The Hopper Paradox*

I.

Edward Hopper's paintings continue to enjoy a tremendous and amazing popularity. One reason may be that he bridges different taste levels. On the one hand, recent exhibitions of his paintings in such high-art places as the Ludwig-Museum in Cologne or the Tate Gallery in London have been highly successful events on the European exhibition calendar.[1] On the other hand, prints of Hopper's paintings pop up everywhere in much more mundane contexts. They can be found on office walls as well as in students' dormitories, in bars and dental practices, on calendars and Christmas cards. Indeed, the public presence of Hopper's pictures has become so pervasive that they have also become frequent objects of satire – a satire which must assume that Hopper's images are widely known and have become part of the cultural imaginary. In all of these aspects, Hopper's work illustrates a common fate of paintings in modern media societies: Images begin to separate themselves from the paintings in which they were first represented and take on a life of their own. One can no longer discuss them as paintings only, because they have become cultural icons. In the following discussion, I will therefore treat them as forms of visual culture – an analysis that must also consider their painterly qualities, however because these are inextricably intertwined with their effectiveness as cultural images. In effect, I want to claim that reception aesthetics, that is, the attempt to explain what constitutes aesthetic experiences, is a key for understanding the cultural significance of Hopper's paintings.

Hopper's amazing popularity rests on a strange paradox. Whenever scholars, journalists, or students try to explain the appeal of his pictures, they talk about a world of alienation, isolation and quiet despair, presented in paintings in which solitary figures are often placed in wide empty spaces, in which

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1 The high esteem of Hopper on the high-brow level goes beyond the art world. Two examples in Germany are the film director Wim Wenders and the writer Peter Handke, for example, in his *Die Lehre der Sainte-Victoire.*

couples have nothing to say to each other, and in which the viewer often faces bare, enigmatic surfaces.[2] How can loneliness, alienation and social isolation be so appealing, however? One frequently given answer is that Hopper's paintings show us an unembellished truth about America. Hopper, the argument goes, depicts an unglamorous, plain America of motels and gas stations, trains and railway tracks, drugstores and movie houses, a version of America that contradicts the myth of the American dream and undermines flattering self-perceptions of America as the land of vibrant modernity symbolized by skyscrapers and icons of technological progress. Even Hopper's pictures of New York, i.e. *Approaching a City* (1946), transform one of the metropolitan centers of the world into bland, empty surfaces that evoke a backwater mood in the midst of urban life, not urban excitement.[3]

Seen this way, a major reason for the popularity of Hopper's paintings would lie in their anti-mythical and anti-ideological dimension: In contrast to American myths of success and progress, Hopper shows us an America where people are left behind and left to themselves, where shallow optimism gives way to quiet resignation, and loneliness is shown to be the price for an unwillingness to learn how to make friends in ten easy lessons.[4] One might

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2 When Hopper's paintings were shown at the Ludwig-Museum in Cologne in 2004, newspaper reviews indulged in the description of this aspect of Hopper's work. The Berlin newspaper *Berliner Zeitung,* for example, claimed: "His paintings are terribly quiet dramas of alienation and a lack of social relations" (*Berliner Zeitung* 29.10.2004, 26, my translation). And the review in the paper *Der Tagesspiegel* began with the observation: "There it is again, this feeling of being deserted, lonely, alienated: the Hopper feeling" (*Der Tagesspiegel* 11.10.2004, 28, my translation).

3 Milton Brown has provided a nice description of Hopper's representation of the city: "He sees it now as a stranger might, as a bleak and forbidding place where one wanders lost and alone. The city for Hopper is not a place where children play in the streets and women gossip, but a place where one rents a room for a night or eats a lonely meal in a brightly lit cafeteria" (Brown 5).

4 The view of Hopper as a critic of American society and ideology is not restricted to Europeans. See, for example, Susan C. Larsen who describes Hopper's paintings as narratives about an America of high ambitions and promises that often remain unfulfilled (Larsen 13). Similarly, in her *American Painting. The Twentieth Century,* Barbara Rose writes: "Isolation *per se* is the dominant theme of Edward Hopper's work. But Hopper is a sufficiently profound artist to have been able to generalize the sense of loneliness and alienation felt by many Americans into a universal theme" (50). Erika Doss draws analogies between Hopper and a sociological study by David Riesman: "Perhaps David Riesman best expressed America's pervasive sense of personal and national crisis in the title of his 1953 tract, *The Lonely Crowd.* But Riesman was not alone. Seers of both elite and popular culture – Edward Hopper and *film noir* moviemakers – told us about ourselves earlier and responded to the cultural climate of America by using a common style and a common story of urban despair" (Doss 33). See also Linda Nochlin: "What Hopper's *Gas* evokes is, on the contrary, a thoroughgoing kind of rootlessness: alienation seized under the aspect of a particular time and place which is yet part of a larger American alienation" (Nochlin 136).

