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Allegory and frozen play

Walter Benjamin's concept of allegory, while central to discussions of Benjamin's work, is famously difficult to grasp. Bainard Cowan writes in 1981, 41 years after Benjamin's death, "almost every study of Benjamin's thought mentions allegory... however, the [theory] in its entirety, as elusive and unconventional by scholarly standards as it is, has gone virtually without a thorough explication".³⁷ However, what is remarkable is not that this "concept" went so long without a comprehensive study — what *is* remarkable is that in his thousands of pages of writing and through all of his discussions of allegory, Benjamin *never* defines the term "allegory", and never explains it as a concept.

This is because allegory is *not* a concept (*Begriff*), and is rather something that resists being possessed or grasped (*ergriffen*). In its essence, allegory is something which *eludes* representational meaning. Like lament, it interested me precisely because of its non-representative, or even anti-representative relation to meaning. Benjamin is only able to reveal allegory to us by "performing" allegory in his texts through allegorical gestures. These gestures and specific examples of allegory provided by Benjamin facilitate an experience of allegory as such. Allegory is thus more of a method or practice than it is a concept or theory, but for the sake of clarity I will attempt to work towards a rough definition of allegory, even if it is paradoxical to do so. But more importantly, I will present allegory as a method for working with meaning (both linguistically and musically). In order to do this, I will analyse how it is employed by not only Walter Benjamin, but also by Brecht and Weill, Luigi Nono, and several composers and artists working today.

As I wrote in the introduction, most people assume that allegory is when art represents society at large (or aspects of society at large). Today, allegory is most often interchangeable with metaphor, and its wholistic social implications are even viewed as secondary in its definition. However, for Benjamin and his friend Bertolt Brecht, the *function* of allegory is in some ways the total opposite of this supposition. Allegory is not figurative. Instead of "portraying" reality in metaphors, the language of allegory breaks its connections to reality by revealing its "portrayal" to be fraudulent. Allegory draws attention to the abyss between the sign and any kind

³⁷ Cowan, Bainard. "Walter Benjamin's Theory of Allegory." *New German Critique*, no. 22 (Durham: Duke University Press, 1981), 109-22. doi:10.2307/487866.

of signified. For Benjamin and Brecht, this process of distancing [*Verfremdungseffekt*] between art and reality was crucial to inducing the audience to critical thinking. As a result of *Verfremdung*, audience lost the illusion that what they are viewing was “real”. This non-representational character; this disjuncture from “the real” is the reason that Benjamin cannot *define* allegory: it would then cease to be allegorical. Benjamin can thus only demonstrate its non-representational, or anti-representational function.

The closest that Benjamin comes to defining allegory in his habilitation is a short section in the second chapter of the work, “Allegory and Trauerspiel”. Benjamin begins by explaining a few enlightenment authors’ ideas about allegory as a jumping off point. The author that he does not dismiss entirely is Goethe, who writes:

“There is a great difference between a poet’s seeking the particular from the general, and his seeking the general from the particular. The former gives rise to allegory, where the particular serves only as an *instance* or the example of the general; the latter, however, is the true nature of poetry: the expression of the particular without any thought of, or reference to, the general. Whoever grasps the particular in all its vitality also grasps the general”.³⁸

This statement clearly shows allegory to be inferior to poetry. However, Benjamin finds an explosive power in this definition. Allegory *is* the expression of the generic, it is not a “convention of expression” but the “expression of convention”³⁹ itself. It does not express an integrated whole through details. This would bind the world together and show the world as a “vital” organism. Rather, when the general reveals itself in discrete objects — objects who do not need each other in their independent “instances” of the general — the world explodes into fragments, isolated from the living world. Benjamin continues:

“Any person, any object, any relationship can mean absolutely anything else. With this possibility a destructive, but just verdict is passed on the profane world, it is a world in which the detail is of no importance. But... [in allegory] the things that are used to signify derive a power which makes them appear no

³⁸ Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, trans. John Osborne, (London: Verso, 1998), 160.

³⁹ Benjamin, 175.

longer commensurable with profane things, which raises them onto a higher plane, and which can, indeed, sanctify them. In allegorical terms, the profane world is both elevated and devalued.”⁴⁰

Instead of being a particle that contains a small amount of the whole – the particular that expresses in itself the *fabric* of the whole – an allegorical signifier is a “place holder” for the generic. This “place” is simply occupied by an allegorical “sign” which never refers to any specific thing, only *the general or generic*. And so, it could effectively express *anything*. What it means at a particular moment is arbitrary. Because everything stands for the whole, nothing can then be an integrated part of the whole, or a part of any system, even a semiotic one. It is “no longer commensurable” with these things. It is not a sign that refers, but rather something that re-replaces, or even re-moves. It is at once holy and damned, “elevated and devalued”: it is inherently empty and isolated, yet it indicates the *potentiality* of meaning. Its existence is the existence of absence in presence, the closest we come to the existence of death in life.

Walter Benjamin uses and demonstrates allegory in a number of ways and gives numerous examples of allegory. Example is a special form. It allows a reader to grasp a *specific* thing in order to get a sense of a whole *category* of things. But in becoming an example, this specific thing is separated from the rest of its category. All examples stand alone – with its *exempleness* comes the recognition of the example’s failure to carry the universal for which it attempts to “stand-in”.⁴¹ The example is allegorical in itself. Examples are isolated – exiled –, and although tangible as objects, they reaffirm one’s distance from definitive truth. Benjamin gives us many examples of allegory in *The Arcades Project*. One entry reads: “On allegory: limp arms, like weapons dropped by one who flees”.⁴² Having set up this example by writing “On allegory” what comes after is expected to shed light upon allegory. The result is intentionally frustrating. Nothing is explained. The quote that stands in for a definition, flees from its role. Instead of

⁴⁰ Ibid., 175.

