

Susanne Langer's Theory of Art - Form Out of Emotion: *Under the Skin* (2013) and
"Semblance"

In her book *Feeling and Form*, Susanne Langer puts forth her conception of the defining feature of art as being the symbolic articulation of feeling and incarnation of those emotions unique to the human experience. For Langer, art, in its broadest yet most succinct sense, is "the practice of creating perceptible forms expressive of human feeling" (Langer 6). This statement ostensibly expresses art's inherent non-discursiveness in the way it embodies feeling. This theory can be, and has been, applied across media—from painting to sculpture, even architecture and music—and bases itself around Langer's belief that art is able to make intelligible "inner life" through symbolic means. When we say "non-discursiveness," we refer to a way of conveying meaning without the use of language or pre-determined conventions that allow for forthright understanding. Langer purports, though, that art expresses feelings that cannot be exhibited through those means alone; at least not in their entirety. Rather, she argues that art performs a 'shaping' of perceptible elements—images, sounds, textures, etc.—into symbolic representations. In doing so, she says, art allows us to both ascertain feeling and create it.

This theory is exemplified through the annals of historical art that has shaped popular discourse over the years, and can be described best when looking at a particular work through Langer's conception. This essay will use Jonathan Glazer's *Under the Skin* (2013) to exercise this property in order to ascertain its effectiveness and to uncover pitfalls that may arise as a result of such a framework. The film's use of abstraction, undefined space, sound, and fragmented narrative creates a spate-temporal structure that does not edify or point to emotion/feeling; rather, it presents it outright and embodies feeling without illustration. *Under the Skin* functions as a product of "semblance," as Langer describes it, in that it performs an

illusory task of creating form out of human emotion by creating a virtual space wherein the receiver can perceive a world that defies empirical emotive understanding (72). Due to its obscure aesthetic and narrative properties, the film qualifies itself to be subject to such analysis.

Langer defines expression as a symbolic presentation of an idea, and states that this expression is made possible through the creation of a form that resembles the ‘thing’ being represented (7). Art, she says, is not meant to “give vent” to emotion or even evoke certain feelings in the receiver. In this sense, art is not discursive and so it symbolizes, in a presentational way, feeling through shape, internal coherence, and rhythm that forms the perceptual structure of the work. For example, when we look at a painting, the feelings and thoughts that arise are not a result of the shapes themselves, or the texture of the paint, or the color, but from how these shapes, textures, and colors unify to create a virtual space. This virtual space embodies and communicates a form that emerges therein (84-5). In a similar way, film performs its illusory effect through the patterns of time and space, and how elements of the narrative and formal composition coalesce to create a symbolic image—one that reflects feeling. In contrast, the literal content of the moving picture is merely sensory and is discursive in that it relies on our basic understanding of language, movement, and spatial relativity. The rest is indicative of Langer’s idea of “semblance”.

Under the Skin opens with an abstract sequence of the slow emergence of an eye—not literally, since this construction occurs in a void of black and happens out of the bending of circular light. The high-pitched, synthetic sounds that envelop this moment create a sense of ‘otherworldliness’. Immediately, the film refuses interpretation and clarity as the rings of light cut to an extreme close-up of an eyeball, dilating as white light surrounds it. This sequence performs the very function Langer identifies as expressing feeling through symbolic form (7). In

this case, it is the emergence of sentience and consciousness. We are not told this is happening, nor are we shown it, but the elements of the scene express a feeling that points to this. The form of the eyeball is represented first with just a black spot surrounded by rings of light, so when the eyeball does show up, we experience a coherence of ideas that first began with a symbolic image. The following scenes continue this approach, shadowing the unnamed alien protagonist (Scarlett Johansson) observing and mimicking human behavior with an uncanny detachment. Most of the film relies on this recognition of uncanniness and the eerie nature of the way she moves throughout the world. These moments are not expressive because they evoke emotion in the conventional sense (her interiority and feeling are not conveyed through words or visual cues). Instead, they shape a structure that resembles the form of many inner experiences: namely, disembodied consciousness, emotional dejection, voyeurism, and curious exploration. The form of the film puts these feelings on display non-discursively and while we can name them (as done above), the simple utterance of these words do not enable us to feel them completely. Langer states that these are feelings that in fact can be felt, but are only visible when they are “an apparition given to our perception” (6-7). In the opening scene of *Under the Skin*, the feeling of existential pondering and humanism are evoked only by way of the virtual image presented, not stating the obvious.

