

Elsewhere and Otherwise

Introduction to a Symposium on Fredric Jameson's *Allegory and Ideology*

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Abstract

This text introduces the symposium on Fredric Jameson's *Allegory and Ideology* (2019), the second volume in his six-part *The Poetics of Social Forms*. It frames the debate with a brief exploration of some of the figures and problems of allegory that appear across Jameson's *œuvre*, and surveys some of the Marxist conceptualisations of allegory that have shaped Jameson's approach, as it straddles allegories of the commodity and allegories of utopia. The musical investigation of the nexus of allegory and affect, and the presentation of political allegory as primarily concerned

with the disjunction between (national and international) levels are also touched upon as salient dimensions of Jameson's theorising.

Keywords

affect – allegory – Walter Benjamin – Fredric Jameson – music – politics
– utopia

Allegory and Ideology is the penultimate (by order of publication) and second (in terms of internal sequence) volume in Fredric Jameson's six-part critical *summa*, *The Poetics of Social Forms*, whose closure awaits its final and 'first' volume, currently listed as *Categories of the Narrative-Historical*.¹ This symposium was organised by *Historical Materialism* in the conviction not only of the centrality of Jameson's work to contemporary Marxist theorising, but in the belief that, notwithstanding its apparent anachronism and distance from matters of political and economic urgency, the question of allegory provides a unique prism through which to reflect on the hermeneutical powers of Marxism – not just with respect to literary and aesthetic production, or indeed as pertains to the mapping of capitalism itself, but inasmuch as these powers are ones of insistent

¹ For important insights into the architectonic and orientation of Jameson's *Poetics*, see Wegner 2014.

self-reflection, intransigent auto-analysis.² Cutting across literary criticism, psychoanalysis, philosophy and political thought, and probing the potentials and limits of Jameson's articulation of allegory across multiple levels of meaning, the contributors to this symposium all demonstrate, in distinct fashions, how the question of allegory can indeed serve as a testing-ground for the powers of a Marxist hermeneutic, as well as an avenue into some of the most urgent questions of our time, from the nature of the collective to the persistence of the 'national question'.

Jameson's most sustained engagement with the theory of allegorical levels prior to this volume, his 1981 *The Political Unconscious*, was indeed preoccupied with exploring the extent to which viewing Marxism as allegorical should be deemed reductive and pejorative – as could be gathered from Althusserian asseverations against 'expressive causality' and the one-to-one projection of social relations onto an economic base – or could instead be mined for its expansive possibilities. Playing Althusser against himself by affirming the inescapability of an ideological moment, Jameson drew on the patristic and Mediaeval theory of allegorical exegesis as a potential model through which to remap our understanding of Marxism itself. In what could be taken as an image of

² In conversation with the notion that allegories are allegories of reading, or even of reference ('allegories of *of*', to borrow from Warminski's introduction to de Man 1996), Jameson has repeatedly explored the question of allegory's autoreferentiality. See, *inter alia*, 'The Ideology of the Text' (1975–6) in Jameson 2008, pp. 44–5, and 'Allegorizing Hitchcock' (1982), in Jameson 1992, pp. 168–75.

his own theoretical practice, he enjoined us to think allegory not as a rigid system of biunivocal correspondences, but

as the opening up of the text to multiple meanings, to successive rewritings and overwritings which are generated as so many levels and as so many supplementary interpretations ... less as a technique for closing the text off and for repressing aleatory or aberrant readings and senses, than as a mechanism for preparing such a text for further *ideological* investment, if we take the term ideology here in Althusser's sense as a representational structure which allows the individual subject to conceive or imagine his or her lived relationship to transpersonal realities such as the social structure or the collective logic of History.³

A Marxist theorising (or literary criticism) of allegory is always accompanied in Jameson by what we could term an allegoresis of Marxism. This is evident throughout Jameson's 'group portrait' of dialectical criticism, *Marxism and Form*.⁴ It informs the way in which the theory of types in Lukács introduces a conception of class-consciousness *qua* allegory – one that will return in Jameson's explorations of cognitive

³ Jameson 2002, pp. 14–15. As a mode of *interpretation*, Marxism is 'an essentially allegorical act, which consists in rewriting a given text in terms of a particular interpretive master code' (p. x).

