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Allegory happens: allegory and the arts post-1960

Allegory, as others in this volume have explored, is derived from *allos* and *agoreuein*, signifying “other speaking,” other than what is said, or, what is not said. Because of the interest in “otherness” in the cultural, social and philosophical contexts of many Western academic disciplines, much of the recent discussion and development of allegory has been toward issues of difference and absence. Most of the critics turning their attention to the topic quickly cast aside the relationship of allegory to one-on-one emblem, or “naïve” allegory. Similarly, the connections with fable, a genre that plots the associations between A and B, and even with irony, which uses techniques similar to those found in allegory to convey the common grounds needed for ironic or satirical reflection, are not much pursued. Allegory fascinates those who want to explore the complexities and difficulties of speaking about the not-said, or more interesting, the not-yet-said.

Allegory has come to be perceived as a rhetorical stance, one that in literature includes the writer, the words and the reader into a reading event called “text” or textuality. It is not a thing but an event that happens. Any one piece of writing may be an allegory if the reading constitutes it as such, while at another time it may be read more generically as utopian or satirical or even realist. This does not mean that it is entirely up to the reader to make an allegorical event. At any particular time or in any particular place, a writer, artist, musician or whoever, will have available a range of strategies, techniques and devices that are more or less conducive to encouraging the allegorical event. In general an allegory rests on few *a priori* assumptions, but requires a negotiation of probable common grounds for interpretation and engagement. It uses strategies for insisting that the language human beings employ is limited: it can never fully or exactly describe the actual world, and in this enacts the impossibility of human control over the actual, and of human knowledge of spiritual absolutes or universal truth.

Allegory steps outside representative strategies and man-made [sic] definitions posing as facts or truths, to recognize otherness. It foregrounds these

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strategies as assumptions, conventions and habits. Words, devices and narrative worlds fossilize with historical accretions, which allegory chips away, often with non-referential techniques, and in doing so also chips away the accretions of the self. It allows us to see differently and with intensity the things other than ourselves that surround and place us, and which we can never fully know. Allegory insists on historical materiality, the separate contexts of the writer, the words and the reader that come together in the moment of the text. The topics of category, structure, person and act are set within socio-cultural and political specifics, which can be flexible or fixed. Allegory happens when they are flexible and responsive, when the words are read as devices that readers recognize as “making” or as “in process” – today such devices might include dream, paradox, pun, joke, aporia, cataphoresis, and many contemporary critics explore particular devices in some depth.

Allegory generates complexity often by way of contradictory rhetorical strategies and semiotic codes that generate new contradictions and further possibilities. The strategies may be linguistic, generic, discursive or semiotic, or semantic and rooted in recognized ideological codes for society, culture, politics, economics, religion and such like. The contradictions are focused through literary devices that are historically appropriate to the elements of the textuality. For example, George Orwell may well have thought that the use of the dream sequences in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949) would defamiliarize as Freud’s techniques had suggested. If readers today have no way of constituting a defamiliarization effect for dream, whether it’s Freudian or not, that literary device will not work allegorically. On the other hand another device, say one brought from the environmental debate so current today, might well suddenly spring to allegorical life. Or, for example, the use of sexuality in John Barth’s pre-AIDS *Giles Goat-Boy* (1966), defamiliarized in the 1960s in a different way than it does today.

The allegorical stance uses structures, strategies, techniques, that are more or less appropriate to instigating awareness of otherness, flexible interpretation, and contradiction, within particular reading environments. If the reading is situated within such an environment, allegory happens. Nevertheless it is possible to narrativize the late twentieth century as a period in which academic criticism, and to some extent literary writing, changes the focus on what constitutes allegorical work, and, as I will go on to suggest, various performance arts have to a large extent colonized the allegorical into what we now refer to as “performativity.”

