

**ALLEGORICAL ILLUSTRATION & THE  
CASE OF MARK RYDEN.**



**“Allegorical Illustration & the case of Mark Ryden.”**

MA Visual Communication

Research Methods-Case study

**Athina Pappa, 2012**

21 pages, 2,720 words (all references excluded)

## Abstract

Allegorical illustration or in other words the use of allegory in illustration, is a very dominant approach in many types of illustration, especially in editorial. Mark Ryden's work although officially branded as 'fine art', falls into this category, being an appropriate example of the approach. This research attempts to define the meaning construction mechanisms in Mark Ryden's work, which are related to the use of allegory, while linking the outcome to contexts outside visual communication. In order to respond to this statement, formal research methods will be applied, such as literature search including book publications, online resources, articles, reviews and published interviews of the artist. Also, a variety of Mark Ryden work examples will be presented and analyzed as well as compared to other practitioners that share some of the same principles in their work. No questionnaires will be used in this research, as it is not a case related to personal experience and therefore, gathering opinions would not be useful. The main criteria behind the choice of Mark Ryden, is that his work stands right on the blurry limit between fine art and illustration and this is an intended oxymoron. Consequently, many art movements from symbolism to dadaism, and the op-ed section in the New York Times, are equally relevant references. In broader terms, semiotics, the theory of archetypes and post-modernism are also associated with the subject.

## Introduction

"Allegory is the representation of abstract ideas by characters, figures or events in a dramatic, narrative or pictorial form' (The free dictionary by Farlex). In terms of etymology, "Allegory means 'other speech', from Greek allos (other) and agoreuein (to speak openly); it signifies an open declamatory speech which contains another layer of meaning. It thus possesses a double intention." (Warner, 2010, p.19) In this explanation by Warner, I would replace the word 'speech' with 'text', because allegory is a generic term directly linked to the concept of metaphor and can be generated in many codes of communication, from literature and proverbs to drawings and films. It is a fundamental conceptual approach whose origins go back to the ancient world, both timeless and transcultural and this is mainly because of the plethora of its forms and functions. For instance, the figure with scales and a sword, is an allegory of "justice".



**Figure 1:** The statue of Justice on top of the Old Bailey, London, was made by Morris Singer Art Foundry. Photograph: Rex Features, 2010.



Conducting the allegory is rather useful for an illustrator, who intends to create a rich-in-content visual text that apart from stating the obvious points of an article or theory-in a way photography would- expands the given concept (Zeegen, 2006) and even allows an individual interpretation by the viewer (Holland, 2010).

**Figure 2:** Shimizu Yuko, unpublished illustration for Time magazine, 2011.

The allegorical approach is often used by the artists in the ‘**opposite editorial** section’, which originated in the New York Times in 1970. In this section, people not affiliated with the newspaper would express their independent opinion and artists (op-artists) would transcript and interpret these articles using metaphor and allegory (Holland, 2010) The following illustrations are by Brad Holland and Rafal Olbinski, both considered veteran op-artists.



**Figure 3:**Holland Brad, ‘Dare to Dream’, 2006



**Figure 4:**Olbinski Rafal, ‘New York Capital of the world’, 1995

Almost during the same period (mid 70s), a new art movement emerged in the U.S., mostly in California, known as '**lowbrow**' or '**pop surrealism**' adopting a more illustrative, representational style, using streetwise aesthetics. (Zeegen, 2006). "The term lowbrow is used as opposed to 'highbrow' meaning fancy, sophisticated, elitist or intellectual" (Alonzo, 2008). The following image is a Gary Baseman painting, whose work is often categorized as "lowbrow".



**Figure 5:**Baseman Gary, 'Sweet Surrender', 2003.

The chosen artist **Mark Ryden**, is considered 'the godfather' within this oddly defined movement, a significant proportion of which is flirting with allegory in a post-surrealism context. His images are highly symbolic, rich in cultural references, and there is an implication of social commentary through his ambiguous and conversational outcomes. Critic Carlo McCormick suggests that there is "the application of irony that in no way constitutes a critique" (McCormick, 2001). However, the focusing point is to identify any techniques behind the creation of the allegory, a fact that might be responsible for the given controversy and dialogue around his artwork.



