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WHAT COMMUNICATION LOOKS LIKE: THE ALLEGORICAL PERSONIFICATION AND THE COMMUNITY OF UNDERSTANDING

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Prognostications for 1984 and beyond of the sense of community to be engendered by the new technology of telecommunications is the concern of today's sessions. Certainly there seems to be brave promise. Symptomatic of the longing for community -- familial, professional, international, intellectual -- and a commonality of experience is the rather insistent verbal pattern particularly prevalent in California by way of which one is asked to "share" in an experience. In traditional imagery, to the development and special intricacies of which the art historian directs his or her attention, there has been a tremendously important special, privileged class of images that are meant to provide focus and a sense of cohesiveness among viewers, a sense of community if you will. They are found especially in public art, to which a large audience has access. They are frequently official. They are condensed images that embody general ideas and concepts. I am referring to the allegorical mode which in the visual or plastic arts of painting and sculpture often has been embodied by a human or personifying figure. Allegorical images have transmitted purposeful messages and affirmed commonly held beliefs or hoped for aspirations. They have been thought of as unifying agents, par excellence, for they are the concrete, visible

manifestation of that which is not concrete and may be exceedingly complex or largely ineffable: Liberty, Truth, Justice, the Virtues, the Vices, or for that matter Technology or Communications itself have been so embodied. In looking at these public and frequently mass images that are to provide a common focus for numerous viewers or spectators the art historian tries to reckon why they take the form they do and what it means when that form changes.

It is of course a commonplace that visual imagery offers the possibility of extraordinary focus; as only one example, the tympanum reliefs and stained glass images of the Middle Ages have been called the "bibles for the poor." A secular only semi-public example is this quite remarkable and delicious eighteenth-century painting, Giambattista Tiepolo's Triumph of Virtue and Fortitude over Ignorance with which you may be familiar (it is in the Norton Simon Museum of Art). Originally meant as a ceiling painting, here dark and ugly Ignorance is obviously being toppled, practically out of the pictorial world. Virtue and Fortitude are firmly and triumphantly seated in the billowing clouds, the victors over vice. Crucial to the correct interpretation of the allegorical figure and an understanding of its significance is that the symbolic status of the figures be readily grasped. Not having seen the image before of this steel-engraving, produced like others of this kind from about 1890 to 1920 by the American Bank Note Company, a beautiful robust woman with a small globe at her side representing Telephone Communication, we nevertheless understand this is no ordinary lady with a small globe. With scale established by the commanding figure we are given to

understand the smallness of the globe refers graphically to how small the world becomes (but we hope not diminished) through Telephone Communication. Here is the concept of the Global Village.

It is to be noted that within the allegorical tradition female figures have been especially prevalent -- in part this may be because of the general popularity in imagery of the female figure in art, whether semi-draped or nude. She can sell a product. But the most important source seems to be the Greek and Latinate roots themselves of our language that seem to give ontological status, and that of the feminine gender, to general notions and concepts: thus, Fortune is Fortuna or La Fortuna; Liberty is La Liberté, and so forth. Though pointed out by literary historians, Ernst Gombrich and other scholars, no one yet has been able to explain further this convention of the female personification -- the sex of personification -- putting its origins back to the far and misty reaches of the beginnings of language. The female allegorical figure does seem to have functioned well -- and her sex may have helped, conferring special status -- an additional sense of the unreal on the ideal personifying figure. For what female would really be an active participant in a fray, nude or otherwise? In most instances, quite unlikely. From the sixteenth century at least to the beginning of the nineteenth, handbooks that were designed to aid in the creation of these important images were readily available to artists. These indexed handbooks by Ripa and others consisted of codified images armed with appropriate appurtenances or attributes. Labels or cartouches or titles might be included as an invaluable aid in helping to differentiate figures when

a number of alternatives might be possible. One thing was certain: to function the allegory had to be recognized as such. A viewer somehow had to know that embarking on allegorical interpretation was appropriate. Moreover, allegorical figures were to be accessible and graspable.

