Susanne Langer's Film Theory: Elaboration and Implications

Courtenay Wyche Beinhorn

Republication of Courtenay Wyche Beinhorn, "Susanne Langer's Film Theory: Elaboration and Implications," *Cinema Journal* 13, no. 2 (1974): 41–54. https://doi.org/10.2307/1225250. Republished with permission.

Courtenay Wyche Beinhorn, "Susanne Langer's Film Theory: Elaboration and Implications," History of Media Studies *5 (2025), original publication date: 1974, https://doi.org/10.32376/d895a0ea.149af19e.*

In her essay, "A Note On The Film," Susanne K. Langer develops a thought-provoking theory of film as art which, perhaps because of its brevity, has received too little attention from film scholars and theorists.[1] Drawing upon the analogy of film to dream, Langer extracts from dream the quality of "the on-going present" and proceeds to show how this quality is transformed into the "virtual present" of filmic art. Langer's theory of film is particularly significant when considered in relation to her general philosophy of art: together they provide not only a framework within which film may be compared with the other arts, but also a set of standards by which one may evaluate the merits of individual films.

[1] Susanne K. Langer, *Feeling and Form* (New York: Charles Scribners Sons, 1953), p. 411.

Although she never explicitly states that still photography is not an art, the bias is implicit in the occasional comparison she makes between the photograph and other art forms. In a painting, for example, the artist exercises his creative ability to make visible all the entities which in real life are known by touch, movement, and memory, rather than through sight alone.[2]

[2] *Ibid.*, p. 73

> The visual substitutes for the non-visible ingredients in space experience make the great difference between photographic rendering and creative rendering; the latter is necessarily a departure from direct imitation, because it is a construction of color alone ... by all sorts of devices in order to present at once, with complete authority, the primary illusion of a perfectly visible and perfectly intelligible total space.[3]

[3] *Ibid.*

Langer subscribes to Hildebrand's idea that pictorial art is created through an "architectonic" process—that is, space is "built up" by the application of paint to canvas.[4] This gives the artist a great deal of creative flexibility. A painted apple, for example, need look nothing like a real apple; moreover, its relation to an orange may be completely imaginary. Presumably, since the camera records an image directly onto film, this creative flexibility is minimal. An apple will look like a real apple, and its relation to an orange is a duplication of reality.

[4] *Ibid.*, pp. 72–73.

If we accept the idea that visual art must be "architectonic," then Langer's apparent bias against photography seems to be justified. It is interesting, however, that her broad definition of art can be used to defend the medium. We could argue, with some justification, that a photograph is an illusion, and therefore an abstract or symbolic form. A photograph of a house is not an actual house; it presents the semblance of a house.

Furthermore, we could argue that photographic space is not real space, but "virtual space." For instance, Brett Weston's "Garapata Beach" presents the semblance of planes of vision, or virtual space.[5] The interplay of light and shadow creates a series of visual planes which extends from the jagged rocks in the foreground to the mountains and sky in the back ground. This is not the real space in which we live and act, but virtual space.

[5] See *The Print* (New York: Time-Life Books, 1970), p. 121.

If a photograph can, in fact, be an abstraction or a symbolic form, then how can it express human feeling? "Tide-Battered Tree Trunk," by Minor White, is not a simple record of an uprooted tree on a beach.[6] The trunk rushes downward with the force of the waves which beat upon and smoothed it. What it expresses is the almost indescribable feeling of being swept up in a power greater than oneself. Isn't this a pattern of sentience? Even a strictly documentary photograph like "Migrant Mother," by Dorothea Lange, has a timeless quality that is both particular and universal.[7] In the gaunt face and squinted eyes, there is concern, bewilderment, weariness, strength, and an infinite number of more indefinable feelings. Jerry Uelsmann employs a technique (which might be called architectonic) to create gestalt-like images which evoke inexplicable primordial associations.[8] Langer herself says that one of the distinguishing qualities of art is its ability to express the total range of emotive life in ways that are not always verbally expressible.

[6] See *mirrors messages manifestations minor white*, An Aperture Monograph, 1969, p. 188.

