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COMMENTARIES

Myths of the new future

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On Allegory as Cut Form

As a form, allegory is invested in coherence. One narrative, image, setting or character in a piece of art or media is understood to be a substitution for another narrative, image, setting or character in the real world. For the allegory to function, for it to be able to be interpreted as such, representation and reality need to cohere in some way, while at the same time the distance between them is emphasised: *this* is not *that*. Allegory itself comes to stand for a removal from the material world, considering its problems through the veil of fantasy in such a way that obscures or pulls force from the complexity of concrete experience. Through a reading of two works in the exhibition, *Myths of the new future*, I want to instead emphasise the ways in which allegory is already cut through with the infrastructure of social reality, and ask how this might change our understanding of the autonomy of experience.

Allegory can work against a person's own sense of reality; against the psychic performance of coherence. If one understands one's life to be symbolic and always awaiting an interpretation, then personal experiences, sensations, and knowledge can be appraised as myths – fundamentally unreal delusions to be variously tolerated or eradicated. P. Staff's *In Ekstase* (2023) records what it's like to live within this affective atmosphere, where your feelings may not feel real, even to yourself. The 'cherubic trans-sexed' poet-narrator is 'crying in the street [...] stared down by strangers', a brutal gaze which is internalised in a dissociative split between 'I' and 'you'.¹

This feeling of unreality can happen to anyone, but it is important that Staff's narrator is specifically marked as trans. The cherubic transsexual recalls Emma Heaney's definition of the trans feminine allegory, a figure developed by early sexology, modernist literature and queer theory to deny the reality of trans womanhood. The allegory's sex was dismissed as purely symbolic, literary, an explanatory metaphor for some other phenomenon not grounded in the sensations and organs of the woman's own body. She was a 'feminine soul in a

masculine body', whose felt sense of gender was aspirational; allegorical of a state that did not – could not – otherwise exist.²

Trans people are materially denied existence; subject to strategies which push them out of their own lives. This might be accompanied by fatal violence, both quick and slow, but it does not require a literal death; even the trans afterlife can be symbolic. As Zhao Ng has noted, angels often become insignia of 'queer and/or trans identification, marking out a minor transcendence of the spirit from the differently sexed mammal'. Trans angels 'inexist' because they are 'never fully there', sexually, socially, and physically, but rather 'always just a few degrees heavenward of their thrown, collapsed placement in the cell of the body'.³ Staff's narrator describes their similarly crumpled attitude; their body is 'empty of bones – one wet sac'. But this disintegration seems not to eject them from their body, but draw it closer in a kind of fall from an equally in-existent grace. When they speak of their 'env[y] of the air', even this wish to join a disembodied mass is expressed through the most essential of substances; something unseen yet never questioned in its reality, the opposite of the trans femme allegory. As much as the narrator's body is lacerated and emptied by its own yearning, the oppressive structure of feeling cannot be separated out from life-affirming moments which texture their inner monologue; they might be obliterated, but it is a destruction 'in ekstase', a glorious sunder.

Reality and its dissociated representation are cut through with each other; what we might think of as real is often loaded with abstraction, bringing it closer to an experience of allegory. Sex and gender are, as Donna Haraway says, only metaphors produced by medical science to pattern the otherwise inconceivable arrangement of anatomical, endocrinological and behavioural variation across species.⁴ The body and its characteristics are real, but the concepts of 'sex', 'man' and 'woman' are representations – expectations and imaginations of material form. Viewing sex and gender as metaphors opens up a new window onto the trans feminine allegory. Her embodiment is not the source of a private displacement or wrongful arrangement, but rather the medium

through which the organisation of sex on a societal level is worked out. Her symbolic dissonance cannot be resolved through an alignment of her sex with itself, for that only produces a new metaphor. The demand, though, from the clinic and the psychiatrist is that she alone holds and hides sex's metaphorical form – the incoherent reality of biology is relocated onto the trans woman, who is forced to always work to cohere her sex within herself, a coherence which relies on this effort for its apparent naturalised reality.

But what if, instead of a 'minor transcendence', allegory is subject instead to a 'minor negation', to borrow Danny Hayward's description of Marina Vishmidt's infrastructural critique, embodied in her teenage hopping of NYC's subway gates on the way to the movies.⁵ Skipping the fare in the pursuit of art and pleasure, forces open the gap between economic infrastructure and its abstracted representation; it is an embodied acknowledgment of the indeterminacy that exists between these two terms, a cut introduced between the way things are and how they are supposed to be.