Critics in the Euro-American western academies of the second half of the twentieth century have tended to use allegory to deal with universals. The twentieth century saw the socio-political implications of universalist

philosophies played out in totalitarianism and authoritarianism. Idealism, by definition never achievable, shifted that one degree to its other face, total power. Mid twentieth century commentaries on allegory suggest it is not a theory of knowledge, or a specific genre, but is, as Angus Fletcher, after Northrop Frye, defined it in *Allegory: The Theory of a Symbolic Mode* (1964), a "mode."¹ On the whole it is taken as a mode of writing about what is impossible to know or impossible to articulate: God, Love, Truth, the animal, the not-human. For example, Kafka used what has been called the "anagogic and allegoric anecdote" to communicate the impossible.² But if allegory can be used to indicate the impossible-to-say, it can also be used to undermine those universals. Walter Benjamin suggests that allegory collapses the beauty of totality by exposing the limitations of humanity, yet it achieves its own beauty in the grotesque ruin of subjective identity that it exposes.³

As part of the socio-political revolution in Western nation states that has accompanied the growth of the franchise, people have become more engaged in a critique of the idea of those human "limitations" as predetermined or fixed. Studies of ideologies, whether they be nation-state, religious, or domestic, and of the relations between ideology and the individual subject, led to allegory being used to critique systems of power. Systems of power that are perceived as all-pervasive and determining are impossible to describe, so allegory enables a critique by sidestepping a realist agenda and positioning writers to use strategies and techniques that foreground the assumptions of the system so they can be questioned and challenged. Certain devices are semiotically coded to do this, for example, the dystopian genre, use of which in the mid twentieth century temporarily gave "allegory" the characteristics of a genre. William Golding's *Lord of the Flies* (1960), Orwell's *Animal Farm* (1946), Anthony Burgess' *Clockwork Orange* (1962), have many generic features that disorient and generate contradiction, yet place the text within a particular temporal and social location that asked the then readers to re-think their own concurrent settings.

At the same time, allegorical flexibility has been used to investigate the impact of the new kinds of power on individuals, generating dense webs of significance that are still with us. The linguistic complexity of James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922) or *Finnegan's Wake* (1939), the elusive absurdity of Samuel

¹ Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957); Angus Fletcher, *Allegory: Theory of a Symbolic Mode* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1964).

² See George Steiner, *After Babel: Aspects of Language and Translation* (London: Oxford University Press, 1975), p. 66.

³ Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, trans John Osborne, intro. George Steiner (London: New Left Books, 1977), p. 181.

Becker's *Molloy* (1951), Jean-Paul Sartre's *La Nausée* (c. 1938), Albert Camus' *L'Étranger* (1953), or Alain Robbe-Grillet's *Les Gommes* (1953), engage the reader into allegorical aspects of the text stressing the experience of nothingness, of the arbitrary and the existential – those othernesses of mid twentieth century life that still trail us, even though they are today realized in different environments.

In 1981 two significant essay collections appeared, *Allegory, Myth and Symbol*, edited by Morton Bloomfield, and *Allegory and Representation*, edited by Stephen Greenblatt.⁴ These collections presented work by critics from previous decades considering allegory as a mode that addressed the "other" as apprehended truth, approached truth, and unattainable truth.⁵ The critics taking the role of allegory in apprehending truth focused on God, unity, matter, nothingness, goodness, and of course, truth. Those considering it in terms of its ability to approach truth generally separated into camps representing definitions of truth as polysemous, with multiple layers of discourse that could indicate it, or truth as contradictory and disruptive, indicating truth by oppositional tactics. Both approaches, however, assume that the value of allegory lies in getting you closer to "truth." Those considering it as a communicator of unattainable truth, or as communicating that truth is unattainable, resituated value as fact, combining means and ends. Nevertheless all three positions imply that allegory is a process by which we grow closer to knowing or representing.

Many of William Golding's novels have been critically received in this manner, the most well-known being *The Lord of the Flies*, which casts issues of untrammelled power into the isolated community of a group of boys who behave with the characteristics of English public school stereotypes. Other works, such as *The Inheritors* (1962), also appear to satisfy readers because "in the end" we can understand that the meaning of the book is a discussion about the paranoid barbarity and selfishness of human behavior. Interestingly, this book has considerable potential for reclamation by younger generations concerned with animal rights. John Barth's *Giles Goat-Boy* provides a set of clashing codes from a post-World War II America that many readers have mapped onto Cold War East-West relations and how we come to terms with a humanity that we now unavoidably recognize as corruptible. The novel uses strategies that allow specific topical registers such as "the university," "Cold War," "sexual freedom," to

⁴ Morton Bloomfield, ed., *Allegory, Myth, and Symbol* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981); Stephen Greenblatt, ed., *Allegory and Representation: Selected Essays of the English Institute 1979–80* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1981).

