

Jack Sarick

Take home exam

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Dr. Laura Penny

1 Question 3: Discuss Benjamin's ideas about allegory in relation to Baudelaire's writing, with reference to at least two texts we have read

In *Central Park*, Walter Benjamin offers an allegorical reading of *Fleur de Mal* that provides a cohesive method to understanding Baudelaire's work. The application of allegory to Baudelaire's poetry is not what makes Benjamin's reading of it so interesting, it is the fact that Benjamin's conception of allegory deviates from the German philosophical and literary tradition of his time. It is not, however, a novel interpretation. When Benjamin refers to allegory, he is drawing on the Jewish tradition of *Pardes*. *Pardes* is a rabbinic exegesis typically applied to the Torah, though often used elsewhere, and is a concept that Benjamin, as a well-read Ashkenazi Jew, would have been familiar with. *Pardes* divides interpretation into four categories: surface, symbolic, prophetic, and hidden. All four levels of interpretation are connected, seen as a progression from literal to obscure, which also means that the number of interpretations increase exponentially as they descend. While a Baroque interpretation might see the steps of *Pardes* as an increasing or ascending understanding of the text, "PaRDeS" is an acronym¹ for the four steps that you literally work your way down, deeper into the text. The word itself can be read as allegorical, much the same way Benjamin leaves even the title of his notes saturated with meaning, having never seen the Central Park of NYC that he references. By reclaiming allegory from the Baroque, Benjamin is able to squeeze far more meaning out of Baudelaire's poetry.

¹My Hebrew is awful and I'm not smart enough to come up with an English translation that acronyms well. Sph just doesn't roll off the tongue very well, so I'm stuck using transliterated words like Benjamin did

A surface reading of Baudelaire's poetry is mostly a humorous one. This is not to say that it isn't invaluable, but as a literal reading there simply isn't that much more to say than what is already on the page. Any further discussion is mostly a dissection of the text, which, in the case of funny poems, tends to ruin the joke. Benjamin leaves the poetry as it's own surface reading and wastes no time delving deeper into the text to uncover more philosophical content. As far as the next two layers are concerned (symbolic and prophetic), Benjamin includes the cryptic note "difference between allegory and parable" (*Central Park*, 43.1) for his readers to ponder. This offers an insight as to where the Baroque notion of allegory fits into Benjamin's conception of it. Baroque allegory is, for Benjamin, a merely symbolic reading of the text, only the second level of Parnes. Benjamin says "the Baudelairean allegory - unlike the Baroque allegory - bears traces of the rage needed to break into this world, to lay waste its harmonious structures" (*CP*, 20.3), which is to say that the Baudelairean allegory contains within it the Baroque allegory along with some other literary or philosophical device. The Baudelairean allegory does not neatly link together ideas and images like the Baroque allegory does, instead twisting the links of the Baroque allegory to show new connexions. These new connexions are often profane, completely the opposite of what the Baroque allegory was intended to be used for. Benjamin writes "the heroic is the sublime manifestation - while spleen is the abject manifestation - of the demonic. Yet these categories of his aesthetic must be deciphered. They cannot be taken at face value" (*CP*, 20.4), seeing this inversion of holy and profane in Baudelaire's writing not as the meaning of the text but as a starting point for the further questioning of it.

Using Baudelaire's break from tradition as the starting point for his reading of the text, Benjamin is able to draw out the prophetic nature of the text. In section 16 of *Central Park*, Benjamin ascribes predictive powers to Baudelaire, crediting him with foreseeing the decline of the Garde Nationale a mere five years after his death,² though this is not the prophetic. Benjamin expresses the distinctly prophetic nature of the poems as "reveal[ing] the new in the ever-selfsame, and the ever-selfsame in the new" (*CP*, 22.3). This Nietzschean eternal recurrence

²How was Benjamin to know that a century and a half later they would be back in full force and we'd cycle back around to start worshipping the middle class again?

