Art in Theory 1900–2000

An Anthology of Changing Ideas

Edited by Charles Harrison and Paul Wood
often seen in matters of faith — the fact that the work is indeed made not twice, but a hundred times, by all those who are interested in it, who find a material or symbolic profit in reading it, classifying it, deciphering it, commenting on it, combating it, knowing it, possessing it. Enrichment accompanies ageing when the work manages to enter the game, when it becomes a stake in the game and so incorporates some of the energy produced in the struggle of which it is the object. The struggle, which sends the work into the past, is also what ensures it a form of survival; lifting it from the state of a dead letter, a mere thing subject to the ordinary laws of ageing, the struggle at least ensures it has the sad eternity of academic debate.

1 Interview published in P/B/H, 3, Autumn 1970, pp. 55–61

3 Craig Owens (1950–1990) from ‘The Allegorical Impulse: Towards a Theory of Postmodernism’

With the sudden decline of canonical Modernism in the late 1960s an apparent diversity of art practices emerged on to the international scene; a scene, it should be noted, in which American dominance also came to be challenged for the first time in a generation. Since then various attempts have been made to divine an underlying impulse which can be seen as cohering the apparently heterodox surface appearance of contemporary art. One of the most ambitious readings is Owens’s. Following Walter Benjamin and Paul De Man, he notes that Modernist critical theory oculudes allegory as a mode of artistic signification. He claims it is the apparent re-emergence of allegorical modes in the period after Modernism which renders that art so different from, indeed incomprehensible to, Modernist criteria of artistic quality. Just as provocatively, Owens also claims to detect allegorical moments in much Modernist practice itself: the implication being that Modernist theory misrepresented its own. The result is a theory of Postmodernist art as an art whose purpose is ‘no longer to proclaim its autonomy, its self-sufficiency; its transcendence; rather it is to narrate its own contingency, insufficiency and lack of transcendence’. Originally published as a two-part article in October, Cambridge, MA, no. 12, Spring 1980, pp. 67–86, and no. 13, Summer 1980, pp. 59–80. Reprinted in Brian Wallis (ed.), Art After Modernism, New York and Boston, 1984, pp. 203–35. The present extracts are taken from the first part of the essay.

Every image of the past that is not recognized by the present as one of its own concerns threatens to disappear irretrievably...

Walter Benjamin, ‘Theses on the Philosophy of History’

[...] To impute an allegorical motive to contemporary art is to venture into proscribed territory, for allegory has been condemned for nearly two centuries as aesthetic aberration, the antithesis of art. In Aesthetic Croce refers to it as ‘science, or art aping science’; Borges once called it an ‘aesthetic error.’ Although he surely remains one of the most allegorical of contemporary writers, Borges nevertheless regards allegory as an outmoded, exhausted device, a matter of historical but certainly not critical interest. Allegories appear in fact to represent for him the distance between the present and an irrecoverable past:

I know that at one time the allegorical art was considered quite charming… and is now intolerable. We feel that, besides being intolerable, it is stupid and frivolous.¹ [...]

[...]}
This statement is doubly paradoxical, for not only does it contradict the allegorical nature of Borges’ own fiction, it also denies allegory what is most proper to it: its capacity to rescue from historical oblivion that which threatens to disappear. Allegory first emerged in response to a similar sense of estrangement from tradition; through its history it has functioned in the gap between a present and a past which, without allegorical reinterpretation, might have remained foreclosed. A conviction of the remoteness of the past, and a desire to redeem it for the present – these are its two most fundamental impulses. They account for its role in psychoanalytic inquiry, as well as its significance for Walter Benjamin, the only twentieth-century critic to treat the subject without prejudice, philosophically. Yet they fail to explain why allegory’s aesthetic potential should appear to have been exhausted long ago; nor do they enable us to locate the historical breach at which allegory itself receded into the depths of history.

