Revisiting Arnheim and Gombrich in Social Scientific Perspective

ABSTRACT
This article revisits an earlier social scientific analysis of the thought of Rudolf Arnheim and E. H. Gombrich. Adding to the earlier analysis in terms of social ontology and historical development is an analysis of the sufficiency of perception to yield information about the world, both in ordinary and in artistic contexts. Gombrich held to an idea of perception as hypothesis testing, and it joins with Popper’s philosophy in the deferred warrant of the perceptual image. Arnheim, instead, followed the Gestalt theorists to believe that each stage of perceptual experience was incorrigible according to the given conditions. Consequently, Arnheim felt confident addressing the essence of art, while Gombrich remained anti-essentialist. Ultimately, Gombrich’s Popperian empiricism attenuates realism, whereas Arnheim’s gestaltism seeks to build a bridge between ordinary and scientific observation.

Still today, Rudolf Arnheim’s Art and Visual Perception and Ernst Gombrich’s Art and Illusion remain as monuments of the psychology of art from the mid-twentieth century. Previous scholarship has teased apart their different philosophical commitments to justify Arnheim’s contention that, “I would insist that . . . the difference between Gombrich and myself is not simply a question of emphasis. When we both treat of the same problem or theory, we affirm incompatible things” (Pizzo Russo 1983, 26). In 2004, I published an article breaking down the aesthetics of Rudolf Arnheim and E. H. Gombrich in social scientific terms related to commitments to social and historical ontology. Gombrich’s well-known derivation and inspiration of his approach from Karl Popper was complemented on Arnheim’s side with Maurice Mandelbaum, whom I argued was a “gestalt” philosopher to complement Arnheim (Verstegen 2010). This was fortuitous, because Mandelbaum’s critiques of Popper helped provide new insights into the differences between the two art writers.

In particular, Mandelbaum was used to point out the one-sidedness of Popper’s critique, as it was reflected in Gombrich’s aesthetics. Popper had opposed both social holism and historical teleology (defining for him “historicism”), yet Mandelbaum’s critiques had defined more moderate positions that were neither individualist nor holist. As reflected back on Arnheim, it staked out a space where one could seek to overcome the aridity of Gombrich’s stark individualism without explaining phenomena only by their meaning in a historical sequence.

If there is more to be said about the differences between the two theorists, perhaps it is possible to say more about their differences by recognizing their similarities. For example, there is the interesting fact that Arnheim always liked Gombrich’s essay, “Meditations on a Hobby Horse,” and did not fail to acknowledge it. Their real differences lay in Gombrich’s Art and Illusion and the trust put in the sense of vision, with Gombrich more skeptical and Arnheim more optimistic about its epistemic potential. These differences are worth revisiting again, because perceptual theory has
again divided on similar lines based on whether the brain and perceptual system is anticipatory or structural.\(^2\)

After characterizing an interpretive lens that can account for more similarities (the glass half full and half empty metaphor), I establish Arnheim’s positive reception of “Meditations on a Hobby Horse.” Next, I move on to Gombrich’s reception of *Art and Visual Perception* and Arnheim’s of *Art and Illusion*, where I note the deep difference between Arnheim and Gombrich in the immanence of perception and the ad hoc versus ex post facto point of view. Finally, I review a series of late reviews and comments where the debate ossified into a defense of schools and entrenched reception.

From this basis, I add to my earlier critique of Gombrich by isolating deep commitments he shared with Popper regarding the structure of knowledge and the structure of the world. I argue that Gombrich’s model of perceiving a work of art is caught between realism and empiricism, confusing what the object of perception is, external or mental. In addition, such a theoretical grounding points to deeper beliefs about the world, where what is at base a Humean irrealism makes order purely a construct of the mind. Arnheim’s more overt phenomenal realism tracks both perception and its origin in physical structures, making a more satisfying account.

1. **ARNHEIM GLASS HALF FULL, GOMBRICH GLASS HALF EMPTY**

In an interview, Arnheim once said, “You know, Gombrich was trained by the cynics. And I have always been an optimist. I have always believed in the great possibilities of people to grasp the truth” (Grundmann 2001). This statement accounts for many differences between the respective theories of the two. Arnheim is interested in the phenomenon in its own right, Gombrich is interested in the context that conditions it. In some cases, they are not disagreeing, as in *Art and Visual Perception*, where Arnheim interestingly cited Gombrich’s notion of the choice situation as delimiting the range of possible meanings.