almost speak of a visual anti-exceptionalism. The "realist" Hopper reveals a truth about America that America itself prefers to suppress.[5] Indeed, there is something like a visual precedent that has also gained prominence as a pictorial critique of the American way of life. I am referring to the documentary pictures made in the Thirties for the Farm Security Administration by photographers like Walker Evans, Dorothea Lange and others. These photographs established a visual tradition and, above all, an iconography that has remained popular among intellectuals and scholars as a documentary representation of the "truth" about America. They share with Hopper's paintings a small town pastoralism, a poetry of simple life, and a melancholic aestheticization of empty and deserted spaces. Of course, Hopper does not depict poverty and squalid social conditions, but neither does a picture like Walker Evans' *Main Street Block, Selma Alabama,* which bears striking similarities to Hopper's *Early Sunday.*[6] Hopper's paintings then, may appear as updated, colorized versions of a cherished realist tradition in America. There is no longer poverty but there is still loneliness as a price to pay for the American way of life.

Fig.1: Walker Evans, *Main Street Block, Selma Alabama*, 1936; Evans Part Two, pl. 30.

II.

However – and this is where the complications begin – Hopper's paintings do not just consist of themes and motifs. They are paintings, after all, and as such, they are appealing because they provide an aesthetic experience.

5 In an article in the *Los Angeles Times* on the British response to the Hopper exhibition at the Tate Modern, John Daniszewski writes: "To British art viewers and critics, Hopper lays bare a barrenness in American life that is well suited to a time when the ideal of America as a forward-thinking optimistic country is under assault across Europe" (*Los Angeles Times* June 30, 2004).

6 See James Curtis: "In Selma, Alabama, in December 1935, Evans suggested the quality of small-town life in photographs of empty commercial establishments in early morning light. These pictures work in much the same way as Hopper's paintings of lifeless row houses or deserted storefronts" (Curtis 7).

Hopper's pictures do not hang on the walls of offices and dentist's waiting rooms because they tell an unwelcome truth about America, but because they have an aesthetic impact on viewers. When I ask friends, colleagues, or students why in the world they like to look at pictures of loneliness or failed communication, they are usually at a loss for words, because their own focus on realism and cultural criticism has hidden from themselves other reasons why they may be attracted by Hopper's paintings. And yet, a first, tentative answer would be so easy. A feeling of loneliness and its representation in painting are, of course, two different things, as is a shipwreck and its representation in painting. This draws attention to the pictorial context in which Hopper's lonely people are usually placed: in strong, attractive colors and generous configurations of space. Hopper's lonely people are never alone in the sense of being left behind or being deserted. They have retreated to a position in which they dominate the space around them and seem quite at home in the spatial context created by Hopper's strong coloration.

Fig. 2: Edward Hopper, *Hotel Room*, 1931. Oil on canvas, 60 x 65 ins; Levin 204, pl. 269.

Colors, in fact, often function like spaces in Hopper's paintings, although space and color are never depicted for their own sake, as they often are in American Precisionism, a label under which Hopper is occasionally (but wrongly) grouped. In Charles Sheeler's painting *Upper Deck* (1929), for example, certain similarities between Hopper and precisionist paintings can be seen in the "cool," unemotional and cerebral style. There is, in both cases, a preference for empty or uncluttered spaces, for sharp-edged forms, clearly defined planes, and undifferentiated surfaces which, although realistically depicted, take on an almost abstract dimension. Both, Sheeler and Hopper, seem to go in the direction of photographic precision. In both cases, representational ideals such as a tendency toward abstraction, a hard-lined clarity of form, and a cold realist illusion prevail and the silent, motionless quality

of the represented world is an important source of effect.[7] Everyday objects are singled out and are provided with a certain dignity and aesthetic appeal by means of decontextualization. Hopper's precisionist-like restraint is obvious in contrast, for example, to Georgia O'Keeffe's depictions of New York, where the urban space gains a highly expressive, almost organic or even animistic force of its own.

And yet, there is one crucial difference between precisionism and Hopper. In most precisionist paintings, people, let alone distinct characters, are absent, whereas in Hopper's paintings human figures play an important part. Sheeler needs space in order to liberate the object, which, as often in precisionism, is a seemingly profane item of technological progress that has not yet been sufficiently appreciated in its aesthetic potential. Hopper, on the other hand, needs space in order to create a stage for the drama of subjectivity (and this, I want to claim, applies even to those of his paintings that do not contain any human figures). Without people or, more precisely, without subjectivity, Hopper's paintings do not work, as a comparison with the photorealism of Richard Estes can show. If one would place human figures prominently in Estes' painting *Central Savings* (reprinted in "Surface Knowledge and 'Deep' Knowledge" in this volume), the hyperrealistic effect of an allover sharp focus on the picture's surface structure would be spoilt. There are traces of human beings in the picture but no characters, only (radically) fragmented impressions of bodies. If one would take the human figures out of *Nighthawks* (also reprinted in "Surface Knowledge and 'Deep' Knowledge" in this volume), on the other hand, the picture would lose its point and impact completely because the colored space in itself is not interesting and substantial enough in painterly terms to merit attention on its own.

