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Abstracting Hopper

19 December 2019.

Richard Phelan

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PREO

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Introduction

I Abstraction

1.1. The word *abstract*

1.2. *Extract* vs. *abstract*

1.3. Hopper and Abstraction

II. An experiment

III. The Virtues of Abstraction

Conclusion

Références picturales

Introduction

- 1 As the 20th century progressed, images of paintings by Edward Hopper permeated American and European culture, conflating to become, for many, 'Images of the USA'. This imagery or, as we would now say, these *icons* have continued to circulate so smoothly that, when I actually find myself in front of a Hopper painting in a museum, I am surprised anew by the intense power of that material object to captivate my attention and to hold me in its hushed perimeter. The origin of this seduction is of course to be located partly in the narrative spell that Hopper casts, the inchoate fiction that his pictures spin for us— suggestive enough to serve as an incipit or opening chapter,

yet vague enough to enable the widest set of developments, as the number and variety of paperback covers derived from Hopper 'images' have demonstrated¹.

- 2 Yet this is only half — or less than half — of the story. One of its other fractions is the sheer visual potency of the painted surface, the lavish formal traps of line and color that the artist composed for over fifty years. Parts of a Hopper canvas can thus be seen to have a life of their own, a life abstracted from the 'Hopperesque'. The aim of this paper is to *tease out*, isolate and analyze this other, abstract Hopper and to pay some attention to it. I will first take a look at the meaning of the term *abstract*, and consider Edward Hopper's attitude to abstraction in painting. Then I will experimentally investigate the existence of a certain abstraction in Hopper's canvases with a view to describing its link with the figurative elements. Finally, I will attempt to assess how this contributes to the way we see and value Hopper's paintings.

I Abstraction

1.1. The word *abstract*

- 3 Producing meaning by its use in opposition to the term *concrete*, the adjective *abstract* designates something that is separated from particular matter or from actual instances, something which the 1913 edition of the Webster dictionary defined as 'existing in the mind only'. The movement away from complexity towards simplicity is expressed in the verb *to abstract*, evoking a process of distillation or of extracting an essence. An *abstract* is therefore a general idea, a summary, or an epitome.
- 4 Non-figurative, non-concrete, non-particular, non-complex... the dictionary definitions evoke a privative dimension for the term under study. But the same idea can be expressed positively in terms of 'purification'. In painting, the term can thus mean a total concentration on the constituent elements of the art itself: line, shape, color, brushstroke, format, formal relationships... This can of course become paradoxical as *abstract art* then turns out to be quite material and involved with the *concrete* elements of a painting. However, we can restrain from plunging too far into this paradox by convoking

that historical figure of early abstraction, Wassily Kandisky (Bonfand : 5-19). For the latter, ideas and spirituality were founding elements in abstraction, and the purification at work in abstraction comes from the fact that the art is not devoted to outer appearances, but to inner vision. A similar basis in spiritual ideas can be attested for the abstract art that was being produced in the USA as of the 1940s (Bonfand : 91-117).

- 5 One particular meaning of the term ‘abstract’ might hold our attention for a moment. That is its use to refer to a person as someone remote, dissociated, or distracted. This initial medieval sense of the word, formed from the Latin *abstractus* (with the privative *ab*) meaning ‘withdrawn from worldly interests’ fits well with a lot of the figures in Hopper. They are, as it were, *abstracted* from their situations.

1.2. Extract vs. abstract

- 6 The Merriem Webster dictionary tells us of the crossed histories of the terms *abstract* and *extract* which intersected and then separated in modern English. Both words stem from Latin through the combination of *trahere* (meaning to draw, to detach) with the prefix *ex-* (meaning “out of”, “away from”) or *ab-* (meaning “off, away from”). *Abstract* is most frequently used as an adjective and a noun, but less commonly as a verb; this contrasts it (in a kind of mirror image) with *extract*, which is more common as a verb. The noun *abstract* applies to something that has been summarized, and *summarized* means reduced from a larger work. Both *extract* and *abstract* render the idea of “removing” or “pulling away”, but can an extract have the epitomizing function of an abstract? If something is *removed* from a Hopper painting, does this extract give us something of the essence?

