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Rethinking Postmodernism

JUST AS *POST-* BECAME AN OMNIPRESENT prefix for describing cultural phenomena from the sixties onward, a survey of critical theory titles from the last fifteen years demonstrates that the prefix *re-* has emerged as a favored option for describing intellectual projects of the late twentieth century. With titles like *What Happens to History: The Renewal of Ethics in Continental Thought* (2001), *Retrieving Experience* (2001), *Reclaiming Identity: Realist Theory and the Predicament of Postmodernism* (2000), *Redeeming Art: Critical Reveries* (2000), *Constructive Postmodernism: Toward Renewal in Cultural and Literary Studies* (1999), *The Rebirth of Value: Meditations on Beauty, Ecology, Religion, and Education* (1991), *States of Grace: The Recovery of Meaning in the Postmodern Age* (1991), and *The Resurgence of the Real* (1997), scholars from various disciplines are positing a *re-* in answer to the *post-* in postmodernism. Something about the postness of earlier postmodernist texts and theory, apparently, makes this *re-* inevitable or desirable for many writers. The discursive acts of redemption, renewal, recovery, retrieval, and reclamation heralded in recent discussions of postmodernism indicate a frustration, disappointment, or fatigue with the direction in which studies of postmodernity have gone, coupled with a determination to change that direction. The imagined losses and lapses necessitating so much redemptive activity arise perhaps from a sense of exhaustion with reading practices that emphasize textual indeterminacy and self-contradiction while leaving unexplored specific value claims made by texts. The problem with such reading protocols is that they tend to produce the same observations—reality is mediated by language and representation, the mediating function of language and representation make reality difficult or impossible to know, language ultimately refers to other language, and textual meaning is fragile, unstable, or self-contradictory. This set of insights, having been iterated sufficiently, leads some to that sense of exhaustion, frustration, or boredom that

leads writers to look for new ways of reading postmodernism. Anxieties about postmodernism also stem from a sense that the thinking characteristic of postmodernist theory strips literature and philosophy of their ancient traditional cultural functions of providing meaning in a human world that is often frighteningly chaotic and violent.

The term *postmodernism* is famously difficult and protean—so much so that it has become necessary in some critical quarters to speak of postmodernisms, to do justice to the variety of understandings that have developed over the last quarter century. In this book, I refer to the understanding of postmodernism that has evolved from Jean-François Lyotard and Jean Baudrillard, whose work describes postmodernism as a late twentieth-century condition of culture characterized by skepticism toward two fundamental categories of thought and experience: the true and the real. In *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on the State of Knowledge*, Lyotard describes postmodern thinking as a tendency to question the validity of “grand narratives”—stories like the ones conveyed in ancient holy books or sweeping scientific theories, stories that purport to explain *the way things are*. The postmodern mind, Lyotard explains, has lost faith in the explanatory power of these master narratives, and in their ability to provide shared sources of value. Postmodernism then, is an epistemological crisis; we no longer know whether we can trust what we think we know. For Baudrillard, this postmodern epistemological crisis produces an ontological crisis: if we cannot trust what we think we know, then how do we know what exists? Baudrillard’s *Simulacra and Simulation* debuted in France in 1981 and was translated into English in 1994. Its first chapter, “The Precession of Simulacra,” appeared in numerous anthologies of postmodernism and shaped public conceptions of postmodernism considerably. In Baudrillard’s description of fin-de-siècle Western culture, simulation has overtaken reality, resulting in an epistemological implosion wherein the true and the real cease to exist altogether. In a florid, fanciful style, Baudrillard’s seminal text makes such apocalyptic announcements as “It is all of metaphysics that is lost” (1994, 8) and “simulation threatens the difference between the ‘true’ and the ‘false,’ the ‘real’ and the ‘imaginary’ (3). From Lyotard, Baudrillard, and others spinning their ideas, we get a characterization of postmodernism as a collective abandonment of truth and reality as viable categories of thought.

While recent titles in critical theory evidence a critical desire to revise this concept of postmodernism, fatigue and irritation with postmodernism is even stronger outside scholarly circles, and unaccompanied by a desire to rehabilitate it. The poet David Lehman quipped in an interview with the *Writer’s Chronicle* that the observation that reality/experience is always mediated by language *was* interesting the first three dozen times it was made (2001, 23). Posthumously ribbing a thinker whose name has become synonymous with postmodern insights about the fragilities of language, the satirical newspaper *The Onion* ran a headline on

October 26, 2004, that read “Jacques Derrida ‘dies,’” calling attention to how non-negotiable the real can be, even to someone with sophisticated ideas about how language mediates reality. Nearly every reference to postmodernism in popular culture is similarly snide and pejorative (and not always as funny), associating the postmodern with meaninglessness, lack of depth, alienation, and estrangement from important human concerns. In fact, the word “postmodern” often gets used as an adjective for the shallow, pointless, depthless, or insubstantial. In an episode of *The Simpsons*, the bartender Mo, after opening a nightclub with some odd decor, tries to characterize postmodern design for his guests. He remarks, “You know. It’s pomo.” When his guests look at him blankly, he clarifies the statement, “You know. Postmodern.” When this still doesn’t get any response, he offers, “All right. Weird for weird’s sake.” In a *New York Review of Books* piece assessing Jeffrey Eugenides’ novel *Middlesex*, Daniel Mendelsohn complains of flaws in the novel’s narrative voices, one of which he considers an “all-too-typically sardonic, post-everything American male.” The reviewer goes on to say that readers will finish the novel without knowing much about the central character, except that he has a “penchant for saying sardonic things” and for making “vaguely postmodern narrative gestures” (2002, 18)—observations which implicitly associate postmodernism with depthless, insubstantial, unsatisfying verbal play. In the April 2002 *Harper’s*, Thomas de Zengotita mounts an impassioned critique of what he sees as the mind-numbing (and soul-killing) speed of contemporary American culture, which ushers people along from post-September 11 horror to the next Arnold Schwarzenegger flick. Zengotita writes, “So it’s not surprising that you have learned to move on so readily to the next, sometimes moving, moment. It’s sink or surf. Spiritual numbness guarantees that your relations with the moving will pass. And the stuffed screen accommodates you with moving surfaces that assume you are numb enough to accommodate them. And so on, back and forth. The dialectic of postmodern life” (36)

