

The Age of Allegory

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Abstract

This paper examines the uses of allegory in early modern and contemporary art. I discuss allegory as a poetic and visual means, creating a multiplicity of meanings, and positing the image as a ruin. Referencing previous discussions of allegory by Walter Benjamin (1963, 2010), Peter Burke (1997), Craige Owens (1980), among others, I discuss the reliance of allegory on iconographical precedents and its fragmentary nature. These points are exemplified through paintings from the 17th century, by Peter Paul Rubens and Diego Velazquez, and contemporary artworks by Joseph Beuys and Francis Alÿs.

Keywords: Allegory, Ambiguity, Rubens, Beuys, Alÿs, Fragmentation

Introduction

In the 17th century, allegory was a central visual device. Artists used it to synthesize realistic representations with abstract religious and social ideas. In the following paper, I will analyze the use of allegory in some significant examples from Early Modern painting and discuss the allegorical interpretation of these paintings. In addition, I will show the ways in which allegory is still used by contemporary artists. The term “Allegory” derives from the ancient Greek word *állogoreúein*, meaning “to say something else” (Pontani, 2016). Allegory is a method of creating meanings through difference. Often, a work of art suggests a symbolic narrative implicitly (Britannica, 2019). Thus, it is not surprising that during the Middle Ages, allegory developed into a method of interpreting words and images called “allegoresis,” and was usually applied to Holy Scripture (Büttner, 2018). Allegory builds a parallel meaning to a given text or image, one that is not outspoken and evident but must be revealed. Much of the New Testament is written as allegory, and many examples of Christian iconographies are allegories, such as the prototype of the Good Shepherd. Allegory is at the basis of the Christian tradition, in the fundamental understanding of the Old Testament as a prefiguration of the New Testament. When believers read the Old Testament, they are not reading it as is but rather reading it as a prefiguration to the New Testament. Allegory was prevalent in the early modern period in history paintings, which often contained a contemporary reading of an event from the past (Burke, 1997).

Walter Benjamin (2010) elucidated the meaning of allegory as a negation of the symbol: “It is not possible to conceive of a starker opposite to the artistic symbol, the plastic symbol, the image of organic totality, than this amorphous fragment which is seen in the form of allegorical script,” or “In the field of allegorical intuition the image is a fragment” (p. 63). Whereas the symbol condenses the general into a particular, allegory expands the singular into the general (Benjamin, 2010, pp. 70-71). When we encounter an allegorical representation based on a textual source, we are asked to understand a more comprehensive concept through the representation given to us. A beautiful lady sitting on a throne and holding a pair of scales is an allegorical representation of Justice. However, she also alludes to the Last Judgement and other iconographies using scales. A beautiful young male draped with a lion’s skin and holding a club is the mythological hero Hercules, but he is also an allegorical representation of courage. In this sense, allegory demands a second reading. One needs to understand meaning through a representation that does not explicitly show the intended meaning. In this sense, allegory is dialectical and open to new interpretations. It is fluid and even iconoclastic, not allowing meaning to rest in form but provoking an ever-expanding interpretation. It is ambiguous, containing a multiplicity of meanings allowing for the construction of new meanings in the same forms.

The basis for an allegorical image is the fragment or the ruin. Benjamin (2010) writes: “Allegories are, in the realm of thoughts, what ruins are in the realm of things” (p. 65). Baroque artists synthesized diverse sources and manipulated models of representation, such as fantasy and realism, to create a new whole. This new whole is constructed (Benjamin, 2010, p. 66). The building of meaning relies on an imaginary

content, that is alluded to but not explicitly stated, thus remaining always open to interpretation. A good example is Peter Paul Rubens' painting *The Allegory of Peace* (Figure 1), made as a speech-act towards the conclusion of peace between the Spanish and English crowns in 1630, which Rubens assisted as a diplomat (Heinen, 2004).