[7] See Edward Steichen, ed., *The Bitter Years: 1935–1941* (New York: Museum of Modem Art, 1962).

[8] See *Jerry N. Uelsmann*, An Aperture Monograph, 1970, passim.

The ability of the photograph to transcend direct imitation has been explained by Minor White, whose photographs, although firmly grounded in reality, have been compared to "inner landscapes."

> Camera is always pointed at a subject, always. Occasionally one of the camera's photographs points away from the subject toward the mind, or the imagination.[9]

[9] *Mirrors,* p. 108.

If, however, as Langer seems to imply, photography is direct imitation, then how can cinema, which uses the photographic image, be an art? The answer, in Langer's view, is that cinema *moves*.[10] The space in a still photograph is fixed, and generally the spatial relationships between the objects therein cannot be altered. In cinema, however, the camera can pan, tilt, dolly, zoom, focus-through, and move freely when attached to a crane. In this sense, the moving camera can manipulate the spatial relationships between the objects in its field of

[10] Langer, *Feeling and Form,* pp. 411–12.

view. Cinema, then, transcends direct imitation, because the moving camera allows the artist to exercise his creative flexibility and imagination.

Langer notes that some of the earliest films directly recorded stage plays. At this point, she feels, film had not yet become an art.

> For a few decades it seemed like nothing more than a new technical device in the sphere of drama, a new way of preserving and retailing dramatic performances ... The moving camera divorced the screen from the stage. The straightforward photographing of stage action, formerly viewed as the only artistic possibility of the film, henceforth appeared as a special technique.[11]

[11] *Ibid.*, p. 411.

We may conclude from this statement that, for Langer, recording the move ment of figures is just another form of imitation. The camera had to be freed from its fixed position before film could become an art.

By implication, we can expand Langer's concept of movement to include the movement created in the editing process. Space can also be manipulated through the juxtaposition of close-ups with medium and long shots. The spatial relationship between eyes, nose, and mouth in an extreme close-up is radically altered when the subject next appears in a long shot which shows his relationship to his total environment. This is supported by Pudovkin's explanation of filmic space.

> By the conjunction of the separate shots, the director builds a filmic space entirely his own. He unites and compresses the separate elements that have recorded different points of real, actual space into one filmic space.[12]

[12] Lewis Jacobs, *The Movies as Medium* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1970), pp. 131–132.

This suggests an "architectonic" process which resembles Langer's concept of the creation of pictorial art.

Furthermore, the editing process also manipulates space through the juxtaposition of different locations. Whether connected by a dissolve, fade, or simple cut, the movement from one location to another creates an entirely new set of spatial relationships. In *Intolerance,* for example, Griffith cross-cuts between parallel action in four different parts of the world at four different times. The manipulation of space created by the juxtaposition of separate spatial areas heightens the dramatic impact of the film.

Although Langer never specifically mentions editorial movement, it is significant that she has included Andre Malraux's essay, "A Sketch for the Psychology of the Moving Pictures," in her book *Reflections on Art.* Since she says that she agrees with the artistic concepts explored in all the essays included therein,[13] we may conclude that Malraux's theory of spatial manipulation in cinema reflects and amplifies Langer's own.

[13] Susanne K. Langer, ed., *Reflections on Art* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1958), p. xi.

> The birth of cinema as a means of expression (not reproduction) dates from the abolition of that defined space; from the time when the cutter thought of dividing his continuity into 'planes' (close-up, intermediate, remote, etc.) ... when the director took to bringing forward the camera ... and moving it back; and above all, to replacing the theatre set by an open field of vision corresponding to the area of the screen ... The means of reproduction in cinema is the moving photograph, but its means of expression is a sequence of *planes*.[14]

[14] *Ibid.,* p. 320.

The manipulation of space afforded by editorial and camera movement frees cinema to become a medium of expression.

