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Melancholy and Allegory in Marcel Broodthaers' *La Pluie (projet pour un texte)*

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Abstract

Drawing on Jacques Derrida's notion of the two interpretations of interpretation in *Writing and Difference*, this paper proposes an allegorical or 'poetical' reading of Marcel Broodthaers' two-minute film of 1969, *La Pluie (projet pour un texte)*. Using the respective examples of Erwin Panofsky and Walter Benjamin's interpretations of Albrecht Dürer's 1514 engraving *Melencolia I*, I argue that although both approaches serve to illuminate Broodthaers' film, the ambiguity and richness of signification found in the work are best captured by Benjamin's allegorical method.

More than cinema, the new techniques of the image (laser?) offer the way to a solution that is, I fear, momentous, if certainly interesting.

But you need to be born to a technological world to use this kind of resource successfully. And here I am cruelly torn between something immobile that has already been written and the comic movement that animates 24 images per second.¹

Marcel Broodthaers

More than thirty years after his premature death, the enigmatic figure of Marcel Broodthaers, who made his brief appearance on the stage of the European visual art scene between the mid 1960s and the mid 1970s, remains relatively neglected and under-researched. This neglect is nowhere more apparent than in the study of his cinematic production.² The reasons for this are plentiful: some of the films have been lost or destroyed; others have aged badly and are now in a state of deterioration awaiting careful restoration; many of them were originally screened as components of larger, often ephemeral, installations which are difficult to replicate. While Bruce Jenkins and a small handful of other theorists have written highly illuminating accounts of Broodthaers' general cinematic output, detailed studies of individual films are few and far between.

The following essay aims to rectify this situation through a sustained analysis of *La Pluie (projet pour un texte)* (figs 1 and 2), a short film created by Broodthaers in Brussels in 1969.

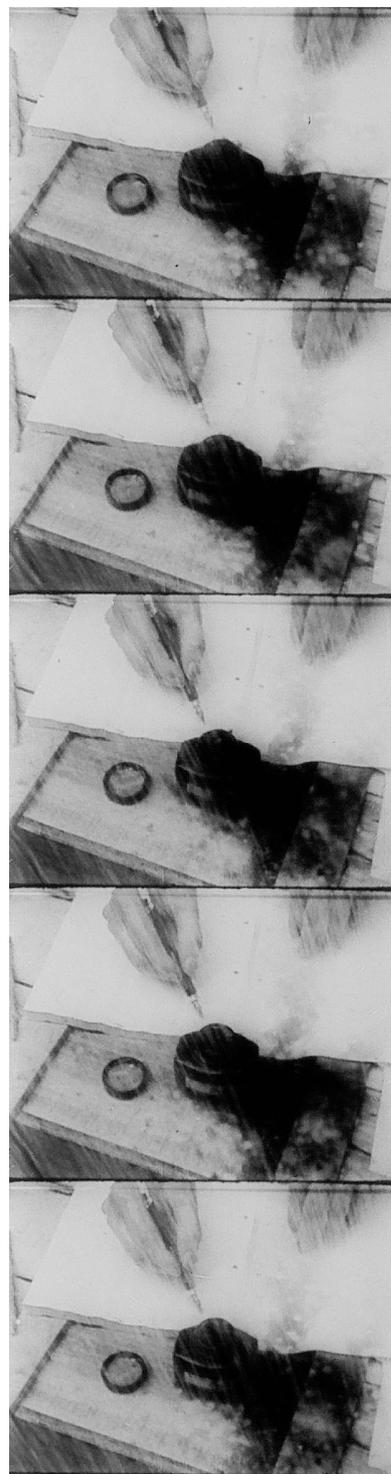
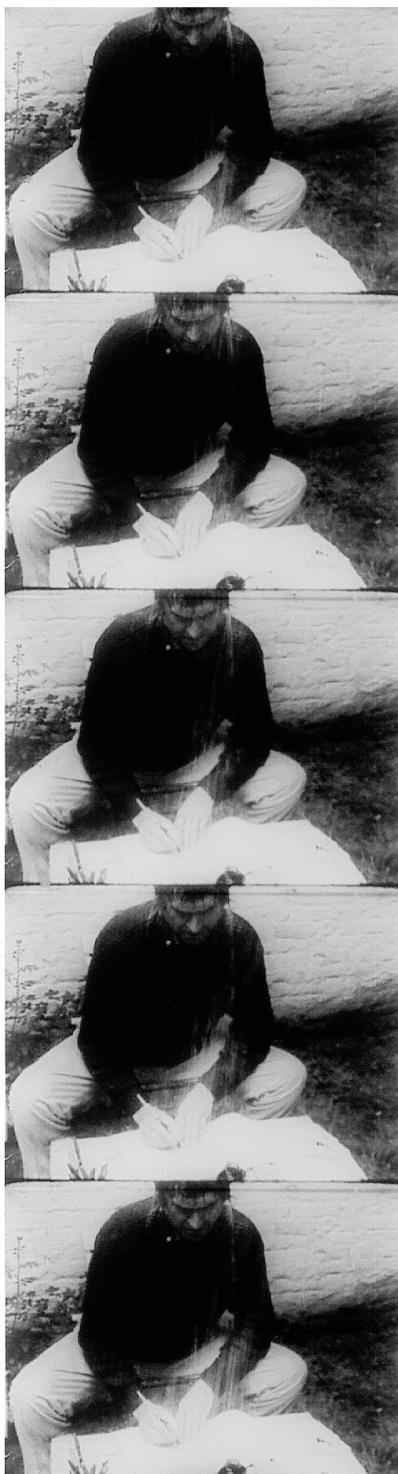
In this paper I argue for an allegorical reading of *La Pluie*. I begin my analysis of the film by drawing on Erwin Panofsky's writing on melancholy in his discussion of Albrecht Dürer's allegorical engraving *Melencolia I* of 1514. I contend that although Panofsky's iconographical method proves fruitful to an examination of *La Pluie*, this approach is limited insofar as it seeks to subsume allegorical fragments within a unifying system, thereby taming the esoteric play of signification that is inherent to the film. Rather than abandon this approach entirely, however, I contend that a fuller picture of *La Pluie*, in all of its iconographical and conceptual richness, can be obtained through supplementing this iconographical account of melancholy with that of Walter Benjamin. Specifically, it will be shown that Broodthaers' performance in *La Pluie* mirrors Benjamin's figure of the melancholy allegorist in *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*. In this respect, I shall emphasise Broodthaers' affinities with the thought of Benjamin through a comparative reading of the artist's *Projet pour un texte* from 1969-1970, a written work that is contemporaneous with *La Pluie* and is directly related to the film.³ Finally, the film will be placed in the greater context of more recent art historical writing on allegory and postmodernism. For although Benjamin's notion of allegory as a critical method has most strikingly been read into the work of the Pictures group of artists that are the focus of Craig Owens' two part essay 'The Allegorical Impulse,' both Owens and many of the artists he discusses within this framework tend to overlook the melancholy and the ambivalence which underlie both the writing of Benjamin and the artistic production of Broodthaers.

Created under the aegis of the Nineteenth Century Section of Broodthaers' larger project, the fictive Museum of Modern Art, Department of Eagles, *La Pluie* is a two minute 16mm black and white film shot in the artist's back yard on rue de la Pépinière, the same location he had used to inaugurate the opening of his fictive museum two years previously.⁴ The film opens onto a view of the artist sitting in front of a white-washed brick wall, his white trousers against the

dark ground of the earth, his black shirt silhouetted against the white wall behind him on which the words *Département des Aigles* are boldly stencilled in black letters. Multiple cuts intersperse the footage as the camera's point of view shifts from straight on head shots to shots taken from over Broodthaers' shoulder, to overhead shots, and back again. Sitting on a garden chair that seems incongruously small for his large frame, the artist holds an unravelled scroll of paper open on top of a wooden crate which functions as a writing surface and also recalls, as we shall see, an allegorical fragment of his larger project: his museum of modern art. As he dips an old fashioned stylus into the inkwell in front of him and begins to write in long, cursive strokes, it begins to rain. The water, produced artificially by means of a watering can, washes away the ink before it has dried, forming abstract black pools across the paper as the artist continues to write in earnest, pausing only for a moment to lean back and study his work *as though he was a painter*.⁵ As the rain gathers momentum and the film draws to an end, Broodthaers appears to sign the text before laying down his stylus. His initials linger on the paper while the words "*projet pour un texte*" are seen, superimposed in black type, over a shot of his abandoned writing instrument lying on the watery surface of the page.

How is one to interpret this melancholy sequence of images? As a representation of frustrated creative genius? As Broodthaers' critical meta-commentary on the appropriation of heterogeneous mediums in the period of the 1960s and the consequent blurring of their boundaries? As neo-surrealist *blague*, as suggested by Benjamin Buchloch?⁶ In attempting a reading of the work, it quickly becomes apparent that there is no single, overriding message to be found. Rather, as I shall show, the question becomes one of interpretation.

The polysemic title of the work, *La Pluie (projet pour un texte)*, sets the tone for what is to come: a conflation of text and object, of film and painting, of competing systems of representation all carried out in the guise of a simple, amateur film. 'To project' connotes the visual image, or, more precisely, the moving images of cinema; projection is also a psychoanalytic term. Finally, 'project' can also be taken to signify a task. The artist sets himself a Sisyphean task which in its very formulation sets itself up for repetitive failure.



Figs 1 and 2: Marcel Broodthaers, *La Pluie (Project pour un texte)*, 1969, 16mm film.
Courtesy SMAK, the Municipal Museum of Contemporary Art, Ghent.

Jacques Derrida, in his essay 'Edmund Jabès and the Question of the Book,' writes that there are two interpretations of interpretation: the first he designates as the 'rabbinical' interpretation of interpretation and links with the Jewish culture of the book, while the second type he calls 'poetical.'⁷ 'The rabbinical interpretation is that interpretation which seeks a final truth, which treats interpretation as an unfortunately necessary road back to an original truth...,' while the poetical interpretation of interpretation 'does not seek truth or origin, but affirms the play of interpretation.'⁸ Where the first mode of interpretation seeks to consolidate the various significations found in a text within an absolute, theological totality, the second, open-ended reading is allegorical insofar as it allows for a play of signs, for a reading that is generative.

In art historical terms, these two interpretations of interpretation are best exemplified in Erwin Panofsky's and Walter Benjamin's respective readings of an earlier image of melancholy – that of Albrecht Dürer's engraving *Melencolia I* of 1514.⁹ Although space precludes a more robust examination of these two approaches, it may be said that Panofsky's interpretation is aligned with the rabbinical interpretation of interpretation, while Benjamin's is much closer to Derrida's poetical or allegorical interpretation of interpretation. Panofsky's iconographical approach involves a detailed reading of the objects that proliferate around Dürer's winged figure of Melancholy, tracing the historical shifts in signification of each, and, finally, subsuming all of these elements under the totalising image of a self portrait of the artist as a frustrated creative genius.¹⁰ In spite of the richness of his analysis, Panofsky subsumes the objects depicted in the print under two motifs, respectively those of geometry and humanism, before going on to subsume both under the larger notion of '*Melancholia Artificialis*' or 'Artist's Melancholy,' which is epitomised in the image of the artist as a melancholy frustrated genius.¹¹

Applied to *La Pluie*, Panofsky's iconographical method leads one to a similar conclusion: Broodthaers, who, from all accounts had not garnered a great deal of success during his career as a poet, turns to visual art and becomes a plastic artist only to reabsorb the written word within his visual works, thereby blurring the line between object and text on the one hand and form and content on the

other.¹² In lieu of this it should be noted that Broodthaers' first work as a visual artist, *Pense-Bête* of 1964, consisted of the remains of a published edition of his own poetry encased in plaster, never to be opened again. Seen in this way, *La Pluie* becomes an allegory for Broodthaers' frustration as a failed poet and his subsequent success within the visual arts; ultimately, the work appears as self-portraiture.

Although there is certainly some truth to this reading, it hardly sheds light on the wider art historical issues with which Broodthaers was engaged at the time and which are brought to the fore in *La Pluie*.¹³ Finally, although Broodthaers' large frame, his intent gaze, the ceaseless rain, and the black and white film all underscore the motif of melancholy, his endless activity differentiates him from Dürer's winged figure, which sits motionless, as if frozen in thought. In this respect, his endless scribbling bears a closer resemblance to that of the little winged cherub in *Melencolia I* described by Panofsky as an 'ignorant infant, making meaningless scrawls on his slate and almost conveying the impression of blindness, [typifying] Practical Skill which acts but cannot think...'¹⁴ Thus, in a single gesture, Broodthaers' melancholy poet presents himself as both a fool and a genius.

While both Benjamin and Panofsky viewed the objects in Dürer's engraving as allegorical, Benjamin's reading, unlike that of Panofsky, was itself allegorical. In contrast to Panofsky's objective and totalising iconological analysis of Dürer's work, Benjamin's own reading is allegorical and performative insofar as he reads each object as a fragment with multiple associations of its own, yet he leaves them as fragments instead of inserting them into a greater, totalising narrative.¹⁵ This lack of a unified framework in which to insert signifying fragments sets the melancholy allegorist up for failure yet also serves as the very ground for the play of interpretation. For Benjamin, then, the melancholy state is itself allegorical. Melancholy, he writes, 'betrays the world for the sake of knowledge. But in its tenacious self-absorption it embraces dead objects in its contemplation, in order to redeem them.'¹⁶ The melancholic exists in a state of hypersubjectivity, acutely aware of the dead objects around him.¹⁷ Torn from the

familiar constellations or signifying chains that once bound them together into a coherent whole, to the melancholy eye these ruined objects appear strange.¹⁸

The figure of melancholy is caught between inaction, paralysis – an inability to do anything – and the slow process of active interpretation, highlighting the performative aspect of reading, what Benjamin called ‘the very difficulty, the ambiguities, the piece-by-piece accumulation of meanings, [which] are intrinsic to the form of the allegory.’¹⁹ In his attempt to decipher the fragments, the melancholic reconfigures them in multiple ways only to find that with each new configuration there remains an excess. Likewise, with each new re-inscription, something is lost. Consequently, this rebus or puzzle complicates reading in the very act of inscription while simultaneously providing its foundation. This problem of inscription and erasure is expressed poetically in *La Pluie* in the moment at which the rain obliterates Broodthaers’ writing. While Broodthaers’ figure, in the guise of a melancholy poet, grapples with the act of inscription, the onus is on the viewer to try to decipher the text, to locate meaning within the minimal marks and gestures the artist puts forward. As Iversen has pointed out *vis-à-vis* Benjamin’s allegorical reading of the Dürer image:

[T]he task of interpretation is less a matter of deciphering the meaning of a text and more like an encounter with an enigmatic object that brings us up against the limits of interpretation. If the viewer of Dürer’s print does not experience this moment of dejected frustration, it seems fair to say that he or she has failed to encounter it as a work of art.²⁰

Broodthaers confirms this in an interview with the film journal *Trépied*. Speaking of his film *Le Corbeau et le Renard* – and this statement can be generalised to encompass much of his work – Broodthaers says, ‘My film is a rebus, something you have to want to figure out. It’s a reading exercise.’²¹ Seen through a Benjaminian perspective *La Pluie* takes on a very different meaning from that of Panofsky’s and extends far beyond self-portraiture and biography to engage with both art historical and contemporary art-related discourses, as well as with social and political questions raised by, for example, the rise of

technology in capitalist culture. All of these, as we shall see, were central themes in both Benjamin's and Broodthaers' production. To begin with, one may look at the play between image and text and content and form which figures so prominently within Broodthaers' practice with reference to Benjamin's concept of language after the Fall. In the text 'On Language as Such and on Human Language,' Benjamin argues that before the Fall and Adam's consequent exile from the Garden of Eden, nothing stood between word and object, name and named.²² Language was unmediated and immediate until the Fall and the beginning of human suffering, when language lost its immediacy and became fragmented. Replaced by multiplicity and ambiguity, language lost forever the ability to name. As with Derrida's poetical interpretation of interpretation, language became allegorical.²³

In *La Pluie* meaning cannot be stabilised; language dissolves into ephemeral fragments. It cannot keep up the activity of naming and inscription for erasure always overtakes it. Apropos of this constant activity of inscription and erasure, Benjamin Buchloch has drawn an interesting parallel between the earlier, surrealist practice known as *blague* and Broodthaers' use of text. Broodthaers' response to the institutional, artistic, and political discourses that were current during his lifetime (and many of which continue to be relevant today) often took on the form of a negation of language through the evacuation of meaning. In the case of *La Pluie*, there is only a minimal amount of text: 'Department des Aigles,' the artist's initials, and the words 'projet pour un texte.' As in many of his other works, Broodthaers emphasises the formal elements of text – its typography, colours, and placement – while its signification is rendered ambiguous. Yet, I would argue that there is more to *La Pluie* than a negation of meaning. Instead of the nihilism of a total evacuation of meaning, a complicated dialectic emerges, one that also preoccupied Benjamin in his study of the German Baroque *Trauerspiel*. In this text Benjamin locates a dialectic between the written word and the visual image, between content and form and between convention and expression that lies at the heart of allegory.²⁴ Benjamin is quick to point out that allegory tends toward the visual while 'at one stroke [it] transforms things and works into stirring writing.'²⁵ Through this insight he discovers 'a deep-rooted intuition of the problematic character of art' at the

heart of the *Trauerspiel*.²⁶ Likewise, Broodthaers proclaimed Mallarmé, an earlier experimenter with the formal aspects of text, to be the originator of contemporary art, while his admiration for the older Belgian artist René Magritte is well known. He described his own work as emerging from ‘a contradiction between René Magritte and Marcel Duchamp, through the contradiction of two contradictions, respectively “this is not a pipe” and “this is a work of art”.’²⁷ In *La Pluie*, Broodthaers emphasises this dialectical tension between the visual and the textual while accentuating the instability of both representational systems.

In *La Pluie* meaning persists even after the rain has dispersed the writing on the page. The text goes from being illegible but nonetheless recognisable as text to being completely abstract yet recognisable as form. The dark swirls of ink that pool and bleed across the paper’s surface do not cease to signify. Instead, they now appear as painting, specifically as abstract expressionism, with which Broodthaers would have been familiar enough even to have written a brief article on an exhibition of Mark Rothko’s in a 1962 issue of the *Journal des Beaux-Arts*. Torn between the written word and the visual object, Broodthaers’ work embodies the deep ambiguity between text and image at the heart of Benjamin’s conception of allegory.

An undated written work by the artist entitled *Projet pour un texte*, from approximately 1969-1970, sheds further light on *La Pluie*. This text, I believe, also serves to highlight several concerns the artist shared with Benjamin. Since space precludes a complete examination of it, I will discuss only those points that are most relevant to this analysis. Broodthaers’ begins with a phrase borrowed from Baudelaire, a favourite reference of his and a central figure of interest in the writing of Benjamin as well. Broodthaers writes:

I hate the movement that shifts the lines –
If I make a film, for a cinema still defined as a discipline of movement, I
have to repeat the lines by
Baudelaire, unless I...

1. ... don't make a film and at the same time accept the value of blank film, the filmmaker's white page and pray that others will make it.
2. ... make a film at the expense of hatred. A love story for example. That is very appealing but runs the risk of flying the flag for many a commodity, -- advertising films, propaganda films, pornographic films, banned films.
3. ... set aside the problems of the specific language of cinema by considering the film as a simple reference to some abstraction. Thus in certain kinds of conceptual Art, the film is often a banal intermediary in which the idea plays the main role of subject. But is not the subject diminished by this flatness in the style of transmission, if not absorbed and relegated to a documentary on received ideas that is sometimes original?²⁸

Echoing Benjamin's earlier sentiment from 'The Work of Art in the Age of Its Mechanical Reproducibility,' Broodthaers proposes that, 'more than cinema, the new techniques of the image (laser?) offer the way to a solution that is, I fear, momentous, if certainly interesting.'²⁹ He ends on a melancholy note, adding:

But you need to be born to a technological world to use this kind of resource successfully. And here I am cruelly torn between something immobile that has already been written and the comic movement that animates 24 images per second.³⁰

A number of Broodthaers' concerns are revealed in this text. In the first place, his appropriated phrase from Baudelaire, 'I hate the movement that shifts the lines,' suggests the inventions of both moveable type and film, something that he would realise literally in *La Pluie* by making the text move across the surface of the paper. For Benjamin and Broodthaers the figure of Baudelaire and the historical period that he occupied was of was central interest. In the winter of 1969-70 Broodthaers had participated in a seminar on Baudelaire conducted by the sociologist of literature Lucien Goldmann. The event had a profound impact

on him, a fact he would emphasise in his last interview, published in the journal *+ - 0* in February 1976, the year of his death.³¹

Broodthaers' interest in technological development and in the process of modernisation also finds clear affinities with Benjamin, who, in his *Work of Art* essay saw in the medium of cinema both a potentially revolutionary tool against capitalist oppression as well as a weapon that could be used to lull the masses into inaction. Crucially, however, both men linked allegory to the mass production of merchandise in capitalist culture. In 'Central Park,' Benjamin writes that, in modernity, 'allegorical emblems return as commodities,' while Broodthaers created an entire oeuvre composed of allegorical fragments to be recycled and recombined in a wide variety of configurations, the most obvious example of which was the recurrent figure of the eagle. Writing about a series of his works known as 'industrial poems,' the artist explains that,

They are intended to be read on a double level – each one involved in a negative attitude which seems to me specific to the stance of the artist: not to place the message completely on one side alone, neither image nor text. That is, the refusal to deliver a clear message – as if this role were not incumbent upon the artist, and by extension upon all producers with an economic interest.³²

In *La Pluie*, the permanent, stencilled letters announcing "Department of Eagles" on the wall behind the artist are set in contrast to the ephemeral, longhand in which the artist writes with his stylus, and which seems to suggest a time in an earlier stage of technological development. Throughout his artistic production Broodthaers consistently employed outmoded technologies. In part this may have been a consequence of his relative lack of technical skills; largely, however, it seems to have been intentional. This trope of temporal splitting is a recurrent strategy in the artist's oeuvre and one that he would continue to employ right up until his last major work, the 1975 *Décor. A Conquest by Marcel Broodthaers* at the ICA in London, which was split into two rooms: a nineteenth century room and a twentieth century room. Likewise, the sections of his fictional museum were also demarcated by century. Yet they did

not obey the normative systems of categorisation generally found in museums: his Cinema Section formed a part of the Nineteenth Century section of his Museum of Modern Art, paradoxically, a time before the invention of film. This trope is also apparent in *La Pluie*, which is construed as a silent film but created at a time during which video was already beginning to displace 16mm film. While early silent film has its origins in the late 1800s, it was only at the turn of the century that it captured the popular imagination. In an unpublished note to *Un film de Charles Baudelaire*, Broodthaers writes:

Un film de Charles Baudelaire is not a film for cinephiles. Why not? Because it was shot in the nineteenth century. And because the cinephiles have never seen reels dating from a time when Muybridge, the Lumière brothers and Edison were still unborn or were taking their first steps under the watchful eyes of their industrialist mamas and papas.³³

The first point Broodthaers makes in *Projet pour un texte*, concerning accepting the value of blank film as such and hoping somebody else makes it, addresses issues surrounding both the materiality of film as well as of authorship. In *La Pluie* the artist's signature lingers miraculously on the paper as the rest of his writing dissipates. The question of authorship is evoked not only by this lingering signifier but also by the fact that Broodthaers poses as someone other than himself, as a poet of an earlier time – an amalgamation of the figures of Baudelaire, Mallarmé and the comic Buster Keaton – while the performance itself is filmed by another person, a collaborator who also contributes to the authorship of the film.³⁴ Playing upon the concept of authorship, he was to create many variations on the motif of the signature, including *Une Seconde d'Eternité* of 1970, a film depicting the rapid composition and subsequent decomposition of his initials. In these works, as in *La Pluie*, when Broodthaers engages with the concept of authorship by deploying his signature, he does so allegorically by treating it as a signifier of exchange among other commodities circulating in the economic system. This connection between the commodity and artistic production is made even more explicit in a series of gold ingots Broodthaers produced under the auspices of his Museum of Modern Art,

Department of Eagles, Finance Section of 1970-1971. In this case he stamped the gold bars with the emblem of the eagle, a symbol that had by then become his logo or alternative signature.

The third point of *Projet pour un texte* deals directly with another central debate within the artistic and theoretical practices of the time. Within the context of the 1960s, the use of text in contemporary art was often a response to the reification and commodification of the art object and its reproducibility was seen as more democratic. For Broodthaers, this was not the case. In his text of 1975, 'To be *bien pensant*...or not to be. To be blind,' he writes:

I do not believe it is legitimate to seriously define Art other than in the light of one constant factor – namely the transformation of Art into merchandise. In our time this process has accelerated to the point at which artistic and commercial values are superimposed.³⁵

Linked to this idea of democracy, a number of Broodthaers' peers, notably those affiliated with the Fluxus movement as well as other conceptual artists such as Joseph Kosuth, tended to treat text as a transparent vessel for the communication of an idea.³⁶ Broodthaers, on the other hand, was suspicious of both the so-called transparency of text as well as that of the idea. Emerging onto the visual arts scene as a marginalised symbolist poet with an especial affinity for Mallarmé, Broodthaers was well aware of the ambiguities of language in terms of the signifier's relationship to its signified. Broodthaers recognised that language itself is inherently allegorical and he announced his intention 'to introduce and establish falsehoods in (artistic) reality.'³⁷ Thus in *La Pluie* neither text nor image are seen as transparent vessels for the communication of the Idea. Recalling that the blurring of the ink upon the page produces another implicit critique – that of American abstract expressionism and European geometric abstraction – it is clear that the artist creates intricate layers of meaning that are not to be easily untangled by the viewer.

Taken together, then, the points comprising *Projet pour un texte* would appear to make it difficult, if not impossible, to make any sort of film at all. Yet

Broodthaers resolves this problematic in *La Pluie*. Despite the imposition of rules, he succeeds in producing a film that is at once critical and poignant, a film in which the artist cameos as another, a film without a clear author or clear message, a film that directly addresses both the effort involved in reading, of navigating the slippery trajectories of language, as well as of writing. In the film the artist succeeds in putting aside the “specific language” of cinema by paradoxically revealing the difficulties, the ambiguities at the heart of language itself.

In engaging with the complex issue of language, Broodthaers’ critical viewpoint was indebted to both structuralist and psychoanalytic theory, especially as it was articulated by Roland Barthes, Michel Foucault, and Jacques Lacan.³⁸ Consequently, Broodthaers was sharply aware of the formative function of language on and through discourse and vice versa. In contrast to many of his contemporaries was the fact that, with only one exception, he used film as opposed to the new medium of video.³⁹ *La Pluie*, like many of his other cinematic productions, appears grainy, recalling the early films of the Lumière brothers, of Georges Méliès, and of the comics Charlie Chaplin and Buster Keaton. In comparison with many of his peers, who had by then widely embraced the medium of video, Broodthaers’ antiquated tools and melancholic stance appear anachronistic. As Eric De Bruyn has noted, Broodthaers’ film,

remained wrapped in the contradiction between a static image and a moving image. His cinema presents a text that is in the process of being written and has already been written: a text that, in animating the present, is immediately inscribed as past. The velocity of such cinematic writing, it appears, can never escape the gravitational force of historicity.⁴⁰

This ambiguity is encapsulated in the final passage of *Projet pour un texte*:

More than cinema, the new techniques of the image (laser?) offer the way to a solution that is, I fear, momentous, if certainly interesting.

But you need to be born to a technological world to use this kind of resource successfully. And here I am cruelly torn between something immobile that has already been written and the comic movement that animates 24 images per second.

Positing the laser as a possible solution to the problems set forth in his first three points, he then positions himself within an earlier time of mechanical reproduction, between the photograph and the written word – something immobile that has already been written – and the twenty-four frames per second constituting film.

Together *La Pluie* and *Projet pour un texte* combine to create a potent, albeit esoteric critique of artistic production, of authorship and reception, of medium specificity, and of the various theoretical frameworks taken up by artists and theorists of the time. It should come as no surprise, then, that in his final interview Broodthaers was critical of the state of both artistic production as well as of art criticism, which he considered ossified, a failure and, most scathingly, as pandering to economic interests.⁴¹ Tellingly, he singles out Benjamin's writing as a model for a new kind of criticism to displace the old.⁴² Although it is unlikely that Broodthaers' had read a great deal of Benjamin's text, since at the time much of it had yet to be translated, it is probable that he had familiarised himself with the theorist during his periodic stays in Germany. During the interview he notes with interest that Benjamin had written about cinema and technology, almost certainly a reference to the Work of Art essay.

More recently, the art historian Craig Owens has linked allegory to postmodernism in his essay 'The Allegorical Impulse: Toward a Theory of Postmodernism.'⁴³ In it, Owens draws a number of links between allegory and postmodernist art-making strategies. These include: 'appropriation, site-specificity, impermanence, accumulation, discursivity, [and] hybridization.'⁴⁴ Disregarding stylistic categories, the allegorist confiscates images and turns them into something other; one text is read through another, forming a dialectic that results in a supplementary meaning – a 'third text'.⁴⁵ Certainly, in *La Pluie*

and within his oeuvre as a whole, Broodthaers drew heavily on strategies of appropriation, accumulation, and pre-existing stylistic norms. Yet, unlike many of the Pictures group of artists, Broodthaers' work seems more allegorical in its openness to the play of signification. While an artist such as Martha Rosler could appropriate multiple modes of signification, her critique is much more direct, explicit, and univalent. Yet, in applying Benjamin's writing on allegory as a critical mode, Owens tends to overlook the link between melancholy and allegory. Particularly, it is the ambivalent, even romantic strains which run through Benjamin's writing as well as through Broodthaers' artistic production that are ignored in Owens' text. Once these factors are accounted for, it becomes evident that a work such as *La Pluie* echoes Benjamin's thought much more concisely than do the later group of artists Owens uses in his analysis.⁴⁶

Lastly, no interrogation of the function of allegory in *La Pluie* or any other individual work of Broodthaers would be complete without grounding it within his general practice. Broodthaers' entire oeuvre is structured as a kind meta-allegory comprising allegorical fragments of individual works that are themselves allegorical, as in the case of *La Pluie*. These fragments are continually displaced from their original contexts, reinserted into other contexts and rearranged to create a continuous modulating space for the play of the signifier. What emerges is a kind of double allegory that operates on two levels: that of the individual works and that of Broodthaers' larger practice. *La Pluie* is no exception: part of it, too, was incorporated into other works. Specifically, the packing crate Broodthaers uses as a writing surface in the film frequently appeared in other manifestations of his fictive museum, as do the stencilled letters *Département des Aigles*. Moreover, in addition to using his own readymade allegorical fragments, Broodthaers made extensive use of older, found, allegories such as the fables of La Fontaine.

Reading *La Pluie* allegorically reveals a richness of signification that seems almost too great to be contained within such a short, deceptively simple film. Although one could certainly extend this analysis to his general practice, unearthing new connections and relations between the various fragments of signification Broodthaers poetically inscribes in his work, I hope to have marked

out at least some of the extent to which it reveals a subtle and nuanced critique of the issues the artist was confronted with at the time of its production. Although Broodthaers drew on multiple theoretical frameworks, I hope to have shown that that of Walter Benjamin is especially valuable in understanding the impetus behind the artist's critico-allegorical stance. For Broodthaers, as for Benjamin, art was never seen as autonomous from the rest of society. A critique of the museum, of the status of the artist and of the art object, and the relationships of both to capitalist, discursively conditioned society are key issues that would engage Broodthaers until the end of his life. The melancholic aspect that informs *La Pluie* would become his typically oblique poetic motto: 'O melancholy, bitter castle of eagles.'⁴⁷ Like Benjamin, Broodthaers' critical practice was never unambiguous or prescriptive. As with the older philosopher, who harnesses the allegorical mode as a critical tool, from his early *Trauerspiel* to his allegorical tour de force, the *Arcades Project*, Broodthaers' critique of the discursive frameworks which underpinned the artistic activities of his contemporaries and the cultural institutions that displayed them was heavily dependent on allegory as its main mode of transmission.

¹ Marcel Broodthaers, Excerpt from 'Projet pour un Texte' [1969], reprinted in *Marcel Broodthaers: Cinema* (Barcelona: Fundació Antonio Tàpies, 1997): 322. See 91 for the original French version.

² The main reference in the English language remains the collection of texts found in the exhibition catalogue *Marcel Broodthaers: Cinema*. For a German text on the subject see Rainer Borgemeister et al., *Vortrage zum Filmischen Werk von Marcel Broodthaers* (Cologne: Walter König, 2001).

³ While it would be simplistic to ascribe a melancholic temperament to either Benjamin or Broodthaers, anecdotal evidence does exist for this claim.

⁴ In the course of editing this paper, Lucy Bradnock offered the following insight, which I quote here in full: 'Interestingly in terms of the allegorical ruin, Broodthaers' house on the rue de la Pépinière was itself a relic of the nineteenth century, typical of Brussels. Such houses offered a faded reminder of Belgium's economic strength during that century and a sign of the economic problems faced by the country after the Second World War, providing the perfect setting for a museum that could not afford any art.'

⁵ Bruce Jenkins, 'Un Peu Tard: Citation in the Cinema of Marcel Broodthaers,' in *Marcel Broodthaers: Cinema*: 93.

⁶ Benjamin Buchloch, 'Marcel Broodthaers: Allegories of the Avant-garde,' in *Artforum* (May 1980): 52-59.

⁷ Jacques Derrida, 'Edmund Jabès and the Question of the Book,' in *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (London: Routledge, 2001): 81.

⁸ *Ibid.*: 395, cf. 3.

⁹ Erwin Panofsky, *The Life and Art of Albrecht Dürer* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1995); Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, trans. John Osborne (London: Verso, 1998). For a detailed analysis of Benjamin, Panofsky and Warburg's interpretive frameworks for, and interpretations of Dürer's *Melencolia I*, see Margaret Iversen, 'Writing Melencolia,' 2007 (unpublished manuscript).

¹⁰ Panofsky: 156-171.

¹¹ Panofsky: 164.

¹² This insight was gleaned from conversations with long-standing Broodthaers scholar Marie-Pascale Gildemyn in Brussels, May 2007.

¹³ In an interview published in the Belgian journal *+0* (Plus Minus Null), Broodthaers says: 'My former activity is not recognized by the artistic public although it remains with me and also with a few of my friends. It's like a refusal of the public to recognize this aspect.' See *+0* 'Prix Robert Giron'.

¹⁴ Panofsky: 164.

¹⁵ Benjamin: 185; Iversen: 12.

¹⁶ Benjamin: 157.

¹⁷ Ibid.: 152.

¹⁸ Ibid.: 152.

¹⁹ Iversen: 12.

²⁰ Iversen: 18.

²¹ 'An Interview with Marcel Broodthaers by the Film Journal *Trépiéd*,' reprinted in *October*, vol. 42 (Fall 1987): 36.

²² Walter Benjamin, 'On Language as Such and on Language of Man,' in *One-Way Street and Other Writings*, trans. Edmund Jephcott and Kingsley Shorter (London: NBL, 1979).

