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ADRIANO D'ALOIA

RODOLFO ARNHEIM

Rudolf Arnheim's Italian Writings on Cinema (1932-1939)



Omen of oblivion

February 22, 1937. Today for the second time, air attack simulations. The first time, many people left a light showing at their windows. So this time, the public electricity supply has been cut off, plunging the city into primordial, pre-cosmic darkness – a symbol of human progress – while booming gunshots sounded very realistic, with large searchlights illuminating the horizon. The exercise not only educates the citizens about certain practical details, but also to the belief that an air-raid cannot be all that bad – a mere distraction in the course of everyday life.

It must have seemed to him like the most realistic war film, that night of February 1937 in Rome. The blast of cannon and the glare of searchlights on the horizon ruptured the silence of the city, reduced to darkness – like a cinema where the audience is immersed in the spectacle of a simulated air attack. Rudolf Arnheim (1904-2007) was a German Jew in Rome at the height of the Fascist regime. In this excerpt from his Italian diary, he is still unaware of the disaster that was shortly to befall him. The diary is a cardboard cover notebook of nearly three hundred pages full of illustrations, drawings, postcards, letters, newspaper clippings and, above all, notes and personal reflections, records of everyday events and travel reports, written in an instinctive and sensitive German. It is the inner voice of a man who was always keenly aware of the daily revelations of the world and the beauty of works of art, but also of the impact of history on everyday life. Then, towards the end, the writing style suddenly changes, turning to a drier register, abstaining from any digressions, as if prompted by fear. The last few pages of the diary tell of a man with trepidation, troubled by worries that turn into nightmares at night, but still lucid and indomitably attached to hope in the day – the illusion that preparing for the worst would be enough to escape death, as in a simulation, a movie.

For both linguistic and historical reasons, the Italian period of film theorist Arnheim's career (1933-1938) has not yet been fully explored on an international scale, even though it represents a pivotal moment in the development of his thought on cinema, media, and art¹. This article aims to reappraise the effective importance of Arnheim's contribution in the Italian cultural context of the Thirties and to clarify his theoretical position, with particular regard to the relevance of technological innovations and their impact on both film production and film viewing. It will offer a *bio-historiographical* perspective on Arnheim's Italian years: a bibliographical reconstruction combined with an exploration of his personal diary of that period and an analysis of his passport.

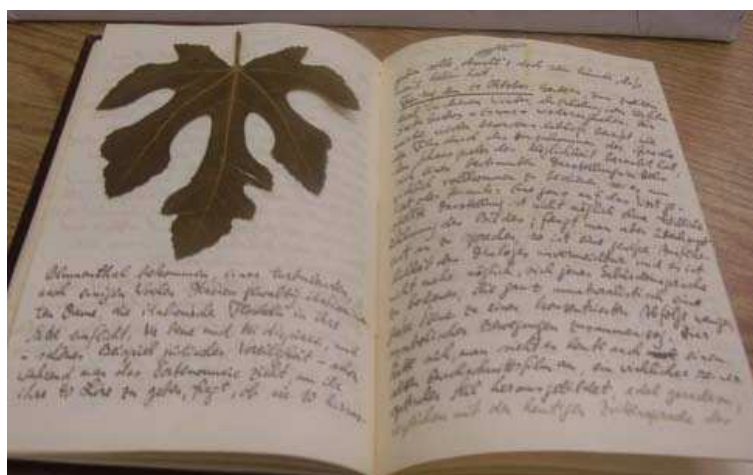


Figure 1. Rudolf Arnheim's personal diary (1934-1938)

Foretastes (1932-1933)

Arnheim's Italian adventure started in August 1933. Luciano De Feo, director of the International Educational Cinematographic Institute (IECI), appointed Arnheim as an editor of the *Encyclopedia of Cinema*², the main project on which the Institute was working. His reputation as an international film scholar grew after the publication in 1932 of *Film als Kunst*³, the book containing the complete exposition of his theory on film⁴. Arnheim's ideas were already beginning to circulate in Italian institutions⁵. In 1933, Emilio Cecchi,

¹ Arnheim himself states that «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, it created a kind of internal home base that remained with me wherever I went to live thereafter», Colby, V. ed., 1991. *World Authors 1980-1985*. New York: Wilson Company, p. 46.

² See Arnheim, R., 1984. *My Life in the Art World*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, p. 8; Arnheim, R., 1986. Come un tifoso d'oggi amai il cinema in Italia. *Cinema Nuovo*, 301, p. 35; Arnheim, R., 1957. A personal note. In: Arnheim, R., 1957. *Film as Art*. Berkeley-Los Angeles-London: California University Press, pp. 1-7.

³ Arnheim, R., 1932. *Film als Kunst*. Translated from the German by L. M. Sieveking and I. F. D. Morrow. Berlin: Ernst Rowohlt. Arnheim's personal diary (October 5, 1938) reveals that the book was written at Badenweiler in 1930.

⁴ The book was immediately translated and published in English as Arnheim, R., 1933. *Film*, London: Faber & Faber.

⁵ The first review of *Film als Kunst* in Italy appeared in February 1932 in the inaugural issue of the journal *Scenario*: Milano, P., 1932. Rudolf Arnheim: "Film als Kunst". *Scenario*, 1, pp. 59-60.

director of Cines asked Umberto Barbaro to translate a substantial extract of the first part of *Film als Kunst* as a course text for the students at the Centro Sperimentale di Cinematografia in Rome⁶.

