

# Peirce's Categories and Langer's Aesthetics: On Dividing the Semiotic Continuum

*Categorias Peircianas e Estética Langeriana: Dividindo o Contínuo Semiótico*

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**Abstract:** This paper looks at some pivotal features of Susanne Langer's philosophical and semiotic model, especially its aesthetic implications, against the background of some central aspects of Charles Peirce's categorial schemes. It investigates whether it can or should function as an *alternative* to the Peircean model of dividing the semiotic continuum or whether it should function as a *complement* to it in a common undertaking. It appears that this way of proceeding, of seeing connections, is fully consonant with Peirce's admonition to not block the road of inquiry. It is argued that Langer adds concreteness and novel categories to Peirce's semiotic frame while remaining at some ambivalent distance from his ontological speculations.

**Keywords:** Peirce. Langer. Semiotics. Categories. Symbols. Art Works. Interpretation.

**Resumo:** *Este artigo examina algumas características fundamentais do modelo filosófico e semiótico de Susanne Langer, especialmente suas implicações estéticas, contra o pano de fundo de alguns aspectos centrais dos esquemas categoriais de Charles Peirce. Investiga se podem ou devem funcionar como uma alternativa ao modelo peirciano de dividir o contínuo semiótico ou devem funcionar como um complemento a isso, em um empreendimento comum. Parece que este modo de proceder, de ver conexões, está totalmente em conformidade com a advertência de Peirce de não bloquear o caminho da inquirição. Argumenta-se que Langer acrescenta concretude e novas categorias ao quadro semiótico de Peirce, enquanto se mantém a alguma distância ambivalente de suas especulações ontológicas.*

**Palavras-chave:** *Peirce. Langer. Categorias. Símbolos. Obras de arte. Interpretação.*

## I

Semiotics, like philosophy, with which Peirce inextricably linked it by multiple strands, is by its very nature a 'big tent' matrix of themes, methodologies, and ultimate commitments. The goal of a philosophically oriented semiotics, as not only Peirce projected it but also others whose projects I have explored elsewhere, is the construction of a general theory of signs. The aim of such a general theory is an exploration of the semiotic 'logic' of the

experienced or objectified forms of the ‘semiosphere’ (Yuri Lotman) and of the open spiral of signifying processes that generate them. Semiosis, on the Peircean position, generates forms of meaning-making that encompass, as Umberto Eco asserted, all of human culture at both the lower (endosomatic) and higher (exosomatic) thresholds. These open and plurisignifying systems of ‘meaning-things’ are processes or activities of the agential or intentional side and experienced or objectified correlates of these pluriform acts of intending and meaning-construction. The configurations make up ‘the world of meaning’ emerging from and pulling us into acts of semiosis.<sup>1</sup>

Peirce’s fundamental contribution was to supply (a) central, indeed essential, guidelines for drawing the fundamental groundlines in and through this multistrand continuum of sign-functions and meanings and (b) to draw out some important implications and consequences of such a ‘division of signs.’ It is precisely its putative comprehensiveness, systematicity, and avoidance of logocentrism that makes the Peircean semiotic framework, with its triadic schemas and their philosophical and historical underpinnings, so heuristically fertile in thematic investigations of myth, art, metaphor, social processes, and religion. Nevertheless, different semiotic traditions have utilized to great advantage different conceptual tools derived from sources rather different from the Peircean and have drawn the lines through the semiotic continuum in somewhat different ways, with different weightings and emphases. Substantial insights can come from quite different frameworks that ‘rotate’ semiosis in different ways that in spite of terminological differences may nevertheless overlap to significant degrees. An especially rich and powerful semiotic framework, with deep philosophical and empirical grounding and implications, was developed by the American philosopher Susanne Langer with only a nod of minimal recognition of Peirce.<sup>2</sup> It merits by reason of its

- 1 I have dealt with the complementarity and contrasts between philosophically oriented semiotics in a number of contexts, especially in *Semiotics: An Introductory Anthology* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), *Karl Bühler: Semiotic Foundations of Language Theory* (New York: Plenum, 1982), *Consciousness and the Play of Signs* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), *Pragmatism and the Forms of Sense* (University Park: Penn State University Press, 2002), and *Susanne Langer in Focus: The Symbolic Mind* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009). Winfried Nöth (*Handbook of Semiotics*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990) remains an indispensable map of the mountains, plains, and valleys of semiotics. But many valuable things are published at an astonishing rate and come from all sectors of all disciplines. A cursory glance alone at *Semiotica* bears this out.
- 2 There are frequent references to important points of intersection between Langer and Peirce in my *Susanne Langer in Focus*. See also my “Placing Langer’s Philosophical Project”, *Journal of Speculative Philosophy*, 21:1, pp. 4-15, 2007. I have discussed Peirce in other contexts: in *Consciousness and the Play of Signs* the context is the relation between perceptual inference and the categories of consciousness; in *Pragmatism and the Forms of Sense* the context is the perceptual roots of linguistic meaning; in a wide psychological context in “Die Überwindung der Assoziationstheorie durch zeichentheoretische Analyse: James, Peirce, Husserl, and Bühler”, *Zeitschrift für Semiotik* 10.4, pp. 149-73, 1988. Langer’s most important books for our purposes here are her *Philosophy in a New Key* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1957, 3rd edition; hereafter *PNK*), *Feeling and Form* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1953; hereafter *FF*), and her three volume *Mind: An Essay on Human Feeling* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1967, 1972, 1982; hereafter *Mind* with volume and page number).

scope and analytical acumen being brought into dialogue with the Peircean framework.