1.3. Hopper and Abstraction

- 7 During his long career, Edward Hopper resisted and fought against abstraction. Although Hopper did not like to be associated with the term ‘American Scene’, he did prefer the realist strain of American art to the modernist strain that was embodied in a variety of attempts – such as those of Max Weber, John Marin, Marsden Hartley– to import European innovations that tended towards abstraction (Chassey : 21-28).

- 8 In the editorial for the first issue of the magazine *Reality*, in 1952, Hopper denounces abstraction, equating it with lifelessness and opposing it to imagination. He considers abstraction as an intellectual process. That is a description that might fit with the work of Barnett Newman, but far less with the work of Jackson Pollock, surely as sensual as it is intellectual, as instinctive as it is rational. As for Mark Rothko, his painting proceeds through a spiritual rather than an intellectual logic. However, it is probably not the process that Hopper is attacking here, but the arguments made in favor of the dominance of abstract art, arguments which were probably associated with Clement Greenberg²:

One of the weaknesses of much abstract painting is the attempt to substitute the inventions of the intellect for a pristine imaginative conception. The inner life of a human being is a vast and varied realm and does not concern itself alone with stimulating arrangements of color, form, and design. (Smithsonian)

- 9 ‘Stimulating arrangements of color, form, and design’, says Hopper, are not enough to make a painting. That of course is an idea that had already been refuted in 1890 in a famous assertion by Maurice Denis³, and proved untrue in practice by Hopper’s American contemporaries Ellsworth Kelly and Frank Stella, both making abstract art. Of course, what Hopper means is that such formal arrangements are not enough for *him* to make a painting.
- 10 The term "life" as used in art is something not to be held in contempt, for it implies all of existence, and the province of art is to react to it and not to shun it. Painting will have to deal more fully and less obliquely with life and nature's phenomena before it can again become great. (Smithsonian)
- 11 This is also contestable if the claim is applied to Pollock, Clifford Still, or Sam Francis. But even if Hopper is dictating to others in 1952, it is more useful to conclude that the truth of what he says is as a description of his own process. What is important for Hopper is life and, for him, the life of his paintings is infused with his inner life. Hopper believes abstraction to be lifeless.

II. An experiment

- 12 What would happen, I wondered, if we *extracted* parts of a Hopper painting? In order to answer that question, I decided to proceed on an experiment, selecting for that purpose the painting in Madrid, at the Thyssen-Bornemisza Museum, entitled *Hotel Room*. <https://www.museothyssen.org/en/collection/artists/hopper-edward/hotel-room>. Painted in 1931, it is relatively large with respect to the viewer, measuring one meter 50 by one meter 65. It is, I believe, a particularly poignant picture. To concretize my speculations, I made a version of it (Figure 1), taking the motif of the woman reading, and putting that motif into a circle (like the circular ‘zooms’ one finds on museum websites). Then I placed the circle within three panels, grey on the left, yellow and black on the right, taking the colors I used from the bedroom in the picture.

Figure 1. Phelan, *Hotel Room Revisted* (acrylic on canvas, 2017)



- 13 In other words, I took out a figurative motif which – like the editorial borrowings, croppings and reframings of Hopper used on book covers – preserves the ‘Hopperesque’, and then I took out some structural and chromatic details in order to present that motif within a more abstract structure based on zones of the canvas. This practical exploration was motivated by the question: is the DNA, as it were, in one type of extract only, or can it be detected in both types? Looking at Hopper’s *Hotel Room*, I had had the impression of a certain impassibility of the backdrop behind the seated figure— perhaps, I wondered, it was an imagined backdrop to a real pose by Jo Hopper, the canvas thus representing a real woman, as it were, sitting in an abstract setting. Of course, once I went away and acted on my speculation, I was forced to recognize how figurative these ‘abstract’ panels that compose the setting were.

