

**VISIONS OF EMPIRE: THE THEORY AND USES OF ALLEGORY  
IN AMERICAN ART FROM THE NINETEENTH CENTURY  
TO THE PRESENT**

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In Partial Fulfillment

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Master of Arts

in

Art History

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by

Lucy Elizabeth Eron

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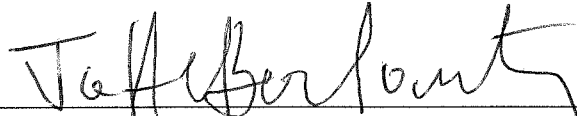
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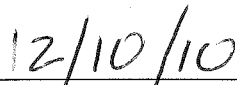
Visions of Empire: The Theory and Uses of Allegory in American

Art from the Nineteenth Century to the Present

  
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## ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Visions of Empire: The Theory and Uses of Allegory in  
American Art from the Nineteenth Century to the Present

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Allegorical expression offers a broad complex of meanings applicable to postmodernist art theory and art. Examination of the revival of theoretical interest in allegory in the early twentieth century by Walter Benjamin, and continuing with the work of Craig Owens, Susan Buck-Morss, and other critics, provides an opportunity to see how allegory applies to modern and contemporary art practices and offers a powerful mode of political commentary.

Two significant precedents to modern usages of allegory in the overlapping arenas of art and politics are evident in Thomas Cole's *The Course of Empire* of 1836, which evoked visions of peril for the American Empire through allegory; and, second, in the Chicago Columbian Exposition of 1893, which showcased a range of allegorical subjects to feed a growing discourse of empire and modern industrial progress. The concept of empire in this discourse is considered in light of nineteenth-century political, social, and economic issues, and is significantly linked to America's fascination with ancient ruins. As a result, the ideals and anxieties are revealed that formed a critical chapter in our country's history – a formative period for artistic expression for over a century to come. Important as well to present-day discourse of American Empire and its perceived decline is the paradigm of ancient Rome, which is discussed from historical and contemporary perspectives.

Finally, in view of current social, economic, and political problems in the United States, allegory's relevance to contemporary art is explored. A series of politically charged photographic works by Eleanor Antin – *The Last Days of Pompeii* (2001), *Roman Allegories* (2004), and *Helen's Odyssey* (2007) – which vigorously allegorize the vices and fall of empire, provide a revealing case study. The context in which Antin cites diverse sources from history, politics, and art forms both an overt and a richly layered allegorical expression. In the past as now, allegory can potentially provide meaningful political commentary through art, though its effectiveness in shaping a political discourse depends on the artist's use of this intricate device.

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# CHAPTER 1

## FROM ANTIQUITY TO POSTMODERNISM: THE REVIVAL OF ALLEGORY

“Allegory is one of the noblest branches of art.”

–Charles Baudelaire

### INTRODUCTION

Allegorical expression in its various modes extends both far into the past with origins in antiquity, and into the present with a broad complex of meanings applicable to postmodernist art theory. Though contemporary artists and writers commonly explore allegorical themes, allegory has been a much-debated device and fell into disfavor in the early nineteenth century. Its revival in the early twentieth century is largely due to the work of theorist Walter Benjamin, who argued for allegory as a relevant and powerful form of expression. In reviving the concept, Benjamin, as well as several other influential theorists whom I will discuss, pointed the way for allegory as a significant contemporary mode of expression. Susan Buck-Morss and Craig Owens<sup>1</sup> are among those who have taken on Benjamin’s writings and made notable contributions to allegorical theory and applications. Buck-Morss demonstrates Benjamin’s theories of allegory as applied to politics, through his significant Arcades Project, and Owens examines the allegorical impulse in postmodern art. Exploring the device through the perspectives of these and other critics, we can better understand how allegorical theory applies to modern and contemporary practices.

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<sup>1</sup> See Susan Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project* (Cambridge, MA and London: MIT Press, 1989), and Craig Owens, “The Allegorical Impulse: Toward a Theory of Postmodernism,” in *Beyond Recognition: Representation, Power, and Culture*, ed. Scott Bryson, Barbara Kruger, Lynne Tillman, and Jane Weinstock, 52-69 (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1992).



Before considering the extensive meanings and implications of allegory, we should examine its basic definitions. The Oxford English Dictionary gives three:

1. Description of a subject under the guise of some other subject of aptly suggestive resemblance.
2. An instance of such description; a figurative sentence, discourse, or narrative, in which properties and circumstances attributed to the apparent subject really refer to the subject they are meant to suggest; an extended or continued metaphor.
3. An allegorical representation; an emblem.<sup>2</sup>

One source suggests that the word “allegory” first appeared in 1350–1400 and derived from the Middle English *allegorie*, the Latin *allegoria*, and the Greek *allegorein*, which means to speak so as to imply something other.<sup>3</sup> *A Handbook to Literature* expands upon a basic definition of allegory as follows:

A form of extended metaphor in which objects and persons in a narrative, either in prose or verse, are equated with meanings that lie outside the narrative itself...Allegory attempts to evoke a dual interest, one in the events, characters, and setting presented, and the other in the ideas they are intended to convey or the significance they bear. The characters, events, and setting may be historical, fictitious, or fabulous; the test is that these materials be so employed in a logical organization or pattern that they represent meanings independent of the action described in the surface story. Such meaning may be religious, moral, political, personal, or satiric.<sup>4</sup>

As this suggests, allegory, with its ability to relay a variety of meanings, is a highly complex literary and artistic device. We will explore the depth and range of allegory in conveying meaning from the religious to the satiric through the work of Benjamin, Buck-Morss, Owens, and other seminal theorists.

### **ALLEGORY’S DEMISE AND ITS REVIVAL BY BENJAMIN**

In the century following in the wake of Romanticism, artists, critics, and historians alike largely dismissed allegory. The Irish poet and theorist William Butler Yeats and the German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer considered allegory as a form inapplicable to the art of their time, viewing allegory as overused and

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<sup>2</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., s.v. “Allegory,” <http://dictionary.oed.com> (accessed May 12, 2009).

<sup>3</sup> Dictionary.com, s.v. “Allegory,” <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/allegory> (accessed April 06, 2009).

<sup>4</sup> William Flint Thrall and Addison Hibbard, *A Handbook to Literature* (New York: Odyssey Press, 1960), 8.

depleted.<sup>5</sup> Benjamin cites Yeats's belief that allegory was merely a conventional device marked by an image and the meaning it intends to relay.<sup>6</sup> Schopenhauer also dismissed allegory as insignificant: "It is true that an allegorical picture can...produce a vivid impression on the mind and feelings; but under the same circumstances even an inscription would have the same effect."<sup>7</sup> Benjamin suggests that the poet Goethe as well viewed allegory negatively: "[Goethe] cannot have regarded [allegory] as an object worthy of great attention."<sup>8</sup> Such remarks allude to the idea that allegory is no more useful than simple descriptive writing. These dismissals of allegory prior to Benjamin relegated allegory to the past, to history. In their abandonment of allegory, the distance between the past and the present became emphasized, leaving the past as inapplicable to contemporary times.<sup>9</sup>

Benjamin, in arguing for the relevance of allegory, opposed other critics and historians of his time. He published numerous essays related to his Marxist, Jewish, and aesthetic beliefs in the early twentieth century. His works ranged from a study of the seventeenth-century *Trauerspiel* to the twentieth century investigations into mass culture with his most well-known essay, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" (1936). Benjamin earned an international reputation as perhaps the most brilliant cultural critic of his era.<sup>10</sup>

In Benjamin's study of allegory in the *Trauerspiel* (1928) he refers to modern allegory as "baroque," indicating its emergence in the sixteenth century.<sup>11</sup> Though the baroque is in many ways connected to medieval allegory, its earlier form,

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<sup>5</sup> Owens, "The Allegorical Impulse," 52.

<sup>6</sup> Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, trans. John Osborne (London and New York: Verso, 1998), 162.

<sup>7</sup> Arthur Schopenhauer, *Sämtliche Werke*, 237, quoted in Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 161.

<sup>8</sup> Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 161.

<sup>9</sup> Owens, "The Allegorical Impulse," 52.

<sup>10</sup> Martin Jay, "Benjamin, Walter," in *Grove Art Online, Oxford Art Online*, <http://www.oxfordartonline.com/subscriber/article/grove/art/T007916> (accessed August 13, 2010).

<sup>11</sup> Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 167.

Benjamin notes that the two forms are distinct, and focuses in his discussion on the baroque.<sup>12</sup> He sees conflict between these two forms arising from their differences: “allegory, like many other old forms of expression, has not simply lost its meaning by ‘becoming antiquated.’ What takes place here...is a conflict between the earlier and the later form which was all the more inclined to a silent settlement in that it was non-conceptual, profound, and bitter.”<sup>13</sup> Benjamin argued for the importance of baroque allegory to the values of history, thereby rescuing the concept of history and bringing it into the present.<sup>14</sup> He asserts, contrary to previous views, that “[allegory] is not a playful illustrative technique, but a form of expression, just as speech is expression, and, indeed, just as writing is.”<sup>15</sup> He further asserts the urgency of reclaiming allegory for the study of history: “Every image of the past that is not recognized by the present as one of its own concerns threatens to disappear irretrievably.”<sup>16</sup> His insistence on maintaining the allegorical lies in his desire to maintain proximity to the past’s concerns as they apply to the present.

Before we examine Benjamin’s argument further we must consider his investigation of the origins of the device so as to fully understand the concept of allegory as applicable to contemporary theory.

### **Benjamin’s Examination of Allegory’s Origin**

“It is by virtue of a strange combination of nature and history that the allegorical mode of expression is born,” Benjamin writes.<sup>17</sup> He traces the emergence of the allegorical impulse to early scholars’ deciphering of hieroglyphics, through which they read philosophical and mystical information.<sup>18</sup> Benjamin describes

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<sup>12</sup> Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 167.

<sup>13</sup> Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 161.

<sup>14</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, “Die Idee der Naturgeschichte,” *Gesammelte Schriften* vol. 1: *Philosophie Frühschriften*, 356, quoted in Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing*, 160.

<sup>15</sup> Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 162.

<sup>16</sup> Benjamin, *Origin of German Tragic Drama*, quoted in Owens, “The Allegorical Impulse,” 52.

<sup>17</sup> Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 167.

<sup>18</sup> Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 168.

hieroglyphics as signifying concepts such as time; essentially they are images created to reflect the divine.<sup>19</sup> In deciphering the enigmatic hieroglyph, one could not make a literal reading; thus an alternate method for interpretation needed to be created, and such was an initial form of allegory.

Divine representation would serve as the basis for later use of allegory, as it is through religion that, Benjamin states, we can discover allegory's true emergence: Allegory "was designed to establish, from a Christian point of view, the true, demonic nature of the ancient gods, and it also served the pious mortification of the flesh...if the church had not been able quite simply to banish the gods from the memory of the faithful, allegorical language would never have come into being."<sup>20</sup> So we can interpret allegory's emergence as being closely tied to Christianity's suppression of reference to ancient, pagan gods.

Benjamin also describes how the notion of guilt as associated with religion plays a role in allegory:

Guilt is not confined to the allegorical observer, who betrays the world for the sake of knowledge, but it also attaches to the object of his contemplation. This view, rooted in the doctrine of the fall of the creature, which brought down nature with it, is responsible for the ferment which distinguishes the profundity of western allegory from the oriental rhetoric of this form of expression.<sup>21</sup>

We note that Benjamin remarks on the biblical notion of the "fall of the creature" which brings down nature with it, referring undoubtedly to the banishment of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden, where they lived in a state of abundance and unending harmony as one with nature. The idea of guilt is tied to their expulsion, the guilt of betraying God's will and consequently becoming separated from nature. The notion of guilt then could relate to human error in disobeying divine command. For as Benjamin says, "guilt should seem evidently to have its home in the province of idols and of the flesh. The allegorically significant is prevented by guilt from finding fulfillment of its meaning in itself."<sup>22</sup> Allegory, then,

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<sup>19</sup> Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 169.

<sup>20</sup> Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 220-222.

<sup>21</sup> Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 224.

<sup>22</sup> Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 224.

serves as a means for circumspectly referring to antiquity when Christianity instilled a sense of guilt upon humanity. Furthermore, Benjamin asserts, “the more nature and antiquity were felt to be guilt-laden, the more necessary was their allegorical interpretation, as their only conceivable salvation.”<sup>23</sup> It is allegory that preserved reference to the ancient while Christianity at the same time repressed such. Allegory, then, in serving as the only form by which the ancient could be safely referenced, preserved antiquity in memory.<sup>24</sup> For Benjamin, it is this desire to rescue the legacy of ancient times that is allegory’s most powerful inclination.<sup>25</sup>

### **Allegory and the Fragment**

Benjamin’s theory of allegory connects closely to the concept of the ruin, the tangible remnants of antiquity. Benjamin describes allegory’s manifestation in the form of fragments from the past:

In the ruin history has physically merged into the setting. And in this guise history does not assume the form of the process of an eternal life so much as that of irresistible decay. Allegory hereby declares itself to be beyond beauty. Allegories are, in the realm of thoughts, what ruins are in the realm of things.<sup>26</sup>

Allegory originated for Benjamin from the concept of the ruin in that upon the decay of the physical form of ancient sculpture and architecture, and with the banishment of ancient gods as heathens in Christianity, what remained were merely the ruins, or fragments, of past human civilization. The disconnected “dead figures” of the gods then came to stand in allegorical representations for the ideas they had once embodied.<sup>27</sup>

Also, in images from antiquity, the divine is thought to be embodied in human form, marking a link between the earthly and the divine.<sup>28</sup> For example,

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<sup>23</sup> Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 225.

<sup>24</sup> Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 398, quoted in Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing*, 168.

<sup>25</sup> Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 223.

<sup>26</sup> Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 177-178.

<sup>27</sup> Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing*, 165.

<sup>28</sup> Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing*, 165.

Venus/Aphrodite, the goddess of love, becomes, in allegory, the emblem of earthly desire.<sup>29</sup> The human skull is commonly used as an allegorical emblem, which can be read in different ways. For example, it shows nature decomposing and human mortality.<sup>30</sup>

Benjamin remarks on the fragments surviving from the past as being strongly resonant marks of history: “That which lies here in ruins, the highly significant fragment, the remnant, is, in fact, the finest material in baroque creation.”<sup>31</sup> For Benjamin, the fragment is a potent reference to the past, and is highly important to allegory. The ruin, then, is testament to antiquity and the tragedies and destruction to which it was subjected. The natural forces of decay that allegory reflects are central to Benjamin’s concept of the power of allegory. Benjamin refers to Borinski’s account of ruins, which declares ruins as “[bearing] witness to the miracle that the sacred edifice has withstood even the most elemental forms of destruction, lightning and earthquake.”<sup>32</sup> As Benjamin writes, “In the process of decay, and in it alone, the events of history shrivel up and become absorbed in the setting.”<sup>33</sup> He further states, “It is fallen nature which bears the imprint of the progression of history.”<sup>34</sup> It is this advance from history to nature that serves as the foundation for allegory in Benjamin’s theory; for him, allegory resides in “consciously constructed ruins.”<sup>35</sup> It is the fragment that stands through time once all else is lost – the remains of history, of tragedy, of the human struggle, of the power of nature – that serve as the basis for an allegorical representation. It is the “appreciation of the transience of things,”<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing*, 165.

<sup>30</sup> Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing*, 161.

<sup>31</sup> Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 178.

<sup>32</sup> Karl Borinski, *Die Antike*, 193-194, quoted in Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 178.

<sup>33</sup> Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 179.

<sup>34</sup> Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 180.

<sup>35</sup> Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 182.

<sup>36</sup> Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 223.

this idea of impermanence and fragility of humanity under the influence of nature, that is allegory's strongest influence.

### **Melancholia and Meaning in Allegory**

Based on the concept of the allegorical impulse forming from ruins and fragments from the past, Benjamin asserts that there is a feeling of loss associated with allegory. Allegories are expressions from the domain of mourning for Benjamin, manifestations that contemplate the future state of things.<sup>37</sup> Allegory, from the melancholic's perspective, finds hope in the realm of spirit rather than either history or nature,<sup>38</sup> in that it is impossible to resurrect what has already decayed. We see the melancholic feeling arise from a sorrow for what has passed in Benjamin's emphasis on the transience of being. Furthermore, Benjamin posits that the allegorist can manipulate meaning under melancholic sentiment, that particular usages of fragments can give an altered meaning to an allegory. Benjamin writes:

If the object becomes allegorical under the gaze of melancholy...then it is exposed to the allegorist, it is unconditionally in his power. That is to say it is now quite incapable of emanating any meaning or significance of its own; such significance as it has, it acquires from the allegorist...in his hands the object becomes something different...<sup>39</sup>

It is the fragmentation of language (or images) in allegory that allows for the reformulation and intensification of meaning of its parts under "the gaze of melancholy."<sup>40</sup> In other words, the accumulations of fragments in an allegory do not recreate the antique in a united whole but apply to the development of the metaphorical or rhetorical figures.<sup>41</sup> Therefore, allegory's implications rely entirely on its manipulation by the allegorist, and the context in which it is presented.

Allegory, as we can see, has several facets that can cause confusion of image, language, readings, and meanings, though these forms necessarily exist in relation with each other in the unified allegory. The basis of allegory for Benjamin is the

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<sup>37</sup> Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 193.

<sup>38</sup> Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing*, 175.

<sup>39</sup> Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 183-184.

<sup>40</sup> Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 208.

<sup>41</sup> Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 178-179.

relation between language and script. So, too, the visual and the verbal are joined in allegory.<sup>42</sup> Also central to this relationship between allegory and language is the idea that every image exists as a form of writing, which Benjamin suggests expresses the spirit of the allegorical attitude.<sup>43</sup>

This brings us to an important distinction that Benjamin makes in his discussion, which is between allegory and symbol. Benjamin argues that allegory is distinct from the symbol, and is a higher form of expression:

The measure of time for the experience of the symbol is the mystical instant in which the symbol assumes the meaning into its hidden and...wooded interior. On the other hand, allegory is not free from a corresponding dialectic, and the contemplative calm with which it immerses itself into the depths which separate visual being from meaning, has none of the disinterested self-sufficiency which is present in the apparently related intention of the sign.<sup>44</sup>

Benjamin argues that allegory, with its “contemplative calm,” contains a depth of meaning that the sign, or symbol, does not in its “disinterested self-sufficiency.” Furthermore, he suggests that allegory continuously reveals its layers of meanings in “new and surprising ways,” while the symbol remains static.<sup>45</sup> This is because allegory poses the broad and complex questions into the nature of human existence and the history of the individual – ultimately the essence of the sorrow and fear of history – which symbols only fleetingly can portray.<sup>46</sup> For Benjamin, then, allegory is a multi-faceted expressive technique that possesses a greater capacity for relaying the intensity of tragic history of humans and individuals than the symbol. In poetry, Benjamin sees allegory as a form of expression with great depth and unlimited potential:

Just as it established itself in every field of spiritual activity, from the broadest to the narrowest, from theology, the study of nature, and morality, down to heraldry, occasional poetry, and the language of love, so is the stock of visual requisites unlimited. With every idea the moment of expression coincides with a veritable eruption of images,

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<sup>42</sup> Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 215.

<sup>43</sup> Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 214.

<sup>44</sup> Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 165-166.

<sup>45</sup> Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 183.

<sup>46</sup> Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 166.



which gives rise to a chaotic mass of metaphors. This is how the sublime is presented in this style.<sup>47</sup>

Allegory here possesses an exceptionally broad inventory of references, and associations to a multitude of visual images. His mentioning of “the sublime” indicates allegory’s potential to represent the divine forces of nature. The breadth of meanings in allegory allows for a connection to the ancients as well as the power to represent just about anything, whether virtue or vice.<sup>48</sup> We can see that Benjamin is arguing for the expressiveness of allegory as a powerful device.

Furthermore, in Benjamin’s discussion of allegory, time is expressed differently than in the symbol. In allegory, time is expressed with the decaying of nature, while the organic quality of nature is more related to the symbol.<sup>49</sup> This concept of time in allegory in relation to decay accounts for Benjamin’s insistence upon allegory as the greater expressive technique, and its timelessness opens it to a virtually endless array of potential applications.

### **SUSAN BUCK-MORSS: ALLEGORY’S POLITICAL DIMENSION**

Extending Benjamin’s view of allegory as a melancholic device with its association to mourning, and considering that new meaning can be constructed under the allegorist’s terms, we can see allegory’s function of political criticism and commentary. Utilized in the context of contemporary political situations, allegory suggests that all is not well. Buck-Morss argues that for Benjamin, the political dimension of allegory exists as allegory’s potential to reveal a negative outlook for humanity, which is what redeemed allegory from being simply an aesthetic device.<sup>50</sup>

Buck-Morss explores the political function of allegory in her discussion of Benjamin’s Arcades Project. For this work, Benjamin undertook a study of industrial-age culture by reflecting upon its historical remnants including corsets,

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<sup>47</sup> Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 172-173.

<sup>48</sup> Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 174.

<sup>49</sup> Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing*, 168.

