

Liminal Figures and Infinities: Edward Hopper as Magic Realism

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Abstract:

While numerous art historians characterized Edward Hopper's art as a prime example of American realism with readily identifiable empty spaces and lonely figures, these characterizations are often qualified by an acknowledgement that Hopper's art has strange, often unsettling undertones which are not easily explained through the lens of realism nor have clear comparison in American art. This paper aims to argue that Edward Hopper is more accurately characterized as a magic realist, both artistically and philosophically, noting in particular Hopper's interest in certain aspects of film, surrealism, and existential philosophy. The paper points towards Hopper's use of liminality and (seemingly) infinite spaces and constructions as non-naturalistic elements that are more easily characterized as magic realist in nature and which help to explain the unsettling effects found in Hopper's work. Finally, the paper briefly explores additional readings of Hopper's work that may be fruitful in future scholarship, particularly in answering the so-called "Hopper Paradox", coined by Winfried Fluck, and the stoic nature of Hopper's figures.

Keywords: Edward Hopper, magic realism, realism, Hopper Paradox, liminality, infinity

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1. Edward Hopper, the Surrealists, and the Magic Realists

There are numerous similarities and connections between Edward Hopper's work and that of the magic realists and surrealists. For instance, Hopper shared with surrealists and magic realists a fascination in the writings of Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung. Art historian Gail Levin, one of the foremost scholars on Edward Hopper's life and career, notes that Hopper was "capable of talking about Freud for an entire evening," and his remarks throughout his career and in various interviews and writings indicate that he had an "enduring interest in psychoanalytic ideas".¹ Hopper even made a small sketch between 1925 and 1930 that depicts a young, cartoon-like boy carrying books with the names "Freud" and "Jung" inscribed on top of them. Yet this fascination goes far beyond being a simple intellectual foray as Freud's theories made a deep impact on Hopper's own artistic philosophies. For example, Hopper writes in 1939 about the impact that the unconscious and subconscious has on art, noting that "[so] much of every art is an expression of the subconscious, that it seems to me most of all of the important qualities are put there unconsciously, and little of importance by the conscious intellect."² And it seems that this fascination with the unconscious extended into his own work. As art historian Rolf G. Renner notes, Hopper's paintings exist in "an ambivalent, Freudian world in which the things that comfort us and the things we find unsettling are implicitly shown to have the same origins... The painting transcends realism."³ Like the surrealists and magic realists, who based much of the philosophy of their movements on Freud's work (as is evident by its influence on Andre Breton's *First Manifesto of Surrealism*) and who even employed new techniques to help explore the unconscious in their art (through techniques like automatism), Hopper was deeply influenced by Freud's unraveling of the mind to the extent that it influenced both the conception of his art and the purpose behind it. Hopper's artistic style and philosophy were greatly impacted by other sources, however.

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His teacher Robert Henri wrote in *The Art Spirit*, for example, that “the object, which is the back of every true work of art, is the attainment of a state of being,” foreshadowing what Franz Roh would identify in the magic realists only two years later.⁴ And for many years the symbolist author Edmund Wilson lived only three floors below Hopper in his New York apartment, writing in his 1931 novel *Axel's Castle* that “the literary history of our time is to a great extent that of the development of symbolism and of its fusion or conflict with Naturalism.”⁵ This dichotomy between symbolism and naturalism was often explored by the surrealists and psychoanalysts, and was one that Hopper himself explored for much of his career. Charles Burchfield notes the presence of this important dichotomy in Hopper's work, finding the competing forces of mind and nature to be a permanent conflict throughout many of his paintings.⁶ It is clear, then, that Hopper was surrounded by thinkers and fellow artists who shared similar intellectual interests as him and who likely pushed him towards a deeper exploration of many of the same topics and ideas that influenced numerous surrealists and magic realists. These influences ultimately helped to shape his art in a manner that was much more symbolic and surreal than the term realism would normally entail.

Hopper was also greatly influenced by the films he saw, as he was an avid movie fan who would go to the theater, according to his friend Richard Lahey, “sometimes for a week or more” at a time.⁷ Film noir in particular was influenced by the surrealists' philosophies, and both film noir and surrealism were, as cultural historian Winfried Fluck notes, rooted in a “post-War atmosphere of disillusion, distrust, alienation, loss of orientation and existential despair in which the quest for individual freedom is presented as a running around in circles or an existential trap.”⁸ Both directors of film noir and surrealists were shocked by the horrors of the two World Wars and began searching the depths of the human mind, either for answers on how to progress past those atrocities or for an explanation as to the causes of them. Film critic and theorist Andre Bazin recognized this common focus between film noir and surrealism in noting that noir was “indebted to surrealism and might have been developed along the lines of literary existentialism.”⁹