In what follows I will examine, with special attention to her aesthetic theory, some pivotal features of Langer's philosophico-semiotic model against the background of some central aspects of the Peircean. Doing so will allow us to ask not whether it can or should function primarily as an *alternative* to the Peircean model of dividing and analyzing the semiotic continuum but rather, notwithstanding some differences on the metaphysical plane, as a *complement* to it in a common undertaking. Is not this way of proceeding fully consonant with Peirce's admonition to not block the road of inquiry?

## II

I will focus, in light of Langer's general semiotic schema and its extension into aesthetic theory, on the status and implications of three central interconnected Peircean triadic divisions of the semiotic continuum: between (a) between firstness, secondness, and thirdness, (b) between feeling, reaction, and thought, and (c) between iconicity, indexicality, and symbolicity. Peirce's first triad is categorial or ontological, the second triad is psychological, and the third triad is clearly and explicitly semiotic. The ideas of first, second, and third are, Peirce says, "constant ingredients of our knowledge" and are due to "congenital tendencies of the mind" (CP 1.374). Indeed, they can be considered as "three parts or faculties of the soul or modes of consciousness" (CP 1.374). So, the ontological or categorial is immediately wedded to the psychological, something not present in any significant degree in Langer. Thus, Peirce affirms in the phenomenological mode, or phaneroscopically, three categories of consciousness:

[...] first, feeling, the consciousness that can be included with an instant of time, passive consciousness of quality, without recognition or analysis; second, consciousness of an interruption into the field of consciousness, sense of resistance, of an external fact, of another something; third, synthetic consciousness, binding time together, sense of learning, thought. (CP 1.377).

These are, it is clear, psychological exemplifications of another Peircean triad: quality, relation, and mediation. Cognitive structure, Peirce importantly claims, is complex in as much as "every kind of consciousness enters into cognition." While feelings, in Peirce's words, "form the warp and woof of cognition," the polar sense introduces the sense of otherness into it. Nevertheless, cognition on Peirce's conception is "neither feeling or the polar sense." It is "consciousness of process, and this in the form of the sense of learning, of acquiring, of mental growth." This is the consciousness of synthesis, or rather synthetic or synthesizing consciousness, a process that, as Peirce says, cannot be "contracted into an instant." It is the consciousness that "binds our life together" (CP 1.381). Symbolic consciousness, or the symbolic dimension of consciousness, in the strict and fully developed sense involves a specific kind or level of binding.<sup>3</sup>

For Peirce his three categories are not only "three radically different elements of consciousness" but they are also comprehensive and exclusive, "these and no

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3 Terrence Deacon, relying on Peirce's conceptual tools, has made this the central thesis of his *The Symbolic Species*. New York: W.W. Norton, 1997.

more” (CP 1.382). Immediate feeling, the polar sense, and synthetical consciousness are ‘ultimate’ factors or dimensions of consciousness, but not necessarily phases or stages except in the anthropological sense (Deacon). Now, inasmuch as on the Peircean position “all thought [...] must necessarily be in signs” (CP 5.251), these factors or dimensions must be seen as semiotic. They make up the operative matrix of semiosis as a universal process of sense-giving and sense-reading, defining the contours of the ‘semiotic self.’ They ground or mirror the major division of Peirce’s typology of signs, with these elements or factors of consciousness being correlated to a specific type of sign or semiotic dimension. Peirce never relinquished his central insight that “whenever we think we have present to consciousness some feeling, image, conception, or other representation, which serves as a sign” (CP 5.283). They make up the differentiated *medium in quo* of semiosis, the semiotic web in which we are embodied and which ties us to the world.

Peirce’s path breaking and most well-known proposal is that we thematize or access the world cognized or meant in terms of three fundamental sign-dimensions: (a) felt qualities that ground and are *signs of resemblances* or *icons*, (b) perceived resistant features that function as *indexical vectors* forcing or constraining consciousness to attend to what is other and that ‘de-fine’ or ‘de-limit’ it, and (c) more or less stable *symbolic cores* that bind as well as articulate qualities and particulars into an intelligible unity. The *tout ensemble*, therefore, whether natural or constructed, that not only confronts consciousness but mirrors consciousness itself is a matrix of sign-functions with iconic, indexical, and symbolic dimensions or constitutive features. Peirce manages in this way to avoid all reification of signs, something, we will see, that Langer also does.