is what allows Baudelaire to foretell a future that has already happened. Baudelaire's poetry does not guess at nor influence the future, simply states it as fact. Baudelaire has the incredible power of writing in the future from the past because, according to Benjamin, "the 'new' in no way contributes to progress" (*CP*, 40.1). Baudelaire knows he is writing for a future generation yet writes only what he sees around him because he knows that things will be exactly the same by the time the public is ready to accept his work. His prophecies are cryptic only insofar as the reader would prefer not to see them as such, obfuscating the obvious so it does not need to be confronted. Benjamin attributes part of the success of *Fleurs du mal* to the fact that Baudelaire left no novels behind (*CP*, 43.6), because if he had left his thoughts in plain writing they would have been easier to reject and ignore. Baudelaire had to bury his prophecy under humour, poetry, and Baroque allegory to make it palatable to his contemporaries and give it any chance of surviving long enough to end up in the hands of Benjamin.

If the prophetic aspects of Baudelaire's writing are hidden deep within his poems, and Benjamin using Parnes as his model for interpretation, what then is left to be the hidden layer? Benjamin thinks that that role is filled by the commodity. This is indeed a hidden connexion, so secretive Baudelaire himself probably did not know he was writing it. Benjamin sees a "a hidden resemblance to Dante" as "there is no other book of poems in which the poet presents himself with so little vanity and so much force" (*CP*, 32.2).³ The lack of vanity is not a depiction of reality but an exaggeration of it (*CP*, 13.1). It is a reality so steeped in commodity that commodity takes the place of allegory (*CP*, 5.7 and 39.4). Benjamin sees Baudelairean allegory (and therefore Pardeic allegory) reproduced en masse and put up as advertisement all around him. When Baudelaire twisted the Baroque allegory to use for his own purposes, the world responded by twisting his allegory to help push product. The difference, though, is that while Baroque poets were disgusted by Baudelaire's misuse of language, Baudelaire (and Benjamin) are overjoyed to see his creations warped and mutated beyond his wildest dreams. Baudelaire compares the poet and the prostitute because both are at once wholly seller and wholly sold, a profane Jesus, and for

³Beyond the scope of this paper, but T.S. Elliott draws a different connexion between Baudelaire and Dante, so perhaps the resemblance is not so hidden

Benjamin they are also their own advertisements, rounding it out to a complete capitalist godhead. This is, for Baudelaire and Benjamin, the final purpose of allegory. To show the divine nature hidden in the mundane. As Benjamin says, the “majesty of the allegorical intention [is] to destroy the organic and the living - to eradicate semblance [Schein]” (*CP*, 19.1). Benjamin sees allegory as the ultimate revelatory tool, the fatal blow that strips the object of its veil and leaves nothing but commodity behind. This is what Benjamin means in saying that “allegorical emblems return as commodities” (*CP*, 32A.4).

Benjamin’s writing are full of religious language and images. He sees souvenirs as secular relics, an attempt to keep the corpse of the past alive for one more day (*CP*, 32A.1). That is not a bad thing, though. Benjamin sees nothing wrong playing *Weekend at Bernie’s* with history. Long experience is dead and the souvenir complements the isolated, shocking experience that is the modern world. Machinery is a destructive force that severs us from each other, and Benjamin thinks that even the skeletons within us are machinery (*CP*, 36.4-7), so we are all dead inside and alone to begin with. Once that fact is accepted, the world can be faced head on and art can finally be made for the modern world. Allegory becomes the tool for seeing the world as it is and fashioning creativity to match it. When Benjamin says that “the most precious booty in the ‘triumph of allegory’ [is] the life which signifies death” (*CP*, 14.2), he is praising Mickey Mouse for his lackluster approach to mortality and Baudelaire for squandering his time in the streets of Paris. No longer is art tied to the abstract and disembodied realm that religion and tradition held it hostage in, now the artist is free to roam the streets and find beauty in the mass produced waste that fills our gutters and homes. Allegory in the hands of artists and advertisers can be applied to so much more than one dusty old book, and Benjamin applauds Baudelaire for being the first to see that.

