

# A Note on Langer: An Introduction to the Susanne Langer on Film Special Section

Jefferson Pooley 

University of Pennsylvania, [jeff.pooley@asc.upenn.edu](mailto:jeff.pooley@asc.upenn.edu)

Sue Curry Jansen

Muhlenberg College, [jansen@muhlenberg.edu](mailto:jansen@muhlenberg.edu)

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THE AMERICAN PHILOSOPHER Susanne K. Langer (1895–1985) came of age when mass media—film and radio—were still in their formative stages. World War I would establish their strategic significance and prioritize their technological development. Sustained scholarly analysis of the popular culture that they produced, did not, however, emerge in the U.S. until the 1950s. While much of Langer’s work focused on aesthetics, the “popular artists of the screen, the jukebox, the shop-window, and the picture magazine” did not attract her fierce, penetrating attention.<sup>1</sup> She made an exception just once, for film, which she heralded as a “new poetic mode”—but in a mere five pages, as an appendix to a 1953 book on art.<sup>2</sup>

We reprint “A Note on the Film” here, together with a pair of essay-commentaries on Langer’s fragment, one from 1974 and the other 2020.<sup>3</sup> The book to which it was appended, *Feeling and Form* (1953), is a masterwork—a philosophically confident, richly informed, and nuanced tour, medium by medium, through the arts: sculpture, painting, poetry, music, dance, and drama. That book, in turn, was a sequel to Langer’s surprise 1941 bestseller *Philosophy in a New Key*, which developed its core argument through the example of music.<sup>4</sup>

The new key that Langer hoped would reinvigorate philosophy was the study of *symbolism*. She distinguished between two types: *discursive* and *presentational*. Philosophers, she said, have tended to fixate on the first—language and its extensions in math and formal

<sup>1</sup> Susanne K. Langer, “The Cultural Importance of Art,” in *Philosophical Sketches* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1962), 93.

<sup>2</sup> Susanne K. Langer, “A Note on the Film,” in *Feeling and Form: A Theory of Art* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1953), 411.

<sup>3</sup> Courtenay Wyche Beinhorn, “Susanne Langer’s Film Theory: Elaboration and Implications,” *Cinema Journal* 13, no. 2 (1974) [reprinted with permission]; Tereza Hadravová, “Film as a Dream of the Modern Man: Interpretation of Susanne Langer’s Note on the Film,” *Eidos. A Journal for Philosophy of Culture* 4, no. 1 (2020) [reprinted with light revisions, under the original publication’s Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 3.0 Unported License]. The only other substantial treatment is an insightful 1978 dissertation, available online: Trisha Curran, “A New Note on the Film: A Theory of Film Criticism Derived from Susanne K. Langer’s *Philosophy of Art*” (PhD diss., Columbus, Ohio State University, 1978).

logic.<sup>4</sup> They have largely ignored the vast sea of knowledge surrounding that “tiny, grammar-bound island.”<sup>5</sup>

Langer’s life project was to make sense of this elusive, “ineffable” class of symbolism. She insisted that presentational symbols are rational in their own way—that they bear vital meanings that science and discursive language cannot express. She developed the argument in luminous, metaphoric prose that, in formal terms, helped exemplify her claims. Her analysis ranged over pre-linguistic modes like magic, ritual, and myth, as well as the “riotous” symbolism of dreams. But her main object of attention was art—all kinds of art, with music, literature, drama, and architecture included.

In *Feeling and Form* Langer explained how the arts make their meanings. Each major form is a distinctive way of knowing, with its own (non-discursive) articulateness. Dance, for example, “speaks” through gesture; a dancer’s movements are symbols for the living experience of power and agency. Music, for its part, represents time—it “spreads out time for our direct and complete apprehension, by letting our hearing mobilize it.”<sup>6</sup> Each of the arts is distinguishable, even autonomous, from the others, with a symbolic mode—a way of knowing—all its own.

*Feeling and Form*’s formalist treatment of the arts, chapter by chapter, has some obvious parallels with the “medium theory” tradition associated with Marshall McLuhan and his medium-is-the-message formula. McLuhan himself read and annotated Langer’s *Philosophy in a New Key*, yet he apparently never cited her.<sup>7</sup> And subsequent scholars invested in medium specificity have rarely engaged with Langer’s work.<sup>8</sup>

We have cited one likely reason for this neglect: Langer’s relative indifference to commercial media. Another explanation has to do with her home discipline. For a variety of reasons, some of them of her own making, Langer did not command much influence among fellow philosophers during her lifetime, with the notable exception of her contributions to aesthetics. That subfield was coded as less central to the philosophic project, more intuitive, and more feminine; and much of Langer’s marginal status otherwise can be traced to the discipline’s well-documented hostility to women in the mid-twentieth century. Because she insisted that the knowledge conveyed by the arts is logical in the strictest sense, Langer seems to have attracted a particularly vehement version of that hostility.<sup>9</sup> As a marginal member of the guild, her ultimate ambition—to reinvent philosophy itself and with it a new theory of society—would have also invited rejection.