Crucially, this is in the context of a discussion of children’s art, and Arnheim explains his law of differentiation (“until a visual feature becomes differentiated, the total range of its possibilities will be represented by the structurally simplest among them”) that he endorses Gombrich’s position that “the meaning of a particular visual feature depends on the alternatives considered by the draftsman” (Arnheim 1974, 181). While Arnheim accepts the choice situation for child development where there was a tendency to prejudice children’s drawings with adult accomplishment, he would generally deny it for forms in general if the exercise of determining the artist’s repertoire is extrinsic to experiencing the form.\(^3\)

Another metaphor explains what they each were doing. In Arnheim’s review of *Art and Illusion*, he says that reading the book was like being led around an empty theater. Gombrich was so obsessed with the mechanics of seeing and meaning, with the stagecraft of history, Arnheim was arguing, that he did not stop to appreciate a work of art for itself. Gombrich owned and accepted the label:

That is perhaps the difference between him and me. In fact, I had a wonderful experience being led through the empty opera house of Drottningholm which is an 18th century opera house with the old stage props still there, and this is a very fascinating experience. As distinct from going to an opera there is an even more fascinating experience but a different one, so that is roughly what I would think. (Sacca 1980–1981, 17)

Another way to put this is to say that Gombrich always had a presentist approach to history. To simplify greatly, imagine a historical sociologist looking at early modern movements and using the tools of social formation to explain things, while a historical anthropologist would be trying to understand those same movements from the mental representations of the people themselves. The sociologist would be interested merely in the how and the anthropologist would be interested in the what.

Obviously, while these two approaches could meet in the middle, with the more skeptical approach of Gombrich perhaps serving as a methodological check on the immanent readings of Arnheim, they will be led to irreconcilable interpretations of the same phenomenon. This is partially what we find with *Art and Illusion*. Before turning to that there is an interesting point of agreement and even personal contact in the thesis of Gombrich’s “Meditations on a Hobby Horse.”
II. "MEDITATIONS ON A HOBBY HORSE" (1951)

When both Arnheim and Gombrich were young and not yet famous, they seem to have spent some time together in New York, where Gombrich was visiting for three months in 1949. There they discussed the source of Gombrich’s eventual theory of the artistic substitute in "Meditations on a Hobby Horse." According to the mature theory, people often treat props as substitutes for real objects. The condition for their serving as a successful substitute, however, is not likeness but functionality. If a stick serves a child as a horse—a hobby horse—then it is regarded as horse-like not because it looks more like a horse. Substitutes do not re-present individual objects—the horse is not a portrait of a real horse—but its own kind of successful horse.4

The substitute, for its part, is a kind of “conceptual” image, awaiting further elaboration. It was the default situation in the history of art, filling a “vast ocean of ‘conceptual’ art” that was opposed to the rare experiments in ancient Greece, the post-medieval west and in China. Although “conceptual” art was privileged throughout the history of art, it was at the same time seen as surpassed in certain traditions, creating an uneasy tension.

After Gombrich had returned to London, he and Arnheim continued to correspond. One letter remains from this time period in the Warburg Institute archive:

Dear Dr. Gombrich,

I had wanted to tell you immediately how glad I was to receive your letter... It is a rare pleasure to meet somebody who transmits on the same wave-length, so that right away one can start to talk about the real things. In the hope that we shall have a chance to talk soon, I will only say that your contention that primitive man does not represent but make his subject seems immediately convincing, bold as it is. For my own part, I have never thought further than to point out that an image always contains part of the object itself (roughly in the sense of Levy-Brühl’s participation). What you are saying may possibly have to be applied to art in general. The question would be whether it cannot be asserted that any artist always, to some extent, creates or re-creates the thing itself. Let’s call it the Pygmalion-complex. (Obvious relation to magic practices, etc.). (Arnheim 1949; Kopecky 2010)5

[Arnheim] seems to believe, however, that the “substitute”—which is what I call the self-image—is limited to an early conception, later replaced with the image as a representation of “something outside itself.” This “change of function,” it seems to me, does not and should not eliminate the earlier conception of the self-image, which continues to operate side by side with what later in this paper I call a “likeness.” (Arnheim 1966, 325)

In effect, Arnheim answered his own question from his earlier letter about whether substitution persists or is lost. The result is that he problematized the “vast ocean of conceptual art” that Gombrich cited, which separated substitutional “conceptual” images from naturalistic ones, and would be important in the debates over Art and Illusion. As indicated by the continued citation of the essay in his 1974 edition of Art and Visual Perception, Arnheim always responded charitably.