⁵ Lynette Hunter, *Modern Allegory and Fantasy: Rhetorical Stances of Contemporary Writing* (London: Macmillan, 1989), pp. 149–66.

crush each other with the weight of their linguistic nets, only to have one or another surface through the mix from time to time before it too is crushed and submerged, the apotheosis of the book arguably allowing all to surface into a pre-Baudillardian simulacrum.

Similarly, Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973) constructs an enormous kaleidoscope of fantastic, realist, surrealist, and magic realist generic strategies, that subtly interpenetrate each other, so that readers suddenly find themselves reading in an inappropriate way. It's dislocating, nerve-wracking and curiously empathetic with the topical field of World War II warscapes, and increases in speed of dislocation as the novel progresses. In some ways it is ironic that critics who pin down the meaning of the novel are the most sympathetic toward it, when its strategies appear intended to engage the reader to the point that they give up on meaning altogether and meditate on the reading moment's significance. A book that offers critical strategies that could helpfully be employed with this and other Pynchon novels is Gordon Teskey's *Allegory and Violence*, in which he notes "we may define the material in allegory as that which gives meaning a place to occur but which does not become meaning itself."⁶ A similar strategy is used by Robert Kroetsch from his earliest works such as *The Studhorse Man* (1969), which crosses Greek myth with cowboy myth, to the more sustaining allegorical opportunities of, for example, *The Puppeteer* (1992), which resist not only knowledge of the topics but also frustratingly/sexually resist an understanding of narrative voice.

The clearest exception to the critical positions in the two 1981 collections is found in an essay by Michael Holquist on allegory in the work of Mikhail Bakhtin.⁷ Holquist focuses on language and the reader, emphasizing that the question is not just about *langue* and *parole*, but a continuum of activity that generates social meaning from the constant tension between canonization (or representation) and heteroglossia (other speech/the speech of others marginalized from power). The focus has the effect of acknowledging the material world around the event of the allegorical reading. It thinks of history as an interaction between human beings and their surroundings, and emphasizes the historical moment of the text, with the writer, the words and the reader, keeping truth flexible, and generating value in the moment that allegory happens.

The focus on the reader as a vital element in allegory became central to the development of ideas about the stance in the latter part of the century. The

concept of readers and audiences as engaged in making the text had been introduced into criticism by Prague School aesthetics in the 1930s.⁸ But it was not extensively taken up until the rhetorical methods of deconstruction fed into some versions of poststructuralism and found a different weighting for allegory, especially through reader-reception theory. Many reader-based theories of allegory emerge from Edwin Honig to Frank Kermode, Maureen Quilligan, and Paul de Man. They and others became involved in a distinctive attempt to distinguish allegory from naïve mimetic representation and reductive generic definitions,⁹ and to focus on it as something that reminds human beings of their limitations, their differences from the material world.

Honig's *Dark Conceit* speaks of an anagogic realization of an intrinsic presence evading explanation, but also introduces the concept of the "allegorical waver" between the external forces of ideology and the individual subject that indicates the "enigma of the material world."⁹ The reader experiences the waver as a dialectical transfer, a constant interaction between word, object and human being. This idea is found again in J. Hillis Miller's commentary that allegory reveals the "eternal disjunction between the inscribed sign and its material embodiment."¹⁰ Quilligan argues that allegory generates more open reader response by using a linguistic process of working against the accepted meaning of words; it opposes the literal (material) function of words to their referential (ideological) meaning.¹¹ Reading for the materiality of the text by engaging with the resistance of the world is allegory, while reading for referential functions is termed "allegoresis." The analysis is echoed in Kermode's understanding of the secrecy of allegory's allusion to something irreducible that works through texts of displacement. Allegory is enigmatic because life is enigmatic and encourages continual interpretation in an oppositional and agonistic mode.¹² Concurrent with this singling out of oppositional and agonistic modes in allegory, is the significant shift in continental critical theory from ideology to

