

Linking the thought of Susanne Langer with a contemporary psychoanalytic understanding of symbolism including an excursion into the world of primary significant forms

Karl Mätzler

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In her writings, Susanne Langer repeatedly dealt with Freudian psychoanalysis. However, as far as I know, she never discussed its later further developments. This is astonishing insofar as the process of symbolization, at the latest from the 1950s, has played a central role in various movements of contemporary psychoanalysis, both in their fundamental understanding of the psyche and in questions of treatment technique. The post-Kleinian psychoanalysis around Wilfred Bion and Donald Meltzer in Great Britain even demonstrates clear indications of a direct influence of Langer's book "Philosophy in a New Key". In my lecture I connect Langer's concept of symbolic transformation as a fundamental act in the development of the human mind with the contemporary psychoanalytic understanding of the psyche as a "symbol incubator". The question of the beginnings of symbolization arises for both Langer and psychoanalysis. In her later work, Langer formulated the emergence of the symbolic function as a dialectical process between the projection of subjective feeling of physical states of tension onto the outside world and the subjectification of the protosymbolic object thus created. The psychoanalytic concept of "projective identification" deals with the dialectical relationship between the internal and external world in their various stages of development. I would like to show how, above all, the psychoanalytic research into autistic and psychotic personality disorders in children has led to a better understanding of the origins of the symbolic function. The first "primary symbolizations" could hardly be progressively transformed because the ability to symbolize in these children was poorly developed in the first months of life. Rather, they manifest in the form of puzzling fears or ostensibly bizarre behaviours. In the therapeutic treatment of such children, the developmental process of significant symbolic forms can be examined more closely in its earliest stages. This is discussed on the basis of specific case studies.

Karl Mätzler, Ph.D., born in 1958, is a psychoanalyst and photographer who lives in Salzburg. He deals with post-Kleinian psychoanalysis, the philosophy of symbolic forms and questions of image theory. Together with his wife Ruth Mätzler, he has published a series of books on post-Kleinian psychoanalysis, in which key works by Donald Meltzer, Wilfred Bion and Frances Tustin have been translated into German. For two years they have been running the "extrazimmer" gallery, a place for the presentation and discussion of artistic, socio-political and scientific topics. www.maetzler.info