Gombrich’s eventual “Hobby Horse” essay appeared alongside one by Arnheim in L. L. White’s Aspects of Form of 1951. Clearly, the biologistic nature of the substitution, in contrast to the later hypercontextual theory of Art and Illusion, appealed to Arnheim, who saw in this theory a way to talk about abstract art. That their two essays appeared together with the similar ethological approach of Konrad Lorenz (1951) probably seemed to Arnheim to signal an important convergence of interests. In both the 1954 and 1974 editions of Art and Visual Perception, Arnheim quoted Gombrich from “Meditations on a Hobby Horse” to the effect that “The greater the biological relevance an object has to us, the more will we be attuned to its recognition—and the more tolerant will therefore be our standards of formal correspondence” (Arnheim 1954, 34; 1974, 51).

Interestingly, when in a Heideggerian mood Arnheim (1959/1966) reflected on his own ontology of the image in a related concept of the “self-image,” he returned to Gombrich. His self-image is like Gombrich’s substitute and is contrasted from the “likeness.” The self-image “visibly expresses its own properties” whereas the likeness is “treated as a statement about other objects” (Arnheim 1966, 325, 329). The self-image is about itself, like Gombrich’s hobby horse, and the likeness only has meaning in reference to something outside itself. Arnheim noted the similarity of concepts, however; he continued in a note:
to the “Hobby Horse” essay. As late as 1983 when, in an interview, Lucia Pizzo Russo asked Arnheim about the essay, he responded “a great essay!” (un bel saggio; Pizzo Russo 1983, 25).

III. ART AND VISUAL PERCEPTION (1954)

Arnheim had taken advantage of the theory of substitution in Art and Visual Perception, so notices of Gombrich were positive in that book. One of the most positive accounts of Arnheim in Gombrich’s Art and Illusion was praise for the chapter on “Growth.” It is interesting to turn to Gombrich’s (1956, 502) review of the book in the International Journal of Psychoanalysis to see why. He felt that it explained elements of the “conceptual” image as outlined in “Meditations on a Hobby Horse”; indeed, for Gombrich, the whole book seemed to be fixed on the conceptual image, preoccupied as Arnheim was with Gestalt psychology’s simple diagrams and illusions. In short, Arnheim had done the work to explain Gombrich’s conceptual image!

This is another half-full, half-empty phenomenon. Arnheim praised as normal the conceptual image that Gombrich took to be an exception. He could accept Arnheim’s explanation if it were put in the context of a larger theory of the heights of naturalistic representation. Gombrich chastised Arnheim for ignoring other kinds of psychology, in particular psychoanalysis, and mentioned Arnheim’s overlooking of Gombrich’s friend Ernst Kris at the “New School of Central Research” (sic) where Arnheim taught. In a related vein, Gombrich criticized Arnheim’s characterization of psychoanalytic approaches to art. Apart from proprietary feelings of closeness to Freud through Kris, I believe Gombrich also believed himself to be operating in a wider theoretical landscape than Arnheim, encompassing quasi-anthropological concepts as “projection” and “magic.”

IV. ART AND ILLUSION (1961)

Gombrich had praised the “Growth” chapter in Art and Illusion, but his other discussions of Gestalt psychology and Arnheim specifically were more lukewarm. This was because Gombrich had by now developed his own alternative theory of perception, partly building upon and partly surpassing “Meditations on a Hobby Horse.” The theory of substitution had been sketched by Ernst Kris and, before him, Heinrich Gomperz (and Julius von Schlosser; Gomperz 1905/2011; Kris and Kurz 1979). What the “Hobby Horse” had accomplished for Gombrich was that substitution could initiate representation but that some other process would have to move it beyond that realm: matching (hence, “making” and “matching”).

