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*Rudolf Arnheim, 102, Psychologist and Scholar of Art and Ideas, Dies*

By MARGALIT FOX

Rudolf Arnheim, a distinguished psychologist, philosopher and critic whose work explored the cognitive basis of art - how we interpret it and, by extension, the world - died on Saturday at his home in Ann Arbor, Mich. He was 102.

The death was confirmed by his daughter, Margaret Nettinga.

At his death, Professor Arnheim was emeritus professor of the psychology of art at Harvard University, where he taught from the late 1960s to the mid-'70s. He was previously associated for many years with Sarah Lawrence College.

Throughout his work, Professor Arnheim was absorbed with the ways in which humans experience the sensory world. Originally trained in Gestalt psychology, with its emphasis on the perception of forms as organized wholes, he was one of the first investigators to apply its principles to the study of art of all kinds. His work took in not only painting and photography, but also film, architecture, radio soap operas and early television. In a sense, he was practicing media studies long before the term was coined.

His writings influenced a range of fields. His best-known books, all published by the University of California Press, include "Art and Visual Perception" (1954), "Film as Art" (1957) and "Visual Thinking" (1969).

Professor Arnheim sought to illuminate the nexus of science and art, and much of his work centered on the deeply intertwined relationship between vision and cognition. Among the questions that engaged him were these: What happens in the mind when we perceive a work of art? Is perception shaped by cultural forces, or is it the product of something innate? Is a work of art like a film or a photograph a literal representation of reality, or does it instead shape our interpretation of reality?

Ultimately, he was concerned with a single large question: Do perception and thought differ? He concluded the two were nearly synonymous: the act of taking in sensory information was in essence thought itself. And it is through acts of seeing and hearing and touching, he argued, that we are able to impose order on the world.

Many of Professor Arnheim's views harked back to the empiricist philosophy of John Locke (1632-1704), who maintained that a person's knowledge of the world is rooted in objective sensory experience. They met stark opposition from some modern philosophers, among them Richard Rorty. Mr. Rorty died the day before Professor Arnheim.

"Our only access to reality is sensory experience, that is, sight or hearing or touch," Professor Arnheim said in an interview published in *Cabinet* magazine, a quarterly survey of art and culture. "And sensory experience is always more than mere seeing or touching. It also includes mental images and knowledge based on experience. All

of that makes up our view of the world."

Rudolf Julius Arnheim was born in Berlin on July 15, 1904; his father owned a small piano factory, which Rudolf was expected to take over one day. "But I just distracted the employees from their work because I wanted to know how such a piano was built," Professor Arnheim said in the Cabinet interview.

At the University of Berlin, Rudolf Arnheim studied psychology, philosophy, music and art, earning a doctorate in philosophy (of which psychology was then a discipline) in 1928. He became an editor at *Die Weltbühne*, a leftist magazine of politics and culture, where he published articles on film, art and architecture.

In 1933, with the rise of Nazism, Professor Arnheim, who was Jewish, fled to Rome. In the late 1930s, after Mussolini allied himself with Hitler, Mr. Arnheim fled to England, where he became a translator for the BBC. In 1940, he arrived in New York.

There he taught at the New School for Social Research and also worked as a researcher for Columbia University, where he studied the habits of radio listeners. His work from this period includes collaborating on a survey of daytime-serial audiences.

In 1943 Professor Arnheim joined the faculty of Sarah Lawrence. From the mid-'70s on, after retiring from Harvard, he was associated with the University of Michigan. Professor Arnheim's first marriage ended in divorce. His second wife, Mary Frame, whom he married in 1953, died in 1999. Besides his daughter, Ms. Nettinga, of Heemstede, the Netherlands, his survivors include two grandchildren and a great-grandchild.

Not all of his work found favor with critics. Some considered his arguments unpersuasive. Others simply thought them obscure. Here, almost in its entirety, is the review of "Entropy and Art" from *The New York Times Book Review* of May 16, 1971:

"Inanimate being tends toward entropy; animate life toward order; art wobbles on in between; orderliness is not order; etc. Donnish."

But even dissenting critics often praised the essential humanism, and essential optimism, of Professor Arnheim's work. Reviewing "New Essays on the Psychology of Art" in *The New York Times Book Review* in 1986, Celia McGee called Professor Arnheim "the best kind of romantic," adding, "His wisdom, his patient explanations and lyrical enthusiasm are those of a teacher."