<sup>50</sup> Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing*, 174.

old photographs, souvenirs, buttons, and other items from the era.<sup>51</sup> Benjamin writes of the project's significance, "allegories stand for that which the commodity makes of the experiences people have in this century."<sup>52</sup> It is through this study of historical fragments that Buck-Morss argues Benjamin was deliberately reviving the concept of allegory as a political statement, to demonstrate that decay is a necessary part of our existence and to comment on the alarming vulnerability of contemporary civilization.<sup>53</sup> She takes to Benjamin's point that allegory emerges amid a period of political turmoil: "Benjamin had argued in the *Trauerspiel* study that baroque allegory was the mode of perception peculiar to a time of social disruption and protracted war, when human suffering and material ruin were the stuff and substance of historical experience — hence the return of allegory in his own era as a response to the horrifying destructiveness of World War I."<sup>54</sup> Because Benjamin believed that allegory emerged in reaction to political events and social issues during that time, allegory in his time would have also been politically motivated.

To substantiate this view of allegory as serving a political function, Buck-Morss returns to Benjamin's discussion of allegory as being consciously constructed by the allegorist. Buck-Morss argues, in Benjamin's philosophy, allegory always has a relatively randomly assigned meaning, whereby allegory becomes an "arbitrary aesthetic device."<sup>55</sup> It is this removal of meaning, where original meaning is purged and an arbitrary meaning assigned, that allows for an entirely new meaning to be created.<sup>56</sup> Thus, the political allegorist has the power to insert commentary as he/she chooses.

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<sup>51</sup> Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing*, 4.

<sup>52</sup> Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 328.

<sup>53</sup> Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing*, 170.

<sup>54</sup> Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing*, 178.

<sup>55</sup> Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing*, 172.

<sup>56</sup> Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing*, 182.

Buck-Morss points to the nineteenth-century French poet Charles Baudelaire, whom Benjamin refers to numerous in his own studies of allegory, as an example of one who effectively portrayed political reality through his use of allegory. Benjamin approved of Baudelaire's methods, situating him as an allegorical, melancholic genius.<sup>57</sup> Baudelaire's allegorical references undercut the myth of Paris as a flourishing city to reveal its dark side – the impoverished and homeless, prostitutes, and people dying. The last line of his poem "Morning Twilight" reveals a sense of sorrow for the state of the city:

Dawn, shivering in her rose and green attire,  
Makes her slow way along the deserted Seine  
While melancholy Paris, old laborer,  
Rubs his eyes, and gathers up his tools.<sup>58</sup>

Baudelaire thus used allegory to destroy the myth that all was well, and Benjamin applauds him for doing so: "If Baudelaire did not fall into the abyss of myth that constantly accompanied his path, it was thanks to the genius of allegory."<sup>59</sup> Buck-Morss describes Baudelaire's use of allegory as intentionally destructive, and Benjamin as well notes the violence marking Baudelarian allegory as removing the "harmonious façade" of the world surrounding him.<sup>60</sup> In his poem "The Confession," Baudelaire employs an allegory depicting destruction:

That it is a sad trade to be a lovely woman,  
That it is the banal labor  
Of a dancer who entertains, manic, cold, and fainting  
With her mechanical smile.

That to try to build on hearts is a foolish thing;  
That all things crack – love and beauty –  
Until Oblivion throws them in his sack  
Voiding them to eternity!<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Owens, "The Allegorical Impulse," 60.

<sup>58</sup> Charles Baudelaire, "Le Crépuscule du Matin," in *Les Fleurs du mal*, quoted in Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing*, 183.

<sup>59</sup> Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, V, 344 (J22, 5), Quoted in Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing*, 182.

<sup>60</sup> Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing*, 182.

<sup>61</sup> Baudelaire, "Confession," in *Les Fleurs du mal*, quoted in Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing*, 182.

And so we can see the powerful potential for allegory, as presented in Buck-Morss's discussion, to destroy false pretenses in political situations, thereby revealing truth.

### CRAIG OWENS ON ALLEGORY AND THE POSTMODERN

Having considered the political potential of allegory, we may turn attention to its relevance to postmodern art and theory. Owens theorizes that, "postmodernist art may in fact be identified by a single, coherent impulse," and that critical discourse "will remain incapable of accounting for that impulse as long as it continues to think of allegory as aesthetic error."<sup>62</sup> Owens defines allegory as occurring "whenever one text is doubled by another,"<sup>63</sup> and the explanation that he gives for allegory (a structural element that induces its own commentary whereby one text reads through another) elevates allegory to "the model of all commentary, all critique."<sup>64</sup>

Owens first aims to uncover exactly why allegory appeared to be of no use to aesthetic inquiries before its revival with Benjamin, and to locate the moment in time when "allegory receded into the depths of history."<sup>65</sup> He attributes the demise of allegory in modernist art to the dichotomy of allegory and realism in nineteenth-century modernism, and allegory's close connection to history painting.<sup>66</sup> As allegory wove into history painting of this period, it was eventually banished to the margins, as the attitude of the avant-garde tended to look toward its contemporary heroes instead of those of past centuries.<sup>67</sup> This view is succinctly expressed by Prudhon in writing of the French Neoclassical painter Jacques-Louis David's *Leonidas at Thermopyle*: "But why this allegory? What need to pass through Thermopyle and go backward twenty-three centuries to reach the heart of

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<sup>62</sup> Owens, "The Allegorical Impulse," 58.

<sup>63</sup> Owens, "The Allegorical Impulse," 53.

<sup>64</sup> Owens, "The Allegorical Impulse," 54.

<sup>65</sup> Owens, "The Allegorical Impulse," 53.

<sup>66</sup> Owens, "The Allegorical Impulse," 58.

<sup>67</sup> Owens, "The Allegorical Impulse," 59.

Frenchmen? Had we no heroes, no victories of our own?"<sup>68</sup> Owens indicates a paradox existing in the assumptions such as this of allegory being too distant from the present to be relevant, because allegory originally emerged from this feeling of removal from tradition. He writes, "Throughout its history [allegory] has functioned in the gap between a present and a past which, without allegorical reinterpretation, might have remained foreclosed."<sup>69</sup> In other words, it is allegory's fundamental inclination to recognize this distance from the past and to incorporate it in the present, as Benjamin had demonstrated. Allegory for Owens, in acting in this gap between the past and the present, brings the former forward, thereby allowing the present to tap into the past.

Owens points out that allegory had begun a revival in contemporary culture, not only through Benjamin's theory, but also with Harold Bloom's 1973 *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry*, and T.J. Clark's art historical discourse on mid-nineteenth-century painting as political form of allegory.<sup>70</sup> Marcel Duchamp also referenced the "allegorical appearance" of his work *The Large Glass* of 1915-23, and in the fifties Robert Rauschenberg titled one of his combine paintings *Allegory*.<sup>71</sup> Owens recognizes the reemergence of allegory in sources such as these, and then addresses its impact on the visual arts to reveal allegory's contemporary manifestations.

### **The Allegorical Impulse Revealed**

Incorporating Benjamin's theories into his argument for its significance to postmodernist art practices, Owens refers to Benjamin's ideas of allegory as distinct from symbol. He states that allegory can exist as an independent part of an image, demonstrating that while the symbol is inseparable from artistic intuition, allegory

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<sup>68</sup> Pierre-Paul Prudhon, in George Boas, "Courbet and His Critics," in *Courbet in Perspective*, ed. Petra ten-Doesschate Chu (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1977), 48, quoted in Owens, "The Allegorical Impulse," 59.

<sup>69</sup> Owens, "The Allegorical Impulse," 53

<sup>70</sup> Owens, "The Allegorical Impulse," 53.

<sup>71</sup> Owens, "The Allegorical Impulse," 53.

can be detached from a work.<sup>72</sup> Based on Benjamin's idea that the allegorist is responsible for assigning arbitrary meaning to the allegory, Owens describes examples of artists doing so. He states that these artists appropriate allegorical imagery, and then act as interpreter, manipulating the appropriated image.<sup>73</sup> Owens cites such usage of allegory in the appropriation of images in works of several contemporary artists whose art reproduces other images. He argues that through manipulation of appropriated imagery, artists such as Troy Brauntuch, Robert Longo, and Sherrie Levine rid the original images of their significance and resonance.<sup>74</sup> Here we see evidence of the allegorical impulse with artists using fragments to create new meanings from the original; the appropriated images acquire, in fact, entirely different significance.

It is often clear that the artists' use of the image does not characterize an original definition of the image, such as when the artist bends concepts from tradition to suggest a new (often political) meaning. This dimension of allegory, where meaning can be confused, can appear as irony, as Owens suggests. He cites words that can point to a meaning opposite of their original meaning, which "in itself is a fundamentally allegorical perception."<sup>75</sup> There are other implications of confusion in allegory, as Owens also discusses the confusion of images and language that can occur. The image exists as a marker of some text or narrative to be determined, while verbal allegory often refers to an image.<sup>76</sup> Therefore, according to Owens, "the allegorical work is synthetic; it crosses aesthetic boundaries," confusing the realms of pictorial and verbal.<sup>77</sup> Owens's idea here is grounded in Benjamin's belief that allegory and language are interrelated.

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<sup>72</sup> Owens, "The Allegorical Impulse," 63.

<sup>73</sup> Owens, "The Allegorical Impulse," 54.

<sup>74</sup> Owens, "The Allegorical Impulse," 54.

<sup>75</sup> Owens, "The Allegorical Impulse," 62.

<sup>76</sup> Owens, "The Allegorical Impulse," 57-58.

<sup>77</sup> Owens, "The Allegorical Impulse," 58.

What meaning remains from the re-appropriation of images in allegory, then, defies direct interpretation. Owens states of such images, they “defer a promise of meaning; they both solicit and frustrate our desire that the image be directly transparent to its signification. As a result, they appear strangely incomplete – fragments or runes which must be *deciphered*.”<sup>78</sup> This idea of the fragment ties into Benjamin’s view of the ruin as an allegorical emblem, which stands for the irretrievable aspect of history.<sup>79</sup>

Owens discusses the idea of the ruin as another main connection between allegory and contemporary art, where site-specific works depend on their setting for meaning. The example he refers to is Robert Smithson’s *Spiral Jetty* (1970), where the earthwork is constructed at a specific site (the Great Salt Lake). Owens stresses the importance of work and site existing in a “dialectical relationship,” whereby the work informs a reading of the site.<sup>80</sup> Because such works do not last, the photograph becomes the only means for preserving the work. Therefore, the photograph takes on the allegorical role, in its attempt to document passing moments in time as an unchanging image.<sup>81</sup> This allegorical motive, the desire to maintain the transitory in the present, becomes the subject of the work.

### **Shift from History to Discourse**

There is another dimension to allegory that Owens addresses, whereby allegory acts as a stimulus to discourse on the reformulation of meanings. He writes, “Allegories are frequently exhortative, addressed to the reader in an attempt to manipulate him or to modify his behavior.”<sup>82</sup> He cites Duchamp’s readymade as a demonstration of this strategic use of allegory, in which the appropriated image acts

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<sup>78</sup> Owens, “The Allegorical Impulse,” 55.

<sup>79</sup> Owens, “The Allegorical Impulse,” 55.

<sup>80</sup> Owens, “The Allegorical Impulse,” 55.

<sup>81</sup> Owens, “The Allegorical Impulse,” 56.

<sup>82</sup> Owens, “The Allegorical Impulse: Toward a Theory of Postmodernism, Part 2,” In *Beyond Recognition: Representation, Power, and Culture*, 70-87, 75.

as a signal to the viewer in a shift toward a particular discourse.<sup>83</sup> He states that this shift toward discourse in postmodernist allegorical art implicates the viewer, illustrating the importance of the viewer's orientation to the artwork.<sup>84</sup> The viewer becomes an essential part of the allegorical discourse, acting as the medium through which the issues the allegorist presents work themselves out. Owens gives the example of Rauschenberg's combine paintings as allegories functioning in this mode of interaction with viewer. Rauschenberg's *Allegory* of 1959-60, which contains fragments of unrelated objects including swatches of fabric, an umbrella, lettering, and bits of sheet metal, presents a representation of mortality, though it provokes questions of its certainty as an allegorical image.<sup>85</sup> He shows that Rauschenberg's works are analogous to the human mind in their illegibility; they are "allegories of consciousness or, perhaps, the unconscious."<sup>86</sup> There is a shift here toward a discourse of the mind, that of the artist and viewer alike.

A problem in such uses of allegory in postmodern art that Owens addresses is the potential for the discourse presented through allegory to mistakenly affirm what issue it intended to criticize. He discusses Rauschenberg's use of allegory as needing to "provisionally accept the terms and conditions it sets out to expose" when his work resides in the gallery, the very issue he condemns in his deconstruction of museum discourse.<sup>87</sup> Therefore, there is a danger that the problem a work exposes will be reiterated through the work, and thus be rendered irresolvable.<sup>88</sup> In this case, the figure "relapses into the figure it deconstructs," in the words of the philosopher Paul de Man, whom Owens cites (discussed in the following section).<sup>89</sup> However, Owens argues that this very potential for failure in

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<sup>83</sup> Owens, "The Allegorical Impulse, Part 2," 75.

<sup>84</sup> Owens, "The Allegorical Impulse, Part 2," 75.

<sup>85</sup> Owens, "The Allegorical Impulse, Part 2," 77.

<sup>86</sup> Owens, "The Allegorical Impulse, Part 2," 77.

<sup>87</sup> Owens, "The Allegorical Impulse, Part 2," 78.

<sup>88</sup> Owens, "The Allegorical Impulse, Part 2," 78.

<sup>89</sup> Paul de Man, *Allegories of Reading*, 275, quoted in Owens, "The Allegorical Impulse, Part 2," 79.



the work is what elevates the discourse to an allegorical level.<sup>90</sup> The confusion of meanings, as discussed earlier in Benjamin's ideas, is again at play here.

### **A Reconsideration of Modernism**

Following his discussion of allegory's influence on postmodern art, Owens proposes that modernist art could be re-opened to evaluate its uses of allegory. That allegory had been disregarded as playing any role in the formation of the avant-garde is revisited with Owens's account of Baudelaire, who defended allegory as "one of the noblest branches of art."<sup>91</sup> For Baudelaire, it is the very connection between modernity and antiquity that formed his theories on art.<sup>92</sup> Owens argues that this connection would in effect transpose the allegorical tendency to the beginnings of modernism, thereby opening to reinterpretation modernist works to account for their allegorical qualities.<sup>93</sup> So Owens deduces that allegory and modernism are not necessarily at odds with one another, but that theory had repressed the allegorical.<sup>94</sup> Though retrospectively applying allegory to artworks could be a significant development in the history of art, it seems difficult to do so, not withstanding the artist's own intentions in using the allegorical device.

Owens concludes his argument by pointing out that allegory did not really vanish entirely from our culture, but that it renewed its connection in contemporary art with its potential for popular appeal.<sup>95</sup> This revived connection of allegory with the public accounts for its function as presenting a discourse, putting forth issues of society and politics through its use in artworks. But Owens writes that allegory may be "that mode which promises to resolve the contradictions which confront modern society – individual interest versus general well-being, for example – a promise

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<sup>90</sup> Owens, "The Allegorical Impulse, Part 2," 78.

<sup>91</sup> Owens, "The Allegorical Impulse," 59.

<sup>92</sup> Owens, "The Allegorical Impulse," 59.

<sup>93</sup> Owens, "The Allegorical Impulse," 60-61.

<sup>94</sup> Owens, "The Allegorical Impulse," 61.

<sup>95</sup> Owens, "The Allegorical Impulse, Part 2," 80.

which must...be perpetually deferred.”<sup>96</sup> The political use of allegory in contemporary art is an issue that should be further explored by examining artworks and their intended messages through allegory.

### ALLEGORY FOR ADORNO, BARTHES, AND DE MAN

Several other philosophers through the twentieth centuries had a profound impact on the revival of allegorical theory. The work of Theodor W. Adorno, who was Benjamin’s contemporary, and twentieth-century post-structuralist and deconstructionist philosophers, including Roland Barthes and Paul de Man, largely impacted Benjamin’s and Owens’s views on allegory.

To begin with, the German philosopher Adorno shared Benjamin’s view on the importance of allegory to artistic practices of their time, and the two engaged in a correspondence for several years. Both philosophers argued for the importance of baroque allegory for the values of history, to bring the concepts of history into “infinite proximity,” to use Adorno’s words.<sup>97</sup> In both Benjamin’s and Adorno’s philosophies of allegory, the removal of meaning and replacement of an arbitrary meaning in allegory, allows for an entirely new meaning to be inserted in subjectively.<sup>98</sup> Adorno writes, “...[T]he alienated objects become hollowed out and draw in meanings as ciphers. Subjectivity takes control of them by loading them with intentions of wish and anxiety.”<sup>99</sup> The two philosophers praised each other’s work, though Adorno based his appreciation of Benjamin’s *Trauerspiel* study on its unintended materialist conception of history.<sup>100</sup>

Roland Barthes, the philosopher who influenced structuralist and post-structuralist thought, provided an inspirational source for Owens in charting allegorical meanings. Owens reveals layers of meaning in allegory in his writings

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<sup>96</sup> Owens, “The Allegorical Impulse, Part 2,” 80.

<sup>97</sup> Adorno, “Die Idee der Naturgeschichte,” *Gesammelte Schriften* vol. 1: *Philosophie Frühschriften*, 356, quoted in Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing*, 160.

<sup>98</sup> Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing*, 182.

<sup>99</sup> Adorno, 1935, quoted in Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing*, 182.

<sup>100</sup> Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing*, 160.

according to the Barthes's allegorical scheme. Barthes writes that the first level of meaning that is revealed is literal, while the second is symbolic, which Owens extrapolates to the rhetorical, or metaphorical, level.<sup>101</sup> The third meaning, according to Barthes, is difficult to pinpoint, and "remains suspended between the image and its description, between definition and approximation."<sup>102</sup> This obscure meaning is what reveals the falsity of the literal reading of the allegory, while the symbolic, or second, meaning reveals a manipulation of metaphor, whose purpose is to elicit a response.<sup>103</sup> And so through the play of these levels of meaning in allegory, all of which are engaged in a tension of readings, confound representation and implicate the viewer in a struggle for truth. Barthes's writings in *The Death of the Author* suggest this idea that the viewer is a requisite part of the discourse presented by allegory:

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 its destination. Yet this destination can no longer be personal: the reader is without history, biography, psychology; he is simply that *someone* who holds together in a single field all the traces by which the written text is constituted.<sup>104</sup>

The text (or artwork, if we apply this theory to art), then, can inspire a discourse, though the viewer's role is central in unifying the text. This idea shows up in Owens's discussion of allegorical meanings in postmodern images that work out their interpretations in the viewer and inspire discourse.

Owens also picks up on Paul de Man's deconstructionist theory of allegory, which suggests that confusions of meaning occur in allegory. In *Allegories of Reading*, he defines allegory as occurring from two distinct uses of language, one literal and the other rhetorical, which contradict each other's pointed meanings.<sup>105</sup> In de Man's theory of allegory, two alternate meanings are present within an allegory whereby

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<sup>101</sup> Owens, "The Allegorical Impulse, Part 2," 81.

<sup>102</sup> Roland Barthes, "The Third Meaning: Research Notes on Some Eisenstein Stills," 66, quoted in Owens, "The Allegorical Impulse, Part 2," 82.

<sup>103</sup> Owens, "The Allegorical Impulse, Part 2," 82-83.

<sup>104</sup> Barthes, "The Death of the Author," 148, quoted in Owens, "The Allegorical Impulse, Part 2," 76.

<sup>105</sup> Owens, "The Allegorical Impulse, Part 2," 72.

one deconstructs the other, showing that each text hinges on the other meaning's presence. De Man writes:

Two entirely coherent but entirely incompatible readings can be made to hinge on one line... 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 sign without a referent.<sup>106</sup>

For de Man, the two meanings at play are narratives, one of which deconstructs the other. The result of this play between literal and metaphorical meanings, according to de Man, would then be allegory.<sup>107</sup> This idea constitutes de Man's theory of allegorical illegibility, in which "allegorical narratives tell the story of the failure to read" and "allegories are always allegories of metaphor and, as such, they are always allegories of the impossibility of reading – a sentence in which the genitive 'of' has itself to be read as a metaphor."<sup>108</sup> Thus, there is a certain elusiveness of meaning in allegory in its deconstruction, and the use of metaphor plays an essential role in denying a literal reading of allegory. From the statement that "there can be...no sign without a referent" in the above passage, we might say that the sign and signified are inseparable, as in allegory where metaphor and literal meaning are equally inseparable. Owens takes to de Man's idea, inferring that allegory is inherent in the structure of a work, and it is not something that is simply tacked onto it.<sup>109</sup> This further establishes allegory as a highly meaningful and relevant artistic device, and is in line with Owens's theories of allegory.

### CRITICS OF ALLEGORICAL THEORIES

The discussions of allegory by Benjamin, Owens, de Man, and other philosophers and theorists that I have presented raised commentary from critics and historians. Stephen Melville suggests Owens's work on allegory to be of seminal

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<sup>106</sup> de Man, *Allegories of Reading*, 11-12, quoted in Owens, "The Allegorical Impulse, Part 2," 74.