**Figure 6:**Ryden Mark, 'The Magic Circus', 2001

## Argument

### A)The case of Mark Ryden

Mark Ryden was born in 1963 and raised in California. His work is widely celebrated and is a seldom case where art that generates the disciplines and aesthetics of notorious illustration, is equally appreciated with conceptual or abstract art and exhibited in galleries. The work varies from large oil paintings to some music covers and from multi character detailed compositions, to portrait pieces, that nevertheless bear a significant amount of symbolic references to create confusion over the 'what do they represent' question(Okazaki, 2009). Mark Ryden appears to be using some kind of techniques to construct these synthetic wholes of elements in a way that they form a narrative.



**Figure 7:**Ryden Mark, 'The Apology', 2006.



**Figure 8**(top):Ryden Mark, 'Little Boy Blue', 2001.



**Figure 9**(right):Ryden Mark, 'Saint Barbie', 1994.



**Figure 10:** Michael Jackson's 'Dangerous' Record Sleeve, 1991

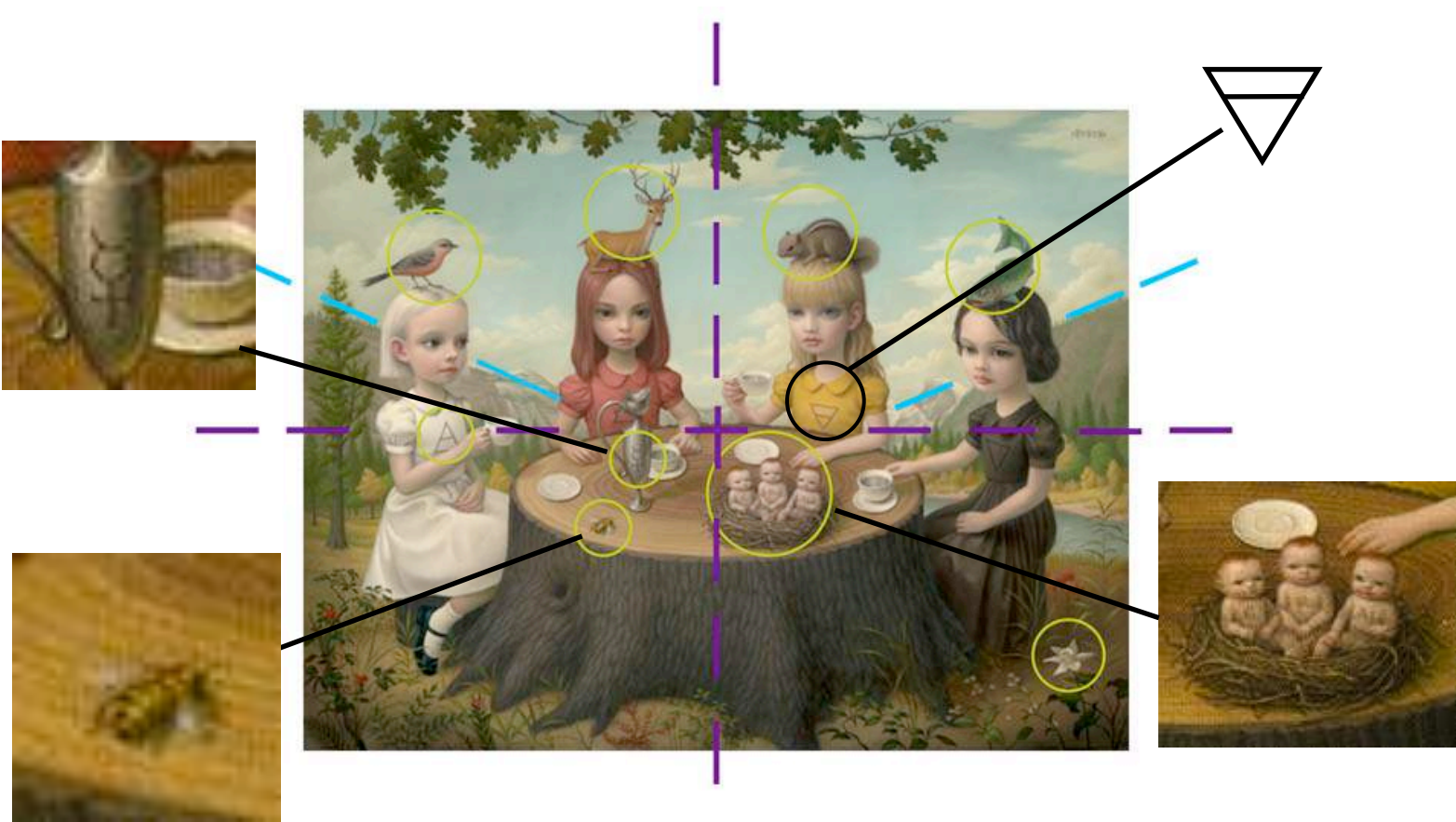


**Figure 11:** Ryden Mark, 'The Piano Player', 2010

Observing a wide range of Ryden's images, I established a list of principles that appear to the majority of his work. This list is demonstrated through the analysis of a chosen example, the 'Allegory of the Four Elements' painting.



**Figure 12:** Ryden Mark, 'Allegory of the Four Elements', 2006.



**Figure 13:** Ryden Mark, 'Allegory of the Four Elements', 2006, with notes.

### Reoccurring Principles in Mark Ryden's work:

#### 1-number of **metaphors**

i) log as a table, ii) human babies as birds, iii) animals as the badges-hats of the girls, iv) girls as the elements.

**2-referencing and editing of archetypes**-use of two clichés minimum in a single composition:

the young girl archetype edited as a fundamental element.

Use of regular connotations: the bird for air and the fish for water but also the deer for fire, less regular connotation.

**3-rearranging structure** of elements, replacement, misplacement, inversion, rotation:

i) baby birds or eggs would be the logical connotation inside a bird nest, in this case they are replaced with three minimized human babies.