Here, the contrast between one of Gombrich’s teachers, Karl Bühler, with Arnheim’s Berlin Gestalt psychology would have taken over. In particular, Bühler’s pupil Egon Brunswick developed a theory of perception as a hypothesis that led directly to his work in California and continuation by a series of American researchers. This group is related but not identical to the “New Look,” which emphasized the way that need can alter perception (Mitrovic 2013). What Gombrich cited of their work was instead their general approach that emphasized the contingencies of perception. Gombrich clearly laid out his sympathies, from Egon Brunswick’s work in Vienna and California and its continuation in the work of Jerome Bruner. Psychologically, the classic challenge (called Høffding’s function) would be: how can a percept be informed of knowledge, associations, past experience, if it is not recognized first? (Rock 1962). This is what the Gestalt school charged about two generations of associationist theory. It is the background to Arnheim’s violent reaction against such constructionism, calling Art and Illusion “a monumental attempt to devalue the contribution of perceptual observation” (Arnheim 1962, 13).

If, epistemologically, both Arnheim and Gombrich were “critical realists” who disjoined experience from reality, how could they be so different? It is useful to turn to their philosophical inspirations to understand how. Arnheim’s teacher Wolfgang Köhler argued that experience is a construction, but it is the only one we have and one, indeed, that is usually veridical (Köhler 1938; compare Mandelbaum 1964). Popper instead stressed the hypothetical nature of reality testing, so he gave precedence to the physical world. Therefore, while both are realists whose criticality expressed itself through a fallibilism, Köhler stressed much more continuity between science and experience, whereas for Popper objectivity was deferred and physical, not phenomenal; reality was normative.
This deferral can be seen in Popper’s adherence to (or, depending on the account, the authorship of) the deductive-nomological (D-N) theory of scientific explanation. According to the D-N theory, an explanation is given when a phenomenon can be “covered” by a law. As Popper wrote in 1934, “To give a causal explanation of an event means to deduce a statement which describes it, using as premises of the deduction one or more universal laws, together with certain singular statements, the initial conditions” (Popper 1959, 59). Laws are considered here in a Humean way, as conjunctions of elements. Therefore, emphasis is not placed upon the actual tendencies and propensities of what is to be explained but upon the subsumption of an event to a law. It is in this context that Gombrich’s hypothesis-testing approach to representation marries itself to equally deferred veridical representation.

This background illuminates one of the more humorous reactions Gombrich had to Art and Visual Perception. In directly addressing the question, “What Looks Lifelike?” Arnheim explained the way in which audiences can adapt themselves to works of art and wrote that “only a further shift of the artistic reality level is needed to make the Picassos, the Braques, or the Klees look exactly like the things they represent” (1954, 93). In Art and Illusion, while reviewing Arnheim’s overall contribution, Gombrich singled out that phrase for criticism and wrote, “If he is right, the Sears Roebuck catalogue of the year 2000 will represent the mandolins, jugs, or twittering machines for sale on this new reality level” (Gombrich 1961, 27). Arnheim in turn replied in his own review of Art and Illusion that, “When I wrote the sentence in question, it did not occur to me that the admittedly incautious formulation could be misunderstood to mean that I was referring to illusion” (1966, 155). In rewriting the section for the 1974 edition, Arnheim wrote instead:

Those of us who live with the art of our century find it increasingly difficult to see what “the man in the street” means when he takes exception to deviations from realistic rendition in the Picassos, the Braques, the Klees. In Picasso’s portrait of a schoolgirl we see the elementary liveliness of the young creature, the girlish repose, the shyness of the face, the straightly combed hair, the burdensome tyranny of the big textbook. The strongly colored, wildly overlapping geometrical shapes do not detract from the subject but carry its expression with such mastery that we no longer see them as mere shapes: they are consumed in the task of representation. (Arnheim 1974, 137)

One thing that is interesting about Gombrich’s subtle shift in his response is the transference of the discussion from avant-garde art to a utilitarian context, a department store catalog. Gombrich has changed the function of the image from general to practical depiction, snapping art into a Popperian natural science environment.