Once again, the postmodern is associated with the depthless, the insubstantial, the spiritually exhausted. Not surprisingly, given this characterization of postmodernism, in religious circles—including among university theologians with PhDs—the habit of denouncing the postmodern has become a cottage industry.¹ Indeed, while researching this book I had a surprising experience that further illustrates how anxieties about postmodernism have seeped out of the academy and into wider publics. During a visit with family in Grand Rapids, which included attendance for the first time at a Protestant church service, the pastor started railing against postmodernism during a sermon. Imagine my surprise at hearing—in the middle of a stream of traditional rhetoric about Jesus—the pastor, Walter Lorenz, warn, “Now postmodern ideas about truth tell you that there really is no such thing as truth. But this is wrong!” I hadn’t realized that people other than professors cared much about postmodern concepts of truth.

Of course, conversation within the academy also percolates on occasion around questions concerning the spiritual and/or political vitality (or lack of vitality) of postmodern art forms and postmodernist thinking. Although theorists like Terry Eagleton and Fredric Jameson express more direct concern over the political implications of postmodernism, their analyses also implicitly suggest that postmodernist forms are spiritually enervating. Some thinkers criticize the spiritual and religious irrelevance of postmodern literature and film more overtly. In “Art That Really Matters,” the cultural anthropologist Richard L. Anderson exemplifies this kind of rhetoric when he tidily characterizes three major categories of late twentieth-century aesthetics: modernism is art for art’s sake; postmodernism is art for talk’s sake; and another kind of art—art rooted in traditions of sociopolitical *engagement* and spiritual expression—is art for life’s sake, or “art that really matters” (1989, 445–48). The imputation of a moral hierarchy here is apparent, and postmodernism occupies the bottom.

This kind of criticism led scholars like Linda Hutcheon to articulate the epistemological and ontological sensibilities of postmodernism more precisely, in an attempt to show how these sensibilities are compatible with political engagement. Hutcheon argues that truth and reality do not cease to exist in postmodern fiction, but have simply ceased to be unproblematic (1989, 34). This elegantly simple observation can also be applied to the relationship between postmodernism and religion, which is my central concern here. It is no surprise that humanists of various stripes, including religionists, have found postmodernist thinking à la Lyotard and Baudrillard antithetical to their concerns, given that humanist and religious discourses have traditionally rested on fixed root assumptions about what is true and what is real; therefore, it is assumed that a discourse that problematizes the very concepts of truth and reality could not possibly contribute anything of substance to conversations about human concerns like whether and what sorts of spiritual forces may exist, shaping human experience; or where humans fit into a bewilderingly complex and unpredictable universe; or why people suffer and how terrible suffering might be alleviated. These concerns have traditionally been the province of theology, cosmology, and salvation mythology, as these discourses have evolved within the context of conventional organized religions. Since all these discourses are forms of metaphysical speculation, it would seem that if postmodernist discourse obliterates metaphysics, as Baudrillard claims, then postmodernism attacks the underpinnings of religion itself, and has no interest in making theological, cosmological, or salvational claims.

My purpose here is to show—through a discussion of postmodernist allegory—that postmodernist skepticism about the true and the real can and does coexist with religious thinking. In fact, postmodernist literature and film, in my view, perform a profound distress over the fact that the true and the real have become problematic concepts. At the same time, they search obsessively for

strategies of articulating stable values in intellectual and cultural climates in which specific values and the epistemological bases for value judgments remain contested. In addition, they struggle for religious insight despite a cultural climate in which institutional religion has lost considerable epistemological authority and moral credibility, at least in some quarters. This loss of authority stems from the fact that the most influential religious discourses have emerged from dominant institutions whose practice of domination has sometimes included—and continues to include—horrifying violence, inequality, and hypocrisy. Many postmodern discourses, wanting to attack various forms of domination, have done so by contesting the assumptions—the concepts of truth and ideas about the real—that undergird hegemonic discourses and practices. However, many postmodern discourses, including postmodern allegories, have been reluctant to abandon the theological, cosmological, and salvational discourses that have accompanied the practice of religion, however flawed.

Questioning the supposedly secular quality of postmodern culture, Claude Lefort argues that religious ideas have not gone away, but merely transformed, that “the religious survives in the guise of new beliefs and new representations” (1998, 215). Similarly, James Champion, whose essay “Sacramental and Prophetic Interpretation” traces “theological survivals” in Jung, Heidegger, Gadamer, Freud, Adorno, and Derrida, identifies intellectual and affective trends in academic discourse attributable to Christian and Hebrew rhetorics. Champion argues that ancient theological concepts have not disappeared from intellectual life, but have merely submerged, surviving in ostensibly secular discourse:

Properly speaking, the prophetic and the sacramental are polar elements in living religion. We live in a highly secularized culture, however, and that makes allusion to such terms problematic. Key theological polarities—such as the divine and the demonic—seem remote when, for many, the symbols of religion are dormant, if not dead. But such polarities may be interwoven with the historical fabric of our lives even though, on the surface, their meanings have been effaced. It is possible, in other words, that such terms point to submerged factors impinging upon modern and postmodern life despite the collapsed state of a traditional world of belief. (1995, 16)

Champion here suggests that ideas and behavior arising from religious traditions transmute in a secular context into ideas and behavior articulated in a secular vocabulary but pursued and responded to with an urgency or intensity associated with the religious. This is certainly true of much postmodernist literature and film, and of all postmodern allegory.