Now, the central Peircean theorem that all thinking takes place in signs entails the consequence that it makes no difference whether the ‘signs’ are external or internal, that is, immanent in consciousness itself or circulating in a space common to all, the public semiosphere, with its panoply of forms and sign-configurations. Signs are ‘semiotic tools’ and indispensable supports for consciousness. They function in the same way that Peirce, in a remarkable example, claimed his inkstand did. It is an external instrument as indispensable for thinking as his brain. Sign-configurations are dynamic semiotic inkstands likewise indispensable for our thinking. Moreover, in another strong image, consciousness is characterized by Peirce as a bottomless lake, a flowing and spiraling and eddy filled sign matrix ‘all the way down’ and ‘all the way up.’<sup>4</sup> The triad of feeling, polar sense, and synthesis as constitutive modes of access to experience is operative both at the lower threshold and at the higher threshold of semiosis, thresholds make up of as our natural bodies, on the one hand, and our semiotic bodies, on the other hand. Semiosis, for a Peirce, has no ‘outside.’ The ‘inner world,’ the world of signifying processes, is itself to be modeled and accessed in terms of the fundamental triad of sign functions and in that sense is ‘outer,’ not

4 “I think of consciousness as a bottomless lake, whose waters seems transparent, yet into which we can clearly see but a little way. But in this water there are countless objects at different depths; and certain influences will give certain kinds of those objects an upward impulse which may be intense enough and continue long enough to bring them into the upper visible layer. After the impulse ceases they commence to sink downwards.” (CP 7.547).

accessible through introspection thought of in intuitive terms. This gives us a formal frame for phaneroscopic investigations. In this way, the types of signs we use tell us not just about the world they 'point to,' but they manifest in what Langer calls their 'morphology' and Peirce their felt 'material qualities' the subjective matrices out of which they arise.

Human semiosis, therefore, in Peircean frame does not just recognize signs and use signs that are rooted in the lived body as a vital matrix of endosomatic powers, as is the case with other animals. It constructs, as biosemiotics teaches us, complex sets of exosomatic organs that go far beyond our natural bodies and make up our array of cultural tools.<sup>5</sup> And just as our natural bodies furnish us at the 'lower threshold' both enabling and constraining access structures to the world, so do our exosomatic bodies furnish us 'upper threshold' access structures to both the 'inner' and the 'outer' world. They refer 'up' to and articulate the continuum of consciousness as a matrix of signifying powers and 'down' to the object world they also articulate or divide and compound and to which they bind us. Langer develops, as we will see, the implications of the position that the 'inner world' is mirrored in the 'outer world' of signs and sign-configurations, especially in the artistic image, which has a special 'import' for her semiotic theory of minding.<sup>6</sup> Langer joins Peirce in "the long way through signs," a way that leads us to a grasp not just of the world but of our sense-making powers.

By developing the key idea, which she has in common with Peirce, that every sign-configuration has not just a felt material quality but a distinctive mode of appearing, Langer offers a powerful way of thematizing and modeling these signifying powers, first by her 'division of signs' and second by developing, as a consequence of such a division, the implications of a reflection on the paradigmatic role and heuristic fertility of the artistic image as itself an icon of minding. And they also allow Langer to characterize with precision the semiotic distinctiveness of art works both in general and in their different modes, a full examination of which falls outside the purview of this paper.

### III

Langer makes in her early works, and presupposes in her later works, two divisions in the semiotic continuum that at first sight may seem to be quite different from Peirce's, whose proliferation of sign types Langer rather peremptorily called an "obstreperous flock." Her thematic division is not triadic, nor does it imply a systematic or fully worked out ontological or categorial scheme. The absence of such a scheme marks

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5 In the words of Ernst Cassirer (*An Essay on Man*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1944): "Physical reality seems to recede in proportion as man's symbolic activity advances. Instead of dealing with the things themselves man is in a sense constantly conversing with himself. He has so enveloped himself in linguistic forms, in artistic images, in mythical symbols or religious rites that he cannot see or know anything except by the interposition of this artificial medium" (p. 25).

6 A fuller and more detailed discussion of the following issues is found in my "Signs of Feeling: Susanne Langer's Aesthetic Model of Minding", *The American Journal of Semiotics*, 28.1-2, pp. 43-61, 2012.

a significant difference between her ultimate philosophical frame, which is resolutely naturalist and has an affinity with a sober form of process philosophy (Whitehead was her teacher), and Peirce's more speculative program and metaphysical vision.

The first division Langer makes is between 'indication' and 'symbolization.' Indication, as Langer conceived it, is meant to encompass the whole realm of semiosis that is prior, both temporally and structurally, to distinctively human semiosis, which is, on Peircean terms, 'symbolic.' Symbolization, for both Peirce and Langer, encompasses what is distinctively, but if we hold to the Peircean doctrine of synechism, not perhaps totally exclusively, human semiosis. Their reasons for holding this position, however, are quite different. For Langer indication and symbolization have different 'logics' and are not connected with any doctrine of categories, such as Peirce's firstness, secondness, and thirdness, which underlies his triadic typology of signs. By 'logic' Langer simply means 'relational structure.' Signs are sign-functions, defined by differential relations, not types of things independent of context or frame. Meaning, for Langer, arises in patterned contexts, indeed is the generation of patterned contexts. Nothing is a sign by itself without a frame that situates it in relational scheme.