Although space is an important, in fact, crucial pictorial element of Hopper's paintings, the depiction of space is not their primary goal. Hopper's spaces and settings are there to create a mood and to function as an atmospheric context for his figures. In this sense, they have an eminently theatrical quality. There is an unmistakable hierarchy in Hopper's pictures. They usually focus on isolated, solitary characters or couples, while the, in painterly terms, three dominant features of his pictures, space, color, and light, intensify the existential plight of his figures.[8]

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7 James Curtis, in turn, points out similarities between Walker Evans and the precisionists: "Evans shared with the precisionists an appreciation for the camera's ability to produce clean, hard lines. … Evans, who once admitted to being a frustrated painter, emulated his concern for sharp, clear detail and look of reality. Many of his photographs have the static quality of precisionist art, yet they lack the anonymity and coldness that made precisionism such a short-lived movement" (Curtis 4).

8 Special attention is paid to the crucial role of light in Hopper's paintings in Heinz Liesbrock's study *Edward Hopper. Das Sichtbare und das Unsichtbare*.

III.

We have to look more closely at Hopper's figures, then, and how they are depicted. Again, comparisons can help to clarify Hopper's project. The paintings by Moses, Isaac and Raphael Soyer, for example, social realists of the Depression years, show people sitting and waiting, as do many paintings by Hopper.

Fig. 3: Isaac Soyer, *Employment Agency*, 1937. Oil on canvas, 34,5 x 45 ins; Lucie-Smith 135, pl. 126.

These people in the waiting room of an Employment Agency sit separately from one another, as do Hopper's figures, but they are connected by a common fate. They are therefore grouped in one line, whereas it is characteristic of similar scenes in Hopper that people are positioned in strange, asymmetrical angles to each other. In Hopper's paintings we never quite know whether and what his characters are waiting for, what they are looking at, and, above all, what they may be thinking of the situation.

"Isolation," then, means something different in both cases. In the waiting room of the Soyers', in a room full of strangers, it stems from a society which has cast off the unemployed and submits them to the humiliating experience of publicly revealing their dependence. In contrast, the people waiting in Hopper's *Hotel Lobby* have chosen their own location in space and have achieved something like spatial control. Their bodies and body postures are unaffected by anxiety and therefore lack the twisted expressivity of many of the figures in the Soyers' paintings. Hopper's figures may not communicate with each other but their lack of communication and hence their "isolation" functions as a kind of liberating decontextualization which foregrounds their self-control and, provides them with an identity of their own, despite a lack of facial differentiation.

This becomes more obvious in comparisons with paintings by Guy Pene Du Bois and George Tooker. In paintings like *Mr. and Mrs. Chester* by Du Bois, a friend of Hopper and like him a student of Robert Henri,[9] we find

9 As Lloyd Goodrich writes, Du Bois was one of the first to write about Hopper (Goodrich 38).

images of restaurants and night clubs that are strikingly reminiscent of some of Hopper's paintings, and yet, again, there is a crucial difference. Du Bois' figures are elegant and, above all, "cool" in their stylized self-control, but they do not interest us as characters. In their stylish façade, they fail to engage us sufficiently to develop an interest in their thoughts and inner feelings, because they do not seem to possess any interiority worth speaking of.

Fig. 4: George Tooker, *Government Bureau*, 1956. Egg tempera on gesso punel, 20 x 30 ins; O'Mahony 217.

In George Tooker's painting *Government Bureau*, on the other hand, we encounter an almost Hopperian world of solitary figures, characterized by restrained emotions and systemic standardization. In a modern world of bureaucratic rule, they have become part of an anonymous mass. Tooker's painting depicts a state *after* the loss of individuality, when individuals have become puppets. In contrast, we realize to what extent Hopper's figures assert themselves, paradoxically, precisely because of their spatial and social isolation. In Tooker's painting, the individual is subjected to bureaucratic control, in the painting by Du Bois he is condemned to empty social performance. In Hopper's paintings, society and social performance have disappeared almost altogether. However, this social dissolution is not experienced as a loss but as a liberation.