So what is religion, what is postmodern allegory, and what can postmodern allegory illustrate about postmodernism and religion? Peter Berger defines

the religious as “a cultural activity that deals with sustaining the boundaries between the islands of meaning socially established as real, commonsense, and rational, and the areas beyond the boundary that are considered dream, fantasy, aberrant, and insane” (qtd. in White 1997, 43). In this formulation, the religious is not that which pertains to one of the world’s organized systems of belief, but that which attempts to articulate cosmology and value: that which attempts to establish what exists, what is good or desirable, and what is bad or undesirable. Religious discourse, accordingly, is not merely discourse that supports this or that specific dogma or set of practices—Christian, Jewish, or Buddhist discourse, for instance—but discourse that demonstrates an urgent interest and deep investment in issues of ontology and morality or, if not in morality exactly, then in what might be called “salutary being.” Stewart Hoover and Knut Lundby, taking a similarly broad approach to religion, connect religious, media, and cultural studies in their book *Rethinking Media, Religion, and Culture*, defining religion as “a symbolic universe or universes of ultimate value and knowledge” (1997a, 6). Such nontheistic understandings of religiosity help clarify how the kinds of fiction I will be discussing here—virtual reality movies, feminist experimental fantasy novels, experimental filmmaking, and Amerindian novels—use postmodernist aesthetic strategies and epistemologies to explore and dramatize religious concerns.

Admittedly, such definitions of the religious make it difficult to identify human discourse and practice that is *not* religious. And here I must acknowledge that my readiness to make use of such definitions reveals my belief that all people *are* constantly engaged in religious activity whether connected to *a* religion or not, for the religious often exists outside the context of religious institutions. Organized religion is but one form of religious behavior. Religiosity itself is the impulse to create symbolic frameworks for ordering and interpreting vast expanses of phenomena and experience—coupled with the impulse to perceive either symbolic frameworks or experience itself with a sense of numinousness or awe. The making of meaning always involves committing oneself, for in the process of making meaning, one singles out and selects as important certain elements of experience or text, leaving aside any number of other elements, and connecting and forging that which most presses upon one’s consciousness into a coherent thought-form—a belief, observation, insight, interpretation, idea. Obviously, these are processes that touch every human endeavor, but particularly the creation and consumption of fiction.

Remarkably, however, critical explorations of the religious in fiction are surprisingly scarce. Perhaps because the religious remains associated with particular religions and not with secular expression, and because most religions have become associated with reductive or ossified concepts of the sacred, or worse, with violence and intolerance, critical discourse tends to skirt it altogether. Also, because of what

James Champion calls “the reduction . . . of religion to belief in a supernatural deity” (1995, 16), it has become unusual among secular academics to approach literature and film with an interest in their configurations of the religious. However, since a good deal of postmodern fiction—and certainly postmodern allegory—demonstrates a marked preoccupation with religious speculation and inquiry, critics need to cope with this queasiness if they are to engage fully with texts. Fortunately, critical theory—especially cultural studies—provides enough nontheistic conceptual apparatus for the study of the religious to support the kinds of analyses Mark Wallace envisions in his introduction to Paul Ricoeur’s *Figuring the Sacred: Religion, Narrative, and Imagination*. Wallace offers an excellent explanation of what it means to read religiously. Religious studies, he writes, offer not “rationalist justification of religious beliefs or a confessionalist defense of traditional doctrines,” but rather “public inquiry into the meaning of symbolic discourses” (1995, 4). This type of reading departs from dominant reading practices evident in scholarship about postmodernist literature and film throughout the seventies and eighties, which often show more interest in contemplating how texts avoid meaning than in contemplating how or what texts mean. Conducting inquiry into the meaning of symbolic discourses requires close reading with the purpose of interpretation; that is to say, religious reading requires midrash. This is the reading practice I bring to postmodern allegory—a category of text perfectly suited to demonstrating how postmodernism does religion.

Postmodern allegory is a genre and mode that asks epistemological and ontological questions using ancient rhetorical strategies evolved to serve religious cultural purposes. These ancient rhetorical strategies include dream-vision, episodic structure, battle or progress, intertextuality, personification, and the quest for spiritual/religious gnosis.² These strategies have since antiquity enabled creators of fictions to engage in religious speculation and, contrary to what many theorists of allegory have to say about allegory in a postmodern context, they continue to serve religious purposes in contemporary allegory. Brian McHale describes the ontological preoccupations of postmodernism in *Postmodernist Fiction*. Summarizing what he takes to be critical consensus about a postmodernist sensibility, McHale writes that postmodernism can be characterized in terms of “its ontological instability or indeterminacy, the *loss* of a world that could be accepted, ‘willy-nilly,’ as a given of experience” (1987, 26; italics in the original). He suggests that postmodernist fiction is governed by an “ontological dominant” and is “designed to dramatize ontological issues” (15). Postmodern fictions, in other words, enact an uncertainty about what exists. Given Paul Ricoeur’s observation that “God is the religious name for being” (1995, 45), it is no wonder that postmodernist fiction often finds allegory hospitable, since allegory evolved as a rhetorical strategy for exploring and expressing religious insight. The postmodern allegories contemplated here enact the ontological

uncertainty McHale identifies as the core energy animating postmodernist fiction: each features a hero or heroes questing, like *Piers Plowman* and all allegorical heroes, through a dream landscape in search of certainty about what is real and what is unreal. Each of the texts selected for analysis here feature, in one form or another, a hero or heroes searching desperately for elemental, transformative insights in bizarre and complicated worlds that make it difficult for the hero or heroes to experience a basic sense of orientation and understanding.