With regard to the first division, that of indication, Langer foregrounded both (a) the primitive grasp of a *felt significance* and of physiognomic/expressive configurations and (b) the *steering* of behavior and perception in stable, ultimately finite, cycles. These are clearly the domains of Peirce's feeling and reaction, of iconicity and indexicality. These domains for Langer, as for Peirce, define the contours of non-human forms of semiosis, and in distinctively human forms they are taken up and incorporated into the symbolic domain, where thirdness reigns. In Langer's early formulation, this was the realm of 'signals,' a term she used to foreground, in accord with pragmatism's and Peirce's deepest insight, the actional, not merely contemplative, matrix of the organism-world interface. This is something Dewey established in his classic 1896 'Unit of Behavior' paper and Jakob von Uexküll sketched in his notion of a 'functional circle.'<sup>7</sup> On the non-human level, which Langer subjected to long and close examination in both *Philosophy in a New Key* and in *Mind*, the realm of indication is a fundamentally closed cycle defined by, and oriented to, pragmatically appropriate perception and pragmatically appropriate action. The domain of indication, as Langer means it, is the domain of finite context-dependency of meaning and action. For Langer, one key theoretical point is that each type of organism has its own 'ambient,' to use a later term from the *Mind* trilogy. Their ambient is tied to their types of bodies (endosomatic and exosomatic) and their respective powers which are displayed in their species-specific functional circles and the sign-systems they rely on and produce. Peirce's and Langer's differences here are purely terminological, although I think Langer's division is leaner and free from metaphysical premises while being supported by a wealth of empirical research, especially drawing out the consequences of the great Gestalt revolution in psychology, which plays a central role in her thought.

Langer divides the *symbolic continuum* into two essentially different sign systems, a *discursive* and a *presentational*, both of which belong to the 'symbolic order,' but in a rather different, though related, sense than Peirce. Her schematization here is also simpler than Peirce's and, in my opinion, more transparent. The discursive system

7 See DEWEY, 1896; and UEXKÜLL, 1940.

or order for Langer is exemplified or embodied in language, mathematics, graphs and diagrams whose contents are able to be articulated in alternative formulations or are dependent upon the conventions of notational systems. The presentational system or order is exemplified or embodied in the image-based and image-constituted sign-configurations of art, ritual, sacrament, and myth, whose 'logic' belongs to a distinctive symbolic order not reducible to the discursive, *but still ideational* and in that sense representational. The symbolic order, as Langer construes it, engenders and structures an 'open ambient,' her term for 'infinite semiosis' in Peirce's sense. A symbolic system, for Langer, is a system that rather than engaging the world directly orients us both to and through concepts and ideas and their integuments, both in the discursive and presentational realm.<sup>8</sup> But in the case of presentational symbols the integuments are essential and cannot be separated from their interpretants, their proper significate effects, to use Peirce's terminology, which Langer, however, does not. But both symbol systems are mediations, instances of thirdness within the Peircean frame, since they both have *logical* interpretants, which, however, have quite different features. Not all logical interpretants belong to the discursive order and hence symbolicity is not exclusively the property of the discursive order. What Langer calls 'presentational forms' are true symbols, carriers of an 'idea.'

Symbolicity, in Langer's framework of discursive symbolization, takes up, as I have noted, the 'prior' phases and dimensions of iconicity and indexicality into itself, without, however, leaving them and their distinctive functions behind. Language and mathematical systems exemplify this to the highest degree. This in no way contravenes Peirce's own account. Langer's domain of presentationality is, looked at within Peircean frame, a domain of *iconic symbols* whose diacritical features constitute its indexical dimension. For Langer, every presentational symbol is based on the symbolic pregnancy of the very forms of experience. Such pregnancy, a term derived from Gestalt psychology, consists in an expressive valence, a distinctive quality, that allows the forms of experience themselves to be transformed into symbols that are woven into the complex webs of art, ritual, myth, and religion, the analysis of which make up Langer's focal concern: to develop a 'new key' for philosophy, a project that runs parallel to and intersects with Peirce's development of a general theory of signs. This is the foundation of Langer's rich analysis of what she calls 'life symbols' that reveal a true semantic beyond the realm of language. Of course, it could be said that Peirce's repertoire of examples in his various inventory of signs that yield his 'obstreperous flock' reveals clearly these important semiotic consequences and that Peirce gives us the analytical tools to see this. While this is true, perhaps Langer cuts through this morass in a more elegant and clean manner and certainly engages a wealth of sources not available to Peirce.<sup>9</sup> One could ask what really is at stake in

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8 A concept for Langer is a form "that appears in all versions of thought or imagery that can connote the object in question, a form clothed in different integuments of sensation for every different mind [...] Whenever we deal with a concept we must have some particular presentation of it, *through* which we grasp it," (PNK 71-72). Langer will exploit this distinction and draw out some radical implications of it for our understanding of the material quality of a sign-configuration.

9 This is clearly not the place to engage Peirce's ten classes of signs diagram or even more the sixty-six signs elaboration of Weiss and Burke.

trying to determine whether and in what ways presentational symbols, in Langer's sense, are rhematic iconic qualisigns, rhematic iconic sinsigns, or rhematic iconic legisigns? Are they not, in fact, all three, but maybe in ways that depart from the letter of Peirce's classificatory system?

