The Allegorical Impulse: Toward a Theory of Postmodernism Part 2

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Stable URL: http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0162-2870%28198022%2913%3C58%3ATAITAT%3E2.0.CO%3B2-4

*October* is currently published by The MIT Press.
We write in order to forget our foreknowledge of the total opacity of words and things or, perhaps worse, because we do not know whether things have or do not have to be understood.
—Paul de Man, Allegories of Reading

Here is the beginning of an allegory, a brief parable of reading from the opening of Laurie Anderson’s *Americans on the Move*:¹

You know when you’re driving at night like this it can suddenly occur to you that maybe you’re going in completely the wrong direction. That turn you took back there . . . you were really tired and it was dark and raining and you took the turn and you just started going that way and then the rain stops and it starts to get light and you look around and absolutely everything is completely unfamiliar. You know you’ve never been here before and you pull into the next station and you feel so awkward saying, “Excuse me, can you tell me where I am?” . . .

This passage, with its images of driving (Anderson’s metaphor for consciousness: “I am in my body the way most people drive in their cars”) and obscurity, is reminiscent of the opening of *The Divine Comedy* (“Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita/mi ritrovai per una selva oscura/che la diritta via era smarrita. . . . Io non so ben ridir com’io v’entrav./tant’era pieno di sonno a quel punto/che la verace via abbandonai”²), or rather of that state of perplexity which initiates so many allegories. And Anderson’s night driver soon encounters her

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1. *Americans on the Move*, a performance by Laurie Anderson, was presented at The Kitchen Center for Video, Music, and Dance in April 1979. Several texts from it were published in *October*, 8 (Spring 1979), 45-57. All quotations are taken from this source.

2. “In the middle of the journey of our life I came to myself within a dark wood where the straight way was lost. . . . I cannot rightly tell how I entered there, I was so full of sleep at that moment when I left the true way . . .” (*Dante’s Inferno*, trans. John D. Sinclair. New York, Oxford University Press, 1939, p. 23).

Virgil in the guise of a grease monkey, who reveals that her befuddlement is the result of her failure to “read the signs”—a failure which is not, however, attributed to a subject who has either neglected or misread directional signals, but to the fundamental unreadability of the signs themselves. Commenting on a projection of the image that was emblazoned on the Apollo 10 spacecraft—a nude man and woman, the former’s right arm raised at the elbow, palm proffered—her Virgil in overalls inquires: “In our country, we send pictures of our sign language into outer space. They are speaking our sign language in these pictures. Do you think they will think his hand is permanently attached that way? Or do you think they will read our signs? In our country, good-bye looks just like hello.”

Two alternatives: either the extraterrestrial recipient of this message will assume that it is simply a picture, that is, an analogical likeness of the human figure, in which case he might logically conclude that male inhabitants of Earth walk around with their right arms permanently raised. Or he will somehow divine that this gesture is addressed to him and attempt to read it, in which case he will be stymied, since a single gesture signifies both greeting and farewell, and any
reading of it must oscillate between these two extremes. The same gesture could also mean "Halt!" or represent the taking of an oath, but if Anderson's text does not consider these alternatives that is because it is not concerned with ambiguity, with multiple meanings engendered by a single sign; rather, two clearly defined but mutually incompatible readings are engaged in blind confrontation in such a way that it is impossible to choose between them. It is, of course, in allegory that "one and the same object can just as easily signify a virtue as a vice," and this works to problematize the activity of reading, which must remain forever suspended in its own uncertainty.

"In the illusory babels of language," Robert Smithson wrote, "an artist might advance specifically to get lost." Anderson is such an artist, and her

performances are narratives of losing one's way in labyrinths of signs. Although she employs, in addition to lyrics and spoken texts, photographs, drawings, films, and music, all of these are implicated in a general thematics of reading that extends far beyond the limits of the written text. For Anderson, the world is a vast network of signs and, as such, continually elicits reading, interpretation. Consciousness, being in the world, is in fact identified with reading—an identification which is not, however, unproblematic, for the legibility of signs is always uncertain. And it is to the problem of illegibility that Anderson's work is addressed.