Inquiry into the origins of the modern attitude toward allegory might appear as ‘stupid and frivolous’ as its topic were it not for the fact that an unmistakably allegorical impulse has begun to reassert itself in various aspects of contemporary culture: in the Benjamin revival, for example, or in Harold Bloom’s The Anxiety of Influence. Allegory is also manifest in the historical revivalism that today characterizes architectural practice, and in the revisionist stance of much recent art-historical discourse: T. J. Clark, for example, treating mid-nineteenth-century painting as political ‘allegory.’ In what follows, I want to focus this reemergence through its impact on both the practice and the criticism of the visual arts. There are, as always, important precedents to be accounted for: Duchamp identified both the ‘instantaneous state of Rest’ and the ‘extra-rapid exposure,’ that is, the photographic aspects, of the Large Glass as ‘allegorical appearance.’ Allegory is also the title of one of Rauschenberg’s most ambitious combine paintings from the fifties. Consideration of such works must be postponed, however, for their importance becomes apparent only after the suppression of allegory by modern theory has been fully acknowledged.

In order to recognize allegory in its contemporary manifestations, we first require a general idea of what in fact it is, or rather what it represents, since allegory is an attitude as well as a technique, a perception as well as a procedure. Let us say for the moment that allegory occurs whenever one text is doubled by another; the Old Testament, for example, becomes allegorical when it is read as a prefiguration of the New. This provisional description – which is not a definition – accounts for both allegory’s origin in commentary and exegesis, as well as its continued affinity with them: as Northrop Frye indicates, the allegorical work tends to prescribe the direction of its own commentary. It is this metatextual aspect that is invoked whenever allegory is attacked as interpretation merely appended post facto to a work, a rhetorical ornament or flourish. Still, as Frye contends, ‘genuine allegory is a structural element in literature; it has to be there, and cannot be added by critical interpretation alone.’ In allegorical structure, then, one text is read through another, however fragmentary, intermittent, or chaotic their relationship may be; the paradigm for the allegorical work is thus the palimpsest. […]

Conceived in this way, allegory becomes the model of all commentary, all critique, insofar as these are involved in rewriting a primary text in terms of its figural meaning. I am interested, however, in what occurs when this relationship takes place within works of art, when it describes their structure. Allegorical imagery is appropriated imagery; the allegorist does not invent images but confiscates them. He lays claim to
the culturally significant, poses as its interpreter. And in his hands the image becomes something other (allos = other + agoreuei = to speak). He does not restore an original meaning that may have been lost or obscured; allegory is not hermeneutics. Rather, he adds another meaning to the image. If he adds, however, he does so only to replace: the allegorical meaning supplants an antecedent one; it is a supplement. This is why allegory is condemned, but it is also the source of its theoretical significance.

The first link between allegory and contemporary art may now be made: with the appropriation of images that occurs in the works of Troy Brauntuch, Sherrie Levine, Robert Longo, and others—the artists who generate images through the reproduction of other images. The appropriated image may be a film still, a photograph, a drawing; it is often itself already a reproduction. However, the manipulations to which these artists subject such images work to empty them of their resonance, their significance, their authoritative claim to meaning. [...] Brauntuch’s images simultaneously proffer and defer a promise of meaning; they both solicit and frustrate our desire that the image be directly transparent to its signification. As a result, they appear strangely incomplete—fragments or runes which must be deciphered.

Allegory is consistently attracted to the fragmentary, the imperfect, the incomplete—an affinity which finds its most comprehensive expression in the ruin, which Benjamin identified as the allegorical emblem par excellence. Here the works of man are reabsorbed into the landscape; ruins thus stand for history as an irreversible process of dissolution and decay, a progressive distancing from origin. [...]