A presentational symbol presents a qualitative configuration, is a qualisign, defines an interruptive or resistive response by its very material reality, is a sinsign, and contains an intelligible core or idea that escapes the discursive dimension, while still being a legisign in a very specific way. In this sense, presentational symbols engender the three principal interpretants, affective, energetic, and logical, delineated, among a plethora of others, by Peirce. These three certainly outline the outer dimensions of an aesthetic encounter and mark the iconic, indexical, and logical factors in a presentational symbol.<sup>10</sup> They tell us what to look for, but do not tell us what we will find. More generally, though, we could ask whether and in what contexts we are necessarily and fruitfully wedded to the Peircean nomenclature, which elicits intense hermeneutical, constructive, and classificatory processes? Or should we look at the phenomenon itself and recall the old Latin axiom that *sapientis est de verbis non curare*? Or, even better, as the old rhetorical adage put it, *rem tene et verba sequentur*.

For Langer the defining marks, or what she calls the "salient characteristics," of discursive symbolism are the following rather uncontroversial features, with which Peirce would agree. Every discursive symbol system (a) has the equivalent of a vocabulary and syntax, that is, a set of distinguishable individual units of meaning and a set of conventional rules by which they are and must be combined, (b) is able to be captured or mapped in a dictionary, albeit one with no greatest upper bound, so that (c) their conceptual spheres are defined by their relations of equivalence to or translation by other units both within the same system and in other systems, but without any claim of a strict isomorphism, especially in the case of natural languages.<sup>11</sup> Discursive symbolism, on Langer's account, generates a symbol field of de-indexicalized *general reference*, that in order to refer still needs to be connected to the world, a position clearly defended by Peirce. Langer's analysis of discursive systems, however, relies upon Karl Bühler's two-field theory of language, which differentiates an indexical or deictic field from a symbolic field. This distinction mirrors or exemplifies the general divide in the semiotic continuum between indication and symbolization, although it is not unique to Bühler.<sup>12</sup>

The wedge between discursive symbol systems and presentational symbol

10 I have dealt with these aspects at length in my "Dimensions of an Aesthetic Encounter: Perception, interpretation, and the signs of art". In *Semiotic Rotations: Modes of meaning in cultural worlds*. GEERTZ, SunHee, VALSINER, Jaan, and BREAU, Jean-Paul (eds.). Charlotte, N.C.: Information Age Publishing, 2007, pp. 113-134.

11 Langer holds that language includes "its refinements in mathematical and scientific symbolisms, and its approximations by gesture, hieroglyphics, or graphs" (*PNK*).

12 See my *Karl Bühler: Semiotic Foundations of Language Theory* for a more extensive discussion of this. Bühler develops this pivotal notion, which was also taken up and developed by such a different thinker as Karl Popper, in his masterwork, *Theory of Language: The Representational Function of Language*. Translated by Donald Fraser Goodwin. Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 1990 [original publication: *Sprachtheorie*. Jena: Gustav Fischer Verlag, 1934.]



systems is based first and foremost on how they refer to, or give us access to, their objects through their interpretants. The philosophical point of the wedge for Langer is to maintain the autonomy and distinctiveness of presentational forms, the essential and constitutive task of which is *to make felt meanings accessible* in a materially rich form. Felt meaning becomes objectively symbolized in the presentational symbol and take on a reality confronting and challenging us by the very 'palpability' of the signs that make it up, as Roman Jakobson clearly showed in his analyses of verbal art. This is the domain of what Langer called the "genuine semantic beyond the limits of discursive language" (PNK 86), certainly one of Peirce's own focal semiotic concerns. But Langer develops this semantic and its implications and applications in directions that Peirce did not, without necessarily contradicting it.

Presentational symbols and systems of such symbols, according to Langer, are *specific and unique* unto themselves. Each is only itself. And even if it belongs to a class of symbols, it does not represent the class but exemplifies it in its own way. For Langer, while they are distinctive instruments of true thought, they have a *total*, not general, reference. They fuse, in the Peircean sense, logical or intellectual, energetic, affective interpretants in such a way as to define the *untranslatable, but not uninterpretable mode*, in which their 'object' or thing-meant is to be accessed. The presentational symbol or symbol system, as in the case of myths, defines a content, embodies an imaginably supported mode of feeling, and constrains or induces patterns of acting and feeling. Langer's notion of a unique 'vital import' encompasses all three types of interpretants. Such symbols are pregnant with a sense which can only be gestured toward in discourse, which is always derivative with respect to them. What Langer says about artistic import, with a distinction between interpretation and perception, exemplifies a general point and will lead to a further dimension of our theme:

Artistic import requires no interpretation; it requires a full and clear perception of the presented form, and the form sometimes needs to be construed before one can appreciate it. To this end, interpretations of verbal material or representational compositions may be useful, even necessary. But the vital import of a work of art need not and cannot be derived by any exegesis. Such a process, indeed, destroys one's perception of import. (*Mind* I: 84).

This notion of the vital import of a presentational symbol is one of Langer's most important and rich analytical notions.