2 Question 7: Discuss the optical unconscious in relation to at least two texts we have read

When you ask me to discuss texts that we have read, it is Benjamin's optical unconscious that allows me to read Mickey Mouse and Charlie Chaplin as literature. The optical unconscious is not the same as visual literacy; literacy is a two way street. The optical unconscious is something that resides in every sighted person, fostered without their consent or even awareness and it cannot be turned around into a creative or expressive tool like literacy can. Closer to an instinct than a skill, the optical unconscious is surprisingly exactly what it sounds like. Benjamin takes care to use the word optical, not visual, to narrow down the scope of the term. *Visual* means strictly what humans perceive, *optics* applies only to the kinematics of light. What matters is what is being shown to me, not what I observe, for observation is a conscious process, and the optical unconscious is, necessarily, unconscious. It is a passive process that is constantly happening in the brain, an accumulation of all the information, consciously processed or otherwise, that has passed down the second cranial nerve and into the occipital lobe. Even walking, the act of scanning the environment to determine optimal foot placement, is a responsibility of the optical unconscious, something that Charlie Chaplin clearly demonstrates.

Chaplin's classic character, the Tramp,⁴ is known for his distinctive walk. Benjamin sees this strange phenomenon as the beauty of film. Marked by a bow-legged, duck-footed, wobbly gait accentuated by baggy pants and large shoes disproportionate to Chaplin's small frame, his walk is immediately recognizable even in silhouette form, raising common movement to the level of artistry (*Chaplin*, 334). His walk has nothing in common with normal ambulation, nor does it need to, yet it is immediately recognizable as such. Chaplin's walk does not need to take him anywhere in particular as cameras and editing do all the movement. By wagging his legs and appearing in a new part of the set, Chaplin has convinced the optical unconscious that whatever he

⁴The Tramp was the only character Benjamin would ever see Chaplin develop. Even in *The Great Dictator*, Chaplin's second character of the Jewish barber was clearly modelled after the Tramp. Who is to say what his opinion of Chaplin would have been had he lived to see his later films

just did should be considered walking. The optical unconscious is not a method of thinking that Chaplin employs, but a touchstone common to every person that he can use a shared reference for his humour. Making fun of walking requires its complete dissection and reconstruction, something only possible with film.

Film is not limited to live action film either. Mickey Mouse plays with the optical unconscious in similar way. Mickey shows us “for the first time that it is possible to have one’s own arm, even one’s own body, stolen” (*Mickey*, 338). This seems like an easily disputed claim; Poe, Dr. Frankenstein, and Hyde all steal varying levels of parts and bodies a century before Mickey steps on screen. The difference is that none of their victims survive the process or are even generally aware of it. Mickey, on the other, can literally jump out of skin and then crawl back into it without changing. His body can be stretched out into a noodle and stuffed back into his pants without consequence (*Steamboat Willy*, 0:54) because it has no border, it is simply an amorphous black mass that tends to take the shape of a mouse. There are just enough details (limbs, facial expressions, clothing, etc.) that Mickey can be recognized as anthropomorphic, but not so many as to make him realistic (e.g. a distinct lack of shadows and borders) and therefore bound to the laws of reality. Mickey and Chaplin both walk a very fine line between existence and non-existence, often switching between the two as is convenient for the joke. They do not abide by the laws of reality but by the expectation of the optical unconscious.

