

Notes on Walter Benjamin & Allegory
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"Allegory is in the realm of thought what ruins are in the realm of things."
 -Walter Benjamin

Notes on Walter Benjamin and Allegory

Benjamin's inquiries into allegory had two phases. The first was from his early period and centered on 17th century Baroque; the second was from his later work and culminated in The Arcades Project, which dealt with the allegories of the modern.

The reason to look at Benjamin's ideas about Baroque allegory is for his critique of it and to see how he differentiated it from later Modern allegory. I'm going to start with a quote from Susan Buck-Morss in her study of The Arcades Project, The Dialectics of Seeing:

"The Baroque poets saw in transitory nature an allegory for human history, in which the latter appeared, not as divine plan or chain of events on a 'road to salvation,' but as death, ruin, catastrophe; and it was this essentially philosophical attitude that gave allegory a claim beyond mere aesthetic device. The forsakenness of nature, understood as a theological truth, was a source of the melancholy of the allegorists. "The steadfastness which expresses itself in the intention of mourning is born out of loyalty to the world of things." But it is a world of 'dead objects', a realm of 'infinite hopelessness.' In it, political action is judged as mere arbitrary intrigue."

It's this last statement that's most important for our purposes because it describes allegory as a mode of contemplation and not one of action (activism). "In it political action is judged as merely arbitrary." This is a system of thought and of allegorical representation that allows hell to exist here on earth. It accomplishes this by presenting evil as allegory, nothing more, in order to illustrate the glory of redemption that is possible in the future. Evil, exists only in relation to spirituality—to redemption. Benjamin's critique of Baroque allegory is that it is not an allegory of the here and now. Again quoting Buck-morss "...allegory deserts both history and nature and (like the whole tradition of idealist philosophy that comes after it), takes refuge in the spirit." In other words, Baroque allegory removes evil from the world by portraying it as allegory: as not real. Another quote—this time from Benjamin: "Evil as such—exists only in allegory, is nothing other than allegory, and means something other than it is. It means in fact precisely the nonexistence of what it presents. The absolute vices, as exemplified by tyrants and intriguers are allegories. They are not real [...]." In order to remain true to their god, the Baroque allegorist was forced to turn his back on the world, rejecting both nature and politics.

In his study of the Baroque it is precisely this passivity and rejection of a dialectic or activist position that Benjamin laments in 17th century German allegory. He sees it as a missed opportunity. Benjamin says: "[allegory in the name of redemption] loses everything that was most its own." Quoting from a text of 1652 he writes, "Weeping, we

scattered seed on the fallow ground, and sadly we went away." He comments, "Allegory went away empty-handed." "When the allegorist declares evil as 'self-delusion' and material nature as 'not real', then for all practical purposes allegory becomes indistinguishable from myth." Allegory, therefore, is not an interpretive system of representation but is, instead, an ontological dead end. It was this problem with Baroque allegory (its other worldiness) that brought Benjamin to study the 'commodity allegories' of 19th century Paris, which he found so clearly articulated in the work of Charles Baudelaire.

The *Arcades Project* comes to us today as a massive collection of notes on 19th century industrial culture in Paris. One of its major interests to artists is its methodology which is fragmentary, collaged, aphoristic, and imagist. It is, in short, a philosophical project whose structure is allegorical. Benjamin's interest in Baudelaire had to do with the way the poet collected the scraps of his time as a means of constructing allegories of the Modern: "in order to express the universal, human problem of evil within the changed context of Modern Life." Benjamin saw in his allegorical process a dialectic that was transformable, not only in the sense of transforming life into art but in transforming art back into life.