#### IV

Langer argues that the 'meaning,' defined in terms of vital import, of an art symbol in particular and of presentational symbols in general is inextricably presented with and in the distinctive 'morphology' of the symbol in a symbolic formation, the palpability or material reality of which can never be circumvented. Such a symbol never becomes transparent as in the ideal of scientific prose or a scientific model or diagram.<sup>13</sup> The

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13 Still, it must be noted that transparency is itself a felt quality, one of the marks, or material qualities, of discursive language that differentiate it from both the syntactic and semantic

presentational symbol is not a model. It is a symbolically pregnant image with a distinctive qualitative feel. The basis of Langer's analysis, I have pointed out, is the insight, or thesis, that an experience, or an affect-laden object of experience, is able to be both itself and what it symbolizes or exemplifies in the mode of resemblance. This is Goethe's *Urbänomen* or originary phenomenon, which for Langer becomes the basis of 'life symbols.' The lower threshold of semiosis, the affective-perceptual-actional field, not only grounds the higher, but it also 'realizes' experience by imposing a schema on the experiential flux that 'fixes' its defining features or form, a process explored by Langer with the help of rich and undervalued materials from the French tradition of philosophical psychology. Hence Langer's aphoristic assertion that "meaning accrues essentially to forms" (PNK 90). Where there is no form there is no meaning in any sense.<sup>14</sup>

In a way, the 'form and meaning' pairing is more primitive for Langer than the 'sign and meaning' pairing. 'Form' is clearly a condition of anything being a sign, which it can be without our necessarily thinking it is one. It has to have, quite generally, a morphological structure. Now, the art image, and not just the art image, what Langer calls a constructed 'semblance' in her great work, *Feeling and Form*, arises out of and transforms experience by a distinctive form of abstraction into the presentational symbols whose very *morphology*, their iconic morphology, lead us to insight into what she calls the 'morphology of feeling.' Presentational abstraction generates the art image (and other presentational forms proper to ritual, sacrament, and mythic symbols) out of the flux of imaginal experience and the image-schemas that support and inform it. It turns experience itself—its objects and patterns of relation—into meaning systems by presenting or constructing material artifacts that are not, and cannot be, described or built up in terms of the salient features of discursive symbols. For Langer, what is defining in a work of art, or aesthetic artifact, is not language-like at all. Language, to be sure, is a complex pattern of internally related, forms. But complex patterns of forms are not languages. Nor, Langer proposes, should we try to force them into such mold. What does join them is the notion of *systems of differences* and the cognate notion of *diacrisis*, that is, the general grasp of pertinences or 'differences that make a difference,' as Gregory Bateson said. But this is not a property of language alone.

For Langer the art work, even the simplest, has a very complex internal structure, but the *elements* out of which it is made are not really individual language-like signifying units nor are they to be identified with *material sensory orders*, as Langer argues against David Prall. The art symbol, Langer writes,

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thickness or density of poetic language or mythic discourse. See on this my "The Making of the Literary Symbol: Taking note of Langer", *Semiotica*, 165-1/4, pp. 91-106, 2007.

- 14 I will treat this theme in another study, 'Langer's French Connection.' But Langer's closeness to and reliance upon the Gestalt tradition can be seen in the following pregnant passage from Wolfgang Köhler's classic *Gestalt Psychology*. New York: New American Library, 1947: "Gestalt psychology holds [that] sensory units have acquired names, have become richly symbolic, and are now known to have certain practical uses, while nevertheless they have existed as units before any of these further facts were added. Gestalt psychology claims that it is precisely the original segregation of circumscribed wholes which makes it possible for the sensory world to appear so utterly imbued with meaning to the adult; for, in the gradual entrance into the sensory field, meaning follows the lines drawn by natural organization; it usually enters into segregated wholes" (p. 82).

[...] cannot be built up like the meaning of a discourse, but must be seen *in toto* first; that is, the 'understanding' of a work of art begins with the intuition of the whole presented feeling. Contemplation then gradually reveals the complexities of the piece, and of its import. In discourse, meaning is synthetically construed by a succession of intuitions; but in art the complex whole is seen or anticipated first. (FF 379).

But the complexity is felt as a kind of semiotic density as opposed to semiotic discreteness, matching the inner nature of the sign-configuration. The import is not 'immediate' in any simple sense. It is rather the felt immediacy of a mediation. We are dealing here, in the case of the art image, with what Peirce called "the emotion of the *tout ensemble*" (CP 1.311), which I have previously referred to. Langer is foregrounding the primacy of a permeating qualitative firstness, something that is never left behind and can never be separated from its symbolic carrier. This is also, quite generally, the ground level of our encounter with the world, a notion that lies at the base of Dewey's reflections on 'qualitative thought.' It is the specific power of human minding, human semiosis, to take this emotion to the thematic or reflective level, which is the symbolic. It involves what Dewey, before Langer, called "going out into symbolization."<sup>15</sup>

The following text explicates, in Langer's terms, a further central feature of this 'going out' and connects it with her theme of different types of abstraction, a concept also discussed by Peirce.

The comprehension of form itself, through its exemplification in formed perceptions or 'intuitions,' is spontaneous and natural *abstraction*; but the recognition of a metaphorical value of some intuitions, which springs from the perception of their forms, is spontaneous and natural *interpretation*. Both abstraction and interpretation are intuitive, and may deal with non-discursive forms. They lie at the base of all human mentality, and are the roots from which both language and art take rise. (FF 378).