Figure 2. Hopper, *Hotel Room*, 1931, detail

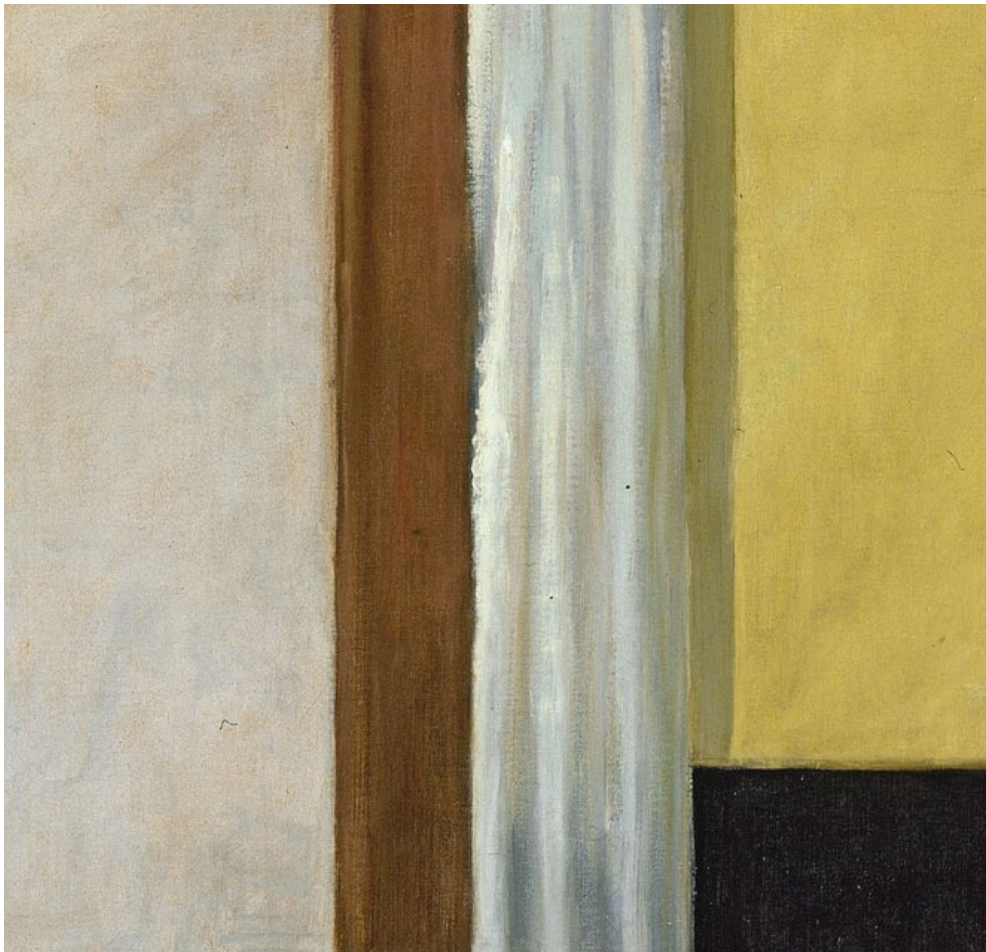


Figure 3. Hopper, *Hotel Room*, 1931, detail



- 14 The first panel (Figure 2) clearly implies three dimensions with the shadow on the wall, the depth of the folds and the transparency of the curtain with respect to the wall. And if the second panel (the bright backdrop behind the figure that sets off the head in shadow, Figure 3) is definitely more abstract, it would still be exaggerated to imagine Hopper painting this large white zone in a manner similar, say, to an artist like Robert Ryman.
- 15 The experiment enabled me to see modulations that I had not noticed and that contradicted the impression of reduction and simplicity; for instance, how in the original the grey panel forming the left side of my revisited version is actually pink at the top and yellow at the bottom. My impression of abstraction in Hopper was beginning to seem erroneous. I found confirmation, however, of the hypothesis for an abstract Hopper in the short film produced for the television channel Arte by Mathieu Amalric in 2012, called *Next to Last (Autumn 63)* and devoted to Hopper's *Sun in an Empty Room*. In this 5-minute film, zones of the canvas are framed close-up in slow movements that

successively evoke abstract paintings by Newman, Ryman and Rothko.