Surprisingly, given the historical origins of allegory in religion, few recent scholars approach allegory as a genre or mode. Definitions and discussions of allegory, strongly influenced by Paul de Man's *Allegories of Reading*, tend instead to focus on allegory as a feature of all language and discourse, and as a habit of reading. In fact, the literary scholarship defining allegory both complicates and clarifies the term either by generalizing it to a point where it would be difficult to locate any discourse that *isn't* allegory, or by offering an extraordinary range of definitions. Despite the confusion the sheer variety of definitions creates, however, many useful critical concepts emerge out of the conflicts in the conversation. The following conflicts, which sometimes overlap, recur throughout the chorus of critical voices defining allegory: (1) a focus on allegory as a way of reading versus a focus on allegory as a feature of texts; (2) the desire to discuss allegory as a feature of all language and narrative, and therefore a model of sense-making versus the desire to define allegory as a specific genre or mode with specific generic and/or modal traits; (3) the tendency to assume that all allegory refers to a set of philosophical or religious ideas using a one-to-one correspondence between a given textual element and its extratextual referent versus the assumption that in the twentieth century, Western culture retains no potential referents in common, so modern allegory can only dramatize the absence of referents; and (4) the view that allegory can be defined as a genre like "epic poem" or "tragic play" versus the view that allegory can be defined as a mode like "irony" or "sarcasm." I am most interested in the definitions that belong to the last category listed here, but since it seems unnecessary to approach the matter from an either/or perspective, I do not see it as a conflict; my discussion explores allegory as *both* a genre (that sometimes overlaps with another genre) and as a mode that cuts across genres. The next two chapters that follow discuss how postmodern allegory, defined as a particular narrative genre, embodies religious discourse; the next two chapters after that discuss how allegory, defined as a mode or strategy deployed in nonnarrative or experimentally narrated texts, infuses those texts with religiosity. While the texts I have selected for analysis differ significantly in important respects—genre, audience, quality—they share, in addition to certain formal allegorical structures, the sense of urgency, intensity, and inquisitiveness that marks religious discourse.

If few recent scholars approach allegory as a specific genre or mode, even fewer attempt to understand the religious dimensions of contemporary allegory. Such an approach seems necessary, however, given the form's ancient roots in religion.³ Earlier theorists of allegory, whose discussions do not cover

post-1960s allegory, considered religious, theological, or metaphysical speculation intrinsic to the form. Edwin Honig describes allegory as a conflation of writing, myth and religion (1959, 27) and Angus Fletcher describes it as the “human reconstitution of divinely inspired messages, a revealed transcendent language which tries to preserve a properly veiled godhead” (1964, 21). Walter Benjamin calls allegory a “synthesis . . . [of] theological and artistic intentions” (1977, 177). In more secular terms, Stephen Greenblatt claims that “the consummation wished by allegory is a perfect, authoritative presentation of Truth” (1981, viii) and characterizes allegory as participating in an “artistic practice [that responds] to an unappeasable craving for reality and truth and a recurrent fear that these forever lie just beyond our grasp” (ix). Considering the connections of allegory with religion and ontology—quests for reality and truth—it is worth investigating why we see a widespread revival of allegory as a literary and visual form (not to mention critical concept) in the latter half of the twentieth century, at which point, at least by some estimates, God has been pronounced dead for almost a century and metaphysical speculation has become passé.

The Irish poet Eavan Boland sheds some light on this question. In her lecture at the 1994 International Writers Center conference, “The Writer and Religion,” Boland describes a sensation that swept through Ireland in the summer of 1988: media, recreation, and tourism that summer revolved obsessively around a series of incidents in which people claimed to see statues of the Virgin Mary move. Boland suggests that this curious cultural phenomenon indexed the intensity of spiritual longing that haunts contemporary Western culture. About the couple who made the original claim, Boland remarks, “In their attempt to make sacred a time and a country that were resolutely being defined as secular, they testified to both loss and deprivation. I think it is right to ask whether literature has written the loss down as a communal one, or whether it has merely responded to this loss by denoting the imagination as a new sacred place and forgetting or dismissing the communal sources of faith” (2000, 19). I submit that contemporary allegory *does* register this communal loss. However, it is not only a loss of gods or the sacred that contemporary allegorical literature and film explore. It is also the loss of ontological certainty—experienced as a diminishing faith in the realness and relevance of the body, everyday private experience, community, and the earth, as well as a diminishing faith in the trustworthiness of language and story to convey meaning. Postmodern allegory labors diligently to resurrect these aspects of experience as sites of the real and sources of value. However, having breathed the epistemological zeitgeist ushered in by Nietzsche, Einstein, Derrida, Baudrillard, and Lyotard, postmodern allegory operates somewhat differently from its formal forebears in the Renaissance, Middle Ages, and antiquity, for postmodern allegory must make and articulate its discoveries in an intellectual context in which truth, reality, and meaning are not only problematic—they are suspect.

Two paintings, by artists removed from each other in time, place, and sensibility, but related through their interest in allegory, illustrate how postmodernist allegory has evolved in the West to suit an epistemologically restless moment. Between 1671 and 1674, almost twenty years after his conversion to Catholicism, the Dutch painter Jan Vermeer completed his ponderous, iconographically precise *Allegory of Faith*, a spectacular visual manifesto of Jesuit belief (Wheelock 1995, 190). The work pictures an idealized female figure, seated before a Crucifixion painting, hand over heart, foot resting on a globe, gazing up at a glass orb while leaning on a table bearing Christian ritual objects; on the floor at her feet lie an apple and a snake crushed beneath a cornerstone. Every detail of the painting—the blue and white of the woman’s gown; apple and snake; chalice, Bible, and crucifix; the Jacob Jordaens painting *Crucifixion* in the background—refers to a world of established religious ideas outside the painting. The seated female figure who represents faith, in fact, comes from Cesare Ripa’s *Iconologia*, a popular sourcebook for Renaissance artists that catalogs and prescribes an entire culture’s worth of symbolic representations; a painter could consult this sourcebook and learn exactly how the virtue of faith should properly be embodied (Gowing 1997, 154). By using the *Iconologia*, as well as a range of other cultural material—Catholic liturgy, Christian doctrine, the Old and New Testaments, and other paintings—*Allegory of Faith* both acquires religious authority and endows it: its assertion about faith’s ability to conquer the world and overcome evil derives credibility from the mass of religious texts and images preceding it. Simultaneously, Vermeer’s painting affirms the authority of those texts and images by acknowledging them as foundational. Through this symbiotic dance of authority borrowed and authority conferred, back and forth, between the painting and its source traditions, the painter and his seventeenth-century audience entered into a powerful social experience—an experience constructed and discovered in the dance of many texts, stories, and images. Through the allegory and its referents, the painter and his audience link themselves emotionally and ideologically with a world of religious meaning around them, and link themselves through this world of religious meaning to people living before, with, and after them. By entering into this social experience, enacted through text and image, painter and audience cultivated in their minds and hearts an experience of order, belonging, assurance, mystery, wonder, knowing, and certainty: this powerful internal experience, in a social context that affirms it, we call truth.