²³ This concept of language is linked to Benjamin's notion of history but falls beyond the scope of this paper.

²⁴ Benjamin: 175-176.

²⁵ Ibid.: 176.

²⁶ Ibid.: 176.

²⁷ Marcel Broodthaers, 'Ten Thousand Francs Reward' reproduced in *October*, vol. 42 (Fall 1987): 47.

²⁸ *Marcel Broodthaers: Cinema*: 322.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ According to some accounts, he was also invited to give a lecture in Goldman's seminar "as an artist" – a clause he found remarkable. In the five years that followed Goldman's seminar, Baudelaire would provide the inspiration behind several of Broodthaers' works. In 1970, Broodthaers made a seven-minute film called *Un Film de Charles Baudelaire (carte politique du monde)* (also produced in an English version). In 1972, as part of an exhibition in Paris, he produced a series of prints that included one titled *Charles Baudelaire peint*. In 1973, Broodthaers published the book *Charles Baudelaire: Je hais le mouvement qui déplace les lignes*. See also interview with Broodthaers 'C'est l'angelus qui sonne,' in *+0*, no. 12 (February 1976): 19.

³² 'Ten Thousand Francs Reward': 42.

³³ From an originally unpublished manuscript reproduced in Michael Compton et al., *Marcel Broodthaers* (New York: Rizzoli, 1989): 103.

³⁴ This is not the first instance in which Broodthaers has evoked the figures of Baudelaire and Mallarmé. In an earlier film, *Un Film de Charles Baudelaire (carte politique du monde)* (1970) he went so far as to credit Baudelaire as author. Bruce Jenkins has suggested that the figure of Buster Keaton is evoked in *La Pluie*, while Jean-Christophe Royoux makes a case for Baudelaire. See *Marcel Broodthaers: Cinema*.

³⁵ Broodthaers, 'to be bien pensant...or not to be. To be blind' reprinted in *October*, no. 82: 35.

³⁶ Rachel Haidu, 'Marcel Broodthaers, 1963-1972, or, the Absence of Work' (PhD thesis, Columbia University, 2003).

³⁷ Reproduced in Compton et al. "In Praise of the Subject" in *Marcel Broodthaers*: 55.

³⁸ For a Lacanian reading of Broodthaers' work see Brigit Pelzer, 'Recourse to the Letter,' in *October*, no. 42 (Fall 1987): 157-182. Broodthaers' witty response to Foucault took the form of unsent letters addressed to the theorist.

³⁹ His final show, *Décor. A Conquest by Marcel Broodthaers* at the ICA in London.

⁴⁰ Eric De Bruyn, 'The Museum of Attractions: Marcel Broodthaers and the Section Cinéma,' http://www.medienkunstnetz.de/themes/art_and_cinematography/broodthaers/scroll/ (accessed 19 May, 2008).

⁴¹ Broodthaers, 'C'est l'angelus qui sonne,' in *+0*, no. 12 (February 1976): 19.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Craig Owens, *Beyond Recognition: Representation, Power, and Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992): 52-87.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*: 58.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*: 54.

⁴⁶ For a more nuanced reading of Benjamin's text see Diarmuid Costello, 'Aura, Face, Photography: Re-reading Benjamin Today,' in Andrew Benjamin (ed.), *Walter Benjamin and Art*, (NYC/London: Continuum, 2005): 164-184.

⁴⁷ The word play in the poem does not translate well into English. In the original French, *O mélancholie, aigre château des aigles*, Broodthaers plays with the sounds of the words *aigre* and *aigle* in a fashion not dissimilar from that of Raymond Roussel.

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Allegorical Impulses and the Body in Painting¹

Matthew Bowman

Abstract

Michael Fried is often recognised as one of the first art critics to explore thematics of beholding and embodiedness in artistic practice. Yet what still seems to go under-acknowledged is his treatment of artworks as themselves embodied, capable of returning the beholder's gaze. This article makes use of Fried's 'Art and Objecthood' and his trilogy of art-historical books examining the anti-theatrical tradition in French painting, as well as arguments made by the philosopher Stanley Cavell, in an effort to illuminate these aspects of Fried's enterprise. It further argues that not only are artworks for Fried allegorical of social relationships, but that allegory is a dimension of artworks, a condition of their appearing and relating to beholders and other artworks. Finally, this article addresses the relationship between allegory and 'presentness,' suggesting that there is a deep link between the two modalities rather than a relation of opposition.

I

For many years, the term 'allegory' designated a kind of dumping ground for aesthetic failures. Right up until—and even after—Benjamin's *Ursprung des Deutschen Trauerspiels*, published in 1928, a steady stream of some of the most distinguished writers condemned the production of allegory. Among them we can figure Goethe, Coleridge, Hegel, Schopenhauer, and Borges. A large part of this condemnation derived from the symbol/allegory distinction, according to which it was claimed that the symbol can present the truth of that which it symbolises with a striking immediacy and instantaneousness; the symbol, it was said, existed in a virtually synecdochal and translucent relationship with its referent. Allegory, on the other hand, seem preordained to a merely mediated and conventional connection to the object, and therefore lacked all the power ascribed to the symbol. It would be only partially accurate to comment that allegory's history is a history of its continual exclusion; in truth, allegory's history is motored by the *failure* of its exclusion, giving rise to a recurrent allegorical impulse. Starting slowly from and after Benjamin's contribution, but by mid-century gradually becoming a torrent, the ontological

and hierarchal distinction between symbol and allegory would be dramatically reconceived. Increasingly, the symbol would appear like an idealistic dream, and allegory would function as a more authentic representation of how language—and our lives—is structured and functions.

In general, many of the twentieth-century developments in the theory of allegory took place under the aegis of literary criticism. But at the end of the 1970s, especially amongst the writers associated with the *October* journal, allegory would become an operative concept in the criticism of the visual arts, and would be seen as definitive of a burgeoning postmodernism.² Interestingly, *October's* brand of postmodernism—linked with names like Cindy Sherman, Sherrie Levine et al.—mostly stemmed from the difference Minimalism made to art rather than from some imagination of Pop Art. For example, Douglas Crimp would write in the *October* version of his important essay 'Pictures':

An art whose strategies are thus grounded in the literal temporality and presence of theatre has been the crucial formulating experience for a group of artists currently beginning to exhibit in New York. The extent to which this experience fully pervades their work is not, however, immediately apparent, for its theatrical dimensions have been transformed and, quite unexpectedly, reinvested in the pictorial image. If many of these artists can be said to have been apprenticed in the field of performance as it issued from Minimalism, they have nevertheless begun to reverse its priorities, making of the literal situation and a duration of the performed event a tableau whose presence and temporality are utterly psychologised; performance becomes just one in a number of ways of "staging" a picture.³

Not long afterwards, Craig Owens would discuss the same group of young artists highlighted by Crimp, prolonging and reconfiguring Crimp's references to theatre by largely utilising Benjamin's conception of allegory. But whether one uses the term 'allegory' or 'theatricality,' it nonetheless seems that what was being posited with those terms acted to invert the evaluative judgments made by the critic Michael Fried in his infamous attack on Minimalism, 'Art and

Objecthood.’ Whereas Fried strongly criticised Minimalism for its alleged theatricality and its uneasy relationship with modernism, Crimp and Owens supported Minimalism and the art that followed from it for its avowal of theatricality and its alleged rejection of modernist values in favour of postmodernist ones. However, to invert Fried’s evaluative judgments is ultimately to remain within the terms and procedures of his criticism. That is not to say this situation is wrong or bad, but it is to suggest the actual relationship between Fried, Crimp, and Owens enacted in these essays—and thus the relationship between theatricality and allegory, and between modernism and postmodernism—needs some readdressing. In what follows, I aim to offer an account of Fried’s criticism, focusing especially upon the connection between allegory and presentness. Ultimately, I hope to show that allegory and presentness aren’t antithetical terms, basically serving to divide postmodernism from modernism, but are significantly implicated within each other. Moreover, I also hope to suggest that although Crimp and Owens do largely remain caught within Fried’s terms, this is not to be perceived as a failure on their part. For what it’s worth, Fried’s terms still provide a surprisingly strong model for approaching art and criticism since the 1960s, and even indicate some political and social perspectives that have been neglected or missed in the overcoming of modernism and the formation of postmodernist theory.

‘Art and Objecthood’, the 1967 essay that has largely served as the keystone of Fried’s career, is occasionally (or perhaps more often than not) accused of dogmatism—especially through the creation of a near-Manichean separation of ‘good’ modernism from ‘bad’ theatricality—and of adhering to an outmoded idealism that is spiritually or theologically inflected. With regard to the second accusation, it is of some consequence that the final sentence, ‘Presentness is grace’, is taken to be conclusive proof of Fried’s barely latent idealist theologism. Looking back to the moment in which ‘Art and Objecthood’ was published in *Artforum*, Rosalind Krauss—once a member, alongside Fried, of ‘Greenberg’s team’—offers the following recollection.

I remember reading Michael’s last sentence—‘Presentness is grace’—with a dizzying sense of disbelief. It seemed to shake

everything I thought I'd understood. The healthy, Enlightenment-like contempt for piety, the faith instead in the intellect's coming into an ever purer self-possession, the oath that modernism had sworn with rationalism. And to show that that final sentence was no accident, Michael Fried had prepared for it from the first, with the passage about Jonathan Edward's faith that each moment places us before the world as though in the very presence of God in the act of creating it. It didn't seem to me that anything about this could be squared with the robustness of most of Michael's earlier talk about modernism.⁴

Krauss' negative reaction to 'presentness is grace' is generally typical of many of the responses Fried's essay has accrued since 1967, but is also relatively distinctive insofar as her critique is not aimed at replacing modernism with a putative postmodernism. Instead, her shock stems from what she takes as Fried's unfortunate theological bent—an idealist inflection that seems to Krauss at odds with the larger modernist project.

It should by now go without saying that Fried's critical framework is much more complicated than this. Indeed it is a curious fact—and one that often seems to be missed—that despite the elitist tone that allegedly characterise such key terms like presentness, presence, literalism, objecthood, theatricality and the essay overall, the closing claim evinces a degree of uncertainty and self-doubt that enters at the end of 'Art and Objecthood.' To really see this, we must pay attention to the lines that immediately precede 'presentness is grace':

This essay will be read as an attack on certain artists (and critics) and as a defence of others. And of course it is true that the desire to distinguish between what is to me the authentic art of our time and other work which, whatever the dedication, passion, and intelligence of its creators, seems to me to share certain characteristics associated here with the concepts of literalism and theatre has largely motivated what I have written. In these last sentences, however, I want to call attention to the utter pervasiveness—the virtual universality—of the sensibility or mode of being that I have

characterised as corrupted or perverted by theatre. We are all literalists most of our lives. Presentness is grace.⁵

Perhaps what counts as the ‘dogmatism’ ascribed to Fried’s criticism is the understandable perception that Fried appears genuinely to believe that he can sort the authentic modernist works from the merely theatrical, the wheat from the chaff; yet theatricality is everywhere, and can occur despite such qualities as ‘dedication, passion, and intelligence.’ The ability to retroactively distinguish modernism from theatricality is, at the same time, the difficulty or perhaps even impossibility of guaranteeing that one produces modernist works rather than theatrical pieces. Taken at face-value, this might seem to give the Friedian art critic a power that is denied the artist; the critic can tell the difference between the good and bad whereas the artist is unable definitively to produce the former instead of the latter.

Once again, however, matters are not so simple, and the division of labour and possibility that separates the critic from the artist has a way of falling apart; depending on the histories to which we belong or which we want to relate, we might want to call this way (late-) modernism or postmodernism. That is to say, the art critic does not only have the task of distinguishing between modernism and theatricality, but is himself at risk of producing a criticism that is itself either modernist or theatrical and that cannot simply chose the former in order to refuse the latter. Robert Smithson, in a hilarious letter sent to *Artforum* in response to Fried’s ‘Art and Objecthood’, was one of the first to note this fact:

What Fried fears most is the consciousness of what he is doing—namely being himself theatrical. . . . Every refutation is a mirror of the thing it refutes—*ad infinitum*. Every war is a battle with reflections. What Michael Fried attacks is what he is. He is a naturalist who attacks natural time. Could it be there is a double Michael Fried—the atemporal Fried and the temporal Fried? Consider a subdivided progression of “Frieds” on millions of stages.⁶

Smithson is perceptive here, but we shouldn't imagine that he has discovered something about Fried's criticism that Fried himself is blind to. Fried is willing to admit that there is indeed a 'double Michael Fried'—and occasionally I am tempted to suggest that Fried's double, the other Fried, was Smithson himself. Perhaps it would be fair to say that Smithson reports as a discovery something about Fried and 'Art and Objecthood' that should really be stated as an acknowledgement. To a certain extent, the closing paragraph of 'Art and Objecthood' is a difficult admission of the sense that what he wants to remark about the theatricality of Minimalism cannot be said without the possibility of himself being theatrical. The critic, too, risks being found theatrical—despite his or her dedication, passion, and intelligence. Although I will not cover this in the depth that it really deserves, it should be understood that Fried's willingness to recognise and acknowledge that the critic is also open to theatricality emerges from his conversations with the American philosopher Stanley Cavell. If I may be forgiven for putting a crucial issue far too simply, what Fried and Cavell deeply share is the conviction that modernism is not defined by a stable set of conventions or by an essentialist drive toward the purity of medium-specificity; again, put too simply, Fried's and Cavell's modernism is largely characterised by the absence of such conventions—neither history nor a priori conditions can effectively serve for the creation of modernist art. After all, the history of modernism is full of occasions when the contemporary form of art has been superseded by a new one. This makes some headway in refuting the oft-repeated claim that Fried propounds a dogmatic modernism, for technically there are no conventions or essential conditions to be dogmatic about. It also helps explain or suggest why the artist, as well as the critic, is unable to guarantee that his work is authentically modernist and not infected by the germ of theatricality.

There is arguably a further sense in which Smithson's witty and pertinent critique of Fried goes astray. The division or doubling of Fried into the temporal and the atemporal is perhaps meant as criticism of the rhetoric of 'instantaneous' that is threaded through 'Art and Objecthood'. But it can easily be taken, and is perhaps intended to be taken, as a slam against Fried's invocation of 'presentness'. It is a curious feature of many critical readings of

Fried's essay that the terms 'instantaneousness' and 'presentness' seem to be construed as interchangeable synonyms or thought to be simply equivalent; and it is a further aspect of those readings that both terms are associated with some imagination of atemporality. To be sure, 'instantaneousness' and 'presentness' are closely linked, but this is insofar as they possess a comparable positive value; they pertain to very different functions, however. With regard to the former, it is possibly enough to note that the repeated mentions of instantaneousness are often hedged with qualifiers like 'as if'. To take instantaneousness as atemporality pure and simple would be a failure to perceive it as another temporal mode, to not realise the rhetoricity or metaphoricity that undergirds Fried's use of the term, and thus also to take Fried literally. And with regard to presentness, it would be an error to conceive it as meaning something like 'living in the present'—thereby giving presentness a mostly (a)temporal shape—instead of something more like 'to be present'; 'continual presentness', we might say.

Perhaps it will appear that we are drifting away from our main concerns, away from the question of allegory, but what I hope to show is that the notion of presentness—and the difficulty of this notion, the demand it places upon us—is deeply relevant to allegory.

II

As an introduction—admittedly a somewhat oblique one—I want to consider an artwork that the critic Craig Owens took to be emblematic of a distinctly allegorical postmodernism, a performance by Laurie Anderson called *Americans on the Move*. It begins by describing a night time car journey in which the driver realises she has taken a wrong turn somewhere along the road. Needing to get her bearings, she pulls into a garage and asks the resident grease monkey, who informs her that being lost is a consequence of her failure to 'read the signs.' Such a failure, however, derives not from an error on the driver's part; instead, according to the grease monkey, it is the result of a fundamental illegibility inherent in signification itself. In order to further his point, he comments on an image sent into space that depicts a nude man and

woman; the man's right arm is raised at the elbow, his palm facing the imagined recipient of this image. The grease monkey comments: 'In our country, we send pictures of our sign language into outer space. . . . Do you think they will think his hand is permanently attached that way? Or do you think they will read our signs? In our country, goodbye looks just like hello'.⁷

In response, Owens reads into this comment,

Two alternatives: either the extraterrestrial recipient of the message will assume that it is simply a picture, that is, an analogical likeness of the human figure, in which case he might logically conclude that male inhabitants of Earth walk around with their right arms permanently raised. Or he will somehow divine that this gesture is addressed to him and attempt to read it, in which case he will be stymied, since a single gesture signifies both greeting and farewell, and any reading of it must oscillate between these two extremes. The same gesture could also mean 'Halt!' or represent the taking of an oath, but if Anderson's text does not consider these alternatives that is because it is not concerned with ambiguity, with multiple meanings engendered by a single sign; rather, two *clearly defined but mutually incomprehensible* readings are engaged in a blind confrontation in such a way that it is impossible to choose between them.⁸

This passage speaks of an indeterminacy of meaning that forestalls any clear and final reading. A couple of years later, Owens recognised an 'oversight' in his analysis, specifically, a failure to notice that Anderson's picture is constituted by gender difference; the man's raised hand effectively functioning to mark gender difference as unequal power relations through identification of itself as the phallus.⁹ Although implicit in his earlier analysis, the issue of (social) representation is brought to the foreground in his self-criticism. Yet such representation is not solely limited to the construction or replication of gender difference, for there is also an important question about 'representationicity' as such, and the capacity of the human body to become a field of

representation—to be able to represent. A question, then, not only of what the human body represents but also of *how* it represents.

In the second part of his *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein proffers the following comment which fits into our discussion: ‘The human body is the best picture of the human soul.’¹⁰ Stanley Cavell’s gloss on this statement brings us right to the heart of the matter and suggests a connection with allegory:

The idea of the allegory of words is that human expressions, the human figure, to be grasped, must be *read*. To know a mind is to interpret a physiognomy . . . I have to read a physiognomy and see the creature according to my reading, and treat it according to my seeing. The human body is the best picture of the human soul—not, I feel like adding, primarily because it represents the soul but because it expresses it. The body is the field of expression of the soul.¹¹

By ‘allegory of words’ Cavell is pointing to the fact that ‘the topic of our attachments to our words is allegorical of our attachments to ourselves and to other persons.’¹² Words are our expressions of ourselves and the precondition of our expression to others. ‘Expression’ is obviously the keyword here, and I suspect that some readers will feel uncomfortable about the contrast set up between representation and expression, especially as much theoretical work in the humanities over the last few decades have been dedicated to illuminating the frequently politicized role that representation plays in language and the world; expression, on the other hand, is often taken to indicate a supposed immediacy that is, ultimately, at odds with how language and the world operate.

‘Expression’, however, strikes me as a more suitable word than representation for the argument I want to build. But if I do insist on ‘expression’, or more precisely, ‘expressivity’, then it is neither to downplay the complex fact of representation nor is it to claim that notions of expression open onto a field of immediacy. Rather, it is to suggest that expressivity—understood as the potential for expression and communication—acts as a precondition for representation. As such, the difference between expressivity and representation

is better thought as a shift between levels rather than as polar opposition. Framed in this way, what the child could be said to discover in the Lacanian 'Mirror Stage' is not simply that he has a body, but that this body is fundamentally expressive, and is therefore capable of 'mirroring' the images constructed by other bodies. That the child's discovery is actually based around a misrecognition that replaces bodily fragmentation with a picture of the body as coherently ordered and whole perhaps augers an interdependency between expressivity, fragmentation, wholeness, subjectivity, and misrecognition that cannot be explored here; hopefully, some of my comments will touch—if only obliquely—on this peculiar condition.

Having spoken of representation and expressivity, it should be clear by now that presentness—the attempting or fact of being present, to one's self and to others—in Fried's writings is alloyed with these notions. On the one hand, this might appear somewhat odd, for it suggests that our relationships with artworks are not only about or derive from our embodiedness, but also—if one is committed to writing of presentness as being something that some artworks own whilst others don't, and Fried is of course committed in just this way—suggests that artworks are themselves in some respect 'embodied'. On the other hand, it might appear quite natural: the division of form and content, with one mediating the other, can be seen as a consequence of the idea that artworks are given over to an expressivity in a manner proximate to the expressivity of the body. Either way, we can start to construe what is at stake in the notion of presentness, and relate that to what Fried describes as Minimalism's latent anthropomorphism.

But what else is being said here? One answer to that question would be, in effect, a paraphrase of Cavell: the topic of our attachments to artworks is allegorical of our attachments to ourselves and other persons. A version of this thought can be found in Cavell's essay 'Music Discomposed' (a text that every reader of 'Art and Objecthood' should also read, for the two essays illuminate each other), when Cavell notes that our responses to artworks often resemble our responses to other people.¹³ The obvious temptation, I think, is to state that we respond to artworks in this manner precisely because artworks are not

natural objects, but are, instead, the products of human labour. Even where the man-madeness is rather limited—say, in certain examples of Land Art—the touch of man is still present, and therefore the work produced remains essentially distinguishable from nature.¹⁴ We might say, then, that our response to specific artworks is the result of our recognition of the human origin of works of art (which is perhaps why biographical issues remain an ongoing problem for art history); but if we do say that, then the artwork seems to be a product made by human beings, rather than fully or authentically continuous with them. As such, despite crucial differences, art's being-in-the-world is closer to everyday present-at-hand objects than it is to man, to Heideggerian *Dasein*. This is fair enough as far as it goes, but the artworks that Fried is interested in are works that are considerably nearer to being-in-the-world like *Dasein*. And Cavell, too, is interested in this. For instance, he later writes of modernist paintings, thinking in particular of Morris Louis' *Unfurleds* of 1960 (but also of Kenneth Noland and Frank Stella):

There may be any number of ways of acknowledging the condition of painting as total thereness . . . For example, a painting may acknowledge its frontedness, or its finitude, or its specific thereness—that is, its presentness; and *your* accepting it will accordingly mean acknowledging your frontedness, or directionality, or verticality towards its world, or any world—or your presentness, in its aspect of absolute here-ness and of now-ness.¹⁵

'Frontedness', a powerful feature of modernist painting that Cavell takes to be definitive of painting as such; modernist paintings, however, largely differ from other types of paintings insofar as frontedness becomes an issue to be acknowledged. The emphasis on frontedness is, crucially, a substantial and important revision of what late-modernist critics—Clement Greenberg, particularly—attempted to pin down as the flatness and "purity" of painting. And one major feature of this revision of flatness as frontedness is that the main issue is no longer, or not simply, about the 'purity' or self-defining essentialism of a modernist canvas, but of an intersubjective-objective relationship that leads to questions of privacy and publicity, of politics and the possibility of community.

Given his longstanding dialogue with Cavell, it is little surprise that questions of frontedness are gradually raised in Fried's trilogy of books on French painting and criticism.¹⁶ I say 'gradually' because frontedness is a material and social quality that is both implicitly recognised and displaced in the history of pre-modern French painting; in Fried's historical trilogy, it is Manet's groundbreaking works of the 1860s that stage the strongest acknowledgment of painting's frontedness—or, to use the designation Fried insists upon, painting's *facingness*—and the shift toward modernism. Rephrasing flatness as facingness puts into focus the notion that the pictorial canvas can function as an analogue or allegory of the human body, especially insofar as both the canvas and body are orientated to a certain frontality and bear a basic expressivity. But this is not a feature possessed by all paintings—that is to say, although all paintings are frontally orientated and often position the beholder in specific ways, it is not true that all paintings can render the connection between painting and beholder concrete or compelling. Landscape and still-life paintings, for instance, do not generally appear to suggest the possibility of such a connection. And it might strike us as odd—perhaps counterintuitive—that abstract paintings, like Louis' *Unfurleds*, can seemingly register this connection, perhaps even insist upon it. Yet it seems to me worth exploring this connection, as it may throw into relief seldom noted but crucial aspects that underpin our aesthetic responses, and suggests why subjectivity, politics, and ethics remain ongoing issues for art and its criticism.

The first volume of the trilogy, *Absorption and Theatricality*, is a close reading of Diderot's criticism and the artworks he describes. Over-simplifying Fried's complex argument formulated over the course of his trilogy: in his *Salons* (the first of which was written in 1759; the longest and most famous in 1765 and 1767), Diderot was deeply concerned with how paintings can convince the beholder of the truthfulness of the depicted image, and of the dramatis personae represented; it came to seem to him that paintings that depicted figures who were in one respect or another conscious of the beholder, thereby calling attention to the artifice of the painting, fundamentally failed to elicit such a conviction. Such works Diderot would label, in a pejorative sense, *theatrical*.

He theorised a counter-practice based around the idea that if the figures in the painting are unaware of the beholder's presence, largely because these figures are *absorbed* in their own activities, then that can serve as a guarantee of the truthfulness of painting or the compellingness of its representations. The primordial convention that paintings are made to be beheld is rearticulated through the supreme fiction of the beholder's non-presence in front of the picture. Consequently, paintings that depict figures immersed in their work (Chardin's *The Card Castle*, c.1737; Washington D.C., National Gallery of Art) or in the company of others (Greuze's *Filial Piety* of 1763; St. Petersburg, Hermitage) would be recruited into a movement that is resolutely anti-theatrical. In his *Salon* of 1767, Diderot would suggest another—more metaphorical—form of absorption through his description of a work by Claude-Joseph Vernet. Here, Diderot narrated a fiction in which he was metaphorically walking through the landscape painted by Vernet. It is as if in this case the fiction of the beholder's non-presence is able to be maintained not only by the absorption of the depicted figures in their activities but also by the 'absorption' of the beholder 'into' the painting.

The Diderotian anti-theatrical project, however, fell into crisis in the nineteenth century. And it did so partly because the strategies of absorption that once guaranteed anti-theatricality harden into sure-fire methods. If initially depictions of sleep, deep concentration, and other absorptive motifs functioned as natural means of denying the beholder's presence, and so as a means of virtually guaranteeing a positive critical reception, then it did not take long or much for these means to become a new mode of eliciting the beholder's presence and evaluatively positive critical appraisal. Denying the beholder in order to impress and convince him of the work's high aesthetic quality is ultimately just another way of admitting the beholder's presence before that work. And if absorptive strategies become yet another way of performing to the beholder, it also nonetheless remains the case that the beholder is there, that the painting is to be seen. One can suspend this primordial convention through the construction of a supreme fiction; but suspension is not eradication or destruction. Like allegory, the history of theatricality—the fact that it does have a history—is motored by the failure of its exclusion.

It is in the work of Gustave Courbet that Fried perceives a radical transformation in the history of anti-theatricality. Courbet's achievement is based around his realisation that the viewer perusing the salon is not the painting's first beholder; instead, the first beholder is the artist himself, and his presence before the painting must also be neutralised. In order to attempt this, Courbet reinvents Diderot's imaginary walk through a landscape painted by Vernet by envisioning a quasi-corporeal merger between artist and canvas. During the early stages of his career, Courbet's metaphysical and essentially impossible project finds a certain orientation within self-portraiture. Courbet portrays himself in states of sleep, gazing dreamily out of the canvas but not into the beholder's space, or romantically immersed in the presence of loved ones. In another couple of paintings, *The Desperate Man* (1843?; Private collection) and *Man Mad with Fear* (1843?; Oslo, Nasjonalgalleriet), the protagonists seem to stare wildly into the beholder's space, but such is the intensity of that stare that the eyes actually appear either to search far beyond the beholder or to be fixated upon some imaginary object roughly coincident with the beholder's position; whichever is the case, these are eyes that don't see the beholder. Beginning with the self-portraits of the 1840s, it is almost as if the Albertian window that had organised the Western pictorial tradition since the Renaissance is rendered increasingly opaque. The canvas of the painting becomes less a window that we metaphorically peer through than a mirrored surface that displaces the beholder.

A later canvas, *The Painters Studio, A Real Allegory Determining a Phase of Seven Years in My Artistic Life* (1854-55; Paris, Musée d'Orsay), for Fried practically emblematises Courbet's project. Focusing on the central group of figures, which comprises a nude woman, a boy in peasant clothing, and Courbet himself seated in front of a landscape painting he is working upon, it is striking that Courbet appears to be seated so close to the canvas that there is no room for his right leg—it is as if his body is physically merging with the canvas. In fact, the lower portion of the right leg is barely visible underneath the chair, but such is the position of Courbet's body that the presence of the leg there seems hardly possible; it would surely involve a bodily contortion at odds

with the basic malleability of the human form. The leg, then, seems like an afterthought, painted there as if to dilute or rationalise the peculiar lack of space between body and depicted canvas; but its cumulative effect, as Fried compellingly describes, is to suggest Courbet's body merging with the canvas—a suggestion that is doubled by the sheet the nude woman holds and spreads out toward the beholder, and which, according to Fried, metaphorically functions as a stream or waterfall of water flowing from the landscape picture. Artist's body merges with canvas, and the canvas reaches beyond its material limits to intertwine with the bodies and room around it.

Courbet's subsequent works, as Fried reads them, continue the project of self-portraiture, but through significantly new directions. Traditionally, self-portraiture is generally understood as an essentially *mimetic* representation of the artist; for Fried, Courbet breaks from this understanding by reconceptualising self-portraiture as an act which is not fundamentally reliant upon notions of mimesis or resemblance. It is along these lines that Fried interprets Courbet's *The Stonebreakers* (1849; destroyed) as an allegorical portrait of the artist, with the older figure grasping an axe standing for Courbet's right hand (the paintbrush holding hand), and the younger man carrying heavy stones as representing the left hand (the hand that holds the palette). Self-portraiture as mirroring is thus problematised, and it is relevant that Fried turns toward Hegel's reinvention of the myth of Narcissus; instead of the boy capturing himself through his reflection in a calm pool of water, Hegel envisages a boy throwing stones into a body of water, thereby disrupting its mirror-like surface, and consequently discovering himself in that action, in the continuity of his acts and selfhood.¹⁷ Thus, for Fried, self-portraiture is not a question of Courbet discovering or representing himself through mimesis and self-picturing, but rather of finding himself through the act of painting.¹⁸ Self-portraiture can be non- or even anti-mimetic, visually indirect, and ultimately allegorical without it being a refusal of the possibility or logic of self-portraiture.

In the detailed historical schema Fried offers, Courbet is not construed as a modernist artist, but his artistic achievement obliges Manet to take the decisive next step. We might say, the unintended effect—which Manet seemingly picks

up on—of Courbet's oeuvre is that rather than establishing an impossible quasi-corporeal merger between painting and painter, resulting in the displacement or denial of the painter's presence *qua* beholder, what actually happens is that the painted canvas takes on the address of the human body. Far from exhibiting their own flatness, as modernist theory will claim, Manet's canvases amount to a demonstration of the facingness of painting, where that facingness is analogous to the facingness that characterises the human body. It is explicitly thematised by the prevalent tendency of Manet's depicted figures to gaze out of—which is to say, face out from—the painted image. Such facing is partly how we communicate, transforming expressivity into expression. But this is also a distinctly double-edged sword: facingness gives equal possibility to presentness and pretence, honesty and dissimulation.¹⁹

We are now in a position to understand why or how Fried, in 'Art and Objecthood', conceives one of the central problems of Minimalism as not being its anthropomorphism, but the fact that this anthropomorphism is hidden. This hiddenness is not, at least in the first place, a hiding of the analogous human embodiedness from the beholder, but its concealment from the Minimalist work (or artist) itself. In a sense, it is largely because the Minimalist work fails to recognise its own humanity that it fails to engage in a human relationship with the beholders in the gallery space. Rather than acknowledging the beholder, as quasi-human to human, in Fried's account Minimalist works exist in an uncomfortable—even threatening—relationship with their beholders. That is, Minimalist works lack presentness *to* themselves, and because they lack this they are unable to engender presentness *of* themselves to their beholders. Minimalism, in other words, suffer from a condition that Cavell designates 'soul-blindness':

If it makes sense to speak of seeing human beings, then it makes sense that a human being may lack the capacity to see beings as human. It would make sense to ask whether someone may be soul-blind. . . . So to speak of seeing human beings as human beings is to imply that we *notice* human beings are human beings; and that

seems no more acceptable than saying we are of the *opinion* that they are. . . .²⁰

III

From what has been discussed so far, it may seem that there exists within Fried's works a tension between our relationship to art as being allegorical of our relationship with other people and the demand that artworks give their presentness to us. The apparent tension consists in the fact that the former proposition allows a notion of allegory to become operative, and this brings in major issues about indirectness, indeterminacy, and so forth; the second proposition seemingly serves as plea for directness and determinacy in human relationships, and contained in that plea we may detect a version of the Romantic symbol, with its own claims of instantaneity and immediacy. Internal to Fried's work, then, seems to be a tension between allegory and symbol, a difficulty in excluding one from the other that, in some respects, seems to distinguish between later and earlier stages (or 'between' art-historical and art-critical modes) of Fried's career.²¹ To a certain extent this is probably right, and one possible reading of Fried's career is that he moves from an early understanding in which symbol and allegory, authenticity and theatricality, are rigorously separable to a later realisation that these are not, after all, fully separable and therefore substantially interdependent. But, to my mind, it also seems right to say that 'Art and Objecthood' is itself determined by the difficulty, even impossibility, in demarcating authentic from theatrical, and thus symbol from allegory. Hence the near-confessional tone that inflects the final lines of the 1967 essay.

Fried's difficulty—which is not a failure in his theory—in sorting modernism from theatricality belongs not only to his belief that our relationship to art is allegorical of our inter-personal relations, and that the painted canvas can be allegorical of the human body, but that allegory is a fundamental aspect of expressivity and expression. Although neither metaphor nor allegory is mentioned in 'Art and Objecthood', these can be seen as hidden terms that structure his argument. Both terms, moreover, offer themselves as natural

contrasts to the Literalist (Minimalist) art—in which ‘the shape *is* the object’—that Fried specifically critiques.²² And if ‘is’ appears to be something definitive of Literalism’s failure, then the repeated and precise use of the ‘as’ in his long footnote attempts to delineate a modernism that runs counter to Greenberg and Literalism. What partly constitutes the precision of the *as* in this case is the manner in which Fried tries to move beyond an *as* that appears arbitrarily thrust upon an artwork to an *as* that is necessitated by and is internal to that work (but such precision is utterly precarious, likely to fall into theatricality at any step). Here is the footnote:

Seeing something *as* a painting in the sense that one sees the tacked-up canvas *as* a painting, and being convinced that a particular work can stand comparison with the painting of the past whose quality is not in doubt, are altogether different experiences; it is, I want to say, *as* though unless something can compel conviction *as* to its quality it is no more than trivially or nominally a painting. This suggests that flatness and the delimitation of flatness ought not to be thought of *as* the “irreducible essence of pictorial art,” but rather as something like the *minimal conditions for something’s being seen as painting*; and that the crucial question is not what those minimal and, so to speak, timeless conditions are, but rather what at a given moment, is capable of compelling conviction, of succeeding *as* painting. This is not to say that painting has no essence; it is to claim that essence—i.e. that which compels conviction—is largely determined by, and therefore changes continually in response to, the vital work of the recent past. The essence of painting is not something irreducible. Rather, the task of the Modernist painting is to discover those conventions that, at a given moment, alone are capable of establishing his work’s identity *as* painting.²³

It can also be said that both uses of the *as*, the arbitrary and the necessary, serve to indicate a *metaphoricity* and *relationality* allied with—and perhaps definitive of—modernist artistic production (the fact that both types of *as* share certain similarities suggests something of their precariousness and how they

are not, ultimately, rigorously separable).²⁴ Literalism, seemingly, misrecognises the *is* it believes proper to itself by not perceiving itself as rooted in an *as* that is the hallmark of modernism.²⁵

Relationality enters into the picture through Fried's claim that an object being perceivable as a painting is not something like the consequence of *our* bringing an *as* to the object (i.e., our subjective choosing to see an object as a painting). Instead, the *as* is secured by the object's willingness to define itself as a painting by comparing itself to paintings which have already demonstrated their identity as paintings. To that degree, far from arguing for painting's pure autonomy, Fried's art criticism refuses a notion of art based on the stability of a 'to be' or 'being', and instead underlines a significantly more open, relational, and fluid understanding of art in which 'to be' is essentially 'to be *as*'.²⁶ Other paintings and artworks, then, exist not in a merely external relation to a given work, but become part of that work's self-definition.²⁷ Although this is perhaps putting the matter too strongly, it might be said that Fried's understanding of artworks places them in an expanded field which isn't altogether different from the expanded fields Krauss imagines in her criticism, or even from the dialectic between sites and non-sites, between varying material instances (film, essay, artwork...), that is central to Robert Smithson's oeuvre. And indeed, Smithson's sites/non-sites and Krauss' expanded fields have been strong influences upon the return to allegory in the late-'70s and early-'80s; in that sense, therefore, we might detect an implicit allegorism in Fried's modernist theory.