At least three articles by Arnheim found space in Italian journals before he came to live in the country⁷. The most interesting of these is “Arte riproduttiva”, a short essay that contains the first critical discussion of artistry in film from an aesthetic perspective. In 1933, three years before Walter Benjamin’s famous essay on the technical reproducibility of art⁸, Arnheim proposed an idea of “aura” (albeit without explicitly using this term) as an aesthetic *status* that art has not lost, but rather that it has to conquer. At issue was not the *authenticity of the work of art* but rather the *artistry of a mechanical process in spite of its technical reproducibility*. The art of film, like other “reproductive arts” (such as photography, radio, and sound recording), is a very human work of creation, not a mere mechanical recording. Film is, in fact, a *stance* on the world; it is not only the recording and re-presentation of reality but also a “subjective relationship” between the viewer and the viewed. Film viewing is an act of creative perception.

It must be noted that Arnheim’s approach to art and media was very innovative for the Italian cultural and philosophical milieu of the time, which was quite suspicious of the aesthetic relevance of technical means⁹. It is no coincidence that the corpus of his Italian writings reveals Arnheim’s strong interest in technology. He simply applied the Gestalt approach he had learned from his mentors in Berlin¹⁰ to the emerging phenomenon that, more than others, seemed to offer psychologists the opportunity to investigate the life of modern man. He understood that there could be no better laboratory than the film-theaters and film-viewers. Cinema was an excellent example of a mass psychological experiment, a public laboratory for testing and developing in aesthetic terms the Gestalt theory of perception.

Expression: the contribution to *Intercine* (1935)

Arnheim’s initial impact on joining the IECI involved a profound revamp of its journal, the *Rivista internazionale del cinema educatore*¹¹. In 1935, the magazine changed its name to *Intercine* and was launched in five editions (Italian, French, English, Spanish, and German). It offered analysis of films, profiles of filmmakers

⁶ See Anon, 1983. Gli anni della Cines. Inediti dai “Taccuini”. *Bianco e Nero*, 4, p. 22. The excerpt is mentioned as “Estratti da *Film als Kunst* di Rudolph Arnheim. Edit. Ernst Rowohlt, Berlin 1932, a cura di Umberto Barbaro (“Cines” 1933)”. The summary was later officially published as Arnheim, R., 1938. Il film come opera d’arte. *Bianco e Nero*, 4, pp. 11-42.

⁷ Arnheim, R., 1932. Soggettista e direttore artistico. *L’Italia letteraria*, 15 May, p. 5, translation of the paragraph “Manuskript und Regie” of Arnheim, 1932, pp. 220-223; Arnheim, R., 1933. Arte riproduttiva. *Cine-Convegno*, 2-3, 25 Apr., pp. 33-36, reprint as Film and Radio. *Cinema Quarterly*, 2, 1933, pp. 84-86; and Arnheim, R., 1933. Contrappunto sonoro. *La Stampa*, 20 Jun., p. 5.

⁸ Benjamin, W., 1936. L’œuvre d’art à l’époque de sa reproduction mécanisée. *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung*, 5, pp. 40-68.

⁹ The main Italian idealist philosopher, Benedetto Croce, “ratified” the artistry of film only in 1948. See Croce, B., 1948. Una lettera. *Bianco e Nero*, 10, pp. 3-4.

¹⁰ Arnheim studied at the University of Berlin under Max Wertheimer and Wolfgang Kohler, the founders of Gestalt Psychology. His doctoral dissertation was Arnheim, R., 1928. Experimentell-psychologische Untersuchungen zum Ausdrucksproblem. *Psychologische Forschung*, 11, pp. 2-132.

¹¹ On Arnheim’s role at the IECI, see Wilke, J., 1991. Cinematography as a Medium of Communication. The Promotion of Research by the League of Nations and the Role of Rudolf Arnheim. *European Journal of Communication*, 6, pp. 337-353; Laura, E. G., 1995. Il sodalizio con Rudolf Arnheim e la nascita di “Cinema”. In: E. G. Laura, 1995. *Parola d’autore. Gianni Puccini tra critica, letteratura e cinema*. Roma: ANCCI, p. 58.

ers and critics, essays on aesthetics and technology, yet with an accessible and attractive style and many illustrations.

The bulk of Arnheim's contribution to *Intercine* consists of the notes on *Expression* in the "Syntheses" columns. In these writings, Arnheim drew inspiration from books or articles recently published in Europe or the United States (including the *International Photographer*, *American Cinematographer*, *Filmtechnik*, *Die Kinotechnik*, *Journal of the Society of Motion Picture Engineers*, and *Sight and Sound*) and discussed the various aspects of the technological innovations used in the art of film and their impact on the perceptual dimensions of film viewing. With clear and sometimes explicit reference to his *Film als Kunst*, he tackled issues related to sound and color, stereoscopy, realism, movement, form, perspective, lighting, editing, etc. His position is summed up in the opening sentence of the first Syntheses:

The artistic average of the film has depreciated alarmingly. The perfection attained by actors, cameramen and composers of musical comment still gives a certain value to cinematographic productions even today; but a good spectacle, fine pictures and pleasing sounds do not of themselves constitute a film¹².