⁴ See Franco Fortini's introduction to the Italian edition of Jameson's book, translated in this issue.

mapping in US cinema.⁵ Responding to the familiar criticism that a Marxist typology merely extracts from a text the class content it has always-already projected into it, Jameson observes that

Such a method is most properly described as an allegorical one; and to say so is only to show the way in which any genuinely dialectical criticism must ultimately turn about and question the sources of its own instruments as well. For it is clear that class consciousness itself – in those societies in which it exists as an existential fact – is an allegorical mode of thought to the degree to which for it individuals are seen as types and manifestations of the social groups to which they belong. Thus a work such as Zola's *Pot-Bouille*, in which the various levels of the apartment house correspond to the various social classes, from the wealthy inhabitants of the first floor all the way up to the maids and workers in the garret, is allegorical because class consciousness still functions structurally within the society as such: it is carried within as a kind of map or chart of society as a whole, as a differential feeling whereby I locate myself with respect to the other classes.⁶

⁵ 'Class and Allegory in Contemporary Mass Culture: *Dog Day Afternoon* as a Political Film' (1977), in Jameson 1992, pp. 47–74.

⁶ Jameson 1971, pp. 398–9.

Allegory is not only a name for those practices of social reading and mapping that span everyday life and theory under capitalist conditions, but also a temporal marker of sorts, albeit one that is difficult or indeed impossible to stabilise (allegory leaping, as we can also see in this book, from the pre- to the postmodern). Here, Jameson's engagement with Benjamin's *Origin of the German Trauerspiel* is formative, as a model for how to employ allegory to name the contemporary – something that occurs through the detour of the Baroque, and thus in a temporal displacement and anachronism that is itself allegorical. As Jameson glosses, with Benjamin we can see how 'allegory is precisely the dominant mode of expression of a world in which things have been for whatever reason utterly sundered from meanings, from spirit, from genuine human existence', meaning that 'for the first time it seems ... that allegory is restored to us – not as a Gothic monstrosity of purely historical interest, or, as in C.S. Lewis, a sign of the medieval health of the essentially religious spirit, but rather as a pathology with which in the modern world we are only too familiar'.⁷ The specific resonance of Benjamin's intervention – which is also to say the short-circuit between the German Baroque, the Weimar years and the US 1970s (and perhaps our own present) – takes a temporal cast, as it is the sundering of temporal

⁷ Jameson 1971, p. 71.

continuity and wholeness into shards of experience (a theme central to Jameson's own account of postmodernism) that neutralises symbolic experience (which required full and meaningful 'nows') and turns us towards allegory as 'the privileged mode of our own life in time, a clumsy deciphering of meaning from moment to moment, the painful attempt to restore a continuity to heterogeneous, disconnected instants'.⁸ This attention to the nexus between allegory and temporality is arguably far more fecund than the temptation to treat allegory as a straightforwardly periodising category, especially salient in the (pejorative or celebratory) identification of allegory and postmodernity.⁹ As Gail Day astutely warned in an important treatment of the place of allegory in art theory (Marxist and otherwise): 'Schemas such as allegory (a.k.a. postmodernism, a.k.a. deconstruction) versus symbol (a.k.a. Romanticism and Modernism, a.k.a. dialectics) just fail to hold'.¹⁰

⁸ Jameson 1971, p. 72.

⁹ Jameson will sometimes map literary tropes onto historical time in this more linear vein, such as when he identifies 'a more general movement in postmodernity from the symbol to the allegory: the former demanding the transcendental unification of the work, that ideal of the "concrete universal" underway since Coleridge, while allegory – the postmodern kind, and not that ancien régime decoration to which Coleridge and Wordsworth were so allergic – returns to the moment in all its semiotic isolation, spurning the superstitions of modernism's (and romanticism's) "grand narratives", which is to say, their absent symbolic unity'. Jameson 2015, p. 179.