The difficult question, then, is to what extent allegory (with its radicalisation or extension of metaphor) can be thought of in relation to presentness. Is allegory to be conceived as a defeat of presentness? Or, despite many clear resemblances, is it possible to differentiate between allegory and theatricality—are the theatrical and allegorical impulses one and the same? These questions are worth posing, for if there is an undercover allegorism in Fried's modernism—or, at least, an openness to allegory—then we are going to be tempted by the thought that there is a subtle distinction between allegory and theatricality that either precludes or just problematises our countervailing temptation to see theatricality and allegory as identical. However, if the

distinction is truly subtle, then we might be equally tempted by the idea that allegory and theatricality will continually become mutually confused and thus necessarily problematise that distinction.

These questions deserve considerable unpacking, though there is not space to fully contemplate them here. In any case, it's a notable feature of Fried's enterprise that such questions are raised and left decisively open—if his authorial voice in 1967 seemed to some dogmatic, then his writings of the last decade and a half have evinced a more speculative, fragmented, and questioning tone. But perhaps, at least, we can make some headway in responding to the question apropos allegory and presentness. And we can do this, perhaps, by imagining the kind of relation theatricality produces between what is said and the one that says it. When somebody is being theatrical, it is not altogether obvious how that person inhabits his words or actions. For example, in everyday life, those words or actions might seemly unreasonably exaggerated, or designed to elicit an undeserved level of sympathy or anger, or may appear just plain false; in theatre (or in films), we know that the actor does not (entirely) *mean* his words or intends to confuse us—we know that the actor is *playing* a part, pretending, and we especially appreciate the actor who can make us suspend that knowledge, persuade us to displace our awareness of the fact that the actor is playing a part, is acting, is being (in a non-derogative sense) theatrical. In both the world and in theatre, theatricality seems to indicate a split between how or what is said and the one saying it. And when this split is pushed to its limits, then we seem to lose either the meaning of the words expressed (they seem the wrong words, or to be used in the wrong way, or become a barrier) or the speaker becomes hidden behind or lost within his own words. Perhaps both things happen simultaneously, but the crucial thing is that theatricality seems to defeat presentness.

Such splitting is not, of course, alien to allegory. On its simplest level, allegory splits form and content like theatricality splits speaking from the speaker. Yet other things appear to happen in allegory. For instance, although the split in allegory can, as in theatricality, occasionally seem like a barrier, it is more often the case that such a split is construed positively as opening up multiple

readings. Form can operate generatively in allegory, appertaining to many different contents, equally repressing some meanings and establishing others. Allegory also differs from theatricality inasmuch as to be recognisable or successful as allegory it needs to, on the one hand, preserve the split between form and content, and, on the other hand, sustain both halves of this split in a state of delicate equilibrium. Where form trumps content, the image or text becomes a confusing mess in which meaning or reading is neither enacted nor deferred but brutally defeated; where content is raised above form, the image or text hardly becomes more than an extrinsic set of aestheticised embellishments or codes merely representing a given meaning. At one end of the scale allegory becomes senseless, scarcely recognisable as allegory; at the other, it becomes mere artifice, barely valuable as allegory. Over the years, allegory has been condemned for both crimes—and both crimes have been understood by its accusers to be *definitive* of allegory.

And yet, if theatricality and allegory are distinguishable, then it is nonetheless true that they do meet in Fried's writing. As already noted, Literalism's problem, according to Fried, is its failure to recognise that the relationship between art and beholder is allegorical of social relations as such, and this failure is continuous with the failure to see artworks as allegories of human embodied subjectivity. Thus, these failures are apiece with Literalism not recognising its theatricality. Manet's success is to recognise and acknowledge these allegories of sociality, embodiment, and subjectivity traversing artistic production. Not only does he liquidate the French anti-theatrical tradition, Manet acknowledges—perhaps even redeems—theatricality by exposing it (by showing it to be *already* exposed) to allegory. Seemingly extending Courbet's discovery that mimesis is not a precondition for (self-)portraiture, Manet finds that *indirect communication*—metaphor and allegory—is not necessarily a turning against the ground of expressivity proper to artworks and humans, but a continuation of it. That is to say, there is a sense in which presentness can be the result of allegory, metaphor, and forms of indirect communication in general. But that forces the question of how or when indirect communication can become a vehicle for presentness.

In bringing this essay to a close, it should be said that my late reference to indirect communication emerges not from Fried's writings but from Cavell's. And in finishing, I want to briefly consider how Cavell's explores this issue in his essay 'Existentialism and Analytic Philosophy'.²⁸ Cavell is struck by Kierkegaard's remark, offered in his *Concluding Un-Scientific Postscript*, that he is *forced* to use indirect communication, and that *everything* is lost when one tries to render the indirect direct. To get the ball rolling, Cavell imagines the sheer necessity of indirect communication as 'poetry communicates indirectly' (suggesting that such indirectness is common to the other arts too) and 'can be communicated in no other way' (a thought that is not fundamental to art, for mathematics or certain scientific theories may also make that claim). In order to unpack these statements, he initially uses a line of Wallace Stevens' poetry in which the meaning is not obviously apparent—clouded by metaphor—and tries to explicate its meaning. Assuming for argument's sake that his explication is correct, he has 'revealed' what the 'indirect' poetical line means in a 'direct' manner, nevertheless in gaining this meaning—and thus the distinction between direct and indirect—the specifically poetical qualities have been lost. Something is lost and something is gained, but as Cavell comments, Kierkegaard claims that *everything* is lost in communicating the indirect directly, and so this particular example does not appear to pertain to Kierkegaard. So Cavell tries another example, another line from Stevens, in which the meaning of the line seems utterly inexpressible in any other way—but here the distinction between direct and indirect communication no longer applies, and therefore it cannot really explain what Kierkegaard wanted it to.

Cavell quickly realises, however, that the nub of the problem is that the distinction between indirect and direct communication is not a matter of two different modes for expressing meaning. Rather, the distinction is meant to suggest that a text is capable of producing more than one meaning, and that these meanings may be in conflict. We return, then, to Craig Owens and his rumination on Laurie Anderson. In Cavell's own words:

This, then, is a very particular literary problem, a problem concerning a very particular situation of language, not one . . . in which there are

alternative vehicles for expressing a thought, one of which could be said to convey it directly, the other indirectly; nor . . . a situation in which there is no alternative vehicle for expression . . . It is one in which, while there is only one vehicle of expression, there are two thoughts it can express, and moreover the thoughts are incompatible, mutually defeating²⁹

Indirect communication, especially in the form of allegory, is not considered here as opposing presentness, but as its precondition. There is nothing easy about this, however: 'In using such words directly the relation between what one says and what there is in those words to be heard and understood is ironic, and, depending on the context and consequences, comic or tragic.'³⁰ Because language is structured in this way, our meaning is as likely to be lost or unrecognised by others, and we fail to inhabit it. But it is also nonetheless true that we do manage to understand ourselves and each other, and even manage moments of presentness. I want to end by quoting from Cavell once more, who, in discussing Louis' *Unfurleds*, revises presentness as candour:

The quality I have in mind might be expressed as an openness achieved through instantaneousness—which is a way of characterizing the *candid*. The candid has a reverse feature as well: that it must occur independently of me or any audience, that it must be complete without me, in that sense *closed* to me. . . . This openness and closedness do not describe particular forms within paintings, but conditions of painting as a form of art.³¹

From what has been argued, we might say that closedness (in art and in humans) derives not only from the sense that because artworks and people are complete and independent of us not everything is open to us, not immediately available for our inspection. It also derives from the fact that our language, our many and varied modes of address, our multiple techniques for converting expressivity into expression, are deeply mediated, and given over to the indirectness of communication. But how else are we to be in the world with others? There is no other way. Allegory will always be more than a random,

perverse impulse, but a structural feature of our being-in-the-world or our forms of life. And insofar as artworks are not only prolongations of human subjectivity, but can also be extensions of our specific embodiedness, allegory will always remain a defining aspect of them as well.

¹ This is one of two essays that discuss the complex relationship between allegory, theatricality, modernism, postmodernism, and art criticism. The other is entitled 'Interpretations of Interpretations—Allegory and Hermeneutics'.

² We can chart the discussion of allegory-postmodernism in a number of *October* essays: Craig Owens' 'Earthwords' (*October*, no. 10) was the first to re-introduce the concept; the theme was extended and deepened in 'The Allegorical Impulse' (*October*, no. 12 and no. 13); treated psychoanalytically by Joel Fineman in his 'The Structure of Allegorical Desire' (*October*, no. 12); it was somewhat implicit—through the metaphor of the ruin—in Douglas Crimp's 'On the Museum's Ruins' (*October*, no. 13); Crimp's 'The Photographic Activity of Modernism' (*October*, no. 15) and 'The End of Painting' (*October*, no. 16) also pursued many of the themes and issues raised by the discourse on allegory. In addition to these, it is also worth noting that many of elements that would be defined as allegorical were already apparent, though not designated as such, in Crimp's 'Pictures' (*October*, no. 8) and Krauss' 'Sculpture in the Expanded Field' (*October*, no. 8). Stephen Melville's 'Notes on the Reemergence of Allegory, the Forgetting of Modernism, the Necessity of Rhetoric, and the Conditions of Publicity in Art and Criticism' (*October*, no. 19) is more or less the culmination of this particular moment and a retrospective analysis of *October's* collective investigation into the interrelation of allegory and postmodernism. Melville's essay deserves to be especially noted—as my own essay will suggest, I have learnt much from Melville. Examples of the resurgence of interest in allegory stretch beyond *October* but are nonetheless in close dialogue with the journal. In 1979 John Baldessari produced his series *Blasted Allegories*, a series which become the subject of an early Hal Foster essay for *Artforum*. See, Hal Foster, 'John Baldessari's *Blasted Allegories*' in *Artforum*, vol. 18, no. 2, October 1979: 52-55. Another example would be a 1980 exhibition at the Brooke Alexander Gallery, New York, called *Illustration and Allegory*; curated by Carter Ratcliff; the group show exhibited works by Richard Bosman, Ken Goodman, Wonsook Kim, Tom Lawson, Robert Longo, David Salle, Phillip Smith, and Michael Zwack. Looking at the list of the artists, the mentality of the show was generally more comported towards *New Image Painting* rather than *Pictures*. For a review of the show, see Joan Simon, 'Double Takes' in *Art in America*, vol. 68, no. 8, October 1980: 113-117. Owens implicitly continued his examination into allegory on the pages of *Art in America*, and Benjamin Buchloh explored a politicised allegorical postmodernism in *Artforum* with his essays 'Marcel Broodthaers: Allegories of the Avant-Garde' (May 1980) and 'Allegorical Procedures: Appropriation and Montage in Contemporary Art' (September 1982).

³ Douglas Crimp, 'Pictures': 77.

⁴ Rosalind Krauss, *The Optical Unconscious* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London, England: MIT Press, 1993): 6-7.

⁵ Fried, 'Art and Objecthood' in *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews* (Chicago and London, University of Chicago Press, 1998): 167-168.

⁶ Robert Smithson, 'Letter to the Editor' in *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings*: 66-67. Originally published in *Artforum*, vol. 6, no. 2, October 1967.

⁷ Cited from Owens, 'The Allegorical Impulse, Part 2' in *Beyond Recognition*, ed. by Scott Tilman et al (Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 1992): 71.

⁸ *Ibid.*: 71.

⁹ See Owens, 'The Discourse of Others' in *Beyond Recognition*: 169-170.

¹⁰ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. by G. E. M. Anscombe (Oxford: Blackwell, 1953): 178.

¹¹ Stanley Cavell *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999 [1979]): 356.

¹² Ibid.: 355.

¹³ See Stanley Cavell, 'Music Discomposed' in *Must We Mean What We Say?* Updated Edition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002 [1969]): 197-198.

¹⁴ This, of course, raises the question of the connection between art and nature. In this regard it is highly notable that, for Kant in *The Critique of Judgment*, artworks are aesthetically perceivable when they are seen as nature (reformulate); and it is equally notable that Hegel rapidly and confidently dispenses with the question of nature and its relation to art in the opening paragraph of his *Aesthetics*.

¹⁵ Stanley Cavell, *The World Viewed: Reflections on the Ontology of Film*, enlarged edition (Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London, England: Harvard University Press, 1979 [1972]): 110.

¹⁶ The trilogy is: *Absorption and Theatricality: Painting and Beholder in the Age of Diderot* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press 1980); *Courbet's Realism* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press 1990); and *Manet's Modernism, or, The Face of Painting in the 1860s* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

¹⁷ See Fried, *Courbet's Realism*: 276-277. For the Hegel passage, see G. W. F. Hegel, *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, trans. by T. M. Knox (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), vol. 1: 31.

¹⁸ But, as Stephen Melville argues along lines stemming from the work of Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, we might want to question the understanding of mimesis as an essentially visual activity based around imitation; instead, conceiving mimesis less as visual imitation than as something like 'prolongation'. For Melville see 'Compelling Acts, Haunting Convictions' in *Seams: Art as a Philosophical Context*, ed. by Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe (Amsterdam: G and B Arts, 1996); for Lacoue-Labarthe, who has carefully explored non-ocularcentric conceptions of mimesis and subjectivity, see 'Typography' and 'The Echo of the Subject' in his *Typography: Mimesis, Philosophy, Politics*, ed. Christopher Fynsk, introduction by Jacques Derrida (Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London, England: Harvard University Press, 1989).

¹⁹ This is not to claim that something like 'staring out of the picture' is enough to constitute facingness. Facingness seems like a good description of Dürer's *Self-Portrait* of 1500, but not really of Rembrandt's numerous self-portraits (although his group portrait the *Syndics* does seem to prefigure many aspects of facingness explored by Fried). Gerhard Richter's *Betty* (1988; St. Louis Arts Museum) seems to explore issues of facingness—although in a manner rendered complex by the fact that she turns away from the beholder.

²⁰ Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*: 378-379.

²¹ I place *between* within scare-quotes in this parenthetical remark to register my scepticism apropos the actual possibility of distinguishing between art criticism and art history in Fried's career. Some writers, such as T.J. Clark, Leo Steinberg, Joseph Leo Koerner, and Michael Baxandall strike me as writing in space where art-critical and art-historical modes are deeply intertwined or implicitly shown to be already 'de-differentiated'. For more on this, see my 'The New Critical Historians of Art?' in James Elkins and Michael Newman (eds), *The State of Art Criticism* (New York and London: Routledge, 2008): 289-295.

²² Fried, 'Art and Objecthood': 151.

²³ Ibid.: 169, n. 6.

²⁴ In trying to imagine the metaphoricity underpinning the *as* in Fried's footnote, it's useful to set that footnote aside a passage from Kant's *Critique of Judgment*: 'Instead, we must be able to view the ocean as poets do, merely in terms of what manifests itself to the eye—e.g. if we observe it while it is calm, as a clear mirror of water bounded only by the sky; or, if it is turbulent, as being like an abyss threatening to engulf everything—and yet find it sublime.' Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. by Werner Pluhar (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987): 130 (§ 149). The *as* which belongs to a particular modality of aesthetic judgment—the sublime—here works the transformation or re-registration through metaphor of aspects in the world that seem beyond our perceptual capabilities; the immense ocean becomes viewable *as* a mirror. More on the relation between these passages in Fried and Kant (and also with Heidegger) is to be found in my 'Interpretations of Interpretation—Allegory and Hermeneutics'.

²⁵ The confusion of *is* and *as*, or of literality and figurality, is a major theme of Paul de Man's criticism. See especially his *Allegories of Reading* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1979).

²⁶ Being in Heidegger is generally a being *as*, and therefore less a stable, self-sufficient thing, but something that is traversed, made out of its relation to other things. I owe this formulation to

Stephen Melville, 'Colour Has Not Yet Been Named: Objectivity and Deconstruction' in *Seams*: 129-146.

²⁷ That the artwork, for Fried, makes itself out of its relation to other artworks, invites difficult questions apropos the 'temporality' and 'historicity' proper *to* or contained *in* the work; furthermore, although this must remain speculative for the present moment, it would also seem to problematise how such works (if their internal temporality and historicity is fundamentally complex) can be said to belong to particular historical moments. I do not have space to consider these questions here (I intend to return to these questions in the near future), but as a way of beginning to think about this issue, it is worth quoting from Fried's essay 'How Modernism Works': 'The most that follows from my account, and I agree that it is by no means negligible, is that those conventions will bear a perspicuous relation to convention operative in the most significant work of the recent past, though here it is necessary to add (the relation of perspicuousness consists precisely in this) that significant new work will inevitably transform our understanding of those prior conventions and moreover invest those prior works themselves with a generative importance (and isn't that to say with a measure of value or quality?) that until that moment they may not have had. Thus the evolution since the early 1950s of what is often called colour-field painting has entailed a continual reinterpretation of Pollock's allover drip paintings of 1947-50 as well as an ever more authoritative identification of those pictures as the fountainhead of an entire tradition of modernist painting.' Fried characterises this view of modernism as 'intensely perspectival' and 'circular' in which 'the meaning and value of the present are conceived as underwritten by a relation to a past that is continually being revised and reevaluated by the present.' See Fried, 'How Modernism Works: A Response to T. J. Clark' in Mitchell, W. J. T (ed.), *The Politics of Interpretation* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1983): 231-232.

²⁸ Stanley Cavell, 'Existentialism and Analytic Philosophy' in *Themes Out of School: Effects and Causes* (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1984): 195-234. The essay was originally published in Summer 1964 in *Daedalus*.

²⁹ Cavell, 'Existentialism and Analytic Philosophy': 228-229.

³⁰ *Ibid.*: 229.

³¹ Cavell, *The World Viewed*: 111.

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Prophet or Witness: Subverting the Allegorical Gaze in Francisco Goya's *Truth Rescued by Time*

Mercedes Cerón

Abstract

This paper explores Francisco Goya's response to the crisis of allegory as a form of visual representation. Goya's use of allegory in a number of works produced about 1800-1820 is considered in relation to a simultaneous crisis of History as a genre. His attempt at representing contemporary events in the *Disasters of War* evidences a concern shared by the late eighteenth-century theoreticians that discussed the suitability of allegory to represent abstract concepts, such as pain and suffering. Goya's way of combining word and image renders the painter's position as either witness or prophet of History problematic. His series plays with the conventions of allegorical language to create a distinct mode of representation where meaning and agency are unsettled and hence constantly negotiated.

Cracking the Code

In August 1798, Manuel de Quevedo y Bustamante, a medical doctor in the Castilian town of Toledo, brought to the attention of the Inquisition a painted fan acquired at the local fair. In his statement, now preserved among the Inquisition papers in the National Archives in Madrid, the doctor described the fan, imported from France, as decorated with a female figure dressed in a white and blue robe, her head crowned with rays of light. He came to the conclusion that this woman ought to represent the Immaculate Conception, although he rushed to add that her immodesty and the fact that she was depicted in an object as frivolous as a fan prevented him from being absolutely certain about this identification.¹

Doctor Quevedo was not the only one to be confused. When called to examine the suspicious fan, two friars from the nearby convent of Discalced Franciscans decided to use the sixteenth-century *Commentaria Symbolica* by Antonius Ricciardus to decipher the allegory, which also included personifications of France, Justice, the Pope and a number of European kings and emperors. In

the Inquisition report, the two friars analyse in detail each individual symbol. Even if Ricciardus's volume was probably a little outdated when it came to French revolutionary propaganda, it helped them to rule out any insult to the Immaculate Conception and to conclude that the image was intended as an allegory of Liberty and an attack on royal and ecclesiastical power.



Fig. 1: Francisco Goya. *Time, Truth and History*, 1797-1800, oil on canvas, 41.6 x 32.7 cm .
Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

At the time this incident happened in Toledo, the court painter Francisco Goya was working on an allegory that might have caused even more puzzlement to doctor Quevedo and his Franciscan companions. Goya's oil sketch representing *Time, Truth and History* (1797-1800; fig. 1) was probably connected with a later painting which was commissioned by the Spanish queen's favourite Manuel Godoy for his palace in Madrid, and which is now in the Nationalmuseum in Stockholm (fig. 2).² Previous discussions and debates on this picture aimed at determining its date of production and the specific meaning of the personifications depicted. Less attention has been paid, however, to Goya's handling of the theoretical problems associated with the contemporary crisis of allegory.³



Fig. 2: Francisco Goya. *Truth, Rescued by Time, Witnessed by History*, 1800-1812, oil on canvas, 294 x 244 cm. Nationalmuseum, Stockholm.

I have begun this essay with the Inquisition episode because it illustrates how and why the French allegorical tradition did not translate well into Spanish. The secular French society of the Directory offered few similarities with a country where the first idea that an enthroned female figure would bring to mind was the Immaculate Conception. Even if the French propagandist was not aware of this when sending his goods across the Pyrenees, Goya must have been. Moreover, the role of the Inquisition evokes an historical moment appropriate for this type of experiment in representation, when 'for political or metaphysical reasons there is something that cannot be said'.⁴

In this essay, I will argue that Goya's take on allegory can be considered as dialogical, in the sense that K. Hirschkop explains Mikhail Bakhtin's work.⁵ Dialogue is understood here neither a conciliatory subterfuge nor the means of striving for the conclusiveness inherent to interpretation. Goya's combinations of word and image, as well as his use of mechanisms of quotation, assemblage and self-reference, preclude any belief in, or hopes of, a hermeneutic totality. In Goya's early allegories, the dialectics of the signifier and the signified are

replaced by a more constructive notion of the production of meaning. They call into question the fundamental distinction between the realistic and the symbolic proposed by Fredric Jameson's statement that 'we can't see the surface of life and see through it simultaneously'.⁶

In this essay, I hope to show how the works produced by Goya between 1797 and 1814 are key to identifying the dominant mode of representation during that period as allegorical. I will argue that his concern with representing History and with the problems of temporality that this subject involved was the catalyst for his exploration of a language that, despite being deemed obsolete by his contemporaries, became productively subverted and renewed in his series of prints. The works dated to this period are subject to the 'disconnectedness', 'disjunction' and 'disengagement' commonly associated with allegory. Both their formal configuration and their structure of signification depend on the constant renegotiation and rearrangement of the levels of meaning coexisting within each image and within each series of images.

History as storytelling

Goya's teacher and protector at the Academy of San Fernando, the German painter and theoretician Anton Raphael Mengs, was well aware of the problems that the 'ideal style' and the language of classical rhetoric posed for Spanish audiences and painters, schooled in the realism of what he called the 'natural' style.⁷ A comparison between Mengs's *Allegory of History* (c.1772; Rome, Vatican library; fig. 3) and Goya's approach to the same subject reveals the latter's peculiar use of allegorical conventions. Mengs's idealised figures are characterised by symbolic attributes arranged in complex combinations. They presuppose a very specific type of viewer, conversant with the emblematic tradition of Italian humanism and familiar with scholarly interpretations of the archaeological pieces depicted in the background. This ideal spectator would know not only how to identify the sources and the meaning of each object, but also how to put all of them together to re-create Mengs's original concept. His work aims at veiling Truth from the general public, following what was declared

to be the main purpose of allegory in an essay published in the Madrid periodicals in 1790:

Under the strangest exterior appearance, allegory hides the wittiest ideas and the most beautiful pictures of Nature to improve the taste of the wise and to hide its wonders away from the profane eyes of the vulgar.⁸



Fig. 3: Anton Raphael Mengs. *Allegory of History*, c. 1772, fresco. Camera dei Papiri, Vatican.

Located in the Vatican's Gabinetto dei Papiri, Meng's painting was addressed to a very specific audience. It is more difficult, however, to define the kind of viewer who would see Goya's allegorical paintings in Godoy's palace, a semi-public space where both state and personal business were conducted. The figure that outstretches her arms and lifts her chin defiantly towards the viewer in Goya's Stockholm allegory has been identified as a personification of Truth. Until very recently, however, she was considered as the embodiment of Spain

holding the text of the first Spanish Constitution, proclaimed in Cádiz in 1812.⁹ The current interpretation of this picture and its pendant, also in Stockholm, as allegories of History and Poetry results from Isadora Rose's archival research on the 1804 inventory of Godoy's collection.¹⁰ Were it not for this document, the woman in white would be still Spain and this allegory would be seen as alluding to a specific historical event.

After the discovery of Godoy's inventory, the painting now titled *Truth Rescued by Time, Witnessed by History* appears as a propaganda piece contributing to Godoy's fashioning of his public self-image into that of an enlightened statesman. The subject becomes problematic because of Goya's suppression of the trappings that traditionally accompany classical personifications. Truth is dressed in white, while her characteristic nakedness becomes an attribute of History. This departure from the preparatory sketch in Boston, which shows a more conventionally naked Truth, suggests that a change in Goya's conception of the allegory had taken place between 1797 and 1814.

What happened during those years? Between 1810 and 1812, Goya produced a series of eighty two etchings known as *The Disasters of War*, which remained unpublished until 1863. Although most of the scenes depicted in the *Disasters* have been regarded as 'factual', they include fifteen allegorical plates which, according to Juliet Wilson, were probably added to the series after 1820.¹¹ The two allegorical etchings representing the death of Truth show a graceful dark-haired young woman dressed in white satin resembling the figure in the Stockholm painting. In *Truth Died* (plate 79), she lies with her eyes closed and an expression of pain in her averted face (fig. 4). Without the rays of light surrounding her, this Truth deprived of her allegorical trappings could be any of the women raped, beaten and killed throughout the series. Among the ghostly ecclesiastics and grotesque onlookers attending her funeral, the only gesture of sympathetic grief corresponds to another woman, who covers her face on the right. She could be mistaken for any of the Spanish women fleeing their homes holding their babies under one arm and their chickens under the other, like the figure in plate 45 (fig. 5). The addition of the abandoned scales lying at her feet, however, transforms the weeping woman into a personification of Justice.

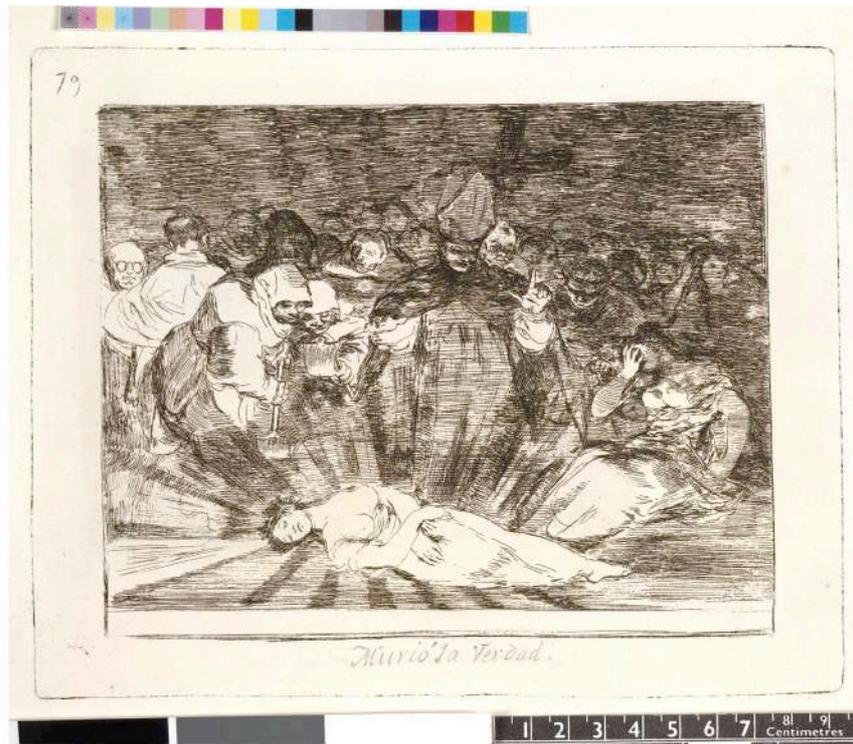


Fig. 4: Francisco Goya. *Truth has died*, 1812-1820, etching and burnisher. 17.6 x 21.7 cm. The British Museum, London. © Trustees of the British Museum.

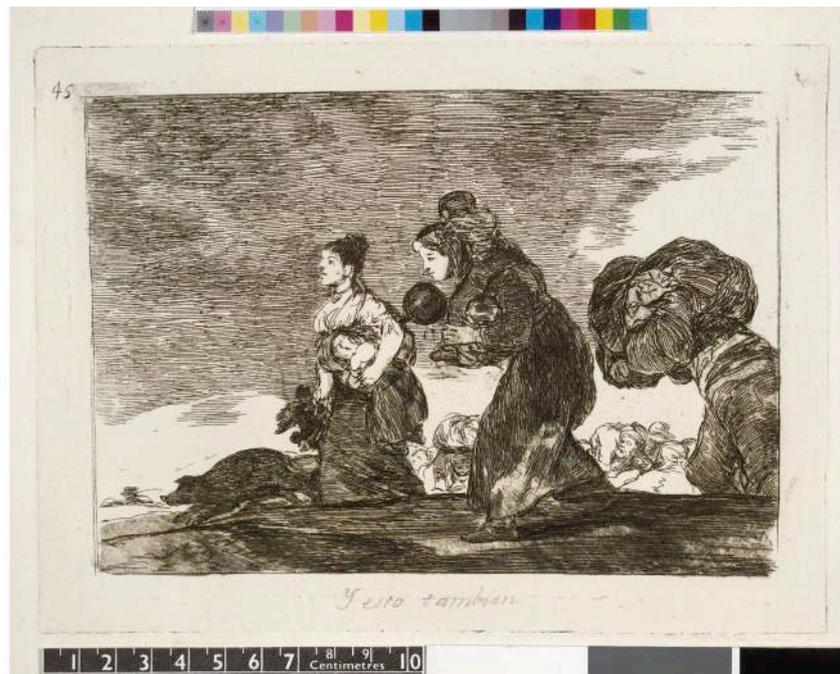


Fig. 5: Francisco Goya. *And this too*, 1812-1820, etching, aquatint, drypoint and burin. The British Museum, London. © Trustees of the British Museum.

The second allegorical plate representing Truth bears the caption *Will she rise again?* (fig. 6) The light coming from her dead body functions as a visual representation of Hope.¹² As often in the *Disasters*, the caption seems part of an ongoing conversation. Meaning is conceived as processual: it emerges from the interaction between the fragmentary utterances of the captions and the images above. The openness of the dialogue that viewers establish either with themselves or with other viewers evokes the practices of seeing associated with the format in which the prints were presented.¹³ Bound in a volume in quarto, like the one open on the ground at History's feet in the Stockholm allegory, the prints would allow viewers not only to construct, but also to discuss, their own interpretation of the images. That the book contains images and not written text can be deduced from a close examination of the open pages. Moreover, the white tissue around History's left feet alludes to a common means of protecting the surface of the etched illustrations. In this painting, the sheet of white tissue paper interspersed among the pages has been temporarily removed from the book while History goes through its pages and makes notes.



Fig. 6: Francisco Goya. *Will she rise again?*, 1812-1820, etching and burnisher, 17.6 x 21.6 cm. The British Museum, London. © Trustees of the British Museum.

A significant precedent of Goya's Truth can be found in Jean-François Detroy's *Time Unveiling Truth* (1733; London, National Gallery; fig. 7).¹⁴ De Troy's personification wears a similar low-cut white robe and her outstretched arms resemble the gesture of Goya's figure. De Troy's paintings were often reproduced in prints, which would potentially have made many viewers familiar with this iconographic variant. In De Troy's work, however, the personification only acquires a specific meaning when considered in relation to the rest of elements forming the allegory. The laurel wreaths, the Roman sandals and the colour-coded draperies, which also feature in Mengs's painting, disappear, however, from Goya's allegory, as does Time's scythe.



Fig. 7: Jean-François Detroy. *Time unveiling Truth*, 1733. Oil on canvas. 203 x 208 cm. The National Gallery, London.

The same mechanism of demystification operates in its pendant: Poetry rolls up her sleeves and leans her hands on her hips like a Madrid *maja*, surrounded by *putti* playing instruments and by a crowd of onlookers who resemble curious passers by, rather than celebrated poets (fig. 8). There is a hint of self-parody in this Parnassus, where Pegasus seems to have been replaced by a hobby-horse. The resulting effect is similar to that produced by the contemporary

theatrical representations criticised by Goya's friend and patron Gaspar Melchor de Jovellanos. Regretting the seeming inability of Spanish authors to represent the ideal which, in his opinion, made Spanish theatre inferior to its French counterpart, Jovellanos noticed that 'other countries bring *gods* and *nymphs* to dance on stage, whereas we have knaves and marketwomen.'¹⁵



Fig. 8: Francisco Goya. *The Apotheosis of Poetry*, 1800-1812, oil on canvas, 298 x 326 cm
Nationalmuseum, Stockholm.

Mengs singled out the same resistance to idealisation as characteristic of the Spanish school of painting, which he identified with Velázquez's works. The 'tinsel and cardboard' elements in the staging of Goya's allegorical images emphasise the artifice and contrivance on which, paradoxically, the effect of the real depends. This strategy would be antithetical to the 'willing suspension of disbelief' that characterises both literary fiction and the 'factual' mode of representation associated with documentary genres, such as the chronicle.¹⁶ Goya's choice of imagery, as well as his pairing of History with Poetry, would imply a notion of History as shaped by rhetorical devices shared by other forms of storytelling.