Langer, however, does not place film in the same category as the plastic arts. The reason, she says, is that, unlike painting or sculpture, the images of actors and objects on film are not oriented in any *total* space.[15] Furthermore, in Langer's view, virtual space is not the primary illusion of cinema, because it is not a strictly visual medium. It incorporates music, words, and dramatic action as well as visual images to create an entirely different sort of illusion. Film is defined by Langer as a *poetic* art, and like poetry, its primary illusion is "virtual experience."[16]

[15] Langer, *Feeling and Form,* p. 415.

[16] *Ibid.,* p. 412.

As explained in *Feeling and Form,* the primary illusion of poesis is the creation of virtual history or experience: "the semblance of events lived and felt ... a piece of virtual life."[17] Cinema, Langer says, creates virtual history in its own special mode—that of the dream.

[17] *Ibid.,* p. 212.

> Cinema is like dream in the mode of its presentation: it creates a virtual present, an order of direct apparition. That is the mode of the dream.[18]

[18] *Ibid.,* p. 412.

Unlike the novel, which creates the illusion of a virtual past, and drama which sets up a virtual future, film presents the semblance of a virtual on going present. Thus, because its primary illusion is closer to virtual experience than virtual space, Langer defines film as a poetic art.

In passing, it is interesting to note that there are other correlations be tween film and poetry. In her analysis of Blake's "The Tyger," Langer mentions that the first words of a poem effect a "break" with the reader's actual environment. This allows him to enter fully into the poetic experience.[19] This "break" is comparable to the viewer's entrance into the movie theater. When the lights dim and the film begins, the real world outside the theater is forgotten. The images on the screen, which create the illusion of life, are for a few hours more vivid or "real" than the viewer's actual life. Further more, cinema partakes of one quality of lyric poetry. Because it is written in the present tense, lyric poetry creates the illusion of subjective experience. Film also presents the illusion of an on-going present.

[19] *Ibid.,* p. 214.

How do film and dream work to create the illusion of a virtual present? In dream, the dreamer stands at the vortex of an ever-changing series of images and events. Because he is the central percipient, all the elements of the dream partake of the sense of immediate experience.[20]

[20] *Ibid.*, p. 413.

> Places shift, persons act and speak or change or fade—facts emerge, situations grow, objects come into view with strange importance, ordinary things infinitely valuable or horrible, and they may be superseded by others that are related to them essentially by feeling, not natural proximity. But the dreamer is always 'there', this relation is, so to speak, equidistant from all events ... the immediacy of everything in the dream is the same for him.[21]

[21] *Ibid.*

Depending on our perception of our own dreams, we may quarrel with Langer's assertion that the dreamer is at the center. Sometimes it seems that we stand on the periphery of the dream and watch the unfolding of the images and events therein. What Langer seems to mean, however, is that the dream is perceived through the dreamer's own eyes, or the "eye" of his mind. There is no objective separate point of view. Nor is there a sense of past or future in the dream. All the events seem to be happening "now."

According to Langer, film abstracts from the dream this sense of immediacy.[22] There is no real past or future in the film. It creates the illusion of an on-going present that ends only when the house lights come up. In *Hiroshima, Mon Amour,* for example, the images of the actress' childhood are, for the viewer, as immediate as the moments she spends with her lover in the hotel room.

[22] *Ibid.*

Insofar as immediacy is concerned, Langer notes a parallel between thought-time and film-time.[23] In thought, as in film, our focus may shift from the present to the past and back again; we may try to imagine the future as well. The difference between thought and film time is that some memories and daydreams may be quite vivid, while others may be only dimly remembered. In film, however, all the images are equally immediate. As Langer notes in her reference to R. E. Jones, film is like thought in that both may "cut" back and forth in time, and from one image to another with equal ease.[24] The similarity lies in the ability to make quick transitions from one subject to another.

[23] *Ibid.*, p. 415.

[24] *Ibid.*

The significant difference between film and dream is that dreams are dictated by the dreamer's own emotional pressure, while film images are not created by the viewer. They are created by the film maker, and the viewer's visual and aural vantage point moves with the camera and the manipulation of sound. The camera is his eye, the microphone is his ear. Thus, as Langer says, film is an "objectified" dream, and the viewer is, perhaps, a virtual dreamer.