¹⁰ Day 1999, p. 117. As Day notes: 'In the polemics of art theory, that opposition of dialectics and deconstruction is reproduced in the distinction between, respectively, symbol and allegory. Accordingly, the symbol (in its more advanced forms) substitutes for dialectical mediation and sublation, allegory for deconstructive disjunction (grasped as temporal deferral)'. Her focus instead is on 'a rather different framing of the problematic: how the conception of allegory itself seems torn between dialectics and deconstruction' (p. 107). As Steve Edwards has noted (in private correspondence), a relative devaluation of allegory in Marxist literary criticism (outside of its minoritarian Benjaminian iterations) is not replicated in Marxist art history and theory where, especially in Anglophone work from the 1980s and 1990s – in the process of tackling the problem of postmodernity and responding to the work of Paul de Man – allegory was an object of sustained theorising (among participants in these debates were Benjamin H.D. Buchloh, Hal Foster, Tom Crow, and Fred Orton). For a Marxist take on the nexus of photography and allegory, see Edwards 1996 and 2006.

For Benjamin, as the further exploration of allegory in the poetry and time of Baudelaire revealed, this ‘frozen landscape’ of Baroque allegory turned out to have a ghastly affinity with the ‘immense accumulation of commodities’. As he outlined in a project note for his Baudelaire book: ‘The allegorical vision is always constructed on the basis of a devalorised phenomenal world. The specific devalorisation of the material world that is manifest in the commodity is the foundation of the allegorical approach in Baudelaire. ... In the body devoid of a soul but still in the service of pleasure, allegory and commodity are conjoined’.¹¹ In one of his notes on the French poet from his *Arcades Project*, the allegorist appears as the desperate hermeneut of the commodity:

Through the disorderly fund which his knowledge places at his disposal, the allegorist rummages here and there for a particular piece, holds it next to some other piece, and tests to see if they fit together – that meaning with this image or this image with that meaning. The result can never be known beforehand, for there is no natural mediation between the two. But this is just how matters stand with commodity and price. The ‘metaphysical subtleties’ in which the commodity delights, according to Marx, are, above all, the subtleties

¹¹ Benjamin 2013, pp. 69–70.

of price formation. How the price of goods in each case is arrived at can never quite be foreseen, neither in the course of their production nor later when they enter the market. It is exactly the same with the object in its allegorical existence. At no point is it written in the stars that the allegorist's profundity will lead it to one meaning rather than another. And though it once may have acquired such a meaning, this can always be withdrawn in favor of a different meaning. The modes of meaning fluctuate almost as rapidly as the price of commodities. In fact, the meaning of the commodity is its price; it has, as commodity, no other meaning. Hence, the allegorist is in his element with commercial wares. As flâneur, he has empathized with the soul of the commodity; as allegorist, he recognizes in the 'price tag' with which the merchandise comes on the market, the object of his broodings – the meaning. The world in which this newest meaning lets him settle has grown no friendlier. An inferno rages in the soul of the commodity, for all the seeming tranquillity lent it by the price.¹²

It is this dissolution of 'natural mediation' in the circuits of the commodity that also conditions the theory of levels that Jameson articulates in

¹² Benjamin 1999, pp. 368–9.

Allegory and Ideology and which he further expounds in his contribution to this symposium. ‘No natural mediation’ should not be interpreted as ‘naturally no mediation’ – much as Stuart Hall once distinguished his claim that there were ‘no necessary correspondences’ among levels in the social totality from Ernesto Laclau’s tenet that there were ‘necessarily no correspondences’ (and thus no totality).¹³

Allegory turns out to be a key trope, device and problem through which to think the relation between the dialectic and difference. This is what Jameson himself intimates, in his recent *The Benjamin Files*, when he defines allegory as ‘a form that lives by gaps and differences rather than identities, and that develops in time’.¹⁴ While Jameson’s engagement with allegory never entirely disavows the cadaveric, petrified features that Benjamin gleaned from the German mourning play and from Baudelaire – encapsulated in the searing critical verdict whereby ‘Baroque allegory saw the corpse from the outside only. Baudelaire sees it from within.’¹⁵ – it also turns from the evacuation and slippage of meaning that marks the condition of commodity-nihilism to an elsewhere and otherwise that we can call Utopia.