Goya's sparse use of the elements provided by the emblematic and allegorical traditions shows his unwillingness to anchor meaning in the way Mengs did. Moreover, it reveals a different awareness of the possibilities offered by allegory when understood as a combination of signs to deconstruct and reconstruct itself. Goya's works have been considered, however, as evidence of 'the ultimate loss of validity of the allegory', akin to the negative appraisal of the obscurity and confusion associated with this trope that appears in Jovellanos's theoretical writings.¹⁷

With allegory thus dismissed by the circle of enlightened thinkers with whom Goya associated himself, why would he return to this mode of representation in the *Disasters*? Godoy, to whom the allegories of History and Poetry belonged, referred in his *Memories* to his support of projects such as the *Picturesque Travels in Spain* in 1802 as a way of 'making Spanish History more accessible and easier to know, so that Spaniards would study their History by means of sight, rather than by reading their books'.¹⁸ Godoy's words also recognise what J. G. Sulzer noted as the purpose of 'historical allegory,' where a specific event is given a 'soul, which renders thus perceptible to the eye what is invisible'.¹⁹

The example chosen by Sulzer to illustrate his definition of historical allegory was that of Alexander's campaigns, where the underlying theme would be 'the noble desire to take revenge for an insolent despot's insults against a free people, or the fatal consequences derived from this spirit of domination and conquest'.²⁰ The parallel with the Spanish resistance to Napoleon's campaign is implied by Goya's title page for the *Disasters*, which reads 'Fatal consequences of the bloody war in Spain with Bonaparte. And other allegorical *caprichos*'.²¹ In his essay, Sulzer also wrote about the advantages that this mode of representation offered for the depiction of historical events, since 'it shows general notions by means of individuals and it encapsulates in a sole instant many sequential events'.²² It is this concern with temporality and its implications that lies at the core of the theories on allegory that may help understand Goya's take on the genre.

On temporality

In the Stockholm allegory of History, Time is represented as an elderly man holding his characteristic hourglass. He grasps Truth's arm while lifting his eyes towards the light coming from the left. The lower part of his body is draped, revealing only his upper half. The heroic modelling of the torso, as well as the turn of his head and neck, the anguished expression of his face and the rendering of his hair recall images of the Hellenistic sculpture of Laocoön. The difference in the disposition of the arms can be explained because of their absence in the damaged group before its restoration. A sixteenth-century engraving of the sculpture after Marcantonio suggests how this detail could be left to the artist's interpretation (fig. 9). Moreover, an early instance of the association of the Laocoön group with Time could be found in Jean Delaune's allegory on Time triumphing over the world, engraved by Étienne Delaune in 1580 (fig. 10). Although Goya might have seen the Laocoön group during his stay in Rome in 1770, the mediating source for his painting is likely to be El Greco's *Laocoön* (c.1610-1614; Washington DC, National Gallery; fig. 11), dated 1610-1614, whose arms are folded in a way similar to Goya's Time.



Fig. 9: Marco da Ravenna after Marcantonio. *Laocoön*, 1522-1525, engraving, 47.4 x 32.5 cm. The British Museum, London. © Trustees of the British Museum.



Fig. 10: Étienne Delaune, after Jean Delaune. *Allegory on Time Triumphant over the World*, 1580, engraving. 0.66 x 0.93 cm. The British Museum, London. © Trustees of the British Museum.

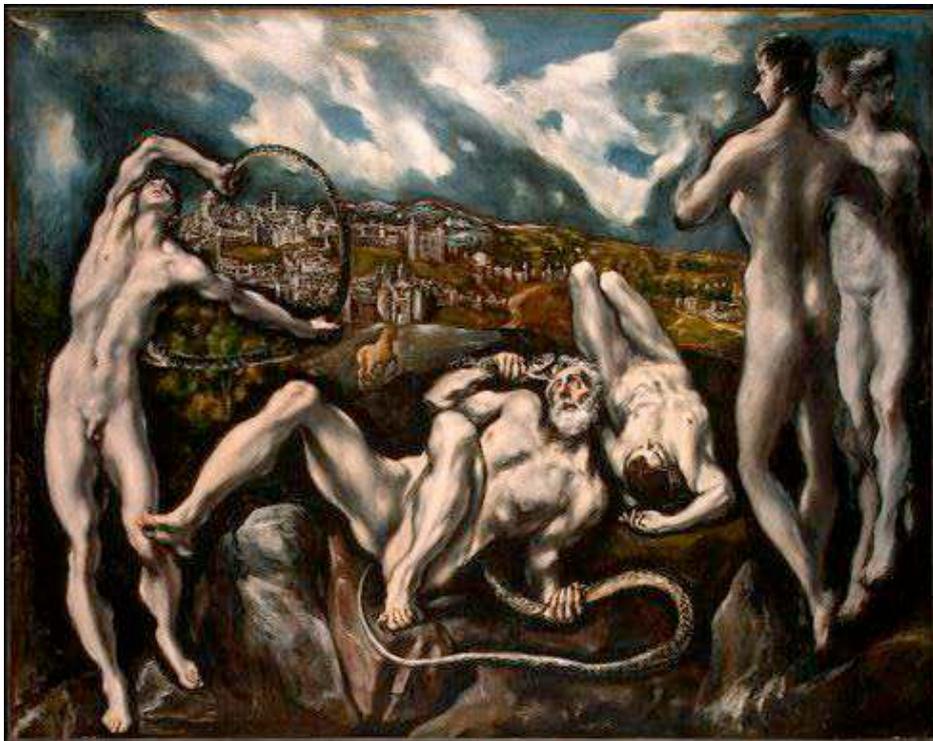


Fig. 11: El Greco (Domenikos Theotokopoulos), *Laocoön*, c.1610-1614, oil on canvas, 137.5 x 172.5 cm. National Gallery of Art, Washington DC

The figure of Laocoön was at the centre of the eighteenth-century debate on the 'limitations of Painting and Poetry', as discussed by Gotthold Ephraim Lessing in his 1766 essay.²³ Lessing's Laocoön illustrates his notion of the 'pregnant moment', emphasising the function of this image of suffering as a representation of time and duration.²⁴ Laocoön could thus be seen as an 'allegory of time made visible'.²⁵ Lessing's reference to the problematic representation of time in painting might explain Goya's quotation. His appropriation of the myth would thus allude to contemporary debates on expression and representation, or on the comparative aptitude of words and images to convey and to communicate meaning.²⁶

In subsequent developments of the debate, the Laocoön group appeared as the site of the polemic between allegory and symbol. William Blake's print after an earlier drawing of the cast in the Royal Academy, dated about 1826, hints at the crisis of allegory in the early nineteenth-century, while also exemplifying the blurring of the genres 'in a mixed art of poetry and painting' (fig. 12).²⁷ Blake's etching shows Laocoön as a sign of the 'historical mutation of conscience' that replaces the visionary with the allegorical.²⁸ Even if 'implicit allegories' can be found throughout Blake's production, they still operate as a form of concealment although, in his case, they pertain to a personal mythology.²⁹



Fig. 12: William Blake. *Laocoön*, c. 1826, line engraving, 52.2 x 21.2 cm. Collection of R.N. Essick, Altadena, California.

Leaving aside the problem of Goya's possible knowledge of Blake's work, the images that he produced around 1800 evidence a similar awareness of allegory's arrival at a point of crisis. Goya's response, however, differs from Blake's visionary detours. While in the former's paintings the reception of the image is somewhat more controlled, his series of prints show the arbitrariness of the allegorical sign opening up the process of signification. Meaning is constructed as an ongoing dialogue between the viewer and the object, the present and the past, the artist and the spectator, the image and the written word. These binary combinations are not dialectical, but dialogical since they do not tend towards a resolution involving the exclusion or the neutralisation of one of their terms. Rather, they suggest that the possibility of representing what escapes representation by means of an open process of incorporation and reconstruction.

The problem of temporality underlying the allegory painted for Godoy is explored further in the *Disasters*. Goya's adopted role as witness and narrator of History can be seen to be derived from a notion of experience based on the relationship between time and being. Such a relationship draws on the distinction between 'the actual' and 'the primordial', 'the actual' being a 'presence marked by the empirical', whereas 'the primordial' is 'an otherness within presence which is part of presence itself.'³⁰ But temporality was not the only problem of representation embodied by *Laocoön*. As Simon Richter notices, in Goethe's essay on the Hellenistic group, 'to see it is to see pain'.³¹ Laocoon exemplifies how pain can be rendered harmless by 'the visual representation of the story, of the linguistic sign.'

The Disasters as allegory

The difficulty of representing war, pain and death is paralleled by the spectator's incapacity to bear their representation. In this sense, Goya's work refers back to the eighteenth-century debate on the expressive possibilities of the visual arts that was, once again, associated with the figure of *Laocoön*. The Spanish diplomat José Nicolás de Azara, portrayed by Goya in 1805, addressed this

problem in the notes to his compilation of Mengs's writings, the second edition of which appeared in 1797, the same date of Goya's Boston sketch. According to Azara,

Nobody with a fair judgement can suppose for a moment that what is represented in a picture is true. And I must add that, if this were the case, most of the paintings would have an effect on us opposed to the one they actually produce. How would any person of a delicate nature and a sensitive soul look with any pleasure at the carnage inflicted by some brutal soldiers on the bodies of some innocent creatures?

The question posed by Azara was one that any viewer could ask in front of Goya's *Disasters of War*. Moreover, Azara specifically refers to the sculptural group of Laocoön as an example of a representation of pain where 'no gesture or convulsion can destroy the beauty of the forms'.¹ footnote? Goya's dialogical mode of representation suggests the way forward from this aesthetic and moral conundrum. In the *Disasters*, allegory is not restricted to the fifteen plates commonly accepted as such. The whole conception of the series could be defined as allegorical in its transformation of individual figures and episodes into a sequence of visual metaphors of war, pain and death.

The difficulties encountered in the study of Goya's use of allegory increase when considering the audience of the series of prints that Goya produced during the same period, mostly satirical, but also symbolic and conventionally allegorical. What happens when the conditions in which the allegorical image is perceived cannot be so easily controlled and pre-determined? The ambiguity of Goya's allegories does not preclude accessibility. His images are open to a multiplicity of readings that do not prevent alternative and conflicting interpretations.

That language may be the key to undermine the descriptive or factual pretensions of the image is a constant assumption throughout Goya's early career. It underlies his allusions to a 'universal language' in the annotations added to his preparatory drawing for the frontispiece of the *Caprichos*, dated

around 1797 (fig. 13). It is significant that 'universal language' was the definition of allegory provided by Winckelmann in an essay on this subject written in 1766.³² Sulzer also addressed the use of allegory as the 'real language' whose composite nature allows expressing 'general truths' in his *Discours sur l'allégorie*.³³ Sulzer specified that allegory has recourse to 'natural' signs, whereas the signs used in 'ordinary language' are arbitrary.³⁴

Goya's concerns can be associated with what Wellbery calls the 'semiotic theory' of the Enlightenment.³⁵ The fact that *Truth, Time and History* is paired with an allegory of Poetry recalls Lessing's own comparison of poetry and the visual arts, which the same author considers 'organized according to a global model of aesthetic signification.'³⁶ The origins of the 'natural sign' and the formation of language were the subject of a series of articles and essays that appeared in the periodical *Spirit of the Best European Journals*, published in Madrid by Cristóbal Cladera during the late 1780s and early 1790s. Both Sulzer's and Winckelmann's works were extensively quoted and discussed in this publication. Drawing on these contemporary German sources, their author discussed the arbitrariness of different types of signs, as well as the comparative merits of word and image to communicate thought and knowledge. According to these principles, allegory in the visual arts would share the arbitrariness of literary language, since both construct meaning by means of sequential permutations and combinations of signs.

In the *Disasters*, the way in which Goya integrates allegories within the established sequence of images of war broadens the expressive possibilities of both modes of representation. The metaphoric nature of the fifteen prints that he explicitly labels as 'emphatic *caprichos*' destabilises the linear sequence of the series, thus escaping the formal constraints and the demands of clarity that would characterise official propaganda. The internal logic of the captions is called into question by the discontinuity of the supposedly sequential order of images, subject to constant fragmentation and rearrangement. The productive albeit uneasy interplay of these two parallel sequences provides a belated response to Lessing's problematisation of the relation between poetry and the visual arts.



Fig. 13: Francisco Goya. *Frontispiece to a set of 'Sueños'*, 1797, pen, brown ink and chalk, 24.8 x 17.2 cm. Museo del Prado, Madrid.

The working proofs of the *Disasters* in the British Museum bear Goya's traces in more than one sense. The album is one of the two sets assembled by Goya himself and printed during his lifetime.³⁷ This volume belonged to Goya's friend, the writer and art historian Juan Agustín Ceán Bermúdez, charged by Goya with correcting and rewriting his captions for the professional etcher. Each print shows a caption written in pencil. However, on closer examination, two superimposed traces can be distinguished in each annotation. The original trace becomes not only the means by which Goya's presence is asserted within the image. Each caption is also an utterance that calls the viewer's attention to the need for interpretation. These captions added to apparently 'realistic' images are neither explanatory, nor descriptive. Susan Sontag has referred to them as 'comments on the provocation' depicted above:

While the image, like every image, is an invitation to look, the caption, more often than not, insists on the difficulty of doing just that. A voice, presumably the artist's, badgers the viewer: can you bear to look at this?³⁸

Unlike Blake's illustrated poems, in Goya's *Disasters*, the written word is integrated as an essential component of the image. The caption is used as an individual signifier, whose function equals that of the personifications depicted in the image or of their attributes. At the same time, the correspondences and relations established between captions throughout the series belongs to a distinct, if not separate, system, whose internal logic conditions and determines the internal logic of the images.³⁹

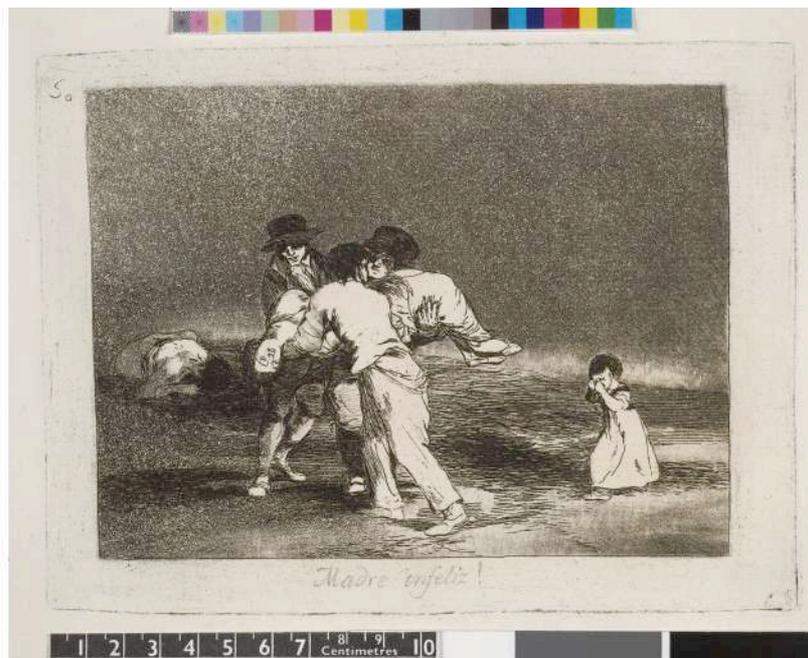


Fig. 14: Francisco Goya. *Unhappy mother!*, 1812-1815, etching, aquatint and drypoint, 15.5 x 20.5 cm. The British Museum, London. © Trustees of the British Museum.

A formal analysis of the plates reveals in the first instance a striking economy in the use of compositional devices. Backgrounds are often sparse to the point of abstraction, as in plate 50 (fig.14). The same lack of individualisation can be noticed in the depiction of the figures. The scenes of war in the *Disasters* have been considered as the outcome of Goya's journey from Madrid to his native Aragón after the French invasion in 1808.⁴⁰ Despite his role as witness, in his

depiction of costumes and settings Goya seems to avoid those specific details that would have reinforced the 'realistic' or 'documentary' claims of his images. In plate 26, *One can't look*, the soldiers are reduced to the tips of their rifles which, only half-seen on the right, function as a synecdoche (fig. 15). Here, as in other plates where the figures of the attackers are depicted in full, they are characterised and recognisable as 'Soldiers', but not specifically as members of the French infantry belonging to the Napoleonic army. Similarly, their victims are shown as defenceless 'Civilians', but their costumes and features remain generic and somewhat timeless.

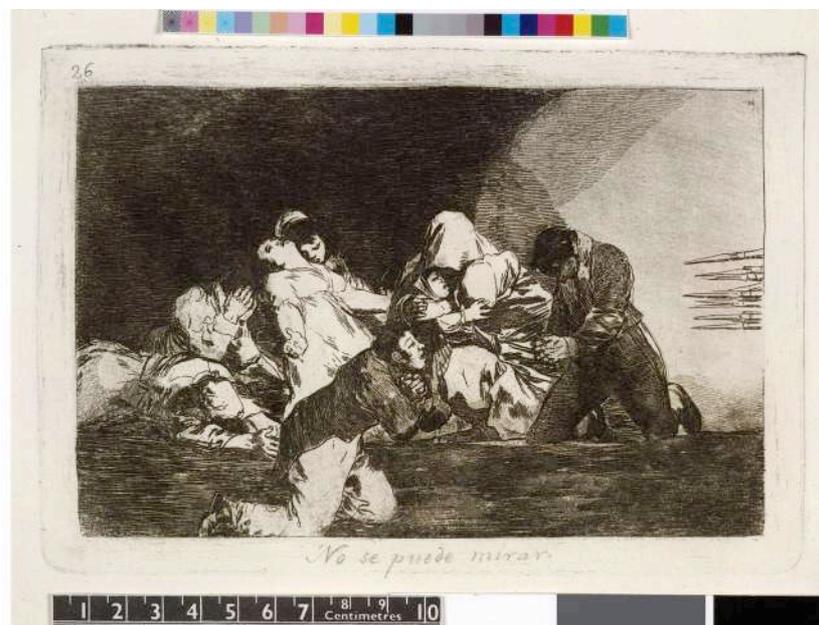


Fig. 15: Francisco Goya. *One can't look*, 1810-1812, etching, aquatint and drypoint, 14.3 x 20.4 cm. The British Museum, London. © Trustees of the British Museum.

The *Disasters* could be considered as a form of allegory that blends the structural and the temporal dimensions of the trope, following Joel Fineman's analysis.⁴¹ The sequential format and the conception of the series evoke the narrative mode and, hence, the 'horizontal' dimension in which temporality is the dominant feature. At the same time, each image reveals a concern with the preservation of an internal coherence throughout the series that is more characteristic of the 'perpendicular' orientation of allegory.⁴² In the *Disasters*, the allegorical mode functions as a form of articulation. It provides what is essentially an assemblage of centrifugal elements and structures with a

coherence that makes the construction of meaning possible, without suppressing or neutralising conflict.

Goya's 'real allegories'

As Terry Eagleton notices, 'Baroque allegory lays bare the device, posing motto and caption in blunt, obtrusive relation to the visual figure, defeating the mystifications of symbolism.'⁴³ The implications of Goya's use of word and image become evident when comparing plate 69, the caption of which has been variously translated as 'Nothing. It says as much' and 'Nothing. That is what it says' (fig. 16), with the *Allegory of Death* painted by the Sevillian Juan de Valdés Leal's in 1670-1672 (fig. 17). In the latter, the scales are held by a disembodied hand emerging from among the clouds over the corpse. In the former, the scales reappear next to a corpse, but this time they are associated with a female personification of Justice.⁴⁴ Valdés's allegory includes the motto 'Neither more nor less', accompanied by the Latin inscription 'Finis gloriae mundi' ('Thus end worldly glories'). The captions in Goya's print are not conclusive and self-contained: they prompt a reply and they presuppose the viewer's interpretive response.

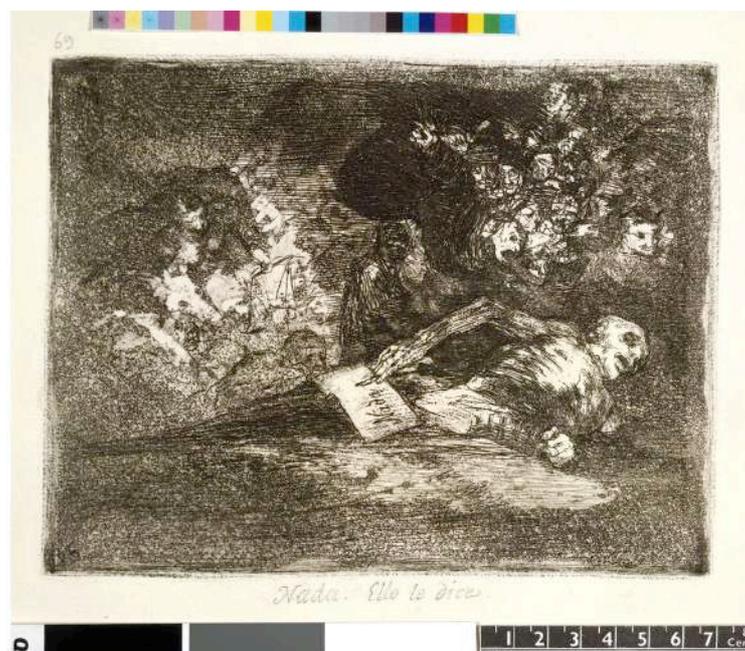


Fig. 16: Francisco Goya. *Nothing. That is what it says*, 1812-1820, etching, aquatint and drypoint, 15.5 x 19.7 cm. The British Museum, London. © Trustees of the British Museum.



Fig. 17: Juan de Valdés Leal. *Finis Gloriarum Mundi*, 1670-1672, oil on canvas, 220 x 216 cm. Hospital de la Caridad, Seville

That the existing eighteenth-century allegorical tradition had reached a dead end in its exploration of this problem is evidenced throughout the plates illustrating Gottfried Eichler's version of Cesare Ripa's *Iconologia*, which George Levitine considers as a possible source for some elements in Goya's *Disasters*.⁴⁵ Eichler's work, published about 1760, was titled *Historiae et Allegoriae*. It addresses the problem of representing abstract concepts, such as famine, rage, war, flight, hunger, pestilence and rebellion, by showing in the same plate an allegorical figure in the foreground and a 'realistic' representation of a relevant historical episode in the background. In Goya's prints, however, the distinction between both modes of representation disappears, as the historical episode becomes allegorical. The burial of Truth seems to take place in the same abstract realm as the rapes, abductions and murders depicted in the previous plates.

When considered as allegorical images, the Stockholm pendants and the *Disasters* share the dialectical structure of the baroque signifier, whose 'denotative force is inseparable from its complex carnality.'⁴⁶ Throughout the

Disasters, however, we witness the formation of what Fredric Jameson has termed ‘allegorical realism’ with regard to the nineteenth-century novel: the main subject is ‘precisely the coming into being of allegory: realistic characters little by little becoming possessed, turning slowly into pure personifications.’⁴⁷ Goya’s claim to the role of witness of the images of war included in the *Disasters* implies that the scenes and the individuals depicted are facts and people located in a specific historical and geographical context. However, the presence of a number of clearly allegorical plates interspersed in the series renders either his position or the ‘factual’ tone of most prints problematic.

It is not coincidental that in the introductory essay to the catalogue of their 2003 exhibition ‘Insult to Injury’ based on the *Disasters*, Jake and Dinos Chapman chose to quote Lessing’s *Laocöon* in order to take issue with Goya’s involvement in the ‘Enlightenment project’.⁴⁸ For them, Goya’s transgression of the limits of Enlightenment’s rationality is purely accidental, the unwanted result of his ‘allegiance [to] the very people who would be crushed by the principles of rationality.’⁴⁹ Far from reinforcing the authority of the image as conveyor of Truth, Goya’s repeated assertions of his role as witness are nevertheless the ultimate acknowledgment of the image’s inability to represent the whole horror of the facts. It is in this respect that the first cracks appear on the apparently seamless surface of the allegory, a mode of representation based on the authority of a structure of meaning firmly anchored in the tradition of classical rhetoric. The fancy dressing and the stage props in Goya’s allegories draw the viewer’s attention to the artifice they involve, to the point of having been read as a form of mockery.⁵⁰ The threat of dogmatic didacticism is hence avoided: images do not impose their Truth on the viewer, but they provide an opening for contesting, discussing and redefining the universality of the concepts, or the ‘Truth’, represented.

The destabilising use of different modes of representation in the *Disasters* represents a transgression of the limits, or the borders, of Poetry and Painting prescribed by Lessing.⁵¹ The internal logic of the captions disrupts the internal logic of the images, whose temporality and sequential arrangement are similarly disrupted by the interspersed allegorical plates. The factual tone of the prints

illustrating the brutality of armed conflict and the suffering inflicted on the civil population is suspended at the beginning and at the end of the series, when nightmare takes over and becomes the norm, instead of an anomaly.

The meaning of Goya's allegories is not univocal but constructed and negotiated by means of dialogical devices. These are the combinations of word and image and the appropriation and recycling of images and symbols previously used in his own works or in the tradition to which they belong. In Goya's allegorical images, the construction of meaning is understood as a collective enterprise. The inclusion of groups of onlookers is reminiscent of a Greek chorus, shifting between the realms of reality and representation and evincing the artifice involved in such distinction. In the Stockholm paintings, as in the *Disasters*, allegorical realism becomes the Trojan horse whose latent threat to destroy allegory from within remains frozen in time.

¹ Antonio Paz y Meliá, *Papeles de la Inquisición. Catálogo y extractos* (Madrid: Archivo Histórico Nacional, 1947): 210-212.

² Ludmilla Kagané, 'On the History of Allegorical paintings by Goya at Nationaalmuseum, Stockholm', *Art Bulletin of the Nationaalmuseum Stockholm*, 1-2 (1994-1995): 82-87.

³ For Goya's use of allegory in his early works and the negative view of this mode in the Spanish Enlightenment, see Rosa López Torrijos, 'Goya, el lenguaje alegórico y el mundo clásico. Sus primeras obras', *Archivo Español de Arte* 68 (1995): 165-177.

⁴ Joel Fineman, 'The Structure of Allegorical Desire', *October* 12 (1980): 48.

⁵ K. Hirschkop, 'A Response to the Forum on Mikhail Bakhtin', *Critical Inquiry* 11 (1985): 672-678.

⁶ Fredric Jameson, 'Metacommentary', *PMLA* 86 (1971): 13.

⁷ See Martín Soria, 'Goya's Allegories of Fact and Fiction', *The Burlington Magazine* 90 (1948): 196.

⁸ M. Dupuis, 'Discurso sobre el estilo alegorico de la remota antigüedad, y sobre su influencia en la historia; por Mr Dupuis Profesor de eloquencia latina en el Colegio Real de Francia', *Espiritu de los Mejores Diarios que se publican en Europa*, 9 (1790): 189 (issue no. 238, published on 21/06/1790).

⁹ This painting was dated c.1812-1814 and interpreted as an *Allegory on the Adoption of the Constitution of 1812* in the exhibitions that commemorated the 250th anniversary of Goya's birth in 1992 (see also the catalogue for the Goya exhibition in the Prado, the Metropolitan Museum New York and the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston: A. E. Pérez Sánchez and E.A. Sayre (eds) *Goya and the Spirit of Enlightenment* (Boston: Museum of Fine Arts, 1989): 167-169, cat. no. 74).

¹⁰ See Isadora Rose-De Viejo, 'Las alegorías para el palacio madrileño de Godoy', in *Goya* (Barcelona: Galaxia Gutenberg, 2001): 99-118.

¹¹ Juliet Wilson-Bareau, *Goya's Prints. The Tomás Harris Collection in the British Museum* (London: British Museum, 1981): 49.

¹² For a similar use of Light associated with the personification of Liberty, see Rolf Reichardt and Deborah L. Cohen, 'Light against Darkness: the visual representations of a central Enlightenment concept', *Representations* 61 (1998): 115, 117.

¹³ 'His manuscript captions... were brief, the sort of outraged, despairing or ironic comments that the artist might have made as he watched a friend turn the pages of his prints' (Juliet

Wilson-Bareau, *Disasters of War. Callot, Goya, Dix* (Manchester: National Touring Exhibitions, 1998): 37.

¹⁴ NG6454.

¹⁵ 'Otras naciones traen á danzar sobre las tablas los dioses y las ninfas, nosotros los manolos y las verduleras' (G. M. Jovellanos, *Memoria sobre las Diversiones Públicas... leída en la Junta Pública de la Real Academia de la Historia el 11 de Julio de 1796* (Madrid: Real Academia de la Historia, 1817): 421).

¹⁶ See Richard V. Ericson, 'How Journalists Visualize Fact', *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 560 (1998): 91.

¹⁷ 'La evidencia del cese de definitivo de la validez de la alegoría la dará más tarde Goya' (Oreste Ferrari, quoted in López Torrijos, op. cit.: 165).

¹⁸ 'Se buscaba... hacer su Historia más común y más sensible, y que los españoles la estudiasen por el sentido de la vista otro tanto y aun mejor que por los libros' (Carlos Seco Serrano, ed., *Memorias del Príncipe de la Paz* (Madrid: Editorial Atlas, 1965): 375).

¹⁹ 'Il faut... que, dans le corps de l'événement qu'il veut représenter allégoriquement, l'artiste sache découvrir une âme, et qu'il en sache rendre sensible aux yeux l'être invisible...' (J. G. Sulzer, 'Discours sur l'allégorie': 257).

²⁰ '...le désir noble de venger les insultes faites à un peuple libre par un despote insolent, ou bien aussi l'esprit de domination et de conquête avec ses suites funestes' (Sulzer: 257).

²¹ Wilson-Bareau (1981): 49.

²² 'Par le moyen de l'allégorie, on y rend possible ce qui paroîtroit ne point l'être; on représente des notions générales par des individus, et l'on renferme dans un même instant des choses successives' (Sulzer: 237).

²³ 'Painting can use only a single moment of an action in its coexisting compositions and must therefore choose the one which is most suggestive and from which the preceding and succeeding actions are most easily comprehensible' (Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, *Laocoön: an essay on the limits of Painting and Poetry*, trans. Edward Allen McCormick (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984): 78. See also W. J. T. Mitchell, 'The Politics of Genre: Space and Time in Lessing's Laocoon', *Representations* 6 (1984): 101.

²⁴ Victor Anthony Rudowski, 'Lessing Contra Winckelmann', *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 44 (1986): 236-237.

²⁵ Simon Richter, *Laocoon's Body and the Aesthetics of Pain. Winckelmann, Lessing, Herder, Moritz, Goethe* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1992): 185.

²⁶ As Richter notes in his study of Goethe's *Über Laocoon*, published in 1798, 'the statue itself... becomes... not only an allegory (as opposed to symbol) but an allegory of the entire discussion that for fifty years was carried out under its name' (Richter: 166).

²⁷ Mitchell: 110.

²⁸ David James, 'Blake's Laocoon: A Degree Zero of Literary Production', *PMLA* 98 (1983): 239.

²⁹ David Bindman, *Blake as an artist* (Oxford: Phaidon, 1977): 51.

³⁰ Andrew Benjamin, 'The Decline of Art: Benjamin's Aura', *Oxford Art Journal* 9 (1986): 33.

³¹ Richter: 166.

³² 'Prise dans le sens le plus étendu, l'allégorie est l'expression des idées par le moyen des images; elle est donc une langue universelle, principalement pour les artistes' (Johann Joachim Winckelmann, 'Essai sur l'allegorie, principalement à l'usage des artistes; Dédié à la société royale des sciences de Gottingen', *De l'allegorie our traités sur cette matière; par Winckelmann, Addison, Sulzer*, etc (Paris, 1799): 21).

³³ 'L'allégorie ne se borne point à des idées simples; elle en embrasse de composées; dans lesquelles plusieurs sont liées de manière à former un tout; elle peut représenter des vérités générales et devient par-là un véritable langage' (Sulzer: 238-39).

³⁴ Sulzer: 239.

³⁵ David Wellbery, *Lessing's Laocoon. Semiotics and Aesthetics in the Age of Reason* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984): 2.

³⁶ Richter: 112.

³⁷ Wilson (1981): 49.

³⁸ Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2003): 40.

³⁹ The notion of Painting as 'an arbitrary method of writing' that Lessing identifies with 'the grotesque forms of allegory' would represent both the culmination and the crisis of the traditional use of image and text in early modern emblem literature. See W. J. T. Mitchell, 'What is an image?', *New Literary History* 15 (1984): 527-30.

⁴⁰ Elena Santiago and Juliet Bateau, *Ydioma Universal. Goya en la Biblioteca Nacional* (Madrid: Biblioteca Nacional, 1996): 199.

⁴¹ Joel Fineman, 'The Structure of Allegorical Desire', *October* 12 (1980): 50.

⁴² Fineman: 50.

⁴³ Eagleton: 22.

⁴⁴ The figure of Justice, identical to the weeping woman in plate 79, can be seen in a proof now in the National Library, Madrid. See Jesusa Vega, *Francisco de Goya, Grabador. Desastres de la Guerra* (Madrid: Real Academia de Bellas Artes de San Fernando, 1992): 45; and Nigel Glendinning, 'Goya and Van Veen. An Emblematic Source for Some of Goya's Late Drawings', *The Burlington Magazine* 119 (1977): 570.

⁴⁵ George Levitine, 'Some Emblematic Sources of Goya', *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 22 (1959): 118.

⁴⁶ Terry Eagleton, *Walter Benjamin or Towards a Revolutionary Criticism* (London: Verso, 1981): 5.

⁴⁷ Fredric Jameson, 'La Cousin Bette and Allegorical Realism', *PMLA* 86 (1971): 252.

⁴⁸ Jake Chapman, 'Insult to Injury: the Marriage of Reason and Squalor', in *Insult to Injury* (Göttingen: Steidl, 2003): n.p.

⁴⁹ Cited in Jennifer Ramkalawon, 'Jake and Dinos Chapman's *Disasters of War*', *Print Quarterly* 18 (2001): 65.

⁵⁰ See Reva Wolf, 'Onlookers, witnesses and judges in Goya's *Disasters of War*', *Fatal Consequences: Callot, Goya and the Horrors of War* (Hanover, New Hampshire: Dartmouth College, 1990): 49.

⁵¹ Mitchell: 105.

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The Other Side of the Gaze: Ethnographic Allegory in the Early Films of Maya Deren

John Fox

Abstract

This paper examines Maya Deren's first three films in which she appears as the central protagonist: *Meshes of the Afternoon* (1943), *At Land* (1944), and *Ritual in Transfigured Time* (1945). While these films are suggestive of a personal autobiographical narrative structure, this essay seeks to show how they use the circumstances and experiences of personal subjectivity as an allegory of modernity transformed by an inverted gaze. The ethnographic allegory of Deren's early films reverse the conventional ethnographic method: they point towards the indigenous social location of the ethnographic observer enmeshed within the ritual practices and mythic subtexts of modernity itself.

Maya Deren was a groundbreaking filmmaker based in the United States, whose working career roughly spanned the two decades after World War II. The dominant themes of her filmmaking practice can be defined on the one hand by a self-reflexive concern with her own experience in terms of the place and role of the artist in the context of Western culture - and on the other by the development of an aesthetics influenced by ritual forms of traditional dance. Although writers such as Moira Sullivan¹ have seen ritual as having had an important influence throughout Deren's working life, discussions of the more directly ethnographic side of her film practice tends to be limited to her mid-career filming of possession rituals in Haiti.² What I aim to stress in this study is how an ethnographic, or more specifically, *auto*-ethnographic perspective can be discerned in her earlier, apparently more autobiographical films.