Obviously, this debate has large consequences for the problem of pictorial representation. Gombrich’s pupil, Richard Woodfield, wrote in 2001 how “[Arnheim] believed that there would come a time when Picasso’s portraits would spring into life just like Franz Hals’s; we are still waiting” (2001, 313). Nevertheless, Fredric Jameson seemed to get Arnheim’s point, even though he did not explicitly cite it and changed the meaning slightly. Discussing how works of modernism had become the new classics of the late twentieth century, he wrote, “Not only are Picasso and Joyce no longer ugly; they now strike us, on the whole, as rather ‘realistic’” (Jameson 1991, 4).

Perhaps a most satisfying resolution to the problem has been suggested by Jennifer McMahon (2006), who has developed an aesthetic model directly on epistemological premises, which help bring the debate back to Köhler and Popper. She outlines how low-level features can be recombined into higher-order gestalts, spurring new abilities of recognition. Following Fred Dretske, she argues that all perception goes through qualia, which are selected and emphasized (or we might say “affirmed”) in different ways. As a consequence, “What at first seemed incoherent later appeared realistic” (2006). McMahon’s reformulation of the problem seems to vindicate Arnheim.

Popper’s realism almost looks like empiricism in comparison because it is very hard to know if we have actually reached a veridical perception. Indeed, in insisting on falsification, Popper opened the way to the unverifiability of theories and their underdetermination by observation. In a sense, both Popper and Gombrich were talking more about cognitive judgments than perception. Making and matching, after all, is a process based on feedback. The default position for perception, then, is that initial percepts are inevitably wrong.

In Arnheim’s response to Gombrich, he argues that when an artist like Donatello wanted to bring
a figure to life, he was not talking about illusion. Gombrich, for his part, always argued that “illusion” was an ill-fitting term that was forced on him by his publishers. Who is right? If we grant that Gombrich was not solely concerned with deceptive illusion but rather convincing depiction, could Arnheim grant the same as well? When he argues that artists sought after “visual dynamics,” it is not clear that Donatello was concerned with such total expressiveness or a proper likeness.

From this point, we can return to the issue of the “conceptual” image that Gombrich originally broached in the “Meditations” essay (Summers 1991). When Gombrich revised the theory in *Art and Illusion*, he stated that all art is conceptual. For Arnheim, this might have seemed an improvement from creating two kinds of art, the naturalistic and the “sea of conceptual art.” However, this did not please Arnheim because, at least in “Meditations,” one part of art was sensory. Now none of the history of art was sensory. The idea that art is conceptual means that there is no sensory input at all. We are back to the impoverishment of the senses.

Arnheim wanted to insist that the so-called conceptual quality of forms of early, or primitive, art was due to perception. As he wrote in *Art and Visual Perception*, “A child’s figure is no more a ‘schema’ than one by Rubens. It is only less differentiated” (Arnheim 1974, 167). Gombrich, as we have seen, cannot countenance this because he has already undermined perception in favor of achieved trial and error solutions. His essentially ex post facto viewpoint again contrasts from Arnheim’s immanent perspective.

This, I think, is the ultimate discrepancy between the two thinkers and their ultimate irreconcilability. The technical qualities of perception, sensation, and so on are important. But what it really boils down to is a deep-seated attitude about the adequacy of single percepts, and single drawings, to report about the world. For Arnheim, all stages of perception are engaged with the world, and for Gombrich only the hard fought later stages can be considered true engagements with the world and appearance. As with Popper, only they become law-like.

But a theory of perception has to be able to account both for fully resolved percepts and those that lead up to them. It is not sufficient to define an intermediary phase of experience negatively as a lack of what may transpire later. The fact that we may never resolve our perceptions onto a stable target suggests that it is improper to privilege in some way only certified experiences. As shown especially in Arnheim’s account of children’s drawings, a meaningful account by definition must exclude what we know about adults.

V. THE SENSE OF ORDER (1979)

Gombrich’s second major work of the psychology of art, *The Sense of Order*, has a subtitle that echoes *Art and Illusion: A Study in the Psychology of Decorative Art* (1979). This monumental study of ornament and decoration promised to be both history and psychology of ornament. While Gombrich was at pains to reiterate that *Art and Illusion* was not an apology for naturalistic art, his bifurcation of pictorial representation and decoration would be, at least for Arnheim, an issue for a true treatment of the decorative.

