

The Tension Structures of Consciousness as the Subject of Art — An Interpretation of the Central Thesis of Susanne Langer's Aesthetic Theory

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"Art is the creation of forms symbolic of human feeling" (1953, 44) – this is the central thesis of the American philosopher Susanne Langer's aesthetic theory. The aim of this paper is to explain this unpretentious thesis and to show its contributions particularly towards the understanding of paintings. First, Langer's concept of feeling will be interpreted as "the tension structure of human consciousness." Second, it will be shown that works of painting are equally composed of elements of tension, which display a kinship with the tensions of consciousness. This makes them a suitable medium of expression for the complex dynamics of mind, which will be illustrated by the detailed analysis of two paintings at the end of this paper. The empirical studies of Daniel Stern, Rudolf Arnheim and Michael Leyton will be drawn on to expound Langer's thesis.

I. The Meaning of "Symbolization" in Langer's Thesis

To understand Langer's theory, one must first clarify her concept of "symbolization." For Langer, artworks being symbols of feeling means that they are "vehicles for the conception" (1957a, 60) of feeling. Through them feeling is "presented directly to our understanding, so that we may grasp, realize, comprehend (it)" (222). Elsewhere Langer writes that art makes "the obscure or elusive (feeling) conceivable" (1967, 76). These statements emphasize that art, instead of serving the purpose of emotional catharsis or

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sensual satisfaction as widely believed, fulfills a *cognitive* function: it imparts knowledge, insight into the world of feeling, which would otherwise remain hidden. Art achieves this aim by a process of *formulation*, i.e. by inventing forms which transform “felt activity (in)to perceptual quality” (152).

In its capacity as symbol art is comparable to language, in the sense that it can refer to things other than itself (quasi-semantics) by virtue of certain formal principles (quasi-syntax). However, art can only metaphorically be called the “language” of feeling, since symbolic references in language are based on pure convention (e.g. the word “apple” in itself has nothing to do with a real apple), whereas symbolic references in art are based on *an intrinsic structural analogy*, also called “isomorphism,” between symbol and its meaning. Art displays similar structures as feeling and has moreover the advantage of being “much easy to perceive and to hold in view” (76), which makes it a suitable symbol of the latter. Later it will be shown that it is the feature of being *tension structures* that feeling and art share with each other.

2. The Meaning of “Feeling” in Langer’s Thesis

A major hurdle to the understanding of Langer's thesis lies in her concept of feeling, since she nowhere clearly defines the term, but repeatedly changes her wording. Sometimes she speaks quite conventionally of “emotions, moods” (1957a, 222), other times of “the inner life” (1953, 127), “the sentient life” (1957a, 98), “the subjective reality” (1957b, 9), and yet other times of “everything that can be felt” (15) and even “consciousness” (112). All these divergent terms can easily lead to confusion. However, considering them altogether, one notices the following key points:

1. Langer insists that her concept of “feeling” must be “taken in its broadest sense” (15). Instead of belonging only to a specific region of consciousness, it relates to the entire subjective experience, the entire human consciousness, which in turn encompasses all that we can ever become conscious of: sensory perceptions, feelings, thoughts and fantasies (1953, 127). On the other hand, the term obviously is

not identical with consciousness; otherwise Langer would have consequently used the term "consciousness" instead of feeling. If feeling relates to the entire human consciousness but is not identical with it, it can only be an *aspect* of it.

2. In exploring further which aspect of consciousness feeling represents, one notices that Langer frequently refers to feeling as a kind of "life," which in turn stresses the fact that feeling is something moving and changing, movement and change being the major characteristics of life. Feeling in Langer's sense is clearly not a steady state, but a process or "a complex of processes" (1967, 19).¹ Accordingly, it is plausible that her term of "feeling" refers to *the dynamic aspect* of consciousness. Langer herself writes that art sets forth "the dynamic forms of subjective experience" (1953, 114) or "the morphology of feeling" (1957a, 238).