*Americans on the Move* continually returns to the fundamental ambivalence of signs and to the barrier they thereby erect in the path of understanding. A photograph of a woman shrugging her shoulders, palms turned upwards, elicits the conundrum: "Does this woman think it's raining? Or do you think it's all the same to her?" An earlier version of the work included the following story about consulting a palmist (a *Reader and Advisor*) in Albuquerque:

The odd thing about the reading was that everything she told me was totally wrong. She took my hand and said, "I see here by these lines that you are an only child..." (I have seven brothers and sisters) "...I read here that you love to fly..." (I'm totally terrified of planes) and so on. But she seemed so sure of this information that eventually I began to feel like I'd been walking around for years with these false documents permanently tattooed to my hands. It was very noisy in the house, family members kept walking in and out speaking a high clicking kind of language that sounded like Arabic. Books and magazines in Arabic were strewn all over the carpet. Suddenly I realized that maybe it was a translation problem—maybe she had been reading from right to left instead of left to right—and thinking of mirrors, I gave her my other hand. She didn't take it, but instead, held out her own hand. We sat there for a minute or two in what I assumed was some sort of strange participatory, invocatory ritual. Finally I realized that her hand was out because she was waiting...waiting for money.

In this passage, which treats the metaphor of communication as economic exchange—the exchange of meaning balanced by an exchange of currency—Anderson proposes that the same "text" read backwards and forwards might engender antithetical meanings. It thus recalls her palindromes, which rarely read the same in both directions: in her *Song for Juanita*, the first syllable "Juan-" is reversed into "no-" producing a rhythmic oscillation "no-one-no-one"; morphemes are thus revealed to contain the seed of their own contradiction.

Palindromes, puns, and "translation problems" recur throughout Anderson's

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works, allowing us to identify them as what Paul de Man, in his recent *Allegories of Reading*, calls "allegories of unreadability." De Man recognizes allegory as the structural interference of two distinct levels or usages of language, literal and rhetorical (metaphoric), one of which denies precisely what the other affirms. In most allegories a literal reading will "deconstruct" a metaphorical one; recalling medieval schemas of textual exegesis, de Man identifies such readings as tropological. Yet because literal language is itself rhetorical, the product of metaphoric substitutions and reversals, such readings are inevitably implicated in what they set out to expose, and the result is allegory:

The paradigm for all texts consists of a figure (or a system of figures) and its deconstruction. But since this model cannot be closed off by a final reading, it engenders, in its turn, a supplementary figural superposition which narrates the unreadability of the prior narration. As distinguished from primary deconstructive narratives centered on figures and ultimately always on metaphor, we can call such narratives to the second (or third) degree allegories. *Allegorical narratives tell the story of the failure to read* whereas *tropological narratives . . . tell the story of the failure to denominate*. The difference is only a difference in degree and the allegory does not erase the figure. Allegories are always allegories of metaphor and, as such, they are always allegories of the impossibility of reading—a sentence in which the genetive "of" has itself to be read as a metaphor.6

De Man illustrates his thesis of allegorical illegibility with examples drawn from both literary and philosophical discourse (although allegory tends to blur this distinction), from Rilke and Proust to Rousseau and Nietzsche. The way in which attention to the incongruence of literal and figurative language upsets our presumed mastery of canonical texts is succinctly demonstrated in his introductory reading of Yeats's "Among School Children," which concludes with the famous line "How can we know the dancer from the dance?"—a line frequently quoted as testimony to the indissoluble unity of sign and meaning that characterizes the (symbolic) work of art. Yet this "meaning" hinges upon reading the line as a rhetorical question, that is, as a rhetorical *statement* of their indissolubility. But what if we read it literally, de Man asks; and the result, not surprisingly, is allegory—the distance which separates signifier from signified, sign from meaning:

It is equally possible, however, to read the last line literally rather than figuratively, as asking with some urgency the question we asked earlier in the context of contemporary criticism: not that the sign and referent are so exquisitely fitted to each other that all difference between them is

at times blotted out but, rather, since the two essentially different elements, sign and meaning, are so intricately intertwined in the imagined "presence" that the poem addresses, how can we possibly make the distinctions that would shelter us from the error of identifying what cannot be identified? The clumsiness of the paraphrase reveals that it is not necessarily the literal reading which is simpler than the figurative one . . . ; here the figural reading, which assumes the question to be rhetorical, is perhaps naive, whereas the literal reading leads to greater complication of themes and statement. For it turns out that the entire schema set up by the first reading can be undermined, or deconstructed, in terms of the second, in which the final line is read literally as meaning that, since the dancer and the dance are not the same, it might be useful, perhaps even desperately necessary—for the question can be given a ring of urgency, "Please tell me, how can I know the dancer from the dance"—to tell them apart. But this will replace the reading of each symbolic detail by a divergent interpretation. . . . This hint should suffice to suggest that two entirely coherent but entirely incompatible readings can be made to hinge on one line, whose rhetorical mode turns the mood as well as the mode of the poem upside down. Neither can we say . . . that the poem simply has two meanings that exist side by side. The two readings have to engage each other in direct confrontation, for the one reading is precisely the error denounced by the other and has to be undone by it. Nor can we in any way make a valid decision as to which of the readings can be given priority over the other; none can exist in the other's absence. There can be no dance without a dancer, no sign without a referent. On the other hand, the authority of the meaning engendered by the grammatical structure is fully obscured by the duplicity of a figure that cries out for the differentiation that it conceals.7