In Lifelike (2024), Dora Budor slices open the smooth abstraction of capital speculation, leaving jagged, wobbly edges. The vibrator-mounted camera literalises the libidinal display of power and wealth on show in the architecture of Manhattan's Hudson Yards, producing a parallel abstraction mediated by pleasure. This parallel, while it reflects the conditions of capital back onto itself, refuses to cohere – the image can't settle. Similarly, Budor's frottages, in their direct representation of vandalism against infrastructure for hire – here, city bikes – equate artistic and capital speculation as two techniques capable of producing abstraction even as they enact material interventions which abrade the neatness of this analogy. Materiality does not exist elsewhere, a few inches below the speculative image, but the two rub off on each other, as evidenced by the imperfectly mirrored marks on both drawing and bike. Budor's works acknowledge the space between the physical and the abstract, the allegory and what it allegorises, but do not reduce this to dialectical opposition. The representational image and that which

is represented are always combined *and cut* through with each other. This is the shape allegory comes to wear when we accept the impossibility of the demand for coherence.

In her book *Speculation as a Mode of Production: Forms of Value Subjectivity in Art and Capital*, Vishmidt sets up a series of equivalences between her terms: speculation and production, art and capital. These pairs relate to but also recoil from one another, productively revealing the friction in this structural analogy. Budor's buzzing camera and sandpaper frottages rub against this seam further. Writing about Budor's 2022 exhibition at Kunsthau Bregenz, Vishmidt describes how the artist 'works to generate [...] a transformation of gaps and significant absences', an appearance of spaces in a social and political context characterised by a fascistic need to present a solid impermeable front.⁶ This is, according to Vishmidt, 'a recurrent theme' in reactionary desires for gender normativity, but it also characterises the relation between the speculative practices of art and financial capital. The subjective experience of speculation becomes coded in the labour market as 'creativity', meaning that art 'becomes no longer just a commodity in the market or a gratuitous activity but a tool of socialisation and re-valorisation of land, populations and political entities'.⁷ We see this instrumentalisation in the architecture and urban development that appears in *Lifelike*, an instrumentalisation that is then undercut by Budor when she vandalises the totems of the flexible neoliberal economy. These drawings point towards an autonomy of art in their abstraction, but this mythic charge of art is changed, never able to fully pull away from its participation in the new economic landscape.

Both Staff's dissociative narrator and Budor's distorting antagonist are caught in the same vanishing logic, required to do the work of making positive content out of the abstractions of sex and capital. This positive and coherent form is the mythic structure demanded by the present social, political and economic conditions of production imposed upon us by equivocations between the real and representation. However, allegory – despite its appearance of coherence – offers a way to cut these ties, and open paths for new possibilities.

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1. P. Staff, 'In Ekstase' (2023).

2. Emma Heaney, *The New Woman: Literary Modernism, Queer Theory, and the Trans Feminine Allegory*, Northwestern University Press, 2017. Heaney recounts historical testimony from trans women which shows they did not feel this way. Their bodies were already womanly, in their words, irrespective of what anyone else had to say. Yet, wielded by clinicians and publishers, the allegory not only contradicted these women's experiential expressions, it became a framework which insisted on the impossibility of transitioning and thus limited access to its means.

3. Zhao Ng, 'Trans Romance; Queer Intimacy and the Problem of Inexistence in the Modern Novel', *Critical Inquiry* 49, no. 2, 2023, p.195.

4. Donna J. Haraway, *Crystals, Fabrics, and Fields: Metaphors of Organicism in Twentieth-Century Developmental Biology*, Yale University Press, 1976, p. 9.

5. Danny Hayward, 'Introduction: A Life Lived in Different Circumstances', in Larne Abse Gogarty, Danny Hayward and Kerstin Stakemeier, *Marina Vishmidt, Infrastructural Critique: Between Reproduction and Abolition*, Verso, forthcoming.

6. Marina Vishmidt, 'Basement Jazz: Dora Budor,' *Mouse 81*, 28 September 2022 [online]. Available at <https://www.moussemagazine.it/magazine/dora-budor-marina-vishmidt-2022-2/>

7. Marina Vishmidt, *Speculation as a Mode of Production: Forms of Value Subjectivity in Art and Capital*, Brill, 2018, p. viii-ix.



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