Figure 1

Peter Paul Rubens, Allegory of Peace, 1629-1630, oil on canvas, 203.5 X 298 cm, National Gallery, London (Public Domain)



Rubens' *Allegory* shows the personification of peace, Pax, in the center, feeding Pluto – God of wealth and abundance — with her breast milk while plenty and prosperity surround her (Martin, 1986, pp. 120-121). These are represented by an entourage of dancing women on the left, taken from the Bacchanal, and a host of children – modeled after the children of Sir Balthasar Gerbier — with whom Rubens was staying in England. In the background, the goddess of wisdom, Minerva, pushes Mars away. Rubens' painting is clearly allegorical, making the point that enduring peace is more important and beneficial than the fulfillment of fleeting pleasures.

This intricate allegory is based on a composition by Rubens' teacher Otto van Veen, *The Temptations of Youth* (Figure 2). In Van Veen's painting, it is Venus in the center pressing milk from her breast, and it is a male youth whose mouth is open to whom she caters. Above the youth, Minerva is trying to stop this display of lust by stopping the milk stream with her hand. On the left-hand side of the painting, the figure of Bacchus pours wine from a cup towards the youth's loins, while the figure of Poverty pulls at his shirt. These figures symbolize the temptations of youth and the dangers they bring. Minerva, acting as the symbol of reason, tries to rescue the youth from these temptations and lead him towards the right path, symbolized by the temple on the right-hand side of the painting. Including a temple on a high, rigid mountain references another allegory, known as *The Choice of Hercules*, educates readers and viewers about the importance of virtue and the consequences of temptation to pleasure (Panofsky, 1997). The meaning of Rubens' painting is in direct opposition to Van Veen's, though still alluding to it through the compositional similarity. While Van Veen emphasizes the dire outcomes of bodily temptations, symbolized by the figures of poverty and drinking (Bacchus) pulling at the youth's clothes, Rubens depicts the figures from the Bacchanal as a positive consequence of peace, and explicitly linking such prosperity to the reign of Charles I, to whom Rubens gave this painting. Alluding to the precedential composition by Van Veen while turning its meaning on its head, this is a good example of how allegory turns historical content into philosophic truth, to use

Benjamin's words (Benjamin, 2010, p. 69).

Figure 2

Otto van Veen and Workshop, *Allegory of the Temptations of Youth*, 1597, oil on canvas, 146x212 cm, Nationalmuseum, Stockholm (Public Domain)



Allegory is not only about the creation of meaning but of the tendency of such meanings to multiply and accumulate. Thus, the use of artistic precedent and homage can easily create an allegory. One of the most potent forms of allegory is found in a series of works made by Rubens for the French Queen Marie de Medici. Initially, there were to be two cycles of paintings, the first dedicated to Henri IV, the King of France and Marie's husband, who was assassinated in 1609, and the second dedicated to Marie de Medici. However, Rubens never completed Henri's cycle, and we are left with the Queen's cycle.

The cycle, an amalgam of allegory and political propaganda, was meant to justify the reign of Marie de Medici after the death of her husband, Henri IV, until the coming of age of Louis 13th (Saward, 1978). Using allegory, Rubens tackled the problem of subject matter, or lack thereof, and created meaning with little content available to him. The cycle divides into three parts. The first part consists of Marie's early years from birth to childhood and education. The second part depicts her marriage to Henri IV and her progeny. Finally, the third part shows the rise of the dauphin, Louis XIII. The series comprises an overall of 24 paintings.

We will look at several paintings to highlight the functions of allegory. From the first part of the series, we see *The Fates Spinning Marie's Destiny* (Figure 3). This painting shows the Parcae, allegories of fate, spinning the Queen's future, while Jupiter and Juno oversee their work. Jupiter and Juno feature widely in the series, not only as the head of the Olympian gods but as a symbol of the sacred marriage, the hieros gamos, an example Marie is to follow. From the onset, we see the work of Allegory, referencing a concrete event, the birth of a Tuscan princess, and reading it as a mythological working of the fates and Olympian gods.