If *Art and Illusion* had been more exploratory in its claims, *The Sense of Order* could claim to be a consolidated psychological position, and Gombrich more confidently stated his point of view. He used Popper again, prominently, and continued to see the search for order as a means of coming to terms with the environment. The “sense of order,” finally, was the organism’s heightened ability to sense deviation. For this, the hypothesis-testing theory was supplemented with an approach inspired by information theory, in constructing pattern on “redundancy,” and deviations as “information.” The achieved order found in ornament throughout the world was a manifestation of this imposed regularity and redundancy.

Gombrich both advertised his disagreement with Gestalt theory and then went on to attribute this to Arnheim’s trouble with the book. In an interview given one year after both the publication of the book and Arnheim’s review, Gombrich said:

I think that I must say that considering I have criticized his pet theory, Gestalt theory, I found that his review was quite generous. I had expected worse, because after all he is totally wedded to a theory which I consider outmoded, and he is quite right when he says that the questions which I asked are far down below the peaks of art. I never said they weren’t. It was perhaps unnecessary to rub it in as if I hadn’t noticed that, but he is right. (Sacca 1980–1981, 17)
The most interesting thing about this response is that Gombrich interpreted Arnheim’s criticisms as almost taunting, indicating how he seemed to actually believe the point that he was denying, that he felt that ornament was inferior in some way to figural representation.

Turning to Arnheim’s actual review, we find that he had his own rhetoric, which was that Gombrich was a brilliant historian and had written a rich history of Western ornament, but that its examples were one-sided and its psychology was underwhelming (Arnheim 1979). Just as in *Art and Illusion*, Arnheim felt that Gombrich had found mechanisms to describe ornament, but they were mechanical and nonaffirming. When Gombrich wrote that “delight lies somewhere between boredom and confusion,” Arnheim responded that that is like “defining heaven as the avoidance of hell” (38). In other words, we find ourselves with another glass-half-full-and-half-empty scenario.

Arnheim felt that much more strong things could have been said in favor of ornament, and these can be interpreted narrowly, as elements of artistic construction, and widely, as echoes of universal order. For the first question, we run up against the “vast ocean of conceptual art” in the decorative sphere. Gombrich’s system, while giving ample attention to ornament, was based on the dichotomy of figural and decorative form. Once again, Gombrich could only view the history of art from the perch of modernity and the heights it had achieved. When Arnheim saw the riches of ornament in world art, he was ironically being more historical or trying to view ornament from the aesthetic of a native tradition.

As to the second question, there were deep philosophical reservations that would keep Gombrich from seeing order in nature. The whole idea of isomorphic kinds of structure throughout nature—from the natural world to the brain—would have smacked of romantic Naturphilosophie to the rationalist Gombrich, which he never ceased to critique. Popper was used to seeing the world as highly chaotic, with law bringing order, externally, via observed conjunctions, to the flux of difference. Completely oppositely, Köhler and Arnheim in *Entropy and Art* (1971; compare Lehar 2004) affirmed the subjection of man and nature to universal laws.

In fact, in Arnheim’s psychology of art, there was really no separation of ornament from art, because ornament was no different from the general form-giving impulse: “visual form subordinated to a larger whole, which it completes, characterizes, or enriches” (Arnheim 1974, 149). If in his 1956 review of *Art and Visual Perception* Gombrich had seen Arnheim as exhaustively explaining the “conceptual” image, in a similar fashion Arnheim ascribed order to all art. Yet just as he argued against “Meditations on a Hobby Horse” that the conceptual image is never actually superseded, he would argue against Gombrich’s *Sense of Order* that order and ornament still inhabits the heights of artistic production.

These ideas about order as a universal of art pointed to deeply held beliefs about the world and art. Gombrich opened *The Sense of Order* with a Popper quote and immediately framed the book with his evolutionary theories, which affirm that we seek regularities rather than, as Arnheim would prefer, find them. In his review, Arnheim called the “sense of order” a “kind of Darwinian trick” (1979, 37). It is interesting that Arnheim did some deeper reading of Popper, as is seen in his notebooks. He read Popper’s “Of Clouds and Clocks” (1972 [1965]). Characteristically, he questioned Popper’s imputation of pure disorder to a swarm of gnats, wondering if even there we might see order (today we would call it “swarm intelligence”).