Nearly three centuries later, in a changed cultural context, Robert Rauschenberg produced an allegory that operates quite differently from Vermeer’s. Using three canvases, a mirrored panel, oil, paper, fabric, printed paper, wood, metal, sand, glue, and an umbrella, Rauschenberg created his combine painting *Allegory*, which, unlike Vermeer’s allegory, seems more interested in multiplying meaning infinitely, instead of carefully determining it. Although the painting’s umbrella

and fragmentary red letters refer to the world of human objects and culture, the work has no necessary and obvious internal framework of meaning, and seems uninterested in fitting itself into any specific external framework of meaning. Whereas *Allegory of Faith* asserts that “Christ’s death has saved the world from evil” and that “Christian faith can overcome evil,” Rauschenberg’s *Allegory* seems to depart from the notion of art as assertion, moving toward a notion of art as wondering, or even as sheer material exploration. For some art viewers, this movement from assertion to wondering amounts to a movement away from meaning itself. Charles F. Stuckey remarks that while Rauschenberg’s “repeated materials and images invite interpretation. . . . his work harbors no specific meanings” (1997, 32). The artist himself, in fact, has declared his own aversion to the idea that *understanding* constitutes a worthwhile response to art: “Understanding is a form of blindness. Good art, I think, can never be understood” (Rauschenberg and Saff 1991, 177). This mistrust of understanding, of meaning-making as traditionally conceived, typifies attitudes toward meaning often associated with postmodernist art and engenders reading habits that emphasize textual indeterminacy and self-contradiction while underemphasizing positive content.

Craig Owens exemplifies this method of reading in part 1 of his essay “The Allegorical Impulse: Toward a Theory of Postmodernism.” Writing about Rauschenberg, Troy Brauntuch, Sherrie Levine, and Robert Longo, Owens asserts that the ways these artists manipulate images “empty [the images] of their resonance, their significance, their authoritative claim to meaning” (1980a, 69). In part 2 of “The Allegorical Impulse,” Owens remarks that postmodernist artistic strategies therefore “problematize the activity of reading, which must remain forever suspended in its own uncertainty” (1980b, 61). This emphasis on textual indeterminacy or self-contradiction, with its concomitant focus on what de Man calls the “impossibility of reading,” has come to dominate contemporary thinking about allegory. Interestingly, theorists of allegory have applied this reading approach not just to postmodern works but also to Vermeer himself, as when Clive Dilnot and Maruja García-Padilla offer a reading of *Allegory of Faith* that altogether ignores its religious claims and instead reads it as a meditation on “the referential moment as a whole,” a “kind of parody of the injunction regarding the rendering of the human” (1989, 47). Dilnot and García-Padilla write, “[*Allegory of Faith*] is essentially unstable and contradictory at core. . . . [Its] intention appears simple and the freedom granted the viewer for its interpretation very limited. But this conceptual fixedness, the determination of a truth of the known but hidden order revealed by allegory, subverts the reliability of the representation of the visual experience. At the same time, however, the conscious stress on a skillful and carefully crafted illusion of life in the description of appearance in turn subverts the fixedness of the allegorical exegesis” (47). This reading, intended to rehabilitate a painting whose apparent determinacy of meaning has made it “critically condemned” (46), exemplifies how poststructuralist theory

has influenced contemporary commentary about allegory. Contemporary allegory theory, taking its cues from de Man, tends to focus on how allegory dramatizes a distance between sign and signified, between grammatical structure and rhetorical purpose, between what a text says and what it performs. In other words, contemporary commentary about allegory tends to focus on how allegory *problematizes* meaning while ignoring or underplaying how allegory *conveys* meaning. While the former reading activity complicates texts in exciting ways for readers with an interest in semantic operations, the latter activity enables readers to recognize the specific value claims texts make. Given Vermeer's historical context and personal biography, any reading of *Allegory of Faith* that omits attention to its specific value claims remains incomplete.

The fact remains that however much Vermeer's painting can be read as a meditation on representation, it is clear that *Allegory of Faith* has faith not only in Christian ideology, but also in the capacity of religion, text, and art to develop and communicate valuable, trustworthy meaning for art appreciators. Even further, it has faith in what Catholics in its age and locality believed incontrovertibly existent: God exists, the saving power of Jesus Christ's death exists, evil exists, a means of combating evil exists, goodness exists, individual souls exist. Still further, it expresses faith that the saving power of Christ's death extends to individuals—that individual souls can be saved through Christ's mysterious sacrifice. Eurocentric intellectual history from the Enlightenment to the present has been described as a continually evolving departure from the dominance of these ideas and their replacement by faith in rationality, scientific method, empiricism, rationality, and materialism; religionists call this historiographical arc the "secularization thesis." Many versions of intellectual history identify an intensification of this process beginning with the Industrial Revolution around 1850 and continuing through the end of World War II. A new intellectual paradigm repudiating the modernist faith in reason emerged, according to many histories, somewhere around 1960. Postmodernity has been described as a sea change in belief, at least among intellectuals: not only has religious faith and faith in rationality been discredited, but so has faith in the referential capacities of language, as well as faith in the idea of self, in the reliability of history, and in the stability of knowledge.⁴ Faith in the possibility of meaning itself becomes questionable. Rauschenberg's *Allegory* serves as a visual analogue for this sensibility. In what has become a cliché of postmodernist form, Rauschenberg's *Allegory* would seem illegible—an allegory of nothing but the elusive, arbitrary, and subjective nature of meaning itself or, as Owens puts it in part 2 of "The Allegorical Impulse," an allegory "of its own fundamental illegibility" (1980b, 70). Without faith in the possibility of meaning in art, Rauschenberg's painting, obviously, must also lack faith in any traffic between art and truth, or art and religion.