The origins of the allegorical mode might be associated with Greek and Roman antiquity when a god or god-like figure or demiurge, a subordinate deity who does the bidding of others like a genie or a fairy, was charged with this or that responsibility. The image that Telecommunication -- communication from afar -- conjured up for the Greeks was the figure of Hermes, the messenger of Zeus. In primitive Greece, where there was strong distrust of the stranger or the member of an alien group, intercourse with strangers, communication, was surrounded with ceremony and magical safeguards. Hermes presided over comings and goings and was an important "ambassador," and was also later the God of Trade as well as Communication. For the Romans the messenger-god was Mercury portrayed, as was Hermes, with petasus or winged hat, winged heels, and caduceus. His name still is associated with merchandise and mercantilism. How communication might be pictured is seen in these fifteenth- and sixteenth-century representations that indicate how a tenacious habit of conception and imagery can conjoin communities even at a distance of some two thousand years, antiquity and the Renaissance. On the screen I show you Mercury, a detail of a painting of the fifteenth century by the Renaissance master Mantegna, and I show a sleek sixteenth-century sculpture by Giovanni da Bologna of Mercury posed elegantly on one

foot. Indeed, a flattened vestige of the Mercury figure is used by florists today, some 2500 years distant, to indicate the rapidity of delivery of their goods over great distances. Though dwindled in dignity to be sure, now but an emblematic cipher affixed to flower shop windows, as seen here, the figure is a strong reminder of the imaginative hold of these kinds of figural embodiments.

What does communication look like now? How has it more recently been pictured? It is difficult for the layman to be informed as to what to expect even three years hence from the rapidly advancing new technology; its significance, the more enduring effects on society and community are interesting to try to fathom if impossible to determine. One looks to past models and images for guidance. In the nineteenth century the larger significance of new concepts and evocations of meaning might still be sought in the imagery of painting or poetry. Even as illustrious an official artist as the French mural painter Pierre Puvis de Chavannes who was the most important French artist of public paintings during the second part of the Second Empire and the first part of the Third Republic, from about 1860 to 1898, might marvel about scientific advances such as vibrations converted to waves of force, but in order best to evoke this phenomenon make comparisons to Dante's description of the movement of the spheres. In the 1890s when this most important painter of official art was to evoke the idea of Electricity for a mural at the Boston Public Library, one of his series of murals there, he resorted to painting two muses flying alongside telegraph poles. They represent good and bad news. To our eyes this vision of the

latest in science may seem, to put it kindly, somewhat quaint. In his contemporary description for a library pamphlet he explained, ". . . by the wondrous agency of Electricity speech flashes through space and swift as lightning bears tidings of good and evil."

One may ask why the allegorical figures which have long been used in painting and sculpture of the Western tradition to communicate purposeful messages, to affirm commonly held aspirations -- particularly in public or semi-public, official and semi-official art, sponsored by princely patrons, secular governments, and religious orders, allegorical images that were such strong instrumentalities for community, may no longer seem appropriate to indicate what Electricity or communications look like. Is it only technological and scientific concepts that seem intractable. After all, allegorical figures have allowed a powerful concrete focus on a commonality of ideals. Our colossus, "Liberty Enlightening the World," that we know as the Statue of Liberty by the French sculptor Frédéric Bartholdi, given to the people of the United States by the people of France in commemoration of the centennial (in the 1870s), which I show you with some studies for it, is a reminder of the enormous usefulness of this type of public imagery -- tantamount to what the mass imagery of telecommunications might try to forge.

In two recent instances having nothing to do with technology but with our picturing of general ideas, the allegorical figure has been abjured.

With the fading into oblivion of the Columbia Pictures Lady (in favor yet of her torch), as can be seen in the slide to the left,

and the failure of feminists to champion a female allegorical personification of Liberty for representation on U. S. coinage and instead to go for Susan B. Anthony, we may well wonder why the public allegorical image has gotten an apparently sullied reputation. These are two recent instances in important public arenas of imagery -- the industrial-commercial in the case of Columbia Pictures Lady and the governmental in the case of the dollar coin (in which currency literally is at issue) -- in which the human embodiment of the idea of nationality or liberty have been rejected.