I have quoted this lengthy passage in full not only because it illuminates the structure of Laurie Anderson's art and allows us to identify it as allegorical, but also because it demonstrates that modernist texts such as Yeats's contain within themselves the seed of their own allegorization. Allegory can no longer be condemned as something merely appended to the work of art, for it is revealed as a structural possibility inherent in every work. In modernism, however, the allegory remains in potentia and is actualized only in the activity of reading, which suggests that the allegorical impulse that characterizes postmodernism is a direct consequence of its preoccupation with reading. It is not surprising, then, that we should encounter Robert Rauschenberg, on the threshold of postmodernism, executing works which transform our experience of art from a visual to a textual encounter, and entitling these works Obelisk, Rebus, Allegory.

7. Ibid., pp. 11-12.
The displacement enacted by Rauschenberg’s art was first acknowledged by Leo Steinberg, who identified it as a shift from nature to culture. But Steinberg presumes the nature/culture opposition to be a stable one, a presupposition that postmodern artists—not to mention their poststructuralist counterparts—are determined to subvert. In postmodernist art, nature is treated as wholly domesticated by culture; the “natural” can be approached only through its cultural representation. While this does indeed suggest a shift from nature to culture, what it in fact demonstrates is the impossibility of accepting their opposition. This is the point of a recent allegorical project by Sherrie Levine, who has selected, mounted, and framed Andreas Feininger’s photographs of natural subjects. When Levine wants an image of nature, she does not produce one herself but appropriates another image, and this she does in order to expose the degree to which “nature” is always already implicated in a system of cultural values which assigns

it a specific, culturally determined position. In this way she reinflects Duchamp’s readymade strategy, utilizing it as an unsettling deconstructive instrument.

This reference to Duchamp suggests that the postmodernist “shift” should not be characterized as from nature to culture, but as a shift in elocutionary mode, from history to discourse, the terms which Émile Benveniste uses to distinguish between impersonal, third-person narration and direct address, which he associates with the personal pronouns I and you.9 In her “Notes on the Index . . .” Rosalind Krauss demonstrates that this shift of pronominal emphasis is characteristic of all of Duchamp’s work, and that it signals a “tremendous arbitrariness with regard to meaning, a breakdown of . . . the linguistic sign.”10 All of Duchamp’s works read as messages addressed to the spectator—explicitly in Anemic Cinema and Tu m’ and To be Looked At (from the Other Side of the Glass) with One Eye, Close to, for Almost an Hour; implicitly in the readymades Fountain and Trébuchet11—and it should be remembered that allegories are frequently exhortative, addressed to the reader in an attempt to manipulate him or to modify his behavior. It is on the basis of this shift to a discursive mode that a reading of what Duchamp himself identified as the “allegorical appearance” of the Large Glass—itself an elaborate psychomachia—should proceed.

This shift from history to discourse, from a third- to a second-person mode of address, also accounts for the centrality which postmodernist art assigns to the reader/spectator;12 significantly, Steinberg frequently refers to Rauschenberg’s reorientation of the conventional picture field from a horizontal to a “flatbed” position as a form of “spectator modification.” Krauss observed that Rauschenberg’s art follows a discursive model by compelling a part-by-part, image-by-


11. In Passages in Modern Sculpture, Rosalind Krauss describes the readymades’ interrogative structure: “The readymades became . . . part of Duchamp’s project to make certain kinds of strategic moves—moves that would raise questions about what exactly is the nature of the work in the term ‘work of art.’ Clearly, one answer suggested by the readymades is that a work might not be a physical object but rather a question, and that the making of art might, therefore, be reconsidered as taking a perfectly legitimate form in the speculative act of posing questions” (New York, Viking, 1977, pp. 72-3).