<sup>107</sup> Owens, "The Allegorical Impulse, Part 2," 72-73.

<sup>108</sup> de Man, *Allegories of Reading*, 205, quoted in Owens, "The Allegorical Impulse, Part 2," 73.

<sup>109</sup> Owens, "The Allegorical Impulse, Part 2," 74.

importance to contemporary art: “[Owens] did more than any other single writer to secure the applicability of the notion of postmodernism to contemporary visual art and he also played a significant role in laying out the initial ground on which much contemporary art and criticism established its continuity with the broader enterprise of cultural studies...”<sup>110</sup> Benjamin’s and de Man’s theories of allegory attracted commentary on the issues each raised through their formalist approaches to allegory. The critic Jim Hansen points that the political dimension of their critiques on allegory “becomes a self-consciously micrological way of articulating the underlying macroproblems of modernity,”<sup>111</sup> though he also suggests that this approach could be problematic, or rather, ineffective: “...critics might well fear that even supple and reflective formalist practices lead, at best, to something like a diffident quietism.”<sup>112</sup> Furthermore Hansen suggests, “I believe that in their separate techniques for engaging with or displacing the dialectic of immanence and transcendence, Benjamin and de Man suggest that any contemporary type of formalism is always already itself an allegory of larger philosophical or social problems.”<sup>113</sup> Hansen is suggesting that problems exist in the dialectical approach of formalism in addressing allegory. He discusses the issues involved with this approach:

Formalism always points towards boundaries, towards that which cannot be discussed, always draws a line past which critical consciousness trespasses only at the risk of projecting a potentially mythic or totalitarian order on an already existing world. Implicitly, formalism conceals certain assumptions about that preexisting order and its role in creating the possibility for human action and critical theory in the first place...In other words, even a most circumspect and rigorously skeptical formalism relies on or moves towards certain ontological assumptions.<sup>114</sup>

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<sup>110</sup> Stephen Melville, “Contemporary Theory and Criticism,” *Art in America* 81, no. 7 (July 1993): 30, Academic Search Premier, EBSCOhost (accessed April 17, 2009).

<sup>111</sup> Jim Hansen, “Formalism and Its Malcontents: Benjamin and de Man on the Function of Allegory,” *New Literary History* 35, no. 4 (September 2004): 663-683, Academic Search Premier, EBSCOhost (accessed April 17, 2009).

<sup>112</sup> Hansen, “Formalism and Its Malcontents,” 663.

<sup>113</sup> Hansen, “Formalism and Its Malcontents,” 665.

<sup>114</sup> Hansen, “Formalism and Its Malcontents,” 667.

Hansen questions the theorist's claims as being based on a certain set of assumptions. In Hansen's view, the allegorical theorists are in danger of contradicting themselves. He also writes, "Benjamin's critique, blind to its own situatedness and historicity, remains too transcendental, too willing to remain outside of history and attack the whole of romantic consciousness because of its fragments and divisions."<sup>115</sup> He speaks of a possible solution to this predicament: "If formalism is to survive, it must itself become allegorical. That is, formalist reading must become an allegory for larger, sociohistorical contradictions and/or ontological problems."<sup>116</sup> Hansen is arguing for the critique to become aware of its own underlying assumptions of the meanings that it projects, to be aware that it is an allegory itself.

## CONCLUSION

Through the philosophies and commentary on allegory that I have discussed, allegory is revealed to be an inherently complex literary and artistic device, with implications that extend far beyond simple metaphor. Allegory, in its ancient origins, provides a link to the past that Benjamin, Adorno, Baudelaire, de Man, Buck-Morss, Owens, and other influential philosophers and historians found of seminal theoretical importance. Allegory has a multitude of applications; beyond referencing antiquity and past cultures, it can provide a certain veiled, though compelling mode of political commentary. We can debate, as did Hansen, the effectiveness of such a form of political activism, but not its decisive importance to contemporary art theory. It is also certain that through allegory we can at least express those political ills, find connection to antiquity, comment on human mortality, and meditate on transience in our culture.

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<sup>115</sup> Hansen, "Formalism and Its Malcontents," 667.

<sup>116</sup> Hansen, "Formalism and Its Malcontents," 669-670.

**CHAPTER 2**

**NINETEENTH-CENTURY VISIONS OF EMPIRE:  
A STUDY OF THOMAS COLE'S *THE COURSE  
OF EMPIRE* OF 1836 AND THE CHICAGO  
COLUMBIAN EXPOSITION OF 1893**

“Each age tries to form its own conception of the past. Each age writes the history of the past anew with reference to the conditions uppermost in its own time.”

-Frederick Jackson Turner

Building upon a theory of allegory as political commentary, we may observe renewed interest in the form in nineteenth-century America, and see allegory at play in the overlapping arenas of art and politics. Two significant visions of empire, one pessimistic and the other optimistic, mark this century, and both express their political sentiments through allegory. Early in the century, landscape painter Thomas Cole witnessed profound changes to the American political scene, which inspired his allegorical series, *The Course of Empire* of 1836. In the late nineteenth century, Chicago became the site of a major world's fair, the Columbian Exposition of 1893, which showcased a range of allegorical subjects that fed a growing discourse of empire and modern industrial progress. In this chapter, I will examine the concept of empire in the context of nineteenth-century political, social, and economic issues and developments, and also consider how America's fascination with ruins pertains to this discourse. By analyzing two contrasting allegorical visions of empire in this century – to express antiprogress sentiments, as in Cole's *The Course of Empire*, or to express values promoting progress, as at the Chicago Columbian Exposition – we may gain insight into American ideals and anxieties that formed a critical chapter of our country's history.

## DISCOURSE OF EMPIRE AND FASCINATION WITH RUINS

To begin analysis of the nineteenth-century discourse of empire, we will consider the historical background of the period, which marked a unique era of growth and change in the United States. At the time, notions of material, social, and technological progress and expansion formed the basis of American ideology.<sup>117</sup> The dominant American political ideology was largely constructed around manifest destiny, the concept that God's will led white civilization to expand westward and invest in America's future.<sup>118</sup> Expansion of the railroad, bringing with it the promise of further industrial development, was rapid in early to midcentury. An American expansionist motto famously articulated by Bishop Dean George Berkeley – “Westward the course of empire takes its way”<sup>119</sup> – summarizes the felt need for, and ostensible inevitability of, growth during this period.

Furthermore, the nineteenth century witnessed a major shift in attitude toward Native Americans. Native Americans were now regarded as a doomed race, threatened by extinction in the face of challenges presented by the spread of the new white culture, including disease such as smallpox and alcoholism. With the Indian Removal Act passed by Andrew Jackson in 1830, the Native American race was marginalized to reservations, thereby allowing white-dominated culture to expand further westward under the authority of manifest destiny. Few Americans who moved west questioned their destined duty to do so, even if it meant the stealing of Native American land.<sup>120</sup> This discourse of the “other,” as evident in attitudes toward ostensibly inferior races, reinforced a certain notion of evolution; it was

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<sup>117</sup> I use the term “America” instead of “United States” throughout this chapter in adherence to nineteenth-century terminology. The “Americas” are, of course, a broader reference to the north, south, or central American continents and should not be used in reference solely to the United States.

<sup>118</sup> The term “Manifest Destiny” was coined in 1845. Wayne Craven, *American Art: History and Culture* (New York: McGraw Hill, 2003), 198.

<sup>119</sup> Quoted in Stephen Daniels, “Thomas Cole and the Course of Empire,” in *Fields of Vision: Landscape Imagery and National Identity in England and the United States* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993), 158.

<sup>120</sup> Craven, *American Art*, 198.



central to America's focus on progress and the advancement of civilization throughout the century and, as we will see, also provided justification for an expanding empire.

### **A Desire for Ruins and for Identity**

Before looking closely at the discourse of empire that is salient to this particularly significant period of American history, it is instructive to examine how a perceived need for ruins in the nineteenth century led artists and political leaders to turn to allegory for expression of political beliefs. Western history, in its obsession with ruins, is inscribed with a melancholic sentiment. Professor of Literature Andreas Huyssen writes, "In the body of the ruin the past is both present in its residues and yet no longer accessible, making the ruin an especially powerful trigger for nostalgia."<sup>121</sup> Huyssen argues that since the 1990s, ruins have become associated with a broad discourse of trauma associated with war and genocide.<sup>122</sup> Ruins for modernity invoke nostalgia because they "seem to hold a promise that has vanished from our own age: the promise of an alternative future."<sup>123</sup> There also is a perceived need for "authentic" ruins – those that are real and preserved, though Huyssen points out that in the age of capitalism, the ability of objects to age and become ruins has greatly declined.<sup>124</sup> Authentic ruins "function as projective screens for modernity's articulation of asynchronous temporalities and for its fear of and obsession with the passing of time."<sup>125</sup> Ruins, in other words, reflect the anxiety of the passage of time in the modern era, and may produce a calming effect.

Nostalgia for ruins became central for western modernity beginning in the eighteenth century.<sup>126</sup> The cult of the ruin can be traced to Europe, when fascination

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<sup>121</sup> Andreas Huyssen, "Nostalgia for Ruins," *Grey Room* 23 (Spring 2006): 6-21, 7.

<sup>122</sup> Huyssen, "Nostalgia for Ruins," 7.

<sup>123</sup> Huyssen, "Nostalgia for Ruins," 8.

<sup>124</sup> Huyssen, "Nostalgia for Ruins," 10.

<sup>125</sup> Huyssen, "Nostalgia for Ruins," 11.

<sup>126</sup> Huyssen, "Nostalgia for Ruins," 7.

with ancient objects led eighteenth-century artists and philosophers to ponder the remains of ancient Rome and other ancient civilizations. The ruins of antiquity offered, in the words of Richard Wendorf, “visual reminders of a monumental past, a past so present that contemporary sensibility must accommodate rather than attempt to obliterate it.”<sup>127</sup> The concept of the ruin offered scholars, artists, and writers a means for romantic contemplation. W.S. Gilbert, the nineteenth-century English poet and dramatist, called, “the fascination frantic/For a ruin that’s romantic.”<sup>128</sup> Motives for this interest were substantial. Ruins can trigger deep emotional responses including pathos, relief that a political past is over, or nostalgia for bygone eras. Other responses to ruins may be aesthetic, intellectual, political, or philosophical. Ruins offer an opportunity for temporal contemplation through their existence, in a sense, both inside and out of time. These physical remains of past cultures instigate looking backward and forward, from the legacy of the past through the present to the future. As we will see, the ruin also can also serve as an aesthetic object in itself. This is a subject that many artists through this period have explored.

This early attraction to ruins is perhaps best demonstrated in the work of Venetian printmaker Giovanni Battista Piranesi, who made hundreds of etchings of Roman ruins in the mid- to late eighteenth century. Piranesi’s *Views of Rome* deeply influenced the cultural imagination of his contemporaries, and likely shaped later centuries’ enthrallment with ruins; Horace Walpole encouraged his generation to “study the sublime dreams of Piranesi, who seems to have conceived visions of Rome beyond what it boasted even in the meridian of its splendor.”<sup>129</sup> Further, Walpole proclaimed: “[Piranesi] has imagined scenes that would startle geometry,

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<sup>127</sup> Richard Wendorf, “Piranesi’s Double Ruin,” *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 34, no. 2 (Winter 2001): 161-180, Antiquarians, Connoisseurs, and Collectors, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/30053964> (accessed June 23, 2010), 161.

<sup>128</sup> Clare Boothe Luce, introduction to Werner Bergengruen, *Rome Remembered*, trans. Roland Hill (New York: Herder and Herder, 1968), 5-16, 5.

<sup>129</sup> Horace Walpole, *Anecdotes of Painting*, 4th ed., vol 4 (London, 1782), 398, quoted in Wendorf, “Piranesi’s Double Ruin,” 162.

and exhaust the Indies to realize. He piles palaces on bridges, and temples on palaces, and scales heaven with mountains of edifices. Yet what taste in his boldness!"<sup>130</sup>

Though Piranesi exalted the grandeur of Rome's past in his engravings and was celebrated for doing so, what he ultimately created was an idealized version of the ancient city; his works were not, in fact, accurate reformulations of the ancient buildings.<sup>131</sup> These new, monumental conceptions "represented no abrupt break between past and present, but rather a salutary continuum."<sup>132</sup> That is, Piranesi's visions of Roman ruins presented a narrative of continuity between his present and the legacy of antiquity. It is noteworthy that this desire to resurrect the past, as evident in Piranesi's imaginings, and a seeming hesitance to view the past as completely past, are recurring themes in our analysis of allegory and the concept of the ruin.

The decaying effects of nature and the passage of time on civilization are also themes present in Piranesi's illustration of Roman remains, and are concepts that would inform later portrayals of ruins. Wendorf proposed that Piranesi's *Prima Parte* of 1748 was "a reenactment of the temporal and physical forces that engender ruin in the first place. Even the luxuriant vegetation reminds us of the indifference of the natural world and its continuing role as a destructive agent."<sup>133</sup> Walter Benjamin's theory of allegory also noted the ruin's remarkable ability to evoke an awareness of temporality and human fragility amidst the persistent forces of nature. Indeed, allegory originated for Benjamin from the concept of the ruin; upon decay of objects from antiquity, what remained were merely fragments of past civilizations. It is this move from history to nature that serves as the foundation for allegory in Benjamin's view; allegory, for him, resides in "consciously constructed ruins."<sup>134</sup> What is

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<sup>130</sup> Walpole, *Anecdotes of Painting*, 398, quoted in Wendorf, "Piranesi's Double Ruin," 162.

<sup>131</sup> Wendorf, "Piranesi's Double Ruin," 164.

<sup>132</sup> Wendorf, "Piranesi's Double Ruin," 165.

<sup>133</sup> Wendorf, "Piranesi's Double Ruin," 172.

<sup>134</sup> Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 182.

assembled according to one's personal vision becomes the basis for allegory, we can infer from Benjamin's argument.

The historical fascination with ruins is significantly rooted as well in the English Picturesque tradition. Introduced and popularized by William Gilpin in the late eighteenth century through accounts of tours around England, this tradition offered idyllic scenes that appealed to the English upper class. In the Picturesque, which is based on romantic notions of landscape and gardens, ruins and the effects of nature often are of thematic prominence. The concepts of sublimity and beauty relate closely to the Picturesque aesthetic, though it occupies a middle ground between the two concepts, in its blending of nature with artifice.<sup>135</sup> This particular aesthetic revels in a combination of sublime nature with remnants of human creations, and perceives imperfection in detail. Sidney K. Robinson describes the Picturesque delight in a mixture of beauty and decay: "[The Picturesque] keeps insisting on mixture through inclusion of the marginal condition."<sup>136</sup> This distinction between beauty and sublimity in the Picturesque occurs with the acknowledgement of the passage of time. Robinson writes, "Greek temples are beautiful; they are systematically conceived and symmetrical. They become Picturesque when they are in ruins. Time is the 'great author' of the changes that convert a beautiful object into a picturesque one."<sup>137</sup>

Clearly the Picturesque interest in ruins, then, is driven by the inevitable decay that the forces of nature and the passage of time wreak on human creations. We could assume that the Picturesque search for evocative ruins is fueled by melancholia, a nostalgia for times past. Yet in Arthur Young's description of Rievaulx, a ruined monastery in northern England, he does not appear to be afflicted by melancholic sentiments; Young, to the contrary, suggests a pleasurable view of the ruins: "You look...down immediately upon a large ruined abbey, in the

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<sup>135</sup> Sidney K. Robinson, *Inquiry into the Picturesque* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 16-17.

<sup>136</sup> Robinson, *Inquiry into the Picturesque*, 96.

<sup>137</sup> Robinson, *Inquiry into the Picturesque*, 125.

midst...of a small but beautiful valley; scattered trees appearing among the ruins in a style too elegant to admit description; it is a casual glance at a little paradise, which seems as it were in another region.”<sup>138</sup> Notable is his focus on the beauty of the scene, its “style” and elegance. Gilpin, as well, expresses an almost pathological obsession with the ruin for what appears to be a purely aesthetic purpose in his *Three Essays*:

A piece of Palladian architecture may be elegant in the last degree...But if we introduce it in a picture, it immediately becomes a formal object, and ceases to please. Should we wish to give it Picturesque beauty, we must use the mallet, instead of the chisel, we must beat down one half of it, deface the other, and throw the mutilated members around in heaps. In short, from a smooth building we must turn it into a rough ruin.<sup>139</sup>

Gilpin’s insistence on turning a smooth work of classical architecture into a “rough ruin” demonstrates a perceived psychological need for ruins, be it for thematic or formal purposes. The desire to indulge in melancholia with ruins may be pleasurable, for some. John Ruskin, in his essay “Of the Turnerian Picturesque,” condemns what he called the “lower Picturesque” for its exploitation of ruins for purely aesthetic effects.<sup>140</sup> For Ruskin, the most powerful expression of the Picturesque is that which views ruins with regret or melancholy – that which does not deny the notion of human calamity.<sup>141</sup>

The Picturesque tendency to view scenes from above, and also from a distance, seems to it offer the observer protection from falling into a tragic experience.<sup>142</sup> Thus the ruin is viewed from a safe distance; the object in ruins is far removed from the viewer physically and temporally. The ruin for the Picturesque is connected to the concept of the sublime – the destructive power of nature, which landscape painters such as J. M. W. Turner dynamically portrayed – though the ruin

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<sup>138</sup> Michael Charlesworth, “The Ruined Abbey: Picturesque and Gothic Values,” in *The Politics of the Picturesque: Literature, Landscape and Aesthetics since 1770*, ed. Stephen Copley and Peter Garside (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 64.

<sup>139</sup> William Gilpin, *Three Essays*, 2nd ed. (London, 1794), 7, quoted in Raimonda Modiano, “The Legacy of the Picturesque,” in *The Politics of the Picturesque*, 235.

<sup>140</sup> Modiano, “The Legacy of the Picturesque,” in *The Politics of the Picturesque*, 204.

<sup>141</sup> Modiano, “The Legacy of the Picturesque,” in *The Politics of the Picturesque*, 204-205.

<sup>142</sup> Modiano, “The Legacy of the Picturesque,” in *The Politics of the Picturesque*, 199.

is removed from the time in which the devastation occurred. Ruins in the Picturesque tradition therefore did not pose a threat to English society, which valued cleanliness and newness. Raimonda Modiano writes, “The fear of and containment of violence is paramount in the Picturesque and is best expressed in the period’s obsession with ruins. The ruin is an object which has sustained violence, be it the violence of man or simply the violence of time, but this violence is mitigated by being placed in a distant and unrecoverable past.”<sup>143</sup>

Ultimately, ruins will come to be reconstructed in a new context according to a personal vision. Michael Charlesworth writes of Willam Westall’s view of the ruins of the Abbey during the early evening when long shadows are cast, “...the ruins become superstitious in a *personal* and individual way – ultimately, that is, by providing ghosts or visions.”<sup>144</sup> We can witness this form of reconstruction of fragments framed by the artist’s personal vision in our examples of nineteenth-century allegory, which I will examine later. This reformulation of fragments is significant; after all, as Benjamin argued, the ruin is placed in a contemporary context, in the present, and what significance it holds is for that particular present.

The desire for ruins is, as discussed, closely associated with nostalgia and a pathological mourning of the past. The obsession with ruins in the eighteenth century is – perhaps not coincidentally – concurrent with the emergence of the concept of nostalgia. Nostalgia derives from *nostos*, Greek for “return home,” and *algia*, meaning “pain or longing.” The term was first articulated in the late seventeenth century by Swiss physician Johannes Hofer, who observed the extreme homesickness that mercenaries experienced. Its symptoms included, according to Hofer, a longing for home, melancholy, weakness, anxiety, shortness of breath, and insomnia.<sup>145</sup> Nostalgia has also been defined as a “species of melancholy” that is

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<sup>143</sup> Modiano, “The Legacy of the Picturesque,” in *The Politics of the Picturesque*, 216-217.

<sup>144</sup> Charlesworth, “The Ruined Abbey,” in *The Politics of the Picturesque*, 72.

<sup>145</sup> Willis McCann, “Nostalgia: A Descriptive and Comparative Study” (Ph.D. dissertation, Department of Psychology, Indiana University, 1940), 5, quoted in Janelle L. Wilson, *Nostalgia: Sanctuary of Meaning* (Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press, 2005), 21.

marked by mild insanity and continuous longing.<sup>146</sup> It can be individual, though it is often collective and historical as well. The definition of nostalgia as a disease continued until the late nineteenth century, when doctors claimed that advances in technology and communication caused nostalgia's reduction from pathology to wistfulness.<sup>147</sup> By the end of the nineteenth century, nostalgia took on a temporal reference in its regret for the passage of time and sentimentalizing of bygone eras.<sup>148</sup> The nostalgic sentiment has the tendency to idealize the past in a longing for that which is forever unattainable.

