

The Significance of the Allegorical and Symbolic Register, Including Their Polarity within Painting

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Abstract. Allegory and symbol are analyzed as fundamental instruments for communicating moral and spiritual concepts, marked by a structural interdependence throughout art history. While the symbol is defined as a unitary and transcendent revelation of the absolute - reaching its peak in Romantic mysticism - allegory takes shape as a narrative and material structure used to humanize abstract ideas. Although abstract modernism marginalized allegory in favor of symbolic purism and an escape from the mundane, postmodernism rehabilitates it through what Craig Owens terms the "allegorical impulse." This return transforms allegory into a critical tool for deconstruction, abandoning the illusion of aesthetic autonomy to re-engage visual discourse with the complexity of social and historical reality.

Keywords: *Allegory; context; significance (or meaning); symbol; structural.*

Introduction

The relationship between allegory and symbol represents one of the recurring themes in the theoretical reflection on the artistic image, as these two registers constitute essential means through which visual art conveys complex meanings of a moral, spiritual, or conceptual nature. Throughout the history of art, they have been examined both in opposition and in complementarity, generating an interpretative framework in which the image surpasses its simple representational function and becomes an instrument for articulating abstract ideas. Allegory operates through a discursive and narrative structure in which multiple visual elements construct an extended meaning, while the symbol tends to condense significance into a unitary form oriented toward the revelation of a transcendent dimension. At various historical moments, the status of these two concepts has undergone significant transformations, from the predominance of allegory within the figurative tradition to the valorization of the symbol in the aesthetics of Romanticism and modernity. Nevertheless, contemporary artistic discourse demonstrates a reactivation of the allegorical mechanism, reinterpreted as a critical instrument capable of interrogating cultural and social reality. In this context, the present study aims to analyze the structural interdependence between allegory and symbol, highlighting the manner in which these two registers participate in the configuration of meaning within the artistic image.

I. The Framework of Allegory in Historical Perspective

A colossal volume within the collective memory of humanity is comprised of storytelling - a milieu that portrays a framework of art incomparable in its mastery and serves as a determining element in the process of self-knowledge. Throughout history, mankind has embraced the act of storytelling, crafting this framework through a broad palette of forms: from the literary realm to the performing arts, through narration and musical contexts, to visual conception or distinctive non-oral methods.

It must be noted that Allegory is considered one of the most effective elements employed for the disclosure of a particular narrative or idea. The term originates from Latin, constituting a description of a 'hidden language.' In the same semantic vein, Allegory relates or indicates a certain presentation - usually a meticulously 'packaged' concept or moral - whose meaning is distinct from what is overtly displayed, requiring, at the same time, a pause for research and careful decoding.

In this context, specialized literature utilizes a far more extensive palette of sources compared to other arts, particularly invoking the spectrum of semantic figures of speech, such as epithets, similes, hyperboles, metaphors, and so forth. Within the visual arts - specifically on the path of painting - creators have opted for the allegorical range to convey plurivalent concepts, such as the existential plane, love, virtue, morality, ethics, or justice, through symbolic elements and metaphors of a plastic and aesthetic nature. Unequivocally, Allegory possesses the potential to be interpreted as a veiled meaning, intended to be deciphered by the 'reader' of the image.

Ultimately, Allegory manifests as a stance, a specific technique, a body of knowledge, or a process; in this context, it emerges whenever a text is seconded by another text at a different level. Furthermore, allegories can be presented as artistically framed figures of speech mediated through distinctive yet complementary expressive elements, which prompt a 'vertical' reading - paradigmatic 'filters' that establish new concordances on the horizontal segment, separate from common interpretations. Moreover, it could be considered that Allegory achieves a detachment into other classes or even subject matters, indicating that an allegorical elaboration is summative, capable of transcending even the boundaries of the aesthetic. It possesses the potential to encompass the emotional realm, capitalizing on flaws, affiliations, or partial information.²

"Allegory has been widely used throughout history not only in painting and sculpture but in all forms of art. Graphics (and especially printmaking) represented a plenary medium of expression through allegory. A major reason for this is its immense power to illustrate complex ideas and concepts in ways that are both easily decipherable and, at the same time, tangible for the viewers of each period" (Răzvan-Constantin Carătănase, *A History of Romanian Graphics: Notions, Concepts, and Principles*, 2025, p. 61). This citation highlights the role of printmaking as a primary, accessible medium for allegorical expression.

We began by specifying Allegory within the field of literature because it has been constituted, and continues to be, as a primordial or equally significant source for providing the accepted cases within the visual arts.

