Faculty of Art

1985

Allegory: To speak other wise

Garnet, Eldon

Count Olympe; *Admiration;* 1860; albumen print.

ALLEGORY:
TO SPEAK OTHER WISE

Photography
Allegory

A man through the woods.

To speak the truth it isn't a woods through which he walks but a city. This is the city through which we walk. And to try to speak the truth, this city/life which is at once city and metaphor. This is the allegory, at once the physical and the other, the emblem, the symbol. And here is the man, at once a woman and a man, that is, the, and all the's, and all of the individuals.

The constructed photograph: allegory.

Allegory is an uneasy unity between the material and the transcendental object, a relationship between appearance and essence. Between the empirical and the ideal: the body and the shadow.

The constructed photograph embodies the remarriage of poetry and the image.

There is a great difference between a poet's seeking the particular from the general and his seeing the general in the particular. The former gives rise to allegory, where the particular serves only as an instance of example of the general, the latter, however, is the true nature of poetry: the expression of the particular without any thought of, or reference to, the general. Whoever grasps the particular in all its vitality also grasps the general, without being aware of it, or only becoming aware of it at a late date.
Goethe

So the argument begins.

The latter half of Goethe's statement, that the true nature of poetry is an expression of the particular, is reminiscent of many current theories of photography from Sontag to Barthes in which the photographic image is considered a "captured" moment, a frozen particular instant, memento of the past, a tangible memory. In these theories the photograph is a mechanical reproduction of a specific particular. The photograph exists as a record. It is a physical representation of a physical world. Any overtones of the general are accidentally added with time. The "mother" photograph of Barthes' "*Camera Lucida*" is

important only in the fact that it is an image of the mother of the famous writer Roland Barthes, that there are historical, sociological recordings in the appearance, dress and general posture of the "mother", that the background and foreground record a specific locale at a specific time. Otherwise the "mother" is trivial. She is not a particular which gives rise to a general; she is not all mothers. She is a "mother" without poetry for anyone except Barthes for whom she is the muse, the mother of poetry. She is a particular which remains a particular.

A photograph exists as a physical presence and representation of a previous physical situation, an otherness, an embodiment of that which constituted the making of the photograph. The materiality of the photograph exists outside its initial materiality, outside of its initial otherness. If the photograph's otherness is merely a direct product of a once-existing physical reality, it is merely a representation of nature. The greater the photograph's dependence on a physical situation the latter its mimesis. Nature captured may be pleasant but it is not poetry; it is a pale simile of the original, often all we have to remind us of what once existed but necessarily less than the source, a memento.

The more the photograph is constructed, that is, the less it is the captured moment, the greater is its own materiality, its own otherness. The materiality of the constructed photograph begins at the moment of the photograph and not at some pre-physical moment. The photographer does not discover the physical situation, but rather constructs it. The true materiality of the constructed photograph therefore has no antecedents in another physical realm, but is rather born with the photograph. The otherness is not a backward seeking but one which must proceed outward from the photograph. The staged photograph is not a particular, but a general, an otherness.

Otherness is the basic construction of the allegory. The tableaux employs triggers from a stock of physical images to fabricate an expression, a unity of materials and transcendental objects. It is this uneasy synthesis which constitutes its allegory.

Allegory: (from the Greek "saying something otherwise") sensual representation portrayed rationally: perceived by the senses and corresponding in some rational way to something which can be said abstractly. One of its basic characteristics is ambiguity—multiplicity, richness of meaning.

Often a puzzle which can be tricked out.

A dialectic expression of abstract qualities and physical states. It has both the abstract and the physical contained within it simultaneously, inseparable.

When the tableaux is constructed, when the objects are chosen and arranged, the question of correspondence between the physical properties characterized by the objects and the intended conveyance is a problematic consideration. One approach demands that there be a "natural", conventional relationship between an illustrative image and its meaning, i.e., a designation. Another approach is that any person, any object, any relationship can be employed to mean absolutely anything else. In the former approach allegory becomes a mere playful illustrative basic, it is speculative; expressive. But allegory is inherently both—convention and expression.

In allegorical terms the profane world is both elevated and devalued. It is elevated in that things used to signify, to point to something else, are embodied with a power which raises them above the profane world into a higher plane. The material world at the same time is devalued in that any object can represent anything else; the profane world is characterized as a world in which the detail is of no great importance. The allegorist often humiliates the object in order to satisfy it.

In one view, the successful allegorical depiction must unfold in new and surprising ways. But as a form of photography, allegory employs a specific language, an artificiality; it is a schema dependent on convention such that it is not secure until it becomes a fixed schema not merely a sign of what is to be known, but itself an object worthy of knowledge.

The conventional relationship between object and conveyance insists in a simple designing of a picture which expresses the intended meaning in a few concise signs.

The awkward heavy-handedness which has been attributed either to lack of talent on the part of the artists or lack of insight on the part of the patron, is essential to allegory.

The undialectic neo-Kantian mode of thought is not able to grasp the synthesis which is reached in allegorical writing.
Walter Benjamin

In considering the relationship between direct expression and the expression through allegory it is also necessary to consider the difference between symbolic and allegorical representation. Symbolism is connected with mysticism. The symbol refers to something beyond, and to the beyond which is not expressible in human terms, that is, it represents the above and beyond of discourse, that which can only be known through the symbol. It is the very incarnation and embodiment of the idea.