These comparisons make us realize that Hopper's figures play a crucial role in his paintings not only in terms of composition but also in terms of spectator involvement. They are figures who do not talk, who just sit there, silently but who are nevertheless interesting because their silence is highly suggestive. In a discussion of the melodrama, Peter Brooks has pointed out that melodrama as a mode of representation transforms what is not visible into a form of heightened representation. Its art lies in dramatizing what the characters themselves cannot or do not want to articulate. Similarly, in Hopper's paintings a powerful inwardness is suggested which gives his figures a certain heroic dimension. This often applies to women, too, who dominate the picture by their strong subjectivity, even when they are depicted within the convention of nude painting. I say subjectivity and not individuality because another paradox of Hopper's paintings consists in the fact that his figures seem to be diminished in their individuality in the sense that they do

not stand out as special characters.[10] They are often characterized by average appearance and are not noticeably individualized in their dress, attitudes or gestures, as are the figures, for example, in pictures with comparable themes like William Glackens' painting of the corner shop, *Soda Fountain* or John Sloan's paintings of bachelor girls, *Three A.M.* However, although we may not find much individuality in Hopper's paintings, a strong dimension of subjectivity is suggested, because his figures seem to be in the grip of an interiority that controls their behavior and body language. We would like to know what they are thinking, because they appear to be dominated by an inner life that they keep from our sight. In effect, they seem to be so self-composed precisely because they have found a way to deal with their inner life without open gestures of self-expression or self-dramatization. Paradoxically enough, this gives them a dimension of both inaccessibility and invulnerability.

IV.

The fascination of Hopper's paintings, then, lies not in their being "Portraits of America" (Wieland Schmied)[11] nor in their deconstruction of the American dream or in a critique of the American way of life, but in the pictorial staging of a drama of subjectivity. One might even be tempted to call it a melodrama of subjectivity because there often seems to be a melodrama lurking in the back of Hopper's paintings which is reduced to a mere tableau or chiffre on the pictorial level. Hopper's paintings are always static, after all. Of course, the body language of his figures is decidedly anti-melodramatic in its restraint, but there is a faint melodramatic echo in the depiction of an interiority that cannot be articulated and, perhaps, does not even know itself.[12] One is reminded here of his by now most famous painting *Nighthawks,* which in its iconography opens up a set of possible associations with the melodrama of *film noir.*

Although Hopper does not usually employ *film noir* iconography (a picture like *Night Shadows* is an exception), the point of convergence in *Nighthawks* is not accidental and opens up another way of thinking about Hopper. *Film*

10 Cf. Erika Doss who says about the figures in the painting *Nighthawks*: "As anonymous types, they lack individual identities and personalities … we are not really sure why Hopper's characters are in the diner, just as we are not sure who they are" (Doss 31).

11 Occasionally, even the worn-out phrase "Bilder der Neuen Welt" ("Images of the New World") is still in use. Cf. Rolf Günther Renner, *Edward Hopper 1882-1967. Transformationen des Realen*, 21.

12 In a letter to Charles Sawyer, Hopper emphasizes this enigmatic dimension of the inner life repeatedly: "To me, form, color and design are merely a means to an end, the tools I work with, and they do not interest me greatly for their own sake. I am interested primarily in the vast field of experience and sensation which neither literature nor a purely plastic art deals with … (Goodrich 152-3).

Fig. 5: Edward Hopper, *House by the Railroad*, 1925. Oil on canvas, 24 x 29 ins; Levin 200, pl. 264.

noir is a French invention in which a number of films with different genre affiliations – from gangster and detective movie to women's melodrama – were grouped together because these movies had a common style and a common theme. Their common theme is crime, and more specifically, the crime not of a professional criminal from whom criminal deeds are to be expected, but often a crime committed by a respectable citizen who is drawn into criminal acts by chance.[13] This explains the characteristic mode of narration in *film noir*, the flashback narrative, in which the everyday character who got drawn into crime tries to reconstruct how this could happen to him or her. Consequently, the central topic of *film noir* is the riddle of subjectivity. To be sure, none of Hopper's figures seems to have committed a crime and in their "stern immobility" (Brown 7) we can almost be sure that they never will. Nevertheless, what we see in painting after painting are single or isolated individuals who cannot, or do not want to, articulate themselves, often it seems, because they do not fully know themselves. Something is going on inside of them but we will never have access to their hidden subjectivity – in part because it remains hidden to themselves. Hopper himself said about his art:

13 Two by now classical examples are Billy Wilder's *Double Indemnity* and Fritz Lang's *The Woman in the Window.* The theme is central in *film noir.* On the topic of crime, guilt and subjectivity in *film noir* see my essay "Crime, Guilt, and Subjectivity in *Film Noir,"* reprinted in this volume under the title "Mass Culture Modernism. Guilt and Subjectivity in *Film Noir."* Cf. also Erika Doss's essay "Nighthawks and Film Noir" and Michael Leja who discusses *film noir* in connection with Abstract Expressionism: "The typical *noir* hero is a sympathetic male character who commits crimes, acts violently or brutally, destroying others and himself for reasons he does not understand and cannot control. Sometimes mysterious inner compulsions are portrayed as the principal factors in his destructive actions: for example, obsessive attraction to a dangerous woman (*The Postman Always Rings Twice*, 1946), unresolved Oedipal conflict (*The Dark Past*, 1948; *White Heat*, 1949), or repressed wartime trauma (*The Blue Dahlia*, 1946). At least as often, inscrutable fate is the implicit or explicit cause of his antisocial behaviour" (Leja 109).