ii) another misplacement is the animals on the girls' heads.

**4-creating contrast** between elements (and/or extracting elements from their original context and i) either presenting them isolated or ii) in a contradicting context:

Eg) The girls are well dressed and seem as if they live on that set, but no sign of civilization is presented beyond the teacups on the log-table. Their figures are in a way extracted from a residential area we can't see, and relocated in what seems to be a pure natural set.

**5-combining clichés to create hybrid characters** or elements (personification, merging, replacing) (levels of merging: from evident transfiguration and hybridity to complete transformation/replacement):

hybrid elements: in this case, the girls' instead-of-hats animals on top of their heads. (merging level: replacement)



6-presence of at least one **human character** (rare exceptions), mostly girls with an age variation from 10 to 20 years old.

7-**tight structured** images, use of symmetry, axis, golden section:

The image is tightly cropped, there is symmetry both on the horizontal and the vertical axis.

8-use of **details**, sometimes hidden in unexpected places, to create the urge to be discovered:

hidden and edited female symbol on the teapot and the triangle symbols on the girls' dresses, bee on the table, minimized babies.

9-use of famous/**recognizable** figures and objects and/or symbols:

previously mentioned symbols. The levels of "recognizable" may differ.

10-**scale** distortion:

i) The girls' heads are oversized, ii)The human babies are minimized, iii)The animals on the girls' heads are presented as if they were the same size(a deer as big as a squirrel)

11-symbolistic use of **colour**:

The same colour is used for the hair and dress of each element and it is matching the nature of the element: Eg)white for air.

13-descriptive or explanatory **titles**:

"Allegory of four elements", both descriptive and explanatory.

14-**drama**:

The characters are presented during an action:

The four elements are drinking tea.

15-**style**: atmospheric and dreamy result, reminiscent of catholic religious illustration, vintage aesthetics, nostalgic sensation, kitsch.