For both of these reasons, Arnheim (1995a) could only see Gombrich’s approach as biased, an impression that was shortly confirmed when he reviewed *The Mediation of Ornament* by the Islamicist Oleg Grabar. Gombrich was at pains to stress that he was always interested in ornament, that he did not see it as subordinate to Western figural representation. Yet Arnheim argued that Gombrich’s very procedure betrayed a dichotomy that in itself made it impossible to treat ornament in other than secondary ways. In some senses the difference between Arnheim and Gombrich on the issue of ornament comes down to the reception of the pioneer art historian Alois Riegl. Gombrich’s *Sense of Order* was, in a sense, a tortured working-through of his relationship to his Viennese forebear. Arnheim (1995b), in reviewing a translation of Riegl’s *Problems of Style* (Stilfragen), found everything congenial in the book, as if it were an early anticipation of his own views.

It can be seen finally that Gombrich, like Popper, is really a Humean irrealist. Order is a contingent thing (like causality) because it is
supplied by human thought. The world really is not ordered, and that is why Gombrich could not really fake it. Like a covering law, Gombrich could discover the external lawfulness of ornament in a “Darwinian trick,” but, as Arnheim sensed, the theory remained a negative enterprise.

VI. IMAGE AND THE EYE (1982)

Indeed, in his review of The Image and the Eye, Arnheim actually calls Riegl the anticipator of the Gestalt approach, based on “formative properties and preferences” (Arnheim 1982). It is in this review that Arnheim crystallizes his opinion of Gombrich, emphasizing his excellence as an art historian, stressing the consistency of his cumulative work, but reiterating some of the points he had made earlier about his unhappiness with his deflating reductivism. In this volume of collected essays on representation, movement, and caricature, Arnheim agreed that Gombrich’s principles were not “home-made” but challenged the persistent valuation of Western art, physicalist bias, and distrust of the image’s ability to communicate on its own.

The publication of Art and Illusion allowed for relativists to provide a useful model of the constructedness of the image, most notably in Nelson Goodman’s Languages of Art, and many critics noted Gombrich’s apparent corrective shift to emphasize the veracity of the image (Goodman 1968). Arnheim too stressed this tension, especially where Gombrich returned discussion back to biology in a way that he had started things back in “Meditations on a Hobby Horse.” In a manner reinforcing the “empty theater” metaphor, Arnheim pithily wrote that Gombrich’s idea of pictures is that they are “clever” but not “admirable.” In other words, as he had noted of Art and Illusion and the Sense of Order, we do not get a sense of why images are of value; there is no affirmative element to them.

Gombrich’s brief response to the review is interesting in noting two points only. First, he argues that he does not value naturalistic styles over others, and, second—perhaps predictably—that Gestalt theory is outdated:

In his review (October 29) of my book The Image and the Eye Rudolf Arnheim tells your readers that I regard ‘highly naturalistic styles’ ‘as the consummation of art’s function.’ I do not. I have always stressed that what is called ‘art’ can serve very different functions; but while the painted cyclorama may admirably suit the purpose of the fairground this does not make me prefer its style to that of the windows of Chartres Cathedral. Perhaps it was not to be expected that one of the last champions of the original tenets of the Gestalt School of psychology could succeed in his evident effort to be fair to a book which relies on alternative theories. But since in his recent work The Power of the Center Arnheim quotes with approval a passage from my book The Sense of Order, it cannot have escaped him that my reservations about the Gestalt hypothesis have not led me to ignore the problems and achievements of formal organization in the arts. (Gombrich 1982b)

Yet Gombrich had indeed written, as Arnheim accurately quoted, that he praised “critical rationalism in Greek culture” and resisted the wrongness of “seeing our culture as superior to other varieties.” When Gombrich says he does not prefer the cyclorama, he is gently referencing his statement of how “science overtook art” with “photography, the colour film and the wide screen” (Gombrich 1982a, 27). He is saying he does not prefer rampant technical innovation—curiosities that border on spectacles—over older art. But that still leaves him with the secure canon of representational art.