I will begin my reading by looking at Deren's first film of 1943 - *Meshes of the Afternoon* - to show how she uses this work to establish the basic structure of an auto-ethnographic method. I aim to describe this method by reference to Maurice Merleau-Ponty's discussion of the gaze in painting taken from his 1961 essay 'Eye and Mind'. According to Merleau-Ponty, certain paintings can be shown to demonstrate a 'figured philosophy of vision,' where the position and

role of the artist's gaze is included within representation itself.³ For Merleau-Ponty's notion of creative practice, the artist is *seen* as much as seeing, thus exposing the basic paradox of vision in which,

[t]hat which looks at all things can also look at itself and recognise, in what it sees, the "other side" of its power of looking. It sees itself seeing; it touches itself touching, it is visible and sensitive for itself.⁴

Criticising the absolute Cartesian split between subject and object, observer and observed, Merleau-Ponty's description of the gaze emphasises their reciprocal interpenetration and chiasmic intertwining; he points out how the embodied perception of the observer is itself fully implicated and enmeshed within the field of the visible. This reciprocal intertwining and reflexive reversibility of the divided gaze is made explicit in paintings that include mirrors or portrayals of the artist rendered within the image. As Merleau-Ponty explains:

Mirrors are instruments of a universal magic that converts things into spectacle, spectacle into things, myself into another and another into myself. Artists have often mused upon mirrors because beneath this 'mechanical trick', they recognised, as in the case of the 'trick' of perspective, the metamorphosis of seeing and seen that defines both our flesh and the painters vocation. This explains why they have so often chosen to draw themselves in the act of painting [...] adding to what *they* could see of things at that moment, what *things* could see of them.⁵

Similarly, *Meshes of the Afternoon* makes significant and repeated use of mirrors and 'trick photography' to anatomise the image, to examine the creative process and to destabilise normative social positioning in order to problematise the artist's relation to the gaze. This instability is rendered through the dream-like visual narrative of *Meshes*, which follows Deren's journey in and around the impossible and disorientating spatio-temporal logic of her home. Here the space of conventional married domesticity is decentred and rendered uncanny through

the enigma of animated objects, losses of gravity, mirror reflections, haunting apparitions and multiplications of Deren's own body.

In her now famous article of 1975, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,' Laura Mulvey demonstrated the way in which the relationship between the seer and the seen can be divided and distributed in terms of gender.⁶ In *Meshes* the gendered division of the gaze is located between Deren and her husband Alexander Hammid. This film was Maya Deren's first foray into filmmaking – made in collaboration with her husband, who introduced her to filmmaking techniques in the process of its making. With both of them working both in front of and behind the camera, the gendered configuration of the gaze as that of a simple split between seer (masculine voyeur) and seen (feminine spectacle) is immediately challenged. As can be seen particularly with the repeated use of the mirror motif in the film, as well as in the techniques of repetition, doubling and reversal in its editing, the film takes the gaze as an object of analysis and works to investigate the unstable liminal space between seer and seen.

The division of the gaze is primarily distributed between the anonymous positions 'behind' and 'in front of' the camera, with Deren and her husband potentially occupying either place: both ultimately situated in a fluid and mobile space of exchangeability and reversibility between these positions. By complicating and distorting the space of the home, the film reflexively plays out the gendered power struggle of its own making. This struggle takes place between Hammid-as-filmmaker, who, with his experience of the film technology, can be seen to stand for the active mastery of 'seeing' and Deren's diegetic persona who, as the on-screen recipient of the gaze, occupies the position of the passively 'seen'- a developing artist striving to achieve a sense of control and creative agency throughout the course of the film. At the film's conclusion Deren 'dies', her body found in the home by Hammid who appears briefly in the final scenes. The roles have been reversed; Hammid is alone and objectified on screen as Deren has been throughout most of the film. In this final scene we can be sure that Deren is now the one behind the camera. Here Deren, having mastered the basics of filmmaking during the course of the film, has effectively reappropriated the other side of her own gaze away from its captivation and

definition by the social other (as represented by her husband), to control her own self-objectification through film - thus launching herself on an independent filmmaking career.

While there doubtless *are* autobiographical elements within the work, *Meshes* is not a self-portrait: while Deren's films are open to valid psychoanalytical interpretations in particular, she felt that an exclusive focus on the psychoanalytic framework of understanding obscured her aim to achieve a more ritualised and mythical mode of filmmaking. This has been a persistent problem with understanding her films – their proximity to a surrealist aesthetic seeming more suggestive of the subjective interiority of dream states rather than the objective embodiment of ritual gestures. Deren was particularly frustrated with the persistent audience interpretation of *Meshes* as dreamlike, to the extent that she added a soundtrack of traditional Japanese Bucaku music in 1959 to emphasise the ritualistic qualities of the film. Much of Deren's writing and lecturing on her film theory was produced to support her films against their failure to stand on their own and communicate directly with the audience, as she had hoped.

Through ritual aesthetics Deren aimed to decentre conventional notions of creative expression as having their origin in individual authorship. Her studies of ritual practice in Haiti emphasise how the ritual forms are not the creative expression of individuals but are the outcome of an anonymous collective creativity in which 'the collective functions at a level superior to the creative capacities of the individuals which make it up.'⁷ This presents a particular problem for an artist aiming to implement these insights within a society that does not recognise ritual or collective creativity as forming a legitimate part of its own make-up. Renata Jackson has outlined in detail the problems with Deren's notion of creativity in relation to her ritual aesthetics, in particular how she 'elides the distinctions among the performance of the ritual, the art-object used in ritual, and the individual artist creating the work.'⁸ The difficulty in translating an ethnographic perspective into a modern context is particularly acute here: Deren wants her work to be seen as an impersonal ritual and mythological form emerging directly from the social conditions of modernity (and in this sense a

‘collective’ creative expression) and yet she is clearly an individual artist working *without* a social consensus of ritual meaning. Her work is thus destined to be contextualised by her audiences as personal and ‘psychological’ in spite of her desire for her films to break through this conventional interpretation in order to be perceived in their ritual dimension.

What Deren emphasises over and over again in her film theory is the importance of the film *form* – to the extent that it is possible to see Deren’s relationship with her husband, in *Meshes*, being used more as a pretext for working out the structure of the gaze and how she can use it in her subsequent filmmaking practice. It is thus important to see that for Deren *Meshes* is primarily a ‘figured philosophy of vision’ and, even more, a socially performative ‘definition of vocation’ rather than a straightforward autobiographical confession of inner emotional drives. While this aspect of the film may have been lost to most audiences, it nevertheless may be considered a crucial gesture for Deren in establishing the creative logic of her subsequent work. What *Meshes* actively *does* – in bringing out the ‘other side’ of the gaze - is inaugurate the basic method for an experimental auto-ethnographic practice.

Before making films Deren was steeped in ethnographic influences, especially through her working relationship with the choreographer and ethnographer Katherine Dunham. In 1942, a year before filming *Meshes*, Deren published an article entitled ‘Religious Possession in Dancing,’ which consisted of a comparative analysis between possession in Haitian Voudoun and the symptomatology of hysteria in Western culture.⁹ These influences clearly inform the structure of *Meshes of the Afternoon* – the somnambulistic depersonalisation of the central character evokes states of possession, while the animistic metamorphoses and ‘malevolent vitality’ of objects suggests the intervention of mysterious forces and magical influences.¹⁰ But even more importantly, I think, is the film’s emphasis on ritualised repetition and formalised gestures played out in the uncanny liminal space between the seer and the seen.

The effort by Deren to participate in the ritual structure of her own films points towards an acknowledgement of her *own* indigenous social location and that of the film technology with which she works. Rather than adopt a detached and self-blind position of voyeuristic mastery over the other, as in the conventional ethnography of her time, Deren's auto-ethnography aims to privilege the other side of the gaze, objectifying both her and the film technology as fully implicated within the field of the visible.

According to Deborah Reed-Danahay, the practice of auto-ethnography is used as a means of addressing the limitations of these earlier conventional ethnographic methods.¹¹ The binary oppositions between the ethnographer and the native, observer and observed, modern and primitive, even mind and body, are seen by contemporary ethnography as no longer fully viable. Auto-ethnography tends to be linked to self-reflexive, autobiographical and embodied modes of discourse which attempt to overcome these types of binary opposition. Reed-Danahay outlines a number of definitions of 'auto-ethnography' which tend to disagree and vary on the ratio of autobiography to ethnography – the self and the social.

Dorothea Fischer-Hornung points out that it is precisely this unstable *ambiguity* between autobiographic and ethnographic perspectives which is characteristic of Deren's early films:

Deren's appearances in her three earliest films, her personalised locations and spaces, her strong female perspective, and numerous autobiographical references make the films "feel" extremely personalised and therefore can be read as autobiographical by the viewer. Yet, Deren's use of experimental film technique assures that her films are simultaneously depersonalised and archetypal in filmic effect. Her particular emphasis on ritualized form and archetypal content as well as her manipulation of filmic space and time, move her films away from individualized narrative. Her aesthetics, therefore, hover liminally

between individualized autobiographical performance and universalized myth.¹²

At Land (1944), Deren's second film in which she appears as the main protagonist, is explicitly formulated in mythological terms. Her stated aim was to create an allegorical 'inverted odyssey' through the unstable relativistic universe of the twentieth century.¹³ In *At Land*, the inverted, self-objectifying gaze developed in *Meshes* is deployed to perform a reverse, defamiliarising auto-ethnography in which Deren maps out the very tensions between self and society. The film begins with Deren washed up on a sandy beach, as if deposited like a piece of driftwood. She quickly adopts the role of a 'mermaid' – a half-human, half-animal creature who embarks on an 'evolutionary' adventure. The passage from nature to culture is represented in her encounter with various social scenarios: a party, a chess game and a romantic walk. In these encounters Deren appears curious and tempted by social rituals but ultimately refuses total participation, remaining both inside and outside, half-way between nature and culture.

Here, modern society is encountered from the point of view of a participating, yet alienated gaze approaching, flirting with and ultimately fleeing its own rituals of socialisation. This auto-ethnographic positioning is not so much self-referential and autobiographical but rather submits itself to the objectifying and depersonalising gaze of the other - maintaining itself in the unstable zone between subjectivity and objectivity. Deren achieves this through an allegorical quest narrative – where the normal sense of a centred and grounded personal autonomy in looking and acting on a stable world is reversed. This is particularly notable in the way she uses water to objectify the structure of the gaze within the visual logic of the film: Deren aimed to convey the sense that the whole film was taking place underwater. The frequent use of slow motion and her close proximity to natural objects such as stone and wood help to objectify the scenes and turn them into a spectacle – as if the world she portrays were taking place in a giant aquarium. Not only does this suggest the way in which all the depicted objects and events are 'immersed' in the visible, it also stresses the unanchored, free-floating and decentred nature of subjectivity within this

rendering of the gaze. Throughout the film, Deren effectively remains a piece of driftwood, floating out 'at land'.

Deren supplements these techniques with the skilled use of editing to create continuous transitions between discontinuous spaces; her protagonist is objectified and subsumed by a larger sense of being seen and acted upon by the time/space manipulations of the camera, to the extent that 'the universe itself has usurped the dynamic action which was once the prerogative of human will.'¹⁴ With this reversal of the gaze, the protagonist is rendered passive, decentred and subject to the contingencies opened up by the spaces of technological modernity – allegorised in the camera techniques. However, this same gaze allows Deren to examine this space as that of her own indigenous social location and the stakes at play in her own processes of socialisation – particularly in her encounters with several male figures in the course of her 'adventure'.

Having broken with the normative determinations of the male gaze in *Meshes*, it is as if she returns here to re-examine the situation of the gaze and its ritual performativity in the construction of social identity. In scenes that effectively utilise the 'Kuleshov effect,' Deren is able to show how she becomes trapped in a number of dramatised ritual scenarios and how her subjectivity is socially positioned by them in spite of her passivity: she shows 'fascinated curiosity' towards the contemplative chess player, 'superiority' over the passive gaze of an admirer and 'inferiority' towards the gaze of a partner – her passive expressionlessness (as maintained throughout the majority of the film except where she shows stereotypically exaggerated emotions of 'fear' or 'joy') is shown to be socially configured and interpreted according to differing contexts. Nevertheless, the gaze does not remain entirely within these social dynamics but includes a supplementary, reflexive ethnographic gaze embedded in the film (the 'underwater' quality) – the gaze of Deren-as-filmmaker. Here Deren is both an active filmmaker and ethnographic analyst at the same time as being the passive 'victim' of indigenous ritual determinations. She has fully taken over both the positions of subjectivity (seer) and objectivity (seen) established in *Meshes* and used them to extend her analysis of the ethnographic themes also

begun there. *At Land* thus has conceptual as well as narrative and visual continuities with *Meshes* to the extent that it appears to function as the second part of a trilogy - with *Ritual in Transfigured Time* as the third and final part: Deren's most complex and explicit analysis of the gaze in relation to filmmaking and the ritual structures of socialisation.

Ritual in Transfigured Time (1945-6) accumulates and develops the themes, structure and techniques of the previous two films in exploring the dynamics of the gaze and the tensions between self and society. This time the journey, in which a widow fearfully negotiates the transformative rite-of-passage into socialisation, is finally concluded when she paradoxically achieves the status of bride upon her escape from society and her suicidal return to the sea at the film's end – just as the stable normative subject position had been rejected at the end of both *Meshes* and *At Land*. A party scene, in particular, emphasises the dance-like ritualised movements and gestures which are normally overlooked, taken-for-granted and thus invisible to normal perception. The ritual use of film technology is directly linked by Deren to the analysis of ritual forms in society. Rejecting the detachment of documentary realism, subject and object merge in the creative use of film technology which intervenes, transforms and depersonalises what it sees. Deren, commenting on this film, states that

[T]he pattern, created by the film instrument, transcends the intentions and movements of the individual performers, and for this reason I have called it *Ritual*. I base myself upon the fact that, anthropologically speaking, a ritual is a form which depersonalizes by use of masks, voluminous garments, group movements etc., and, in so doing, fuses all individual elements into a transcendent tribal power towards the achievement of some extraordinary grace.¹⁵

James Clifford's essay 'On Ethnographic Allegory' describes how an allegorical dimension emerges as an unwanted excess in even the most scientific of ethnographic accounts.¹⁶ He cites the salvage paradigm of early ethnography as a key example – its redemptive and heroic project of salvation in which the

lost Edenic past of organic community is recuperated through the very act of ethnographic representation. Such allegorical narratives potentially expose the pre-scientific subjectivity and desire of the ethnographer through a kind of parodic meta-commentary upon his work. They threaten to undermine the claim of scientific detachment and delegitimise the representations of scientific realism.

In ethnographic allegory, these enframing assumptions of ethnography are found to be implicit in its very act of enunciation: in the representational methods and 'ritual' practices of ethnographic work itself. The 'salvage paradigm' that justifies ethnographic intervention can particularly be seen to betray a similarity with the hero narratives of mythological thought and even a belief in the magical potency of writing, for example. Here, ethnographic allegory becomes a performance of self-narration and self-dramatisation which threatens to overwhelm the atmosphere of impartial scientific description. Rather than subjective self-expression, Deren's own self-dramatisation and self-mythologisation through film suggests an alternative, inverted objectivity. She aims at exposing and articulating this potentially 'embarrassing' dimension of the scientific observer: not in the spirit of a critical deconstruction but rather in an expanded objectivity which takes seriously the 'native' aspect of the ethnographer as a legitimate object of ethnographic investigation and analysis. Here the attention is focused on recuperating, objectifying and analysing not the psychological interiority of the individual observer but precisely the non-personal, mythic and ritual components of his or her indigenous, socially located subjectivity - otherwise displaced and formally exiled from the field of scientific observation.

If allegory in its broadest sense can be defined as a text which consistently implies another text, another story, here the marginalised 'other story' of ethnography reflexively refers back, threatening to delegitimise the original text with a re-interpretation of its form. From this point of view, ethnographic allegory can thus be linked both to the 'other side' of the gaze and the potential emergence of a counter-discourse in which the ethnographer and his world come under observation and into representation. George Marcus and Michael

Fischer make a similar claim with their notion of ‘anthropology as cultural critique,’ where comparative speculations about our *own* society are often found in writings on other cultures. And yet, they argue, such comparisons often ‘playfully remain on the margins’ rather than take seriously the return of the ethnographic gaze as capable of systematically observing the place of the observer.¹⁷

Here, in conventional ethnography, it is as if the ethnographer’s own gaze threatens to boomerang back and produce a disconcerting *auto*-ethnography, but is instead held back to be contained and trivialised in the margins. And yet these marginal perspectives are important as reflexive metadiscourses which ultimately indicate the ethnographer’s own visibility and availability for ethnographic observation, objectification and representation. In this way both the ethnographer and his society potentially fall under the ethnographic gaze. As Merleau-Ponty states in the first chapter of his unfinished work *The Visible and the Invisible*:

It was, for example, evident to the man brought up in the objective cognition of the West that magic or myth has no intrinsic truth, that magical effects and the mythical and religious life are to be explained by “objective” causes and what is left over ascribed to the illusions of Subjectivity. Yet if social psychology wishes truly to see our society such as it is, it cannot start with this postulate, which itself is part of Western psychology [...] [S]ocial psychology, precisely if it wishes to really know our own societies, cannot exclude a priori the hypothesis of a mythical time as a component of our personal and public history. To be sure, we have repressed the magical into subjectivity, but there is no guarantee that the relationship between men does not inevitably involve magical and oneric components.¹⁸

It is precisely this level that Deren’s allegorical quest narratives seek to grasp, attempting to show how the wider social field is implicated by the ritual and mythic structures discovered in the more restricted ‘personal’ environment of

Deren's life and work. Her films are geared towards an imminent ethnographic understanding of the observer and his or her social location, generating their content from the immediate social, technological, and psychological circumstances of their making. They are reflexively turned towards the investigation and objective representation of the decentred enunciating subjectivity embedded imminently and invisibly in the film form and in the practical logic of filmmaking. They are self-allegorising, self-dramatising performances in ritual form which make themselves available as objective ethnographic artefacts. And finally, they are *indexical* allegories, physically a part of the larger context which they aim to represent. Rather than being limited to the expression of a personal and individual autobiographical subjectivity, Deren's use of the other side of the gaze is an exemplary instance of a self-objectifying auto-ethnographic method encompassing, decentring and expanding the notion of personal subjectivity within a wider framework of understanding.

¹ Moira Sullivan, *An Anagram of Ideas on Filmmaker Maya Deren: Creative Work in Motion Pictures* (Karlstad: University of Karlstad Press, 1997).

² Renata Jackson, *The Modernist Poetics and Experimental Film Practice of Maya Deren (1917-1961)* (Lewiston, Queenston and Lampeter: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2002)

³ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, 'Eye and Mind', in *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader: Philosophy and Painting* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1993): 129.

⁴ *Ibid.*: 124.

⁵ *Ibid.*: 130.

⁶ Laura Mulvey, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' [1975], in *Visual and Other Pleasures* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989). Originally published in *Screen*, vol. 16, no. 3 (Autumn 1975): 6-18.

⁷ Maya Deren, *Divine Horsemen: The Living Gods of Haiti* [1953], Documentext, (McPherson and Company, 2004): 228.

⁸ Renata Jackson, *The Modernist Poetics and Experimental Film Practice of Maya Deren*: 135.

⁹ Maya Deren, 'Religious Possession in Dancing' [1942], in Veve A. Clark et al., *The Legend of Maya Deren: A Documentary Biography and Collected Works Vol. 1 Part One: Signatures (1917-42)* (New York: Anthology Film Archives/Film Culture, 1984).

¹⁰ Deren in P. Adams Sitney, *Visionary Film: The American Avant-Garde 1943-2000*, Third Edition, (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2002): 9.

¹¹ Deborah Reed-Danahay (ed. and intro.), *Auto/Ethnography: Rewriting the Self and the Social* (Oxford: Berg, 1997).

¹² Dorothea Fischer-Hornung, "'Facts of the Mind Made Manifest in a Fiction of Matter": Theory and Practice of Life Writing in Maya Deren's Early Films', in *Prose Studies* vol. 27, no.3 (Dec 2005): 281.

¹³ Maya Deren, 'Three Abandoned Films' [1946], in *Essential Deren: Collected Writings on Film by Maya Deren*, Documentext, (New York: Kingston, 2005): 248.

¹⁴ Maya Deren, 'Cinematography: The Creative Use of Reality' [1960], in *Essential Deren*: 126.

¹⁵ Maya Deren, 'Ritual in Transfigured Time' [1946], in *Essential Deren*: 226.

¹⁶ James Clifford, 'On Ethnographic Allegory', in James Clifford and George E. Marcus, *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1986).

¹⁷ George E. Marcus and Michael J. Fischer, *Anthropology as Cultural Critique: An Experimental Moment in the Human Sciences*, Second Edition, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999): 145.

¹⁸ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1968): 24.

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Resisting the Allegorical: Pieter Bruegel's *Magpie on the Gallows*

Stephanie Porras

Abstract

This paper seeks to go beyond the numerous interpretations of Pieter Bruegel's *Magpie on the Gallows* that follow Karel van Mander's interpretation of allegorical subject matter. Rather than seeing the painting as a palimpsest of proverbs in service of an emblematic meaning, I propose that it represents the interaction and interorientation between competing allegories. An examination of the relationship between the painting's external and internal viewers (two pointing onlookers) throws the concept of any single interpretative authority into question. Bruegel represents intersecting and conflicting allegorical possibilities within *Magpie on the Gallows*, which, rather than acting as markers of numinous authority, operate as signs of contingent social practice, in a similar way to what Stephen Greenblatt has termed "textual traces." Through numerous tracings of authority as both subject and interpretative object, the viewer of *Magpie on the Gallows* is forced to negotiate between various allegories, as represented and enacted by the picture itself. *Magpie on the Gallows* allows a multiple unfolding of implications, creating a continually refining semiotic web into which the authority of culture is continually translated, performed and redefined by the viewer.

Pieter Bruegel brings out the allegorical impulse in art historians. He has done so since the early twentieth century, when Bruegel made the move from being merely a 'peasant artist' to being a humanist painter of peasant subjects.¹ Images that once appeared coarse and unlearned were now seen as the product of an intellectual milieu that included the great geographer Abraham Ortelius and the publisher Christopher Plantin. In the hunt for Bruegel's humanist credentials, Bruegel's imagery has been mined for allegorical content. One of Bruegel's final paintings, *Magpie on the Gallows* (1568; fig. 1) is often subjected to just such a search for 'hidden' meanings. This is not a new phenomenon, as less than forty years after its execution Karel van Mander was the first to identify the painting as allegory, writing in his *Schilderboek*: 'In his will, he left his wife a painting with a magpie upon the gallows, by the magpie he meant the gossiping tongues, which he committed to the gallows.'²



Fig. 1: Pieter Bruegel the Elder, *Magpie on the Gallows*, 1568, oil on panel.
Hessisches Landesmuseum, Darmstadt.
(Reproduced with the permission of the Hessisches Landesmuseum.)

Subsequent generations of art historians have followed van Mander's lead, citing a number of vernacular proverbs in service of an allegorical, typically moralising, reading of the panel. The painting has been said to represent a number of proverbs, drawn from details in the picture. These proverbs include, to name but a few: the way to the gallows leads through pleasant meadows, to chatter like a magpie, to talk someone to the gallows, to dance to the gallows, etc.³ Perhaps the most colourful proverb brought to bear on the panel is the proverb 'to shit on the gallows,' cited in reference to the squatting figure in the bottom left hand corner of the painting (fig. 4).

This proverb, and several others discussed in relation to the *Magpie on the Gallows*, refers to subversive and potentially foolish action against authority.

The gallows, located in the centre of the panel, are a visually dominant authoritarian symbol, with twisting beams that appear almost to straddle the landscape. The prominence of the gallows takes on additional significance when one considers the painting's historical context. 1568, the year the *Magpie on the Gallows* was painted, was a time of considerable social, political and religious unrest in the Spanish-controlled Low Countries.⁴ Following widespread iconoclastic rioting in 1566, Phillip II had dispatched Spanish troops to the Netherlandish provinces under the command of the Duke of Alva. Alva disbanded the citizen's militias, he replaced a number of native officials and judges with Spaniards, and he instituted the notorious Council of Troubles (popularly known as the Council of Blood), which began bringing thousands of people before the courts on charges of heresy, and issuing a number of edicts restricting fairs, as well as censoring public performances and printed texts.⁵ Meanwhile, rebel groups, soldiers and itinerant Protestant speakers all roamed the countryside and there was a general fear of war and ensuing economic disaster.

Given the tense political context, and in particular the reinforced censorship of images by the Council of Troubles, as well as that of the written and the spoken word, *Magpie on the Gallows* has been read as a political allegory, commenting on the breakdown of order in the Netherlands. This sort of reading either interprets the dancing peasants as an allegorical assertion of local community life and its continuing traditions, in contradistinction to the foreign political authority of the gallows – or one views the peasant dance as representing the Netherlanders' imprudent folly in the face of impending danger. Using proverb and other literature related to the magpie, the Bruegel scholar Ethan Matt Kavaler has argued that the *Magpie on the Gallows* is a commentary on human reason and the need for self-knowledge and self-control in such troubled times.⁶ Robert Genaille meanwhile has gone so far as to state that the panel is a *memento mori* (fig. 2), where the rustic pleasure of the dancing peasants is revealed to be a dangerous and ultimately, deadly act.⁷ In this reading, the painting's wonderful panoramic vista and the wooden cross just behind and to the right of the gallows (fig. 3) are seen as affirming the definitive authority of the natural world and of divine judgment.



Fig. 2: Detail of fig. 1.



Fig. 3: Detail of fig. 1.

Despite their contradictory conclusions, in all of these interpretations the ‘key’ to the image is understood to reside in either a single, or a set of, proverbial meanings. Proverbs become the terms of reference for Bruegel’s allegorical design, whatever it may be. However, I believe that rather than seeing *Magpie on the Gallows* as a palimpsest of proverbs in service of a particular allegorical meaning, it is more useful to see this picture as representing the interaction and inter-orientation between allegorical and proverbial readings. By looking closely at how Bruegel engages with proverbs and how he engages with the problems of looking and knowing, I aim to sketch out how the panel resists

straightforward interpretation, and is in fact designed for the viewer's particular negotiation.



Fig. 4: Detail of fig. 1.

Firstly, Bruegel may refer to proverbs in *Magpie on the Gallows*, but he does not represent them. This is a crucial distinction often missed by those who cite the proverbial references in *Magpie on the Gallows*. For example, the squatting man in the bottom left-hand corner of the panel (fig. 4) is often discussed as illustrating the proverb 'to shit on the gallows,' despite the fact that the man is shown some distance from the central gallows. The defecating figure is placed in the corner, where Bruegel often placed key figures or his own signature. Amongst the encyclopaedic collection of proverbs illustrated in the 1559 Berlin panel *Netherlandish Proverbs*,⁸ Bruegel does illustrate the proverb 'to shit on the gallows,' with a literal representation of that act (figs 5 and 6). In *Magpie on the Gallows*, he does not do this, and this deliberate refusal to directly illustrate the proverb distances the figure from a straightforward proverbial or allegorical reading. Other proverbs cited in reference to the panel are similarly treated. The way to the gallows is not pictured as being 'through pleasant meadows,' we see no one 'chattering like a magpie.'

Perhaps the closest the picture gets to illustrating a proverb openly is the group of dancing peasants, often taken to be 'dancing to the gallows.' However, their progress to the gallows cannot be taken for granted. The villagers dance in a

circle, seemingly inhibiting any forward progress. In each case, Bruegel avoids directly picturing proverbs in the same way as he does in the Berlin *Netherlandish Proverbs* or in the Antwerp panel *Twelve Proverbs* (c.1560s). In doing so, he elides the representation of a specific proverb, while retaining the allusion to proverbial meaning. Both the *Netherlandish Proverbs* and *Magpie on the Gallows* represent a collection of proverbial meanings, but in *Magpie on the Gallows* this collection is a heap of fragmented proverbial references that may work together or against one another, rather than a painted collection of discreet proverbs. The magpie may be an allegorical figure for gossip and imprudent speech, but the bird could also be the watchful eye of Nature, surveying man's folly. The peasant dance may represent this folly or it may be seen as a form of social protest, particularly directed at the Spanish restriction on fairs. This multitude of allegorical possibilities means that the panel is at once political allegory, an allegory of imprudence, an allegory of Death, of Nature, of Life.



Fig. 5: Pieter Bruegel the Elder, *The Netherlandish Proverbs*, 1559, oil on panel.
Gemäldegalerie, Staatliche Museen, Berlin.
(bpk / Gemäldegalerie, SMB / Jörg P. Anders)



Fig. 6: Detail of fig. 5.

The ambiguity about the painting's allegorical meaning is built into the panel itself, which neither confirms nor denies any of the above readings. The fact that art historians since Van Mander have turned to the proverbial in search of the painting's transcendent meaning, testifies to the allegorical lure of the image. It must *mean* something. The painting's small size, its jewel-like finish and level of detail, its provenance, the fact that it was left to Bruegel's widow, all contribute to the allegorical feeling of *Magpie on the Gallows*. Yet looking to proverbs to provide the key to the painting's allegory is in some way a fruitless task, as proverbs, by their very nature, offer no precise answers. Bruegel's use of proverbs as a source of painting contrasts markedly with the textual authority demanded by an Albertian conception of the painting of *istoria*.⁹ A painting of *istoria* depicts a character or an event drawn from written history – classical, biblical or contemporary. *Istoria* is fixed in meaning, time and space. Proverbs, on the other hand, are unauthored, deriving their authority by their very ubiquity. They are products of an oral culture and therefore are mobile, resisting textual transmission because they are difficult to translate.

Although Latin and Greek proverbs were certainly known in the sixteenth-century through textual sources, they were not treated as fixed in meaning and often were simply translated into an oral vernacular roughly equivalent proverb. Vernacular proverbs are sprinkled through contemporary works on history, as well as Netherlandish chapbooks, emblems and songs, used to instruct as well

as delight. Erasmus's continued revision and expansion of his collection of classical proverbs, the *Adagia*, demonstrates how proverbs encouraged the production of meaning through the performance of interpretation, discussion and debate.¹⁰ Proverbs, therefore, generate their own allegorical system. The traditional search for a particular proverbial meaning within *Magpie on the Gallows*, as key to the panel's allegory, ignores the multilayered and diffuse nature of proverbial authority. Substituting proverb for *istoria* does not provide an interpretative key to the painting, but places the very idea of any singular interpretation out of reach.



Fig. 7: Detail of fig. 1.

The limitations of any singular physical or allegorical standpoint in viewing the *Magpie on the Gallows* is articulated in the relationship between the painting's audience and the two painted onlookers at the left of the panel (fig. 7). These figures establish an epistemology of participation, as observers both inside and outside of the scene.¹¹ The figure at far left points to the action/scenery in front of him, a rhetorical gesture designed to catch the observer's eye and guide it back to the central action. The device of the pointing figure is an appeal to the onlooker, and it pops up in numerous guises. Often it is the figure of St. John

the Evangelist who points to the figure of Christ on the Cross – for example in Matthias Grünewald's famous *Crucifixion* panel of the Isenheim Altarpiece or in Frans Floris's *Allegory of the Trinity* (fig. 8). The pointing gesture functions as a cue to the viewer: we are being told that what we are observing must be noted, that what is being pointed to is the 'point' of the picture.



Fig. 8: Frans Floris, *Allegory of the Trinity*, 1562, oil on panel. Musée du Louvre, Paris. (Photo: RMN)

By indicating a specific spatial location for an abstract idea, pointing also invites consideration of the allegorical.¹² In the case of Floris's *Allegory of the Trinity*, the pointing finger shows us that God is there, on the cross – the divine is made human in the ultimate instance of allegory. Therefore, when confronted by the pair of onlookers in *Magpie on the Gallows*, we expect the pointing figure to indicate and demarcate the painting's central allegory, to display it to us.¹³ We believe that the gesture of the pointing internal viewer will 'unlock' the image, or at least indicate where the puzzle lies. Yet, in *Magpie on the Gallows*, this is not the case. The pointing gesture cannot 'unlock' the image because we, the external viewer, cannot determine exactly what is being pointed at. Does the gesture point us towards the dancers, the gallows or the wooden cross in the background? The complication lies in the fact that we have a manifestly different viewpoint from that of these internal viewers. Their view is presumably

framed by the trees at left and the gallows upon the hill to their right, and probably extending only as far as the trees behind the dancing peasants.

In contrast, we, the external viewer, can behold a wide vista beyond the trees and the gallows, apparently unseen by the two internal onlookers. The authority of the internal viewer's interpretative gesture (the pointing finger) is put into question by our own, seemingly more authoritative viewpoint. Indeed, we can even see behind the two onlookers, where, in the darkness of some shrubbery a man crouches and lowers his trousers. The two observers seem unaware of the defecating man behind them and indeed, the casual observer of *Magpie on the Gallows* may miss the figure altogether. The two observers point to the scene in front of them, but remain unaware of what goes on behind their backs. How then can we trust these onlookers' interpretation of the picture, how can we trust in the authority of the pointing finger, if these observers cannot even see the picture in its entirety? Is it even possible to trust our own eyes, if we missed the squatting figure at first glance? Bruegel plays with the relationship between seeing and knowing, our assumed relation between vision and certainty. We see the pointing finger and expect to be directed towards meaning, but what results is only uncertainty.