In *Marxism and Form*, this shift is marked in the passage from Benjamin to Bloch, with the latter recoding the traditional distinction

¹³ Hall 1985, p. 92.

¹⁴ Jameson 2020, p. 1.

¹⁵ Quoted in Jameson 1971,

between the symbolic and the allegorical as one between the ‘folding back of all things into the unity of the same’, on the one hand, and ‘an opening onto otherness or difference’, on the other.¹⁶ In terms both of its futurity and its longing for another collective life – its ‘anagogical’ register, to use the terminology deployed in *Allegory and Ideology* – ‘The Utopian moment is indeed in one sense quite impossible for us to imagine, except as the unimaginable; thus a kind of allegorical structure is built into the very forward movement of the Utopian impulse itself, which always points to something other, which can never reveal itself directly but must always speak in figures, which always calls out structurally for completion and exegesis’.¹⁷ *Allos* (another, different) and *agoreuein* (speaking openly, in the assembly, in the *agora*) – following the Greek etymology of the term, we can see how allegory would resonate with the utopian taken both as a ‘speaking otherwise in public’, and a ‘speaking in public about otherness’, but also, in its more clandestine variants, ‘speaking otherwise than publicly’, and about an elsewhere.¹⁸

The figuration and feel of that elsewhere is also conditioned by the kinds of experience possible at a given moment, and it is worth remarking

¹⁶ Jameson 1971, p. 146.

¹⁷ Jameson 1971, p. 142.

¹⁸ Unsurprisingly, Heidegger carries with this etymology in his own meditations on the artwork: ‘The artwork is, to be sure, a thing that is made, but it says something other than what the mere thing itself is, *allo agoreuei*. The work makes public something other than itself; it manifests something other; it is an allegory. In the work of art something other is brought together with the thing that is made’. Heidegger 1993, pp. 145–6.

how – in spite of and against its reduction to the visual emblem – a very significant aspect of Jameson’s recent theorisation of allegory is musical (something signalled, *inter alia*, by the original title under which this volume of his *Poetics* was first announced: *Overtones: The Harmonics of Allegory*). It is in a musical register that Jameson investigates that transmutation of named emotions (and their personifications) into an elusive and mutable ‘affect’ that is also at the core of *The Antinomies of Realism* (the third volume of the *Poetics*). In a sense, then, the mutation of emotions into affects periodises allegory itself, and the art of this transition is (nineteenth- and twentieth-century European symphonic) music. The interpretation of Mahler’s *Sixth* that makes up the fourth chapter of *Allegory and Ideology* thus concludes with the detection of ‘some new allegory of qualitative states and their transitions into one another [which] here has replaced the older search for personifications and identities’. Mahler straddles ‘this historical development [and] the great historical transition from named emotions to a gamut of nameless affect’ while hinting at a kind of limit to dialectical criticism, inasmuch as ‘music is profoundly allegorical in its temporalities at the same time that, nonlinguistic, it eludes the analysis of a mode that arises from the alienating power of words and names, of language as such’.¹⁹ Wagner’s

¹⁹ Jameson 2019, p. 157.

music-dramas of course don't eschew but amplify and transfigure the linguistic, which is why Jameson can present them as the bearers of a 'psychic allegory' that once again instructs us about the critical emergence of affect from emotion and distances us from the figural habits of traditional allegoresis. In Wagner, 'all the characters and their dialogue with one another are subsumed by the musical element in such a way as greatly to reduce the conventional distance established by allegorical personification. The music takes on the function of a psyche in which the various impulses emerge, differentiate, and recombine, and which thereby ... serves as the medium wherein ... the various named emotions and motivations ... become identified and transformed into a stream of affect'.²⁰ This reciprocal transformation of the theoretical discourses of affect and allegory 'in the spirit of music' is perhaps one of the most original, and easily overlooked, aspects of Jameson's recent work.