Langer takes Eisenstein to task on this very point; she says that he con fuses the virtual experience of the spectator with actual experience.[25] In *The Film Sense,* Eisenstein states that the viewer's individuality is fused with the author's intention, so that he may participate in the creative process.

> In fact, every spectator ... creates an image in accordance with the representational guidance suggested by the author, leading him to understanding and experience of the author's theme. This is the same image that was planned and created by the author, but this image is at the same time created also by the spectator himself.[26]

The creation of an "image" is the most basic principle of montage. It stems, Eisenstein says, from the fact that "two film pieces of any kind, placed together, inevitably combine into a new concept, a new quality, arising out of that juxtaposition."[27] Of the Kuleshov experiment, Eisenstein would say that with each new juxtaposition of shots, the viewer created a new concept. Langer seems to argue that because film images and the order of their apparition do not spring from the viewer's own mind, the creation of a concept is a virtual, rather than an actual, experience.

> Here we have, I think, an indication of the powerful illusion the film makes not of things going on, but of the dimension in which they go on—a virtual creative imagination; for it *seems* one's own creation, direct visionary experience, a dreamt reality.[28]

Langer's objection is not entirely justified. Even though the apparition of images may lie in the realm of virtual imagination and the concepts with which the spectator emerges are intended by the film maker, the viewer *does* make actual mental associations which, on a very basic level, may be called creative.

2

In *Sex, Psyche, Etcetera in the Film,* Parker Tyler attacks both Langer and Kracauer on the grounds that they say that film should duplicate, respectively, external reality and the dream world.

> The point of our awkward, Janus-face pair of theories is that *both* assume that film's dominant function is reportorial: one reports the physical aspect of life, the other reports a special mental aspect—or if you will, seeks to duplicate its 'mode'.[29]
>
> Her dream-mode film also implies the 'open end' and 'flow of life' as necessary traits of a disorderly, uncontrolled world without true climax, sustained rhythm, or film spatial orientation.[30]

Tyler's objection stems from what is apparently a cursory reading of Langer's film essay and an unfamiliarity with her principles of art.

[25] *Ibid.*, p. 414.

[26] Sergei Eisenstein, *The Film Sense,* trans, and ed. by Jay Leyda (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1942), p. 33.

[27] *Ibid.*, p. 4.

[28] Langer, *Feeling and Form*, p. 414.

[29] Parker Tyler, *Sex, Psyche, Etcetera in the Film* (Horizon Press, 1969), p. 121.

[30] *Ibid.*, p. 122.

Langer explicitly states that film does not *copy* dream, as elsewhere she states that art is not imitation.[31] Furthermore, a dream can no more be a work of art than a doodle on a piece of paper, or a crying child, because it lacks the quality of abstraction.

> A dream is not a work of art ... because it is improvised for purely self expressive ends, or for romantic satisfaction, and has to meet no standards of coherence, organic form, or more than personal interest.[32]

[31] Langer, *Feeling and Form*, p. 412.

[32] *Ibid.*, p. 168.

Film, then, does not duplicate the seemingly jumbled, impressionistic quality of the dream. Like the poet, the film maker organizes the images into a coherent composition which is governed by a definite idea or "matrix," not the actual emotional pressure which dictates a dream.[33] Film is in the dream *mode* because both present the semblance or primary illusion of the on-going present. As she explains, an art mode is a mode of *appearance.* Film is *like* dream because its images appear in the manner of direct apparition.[34]

[33] *Ibid.*, p. 168.

[34] *Ibid.*, p. 412.

The reference to Kracauer, however, is interesting. Langer and Kracauer differ radically in their approach to film as a photographic medium. Basically, Kracauer believes that film is an *outgrowth* of still photography.

> It *[Theory of Film]* rests upon the assumption that film is essentially an ex tension of photography and therefore shares with this medium a marked affinity for the visible world around us. Films come into their own when they record and reveal reality.[35]

[35] Siegfried Kracauer, *Theory of Film* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1960), p. ix.