The Columbia Pictures Lady, was probably originally based on the figure developed for the World's Columbian Exposition in 1893 in Chicago with intimations of the Statue of Liberty and the nationalism that that comports. She now appears only for a moment on the motion picture screen, the camera moves quickly away from her as she fades and to her torch that is then metamorphosed into an abstracted sunburst. This spray of light was deemed more suitable to the entertainment conglomerate that Columbia Pictures was trying to become in the 1970s as is stated in the minutes of the corporate meeting when the new imagery was "unveiled." The corporate heads wanted their audience,

to know immediately that the corporation is large; that it is well-organized; that it is proud to put its name on its products; that it cares about the impression it makes; that it is responsible, contemporary, and a force to contend with.

Apparently the Lady would not do; as for her:

The lady with the torch has had a great following and enjoys immediate recognition when seen on the movie screen. [But] she is . . . old-fashioned, a bit behind the times and visually unattractive anywhere else but on the screen. So we have decided to abandon the lady -- although, as you will see, we will still be carrying the torch.

In the case of coinage, the depiction of the real, historical figure of Susan B. Anthony, to be pictured with a notable lack of youth and beauty, was espoused by feminist organizations and subsequently adopted for the new dollar coin issued by the U.S. Treasury instead of the figure of Liberty that was at first advocated. (Actually it now seems the issue was a failure for reasons of weight and size.) While it is important to note a real, historical figure was considered more significant because of real social and political contributions she had made, it is vital also to note the changing flex of feminist history had shifted the status of the idealized female allegorical figure, emphasizing that that status was no more than one of convention. As noted, coins have enormous currency as images. That a figure representing Liberty was not adopted because it was thought to mean something transcendent, something to aspire to, but something that did not necessarily exist in any real way, is significant. The allegorical figure with its moralizing and didactic purpose, was apparently considered something of an empty relic. I cannot show you what Liberty would have looked like, so I offer another comely early American Liberty as a substitute and John

Updike's verse:

ON THE RECENTLY MINTED
HUNDRED-CENT PIECE

What have they done to our dollar, darling,
And who is this Susan B.
Anthony in her tight collar, darling,
Instead of "Miss Liberty"?

He concludes other symbolic figures are the culprits, in his last lines:

Father Time, Uncle Sam, Lady Luck, beloved,
Have done done our doll dollar in."

As useful for centuries as the message-bearing device of the allegorical figure had been and despite numerous appearances in public and official art of the late nineteenth and earlier twentieth centuries -- the colossal Statue of Liberty; so many naked Truths, such as this one by Jules Lefebvre of 1870, holding aloft like Liberty a lamp to guide in the heroic missions undertaken; images of the Republic; or so many steel-engraved ladies used for bank notes -- there were instances of repudiation. On the one hand and with great economy of effort this stance could serve a variety of purposes. In its frontality and hieratic gesture it was so clearly associated with allegory that when in 1882 Mrs. Cornelius Vanderbilt posed in this stilted position as The Electric Light (the photograph is taken from Marvin Trachtenberg's excellent book on the Statue of Liberty), without even being clad in historicizing drapery, she would still be

viewed as embodying a special, excuse the expression, surcharge of meaning. But this kind of figure holding up a torch or light also became the subject of ridicule.

In France in the nineteenth century annual and semi-annual exhibitions were held at which were displayed paintings and sculpture deemed officially acceptable. Though in some years the jury that made the decision as to what was to be included at these so-called "Salons" was more liberal than in others, the final assemblage still represented what was officially sanctioned. Many of the paintings displayed at the annual Salon exhibitions were subjected to the yearly lampoons of the caricaturist Cham (the pseudonym for Comte Amédée de Noé). For example, in this one, on the screen, an allegorical figure with a lamp, such as we have seen, is mocked. Based on a work at the 1868 Salon by a M. Bouvier, the artificiality of the pose is indicated by suggesting the woman must be holding up a light so that the man -- who has inadvertently left his personal effects at her place -- and there has been hanky-panky -- can find and retrieve them. Caricatures by Cham and others of serious Salon works provide a valuable critical index to precisely what was found contrived or wanting or new and strange in subject matter or style in contemporary art. Borrowing terms from the stockmarket and finance to express upward or downward swing, the rising or falling favor conferred on the pictorial device of the allegorical figure and the value placed on it as a message-bearer of wide communal interest (putting aside, if that is possible, examples of particular excellence), depending on the arena and subject -- private or public -- the allegorical personification might at once