8 See Michael L. Quinn, *The Semiotic Stage: Prague School Theatre Theory* (New York: Peter Lang, 1995).

9 Edwin Honig, *Dark Conceit: The Making of Allegory* (London: Faber and Faber, 1959), p. 141.

10 J. Hillis Miller, "The Two Allegories," in Bloomfield, ed., *Allegory, Myth, and Symbol*, p. 365.

11 Maureen Quilligan, *The Language of Allegory: Defining the Genre* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1979), pp. 138, 145. See also Quilligan, "Allegory, Allegoresis, and the Dealing of Language: the Roman de la Rose, the *De planctu Naturae*, and the *Parlement of Foules*," in Bloomfield, ed., *Allegory, Myth, and Symbol*, pp. 163–86.

12 Frank Kermode, *The Genesis of Secrecy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979), pp. 146–47.

6 Gordon Teskey, *Allegory and Violence* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996) p. 19.

7 Michael Holquist, M., "The Politics of Representation," in Greenblatt, ed., *Allegory and Representation*, pp. 163–83.

hegemony, and the discussion of oppositional and agonistic strategies by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe.¹³

Possibly the most integrative exploration of allegory is Paul de Man's *Allegories of Reading*. De Man treats allegory as a stance in which the way writing is read, and reading is written, confuses the referent.¹⁴ This prescient move heralds the recent shift in philosophy, especially political philosophy, toward the idea of a differentiated public, and a situated textuality, with their concomitant moves toward chaos theory, string theory and mess. There is no specific end or truth in the engagement of writer, text and reader, but there are distinct value systems that raise the distinction between the *allôs* in allegory as either an other that is impossible to say, or an other that is different, or as Derrida had already said, *différamt*.¹⁵

It is difficult to know whether writers respond to readers' interpretations of earlier work, but the work of Angela Carter certainly grows in complexity, and her novels increasingly resist the reader's strategies for finding referentiality. *The Passion of New Eve* is a novel that mixes topical codes about sexuality and gender in an exploration of bisexuality, transvestism, transgender and other sexualities. Readers in 1977, the year of its publication, were probably not as attuned to the multiplicitous possibilities of sexualities and genders as we are today. Reading it then it was a phantasmagoria of not-said states of being straining belief. Reading it in the early twenty-first century it feels a more straightforward political allegory. Carter's later work *Nights at the Circus* (1984) however, still resists attempts at meaning, possibly because it is also read as a metanarrative about fictionality. The possibility of making fictions is a strong feminist strategy, and part of a need to create alternative figurations for "woman" if they, and men, are to articulate their experiences in their own words – their experiences being the not said "other" of a literary world largely constructed by men. Carter's ability to enmesh topical questions of sexuality within a set of contradictory generic conventions appears to have the ability continually to re-engage readers. A similar generic mix with more pointed political aim is Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985), which alternates realist narrative

(albeit set in the future) with lyric prose, and concludes rather mischievously with a report. The elusive quality injected by the generic juxtapositions has helped to maintain the political commentary as a responsive site for readings. In contrast, Atwood's later *The Robber-Bride* (1993) is far more complex linguistically, structurally and topically, but the generic codes are not as obviously strategic, so it is difficult to know if future readers will be able to engage more with the topics, or less.

Michael Holquist's essay on Bakhtin and allegory speaks about a concern with the impossibility of representation, and the anachronistic presence of universal/relativist dualities in a Western nation-state world of presumably empowered citizens that had arisen under communist, socialist and liberal democracies. Suddenly, from the middle of the twentieth century, there were large and diverse populations all claiming cultural power and needing new modes of articulation such as magic realism, or needing to find new ways of valuing previously ignored aspects of their lives in different literary genres. There was a constant tension between these material needs of individuals, and ideological or hegemonic representations, which generated a discursive vision that parallels the shift from universalism to pluralism or relativism in the last two decades of the century. This parallel has been recognized by a number of critics, including Craig Owens and later Longxi Zhang.¹⁶ Yet pluralist concepts often end up simply being the obverse face of universalism. Allegory, however, is uniquely suited to engage with the locations of partial knowledge that have resulted from concepts of *différance* in aesthetics coming together with the new political realities of an enfranchised population. The contradictions of allegory generate and carry the enigmatic experience of partial knowledge, in which we honestly recognize that others are radically different from our selves, and that our engagement with that *différance* generates difference that we can value.