To summarize, I would like to propose the following interpretation of Langer's concept of "feeling" as the subject of art: it refers to *the temporal structures* of the entire human consciousness – of perceiving, feeling, willing, thinking, etc. All mental acts, as long as they exceed the threshold of awareness to become part of our conscious life, are experienced as unfolding in a certain way in time. One may also say that they trace *a temporal pattern*.

This interpretation was inspired by the writings of the American psychologist Daniel Stern, who himself was inspired by Langer (Stern 1985, 54). Stern coined the term "vitality affect," which in my view largely overlaps with Langer's concept of "feeling." Stern defines vitality affect as "the flow pattern" of human life (consciousness being its major component), "regardless of the content (thoughts, actions, emotions)" (Stern 2010, 8). An example of such flow patterns is "*the rush*," which may belong both to sensations, emotions and thoughts. Stern explains:

¹ See also Langer (1967, 19): "The basic misconception is, I think the assumption of feelings (sensations, emotions, etc.) as items or entities of any kind." and (21): "the phenomenon usually described as 'a feeling' is really that an organism feels something, i.e., something is felt. What is felt is a process, perhaps a large complex of processes, within the organism."

“A rush of anger or joy, a sudden flooding of light, an accelerating sequence of thoughts, a wave of feeling evoked by music, a surge of pain, and a shot of narcotics can all feel like ‘rushes’” (Stern 2004, 64).

Other flow patterns of consciousness are “surging,” “fading away,” “fleeting,” “explosive,” “crescendo,” “decrescendo,” “bursting,” “drawn out,” and so on (Stern 1985, 54). Stern points out: “These temporally contoured feelings could be associated with affects, movements, streams of thought, sensations, and any and all activity, mental or physical” (Stern 2004, 36), i.e. they are *not* tied to any particular mode of consciousness. In particular, it is worth stressing that the process of thinking also displays such flow patterns, for example: “a thought can rush onto the mental stage and swell, or it can quietly just appear and then fade” (Stern 2010, 21).

Stern has clearly demonstrated here that human consciousness can be analyzed into two aspects: the aspect of “What,” which concerns the content, the objects of consciousness, and the aspect of “How,” which concerns its temporal structure (Stern also calls it “the temporal contour”, Stern 2004, 64) (Stern 2010, 8). Though in actual experience these two aspects are always intertwined, it is possible to treat them separately for theoretical purposes. In my view, Langer’s concept of feeling refers precisely to the “How”, i.e. the temporal structures of consciousness: “He (the artist) knows something of how feeling rises, develops, tangles or reverses or breaks or sinks, spent in overt action or buried in secrecy” (1967, 64).

3. The Temporal Structures of Consciousness as Tension Structures

The term “temporal structure of consciousness” requires further explanation as to which factors or features characterize it. By studying again the terms used by Langer and Stern to describe the dynamics of consciousness, one observes that they define either the change of *intensity*, or *direction*, or *rhythm* of the latter. Words such as “rise,” “sink,” “tangle” and “reverse” refer to the constant directional changes of consciousness, while words like “crescendo” and “decrescendo” describe its changes in intensity (also

called strength). Moreover, the temporal structure of consciousness varies in terms of rhythm (involving the change of tempo and of duration). It can "accelerate," "slow down" (change of tempo) or alternate between activity and rest (change of duration).

The dynamics of consciousness therefore has a three-dimensional, more precisely, a spatial-temporal-energetic structure. Langer characterizes it further by calling it an "interplay of tensions":

"That life of feeling is a stream of tensions and resolutions. Probably all emotion, all feeling tone, mood and even personal "sense of life" or "sense of identity" is a specialized and intricate, but definite interplay of tensions" (1953, 372).