Langer's point here, continuing and paralleling the work of Ernst Cassirer, to whom she dedicated *Feeling and Form*, is that each experienced form of experience has an expressive face, a defining quality or feeling tone that is present before a distinct 'object' in the epistemological, or thematizing, sense is grasped and that itself grasps us.<sup>16</sup> Even after the object or thing-meant either referred to or exemplified is grasped

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15 See for an elaboration of this theme my essay, "The 'Quality' of Philosophy: On the aesthetic matrix of Dewey's pragmatism". In HICKMAN, Larry, FLAMM, Matthew, SKOWROŃSKI, Krzysztof, and REA, Jennifer. *The Continuing Relevance of John Dewey*. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2011, pp. 43-59. In this paper I show how in one sense Dewey can be seen as developing out of the seeds of Peirce's notion of quality his own distinctive experience-based account of art and the aesthetic.

16 Speaking of such an experience of a defining quality, whether aesthetic or not, Dewey writes: "Even at the outset, the total and massive quality has its uniqueness; even when vague and undefined, it is just that which it is and not something else. If the perception continues, discrimination inevitably sets in. Attention must move, and, as it moves, parts, members, emerge from the background. And if attention moves in a unified direction

in a sign-configuration, the grasping and the sign-configuration that makes it present and holds it in place has itself a qualitative determination, which Peirce called the material quality of the sign—or sign-configuration. Langer's notion of a morphology and Peirce's notion of a material quality, therefore, belong together in our analytical tool box.

Artworks according to Langer bear “a close logical similarity to the forms of human feeling” (FF 27). Hence, they are icons operating in the aesthetic mode. Art images embody these forms of feeling in all their pluriform variety. They express, or exhibit, forms of subjectivity objectively. Art, as Langer puts it, is the objectification of feeling and the subjectification of nature. Art images make objective the forms in which experienced realities appear and are constructed, without being reducible to what they are ‘about.’ These realities are primarily ‘virtual,’ even if the ‘actual’ in some sense comes to presence in them. This is the motivating impetus of Langer's ‘aesthetic turn’ in semiotics. This notion of a logical similarity, or formal analogy, or congruence of logical structures, is Langer's version of iconicity. Such a similarity is no conventional meaning, even if, clearly, there is still room for conventions in art. The similarity is immanent in experience itself. It is the *import* grasped in the image, which we recognize by hermeneutical acts of explication and unfolding. But the import is presented to vision and all interpretation is in the form of gestures that specify the diacritical features of the meaning-bearing form without being in any way capable of duplicating the import.

In the case of the art image, as opposed to a discursive text, Langer argues, the import is not its theme or motif, which it nevertheless may have. Rather, the symbolic image, projected and constructed, makes it possible not just to perceive the world in objective fashion but what it feels like to feel the world in a specific way and how the world is thereby ‘qualified.’ This is Dewey's “undefined pervasive quality of an experience [...] that which binds together all the defined elements, the objects of which we are focally aware, making them a whole” (*Art as Experience*, p. 198). The symbolic image of art is what Langer, herself influenced as Peirce was by Schiller, a ‘semblance’ that primarily presents not objects but “the forms of things” (FF 51) and the forms of the feelings in which they are presented, and thereby the “ideas of feeling” (FF 59).<sup>17</sup> In the case of the projected image, then, Langer does not value it

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instead of wandering, it is controlled by the pervading qualitative unity; attention is controlled by it because it operates within it,” *Art as Experience*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1987, p. 196 [original publication 1934].

- 17 A much fuller comparison of the aesthetics, whether implied or explicit, of Peirce and Langer would have to engage the role of Schiller. Ivo Ibri is right to emphasize this pivotal connection in the case of Peirce. But the affinities are even more extensive, since the non-discursive nature of art and presentational symbolism quite generally is a central theme of Kantian thought and, it must be admitted, Langer's view of minding and emergence of pregnant symbols in the great process of nature involves the sorts of considerations that are not far from those that occupied Schelling. See especially in this regard Ivo Ibri, ‘Reflections on a Poetic Ground in Peirce's Philosophy,’ *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society* 45.3 (2009), pp. 273-307 and his ‘Peircean Seeds for a Philosophy of Art,’ in HAWORTH, K., HOGUE, J., SBROCCHI, L.G. (eds). *Semiotics Today 2010 “The Semiotics of Space”*. New York: Legas Publishers, 2010, pp. 1-16, also available in Portuguese as

in terms of the image's success in giving an exact rendering of its object. The image need not be a model or diagram or lifelike copy. Langer values the art image rather for its power to exhibit the morphology of feeling, indeed, not to express an actual feeling (FF 59), but the experiential logic of one. Art symbols, Langer asserts, have one unifying feature: in creating a "semblance" they articulate a "vital form within its scaffold" (FF 68). Every symbolic image that is the work of art is a "total form" (FF 369), a "single, indivisible symbol, although a highly articulate one" (FF 369). What it articulates is not just the 'objective' world, but ourselves and the dynamic contours of the access structures to the felt meanings of the forms of the world. This is the double role the art image plays in Langer's work and joins together her semiotics, her aesthetics, and her philosophy of mind.

The general theoretical issue concerning minding as semiosis, the ontological overtones of which Langer as opposed to Peirce does not develop in a systematic way, is of "recognizing vital patterns in pure art which may be keys to essential relations in the life of feeling" (*Mind I*: 69). The artistic image in her conception projects not so much an identifiable 'object,' which it certainly can and does do, as *the form of feeling in which the object is accessed*, but not a definite individual feeling. This projection gives an idea "enhanced perceptibility" (*Mind I*: 75), Jakobson's palpability of the poetic function, and in the process it presents "the morphology of feeling" (*Mind I*: 75), that is, the "logical form" of feeling (*Mind I*: 77).