This play between vision and knowledge recalls the subject matter of his earlier and only etching, *The Rabbit Hunt* (1560; fig. 9).¹⁴ In this image, a man stalks rabbits with a crossbow, seemingly unaware of the fact that there is a man who is stalking him from behind a tree. In *Magpie on the Gallows*, there is a similar tension between what the internal spectator sees and understands, and what we see and understand. This tension undermines our own feelings of confidence in beholding and understanding the painting. The idea of any authoritative viewpoint is undercut by the sense that our own perspective, like the onlookers within the picture, may be in some way limited. This sense of a framed (and therefore limited) view is accentuated by Bruegel's placement of trees at either side of the panel, neatly framing the picture. These trees are like green curtains hung before a theatre set – a miniature theatre of the world to rival the *Theatrum Orbis Terrarum*, the great atlas of Bruegel's friend Abraham Ortelius.¹⁵

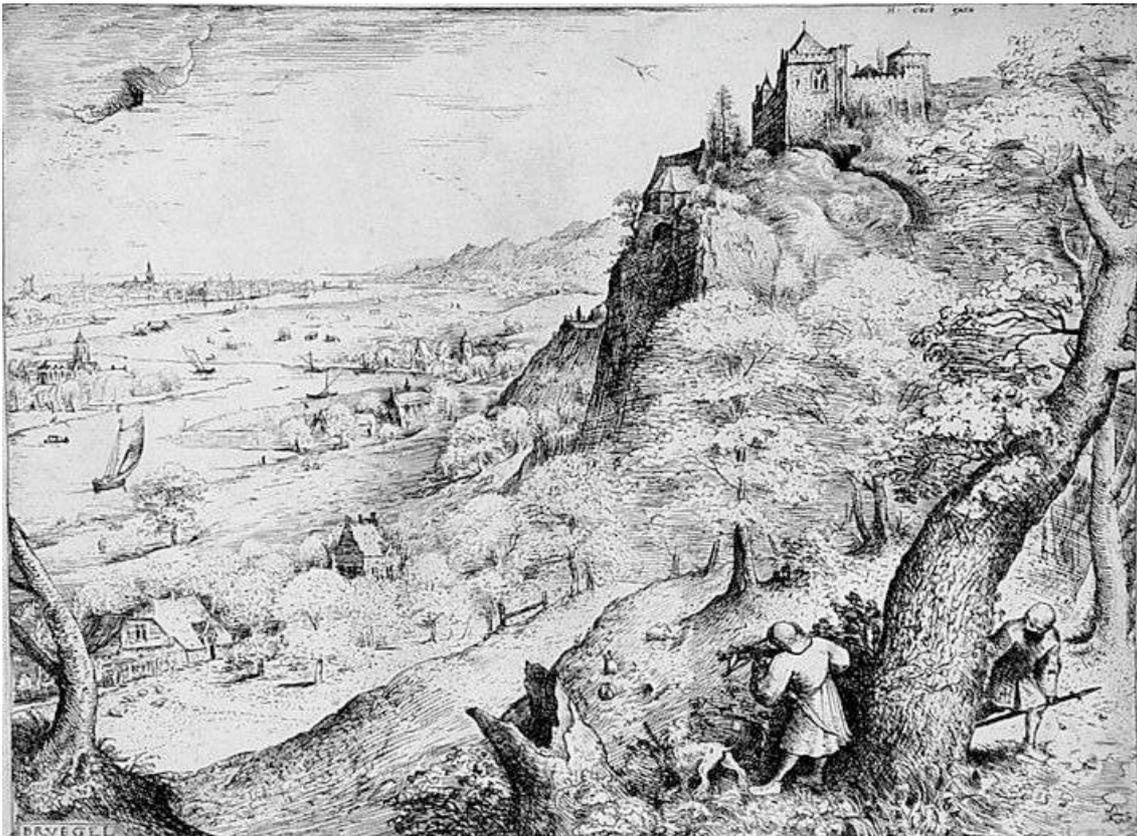


Fig. 9: Pieter Bruegel the Elder, *The Rabbit Hunt*, 1560, etching.
Courtauld Institute of Art, London.
(Reproduced with the permission of the Courtauld Gallery.)

In Bruegel's miniature theatre, the viewer is offered a number of proverbial allusions, iconographic and allegorical cues – gallows, dancing peasants, a cross, a pointing observer. We feel as if we should be able to construct the image's meaning. We can try several proverbs on, trace a number of potential interpretative trajectories, but at some point we hit a wall. Details fail to fit together, or become unaccountable all together. Each allegorical horizon is revealed to be as limited as our viewpoint, particular to an individual's interpretative choices. Edward Snow, in his work on Bruegel's *Children's Games*, has observed a similar phenomenon within Bruegel's monumental scene of child's play.¹⁶ He has noted how the simple interpretation Bruegel often hints at is frequently revealed as merely one facet of an unstable perception, whose fixing references to external conventions are quickly subsumed in cognitive uncertainty and connotative play.

This sense of play, of negotiation between representation (what is shown or written) and what is meant, is symptomatic of a wider cultural shift taking place in the period. In orthodox allegory, the gap between what is said and what is meant is immutable, but Renaissance literature redefined this abyss. Robert Weimann, citing authors as diverse as Luther, Erasmus and Rabelais, has explored how the deployment of irony has allowed the nature of this gap to become subject to interpretation. The ironic mode leads to a renegotiation between the reader and spectator, between discursive conditions and authorial designs.¹⁷ This early modern redefinition of allegory from fixed relation to continual process mirrors the way both Walter Benjamin and Paul de Man's reconceived the term allegory – from a mode not just of deferred, but of disfigured meaning.¹⁸

The space between external and internal viewers within *Magpie on the Gallows* is likewise not one fixed in meaning; the onlookers do not stand for the viewer, in fact the divergence of our standpoint from theirs is made overt, as we have seen. The panel pictures this difference, the space between what the painted onlookers point to and what we can see. It is left to us to explore this space and to negotiate the panel's numerous fragmented allusions to proverbs. Alternative allegories may be posited or played against one another, but Bruegel resists the presentation of allegory as in anyway fixed. The pleasure of viewing *Magpie on the Gallows* comes from this resistance, the panel's continued ability to generate new allegories and meanings. This is in part possible because the allegorical terms of reference are not those of the painting of *istoria*, but of the oral and multivalent world of proverbs, which are mobile elements of an oral culture, capable of numerous shifts in significance depending on use and context. From a strictly commercial standpoint, the viewer's pleasure in negotiating the painting's various allegorical prospects and the individual's freedom in determining the painting's 'meaning' means that the painting appeals to the broadest possible audience – to sympathisers with the peasants and those who think them foolish, to people looking for humour or for a panoramic landscape.¹⁹

Rather than acting as markers of numinous interpretative authority, these intersecting and conflicting allegorical possibilities within *Magpie on the Gallows* operate as signs of contingent social practice, in a similar way to that which Stephen Greenblatt has termed “textual traces.”²⁰ As textual traces, the fragments of proverbs within *Magpie on the Gallows* represent potential avenues of engagement for the viewer, as well as discarded opportunities. Greenblatt has defined the study of these textual traces, and the relations between them, a poetics of culture.²¹ In its numerous tracings of allegory, I believe one can consider *Magpie on the Gallows* as a representation of this ‘poetics of culture,’ where the viewer of the painting is forced to negotiate between various allegories, as represented and enacted by the picture itself. *Magpie on the Gallows* allows a multiple unfolding of implications, creating a continually refining semiotic web into which the authority of culture is continually translated, performed and redefined by the viewer.

¹ A recent review of the art historical literature can be found in Peter Zagorin’s article, ‘Looking for Pieter Bruegel,’ *Journal of the History of Ideas* 64 (2003): 73-96. Crucial early works on Bruegel’s humanist circle include: René van Bastelaer and Georges Hulin de Loo, *Pierre Bruegel l’Ancien. Son oeuvre et son temps* (Brussels: G. van Oest, 1907); René van Bastelaer, *Les estampes de Pierre Bruegel l’Ancien* (Brussels: G. van Oest, 1908); A.E. Popham, ‘Pieter Bruegel and Abraham Ortelius,’ *Burlington Magazine* 59 (1931): 184-8; and Gustav Glück, *Bruegels Gemälde* (Vienna: Anton Schroll & Co., 1932).

² Karel van Mander, *The Lives of the Illustrious Netherlandish and German Painters from the first edition of the Schilder-Boek (1603-4)*, trans. Michael Hoyle, Jacqueline Penniall-Boer and Charles Ford, ed. Hessel Miedema (Doornspijk: Davaco, 1994): 234r.

³ See Robert Genaille, ‘La pie sur le gibet,’ in *Relations Artistiques entre les Pays Bas et l’Italie à la Renaissance études dédiées à Suzanne Sulzberger* (Brussels and Rome: L’Institut historique belge de Rome, 1980): 143-52; Anne Simonson, ‘On Pieter Bruegel’s *Magpie on the Gallows*,’ *Konsthistorisk Tidskrift* 67 (1998): 71-92; Walter S Gibson, *Pieter Bruegel the Elder: Two Studies*, The Franklin D. Murphy Lectures XI (Lawrence, Kansas: University of Kansas Spencer Museum of Art, 1991): 45-6; and Gustav Glück, *Pieter Bruegel the Elder*, trans. Eveline Shaw (London: Zwemmer, 1951).

⁴ For economic conditions see Erich Kuttner, *Het Hongerjaar 1566* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam Boek en Courantmaatschappij, 1949); E. Scholliers, *Loonarbeid en Honger. De Levensstandaard in de XVe en XVIe eeuw te Antwerpen* (Antwerp: Sikkell NV, 1960) and Herman van der Wee, ‘The Economy as a Factor in the Start of the Revolt of the Southern Netherlands,’ *Acta Historiae Neerlandica* 5 (1971): 52-67. For a first hand account of the growing disorder and fear that swept the nation in the period, see Charles R. Steen, *The Time of Troubles in the Low Countries: The Chronicles and Memoirs of Pasquier de le Barre of Tournai, 1559-1567* (Paris, Bern and Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1989). A recent bibliography on the 1566 iconoclasm, or *de Beeldenstorm*, can be found in Herman Kaptein, *De Beeldenstorm* (Verloren: Hilversum, 2002). For an overview of the early history of the Dutch Revolt see Pieter Geyl, *The Revolt of the Netherlands 1555-1609* (London: Ernest Benn, 1966).

⁵ Margaret Carroll, ‘Peasant Festivity and Political Identity in the Sixteenth Century’ *Art History* 10 (1987): 295.

⁶ Ethan Matt Kavaler, *Pieter Bruegel: Parables of Order and Enterprise* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999): 232-3.

⁷ *Ibid.*: 145.

⁸ There is a large existing body of art historical writing on the *Netherlandish Proverbs*, much of which is concerned with the identification of specific proverbs. The most systematic treatment of the painting can be found in Mark Meadows, *Pieter Bruegel the Elder's Netherlandish Proverbs and the Practice of Rhetoric* (Zwolle: Waanders, 2002). The recent Gemäldegalerie publication, Rainald Grosshans, *Pieter Bruegel d. Ä. Die niederländischen Sprichwörter* (Berlin: Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, 2003) also provides a summary of art historical opinion, as well as a thorough bibliography.

⁹ The painting of *istoria* was both the means and aims of humanist painting; to portray human emotions and to captivate and elevate the viewer with the aim of moving their very soul. See Leon Battista Alberti, *Della pittura*, Book II, trans. John Spencer (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970): 74.

¹⁰ On Erasmus's use of Dutch proverbs see Ari Wesseling, 'Dutch Proverbs and Expressions in Erasmus' Adages, Colloquies and Letters,' *Renaissance Quarterly* 55 (2002): 81-147. On proverbs in chapbooks, *Uenspiegel* and books of false or comic prognostication for the year see: Hinke van Campen, Herman Pleij and Bob Stumpel, et. al. *Het zal koud zijn in 't water als 't vriest: zestiende-eeuwse parodiën op gedrukte Jaarvoorspellingen* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1980).

¹¹ See the discussion of this participant/observer phenomenon in relation to a 'recursive loop' of interpretation in Wolfgang Iser, *The Range of Interpretation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000): 111.

¹² D. McNeill, J. Cassell and E.T. Levy, 'Abstract deixis,' *Semiotica* 95 (1993): 5– 19.

¹³ See the use of pointing fingers in moralizing images, as well as by figures like John the Baptist, in order to point the viewer's attention towards a particular detail.

¹⁴ René van Bastelaer, *Les estampes de Pierre Bruegel l'Ancien* (Brussels: G. van Oest, 1908); no. 1; P.P. Fehl, 'Peculiarities in the relation of text and image in two prints by Peter Bruegel: "The rabbit hunt" and "Fides,"' *North Carolina Museum of Art Bulletin* 9 (1970): 25-35; Christopher White, "'The Rabbit Hunters" by Pieter Bruegel the Elder,' *Pieter Bruegel und seine Welt*, eds. Otto von Simson and Matthias Winner (Berlin: Mann Verlag, 1979); Nadine M. Orensten, ed. *Pieter Bruegel the Elder: Drawings and Prints* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2001): 200-202; and Margaret Sullivan, 'Proverbs and process in Bruegel's "Rabbit hunt",' *Burlington Magazine* 145 (2003): 30-35.

¹⁵ The connection between the maps of the geographer and the landscapes of Bruegel was first comprehensively discussed by Justus Müller-Hofstede, 'Zur Interpretation von Bruegel's Landschaft, ästhetischer Landschaftsbegriff und stoische Weltbetrachtung,' *Pieter Bruegel und seine Welt*, eds. Otto von Simpson and Matthias Winner, (Berlin: Mann Verlag, 1979). More recently Bruegel's landscape and the relation to contemporary map culture has been discussed by Nils Büttner, *Die Erfindung der Landschaft: Kosmographie und Landschaftskunst im Zeitalter Bruegels* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 2000).

¹⁶ Edward Snow, "'Meaning" in *Children's Games: On the Limitations of the Iconographic Approach to Bruegel*,' *Representations* 1 (1983): 26-60 and *Inside Bruegel: The Play of Images in Children's Games* (New York: Northpoint Press, 1997).

¹⁷ Robert Weimann, *Authority and Representation in Early Modern Discourse*, ed. David Hillman (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1996): 146. The relation between the written and the spoken word is also discussed by Horst Wenzel, 'Die Stimme und der Schrift: Autoritätskonstitution im Medienwechsel von der Mündlichkeit zur Schriftlichkeit,' *Construction of Textual Authority in German Literature of Medieval and Early Modern Periods*, eds. James F. Poag and Claire Baldwin (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 2001).

¹⁸ Laura Camille Agoston, 'Giotto, de Man and the Allegorical Impulse in Michelangelo,' *Early Modern Visual Allegory: Embodying Memory*, ed. Cristelle Baskins and Lisa Rosenthal (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007): 13-35.

¹⁹ Despite van Mander's assertion that *Magpie on the Gallows* was left to Bruegel's widow, we can assume that the painting was created for the open market. There is only one record of a direct commission from Bruegel, dating from 1569, and he died before beginning work. Given the relatively advanced art market in Antwerp and Brussels at the time, where designated vendors sold art works – either through Antwerp's *Schilderspand* or through various markets and fairs, it is likely Bruegel produced paintings on spec. On the issue of commercial viability

and ambiguity see Jan van der Stock, 'Ambiguous Intentions, Multiple Interpretations: An "Other" Look at Printed Images from the Sixteenth Century,' *Nederlands Kunsthistorisch Jaarboek* 52 (2001): 19-29. The ingenuity of printmakers in printing a portrait say, of a dissident religious leader above a text condemning him, allowed for the image's potential use by dissidents themselves, who simply had to cut off the offensive text to have a portrait of their leader.

²⁰ Stephen Greenblatt, *Shakespearean Negotiations: The Circulation of Social Energy in Renaissance England* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992): 5.

²¹ Ibid.

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Allegory and the Critique of the Aesthetic Ideology in Paul de Man

Jeremy Spencer

Abstract

This article offers an exposition of Paul de Man's theory of allegory developed in his essay 'The Rhetoric of Temporality'. It discusses this theorisation of allegory, informed by Walter Benjamin's writings on allegory, as key to understanding the critique of 'the aesthetic ideology' that preoccupies de Man's late work and considers its role in what Jacques Derrida referred to as its 'materialist signature'. This article addresses this materialism in one of the three registers in which it appears in de Man's work on aesthetics and ideology, the 'materiality of history', and seeks to illuminate the counter-intuitive and complex character of this materialism by referring to the Marxist tradition and de Man's unfinished engagement with it.

The philosophical, literary and linguistic themes of the work of Paul de Man (1919-1983) have guided the project of social art history in the writings of its leading practitioners.¹ The practice of deconstruction, which describes what de Man did, is formally or methodologically consecrated as commentary or philosophical *explication de texte*. This kind of careful and attentive reading characterises the more recent writing of art historians associated with the social history of art. This writing, which is close to what de Man calls a 'rhetorical reading,' places its objects within an historical context of political events, but also focuses on the internal relationships of their themes, statements, and rhetorical and figural structures to define the way in which they achieve meaning. I do not address the nature of this encounter here, the social history of art's engagement with the practice and methodology of deconstruction as it was developed in de Man's writings. I focus, instead, on the pivotal concept of allegory and its part in the idea of the 'materialist signature.' Materialism is the obvious place where de Man's deconstructive textual commentaries, convinced of the materiality of language, and the social history of art meet.

Allegory and Symbol in Benjamin and de Man

The writings of Walter Benjamin are key to understanding the elaboration of allegory in Paul de Man. He derived from Benjamin's critical revival and reinterpretation of the concept of allegory in *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* (1928) an understanding of allegory as a distinctly negative and destructive mode of representation. At the end of 'Form and Content in American New Criticism' de Man quotes Benjamin's definition of allegory 'as a void "that signifies precisely the non-being of what it represents".'² Benjamin understands allegory in terms of fragmentation and ruin that involves the 'renunciation of the idea of harmonious totality' promised by the symbolic mode of representation.³ In its fascination with ruins, with significant fragments, and remnants as the finest materials for artistic creation, thereby conceiving the work of art as their accumulation, allegory 'declares itself to be beyond beauty.'⁴ Benjamin sees this preoccupation with broken fragments as a politically progressive tendency of allegory, destroying what he calls 'the illusion of totality or of organic wholeness' that transfigures bourgeois life and 'makes it seem endurable.'⁵

For Benjamin, any discussion of allegory was inadequate without considering the contrasting notion of the symbol. This consideration of the imbrications of allegory and symbol characterises de Man's 1969 essay on the aesthetics and rhetoric of Romanticism, 'The Rhetoric of Temporality', which may serve as the canonical expression of his views on allegory and the difference between it and symbolic representation. The exploration of the 'intentionality' of rhetorical language in this essay owes much to Benjamin's text.⁶ Benjamin's analysis, in a similar way to de Man's, begins with the antinomy between allegory and symbol established in Romantic aesthetics in which a concept of the allegorical becomes the 'speculative counterpart' of the symbol, presented as the 'dark background against which the bright world of the symbol might stand out.'⁷ In the Romantic invention of an opposition between allegorical and symbolic representation, which de Man's essay seeks to deconstruct, the symbol was valorised for its 'depth and integrity, spontaneity and organic holism.'⁸ The

aesthetic potential of allegory was thought exhausted, lacking these qualities. Romantic and modernist criticism pointed to the merely ornamental and decorative, artificial, doctrinal, or conventional character of allegory. Allegorical representation was denounced as the antithesis of art: 'the product of disjunction between the workings of reason and the workings of the imagination.'⁹ Hegel condemned allegory as a mode of representation that 'only imperfectly [corresponded] to the essence of art'; considering it an abstract and coldly intellectual affair lacking in 'the heartfelt depth of the imagination.'¹⁰ The primary concern of allegory was the personification of universal, abstract situations and qualities, i.e. religion, love, justice, and discord. However, the 'allegorical being' that embodies these qualities never attains a specific 'concrete individuality;' despite its human shape, it must remain a hollow, empty form 'in order that there may be congruity between subjectivity and the abstract meaning it has.'¹¹ The concern with clarity determined the transparency of the allegorical sign, the 'sensually concrete objects' through which it availed itself. Hegel therefore considered allegory 'bleak' because the allegorical sign was meaningless in itself, 'its general personification is empty,' and because the connection between the allegorical meaning and the objects or images chosen to personify or illustrate that meaning were lacking in unity and entirely arbitrary. In a similar way, Benjamin observes the denunciation of allegory as a 'mere mode of designation' and the failure of Romanticism to engage productively with allegorical representation due to its conceiving it dismissively as, 'a conventional relationship between an illustrative image and its abstract meaning.'¹²

De Man follows Benjamin in challenging the invisibility of allegory in modern art theory. Its invisibility was a symptom of the presumed superiority of symbolic representation over allegory for the purposes of artistic creativity.¹³ 'The Rhetoric of Temporality' offers a formalist analysis of how different tropological mechanisms of language (allegory, symbol, and irony) produce their effects of meaning or representation. As such, the 'deliberate emphasis on rhetorical terminology' in this essay demonstrates a move in de Man's work away from a philosophical vocabulary and concern with consciousness, subjectivity, and the

question of authorial intention. The way a text signified was no longer primarily a question of authorial subjectivity for de Man: 'it follows from the rhetorical nature of literary language that the cognitive function resides in the language and not in the subject.'¹⁴ (Benjamin's theory of allegory 'suggested to de Man the power there might be in the use of the figures of rhetoric to mortify the text by disfiguring it in order to see how it works, not as something guided by an animating spirit, but as a mechanism.')¹⁵

'The Rhetoric of Temporality' examines Romanticism as a definite mode of representation rather than as a discrete period in literary history. It addresses the inflation in the value of the symbol as a mode or as a structure of representation, and the growing sense of its superiority over allegory in romantic and post-romantic literature. It seeks to undo or deconstruct this valorisation of symbolism. It begins by examining their changing and relative prominence in art criticism since Romanticism: 'when the rhetorical key-terms undergo significant changes,' when "symbol" displaces or masks "allegory", is confused with or supplants other denominations for figural language.¹⁶

'The Rhetoric of Temporality' addresses, therefore, the inflation in the value of the symbol as an especially creative mode of representation and the increasingly assured sense of its superiority over other kinds of figural language. De Man briefly details the qualifications to the claims of its superiority but concludes that by the later nineteenth century the 'supremacy of the symbol, conceived as an expression of unity between the representative and the semantic function of language, becomes a commonplace that underlies literary taste, literary criticism, and literary history.'¹⁷

Following Benjamin, de Man challenges allegory's invisibility in modern art criticism, perceiving it as symptomatic of the presumed superiority of symbolic representation for artistic creativity, in which the symbol would transcend the disjunction between experience and the representation of that experience in art. He observes how they were considered antithetical, and describes the main attraction of the symbol as opposed to allegory, the basis of its assumed

creative superiority. 'Allegory,' he writes, 'appears as dryly rational and dogmatic in its reference to a meaning that it does not itself constitute, whereas the symbol is founded on an intimate unity between the image that rises up before the senses and the supersensory totality that the image suggests.'¹⁸

To test the claim of the symbol's apparent superiority and the antinomy between allegory and symbol, de Man shifts his discussion from German to French and English Romantic literature. He turns first to Coleridge, who expressed himself most explicitly on the antinomy of allegory and symbol. For Coleridge, the symbol meant 'an actual and essential part of that, the whole of which it represents.'¹⁹ In its designation of a totality in which it participates, and in that it becomes 'the sensorial equivalent of a more general, ideal meaning,' a symbol takes on the structure of the synecdoche.²⁰ De Man explores this definition in his essay. The synecdoche, usually understood as a sub-species of metonymy, is a trope that identifies the part for the whole and lets us understand 'the plural from the singular, the whole from a part, a genus from the species, something following from something preceding; and vice versa.'²¹ The synecdoche is important to the symbolic relation 'in which one may read both a relation of contiguity between the two complementary halves of the *symbolon*, and a relation of inclusion between each of these two halves and the whole that they constitute and reconstitute. Each demi-symbol both suggests the other and evokes their common totality.'²² Coleridge considers the symbol to be superior to allegory because with 'the symbolic imagination [...] the material perception and the symbolic imagination are continuous, as the part is continuous with the whole.'²³ However, the identification of the part for the whole fits easily the logical criterion of allegory, since the synecdoche indicates some larger organisation of meaning to which it has an integral relationship.

De Man addresses the attempt to distinguish allegory and symbol formally in a passage from Coleridge's *The Statesman's Manual* (1816) and details the erasure of a firm distinction between these tropes.²⁴ The brief discussion of rhetorical language is part of an argument advocating the *Bible* as a practical handbook for statesmen²⁵ and its relevance as a 'guiding light' for 'statecraft'.

Coleridge contrasted the abstract thought of revolutionary France to the established wisdom and the truths of the *Bible*. For Coleridge, the *Bible* was 'a system of symbols, harmonious in themselves, and consubstantial with the truths, of which they are the *conductors*.'²⁶ (It is interesting to note that the valorisation of the symbolic over the allegorical mode of representation, this language of aesthetics, has often occurred as part of political discourse, in *The Statesman's Manual* and also for example, in Friedrich Schiller's (1759-1805) *On the Aesthetic Education of Mankind*, where it frames Schiller's social critique. In the Sixth Letter, concerned with specialisation and the division of labour in production, he writes that in the Greek state, 'every individual enjoyed an independent existence but could, when need arose, grow into the whole organism,' whereas contemporary society appeared to him as an 'ingenious clock-work', assembled from 'lifeless parts.'²⁷ In terms used to value symbol over allegory, Schiller compares ancient Greek civilisation with the modern.)

Coleridge understood an allegory as merely:

a translation of abstract notions into a picture-language which is itself nothing but an abstraction from objects of the senses; the principle being more worthless even than its phantom proxy, both alike unsubstantial, and the former shapeless to boot. On the other hand a symbol [...] is characterised by a translucence of the Special in the Individual or of the General in the Especial or of the Universal in the General. Above all by the translucence of the Eternal through and in the Temporal. It always partakes of the Reality which it renders intelligible; and while it enunciates the whole, abides itself as a living part in that Unity, of which it is the representative.²⁸

This passage presents, at first sight anyway, an unqualified assertion of the superiority of the symbol on the grounds of the structure it shares with the synecdoche. A symbol is 'a part of the totality that it represents' and is therefore predicated on the continuity between an initial 'material perception and the

symbolical imagination.²⁹ In other words, there appears an *organic* relationship between the symbol and the totality it symbolises or between signifier and signified, a relationship that in allegory appears 'purely mechanical' and abstract. There is no necessary connection between the allegorical signifier and the signified for Coleridge. Moreover, in that the allegorical signifier is merely the 'phantom proxy' for another unrelated but more engaging meaning, it is therefore without sensuality and condemned to become 'a sheer phantom devoid of shape or substance' in Coleridge's text.³⁰

Thus, Coleridge criticises the 'essential thinness' of allegory and its 'lack of substantiality.'³¹ It is therefore surprising that the symbol is not valued for its 'organic or material richness' or 'material substantiality.' For Coleridge, the symbol is an image alone but also a part of the whole that animates it; as part of the totality it 'represents', it is characterised by translucence, it is part of and acts as a vehicle for, what shines through it.³² However, given the other claims made for the symbol, the claim for translucence is a discrepancy in Coleridge's argument. The clear declaration of the superiority of symbol over allegory in the passage from *The Statesman's Manual* starts to sound more ambiguous. The rich substantiality of the symbol dissolves to become 'a mere reflection of a more original unity that does not exist in the material world;' this conclusion is unusual because Coleridge had characterised *allegory* 'negatively as being *merely* a reflection.' The materiality or the sensuality of the symbol becomes largely unimportant and the passage describes how symbol and allegory alike originate 'beyond the world of matter.' What is central is their shared 'transcendental source' rather than the kind of relationship they have to it, either through 'the organic coherence of the synecdoche' possessed by the symbol, or the rational and 'pure decision of the mind' of allegory.³³

So, the passage from *The Statesman's Manual* is convinced of the inferiority of allegory in contrast to the symbol, convinced of their antithetical nature. But the distinction between these figures ultimately disappears: 'Starting out from the assumed superiority of the symbol in terms of organic substantiality, we end up

with a description of figural language as translucence in which the distinction between allegory and symbol has become of secondary importance.³⁴

The criticism of Romantic imagery ignored this description of figural language as translucence and found the 'ultimate intent of the image' in synthesis, an attribute of the symbol. Romantic poetry has most often been interpreted in terms of synthesis, fusion, and unity. The interpreters of Romanticism have distinguished the poetry of Wordsworth and Coleridge in terms of an intimate and synthetic 'relationship between mind and nature, between subject and object', a relationship that de Man also acknowledges as fundamentally important. Romantic poetry seeks in the description of nature an analogy for the mind, a relationship between entities that can be antithetical, that critics expressed as an affinity or sympathy. De Man describes how critics searched for a language to correctly describe this relationship and therefore a shift from the more formal language of analogy to a language that more usually applies to relationships between subjects rather than a subject and an object. This change in terminology indicates that in the criticism of Romantic nature poetry, the 'relationship with nature has been superseded by an intersubjective, interpersonal relationship that, in the last analysis, is a relationship of the subject toward itself.'³⁵ The 'radical idealism' of the commentary appears incompatible with the importance romantic poets gave to nature.

De Man turns to a passage from Wordsworth's *The Prelude* to demonstrate how Romantic poetry, far from the idealism it now appears, does not prioritise the subject, or posit an intersubjective relationship and sees in nature a 'temporal stability' that the self lacks, a refuge from mortality. De Man identifies, therefore, a confusion in the critical approaches to Romanticism that cannot decide whether its imagery suggests 'subjective idealism' or naturalism. This impasse results ultimately from 'the assumed predominance of the symbol as the outstanding characteristic of romantic diction, de Man argues, and the fact that the symbol cannot adequately articulate the relationship of the subject to the natural world.'³⁶

De Man turns from English to French literary history with the example of Rousseau's epistolary novel *La Nouvelle Héloïse* (1761) to clarify 'the entire problem of analogy, as connected with the use of nature symbol,' which the assumed dominance of the symbolic mode of representation had obscured. French literary history emphasised the same 'close unity between mind and nature as a fundamental characteristic of romantic diction' found in American historians of romanticism. *La Nouvelle Héloïse* demonstrates the priority of symbolic language over allegory in Romantic imagery and that 'the origins of romanticism coincide with the beginnings of a predominantly symbolical diction.'³⁷ There are intimate analogies between 'the outward aspect of nature' and inner states of emotion or the soul in Rousseau's text. However, de Man questions the symbolic character of the 'central emblem' of *La Nouvelle Héloïse*, 'the garden that Julie has created on the Wolmar estate as a place of refuge.'³⁸ In detailing Rousseau's aesthetic and literary appropriations and allusions, de Man discovers an allegorical language rather than one of analogy or correspondences.

The presence of 'allegorizing tendencies' in Romantic language suggests, de Man argues, that 'the dialectic between subject and object does not designate the main romantic experience, but only one passing moment in a dialectic, and a negative moment at that, since it represents a temptation that has to be overcome.'³⁹ 'The Rhetoric of Temporality' therefore identifies the prevalence of allegory in early Romanticism in the writing of Rousseau and Wordsworth, which unlike their critics, had to 'renounce the seductiveness and the poetic resources of a symbolic diction.'⁴⁰

Allegory 'corresponds to the unveiling of an authentically temporal destiny. This unveiling takes place in a subject that has sought refuge against the impact of time in a natural world to which, in truth, it bears no resemblance.'⁴¹ We find refuge from temporality through the spatialisation of time that symbolic modes of language effects. The symbolic relationship of the signifier and the signified 'is one of simultaneity,' whereas the allegorical sign accentuates the temporal distance between its constitutive parts: 'it remains necessary, if there is to be

allegory, that the allegorical sign refer to another sign that precedes it.' The meaning of the allegorical sign is constituted through the repetition of an earlier sign to which it has a relationship of 'pure anteriority.'⁴² For allegory to exist at all, the allegorical sign must refer to another sign that precedes it. The meaning of an allegorical sign is therefore always and only constituted through the repetition of the previous sign with which it can never coincide given the character of the structure of allegory. De Man writes:

Whereas the symbol postulates the possibility of an identity or identification, allegory designates primarily a distance in relation to its own origin, and, renouncing the nostalgia and the desire to coincide, it establishes its language in the void of this temporal difference. In so doing, it prevents the self from an illusory identification with the non-self, which is now full, through painfully, recognised as a non-self. It is this painful knowledge that we perceive at the moments when early romantic literature finds its true voice.⁴³

Allegory and Materiality

Benjamin's *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, a book on seventeenth-century German plays in which mourning and grief are represented allegorically, in which a mortifying gaze causes objects and words to disintegrate so that there are only syllables and letters left, is suggestive of the difficult idea of materiality of de Man's late writings, and the role materiality plays in the critique of 'aesthetic ideology' - namely the desire for symbolic and aesthetic syntheses. With reference to Benjamin's treatment of allegory in his writings of the 1930s on Baudelaire, which compare allegory to the commodity form, and to a 'least valued' (because of its antipathy to 'the phenomenism of art') section from Hegel's *Aesthetics*, de Man describes the materialistic character of allegory. He insists that both commodity and allegory exist merely as inscription or notation on paper, and he therefore describes allegory as:

material or materialistic, in Benjamin's sense, because its dependence on the letter, on the literalism of the letter, cuts it off sharply from symbolic and aesthetic syntheses. [...] Allegory names the rhetorical process by which the literary text moves from a phenomenal, world-oriented to a grammatical, language-orientated direction.⁴⁴

According to de Man, the meaning of allegory is not determined by 'mimetic moments' – an allegorical text does not have an ordinary referential relationship to its topic. We should consider allegories within a condition of textuality – allegorical modes of representation or expression refer to other writings rather than find their referents in nature, as de Man's commentaries in 'The Rhetoric of Temporality' make clear. Allegories imply an attention to the grammatical and the linguistic form of language rather than to the aesthetic. The conclusion to another late essay, 'Sign and Symbol in Hegel's *Aesthetics*', argues that, 'Allegories are allegories of the most distinctively linguistic (as opposed to phenomenal) of categories, namely grammar.'⁴⁵ In other words, allegory marks a shift from art's engagement with the perception of a phenomenal world to a condition of textuality. Benjamin also described allegory as a form of expression not essentially different to writing.⁴⁶

The allegorist deals in pure or empty signifiers for both thinkers. This sense of writing is fundamental to de Man's formulation of materiality. Allegorical form is there to be decoded rather than enjoyed as an imitation of reality. Thus, in the terms of de Man's late writings, allegorical form is strongly materialistic, it is part of the 'materialist signature' of this writing, and an instance of what he names, perhaps uncertainly and uncomfortably, as 'materiality'.

The Materiality of History

The complex and seemingly paradoxical concept of materiality occurs in three closely related ways in de Man's late writings: the materiality of the letter or

inscription, the materiality of history, and material vision. In what follows, I outline what de Man means by the “materiality of history”.

De Man’s elaboration of the materiality of history emerges in his analysis of the critical reception of Kant’s *Critique of Judgement* in his fifth Messenger lecture, ‘Kant and Schiller’, given at Cornell University in March 1983. (He did so apparently against his will: he told his audience he did not deliberately want to address the ‘question of historicity’ which ‘emerged by itself’ when he set himself the problem of seeing what happened when Schiller reads Kant’s *Critique of Judgement*.⁴⁷) The Messenger Lectures on Kant argue that the third *Critique* represents a threat to the category of the aesthetic in its espousal of a radical materialism, and the aesthetic tradition that followed sought to emphasise and revalorise the aesthetic as an exemplary and unifying category and thus as a model for education and ultimately the state. De Man examines the complexity of Schiller’s encounter with Kant in Schiller’s reading of the *Critique of Judgement* in the spring of 1791 and the rewriting of the Kantian sublime in an essay of 1793 entitled ‘On the Sublime’. Schiller *domesticated* ‘the critical incisiveness of the original’ text he followed. (In another late essay de Man commented on the ‘simplified versions’ of the *Critique of Judgement* that appeared in ‘Schiller and his offspring’.⁴⁸) The tendency to ‘domesticate the more threatening difficulties’ of a text, the temptation to smooth over or explain away its anomalies, dead ends, or breaking points in the critical traditions that follow it preoccupies de Man.