Tension is a type of *force*. By referring to the temporal structure of consciousness as a structure of tensions, Langer calls our attention to an important phenomenon, namely that consciousness is often experienced as consisting of forces and their changes.² This is the case, because, as shown above, consciousness is constantly altering its intensity and its direction - these being the two determinants of force. The rise and then decline of emotions and thoughts, the intensification and then weakening of sensations and desires all awaken in us the sense of a dynamic play of force.

The fact that Langer uses the word "tension" instead of "force" to refer to the dynamics of consciousness is based on a further crucial insight, which unfortunately she herself has not explicated. In physics, tension is the force that tries to restore an initial state of equilibrium which has been altered. For example, the tension of a pulled bowstring is the force that attempts to unbend it. This means that tension as a type of force always arises from the *deviation* from an initial state of balance and strives to return to it again. This physical meaning of tension applies also in the mental realm. Consciousness equally arises from the alteration, i.e. the disturbance of an original bodily or mental state, mostly because we are reacting to an internal or external stimulus. The reaction in turn only aims at "consuming" the stimulus and then returning to the initial state. Should

² Stern: "Most mental and physical movements are subjectively experienced as caused and guided by forces" (Stern 2010, 22).

our body and mind always remain at rest, we would have no consciousness.³ That is, consciousness always alternates between a state of balance (a kind of mental “homeostasis”) and the deviation from it, tracing a dynamic temporal profile in which the initial balanced state is implied as the base of departure and the destination of return. It is in this sense that consciousness is “a stream of tensions and resolutions.”

4. The Tension Structures of Consciousness as the Subject of Art

Summarizing the foregoing interpretations, Langer's thesis can now be restated as follows: art creates forms which represent by virtue of structural similarity the tension structures of human consciousness. This sentence includes but one last unexplained premise, namely that artworks too are composed of tensions. This point will be discussed in detail now, with the emphasis on the pictorial art.

That music is composed of tensions is quite evident. It is no coincidence that musical terms have already been used to describe feeling. Like the flow of our consciousness, the musical flow is equally characterized by a constant change of *intensity* (e.g. the crescendo or decrescendo of volume), *direction* (e.g. the rise or fall of pitch), and *rhythm* (Stern 2010, 82-83). These multi-dimensional variations are responsible for the fact that a piece of music is often experienced as an interplay of *forces*.⁴ What furthermore characterizes musical forces as *tensions* is the fact that “in a tonal system, the expression and meaning of every tone or phrase is derived from the force that raises it above or drops it below the level of the keynote” (Arnheim 1982b, 93). The keynote is thus the base of departure, the deviation from and the striving back towards it define musical tensions.

³ Antonio Damasio also traces the emergence of consciousness to the change of the states of the organism: „Kernbewusstsein liegt vor, wenn die Repräsentationsmechanismen des Gehirns einen vorgestellten, nicht sprachlichen Bericht erzeugen, in dem niedergelegt ist, wie der eigene Zustand des Organismus davon beeinflusst wird, dass er ein Objekt verarbeitet, und wenn dieser Prozess die Vorstellung von dem verursachenden Objekt verstärkt, so dass es in einem räumlichen und zeitlichen Kontext hervorgehoben wird“ (Damasio 2002, 205).

⁴ Ernst Kurth: “Wir ‘hören’ nicht bloße eine melodische Linie, sondern wir erleben auch als den eigentlichen und tiefsten melodischen Impuls den Zug bewegender Kraft in ihr” (Kurth 1917, 11).

While musical compositions can clearly be understood as complexes of tensions, it is not the case with visual compositions, though quite a few artists and theorists have pointed to the phenomenon of tension in paintings.⁵ Langer also states that "a work of art (including a painting) is a composition of tensions and resolutions" (1957b, 7).⁶ Still, most people tend to see paintings as consisting of the objects or figures depicted, and those who see a little more abstractly as consisting of points, lines, planes and volumes. A painting as a configuration of force is at best a figure of speech for them. The psychologist Rudolf Arnheim and the mathematician Michael Leyton are among the very few researchers who have systematically studied tension in the visual arts. Their findings may help to spell out Langer's important insight.

