

November 24, 1981

In this paper I want to focus on Arnheim's use of the concept of significant form to delimit the artistic in film. If "film as art" in Arnheim's sense really means nothing more than "film possessing significant form," then I think that Arnheim's theory could not only help to put this elusive and somewhat discredited notion in a new light, but also be turned against Arnheim's own "purist" critique of the development of sound, color, 3-d projection, and wide screen. I shall therefore divide my investigation into three parts, the first two of which are expository while the last one is critical. First, I shall interpret Arnheim's concept of significant form as a regulative ideal for steering the film maker or critic along the artistic high road between the pitfalls of naturalism and formalism. Second, I shall run through Arnheim's arguments that silence, black and white, 2-d projection, and the traditionally delimited screen image are essential elements of the formative potential of the film medium. Third, I shall question whether these elements really are essential, and whether the development of color, sound, 3-d projection, and wide screen are incompatible with the film as a vehicle of formal significance.

# I.

Arnheim subscribes to the view that art does not imitate nature, but rather rounds it off, completes it, or perfects it. More precisely, art rounds off or shapes what we naturally or ordinarily see, in such a way that a hitherto unnoticed significance can be seen to emerge from the natural or the ordinary itself.

This significance, which is normally present but diffuse and unidentified in ordinary perception, is called "formal significance" or "significant form" because it is rendered concrete and determinate by the formal arrangement of actors and objects in the work of art. The formative means of the artistic medium can be used to transform objects into actors and actors into well-placed props, so that both present an expressive or symbolic significance not usually noticed in everyday perception. Even though this sort of significance may seldom or never be seen to belong to persons or objects in ordinary perception, it is seen to belong naturally to them as the subject matter of a work of art. The concept of formal significance in a work of art helps to put two liabilities of the film medium in perspective. The first, naturalism, or the mere recording of what we usually see, involves the failure of the medium to realize its potential to transform objects and actors in such a way that their normally unnoticed expressive or symbolic significance is made manifest. The second, formalism, involves such an unrestrained or unmotivated exploitation of the formative potential of the medium that ~~the~~ expressive or symbolic significance, if it is captured and represented at all, is not seen to emerge naturally from the subject matter, but rather is seen to lie side by side with it.

Given this very rough outline of Arnheim's concepts of naturalism, formalism, and formally significant work of art, one could well ask how the same film medium can be used to create works falling into any of these three categories. How, to begin with, can the film be alternatively a recording medium and a formative medium? The answer to this question will help us to

understand the distinction between naturalism and a formally significant work of art. And how can the film as a formative medium be used to create works possessing formal significance? The answer to this question will help us to understand the distinction between formalism and a formally significant work of art.

Strictly speaking, the use of film as a recording medium and the use of film as a formative medium are never mutually exclusive alternatives. There is a sense in which film is always a recording medium, and a sense in which film is always a formative medium. Arnheim makes this point clear by comparing the ways in which the human eye and the camera perceive reality. The major difference between the human eye and the "eye" of the camera is that the interpretations of the former always enter into what it perceives, while the latter qua perceiver is purely passive and receptive. The film is always a recording medium in this sense: that in a single shot the "eye" of the camera sees just what immediately strikes it and no more. This means, among other things, that the camera always "sees" things in geometrical perspective, while the human eye only rarely and with training can approach this way of seeing. For example, in one shot the camera can only "see" and record the exact geometrical outline of the shape of the mouth of a cup placed at an angle, while the human eye normally sees the same mouth as neither exactly oval nor exactly round, but as a tension between the round shape that would be seen from above the cup and the oval shape that "ought" to be seen from an angle. This is only one example illustrating a difference between photographic "perception"

and ocular perception, but we do not need to list all of the differences and the reasons for them to understand what is at issue. The camera can "see" what the human eye does not normally see, precisely because the camera's way of seeing is a mere mechanical recording.

If the film in the sense described above is always a recording medium, in what sense is it always a formative medium? Arnheim makes the interesting point that the film must be used as a formative medium not only when the aim is the creation of a work of art, but also when the cameraman wants merely to record a subject "naturalistically" in a single shot. The early film makers, for whom an accurate presentation of content or subject matter was allegedly everything, were acutely aware that a "good" recording of reality depends on much more than what immediately meets the camera's eye. A good naturalistic shot presents the subject as it is characteristically or normally seen, which involves the placement of the camera at an optimum angle and distance from an optimally arranged subject matter in optimum lighting conditions. Therefore, in order even to record a scene naturalistically, the camera must not only record what it "sees" in the sense outlined above, but also be used in a way that formally composes the scene, even in a single shot.