Observing the nature of the principles, it could be stated that they are promoting some kind of duality, often presented as a forced-fictional interruption of normality. Thus, these statements are directly linked to the notion of a 'text which contains another meaning' initial definition of **allegory**. Allegory suggests an intermediate stop to a hypothetically unrelated subject between the observed and the signified, the exact same way metaphor does (Peirce C.S.1903) Therefore and under this prismatic analysis, these principles lead to the strengthening of the allegorical quality. Additionally, the atmospheric painting style and human characters, create a nostalgic sensation that looks like new age religious illustration that isn't really about the existence of god but merely about the potential human explanations on life.

Ryden's work is balancing between -unintended according to him(Okazaki, 2009)- social commentary and dreamy getaway; between almost annoying combinations and making sense; between macabre and childish cute; there is a balancing indecisive stumbling between his demonstrated 'awareness of mortality' and the manifestation of happily existing. It is this duality that enables the allegory to generously spread. "Yes Mark Ryden invites us into a slaughterhouse disguised as a madhouse, but it is also a funhouse, where the distortions of flesh and mind are there primarily for our greater

entertainment” (McCormick, Anima Mundi essay, 2001). His bold juxtaposing of trivial objects with loaded religious or political figures, opens the gate to philosophical thought as the viewer forces connotations questioning established approaches(Okazaki, 2009).

One of the things that Ryden has in common with some of the op-artists mentioned earlier, is that he leaves a conceptual margin for the viewer to fill in with their own opinion. The descriptive meaning is threefold: a)the obvious b)the implicated and c)the viewer’s interpretation.

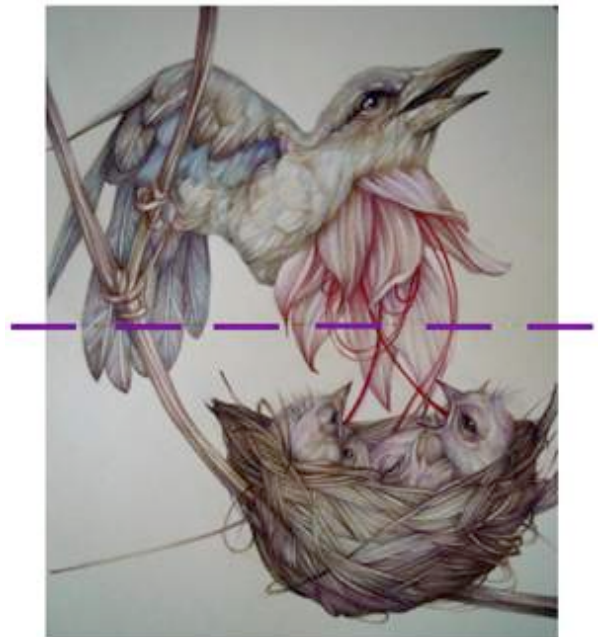
In terms of aesthetics and content, there is influential evidence by the post-modern, widely consumeristic, American society and a variety of other things from mythologies to Hieronymus Bosch paintings (Ryden, 2008).

## B)Comparisons

### #1 Mark Ryden & Marco Mazzoni



**Figure 14:** Ryden Mark, ‘The Apology’, 2006.



**Figure 15:**Mazzoni Marco, ‘The Mother’, 2012.

(Purple lines are inserted to show symmetry)

The main difference between these two pictures is that Mazzoni does not insert any irrelevant elements, whereas Ryden is using personification of the tree, painting a big eye on the log. Although both of them use allegory, Ryden’s case is focusing on metaphor and synecdoche via his principle-tactics and Mazzoni is focusing on hyperbole as a visual rhetoric, without juxtaposing any other content (visual rhetorics terminology, Hunt S., 2012).

## #2 Mark Ryden & Camille Garcia



**Figure 16:** Ryden Mark, 'The Pumpkin President', 1998.(black lines inserted)



**Figure 17:**Garcia Camille Rose, 'Royal Disorder Subterranean Invasion', 2006.

These examples show how the two artists use different structures to coordinate their multi character compositions. Ryden's elements and characters are placed from larger to smaller in what appears to be a golden section fragmented canvas, whereas Garcia is creating a pattern-like, even-density image not highlighting a single character.