Turning to the nineteenth century's romantic obsession with the ruin and evident nostalgia, we can understand the significance that the ruin holds for this era, and how it may have helped Americans to cope with their difficulties. In view of pervasive uncertainty and angst in America throughout this century, physical ruins offered a possible means to make sense of change and destruction. Following the devastating Civil War in 1865, for instance, economic, social, and political turmoil was widespread. America had suffered great losses during the war; the country was now financially and socially unstable, with an economic depression looming and palpable tension between the races. President Abraham Lincoln was assassinated by Confederate sympathizer John Wilkes Booth just as the war was drawing to a close. Following the war, racism became a major issue and severe strains persisted between the north and south. With concern about what lay ahead for the troubled country, many Americans were likely nostalgic for the perceived "good old" ways of life in antebellum America.

During this period, we note Americans engaging with the physical ruins of past civilizations. An early introduction to postwar America of the romantic notion of the ruin occurred through the writings of Comte de Volney, the French philosopher and explorer, who in *Voyage en Syrie et en Egypte* of 1787 declared of

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<sup>146</sup> McCann, "Nostalgia: A Descriptive and Comparative Study," in Wilson, *Nostalgia*, 21.

<sup>147</sup> Wilson, *Nostalgia*, 22.

<sup>148</sup> Wilson, *Nostalgia*, 23.

Egyptian ruins, “hail solitary ruin, holy sepulchers, and silent walls!”<sup>149</sup> Thomas Jefferson, who invited Volney to America and publicized his ideas, also kept a “Cabinet of Curiosities” filled with cultural objects from distant parts of the world including Egypt. At the same time fine arts museums began to lay claim to Greek antiquities. The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York opened its doors in 1872, with a large collection of artifacts and objects from various cultures. The bifurcation of the classes in the nineteenth century also triggered an interest in the high cultural values that were believed to be embodied in art, and proliferating museums and art collections represented the new cultural elite.

American anxieties during the period could have spurred interest in importing traditions, as America was a relatively young country without a great historical legacy that it could claim. The country’s desire to legitimize its importance can be seen in the need to honor the past. Enhancing a speculative culture, monuments became popular during this time as well, indicating a desire for unity and for marking history, and they served to help establish a national identity.<sup>150</sup> The late eighteenth century saw the establishment of museums, and the tradition of museological enterprise continued in the nineteenth century, with the founding of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York in 1870. Museum culture, with its collections of ancient art through the modern, revels in melancholia and the distance from the past. Ruins of older civilizations offered perspective on America’s present and future by linking to a larger past. In appropriating the ruins of others, a country can also construct a narrative about itself.

## **Nationalism and History**

Anxiety about the future fueled the appropriation of ruins and architecture of older traditions and connected the young country to the greater history of western

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<sup>149</sup> Caroline Winterer, “Before Egyptomania: American Knowledge of Ancient Egypt before c. 1820” (paper presented at American Ruins and Antiquities in the Long 19<sup>th</sup> Century Conference, The Huntington Library, Los Angeles, CA, March 12, 2010).

<sup>150</sup> The Washington Monument, erected between 1848 and 1884, is perhaps the most notable monument of this century. It inspired monuments in the following century, such as the Jefferson and Lincoln Memorials, which were both based on classical models.



civilization. In this way America began to form its identity as the inheritor of western civilization. We may better contextualize the American desire for a historical legacy and a distinct national identity during this time considering a particular theory of nation-building. Benedict Anderson argues that nations are built upon a fictional view of themselves. His very definition of a nation is “an imagined political community – and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign.”<sup>151</sup> He stresses the fictive quality of national identity: “Nationalism is not the awakening of nations to self-consciousness: it *invents* nations where they do not exist.”<sup>152</sup> Other scholars also argue that nationalism is a pathological condition, of sorts, of modern history.<sup>153</sup> This notion of sovereignty invokes a sense of comradeship citizenship that justifies sacrificing for the good of the country.<sup>154</sup> The cause of national identity is also closely connected to religious ideals, and formed the basis of nation-building in eighteenth-century Europe. It provided a means for transforming religious fatalism into continuity through the idea of a nation.<sup>155</sup> Furthermore, Anderson argues, the concept of nationalism formed from a collapse of the dynastic realm traditions, whereby early empires were able to maintain governance over large populations for extended intervals.<sup>156</sup> Modern nation-building, it would appear, is bound by past traditions, the strategies and values of which are reformulated into a modern approach.

Apprehension over the passage of time and what lies ahead also underpin nationalistic feeling, according to Anderson. The imagined community can provide a means for people to view themselves as steadily advancing together through time.<sup>157</sup> This concept of the value of time connects to Benjamin’s idea of a

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<sup>151</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London and New York: Verso, 1991), 5-6.

<sup>152</sup> Ernest Gellner, *Thought and Change*, 169, quoted in Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 6.

<sup>153</sup> Tom Nairn, *The Break-up of Britain*, 359, quoted in Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 5.

<sup>154</sup> Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 7.

<sup>155</sup> Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 11.

<sup>156</sup> Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 19.

<sup>157</sup> Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 26.

“homogenous, empty time,” which replaced medieval fears of an end of time approaching.<sup>158</sup> We can infer from Anderson’s argument that anxiety about the passage of time and the uncertainty of the future leads people to desire to stitch themselves together in a history, and therefore to invest in a national identity. Similarly, American anxieties about the country’s temporality – as called into sharp focus by the Civil War and its aftermath – may have spurred strong nationalistic feelings.

A pitfall of the nationalistic mindset is of course the potential for racial and class discrimination. Anderson perceives that nationalism has “its roots in fear and hatred of the Other, and its affinities with racism.”<sup>159</sup> Racism, he points out, is always associated with European domination.<sup>160</sup> We may likewise regard American nationalistic attitudes as bound inextricably to racist thought. American imperialism, with its projected view of itself as the leading global power, finds it necessary to establish “inferior” races to feed its hegemony. We can frequently observe the concept of the “other” at play in American empire-building discourse, especially that which became established at the Chicago Columbian Exposition, which I will take up subsequently.

Anderson’s discussion of constructed national identities supports Hayden V. White’s analysis of the nineteenth century’s obsession with history. Early nineteenth-century intellectuals, artists, and the upper classes were fascinated by history, which was seen as being intimately connected to art, science, and philosophy.<sup>161</sup> Romantic painters often turned to historical themes for subject-matter. White asserts that historical narratives, like national identities for Anderson, are essentially fictional rather than truthful representations.<sup>162</sup> History, White

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<sup>158</sup> Benjamin, *Illuminations*, 265, quoted in Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 24.

<sup>159</sup> Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 141.

<sup>160</sup> Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 150.

<sup>161</sup> Hayden V. White, “The Burden of History,” in *The Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), 41.

<sup>162</sup> White, “Historical Text as Literary Artifact,” in *The Tropics of Discourse*, 82.

maintains, presents a story about the past that is essentially myth, because, “We choose our past in the same way we choose our future. The historical past, therefore, is...at best a myth, justifying our gamble on a specific future, and at worst a lie, a retrospective rationalization of what we have in fact become through our choices.”<sup>163</sup> A historical narrative is thus a compilation of stories about the past that are formulated and retold according to a historian’s ideological slant. Historical narratives, White argues, succeed in assigning contemporary and historical significance to past events by taking advantage of symbolic similarities between actual historical events and our fictions.<sup>164</sup> These are “thus necessarily a mixture of adequately and inadequately explained events, a congeries of established and inferred facts, at once a representation that is an interpretation and an interpretation that passes for an explanation of the whole process mirrored in the narrative.”<sup>165</sup> White argues that the only way to confront issues of the present in a creative way is to be freed from the restraints of the historical past, which presents an outdated set of institutions, ideas, and values – essentially an outmoded view of the world.<sup>166</sup>

Early nineteenth-century historians lacked insight into the fictions that permeated their discipline, and so history – or more precisely, the historical narratives of the time – was perceived as accurate and objective.<sup>167</sup> White alludes to a pathological disorder that infuses nineteenth-century historical narratives: “The historian appears to be the carrier of a disease which was at once the motive force and the nemesis of nineteenth-century civilization.”<sup>168</sup> On the other hand, White sees that the very uncertainty and untruthfulness of history provide opportunities for commenting on both past and present.<sup>169</sup> This view of history as offering creative

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<sup>163</sup> White, “The Burden of History,” in *The Tropics of Discourse*, 39.

<sup>164</sup> White, “Historical Text As Literary Artifact,” in *The Tropics of Discourse*, 91.

<sup>165</sup> White, “Interpretation in History,” in *The Tropics of Discourse*, 51.

<sup>166</sup> White, “The Burden of History,” in *The Tropics of Discourse*, 39-40.

<sup>167</sup> White, “Fictions of Factual Representation,” in *The Tropics of Discourse*, 124.

<sup>168</sup> White, “The Burden of History,” in *The Tropics of Discourse*, 39.

<sup>169</sup> White, “The Burden of History,” in *The Tropics of Discourse*, 48.

freedom for commentary aligns with Benjamin's and Owens' argument for the use of allegory, with its references to the past, as an effective mode of criticism.

In the twentieth century, the collective intellectual view of historical narratives would turn negative. Albert Camus would argue that the Western obsession with understanding history led to later anarchism and totalitarianism.<sup>170</sup> White notes the development of an antihistorical view preceding World War I, with its overt hostility towards the historical consciousness, and a growing belief that Europe's devotion to the ruins of its past expressed fear of the future.<sup>171</sup>

Obsessions with the ruin and the past in the nineteenth century thus played important roles in a complicated scenario: in the formation of a historical narrative, the establishment of a national identity, and the launching a discourse of empire. We might assume that the appeal of ruins and history is based simply in a desire to remember the past. White questions the value of history to the present, saying, "The historian serves no one well by constructing a specious continuity between the present world and that which preceded it. On the contrary, we require a history that will educate us to discontinuity more than ever before."<sup>172</sup> We should also question whether instances of quoting history via ruins in nineteenth-century art achieve this higher moral purpose articulated by White, or whether citing past models is the epitome of an obsession with the past with which White finds fault. In either case, interpretations of historical events, and ruins, differ drastically – a phenomenon that we will next observe in two contrasting views of the classical past, and how that past relates to the present, in the work of Thomas Cole and in the offerings of the Chicago Columbian Exposition.

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<sup>170</sup> Camus, *The Rebel*, 1951, quoted in White, "The Burden of History," in *The Tropics of Discourse*, 38.

<sup>171</sup> White, "The Burden of History," in *The Tropics of Discourse*, 35.

<sup>172</sup> White, "The Burden of History," in *The Tropics of Discourse*, 50.

## THOMAS COLE'S *THE COURSE OF EMPIRE*

Amid an intense interest in ruins, history, and a discourse of expansion and progress in the nineteenth century, one artist's pointed dissent against American political values stands out. Thomas Cole allegorized the collapse of empire in a distinctly American context in his expansive *The Course of Empire* of 1836.

Commissioned by the American self-made entrepreneur Luman Reed, *The Course of Empire* is a narrative of five scenes, each depicting a sequential stage in a cycle of civilization. Allan Wallach calls *The Course of Empire* "an imaginative paradigm of American history."<sup>173</sup> The title borrows ironically from Bishop Dean George Berkeley's expansionist slogan, "Westward the course of empire takes its way." In contrast to the optimistic outlook for progress and expansion of the original statement, Cole's reference is grounded in pessimism. He envisions a catastrophic outcome to the unfolding of empire.

The first of Cole's scenes, *The Savage State*, exhibits untamed nature, with little evidence of early human activity. *The Arcadian or Pastoral State* portrays a harmonious, agrarian ideal and an indication of early settlement, with a lone figure tending to a flock of sheep. Civilization reaches its dramatic height in *The Consummation of Empire*, which depicts a flourishing classical city bustling with activity. This same city subsequently burns in the horrific apocalyptic scene of *Destruction*. In the final image, *Desolation*, the remains of the city are reduced to scattered ruins mostly reclaimed by nature. Each scene in the series unfolds against a common mountainous landscape, indicating the sublimity of nature and human temporality.

### **Allegorizing the Cyclical Nature of Civilizations**

Cole's classical city featured in *The Course of Empire* deliberately links America to the empires of antiquity through allegory in an unmistakably American landscape juxtaposed with classical architecture and its subsequent ruination. Cole himself

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<sup>173</sup> Alan Wallach, "Cole, Byron and The Course of Empire," *Art Bulletin* 50 (1968): 375-9, quoted in Daniels, "Thomas Cole and the Course of Empire," 158.

described the mixed classical architectural styles of the city he portrayed in the series as containing the essence of New York in its bustling diversity, thereby pointedly linking the classical city of his paintings to a modern American one.<sup>174</sup>

Like other artists enthralled by classical ruins, Cole was greatly influenced by Rome, having traveled there while he was in Europe in 1829, and he visited many of its ruined monuments. For Cole, the Roman ruins “represented in both symbol and reality the old edifice of Europe,” and illustrated cycles of life and history.<sup>175</sup> He also was intensely influenced by the artists of the Picturesque, especially Gilpin, whose fascination with ruins appealed to Cole’s romantic inclinations.<sup>176</sup>

Cole’s ideology and his deliberately pessimistic statement about America’s future in *The Course of Empire* were steeped in fear of the results of progress, technology, and the expansion of empire. In his native England, Cole experienced the negative effects of the Industrial Revolution first-hand; his parents suffered from the economic depression in England following the Napoleonic Wars, and did not find success after immigrating to America either.<sup>177</sup> In early nineteenth-century America, skilled factory workers were replacing artisans, immigration increased greatly, and growing tension between north and south over slavery combined to present an uncertain and shaky future. Cole viewed the Industrial Revolution and the advances that accompanied it as signifying loss and disruption.<sup>178</sup> On the prospect of America’s continued development, Cole expressed a melancholic longing, writing:

[I] express my sorrow that the beauties of such landscapes are quickly fading away – the ravages of the axe are daily increasing – the most noble scenes are made desolate, and often with a wantonness and barbarism scarcely credible in a civilized nation. The

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<sup>174</sup> Daniels, “Thomas Cole and the Course of Empire,” 160.

<sup>175</sup> Earl A. Powell, *Thomas Cole* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1980), 61.

<sup>176</sup> Powell, *Thomas Cole*, 20.

<sup>177</sup> Cole’s Father attempted to open several businesses, all of which failed.

<sup>178</sup> Angela L. Miller, Janet C. Berlo, Bryan J. Wolf, and Jennifer L. Roberts, *American Encounters: Art, History, and Cultural Identity* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Prentice Hall, 2008), 255.

wayside is becoming shadeless, and another generation will behold spots, now rife with beauty, desecrated by what is called improvement.<sup>179</sup>

While regretful of the damaging effects of industry on the landscape, Cole more importantly intended *The Course of Empire* to embody a strict moral lesson, a warning of the inevitable fall of empire. The series allegorizes the concept of the rise and inevitable demise of civilization—the theory of the cyclical nature of civilizations. Wealth, according to this theory, “gives rise to avarice, while political liberty leads to overbearing ambition. Corruption sets in and civilization collapses. Centuries pass and new civilizations arise to begin the cycle over again.”<sup>180</sup> Cole subscribed to this cyclical theory, and *The Course of Empire* embodies his political beliefs—his vehement opposition to progress and expansion of empire. Cole challenges the American ideal of boundless growth and progress by demonstrating the lessons of antiquity through allegory, in its veiled mode of political dissent. Cole writes that the “philosophy of my subject is drawn from the history of the past, wherein we see how nations have risen from the savage state to that of power and glory, and then fallen, and become extinct.”<sup>181</sup> He uses antiquity as a spectacle in his work, in reference to the decline of all past empires. In his *Essay*, written a year prior to *The Course of Empire*, Cole struggles with opposing beliefs about America’s future—a progressive and competent future versus the “cyclical conception of the rise and fall of civilizations to which America would be subject, no less than was Europe.”<sup>182</sup> Later, Cole wrote, “We see that nations have sprung from obscurity, risen to glory, and decayed. Their rise has in general been marked by virtue; their decadence by vice, vanity and licentiousness. Let us beware!”<sup>183</sup>

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<sup>179</sup> Daniels, “Thomas Cole and the Course of Empire,” 157.

<sup>180</sup> Daniels, “Thomas Cole and the Course of Empire,” 158.

<sup>181</sup> Powell, *Thomas Cole*, 64.

<sup>182</sup> Daniels, “Thomas Cole and the Course of Empire,” 157.

<sup>183</sup> Thomas Cole, “Sicilian Scenery and Antiquities,” 1844, quoted in *Thomas Cole: Landscape into History*, ed. William H. Truettner and Alan Wallach (New Haven, CT and London: Yale University Press, 1994), 93.

By endorsing the cyclical theory of civilization, Cole drew from the philosophy of republican politics.<sup>184</sup> Classical architecture in an American context cites early models of order, and republicanism. Traditional republican ideology, such as that to which the Founding Fathers adhered, was based on the belief that democracy inevitably gives way to arbitrary mass rule.<sup>185</sup> Cole, like the aristocratic landowners of his time, lamented the fall of Federalism upon Democracy's rise in popularity in the mid-nineteenth century. The scene in *Consummation* depicts the victorious return of a leader, which Wallach suggests represents Andrew Jackson, and points to "democracy sliding into demagoguery and mob rule."<sup>186</sup> For Cole, President Jackson represented a modern-day Caesar, a power-hungry usurper who would lead America to its doom.<sup>187</sup>

### **Cole's Melancholia**

*The Course of Empire*, for all of its fatalistic visions of dystopia, is a moral allegory, a "paradigm of the Romantic spirit—melancholy, grand in conceptual scope, and didactic and moralizing."<sup>188</sup> Cole's melancholic vision may be better comprehended if we consider his use of the ruin as evidence of nostalgic sentiment, as well as a means for influencing others' views of current trends. Allegory, according to Benjamin, arises from the domain of mourning, and melancholia develops from recognition of the transience of our culture—and of ourselves.<sup>189</sup> Cole's landscapes are highly melancholic in their references to history and the lessons of the past. Perhaps this melancholic view for Cole originated in nostalgia for Federalism, which was weakening, and the aristocratic class. Wallach notes, "Classes or social groups in decline often exhibit a tendency to dwell upon the

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<sup>184</sup> *Thomas Cole: Landscape into History*, ed. Truettner and Wallach, 92.

<sup>185</sup> *Thomas Cole: Landscape into History*, ed. Truettner and Wallach, 92.

<sup>186</sup> Daniels, "Thomas Cole and the Course of Empire," 160.

<sup>187</sup> Miller et al., *American Encounters*, 257.

<sup>188</sup> Powell, *Thomas Cole*, 70.

<sup>189</sup> Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 193.



past.”<sup>190</sup> Nostalgia, as previously discussed, involves longing for an irretrievable past, and the sentiment is imbued with an unredeemable desire to resurrect history. If Cole’s allegory in *The Course of Empire* is mournful, it is because he knows that life cannot return to the way it once was, and he idealizes that past. Cole’s allegorical references, though, are aimed more at the present and the future than the past.<sup>191</sup> The meaning of a ruin, when cited in contemporary context, is directed toward the present moment, just as nostalgia is not a simple escape into the past, but more a framing of the present. Janelle L. Wilson expresses nostalgia’s role in the present: “Individuals decide – in the present – how to recall the past and, in this process, imbue the past with meaning, which has evolved over time and is relevant in the present.”<sup>192</sup> Ruins, in this sense, may help one cope with present anxieties. It is unlikely that the ruin served as a mere object for aesthetic contemplation for Cole, or as a means for marking continuity between past and present, as may have been the case for Piranesi. Rather, the ruin for Cole served to express melancholic longing for a previous, irretrievable era.

The fragmentary ruin is central to Cole’s allegory in *Desolation*, the final scene in the series, in which the once-majestic city, having burned, stands in ruin. No evidence of humans is present in this final, dark scene. The ruin, as discussed earlier, is a potent reference to the past – the tragedies and destructions of antiquity – in a present context. As Benjamin noted, the ruin is an anachronism, a remaining fragment from a past era that reminds us of the history of human struggle. The impermanence and fragility of humans and their civilizations serve as the basis for allegorical representation for Cole, and Benjamin as well. As with allegorical theory for Benjamin and Owens, the allegorist has power over its meaning to manipulate or otherwise instruct the viewer. Benjamin noted, “If the object becomes allegorical

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<sup>190</sup> Wallach, “Thomas Cole and the Aristocracy,” in *Reading American Art*, ed. Marianne Doezema and Elizabeth Milroy (New Haven, CT and London: Yale University Press, 1998), 70-108, 88.

<sup>191</sup> Daniels, “Thomas Cole and the Course of Empire,” 156.

<sup>192</sup> Wilson, *Nostalgia*, 7.

under the gaze of melancholy...then it is exposed to the allegorist, it is unconditionally in his power."<sup>193</sup>

For all of the melancholy in *The Course of Empire*, Cole achieved success. Earl A. Powell asserts that the series "is not mournful. [It] was a triumph for Cole, whose wish to transcend the picturesque and elevate landscape to the level of history painting had finally been accomplished to public acclaim."<sup>194</sup> Powell's account of the facts surrounding reception of Cole's work indicates that the artist's grand allegory of civilization brought him renown as a painter, which in fact grew from public misconception of his work. This leads us to discussion of how Cole's allegory was received on a broader critical level, and whether the series succeeded in meeting his objectives.