With the allegorical cult of the ruin, a second link between allegory and contemporary art emerges: in site-specificity, the work which appears to have emerged physically into its setting, to be embedded in the place where we encounter it. The site-specific work often aspires to a prehistoric monumentality; Stonehenge and the Nazca lines are taken as prototypes. Its ‘content’ is frequently mythical, as that of the Spiral Jetty, whose form was derived from a local myth of a whirlpool at the bottom of the Great Salt Lake; in this way Smithson exemplifies the tendency to engage in a reading of the site, in terms not only of its topographical specifics but also of its psychological resonances. Work and site thus stand in a dialectical relationship. (When the site-specific work is conceived in terms of land reclamation, and installed in an abandoned mine or quarry, then its ‘defensively recuperative’ motive becomes self-evident.)

Site-specific works are impermanent, installed in particular locations for a limited duration, their impermanence providing the measure of their circumstantiality. Yet they are rarely dismantled but simply abandoned to nature; Smithson consistently acknowledged as part of his works the forces which erode and eventually reclaim them for nature. In this, the site-specific work becomes an emblem of transience, the ephemerality of all phenomena; it is the memento mori of the twentieth century. Because of its impermanence, moreover, the work is frequently preserved only in photographs. This fact is crucial, for it suggests the allegorical potential of photography. ‘An appreciation of the transience of things, and the concern to rescue them for eternity, is one of the strongest impulses in allegory.’ And photography, we might add. As an allegorical art, then, photography would represent our desire to fix the transitory, the ephemeral, in a stable and stabilizing image. In the photographs of Atget and Walker Evans, insofar as they self-consciously preserve that which threatens to disappear, that desire becomes the subject of the image. If their photographs are allegorical, however, it
is because what they offer is only a fragment, and thus affirms its own arbitrariness and contingency.

We should therefore also be prepared to encounter an allegorical motive in photo-montage, for it is the ‘common practice’ of allegory ‘to pile up fragments ceaselessly, without any strict idea of a goal.’ This method of construction led Angus Fletcher to liken allegorical structure to obsessional neurosis, and the obsessiveness of the works of Sol LeWitt, say, or Hanne Darboven suggests that they too may fall within the compass of the allegorical. Here we encounter yet a third link between allegory and contemporary art: in strategies of accumulation, the paratactic work composed by the simple placement of ‘one thing after another’ — Carl Andre’s Lever or Trisha Brown’s Primary Accumulation. One paradigm for the allegorical work is the mathematical progression. [...] 

Allegory concerns itself, then, with the projection — either spatial or temporal or both — of structure as sequence; the result, however, is not dynamic, but static, ritualistic, repetitive. It is thus the epitome of counter-narrative, for it arrests narrative in place, substituting a principle of syntagmatic disjunction for one of diegetic combination. In this way allegory superinduces a vertical or paradigmatic reading of correspondences upon a horizontal or syntagmatic chain of events. The work of Andre, Brown, LeWitt, Darboven, and others, involved as it is with the externalization of logical procedure, its projection as a spatiotemporal experience, also solicits treatment in terms of allegory.

This projection of structure as sequence recalls the fact that, in rhetoric, allegory is traditionally defined as a single metaphor introduced in continuous series. If this definition is recast in structuralist terms, then allegory is revealed to be the projection of the metaphoric axis of language onto its metonymic dimension. Roman Jakobson defined this projection of metaphor onto metonymy as the ‘poetic function,’ and he went on to associate metaphor with poetry and romanticism, and metonymy with prose and realism. Allegory, however, implicates both metaphor and metonymy; it therefore tends to ‘cut across and subvert all such stylistic categorizations, being equally possible in either verse or prose, and quite capable of transforming the most objective naturalism into the most subjective expressionism, or the most determined realism into the most surrealistically ornamental baroque.’ This blatant disregard for aesthetic categories is nowhere more apparent than in the reciprocity which allegory proposes between the visual and the verbal: words are often treated as purely visual phenomena, while visual images are offered as script to be deciphered. [...] 

As much as this may recall the linguistic conceits of conceptual artists Robert Barry and Lawrence Weiner, whose work is in fact conceived as large, clear letters on the wall, what it in fact reveals is the essentially pictogrammatical nature of the allegorical work. In allegory, the image is a hieroglyph; an allegory is a rebus — writing composed of concrete images. Thus we should also seek allegory in contemporary works which deliberately follow a discursive model: Rauschenberg’s Rebus, or Twombly’s series after the allegorical poet Edmund Spenser. [...] 