be described as Bullish or Bearish or perhaps beginning to be Sheepish: various critics suggested the aesthetic convention of allegory was old-fashioned or outmoded. With disbelief no longer suspended, as is indicated by Cham's drawing, there were signs it was a faltering convention.

Among the personifying figures Cham satirized was the conventionalized symbolic figure of Fortune. On the left I show you a painting of Fortune by the nineteenth-century American artist Elihu Vedder with which to compare Cham's charged drawing. Coins flow from her hand and the other traditional attribute of the figure, the wheel, also accompanies Vedder's marvelous Fortune. Indeed, in popular parlance we still speak of the wheel of fortune. As he had done in his caricature of a woman with lamp held aloft, Cham once again ridicules the patent artifice of the conventionalized attribute and the lack of realistic context by suggesting Fortune may be brought up to date by having the wheel be part of a bicycle on which she is astride. This caricature is captioned, "Fortune, need only make modest modifications on her wheel to go more commodiously."

Insofar as the allegorical or traditional image could yield to current situations and be modernized it was considered less of an embarrassment. This notion is expressed in two other caricatures by Cham in which ancient, historico-classicizing figures are trying to accommodate themselves to new situations. Cham hints that the old anthropomorphic embodiments wouldn't do for new concepts and were seriously outdated. On the one side is Apollo who "converts his chariot to get into the swing of Progress," and the very similar (it

seems Cham liked to repeat what he felt was a good thing), "Neptune obliged to follow Progress so as not to lose the sovereignty of the seas." In both, ancient gods are depicted desperately trying to keep up with the times, now astride bicycles madly peddling away.

Cham was by no means the first to repudiate the allegorical image in general or the personifying image in particular. The onslaught was well underway by the mid-eighteenth century. The tendency to personify, to anthropomorphize, was felt by some critics in England to have run rampant, with every flower being a little maid all in a row. For others, the philosopher-critic Friedrich Grimm, for example, allegory was felt to be too rigidly conventionalized and inelastic. Grimm condemned the tendency of large-scale projects to be built around allegory. (And in this we can certainly compare telecommunicated messages of the future, intended for mass recognition and appeal.)

Both literary and pictorial allegory were routinely castigated in many European countries. Dr. Johnson declared extensive allegorical personification an incongruity which defeated the tenets of good taste. Proponents of classicism, such as Heinrich Winckelmann, were less damning, but even he advocated a reconstruction of a comprehensive system of allegories to give art a new spiritual vitality. Goethe blasted allegory, preferring the open-endedness and what he viewed as the organic relationship of signifier to signified of Symbolism. Critics, writers, and philosophers took sides, generally against allegory, while more and more frequently differentiating it from Symbolism. Schlegel and Coleridge, who wrote

extensively on the modes, thought allegory out of fashion. It seemed almost always cold, obscure, and "insupportable" to the great Diderot as it was to Stendhal. Ruskin too attacked; he called allegory "a mere recreation of fancy." By the mid-nineteenth century it behooved Baudelaire, at least for a time, to protest it was indeed a marvelous mode. Do remember that the allegorical image was one that was to promote a kind of community view and a certain consensus of understanding.

Literary historians have had more to say and more carefully perhaps and certainly in more numbers for a longer time than have art historians about what they have called the "conceit" of allegory. The presence of personification has been attributed by some to a simple fondness at certain points of history to abstraction, as Bertrand Harris Bronson has attributed to the eighteenth century; others have viewed a penchant towards Platonic ideals and how strongly or firmly they are taken to heart as central to the prevalence of personification at a given time. One reason suggested for the dearth of personifications at present may be a lack of feeling for abstraction in our own time. To counter this assertion Jungian archetypes and Freudian models have been suggested as abstractions of wide and forceful communal adherence.