Figure 3

Peter Paul Rubens, *The Fates Spinning Marie's Destiny*, Marie de Medici Cycle, 1622-25, oil on canvas, 394 x 153 cm, Louvre Museum, Paris (Public Domain)



The Fates, who appear as present in some accounts of the marriage of Jupiter and Juno, exemplify the idea that Marie is chosen, comparable to the Olympian gods. The thread is twisted and pulled up from the fate sitting at the bottom left, through the middle fate, and up to the fate closest to Jupiter and Juno. She is the one holding the spindle. The spindle bearing the spun thread of Marie's destiny is held in a diagonal towards Jupiter and Juno, signaling their influence and overseeing of Marie's fate. The three fates call for a visual comparison with the three graces, beauty, chastity, and joy, who aided Venus and were painted by Rubens on a different occasion. Thus, although Rubens does not paint an actual event in Marie's life, he alludes to her destiny as the future queen of France through mythology. As viewers, we are expected to understand the meaning of this scene through the example of Juno and Jupiter, and an application of the mythological story of the Fates to a current political narrative. This canvas represents an event that is only possible on the allegorical level, which cannot take place in reality, the spinning of fate. Therefore, it is alluded to through comparison and parallel, through the imaginary and the mythological.

The second example from the series shows *The Birth of the Princess* (Figure 4), in which baby Marie is held by the personification of the city of Florence. A putto holding a shield with the Fleur de Lis, the symbol of the French royal house, is seen in the left corner, while a river god sprawled in the right corner represents the Arno River, thus alluding to the origins of both baby Marie and her future home of the French Monarchy. A cornucopia and torch held by Hymen, the god of marriage, seen flying in the upper right corner, suggests the fate of this baby as the future Queen of France through marriage. Hymen's inclusion, along with that of the Fleur de Lis and the Arno river, shows that the historical event of Marie's birth is read considering future politically important events. Through this allegorical reading Marie's birth is given epic connotations and turned into a philosophical truth: Marie de Medici was destined from birth to greatness.

Figure 4

Peter Paul Rubens, The Birth of a Princess, Marie de Medici Cycle, 1622-25, oil on canvas, 394 x 295 cm, Louvre Museum, Paris (Public Domain)



Looking at these paintings, one is overtaken by allegory. The creation of meaning is created layer by layer through the influences and allusions to previous artworks, Greek and Roman mythology, and courtly symbolism. These varied sources are all combined to paint a picture of the current Marie de Medici. Rubens used similar visual allegory in his great allegories of the Christian Church, *The Eucharist* tapestries, as well as *The Constantine* series. In the Marie de Medici series Rubens creates content where there are not real political events to depict, and he does this through allegory. Allegory represents and portrays abstract concepts, such as destiny, and was a general form of visual communication in the 17th century.

In many senses, this allegorical tendency points to speaking something through something else in an ever-growing cycle of parallels and displacements: Marie's destiny is represented through mythological figures, her birth is depicted through personifications of her future home, and so on. In his paintings, Rubens depicts contemporary political figures and events from their lives alongside mythological figures from a cultural past (i.e. Greek or Roman) and personifications of abstract ideas (such as the city of Florence). Under the umbrella of allegory, Rubens synthesizes the contemporary story of Marie de Medici with the ancient past. He renders the contemporary through mythology, making the latter relevant and the former distant. Benjamin noted that allegory is a mixture of convention and expression (Benjamin, 2010, p. 63). In the case of the Marie de Medici cycle, the conventional use of mythology is harnessed to express Marie de Medici's political role and stature.