The invisible signature: the hidden contribution to *Cinema* (1936-1938)

The project *Intercine* lasted only twelve months. At the end of 1935, Italy left the League of Nations and the IECI was moved to Paris. De Feo secretly attempted to save the heritage of the magazine (above all, the draft of the *Encyclopedia of Cinema*) and a few months later founded *Cinema*¹³. Abandoning any pretense of an international audience, the new magazine had a very informative and popular style, with ample use of photography, essentially following the model of other magazines by the Milan-based publishing house Ulrico Hoepli.

Arnheim published thirty signed articles in two years, many focusing on technological innovations: natural color techniques, polarization, lighting, editing, sound and voice reproduction, proto-cinematic optical devices, representation of movements, film format, etc.¹⁴ The technical operation of the machinery of cinema is accurately explained through a comparison with the perceptual function of the human senses.

Arnheim's contribution to *Cinema* is not limited to these officially signed articles. Arnheim's statements in the 1970s and 1980s have led me to identify his hand behind some of the pseudonyms under which many of the journal's columns were written. It is certain that, from summer 1936 to summer 1938, he was

¹² Arnheim, R., 1935. Expression. *Intercine*, 1, p. 35.

¹³ The first issue of *Cinema* is dated July 10, 1936. For details of the administrative and editorial issues involved in the transition from *Intercine* to *Cinema*, see Caldiron, O., 2003. L'impero di carta. *Bianco e Nero*, 547, pp. 93-99.

¹⁴ For documentation of Arnheim's contribution to *Cinema*, see the bibliography in the Appendix (years 1936-1938).

Nostromo¹⁵, the author of the correspondence with the readers, in a column called “Capo di Buona Speranza”, which was first erroneously attributed to Francesco Pasinetti¹⁶.



Figure 2. Rudolf Arnheim in the *Cinema* editorial office (Rome, 1938)

He also curated the columns on photography dedicated to amateur photographers (“Voi fotografate noi pubblichiamo” and, occasionally, “Fotografia”) in collaboration with his sister Mary Arnheim-Gay¹⁷. In fact, they used the pseudonym Marie Onussen, derived from the name of Arnheim’s sister and the inversion of the word “Nessuno” (Nobody)¹⁸. There is no doubt, also, that Arnheim was Candido, the pseudonym that appeared together with Arpagone (Gianni Puccini)¹⁹ in the “Bianco e Nero” double film critic reviews column published from the first issues of 1937. Paradoxically, Arnheim was the “optimistic” critic, and Puccini the “pessimist”²⁰. Because of the lack of references, the attribution of the pseudonym Ciak, under which the columns given over to technical innovations (“Notizie tecniche” and “Scienza e tecnica”) were written, is necessarily uncertain. However, statements by Arnheim²¹ and the style and the subjects of those writings (which are very similar to the *Intercine* contributions in *Expression*) make the ascription of those articles to him plausible. These articles explain the operation of technologies involved

¹⁵ Arnheim, R., 1978. L’esito ideologico ultimo approdo del film. *Cinema Nuovo*, 255, p. 9.

¹⁶ See Mida, M., 1981. La testimonianza di un allievo. *Cinema Nuovo*, 271, p. 41; Aristarco, G., 1981. Francesco Pasinetti, una lezione disattesa. *Cinema Nuovo*, 271, p. 44; Arnheim, R., 1981. Arnheim e il Nostromo. *Cinema Nuovo*, 274, p. 58; Meccoli, D., 1982. Ancora su Arnheim e il Nostromo. *Cinema Nuovo*, 275, p. 29; Argentieri, M., 1993. Il Nostromo del Capo di Buona Speranza. *Cinema Nuovo*, 343, p. 34.

¹⁷ See Arnheim, 1986.

¹⁸ See Arnheim, 1981.

¹⁹ See Puccini, G., 1965. Storia di «Cinema». In: O. Caldiron, ed. 1965. *Il lungo viaggio del cinema italiano. Antologia di «Cinema» 1936-1943*, Padova: Marsilio, p. LXXIX, building on two previous articles: Puccini, G., 1951. I tempi di “Cinema”. *Filmeritica*, 5, pp. 151-155 and Puccini, G., 1953. Il venticinque luglio del cinema italiano. *Cinema Nuovo*, 24, pp. 340-342. See also Caldiron, O., 2002. «Cinema» 1936-1943. *Prima del neorealismo*. Roma: Fondazione Scuola Nazionale di Cinema, p. 10.

²⁰ On the reasons for the discontinuance of certain columns, see also L’uomo grigio, 1937. Momento grigio. *Cinema*, 24, p. 509.

²¹ See Arnheim, 1978 and Arnheim, 1986.

in sound, make-up, tricks, editing, camera movement, film preservation, animation, color, and other technical curiosities in which the reader might be interested.



Figure 3. Rudolf Arnheim with Francesco Pasinetti, Domenico Meccoli, and Gino Visentini in *Cinema* editorial office (Rome, 1938)

The wonders of technique

The article *April Fool. The Wonders of Technique*²², while highly amusing, is also indicative of Arnheim's perspective on film and technology. Arnheim presented, with a serious tone, a bizarre series of fictitious technical innovations that he had dreamed up. These included: 1) a special camera that filmed scenes in five languages at the same time – the camera was equipped with optical filters to select those elements that were compatible with different countries' tastes; and the film was developed using developing solutions flavored with tomato sauce for the Italian version, 'bouillabaisse' for the French, Bavarian beer for the German, and tea for the English; 2) a technique of recording sound on a thread, for editing by a dressmaker or tailor; 3) the Erotoscope, a telescope that radiated invisible ultraviolet rays, through which a special guardian was able to discover any violations of public morality in the cinema during the projection; the guilty had to pay a fine, according to the gravity of the offense; 4) the discovery of a film bacterium that infected the audience and led to 'screen-phobia' – the abhorrence of film screenings – which after a further two weeks of incubation becomes 'screen-mania', resulting in a considerable weakening of the patient's cash resources; in the third stage of this disease, the subject experiences an irresistible desire to become an actor, director or production manager; 5) Arnheim also reported the invention of the close-up, or rather, of the conceptual notion of 'close-up'. The Italian for close-up is 'primo piano', which means

