

RUDOLF ARNHEIM**Radio-Film**

First published as “Der Rundfunkfilm,” in *Film als Kunst* (Berlin: Ernst Rowohlt, 1932); reprinted in *Film als Kunst* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2002), 271–72. Translated by Michael Cowan.

Whereas the other articles on television included in this chapter strike an optimistic tone in their hopes for the emerging medium, Rudolf Arnheim’s discussion of what he called “radio-film” evinces darker forebodings in its concern about the potential monopoly power of a central broadcasting agency to “decide what is performed and what is not.” It might be tempting to read Arnheim’s text retrospectively as a prescient prediction of Nazi media policies, but Arnheim makes no mention of the rising tide of fascism in his discussion of the effects of centralization on quality. It is also important to note that all of the texts on television presented here touched on possible (and some actual) futures of the medium. This essay appeared in the original edition of *Film als Kunst* and was included in the 1933 British translation but was left out of later English-language versions.

Since the technical problems of television are currently being tackled with great zeal and success, we can expect to see films distributed via radio in the near future. At that point, it will be possible to screen films transmitted from a central station in hundreds of theaters simultaneously, or even in the private homes of “listeners.” This would not change much in terms of aesthetics, but it would significantly alter the practical state of film production. In connection to these questions, the following lines recently appeared in a trade journal: “We will need to reach an agreement concerning the extent to which films should be produced for such centralized broadcasts, since the costs of a live performance in the studio could easily be recouped by such a wide distribution.”

Here too, in other words, film is in danger. In a practical sense, film is theater for the people: since theater is too expensive, the people go to the cinema. But as soon as theater becomes less expensive to produce than film, the producers will put their efforts into theater. And if we recall our previous observations on the coming development of film, then we must indeed concede that it would be pointless to use radio for broadcasting complete films. One could simply skip the act of recording and perform the film—that is, the theatrical play—live before the radio apparatus. This is all the more true since, in most cases, no more than a single performance of the same film (play) will be necessary or possible if the central station has a monopoly! In our current radio industry, radio dramas are generally played on several different stations. But if centralization becomes a fact, then a given radio drama will of course be broadcast only once, and since it is cheaper to maintain a single station than twenty, this centralization will probably come to pass.

No doubt, centralization goes against the interests of art in many respects. Recently, Ernst Krenek brought up this point during a discussion of the so-called opera film:¹

He [Krenek] believes that the plans for centralization will only reinforce the mania for excellence and intensify the dreadful cult of prominent artists. He rightly emphasizes that nothing is less desirable for German art than the centralization of radio in Berlin. It might be the case that the lack of centralization in Germany means less tradition. But the German character, in order to develop its particular nature, requires above all a variety of local and provincial initiatives and developmental opportunities.

A *single* body will have the power to decide what is performed and what is not, and the result will be an appalling uniformization of offerings.

True, one could then force the masses to hear only good radio plays and see only good films, since monopolies allow one to dictate what products are available to consumers. But as already stated, it makes no sense, given the current cultural level of the masses, to offer them only first-rate art.

Today, we cannot foresee whether an extreme monopoly in the broadcasting of films will come to pass. Perhaps individual screenings will still exist alongside broadcasts, just as music today is still played in concert halls as well as on radio. What is certain is that we will see a vigorous standardization of all cultural needs, and there is reason to fear that this standard will not be high in the domain of art.

Whether or not those who understand and appreciate good art will still find some way to satisfy their needs, whether or not good artists will find opportunities for work are questions we cannot yet answer today.

The future of film will be determined by the future economics and politics, and it is not within the purview of the present book to predict the latter. How film fares will depend on how we fare.

Note

1. On the Austrian composer Ernst Krenek (1900–1991), see also the text by Fritz Giese in chapter 12, no. 181, note 6.