The sphere of visual arts is excellently suited for considering the allegorical segment, as an image allows for a focused narration of a story while remaining accessible to the person interacting with the work. Certainly, these allegorical images often incorporate elements, characters, or symbols that humanize various affective reactions, such as envy, greed, impetuosity, love, and so forth. Spiritual symbolism is frequently rendered in the form of a flower, a bird, or a ray of light.

From the inventory of allegorical subjects across various geographical meridians and eras, such works were commonly produced in painting from the Renaissance until the mid-19th century - a considerable interval during which Allegory reached its peak of fame. On the other hand, a substantial number of such creations have been perceived as having esoteric or imprecise content by contemporary audiences; this is because such compositions are conditioned by the viewer's ability to recognize them, an ability to decode that not everyone retains over time. Against this backdrop of interpretative subjectivity, their meanings often suggest a sequence of speculative elements and constant contradictions.

A prime example of this would be Sandro Botticelli's (1445-1510) famous work, 'Primavera,' which is revered by the general public even without specific cultural training; nonetheless, viewers possess the capacity to observe the staging of the characters, the rendered atmosphere, the harmony, and other aspects. Furthermore, it is worth noting that even his contemporary audience did not necessarily benefit

² Craig Owens, *The Allegorical Impulse: Toward a Theory of Postmodernism*, in „MIT Press Journal Article”, vol. 12 (Spring, 1980), p. 67, online: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/778575>

from the formal training required to perceive the nature of the meanings embedded within this splendid allegory.

Following the aforementioned example, creators have continued to resort to allegory up to the present day, just as numerous precedents existed prior to the Renaissance. It is necessary, however, to point out that there are specialized voices capable of bringing the purpose of allegory to light, especially since there is an immeasurable volume of examples spanning several centuries.

The famous work 'Guernica' by the illustrious artist Pablo Picasso presents a series of symbols that are generally not deciphered by the public. These can only be decoded if the viewer possesses knowledge regarding the Spanish Civil War (1936-39), specifically the bombing of the town of Guernica in the Basque Country (April 26, 1937) - the very year the artist created this work as an overt manifesto. This creation incorporates symbols of prehistoric origin (from cave paintings, such as the bull, rendered in a Cubist manner through the 'distortion' of perspective) or symbols correlated with a subjective mythological framework, belonging to a personal lexical fund of signs that later became world-renowned alongside the international recognition of the artist's work. Thus, such symbols were absorbed into the compositional register, specifically within the 'galaxy' of allegories.

Craig Owens, one of the most reputable art critics, identified the foundation of the Postmodernist movement, decisively labeling it an 'allegorical impulse.' He maintained that restructuring and recoding establish a prominent effect in our contemporary era in relation to a new work. Furthermore, he argued that it is nearly impossible to realize an artistic creation that remains authentic as long as the traditional (classical) modes of expression remain unchanged. The emergence of such authentic creations might be possible - though certainly not in all circumstances - most likely within new media, aided by increasingly advanced technologies, potentially correlated with the framework of artificial intelligence; however, these directions lie beyond the scope of the present study.

To reiterate, the postmodernist operation with fragments (sections) exceeds the exploration of a complete ensemble (of a symbolic nature), just as the framework of seriality supersedes uniqueness (of the artistic creation), which was once regarded as an irrevocable, finalized form. This line of thought established the framework for the characteristic implementation of allegory in the visual arts, displacing it from its traditional sphere - namely, literature. In other words, the inclusion of the post-structuralist concept in accordance with this argumentative endeavor facilitated the innovative transposition of the concept of allegory into the realm of visual arts, operating a necessary distinction from its traditional literary content. The process consists in assuming the post-structuralist paradigm, according to which the act of receiving a text is not static; on the contrary, the interaction between the reader and the work generates polysemic meanings and distinct effects³, conditioned by the variability of the temporal and subjective context.

Establishing a precise ontology of allegory imperatively requires relating it to the concept of the 'symbol' - a term with which it maintains a semantic proximity that is often a source of confusion. In contemporary theoretical discourse, the two notions are frequently correlated, with allegory not uncommonly perceived as an extension or as a specific mode of manifestation of the symbolic⁴.

II. The Context of the Symbol

The analysis of the previously mentioned examples reveals a structural interdependence between the two registers: allegory often encapsulates the valences of the symbol, just as the latter can constitute the foundation or the catalyst of allegorical architecture.