One more example from the Marie de Medici cycle will demonstrate the function of allegory on a visual level. The painting shows her introduction by portrait to Henri the IV (Figure 5). This occurrence references methods in which elite European society was matched and married by presenting portraits of eligible others to the man preceding the official engagement and marriage. Here we see Henri IV with the personification of France at his side. She wears a cape covered in Fleur de Lis, whispering in his ear while he surveys a portrait of Marie de Medici. Holding it are Cupid, son of Venus and Mars, and Hymen, the marriage god, whom the viewer would have met already at the painting of Marie's birth. Above, Jupiter and Juno look on, blessing the match.

Figure 5

Peter Paul Rubens, The Presentation of Marie de'Medici to Henri IV, Marie de Medici Cycle, 1622-25, oil on canvas, 394 x 295 cm, Louvre Museum, Paris (Public Domain)



Henri IV, fashioned after the figure of Mars or the hero Hercules, wears armor, and France is shown as an allegorical representation of Rome (Vivanti, 1967). The diagonal between Juno and Jupiter and Henri and the personification of France shows Marie de Medici to be a stand-in for France herself. Rubens compares the holy marriage of the gods to the soon-to-be monarchical couple, and the message to the viewer is allegorical: it is in France's interest to have Marie as a Queen.

The need to recognize and read allegory caters to the discipline of art history, as, of course, to viewers, and speaks to how images were understood to function during the 17th century. Another great artist versed in allegory is the Spanish Baroque painter Diego Velazquez. In his painting *Los Borrachos* (The Drinkers), we see a young male in the role of Bacchus, the Roman god of wine (Figure 6). He wears a wreath of vine tendrils on his head while crowning another figure. The other figures around him divide into the mythological figures on the left and Spanish peasants on the right. The identification of the figures is based on their clothing, as seen in comparison between the standing figure with the brown cape, based on Velazquez's earlier painting of the Water Seller, made in Seville.

Figure 6

Diego Velazquez, *Los Borrachos (The Drinkers)*, 1628-29, oil on canvas, 165 x 225 cm, Prado Museum, Madrid (Photo credit: ©Museo Nacional del Prado)



Velazquez fuses mythological and social realism in this painting, based on a composition by Hendrick Golzius known through an engraving by Jan Saenredam. In the print, peasants beg the wine god for his gift of wine, hoping it assuages their pains of life. Velazquez's *Drinkers* hung in the summer bedroom of King Philip the IV and should be understood also in relation to the King's own pleasure of drinking while looking at the benefits of such an action represented allegorically in the painting by Velazquez. Allegory contemporizes the mythological, forming a new, relevant depiction of drink as fitting for the painting's patron and viewer.

In this painting, as in the paintings in the Marie de Medici cycle, the painter synthesizes contemporary representations with mythological reference. On the one hand, the reference to Bacchus situates the painting within the mythological and iconographic traditions. On the other hand, the representation of common Spanish figures, such as the water seller, alludes to contemporary Spain. Velazquez creates allegory by merging these two distinct traditions: mythology and realism. Thus, the painting does not depict pure mythological narrative, nor absolute realism. In this sense it remains fragmentary, situated in the gap between two traditions of representation. The allegorical image is always prone to ruin, as Benjamin (1963) says: "In the field of allegorical intuition the image is a fragment, a rune. Its beauty as a symbol evaporates when the light of divine learning falls upon it. The false appearance of totality is extinguished" (p. 176).

The allegorical in baroque imagery builds meaning and can be considered an early modern mode of visual discourse. The visual world mostly served elite patrons, which is true in general of the viewers and "art consumers" of the early modern period. However, the recurrence of allegory as a visual device in the modern period can attest to a search for meaning by artists and viewers alike. A case in point is Joseph Beuys' *How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare*, which uses allegory as its prime method. Beuys staged the work at the event of his first solo exhibition of drawings and watercolors at the Schmela Gallery in Dusseldorf, a commercial gallery. From the onset, the action was meant to infuriate Beuys' critics and can be read as an allegorical action. Kuspit referred to it as an act of symbolization (Kuspit, 1995, p. 47). However, I think allegory would be a more fruitful term. Following Benjamin's definition of allegory as the antithesis of the symbol, made of multiplicity and never reducible to coherency, Beuys brings together his varied public image as a social artist whose teachings have educational content and now as a commercial artist having a debut show in a gallery. He uses this multiplicity to critique and distance his own exhibition

in a commercial gallery from his public image as an educator. The result is an allegory about art and its role in contemporary life.