12. Consider Krauss’s treatment, in Passages . . . , of the emblem in abstract expressionism: “All these qualities—frontality, centralization, and literal size and shape—characterize the developed work of most of the abstract-expressionist painters; even those who, like Pollack and Newman, eventually dropped some of these emblematic features continued to work with the most central aspect of the sign or emblem. And that is its mode of address. For while we can think of a traditional picture or a photograph as creating a relationship between author and object that exists independent of an audience, addressing no one in particular, we must think of a sign or emblem as existing specifically in relation to a receiver. It takes the form of a directive addressed to someone, a directive that exists, so to speak, in the space of confrontation between the sign or emblem and the one who views it.” (Ibid., pp. 150, 152.) Like de Man’s reading of “Among School Children,” Krauss’s passage suggests that abstract-expressionist painting may indeed contain the seed of its own allegorization.

image reading that is temporal in character.\textsuperscript{13} Yet it remains impossible to read a Rauschenberg, if by reading we mean the extraction from a text of a coherent, monological message. All attempts to decipher his works testify only to their own failure, for the fragmentary, piecemeal combination of images that initially impels reading is also what blocks it, erects an impenetrable barrier to its course. Rauschenberg thus confounds the attitude towards reading as an unproblematic activity—which persists, as we know, under the dubious banner “iconography” in art-critical and art-historical discourse, which are thereby paralyzed when confronted with his work, and with postmodernism in general—substituting for it something remarkably similar to Roland Barthes’s “stereographic” view of the text:

A text is made of multiple writings, drawn from many cultures and entering into mutual relations of dialogue, parody, contestation, but there is one place where this multiplicity is focused and that place is the reader, not, as was hitherto said, the author. The reader is the space on which all the quotations that make up a writing are inscribed without any of them being lost; a text’s unity lies not in its origin but in its destination. Yet this destination can no longer be personal: the reader is without history, biography, psychology; he is simply that \textit{someone} who holds together in a single field all the traces by which the written text is constituted.\textsuperscript{14}

Here, then, is Rauschenberg’s \textit{Allegory}, a “combine painting” executed in 1959–60, exactly one year after the artist began his series of illustrations for \textit{The Divine Comedy} (the project during which the transfer process characteristic of his subsequent work was “discovered”). Couched in its flatbed surface there is a random collection of heterogeneous objects: a red umbrella, stripped from its frame and splayed like a fan; rusted sheet metal, crumpled into a cascade of metallic drapery and mounted on mirrors; red block lettering, apparently from a broadside that has been ripped apart and dispersed; swatches of fabric; bits of clothing. It is difficult, if not impossible to discover in this inventory any common property that might coherently link these things, justify their bedding down together. The only metaphor that suggests itself is that of a dumping ground, and it is hardly a new one: with his customary precision of language, Steinberg described Rauschenberg’s typical picture surface as “dump, reservoir, switching center.” Krauss also characterizes Rauschenberg’s art in terms of place: discussing the “equal density” which disparate images acquire in \textit{Small Rebus}, she is “struck by the fact that the surface of this painting is a place, a locale, where this kind of


equalization can happen." Both Steinberg and Krauss describe the work in this way in order to analogize it to the human mind; Rauschenberg’s works thus become allegories of consciousness or, perhaps, the unconscious.

Is this then what makes Allegory an allegory? By making works which read as sites, however, Rauschenberg also seems to be declaring the fragments embedded there to be beyond recuperation, redemption; this is where everything finally comes to rest. Allegory is thus also an emblem of mortality, of the inevitable dissolution and decay to which everything is subject. But can we in fact be certain that this is an allegorical image; might it not be an image of allegory itself, of the disrepute into which it has fallen? All three readings are correct, but only in part; if, however, we were to superimpose them then the work would become the narrative—the allegory—of its own fundamental illegibility.

In his essay “On the Museum’s Ruins,” Douglas Crimp proposes another locale suggested by Rauschenberg’s art: the museum, the dumping grounds of culture.16 If we accept for the moment—and I believe we must—this identification of Rauschenberg’s works as “museum paintings,” in the sense that Michel Foucault attributes to Manet—painting as “a manifestation of the existence of museums and the particular reality and interdependence that paintings acquire in museums”17—then it follows that they will acquire their fullest measure of significance only when seen in situ. Rauschenberg’s art remains in potentia until it is seen in the museum, where it opens a dazzling mise en abyme reminiscent of Husserl’s Dresden Gallery passage in Ideas:

A name on being mentioned reminds us of the Dresden Gallery and of our last visit there: we wander through the rooms, and stand before a picture of Teniers which represents a picture gallery. When we consider that pictures of the latter would in their turn portray pictures which on their part exhibited readable inscriptions and so forth, we can measure what interweaving of presentations, and what links of connexion between the discernible features in the series of pictures, can really be set up.18