- 16 Amalric gives credence to the idea that a Hopper painting offers a story to the eye while the serious work is being done by the deep structure of the painting. This recalls T.S. Eliot's famous remarks about meaning in poetry:

The chief use of the "meaning" of a poem, in the ordinary sense, may be ... to satisfy one habit of the reader, to keep his mind diverted and quiet, while the poem does its work upon him: much as the imaginary burglar is always provided with a bit of nice meat for the house-dog (Eliot : 144).

- 17 Does what I have called the abstract (the colored panels I made for my version) function as a formal game that holds the viewer's gaze once the latter has been hooked by the figurative bait (here, schematically, the seated woman)? Or is it something that has hooked the painter while he thought he was occupied with a scene to portray? What, in other words, is the deal done between the 'abstract' and the figurative in Hopper?
- 18 The first hypothesis is that we look at a painting by Edward Hopper because we are invited into a story, a situation which captures us, but which is so disquietingly open-ended that we cannot help but linger over it; and as we linger, we linger over the colored panels, the structure of planes and of lines, in other words, the *chromatic geometry*. The thematic *irresolution* is, as it were, appeased by the chromatic resolve, the resolution by the artist of a formal composition. So if we were initially hooked on the content a story, now we have become hooked on the way it is being told.
- 19 The viewer's experience perhaps matches that of Hopper himself. The artist imagines a scene, so he sets up the props, he has Jo pose this way and that; he has created a pictorial situation and begun to paint it, but in the process of painting, he forgets the 'story'. He relinquishes his focus on the figure and the décor, seeing everything as degrees of light, as photo-metric information to be registered by the "transparent eye-ball" (Emerson : 6) and to be transcribed by the well-trained hand, as if the latter were capable of a sort of manual *photogravure*. In this scenario, the artist becomes a camera, a re-

ceptor and engraver of colored marks on a canvas. “Painting”, says James Elkins (5), “is an unspoken and largely unrecognized dialogue, where paint speaks silently in masses and colors and the artist responds in moods”. Hopper, perhaps despite himself, has become absorbed in the marks being placed on the canvas, and the visual magnetism of these marks has gained all his attention. He no longer cares about the hotel room, the suitcases or indeed the woman.

- 20 This detachment might explain the famously vacant expression on the face of many of his figures, or the absence of light or detail on their faces, as if they were dummies and not people (see, for instance, the figures in *Room in New York*, 1932). Moreover, the décor in Hopper too, is often reduced to a minimal set of signs, as if it were being stripped bare. Thus, *Nighthawks* (1942) could be seen as a film set for a thriller; the 7th avenue street scene in *Early Sunday Morning* (1930) is a theatre backdrop; the room in *Morning Sun* (1952) is empty except of a bed; and the city being approached in the eponymous 1946 painting is a ghost town. Throughout Hopper’s canvases, there is a sense of emptying out, of absence, of withdrawal – a purification which Pierre Fresnault-Deruelle (253-262) calls *raréfaction de la vie*. Either the artist has lost interest in the life in the representation or he has set up something that is eating away at it from the inside⁴. Hopper’s world is, as it were, being emptied from within.