The aesthetic for de Man is primarily a principle of articulation. The symbol is the dominant trope of what he understands as the category of the aesthetic. It involves a confusion of linguistic with phenomenal or natural reality and also applies to the mistake of taking the experience of an artwork for the experience in which that work originated.⁴⁹ The aesthetic names:

the attempt to find a bridge between the phenomenal and the intelligible, the sensuous and the conceptual. Aesthetic objects [like paintings or sculptures] with their union of sensuous form and spiritual content, serve as guarantors of the general possibility of

articulating the material and the spiritual, a world of forces and magnitudes with a world of value.⁵⁰

The category of the aesthetic is what critics rely upon to establish a passage between formal linguistic structures and the meaning of a literary text they want to interpret. It seems to offer a way of making a hermeneutics of reading more compatible with 'a poetics of literary form.' De Man is preoccupied with writers, predominantly Baudelaire and Benjamin in his writings on allegory, who problematise the category of the aesthetic, who demonstrate, to de Man at least, the *instability* of the aesthetic as a principle of articulation.

So, 'Kant and Schiller' is concerned with the complex reception and the critical afterlife of the *Critique of Judgement* in terms of a regression from its incisiveness and the domestication of its more 'threatening insights' through a kind of aestheticism. The juxtaposition of Kant and Schiller's opposed treatments of the sublime expose the valorisation of art and the category of the aesthetic as principles of harmony and reconciliation in Schiller's writings. De Man identifies the various ways in which Schiller's treatment of the sublime diverges from that of Kant and the essentially different complexion of their concerns. Schiller valorises what he names as the practical over the theoretical sublime for the sake of artistic creativity: its subject matter of physical threat to the human body that we cannot oppose or resist has a greater power to move an audience emotionally than the philosophical abstractions that preoccupy Kant, such as infinity or the concern with the conditions of possibility, the foundations, the origins and the rightful limits of representation, that are anyway not easily or successfully represented by art. There is simply more at stake artistically for Schiller in the practical sublime, specifically, an empirical threat to our bodily existence. For Hegel in the introduction to his lectures on fine art, it was '*Schiller* [...] who must be given credit for breaking through the Kantian subjectivity and abstraction of thinking and for venturing on an attempt to get beyond this by intellectually grasping the unity and reconciliation as the truth and by actualising them in artistic production.'⁵¹ Schiller's is a realistic, practical and psychological discourse that has nothing to do with the philosophical concerns of Kant. But what interests de Man and strikes him as paradoxical is

that Schiller's emphasis upon the practical and the psychological, that structures his writings on the sublime and renders them entirely intelligible, ends up with 'a radical separation between mind and body' and an untenable idealism. Schiller argues that the practical sublime makes us aware of the fragility of our physical being but awakens in us a resistance to the terror which confronts us, a 'counterforce' which 'isolates' our physical existence from our personality. Through the 'aesthetic contemplation of the sublime', Schiller continues, we learn to consider our physical existence as sensuous beings as entirely indifferent to us, and our freedom resides in taking our bodily existence as 'something external and foreign, that has no influence on our moral person'. This is the way Schiller is ideological, in the way Marx in *The German Ideology* would have understood, this positing of pure intellect unburdened by matter, or entirely separated from actual material existence.

It is the emergence of a radical materialism in Kant's text and the ideological response to it in Schiller's writings on the sublime and the theme of the critical reception and juxtaposition of texts more generally, leads de Man to the counterintuitive formulation of the 'materiality of history'. He is concerned with the progress towards an occurrence of materialism in the *Critique of Judgement* that 'has the materiality of something that actually happens, that actually occurs [...] that leaves a trace on the world, that does something to the world as such.'⁵² De Man offers a 'linguistic model' for the relationships between aesthetic texts and parts of texts he describes. He reads 'The Analytic of the Sublime' as a *passage* or transition between two distinct conceptions of language. He demonstrates that what happens at this moment in the *Critique of Judgement* is a transition from a tropological to a performative use of language, from language as cognition or truth to language as power or effectiveness. In other words, de Man turns to a linguistic terminology to describe the transition from the mathematical to the dynamic sublime in the *Third Critique* and the later entanglements of aesthetic theories that follow Kant's text.

A performative statement does not describe an event or action but *does* it or carries it out. For example, the sentence "I declare war" is *itself* the act of

declaring war. We find instances of performative language 'whenever, in a given situation, *saying* something is *doing* something recognisable.'⁵³ Language that legislates, promises, confesses, denounces or excuses is performative. In legislating, promising, confessing, denouncing, or excusing language does not describe something that exists outside and before it, but rather produces or transforms a given situation. If, as Johnson explains, 'a performative utterance is originally a self-referential speech act, its production is simultaneously the production of a new referent into the world.'⁵⁴ This is what interests de Man in his discussion of the juxtaposition and the succession of aesthetic, philosophical and critical texts. He is concerned with 'the positional power inherent in language.'⁵⁵ That is, its power to actually produce its objects, invent the entities it signifies - which have no equivalents in nature - through kinds of rhetoric (catachresis, prosopopeia). It is thanks to language that 'woods speak, echoes sigh, marble breathes and all inanimate objects come to life.'⁵⁶ The production of a unique referent is what 'occurs materially' for him in the texts he reads, and, to the extent that the referent is produced by a performative statement, it is neither exterior nor prior to language itself, the difficult notion of materiality becomes more understandable.

The reception of Kant in Schiller does not represent a reversal of this passage or process but a relapse into ideology, a recuperation of materialism within the cognitive system of tropes on which the category of the aesthetic depends. History, for de Man, emerges at the moment when things happen, when there is occurrence or event. History emerges, therefore, with the performative and as such is inaccessible to cognition given that the nature of the referent is a consequence of a performative statement. As such, talking about the "materiality of history" is not talking about "what really happened". For de Man, 'the materiality of history, properly speaking, is the result of acts of power that are punctual and momentary, since they are atemporal, noncognitive and noncognizable, performative utterances.'⁵⁷ The regression from the third *Critique* that Schiller's reinscription of Kant within the tropological system of aesthetics represents is not historical but ideological: 'Schiller's ideological misreading of Kant and its long progeny in the nineteenth and twentieth

centuries were nonevents, certainly not irreversible material events,' nothing happens in the reception of Kant in Schiller for de Man.⁵⁸ History, de Man claims, 'is therefore not a temporal notion, it has nothing to do with temporality, but it is the emergence of a language of power out of a language of cognition.'⁵⁹

The discussion of history in Kant and Schiller suggests the critique of art historical methodology in the introduction to T. J. Clark's *Image of the People: Gustave Courbet and the 1848 Revolution* (1973). Clark construes the first exhibition of a painting, the day it 'was released into the public realm' as an occurrence, of something that actually occurs, that actually happens – the social history of art was always structured not by a scheme of progression but by the event or the occurrence, and the value of this notion of occurrence links painting not to art history as a 'self-directed evolution of styles and biographies,' but to art as power. *Image of the People* begins with a moment when critics and publics agreed that the paintings Courbet sent to the Salon of 1851, which were given a Socialist interpretation by the critics, had, as the epigraphs at the beginning of the introduction to Clark's book, 'On the Social History of Art' on Proudhon and bohemian culture demonstrate, 'a political sense and intention,' and were 'an effective part of the historical process.'⁶⁰

This strangely "material" history might seem hard to accept. But the insistence upon history as the 'eventness of events rather than as temporal process,'⁶¹ as Derrida puts it, becomes more acceptable and perhaps understandable if we recall Althusser's interpretation of ideology in 'Ideology and the Ideological State Apparatuses' (1970): it 'is not their real conditions of existence, their real world' that individuals represent to themselves in ideology, but an illusory or imaginary relationship to historical reality.⁶² In an earlier essay on materialist theatre, in the context of reflecting upon the emergence of and structural position of critique in Brecht's plays, Althusser comments that an ideological 'consciousness does not accede to the real through its own internal development, but by the radical discovery of what is *other than itself*.'⁶³ In these comments that separate history from historical reality, Althusser follows critically Marx and Engels of *The German Ideology*. They argue that the forms of

ideology and the forms of consciousness that correspond to them have no history of their own, ideologies have no development apart from ‘men, developing their material production and their material intercourse.’⁶⁴ So, for Marx and Engels, ideology, ‘the production of ideas, of conceptions, of consciousness,’ is ‘directly interwoven’ with concrete human history, ‘the material activity and the material intercourse of men,’ and is ‘the language of real life,’ but it is not in itself historical – ideology is not an event or occurrence as de Man understands those words.⁶⁵ Althusser acknowledges that Marx and Engels *do* understand that ideology has no history of its own, that its history is always outside it, but only insofar as they construe it as ‘pure illusion, a pure dream, i.e. as nothingness.’ According to Althusser, *The German Ideology* interprets ideology as ‘an imaginary assemblage, a pure dream, empty and vain, constituted by the “day’s residues” from the only full and positive reality, that of the concrete history of concrete material individuals materially producing their existence.’⁶⁶ (Althusser defends a radically different thesis to that of *The German Ideology* while retaining its terms – he will argue that ideology in general has no history, but not for the reason that it is the pale and empty reflection of a history of concrete individuals always external to it. Rather, ideology is not historical because it is *eternal*, a formulation that Althusser adopts from Freud’s consideration of the unconscious.)

The German Ideology describes history as ‘nothing but the succession of the separate generations’ that variously modify and continue the circumstances they inherit. However, Marx and Engels warn again distorting this argument to mean that later history is the goal of earlier history or that earlier history is the ‘germ’ of later history. They refute historical narratives that personify the succession they describe, or understand history biologically or organically. And in a similar way to the conception of history presented in *The German Ideology*, de Man does not regulate the concept of historicity ‘by the scheme of progression or of regression, thus by a scheme of teleological process, but rather by that of the event, or occurrence, thus by the singularity of the “one time only”.’⁶⁷

De Man valued Marx as an aesthetic thinker, especially in *The German Ideology*, a text he described as ‘a model of critical procedure along the lines of Kant’s third *Critique*,’ and the tradition of Western unorthodox Marxism of Lukács, Benjamin, Adorno and Althusser. *The German Ideology*, concerned with language and epistemology, exemplifies a particularly aesthetic thought which has nothing in common with what we ordinarily consider as aestheticism. Marx’s text is aesthetic theory and these authors are ‘aesthetic thinkers’ because of the way they critically examine the conditions of possibility and the modalities of political discourse and action. Against the accusation of the frivolity of aesthetic debate, the feeling that it betrays, as Schiller puts it, ‘a culpable indifference to the common weal,’ de Man argues for the incisive contribution aesthetic thinkers have made to political thought.⁶⁸ Their work ‘precludes, for example, any valorisation of aesthetic categories at the expense of intellectual rigour or political action, or any claim for the autonomy of aesthetic experience as a self-enclosed, self-reflexive totality.’⁶⁹ It is erroneous to assume that a concern with aesthetics naturally excludes a concern with politics, to take the aesthetic as a principle of exclusivity in contemporary theoretical discourse.

Hillis Miller argues for the congruence of Marx’s critique of political economy with de Man’s literary theory.⁷⁰ Reading the first chapter of *Capital* on the commodity as essentially an aesthetic theory and a kind of prototype of deconstructive criticism demonstrates clear similarities to the key concepts of de Man’s writings. For example, Marx argues that: ‘Not an atom of matter enters into the objectivity of commodities as values; in this it is the direct opposite of the coarsely sensuous objectivity as physical objects.’⁷¹ He explains that commodities have a double form – a natural form and a value form. As values, commodities are objective but without matter – they possess a ‘materiality without matter.’ This is how Derrida formulates the equally paradoxical elaboration of the materiality that emerges in de Man’s late writings. Marx goes on to explain how the value form of the commodity is nothing but a social relation between people – it has, Marx writes, absolutely no connection with the physical nature of the commodity – but a fetishism attaches itself to the

products of men's and women's labour and value appears to belong to sensuous things in themselves. Marx writes in the section on 'The Fetishism of the Commodity and its Secret' that the 'mysterious character of the commodity-form consists therefore simply in the fact that the commodity reflect the social characteristics of men's own labour as objective characteristics of the produces of labour themselves. [...] Through this substitution, the products of labour become commodities, sensuous things which are at the same time suprasensible or social.'⁷² In Marx, there is a critique of this confusion between the value form of the commodity and its sensuous, natural body. In the terminology of de Man, there is a critique of the confusion between linguistic reality – language only exists as a social relation between people – with 'natural reality' – which is how he defines ideology. So, the elaboration of the fetishism of commodities in *Capital* is compatible with de Man's own definition of ideology.

Value in Marx's chapter on the commodity, history, inscription and the vision of the poets, the other registers of de Man's materialism, possess equally 'materiality without matter.' Whatever form the counter-intuitive concept of materiality takes in de Man's late writings, in whatever registers or modalities it appears, it is not, as value is not in Marx's chapter on the commodity, in Derrida's words, 'a thing, it is not something,' but it is a nothing which works, which operates, which forces, it is 'a force of resistance.' Materiality, Derrida adds, 'resists both beautiful form and matter as substantial and organic totality,'⁷³ that is, those values that are identified by de Man as those of the symbol and ultimately of the aesthetic itself.

¹ Speaking at the University of Leeds in 1992, the art historian T. J. Clark asked his audience, 'Does it seem perverse of me to offer de Man as a guide to reading in the "social history of art"? Maybe. All I can say is that he has *been* a guide. And in bad times you look for instruction often in tainted places. Your enemies have more to teach you than your friends'. See T. J. Clark, 'On the Very Idea of a Subversive Art History', unpublished conference paper, (1992): 16.

² Walter Benjamin quoted by Paul de Man, *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism, Second Edition, Revised*, (London: Routledge: 1989): 35.

³ Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin, (Massachusetts and London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2002): 330.

⁴ Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, trans. John Osborne, (London: Verso, 1992): 178.

⁵ Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*: 331.

⁶ Doris Sommer remarks that de Man's formulation of allegory in its relationship to the symbol in 'The Rhetoric of Temporality' is indebted to Benjamin's bothering 'to dust of the notion of allegory and deploy it for modern criticism.' She considers Benjamin to be 'a closer and more immediately relevant master' than the more recognised role Nietzsche plays in de Man's writings on allegory. See Doris Sommer, 'Allegory and Dialectics: A Match Made in Romance', *boundary 2*, 18:1, (1991): 60.

⁷ Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*: 161.

⁸ Stephen Melville, 'Notes on the Reemergence of Allegory, the Forgetting of Modernism, the Necessity of Rhetoric, and the Conditions of Publicity in Art and Criticism', *October*, 19 (Winter 1981): 57.

⁹ Edwin Honig, *Dark Conceit: The Making of Allegory*, (Evanston, IL.: Northwestern University Press, 1959): 4.

¹⁰ G. W. F. Hegel, *Aesthetics, Lectures on Fine Art Volume I*, trans. T. M. Knox, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998): 400.

¹¹ *Ibid.*: 399.

¹² Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*: 162.

¹³ Christopher Norris remarks that at issue in many of de Man's writings is 'the high valuation of artistic creativity vested in privileged poetic tropes, especially metaphor and symbol.' Norris argues that this 'valuation goes along with the Romantic belief in art as the manifestation of genius, of creative powers that lie beyond the reach of mere craft, learning, or applied technique'. Christopher Norris, *Paul de Man: Deconstruction and the Critique of Aesthetic Ideology*, (London: Routledge, 1988): 25.

¹⁴ De Man, *Blindness and Insight*: 137.

¹⁵ Lindsay Waters, 'Introduction. Paul de Man: Life and Works', in Paul de Man, *Critical Writings 1953-1973*, (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1989): iv.

¹⁶ Craig Owens also remarks upon the same critical suppression or invisibility of allegory described by de Man and sees it as a legacy of romantic art theory. He points out that twentieth century allegories – those of Kafka or Borges for example – 'are rarely called allegories, but parables or fables.' Craig Owens, 'The Allegorical Impulse: Towards a Theory of Post-modernism', *October*, 12, (Spring, 1980): 76.

¹⁷ De Man, *Blindness and Insight*: 189.

¹⁸ *ibid.*

¹⁹ Samuel Taylor Coleridge, 'The Statesman's Manual', in R. J. White (ed.), *Lay Sermons* (Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1972): 79.

²⁰ De Man, *Blindness and Insight*: 190.

²¹ Quintilian quoted by Fletcher, *Allegory: Theory of a Symbolic Mode*, (Cornell University Press, 1964): 85.

²² Gérard Genette, *Figures of Literary Discourse*, (trans.) Alan Sheridan with an Introduction by Marie-Rose Logan, (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1982): 109.

²³ De Man, *Blindness and Insight*: 191.

²⁴ Following de Man, Gail Day questions the treatment of the 'allegory-symbol distinction' as a clear dichotomy or static opposition, but she does not wish to efface the distinction entirely. Through the remarks on allegory and symbol in *The Statesman's Manual*, de Man's consideration of the valorisation of the symbol over allegory in the modern epoch in 'The Rhetoric of Temporality' does clearly distinguish allegory from the symbol in terms of disjunction and synthesis respectively. And for Day, there is little doubt that de Man and Benjamin, the two authors that informed the discussion of allegory in Craig Owens' two part essay on allegory published in *October*, 'characterize the symbol as immediacy, presence, identity, and transcendence, nor that they emphasise allegory's qualities of non-identity, rupture, disjunction, distance, and fragmentation.' Allegory and symbol are understood or described in these terms and we are left with the impression that they do clearly separate allegory from symbol in terms of disjunction and synthesis respectively. See Gail Day, 'Allegory: Between Deconstruction and Dialectics', *Oxford Art Journal*, 22:1, (1999): 106.

²⁵ Fred Orton, '(Painting) Out of Time', *Parallax*, 3 (September, 1996): 100.

²⁶ Coleridge, 'The Statesman's Manual': 28.

²⁷ Friedrich Schiller, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man In a Series of Letters*, Edited and translated with an Introduction, Commentary and Glossary of Terms by Elizabeth M. Wilkinson and L. A. Willoughby, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2005): 35.

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- ²⁸ Ibid.: 30.
- ²⁹ De Man, *Blindness and Insight*: 191.
- ³⁰ Ibid.: 192.
- ³¹ Ibid.
- ³² See Fred Orton, 'Figuring Jasper Johns', Henry Moore 'Objects of Sculpture' Lecture, University of Leeds, (March 1992): 20.
- ³³ De Man, *Blindness and Insight*: 192.
- ³⁴ Ibid.: 192-193.
- ³⁵ Ibid.: 196.
- ³⁶ Ibid.: 198.
- ³⁷ Ibid.: 200.
- ³⁸ Ibid.: 201.
- ³⁹ Ibid.: 204.
- ⁴⁰ Ibid.: 206.
- ⁴¹ Ibid.
- ⁴² Ibid.: 207. De Man describes the repetition of the two signs as 'Kierkegaardian'. Repetition is a specifically linguistic or 'textual phenomena' in 'The Rhetoric of Temporality', and following Arne Melberg's exegesis of Kierkegaard's sense of "repetition" that de Man invokes – he wants to suggest the allegorical meaning comes after the allegorical sign, but it does not repeat it, it is new – it is a 'now that is always an after' – the allegorical meaning is a 'caesura that defines what has been and prepares what is to become.' See Arne Melberg, "Repetition (in the Kierkegaardian Sense of the Term)", *diacritics*, 20:3, (Fall, 1990), 74.
- ⁴³ De Man, *Blindness and Insight*: 207.
- ⁴⁴ Paul de Man, 'Reading and History', in *The Resistance to Theory*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986): 68.
- ⁴⁵ Paul de Man, 'Sign and Symbol in Hegel's *Aesthetics*', *Critical Inquiry*, 8(4), (Summer 1982): 775.
- ⁴⁶ Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*: 162.
- ⁴⁷ Paul de Man, 'Kant and Schiller', in *Aesthetic Ideology*, (Minneapolis/London: University of Minnesota Press, 1996): 132.
- ⁴⁸ De Man, 'The Return to Philology', in *The Resistance to Theory*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986): 25.
- ⁴⁹ De Man is doubtful of 'the notion that language, poetic or otherwise, can say any experience, of whatever kind, even a simple perception. Neither the statement "I see a cat" nor, for that matter, Baudelaire's poem "*Le Chat*" contains wholly the experience of this perception'. See de Man's essay 'The Dead-End of Formalist Criticism', in *Blindness and Insight*: 232.
- ⁵⁰ Jonathan Culler, 'Paul de Man's War and the Aesthetic Ideology', *Critical Inquiry*, (Summer 1989): 781.
- ⁵¹ Hegel, *Aesthetics*: 61.
- ⁵² Ibid.: 132.
- ⁵³ Barbara Johnson, 'Poetry and Performative Language', *Yale French Studies*, No. 54, *Mallarmé*, (1977): 144.
- ⁵⁴ Ibid.: 147.
- ⁵⁵ Paul de Man, 'The Epistemology of Metaphor', in *Aesthetic Ideology*, (Minneapolis/London: University of Minnesota Press, 1996): 42.
- ⁵⁶ Julien Offray de La Mettrie, 'Machine Man', in Ann Thomson (ed.), *Machine Man and Other Writings*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996): 15.
- ⁵⁷ J. Hillis Miller, 'Paul de Man as Allergen', in Tom Cohen, Barbara Cohen, J. Hillis Miller, Andrzej Warminski (eds), *Material Events: Paul de Man and the Afterlife of Theory*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001): 188.
- ⁵⁸ Ibid.
- ⁵⁹ De Man, 'Kant and Schiller': 133.
- ⁶⁰ T. J. Clark, *Image of the People: Gustave Courbet and the 1848 Revolution*, (London: Thames and Hudson, 1973): 9-10.
- ⁶¹ Jacques Derrida, 'Typewriter Ribbon: Limited Ink (2) ('within such limits')', in Tom Cohen, Barbara Cohen, J. Hillis Miller, Andrzej Warminski (eds), *Material Events: Paul de Man and the Afterlife of Theory*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001): 320.
- ⁶² Louis Althusser, 'Ideology and the Ideological State Apparatuses', in *Lenin and Philosophy and other Essays*, trans. Ben Brewster, (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1971): 164-165. For

the idea that Althusser's development of the Marxist concept of ideology in 'Ideology and the Ideological State Apparatuses' can make de Man's statements on the materiality of history that derive from his analysis of the reception of Kant's *Critique of Judgement* in aesthetic writings that followed it, particularly in Schiller's writings on the sublime, seem more understandable and acceptable, see Hillis Miller, 'Paul de Man as Allergen': 189.

⁶³ Louis Althusser, *For Marx*, trans. Ben Brewster, (London: Verso, 1990):143.

⁶⁴ Marx and Engels, *The German Ideology*, (ed.) C. J. Arthur, (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1974): 47.

⁶⁵ Ibid. For Marx and Engels, ideologies were the mere reflexes and echoes, the phantoms and the sublimates of the material life process' of individuals, and as such, 'Morality, religion, metaphysics, all the rest of ideology and their corresponding forms of consciousness, thus no longer retain the semblance of independence. They have no history, no development; but men, developing their material production and their material intercourse alter, along with this their real existence, their thinking and products of their thinking.'

⁶⁶ Althusser, 'Ideology and the Ideological State Apparatuses': 160.

⁶⁷ Derrida, 'Typewriter Ribbon': 319.

⁶⁸ Schiller, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man in a Series of Letters*: 9.

⁶⁹ Paul de Man, 'Hegel on the Sublime', in *Aesthetic Ideology*, (Minneapolis/London: University of Minnesota Press, 1996): 107.

⁷⁰ J. Hillis Miller, 'Promises, Promises: Speech Act Theory, Literary Theory, and Politico-Economic Theory in Marx and de Man', *New Literary History*, 33, (2002): 1.

⁷¹ Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy. Volume One*, trans. Ben Fowkes, (Harmondsworth, Penguin Books in association with New Left Books, 1976): 138.

⁷² Ibid.: 165.

⁷³ Derrida, 'Typewriter Ribbon': 350.

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Allegorical Interruptions: Ruined Representations and the Work of Ken Jacobs

Francis Summers

Abstract

This paper discusses allegorical procedures in two films by Ken Jacobs - *Blonde Cobra* and *Tom, Tom, the Piper's Son*. Starting with Craig Owens' notion of allegorical interpretation as disinterment, this paper proposes that we read Jacobs' work as an allegorical examination of an exhumed filmic body. This exhumation acts as a double interruption: fragmenting the previous narrative and then stopping up the continuum of perceptual experience through the accumulation of these gathered fragments. Looking at the various interruptions in Jacobs' films, this paper will focus on those procedures that foreground the allegorical disintegration of the symbol and dwell upon the ruination of representation.

In his canonical two-part essay 'The Allegorical Impulse: Towards a Theory of Postmodernism' (1980) Craig Owens charts a slow but seismic shift towards a burgeoning set of allegorical modes, attitudes and techniques. This 'allegorical impulse', as defined by Owens, was exemplary for its markedly deconstructive readings of pre-existing texts, supplementing (and thus supplanting) one with another and leading to what Owens describes, via Croce, as the inherently monstrous nature of locating two contents in one form. Owens opens the first part of his essay with a clear set of practices in mind: the practices of Troy Brauntuch, Sherrie Levine and Robert Longo; artists who, in Owens' words, 'generate images through the reproduction of other images'¹ - a procedure that seems to empty these appropriated images of their initial meaning, leaving them abruptly monolithic or with a quality that is 'resolutely opaque.'² We are invited to witness a supplemental replacement of the self-evident clarity of a symbol with a kind of runic to-be-deciphered-ness. In these works there is a display of a critical double writing whereby a symbol is first evoked and then ruined; held up for view and in this moment turned into a fragment, or even mortified. The image in its new context - for example, a photograph by a modernist master such as Walker Evans or Edward Weston re-photographed and displayed under the authorship of Sherrie Levine - no longer means the same thing, no longer

'reads the same way'; yet it retains an effaced version of its prior self. In relation to an understanding of the symbol as complete and expressive in, and of, itself, this postmodern allegorical mode, according to Owens, is one that displays signs in a resolutely mediated form – non-vital, constructed, not fully present. Using a Derridean formula, allegory becomes a form of writing, opposed to the unmediated and full 'speech' of the symbol.

For Owens the contemporary artist as allegorist could be represented through a form of interpretive confiscation by the artist-appropriator: 'in his hands the image becomes something other... He does not restore an original meaning that may have been lost or obscured... he adds another meaning to the image. If he adds, he does so only to replace: the allegorical meaning supplants an antecedent one; it is a supplement.'³ This allegorist is endowed by Walter Benjamin with a melancholy gaze which surveys history conceived as 'a petrified, primordial landscape,'⁴ a space from which ruined fragments are disinterred as hieroglyphic relics - a rubble-strewn forum pregnant with as yet uncovered meanings. Submitted to this gaze, the symbol is intercepted by allegory: dissolved, distorted. Craig Owens posits Walter Benjamin's own methods as a form of unearthing, of dredging up sedimentary depths of meanings – a practice whereby '*interpretation is disinterment*'⁵ – a picture where we see the allegorist as a grave-digger working in reverse, digging into this petrified landscape to exhume dead treasures. It is possible to see in this disinterment the model of allegory as an *interruption*, a disruption of the natural continuum, the shovel breaking through the earth. Recent art practice has often been interested in revealing the sign in its fragmentary and divided form, encountered as a split formation encompassed in the structure signified/signifier – intended meaning and material form no longer always coinciding in a perfect fit. Developing this perspective, Craig Owens cites the writings of the artist Robert Smithson as those of an allegorical protagonist, with Smithson's practice presented as an abyssal one that proceeds via the investigation of the world as, in Smithson's words, 'a syntax of splits and ruptures'; a working of interpretive critical practice which, through prolonged observation, reveals those antagonistic inner divisions that structure the object of analysis. Smithson writes about the cracked nature of language itself revealed through duration: '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...'⁶

Interruption has its own allegorical function for Benjamin, most notably through the shock effect that montage produces in the viewer as it juxtaposes two or more previously unlinked images or ideas. As Stanley Mitchell points out: 'Montage became for [Benjamin] the modern, constructive, active, unmelancholy form of allegory, namely the ability to connect dissimilars in such a way as to 'shock' people into new recognitions and understandings.'⁷ Benjamin located a part of this principle of interruptive shock in the ideas of the playwright Bertolt Brecht whose model of epic theatre endeavoured to show its own apparatus. Brecht used the so-called alienation or distancing effect to split open the naturalistic or realist illusion of theatre in order to make the action strange, operating in some instances through the actors directly addressing the audience outside of their theatrical roles. Crucial to this mode is the act of 'scission', the breaking of the flow of narratives and gestures. As Benjamin remarks: 'the first point at issue is to *uncover* these conditions. (One could just as well say: *to make them strange [verfremden]*.) This uncovering (making strange or alienating) of conditions is brought about by processes being interrupted.'⁸ The scission of interruption could be seen to have laid the device bare, thus stripping the illusion: the stage would appear as such, the machinery of representation exposed for all to see.

The work of New York based filmmaker Ken Jacobs sits somewhere on the interface between this allegorical and interruptive set of procedures – intercepting the symbol and submitting it to an explosively digressive analysis. His film work sprawls across multiple areas; combining appropriation procedures with a cinema that self-reflexively reveals its material conditions, a revelation that retains a sense of fascination in the series of enigmatic images conjured. This work, which ranges from the mid 1950s until today, crosses over (or even makes mutant) legacies of found footage films, the mythical-poetic film tradition and the rigours of so-called structural film. As film historian Scott MacDonald notes, Jacobs' filmmaking, as well as being exemplary of found footage and structural film traditions, is also akin to a 'trash-movie' aesthetic

that acts as a forerunner to the work of Andy Warhol and John Waters through his films such as *Little Stabs at Happiness* (1958-60), *Blonde Cobra* (1959-63), and the seven hour epic that has taken nearly fifty years to complete: *Star Spangled to Death*; begun in 1957 and finally released in a definitive form in 2004.⁹

Although many of Ken Jacobs' films use entirely his own shot footage (including *Orchard Street*, 1955, and *Little Stabs at Happiness*), in this paper I want primarily to concentrate on his work with found footage, looking at his *Blonde Cobra* for its use of fragments and its parodic mode, situating this in relation to Joseph Cornell's film *Rose Hobart* (1936), and finally focusing on what is arguably Jacobs' best known work, *Tom, Tom, the Piper's Son*, made in 1969, revised in 1971 and released on vhs in 2000. *Tom, Tom...* has been cited as one of the exemplary films of the structural film era – the filmmaker Birgit Hein commenting on how in its close analysis of found footage it is, 'moving from the reality of representation to the reality of the filmstrip.'¹⁰ In this paper I would like to situate the work within some other economies, such as parodic theatricality and a logic that is not just that of 'finding reality'. Locating a reality to represent (both psychic and material) is a precarious and contingent activity, often given over to loss, fragmentation, and ruination.

Working mostly, although not exclusively, with appropriated film footage since the 1960s, Jacobs' filmmaking productively operates in the formal gap between the *intensive* found-footage strategies employed by Joseph Cornell in *Rose Hobart* (which pares down most of the footage of the 1931 film *East of Borneo* to linger upon the star of the film, Rose Hobart) and the *extensive* form of Douglas Gordon's *24 Hour Psycho* of 1993 (a simple act of elongation which stretches the appropriated film to the length of an entire day). Jacobs combines both approaches by often selecting very intense excerpts of found footage which are then dwelt upon for extremely long periods of time; such as the ninety minute examination of a ten minute film in *Tom, Tom, the Piper's Son* or his 'Nervous System' performances that combine dual analytic projectors (capable of variable frame-speed playback) with custom image-blocking propeller to scrutinise snippets of appropriated film-action; an example of which is the two

hour transformation of a two minute excerpt of a pornographic film in his *XCXHXEXRXIXEXSX*, first shown in 1980. In these 'Nervous System' works, which are as much improvisatory performances as film-screenings, two images are projected onto the same screen and intermittently blocked and revealed creating a 3-D illusion as well as a throbbing flicker effect that disturbs an uncanny, hovering, almost-still image, producing, in his words, 'unfrozen slices of time, sustained movements going nowhere.'¹¹

What is pronounced in much of his work is an emphasis upon uncovering the mechanisms of cinema whilst addressing, or eliciting, the urge of the spectator to believe in the illusions of the moving image: a double-handed, double-facing practice Jacobs describes as 'existential clowning' - a goofing around with the tacit acknowledgement that what we watch is a trick: an illusion of moving images that re-present the world to us. Jacobs again: 'Making works that displayed mechanism, emphasizing tension between means and appearance was Modernism, and political inasmuch as it shared in the historical move to demystify power's projection of image, aka, The Toto (pull-back-the-curtain) Effect... Cinema for me would remain a playing on the margin of illusion and its imminent collapse into evident means, the drama of a tottering presence,' a space where tricks were shown as such - the mechanics revealed - but these tricks were still seen as events to marvel at, a marvelling co-mingled with the knowledge of the desire to be duped.¹² This activity is marked with a humour he describes as, 'part good-natured and part shit-eating, in the way that a conscious person resigns to a life-sentence of conscious error and even embraces it.'¹³

Jacobs' early films are typified by what film historian P. Adams Sitney describes as a pronounced 'aesthetic of failure', remarking that, 'Jacobs insists upon the idea of film as a dying organism throughout his works.'¹⁴ Jacobs describes his own aesthetic as one based around a certain kind of interruption, a process he used to counteract his penchant for order, something he honed during the making of *Star Spangled to Death*. This film features darkly humorous street performances by the artists Jack Smith and Jerry Sims (among others) directed by Ken Jacobs as the mock allegories 'Suffering' (played by Sims) and 'The

Spirit not of Life but of Living' (enacted by Smith). Discussing his working method on *Star Spangled to Death* in the 1950s in which Sims and Smith would chaotically disturb ordered scenarios, Jacobs' notes: 'I had a terrific bent towards a barren dynamic perfection. I was leaning toward a work like Mondrian would make. At the same time, these perfect structures, I knew were not right. I felt that their destruction revealed more of a truth than their standing perfection' - 'Just watching things break, and in their breaking reveal their structure, had the most vibrant moment of life... I was interested in revealing things in their breaking and I wanted *Star Spangled to Death* to be a film that was constantly breaking.'¹⁵ Leaning towards an ethics of discord this aesthetic resonates with the Romantic sensibility Maurice Blanchot describes as a move towards acknowledged internalised discord rather than harmonised discourse, a movement that acknowledges fragmentary practice and self-effacing humour: 'Discontinuous form: the sole form befitting romantic *irony*... to write fragmentarily is simply to welcome one's own disorder'.¹⁶

A key example of this disordered practice is *Blonde Cobra*, which is an editing together of fragments of film shot by Jack Smith and Bob Fleischner in the late 1950s, fragments of two films shot supposedly under the working titles *Blonde Venus* and *The Cobra Woman*.¹⁷ After the original footage had been damaged in a fire Fleischner donated the remains to Jacobs to develop as he saw fit. *Blonde Cobra*'s found footage mode operates under the rubric of gift rather than theft; a deposit of two sets of fragments made by close associates assembled to produce a multi-layered whole. We are warned to expect little from the start – in the title screen sequence the actors hold up hand written cards 'Blonde Cobra / a philm by Bobby Fleischner / with Jacky Smith' – a renaming of the protagonists as mis-spelling feminised infants; a renunciation of any properly 'adult' artfulness.