Roland Barthes' 1967 essay on "The Death of the Author" replaced the author with the scriptor, the discursively structured individual who writes, and the birth of the reader. Michel Foucault's essay "What is an Author?" (originally published in 1969) positioned the writer as discursive, not uniquely in touch with universals, but socially constructed or constituted.¹⁷ The shift in critical theory to historical particularity and to

13 Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*, trans. W. Moore and P. Cammack (London: Verso, 1985).

14 For further and more recent discussion, see Theresa Kelley, *Reinventing Allegory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp. 12–13.

15 Paul de Man, *Allegories of Reading: Figurative Language in Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke, and Proust* (London: Yale University Press, 1979), p. 148; Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), pp. 113–122. See also Paul de Man, "Pascal's Allegory of Persuasion," in Greenblatt, ed., *Allegory and Representation*, pp. 1–25.

16 Craig Owens, "The Allegorical Impulse: Toward a Theory of Postmodernism," *October* 12 (1980), 67–86; Zhang Longxi, "Historicizing the Postmodern Allegory," *Texas Studies in Language and Literature* 36 (1994), 212–31.

17 Roland Barthes "The Death of the Author," trans. Richard Howard, *Aspen*, Numbers 5+6 (1967) (unpaginated); Michel Foucault, "What is an Author?" trans. Donald Bouchard and Sherry Simon, in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews* by Michel Foucault (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977), pp. 113–38.

the needs of audiences and readers paralleled a semiotic turn: the recuperation of rhetoric and an insistence on audience and the context of the audience in any aesthetic or communicative event. Techniques such as intertextuality, metafiction, historiographical metafiction, magic realism, came into play. While no technique will necessarily enable allegory, these literary techniques of layering, of weaving, of knotting, with paratext and juxtaposed devices, generated a strangeness or otherness that in their inception encouraged allegorical encounters with readers.

Some of the most remarkable opportunities for literary allegory in the late twentieth century and beginning of the twenty-first come from writers from countries that were once subject to direct European colonization. Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1980) remains an engrossing experience through its ability to cross the domestic with the personal with the political, leaving a Euro-American reader unsure as to whether the dislocation is due to the cultural difference, the social difference, the political difference, or indeed the difference in focus between the personal and the political. His notorious *The Satanic Verses* (1988) is a good example of a work that can be read allegorically in the West as an unsettling account of the disruption and difficulty of being a Muslim in England in the 1980s, but has been read realistically if not literally by some Muslims elsewhere as blasphemous. Conversely, the work of Gabriel García Márquez, such as *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1982), is often read in Euro-American contexts as "magic realism," a surreal extension of realistic device to the point where it can no longer bear the representational burden of bourgeois realism, while in his native Colombia the works are often considered pointed and immediate political allegories.

Ben Okri's writings, for example, the short stories *Incidents at the Shrine* (1986), have encountered a similar response. Those set in England, in which characters from Nigeria find themselves isolated and fractured, can be read through conventions of cultural displacement and psychoanalytical techniques. But those set in Nigeria highlight the additional difficulties that a non-Nigerian reader encounters when they read – are the literary strategies encouraging a reading of realism? magic realism? or allegory? They present moments of intense defamiliarization and contradiction for a Euro-American reader, and can generate allegorical responses about what is difficult to say, what is not said, or what is not-yet-said. But there is a political dimension to the reading: do "postcolonial" writers construct allegorical texts because their experiences are traditionally outside of ideological representation, or is the allegorical reading only available to Euro-American readers who do not understand their experience? When Métis writer Alice Lee says an old medicine woman "showed me / how to crawl inside him [her lover] / and

make him love me // today he died / i was still inside him // Kohkom / never told me / how to get out,"¹⁸ does she hope for literal or metaphorical or allegorical readings? One finds similar questions in different contexts: books such as Orhan Pamuk's *My Name is Red* (2001), a historical novel about Turkey at a time when it is centrally and powerfully positioned between East and West, can be read allegorically as an exploration of contesting cultural ideas about representation current today. A similar response occurs with the writing of Philip Pullman, whose *His Dark Materials* (1995–2000) trilogy is read relatively happily as a children's fantasy, despite the text making available philosophical principles from Daoism that completely undercut any promise of realism that fantasy makes.