This notion of form as being symbolic, to Langer, is central to her philosophical basis, as it relates to art. She emphasizes the expression of form as not being a combination of the materials that comprise it, but as the illusion they generate. What matters to Langer, in the most general sense, is the “virtual” space, time, or structure the artwork constructs. Mentioned previously, she names this illusion as “semblance” (or *Schein*) (7; 72). In *Under the Skin*, this is evident in recurring motifs of black voids and undefined, indefinite white spaces. These spatial

environments are not meant to indicate or point to any real or empirically observable spaces; they act as symbolic representations (illusions, semblances) of the protagonist's mental state, or the film's thematic focus of emotive nullity. They are literal manifestations of "virtual spaces"—featureless environments where our protagonist disappears her victims into a pool of black nothingness. The spaces are constructed to *embody* the absence of meaning and the resistance to interpretation.

Langer contends that art is representational of every aspect of conscious life, and redefines "feelings" as being critical to this representation. Art is valuable, she says, because it articulates feelings that would otherwise be unstructured inner experiences that could not be explained merely through language. Glazer's film, corresponding to this process, utilizes music to a great extent. The eerie, non-melodic score creates what Langer calls "lived time": an independent temporal illusion that is separated from the mechanical, or "clock," that is empirically observed (107-8). Langer states that this "lived time" differs from mechanical time in that it is measured not by clocks, but by the varying tensions, resolutions, and expectations we feel internally (84-5). In the film, this dissonant and pulsing music warps the viewer's sense of temporal consistency, warping our sense of time, and by elongating and compressing moments based on emotional intensity. These patterns of perception, as they relate to music and time, is what Langer terms "sounding forms in motion"—an illusory articulation of time that can proceed at various rates, which acts as completely separate from measurable time (107-8).

Langer adds to this definition of art by saying that its purpose is to shape what can be felt, not to express feeling that is explicable or obvious. She suggests that bad art can lead to "formless emotion" which often leads to cultural and political impoverishment of thought (10-12). *Under the Skin* exemplifies this thought of hers by giving shape to feelings of alienation,

disembodied subjectivity, and presents all of this via an exploration of the human condition through a non-human. The film's narrative and artistic form—its sound, visual minimalism and abstraction, its disjointed narrative—symbolizes a structure of experience, not any particular identifiable feeling. The entire film follows an alien as she struggles with her attempts at becoming a 'person' and her experience is reflected almost entirely through illusory symbols. While the narrative can be plotted out, many of the film's most effective and rich moments arise out of abstraction—not clarity. Langer's thought that such art can accomplish an "education of feeling" becomes real here (12).

However, Langer's theory is open to criticism and its limitations mostly arise from its simplicity. It is true that her general ideas can be applied to many works of art, and its application to a film like *Under the Skin* is effective, it cannot be surmised that is applicable to all works of art. Some forms of contemporary and postmodern art do not fit neatly within her conceived framework. Conceptual art and anti-aesthetic movements often reject many of the ideas that Langer purports. If a piece lacks a form that shares structure with a feeling, or actively avoids the illusion of expression, it may not count as part of Langer's idea of 'art'. For example, Joseph Kosuth's *One and Three Chairs* (1965) is an art installation that included a physical chair, a photograph of that chair, and printed definition of the word "chair" itself. The piece emerges as a commentary on the arbitrariness of meaning-making and semiotic study. There is no perceptual form or expressive symbolism that indicates any feeling or inner experience. The art here lies in the ontological puzzle that it operates within. While this is still a discursive piece, Langer's framework may not apply here since her definition relies on human feeling; *One and Three Chairs* is ostensibly a philosophical art experiment.

Nonetheless, for works that aim to present experience through a structure that relies on giving form to feeling and “virtual space”—like *Under the Skin*—Langer’s theory clarifies and accentuates the excellence of their existence.

In conclusion, Susanne Langer’s General Theory of Art offers a powerful lens through which to understand much of the art that has come in contact with humanity, and much of what is yet to arrive. By shifting focus away from straightforward representation or provocation, and instead focusing on the essence of human feeling and the structures that define it, Langer provides us with a potent way of understanding how art can communicate without language, universally. Whether this framework can be applied to all forms of art creates more questions relating to whether those inapplicable forms even are art, it is clever that her theory defines what a *certain* kind of art does: it amplifies inner experience so as to make it intelligible, yet still be uniquely human. For any work of art that seeks to provide a skeleton for a particular experience, Langer’s account remains essential.