The illegibility of a Rauschenberg, however, works to deny the possibility of precisely such “links of connexion” as Husserl proposes, which hinge on the readability of the “inscriptions.” There is no escape from this situation, no clear route back to the “reality” it purports to describe, as Jacques Derrida, in his Borgesian critique of this passage, indicates: “The gallery is the labyrinth which includes in itself its own exits.”19

16. This essay is published in this issue of October.
museums of modern art is thus their final, ironic triumph. They become that term in the series of works exhibited there that permits the allegorization of the entire series. But this triumph is ultimately an equivocal one, for in order to function as deconstructions of the discourse of the museum, of its claims to coherence, homogeneity—the ground of its alleged intel-legibility—they must also declare themselves to be part of the dumping ground they describe. They thus relapse into the "error" they denounce, and this is what allows us to identify them as allegorical.

What I am imputing to Rauschenberg, then, is a peculiar form of site specificity: museum painting for the museum. This gesture is both economic and strategic, for if, in his works, Rauschenberg enacts a deconstruction of the museum, then his own deconstructive discourse—like Daniel Buren's—can take place only within the museum itself. It must therefore provisionally accept the terms and conditions it sets out to expose. This is of course the constraint to which any deconstructive discourse is subject, as the deconstructors themselves frequently remind us: Derrida, for example, speaks of the methodological necessity of preserving as an instrument a concept whose truth value is being questioned. (Significantly, his example is Claude Lévi-Strauss's ethnographic discourse, which must utilize the nature/culture opposition even while rejecting it.20) There is thus a danger inherent in deconstruction: unable to avoid the very errors it exposes, it will continue to perform what it denounces as impossible and will, in the end, affirm what it set out to deny. Deconstructive discourses thus leave "a margin of error, a residue of logical tension" frequently seized upon by critics of deconstructionism as its failure. But this very failure is what raises the discourse, to use de Man's terminology, from a tropological to an allegorical level:

Deconstructive readings can point out the unwarranted identifications achieved by substitution, but they are powerless to prevent their recurrence even in their own discourse, and to uncross, so to speak, the aberrant exchanges that have taken place. Their gesture merely reiterates the rhetorical defiguration that caused the error in the first place. They leave a margin of error, a residue of logical tension that prevents the closure of the deconstructive discourse and accounts for its narrative and allegorical mode.21

Reading Rousseau's Second Discourse as the narrative of its own deconstruction, de Man concludes:

To the extent that it never ceases to advocate the necessity for political legislation and to elaborate the principles on which such a legislation could be based, it resorts to the principles of authority that it under-

mines. We know this structure to be characteristic of what we have called allegories of unreadability. Such an allegory is metafigural; it is an allegory of a figure (for example, metaphor) which relapses into the figure it deconstructs. The Social Contract falls under this heading to the extent that it is structured like an aporia: it persists in performing what it has shown to be impossible to do. As such, we can call it an allegory.22

The "figure," then, deconstructed in Rauschenberg's work is that which proposes the substitution of the "heap of meaningless and valueless fragments of objects [contained within the museum]... either metonymically for the original objects or metaphorically for their representations."23 Exposing this substitution to be impossible, Rauschenberg imputes the same impossibility to his own work, thereby opening it to criticism that it merely perpetuates the confusion it sets out to expose. Postmodernist art is frequently attacked on exactly this point; for example, it is said of Troy Brauntuch's reproductions of Hitler's drawings that, because they lack captions or identifying labels that might inform us of their origin, the work remains mute, meaningless. It is, however, precisely this opacity that Brauntuch sets out to demonstrate, and this is what enables us to identify his works as allegories. Whether or not we will ever acquire the key necessary to unlock their secret remains a matter of pure chance, and this gives Brauntuch's work its undeniable pathos, which is also the source of its strength.

Similarly, Robert Longo's work, which treats the aestheticization of violence in contemporary society, participates of necessity in the activity it denounces. In a recent series of aluminum reliefs, entitled Boys Slow Dance and generated from film stills, Longo presents three images of men locked in... deadly combat? amorous embrace? Like Anderson's parables, Longo's images resist ambiguity; they might, in fact, serve as emblems of that blind confrontation of antithetical meanings which characterizes the allegory of unreadability. Suspended in a static image, a struggle to the death is transformed into something that "has all the elegance of a dance."24 Yet it is precisely this ambivalence that allows violence to be transformed into an aesthetic spectacle in photographs and films, and on television.