However, Arnheim's claim that the camera must formally compose reality in order to record it is less critical to his analysis of naturalism, formalism, and formal significance than his claim that the camera must record reality in order to compose it formally. We have actually been talking about two different senses of "record" thus far. The first sense, that of a good



naturalistic recording of reality, also involves some minimal formal composition of reality by the camera. The second sense, that of the camera passively registering whatever strikes its "eye," makes any formal composition of reality possible in the first place. Put another way, the first sense of recording represents, to the extent that film can represent by means of formal composition, what the human eye characteristically or normally sees. The second sense of recording represents what the human eye rarely if ever sees or notices, but that which can serve as an element in formally composing something that the human eye can see characteristically (just the subject matter itself) or in a new way (the expressive or symbolic significance of the subject matter).

It is the film maker's attitude toward the formal composition of photographic recording in the ~~primary~~ sense that determines whether his work will be a naturalistic recording of reality, a formally significant piece of art, or an instance of formalism. Arnheim discusses the first alternative in terms of the impulse to make good the deficiencies of mere photographic recording. If the camera as a recording device can "see" what no human eye normally sees, then the scene, lighting, and position of the camera can be arranged so that what the shot represents will come close to what the human eye characteristically, normally, or naturally sees. But if one stops here, one has naturalism or a mere imitation of reality, rather than art. Formalism, at the other extreme, is the result of the impulse to experiment or play with the deficiencies of photographic recording, come what may to the subject matter. The making of formally significant

films depends on the discovery that one can not only restore the naturalness of a subject matter by means of the formal composition of a film recording, but also bring out its normally unnoticed expressive or symbolic significance by the same means. The concern with the portrayal of expressive or symbolic significance takes one beyond naturalism and reflects the intention of the artist to round off or complete nature. The success of this intention, and the avoidance of formalism, depend on whether the artist is able, by formative means, to capture and represent the expressive or symbolic significance of a subject matter without violating the latter's naturalness.

## II.

According to Arnheim, the formative capacity of the film medium is so great that it can not only represent a subject as it is characteristically seen in everyday life, but also represent a hitherto unnoticed expressive or symbolic significance arising out of the same familiar subject. Arnheim discusses a long list of the formative elements of the film medium, and recommends that every opportunity to employ these in the service of a formally significant work ought to be exploited. Every formative element of the medium is therefore held to be essential, but some of the more controversial ones are the absence of color, the absence of sound, 2-d projection, and the traditionally delimited screen.

Let us run through Arnheim's arguments for the formative power of each of these elements, before we ask in the next section whether they are essential to the film as art.

Arnheim argues that black and white film has the potential to be a species, with the graphic arts and music, of the same

artistic genus. These sorts of art bring out the formal qualities of a subject by clear-cut contrasts of elements, which in turn must be as distinguishable as black, white, and all of the tones of grey in between. A skillful use of the black and white range is also suggestive of mood, or expressive significance, and of good and evil, or symbolic significance. The full chromatic scale of colors, on the other hand, lacks both the sharp or at least simple distinctions of the black to white scale and the capacity of the latter to reflect the overall expressive or symbolic lighting of a scene. In general, since the human eye does not normally see in the black and white scale, this scale is formative in the sense that it can capture and represent other things - expressive and symbolic significance - also not normally seen by the human eye.

Arnheim claims that in sound films, as in natural life, sense or significance is immediately derived from the spoken word, while the significance of gestures or facial expressions lurks in the background as a mere unnoticed accompaniment. Silent film does not simply drop the sound of the spoken word and leave the accompanying gestures and facial expressions as a remainder, but enhances, captures, shapes, and makes determinate their expressive or symbolic significance. Once again, the film has the formative power to make this significance, which is normally unnoticed because diffuse and indeterminate, fully determinate and accessible to perception. Moreover, since expressive or symbolic significance is inscribed in bodily gestures in the same way that it is inscribed in other objects, the silent film helps to collapse the difference between actor and object so that significance can be seen to arise out of either one indifferently and naturally.

Arnheim also argues that 2-d projection is an essential formative element of the film as an artistic medium. 2-d projection refers, first, to the capacity of the camera to record three-dimensional surfaces on a two-dimensional surface - the film, and second, to the capacity of the projection machine to throw three-dimensional surfaces onto another two-dimensional surface - the screen. The formative effect of these two projections does not seem to be additive, but occurs indifferently when we look at either a snap shot or a movie. The principal formative effects of 2-d projection for Arnheim are distorted perspective and reduced depth. As I pointed out earlier in this paper, since the "eye" of the camera sees everything in exact geometrical perspective, the recorded image of what the camera "sees" will seem distorted in perspective to the human eye, which rarely if ever sees things in exact geometrical perspective. As Arnheim shows, the right mixture of such "distorted" perspective and a well-chosen camera angle can capture the expressive or symbolic significance that would otherwise go unnoticed in familiar objects - for example, the domineering character of the generals and captains of industry as shot by the Russian cameras from a worm's-eye view. The reduced depth of 2-d projection all but eliminates the constancies of size, shape, and position of objects as they are ordinarily perceived. By means of the absence of these constancies, the expressive or symbolic significance of objects such as Pudovkin's peasants and the statue of the tsar, for example, can be strikingly revealed. Arnheim's discussion of reduced depth also gives him an

opportunity to extend his analogy between film and the graphic arts. The case he makes is worth quoting:

The purely formal qualities of the picture come into prominence only because of the lack of depth. Every good film shot is satisfying in the purely formal sense as a linear composition. The lines are harmoniously disposed with reference to one another as well as to the margins. The distribution of light and shade in the shot is evenly balanced. Only because the spatial effect is so slight, the spectator's attention is drawn to the two-dimensional patterns of lines and shadow masses. These, after all, are actually the components of three-dimensional bodies and become elements of the surface composition only through being projected onto a plane. (p. 58)

"The margins" in the above passage refer to a fourth formative element of the film medium that Arnheim regards as essential to its artistic employment - the traditionally delimited screen image. It is important to note that a screen image of any size, as long as it has definite limits, can adequately do a couple of jobs for Arnheim's film artist. First, a screen of finite size permits him to compose the formal elements of the subject matter "graphically" within determinate margins, and second, it allows objects outside the margins to enter the image in significant ways during the course of the movie. The real advantage of the traditionally delimited screen over the wide screen lies, according to Arnheim, in the freedom that the former gives the film artist to decompose a subject matter, by means of a series of close-up shots, in order to recompose it, by means of montage, in a way that brings out an otherwise

unnoticed expressive or symbolic significance.

### III.

We have seen that for Arnheim, one of the defining properties, or perhaps the defining property, of a work of art is that it is a vehicle of significant form. Something is a vehicle of significant form if it can be used to transform a subject in such a way that its expressive or symbolic significance, which is always present but usually diffuse and unnoticed in ordinary perception, is captured and made determinate and recognizable. A medium, such as the film, can be used to transform a subject in this way only if its formative elements are properly exploited. Among the essential formative elements of the film medium, says Arnheim, are the absence of color and sound, 2-d projection, and the traditionally delimited screen. The inference is, then, that the development of color, sound, 3-d projection, and wide screen can only ruin the artistic potential of film. But suppose that these developments on the contrary actually enhance the artistic potential of film, as some writers have argued. Then one inference might be that since Arnheim's arguments against these developments seem to be derived from his concept of art as a vehicle of significant form, perhaps this concept ought to be consigned to the trash-heap of attempted "definitions" of art. I think that another inference is possible, however. What this second inference is, and that there are better grounds for making it than for drawing the first one, will take up the balance of this paper.

The second inference is that Arnheim's exclusion of color, sound, 3-d projection, and wide screen from the class of formative



elements of the film medium is mistaken, not because their exclusion derives from the mistaken notion that works of art are vehicles of significant form, but because this notion is not mistaken and the elements in question actually enhance the significant form of which works of art are the vehicles. Some of Arnheim's critics help to warrant the second inference rather than the first one. According to Bazin ("The Evolution of the Language of the Cinema") and Barr ("Cinemascope: Before and After"), the basic failings of Arnheim's view can be reduced to two:

1. Arnheim tends to conceive expressive or symbolic significance as the significance of a visual pattern rather than as the significance of an event.
2. Arnheim thinks that the expressive or symbolic significance of a subject matter should be fully spelled out by the artist, rather than suggested or left open to the interpretation of the audience.

It seems to be these two fundamental prejudices, rather than a misguided concern with significant form, that incline Arnheim toward the absence of color and sound, 2-d projection, and the traditionally delimited screen as means of realizing significant form.. One could go even further and claim that for Arnheim, the significance of a visual pattern is taken as a model for the formal significance of film, because film is taken as an analogue of the graphic arts.

Once one is delivered from these fundamental prejudices, as Bazin and Barr show, the inclusion of sound, color, 3-d projection (or at least deep focus and Cinemascope), and wide

screen as formative elements of the film medium does not seem to detract from the formal significance of a work, but rather serves to enhance it. Instead of decomposing a concrete event in order to recompose it as a visual pattern revealing expressive or symbolic significance, the director with these "modern" formative elements at his disposal is able to transform a subject matter to disclose its significance while leaving it intact as an event. The price paid for employing sound, color, 3-d projection, and wide screen instead of the alternatives is a relative underdetermination of the expressive or symbolic significance made manifest, but the argument is that just what this is ought to be left up to the audience anyway.