By the nineteenth century whether European Realists engaged in recording their time and interested in fashioning convincing images and reducing apparent stylistic artifice and emotional distance could accommodate allegory with its promise of imbuing images with greater meaning was of concern to a number of artists such as Courbet, Manet,

Glaize, and Gérôme, to name but a few.

One solution was an ancient one, that of mixing orders of reality, the actual and historical with the allegorical. In the language of today, adding an editorial comment on a passing event. One example of many is Thomas Couture's mid-nineteenth century Enrollment of the Volunteers of 1792, in which a real historical scene, depicted below, is augmented by the allegorical figures seen above, which are meant to indicate the further meaning of the event, thus narrowing for spectators the range of interpretation by showing the glory of victory, suggesting patriotism, etc.

In other paintings and numerous commemorative sculptural monuments of the nineteenth century this combination of real and allegorical is quite standard. At a time when Realism was in its ascendancy, however, artists were sometimes apologetic about or circumspect in introducing allegorical figures, creating a theatrical or dream-like setting for them, for example, to excuse, as it were, their inclusion. Thus, the artist Glaize presents his moralizing, didactic Allegory of Human Folly (Museum of Arras) via a theatrical setting with a costumed narrator-like figure. With the painting within a painting, the allegorical subject of the interior painting is made more acceptable as it is thus shown indirectly, as the subject merely of the interior painting. As we shall see shortly, the theater could even become vaudeville.

Insofar as an artist might try to make an allegorical figure germane to an actual situation, even a label would suffice to identify the iconic allegorical figure. Thus, Gustav Klimt's Veritas, painted

in the 1890s, one of a long line of naked Truths, has her allegorical status which otherwise is not apparent, clinched with her label. That she may have been created to pertain to the very current issue of the Dreyfus case, as indeed several Gérôme paintings of Truth at this time were (Truth at the Bottom of the Well or Truth Emerging from a Well) is not, however clear.

The reason for thinking the personification of Telephone Communication or Puvis de Chavannes' Electricity "quaint" perhaps and outdated and for relinquishing the Columbia Pictures Lady while retaining her torch may be attributed to yet another reason. In recent times a lack of willingness to anthropomorphize in serious art except in a satirical or ironic sense may be a concomitant to a reduced expectation of the power of the individual, even as projected onto an idealized image, to act or hence be anything but a vestigial signifier. This may be another leading reason for the falling away of the embodiment of meanings via human imagery or the projected human imagery of the traditional allegorical demiurges.

Objects rather than figures, as has often been noted, enjoy great attention in earlier twentieth-century imagery. The iconic presence and written claims of, for example, Stuart Davis' 1924 portrait of a bottle of mouthwash, Odol, in which the label promises that "it purifies," comprises a curiously complete personifying presence in all but what may be its fatal lack of personifying form. Davis' Odol stands much as older figures of Purity, traditionally a lady dressed in white, does. Note particularly in this example the human spectator is no longer made to feel the active seeker after

Purity in the sense that he is empowered to aspire to it. Nor does Purity attract by reason of being portrayed as an attractive figure. Rather now the commercial product holds out the promise that it will be the active agent of change, of Purity. The viewer may remain passive.

After the First World War, in 1919, the figure of Columbia made a spirited but now merely charming and witty, and one is tempted to say, sheepish appearance against a backdrop of flags and between two service men also performing in a work by Charles Demuth called In Vaudeville. Here a theatrical setting, bordering even on the burlesque, provides the raison d'être, the excuse for the costumed figures so they may thus represent greater meaning but in a persuasive context, one calculated to reduce embarrassments.

Another reason for the discreditation of the personifying figure that so usefully had presided over so much up until the nineteenth century, may be the lack of cultural hegemony and authority on which cogent normative allegorical images have traditionally been premised. Few concepts seem conducive to serious laudatory representation without seeming bland. In an era in which cynicism at least on the part of certain art-makers is the rule, an index to the emptiness of certain so to speak "cherished beliefs" may itself be the lack of allegorical figures. Moreover, the existence of transcendent values themselves have been called into question, and with that a proclivity to reify at all.