Longo's manipulation of film stills calls attention to the fact that, despite its suppression by modern theory—or perhaps because of it—allegory has never completely disappeared from our culture. Quite the contrary: it has renewed its (ancient) alliance with popular art forms, where its appeal continues undiminished. Throughout its history allegory has demonstrated a capacity for widespread popular appeal, suggesting that its function is social as well as aesthetic; this

22. Ibid., p. 275.
would account for its frequent appropriation for didactic and/or exhortative purposes. Just as Lévi-Strauss’s structural (allegorical) analysis of myths reveals that the function of myth is to resolve the conflicts which confront primitive societies by maintaining them in paralogical suspension,25 so too allegory may well be that mode which promises to resolve the contradictions which confront modern society—individual interest versus general well-being, for example—a promise which must, as we know, be perpetually deferred. The withdrawal of the modernist arts from allegory may thus be one factor in their ever-accelerating loss of audience.

25. Claude Lévi-Strauss, “The Structural Study of Myth,” Structural Anthropology, trans. Claire Jacobson and B. G. Schoepf, New York, Basic Books, 1963, p. 229. Lévi-Strauss, however, seems to consider this suspension of contradiction to be perfectly logical: “The purpose of myth is to provide a logical model capable of overcoming a contradiction (an impossible achievement if, as it happens, the contradiction is real).” Rosalind Krauss, however, has properly described it as “paralogical” (“Grids,” October, 9 [Summer 1979], 55). On the allegorical character of structuralist analysis, see Joel Fineman, “The Structure of Allegorical Desire,” October, 12 (Spring, 1980), 47-66.
The Western, the gangster saga, science fiction—these are the allegories of the twentieth century. They are also genres most intimately associated with film; that film should be the primary vehicle for modern allegory may be attributed not only to its unquestioned status as the most popular of contemporary art forms, but also to its mode of representation. Film composes narratives out of a succession of concrete images, which makes it particularly suited to allegory's essential pictogrammatism. (As stated in Part 1 of this essay, "In allegory, the image is a hieroglyph; an allegory is a rebus, writing composed of concrete images.") Film is not, of course, the only medium to do so, as Barthes has indicated:

There are other 'arts' which combine still (or at least drawing) and story, diegesis—namely the photo-novel and the comic-strip. I am convinced that these 'arts', born in the lower depths of high culture, possess theoretical qualifications and present a new signifier. . . . This is acknowledged as regards the comic-strip but I myself experience this slight trauma of signification faced with certain photo-novels: 'their stupidity touches me.' There may thus be a future—or a very ancient past—truth in these derisory, vulgar, foolish, dialogical forms of consumer subculture.26

Borges condemned allegory as "stupid and frivolous"; yet for Barthes its very stupidity functions as an index to its potential "truth." He goes on to designate a new object for aesthetic investigation: "And there is an autonomous 'art' (a 'text'), that of the pictogram ('anecdotalized' images, obtuse meanings placed in a diegetic space); this art taking across historically and culturally heteroclite productions: ethnographic pictograms, stained glass windows, Carpaccio's Legend of Saint Ursula, images d'Epinal, photo-novels, comic-strips."27

These remarks on the pictogram occur in a footnote to the essay "The Third Meaning: Research Notes on Some Eisenstein Stills," in which Barthes attempts to locate and define the specifically "filmic," which he discovers not in the movement of images, but in the still. Despite the essentialist undertones of this project, and whether or not we agree with Barthes's characterization of film as static in essence, or with his interpretation of Eisenstein's work, this essay remains extremely important because, in order to describe the still, Barthes elaborates a three-fold schema of interpretation highly reminiscent of the three- and four-fold schemas of medieval textual exegesis—a parallel of which Barthes himself is not unaware. This schema is necessitated by a description of the still in terms traditionally associated with allegory: it is a fragment, a quotation, and the meaning it engenders is supplementary, excessive, "parodic and disseminatory."

An arbitrary cut, the still suspends not only motion but also story, diegesis;

27. Ibid.
engendered by the syntagmatic disjunction of images, it compels a vertical or paradigmatic reading. ("Allegory is 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"—Part 1.)