²² Arnheim, R., 1937. Le meraviglie della tecnica. *Cinema*, 18, pp. 217-219.

not only 'foreground' but also, and literally, 'first floor': the 'primo piano' was invented by an elderly woman called Emilia Closeupper in her old house.

Beyond the humorous dimension of this enjoyable article, its sarcastic – even sardonic – tone shows a certain resistance to innovations and implies a critique of “talkies” (that is, to the introduction of speech), censorship, star-mania, and formalistic style. At the same time, the article extols the “wonders” of technique and implies a challenge to it: technology must be used to achieve a more artistic result, rather than mechanically reproduce reality.



Figure 4. Rudolf Arnheim during his Italian years

Paradoxically, then as now, the disappearance of an established idea of cinema was the point at issue: silent and “artistic” film in the ‘30s, celluloid film or theater-based film experience today. As is known, Arnheim maintained throughout his career that cinema was essentially a pictorial art; «he aligned himself with his German-language contemporaries, such as Hans Richter, Walter Ruttmann, and Béla Balázs, who theorized film as a «primarily *visual* image-based medium»²³. Sound, color, and the stereoscopic screen added very little. Many aspects of the information that is available to our perceptual apparatus are not recorded by the camera. And these failures are precisely what make film possible as an art form. But the Italian writings illuminate that what is central about the notion of “failing” is not so much the *result* but the *process* through which that result is achieved. It is not an *ontological* issue, but rather, a *pragmatic* one. What really matters is the role played by human intentions in the process of reproduction²⁴. As David Bordwell argues in his obituary of Arnheim, «This ... is Arnheim’s reply to Walter Benjamin’s theory of cinema as

²³ Alter, N. M., 2011. Screening out sound: Arnheim and cinema’s silence. In: S. Hidding, ed. 2011. *Arnheim for Film and Media Studies*. London: Routledge, pp. 69-87.

²⁴ Carroll, N., 1988. *Philosophical Problems of Classical Film Theory*. Princeton: Princeton University Press; Davies, D., 2008. How Photographs ‘Signify’: Cartier-Bresson’s ‘Reply’ to Scruton’. In: S. Walden, ed. 2008, *Photography and Philosophy: Essays on the Pencil of Nature*. Oxford: Blackwell; Tétreault, Y., 2008. Mechanical Recording in Arnheim’s *Film As Art*. *Postgraduate Journal of Aesthetics*, 1 (5), pp. 16-26.

mechanical reproduction. Film is not a medium signaling a break with the canonized arts, by virtue of its abandonment of “auratic value”. For Arnheim, filmmakers continue the mission of the traditional arts. Like painters, film directors use their medium to create meanings, emotions, and engaging perceptual effects»²⁵. In other words, for Arnheim, it is not that film can be art because it *fails* to mechanically reproduce reality, but rather, that *although the camera is a mechanical recording device*, it can still be used for artistic purposes. Art is not incompatible with mechanical recording, as long as the purpose of the recording is not mechanical recording itself. Departing from mechanical recording does not mean rejecting technological innovations, which the Italian articles prove with dozen of examples, allowing us to see past some of the more notorious statements in *Film als Kunst*.

This significant contribution to the discussion of the technical aspects of cinema and photography, as well as interviews with readers and movie reviews, can be attributed with certainty to Arnheim up to summer 1938. After this date, this attribution has to be considered merely probable. At that time, in fact, the «sort of liberalism that differentiated [...] the practices of Fascism from Nazi orthodoxy»²⁶ turned into an anti-Semitic politics. The racial laws began to purge the Jews from intellectual circles, and Arnheim's work, along with his idyllic Italian adventure, ground to a halt. Paradoxically enough, an article signed by Arnheim was published in the Fascist journal *Il Ventuno* in August 1938²⁷. At the end of that month, *Bianco e Nero* published a remarkable essay that gathered a very lively controversial debate, the “New Laocoon”²⁸. In September, the regime decreed the expulsion of Jews within six months²⁹. After that, Arnheim's signature literally disappeared from the Italian journals³⁰. The escalation of the racist climate relegated him into effective isolation, both personally and professionally. He had to flee for his family's safety and find a new job abroad. My research brings to light his actual contribution and enables his role in the Italian cultural context to be evaluated more objectively.

A passport to memory

The Italian chapter of Rudolf Arnheim's career has been partially suppressed and historically forgotten. As a bio-historiographical addendum, I would like to present two extraordinary documents that help to pinpoint how, after the adoption of the racial laws, he spent his last months in Italy, and when exactly he left

²⁵ Bordwell, D., 2011. Rudolf Arnheim: clarity, simplicity, balance. In: S. Hiddings, 2011. *Arnheim for Film and Media Studies*. London: Routledge, p. 26.