### **Allegory's Misconceptions**

Cole's intended message in *The Course of Empire* was largely misinterpreted, which brings into question the effectiveness of allegory as an expressive device. Cole faced a dilemma of representation in *The Course of Empire*; his allegory needed to embody a universal truth that would be relevant to a broad audience.<sup>195</sup> Because of this, Cole did not focus on a single historical model, but rather portrayed a generic classical empire with references to both ancient Greece and Rome, as well as other civilizations.<sup>196</sup> He wanted the series to lend itself to the wide authority of cyclical theory, applicable to all civilizations, of both past and present. By allegorizing the collapse of empire, Cole meant to relay a collective moral lesson on the vices of empire and its inevitable downfall. Though he intended *The Course of Empire* to serve as a warning, the message was critically misunderstood. The meaning of the series, in fact, was so misconstrued that it was even seen to endorse the idea of continued American progress. *Consummation* was not viewed as a prediction of America's

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<sup>193</sup> Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 183-184.

<sup>194</sup> Powell, *Thomas Cole*, 71.

<sup>195</sup> *Thomas Cole: Landscape into History*, ed. Truettner and Wallach, 92.

<sup>196</sup> *Thomas Cole: Landscape into History*, ed. Truettner and Wallach, 91.

future, because, it was argued, America was not established on ancient principles but on a more stable foundation.<sup>197</sup> Though Cole's work was highly praised for its poetic quality and for his artistic genius as a landscape and history painter, his intention that the work be read as an allegory of cyclical theory was completely undercut. As the critic for *The New York Mirror* wrote, Cole, in *The Course of Empire*, had merely depicted "that which *has been* in all past times."<sup>198</sup> Democracy and material progress would bring about a more advanced civilization than ever achieved, and an "empire of love" would be the result.<sup>199</sup>

The fact that Cole's intentions were diametrically misunderstood presents an opportunity for insight into the problems of allegory as a device for political commentary. As noted by Owens, allegory in its fragmentary state risks illegibility and subsequent misinterpretation. It cannot effectively transfer from a visual state into language, and confusion between the two realms can easily occur; the allegorical work crosses aesthetic boundaries, Owens argued, and complicates the pictorial with the verbal.<sup>200</sup> Furthermore, he suggested, allegory functions by "provisionally accept[ing] the terms and conditions it sets out to expose."<sup>201</sup> In doing so, the allegorical work risks potential failure. This seems to be the case for *The Course of Empire*, which attempted to reveal the consequences of empire while simultaneously performing them.

An added complication is that Cole's views on empire and the future of America seem contradictory. He offered a fatalistic view of the course of empire without offering a hint of hope for an alternative outcome. He also viewed the course of empire as inescapable and expressed resignation about the future. As for the inarguable improvements and developments taking place in American culture,

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<sup>197</sup> Daniels, "Thomas Cole and the Course of Empire," 160.

<sup>198</sup> *Thomas Cole: Landscape into History*, ed. Truettner and Wallach, 95.

<sup>199</sup> *Thomas Cole: Landscape into History*, ed. Truettner and Wallach, 95. This sort of utopian vision will be observed in more depth in my analysis of American exceptionalist thought as relevant to the Chicago Columbian Exposition of 1893.

<sup>200</sup> Owens, "The Allegorical Impulse," 58.

<sup>201</sup> Owens, "The Allegorical Impulse, Part 2," 78.

Cole wrote, “This is a regret rather than a complaint; such is the road society has to travel.”<sup>202</sup> He seemed to surrender to the idea of progress as inevitable, and his sentiments reveal a nostalgic – rather than activist – position.

Allegorical works, then, can be readily misinterpreted because the artist’s intentions are not directly revealed. In this case, the artist himself gained wealth and renown from the very institutions upheld by the political system he intended to denounce. This difficulty with allegory and its interpretation presents what might well be a fundamental paradox of art – that for all its political commentary, visual imagery is more open to misinterpretation than verbal or written discourse.

Regardless of *The Course of Empire’s* effectiveness as a political statement, Cole’s fears about empire-building and progress would be realized later in the century.

### THE CHICAGO COLUMBIAN EXPOSITION OF 1893

Cole’s premonitions about American expansionism and empire-building in *The Course of Empire* came surprisingly close to reality; about sixty years later, grand visions of an American empire were manifested at a major world’s fair in Chicago – the Columbian Exposition of 1893. Directed by eminent architect Daniel H. Burnham, the fair was staged from May through October. The fair grounds comprised two distinct areas: the stunning “White City,” centered on a lagoon and featuring neoclassical buildings that housed artistic and industrial exhibits; and the “Midway Plaisance,” which offered diverse ethnographic displays and entertainment. The stated purpose of the fair was to commemorate the four-hundredth anniversary of Columbus arriving in America, though the fair took place a year after the actual anniversary. It also served a celebration of Chicago’s swift recuperation from the Great Fire of 1871.<sup>203</sup>

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<sup>202</sup> Daniels, “Thomas Cole and the Course of Empire,” 157.

<sup>203</sup> The Great Fire of 1871 destroyed more than two thousand acres. 100,000 homes were burned, displacing about a third of the city’s population. The rebuilding of the city began almost immediately afterwards, and Chicago recovered relatively quickly following the fire.

In addition, the Chicago Columbian Exposition's leaders, a board of architects and planners organized by Burnham and numerous committees of public officials, sought to offset the dismal economic situation the country in general faced in the closing years of the nineteenth century, while seeking to upstage the latest Paris Exposition.<sup>204</sup> Lyman Gage, president of the First National Bank and the first president of the board of directors, lobbied Congress to secure the funding for Chicago to host the fair. Gage declared, two years prior to the fair's opening, that visitors "will see beautiful buildings radiate with color and flashing the sunlight from their gilded pinnacles and domes... And beyond all...will behold the boundless waters of Lake Michigan, linking the beautiful with the sublime, the present with the past, the finite with the infinite."<sup>205</sup> Numerous renowned artists and architects collaborated on the design and plan of the fair, while countless laborers helped to erect over 200 structures spanning 600 acres. Augustus Saint-Gaudens declared that the Columbian Exposition marked "the greatest meeting of artists since the fifteenth century!"<sup>206</sup>

Furthermore, the fair showcased the works of numerous American artists, including William Merritt Chase, Thomas Eakins, Winslow Homer, John Singer Sargent, James Abbott McNeil Whistler, and George Inness, among others. The *Chicago Tribune* asserted, "the influence of art at the Columbian Fair will reach far into the future."<sup>207</sup>

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<sup>204</sup> Erika Doss, "The Gilded Age," in *Twentieth-Century American Art* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 19-33, 19.

<sup>205</sup> Lyman Gage, *The World's Columbian Exposition: First Annual Report of the President* (Chicago: Knight and Leonard Company, 1891), 22, quoted in Robert W. Rydell, "The Chicago World's Columbian Exposition of 1893: 'And Was Jerusalem Builded Here?'" in *All the World's a Fair: Visions of Empire at American International Expositions, 1876-1916*, (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 43.

<sup>206</sup> Richard Guy Wilson, et al., *The American Renaissance, 1876-1917* (Brooklyn: Brooklyn Museum, in association with Pantheon Books, 1979), quoted in Miller, et al., *American Encounters*, 382.

<sup>207</sup> *Chicago Tribune*, 1 November 1893, 4, quoted in Carolyn Kinder Carr, "Prejudice and Pride: Presenting American Art at the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition," in *Revisiting the White City: American Art at the 1893 World's Fair* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution, 1993), 63.

## A Brief History of World's Fairs

World's fairs, the first in London in 1851, offered international attention and recognition, as well as tremendous economic gain. Expositions in Europe, including the 1889 Paris Universal Exposition that flaunted Alexandre Gustave Eiffel's unprecedented feat of engineering, drew tens of millions of visitors, and therefore enormous revenue. America soon adopted the European fair tradition. Victorian-era expositions in America, including the Chicago Columbian Exposition, the 1876 Philadelphia Centennial Exhibition, the 1904 St. Louis Louisiana Purchase Exposition, the 1915 San Francisco Panama-Pacific International Exposition, and the 1915-16 San Diego Panama California Exposition, were seen as cultural icons of the nation's hopes and future.<sup>208</sup>

World's fairs reflected major anxieties about the future and, more important, diffused dangerous political and social criticism.<sup>209</sup> The political implications of fairs perhaps even surpass their economic value. Robert W. Rydell notes that American expositions "were developed as organized responses to class conflict in the aftermath of industrial depressions..."<sup>210</sup> In America world's fairs aided political efforts to reconstruct the country following the Civil War.<sup>211</sup> Furthermore, fairs reflected their nations' political ideologies, which often centered on imperialist motives. As Rydell argues, "...world's fairs need to be understood as vehicles intended to win popular support for national imperial policies."<sup>212</sup> Consequently, fairs were linked closely to discourse on the hegemony of the white race, and they promoted notions of evolution and domination, a topic I will revisit shortly.

The tradition of world's fairs continued to gain momentum and developed into an ongoing phenomenon through the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

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<sup>208</sup> Rydell, *World of Fairs: The Century-of-Progress Expositions* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 1.

<sup>209</sup> Rydell, *World of Fairs*, 5.

<sup>210</sup> Rydell, *World of Fairs*, 5.

<sup>211</sup> Rydell, John E. Findling, and Kimberly D. Pelle, *Fair America: World's Fairs in the United States* (Washington, D.C. and London: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2000), 7.

<sup>212</sup> Rydell, Findling, and Pelle, *Fair America*, 5.

The Century of Progress Expositions of the early twentieth century included fairs in Chicago, San Diego, San Francisco, Dallas, Cleveland, and New York. The expositions of this era continued to extol the notions of progress established in the previous century, and helped Americans cope with the massive economic and social difficulties they faced following the Great Depression and World War I.<sup>213</sup>

The Chicago Columbian Exposition is no exception to the trend of national and political strategies put forward by world's fairs, as we will come to better perceive by analyzing the elaborate discourse of progress constructed at this particular fair.

### **Discourse of Progress**

While the Chicago Columbian Exposition served as a vehicle of celebration, innovation, and profit, it was in fact packed full of ideological assumptions and projections, as were other expositions. The underlying purpose of the fair was to establish a discourse of industrial and technological progress, evolution, and empire. If we consider the fair's association with Columbus' "discovery" of America, the fair was from the start enmeshed in imperialist ideology of spread of empire, a deft mouthpiece for the spread of empire. The fair served to express an optimistic future – an ambitious political, social, and economic vision for the country. Erika Doss writes that the fair "is best understood on performative terms as a grand theatre where a forthcoming century's understandings of modernism, migration, and culture were rehearsed."<sup>214</sup> The fair offered its directors an opportunity to create a vision for America as a progressive world power, as well as a framework for sustaining the country's identity as linked to grand empires of the past.

The Columbian Exposition aimed to signify the benefits of progress, and encouraged Americans to support expansion and science; it instructed Americans on the necessary progression of civilization. The White City could be seen as a symbol of the benefits of American life and a representation of the ideals that Americans

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<sup>213</sup> Rydell, *World of Fairs*, 2-3.

<sup>214</sup> Doss, "The Gilded Age," in *Twentieth-Century American Art*, 19.

should strive to achieve.<sup>215</sup> Erik Larson, author of *The Devil in the White City*, describes the fair's idealized vision of an American city: "With its gorgeous classical buildings packed with art, its clean water and electric lights, and its overstaffed police department, the exposition was Chicago's conscience, the city it wanted to become."<sup>216</sup> Chicago at this time was a rapidly expanding metropolis, and had its share of problems including grime, poverty, crime, and other urban issues. With its blackened, soot-tainted streets and buildings, its fires, persistent smoke, putrid stockyards, and rampant disease, Chicago was far from ideal. Furthermore, the financial disaster in late century was felt throughout the country, as banks began to close, railroad stocks plummeted, and unemployment grew rapidly.

Rydell expresses the need for a vision of purity and well-being during this time: "To a country on the brink of yet another financial panic, the fair seemed a little ideal world, a realization of Utopia...[foreshadowing] some far away time when the earth should be as pure, as beautiful, and as joyous as the white city itself."<sup>217</sup> Connected to this notion of utopia is the concept of willed progress, that the fair could educate the public to achieve national collaboration toward a common future ideal.<sup>218</sup> These nationalistic undertones recall Anderson's discussion of nation-building strategies—that nationalistic attitudes are fictionally based and serve as a powerful means for binding citizens together for a common cause. Instilling notions of unity and allegiance for the nation, the fair even offered Americans a pledge for commitment. Francis J. Bellamy, editor of the children's magazine *Youth's Companion*, composed the Pledge of Allegiance for the Dedication Day of the fair so that schoolchildren in America would have something to offer their nation.<sup>219</sup>

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<sup>215</sup> Rydell, "The Chicago World's Columbian Exposition of 1893," in *All the World's a Fair*, 40.

<sup>216</sup> Erik Larson, *The Devil in the White City: Murder, Magic, and Madness at the Fair that Changed America* (New York: Crown, 2003), 181.

<sup>217</sup> Rydell, "The Chicago World's Columbian Exposition of 1893," in *All the World's a Fair*, 39.

<sup>218</sup> Rydell, "The Chicago World's Columbian Exposition of 1893," in *All the World's a Fair*, 46-47.

<sup>219</sup> Larson, *The Devil in the White City*, 181.



Thus, the fair embodied a specific political agenda of national unity and progress, and was steeped in ideological assumptions. G. Brown Goode of the Smithsonian Institution, who assisted in classifying exhibits for the fair, asserted that museums and fairs were an excellent device for the enlightenment of the public, so fundamental to a progressive civilization.<sup>220</sup> Goode described the central theme of this and future fairs as “an exhibition of ideas rather than of objects,” and stated that the fair would demonstrate “the steps of progress of civilization and its arts in successive centuries, in all lands up to the present time.”<sup>221</sup> The fair, consequently, would be “an illustrated encyclopedia of civilization.”<sup>222</sup>

The Columbian Exposition constructed a linear view of civilization according to the discourse of progress articulated by the fair’s directors. America could be seen as a continuation of an earlier empire; the new country built upon ancient traditions but would take its empire beyond the achievement of the Romans. The fair would represent “a new era in the onward march of civilization,”<sup>223</sup> a glorious vision of unity and triumph. Based on this vision of a utopian civilization, the Columbian Exposition borrowed heavily from classical tradition to establish a dialogue between America and ancient Western civilizations. It set up America as a global power akin to Rome in two notable ways; first, by allegorizing classical empires; and second, by establishing a discourse of racial evolution by way of marginalizing “other” – that is, nonwhite – cultures. The foreign peoples of Native America, Samoa, Java, South America, and other cultures, were placed on display at the Midway Plaisance. In juxtaposition to the idealized, classical area of the White City, the ethnographic displays of “savages” pointed to the triumph of Western civilization over others.<sup>224</sup>

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<sup>220</sup> Rydell, “The Chicago World’s Columbian Exposition of 1893,” in *All the World’s a Fair*, 44.

<sup>221</sup> Rydell, “The Chicago World’s Columbian Exposition of 1893,” in *All the World’s a Fair*, 45.

<sup>222</sup> George Brown Goode, “First Draft of a System of Classification for the World’s Columbian Exposition,” 656, 650-52, Smithsonian Institution Archives, Record Unit 70, box 37, in Rydell, “The Chicago World’s Columbian Exposition of 1893,” in *All the World’s a Fair*, 45.

<sup>223</sup> Thomas W. Palmer, “Presentation of the Buildings,” in *Memorial Volume: Dedicatory and Opening Ceremonies of the World’s Columbian Exposition* (Chicago: A. L. Stone, 1893), 159, quoted in Rydell, “The Chicago World’s Columbian Exposition of 1893,” in *All the World’s a Fair*, 46.

<sup>224</sup> Rydell, “The Chicago World’s Columbian Exposition of 1893,” in *All the World’s a Fair*, 63.

The Japanese exhibit was the only nonwhite area of the fair to be granted any sign of respect. Rydell believes this is because the Japanese were made an example to backward Asian countries for their willingness to invest and participate in American commerce.<sup>225</sup>

The fair's directors excluded the African American population from fully participating at the exposition. African American leaders were denied a place on the fair's committee, and their achievements since the Civil War were not admitted for display at the fair. The fair's directors did encourage African Americans to submit exhibits, though they first had to be approved by all-white communities in their respective home states. Hence, very few African American exhibits actually made their way to the fair.<sup>226</sup> The fair management's treatment of African Americans reinforced racist thinking of the time, though this went largely unnoticed by the public as there were few overt instances of racial exclusion during the fair itself.<sup>227</sup> One day was set aside to acknowledge African Americans at the fair – "Colored People's Day" on August 25, 1893 – when Frederick Douglass delivered his message from the Haitian Building. He declared, "Men talk of the Negro Problem. There is no Negro Problem. The problem is whether the American people have honesty enough, loyalty enough, honor enough, patriotism enough to live up to their own Constitution."<sup>228</sup>

Through these tactics of exclusion, the fair reinforced notions of a white-centered, advanced American civilization, with the nonwhite outsiders represented as being ostensibly "barbaric and childlike."<sup>229</sup> This discourse of "other" relates to White's analysis of establishing a historical narrative in the process of creating American identity in the late nineteenth century. White writes that the Natives

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<sup>225</sup> Rydell, "The Chicago World's Columbian Exposition of 1893," in *All the World's a Fair*, 48-49.

<sup>226</sup> Rydell, "The Chicago World's Columbian Exposition of 1893," in *All the World's a Fair*, 52-53

<sup>227</sup> Rydell, Findling, and Pelle, *Fair America*, 39.

<sup>228</sup> Quoted in Rydell, "The Chicago World's Columbian Exposition of 1893," in *All the World's a Fair*, 53.

<sup>229</sup> Rydell, "The Chicago World's Columbian Exposition of 1893," in *All the World's a Fair*, 40.

Americans' status as "natural slave" provided a justification for the conquering of the New World following the arrival of Columbus in America.<sup>230</sup> He argues, "The implicit distinction is between barbarians and city dwellers, a distinction that simply juxtaposes two ways of life found universally, positions the individual in a situation of choice between these two ways of life, and accepts force as the ultimate form of mediation in cases where the two ways come into conflict."<sup>231</sup> This ideological slant evident in the juxtaposition of native cultures, including the marginalized African American population, with ostensibly advanced ones (white culture) provided a strong undercurrent for the pro-white movement in nineteenth-century America.

### **Establishing American Empire: Visions of Antiquity**

Returning to the first instance of establishing a discourse of progress at the fair, we can examine how the design of the fair and its architecture served the allegory of empire. The White City's Court of Honor formed the central point of the exposition, with wide boulevards and harmonious neoclassical edifices surrounding the lagoon. Edgar Lee Masters called the White City "an inexhaustible dream of beauty."<sup>232</sup> The white neoclassical buildings, which shared a common cornice line, appeared to be authentic marble structures, though nearly all were in fact cheap imitations, hastily erected. The structures were framed in wood, covered in staff (a mixture of plaster, cement, and straw), and spray-painted white.<sup>233</sup> Elaborately decorated with neoclassical murals and statues that portrayed allegorical themes, the classically proportioned European-inspired buildings harkened back to classical tradition, connecting American empire and its ancient Greco-Roman predecessors – which was precisely the fair's allegorical purpose.

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<sup>230</sup> White, "The Noble Savage Theme as Fetish," in *The Tropics of Discourse*, 188.

<sup>231</sup> White, "The Noble Savage Theme as Fetish," in *The Tropics of Discourse*, 189.

<sup>232</sup> Larson, *The Devil in the White City*, 252.

<sup>233</sup> The technique of spray-painting was, in fact, invented for use at the Chicago Columbian Exposition. Other notable inventions/products that came from the fair are the Ferris Wheel, Shredded Wheat cereal, and Juicy Fruit gum.

Sculpture created for the fair also supported its didactic purpose in linking America to classical tradition. The *Columbian Fountain*, designed by Frederick MacMonnies, represented Columbus' arrival in America with an allegorical figure of a female, seminude Columbia atop the Barge of State at its center. At the far end of the Court of Honor stood Daniel Chester French's *The Republic*, an enormous gilded statue of a goddess holding an eagle.<sup>234</sup> These, and other ubiquitous monumental forms at the fair "underscored the fair's ideal of republican unity" and served as recognizable symbols of America as an imperialist power.<sup>235</sup> There was even a *quadriga*, or a horse-drawn war chariot, next to a statue of Columbus and several allegorical female figures, which further linked Columbus—and America—to the cultural emblems and principles of classical empires.<sup>236</sup>

It is notable that the classical city that Cole imagined some sixty years earlier in *The Course of Empire* bears striking resemblance to the architecture of the exposition. It is not difficult to note the remarkable similarities between the Court of Honor, with its neoclassical buildings, lagoon, and public statue, and Cole's metropolis of *Consummation*.<sup>237</sup> However, the vision projected by the fair directors couldn't be more dissimilar to Cole's, as Angela L. Miller points out; "the architects of the fair—unlike Cole half a century earlier—now embraced the analogy with imperial Rome rather than taking it as a stern warning."<sup>238</sup>

It is significant that the neoclassical architecture and sculpture of the fair, in serving its allegorical purpose, was created in a contemporary American context, which allowed for America to clearly be seen as the new heir to the empires of the past. Richard Watson Gilder's homage to the fair in his 1893 poem entitled "The White City" notes its striking resemblance to classical cities, and accordingly expresses America's association to ancient empire:

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<sup>234</sup> Doss notes that this statue was Chicago's answer to New York's *Statue of Liberty*.