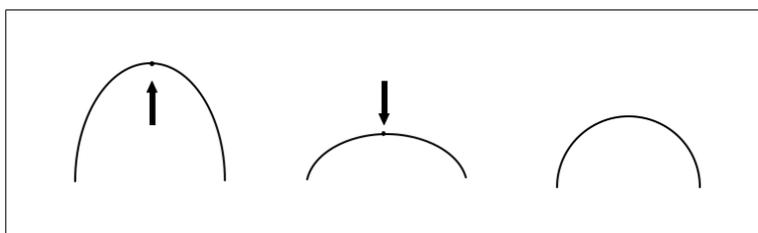


FIGURE 1. Curve with a penetrative extremum. — Curve with a compressive extremum. — Part of a circle.

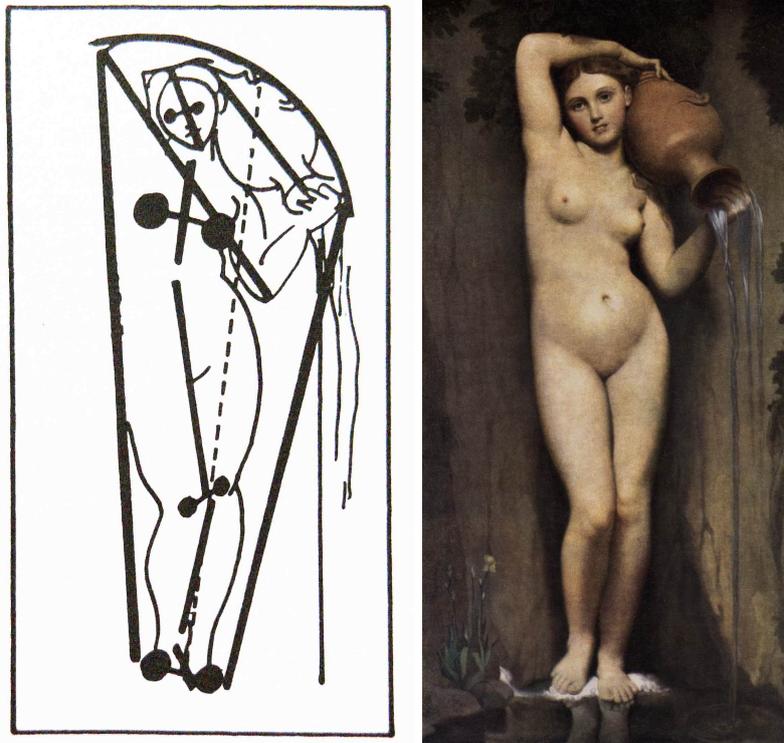
Both Arnheim and Leyton hold that pictorial tension results from the deviation from an initial balanced position or the deformation of an initial balanced form (Arnheim, 1982a, 428; Leyton 2006, 11). The tension of straight lines (either explicitly drawn lines or implied axes) is normally caused by their deviation from the horizontal or vertical positions, which are perceived as positions of rest (that is why the canvas frame which marks the orthogonal directions plays such an important role in paintings).⁷ This type of tension can be called *tension through dislocation*. The tension of

⁵ Kandinsky: "In fact, no materializing of external forms expresses the content of a work of painting but, rather, the forces = tensions which are alive within it" (Kandinsky 1947, 33).

⁶ Elsewhere Langer writes: "tension and resolution are the basic conceptions in all of them (the arts)" (1967, 158).