> Why I select certain subjects rather than others, I do not exactly know, unless it is that I believe them to be the best medium for a synthesis of my inner experience. … Great art is the outward expression of an inner life in the artist … (Goodrich 152-3).

Even the bare facades of houses in those pictures that do not have any figures in them, like *House by the Railroad* or *Early Sunday Morning*, show the same ambivalence between a promise of subjectivity (somehow these houses have faces) and its unknowability. Although these houses appear empty, showing no sign of life, they nevertheless seem to possess a character of their own that makes us speculate about their inside.

In Hopper's paintings without people, houses usually take the place and role of human figures. As Gail Levin has pointed out, "the houses seem strangely animated, as if they had personalities all their own" (44-5).[14] How much they resemble Hopper's solitary figures can be grasped in a comparison with the painting *House of Mystery* by the American regionalist Charles Burchfield, another friend of Hopper's.[15]

Burchfield's picture tries to provide a sense of mystery in the traditional mode of the gothic, that is, by heightened expressivity, while Hopper manages to heighten the mystery much more effectively by skillful restraint which provides his houses with an enigmatic quality of unknowability.[16] They are, like his paintings in general, "at once absolutely familiar and completely unsettling … The paintings look rooted in reality, yet shiver on some invisible border and veer off to the surreal" (Dupont 6). Hopper's ultimate triumph in the representation of a subjectivity that is not represented or articulated itself but evoked by an analogue,[17] is his late painting *Sun in an Empty Room* where radical reduction opens a space for intense speculation.

The similarity between Hopper's project and that of *film noir* can explain Hopper's popularity in Europe, and, especially, in France, which rediscovered hard-boiled fiction and *film noir*, both of which, to the initial amazement of the rest of the intellectual world, were no longer considered mass culture but eminently "modern" forms of culture. As Carolyn Dean has shown in a book on Bataille and Lacan, a history of the decentered subject, the riddle of subjectivity stood at the center of French intellectual life in the Thirties and

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14 See also Karal Ann Marling's essay "Early Sunday Morning" in which she quotes an article by the critic Ernest Brace: "Without the use of a single figure he [Hopper] is able to impart to a row of commonplace buildings … a haunting sense of life and heedless human activity" (Marling 27).

15 Cf. Milton Brown, "The Early Realism of Hopper and Burchfield." As Brown points out, Hopper even wrote an article on Burchfield called "Charles Burchfield: American."

16 On Burchfield's "gothicism," Brown writes: "But Burchfield's sources are much simpler. His art comes out of a deep-seated and naïve anthropomorphic folklore, which sees the world of nature peopled with lurking spirits and mysterious forces" (Brown 8).

17 On the role of "analogons" in the processes of articulation and representation, cf. Sartre, *The Imaginary*, 52.

played a crucial role in the emergence and formulation of surrealism and Lacanian psychoanalysis. Both are based on the premise of the unknowability of the subject, and for both approaches crime provided a stark illustration of this unknowability.[18] These were central topics also in phenomenology and especially in French existentialism, which discovered American writers like Ernest Hemingway, William Faulkner, Richard Wright, Dashiell Hammett, Raymond Chandler, James Cain, David Goodis, and Cornell Woolrich who provided forceful dramatizations of the accidental, inherently unstable nature of subjectivity.

Fig. 6: Edward Hopper, *Sun in an Empty Room*, 1963. Oil on canvas, 28 3/4 x 39 1/2 ins; Levin 299, pl. 429.

This explains a key moment of transatlantic exchange between American and French culture in mid-20th century: Americans provided "raw material" for the drama of subjectivity in the form of crime fiction, but they themselves had no philosophical or intellectual tradition at the time on which they could draw to see the deeper implications of these – on the surface – sensationalist and effect-conscious crime stories. The then dominant American philosophy in the U.S., pragmatism, had an entirely different view of human nature than phenomenology and existentialism and when that view seemed no longer tenable, it was replaced by Marxism and 1930s-Populism. The French, on the other hand, had the theory, and they also had cultural artefacts to illustrate it, but not of the same (apparent) authenticity as the Americans. Their own illustrations were highly intellectualized, whereas American hard-boiled fiction and *film noir* gave the theory the plausibility of "life as it really is." In other words, American culture needed the French perspective in order to fully grasp the originality and philosophical depth of its own popular culture.