In Barthes's allegorical schema, the first level of meaning is informational, referential, to make its parallel with exegesis more apparent, literal. This is the level of anecdote, and it comprises setting, costume, characters and their relations. It unproblematically assumes the reality of what it denotes, that is, that the sign is transparent to a referent. The second level is symbolic—Barthes calls it obvious, relating it to theology, in which, "we are told, the obvious meaning is that 'which presents itself quite naturally to the mind.'" Significantly, Barthes describes this level in terms that allot us to identify it as rhetorical: "Eisenstein's 'art' is not polysemous, it chooses the meaning, imposes it, hammers it home. . . . The Eisensteinian meaning devastates ambiguity. Here, by the addition of an aesthetic value, emphasis, Eisenstein's decorativism has an economic function: it proffers the truth." Rhetoric, which is always emphatic, is both decorative and persuasive, a system of tropes frequently employed in oratory to manipulate the listener, to incite him to action. All of the Eisenstein stills analyzed by Barthes function simultaneously on both rhetorical levels: a clandestinely clenched fist, for example, a metaphoric synecdoche for the proletariat, is meant to inspire revolutionary determination.

In contradistinction to the literal and rhetorical meanings, the third, or "obtuse" meaning is difficult to formulate; Barthes's description of it is elusive, vague:

The obtuse meaning is a signifier without a signified, hence the difficulty in naming it. My reading remains suspended between the image and its description, between definition and approximation. If the obtuse meaning cannot be described, that is because, in contrast to the obvious meaning, it does not copy anything—how do you describe something that does not represent anything? Nevertheless, the third meaning, Barthes tells us, has "something to do" with disguise; he identifies it with isolated details of make-up and costume (which properly belong to the literal level) which, through excess, proclaim their own artifice. If Barthes refuses to assign such details a referent, he does accord them a function: they work to expose the image as fiction. Barthes's reluctance, even inability to specify obtuse meaning cannot be considered an evasion, a ruse; it is a theoretical necessity. For as de Man observes:

28. Ibid., p. 54.
29. Ibid., p. 56.
30. Ibid., p. 61. italics added.
What makes a fiction a fiction is not some polarity of fact and representation. Fiction has nothing to do with representation but is the absence of any link between utterance and a referent, regardless of whether this link be causal, encoded, or governed by any other conceivable relationship that could lend itself to systematization. In fiction thus conceived the “necessary link” of the metaphor [of the symbol, we might add, recalling Coleridge] has been metonymized beyond the point of catachresis, and the fiction becomes the disruption of the narrative’s referential illusion.31

The obtuse meaning differs not only in kind (since it refers to nothing, copies nothing, symbolizes nothing) from the literal and the symbolic; it is also sited differently: “Take away the obtuse meaning and communication and signification still remain, still circulate, still come through.”32 The absence of obtuse meaning is, in fact, the very condition of communication and signification, but its presence works to problematize these activities. Since the obtuse meaning has no objective, independent existence, it depends upon the literal and the rhetorical, which it nevertheless undoes. An unwelcome supplement, it exposes the literal level of the image to be a fiction, implicating it in the web of substitutions and reversals properly characteristic of the symbolic. The actor is revealed as the (metaphoric) substitute for character; his facial contortions, the emblem of grief, not its direct expression. Hence every image that participates in what photography criticism calls the directorial, as opposed to the documentary, mode is open to the intervention of obtuse meaning. And the symbolic dimension of the image, which depends upon the univocity of the literal, is thereby disfigured; erected upon an unstable base of substitutions and displacements, it becomes metarefigural, the figure of a figure. The “necessary link” which characterized it as metaphoric is rendered contingent, “metonymized,” as de Man has it. The projection of metaphor as metonymy is one of the fundamental strategies of allegory, and through it the symbolic is revealed for what it truly is—a rhetorical manipulation of metaphor which attempts to program response.

The presence of an obtuse, supplementary, third meaning . . . radically recasts the theoretical status of the anecdote: the story (the diegesis) is no longer just a strong system (the millennial system of narrative) but also and contradictorily a simple space, a field of permanences and permutations. It becomes that configuration, that stage, whose false limits multiply the signifier’s permutational play, the vast trace which, by difference, compels . . . a vertical reading, that false order which permits the turning of the pure series, the aleatory combination (chance

is crude, a signifier on the cheap) and the attainment of a structuration which *slips away from the inside.*

Insofar as Barthes claims that the third meaning is that in the image which is "purely image," and because he identifies it with the "free play" of the signifier, he is open to charges that he is merely reiterating, in semiological jargon, aesthetic pleasure in the Kantian sense, delight in the form of a representation apart from the representation of any object whatsoever. And since the concept of a "signifier without a signified" presupposes that the referential function of language can, in fact, be suspended or bracketed, Barthes in fact repeats the postulate that lies at the base of every formalist aesthetic. The obtuse meaning does indeed appear reducible to the aesthetic; but I am interested in what motivates Barthes to insert it into the slot left vacant by the allegorical in an ancient interpretive scheme.