The relative neglect of her work is beginning to lift. The Langer Circle, a scholarly society launched in 2020, sponsors conferences

Langer, *Feeling and Form: A Theory of Art* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1953); Langer, *Philosophy in a New Key: A Study in the Symbolism of Reason, Rite, and Art* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1942).

<sup>5</sup> Langer, *Philosophy in a New Key*, 82.

<sup>6</sup> Langer, *Feeling and Form*, 110.

<sup>7</sup> The only reference to Langer in McLuhan’s published work is as translator of German philosopher Ernst Cassirer’s *Language and Myth* (New York: Harper, 1946). See McLuhan, *The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1962), 282. On McLuhan’s “lightly annotated” copy of *Philosophy in a New Key*, see Marshall McLuhan Library Collection, Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library, University of Toronto Libraries, <https://fisher.library.utoronto.ca/mcluhan-library>, 245.

<sup>8</sup> The eclectic media ecology movement has recognized her relevance to their project, but few treatments have gone beyond listing her among the movement’s key figures. See, for example, Casey Man Kong Lum, “Notes Toward an Intellectual History of Media Ecology,” in *Perspectives on Culture, Technology, and Communication: The Media Ecology Tradition*, ed. Casey Man Kong Lum (New York: Hampton Press, 2006), 22, 28. Media ecologist Christine Nystrom’s 2000 essay on Langer and Benjamin Lee Whorf is a smart excep-

and conversation among the growing ranks of the Langer-curious. Full-length monographs—including Adrienne Dengerink Chaplin's superb *Philosophy of Susanne Langer* (2019)—have been published alongside collections like *The Bloomsbury Handbook of Susanne K. Langer* (2024). Researchers across a range of fields are discovering, or re-discovering, Langer.<sup>10</sup>

To date, however, media scholars have contributed little to the Langer renaissance now underway. This is unfortunate, since the richness and relevance of her work has much to contribute to a deeper understanding of media and communication—on multiple registers. This modest collection—"A Note on the Film" and the two exegeses re-published here—is an invitation to probe Langer's full, rousing generative writings. We think of the fragment on film as something like a save-the-date notice, an advertisement for the media-relevant thinking that permeates *Philosophy in a New Key, Feeling and Form*, and her final, monumental project, the three-volume *Mind* (1967, 1972, and 1982).<sup>11</sup>

### *A Note on 'The Note'*

Cinema, Langer declared in *Feeling and Form*, is a new art. "Our own age," she wrote, "has seen the birth of the motion picture, which is not only in a new medium, but is a new mode."<sup>12</sup> She later admitted that the spare, five-page "A Note on the Film" was "only an impressionistic sketch" for a simple reason: She wasn't much of a movie-goer. The "number of films I've seen in my life I could count on my fingers and toes," she said. "If I had seen more, I would have written an extra chapter like I did for the other arts."<sup>13</sup>

Those other arts, recall, each have formal properties that, when realized in works, make for distinctive meanings. Film's key feature, she argued, is the *moving camera*, its roaming through space and time. Drama is fixed to a stage and an audience. The movie viewer, by contrast, "sees with the camera; his standpoint moves with it, his mind is pervasively present."<sup>14</sup> A film is indeed a *motion* picture, a space- and time-machine that lends its eyes to the audience.

Langer's stress on the moving camera is interesting enough, even if it is a point not infrequently made in the film-theory canon—the bundle of texts identified and extended by the then-new film studies field in the decades after "A Note on the Film." Art historian Erwin Panofsky's 1937 essay on cinema, for example, also centers on film's departure from the fixed stage—its "dynamization of space" and "spatialization of time."<sup>15</sup> Langer did not cite Panofsky, and she only sparingly references other writers on the medium. A notable exception is Sergei Eisenstein, the Soviet filmmaker and theorist,

as is John Power's 2006 chapter on Langer's philosophy of mind. Nystrom, "Symbols, Thought, and Reality: The Contributions of Benjamin Lee Whorf and Susanne K. Langer to Media Ecology," *New Jersey Journal of Communication* 8, no. 1 (2000); and John H. Powers, "Susanne Langer's Philosophy of Mind: Some Implications for Media Ecology," in *Perspectives on Culture, Technology, and Communication: The Media Ecology Tradition*, ed. Casey Man Kong Lum (New York: Hampton Press, 2006).