Hopper was directly exposed to the philosophies of the surrealists directly in reading the work of Freud and Jung, but he was also indirectly exposed to their existential views through the films he watched. The surrealists, then, play an overwhelming role in shaping how Hopper not only viewed art (both his own and that of others), but how he thought about society more broadly. In sharing such views, it is not surprising that Hopper had a similar artistic vision as many of the film noir directors. For instance, film and literary critic James Naremore notes that film noir “has been valued by successive critics for its supposed challenges to or disruptions of the stylistic, narrative and generic norms of the ‘classical’ system of film-making,” while film critics Raymond Borde and Etienne Chaumeton believed that the “essence of noirness lies in a feeling of discontinuity, an intermingling of social realism and oneirism.”^{10, 11} Hopper too is noted for disrupting narrative and general narrative norms to create dream-like scenes of society and modern life. In essence, then, film noir not only embodied much of the same philosophies that Hopper was exploring through the writings of Freud while indirectly exposing him to many of the ideas of the surrealists, but also shared similar artistic goals as Hopper. Thus, although he himself was not a surrealist, he was deeply intertwined with many of their ideas through the people he talked to, the authors he read and interacted with, and the films he watched.

However, Hopper also interacted with the surrealists directly. As a member of the Museum of Modern Art in New York who was invited to many gallery openings and exhibitions, he was exposed to the surrealist art that had made its way to the United States around the time of the Second World War. Gail Levin notes that Hopper was fond of some aspects of the surrealists' work, telling his wife Josephine that he appreciated “their fine use of color” and that “some of them... were better artists than they realized.”¹² She notes that two artists he may be commenting on in particular were Miro and Dali, whose work Hopper saw in 1941. As an artist during the war, Hopper was also on the panel to choose artists for the “Artists for Victory” exhibit at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, which further exposed him to the work of notable surrealists. He even helped choose to display the work of surrealists Andre Masson and James Guy and magic realist O. Louis Guglielmi as part of the exhibit.¹³ According to his wife's statements, Hopper was impressed by both the surrealists' handling of color and their skill in depicting altered realities, even if he himself did not believe in or acknowledge such alternative realities in his own work. Yet Hopper seems to find non-naturalistic forms of representation within the work of other American realists exciting and admirable. For example, in writing about John Sloan's early work in 1927, Hopper notes that he was fond of how Sloan was able to produce a “distortion that looks like the truth,” so that “the object drawn is seen first before one becomes conscious of its design.”¹⁴

Although the surrealists he viewed at the Museum of Modern Art were likely far more extreme in their distortion of reality, Hopper seemed to have a particular fascination with using realistic representations to create realities rather than mimic them, and this surely translated into his own art; Carter Foster, curator of drawings at the Whitney Museum of American Art and author of a book about the sketches behind many of Hopper's most famous paintings, notes that "every major painting by him features his subtle tinkering with reality."¹⁵ It becomes clear that even if Hopper was not outwardly employing the same techniques that the surrealists used, he found aspects of the surrealists' work stimulating and, in turn, found a way to incorporate surrealist hints into his own work and ideas on art, even if subtly.

Connections have been made between Edward Hopper and the surrealists. Rolf G. Renner, Joseph Stanton, John Hollander, and a plethora of others have noted the similarities between Hopper's work and that of surrealist Rene Magritte, while Wieland Schmied sees a resemblance to Giorgio de Chirico. This connection in particular is not new, as when Hopper's work was sent to be displayed at the Venice Biennale in 1952 critics compared Hopper's paintings to de Chirico's early work, even calling him "an American de Chirico."¹⁶ Others have gone so far as to say that Hopper's work not only resembles de Chirico's paintings, but that he is continuing in the Metaphysical tradition; for example, Seymour Menton in *Magic Realism Rediscovered* argues that Hopper converts de Chirico's lonely Italian plazas into American provincial towns to a similar effect.¹⁷ Even if it is generally accepted that Hopper is a realist painter, there seems to be an undeniable similarity between his work and thinking and that of several of the surrealists and magic realists, and yet few have made any attempt to recontextualize his work in light of this information.

Given the already recognized connections between Hopper and the surrealists and magic realists, one must ask what the value of recontextualizing Hopper's work as magic realism may be. I believe this reading of Hopper may enhance our understanding of his work and its importance in the modern age by helping to explain non-naturalistic forms and avoid narrativizing paintings that were never meant to be read as complete stories. As Filip Lipinski notes in *The Virtual Hopper: Painting Between Dissemination and Desire*, much of Hopper's work is rendered through a "withheld narrative" which generates "unfinished, suspended sentences such as 'A woman looking at ...', 'People talking about ...', 'A couple waiting for ...'."¹⁸ There are no complete stories with clear readings in any of Hopper's paintings, as many of the stories that do appear to be present are only there because it is the viewer who helps to complete them.