Hopper is part of that American culture and like *film noir*, he has gradually been elevated to highbrow status. As we have seen, he also focuses on the drama of subjectivity. At the same time, however, he became only widely popular in the 1960s, in the context of the emergence of Pop Art and postmodern culture. Hopper draws on the theme of "noir"-modernism, its aesthetics,

18 As Dean points out, the starting point for a new theory of subjectivity in French thought were the phenomena of incomprehensible crime and inexplicable murder. See the first chapter, "The Legal Status of the Irrational," of her book *The Self and Its Pleasures*.

and even its iconography, and yet, he is different in one important respect. The drama of subjectivity, for him, does not manifest itself in the fatal misstep of a citizen, that is, in crime, but in the decontextualized, quasi-photographic glimpse of a subject who, precisely because of the non-descript commonness of the situation in which he or she is depicted, remains enigmatic. Because there is no narrative, there can be no guilt. Even Hopper's probably most "narrational" picture, *Excursion into Philosophy*, leaves a wide space for speculation about what is happening or may have happened and finally confronts us with the realization that we will not be able to find out.

V.

As a mode of representation, the drama of subjectivity in Hopper's paintings can be conceptualized in terms of surface and depth, an issue that has assumed new importance in postmodern cultural criticism. A photorealistic painting like *Telephone Booths* by Richard Estes stimulates the viewer's interest through its radical reduction of depth to surface.[19] In contrast, Hopper's paintings always retain a promise of depth which is, however, never quite fulfilled, because we do not get close enough to his figures and there are no overt signs of self-knowledge and self-expression. This becomes obvious when we compare *Telephone Booths* with Hopper's painting *Night Windows*. In both cases, we only see fragments of bodies and have no way of getting closer to the figures depicted. But whereas in Estes' painting the human figures thereby become part of a dehierarchized (and "dehumanized") surface structure in which all pictorial elements are equally important because taken together they create a fresh new pictorial surface, Hopper's painting suggests a spatial depth in which a plot is enacted of which we can only grasp a faint suggestion. The body has not yet dissolved in visual fragmentation, as it has in the painting by Estes. On the contrary, the only partly visible part evokes a wide range of possibilities from the banal routine of going to bed to a developing drama (for which the blown up curtain might be a metaphor).

"Unknowability" thus changes its function and meaning. In *Night Windows* it still suggests a potentially melodramatic plot, in *Telephone Booths* it has become a mere surface of "empty" signs. The signs are "empty" because

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19 On the influence of Hopper on Estes, cf. Deborah Lyons and Adam Weinerg, eds. *Edward Hopper. Bilder der amerikanischen Seele: "*Some of Estes' paintings present Hopper's themes in contemporary: *Welcome to 42nd St. (Victory Theatre),* 1968, recalls Hopper's *The Circle Theatre* (1936), and *Drugs* (1970) is an updated variation on Hopper's *Drug Store* (1927): In *People's Flowers* (1971) Estes paints a corner store with a look through the store window onto buildings on the other side of the street: in doing so he follows the compositional scheme of *Nighthawks,* but his main interest lies in how the day light is reflected and not in the ominous atmosphere of the big city at night" (147, my translation).

they have lost their reference to a dimension of meaning beyond their aesthetic surface, whereas Hopper's paintings are not fully erasing the idea of meaning but are constantly frustrating it. This indeterminacy stimulates, but it also frustrates. The painting evokes voyeurism but it also frustrates it and throws us back onto ourselves as observers who cannot bridge the gap and therefore will not be able to know.

Fig. 7: Richard Estes, *Telephone Booths*, 1968. Oil on canvas, 48 x 69 ins; Meisel 58.

Such observations can take us back to another look at Hopper's aesthetics. The starting point here must be Hopper's attempt to use the visible – a profane, everyday world – to articulate an invisible dimension of experience – inner dreams, feelings, sentiments, moods, and, even more radically speaking, what I have called the unknowability of the subject. Artistically, this poses the fascinating challenge of how one can actually express the "invisible." Hopper and a writer like Hemingway go in similar directions in this respect. Just as Hemingway's writing is based on the construction of "objective correlatives" for hidden emotions, Hopper's paintings follow an aesthetics of restraint in order to transform figures and objects into signifiers of the drama of subjectivity. Both try to maintain a difficult, precarious balance between realism and modernism, and logically so.[20] The visible can only dramatize the problem of representation and stimulate a search for deeper meanings, if it is sufficiently indeterminate. The realistic mode promises meaning, but because of Hopper's representational strategy of decontextualization (= the elimination of narrative) and his reduction of expressivity, the painting's surface frustrates our search for meaning and challenges us to look for meaning on a deeper level. Hence, the skillful balance between realism and abstraction in Hopper's work. The realistic mode creates the expectation of a

20 For a comparison between Hopper's and Hemingway's methods see Marc Holthof, "Die Hopper-Methode" (22). It is well-known that Hopper in 1927 wrote a letter to the editor in praise of Hemingway's short story "The Killers:" "It is refreshing to come upon such an honest work in an American magazine, after wading through the vast sea of sugar coated mush that makes up most of our fiction. Of the concessions to popular prejudices, the side stepping of truth, and the ingenious mechanism of trick ending there is no taint in this story" (quoted in Marling 38).