Whilst Jacobs is not responsible for directing much of the action onscreen, his editing structure brings together vital aspects of these donated films' fragments - with some new footage by Jacobs himself – overlaid by an audio-recording of stuttering ancient records chosen in collaboration with Smith and Jacobs and the voice of Jack Smith mawkishly reciting sing-song phrases as a narrative

monologue. The resulting discontinuous structure, which often uses sound over an extended black screen with aggressively long durations and has projection instructions to turn on a radio during one part of the film, broadly refuses symbolic closure. The loose structure of *Blonde Cobra* conjures instead a montage of associations of film codes underwritten by a strangely anachronistic quality; the continual half speech / half song of Smith is counterpointed by the blaring snippets of music amongst from a number of fuzzy records dating from the 1920s and 1930s. Rather than being a restorative piece of post-production, *Blonde Cobra* often takes the series of fragments as such, enforcing their partial nature. Sound and image sometimes seem to come together, at other times the very gleeful chaos of the sound, whilst unmoored to any discernible aspect of the image, emphasises the camp attitude of the performers themselves, who often appear in ragged drag costume. P. Adams Sitney has characterised *Blonde Cobra* as breaking down before it even gets started. Jacobs commented that Smith complained that this new edit was too 'heavy' – a gentle irony given the strange deathly pallor that defines the mood of his own infamous film *Flaming Creatures*, in which a motley group of made-up performers romp in decaying orgiastic abandon, Smith's own homage to the deceased film heroine Maria Montez – a parodic turn around the film star, and film genre, as lost object. The filmmaker and critic Jonas Mekas would claim that both of these films, *Blonde Cobra* and *Flaming Creatures*, heralded a new mood in American film. He termed them examples of a Baudelairean cinema which would replace previous tendencies of symbolist-surrealism and the social engagement of realist film, upstaging them with a new logic of disengagement; a sensibility encapsulated by, 'a world of flowers of evil, of illuminations, of torn and tortured flesh; a poetic form which is at once beautiful and terrible, good and evil, delicate and dirty'.¹⁸

Throughout *Blonde Cobra* there is an emphatic embrace of low standards of production that wallow in the cheapness of regressive fantasy – both in the acting style that barely hangs onto the term 'theatre' and also in the faltering narrative themes and clashing sounds: these refer to defunct films style of the 1930s and 40s, appropriating and reworking themes of exotic adventure into clunky encounters between down and out bohemians and their slum tenement

context. Throughout the film the actors are dressed in flamboyant parlour game costumes that foreground the clunky theatrical nature of their acting with a distinctly bathetic flair: a putrefication of filmic narrative into ludicrous scenarios: 'The Lonely Boy', 'Madame Nescience' and 'Sister Dexterity'.

Midway through the film, we see Jack Smith resplendent on a couch, in drag with white face paint caked across his face in a awkward parody of the exotic feminine. The camera pans across the prone body and we witness the character rise and adjust the threadbare costume. The soundtrack is Smith talking in descriptive monologue again, tying the (in)action to a narrative space: 'Madame Nescience is lying on her couch. She is dreaming of old musty memories that she had forgot. Or so she thought. Because you see they came up in a funky mass of, umm, exuding effluvioms and... [pausing momentarily as if forgetting his lines] from the musty past, covered with, uh, moss and funk.' Delivered with repetitions and staged falterings the acting and monologue conjure an anti-aesthetic attitude at times descending into morbid sexual encounters: 'sex is a pain in the ass' as Smith overdubs an image of a knife inserted between buttocks. Whilst using a spontaneous improvised approach, *Blonde Cobra* is tinged with a sensibility of ironic despair through the editing that pervades the claustrophobic scenarios, a despair that points to a political attitude of aggressive apathy, an anti-social *jouissance* as malignant evil as much as pleasure. Jacques Lacan notes, apropos of Freud's *Civilisation and its Discontents*; 'we cannot avoid the formula that *jouissance* is evil... it involves suffering for my neighbour'.¹⁹

Another scenario: over a black screen, Smith's voice again 'Evil works, yes evil really works [break into sing-song phrases, dum-de-di-dum etc. then continues] God is not dead, he is just marvellously sick.' Cue more sing-song phrases then a screeching laugh that moves from hilarity to inarticulate strangled choke which transitions abruptly into a scratched record playing a ferocious speedy melody, like a cartoon gone haywire. Rather than attempting a *jouissance* of transgression, a breaking of boundaries through progressive avant-gardism, this film might be seen to pose instead an enjoyment in failure – a retreat from advancement into anachronistic spirals: Freud's definition of the pleasure

principle as the binding of impulsive excitation – ‘a tendency operating in the service of a function whose business it is to free the mental apparatus entirely from excitation’²⁰ – moving the organism towards inertia, or even here locating an inertia within excitement: this death-driven pleasure signalled by Smith’s metaphor of funky moss-covered memories, his hysterical acting-out and Jacobs’ interruptive re-dis-ordering editing that adds a certain inert obliqueness to the image.

These strategies of entropic cardboard theatrics at odds with their contemporary reality have resonances with Joseph Cornell’s celebrated *Rose Hobart* of 1936, the first film to have been generated using only found footage. *Rose Hobart* also employs a certain love of corny exoticism in its subject matter – it is an appropriation of George Melford’s 1931 film *East of Borneo* where a female protagonist travels through an obviously fake jungle to find her husband who believes her to be lost to him. Cornell bought the film from a warehouse in New Jersey and re-edited it at home in his basement using crude table-top editing equipment, the film becoming what he calls a ‘tapestry in action’, as he stitched together fragments of the original to focus mostly on moments where the lead actress is present.²¹ Through the cut and stitch process of editing, Cornell transforms the narrative: shifting it from one where a female protagonist (Linda, played by Rose Hobart) travels through an obviously fake jungle to find her husband to a space of reverie where the actress is seen again and again, where scenes are played out of order producing a tangle of sight lines between characters who no longer logically relate. *Rose Hobart* is used as an example by film historian Nicole Brenez of an elegiac mode of found footage filmmaking – a strategy of interrupting a previous narrative, ‘in order to keep only the specific moments. These are then fetishised through re-editing: the leitmotif is foregrounded to such an extent that the editing scheme is secondary to the apparition of the leitmotif, giving rise to wild forms of continuity.’²² Paring away most of the original material - Cornell’s *Rose Hobart* lasts approximately nineteen minutes whilst *East of Borneo* is around seventy five minutes long – the majority of the remaining footage consists of the lead actress whose name is used for the film’s title with some additional material spliced in (around one and a half minutes of the nineteen minute duration). As an act of elegiac, or

reflectively mournful, fandom, *Rose Hobart* is a recycling of privileged portions of a banal melodrama into what Brenez calls a 'dreamscape portrait of a woman,' a portrait of a longed-for star that occurs through the focus of the viewers attention onto this one key figure of romantic interest.²³ The art historian Jodi Hauptman argues that Cornell's strategy is one that emphasises the nature of Hobart's acting style:

Rose Hobart's performance in *East of Borneo* consists of anxious and twitchy movements of the body and rapidly changing facial expressions. In collecting frames of the actress, Cornell seeks not to smooth out her jarring behaviour but to emphasise her frenetic actions through disjunctive editing. Revelling in these joints, breaks, and splices (each of which presents another face of the actress), the artist constructs *Rose Hobart* of mismatches, awkward juxtapositions, and temporal discontinuities.²⁴

Whilst the primary logic is one of interruption and amplification – the cutting into of a much-loved and/or coveted narrative - Cornell also introduces a restorative counter-logic shot through with imaginary escapism. In another context, Laura Mulvey has suggested that the found footage filmmaker can be seen as 'possessive spectator' who, 'commits an act of violence against the cohesion of a story, the aesthetic integrity that holds it together, and the vision of its creator'²⁵ – a move from fetishistic scopophilia into one of a Freudian 'sadism proper' where a will to mastery of the spectator foregrounds a psychic repetition compulsion. The violence of interruption is often mediated, however, by factors returning the work to a space of enigmatic mystery. Mulvey notes that the possessive spectator position is one that is defined by a certain ambivalence, 'that wounds the film object in the process of love and fascination; delaying it whilst also reinventing its relations of desire and discovery'.²⁶ This re-invention occurs in *Rose Hobart* through its temporality, coloration and relation to sound.

The original projection conditions of *Rose Hobart* stipulate that it should be projected through a blue filter, or coloured glass, transforming its original black and white format into a blue and black palette. The film is also to be projected at

silent film speed - 16 frames a second, subtly slowing down the original, which was shot for replay at 24 frames a second replay. Another act of removal along the lines of disjunction-synthesis (unlink-relink, break-then-smooth) occurs with the original soundtrack: *East of Borneo* is an early 'talkie', replete with dialogue and soundtrack. This is removed by Cornell and replaced by music from Nestor Amaral's *Holiday in Brazil*, originally played on an adjacent record player, an accompaniment to the now silent moving image that mires the work in a kind of never-land with second-hand exotic sonic overtures. P. Adams Sitney argues that the slowing motion of changing speeds adds a retarded quality to the original narrative of *East of Borneo*, a retardation of the original's 'gesture and action... not enough to make them look slow motion, but to lend them a nuance of elegance and protraction.'²⁷ Taken together, the slowed projection through a blue filter and addition of Brazilian music produced a soothing aspect: 'The silencing, tinting and musical accompaniment provide a unity and a fluidity that the montage style contradicts.'²⁸ Joseph Cornell himself, writing in the early 1940s about the actress Hedy Lamarr, describes sound film as 'the barren wastes of the talking film,' a tundra from which, 'there occasionally occur passages to remind one of the profound and suggestive power of the silent film to evoke an ideal world of beauty, to release unsuspected floods of music from the gaze of a human countenance in its prism of silver light.'²⁹ This text becomes in part a eulogy to the lost art-form of the silent film, this forming part of the elegiac core of *Rose Hobart*. Annette Michelson notes that in stripping back the original sound of the 'talkie' and substituting this with a dance melody, Cornell cocoons the footage, highlighting its silence in the midst of his own attached sound. She notes that, 'silence is thus reinforced, enveloped in another way by the substitution of an assertively rhythmical musical accompaniment'; 'Rose Hobart moves with the splendour of *Gradiva*, enveloped in a silence intensified by music, through a landscape decomposed, a space distilled, into a blue inane'.³⁰

Evoked here could be a desirous longing for an object, located here in the fan's unrequited love for the icon of Rose Hobart, and also in the object-form of silent-film itself; an object that is acknowledged as lost but which nonetheless becomes coextensive with the artist's subjectivity, framing the sensibility of

silent-era cinema as an elevation of loss into a celebratory yet ambivalent fetish. The fragmentary, even allegorical, dimension of Romanticism arrives here again as the elevation of unsubstantiated longing into an art-form itself. Slavoj Žižek has remarked that the 'innermost logic' of Romanticism is found in a 'failing melody' as well as in the notion of loss as internalised by the subject in a melancholic fashion in a similar manner to the melancholy gaze attributed to the allegorist. Žižek continues, 'the Romantic loss is the loss of what one never had,'³¹ a loss that is allied to the fading of desire (desire being driven by lack, not loss). This is a melancholic relationship to a positive object which no longer exists. Žižek: 'The lost object is thus precisely *not* lacking: it is identical to itself; the subject possesses it in the very mode of loss; his desire is fixed in / on it... For this reason, melancholy is deeply related to drive: it is, in a way, *desire itself, perceived within the horizon of the (death) drive*... a desire which is not a desire for something, a definite object, but a direct desire for the lack itself.'³² In contrast to the other-worldly sound-image clash of *Blonde Cobra* or morbid homage of *Flaming Creatures*, the more relaxed, yet in its own way failed, exotic melody of *Rose Hobart's* and the intense reflection on one named actress provide a lulling hypnotic appeal to the senses; still scrambling the viewer's continuous apprehension of a story which might resolve, but producing this scrambling in regards to a melancholic dialectic of desire (or more precisely longing) rather than through the ragged edges of dislocation. In both practices, however, whether affirmatively fragmentary or the apparition of discontinuity smoothed by restoration, we find an allegorical ruination of representation; be this celebrated or mourned, is a palpable presence.

The contact point between Cornell's *Rose Hobart* and Ken Jacobs' work in appropriated film comes through the meetings they had as the younger artist worked briefly for the elder (Jacobs for Cornell) as an assistant whilst Jacobs was working on his *Star Spangled to Death*. Cornell lent the younger artist various filmic materials to watch in his loft – both his own work and the work of others - these films becoming creative seeds which were sown deeply as Jacobs watched them. He notes,

I looked at every sort of filmic thing, with perhaps the richest payoff coming from repeated viewing of *Rose Hobart*, the original spliced strand lent to me by Joseph Cornell... Suffice to say he was generous in his own way, freely lending me films from his brilliant collection of disregarded wonders like *The Belcher Sisters*, meaty stage-tumblers in white gymnast outfits... *Tom, Tom, The Piper's Son* grew – spontaneously – out of those ecstatic motion studies.³³

P. Adams Sitney remarks upon the impact that *Rose Hobart* had upon Jacobs when he first saw it. He calls attention to an unpublished interview where Jacobs recounts his excitement to Jack Smith: 'We looked at it again and again, and we were both knocked out... We looked at it in every possible way: on the ceiling, in mirrors, bouncing it all over the room, in corners, in focus, out of focus, with a blue filter that Cornell had given me, without it, backwards... it was another reinforcement of this idea I had for making this shit film that would be broken apart and then again there would be order.'³⁴ Whilst Jacobs is referring to *Star Spangled to Death* as 'this shit film,' Sitney signposts the direct creative debt that *Tom, Tom, the Piper's Son* owes to *Rose Hobart* and to this initial set of experimental viewing conditions.³⁵

If *Rose Hobart* is an intensive scrutiny of a singular named body and an elegy to a lost genre then Ken Jacobs' *Tom, Tom, the Piper's Son* (begun in 1969, completed definitively in 1971) exists as a prolonged visual study of a disinterred filmic body, a paper negative rented from the Library of Congress. This dug out anachronistic corpse is a film of the same title, *Tom, Tom, the Piper's Son*, made in 1905, originally distributed by the Biograph company and thought to have been directed by G. W. 'Billy' Bitzer, also known for his role as D. W. Griffiths' principle cameraman. This film could be termed an example of 'primitive' cinema from a period long before the lexicon of shooting techniques we now recognise as cinema were developed - techniques such as the complex suturing effect of shot and reverse shot.

Bitzer's film consists of several long static takes, each of a substantial duration. In each take the camera is fixed on a diorama – an obviously staged tableau,

consisting of thin-walled sets populated by an animated crowd of actors adorned with historical clothing. Without camera movement the viewer's eye is left to blithely wander, picking out details from the seeming chaos. Bitzer's narrative thrust is comprised of scenarios acting-out the children's rhyme: 'Tom, Tom, the piper's son / Stole a pig and away he run / The pig was eat, and Tom was beat / And Tom ran crying down the street'. This early cinematic version is not quite faithful to its own script: for example, the pig is not eaten, merely left in the well. Another narrative deviation is that the shame-faced Tom avoids a beating: in the final scene he is hoisted into the air to the appreciative but silent cheers of the crowd.

Bitzer's film is a directionless and ludic affair, a series of comic passages as a crowd of costumed figures aimlessly chase the eponymous Tom and the stolen pig through a series of obviously two-dimensional painted sets and backdrops. Here is a more detailed description of the order of Bitzer's original structure:

Scenario 1: a crowd gathered in a square, some actions: a female trapeze artist performs with hoop and hankies, a fight breaks out, a clown juggles, a pig is stolen.

Scenario 2: The thief, Tom, rushes into a house, the crowd follow and gather outside the door.

Scenario 3: Tom realises he is trapped, and improbably rolls on the floor and then disappears up the chimney. A young boy in striped trousers who has accompanied him on this part of the adventure follows suit. The door is broken down, the crowd rush in; bereft of their prey, they circulate the room.

Scenario 4: In pursuit the crowd exit via the two key apertures: first chimney, then door.

Scenario 5: Tom and pig enter barn, hide under hay, crowd rush in, go up ladder, Tom emerges, pushes ladder away, exits. Crowd jump down.

Scenario 6 and 7: Another house exterior, Tom enters it. From the interior we witness the crowd push the door open but trip over themselves. In the chaos Tom plus pig leap through window. Again, the crowd follows via both possible apertures.

Scenario 8: A well, surrounded by various fowl. Tom plus pig rush into frame, hide in well. Crowd follow and scoop Tom out, minus pig: he hangs, ashamed. The crowd looks on in merry amusement, displaying their catch.

The chain of references extend beyond the adaptation of a children's rhyme; the initial sequence, or scenario, is closely modelled on William Hogarth's 1733 etching *Southwark Fair*, the composition with houses, trapeze artist, milling crowd and painted horse transposed into a cramped cinematic mise-en-scène. This densely theatrical image presents, in a detail, a precedent for Bitzer's work: in the foreground of Hogarth's image we are presented with a proto-cinematic encounter as two figures stare into a drum-like device in which optical illusions are presumed to be hidden – crucial technological steps towards our cinematic present. Hogarth, in advance of Brecht's advice, is concerned less with 'good-old-things' and is looking avidly at 'bad-new-ones'.

In Jacobs' film-as-visual-study the celluloid body is disinterred from the library archive and then dissected, figuratively speaking, in the artist's studio. In the Jacobs version the full corpus of the Bitzer version is first shown in an unaltered state. It is then shown stretched out and enhanced – stopped, slowed - minutely observed in close-up for approximately ninety minutes until a multiplicity of fissures and voids begin to appear. As the film is examined down to its edges, its grains, its intervals, stripped down to its very material structure, the basic elements of cinema, the frames and grains, are made obvious. We are reminded of Robert Smithson's allegorical strategy when he states, '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...'.³⁶ The sign when looked at closely enough reveals its split nature. Jacobs skits a meta-physical variation on this theme, filling the materiological void with spectral evocations:

Ghosts! Cine-recordings of persons long dead... I wanted to 'bring to the surface' that multi-rhythmic collision-contesting of dark and light two dimensional force areas struggling edge to edge for identity of shape... to get into the amoebic grain pattern itself... the teeming energies elicited (the grains! the grains!) then collaborating,

unknowingly and ironically, to form the always-poignant-because-always-past-illusion³⁷

The splitting open of the image becomes a wallowing in its ground, the figure of image is shown in relation to the ground-work of pattern, of shifting undead and amoebic forces. We also encounter here a movement from film-work as dream-work to allegorical filmic analysis that transforms the seemingly living sign into a flattened field, or even a labyrinthine graveyard, using the incantatory rhetoric of the séance. To conclude his examination the original is then re-presented in its unmodified form. Bitzer's original narrative-form brackets the formal chasm of Jacobs' autopsy. When seen for a second time, in its re-constituted, post-analysed state, it returns with the analytical interruptions internalised in the viewer's memory – the form this time repeating its original content shot through with spectral echoes as the viewer searches for those details that have been pointed out, the re-vitalisations of ancient gesture generated by the parasitical catalyst of interruption.

The process in more detail again. Throughout 1969 to 1971 images from the appropriated strip of film from 1905 are thrown via a Kalart-Victor projector onto a small translucent screen; on the other side of this back-projected screen Jacobs is poised at his Arriflex 16mm camera recording the fleeting images as they appear.³⁸ The production method is described by the filmmaker as embedded in a relay of instructions. Either his friend Jordan Meyers or his partner Flo operate the projector on one side of the screen. On the other side Ken Jacobs is at the camera issuing commands in regards to the speed of the projection – forward-slow-stop-reverse-forward. In response to these verbal demands the film is recorded as moving through a range of folding temporalities: the 'real-time' of 16-24 frames a second, interminable slow-motion, dazzling speeds of illegibility, momentary cohesions, then back to loss, reversals (at various speeds), momentary freezings, and then life again – movement returns, often underpinned (undermined?) by an insistent beat as black cuts into the light that constitutes the image: a pervasive on/off pulsing flicker is a key structural feature in this play-back architecture.

To return to Laura Mulvey's possessive spectator. We encounter here both a sadistic stripping away of narrative protection from the characters and also a fetishistic 'frozen' or freezing form of scopophilia: a 'returning compulsively to privileged moments, investing emotion and "visual pleasure" in any slight gesture,' with the notion of the close-up as another part of this dimension: an 'ecstatic contemplation of cinema in its uniqueness.'³⁹ Slavoj Žižek further notes that cinema's ontological condition is that of animating the in-animate, 'Cinema is a "moving image", the continuum of dead images which give the impression of life by running at the proper speed; the dead image is a "still", a "freeze frame" – that is, stiffened movement' – the difference between moving and still image being less important than the key observation that 'the picture "as such" is immobile, frozen, and the "moving picture" is its subspecies, the magic paradox of a dead image coming alive as a spectral apparition.'⁴⁰ As ambiguous monument to something lacking, this affirmation of the frame in its fixed and frozen status also calls up Roland Barthes' notion of photography as both temporal hallucination and the 'return of the dead.' Between life and the inanimate – *Tom, Tom, The Piper's Son* as a filmic experience totters precariously, shuddering over catastrophes that have already happened.

Whilst Bitzer's recording point-of-view has been nailed to the floor, Jacobs and his Arriflex form a more mobile and subjective coupling. This nomadic formation roams the small rear-screen projection, seeking out details, zooming in on minimal gestures and incidental detail: fixating upon them until they assume a monumental proportion as well as a stain-like appearance: significant yet not quite signifying. Jacobs' description: through a 'manic ultra-closeup repetition... the action fixates, the recognizable gives way in close-ups to obscenely slithering biomorphic shapes.'⁴¹ A sliding-away of the image's capacity to hold meaning is enacted, a devolution of its boundaries as well as a closing up of these remnants into uncertain concrete ruins. This process repeated over a long period of time, provides another ludic passage that parallels that of Bitzer's actors – we are taken on a digressive (disfigurative even) journey through the field of the image, moving in and out of its thickets and getting swamped in its material mire of grain patterns. 'Get lost and get lost again,' is the advice given by Jacobs to his students.⁴² The same object-lesson of discontinuous pedagogy

is enacted through the structure of this film as it elicits in its audience a zoning out of attention through its extreme duration and vacillating images.

The film is shown to be a strip of images, separated from each other, a series of frames. The image is shown to consist of patterns of grains. The image is shown to be projected on a screen, a screen that is lifted up at one point so the light of the projector is shone directly into the lens of the camera. The illusion is made obvious and strange. The pictorial screen is interrupted. Jacobs persists in examining, in looking at the act of looking, deeply fascinated by the grain, the pattern, the perfection of the image dissolving, then magically returning. The artist and writer Lucy Reynolds writes that Jacobs is perhaps attempting to find redemptive significance in early cinematic invention, perhaps encountering this in 'the hallucinatory swirl of the film grain.'⁴³ The work is far from a negative critique, more a yearning observation, an operation of longing, a movement of lost images and found footage. Jacobs describes the movement thus: '*Tom, Tom, the Piper's Son* was still one more investigation beyond appearances... The film finally gets back to appearances, and hugs appearances, adores them – after the terror of slipping away into disintegration, into pure energy, noise and dust'.⁴⁴ Once lost, the image, appearance, is found again. As Gail Day has noted, via Paul de Man, allegorical meanings are dependent, albeit destructively, upon the literal representations they usurp: 'allegory is dependent upon a literal representation that is disjunct from the proper meaning... an erosive dynamic is set in motion. Allegory is not just the disjunctive, not simply the negative, but a process or dynamic in which tensions are exacerbated, in which antinomies cross, interact, and even degenerate.'⁴⁵ Day further notes that destruction in itself is not the positive endpoint of allegory. Rather she cites Benjamin: 'it is precisely visions of the destruction, in which all earthly things collapse into a heap of ruins, which reveal the limit set upon allegorical contemplation, rather than its ideal quality.'⁴⁶ Escaping 'pure destruction', *Tom, Tom...* seems to explore the points of degeneration and redemption, ruining a representation, then restoring it once more, embracing the image it destroyed.

Within the closed circuit of *Tom, Tom...* there are also a number of divergent viewing positions to be addressed: firstly we encounter Bitzer's filmic gaze, that

which captured the original sequence, the authorial gaze that defines, surveys and approves of the flurried action – the gaze under which a prior circuit of instructions and responses were acted out. There is, secondly, that of the turn of the century viewer witnessing the clunky cardboard drama of this primitive cinema, both watching the illusion yet presumably aware of its illusory conditions. We have an approximation of this viewer in the foreground of Hogarth's image of Southwark Fair: a pair of viewers whose heads literally bump against the apparatus of viewing. More importantly, Jacobs returns to this physical contact with the object-machine when the hand reaches into the frame, lifting the screen. Rosalind Krauss (in turn following the argument of Jonathan Crary) has described a similar viewing position more precisely in relation to the viewer of proto-cinematic devices such as the zoetrope, proposing a doubled viewing position that is defined by its relationship to the open display of the apparatus in proto-cinematic devices. A double vantage: 'One is imaginary identification or closure with the illusion... The second position is a connection to the optical machine in question, an insistent reminder of its presence, of its mechanism.'⁴⁷ This position finds itself inside and outside the image – having an experience, yet watching oneself have this experience: this viewer is 'captured not so much by the visual itself as by what one could call the *visuality-effect*.'⁴⁸ This effect is defined by Krauss as *rhythmic*, a binding effect found in the 'beat or pulse that courses through the zootropic field... the beat both constructing the gestalt and undoing it at the same time.'⁴⁹ This is a binding yet *dysmorphic flicker*, an effect that Jacobs foregrounds insistently throughout much of this film. Revealing and dissolving the image, the flicker-effect is as hallucinatory as the swirl of the film grain, a disorienting and ungrounding effect, yet one that compels vision and fascinates. Whilst again it highlights the ontological condition of film – its one-frame-after-another status, it also provides an allegorical portrait of subjectivity akin to Jacques-Alain Miller's concept of the subject as a kind of 'flickering in eclipses.'⁵⁰

To conclude: a third position – Ken Jacobs performing his role as active viewer, plunging himself into uncertainty, into the game of lost and found, revelling in the theatrics of the machine and of the figures. In Jacobs' film, we arrive at an interrupted cinema where the disinterred corpse provides an abyssal series of

encounters that interrogate the concreteness of the filmic medium alongside a fascination with cinema's illusory screen-space. Jacobs' focussed concentration on darkened points of exit and egress, the points of mobility and passage, continually allude to an uncertain point beyond the picture plane, an uncanny hole, or void, through which the characters disappear and then re-appear. If the sets in themselves appear radically flat in close-up, then they begin to act as a form of screen, with these exit points upon which Jacobs' camera-eye lingers becoming threatening transition points: points of closure as well as of possibility and escape, porous, uncertain holes in representation, holes that seem to look back, threatening to engulf our fascinated look. In exposing such an uncertain condition of the visible, *Tom, Tom...* becomes an interrogation that elides the strict distinction between the materiality of the filmic strip and the fantasmatic scenes this strip animates; engaging in the uncanny delight of illusions, in the contingent identifications with the representations put before us. Whilst *Tom, Tom...* as a film might destroy the filmic space under the order of a ruining allegorical gaze, it also does so to find a source of redemption in this fecund pile of ruins. In Jacobs' words: 'My camera closes in, only to better ascertain the infinite richness... searching out incongruities in the story-telling (a person, confused, suddenly looks out of an actor's face), delighting in the whole bizarre human phenomena of story telling itself and this within the fantasy of reading any bygone time out of the visual crudities of film: dream within a dream!'⁵¹ One might say here that the dream of a materialist revelation of cinema is as illusory as the dream of narrative cinema. Jacobs takes on this to the point of absurdity; producing the heresy of a structural film in the form of an ecstatic reverie on ruination.

¹ Craig Owens, 'The Allegorical Impulse: Towards a Theory of Postmodernism', *October*, vol. 12 (Spring 1980): 69.

² *Ibid.*: 69.

³ *Ibid.*: 69.

⁴ Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* (trans. John Osborne, London: N.L.B., 1977): 666. (Cited in Owens, 'The Allegorical Impulse': 70.)

⁵ *Ibid.*: 84.

⁶ Robert Smithson, 'A Sedimentation of Mind: Earth Projects' in *The Writings of Robert Smithson*, Nancy Holt (ed.), (New York: New York University Press, 1979): 87-88. (Cited in Owens, 'The Allegorical Impulse': 85.)

⁷ Stanley Mitchell 'Introduction', *Understanding Brecht* (London: N.L.B., 1973): xiii.

⁸ Walter Benjamin, 'What is Epic Theatre? [Second version]' in *Understanding Brecht*: 18.

- ⁹ Scott MacDonald, 'Ken and Flo Jacobs' in *A Critical Cinema 3: Interviews with Independent Filmmakers*, (Berkeley, Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1998): 363-5.
- ¹⁰ Birgit Hein, 'Structural Film' in *Film as Film: Formal Experiment in Film 1910-1975*, (London: Hayward Gallery, 1979): 98.
- ¹¹ Ken Jacobs, 'Program Notes from XCXHXEXRXIXEXSX (1980)' in *Millennium Film Journal*, no. 43-44. (Summer/Fall, 2005): 36.
- ¹² Ken Jacobs, 'Painted Air: The Joys and Sorrows of Evanescent Cinema' in *Millennium Film Journal*, no. 43-44. (Summer/Fall, 2005): 37.
- ¹³ *Ibid.*: 38.
- ¹⁴ P. Adams Sitney, 'Recovered Innocence' in *Visionary Film: The American Avant-Garde*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974): 335; 331; an essay to which this paper is very much in debt for its discussion of the three films under discussion here; *Blonde Cobra*, *Rose Hobart*, and *Tom, Tom, the Piper's Son*.
- ¹⁵ Ken Jacobs, cited *Visionary Film.*: 335.
- ¹⁶ Maurice Blanchot, 'The Athenaeum', in *The Infinite Conversation*, trans. Susan Hanson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993): 358-9.
- ¹⁷ *Blonde Venus* was a 1932 film directed by Josef von Sternberg starring Marlene Dietrich and *Cobra Woman* was a 1944 film starring Maria Montez, a deceased film star who fascinated Jack Smith. To view *Blonde Cobra* over the internet visit: http://www.ubu.com/film/jacobs_blonde.html (accessed 2 April, 2008).
- ¹⁸ Jonas Mekas, 'Movie Journal', *Village Voice*, (May 2, 1963) cited in *Visionary Film*: 340.
- ¹⁹ Jacques Lacan, 'Love of one's neighbour' in *Seminar VII: The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Dennis Porter, Jacques-Alain Miller (ed.) (London: Routledge, 1992): 184.
- ²⁰ Sigmund Freud, 'Beyond the Pleasure Principle' (1920) in *Standard Edition XVIII*, James Strachey (ed.), (London: Vintage, 2001): 62.
- ²¹ Joseph Cornell diary entry c.1956 cited in Jodi Hauptman, 'The Erupting and Occluded Body: *Rose Hobart*' in *Joseph Cornell: Stargazing in the Cinema*, (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1999): 85.
- ²² Nicole Brenez, 'A Cartography of Found Footage' in *Tom, Tom, the Piper's Son*, (Re:Voir and Exploding, 2000): 93.
- ²³ *Ibid.*: 93.
- ²⁴ Jodi Hauptman, 'The Erupting and Occluded Body: *Rose Hobart*': 89.
- ²⁵ Laura Mulvey, 'The Possessive Spectator' in *Death 24x a Second: Stillness and the Moving Image*, (London: Reaktion, 2006): 171.
- ²⁶ *Ibid.*: 178.
- ²⁷ P. Adams Sitney, 'The Cinematic Gaze of Joseph Cornell' in Kynaston McShine (ed.), *Joseph Cornell* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1980): 76.
- ²⁸ *ibid.*:76.
- ²⁹ Joseph Cornell, 'Enchanted Wanderer: Excerpt from a Journey Album for Hedy Lamarr', *View*, 1941-2: 3, reprinted in P. Adams Sitney, 'The Cinematic Gaze of Joseph Cornell': 73.
- ³⁰ Annette Michelson, 'Monsieur Phot and Rose Hobart: Early Films from Utopia Parkway', *Artforum*. vol. XI, no.10. (June 1973): 49; 57.
- ³¹ Slavoj Zizek, 'Robert Schumann: The Romantic Anti-Humanist' in *The Plague of Fantasies* (London: Verso, 1997): 194.
- ³² *Ibid.*: 195.
- ³³ Ken Jacobs, 'Painted Air: The Joys and Sorrows of Evanescent Cinema': 42.
- ³⁴ Unpublished interview, cited in P. Adams Sitney 'Recovered Innocence': 349.
- ³⁵ *Ibid.*: 349.
- ³⁶ Robert Smithson, 'A Sedimentation of Mind: Earth Projects': 87-88 (Cited in Owens, 'The Allegorical Impulse': 85).
- ³⁷ Ken Jacobs cited in P. Adams Sitney, 'Recovered Innocence': 368.
- ³⁸ It should be noted that different versions of the same film were shown during this time, Jacobs adding to the film until its definitive 'finish' in 1971. Sections from *Tom, Tom...* have also been re-used in various of his 'Nervous System' performances.
- ³⁹ Laura Mulvey, 'The Possessive Spectator': 164-165.
- ⁴⁰ Slavoj Zizek, 'Fetishism and its Vicissitudes' in *The Plague of Fantasies*, (London: Verso, 1997): 88.
- ⁴¹ Ken Jacobs, 'Beating My Tom Tom...' in *Tom, Tom, the Piper's Son* (Re:Voir and Exploding, 2000): 8.

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- ⁴² Ken Jacobs interviewed by Lindley Hanlon, *Film Culture*, no.67-68-69. (1979): 75.
- ⁴³ Lucy Reynolds, 'Outside the Archive: The World in Fragments' in Jane Connarty and Josephine Lanyon (eds) *Ghosting: The Role of the Archive within Contemporary Artist's Film and Video*, (Bristol: Picture This, 2006): 22.
- ⁴⁴ Ken Jacobs in Scott MacDonald, 'Ken and Flo Jacobs': 381.
- ⁴⁵ Gail Day, 'Allegory: Between Deconstruction and Dialectics' in *Oxford Art Journal*, vol.22, no.1. (1999): 112-113.
- ⁴⁶ Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*: 232. (Cited in Day, 'Allegory: Between Deconstruction and Dialectics': 117.)
- ⁴⁷ Rosalind Krauss, 'The Im/Pulse to See' in Hal Foster (ed.), *Vision and Visuality* (Seattle: Seattle Bay Press, 1988): 59.
- ⁴⁸ *Ibid.*: 59.
- ⁴⁹ *Ibid.*: 59-60.
- ⁵⁰ See Jacques-Alain Miller, 'Suture (elements of the logic of the signifier)', *Cahiers pour l'analyse*, no.1, Winter 1966, reprinted in English in *Screen* 18, Winter: 24-34 1978 (trans. Jacqueline Rose).
- ⁵¹ Ken Jacobs cited in P. Adams Sitney, 'Recovered Innocence': 368.

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