Analogous to allegory, the nature of the symbol constitutes the object of vast exegesis. In the view of Ananda Coomaraswamy, symbolism represents the 'art of thinking in images' - a faculty that modern man seems to have lost over the last three centuries, a phenomenon that occurred, perhaps, as a consequence of the '*catastrophic theories of Descartes*'.⁵ However, research in the fields of

³ Joel D. Black, *Allegory Unveiled*, in *Poetics Today*, nr. 4(1), 1983), p. 112

⁴ Angus Fletcher, *Allegory: The Theory of a Symbolic Mode*, Ed. Princeton University, 2021

⁵ Coomaraswamy shares the perspectives of Erich Fromm and Harold Bayley, authors who theorized these aspects in theoretical works with explicit titles such as *The Forgotten Language* and *The Lost Language of Symbolism*, respectively

anthropology and psychoanalysis demonstrates that this atrophy is confined solely to the conscious plane; the subconscious, as Juan Cirlot emphasizes, seems to have compensated for this centuries-old deficiency through an exuberant repression, becoming an overloaded repository of symbolic structures.⁶

In the visual plane, masterpieces such as Hieronymus Bosch's *The Garden of Earthly Delights* exhibit a remarkable symbolic density; however, their power derives from their integration into a compositional architecture that configures a consummate allegorical model. In contrast, in the case of contemporary visual replicas or citations - such as the re-reading of Bosch's work proposed by Lluís Barba - the symbolic detail migrates toward the foreground, acquiring an anecdotal valence. In this context, the compositional solutions (and, by extension, the allegorical mechanism) remain beholden to the matrix established by the Dutch master, allowing the symbol to function autonomously.

A distinct paradigm is offered by William Blake who, in the pure spirit of Romanticism, built a parallel mythology grounded in a personal hermeneutics. His creation, at once fascinating and hermetic, is intrinsically symbolic, rejecting the structured rigor of allegory.

Viewed through the lens of stylistic succession, the supremacy of the symbol was consecrated by the Romantic era. The thinkers of this movement postulated that the symbol represents the sole vehicle through which the artistic imagination achieves plenitude. From this perspective, allegory was demoted to the status of a mere artifice - a conventional mechanism that risked altering the purity of the work. Following this theoretical decline, allegory began to be perceived as a form lacking phenomenological authenticity, reduced to a repertoire of signs and technical procedures - a vision that has survived, with remarkable persistence, from the nineteenth century into contemporary discourse.⁷

"Among the characteristics of Romanticism, we include: the exaltation of nature, captured in the Kantian guises of the 'beautiful' and the 'sublime'; the exaltation of the artist as the supreme individual creator, whose creative spirit is more important than the strict adherence to formal rules and traditional procedures; the prevalence of emotion over reason and of the senses over the intellect; the revaluation of the self; the exploration of mental states; the preoccupation with genius, heroes, passions, and inner struggles." (op. cit., Aura Evelina Radu, *Analysis of Visual Art Elements*, Eurostampa Publishing House, Timișoara, 2024, p. 67)

The revaluation of William Blake's work in the 1930s exerted a catalytic influence on the Neo-Romantic group, represented by prominent figures such as Graham Sutherland, Paul Nash, John Piper, John Craxton, and Keith Vaughan. These artists assimilated Blake's mystical visions, transposing them into a visual language marked by a metaphysical sensitivity toward the landscape. Blake's famous axiom - the possibility of glimpsing an entire universe captive within a grain of sand - constituted the aesthetics of these creators, leading them to explore and cultivate the intrinsic poetic valences of the natural world, perceived as a repository of profound spiritual meanings⁸.

III. The Duality Between the Allegorical and Symbolic Registers

The antithesis between symbol and allegory has been a subject of reflection since Antiquity, with Platonic dialogues providing a fundamental reference point in this regard, through which allegory was invested with the status of a superior artistic form.

From a structural perspective, allegory can be defined as an extended or sustained metaphor. While the symbol is distinguished by a unitary character and a vocation for transcendence, allegory takes shape as an open, predominantly narrative device. Within this mechanism, a plurality of images or emblems resonates with an external referent which, in turn, possesses a multiple nature and an intrinsic complexity.

In contrast to the polysemantic nature of allegory, the symbol functions as a unitary sign, establishing a one-to-one (biunique) metaphorical relationship with its referent. It is governed by the attributes of clarity and conciseness, being frequently associated with aesthetic grace or radiance by virtue of specific

⁶ Juan Eduardo Cirlot, *A Dictionary of Symbols*, Ed. Routledge, 1962, London, p. 30

⁷ Glenn Adamson, *Craft and the Allegorical Impulse*, articol în André Gali; Knut Astrup Bull, *Material Perceptions: Documents on Contemporary Crafts No. 5*, Ed. Arnoldsche, 2018, p. 15

⁸ <https://www.tate.org.uk/visit/tate-britain/display/ancients-and-moderns-legacies-william-blake>

cultural conventions. In the economy of the symbol, the particular element is not a mere phantasmal projection or a 'shadow' of reality, but constitutes an immediate revelation of the general, providing access to an otherwise ineffable dimension of knowledge.⁹