In his earlier study of the Baroque, Benjamin had said that allegory comes to prominence at times of great social upheaval and disintegration. One of the things that had attracted him to an analysis of the allegory of Baudelaire was that his was constructed not during a period of disintegration but at a time of apparent optimism and progress. It was the era of the first department stores, the grand boulevards of Hausmann's Paris, the invention of architectural steel: a time of magnificent material and industrial progress. But, for Baudelaire, this splendor was vacuous and even worse, destructive, and it became the source for his allegories of destruction, melancholy, and despair. He was responding to the change-as-progress of the urban phantasmagoria, which he exposed as being mythological and empty. His method was to take the symbols of mythology (the swan for example – images from antiquity) and use them, not to enhance commodity myths (Marx's term) but to undermine them. The myths that are being undermined are those of progress, of materialism, and of the commodity. Benjamin saw in this method a way to revitalize allegory. In the hands of Baudelaire, allegory was a social weapon carried in an aesthetic sheath. It expressed the hollowing out of the commodity: the commodity as shell and its myth as delusion. "The allegories [in Baudelaire's poems] stand for what the commodity has made out of the experiences that people in this century have had." (Benjamin) Which is more commodity.

Adromache, I think of you! The stream,
 The poor, sad mirror where in bygone days
 Shone all the majesty of your widowed grief,
 The lying Simois flooded by your tears,
 Made all my fertile memory blossom forth
 As I passed by the new-built Carrousel.
 Old Paris is no more (a town, alas,

Changes more quickly than man's heart may change);
 Yet in my mind I still can see the booths;
 The heaps of brick and rough-hewn capitals;
 The grass; the stones all over-green with moss;
 The débris, and the square-set heaps of tiles.

There a menagerie was once outspread;
 And there I saw, one morning at the hour
 When toil awakes beneath the cold, clear sky,
 And the road roars upon the silent air,
 A swan who had escaped his cage, and walked
 On the dry pavement with his webby feet,
 And trailed his spotless plumage on the ground.
 And near a waterless stream the piteous swan
 Opened his beak, and bathing in the dust
 His nervous wings, he cried (his heart the while
 Filled with a vision of his own fair lake):
 "O water, when then wilt thou come in rain?
 Lightning, when wilt thou glitter?"

Sometimes yet
 I see the hapless bird -- strange, fatal myth--
 Like him that Ovid writes of, lifting up
 Unto the cruelly blue, ironic heavens,
 With stretched, convulsive neck a thirsty face,
 As though he sent reproaches up to God!

II.

Paris may change; my melancholy is fixed.
 New palaces, and scaffoldings, and blocks,
 And suburbs old, are symbols all to me
 Whose memories are as heavy as a stone.
 And so, before the Louvre, to vex my soul,
 The image came of my majestic swan
 With his mad gestures, foolish and sublime,
 As of an exile whom one great desire
 Gnaws with no truce. And then I thought of you,
 Andromache! torn from your hero's arms;
 Beneath the hand of Pyrrhus in his pride;
 Bent o'er an empty tomb in ecstasy;
 Widow of Hector -- wife of Helenus!
 And of the negress, wan and phthisical,
 Tramping the mud, and with her haggard eyes
 Seeking beyond the mighty walls of fog
 The absent palm-trees of proud Africa;

Of all who lose that which they never find;
 Of all who drink of tears; all whom grey grief
 Gives suck to as the kindly wolf gave suck;
 Of meagre orphans who like blossoms fade.
 And one old Memory like a crying horn
 Sounds through the forest where my soul is lost . . .
 I think of sailors on some isle forgotten;
 Of captives; vanquished . . . and of many more.
 -Charles Baudelaire, *The Swan*

Now I want to talk little bit about the commodity, at least as it relates to Benjamin and his interest in the commodity as a vehicle for allegory. I quote Benjamin quoting Marx: "With its price tag the commodity enters the market. If its substantive quality and individuality create the incentive to buy, for the social evaluation of its worth this is totally unimportant. The commodity has become an abstraction. Once it has escaped from the hand of its producers and is freed from its real particularity, it has ceased to be a product controlled by human beings. It has taken on 'phantom-like objectivity,' and leads its own life. A commodity appears at first glance a self-sufficient, trivial thing. Its analysis shows that it is a bewildering thing, full of metaphysical subtleties and theological capers." I quote Buck-morss: "[I]f the social value (hence the meaning) of commodities is their price, this does not prevent them from being appropriated by consumers as wish images within the emblem books of their private dream world." For this to occur, estrangement of the commodities from their initial meaning as use-values produced by human labor is in fact a prerequisite. It is after all the nature of the allegorical object that once the initial hollowing out of meaning has occurred a new signification has been arbitrarily inserted into it, this meaning "can at any time be removed in favor of any other." Adorno described the process this way: "[...T]he alienated objects become hollowed out and draw meanings as ciphers. Subjectivity takes control of them by loading them with intentions of wish and anxiety" –Benjamin added: "To these thoughts it should be noted that in the nineteenth century the number of 'hollowed-out objects' increases in a mass tempo previously unknown." My addendum: It would not be an exaggeration to say that the hollowing out of the 19th century seems at a snail's pace when seen in the light of our own time.