I have attempted, in this paper, to suggest some of the ways in which communication has been envisaged, some reasons for the

rejection of specific allegorical figures in our time and ambivalence towards allegorical figures in the past. At another level I have tried to show the general and growing disaffection with the allegorical personifying image itself, which had a long history of success as a vehicle for forging community focus.

In the instance of Columbia Pictures, the allegorical figure has been rejected by a patron who, like many corporations of the late twentieth century, want to be known to their publics in an abstract sense. Allegorical figures, associated with the past and a particular product, do not, in their opinion, suit a mobile, merger-minded, fluid management. Of course other patrons, other manufacturers want precisely such a personalized identification for their products.

In the instance of the figure of Liberty for the new dollar coin perhaps another motivation was at work. Women may have seen themselves doomed to being blandly idealized allegorical figures in public images victims of what might be called "pedestalism," while men were given specific historic recognition. Lincoln, Kennedy, Washington are all concrete public images who figure in American currencies. A demand for recognition of a real and historic female leader can be better understood placed in this context of image discrimination in which males are destined to be represented as actual leaders and females seem fated to be allegorized presences.

I have tried to underscore the changing devices used in art by which and the changing contexts in which the allegorical figure or mode has been presented so as not to be totally discredited. The new media -- film, advertising, television -- have, at times, seized the

role of serving as primary hortatory and propagandizing vehicles at the same time that values and concepts that lie behind traditional allegorical figures based on cultural hegemony have been subject to question.

The highly efficient traditional banderoled and labeled personifying figure continues to function in two significant public areas that should be mentioned. It functions publicly and valuably as a message-bearer within the context of satire and caricature. I show a nineteenth-century example by Daumier, but Conrad's daily caricatures would do. These are at heart normative and moralizing. Here the figure can still be half-draped and classicizing and acceptable and is still so portrayed in so many daily political cartoons of our own day. Indeed these appurtenances that set off the figure help us to recognize them as allegorical. If by the later part of the nineteenth century the cultural authority needed for allegory which expounds no longer held sway, caricature which ridicules and depends on expressionist style to set it off from the ordinary, did.

Vestigial allegorical figures also still appear in the "Beauty Pageants" of our own day smiling, idealized, banderoled and labeled figures representing America, the Universe, and the wool or telephone industry, what have been called in another context figures "embourgeoisées." Here is not the demythified woman feminists favor, but once more the generalized and bland idea of women as a simply pleasing figure, a message-bearing caryatid onto which ideas are projected.

With the fading of the allegorical personification, one may ask what kinds of images best embody or call forth Telecommunications. What does Communication look like now? How might the new technology be brought home? Several possibilities come to mind. Having read a bit about the new technology and projections of what will occur in 1984, I am struck by the descriptive language which evokes and at times seems almost a satire of the language used to describe that style of painting which has been called Analytic Cubism, the early phase of Cubism pioneered in France by Picasso and Bracque around 1908 to 1912, with its bits and pieces of "information." In Analytic Cubist paintings objects are fragmented and bits of data scattered only to achieve a new pictorial totality. "Ma Jolie," my pretty one, by Picasso, of 1912, a painting of a woman playing a guitar, may be taken symbolically of the new order. Others have suggested that Telecommunications are to be envisaged and understood digitally, power is to be given to numbers. The traditional human figure is in any case shunted aside, no longer an apt iconic reminder of the new technology.

Aside from numbers, absolutes are lacking, and allegory does not thrive on hesitation. Allegory thrived in reliably structured and sovereign older societies with their felt (and hoped for) commonality of ideals. A shifting reality, cultural pluralism, doubts about public institutions and ideals and a stable and believable hierarchy of values together with extraordinary competition in the marketplace of public images have changed the role of the artist and art itself, and these changes have driven -- at least for now -- allegory from its familiar and habitual precincts.