This confusion of the verbal and the visual is however but one aspect of allegory’s hopeless confusion of all aesthetic mediums and stylistic categories (hopeless, that is, according to any partitioning of the aesthetic field on essentialist grounds). The allegorical work is synthetic; it crosses aesthetic boundaries. This confusion of genres, anticipated by Duchamp, reappears today in hybridization, in eclectic works which ostentatiously combine previously distinct art mediums.
 Appropriation, site-specificity, impermanence, accumulation, discursivity, hybridization — these diverse strategies characterize much of the art of the present and distinguish it from its modernist predecessors. They also form a whole when seen in relation to allegory, suggesting that postmodernist art may in fact be identified by a single, coherent impulse, and that criticism will remain incapable of accounting for that impulse as long as it continues to think of allegory as aesthetic error. We are therefore obliged to return to our initial questions: When was allegory first proscribed, and for what reasons?

The critical suppression of allegory is one legacy of romantic art theory that was inherited uncritically by modernism. […]

In the visual arts, it was in large measure allegory’s association with history painting that prepared for its demise. From the Revolution on, it had been enlisted in the service of historicism to produce image upon image of the present in terms of the classical past. This relationship was expressed not only superficially, in details of costume and physiognomy, but also structurally through a radical condensation of narrative into a single, emblematic instant — significantly, Barthes calls it a hieroglyph — in which the past, present, and future, that is, the historical meaning, of the depicted action might be read. This is of course the doctrine of the most pregnant moment, and it dominated artistic practice during the first half of the nineteenth century. Syntagmatic or narrative associations were compressed in order to compel a vertical reading of (allegorical) correspondences. Events were thus lifted out of a continuum; as a result, history could be recovered only through what Benjamin has called ‘a tiger’s leap into the past’:

Thus to Robespierre ancient Rome was a past charged with the time of the now which he blasted out of the continuum of history. The French Revolution viewed itself as Rome reincarnate. It evoked ancient Rome the way fashion evokes costumes of the past. Fashion has a flair for the topical, no matter where it stirs in the thickets of long ago; it is a tiger’s leap into the past.9

Although for Baudelaire this allegorical interpenetration of modernity and classical antiquity possessed no small theoretical significance, the attitude of the avant-garde which emerged at mid-century into an atmosphere rife with historicism was succinctly expressed by Proudhon, writing of David’s Leonidas at Thermopylae:

Shall one say… that it is neither Leonidas and the Spartans, nor the Greeks and Persians who one should see in this great composition; that it is the enthusiasm of ’92 which the painter had in view and Republican France saved from the Coalition? But why this allegory? What need to pass through Thermopylae and go backward twenty-three centuries to reach the heart of Frenchmen? Had we no heroes, no victories of our own?10

So that by the time Courbet attempted to rescue allegory for modernity, the line which separated them had been clearly drawn, and allegory, conceived as antithetical to the modernist credo Il faut être de son temps, was condemned, along with history painting, to a marginal, purely historical existence.

Baudelaire, however, with whom that motto is most closely associated, never condemned allegory; in his first published work, the Salon of 1845, he defended it against the ‘puntits of the press’: ‘How could one hope… to make them understand that allegory is one of the noblest branches of art?’11 The poet’s endorsement of allegory is only
local, for it was the relationship of antiquity to modernity that
for his theory of modern art, and allegory that provided its form.
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ory's recent return.

of 'The Origin of the Work of Art,' Heidegger introduces two
the 'conceptual frame' within which the work of art is convention-
thetic thought:

Not sure, a thing that is made, but it says something other than the mere
agorenci. The work makes public something other than itself; it
other; it is an allegory. In the work of art something other is brought
thing that is made. To bring together is, in Greek, sumballein. The work

categorical dimension to every work of art, the philosopher appears
regularly lamented by commentators, of generalizing the term
ent that it becomes meaningless. Yet in this passage Heidegger is
philosophical aesthetics only in order to prepare for their
ent is ironic, and it should be remembered that irony itself is
variant of the allegorical; that words can be used to signify

t itself a fundamentally allegorical perception.

tool — like all conceptual pairs, the two are far from evenly matched.

s, allegory is regularly subordinated to the symbol, which repre-
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presence. Although this definition of the art work as informed
as old as aesthetics itself, it was revived with a sense of renewed
the art theory, where it provided the basis for the philosophical
egory. According to Coleridge, 'The Symbolical cannot, perhaps,
distinction from the Allegorical, than that it is always itself a part of
which it is the representative.' 14 The symbol is a synecdoche, a
whole. [..]

Coleridge's is thus an 'inner essence' and outward
essence is nothing but the
essence. The theory of
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its 'essence.' In Coleridge
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16 If the symbol
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This association of the
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Now if the symbol be one
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apparently paradoxical, for it was the relationship of antiquity to modernity that provided the basis for his theory of modern art, and allegory that provided its form. [...] If the modern artist was exhorted to concentrate on the ephemeral, however, it was because it was ephemeral, that is, it threatened to disappear without a trace. Baudelaire conceived modern art, at least in part, as the rescuing of modernity for eternity. [...] Benjamin’s primary insight—‘Baudelaire’s genius, which drew its nourishment from melancholy, was an allegorical one’—effectively situates an allegorical impulse at the origin of modernism in the arts and thus suggests the previously foreclosed possibility of an alternate reading of modernist works, a reading in which their allegorical dimension would be fully acknowledged. Manet’s manipulation of historical sources, for example, is inconceivable without allegory; was it not a supremely allegorical gesture to reproduce in 1871 the Dead Toreador as a wounded Communard, or to transpose the firing squad from the Execution of Maximilian to the Paris barricades? And does not collage, or the manipulation and consequent transformation of highly significant fragments, also exploit the atomizing, disjunctive principle which lies at the heart of allegory? These examples suggest that, in practice at least, modernism and allegory are not antithetical, that it is in theory alone that the allegorical impulse has been repressed. It is thus to theory that we must turn if we are to grasp the full implications of allegory’s recent return.

Near the beginning of ‘The Origin of the Work of Art,’ Heidegger introduces two terms which define the ‘conceptual frame’ within which the work of art is conventionally located by aesthetic thought:

“The art work is, to be sure, a thing that is made, but it says something other than the mere thing itself is, allo agoreoci. The work makes public something other than itself; it manifests something other; it is an allegory. In the work of art something other is brought together with the thing that is made. To bring together is, in Greek, sumballein. The work is a symbol.”

By imputing an allegorical dimension to every work of art, the philosopher appears to repeat the error, regularly lamented by commentators, of generalizing the term allegory to such an extent that it becomes meaningless. Yet in this passage Heidegger is reciting the litanies of philosophical aesthetics only in order to prepare for their dissolution. The point is ironic, and it should be remembered that irony itself is regularly enlisted as a variant of the allegorical; that words can be used to signify their opposites is in itself a fundamentally allegorical perception.

Allegory and symbol—like all conceptual pairs, the two are far from evenly matched. In modern aesthetics, allegory is regularly subordinated to the symbol, which represents the supposedly indissoluble unity of form and substance which characterizes the work of art as pure presence. Although this definition of the art work as informed matter is, we know, as old as aesthetics itself, it was revived with a sense of renewed urgency by romantic art theory, where it provided the basis for the philosophical condemnation of allegory. According to Coleridge, ‘The Symbolical cannot, perhaps, be better defined in distinction from the Allegorical, than that it is always itself a part of that, of the whole of which it is the representative.’ The symbol is a synecdoche, a part representing the whole. [...]
Coleridge’s is thus an expressive theory of the symbol, the presentational union of ‘inner essence’ and outward expression, which are in fact revealed to be identical. For essence is nothing but that element of the whole which has been hypostasized as its essence. The theory of expression thus proceeds in a circle: while designed to explain the effectivity of the whole on its constituent elements, it is nevertheless those elements themselves which react upon the whole, permitting us to conceive the latter in terms of its ‘essence.’ In Coleridge, then, the symbol is precisely that part of the whole to which it may be reduced. The symbol does not represent essence; it is essence.