It is like the sudden appearance of a ghost, or a flash of lightning which suddenly illuminates the dark night. It is a force which seizes hold of our entire being.
Gustav Creuzer

Allegory is not unitary; it is an idea which is different than itself. Allegory is involved in the dialectic tension between perception and meaning. Symbol can be taken as a sign for self-contained, concentrated ideas which firmly remains itself, while allegory is a mobile, dramatic, representation of ideas possessing the fluidity of time.

The measure of time for the symbol is the mystical instant. The worldly, historical duration is ascribed to allegorical intention. The introduction of the category of time permits the incisive, formal definition of the relationship between symbol and allegory. The symbol is the instant of nature revealed. The allegory is the relating of the physicalities as they interact in the telling of events.

Both symbol and allegory are revised versions of myth. They are both post-mythical. One of the first efforts of allegorical analysis was an effort to reduce to respectability certain scandalous celestial behaviours, to find a hidden meaning of ethical importance in the unethicality of the myths. Allegory can be seen as moral myth. That Jesus told parables was not unusual for a Jewish teacher of the time.

When the personal qualities of the gods die, the abstract representation takes precedence and myth becomes allegory: i.e. when the concrete is betrayed for the sake of knowledge of the abstract.

Viewing a tableaux necessitates a passage through a series of actions
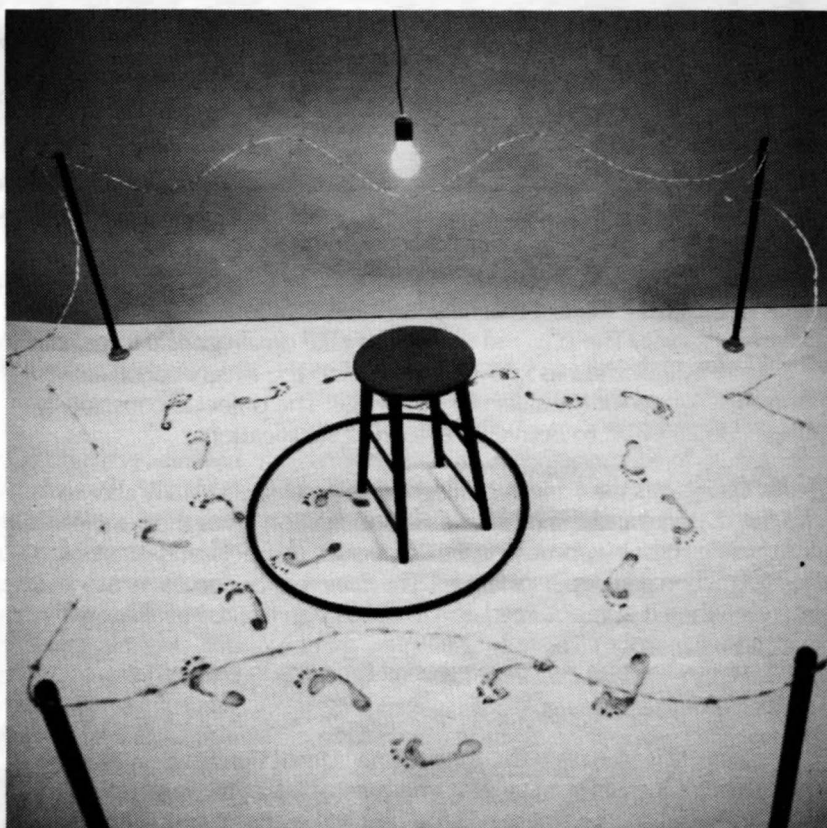
Eldon Garnet; *Habit*; 1985; cibachrome print; 40 × 40 in. Photo: courtesy the artist.

Eldon Garnet; *Panic;* 1985; cibachrome print; 40 × 40 in. Collection: Sydney Dinsmore.

which represents a logic, a teaching, an interpretation: dependent upon human reasoning. The physical object can take on allegorical form only for the individual who has knowledge. And so the allegorical observer betrays the world for the sake of knowledge. The object is consciously betrayed in an effort to derive an extended signification.

Lucifer appears as the "original" allegorical figure, successfully able to bind the material and the demonic. Personification gives the concrete an imposing form by portraying it as a person; this person is most imposing when it is depersonalized. The concrete becomes most concrete when it is vapourized and acquires significance in allegory.

Nature serves the purpose of expressing meaning in emblematic representation.

The closer one is to nature the further one is from signification. Nature is mutability. One of the strongest impulses of tableaux depiction is to rescue transient things, to embed the physical with the status of the abstract. It does this by construction, by building into areas where a

similitude can point to "important" human action.

The constructed image does not desire to create a "naturalistic" picture of the world. It does not attempt to imitate nature, to create that which may be physically believable. Rather it excels in its own sense of artificiality, its own otherness. A constructed depiction does not request that the observer suspend disbelief, but rather that the intellect be kept alive and that the tools of analysis be constantly applied. It distances rather than lulls—it does not ask the viewer to be pleased but rather to question. The aim through curiosity is not at truth but at knowledge.

Desiring to set up a boundary between expression and audience. Demanding an alienation to be effective. Not a personal particular representation but the "general in the particular".

Didactic in its insistence on standing aside, on refusing to be tied to a single location of thought. Refusing to be emotional mannerism. Rather than nature longing to be a crafted history. ■