This approach is diametrically opposed to Langer's view that film as art cannot function as a simple recording device. As mentioned earlier, Langer implies that still photography cannot be an art because, unlike other visual media, such as painting, it merely records what is seen through the lens of the camera. In her view, the artist's ability to transform physical reality is minimal. According to Langer, camera and editorial movement "redeem" the photographic nature of cinema, and free it to become a medium of expression.

If we probe more deeply, however, it becomes apparent that Langer and Kracauer converge on one essential point. Langer's concept of film as an expression of human feeling is not incompatible with Kracauer's inference that cinema may evoke an inner reality beyond material reality. As Kracauer states:

> They [cinematic films] point beyond the physical world to the extent that the shots or combinations of shots from which they are built carry multiple meanings. Due to the continuous influx of psychophysical correspondences thus aroused, they suggest a reality which may fittingly be called 'life' ... The concept, 'flow of life', then, covers the stream of material situations and happenings with all that they intimate in terms of emotions, values, thoughts.[36]

[36] *Ibid.*, p. 81.

Furthermore, Langer's view that film as art must have a "matrix" or "commanding form" is comparable to Kracauer's view that the film maker's "formative energies" must intervene "in all the dimensions which the medium has to cover"—i.e., the different aspects of physical reality.

> It is evident that the cinematic approach materializes in ... all films which follow the realist tendency. This implies that even films almost devoid of creative aspirations, such as newsreels, scientific or educational films, artless documentaries, etc. are tenable propositions from an aesthetic point of view ... *But as with photographic reportage, newsreels and the like meet only the minimum requirement* ... As in photography, everything depends on the 'right' balance between the realist tendency *and the formative tendency*.[37] [Italics mine.]

[37] *Ibid.*, pp. 38–39.

It is important to note, however, that Kracauer believes that "formative energies" may enter into the creation of a still photograph, while Langer sees still photography as a recording device. Then too, Kracauer believes that the formative tendency should "follow the lead" of the realist tendency, while Langer implies that the matrix determines both the structure and the content of a film.[38]

[38] *Ibid.*, p. 39.

The essential difference between the two is in the definition of a cinematic film. Kracauer's theory deals mainly with the *content* of a film. Due to his emphasis on physical reality, he favors films which depict "moments of everyday life."[39] Langer, on the other hand, approaches film, as she does the other arts, as an expression of forms symbolic of human feeling. Because she is not as concerned with content as she is with feeling and form, it is doubtful that she would arbitrarily exclude dramatic, narrative, historical, and fantasy films from the category of cinematic film. Her concept of life extends beyond the physical reality to a deeper life of feeling. The superficial content matter of the film may not be as important as what it expresses.[40]

[39] *Ibid.*, p. 302.

[40] See Section 3, below.

One of the peculiar qualities of film, Langer states, is its ability to assimilate diverse materials, such as picture, words, and music, and transform them into a completely filmic vision.

> One of the most striking characteristics of this new art is that it seems to be omnivorous, able to assimilate the most diverse elements and turn them into elements of its own. With every new invention—montage, the soundtrack, Technicolor—its devotees have raised the cry of fear that now its art must be lost ... But the art goes on. It swallows everything: dancing, skating, drama, panorama, cartooning, music . . .[41]

[41] Langer, *Feeling and Form*, p. 412.

It is the fact that film is a poetic art that seems to account, in Langer's view, for its power of assimilation. The creation of a virtual present necessarily involves more than the visual element. Thus film may

also include word, music, and sound effects. However, she overstates the case when she says that film "enthralls and commingles all the senses."[42] In a dream we may be dimly aware of the sense of touch, and possibly of smell and taste. Film, however, is limited at present to sight and hearing.

[42] *Ibid.*, p. 414.

Generally, the primary illusions of the other arts constitute secondary illusions in film. Virtual space and time, for instance, are incorporated in the primary illusion of the virtual present. Although the picture remains paramount, the semblance of space is a transient illusion; similarly, words and music are supportive elements. Langer notes that the film "needs many, often convergent, means to create the continuity of emotion which holds it together while its visions roam through space and time."[43] All of the secondary illusions, then, enrich the substance of film and contribute to the primary illusion of the virtual present.