Beuys appears in his exhibition, his face covered with a mask of gold leaf and honey, the soles of his shoes covered in felt and iron rods. The covering of his head with gold leaf and honey is symbolic. He places the liquid substance of honey on the head as a locus of rationality and constancy. He mixes symbols of manly rationality and feminine “beauty.” Using iron rods in one of his shoes and felt in the other Beuys also refers to the symbolic order. Iron is used to represent masculinity and is connected to the mythological god of war, Mars, who was the allegorical representative of war tools. This complex figure, an allegory, then proceeds to “explain” the painting to the dead hare. Beuys identifies with the dead hare and its actions during life: rubbing, pushing, digging, actions foregrounding material existence (Duncan, 1995, pp. 82-83). Thus, the work becomes an allegory of two kinds of artists: the commercial artist, or the rationalist, and the performance artist, a materialist whose body, and not a distant representation, is art.

This unique approach to the body, as a means of thinking in a non-rational way, departs from the Western dualism splitting mind and body and higher and lower realms of existence (Duncan, 1995). One of the results of allegory is its dialectical character, always oscillating between two elements, speaking of one thing through the other, mixing symbolically loaded elements into a new relationship. In this light, much of contemporary art can be seen as having an allegorical tendency, as Craige Owens has claimed in his article on allegory as the basis for postmodern art (Owens, 1980).

Conclusion

To summarize, I will give an example of recent contemporary use of allegory, which refers to traditional allegories of the early modern time. In the Belgian pavilion at the Venice Biennale, Francis Alÿs explores the theme of children’s games, through films of children playing and paintings made by the artist. (The work was first shown in 2019 at the Eye Filmuseum in Amsterdam during 2019-2020). Through Alÿs’ videos of children’s games around the world, he speaks to the internal logic and system of rules that control these games (The Nature of the Game).

Alÿs’ work also speaks to the difference or gap between the naivety of the children’s games and the harsh, war-stricken realities of these children. However, the subject of children’s games is far from new. In 1560, Pieter Bruegel the Elder painted his known painting by this name. In it, Bruegel created an index of children’s games, and framed the world of children as a mirror to adult life. While adults work, children play. Some of the games are naïve, while others are cruel or mischievous. The comparison between the children’s world and that of the adults results in melancholy. Bruegel exposes “human nature” in the children’s games, showing them to be prone to adult cruelty already in childhood. As Benjamin has shown, one of the characteristics of allegory is melancholy (Benjamin, 1963, pp. 132-133). In Bruegel’s painting, the naïve games of children are compared to the brutal acts of adult violence and worldly interactions. Much in the same vein, Alÿs’ choice to forefront playing of games speaks to difference and similarity with the grown-up world. Even if Alÿs did not have in mind the canonical work of Bruegel the Elder, his focus on a subject that has a rich iconography, lends an allegorical aspect to the work.

Alÿs’ work stems from the artist’s travels and looking. However, it cannot escape the allegorical tendency due to the subject matter, its universalizing aspects and the melancholic expression that ultimately pervades when watching the videos. Melancholy, according to Benjamin, grows from an understanding of relativity: understanding meaning as fluid, as relational, and tingent. Allegory, as always, is fragmentary. Allegory functions on several parallel levels. As we saw in the Marie de Medici cycle by Rubens, or *Los Borrachos* by Velazquez, allegory merges the imaginary and the realistic, the abstract and the concrete. Referring to subjects present beyond the representation, allegory ultimately leaves gaps in our interpretation, and evolves towards melancholy.

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