### #3 Mark Ryden & Emiliano Ponzi



**Figure 18** (left):  
Ryden Mark 'Saint  
Barbie', 1994.(black  
lines inserted)



**Figure 19** (right):  
Ponzi Emiliano,  
'Death of Post-  
modernism/what's  
next', 2011.(purple  
circles inserted)

Both of the artists use the religious theme, although Ryden uses more characters again in a strict golden section fragmented image, carefully placing the items. The use of details in Ryden's case increases the complexity of the content and distracts the viewer from the main allegory (Barbie as a Saint), whereas Ponzi's image is clearer on the communicated message.

#### C)The origins of Allegorical Illustration and broader contexts.

“Visual metaphors are a powerful aid to human thinking. From Sanskrit through hieroglyphics to the modern alphabet, we have used ciphers, objects and illustrations to share meaning with other people, thus enabling collective and collaborative thought” (Van Heerden, 2008, p.5). Early types of allegorical illustration are to be found in the first religious artwork created by civilizations around the world. Primal attempts to illustrate parables, folk tales, epic poems and mythology, form the first archive of 'illustration for allegory' which could be considered as a pre-stage of allegorical illustration. Hieronymus Bosch, the Flemish painter, illustrated religious themes in a darker way than his contemporaries and stands among the many influences of Mark Ryden.



**Figure 20:** Bosch Hieronymus, 'Garden of Earthly Delights', 1480-1515.

Within this research the term “allegorical illustration” is defined as a counter term to ‘literal’ or realistic illustration. Almost the same distinction that Andrew Hall suggests as “the imagined and the observed”(Hall, 2008 p.27). Allegorical illustration attempts to represent the unknown, the unseen, the fictional, the fantastical, the implicated. From symbolism to surrealism and dadaism but also in 19th century illustration, Dali, Magritte and Francisco Goya have the use of allegory in common. Especially surrealism could be considered the most significant influence on lowbrow movement and contemporary illustration(Hall, 2011).



**Figure 21:** Dali Salvador, 'The Persistence of Memory', 1931.



**Figure 22:** Goya Francisco, 'Hasta su abuelo', 1799.



**Figure 23:** Magritte René, 'Home sickness', 1940.

Apart from the above references, the kitsch movement, comic book art, science fiction, pin-up, psychedelic & punk rock art, graffiti art, tattoo art, pornography, music art, posters, animation and more, also had a major impact on contemporary practitioners (Williams, 2004).

Also, there is a differentiation between representational fine art movements that use allegory and "allegorical illustration", which opens the unresolved debate over what is considered fine art and what illustration within the academic circles. Illustration alone, is hard to be defined and this is partly the problem: "It is derided as whimsical by artists and arty by designers" (Zeegen L., 2006, p.12)

Contemporary allegorical illustration is referencing and repurposing art movements, creating new versions of archetypes in a more defined context, aiming to convey specific messages. However, strict labeling and categorizing can be more harmful than useful in an effort to construct a holistic perspective on the issue and this is why my chosen examples are both from fine art, 'lowbrow art' and illustration.

## Conclusion

Allegorical illustration in general, interferes with the theories of archetypes, the field of semiotics and cognition, literature & other forms of communication, Freudian theories, cosmogony, existentialism and philosophical thought.

It appears to be the infusion of dual meaning in an element or a character for the sake of communicating an idea through symbolistic mechanisms. This indirect potential is able to unlock certain parts in our subconscious, while we create new connotations avoiding the disciplines of a rational systemic approach. This is a fact that can be proved rather dangerous given a case of misuse for the likes of propaganda, but this is a different case. What emerges as important is that some of the mechanisms of allegorical approach evoke existential thinking and that these mechanisms are to be found in the work of Mark Ryden packaged under his own signature style.