[43] *Ibid.*

It is interesting to compare Langer's theory of assimilation with that of Arnheim. In *Film as Art,* Arnheim states that the separate arts are discrete and complete structural forms; they may, in some instances, combine successfully, but the "personality of the two partners remains intact, nevertheless."[44] The talking film, he feels, is a hybrid form. The basic problem is that dialogue introduces an alien element into what is essentially a visual medium. Words, in his view, serve only to distract from the import of the moving image.[45] Langer, on the other hand, says that one art can totally assimilate and transform the elements of another. Despite the fact that a song, for instance, contains both words and music, it is not a hybrid form. The words combine with music to create the illusion of virtual time. "When words and music come together in song, music swallows words; not only mere words and literal sentences, but even literary word structures, poetry."[46] By implication, the inclusion of dialogue in a film supplements the primary illusion—the creation of a virtual present.

[44] Rudolf Arnheim, *Film as Art* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1966), pp. 207-8.

[45] *Ibid.*, p. 211.

[46] Langer, *Feeling and Form*, p. 152.

The essential difference between the two is that Arnheim regards film as a visual medium (although he does admit that music may complement and reinforce visual imagery), while Langer defines it as a poetic art. Or, if you will, Arnheim emphasizes the material elements of the film (sound, picture), while Langer sees it in terms of the illusion that the materials, when imaginatively used, create. Arnheim explicitly states that the addition of dialogue to a visual medium cannot be justified by the fact that in daily life, "visual and auditory elements are intimately connected and, in fact, inseparably fused. There must be artistic reasons for such a combination; it must serve to express something that could not be said by one of the media alone."[47] While Langer would agree that film should not imitate

[47] Arnheim, *Film as Art*, p. 215.

daily life, she would argue that the visual image alone cannot create the semblance of the virtual present. Words support and "punctuate" the total illusion.[48]

[48] Langer, *Feeling and Form,* p. 414.

At the end of her film essay, Langer mentions that she believes the novel may be translated into film more easily than drama.[49] Spatial considerations are paramount. Drama unfolds within the fixed space of the stage. Apart from the physical movement of the actors and a possible change of scenery, the spatial relationships between the actors and objects therein cannot be significantly altered. In the novel, however, there is no framework of fixed space. Our focus shifts from minute detail to vast panorama; locations change; characters enter and leave at the novelist's discretion.

[49] *Ibid.*, p. 415.

Langer notes that the space in both the novel and film is very much like dream space.

> Dream events are spatial—often intensely concerned with space—intervals, endless roads, bottomless canyons, things too high, too near, too far—but they are not oriented in any total space. The same is true of the moving picture ... *its space comes and goes* ...[50]

[50] *Ibid.*

Movable space, then, is the factor which is common to both the film and the novel.

3

In the introduction to *Feeling and Form,* Langer states that she does not offer standards for judging masterpieces against lesser works of art.[51] Accordingly, "A Note on the Film" does not establish guidelines for determining if a particular film is "good" or "bad." However, there are tentative implications which may be drawn from the essay that may be used as criteria in evaluating specific films.

[51] *Ibid.*, p. vii.

First, if film creates the semblance of virtual present, then the *complete,* or fully developed, film will incorporate picture, sound, and, perhaps, color. This conclusion does not negate films that do not fulfill all three requirements; it means simply that they are incomplete forms of the art. Second, if a work of art, by definition, expresses forms of human feeling, then those feelings must be organized in a coherent, harmonious manner and, further, must reflect patterns of sentience with accuracy. I emphasize that these conclusions are somewhat speculative.

Furthermore, Langer's theory of assimilation seems to imply that film is a growing, changing art. The silent, and some black-and-white films, then, may be viewed as stages in the development of the art, which, in present perspective, are incomplete. This assumption is also borne out when Langer says that film developed to a "fairly high

degree" as a "silent art."[52] The fact that she places conditions upon the merit of the silent film as a viable art form seems to indicate that it is one stage in the development of the medium.

