelerate, slow down, or relativize the action by fragmenting the horse from its referent world. In the cinematographic art, not only is fragmentation possible, as in painting or in photography, but there is also the possibility of experimentation with camera motion :

In Murnau's *The Four Devils* there is a circus scene : a white horse trots steadily round the arena, the camera follows, and so the horse always remains in the middle of the screen and seems almost stationary, because only its body and not its legs are seen ; (pp. 103 -104)

In taking the shots for the I. G. Farben film *Miracle of Flowers* . . .

plants have expressive gestures, . . . which become visible in accelerated pictures. (p. 115)

And once again Pudovkin is the pioneer. According to the newspaper report he is using slow motion in his new film *The World Is Beautiful* for such things as allowing a child's smile to develop slowly in a close-up. (p. 117)

Arnheim's observations are concerned with those uses and techniques specific to cinematography, which challenge the realistic vision of the world. Arnheim points out all kinds of visual artifices due to the camera angles, movements and to the filmmaker's contribution of a symbolic meaning which elevates film to the pantheon of the arts.

The first theme inspiring Arnheim is the ironic criticism of the human condition which the films of Charlie Chaplin focus on the futility of individual happiness. The metaphorical use of the objects in Chaplin's comedies simultaneously exaggerates and universalizes poverty and hunger. Arnheim writes about *The Gold Rush* :

There is the scene where Charlie as a starving prospector cooks and eats his dirty oiled boots. Elegantly and with perfect table manners he carves his unusual dish. . . . the contrast between rich and poor is symbolized in an incomparably original, striking, and graphic manner. (p. 144)

. . . the big gold miner, half-crazed with hunger, suddenly sees his mate Charlie as a fowl and tries to catch him and eat him. (p. 145)

The inability to satisfy psychological desires is another theme that is structured as if a hopeless destiny always prevents man from attaining happiness. Such is the scene of Chaplin dancing with the girl of his dreams while a rope catches and ties him to a dog.

Lack of contrast and communication among the sexes is another point in Arnheim's observation when he depicts a scene in *A Woman of Paris* :

One day she is driving along the road in a cart with her pupils, when her former lover comes from the other direction in a fine car. The vehicles pass without the occupants recognizing each other. . . . (p. 147)

The tragic point of the image is that "The paths of two lives cross and separate."

Chaplin's emphasis on human misfortune is counterbalanced by his unexpected creative associations, metaphorical fantasies and his "psychology of productive thinking." (p. 149)

Unexpected likeness of form of function is used. . . . there is no deeper meaning to the ideas of equating a food can and an alarm clock, a heartbeat and the ticking of a clock. (p. 148)

The function of the gas lamp has thus been restructured. At first, its psychological character is merely that of a strong pole, something that can be bent to attest one's strength. . . . suddenly and unexpectedly it turns into a container for a head. The gas, hitherto used only for illumination, is suddenly turned into a weapon.

(p. 149)

Arnheim admires the pictorial concreteness of the human condition, and psychological realism of Chaplin's ambivalent gags, combining comedy and tragedy or vice versa.

Arnheim views Eisenstein's composition of images as indicative of a powerful social criticism. The social status of a poor peasant woman is conveyed by "the huge elephantine back" of the fat Kulak occupying the whole picture in *The General Line*. Arnheim makes a connotative interpretation :

Then as idea is suggested—“power obliterating helplessness”—and the woman disappears from the picture altogether. (p. 53)

Interpreting the montage of the lion statues in *The Battleship Potemkin*, Arnheim accords to it a symbolic meaning without openly defining it as dialectic montage.

In Eisenstein's *The General Line* a tractor is seen crashing through the fences that cut up a field into a number of small holdings. The scene is intended to convey symbolically that the tractor, the emblem of modern agriculture, enforces collectivism. . . . a bureaucratic Soviet official cleans his pen on the china head of Lenin that adorns his inkpot. Here we have the underlying idea—“bureaucrats smirch the ideal of the revolution”—(pp. 151-152)

Arnheim recognizes Eisenstein's skill and artistry because “one of the two themes (the concrete) is sacrificed to the other (the symbolized thought), and the congruence is achieved artificially.” (p. 151) Eisenstein's socio-ideological criticism is not an abstract motivation but takes a concrete form of interactive images producing artificially symbolic meaning. In these terms Arnheim goes beyond pictorial denotative analysis, by according importance to images with a connotative ideological meaning.

I will conclude this section on fragmentation of the cinematographic observation, with the most fragmented unit, the face. The faces, with their thick chalky masks, soldier's hats, careful make-up and suitable lighting are considered by Arnheim as expressive mirrors of human psychology :

He Who Gets Slapped, where a scientist who has fallen on bad times becomes a clown. His face has been painted into a thick chalky horror. Nothing of the actor's face can be seen through this mask, and yet the spectator feels most vividly the agony of the humiliated creature simply because he knows what the man was like before, and hence what he must be feeling now. (p. 140)

... a German soldier and a Russian attack each other with bayonets. There is a sudden close-up and it is seen that both have the same face. They recognize each other and drop their bayonets.

(pp. 123-124)

They go into the garden, the girl takes a cigarette between her lips, the man lights a match, but instead of lighting up, she makes a tiny retreating movement, the flame illumines the two faces, they look each other. (pp. 142-143)

In all these scenes what seems to guide Arnheim's observation is not the appearance of the face, nor its form. The expression of feeling and interior sensibilities are intelligible, recognizable even behind the mask of a clown. In these images, Arnheim is absorbed by the concrete visual forms generating meaning which communicate directly to the aesthetic and psychological sensibilities of the audience.

Conclusion

The intention of this paper has been to develop a multifactorial approach on the choice of examples in film theory. Observation represents, in my opinion, a fundamental act in film theory. The example of Arnheim is preferred to other film theorists because of his rich iconographic approach, and also because of a variety of motives and limitations reflecting his theoretical predisposition to support the early art cinema.

From this analysis we can conclude that observation is both subjective and objective. It is the product of a subjective aesthetic and psychological response, and also is conditioned by certain conventions in sensing and comprehending. Observation is, thus, culturally and historically determined and also dependent on the films created in the past and present of a particular era. A creative film theorist such as Arnheim can match the artistry of great filmmakers through his power of observation.

Notes

1. Rudolf Arnheim, *FILM as ART* (Berkeley and Los Angeles : University of California Press, 1957)
2. Gerald Mast & Marshall Cohen (ed.), *Film Theory and Criticism* (New York : Oxford University Press) 1979, p. 225.
3. Peter Wollen, *Signs and Meaning in the Cinema* (Bloomington : Indiana University Press) 1972, p. 74.

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