VII. CONCLUSION

The two had reached a détente signaled by a friendly correspondence for a time in these years. Gombrich would argue that Gestalt psychology was passé; Arnheim would argue that Gombrich had better leave psychology to the psychologists. A manifestation of this came in 1986, when both Rudolf Arnheim and Ernst Gombrich, in a rare occasion, were both present together at the Darmstadt conference devoted to symmetry. The two old men sat together in the great hall chatting happily, Arnheim with his Berlin accent and Gombrich with his Viennese one. At one point in the conference, Arnheim gave a response, and, when asked, Gombrich said, “I have nothing to add.” It was a calm moment of mutual respect, marked by the more relaxed tone of reviews exchanged between the two.

They had made their peace with one another, but the deep differences persisted then and still today. As I have argued throughout this article, these difficulties face
Gombrich more than Arnheim. I will summarize them.

With agreement about the value of a substitutional theory of art, their first diversion comes with the ontogenetic fate of substitution. For Gombrich it is superseded; for Arnheim it persists. Arnheim’s account has the advantage that it does not force qualitative splits between major representational approaches. Indeed, Gombrich’s insistence of the uniqueness of post-conceptual representation has created most of the problems that critics find in his theory and its flirtation with ethnocentrism.

In regard to representation proper, Arnheim and Gombrich have a fundamentally different view of what is to be explained. Gombrich insists that art is a science-like pursuit, and its successes allow us to track the difference between real knowledge and error, hence, his preference for initial attempts at representation as hypotheses. Yet as Arnheim points out, the deference to hypotheses risks doubting the object itself, and Höfding’s argument holds, that a hypothesis has to attach to something first so that the hypothesis has something with which to be associated.

Something similar can be said about the argument about ornament because Gombrich defines it negatively. The thoughts made about the phenomenon refer to survival, picking out regularities, without reference to what caused them. At root Gombrich (and Popper) are Humean irrealists for which order is discovered in physical contingencies by mental activity. At root it is which theory can track reality more successfully. Gestalt realism wins out over Popperian positivist quasi-realism.18

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REFERENCES


1. “Insisterei però che la differenza fra Gombrich e me non si riduce a una semplice questione di enfasi. Quando noi due affrontiamo lo stesso fatto o la stessa teoria, affermiamo cose incompatibili.” For direct comparisons of Arneheim and Gombrich, see Cassanelli (1989) and Andina (2005).

2. This is the debate over the “Bayesian” brain. For a good review see Van der Helm (2016).

3. As Richard Wollheim (1980, 39) writes, “Why is it that, as soon as he does have knowledge of the artist’s repertoire, he is able to come to an expressive understanding?”

4. Gombrich’s theory has been most prominently developed by Kendall Walton (1990).

5. This is the only early letter in the archive, and there are several from later periods. I am grateful to Dr. Kopecny for informing me of the material available in the archive. Gombrich’s corresponding letter to Arnheim is in the Archives of American Art, Washington, D.C.

6. It is useful to point out that Gomperz knew Schlosser, who drew on these ideas for his work on wax portraits.

7. Gombrich: “If any student of the subject should wish to know at this stage what direction this bias took, I would refer him to the famous joint article by E. C. Tolman and E. Brunswick, ‘The Organism and the Causal Texture of Environment’, Psychological Review, 42, 1935, 43–77, which stresses the hypothetical character of all perceptual processes” (1961, xxix). Gombrich also cites Jerome Bruner (1957).

8. The classical form of the D-N theory is also found in Carl Hempel (1942). For a discussion, see Peter Manicas (2006).

9. McMahon quotes Dretske (1988). A reviewer has pointed out that there is a tension in McMahon’s use of Dretske. I believe this is true of Dretske’s later theory of representative realism. As expressed in this article, his theory is very close to gestalt critical realism.

10. Pizzo Russo (2006) notes that for Arneheim concepts are perceptual; for Gombrich perception is intellectualized.

11. For similar thoughts on Arneheim versus Piaget, see Verstegen (2014).


13. For a discussion, see Roach, Ewert, Marks, and Thompson (2013).

14. The two exchanged letters from 1982 to 1985; Arneheim’s are in the Deutsches Literaturarchiv, in Marbach, Germany, and Gombrich’s are in the Warburg Institute archive, London.

16. Raphael Rosenberg, of the University of Vienna, was a participant and kindly recounted the story to me (6/2016).


18. I thank two anonymous reviewers whose helpful comments improved the article.