[52] *Ibid.*, p. 412.

Films which function primarily as records of life or experience are, in the most basic sense, incomplete. These include the early films which used the still camera to photograph action in a straightforward manner. The action may have been spontaneous, as in Lumiere's *Le Repas de bébé,* or staged, as in Edison's *John Rice-May Irwin Kiss,* or *The Beheading of Mary, Queen of Scots,* which was filmed in one setup. Into the same category fall those films which record dramatic plays, such as *Queen Elizabeth,* which was a still-camera, one-shot affair. Presumably we could also include Warhol's *Empire,* and his other one-shot films, in that they are basically photographs on film. Lack of the moving camera, which in Langer's view freed film to become an art, is the characteristic of all such films. Although Langer remarks that film has assimilated color, which, by implication, brought it to a higher stage of development, it is not clear if she would insist that the complete film incorporate color. Black-and-white cinematography may be justified where it seems appropriate for the subject matter, and where it complements the import of the film.

Langer's definition of film as a poetic art supports the validity of the narrative as a viable film form. Most poems, plays, novels, and other pieces of prose fiction tell a story of one sort or another. The narrative line may be dominant, or it may be submerged in mood, atmosphere, or introspective reflection. However, it is usually possible to detect an action line or sequence of events in literary works. The fact that Langer feels that the novel may be most easily translated into film may also support this conclusion, although her bias is grounded on spatial rather than narrative considerations. Presumably all genres are permissible in that, no matter what the subject, whether it be gangster, western, horror, musical, science fiction, etc., film creates the illusion of the virtual present.

The question may be raised whether futuristic films or historical reconstructions can convey the illusion of the virtual present. Although Langer never discusses either type, it would seem that the ability to communicate virtual experience depends heavily, as in all other films, upon the skillful blending of sensitive directing, acting, decor, and atmosphere with the other elements of the films.

In her essay on film, Langer says that documentary film is a "pregnant" invention.[53] This seems to have something to do with the fact that there are no "actors" as such in the documentary. It is not clear if she means that it is an incomplete form of the art.

[53] *Ibid.*

I would argue that the documentary is a viable film form in Langer's theory if it is unified by the matrix or import of the film.

This may be as simple as showing how people live, as in Flaherty's *Man of Aran.* Or it may be more complex: the film maker may attempt to persuade the audience of his convictions, as Wiseman does in *High School.* As long as the documentary is not an apparently random flow of images without any guiding purpose, it would seem to be a valid film form.

If film creates a virtual experience, then we may argue that representational images are some part of our perception of experience. We do not normally see in terms of the lines, dots, and amorphous images of which the films of John Whitney and Jordan Belson are composed. We might conclude that the abstract film is not a viable form; it may be a hybrid form, part film and part "pictorial" art. Still it must be admitted that sometimes these films do communicate a sense of the rhythm of life. In terms of Langer's theory, however, it is fairly certain that these films do not create a sense of the virtual present as easily or as effectively as those which em ploy representational images.

Surrealist and Dada films are a troublesome category. *Le Chien Andalou,* for instance, is composed of identifiable images—quite realistically shot, in terms of photographic style—that do not attempt to make sense in conventional terms. In one sense, these films resemble our actual dreams, in that they appear to be a jumble of disconnected or inexplicably juxtaposed images. The question, however, may be one of intent and perception. What the author intends may not be perceived by the viewer, or the intent may be purposely obscure, or the intent may be "meaninglessness" itself. The fact remains that these films intrigue us, and sometimes evoke strong but verbally inexpressible feelings. No absolute conclusions may be drawn from Langer's theory as to the general validity of this form.

At least we may say that films which resemble dreams are not necessarily "good" films. To reiterate, Langer explicitly states that film does not *copy* dream; it is *like* dream in that it creates the illusion of a virtual present. This raises the question of the validity of films like *L'Etoile de Mer,* the German Expressionist films, and the more recent sub-genre of drug films, which employ distorted images of an inner reality. Although Langer never deals with the issue, it would seem that the effectiveness of these films in creating a virtual present would depend, at least in part, upon the ability of the audience to relate intellectually or experientially to the distorted images.