Scholars writing extensively about allegory today—Deborah Madsen and Theresa Kelley, for instance—argue that in our postmodernist context, allegory has become a vastly different textual creature from the literary form most readers associate with the term. These scholars take care to point out that allegory in the late twentieth century has lost the overdetermined quality, the one-to-one correspondences, that gave it a bad reputation among the romantics and their heirs. Madsen, in fact, coins the terms “pre-Romantic” and “post-Romantic” allegory to distinguish between, on the one hand, religious or polemical forms of discourse based on correspondences and, on the other hand, the allegories of novelists like Franz Kafka, Thomas Pynchon, and John Barth, in which an allegorical element may have multiple referents, indeterminate referents, or no referents. The absence of referents in contemporary allegory, these theorists claim, stems from the absence of culturally shared sources of ultimate authority or meaning. These discussions of allegory have considerable explanatory and descriptive power. *The Trial* or *The Crying of Lot 49*, after all, differ from John Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress* or William Langland’s *Vision of Piers Plowman* as much as Rauschenberg differs from Vermeer; and certainly, these differences bespeak transformations in notions of meaning and authority.

Like these postmodern novelists, however, Rauschenberg’s painting, while embodying the epistemological skepticism of its cultural milieu, also makes use of an aesthetic form rooted in religion and given to polemic—a form historically associated with the confident presentation of firm intellectual and/or religious principles. As a genre, allegory originated in ancient Hebrew wisdom literature, flourished further in classical Roman religion, and evolved into a sophisticated rhetorical strategy for exploring and presenting religious, cosmological beliefs (Lewis 1936, 63). Allegory has, in fact, been so intimately related to polemics and religion that, as every post-Romantic theorist of the form observes, romantic poets and essayists, and Coleridge in particular, rejected it as pedantic, parochial, and antique—utterly unequal to modern tasks of aesthetic exploration and innovation. The opinion of allegory represented by Coleridge persisted throughout the nineteenth century and into the twentieth, leaving the form in critical disrepute, largely untheorized, unremarked, and poorly regarded, except by medievalists (Honig 1959, 44–50). It seems curious, then, that Rauschenberg, an artist who exemplifies a postmodern intellectual climate of doubt about the possibility of meaning itself, would show interest in a form that forebears like Vermeer have historically used to figure, with passionate conviction, religious worldviews not only convinced of the possibility of meaning, but also confident about specific meanings: the nature, purpose and meaning of life, death, love, and suffering; the nature of the divine; the order of the universe; the path to salvation. Rauschenberg’s painting, therefore, gives rise to the question that informs my discussion: What is a nice postmodernist artist like that doing with a strange, premodern form like this?

Similarly, it makes sense to ask why Kafka, Pynchon, Barth, or the writers and filmmakers I discuss, whose epistemological or semiotic strategies have more in common with Rauschenberg than with Vermeer, have embraced an ancient form that has for centuries been used to figure religious ideas and to opine about topical issues. Why has allegory made a comeback in the late twentieth century? True to their cultural moment, the allegories explored here profess, like Rauschenberg's painting, a lack of faith in the possibility of certainty. They are, then, allegories of *unfaith*, partaking in a post-1960s skepticism about truth, knowledge, language, and meaning. They deconstruct key articles of post-Enlightenment epistemological faith—Darwinism, scientific method, rationality, industrial/technological progress, and common sense. Semiotically, they resemble Rauschenberg more than Vermeer. Even when they retain the readability of a seventeenth-century painting, they differ as much ideologically from medieval allegories like *Piers Plowman* and *Pilgrim's Progress* as Rauschenberg differs from Vermeer. Contemporary scholars of allegory detail these points of departure, however, without investigating points of convergence.

Madsen, for instance, devotes an entire chapter of *Rereading Allegory* to “allegory after the ‘romantic revolution,’” arguing that “allegory has become a response to the sense of perpetual crisis instilled by modernity” (1994, 109). This sense of crisis, Madsen explains, issues in large part from a collapse of the hegemony of Christian ideology in Europe and the rise of secularism, which is accompanied by a perceived loss of access to the transcendental, which romantics attempt to address by sacralizing the imagination, poetry, and the symbol (110). After this “revolution,” Madsen claims, allegory can only be appreciated for its ability to dramatize the absence of a transcendental signified. Elsewhere Madsen writes, “More disabling for allegory in the modern period than the subversion of allegorical rhetoric has been the crisis of belief which places in doubt the possibility of hermeneutic authority” (1996, 167), again implying that allegory in a postmodern cultural environment functions in dramatically different ways than premodern allegory because of the altered climate of religious belief. While uses and understandings of allegory in postmodern culture have certainly changed with the evolution of intellectual history, it is also worth recognizing how allegory, as a genre and mode of discourse, has remained consistent.

My contribution to the study of contemporary allegory, therefore, avoids emphasis on differences between twentieth-century allegory and earlier forms of allegory. I focus instead on what allegories of *unfaith* share with Vermeer's *Allegory of Faith*. In particular, I propose that, like *Allegory of Faith*, *Pilgrim's Progress*, and *Piers Plowman*, allegories of *unfaith* perform cultural work that is religious and polemical in nature. Rhetorically, postmodern allegory serves the same purposes as overtly religious Christian allegories of the Middle Ages and Renaissance. These purposes are: (1) theological—they seek to theorize, analyze, and illuminate sources of ultimate power; (2) cosmological—they articulate a

vision of how the universe works, with special attention to the nature of the human; and (3) salvational—they identify threats to the individual soul (which in secular form becomes the “self”) and propose methods by which the soul/self can be saved from “hell.” If it is true that metaphysics is dead in a postmodern cultural context, then someone had better inform novelists and filmmakers.