²⁶ Arnheim, R., 1992. Un fedele lettore. *Cinema Nuovo*, 336, pp. 5-6. See also Anon, 1935. I.C.E.: A Reply to G. F. Noxon. *Cinema Quarterly*, 3, pp. 95-97 (translated by the author).

²⁷ Arnheim, R., 1938. Il cinema documentario e i popoli. *Il Ventuno*, 3-4, pp. 36-38.

²⁸ Arnheim, R., 1938. Nuovo Laocoonte. *Bianco e Nero*, 8, pp. 3-33.

²⁹ Anti-Semitism arose after the visit of Adolf Hitler in Rome, 3-9 May 1938, just days after the invasion and annexation of Austria. On 25 July of that year, the “Manifesto della razza” was published in the *Giornale d'Italia* (later the first edition of “In difesa della razza”, Aug. 5). On 3 September, the *Gazzetta del Popolo* announced the first measures against the Jews by the racist regime. And on September 5th, the Royal decree was issued expelling Jews from schools, followed on 7 September by the expulsion of foreign Jews.

³⁰ With the exception of the reprint of a short article on ‘the actor’ audaciously published by *Bianco e Nero*: Arnheim, R., 1939. L'attore e le stampe. *Bianco e Nero*, 3, pp. 98-101.

the country. If one places the last pages of his Italian diary and those of his passport side by side, an incredible story emerges: we gain an understanding not only of the impact of history on his private concerns and anxieties in those months but also a private and personal perspective on some momentous events in world history³¹.



Figure 5. Rudolf Arnheim's passport during his Italian years

He applied for a German passport at the Embassy of the Reich in Rome on September 24, 1938, on the eve of the Munich conference. Being conscious of having to leave the country soon, he decided to visit his beloved Rome one last time. «In days of terrible tension – he wrote in his diary – it's nice to spend quiet moments out of time and its atrocities» (September 29, 1938). He shared the Romans' fears for the fate of Europe, by reading the special editions of newspapers that were published every half hour and listening to the latest radio news broadcasts from street speakers. He hoped for peace, but in the meantime vacillated, debating the opportunity with some confidants of a precautionary trip to Switzerland – which he never made:

Thursday, September 29, 1938. Yesterday, world events have taken [...] a turn that hopefully can help [...] to maintain the peace. I consulted with Nathan and, as we learned from the newspapers that I'd bought on the street that Germany had decided to mobilize, we decided there and then to leave for Switzerland as a precaution. But as we moved around the city, the newspaper, of which new editions were coming out every half an hour, already carried the news of an important mission by Chamberlain to Mussolini. Shortly after, we heard that the heads of government of the

³¹ The information in this paragraph derives from Arnheim's personal diary of his Italian years (1934-1938) and his passport of that time, provided directly by his family.

four great powers would meet in Munich, to find a last-ditch solution to the conflict between Hitler and Czechoslovakia and try to avoid a world conflict.

I will not easily forget those ten minutes in Via Frattina. It is a narrow street in the most beautiful Roman rust color, barely illuminated at night. At a first-floor window of a house hung a loud-speaker, which reported the latest news with a full, powerful voice that filled the narrow street. From the windows, men and women leaned toward the source of the sound, which echoed through the street. Above the crowd fluttered a bat; it was the only thing that moved, as if embodying the fearful soul of the rapt crowd. The voice told of the tense London meeting: how old Chamberlain, who was behind all the efforts for peace, announced with no little emotion, that his proposal had been accepted and that the clarifying negotiations in Munich would take place. When the radio report finished, the crowd slowly began to disperse, without anyone saying anything. Although great, the relief was slow to find voice. The people are too stunned and scared to rejoice spontaneously. Only slowly did tongues begin to loosen, as one person said to another, and each to whoever was standing next to them: *Speriamo bene*.

Arnheim experienced the first week of October 1938 with a sort of detachment from the unfolding of political events. He spent his days locked up at home with his wife and daughters, and to occupy his mind, he worked hard on his novel *Eine verkehrte Welt*³², “The world upside down” – a title of some significance. He described Leni Riefenstahl’s film on the Olympic Games in Berlin as the representation of a very controversial – spectacular and painful – event:

Wednesday, October 19, 1938. We watched the German film on the Olympic Games. A great spectacle of flying, vaulting men. Many of the noblest expressions of our species, which is worthy of comparison with the animals and, indeed, superior to them, because it is privileged to have a soul. But compared with the majesty of this event, and the imposing spectacle of all the symbols, the music and fire, the oath, the heads of state, and because this is the only chance for people to meet in such a festive atmosphere of brotherhood, what moves me like a painful contradiction is that this is an event where the soul is at the service of the body and not the other way round, as would be only right and natural. The brotherhood and strength of mind are only focused on the effectiveness of the physical performance! They were supposed to celebrate a great festival of peace, to express a genuine desire for brotherhood between nations – yet here, in fact, we have individuals competing dressed partly in military-like uniforms, who may have to fight on the front line tomorrow. In Greece, the gymnastic competitions were an expression of solidarity between different communities [...]. – Damn it, they brought the Olympic flame through the whole of Europe, but all that’s left is a smoldering cinder!

³² Arnheim, R., 1997. *Eine verkehrte Welt. Phantastischer Roman*. Hürt: Edition Memoria.