4

The concept of significance or vital import runs throughout Langer's philosophy of art. It is the matrix, "commanding form," or unifying

idea or feeling that the artist conceives of before he begins to create a work of art, and which dictates the structure of that work, as well as all the detail included therein. Langer likens the matrix to Eisenstein's concept of "the initial general image which originally hovered before the creative artist."[54] It is the abstraction of the forms of human feeling.

[54] *Ibid.*, p. 414.

This standard is particularly useful in determining "what the film is about," not in terms of subject matter but in terms of the author's intent. Did he carry through with his apparent intent? If we are unsure of the vital import of the film, it may be that the artist was unsure of his intent. The standard is also helpful in determining if elements of style, structure, or detail are wholly in accordance with the author's intent. Sometimes we feel that something is "wrong" or out of place in a film. By referring to the matrix, we may determine if this is in fact the case, and if so, why it doesn't work.

In discussing music, Langer remarks that the function of the arts is not to stimulate the senses, but to express human feeling. We may infer that a film whose sole function is entertainment of one sort or another is not a viable form of the art. Into this category fall hard-core pornography, films which use the sex-and-violence formula for no other purpose than to give the viewer a vicarious thrill, and the myriad productions starring Debbie Reynolds, Doris Day, Annette Funicello, and others, whose sole function is to keep the viewer amused for a couple of hours. This does not mean that a film which is entertaining or which arouses the emotions cannot be a work of art. It simply means that we must look beyond entertainment value and sensory stimulation to the vital import of the film. Indeed, a "good" film may combine all three elements.

Langer's theory of musical assimilation suggests that in the "good" film, picture, words, and music will be blended harmoniously to create the illusion of virtual experience. In a sense, this is similar to Panovsky's principle of co-expressibility. However, it does not preclude the possibility, for example, of using music as counterpoint to the visual images. It means only that no element of the film should be so jarring or distracting or obvious that it calls extreme attention to itself, unless, perhaps, it is part of the film maker's intent. In this case, significance would take precedence over ideal assimilation. It may also be implied that the author's intent should not dominate the film. In other words, it should *evolve* out of the combined elements of the film, rather than being blatantly obvious.

If art is the abstract expression of forms of human feeling, I would argue that those feelings which constitute the matrix of a particular work of art must be "true to life." That is, the import of the film must accurately reflect those patterns of sentience that the film is about.

In discussing expressiveness, Langer says that in the early stages of the growth of a work of art, the "envisagement" of the symbol may be interfered with by unformed or unrecognized emotions that may distort the artist's imagination of subjective experience.

> Art which is thus distorted at its very source by a lack of candor is bad art, and it is bad art because it is not true to *what a candid envisagement would have been.* Candor is the standard; 'seeing straight,' the vernacular calls it.[55]

[55] *Ibid.*, pp. 380–81.

She concludes vehemently that bad art is corrupt art, and should be destroyed.[56]

[56] *Ibid.*, p. 381.

If truth is an essential ingredient in a good work of art, then all those films whose matrix has been distorted by deceit, dishonesty, greed, or confusion must be called bad films. Often, films tell us more about their makers than what the intent was supposed to be. As Parker Tyler has noted in his essay on *The Portrait of Dorian Grey*, the "real" truth has a nasty way of sneaking into the film.

The value of Langer's theory is that it enables one to examine film from the perspective of all the arts and discover what it has in common with, and how it differs from, the others. Although theories which attempt to narrow the field of art to a few special filmic modes, like those of Arnheim and Kracauer, may provide specific insights into the nature of film, still they seem limited in comparison.

Langer's theory also gives us a clue to those special qualities which distinguish a masterpiece from lesser forms of the art. A "good" film will enthrall us again and again. With each new viewing, we may learn more about the patterns of feeling that form its matrix, and, possibly, more about our selves and mankind. This, perhaps, is what the art is all about.