Barthes's interest in the theoretical value of the film still is paralleled today by several artists who derive their imagery from stills—Longo and James Birrell, who work to isolate that in the image which is purely image—or whose works deliberately resemble stills—Suzan Pitt's Disneyesque treatments of surrealism; Cindy Sherman's "untitled studies for film stills." These latter treat the subject of mimesis, not simply as an aesthetic activity, but as it functions in relation to the constitution of the self. Sherman's works are all self-portraits, but in them the artist invariably appears masked, disguised: she first costumes herself to resemble familiar female stereotypes—career girl, ingenue, sex object . . . —and then photographs herself in poses and settings reminiscent of the cinematic culture of the 1950s and '60s. Her "characters" frequently glance anxiously outside the frame at some unspecified menace, thereby implying the presence of a narrative even while withholding it. This—the "still"—effect prevents us from mistaking Sherman's women for particular human subjects caught up in narrative webs of romance or intrigue (a reading which would correspond to Barthes's first, or literal level, which indicates the position of the image in the anecdote). Instead it compels a typological reading: Sherman's women are not women but images of women, specular models of femininity projected by the media to encourage imitation, identification; they are, in other words, tropes, figures. (In works which appropriate images of maternity from popular magazines, Sherrie Levine deals with the same rhetorical function of images: it is the picture which inspires imitation, mimesis, not the other way around.)

And yet the uncanny precision with which Sherman represents these tropes, the very perfection of her impersonations, leaves an unresolved margin of incongruity in which the image, freed from the constraints of referential and symbolic meaning, can accomplish its "work." That work is, of course, the deconstruction of the supposed innocence of the images of women projected by the media, and this Sherman accomplishes by *reconstructing* those images so

painstakingly, and identifying herself with them so thoroughly, that artist and role appear to have merged into a seamless whole in such a way that it seems impossible to distinguish the dancer from the dance. It is, however, the urgent necessity of making such a distinction that is, in fact, at issue.

For in Sherman’s images, disguise functions as parody; it works to expose the identification of the self with an image as its dispossession, in a way that appears to proceed directly from Jacques Lacan’s fundamental tenet that the self is an Imaginary construct, “and that this construct disappoints all [the subject’s] certitudes. For in the labor with which he undertakes to reconstruct this construct for another, he finds again the fundamental alienation which has made him construct it like another one, and which has always destined it to be stripped from him by another.” 34 (Significantly, in The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis, Lacan describes mimicry, mimesis, as the mechanism whereby the subject transforms himself into a picture.) By implicating the mass media as the


*Cindy Sherman, Untitled studies for film stills, 1980.*
false mirror which promotes such alienating identifications, Sherman registers this "truth" as both ethical and political.

But there is also an impossible complicity inscribed within Sherman's works, a complicity which accounts for their allegorical mode. For if mimicry is denounced in these images, it is nevertheless through mimetic strategies that this denunciation is made. We thus encounter once again the unavoidable necessity of participating in the very activity that is being denounced precisely in order to denounce it. All of the work discussed in this essay is marked by a similar complicity, which is the result of its fundamentally deconstructive impulse. This deconstructive impulse is characteristic of postmodernist art in general and must be distinguished from the self-critical tendency of modernism. Modernist theory presupposes that mimesis, the adequation of an image to a referent, can be bracketed or suspended, and that the art object itself can be substituted (metaphorically) for its referent. This is the rhetorical strategy of self-reference upon which modernism is based, and from Kant onwards it is identified as the source of aesthetic pleasure. For reasons that are beyond the scope of this essay, this fiction
has become increasingly difficult to maintain. Postmodernism neither brackets nor suspends the referent but works instead to problematize the activity of reference. When the postmodernist work speaks of itself, it is no longer to proclaim its autonomy, its self-sufficiency, its transcendence; rather, it is to narrate its own contingency, insufficiency, lack of transcendence. It tells of a desire that must be perpetually frustrated, an ambition that must be perpetually deferred; as such, its deconstructive thrust is aimed not only against the contemporary myths that furnish its subject matter, but also against the symbolic, totalizing impulse which characterizes modernist art. As Barthes has written elsewhere:

It is no longer the myths which need to be unmasked (the doxa now takes care of that), it is the sign itself which must be shaken; the problem is not to reveal the (latent) meaning of an utterance, of a trait, of a narrative, but to fissure the very representation of meaning, is not to change or purify the symbols, but to challenge the symbolic itself.35