Far from being philosophically noncommittal, the postmodern fiction discussed here remains profoundly engaged with all kinds of political, philosophical, metaphysical, and spiritual inquiry. As to Boland’s question about whether literature has merely made the imagination a “new sacred place,” the allegories examined here, while recognizing the world-generating, truth-generating possibilities of the imagination, also approach these possibilities with suspicion. In fact, as a genre, the virtual reality film, analysis of which occupies the next chapter, portrays the potency of the imagination as a threat to individuality, community, and meaningful life. Dystopian films like *Total Recall*, *The Matrix*, *Thirteenth Floor*, *Dark City*, *The Lawnmower Man*, and *eXistenZ*, in addition to exploring the destructive potential of imagination, express tremendous anxiety about the capacity of science and technology to dehumanize the world, reducing human beings to simulatable mechanical entities without soul, self, or dignity. These films protest the mechanistic view of body implicit in a scientific paradigm. Far from taking a playful attitude toward the possibility that truth and reality remain impossible to fix, virtual reality films express intense anxiety about an epistemology that cannot reliably locate truth and reality. In each film, the hero quests through a dream or dreamlike landscape, realizing with growing horror that its ontological status cannot be verified, and attempting to distinguish the simulated or staged from the actual or spontaneous. Explosions of objects and bodies serve as visual analogues for the anxiety, death, and destruction—sometimes apocalyptic in proportion—associated with the loss of basic ontological certainty. In addition, virtual reality films pursue ancient theological inquiries in secular form: the existence of self/soul; the relationship of body and soul; the implications of predestination for free will; and various attributes of divinity, including omnipotence, omniscience, benevolence, or despotism. This film genre, therefore, constitutes a contemporary form of religious thinking.

Of course, allegory as a genre cuts across and overlaps other genres, and my third chapter examines the form as it manifests in feminist experimental fantasy fiction. I discuss allegories by Angela Carter and Marguerite Young, showing how these sophisticated and deconstructive postmodern texts make definite value claims and engage in theological, cosmological, and salvational speculation. In fact, deconstructive thought and discourse itself strongly resembles an ancient form of theological thinking. A small but significant (and growing) body of critical theory connects Derrida and deconstruction to the medieval tradition of negative theology. This body of theory helps illuminate the religious impulses in even such relentlessly deconstructive discourse as that

occupying Angela Carter's novels, and in the wildly complex and mercurial textual acrobatics of Young's 1965 best-seller, *Miss Macintosh, My Darling*. In appreciating the similarities of texts as different as virtual reality films and feminist experimental novels, it becomes increasingly apparent that distress over any perceived collapse of the real reaches into various quarters of post-modern culture, and shows itself across different media, genres, and decades.

My fourth chapter explores allegory as a mode of representation in challenging works of experimental film, showing how three particular species of allegorical form—quest, ritual, and anatomy—permit the filmmakers to pair characteristically postmodernist aesthetic strategies with traditionally religious inquiries. Whereas chapters 2 and 3 focus on strategies by which postmodern texts use allegory to engage such basic religious questions as “Am I really here?” and “What else really exists?” chapters 4 and 5 focus on texts that accept the basic experience of existence but ask questions that are equally intrinsic to religious inquiry: “How can I make sense of what happens to me?” “What is the meaning of suffering?” “Why do people suffer?” and “How can people be delivered from unbearable suffering?” The works by filmmakers Peter Greenaway, Yvonne Rainer, and Nina Menkes, while engaging these pressing questions, and modeling how allegory functions as one mode among many in hybrid aesthetic forms, also exemplify ways in which media function religiously. The cultural critic Robert White has suggested that contemporary media operate as sites for the pursuit of ultimate meaning, the search for perfect community, and the quest for authentic personal identity—all processes rooted in religious curiosity and utopian aspiration (1997, 47). Selecting films that are representative of each filmmaker's thematic concerns and aesthetic strategies, the fourth chapter shows how each film exemplifies one of these three religious functions of media, in addition to discussing how each film utilizes a traditional feature of allegory: quest, ritual, and anatomy.

The fifth chapter also discusses allegory as a discursive mode, drawing on Angus Fletcher's theory of allegory as magical ritual and William Covino's theory of magic as rhetoric designed to produce change in the material world. Using these conceptual frameworks, I examine two novels by writers of American Indian descent, demonstrating how they use allegory to reinscribe Amerindian theology, cosmology, and salvific wisdom into a dominant culture that has all but erased them. Wilson Harris's *Palace of the Peacock* and Leslie Marmon Silko's *Almanac of the Dead* constitute two instances of allegory used as ritual invocation. In the hands of these writers, the invocation serves the explicitly religious rhetorical purpose of illustrating an animist cosmotheology and arguing that the widespread adoption of this cosmotheology would save Western culture from the interpersonal violence and ecological destruction that, in Harris's and Silko's estimation, proceeds inevitably from systems of colonial domination.

My last chapter uses the study of postmodern allegory to understand fundamentalist religious thinking and the practice of violence. I respond to the claim that postmodernist thought and culture gives rise to religious fundamentalism, and therefore to the present clash of fundamentalisms that drives both terrorism and the “war on terror.” The chapter closes by gesturing toward a practice of religion that provides meaning and beauty to human life but requires neither certainty nor a fearful, rigid clinging to dogma or belief.

As should be evident from these chapter summaries, my discussion endeavors throughout to demonstrate that, despite the tendency of critical conversation to emphasize differences between pre- and postmodern allegory, postmodern allegory resembles medieval and Renaissance allegory as much as it differs from them; for despite significant differences in aesthetic strategy and ideational content, allegory in every age fulfills religious rhetorical purposes. In addition, as a consequence of appreciating the religious dimensions of postmodern allegory, it becomes clear that postmodernist literature and film, far from dispatching such ancient epistemological values as reality and truth, as some commentators about postmodernism complain (or celebrate), actually work fervently to rescue the real and search for the true, albeit with a complexity and caution appropriate to their moment.