<sup>9</sup> See Randall E. Auxier, "Foreword," in *The Bloomsbury Handbook of Susanne K. Langer*, ed. Lona Gaikis (London: Bloomsbury, 2024), xii–xiv; Arthur C. Danto, "Three Careers," in *The Visionary Academy of Ocular Mentality: Atlas of the Iconic Turn*, ed. Luca Del Baldo (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2020), 126; and Adrienne Dengerink Chaplin, *The Philosophy of Susanne Langer: Embodied Meaning in Logic, Art and Feeling* (London: Bloomsbury, 2020), chap. 3.

<sup>10</sup> Susanne K. Langer Circle, <https://langercircle.sites.uu.nl>; Chaplin, *The Philosophy of Susanne Langer*; and Lona Gaikis, ed., *The Bloomsbury Handbook of Susanne K. Langer* (London: Bloomsbury, 2024).

<sup>11</sup> Susanne K. Langer, *Mind: An Essay on Human Feeling*, 3 vols. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1967, 1972, 1982).

<sup>12</sup> Langer, *Feeling and Form*, xii.

<sup>13</sup> Langer, "A Note on the Film," 411. The Langer quotes are from a 1978 interview conducted by Trisha Curran, "A New Note on the Film," 1.

<sup>14</sup> Langer, "A Note on the Film," 413.

<sup>15</sup> Erwin Panofsky, "Style and Medium in the Moving Pictures," *Transition* 26 (1937).

whose 1943 *The Film Sense* Langer uses to sharpen her crucial but counter-intuitive point about the “virtual” experience of the film-goer.<sup>16</sup>

The term “virtual,” alas, now refers to expensive VR headsets. So it takes effort to occupy the meaning that Langer had in mind. The key to understanding Langer on film—and the other arts, for that matter—is the idea of *formal* resemblance. A film, or a painting, doesn’t directly represent experience. Instead, the film (or painting or poem) mimics the *shape* of human activity. Art bears a likeness to human life, in other words, but not in the usual sense of “looks like” or “sounds like” or “has come to refer to.” The relationship of art to life is about similarity of *form*.

Consider a piece of instrumental music, a defining example for Langer (an accomplished cellist herself). In its pitch, cadence, tone, orchestral arrangement—its morphology, so to speak—music may register aspects of life (“vital impulse, balance, conflict, the ways of living and dying and feeling”) without describing or depicting them.<sup>17</sup> All of the arts have this indirect, but still logical, relation to experience—a certain distance from lived reality, even for those modes (like film and photography) that are hard to pry loose from the scenes they ostensibly “capture.”

Here, then, is the sense of “virtual” that Langer intends: alike, but distinct from, life. The arts, including film, present virtual overlays of lived experience. They provide insights about human existence, as revealed by their formal—their virtual—re-enactments. The arts, film among them, provide vital knowledge—important, yes, but vital in the sense of life and living, the organic patterns and rhythms that are the condition of human existence. We cannot get to these insights otherwise; they escape everyday reflection and the discursive mode of reasoning that we are all steeped in.

The distinctive sense that film creates—its “primary illusion”—is “virtual history.”<sup>18</sup> What Langer means can be drawn out by comparison with a sibling art, poetry.<sup>19</sup> Despite its arrangement of words, poetry for Langer is non-discursive. Through its rhythms, tensions, and balances, a poem symbolizes experience itself. It’s not about an *actual* experience, nor is it an invitation to feel something. Instead, Langer writes, the poet’s “business is to create the appearance of ‘experiences,’ the semblance of events lived and felt, to organize them so they constitute a purely and completely experienced reality, a piece of *virtual life*.” In contrast to the jumble of everyday experience, a poem pulls out—distills, in a sense—experience itself: “The *illusion of life* is the primary illusion of all poetic art.”<sup>20</sup>

Virtual life, virtual history—these are the primary “illusions” of poetry and film, respectively. They are illusions in that they aren’t life

<sup>16</sup> Langer, “A Note on the Film,” 413–15; Sergei Eisenstein, *The Film Sense* (London: Faber and Faber, 1943). See Tereza Hadravová, “Film as a Dream of the Modern Man,” reprinted here, for a rich exploration of Langer’s differences with, and debts to, Eisenstein.

<sup>17</sup> Langer, *Philosophy in a New Key*, 207.

<sup>18</sup> Langer, “A Note on the Film,” 412.