Among the more subtle allegorists of the late twentieth and early twenty-first century are W. G. Sebald and Nicole Brossard. Sebald, a German émigré to England in the 1960s, wrote a series of novels in German, translated into English by others, exploring the post-war history of Europe, including *The Rings of Saturn* (1998). This novel is an unnerving palimpsest of the landscape of south-east England. It layers social, cultural, political, aesthetic, scientific, geographical and architectural moments from the last 400 years on top of each other, as if they were transparent layers superimposed by an alien eye that had little clue as to what was important to the inhabitants or not. One of its primary devices is the intermediality of printed writing and visual graphics, in which the written word does not always or often marry with the visual presentation.¹⁹ The effect is to generate not an articulation of what is not said or even not-yet-said, but a distinct sense that we feel significance but have no idea of what the significance might be.

Nicole Brossard is a Québécoise writer also writing in her first language and being translated by others. Her novels *Manne Desert* (1987) and *Baroque at Dawn* (1995) are clear examples of writing the not-yet-said, as she traverses a huge philosophical terrain exploding notions of conventional beauty, and sliding bodies, identities, strategies and moralities, through the surface oils of simulacra, inviting readers to sense the moment of linguistic skin that holds significance. Brossard's extensions of narrative, genre, language and poetics, pose substantial contradictions for the reader that may or may not be exacerbated by their translated status. But translation and allegory frequently go hand in hand, as the translator's art is the one where irreducible difference is most keenly felt. The point about allegory is that it asks the reader to choose to make a text with the writer's words. This

¹⁸ Alice Lee, "love medicine," in Jeanne Perrault and Sylvia Vance, eds., *Writing the Circle: Native Women of Western Canada* (Edmonton: NeWest Publishers, 1990), p. 161.

¹⁹ Jeffrey Orr, "Visuality, Genre, and Translation in Selected Works of Michael Ondaatje and W. G. Sebald," unpublished PhD thesis, University of Leeds, 2005.

happens to some extent or another with all readings, but with allegory it is foregrounded as part of the process. If allegory did not insist on history, readings could be delightfully pluralist. But it does, and so it requires a commitment to a particular cross-cultural, trans-individual collaboration that defines the difference of the reader as well as that of the writer.

Perhaps it is not so surprising, if allegory is perceived as a stance that includes the writer, the words and the reader into a reading event called "text" or textuality, that theater and performance studies have taken over the term since the 1980s. In many art media the aesthetics of making is separate from the aesthetics of the art object, but the performance of theater has them going on at the same time. Theatricality and performativity are about process, the audience is involved in the "making." Arguably, this is the opportunity offered by Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* (published in French, 1952; in English, 1954), a play in which he crosses not narrative convention but theatrical expectation, of character, plot and structure, bringing the audience into the event of waiting as an allegorical event of life. The advent of improvisation as the study of highly skilled makers and audiences interacting in the making of a performance "in the moment," has many similarities with allegory's rhetorical features. As the performance events known as "Happenings" in the 1960s coalesced into simultaneous political commentary, they took on many other elements of the stance as they included the social context on which allegory insists.

Some critics have indicated that theatre in itself is potentially allegorical in spirit. Not only is there a fully fledged theory of theater allegory in Bertolt Brecht's writing, but the coincidence of the new media with performative modes has intensified the relationship. Brecht, as Elin Diamond elegantly argues, develops his idea of *gestus* alongside Benjamin's work on allegory. Benjamin "drags the essence of what is depicted as art before the image, in writing, as a caption," while Brecht says that every gesture has a caption that is "set out and laid bare to the understanding of the audience."²⁰ In Benjamin's allegorical case the sign of the caption is empty: allegory is transitoriness, decline, dissipation, death.²⁰ In contrast and elaborating on Diamond, Brecht's position can be read as a conflict of codes between the gesture and the caption that shatters notions of artistic unity, of representation and ideology. Brecht's *gestus*, Diamond says, invokes political will and the possibility of change. Specifically, Brecht's concepts of alienation, the not... but, historicization, and the *gestus* that combines them all, are

²⁰ Elin Diamond, *Unmaking Mimnesis: Essays on Feminism and Theater* (London: Routledge, 1997), p. 79; *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic*, ed. and trans. John Willett (London: Methuen, 1964), p. 201.

directly parallel to allegory's combination of foregrounding and disruption, its construction of contradiction and conflicting codes, and its insistence on context and history.