The strategies postmodern allegory uses to create and articulate insight have been well described—although applied to nonfictive disciplines—by more recent contributors to the conversation about the usefulness of postmodern epistemologies. From the 1990s to the present, some writers have been drawing a distinction between the “deconstructive postmodernism” assumed by earlier theorists and “constructive postmodernism,” a concept in which the epistemological cautions of poststructuralism become additional tools in the pursuit of nonrelativistic knowledge. In *Constructive Postmodernism: Toward Renewal in Cultural and Literary Studies*, Martin Schiralli characterizes deconstructive postmodernist epistemology: “Wary of all talk of grounding value or even meaning and knowledge in essential foundations, the postmodern attitude regards human meanings as too fragile and indeterminate to support any such inquiry. While the postmodern creative imperative is to illustrate these fragilities and ambivalences, indeed, to tease and play with them disruptively . . . the postmodern critical imperative is to challenge the very conceptual frameworks within which it can make sense to ask such a question as ‘What is the genuine source of value here?’—let alone answer it successfully” (1999, 11). Schiralli, like others before him, identifies this attitude as a response to modernist (and New Critical) searches for essence—movements claiming to isolate and celebrate the essence of poetry, dance, building, etcetera—and suggests that in becoming preoccupied with indeterminacy, deconstructive theorists of postmodernism have “replaced one kind of procedurally fascinating dogma with another” (44).

Schiralli contrasts this “deconstructive” postmodernism with “constructive” postmodernism, a critical construct that understands knowing as the experiential, multifaceted, ecological, provisional, and collective activity described in the philosophy of Wittgenstein and Dewey. A constructive postmodernist epistemology, according to Schiralli, replaces the logico-mathematical rationality of modernism with a rationality grounded in the messy, process-oriented, incredibly complex faculties involved in human experience, which perceive invisible as well as visible phenomena, and remain unable, in many circumstances, to operate without contradiction (68).⁵ Similarly, Frederick Ferré, in *Knowing and Value: Toward a Constructive Postmodern Epistemology*, argues that “deconstructive postmodernist voices [have declared] the end of metaphysics, the end of epistemology, and the end of philosophy,” rejecting their “‘hegemonic’ and ‘totalizing’ tendencies” without offering an alternative (1998, 270). Ferré suggests ecology and systems theory, which he defines as “the science of relations,” as alternatives—epistemological models for the construction of a postmodernist worldview that acknowledges complexity, values multidimensional experience, and aims for descriptive comprehensiveness and accuracy. These are useful descriptions of vibrant strategies of knowing; and while critics have been busy lamenting (or celebrating) losses of epistemological and ontological solid ground, fiction-makers of all kinds have been using these strategies since the late twentieth century to construct representations of the real and true that avoid both naïveté and hands-in-the-air epistemological resignation. The allegories examined here exemplify how postmodern fiction has evolved strategies for engaging in religious inquiry, having absorbed the insights of poststructuralism without abandoning fiction’s traditional work of locating (or leveling, if necessary) shared sources of value and vision.

Paradoxically, allegories of unfaith search for new forms of faith. However, they offer neither a Vermeer-like Christian dogmatism nor a Rauschenberg-like endless ludism. While they participate in their age’s skepticism about language, knowledge, truth, and reality, postmodern allegories repeatedly dramatize the negative consequences of this skepticism; they are often colored emotionally by an acute sense of loss. Also, as they call attention to the lack of foundation underlying certain basic assumptions, they suggest possible new foundations for regrounding and “resacralizing” personal and social experience. As chapter 2 shows, the virtual reality film maintains a faith in the body as an index of the real. The feminist experimental novels I explore all gesture toward a nondualistic experience of mind as an avenue leading away from suffering and lostness, and into saving moments of wholeness in which competing tendencies in the human psyche become balanced in a restful and generative poise. The rhetorical procedures animating these novels resemble the movement of negative theology, which attempts to approach and experience the sacred by emptying the mind of all language for, ideas about, and images of the sacred. In operating

this way, these novels enact a faith in the capacity of human consciousness to shed the perceptual and conceptual habits that limit and imprison it, and thereby glimpse a transcendent wholeness. The trio of experimental films selected for discussion generate an array of insights into sources of stable meaning capable of offering deliverance from various forms of human suffering: in Peter Greenaway's *A Zed & Two Noughts*, family and reproduction provide respite from overwhelming nihilism; Nina Menkes's *The Bloody Child: An Interior of Violence* identifies the structure of human community as the source of suffering and the only potential salvation, offering an ecofeminist analysis of the spiritual dissolution caused by white supremacy, capitalism, imperialism, and life in military-industrial Western cultures. Yvonne Rainer's *Film About a Woman Who . . .* implies that liberation from social structures of dominance and the quest for personal authenticity release people from life-negating power struggles that enervate individuals and mire social relations in repetitive patterns of domination that destroy intimacy and creativity. Chapter 5 illustrates how two American Indian novels offer animist cosmologies as theology and a path of salvation from the social, spiritual, and environmental devastation caused by Western capitalist imperialism. In addition, these two writers, like many American Indian writers, enact a faith in the capacity of language and story to restore and redeem a fallen world. These contemporary allegories, while featuring postmodern aesthetic forms and exhibiting a postmodern sophistication about the complexities of truth and reality, are also engaged in a quest to locate new sources of value and meaning. Their mistrust of received understandings of the true and the real coexists with a determination to find new solid ground, new faiths, without recourse to discourses whose monopoly on truth postmodernism has undone. Postmodern allegory does, like much postmodernist cultural production, undercut the epistemological foundations of traditional religious dogmas and institutions, but it remains, like allegory in all ages, deeply connected with religious concerns. Postmodern allegory thus practices religion without religion, using ancient rhetorical forms to search for viable forms of postmodern faith.