Fig. 8: Edward Hopper, *Night Windows*, 1928. Oil on canvas, 29 x 34 ins; Levin 265, pl. 381.

determinacy of meaning, whereas abstraction can dissolve this promise into indeterminacy.[21]

However, one may argue at this point that Hopper is even more skillful and hence more successful at this game than a writer like Hemingway. Partly, this is the case because the pictorial level is better suited for abstraction, partly, because for Hopper subjectivity is more unknowable than for Hemingway, who still draws on narrative contexts like the initiation story or the drama of "real" manhood. In contrast, in Hopper's paintings narrative is even more radically eliminated than in Hemingway, and this must enhance the drama and riddle of subjectivity. It may also explain why Hemingway has gone out of fashion and Hopper has not.

VI.

This, then, is my explanation for the popularity of Hopper's paintings and their acclaimed "Americanness." Apparently "simple" and easily accessible on the pictorial surface, Hopper's paintings nevertheless pose a puzzling contradiction: They are realistic but they are not mimetic. Although they are said to provide a critique of the American dream and the American way of life, they actually offer a highly stylized, theatrical version of an imaginary America. This explains the puzzling fact that, although they do not reflect American reality "truthfully," they nevertheless depict an America we all seem to know. What is interesting about them is the drama of subjectivity, what provides them with special attraction in the depiction of this drama of subjectivity is the skillful way in which they redefine images of loneliness and isolation in "cool" fashion for contemporary use. Hopper's paintings can be simultaneously appropriated by elite and mass culture because this drama of subjectivity is presented in eminently theatrical, almost filmic fashion.[22]

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21 On this point see my essay "Surface Knowledge and 'Deep' Knowledge: The New Realism in American Fiction," reprinted in this volume.

22 The filmmaker Wim Wenders has pointed out repeatedly that Hopper's paintings look

As Peter Stearns and others have shown, there is a long tradition of "American cool" in American culture of the 20th century. In this phenomenon we encounter something that fascinates many Europeans. Hopper's pictures of heroic loneliness are not realistic but stylizations of an individual, male or female, that has found a way to remain distant and unencumbered, not tied down by social demands and obligations. In this, Hopper's paintings are miles apart from those of Sloan, Du Bois, Glackens, and the Soyers with which they share certain themes. Although Hopper's pictures may go in the direction of Sheeler's or Ralston Crawford's precisionism in their elimination of social life[23] and their abstraction of space, there also remains a basic difference. In placing solitary figures or couples in empty, uncluttered spaces, Hopper's paintings provide an entry and point of reference for the viewer who, in contrast to precisionism, does not focus on the decontextualized surface structure of the material world but is attracted by a promise of depth.

Fig. 9. Ralston Crawford, *Overseas Highway*, 1939. Oil on canvas, 28 x 45 ins; Lucie-Smith 87, pl. 73.

Again, a comparison can help to clarify the argument. In its perspective on the barren surface of the *Overseas Highway*, the painting by Ralston Crawford also evokes indeterminacy. But it cannot suggest depth because of the endless sameness of the vista. Unknowabiltiy is here produced simply by spatial extension into an interminable horizon. In contrast, a painting like *Night Windows* suggests depth in the sense that things will take place in that room which will be withdrawn from our view (and knowledge). Hopper's painting is unknowable, because we will never know the truth, Crawford's painting is "unknowable" because the "truth," in its interminable seriality, is emptied of meaning. Hopper still draws on the age-old promise of paintings that seeing is knowing, whereas Crawford's painting deconstructs seeing as the mere screening of surfaces.

Distance in Hopper should thus not be misunderstood as voyeurism. Accordingly, the window, present everywhere in Hopper's paintings, changes its function: it is no longer the entry-gate for the voyeur but the affirmation of an unbridgeable distance that creates self-possession by means of separation.

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like film stills.

23 See, for example, Erika Doss: "The urban setting in Nighthawks may be devoid of all social problems, but only to the extent that it is devoid of society" (Doss 26).

At the same time, distance is also a means of preserving the secret of subjectivity while at the same time fueling our interest in it ever anew.[24] Thus, in Hopper "voyeurism," understood now as merely a spectator position, is part of a deliberate aesthetic strategy, whereas in Crawford any psychological dimension has been erased. This is highlighted by the positioning of the spectator. In the case of Hopper we are separated by a distance which we cannot bridge; in the case of Crawford we are standing on the bridge but still we do not get closer to any kind of meaningful knowledge simply because of the interminable sameness of the surface.