<sup>235</sup> Doss, "The Gilded Age," in *Twentieth-Century American Art*, 22.

<sup>236</sup> Doss, "The Gilded Age," in *Twentieth-Century American Art*, 23.

<sup>237</sup> Miller et al., *American Encounters*, 382.

<sup>238</sup> Miller et al., *American Encounters*, 382.

Greece was; Greece is no more.  
 Temple and town  
 Have crumbled down;  
 Time is the fire that hath consumed them all.  
 Statue and wall  
 In ruin strew the universal floor.

Greece lives, but Greece no more!  
 Its ashes breed  
 The underlying seed  
 Blown westward till, in Rome's imperial towers,  
 Athens reflowers;  
 Still westward – lo, a veiled and virgin shore!

Say not, "Greece is no more."  
 Through the clear morn  
 On light winds borne  
 Her white-winged soul sinks on the New World's breast  
 Ah! happy West –  
 Greece flowers anew, and all her temples soar!<sup>239</sup>

By appropriating classical art and architecture, America wished to establish a narrative of the country as a preeminent world power linked to its ancient Greco-Roman antecedents, and also to Anglo-Saxon and western European culture.<sup>240</sup> Burnham, and the other elites who collaborated on designing the fair, saw art as a carrier of moral and social values, and utilized its potential to elevate the public and encourage correct public behavior.<sup>241</sup> Doss notes, "Culture was understood as an important vehicle by which the 'official' American identity and these national standards could be taught, and Chicago's fair was viewed as a primary school of instruction."<sup>242</sup>

Ironically, despite its grandiose cultural enterprise of stability and permanence, the White City itself was physically temporary. The fair only ran for six months. The structures of the exposition, as noted earlier, were rapidly erected of cheap materials in Burnham's failed push to make the fair's dedication coincide with Columbus' anniversary. If the architects had been able to build their structures as

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<sup>239</sup> Richard Watson Gilder, "The White City," *The Century* 46, no. 1 (May 1893): 22-23, Cornell University Library Making of America Collection, <http://digital.library.cornell.edu> (accessed May 16, 2010).

<sup>240</sup> Doss, "The Gilded Age," in *Twentieth-Century American Art*, 25.

<sup>241</sup> Doss, "The Gilded Age," in *Twentieth-Century American Art*, 24.

<sup>242</sup> Doss, "The Gilded Age," in *Twentieth-Century American Art*, 25.

originally planned – of stone, steel, and brick – the building would have taken far too long.<sup>243</sup> The staff with which the buildings were covered provided the illusion of stone, another irony, for here is more evidence of the pretenses of the fair. Then the flimsy structures were destroyed, echoing the fate of ancient Greece. Some of the buildings burned even during the course of the fair, and many of the rest were consumed by fire after the fair's closing. There was a further irony in the expressions of resignation and longing for the fair following its passing. As a *Cosmopolitan* magazine writer expressed it, "Better to have [the White City] vanish suddenly, in a blaze of glory, than fall into gradual disrepair and dilapidation. There is no more melancholy spectacle than a festal hall, the morning after the banquet, when the guests have departed and the lights are extinguished."<sup>244</sup>

The contrast between the grandeur of the idealized White City and the realities of Chicago grew more pronounced following the fair as well. Workers who had been employed by the fair found themselves suddenly without jobs. An author of *American Chronicle* wrote, "What a spectacle! What a human downfall after the magnificence and prodigality of the World's Fair which had so recently closed its doors! Heights of splendor, pride, exaltation in one month: depths of wretchedness, suffering, hunger, cold, in the next."<sup>245</sup> It is highly paradoxical that the fair structures were destroyed in light of the intention to project visions of lasting empire and progress into an extended American future. It was as if the fate of the fair validated Cole's belief half a century earlier in the cyclical nature of civilization – that all empires must eventually fall.

### **Allegorical Optimism**

Allegory, as we have learned from Benjamin, Owens, and other scholars of allegorical theory, provides potential for political commentary under the allegorist's melancholic gaze. For Benjamin, allegory primarily carries a pessimistic viewpoint,

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<sup>243</sup> Larson, *The Devil in the White City*, 120.

<sup>244</sup> Larson, *The Devil in the White City*, 322.

<sup>245</sup> Larson, *The Devil in the White City*, 334.

and we have witnessed Thomas Cole's strongly pessimistic prediction of America's future through allegory in *The Course of Empire*. Though it may be most often thought of as having negative and melancholic associations, allegory can, in fact, present a positive outlook and affirmation of an idea. In allegory's role of asserting a vision of empire at the Columbian Exposition, we may observe this alternative mode. Numerous Italian Renaissance works of art also embody optimistic allegorical themes; for example, Agnolo Bronzino's *Allegory of Happiness* of 1564. This scene, with the figures of Justice and Prudence standing over Happiness, offers affirmation of the results of holding good values. The figures of Prudence and Justice are both able to ward off their enemies, Blind Envy, Folly, and Deceit. The meaning of Bronzino's allegory is that civic and spiritual happiness have been achieved in Florence under Cosimo I de' Medici's rule.<sup>246</sup> Other examples of non-melancholic allegory in humanistic art traditions occur when allegory serves to exalt the power of religion. Peter Paul Rubens' allegorical images for Marie de' Medici and the London Whitehall ceiling offer themes of war and peace, and assert Rubens' support of church and state.<sup>247</sup> Titian's *Allegory of Prudence* likewise offers a hopeful vision of the future through allegories of time and the succeeding generations of man.

Like its optimistic allegorical precursors, the Columbian Exposition was certainly not melancholic; allegory at the fair offered a blindly positive—even triumphalist—expression of the glory of empires past and classical traditions. The fair, in fact, lauded the notion of American empire to feed the growing discourse of progress. There is no suggestion of collapse of empire here; and the fair potently ignores potential downfalls and perils associated with an expanding empire.

We may assume, based on the discussion of the fair's projections of a utopian future, that America viewed itself as an exception to the inexorable decline of other empires. According to the theory of American exceptionalism, America was unlike

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<sup>246</sup> Graham Smith, "Bronzino's *Allegory of Happiness*," *The Art Bulletin* 66, no. 3 (September 1984): 390-399, 394.

<sup>247</sup> Lisa Rosenthal, *Gender, Politics, and Allegory in the Art of Rubens* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 70.

other countries, and defined its duty as guardian of the globe and setter of moral example. First to refer to America as an “exception” was French aristocrat and writer Alexis de Tocqueville, who visited the country in 1830.<sup>248</sup> As an empire, America saw itself as a superior, stronger, and more advanced civilization, one guided by democratic principles and therefore capable of overcoming the usual pitfalls associated with empire. According to this theory, as Deborah L. Madsen puts it, “Americans are special, exceptional, because they are charged with saving the world from itself and, at the same time, America and Americans must sustain a high level of spiritual, political and moral commitment to this exceptional destiny...”<sup>249</sup> Furthermore, the myth of exceptionalism holds that “America must be as ‘a city upon a hill’ exposed to the eyes of the world.”<sup>250</sup> There is a prominent religious connotation evident in this theory of exceptionalism. From the colonial period onward, America’s Puritanical destiny was grounded in religious intention, in Christian hopes for the new world. Tocqueville also noted America’s religious fervor, and that it was the most religious country in Christendom.<sup>251</sup> It is not a stretch, in analyzing what has been revealed of the Columbian Exposition’s inclinations and underlying ideological assumptions, to propose that the directors of the fair must have wholeheartedly endorsed this myth of American exceptionalism.

It may be useful at this juncture to point out the layering of religious allegory atop political allegory at the fair that fed the myth of American exceptionalism. We note a strong religious overtone in the new American culture being articulated at the fair: specifically, a utopian vision of a “New Jerusalem,” a city that would be holy, clean, and without crime or sin.<sup>252</sup> The concept of a “New Jerusalem” is no less than

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<sup>248</sup> Seymour Martin Lipset, *American Exceptionalism: A Double-Edged Sword* (New York and London: W.W. Norton, 1996), 17-18.

<sup>249</sup> Deborah L. Madsen, *American Exceptionalism* (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 1998), 2.

<sup>250</sup> “City upon a hill” are the words of John Winthrop, who set out to colonize America in the 1630s. Madsen, *American Exceptionalism*, 18.

<sup>251</sup> Lipset, *American Exceptionalism*, 19.

<sup>252</sup> Rydell, “The Chicago World’s Columbian Exposition of 1893,” in *All the World’s a Fair*, 48.



a representation of the Promised Land. This concept is intrinsic to the discourse of manifest destiny – God’s will dictates expansion and progress – that formed the ideology of American expansionism in the nineteenth century. Religious revivalism and moral reform spread across the American continent in early- to mid-century, and we perceive these themes in Washington Allston’s visions of a new America based on the Old Testament. Allston was hopeful that America would establish a new Christian Paradise.<sup>253</sup> This view is evidenced in *Belshazzar’s Feast* (1817-43), which paid tribute to the notion of divine reckoning and prophesied a bright Christian future for America contingent upon a strong morality.<sup>254</sup>

We can see examples of religious allegory occurring earlier in American history; during the eighteenth century, for instance, stories of the ancient Israelites of the Old Testament came to allegorize the American Revolution.<sup>255</sup> Scholars in eighteenth-century Boston were enraptured, and motivated by, interpretations of the Old Testament as models for the new American Republic. David Bjelajac writes of the religious beliefs of Harvard University professors who, revealingly, referred to themselves as “prophets”:

The prophets and sons of the prophets were to transform the American wilderness into a millennial paradise of enlightened piety. They would teach their intellectual inferiors to curb base, selfish instincts, and instead, to practice self-sacrifice and benevolence for the public good...Americans needed to be reminded that ultimate sovereign power rested not with the people but with God and His law, as interpreted by the schools of the prophets, especially Harvard, Princeton, or Yale.<sup>256</sup>

This history of religious fervor among America’s leaders – for reinforcing the religious base in this country – demonstrates that the directors of the Chicago Columbian Exposition likely could also have been inspired by religious conviction, or at least the expediency thereof. Allegory at the fair is likewise steeped in pious ideals for America’s future. As I have argued, the religious overlay of allegory at the fair presented yet another persuasive dimension to political aspirations for the

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<sup>253</sup> David Bjelajac, *Millennial Desire and the Apocalyptic Vision of Washington Allston* (Washington, D.C. and London: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1988), xi.

<sup>254</sup> Bjelajac, *Millennial Desire*, 99.

<sup>255</sup> Bjelajac, *Millennial Desire*, 50.

<sup>256</sup> Bjelajac, *Millennial Desire*, 57-58.

future of the American empire. After all, religion and politics were bound closely together throughout the history of this country, and continue, we can claim, in present-day politics.

## CONCLUSION

The visions of American civilization projected by the fair were highly unrealistic and the goals unachievable – as well as dangerous – for the fair projected America as a white-dominated, global power. These false visions were built on a foundation of denial that America would be vulnerable to the catastrophes that inevitably beset empires. The fair's directors projected a utopian ideal amidst the bleak realities of the time, which leads us to conclude that the myth of American exceptionalism played a major part in this discourse. At the Columbian Exposition, there was, indeed, a pressing need to create a vision of utopia for Americans to strive toward during hard times, as discussed earlier in our consideration of social, political, and economic realities at the close of the nineteenth century. The exposition was also intended to have a calming effect on international relations during America's energetic expansionist period.<sup>257</sup> In the face of the grim realities of postwar Chicago, the allegorizing of America as a grand, classical empire provided a means for America's leaders to create an image for the country's future based on imperialist goals and to ignore current social, economic, and political problems.

We may question whether the fair indeed succeeded in establishing America in the public mind as a global empire centered on progress and imperialist values, though it was, without doubt, a huge financial success. Total attendance reached more than twenty million visitors, and profits ran to \$1.4 million. Though nearly all the fair buildings burned, memories of the fair lived on in museum exhibits, in writings about the event, and in photographs. Several of its exhibits were later installed at an exposition in San Francisco.<sup>258</sup>

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<sup>257</sup> Rydell, "The Chicago World's Columbian Exposition of 1893," in *All the World's a Fair*, 70.

<sup>258</sup> Rydell, Findling, and Pelle, *Fair America*, 41.

We have demonstrated that earlier in the nineteenth century, in consideration of Thomas Cole's *The Course of Empire*, allegory projected visions of empire culminating in doom and destruction. Yet we may question whether allegory in art can ever be truly political because art is so closely connected to high culture and because allegory's lessons can be so easily misinterpreted. To explore the question further, we may next examine the work of a postmodern artist who, similarly to Cole, deploys allegory as an intended means of political dissent.

## CHAPTER 3

### CONTEMPORARY DISCOURSE OF EMPIRE: THE LAST OF AMERICAN EMPIRE AND ELEANOR ANTIN'S ALLEGORIES

"Tragedies were first produced to remind men of actual experiences and to suggest both that it is natural that such things should happen, and also that if these events entertain us when exhibited on the stage, we should put up with them upon the larger stage of life without repining. For at the play you see that things must turn out as they do..."

-Marcus Aurelius

#### INTRODUCTION

The discourse of empire, which gained momentum in the nineteenth century as represented in the allegorical works of Thomas Cole and the Chicago Columbian Exposition of 1893, continued with fervor through the twentieth and into the twenty-first century. We may trace the nineteenth-century obsession with history, ruins, and classical themes carrying forth into recent art, and see these themes rearticulated in the work of contemporary photographer Eleanor Antin. In this chapter, I will discuss the significance of the paradigm of ancient Rome for present-day discourse of American Empire and the perceived decline of American Empire. I will also examine allegory's relevance to contemporary art in works by Antin that explore politically-charged subjects, namely her photographic series of 2001-2007, which vigorously allegorizes the vices and fall of empire. By analyzing Antin's use of allegory in the context of current political, economic, and social situations in the United States, we can observe a commonality between nineteenth-century models and contemporary uses of the device. I will also consider how theories of allegory, history, and photography influence interpretation of this artist's work. I will argue that the context in which Antin cites diverse sources in history, politics, and art forms both an overt and a richly complex allegorical expression.

## DISCOURSE OF EMPIRE

The discourse of empire that began to coalesce during the nineteenth-century, with goals for American Empire and progress embodied in the Chicago Columbian Exposition of 1893, offered a grandiose political, economic, and social outlook for the future of the young empire. America was to be the next global hegemon, extending its influence as a dominant world power to distant countries.

Recent prolific theories of empire draw comparison between American Empire and empires through history. Many of these sources suggest that traditional problems associated with empire also afflict the American model, and predict its future decline in a manner not so different from that of ancient Rome.

One such discourse, which charts the rise and decline of American Empire in comparison to others, is Niall Ferguson's *Colossus: The Price of America's Empire* (2004). Ferguson begins his study of the politics of American Empire by defining empire as distinct from ordinary civilization in its use of military force to extend authority over others.<sup>259</sup> Ferguson's analysis of America in terms of its political structure, foreign relations, financial resources, and other key initiatives links it compellingly to influential imperial powers of the past. Ferguson suggests that the American Empire can be viewed as a continuation of the British Empire: "If the British Empire was America's precursor as the global hegemon, might not the United States equally well be Britain's successor as an Anglophone empire? Most historians would agree with that, if anything."<sup>260</sup> We may find evidence that supports Ferguson's provocative theory in other sources that also note America's imperial tactics. Historian R. W. Van Alstyne asserted in the 1960s that our Founding Fathers, as early as 1783, viewed America as a "rising empire" and that "The phrase describes precisely what [George Washington] and his contemporaries had in mind, that is to say an *imperium*—a dominion, state, or sovereignty that

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<sup>259</sup> Niall Ferguson, *Colossus: The Price of America's Empire* (New York: Penguin Press, 2004), 169.

<sup>260</sup> Ferguson, *Colossus*, 9.

would expand in population and territory, increase in strength and power.”<sup>261</sup> How could America *not* be an empire when the country’s inception—its colonization by the British Empire, which at its pinnacle dominated a substantial portion of the globe—is thereby rooted in expansionist tendencies? We can deem young America’s territory-building tactics a logical extension of its Western predecessors.

Ferguson situates the American Empire, despite its similarities to other empires, as a more commanding and influential entity than its predecessors. He writes that America, following its conquests after World War II, would “bestride the world like a colossus; neither Rome at the height of its power nor Great Britain in the period of its economic supremacy enjoyed an influence so direct, so profound, or so pervasive.”<sup>262</sup>

According to Ferguson’s theory, America, like other empires, would be subject to an eventual fall. We may question whether America is indeed destined to fall like past empires based on Ferguson’s and others’ political assumptions, or whether it is an exceptional empire, as some have argued. First, however, we should visit the discourse of the decline of the Roman Empire and determine its influence on—and relevance to—this discourse of American Empire.

### **Comparing the American Empire to Rome**

In the plentiful literature on American Empire and this empire’s potential problems, America is most often linked to the Roman Empire, that vast, culturally refined, and seemingly indestructible empire, which, nonetheless, dramatically fell in 476 C.E. Ancient Rome has fascinated historians, artists, poets, and philosophers through the centuries. The allure of the Roman Empire and the proliferation of accounts of its legacy are due largely to the significant work of Edward Gibbon, the English historian who extensively analyzed the Roman Empire and its fall in his seminal *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1776-1788). The introduction to a

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<sup>261</sup> R.W. Van Alstyne, *The Rising American Empire* (Chicago: Quadrangle, 1965), 1.

<sup>262</sup> Geir Lundestad, *The American “Empire” and Other Studies of U.S. Foreign Policy in a Comparative Perspective*, 39, quoted in Ferguson, *Colossus*, 68.

condensed edition of Gibbon's tome published in the United States in 1943 draws an analogy between American Empire and that of Rome. Willson Whitman, the editor of the 1943 edition, suggested that Gibbon's work "reveals the vices and virtue of an infinitely more complex society which, over the centuries, more nearly resembles our own."<sup>263</sup> Henry Wallace, then vice-president under Franklin Roosevelt, also noted in the introduction that, "There is sufficient likeness between the Greco-Roman civilization and our own to make us consider to what extent we are in a period somewhat similar to that of Augustus Caesar."<sup>264</sup>

Gibbon's analysis of the vices of the Roman Empire underlying its decline demonstrates striking similarities with the current state of the American Empire as outlined by Ferguson. First, Ferguson demonstrates that both empires are characterized by a hefty military presence, and that the size and influence of the U.S. army and its economic resources are indications of a formidable empire.<sup>265</sup> Gibbon likewise noted of Rome's imposing army: "They preserved peace by a constant preparation for war."<sup>266</sup> There are numerous other similarities between Roman and American Empire, Ferguson notes: both began with a small core of citizens and expanded drastically, conferred citizenship on many people, and both kept slaves. Both also massively annexed territories, demonstrating the domination of an expanding empire.<sup>267</sup>

America's foreign policy gives further evidence of an imperialist mindset: that it is in the far-flung interests of the U.S. to pursue values such as "justice" and "liberty," and impose like policy on nations across the globe. Too, the American desire for oil can be compared to the desire of Rome and other empires through history to seek out mineral wealth far beyond their borders; Rome invaded remote

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<sup>263</sup> Willson Whitman, introduction to Edward Gibbon, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire: Condensed for Modern Reading* (New York: Wise, 1943), x.

<sup>264</sup> Whitman, introduction to Gibbon, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, xii.

<sup>265</sup> Ferguson, *Colossus*, 16-17.

<sup>266</sup> Gibbon, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, 5.

<sup>267</sup> Ferguson, *Colossus*, 40-41.

areas in order to supply the empire with a multitude of luxuries and delicacies.<sup>268</sup> As Gibbon noted, Rome's inhabitants greedily sought wealth and "enjoyed and abused the advantages of wealth and luxury."<sup>269</sup>

It is significant that America chose the eagle as its national emblem, in concordance with mighty past empires. From the Persians to the Ptolemaic Empire of Egypt, and from the Roman Empire onward, the eagle has served as a seal of empire, symbolizing notions of power, bravery, and honor.<sup>270</sup>

We can find a highly visible link between American and Roman Empire, too, in the predominant style of architecture of America's government buildings. Like the staging for the Chicago Columbian Exposition of 1893, the grand, white, neoclassical architecture of Washington, D.C. deliberately links America to its ancient predecessors. Ferguson notes that the capital and the republican structure of its government would invite us to believe that America may be, more than any other empire in history, a "new Rome."<sup>271</sup> Considering the multitude of similarities to empires of the past, it is not a stretch to place America in alignment with older traditions of order and republic, and therefore to assume the potential for demise.