III. The Virtues of Abstraction

- 21 But, after all, what is the use of an abstract Hopper? One use of course is to make of the artist something other than a Realist, and to help account for the fact that many of his paintings do not fit with the label Realism. If certain of his pictures such as *Rooms by the Sea* (1951) make us think of Magritte, it is because the space represented is not a realistic space but a mental space or a dream space (Gaillard, 111). Just as a certain literary naturalism, in Zola or Stephen Crane for instance, led towards distortion and fantasy, Hopper’s work might thus be considered to have sometimes entered into the realm of the *surreal* or the *fantastic*. If they were not so barbaric, *unnaturalist*, *unrealist*, or even *abrealist* might be terms that would fit Hopper.
- 22 The second virtue is to remind us, in case we had forgotten, that Hopper is literally pursuing light, as he famously said: “What I wanted

to do was to paint sunlight on the side of a house” (Levin : 294). And indeed, Hopper marvelously captured the eerie precision of the light on Cape Cod, just as Vermeer had captured the specific light of northern Europe or Cezanne that of Aix-en-Provence. Yves Bonnefoy entitles his beautiful essay for the Marseille exhibition of Hopper in 1989, “Photosynthèse de l’être”. Bonnefoy uses the word *heliotropic*, as if the artist were a plant, and his painting a biological urge. The way I understand the French poet’s use of *photosynthesis* is in the suggestion that the figures of Hopper’s landscapes need the light in order to thrive, and that the human being painting, or contemplating, the landscape also needs the light in order to exist.

- 23 I would go along with Bonnefoy when he argues that this light has for Hopper a spiritual dimension. Hopper’s quest in painting light is to sense out either a spiritual presence, or to register a spiritual absence. That is a quest implicit in the American tradition of Luminism, a tradition which Robert Rosenblum claimed as a precursor for Rothko (Rosenblum : 115). I would suggest we include Hopper as an heir too, Hopper for whom Emerson and Transcendentalism were a crucial stance with respect to the world (Ottinger : 36-37). Hopper’s light consists not only in sunlight on brownstones or sunlight in a cafeteria, or that of an actual lighthouse on Cape Cod, but a light that is both outer and inner, an inner light of the human soul which may in other terms be an equivalent to the “inner life” of things.
- 24 Might not light itself, moreover, be considered as an abstraction? When we speak of a certain light, we draw it away from the particular matter that it envelops. The great competition between Realism and Abstraction being fought in painting in the U.S.A. in the 1930s was also being played out and resolved within photography. In his *Equivalent* series, dated 1927-29, Alfred Stieglitz demonstrated that the abstract and the figurative were mere modalities of framing. We have similar evidence of this in the work of Weston, Cunningham, and Outerbridge when they capture light, transcribe it, and create a figurative image, forging in the same gesture photographic abstraction and figurative representation, creating the latter through the former.
- 25 The final value of ‘abstracting Hopper’ is to see Hopper again not just as a cliché, but as a great artist. His work is valued of course because it inventories the urban forms of the 20th century, because it pictures

the world power that the USA had become. Hopper, however, is also an inventor of forms. This assertion is not new, but perhaps requires restatement. A certain intellectual disdain for Hopper has been voiced particularly in France (Kempf). The fact that the first major Hopper exhibition in Paris took place only in 2012 is indicative of this neglect, and an evolution in the appreciation of Hopper can be charted, for example, through a comparison of the article published in *Le Monde* by art historian Philippe Dagen on the occasion of the Hopper exhibition in 2004 at Tate Modern, and Dagen's reinstatement of Hopper as a major figure in 2012 while reviewing the Paris exhibition⁵.

Conclusion

- 26 The aim of this essay has been to *tease out*, isolate and analyze another, more abstract, Hopper. My experiment and speculations have sought to give the abstraction in Hopper its due beside the imagery—beside, or rather *inside*. For, like a Trojan horse, Hopper's gifted storytelling is ushered into our imagination and his pictorial chromatics then conquer us from within. What wins out in the end is the abstractive logic of Hopper's persistent *phototropism*.
- 27 But that is perhaps to overcompensate for the cliché that Hopper's images became and to overstate the case for an abstract Hopper. The full story, the truer story, is, of course, comprised of the *collusion* as well as the *tension* between the narrative and the formal; it is formed by the unfamiliar *deal* struck deep between the figurative and the abstract, between the drawing and, as it were, the *drawing away*.