## V

The 'morphology of feeling' is marked by what Langer calls *gradients*.<sup>18</sup> This notion is of capital importance for a phenomenologically astute semiotic reflection on minding and one of the theoretical payoffs for Langer's divisions of the semiotic continuum. Langer writes: "Gradients of all sorts—of relative clarity, complexity, tempo, intensity of feeling, interest, not to mention geometric gradations (the concept of 'gradient' is a generalization from relations of height)—permeate all artistic structure" (*Mind I*:

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"Sementes Peirceanas para uma Filosofia da Arte", *Cognitio*, 12.2, pp. 205-219, 2011. I have engaged other aspects of Peirce's aesthetics in my "Dimensions of an Aesthetic Encounter: Perception, Interpretation, and the Signs of Art."

18 It is pretty clear how much Langer's love of music informed her conceptual analysis of the morphology of feeling. Musical analogies permeate her work. Langer cites in *Philosophy in a New Key* (p. 226) the following passage from Wolfgang Köhler's *Gestalt Psychology* (pp. 248-249), which has remarkable resonance for her reflections. Köhler writes: "Quite generally the inner processes, whether emotional or intellectual, show types of development which may be given names, usually applied to musical events, such as *crescendo* and *diminuendo*, *accelerando* and *ritardando*. As these qualities occur in the world of acoustic experiences, they are found in the visual world too, and so they can express *similar* dynamic traits of inner life in directly observable activity. [...] To the increasing inner tempo and dynamical level there corresponds a *crescendo* and *accelerando* in visible movement. Of course, the same inner developments may express itself acoustically, as in the *accelerando* and *reforzando* of speech. [...] Hesitation and lack of inner determination become visible [...] as *ritardando* of visible or audible behavior."

211). Indeed, gradients of all sorts “run through every artistic structure and makes its rhythmic quality” (*Mind I*: 212). Note that Dewey thought, in pragmatistic mode, of rhythm as ‘rationality among qualities.’ Indeed, Langer’s notion of ‘phase beauty’ points toward the phenomenon that a work of art is not only a completed significant form, but the *result* of successive phases, something that also has close connections with Schelling and others closer to the great Idealist and Romantic traditions in philosophy and in art. As Langer points out, the significant form appears to have developed and to have retained the phases of its own development, thus being in a kind of ‘motion.’ The sense, Langer claims, is one of ‘virtual’ growth. These characteristics of the art work, or art image, are revelatory of the phasal structures of the subjective life of feeling and of the semiotic processes out of which they emerge and which they exemplify. Langer ascribes to them an almost metaphysical import, although she, unlike Peirce and her teacher Whitehead, backs off from systematic cosmological speculation and a schema of ultimate categories. Nevertheless, in the artwork, Langer says, comes to expression “the all-inclusive ‘greatest rhythm’ of life,” a kind of universal cadential rise and fall, growth and decay, and so forth. In the artwork, she writes, life speaks to life. Langer, paralleling the work of James and Dewey, asserts a “tacit recognition of [...] qualitative continua, which is inherent in human perception itself” and thinks of this as being “the intuitive basis of our concepts of degree” (*Mind I*: 214). Articulation, whether visual, audial, or some other mode, deploys sensory materials by degree and “sensations, like emotions, like living bodies, like articulated forms, have gradients of growth and development” (*Mind I*: 214), a position that borders on Peirce’s reflections on synechism. Langer continues:

The rhythm of acts which characterizes organic forms pervades even the world of color and light, sheer sound, warmth, odor and taste. The implicit existence of gradients in all sensation reinforces our appreciation of living form by giving it an echo or reiteration, in sense, which is always charged with feeling and consequently tends to subjectify the form, to make its import felt yet hold that import to the projective medium. This is probably the greatest single means artists have of ‘animating’ their work. (*Mind I*: 214).

Holding the import to the projective medium is an essential aspect of the material quality of the sign. But it not just the work that is animated. It is us. And our forms of animation are projected in and read off of the symbolic image.

## VI

In conclusion, although Langer’s two-fold division of the continuum of signs—dividing indication from symbolization and discursive symbolism from presentational symbolism—might seem to be quite different from Peirce’s schema, within the conceptual space of these distinctions Langer is able to reconstitute Peirce’s triadic distinctions and other categories in a complementary and insightful way, leading to new emphases and new conceptual tools for modeling in a semiotic way the fundamental processes making up minding. Langer, however, sees no need for an ontological or categorial ground out of which the phases of semiosis arise or to which they correspond, although she resolutely places these phases in a dynamic view of nature in her great trilogy. But more importantly, her reflections on the heuristic

fertility of the art image and of the notion of a morphology of feeling opens up a novel way of thinking about the universe of signs as a vast repertory of icons of mind emerging out of natural processes themselves. And this universe of signs itself emerges out of the vortices of the bottomless lake of consciousness and feeling, both source and outcome of the play of signs that constitute semiosis.

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