### **Demise and Eventual Collapse of Empire**

American Empire, if it is like empires of the past, will be fleeting, according to Ferguson, and he remarks on its instability: "If, as so many commentators claim, America is embarking on a new age of empire, it is shaping up to be the most ephemeral empire in all history."<sup>272</sup> Gibbon's account of Rome's fall claims the inevitable temporality of imperialism—that all empires eventually fall. Decline is likely to come from within, Gibbon perceives, noting that decay and corruption

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<sup>268</sup> Gibbon, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, 27.

<sup>269</sup> Gibbon, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, 1.

<sup>270</sup> Other empires that featured the eagle on their seal or coat-of-arms include the Byzantine Empire, Imperial Germany, the Austrian Empire, the Russian Empire, and French Empire under Napoleon I.

<sup>271</sup> Ferguson, *Colossus*, 14.

<sup>272</sup> Ferguson, *Colossus*, 204.



permeated the Roman government which itself “introduced a slow and secret poison into the vitals of the empire.”<sup>273</sup>

Likewise, the rampant spending of the capitalist empire results in colossal debt, which, Ferguson argues, presents evidence of downturn: “...the decline and fall of America’s undeclared empire may be due not to terrorists at the gates or to the rogue regimes that sponsor them, but to a fiscal crisis of the welfare state at home.”<sup>274</sup> British historian and international relations expert Paul Kennedy warned of this phenomenon, which he called “imperial overstretch.”<sup>275</sup> Ample evidence suggests that the U.S. is indeed teetering on the precipice of economic collapse – overspending on the military, and borrowing heavily to sustain this spending. Ferguson reflected that the economic situation in America in 2004 was “so bad that scarcely anyone believes it.”<sup>276</sup> Historian Andrew J. Bacevich argued in 2008, “The United States may still remain the mightiest power the world has ever seen, but the fact is that Americans are no longer masters of their own fate.”<sup>277</sup>

The phenomenon of the inevitable demise of empires as articulated by Gibbon and Ferguson, among others, is readily associated with the cyclical theory of civilization, which inspired Cole to paint *The Course of Empire*. The potential for decline of empire has been recognized throughout modern history, especially during times of political conflict and war; British politician Stanley Baldwin asked in 1926, “Who in Europe does not know that one more war in the West, and the civilization of the ages will fall with as great a shock as that of Rome?”<sup>278</sup>

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<sup>273</sup> Gibbon, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, 29.

<sup>274</sup> Ferguson, *Colossus*, 279.

<sup>275</sup> Paul Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers: Economic Change and Military Conflict from 1500 to 2000* (New York: Harper Collins, 1989), 689, quoted in Ferguson, *Colossus*, 261.

<sup>276</sup> Ferguson, *Colossus*, 271,

<sup>277</sup> Andrew J. Bacevich, *The Limits of Power: The End of American Exceptionalism* (New York: Henry Holt, 2008), 16-17

<sup>278</sup> Whitman, introduction to Gibbon, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, xii.

## American Exceptionalism

However apparent the economic, social, and political problems of American Empire, there is far from public concurrence on the matter. As with projections for a utopian future by America's leaders through the nineteenth century (for example, at the Chicago Columbian Exposition), America generally sees itself as an exception to the cyclical nature of empires. Ferguson argues that the country denies that it is an empire at all, suggesting this as the reason the U.S. does not want to occupy other countries longer than "necessary."<sup>279</sup> This tendency to denial of America as an empire subject to fall has been a recurring phenomenon through American history, and plays into the theory of American exceptionalism. Bacevich reflects on America's exceptionalist mindset: "From its founding, America has expressed through its behavior and its evolution a providential purpose. Paying homage to, and therefore renewing, this tradition of American exceptionalism has long been one of the presidency's primary extraconstitutional obligations."<sup>280</sup>

We can observe America viewing itself as a force distinct from its European counterparts in the country's early agrarian ideology. Historian David M. Wrobel, in his research on frontier ideology, mentions that Benjamin Franklin, among other eighteenth-century leaders, viewed the vastness of the American continent as a reason to dismiss anxiety about European traditions and political problems infringing on American soil.<sup>281</sup> Georg W. F. Hegel perpetuated this myth, arguing in the early 1820s, "America is hitherto exempt from...[economic] pressure, for it has an outlet of colonialization constantly and widely open, and multitudes are continually streaming into the plains of the Mississippi. By this means the chief

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<sup>279</sup> Ferguson, *Colossus*, 6-7.

<sup>280</sup> Bacevich, *The Limits of Power*, 18.

<sup>281</sup> David M. Wrobel, *The End of American Exceptionalism: Frontier Anxiety from the Old West to the New Deal* (Lawrence, KS: Kansas University Press, 1993), 6.

source of discontent is removed, and the continuation of the existing civil condition is guaranteed.”<sup>282</sup>

The notion of America as exempt from pressures that afflict empires continued into the 1940s. Vice-President Wallace denied the notion of the impending fall of modern civilization in 1943: “With modern machinery, modern science, and the insight obtainable in our modern universities, there is no necessary compulsion for this civilization to follow the rhythms of the past.”<sup>283</sup> Wallace, among others, believed our insights into why and how Rome declined would protect us from succumbing to the same fate, thereby breaking the cycle of rise and fall.<sup>284</sup>

The myth of exceptionalism has been perpetuated down to the present, in that America sees itself as a global helper, rather than a traditional imperial power. America’s view of itself as an exception to other imperial powers has served as a means for rationalizing otherwise questionable political behavior. As Bacevich notes, “America’s status as a force for good in a world that pits good against evil has provided a rationale for bribing foreign officials, assassinating foreign leaders, overthrowing governments, and undertaking major military interventions. George W. Bush did not invent this practice; he merely inherited and expanded upon it.”<sup>285</sup>

We may conclude from this discussion that American political ideology is anchored in myth; it created a narrative about itself through political discourse. We may even consider America and its projected national identity as an allegory in itself. American historians tended to allegorize the country by creating a myth of itself as an exceptional empire. The country links itself through allegory – historical narratives, architecture, and discourse – to the grand traditions of the past. Professor of rhetoric and the humanities Frederick M. Dolan asserts that America’s self-allegorization is ultimately self-deconstructing because it is based entirely on

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<sup>282</sup> Georg W. F. Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of History* (New York: Colonial Press, 1900), 85-87, quoted in Wrobel, *The End of American Exceptionalism*, 7.

<sup>283</sup> Whitman, introduction to Gibbon, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, xii.

<sup>284</sup> Whitman, introduction to Gibbon, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, xii.

<sup>285</sup> Bacevich, *The Limits of Power*, 78.

fiction.<sup>286</sup> “America’s discourse of national identity,” according to Dolan, “incessantly negotiates the two poles of, on the one hand, solid foundations of grand narratives and, on the other hand, the ever-present threat of collapse of absolutes.”<sup>287</sup> The country’s intermingling of grand narratives of empire with its democratic foundations presents a volatile political scenario in Dolan’s argument. As we will see, the fictional foundation to which Dolan refers serves as the basis for political commentary through the use of allegory in art.

### Melancholia Amidst Decline

Before turning to allegory of empire in recent art, we should note again that a melancholic sentiment accompanies the observation of past empires. A fallen empire is undeniably a loss – a loss of a celebrated culture, its objects, and the people who created them. Like other eighteenth-century historians and philosophers, Gibbon found the remains of antiquity compelling, as meditations on the passage of time and impermanence – and probably also as means for grieving the loss of a once-glorious classical civilization. Thus, it is not unexpected that Gibbon described the fall of Rome with longing:

In the full meridian of empire the metropolis arose with fresh beauty from her ashes; yet the memory of the old deplored their irreparable losses, the arts of Greece, the trophies of victory, the monuments of primitive or fabulous antiquity... The art of man is able to construct monuments far more permanent than the narrow span of his own existence; yet these monuments, like himself, are perishable and frail; and in the boundless annals of time his life and his labors must equally be measured as a fleeting moment.<sup>288</sup>

The fragility and temporality of humans and their monuments are strongly felt in Gibbon’s description, with his dwelling on “the narrow span” of human existence. It is possible to experience that same recognition of temporality and melancholia *while* witnessing a decline. Roman emperor Marcus Aurelius (reigned 161 to 180 C.E.) expressed his perceptions of human transience thusly: “What a little fragment of boundless, immeasurable time is ours! In an instant it vanishes into eternity. How

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<sup>286</sup> Frederick M. Dolan, *Allegories of America: Narratives, Metaphysics, Politics* (Ithaca, NY and London: Cornell University Press, 1994), 2.

<sup>287</sup> Dolan, *Allegories of America*, 2-3.

<sup>288</sup> Gibbon, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, 458.

small a part of the universal substance!...Bearing these things in mind, think nothing of importance except...to bear whatever universal nature brings."<sup>289</sup>

This brings us to the allegorical tendency, which arises from witnessing loss, as Walter Benjamin and Craig Owens convincingly argue, and which makes one aware of the inexorable passage of time. From the allegorist's perspective, it is a vast distance from the past together with a desire to rescue it from slipping irretrievably away that is perhaps allegory's greatest modern inclination.<sup>290</sup> The fragments of great works of art and architecture that survive after all else passes away serve as the stimulus of melancholia for lost civilizations, and the foundations of allegory. We will shortly examine the role of the ancient fragment in the work of Antin.

While nostalgia for lost cultures and civilizations can be directed toward ruins and objects of antiquity, there is certainly the potential as well for anxiety about one's own fate—or the collective fate of present-day humanity—to be expressed through allegory. Noting the predominating melancholic and anxious sentiments that accompany allegory, we can now turn to an example of allegory in contemporary art that expresses such sentiments—along with a larger political message.

### ELEANOR ANTIN'S ALLEGORICAL NARRATIVES

With the context of American Empire in mind, and having considered the implications of America's link to the Roman Empire, we are ready to examine allegory's potential for present-day political commentary. In this discussion, I will consider a source of allegory in the politically-motivated works of artist Eleanor Antin (b. 1935), who allegorized empire in decline in her large-scale photographic tableaux of 2001-2007. Antin's allegories suggest the melancholic sentiment that typically accompanies allegory's reference to classical legacy, but they more strongly

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<sup>289</sup> *Selections from the Meditations of Marcus Aurelius*, trans. Benjamin E. Smith (New York: Century Company, 1899), 200-201.

<sup>290</sup> Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, quoted in Owens, "The Allegorical Impulse," 52.

offer an anxiety-laden view of the future, and they attempt a moral warning in similar fashion to Cole's *Course of Empire* a century earlier.

Before we examine Antin's allegories in light of their political references, we should consider this artist's background and her history of politically-themed art. Antin explored diverse interests as a student at City College of New York in the late 1950s, where she studied creative writing and art, while dabbling in acting and dance. Antin's mother had been an actress in Yiddish theater in Poland prior to immigrating to the United States. This link to European theater affected Antin's imaginative vision, adding power to her commentaries on sexuality, gender, war, and greed.<sup>291</sup> Amid the social and political turmoil of the late 1960s to early 1970s, when women's issues, the Vietnam War, and civil rights were large concerns, Antin explored conceptual art with feminist and political themes in mind. She repeatedly addressed issues of identity – social, racial, political, and religious in her diverse media, from film to photography to performance. Antin's provocative and complexly layered art crossed and melded boundaries between various media and genres, blurring distinctions between art and life. Her work has challenged conventional notions of identity, gender, race, politics, and history itself. Through her invented personae, including *The King of Solana Beach*, *the Nurse*, *Eleanor Nightingale*, and *Eleanor Antinova*, the black ballerina, and her experiments in photography, film, and performance, Antin has made groundbreaking contributions to art.

In more recent years, Antin began photographing grand-scale tableaux of ancient Greek and Roman life that she staged in the series *The Last Days of Pompeii* (2001), *Roman Allegories* (2004), and *Helen's Odyssey* (2007). These works introduce allegory to her work with themes borrowed from drama, literature, and history. Each series of photographs depicts a different ancient scene, while referencing the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century traditions of English and French Salon painting.

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<sup>291</sup> Betty-Sue Hertz, "Eleanor Antin's Transpositions: A Feminist View of Academic Painting in the Age of Digital Photography," in *Historical Takes: Eleanor Antin* (Munich, Berlin, London, and New York: Prestel, 2008), 85.

The theatrical component is pronounced in these grandly-staged series. *The Last Days of Pompeii* centers on the period leading to the disastrous volcanic eruption, and makes use of realistic sets and costumes so that the scene appears “believable.”<sup>292</sup> *Roman Allegories* theatrically presents a melancholic view of the loss of antiquity through allegorical games and satire. *Helen’s Odyssey* depicts a narrative of Helen of Troy’s exploitation, carried through history, as a marginalized female whom Antin portrays by splitting Helen into two characters – “dark” (brunette) and “light” (blonde) – to reveal her dual nature.

Antin’s use of allegory is complex and unique, though she follows a line of allegorical representation and political commentary similar to her nineteenth-century predecessor, Cole. As we will see, Antin’s use of allegory provides potential for universal political messages, though like Cole’s allegories, hers may also be inhibited by issues in interpretation.

### **The Fragment and Melancholia**

Diverse fragments from the classical past constitute Antin’s allegories: classical ruins, Greco-Roman sculpture, and convincing, traditional Roman garb. There is a sense of loss in *Roman Allegories*, the tableaux that portray characters who are experiencing Rome’s decline. In *The Tragic Performance* (2004), several figures surrounding a musician sit with sorrowful, pensive expressions on their downward-turned faces; several fragments of classical columns and a skeleton are visible in the background. *The Lovers* (2004) likewise exhibits antique ruins – scattered, broken columns and a classicizing statue of a female nude – while the figures in the scene idly contemplate their grim predicament. The tragedy and melancholia accompanying the decline of empire are theatrically stated in many of Antin’s works in this series.

As Benjamin argued, allegory is marked by a longing to reclaim the past, a desire that is steeped in melancholia and nostalgia. Benjamin’s theory of allegory connects closely to the ruin – a tangible remnant of antiquity: “In the ruin history

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<sup>292</sup> Eleanor Antin, quoted in Hertz, “Eleanor Antin’s Transpositions,” in *Historical Takes*, 85.

has physically merged into the setting. ... Allegories are, in the realm of thoughts, what ruins are in the realm of things.<sup>293</sup> For art historian Michael A. Holly, the stranded fragmentary object—an antiquity that exists in the present—provides mystery, fascination, and historical meaning:

Across the ages, these fragments of the past, as Benjamin allegorized, amass into a heap of often un-recyclable ruins that grows skyward under the melancholic eyes of *Angelus Novus*, the angel of history who is pushed backwards by the winds of change through time. In the aftermath of actual loss, the very materiality of objects (objects lost, but continuously refound) presents art historians with profound challenge for ever seeing the past as over and gone.<sup>294</sup>

Holly, like Owens, stresses the role that allegory plays in bringing the past into a dialogue with the present, which thereby enlivens the past. However, in doing so, allegory expresses the fragility of civilization via the ruins that lie scattered while all human remains are gone—a melancholic longing. Citing Owens' thesis of the allegorical tendency in postmodernism, Holly also emphasizes allegory's melancholic vision: "Drawing its 'nourishment' from melancholy, the postmodern sensibility of the late twentieth-century revels in the awareness of its own mortality."<sup>295</sup>

The perception of Antin's melancholic sentiment in connection with the antique fragments is supported by her thoughts about Greco-Roman antiquities. Antin addressed her "emotional connection to what most people today might consider a culturally irrelevant narrative:"<sup>296</sup>

I snuck around the classical sculptures...they were my first romance, those marble cripples, so beautiful and self-involved, with a pathos that was sometimes unbearable... And there was also a deeper sadness, because not only where they dead and gone but they would have been unreachable anyway."<sup>297</sup>

She comments on how she manipulates these remnants from the past, resurrecting them from the dead: "But now, they're always available. I can invent images of their

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<sup>293</sup> Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 177-178.

<sup>294</sup> Michael A. Holly, "Patterns in the Shadows," *Invisible Culture: An Electronic Journal for Visual Studies* (Winter 1999: 1), 2, Visual and Cultural Studies Program, University of Rochester, <http://hdl.handle.net/1802/970> (accessed October 12, 2010).

<sup>295</sup> Holly, "Patterns in the Shadows," 5.

<sup>296</sup> Antin, "Impossible Facts: Max Kozloff Interviews Eleanor Antin," in *Historical Takes*, 78.

<sup>297</sup> Antin, "Impossible Facts," in *Historical Takes*, 78.



world and fill them with bodies, real ones, not marble. I can inhabit their world.”<sup>298</sup> This reminds us of the pathological desire of the historian to reclaim the past, as in Holly’s argument. We can note that Antin’s desire to resurrect antiquities places her in a long tradition of artists and historians (Volney and Piranesi being two notable examples) who likewise desired to live vicariously and melancholically through ruins and antiquities. Antin’s allegories express, on one level, melancholy for the passage of time and the fragility of civilization, which is in itself a fundamental allegorical tendency, and on another level, a poignant warning for contemporary culture.

### **An Allegorical Warning**

In Antin’s allegories of decline, we may read numerous layers of political commentary. The vices of greed, luxury, power, and indulgence in earthly pleasures pervade her series, as well as the consequences of succumbing to their vices. *The Empire of Signs* (2004) from *Roman Allegories* reveals cavorting figures overindulging in pleasure: several figures recline around a swimming pool, some half-nude, many with goblets of wine in their hands. One group of figures appears to be playing a game, which involves precariously balancing a stack of blocks. Here, we can note symbolism, as the entire structure is about to fall, reflecting the state of the empire. Fragments of classical ruins – scattered columns and sculptures – accompany this scene.

Antin is posing a veiled warning of decline of empire through allegories such as this. These works, more specifically, allegorize decline of American Empire, especially if we consider the contemporary discourse of American Empire, and the fact that this scenario is set in the U.S. – San Diego, to be exact.

We may note here the significance of Antin’s ubiquitous frolicking characters. It is a tendency of people to indulge themselves during the period of decline of an empire. Hayden V. White noted the hedonism that pervaded ancient Rome toward the end: “In the chaotic Roman world, the Epicurean doctrine of pleasure-seeking

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<sup>298</sup> Antin, “Impossible Facts,” in *Historical Takes*, 78.

took hold, whereby indulgence in materialism and earthly pleasures was seen as the basis for human life.”<sup>299</sup> As material resources in Rome were rapidly diminishing (land, manpower, and markets), many emperors indulged in the temptations that their court offered them, especially as it was becoming depressingly clear that such pleasures would not last.<sup>300</sup> We may, then, read Antin’s display of pleasure-seeking as an allegory of Roman decline – as well as a warning of the vices of contemporary culture presaging a similar fate.

It is significant, then, that Antin allegorizes collapse of the Roman Empire in a contemporary context. She recontextualizes the traditional allegory by placing seemingly classical scenes in present-day settings. She is further able to achieve immediacy with her use of photography, a distinctly modern and factual medium. With their recognizable San Diego locales, her allegories express pointed significance for us now. *The Empire of Signs* is set on a hillside in San Diego’s desert mountains. The Jamul Mountains in eastern San Diego County, the Salk Institute overlooking the Pacific Ocean, and an upscale villa in Rancho Santa Fe all find places in her sets. Betty-Sue Hertz, curator of Antin’s 2008 exhibit at The San Diego Museum of Art, suggests of these intentional locations, “Although [they] might appear as benign backdrops – merely interesting and diverse choices for the shoot – they in fact include commentary on local culture, tourism, excessive wealth, and the seduction of the natural beauty of the region.”<sup>301</sup>

Antin also mixes contemporary figures with classical ones in her series, further merging the historical with the present, and heightening the complexity of her allegories. In *Judgment of Paris (after Rubens) – Light Helen* and *Judgment of Paris (after Rubens) – Dark Helen* (2007) from *Helen’s Odyssey*, the figure representing the Greek goddess Hera is presented as a 1950s-era housewife pushing a vacuum cleaner, while Aphrodite appears as a glamorous and pretentious 1940s-era movie

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<sup>299</sup> White, *The Greco-Roman Tradition* (New York, Evanston, WY, San Francisco, and London: Harper & Row, 1973), 111-112.

<sup>300</sup> White, *The Greco-Roman Tradition*, 138-139.

<sup>301</sup> Hertz, “Eleanor Antin’s Transpositions,” in *Historical Takes*, 86.

star. The character of Athena is entirely modern, clad in camouflage garments and sporting an up-to-date hairstyle. Meanwhile, she flouts traditional concepts of the *femme fatale* by gazing, confrontationally, at the viewer, with machinegun in hand. We thus are able to read yet another allegory in Antin's work – that which refers to female roles through history.

An additional layer to her ambiguous allegories is Antin's reference to the tradition of history painting, with material drawn from artists including Nicolas Poussin, Peter Paul Rubens, and Thomas Couture. Antin's work plainly replicates, indeed scarcely disguises, compositions by these artists, such as Poussin's *The Triumph of Pan* (1636) and Couture's *The Romans of Decadence* (1847). Her approximation of Salon art may be allegorical in itself – a reference to the larger category of artistic traditions. She is commenting on Salon art as a cliché of grandly staged scenes, though she refashions the scenes with added touches of her own; some figures may seem original, though they are not.