Performance studies, working hand in hand with theatre studies, has developed "performativity" as largely a recognition of audience response, the conditions for its involvement and engagement. Allegory's insistence on context and historicity makes it an ideal stance for thinking about this process. For example, conceptual art is a way of passing a conventional meaning through a particular and socially immediate conceptual lens or coding, so that it becomes an allegorical gesture toward what has not yet been said. Martha Rosler's *Semiotics of the Kitchen* (1975) is a short video of a woman in a claustrophobically small kitchen talking one through kitchen objects in alphabetical order with a controlled rage that occasionally erupts into knives being stabbed into wooden boards as she disrupts the conventions of television cookery demonstrations, and simultaneously creates a new genre that will inspire, for example, work such as Bobby Baker's *Drawing on a Mother's Experience* (1988). Mierle Laderman Ukeles's *Maintenance Art Series* (1973-74 and later) at the Wadsworth Atheneum in Hartford, Connecticut, included a performance in which she washed the floor of a museum, crossing social codes to do with art and labor, with class and service, with gender and domestic identity, to leave audiences perplexed by their inability to work out their social relationship to this working figure, or indeed, if they should respond at all. More recent artists who focus on the allegorical include Ilya Noé, whose *The Return of the One Who's Always Been Around* uses bio-degradable paint pumped through specially made deer shoes to imprint the image of a deer in the Portuguese town of Vila Nova de Cerveira, where deer have been hunted out for nearly two centuries. This process leaves an indelibly enigmatic figuration which asks people to think about the environment, human occupation, and ecological responsibility.

At the same time the conjunction of new media in performance art, conceptual art and theater and dance, has meant that techniques of layering, of collage, hypertext, hologram and others, have been employed to make palimpsests.²¹ Of experience, the imbrications of referential codes that create allegory's contradictions and enigmas. When used first, the effect of a new medium is often disconcerting, the conventional understanding of how communication works breaks down. This can leave us feeling shut out, or with a lack, or with a sense of relative position or plurality. But it may also leave us with an energy for engagement that is needed to recognize *difference* and

²¹ See Gérard Genette, *Palimpsests: Literature in the Second Degree*, trans. Channa Newman and Claude Doubinsky (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1997).

make social value. Cindy Sherman's 1980s' sequence of photographs of herself presents the female body in an often witty and always disruptive framing that dismantles notions of photographic realism in what has been called a "blasted allegory."²² Bill Viola's work with video and projected image, for example, *The Crossing* (1996), backs a continuous video of a person walking who is then engulfed in flames, with a continuous video of a man walking who is engulfed in water. The two enormous screens on which these images are projected dwarf the viewer, and accompanying sound recordings and the darkness of the exhibition room play generic conventions of video across audience expectations of gallery exhibition, with conventions of larger-than-life sublime aspirations across the limited human body. In ways analogous to literary disruptions of generic and linguistic expectation, these artists play with the possibilities of media and socio-cultural reception to engage the audiences in the event of allegory.

On stage, some of the most profound changes in theater performance have grown from highly allegorical productions. In the mid twentieth century one finds several writers playing with allegorical devices, such as Jean Genet or Antonin Artaud or Tadeusz Kantor. Kantor's work, which includes *Dead Class* (1975) and *Wielopole, Wielopole* (1980), runs traditional notions of "liveness" on stage alongside concepts of the "dead actor;" it crosses the potential of the human body with the idea of puppetry, to call upon an audience engagement with concepts of human presence, automatons, bureaucracy, in an extended Kafkaesque landscape. In contrast, Ariane Mnouchkine's *Les Atrides* (1987) collapsed Greek myth into and onto present-day political discussions of colonialism and feminism through Kabukai acting techniques. The collocation of registers split apart traditional interpretations of the *Oresteia* and instantiated strategies with which the audience could engage to re-make the significance of this pervasive Western story from the perspective of those whom the Greeks themselves barred from society: strangers and women.