⁷ Interestingly, I found the following comment regarding Classical art by Heinrich

curves on the other hand (either explicitly drawn lines or implied axes) – and this is one of Leyton’s key findings – normally results from the variation of curvature (curvature = degree of bend). This makes them appear to deviate from the circle, which due to its unvarying curvature is perceived to represent absolute rest and balance. Depending on whether the curve *bends out* or *bends in* from the circle, it evokes the sense of *penetration* or *compression* (of the circle) in the beholder [FIGURE 1] (Leyton 2006, 46). Leyton postulates further that the tension axis of a curve always leads to its extremum (maximum or minimum).⁸ The tension of curves can be called *tension through deformation*.

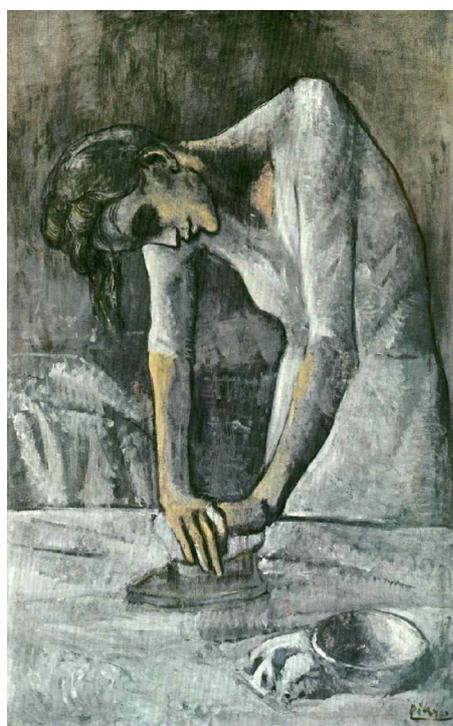
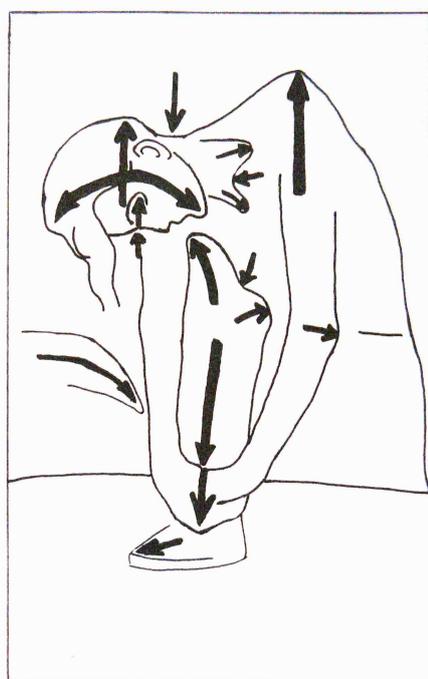


FIGURES 2 AND 3. Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres, *The Source*, 1856.
Musée d'Orsay, Paris.

Wölfflin: “...immer ist das Bild von dem Gegensatz des Senkrechten und des Waagrechten durchwaltet. An der reinen Urform werden alle Abweichungen gemessen“ (Wölfflin 1921, 135).

⁸ The tensions of color and illumination will not be considered here.

FIGURE 2 (Arnheim 1982a, 155) is a diagram which illustrates the tensional structure of Ingre's painting *La Source* [FIGURE 3], in which the tension of straight lines, i.e. the girl's swinging bodily axes, plays a major part (154-157). FIGURE 4 (Leyton 1992, 483) is a diagram which illustrates the tensional structure of Picasso's painting *Woman Ironing* [FIGURE 5], in which the tension of curves, formed by the woman's bodily contours, plays a major part.



FIGURES 4 AND 5. Pablo Picasso, *Woman Ironing*, 1904.
The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York.

Such diagrams not only show the *directions* of the pictorial tensions, but also their different *strength* (i.e. the degree of deviation from the base of departure). Moreover, they allow us to see how these individual tensions are connected with each other to generate an internal change of *rhythm*: the continuous changes both of *tempo* (i.e. how fast or slow the tensions

change their direction and strength) and of *distance* (i.e. how the spaces between the individual axes of tension are divided) are made apparent.