On October 23, 1938, Arnheim went to the U.S. Consulate in Naples, probably supported by some friends, to apply to emigrate to the United States. The consul, however, did not give him much hope. Arnheim felt treated with some suspicion and abandoned the idea. Pensive and alone, he compared his condition to that of the Italians and realized that, for him, there was no place that he could truly call “home”:

Sunday, October 23, 1938. I've been to Naples to see the American consul about obtaining a special visa as a university professor. The prospects are minimal. We were treated not with hostility but with a rather defensive attitude. They do not trust us; they made it sound very problematic, as if we wanted something wrong, yet all we want is to work. The curse of Adam is reversed so grotesquely: we have been driven from the paradise of employment, and nobody wants either our hands or our brains. With a head full of thoughts, I went up to Vomero, envious of all those people squashed up next to me in the bus: all so unwittingly “at home”, as if it were the most natural thing in the world! We, unfortunately, are not given a place to be at peace.

Despite the chasm that was opening up around him, he never yielded to fatalism, preferring to believe in a «judicious fate», based on «power of personality, which always allows us to choose the best option among those available and protects against misfortune» (October 30, 1938). To obtain an entry visa for the United States, Arnheim moved on several fronts, asking for letters of endorsement of his work from foreign magazines that had published his articles³³, and trying to restore relations with his old masters in Berlin (who had moved overseas in the early Thirties). On November 14, 1938, he obtained an entry visa to the United Kingdom at the British Passport Control in Rome.

Meanwhile, the grip of racism tightened round him. On the last page of his journal, dated December 13, 1938, surely troubled by political events and worried for his family, he told of a nightmare in which he walked through inexplicably harmless tongues of fire – a symbol of an *inverted world* that some years earlier had welcomed him as the most promising film theorist and had now turned its back:

Tuesday, December 13, 1938. Last night I dreamed of wanting to sit in a workshop to work. However, because there was no table [...] I placed my jacket on a chair, but then when I looked, it was gone, and I had to scramble to find it: I climbed a mountain slope; there were holes here and there from which rose the smoke of a volcano. Annette warned me to be careful, but I explained that it did not burn – it was cold fire, on which you could walk barefoot. Then Annette asked me why not come out of the flames, but I did not want to and I told her that even if I was not burning, in the future it could still hurt me. I firmly believed it, even though I could not say why.

³³ See the letter of reference by Boris V. Morkovin, director of the journal *Cinema Progress* (Los Angeles), dated December 8, 1938. Shortly after, the journal published two of Arnheim's articles: Arnheim, R., 1939. A Motion Picture World's Fair. *Cinema Progress*, 3-4, p. 2; Arnheim, R., 1939. A Miracle of Color. *Cinema Progress*, pp. 18-19, a summary translation of an article already been published in Italy: Arnheim, R., 1938. Il nuovo sistema italiano per la cinematografia a colori naturali. *Cinema*, 47, pp. 370-372.

The nightmare was turning into reality, and this final diary entry sounds like a premonition: the climate in Italy was becoming darker, as political events turned for the worse. On January 3, 1939, he went to the German embassy in Rome to extend his passport. That day, a disturbing “J” was printed in red on the front page of the document, an indelible mark of his Jewish origins. In early 1939, still in Rome, Arnheim applied for assistance to the German Jewish Aid Committee³⁴. On 25 April, he obtained a visa for the United Kingdom, and on May 3, 1939, he requested a free transit-visa to the Consulate of France in Rome in order to embark for England. Within a few days, he left Italy.



Figure 6. Front page of Rudolf Arnheim's passport during his Italian years

Perhaps because of the tumult of those weeks, no biography or autobiography reports the exact date of Arnheim's departure from Italy. The passport dissolves this doubt. Near the bottom of the last page, a small circular stamp shows his passage through the railway frontier at Bardonecchia, on Italy's north-western frontier, on May 9, 1939. Ten days later, he embarked at Boulogne-sur-Mer and reached Folkestone on the Kent coast. His visa was confirmed on May 25, 1939 in London and extended until November 19 of that year.

³⁴ See the letter by Herbert Read, dated March 3, 1939 (Archives of American Art, Washington DC).



Figure 7. Rudolf Arnheim in Italy (1939)

Arnheim would certainly have preferred to avoid that stopover in the United Kingdom, a belligerent country opposed to the Axis powers. Once in London, he worked as a translator for the BBC. With anguished concern, he wrote to his Italian friend Fedele D'Amico asking him to persuade his wife, who was still in Italy, to join him as soon as she could with the rest of the family³⁵. Unfortunately, the sudden death of his daughter Anna from an infant disease in Rome in September 1939 and the course of the war delayed the reunification for more than a year. In July 1940, the Battle of Britain began, and London was bombed by the Luftwaffe. Finally, on September 18, 1940, he obtained an immigration visa for the United States at the American General Consulate in London, reaching US soil at the end of that month. His third life awaited him on the other side of the Atlantic.

Legacy of a stranger

Behind the biographical interest of his passport, Arnheim's perilous final months in Italy are emblematic of his "outsider's" theoretical position as regards the Italian cultural context of the time. The idealist approach to the arts was philosophical; film had to contend with the mechanical means that, it was claimed, would influence, obstruct, or even prevent the artist's creative activity, the latter being a pure act of the spirit.

³⁵ See D'Amico's letters to Arnheim dated April 21, 1960 and April 29, 1940. In: Arnheim, R. & d'Amico, F., 2000. *Eppure, forse, domani. Carteggio (1938-1990)*. Milano: Archinto, pp. 22-26.