Antin's allegories also draw heavily from mythology, providing yet another level of meaning. In an interview with Max Kozloff, Antin said, "It's the ancient mythologies that I love, how they rhyme with our own lives and illuminate our experiences in the present...I take my old, admittedly absurd Greek myths very seriously. Where would Freud have been without Oedipus, Elektra, Medea?"<sup>302</sup> Mythology presents narratives that are relevant for the present when viewed in the context of contemporary situations, and offers broad psychological references (note Antin's reference to Freud in her interview). Though I will not delve into the myriad moral lessons based on mythological themes in Antin's work, we can deduce that by quoting narratives of the past, Antin brings us closer to the ancients, and urges us to consider what we might gain from the heavily didactic mythologies.

### Contemporary Political References

To outline the political implications of Antin's allegories is not an easy task. Her uses of allegory are extensive and highly complex, and the numerous themes

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<sup>302</sup> Antin, "Impossible Facts," in *Historical Takes*, 77-78.

present in her work are not readily discernable. Though her work apparently incorporates a multitude of political references, each series appears to be linked to the single theme of empire in decline. With cavorting, seminude, and intoxicated players, Antin, as I have already mentioned, compares the Roman Empire to modern American decline. One other theme we can recognize in these works is the tendency of her characters not to realize the weight of their actions, or the severity of their condition. The characters, for the most part, lounge on San Diego ranches, and are too intoxicated or absorbed in their own dramas to recognize tragedy around them. Antin, I am suggesting, in depicting Romanizing figures engaged in licentious activities in the context of contemporary San Diego, points to a larger political arena. She may be commenting on the fallacy of the myth of American Empire as exempt from the fate of other empires – the theory of American exceptionalism. America is clearly the empire in question here, and in Antin’s scenarios it appears to be linked to a Rome-like fall.

Some other pointed political references can be observed in specific works. She references the themes of war’s destruction and of political incompetence as a “masculinist misdeed and violation of humanity”<sup>303</sup> in *The Tourists*, from *Helen’s Odyssey*. Here she appropriates imagery from Géricault’s *The Raft of the Medusa* with a figural grouping and a nude male figure hanging from the edge of the raft that is taken directly from Géricault’s composition. As Hertz suggests, the recontextualized group of figures serves as an explicit reference to *The Raft of the Medusa*’s intended political message.<sup>304</sup> According to art historian Albert Boime, *The Raft of the Medusa* symbolized a “tragic portrait of France at the time of its defeats.”<sup>305</sup> Boime links both this work and Couture’s *The Romans of Decadence*, which Antin also cites in her series, to themes of corruption of the nation.<sup>306</sup> It is therefore apparent that Antin

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<sup>303</sup> Hertz, “Eleanor Antin’s Transpositions,” in *Historical Takes*, 85.

<sup>304</sup> Hertz, “Eleanor Antin’s Transpositions,” in *Historical Takes*, 86.

<sup>305</sup> Albert Boime, *Thomas Couture and the Eclectic Vision* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1980), 157-158, quoted in Hertz, “Eleanor Antin’s Transpositions,” in *Historical Takes*, 86.

<sup>306</sup> Boime, *Thomas Couture and the Eclectic Vision*, quoted in Hertz, “Eleanor Antin’s Transpositions,” in *Historical Takes*, 86.

borrowed from these specific works for a purposeful remark on modern-day corruption.

Furthermore, Antin comments on American capitalism and obsession by means of material objects. The Helens in *The Tourists*, gaily toting handbags and wearing sunglasses, appear untroubled by the devastation and dying bodies surrounding them. *The Golden Death* (2001) from *The Last Days of Pompeii* also provides references to greed and corruption of government. The work alludes to *The Roses of Heliogabalus* (1888) by Lawrence Alma-Tadema, the Dutch/British artist who frequently portrayed scenes of Roman luxuries and decadence.<sup>307</sup> In Alma-Tadema's work, figures suffocate under rose petals, while Antin's reveals figures drowning in gold coins. In both scenes, the consequence of decadence is pronounced.

We can then assume, from the many political references and her recontextualizations, that Antin's allegories embody a distinct didactic tone. Like Cole a century earlier, Antin clearly takes a moralizing stance in her narratives. Her characters succumb to horrible fates; in *Alice's Dream* (2004), of *Roman Allegories*, several women who had enjoyed pleasures in other compositions are gruesomely hung; the passive observer present in each work of *The Last Days of Pompeii* disapprovingly watches scenes of guilty pleasure unfold, until she stands, facing the viewer in the final scene, *The Last Day* (2001). The observer role is parallel perhaps to the role of nature in Cole's *The Course of Empire*—the persisting force that lies on the periphery of the action, and yet remains once all else is destroyed.

Through her innumerable references to the classical past, the tradition of history painting, and manipulated imagery, Antin claims allegory's meaning and refigures it into commentary on current political situations. As Benjamin noted, the allegorist has the power to manipulate meaning, and specific usages of fragments can give an altered significance to allegory. "If the object becomes allegorical under the gaze of melancholy," Benjamin wrote, "then it is exposed to the allegorist, it is

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<sup>307</sup> Hertz, "Eleanor Antin's Transpositions," in *Historical Takes*, 87.

unconditionally in his power."<sup>308</sup> Antin's fragmentation of imagery through various references and reformulation of the images by allegorical means allow for the intensification of meaning of its parts in what Benjamin called "the gaze of melancholy."<sup>309</sup> The accumulations of fragments in Antin's allegories do not recreate the antique in a united whole, but apply to the development of the metaphorical or rhetorical figures, as Benjamin would have suggested. As allegory's implications rely entirely on the device's manipulation by the allegorist, and the context in which it is presented, Antin provides us with a reformulation of meanings that points to both historical and contemporary situations.

### **A Sign of the Times?**

By looking at the political context for Antin's series, we may better grasp their significance in terms of her pointed commentary on specific situations. Antin's allegories, as I suggested, direct attention to issues relating to the vices of American Empire. It is important to note that Antin addressed these concerns just after the turn of the millennium, when America's future was particularly uncertain and national anxiety was widespread. In 2001, George W. Bush was elected president, and thus began a period of controversial domestic and foreign policies. Following September 11, 2001, President Bush declared a "war on terror," and subsequently invaded Afghanistan and Iraq. Thousands of lives were lost and trillions of dollars spent on the war in the Middle East.

Returning to the discourse of American Empire as I discussed earlier, numerous sources have proposed that America is indeed falling from power, while other countries rapidly gain power and pose threats to the U.S. It is not coincidental that in this political climate, Antin, as a contemporary artist with a history of politically- and socially-charged work, would take an anxious, melancholic, and didactic approach. Furthermore, it is noteworthy that the political, economic, and social climate of Antin's time bears striking similarities to that of Cole's in the early

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<sup>308</sup> Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 183-184.

<sup>309</sup> Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 208.

nineteenth century. In both periods economic decline, social tensions, and drastic political changes occurred.

### The Role of Photography in Allegory

With photography as her medium, Antin creates a tension between the real and the fictional, as well as the past and the present. For Antin, photography presents a solution to the representation of earlier artistic traditions and ancient themes. In an interview with Kozloff, Antin stated:

Film in our culture is firmly tied to fiction and illusion. Painting is pretty much a historical ruin. I personally love fiction and like ruins, but for me, at least, some form of photography seems to be the obligatory mode of the present – or at least it’s the mode of modernism, with its ground in technology and its nearly legendary claim to facticity. Admittedly an ironical facticity, but photography inevitably evokes the notion of fact. ... My photographs are impossible facts. They take the guilty and delusionary pleasures and terrors of empire and run them over a cliff.<sup>310</sup>

By referring to the photograph’s “facticity,” Antin identifies an important characteristic of the nature of the photograph, one that Roland Barthes discusses in *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*: “A specific photograph, in effect, is never distinguished from its referent (from what it represents), or at least it is not *immediately* or *generally* distinguished from its referent... By nature, the Photograph...has something tautological about it.”<sup>311</sup> The photograph gives added weight and authenticity to the fictional; the “real” is perceived in a photograph. Photography plays a crucial role, therefore, in forming a convincing allegory, for the allegory becomes tied inextricably to the objects it represents. Antin’s photographs serve as a deceptively veritable form of documentation of the vices and guilty pleasures of empire, providing “evidence” of corruption. Owens, as well, saw the photograph as increasingly important in documenting allegorical works, with the medium’s desire to maintain an unaltered image of the past. He asserted that photography, as an allegorical art form, “would represent our desire to fix the

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<sup>310</sup> Antin, “Impossible Facts,” in *Historical Takes*, 76.

<sup>311</sup> Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, Part One, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), 5.

transitory, the ephemeral, in a stable and stabilizing image."<sup>312</sup> The photograph, then, may serve as a means for preserving the fleeting times and circumstances of a declining culture/empire.

Photography in Antin's work presents a paradox – a realistic portrayal of the imaginary/fictional; the photographic representation of classical subject-matter is an impossible anachronism. Furthermore, by engaging with photography as her medium, Antin comments on its role in relation to painting. Antin said of her recent series, "In these particular works, I'm engaging photography in a dialogue with nineteenth-century French and English Salon painting, which laid claims to the self-flattering myths of empire in which these cultures wrapped themselves and in which we also wrap ourselves."<sup>313</sup> Though the advent of photography largely replaced the need for grand history painting and portraiture to document prominent political figures, painting could benefit from photography's accuracy. As Hertz describes Antin's use of the photograph in relation to painting: "By translating the sources from Salon painting into photographic tableaux, [Antin] explicitly comments on the mutual interdependence of photography and painting. The function of one medium as a source for the other provides another window into the process whereby these two art forms quickly became intertwined."<sup>314</sup> Numerous artists, since photography's advent, have used the photograph as a study for transposing compositions into painting. Eugène Delacroix, for one, worked with photographs by Eugène Durieu to create his odalisque compositions.<sup>315</sup>

There is another dimension to photography's significance as Antin's medium of choice in her allegorical series. The photograph, we might assume, is also an allegory – it stands for something else, which is forever lost, forever relegated to the past. It is relevant in this discussion to mention Barthes' suggestion that photography's process is tied to a notion of death. Barthes asserted that

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<sup>312</sup> Owens, "The Allegorical Impulse," 56

<sup>313</sup> Antin, "Impossible Facts," in *Historical Takes*, 76.

<sup>314</sup> Hertz, "Eleanor Antin's Transpositions," in *Historical Takes*, 84.

<sup>315</sup> Hertz, "Eleanor Antin's Transpositions," in *Historical Takes*, 84.



photography's inability to bring image and the essence of oneself together presents a disconnect: a separation of consciousness from identity, or the experience of oneself as "other."<sup>316</sup> Barthes writes, "Photography is a kind of primitive theater, a kind of *Tableau Vivant*, a figuration of the motionless and made-up face beneath which we see the dead."<sup>317</sup> Photography, in other words, captures the precise moment in which an ever-changing subject is converted into a static object (the photograph), which is forever maintained in an image even after all else is gone.

Barthes' reflections on photography bring us back to Benjamin. In "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," Benjamin addressed problems with photography as an artistic process. The authority of the object, what Benjamin calls the "aura," becomes lost in mechanical reproduction, including photographic reproduction.<sup>318</sup> The uniqueness of a work of art relies in part on its association with tradition, and reproduction, he points out, shatters traditional art practices.<sup>319</sup> Considering Benjamin's identification of the artistic problems with photography, we must ask if something – an "aura," perhaps – is lacking in Antin's work. Or is she able to effectively portray human emotion and tragedy with allegory through her lens?

Benjamin's analysis of photography in the mechanical age draws heavily on Marxist/Socialist and psychoanalytical methodologies; in stating that art serves a political agenda by appealing to the masses, Benjamin is clearly asking how politics affects art. We may also keep Benjamin's argument in mind when we question how Antin's art appeals to, or engages with, the "masses"; that is, her viewers – the museum-goers and the larger public.

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<sup>316</sup> Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 12.

<sup>317</sup> Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 32.

<sup>318</sup> Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt and trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1968), 219-253, 223.

<sup>319</sup> Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," 223

## Allegorical Illegibility

We may wonder whether Antin's allegories effectively fulfill her political intentions, or if they allow misreading—the fate of other allegorists, such as Cole. Antin's multiple layers of narrative and complex meaning in her works present a multifarious puzzle, which the art historian and critic must decode. As Benjamin and Owens discussed, the meaning of an allegory is manipulated in the hands of the allegorist, and the context in which it is presented.<sup>320</sup> While allegory has the potential to serve as a powerful and versatile mode of political commentary, it also, in its ambiguity and circuitous references, presents a complex narrative. Antin describes her own quest for meaning in similar ambiguous and circuitous terms: "It's always a search, a navigation through words and images and ideologies and events and apparent facts, which are merely masks for reality."<sup>321</sup> Antin frequently blurs the lines between reality and fantasy, between fact and fiction, in her work. While she appropriates existing narratives and elements from Western painting and sculpture, other narratives and details are in fact, made up.<sup>322</sup> James Elkins' argument that pictures have become increasingly puzzling, requiring lengthy writing in order to make sense of the fragmentary references and multiple narratives present in a work, resonates for Antin's work.<sup>323</sup>

When I attempted to interview Eleanor Antin via email, questioning her about her appropriation of history painting, her political motivation, and other issues, Antin declined to comment. Her response to my questions, such as "In what way does allegory serve a political function in your work? Could you comment on what particular political situations you address?" was, simply:

I can't answer these questions. They're not uninteresting but they aren't meant to be answered by an artist. As far as I know Shakespeare never said what 'The Tempest' meant. Or Hamlet. It isn't my responsibility to answer these questions, it's your

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<sup>320</sup> See Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, and Owens, "The Allegorical Impulse: Toward a Theory of Postmodernism."

<sup>321</sup> Antin, "Impossible Facts," in *Historical Takes*, 79.

<sup>322</sup> Hertz, "Eleanor Antin's Transpositions," in *Historical Takes*, 84.

<sup>323</sup> James Elkins, "Why Are Our Pictures Puzzles? Some Thoughts on Writing Excessively," *New Literary History* 27 no. 2 (1996): 271-290.

responsibility as a scholar to study the work and answer them as intelligently as you can. You're asking me for Cliff notes.<sup>324</sup>

Her refusal to provide clarification for her intentions could be because the central point of her work – the decline of American Empire – is so direct. However, she also presents wide-ranging and ambiguous references from diverse sources – mythology,

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<sup>324</sup> Antin to Lucy Eron, e-mail, December 11-12, 2009. Other questions that I asked Antin in e-mail were: "2. Could you please expand upon the comparison you draw between the fall of Rome and the decline of the American Empire? 3. I am interested in the idea of veiled political commentary. What was the intended effect of using allegory in this manner? Do you think allegory provides a safer means for making a political statement? Was there any sense of fear of being too blunt or outspoken amidst the turmoil of the Bush administration? 4. The only other American artist I can think of who has allegorized the idea of collapse of empire with such vehemence is Thomas Cole in *The Course of Empire*. What are your thoughts on the relation of your work to his? 5. For Walter Benjamin, the use of allegory reflects a melancholic longing for antiquity. How does your usage of allegory relate to the legacy of antiquity? To what degree is your sentiment melancholic or mourning the passage of time? 6. The fragment, and the ruin, recurs through your work. As Benjamin notes, the fragment appears strangely incomplete, like runes that must be deciphered. How does the fragment's deferral of meaning and the enigma it presents serve your purpose? 7. Your works are very puzzle-like indeed, with many parts referencing narratives from mythology, art history, Roman legend and other traditions. Elkins wrote of the significance of modern art operating as a provocative puzzle, which demands interpretation. Images – and the writing on them – are becoming increasingly complex. To what degree do you engage with the idea of the puzzle? 8. Which texts or stories from mythology have most impacted you? Are there any other texts that have provided inspiration for these series? Gibbon's *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* seems that it may have informed your work. Could you please expand upon this? 9. What is the significance of the alterations – additions or subtractions to the original compositions – you made in, for example, *Plaisir d'Amour (After Couture)*? *The Romans of Decadence* features two disapproving onlookers, who are absent from your composition, and instead you include Helen gazing off to the side. 10. In your interview with Max Kozloff, you said, "I'm engaging photography in a dialogue with nineteenth-century French and English salon painting, which laid claims to the self-flattering myths of empire in which these cultures wrapped themselves and in which we also wrap ourselves." Could you elaborate on the self-flattering myths in particular you reference? 11. Your references to Poussin, Couture, Gauguin, Géricault, and others are apparent to art-savvy viewers. However, do you think that your viewers, if not versed in art history, would be able to understand – and thus be impacted by – your work? 12. The appropriations from Géricault's *Raft of the Medusa* in *The Tourists* would lead us into a commentary on political incompetence at the end of a powerful empire. The addition of the two Helens wearing sunglasses and toting handbags is intriguing. In what way do you tie the narratives together? Could you comment on this scene? 13. Could you perhaps comment on the way your appropriations of imagery from nineteenth-century painting cause the viewer to rethink the older traditions? In other words, in what ways might your own work cause a re-thinking of the "model" from which you draw? 14. Much has been said of the paradox of political art – that it cannot fully be political because it exists within the context of high culture, within the museum. Do you think that the museum offers an effective place in which to view your work? Are there, perhaps, any other venues where you might wish your work to be seen? 15. How are you intending your work to instruct or otherwise persuade the viewer? 16. The female in the wheelchair in *The Last Days of Pompeii* seems to be the disapproving observer, watching passively the scenes of guilty pleasures unfold before her, until in *The Last Day* she stands, confronting the viewer. Could you comment more on the role that she plays in this series? 17. *Roman Allegories* features the little girl, Alice, in many of the works, who projects a certain innocence, sleeping with her doll in one scene. What is her part in these works? Is this a reference to *Alice in Wonderland*?

history, art history, politics, and religion. Her multiple layers of meanings and references, some obvious, others concealed, give a heightened complexity to her work.

Barthes commented on the photograph's dilemma in the representation of meanings: "Society, it seems, mistrusts pure meaning: It wants meaning, but at the same time it wants this meaning to be surrounded by noise...which will make it less acute. Hence the photograph whose meaning...is too impressive is quickly deflected; we consume it aesthetically, not politically."<sup>325</sup> Barthes also argues that politically-charged images may be ineffective if too veiled, and thus fail to present an "authentic and effective social critique."<sup>326</sup> An allegory may be dismissed as ineffective commentary, or otherwise misinterpreted, if it presents a political message that is too convoluted or understated.

Further issues with Antin's work may rest in the fact that her photographic works are intentionally, and ironically, posed, and consequently may lack a quality or detail that would imbue the resulting image with deep emotional resonance.<sup>327</sup> Barthes suggests that the most successful photographs are those that surprise us. He writes, "Certain details may 'prick' me. If they do not, it is doubtless because the photographer has put them there intentionally."<sup>328</sup> We may question whether Antin's photographs are perhaps too calculated, and whether her blatant contrasts between subject, time, and place may irritate the viewer. As Barthes noted of Bruce Gilden's photograph of a nun beside drag queens, "The deliberate (not to say, rhetorical) contrast produces no effect on me, except perhaps one of irritation."<sup>329</sup> Perhaps Antin's meanings, which are revealed with a sense of humor through cartoon-like incongruities, are *too* evident. When Antin poses the Helens casually

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<sup>325</sup> Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 36.

<sup>326</sup> Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 36.

<sup>327</sup> Barthes calls this riveting quality of photographs *punctum*, which is "that accident which pricks me (but also bruises me, is poignant to me)." Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 27.

<sup>328</sup> Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 47.

<sup>329</sup> Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 47.

wearing sunglasses near where dying bodies lie, or Athena in camouflage beside a vacuum-toting Hera, we may wonder whether her messages carry the weight of a serious and effective inquiry into politics and values of empire. We may feel a Barthean sense, even, of irritation.

## CONCLUSION

For Cole in *The Course of Empire*, allegory provided a means for political commentary, though also an arena for misinterpretation. This happened to work in his favor, as his paintings were seen as a positive reflection of America's future, and may not have been critically acclaimed if his true meanings were understood. Like Cole, Antin's uses of various allegorical fragments and disparate political and historical elements add complexity to her works. The questions of individual, social, and political identity; feminist issues; and materialism are at play in Antin's multi-layered works. On the other hand, Antin's overall message is clear – perhaps, in fact, too clear. Antin's comments on specific current political situations and her warning of the impending fall of American Empire, as I have indicated, are very plainly expressed through her allegories. The deliberate clarity of her central message may well prove to be a major impediment to the enduring value of her work.

Allegory, I conclude, offers a rich mode of expression through the melancholic presentation of ruins and fragments and its other references to the past. Allegory, as we have learned from Benjamin and other theorists, and from the work of allegorists through the centuries, including the artists and architects studied here, provides means of political commentary – one that is loaded with meaning, though depending on the artist's use of the device, one that can be more, or less, effective.

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