The Allegorical Impulse In Our Own Time

The importance of allegory for us lies in its understanding of and ability to decipher cultural/historical myths. For the contemporary artist, allegory can be a way of turning commodity culture inside out, in the same way that Baudelarian allegories exposed the emptiness of the dream image by exposing the myth of the commodity phantasmagoria.

Could there be two phases to this activist or dialectic process: a phase one that exposes the emptied dream and a phase two that replaces the emptied dream with a new one? Is there an allegorical poetics that can accomplish this? Or are the only dreams left to us commodified dreams?

As a way of responding to this question I am going to proceed by responding to some comments made by Craig Owens in his essay "The Allegorical Impulse"

"Allegory is an attitude as well as a technique, a perception as well as a procedure. It occurs wherever one text is doubled by another. One text is read through another. The paradigm for the allegorical work is the palimpsest."

My response: the world can be turned into a text, or, more accurately, into a series of texts, which exist one on top of the other. Each text may allow an independent reading, but the most dynamic and relevant readings occur where the texts overlap and intersect. This reveals the spaces in-between. It is where the most ephemeral meanings can be found. It is the domain of interpretation, dialecticism, and poetry.

"Allegorical imagery is appropriated imagery; the allegorist does not invent images but confiscates them. He lays claim to the culturally significant, poses as its interpreter. And in his hands the image becomes something other. He does not restore an original meaning that may have been lost or obscured; allegory is not hermeneutics. Rather he adds another meaning to an image. If he adds, however, he does so only to replace: the allegorical meaning supplants an antecedent one; it is a supplement."

My response: Confiscation or appropriation are not, in themselves, adequate. Particularly when those techniques can be quickly dismissed as nothing more than style. Appropriation must include a dialectic allegoricism that allows interpretation.

"Allegory is consistently attracted to the fragmentary, the imperfect, the incomplete."

My response: Allegory often conflates the visual and the verbal. By turning images into language (interpretation) and by turning language into images (advertising).

"Allegory is synthetic and crosses aesthetic and material boundaries as well as stylistic categories: Appropriation, site-specificity, impermanence, accumulation, discursivity, hybridization—these diverse strategies characterize much of the art of the present and distinguish it from its modernist predecessors.

My response: Allegory is a way to proceed because it recognizes the intolerable confusion of signs and the resulting shifts of meaning that permeate our lives.

"It is, of course, in allegory that 'one and the same object can as easily signify a virtue as a vice and this forever problematizes the activity of reading which must forever remain suspended in its own uncertainty."

My response: An allegorical process recognizes uncertainty and, instead of being alarmed by it, embraces it and makes it substantial.

Allegory is the act of recognizing and embracing the space in between: emptiness, borders, margins, detritus. It is this process which allows the dream beyond the commodity to be constructed.

Cultural artifacts become fragments that can be arranged into countless texts. Allegory is the means by which the text is reordered (or disordered). The new reading of the disordered text becomes the act of interpretation: the point where new meanings are

assigned. It was Duchamp who introduced this discursive process into the visual arts. In the Readymades, for example, art is transformed from visual to textual. From history to discourse. From impersonal third person narrative to direct address. One confronts in Duchamp and in much contemporary work what Rosalind Krauss describes as "[a] tremendous arbitrariness with regard to meaning, a breakdown of...the linguistic sign." The spectator becomes reader of what Duchamp called, "the allegorical appearance of objects."

A quote from Robert Smithson:

"The names of minerals and the minerals themselves do not differ from each other, because at the bottom of both the material and the print is the beginning of an abysmal number of fissures. Words and rocks contain a language that follows a syntax of splits and ruptures. Look at any word long enough and you will see it open up into a series of faults, into a terrain of particles each containing its own void."