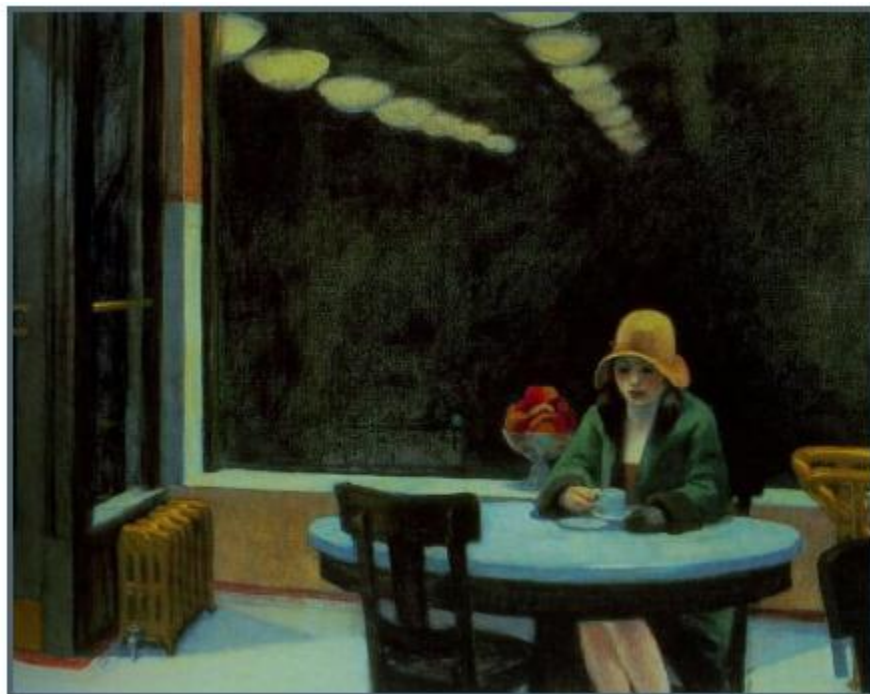


Fig. 1 Edward Hopper, *Automat* (1927). Oil on Canvas, Des Moines Art Center, Des Moines.

Consider, for example, how Carol Troyen, curator of American Paintings at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, observes that the woman in Hopper's *Automat* "...wants to be modern, but she carries it off with a certain discomfort," which is not a comment on the actual rendering of the figure nor a historical analysis of her position in society, but rather a veiled form of saying "I too would be uncomfortable in this scenario."¹⁹ If an accurate reading of Hopper is to be made, it must be as thoroughly unclouded by the viewer's imposition into the scene as possible, and avoiding narrativizing Hopper's paintings is an effective method of doing so. Magic realism, at its core, is rooted in disruptive narrative and incomplete emotional content. As Jeffrey Wechsler notes, an important aspect of magic realist art is its "vagueness" and its "ahistorical quality" that frustrates viewers' attempts at understanding why exactly the art elicits the emotions it does. And, as noted previously, a similar reading is described by Arnason, who notes that magic realism art is "disturbing" even if it is unclear why. Literary critic and philosopher Frederic Jameson notes that magic realist film, too, is often described as containing a "narrative raw material," in which the story is not "subverted or abandoned... but rather effectively neutralized, to the benefit of a seeing or a looking in the filmic present."²⁰ It is this "neutralization" of narrative that stymies any attempt at forming a full story, and as such the emotions evoked by the work of the magic realists are often incomplete; any attempt to describe them through story and narrative is guaranteed to introduce ideas and emotions that were not necessarily present during the conception of the work.

Hopper, too, was thoroughly against any attempt to narrativize his paintings. In conversation about his painting *Cape Cod Morning*, Josephine is noted to have described it as a painting about a "...blondish house wife... looking out to see if the weather's good enough to hang out her wash," to which Hopper responded "did I say that? You're making it Norman Rockwell. From my point of view, she's just looking out the window, just looking out the window."²¹ Other times he appeared to more playfully interact with narrative in his work, as evidenced by the fact that he and his wife were known to make a private game of naming the figures and coming up with stories for them. When even the artist behind the work is toying with the "narrative raw material" within the paintings, it becomes clear that there is no true story within the work that needs to be elucidated, and that critical analysis should primarily focus on the visual and historical nature of the art instead. To this end, contextualizing Hopper's art as an example of magic realism offers another benefit, as it may help to explain some of the non-naturalistic forms inherent in the visual realm of his paintings and can lead viewers to understand why his work appears so lonely and isolating without the need for narrativization. As poet and literary critic John Hollander notes, there is a theatrical quality to many of Hopper's scenes, echoing Wechsler's belief that magic realist art can be displayed like a film set, and yet this quality has "tended to lead interpretation to supply lower, more literal, more banal readings both of the meaning of the spaces in them and of the relation of persons occupying those spaces than the texts of the images demand."²² The natural instinct to story Hopper's figures is a function of the filmic and theatrical aspects of Hopper's work, and by moving away from narrativization and accepting that there are some non-naturalistic forms within Hopper's work, these more symbolic and figurative interpretations may be illuminated.