Just as it is possible to abstract the structure of consciousness from its content, so the same is possible in the analysis of paintings. The tension diagram defines the structure of a painting and makes it clear that it is not merely a juxtaposition of objects, but a tensional and relational continuum.

5. Pictorial Tensions as Symbols of the Tensions of Human Consciousness

It was shown that paintings, just like music, exhibit a structural similarity to human consciousness, in the sense that they too are composed of tensions and their variations. Moreover, pictorial tensions are defined by exactly the same parameters as the tensions of consciousness, namely direction, intensity and rhythm. Thanks to this, paintings are capable of depicting the complex dynamics of consciousness, which can be defined by language only in broad categories. This will be illustrated by the analysis of two paintings.

The first painting is the above-mentioned *Woman Ironing*, which has been analyzed by Leyton in detail. It shows a skinny woman in a pitiful interior who looks so exhausted that she has to struggle with such a simple task as ironing (480). Apart from this obvious narrative content, however, there are more subtle meanings conveyed through the formal composition of the painting (Fig.4), which according to Leyton is dominated by two pairs of tensional contrast:

1. The contrast between the *downward drooping* curve of her neck, whose dynamic continues all the way down the length of her arms until it ends in her fingers, expressing the woman's exhaustion, and the *upward thrusting* curve of her shoulder, which expresses her will to overcome her exhaustion.
2. The contrast between the *outward pushing* curve of the shoulder, which symbolizes the woman's struggle against the environment and

the equally strong *inward pushing* curve of her armpit, which symbolizes the force of the environment directed against her. Leyton notes that the shapes of these two curves are mirror-images of each other, which in turn hints at the futility of the woman's struggle: in the same way she fights against the world, in the same way it fights back against her (485-87).



FIGURES 6. Raphael, *The Deposition*, 1507. Galleria Borghese, Rome.

The second painting is Raphael's *The Deposition* [FIGURE 6]. It shows two men carrying the dead Christ's body into the grave, surrounded by saints

whose gestures and facial expressions obviously express the pain of the event. But just as in Picasso's painting, the more subtle meanings of this painting are revealed by its tensional structure. The most important structural theme of this painting is the V-shape, which according to Leyton is a variant of the penetrative curve (Leyton 2006, 159). A series of V-shapes overlay this painting: the one formed by the body of Christ and the two men carrying him, the one formed by the bodies of Magdalene and the young bearer on the right, and the one formed by the bodies of Christ and Mary. These V-shapes not only serve to link the left and the right halves of the painting, but through their downward pointing tips they also effectively emphasize the passive hanging of Christ's body. Just as one wonders why the painting does not collapse under all these downward forces, one notices the left leg of the young bearer located precisely in the central vertical axis of the painting to be a firm anchor. If this leg were not there, the whole painting would indeed collapse. This young man, the bearer not only of Christ but of the entire painting is none other than Grifonetto Baglioni, the fallen son of Raphael's client, to whose memory this painting was commissioned (Baldini 2005, 106). Thus Raphael has realized through purely formal means two parallel themes in one painting: on the one hand the literally "down-dragging" pain caused by the death of Christ and on the other hand the unwavering stance and determination of Grifonetto.

It emerges from these two analyses that an important part of the meaning of a painting, if not even the bulk of it, is carried by its structure of tensions. These visual tensions appeal directly to the tensions of our mind, activate in us the sense of "exhausted drooping," "defiant thrusting," "painful down-dragging" or "steadfast standing", as was the case in the above mentioned two paintings. Moreover, they give our mental tensions, which otherwise are only vaguely perceived, a concrete form, a clearly defined structure. Thus paintings, which on the one hand certainly illustrate a situation or story of the outside world, become on the other hand direct reflections or embodiments of the dynamics of our inner life. It is for this reason Langer states that art symbolizes our feeling, that it subjectifies the objective reality and objectifies our subjective reality at once (1957b, 74).

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