Arnheim's training in experimental and Gestalt psychology made him a figure somewhat alien to the Italian theoretical background. Even a cursory review of the aesthetics of the cinema books published in Italy in the early decades of the 20th century shows a certain distance between *Film als Kunst* and the contributions of the main exponents of the Italian school (such as Sebastiano Arturo Luciani, Carlo Ludovico Raghianti, Luigi Chiarini, Francesco Pasinetti, and Anton Giulio Bragaglia). Although he was well integrated in Italy and worked closely with many of those scholars, his "outsider's" cultural make-up and education were at the root of his "isolation" from idealism while, in a sense, helping him overcome this "conceptual autarchy".

Thanks to his different theoretical perspective, Arnheim had a humanistic approach that, nevertheless, was not opposed to scientific thought. His profound knowledge of the perceptual implications of the technical innovations adopted in filmmaking allowed him to extend the borders of film aesthetics and to apply theoretical notions to the material side of the film experience. Arnheim was considered by his friends as a "Mitteleuropean guide"³⁶ who helped new generations of critics and directors (especially those destined to become the protagonists of Neorealism)³⁷ to enlarge their horizons and move beyond idealism.

Despite his geographical and cultural isolation, therefore, Arnheim was a decisive figure in the Italian cultural context of the Thirties. History ran its course, forcing him to make a new escape and leading him to abandon his passion for cinema as the main focus of his studies. However, his contribution can now be better evaluated and his merits clearly recognized.

³⁶ This expression is used by Pietro Ingrao in Ingrao, P., 2006. Ricordo di Arnheim. In: G. Bartoli & S. Mastandrea, eds. 2006. *Rudolf Arnheim. Una visione dell'arte*, Roma: Anicia, pp. 23-24; Ingrao, P., 2006. "Caro Arnheim... Caro Ingrao". In: S. Toffetti, ed. 2006. *Mi sono molto divertito. Scritti sul cinema (1936-2003)*. Roma: Centro Sperimentale di Cinematografia, pp. 136-140.

³⁷ See Arnheim, 1953; Arnheim, R., 1957. Ripensando alle cose di allora. *Rivista del cinema italiano*, 1-2, pp. 96-97.

APPENDIX

Bibliography of Rudolf Arnheim's writings on film in the Italian journals (1932-1939)

This bibliography reconstructs Rudolf Arnheim's contribution to Italian film journals and magazines from 1932 to 1938. Articles and essays are listed in chronological order. English reprints in the Thirties are also indicated. The list does not include the columns in *Cinema* between 1936 and summer 1938 that were signed with the pseudonyms Nostromo and Ciak. Unless otherwise indicated, extended signature is meant.

The reconstruction compensates for many gaps and inaccuracies in existing bibliographies, especially in the Italian context, while acknowledging the work of those on which it was originally based. In particular: *Bibliography of Rudolf Arnheim*, manuscript edited in 1974 by Mary Arnheim and deposited at the Fine Arts Library of the University of Michigan, updated in 1983 as *Rudolf Arnheim: Bibliography of his Writings, 1928-1982*, with further additions in 1988 (*Supplement 1983-1987*) and 1991 (*Supplement 1983-1990*); and the *Complete Bibliography of Writings on Film, Photo, Press and Radio by Rudolf Arnheim*, edited by Helmut H. Diederichs, in Arnheim, R., 1997. *Film Essays and Criticism*, Madison, WI and London: University of Wisconsin Press, pp. 223-248, periodically updated in the online forum www.sozpaed.fh-dortmund.de/diederichs/arnforum/ragesv.htm.

As the most complete and accurate one on the subject, this bibliography remains open to additions. A regularly updated version is published on www.RudolfArnheim.it, a website that collects studies and research contributions on the relationship between Arnheim, Italy and cinema.

All the listed articles are reprinted in Arnheim, R., 2009. *I baffi di Charlot. Scritti italiani sul cinema 1932-1938*. Torino: Kaplan, ed. Adriano D'Aloia.

1932

Estratti da *Film als Kunst* di Rudolph Arnheim. Edit. Ernst Rowohlt, Berlin 1932, edited by U. Barbaro ("Cines" 1933). Rome: Centro Sperimentale di Cinematografia.

Soggettista e direttore artistico. *L'Italia letteraria*, 15 May, p. 5.

1933

Arte riproduttiva. *Cine-Convegno*, 2-3, pp. 33-36. Reprint as Film and Radio. *Cinema Quarterly*, 2 (2), 1933, pp. 84-86.

Contrappunto sonoro. *La Stampa*, 20 Jun., p. 5.

1935

Our Daily Bread. *Intercine*, 1, pp. 14-18.

R. A., Expression. *Intercine*, 1, pp. 35-38.

Seeing Afar Off. *Intercine*, 2, pp. 71-82.

R. A., Expression. *Intercine*, 3, pp. 164-167.

R. A., Expression. *Intercine*, 4, pp. 225-227.

R. A., Expression. *Intercine*, 5, pp. 285-287.

R. A., Expression. *Intercine*, 6, pp. 354-356.

R. A., Expression. *Intercine*, 7, pp. 407-409.

Cinematographic criticism of tomorrow. *Intercine*, 8-9, p. 94. Reprinted as The film critic of today and tomorrow. *Cinema Quarterly*, 3 (4), 1935, pp. 203-209.