Walter Benjamin stated that: "*allegory offers the dark background against which the bright world of the symbol might stand out. By its nature, the symbol is multivalent, uniting two or more meanings.*" To also quote the literary theorist William Empson, "*the effect of allegory is to keep the two levels distinct in the mind, though they interpenetrate in numerous details.*"¹⁰

In alignment with the aforementioned accounts, W.B. Yeats stated that: "a symbol is the only expression of an invisible essence, a transparent lamp which reveals the spiritual flame; while allegory is one of many possible representations of an embodied thing, which belongs to fancy and not to imagination."¹¹

The antithesis between allegory and symbol is accurately reflected in the dissonance between the figurative tradition - be it naturalistic or mimetic - and the modernist abstractionism of the twentieth century. Allegory remains intrinsically linked to the materiality of representation and to the status of the work as a finite, empirical object. For instance, in Jacques-Louis David's study, *Allegory of the French People Offering the Crown and Sceptre to the King*, the expressive potential of the paper support is exploited not merely as a simple receptacle, but as a constitutive element of the visual discourse.

Furthermore, allegory obstinately asserts its condition as an artifact; it emphasizes that the image is a product of the intellect, a construction that does not claim to belong to the objective world, but to the sphere of conscious representation. In contrast, symbolic art tends toward an elusion of the material component. In this case, the artistic will seeks to transcend the physical support, so that the work is no longer perceived as an object, but as an epiphany or a vehicle for a spiritual reality that transcends its own material presence.¹²

The divergence between the two paradigms is eloquently illustrated by the antithesis between the compositions of Jacques-Louis David - articulated through complex narratives and engaged in the socio-political issues of the era - and the visions of modernists such as Piet Mondrian or Mark Rothko. In the case of the latter, the image is governed by an organic unity and a depth that exclusively invokes the aesthetic and spiritual dimension. Allegory, by its very nature, refuses to offer what constitutes the essence of the aforementioned works: that self-referential and autonomous escape from the contingencies of the mundane.

While in Mondrian's *Composition with Red, Large Blue, Yellow and Black*, we witness an 'immaterial' and transcendent use of the symbol - where pure form becomes the vehicle of the absolute - the replica proposed by Lluís Barba recontextualizes this heritage in a postmodern key. Thus, a mutation occurs from the autarchic symbol to the 'social' allegory; the work no longer aspires to an atemporal reality but becomes a critical mechanism that interrogates art history and the structures of contemporary society.

The significance of allegory can be interpreted through the lens of a lateral movement, a semantic excursion that deviates from the vertical axis of univocal meaning. This discursive nature explains the marginalization of allegory within Modernism - a movement that privileged the verticality and purism of Abstract Expressionism - but equally grounds its rehabilitation within the paradigm of Postmodernism. In this new context, the allegorical subject is embraced as a tool for deconstruction, intended to negate the 'false promise' of the visual sign's autarchy. Thus, through the recourse to allegory, postmodern art refuses the illusion of the image's absolute dominance and opts for a re-engagement of the aesthetic act within the social sphere, re-establishing the connection between representation and the contingencies of reality.

Allegorical significance can be circumscribed within a lateral dynamic, constituting a hermeneutic excursion that refuses the point-like concentration of meaning in favor of a discursive expansion. This

⁹ Goethe, apud. Susan Skinner, *Symbols of the Soul: Sacred Beasts*, Ed. Circle Books, 2012, p. 11

¹⁰ Walter Benjamin și William Empson, apud. Glenn Adamson, *ibid.*, pp. 15-18

¹¹ Bainard Cowan, *Walter Benjamin's Theory of Allegory*, în „New German Critique 22” (Winter, 1981), p. 111

¹² Termed, in his/her terminology, as Alois Riegl, „*kunstwollen*”.

centrifugal nature explains the exclusion of allegory from the Modernist canon - a paradigm that privileged the autarchy and purism of Abstract Expressionism¹³ - while simultaneously becoming fundamental to its recovery by Postmodernism. Within this new theoretical framework, the allegorical impulse is embraced as a deconstruction strategy, intended to denounce the 'false promise' of immanence and the absolute dominance of the visual sign. Through the recourse to allegory, postmodern art abandons the illusion of aesthetic autonomy and opts for a necessary re-engagement on the social plane, re-establishing a fertile dialogue between the image and the complexity of external contingencies.

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Links:

- [1] <https://www.tate.org.uk/visit/tate-britain/display/ancients-and-moderns-legacies-william-blake>

¹³ Glenn Adamson, *Thinking Through Craft*, Ed. Bloomsbury Academic, 2007, p. 40