And yet, although a promise of depth remains unfulfilled in Hopper's case, we are not disappointed. On the contrary, we are pleased. This finally returns us to the question with which this paper began, that of the continuing paradox of Hopper's paintings. Why should representations of loneliness and alienation, failed communication and unknowable subjectivity be so appealing and gratifying? Although Hopper's figures appear lonely in the literal sense of being alone or isolated from others, they nevertheless do not appear to suffer or be unhappy. On the contrary, they provide gratifying images because, in their self-imposed silence, they appear to be self-contained and self-sufficient.[25] One of the most important aspects of Hopper's pictures – the fact that all of them, even those depicting places of mobility such as railroad tracks, hotel lobbies, motels, or urban nightlife, are dominated by stillness – is of major significance here. It means that Hopper's figures are not imposed upon from the outside, that they are indeed living in a utopia of self-possession.[26]

In Hopper's paintings, the drama of subjectivity – that we cannot possibly know ourselves – can thus be transformed into an unexpected asset because it becomes the basis for a promise of self-empowerment. This, of course, is a dimension of American culture that, starting with Tocqueville and drawing on high as well as popular culture, has always fascinated Europeans because it links individualization with the promise of independence, instead of depicting it as a loss of social bonds. Hopper's paintings, which at first sight appear as demystification of the American dream, thus give us an updated, neon-realistic refashioning of the most American of myths. If this myth comes along in a Western, we immediately recognize the ideological pattern nowadays and probably reject it; if it comes along in the form of tough-guy fiction or *film noir* we may be more willing to engage in it, but may nevertheless still be somewhat embarrassed by its suppressed sentimentality. But if it comes along as a painting by Hopper, we can enjoy it, as a sufficiently cool reformulation for modern times because the themes of loneliness and

24 See, for example, Hopper's painting *Office in a Small City.*

25 J.A. Ward has used silence as the connecting link in a study of American realism, *American Silences. The Realism of James Agee, Walker Evans, and Edward Hopper.*

26 Perhaps, Hopper's paintings focus on transitory situations because these can reinforce the individual's need for self-possession.

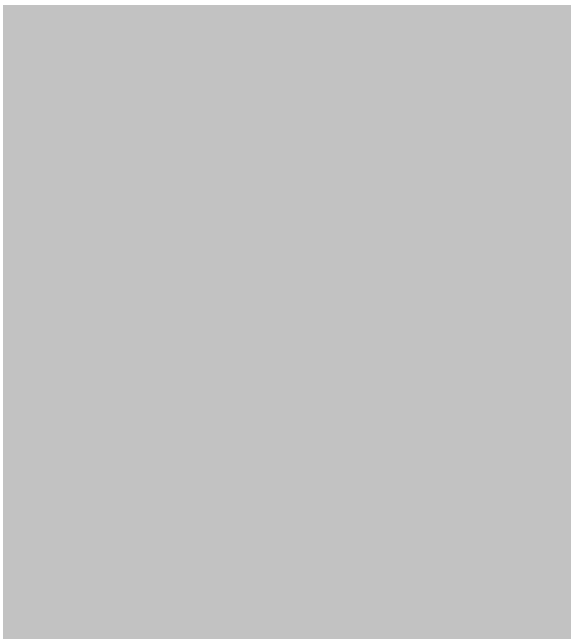

Fig. 10: Edward Hopper, *Compartment C, Car 293*, 1938. Oil on canvas, 20 x 18 ins; Levin 206, pl. 272.

failed communication are transformed by means of space, color, and light into an aesthetically pleasing mood. This explains the paradox with which this paper began, the fact that pictures of alienation can become popular cultural icons. Hopper's technique of decontextualization has successfully cut off any narrative and leaves us with the pure, almost surreal pose or gesture itself. Hopper's transformation of noir-existentialism into what might be called neon-existentialism characterized by cool light and strong colors reflects an aestheticization of existentialist themes in which a repertoire of signs and gestures is provided for a "cool" redefinition of alienation as gratifying self-possession.

The painter Europeans consider the most American is also the painter that has turned out to be the most useful in the construction of an "Americanness" (not only) Europeans would like to see. At first sight, Hopper's paintings seem to function as a key source for a narrative of disenchantment with modernity and "America." However, at a closer look, his squalid pastoralism provides an effective camouflage for precisely the opposite, namely a renewed infatuation with the most American of American utopias, the promise of individual self-possession. In the final analysis, the paradox of Hopper consists in the fact that he has managed to revive and effectively refashion the most American of myths for modern times by seemingly doing exactly the opposite.[27] In this, the Hopper paradox can help us to understand one of the basic paradoxes of aesthetic experience.

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