More recently the work of Tim Etchells with the company Forced Entertainment, in Sheffield, England, has been producing extraordinary allegorical work, continually reconstituting the textual moment they are producing. An example of their work is the bus tour production *Nights in This City* through Sheffield (1995) and later through Rotterdam (1997), which disturbingly re-mixed the histories of the cities as the audience travels through. Another performance group, Xplo, refined this technique with bus tours of New York (*Density*, 2000) and then London (*Found Wantings*, 2003), in which the bus audience listens to a fabricated sound score as the tour proceeds through

widely economically varied metroscales, juxtaposing unpredictable social, cultural and political expectations through sound and sight. One of the most elusively alluring sites for political allegory has been Walid Raad's *The Atlas Group Archives* (2001), which construct a web-accessible hypertext with video material that has to be mail-ordered, to offer a place for potential insight into the recent crises in Lebanon. Playing openly with the fictional quality of newsmaking, Raad destabilizes accepted stereotypes of Middle Eastern events by generating an unsettling sense of "what is missing" in the traumatic event of war.

There are many examples of allegorical opportunities in the performing arts, especially since the growth of conceptual art. But one area in particular is of note: contemporary modern dance. Yvonne Rainer's *Lives of the Performers* (1972), a film of a production process, is in many ways an essay on allegory. It visually discusses the relation of image to meaning, process to significance, and of convention to time and space. For example, she literally writes over on the film and reads over in sound, a rehearsal process that is itself improvised; or, the final section of the video presents static melodramatic images whose temporal extension over several minutes deconstructs their clichéd force. The catalogue of other contemporary dancers who produce work filled with allegorical opportunity includes, to take just one specific grouping, the 1980–2007 San Francisco dance world, and productions such as Della Davidson's potent dance-theatre constructions of intimate trauma in her collaboration with Ellen Bromberg on *The Weight of Memory* (2006); or Keith Hennessey's explicit dismantling of physical images that re-engage audiences in social and political questioning in, for example, *How to Die* (2006); or Kim Epifano's work with community and disabled dancers, including her *Fears of Your Life* (2006–7), which materializes the world of autistic writer Michael Bernard Loggins, actively bringing the audience into a landscape that engenders allegorical interaction at the same time as realizing its literalness, foregrounding the choice of involvement that allegory makes possible.

It is possible that these performative areas, which are among the least supported, and least embedded in the capitalist world of entertainment, have been able to generate allegorical texts precisely because they are not seeking to offer the meanings and satisfactions of conventional entertainment. In other performing arts, especially in film, allegorical strategies that encourage disruption and contradiction, are not welcome. Only those practitioners with a long track record such as David Lynch, can afford to take the chance on a film such as *Mulholland Drive*, which is structured to resist translation into meaning, its narrative movement creating a Möbius strip of unending

22 Karen L. Kleinfelder, "Ingres as a Blasted Allegory," *Art History*, 23:5 (2000), 800–17.

significance.²³ Otherwise, possibly unintentionally, the film world throws forward and underlines the frequency with which artistic works foreign to the audience are susceptible to producing allegorical moments and events, places where we read difference.

More difficult to locate than in events that are strange to the audience, are the possibilities for allegory in the situated environments of particular lives. This, however, is where allegory in the twenty-first century may flower. We are no longer able to read all that is written and supposed to be "good," nor are we able to experience all the artistic products of the many other media there are. Audiences are becoming more selective, creating their own circles of culture within larger capitalist systems of entertainment. Practices that are aimed at the more situated and acknowledgedly partial strategies for living that many people are building, may need to engage the allegorical to communicate with each other.

²³ Alex Lichtentfels has written a number of essays on allegory in film, including the as-yet-unpublished "Self-Reflexivity in David Lynch's *Mulholland Drive*" (2005).

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