If the train in *L’Arrive d’un train en gare de La Ciotat* gave the audience a jolt, Mickey Mouse is a lightning strike directly to the central nervous system. The wild careening in *Plane Crazy* (3:50) is disorienting even to the modern viewer, with the camera seemingly passing through utility poles and other cars, doing a full backflip to land face up in the sky. These movements are wholly unnatural, impossible to capture without the rapid-fire and artificial nature of animation. Despite being slightly nauseating to an audience unused to having their perspective thrown around without the experience of movement, at no point is the scene confusing. Mickey and his plane are never explicitly seen zig-zagging back and forth across the road, though it is instantly clear that that is exactly what’s happening. He is allowed to completely disregard reality

so long as it is intelligible. As such, the rules he plays by are those of the optical unconscious. In *Steamboat Willie*, we, the audience, are fully willing to accept that the goat (4:20) can be played as a music box, but only because we saw it eat sheet music and a guitar. It may be nonsense, but it is intelligible nonsense that follows a set of guidelines we unconsciously lay forth. The duck (5:37) still has to sound like a duck because we have no reason to expect it not to, though we in no way hold it accountable to the laws of physics. To make fun of the optical unconscious by pointing out its gap, like Mickey only falling when he realizes he should (*Plane Crazy*, 5:10), requires an intimate understanding of it only possible through photography and film.

Dissecting the optical unconscious to poke fun at its expectations is no easy task. While Freud proves a lonely room and sufficient time to think might be enough to prod at the subconscious as a whole, understanding the optical unconscious requires photography and film. This is because photography shows the world as it is, not as it perceived. Benjamin is able to sum this up so eloquently in his claim that “[the] magician is to surgeon as [the] painter is to cinematographer” (*The Work of Art: 2nd Version*, 35). The cinematographer, or animator as the case may be, must forensically reconstruct some semblance of the world from disjointed stills. Magic goes from being the goal to the enemy. Chaplin must convince his audience that what he is doing is real despite being nothing more than an illusion. The moment the cameras begin to roll, the world begins to unravel. When Benjamin refers to Chaplin needing 125km of film to produce 3km, the capital required not necessarily money (though that is also required, no doubt) but moments. Chaplin must find the few precious discontinuous frames that appear to be real when juxtaposed, lest he show too much and reveal that the reality on screen is nothing more than a cheap sham built of a hundred other realities. He must play on the optical unconscious with alerting the audience that he is doing so.

In his famous factory scene in *Modern Times*, the audience is led to believe the false premise that actions have consequences. The foreman’s pulling of prop levers (0:52) looks far more like factory work than actual factory work does despite being nothing like it at all, yet the pieces are so expertly stitched together that the audience is convinced the dummy switch is the

only way the machine can be reversed. Chaplin understands that this semblance is nothing more than semblance (i.e. outward similarity), and chases a woman with hexagonal buttons simply because they match the shape of his wrench. Much like Mickey Mouse is leads the audience to believe that he can interchange any two things that look similar enough, Chaplin, as an the Tramp, sees no difference than the prop hexagonal bolts and the prop hexagonal buttons since they are both ultimately hexagonal props. Benjamin thinks the blurring of man and machine is critically important to “establish equilibrium between human beings and the apparatus” (*The Work of Art: 2nd Version*, 37). At no point does the audience actually believe that Chaplin is part of the machine, but by pushing the limits beyond the absurd, he raises the question of where the line between man and machine really is. It is not a question most audience members will consciously ask themselves, but it will fester in their optical unconscious regardless.

Visual literacy is why you understand that clicking hypertext will take you somewhere else, whereas the optical unconscious is why that transition can appear seamless. Like Mickey tousling his body into hair (*Plane Crazy*, 0:43 visual literacy is why we interpret the spiky hair as being a characteristic of a pilot after seeing Lindy’s picture, but the optical unconscious is why we never once assume that Mickey is made entirely out of hair despite there being no border between the hair and the rest of him. Benjamin sees danger in technology, the danger of facism to be specific, but technology is also its own antidote (*The Work of Art: 2nd Version*, 38). Mickey Mouse prepares us to “survive civilization” because he alone is “a creature can still survive even when it has thrown off all resemblance to a human being” (*Mickey Mouse*, 338). When we can no longer tell the difference between ourselves and machines, Mickey and Chaplin tell us there is only one thing left to do: laugh.