Much of Jameson's theoretical work and criticism can be taken as a multi-levelled reply, keyed to the logic of late capitalism, to Paul de Man's interrogation in regard to allegory: 'Why is it that the furthest-reaching truths about ourselves and the world have to be stated in such a lopsided,

²⁰ 'Wagner as Dramatist and Allegorist', in Jameson 2015, p. 55. The demarcation of affect from emotion also has a critical and diagnostic valence: '[The] principal reproach I would have for contemporary affect theory is this neglect of the well-nigh infinite sliding scale of the bodily states, from the high to the bad trip, with its adherents preferring to concentrate their descriptions on this or that allegedly fundamental affect, such as shame ... or in a more general way melancholia. On the contrary, affects are not essentializable in that way: they are multiple and perpetually variable; they shimmer like the orchestra itself in constant mutability' (p. 38).

referentially indirect mode?’²¹ Alas, given the seemingly intractable association of Marxism with a dogged desire for transparency, reduction and revelation – a drive to close all the gaps and flatten all the differences – it is perhaps unsurprising that, notwithstanding his repeated claims for the necessity of a Proustian ‘indirection’²² in the necessary-impossible task of representing capital and everyday life, Jameson’s work has been regarded as inseparable from a political aesthetic of transparency and revelation.²³ His theorising about allegory has frequently been taken to task for its lack of attention to (political) difference, above all in the controversies around the essay on ‘Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism’, reprinted in *Allegory and Ideology*. In the retrospective commentary on those often-harsh debates, Jameson takes the opportunity to underscore that the political in ‘political allegory’²⁴ should be approached not in terms of the expression of a fully-formed subjectivity or project, but in view of those gaps and differences between heterogeneous levels that pose a formidable problem for any politics,

²¹ de Man 1996, p. 52. Jameson touches on Derrida’s engagement with de Man’s thinking about allegory in Jameson 2009, p. 147.

²² Jameson 1992, pp. 143–4, where Raymond Chandler and Proust are brought together with Hitchcock and Nabokov in the proposal of a theory ‘about the artistic representation – by indirection and laterally, as it were out of the corner of the eye – of an everyday life, whose condition is the ostensible fixation of the public on the “molar” pretexts of plot, mystery narrative, “suspense”, and macro-temporality’.

²³ For some recent examples, see the special issue on ‘Allegory and Political Representation’ of *The Yearbook of Comparative Literature* (Volume 61, 2015), edited by Tara Mendola and Jacques Lezra. The rather one-dimensional depictions of Jameson’s framing of political (or national) allegory are perhaps ultimately peripheral, as polemical parerga can be, to the thematic and analytical richness of the essays themselves.

²⁴ For a fascinating example of how a political allegory can both reflect and disturb a collective political unconscious (in this case the one shaped by a reactionary response to the election of François Mitterand), see ‘*Diva and French Socialism*’, in Jameson 1992, pp. 75–85.

especially of a Marxist persuasion. In Aijaz Ahmad's well-known critical rejoinder to the 'Third-World' essay, Jameson accordingly glimpses:

the fundamentally allegorical nature of international politics as such. Its two dimensions – class struggle within a given national situation and the globalized forces at work outside it on a world scale – are at least for the moment incommensurable: which is to say that it is their very disparity and the difficulty of finding mediations between them that is the fundamental political problem for the Left today. ... [The] crucial allegorical question [is] the relationship of the levels to one another, and whether any proper allegorical reading exists in a situation in which there is, if not contradiction, then at least a fundamental disjunction between the anagogical (or world-political) level and the literal or domestic-political levels. Allegory thereby serves as a diagnostic instrument to reveal this disjunction, which is itself the cause of political aimlessness and apathy.²⁵

Between allegory as the gelid stenography of the inferno raging in the soul of the commodity and allegory as the indication of a Utopian elsewhere lies this middle 'level', which is perhaps the uncomfortable but necessary

²⁵ Jameson 2019, p. 190.

location of critical Marxist theory understood as a diagnostic practice that shadows or anticipates the strategic problem of working through and beyond the disjunctions (a problem that may variously be classed under the rubrics 'alliances', 'solidarity', or 'internationalism').

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