R. A., Espressione. *Intercine*, 10, pp. 64-66.

R. A., Espressione. *Intercine*, 11, pp. 47-49.

R. A., Espressione. *Intercine*, 12, pp. 44-46.

1936

Perché sono brutti i film a colori? *Scenario*, 3, pp. 112-114. Reprint of Remarks on the Colour Film. *Sight and Sound*, 4 (16), 1935, pp. 160-162.

Rodolfo Arnheim, A proposito del cinema a colori. *Cinema*, 2, pp. 67-68.

Polarizzazione. La lotta contro i riflessi. *Cinema*, 7, p. 276.

rnh, Danza macabra. *Cinema*, 8, p. 312.

(rnh), La mano del regista. *Cinema*, 8, p. 312.

rnh, Varietà. L'uomo invisibile delle attualità. *Cinema*, 9, p. 340.

rnh, Varietà. Lux e lumen. *Cinema*, 9, p. 340.

rnh, Montaggio senza montaggio. *Cinema*, 9, p. 343.

rnh, Senza parola. *Cinema*, 10, p. 377.

Psicologia del "Gag". *Cinema*, 10, pp. 378-379.

Una notte sul Monte Calvo. *Cinema*, 11, pp. 428-429.

rnh, Dominatrici. *Cinema*, 11, p. 440.

R. Arn., Uno zio del cinematografo. *Cinema*, 12, p. 457.

rnh, Cinema "in persona prima". *Cinema*, 12, p. 480.

1937

Uno spettro in tre versioni. *Cinema*, 13, pp. 22-23.

rnh, Analisi d'una ignota. *Cinema*, 13, pp. 23-24.

Candido-Arpagone [Rudolf Arnheim-Gianni Puccini], Vigilia d'armi, È arrivata la felicità, Voglio essere amata, L'imperatore della California, Il sentiero della felicità. *Cinema*, 14, pp. 69-71.

Candido-Arpagone [Rudolf Arnheim-Gianni Puccini], Lo studente di Praga, Amore tzigano, L'amato vagabondo, I nostri parenti. *Cinema*, 15, pp. 109-111.

Gli occhi del cervello. *Cinema*, 16, pp. 148-149.

Candido-Arpagone [Rudolf Arnheim-Gianni Puccini], Maria di Scozia, I cavalieri del Texas, Il mio amore eri tu, La carica dei Seicento. *Cinema*, 16, pp. 155-157.

Dettagli che non sono dettagli. *Cinema*, 17, pp. 180-182.

Marie Onussen [Rudolf Arnheim and Marie Arnheim-Gay], Istantanee in casa. *Cinema*, 17, p. 192.

rnh, Le meraviglie della tecnica. *Cinema*, 18, pp. 217-219.

Marie Onussen [Rudolf Arnheim and Marie Arnheim-Gay], Pronti in 45 minuti! *Cinema*, 19, p. 263.

Televisione. Domani sarà così. *Cinema*, 20, pp. 337-338.

Candido-Arpagone [Rudolf Arnheim-Gianni Puccini], La donna del giorno, Il paradiso delle fanciulle, Ramona, La bambola del diavolo, Seguendo la flotta, Contessa di Parma. *Cinema*, 21, pp. 389-390.

Espressione e bellezza. *Cinema*, 23, pp. 443-444.

R. Arnh, La luce in movimento. *Cinema*, 24, p. 508.

Resurrezione del cineasta? *Cinema*, 25, pp. 7-9.

Le leggi del colore. *Cinema*, 29, pp. 170-171.

Il paesaggio ispiratore. *Cinema*, 32, pp. 262-264.

RNH, Ma che cosa è questo cinema? I - Sonoro e muto? *Cinema*, 33, p. 306.

R. A., Un mondo più colorato. *Cinema*, 34, p. 337.

rnh, Ma che cos'è questo cinema? II. Bisogna seguire il gusto delle masse? *Cinema*, 34, pp. 345-346.

RNH, Orizzonte perduto. *Cinema*, 34, p. 34.

Disciplina del grammofono, della radio, del telefono e della televisione. *Sapere*, 71, pp. 415-417.

rnh, Memorie della camera oscura. *Cinema*, 36, pp. 433-435.

1938

rnh, Una signora mai vista. *Cinema*, 37, p. 14.

Il cifrario del successo. *Cinema*, 38, p. 44.

Il formato ridotto diventerà formato normale? *Cinema*, 42, pp. 190-191.

RNH, La loro vita privata. *Cinema*, 42, p. 195.

Esame di coscienza. *Cinema*, 44, pp. 289-290.

L'attore e le stampelle. *Cinema*, 46, pp. 335-337.

R. A., Il nuovo sistema italiano per la cinematografia a colori naturali. *Cinema*, 47, pp. 370-372. Partially reprinted as A Miracle of Color. *Cinema Progress*, 4 (2), 1939, pp. 18-19.

rnh, Il detective soggettista. *Cinema*, 50, pp. 56-58.

Principi del montaggio. In: May, R. Per una grammatica del montaggio. *Bianco e Nero*, II (1), pp. 37-42.

Il film come opera d'arte. *Bianco e Nero*, II (4), pp. 11-42.

Un lettore ci domanda. *Sapere*, 86, p. 66.

Il cinema documentario e i popoli. *Il Ventuno*, 3-4, pp. 36-38.

R. Arnheim, Nuovo Laocoonte. *Bianco e Nero*, II (8), pp. 3-33.

1939

L'attore e le stampelle. *Bianco e Nero*, III (3), pp. 98-101. Reprint of L'attore e le stampelle. *Cinema*, 46, 1938, pp. 335-337.