⁴¹ Giorgio Agamben said, in a lecture at the European Graduate School in 2002, that an example, (Greek παράδειγμα [paradigm]) “is neither universal nor particular; neither general nor individual, it is a singularity which, showing itself as such, produces a new ontological context. This is the etymological meaning of the word *paradigme* in Greek, *paradigme* is literally ‘what shows itself beside.’ Something is shown beside, ‘para’”.

⁴² Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, (Cambridge and London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999), 303.

even a metaphor for allegory (*“limp arms”*), we get a metaphor for a metaphor for allegory (*“like weapons”*). Any help we could have received has run away, and the tools or weapons which could have helped us are now powerless, isolated, fragmented. But on a closer look, these “arms” are not weapons, but the very body of allegory, marked by perpetual flight and fragmentation.

In addition to such examples, Benjamin offers obtuse demonstrations of allegory. These statements don’t really help us come closer to a *meaning* of allegory. These statements are instantiations of allegory in themselves, and their performance on the page is an enactment of the shattering and isolating process that is “allegory”. In another example, Benjamin writes:

... [T]he allegorist – for whom objects represent only keywords in a secret dictionary, which will make known their meanings to the initiated – precisely the allegorist can never have enough of things. With him, one thing is so little capable of taking the place of another that no possible reflection suffices to foresee what meaning his profundity might lay claim to for each one of them."⁴³ [H4a,1]

This quote is of particular importance. Its seeming *direct* contradiction to the earlier statement about the universal replaceability of allegorical objects underlines the illogical modus of allegory and its resistance to meaning. Instead of looking for what the text *means*, we must look at what the text *does*. Unlike language, and unlike “symbols or signs”, meaning for the allegory is separated from itself. When reading this quote, meaning is thrice removed from the objects that could contain meaning. 1. Objects represent keywords. 2. Keywords refer one to a dictionary. 3. The dictionary is itself hidden or secret. One could look at this quote and say that allegory, even though it is “very far removed”, still refers one to a dictionary and demands hermeneutic analysis. This hermeneutical instinct, however, only keeps one from experiencing allegory as such. The modus of the allegory *is* to create distance, and herein lies its importance. Benjamin demonstrates this three times in listing one after the other the three steps of removal between allegorical object and meaning. Benjamin facilitates the experience of the allegory by evoking the *potentiality* of meaning, while moving us further and further away from this meaning. The feeling that there is some sort of meaning replaced by allegory is crucial for

⁴³ Ibid, 211.

its existence as a phenomenon. Distance, removal, replacing, these are the keys for understanding the movement of allegory.

Continuing our analysis of the quotation, not only does Benjamin give an illustration of three layers of distance, but he goes to discuss the allegorist as a kind of collector who “can never have enough of things”, because “*one thing is so little capable of taking the place of another*”. Why does he use this wording? Why doesn’t he simply say that one object “cannot” take the symbolic place of another? In a way, by saying that objects are “so little capable” of taking each others places, Benjamin reveals that the desire of the objects is precisely to *take the place of other objects*. Because this is their desire, and because they are so weak in their ability to fulfill this desire, the allegorist must simply collect as many things as possible. Indeed, an allegorist expresses a kind of will to, not quite represent, but to replace the whole world with separate objects. In order to do this, the allegorist would need to collect every object in the world and turn those objects into individual allegorical objects – replacing the entire world with a fraudulent, fragmented alternative.

Benjamin continues, “...no possible reflection suffices to foresee what meaning his profundity might lay claim to each one of them” – it seems at first that at some point in time, the allegorist/collector could potentially glean meaning from the allegorical objects. But this motion is perhaps the most incomprehensible of all. Meaning is not found in the object itself. Meaning is not discovered to have been latent in the object. Nor is meaning even projected upon the object by the allegorist. Rather, it is “the *allegorist’s profundity*” that “*lays claim*” to meaning. This profundity is itself an external object – foreign to both the allegorist and the object. So we have a third term in profundity. Profundity doesn’t supply meaning in itself, but rather the profundity *lays claim* to meaning *for* each object. And so, *meaning* is a fourth term, external to 1. the allegorist/collector, 2. the object/thing, and 3. the profundity of the allegorist. This is truly a shattering action: not only are objects isolated from each other, but each joint in a potentially representative process has been broken down and left standing alone.

Benjamin says right out that allegory occupies the place of death within life.⁴⁴ Fragments and ruins — things that are simultaneously “shattered and preserved”⁴⁵, or if you will, preserved in their destroyedness. The entire world has been replaced by ruins and fragments. Their existence does not communicate their meaning. Rather, their existence seems to communicate the mark of their distance from the present day and the listener or viewer. But it seems that the more removed we are, the stronger the promise of a “lost meaning”. This meaning must be infinitely retreating in order us “to foresee what meaning [one’s] profundity might lay claim to for each one of them”.⁴⁶ With this distancing comes perspective and possibility.

⁴⁴ He states, “...the triumph of allegory-the life which signifies death.” Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*. p. 336.

⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 329.

⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 211.