

Obituary - Nachruf

RUDOLF ARNHEIM 1904-2007

Rudolf Arnheim, internationally known psychologist and art theorist, died on June 9, 2007, in Ann Arbor, Michigan, after a lengthy illness. At age 102, he was the last surviving student of the Gestalt psychologists Wertheimer, Köhler and Lewin at the Psychological Institute at the University of Berlin, in the decade after World War I.

Not an experimental psychologist, Arnheim was a ground-breaking theorist who wrote with such breadth and prodigiousness that, in the course of his lifetime, he authored hundreds of articles and more than a dozen remarkable books on perception and human expression in relation to art, architecture, cinema, graphic communication, physics, psychopathology and so on.

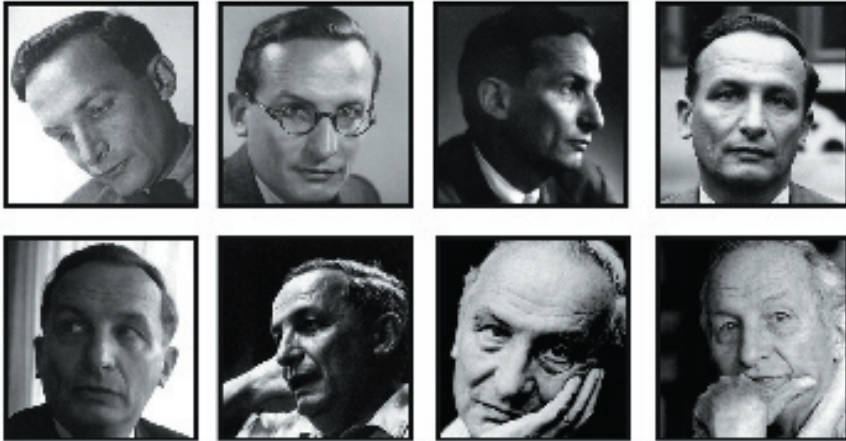
Through such enduring, classic books as *Art and Visual Perception: A Psychology of the Creative Eye* (1954), *Toward a Psychology of Art* (1966), *Visual Thinking* (1969), and *The Power of the Center* (1983), he became, in the words of architectural historian James Ackerman, “the quintessential voice of modernism in the sphere of psychology.” Later, he was also seen as a voice against postmodernism, a role that partly came about from his book *To the Rescue of Art* (1992), a volume of outspoken essays in which he condemned contemporary artistic life as a “low tide of culture,” as confirmed by such ominous symptoms as “an unbridled extravagance, a vulgarity of taste, and a triviality of thought.”



After completing his doctoral degree in 1928, Arnheim’s career as a critic began not as a university professor but as a journalist, when he worked in Berlin as a writer for *Die Weltbühne*, a left wing political weekly. Increasingly drawn to film criticism, he wrote a pioneering book in 1932 titled *Film als Kunst* (Film as Art), but because of his Jewish ancestry, the book was banned the following year when the National Socialists came to power. He then left Germany and settled in Rome, where for five years he worked as an editor at the International Institute for Educational Film at the League of Nations. He loved Italy (“it was my casa propria,” he said) but when the Fascists withdrew from the League of Nations and adopted the racist policies of Nazi Germany, he moved to London (with the help of art critic Herbert Read) and became a BBC radio translator.

Arnheim emigrated to the U.S. in 1940, and, after working briefly as a radio researcher, he reentered academic life. For a period of almost twenty-five years, he taught undergraduate students at Sarah Lawrence College in Bronxville, New York, while teaching graduate courses at the New School for Social Research. And then, in

1968, at age 64, having published a far-reaching, pivotal book on *Visual Thinking*, Arnheim was invited by Harvard University to become a Professor of the Psychology of Art at its newly-founded Center for Visual and Environmental Studies. He remained at Harvard until his retirement in 1974. In the remaining years of his life, he published no fewer than eight new books and completed a major revision of a ninth.



Photos of Rudolf Arnheim courtesy of his family

In recent years, he contributed several articles to *Gestalt Theory*, for which he had also served as an Advisory Editor since its founding in 1979. In 1984, he was designated an Honorary Member of the GTA.

Of Arnheim's books, my favorite is *Parables of Sun Light*. Comprised of observations from his notebooks, it is (as the dust jacket states) "a seedbed of ideas" in psychology and the arts. As for Rudi himself (it continues): "He is always concrete, in the manner that has become his trademark, often witty, and sometimes a bit wicked."

Roy R. Behrens (www.bobolinkbooks.com)

Below are just two of the many comments received by *Gestalt Theory* from international scholars in response to news about the death of Rudolf Arnheim:

"[Rudolf Arnheim] was in many ways a Renaissance man in a very complex, variegated, ever-changing and unpredictable time in world history. His competence, vision, courage, breadth, intellectual integrity, brilliant scholarship, and insightful and sensitive perspectives (both theoretical and practical) are unlikely to be matched."

—Michael Wertheimer (son of Max Wertheimer, Arnheim's beloved Doctorvater)

"[Rudolf Arnheim's death] is sad indeed. He had a long and full life, but it is sad for me because he was so kind to me and helped me as a young man. He made me think I could be a serious scholar, which makes it hard to see him go. He is truly the last of that generation. He outlived everyone else. Now we have no link to that time."

—Ian Verstegen (a former Arnheim student)