<sup>19</sup> Indeed, Langer classifies film, poetry proper, narrative, and drama as “poetic arts,” each with a distinctive relationship to the experience of time. Langer, *Feeling and Form*, 266.

<sup>20</sup> Langer, *Feeling and Form*, 212, 213.

or history, but instead *symbols* of life, *symbols* of history. Poetry and film both symbolize through resemblance, but their similarity to the symbolized is formal—the stuff of shape, pattern, and morphology.

By “history” Langer means the experience of *immediacy*—the sense of the ongoing moment, or what she calls the “endless Now.” It is a virtual present, of course, given in form. Film’s symphonic, omnivorous character—the way it assimilates other arts as well as the sensory manifold—contributes to this feeling of immediacy. Film, Langer writes, “swallows everything: dancing, skating, drama, panorama, cartooning, music,” even as it “enthalls and commingles all senses.” At the same time, the camera lends the viewer its own roving eye, in a space-shifting gambol through an “eternal and ubiquitous virtual present.” If the medium has a message, then, it is an abstracted sense of now-ness.<sup>21</sup>

In developing the point, Langer cites the dream-like quality of spectating. The analogy to dreaming is, of course, as old as film itself; the metaphor played midwife, among other things, to the 1970s psychoanalytic turn in cinema studies.<sup>22</sup> So Langer’s reflections on the “dream mode” may come off, on first read, as yet another nod to a worn theme. But here again it is formal resemblance she has in mind—not the thick claim that, say, darkened-theater movie-goers regress into a dream state. What is similar about watching a film and dreaming is that both involve rapid and cutting shifts of location, a tumbling immediacy in space that “comes and goes.”<sup>23</sup> Film watching is also *unlike* dreaming—the spectator isn’t in the film, in contrast to the dreamer-protagonist. It is, instead, the space-hopping immediacy, the roving eye-camera, that connects film to the dream mode.

### *Media Theory in a New Key*

As Courtenay Wyche Beinhorn observes in her 1974 essay, reprinted here, “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.”<sup>24</sup> Beinhorn is right, and we republish “A Note on the Film” with that aim in mind—to share a mostly forgotten fragment of film theory, for its original and intelligent meditation on the medium.

We have an additional motive. Over the last two years, we have read through Langer’s works, with gathering excitement. We started with *Philosophy in a New Key*, after a podcast re-kindled our curiosity.<sup>25</sup> The book’s astonishing perspicacity, its (uncredited) prescience—even the way its sentences re-enact their claims in metaphor—kept us reading, through *Feeling and Form*, then a pair of brilliant essay

<sup>21</sup> Langer, “A Note on the Film,” 415, 412, 414, 415.

<sup>22</sup> Laura Rascaroli, “Oneiric Metaphor in Film Theory,” *Kinema: A Journal for Film and Audiovisual Media* (Fall 2002).

<sup>23</sup> Langer, “A Note on the Film,” 412–15.

<sup>24</sup> Beinhorn, “Susanne Langer’s Film Theory,” 54.

<sup>25</sup> “Susanne Langer on Our Symbol-Making Nature,” *The Partially Examined Life*, March 28, 2022, <https://partiallyexaminedlife.com/2022/03/28/ep290-1-langer-symbolism/>.

collections, and on to Langer's three-volume opus *Mind*, published over 15 years and cut short by Langer's failing eyesight. We recalled (in the first person, for one of us) *Philosophy in a New Key*'s ubiquity in the 1950s paperback revolution. And we registered the testimony of friends and colleagues, who remembered the book as an important, if inchoate, influence.

We knew from the book's first pages what the rest of her works confirmed: Susanne Langer was a media theorist, set in a different, more expansive key. For Langer, it was symbolization all the way down, and all the way back. She held that most of our symbolizing, for most of human history, has been non-discursive, a vast ocean surrounding (once it surfaced, rather late) a tiny, grammar-bound island. She made that point in brilliant, self-exemplifying, iridescent prose.

Who now reads Langer? Plenty of people, as we learned when we stumbled upon the Langer revival now underway. But not media scholars—not yet. Thus this small collection, centered on a five-page film-theory fragment, is a tease, an invitation, and a promissory note:

The modern mind is an incredible complex of impressions and transformations; and its product is a fabric of meanings that would make the most elaborate dream of the most ambitious tapestry-weaver look like a mat. The warp of that fabric consists of what we call 'data,' the signs to which experience has conditioned us to attend, and upon which we act often without any conscious ideation. The woof is symbolism. Out of signs and symbols we weave our tissue of 'reality.'<sup>26</sup>

<sup>26</sup> Langer, *Philosophy in a New Key*, 235–36.

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