On the basis of this identification, the symbol becomes the very emblem of artistic intuition: ‘Of utmost importance to our present subject is this point, that the latter (the allegory) cannot be other than spoken consciously; whereas in the former (the symbol) it is very possible that the general truth represented may be working unconsciously in the writer’s mind during the construction of the symbol.’ The symbol is thus a motivated sign; in fact, it represents linguistic motivation as such. For this reason Saussure substituted the term sign for symbol, for the latter is ‘never wholly arbitrary; it is not empty, for there is the rudiment of a natural bond between the signifier and the signified.’ If the symbol is a motivated sign, then allegory, conceived as its antithesis, will be identified as the domain of the arbitrary, the conventional, the unmotivated.

This association of the symbol with aesthetic intuition, and allegory with convention, was inherited uncritically by modern aesthetics; thus Croce in Aesthetic:

Now if the symbol be conceived as inseparable from the artistic intuition, it is a synonym for the intuition itself, which always has an ideal character. There is no double bottom to art, but one only; in art all is symbolical because all is ideal. But if the symbol be conceived as separable — if the symbol can be on one side, and on the other the thing symbolized, we fall back into the intellectualist error: the so-called symbol is the exposition of an abstract concept, an allegory; it is science, or art aping science. But we must also be just towards the allegorical. Sometimes it is altogether harmless. Given the Gerusalemme liberata, the allegory was imagined afterwards; given the Adone of Marina, the poet of the lascivious afterwards insinuated that it was written to show how ‘immoderate indulgence ends in pain’; given a statue of a beautiful woman, the sculptor can attach a label to the statue saying that it represents Clemency or Goodness. This allegory that arrives attached to a finished work post festum does not change the work of art. What is it then? It is an expression externally added to another expression.

In the name of ‘justice,’ then, and in order to preserve the intuitive character of every work of art, including the allegorical, allegory is conceived as a supplement, ‘an expression externally added to another expression.’ Here we recognize that permanent strategy of Western art theory which excludes from the work everything which challenges its determination as the unity of ‘form’ and ‘content.’ Conceived as something added or superadded to the work after the fact, allegory will consequently be detachable from it. In this way modernism can recuperate allegorical works for itself, on the condition that what makes them allegorical be overlooked or ignored. Allegorical meaning does indeed appear supplementary; we can appreciate Bellini’s Allegory of Fortune, for example, or read Pilgrim’s Progress as Coleridge recommended, without regard for their iconographic significance. Rosemond Tuve describes the viewer’s ‘experience of a genre-picture — or so he had thought it — turning into ... [an] allegory before his eyes, by something he learns (usually about the history and thence the deeper
significant of the image). Allegory is extravagant, an expenditure of surplus value; it is always in excess. Croce found it ‘monstrous’ precisely because it encodes two contents within one form. Still, the allegorical supplement is not only an addition, but also a replacement. It takes the place of an earlier meaning, which is thereby either effaced or obscured. Because allegory usurps its object it comports within itself a danger, the possibility of perversion: that what is ‘merely appended’ to the work of art be mistaken for its ‘essence.’ Hence the vehemence with which modern aesthetics – formalist aesthetics in particular– rails against the allegorical supplement, for it challenges the security of the foundations upon which aesthetics is erected. [...] 

4 Rosalind Krauss (b. 1940) from ‘The Originality of the Avant-Garde’

For earlier examples of Krauss’s critical writing, tracing her move away from Modernism to an articulated sense of artistic Postmodernism, see VIIb8 and 12. One of the foundation