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1 See for instance the French publisher Gallimard's Folio collections which use Hopper images for Steinbeck (<http://www.folio-lesite.fr/Catalogue/Folio/Folio/Les-naufrages-de-l-autocar>), for Camus (<http://www.gallimard.fr/Catalogue/GALLIMARD/Folio/Folioplus-classiques/L-Etranger>), and Robert Walser (<http://www.gallimard.fr/Catalogue/GALLIMARD/Folio/Folio/Les-enfants-Tanner>). Sites last accessed 09/25/2019

2 Greenberg's essays "On the Role of Nature in Modernist Painting" (1949), "Abstract, Representational, and so forth" (1954) and "'American-Type' Painting" (1955) actually offer a very nuanced position with regard to abstraction and to the values of figurative art.

3 In the journal *Art et Critique* of August 1890, Denis wrote that a picture is essentially a flat surface covered with colors assembled in a certain order (Denis : 1). However, Denis nonetheless insisted on both the importance of nature and of tradition, and his theory could easily be reconciled to the ideas of Edward Hopper.

4 To help me visualize this, I thought of a piece presented by contemporary artist Kader Attia at the 2005 Lyon Biennial in which real birds progressively ate up the materials of his installation. (*Flying Rats*, Lyon, La Sucrière, 8ème Biennale d'Art Contemporain).

5 In "Edward Hopper, le réalisme jusqu'à l'absurde", 2004, Dagen wrote "A Londres, la Tate Modern Gallery consacre une rétrospective au peintre de l'Amérique moderne, devenu l'un des artistes les plus célèbres du XXe siècle. Poussant à l'extrême les codes du réalisme, il a signé une œuvre intense, peuplée de personnages inertes et seuls", whereas in "Edward Hopper tel que vous l'ignoriez", 2012, Dagen, concluded: « La rétrospective magistralement réalisée à Paris, au Grand Palais, rend au peintre américain son ampleur et sa variété ». This change of tone insisting on importance ("ampleur") and variety rather than mere fame ("l'un des artistes les plus célèbres") is not solely due to the differences in museography.

English

One of the most seductive aspects of Hopper paintings is the sheer visual potency of their painted surface, the lavish formal trap of line and color that the artist has composed. Parts of a Hopper canvas can thus be seen to have a life of their own, a life abstracted from the Hopperesque. The aim of this paper is to *tease out*, isolate and analyze this other, abstract Hopper and to pay dues to it. Our thought experiment seeks to give the abstraction in Hopper its due beside the imagery— beside, or rather *inside*. For, like a Trojan horse, Hopper's gifted storytelling is ushered into our imagination and his pictorial chromatics then conquer us from within. What wins out in the end is the abstractive logic of Hopper's persistent *phototropism*.

Français

La force des tableaux d'Edward Hopper tient-elle surtout dans l'histoire qu'ils semblent créer, ces fameuses images qui sont devenues autant de clichés d'Amérique ou de la vie urbaine au vingtième siècle, scènes qui figurent souvent sur les couvertures des livres de poche? Et si la fiction chez Hopper n'était avant tout qu'un prétexte pour piéger l'œil par une structuration géométrique et chromatique, de sorte que l'on pourrait dire que la force des tableaux vient également d'une structuration abstraite? Grâce en partie à une expérimentation pratique, cet article propose d'examiner ce qu'il y a d'abstrait dans l'œuvre de Hopper et de questionner les effets de ce que l'on pourrait appeler sa logique d'abstraction.

Mots-clés

hopperesque, abstraction, fiction, lumière, composition, purification

Keywords

hopperesque, abstraction, story, light, composition, purification

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