Ryden captures the complexity of modern society and injecting a vintage effect into his colourful circus, presents us with his reality in a religious wrapping, indirectly but persistingly asking of us to believe. This very action establishes a rare and desirable state of freedom on both the signifier's and the receiver's ends (illustrator's and viewer's ends), as opposed to the highly manipulated mass-media era we are experiencing. (McLuhan, M., 1967)

In my opinion, Mack Ryden achieves this state of freedom by not over-controlling the drama that takes place in the paintings. There is no logical, sequential narrative in the way his text unravels. There is no evidence of a clear point of view or articulate statement in the work. This ruthless stirring of fixed marks and archetypes that he performs, does not settle to self-confident affirmations. It looks like a mental snapshot just before he made his mind, without informing us of what he eventually thought of. Creating this type of sensation, equally supports the concept of allegory just as it happens in stories: The end of allegorical stories does not include a compressed sentence of the communicated message, at least in the original versions. They leave the reader with a sense of ambiguity while wondering if they correctly grasped the concept. This is also what great conversations and interesting dialogues are created upon: an allegorical text that triggers the imagination and our desperate innate need to respond to the loads of existential questions.



**Figure 24:**Ryden Mark,  
Grotto of the Old Man,  
2008.

## Reflective statement

My final perspective on Ryden's work agrees with the initial, although it is more informed and supported. I have a clearer view on which of his pictures work better and why, at least on a conceptual base. I would like to benefit from the principles I discovered in the work of Mark Ryden and check if some of them are applicable to my own work.

Through this research I shaped a better understanding of possible ways to manipulate the allegorical approach.

I realized that even if it is open to independent interpretation, allegorical illustration is highly opinionated, a fact that raises the responsibility of the creator, as they share personal and philosophical views with the audience.

I want to try and make the existential concerns better structured and visible to my own work by eliminating random symbols-linking and maintain an awareness on how different details lead to different connotations.

I will continue exploring the vast concept of metaphor and allegory while documenting my progress through my work.

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**Figure 13:** (see Figure 12)

**Figure 14:** (see Figure 7)

**Figure 15:** Mazzoni M.(2012), *The Mother*, Marco Mazzoni on facebook, <<https://www.facebook.com/marco.mazzoni.71>>, (accessed 18/11/2012)

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- criteria ~~is~~ → principles

# MA VISUAL COMMUNICATION

## RMCS SKELETON PROPOSAL REVIEW

Name: *Athina Pappa* AOP: *(editorial) illustration* Date: *1/10/2012*  
 Case Study Title: *Allegorical Illustration & The case of Mark Ryden*

### 1. Abstract

	NO	Qualitative Judgment >>> YES				
Significance: Explain why the selected case is 'significant' to learning within your AOP				✓		
Scope: Determine the scope of your study (what will / won't be covered)				✓		
Approach: Describe how you will construct your case study research			✓			
References: Allude to specific (and relevant) references, theories, movements etc				✓		
Word Count: Between 200-250 words ( <i>bigger</i> )			✓			

### 2. Introduction

	NO	Qualitative Judgment >>> YES				
Indicates contextual and/or background information about the case				✓		
Formal theories and models included (identified specifically and referenced)				✓		
Specific visual references included				✓		
Specific practitioners (individuals or groups) included			✓			
Word Count: Between 300-400 words [ <i>Later</i> ] ( <i>bigger</i> ) <i>[It will be]...</i>	✓	✓				

### 3. Argument

	NO	Qualitative Judgment >>> YES				
Individual section headings clearly set out (following a logical structure)			✓			
Specification of the key theme / argument of each section described			✓			
Indication of academic / theoretical visual references to be used within each section			✓			
Indication of case specific visual references to be used within each section			✓			
Indication of OTHER visual references to be used within each section			✓			

### Action Plan: Responding to feedback above

+ check my abstract after I complete the text  
 + maybe simplify + cut some stuff  
 + introduction → cut from the allegory definition  
 + focus on labour & op-ed.  
 + title → content vs image  
 allegory → Develop the argument → correct structure