The fact that the objects and scenes that Hopper paints are recognizable does not indicate that they are mimetic depictions of reality nor that they contain a full narrative. In fact, as Laima Kardokas notes, Hopper's work is expressive of emotion exactly because the objects and situations are recognizable yet stripped of their details, which "invites the suspension of storytelling through the capture of an experiential moment; the viewer is transported into a space of mind similar to a hypnagogic, pre-dream state."²³ Just because the scenes appear realistic or grounded in a reality that the viewer recognizes does not indicate that Hopper intended his art as a mimesis; rather, much of his art has dream-like aspects that must be defined away from a preconceived realistic depiction. And Hopper himself seems to endorse this idea in writing about Charles Burchfield's art, pondering what role artists may take in depicting this strange mix of mimesis and imagination by asking "Can words express this [imagination] to the full? We believe they cannot. Can graphic art? Perhaps - if unrestricted."²⁴ His paintings depict what he believed could not be put into words, indicating there are many more imaginative and surreal aspects of his paintings that are not meant to be analyzed naturalistically or through narrative. By eschewing the idea that his world is a mimetic, Earth-bound one and instead opting to contextualize Hopper as a magic realist, insight into these aspects of his work may be elucidated.

Considering that magic realism and its connections to Hopper have not been given the critical and scholarly attention they deserve, the profound linkage between Hopper and the surrealists and magic realists, both in intellectual influence and artistic technique, justifies such a reading. Moreover, this recontextualization helps to avoid the natural yet flawed instinct to narrativize his paintings while also providing more insight into the non-naturalistic forms that are present in his work.

By exploring such forms, including liminality and its distorting effect on time, and infinite structures or expanses and their distorting effect on space, a more clear image of the importance of Hopper's work in the modern age emerges.

2. Magic Realism in Hopper's Work

The Cambridge Art Association defines a liminal space as "the time between 'what was' and the 'next'," a transitory period between two moments.²⁵ However, other scholars have used the term beyond its temporal context to describe the space between two states of being as well.

For example, the former director of film studies at Clemson University, R. Barton Palmer, identifies liminality as an essential characteristic of film noir which "often [traces] the borders not only between modes of living... but between modes of experience, particularly the (dis)connection between dreaming (along with other alternative states like amnesia) and ordinary consciousness," further noting that this is often a "destabilizing" force within the genre.²⁶ Thus, although liminality is often defined as a temporal relationship, it also describes the condition of existing between two experiences or states of being, and this paper will consider both aspects in the context of Edward Hopper's paintings. Considering that Hopper was greatly influenced by film and that realism itself was radically redefined by the invention of the camera, it is also important to distinguish between liminality and a "timelessness" that is revealed by the photograph. To Andre Bazin, the photograph introduced a radical change to the artist's conception of time. As he writes in *The Ontology of the Photographic Image*, photography is not only a "mummification" of change, but a complete "transference of reality from a thing to its reproduction."²⁷ Not only is the object transferred through time, but so too is time itself transferred, as the photograph is not only an image of an object, but an image of the object's duration as well, leading to a certain timeless quality of film and photography. This temporal relationship, in which objects and scenes are lifted and transported through time, is distinct from liminality because while a photo is always a forward transcription of the past, liminality (especially as applicable to Hopper) represents a more ambiguous relationship between the past, present, and future.



Fig. 2 Hopper, Edward. *Western Motel* (1957). Oil on Canvas, Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven.

For example, it has been noted that in Hopper's 1957 painting *Western Motel*, depicting a woman sitting on the front of a bed while a car lies idly just outside the window, it is impossible to discern whether the woman has just arrived or if she is getting ready to leave the room. While a photograph can ground such a scene in the past, the painting displays a disorienting temporal relationship whereby both the past and the future are being formed simply by what the present depicts; the viewer can either "push" the woman down onto the bed as though she has just arrived, or can "lift" her upwards by anticipating her exit. While film and photography gives scenes and objects a certain temporal weightlessness, allowing them to travel across time while still rooted in the past they depict, liminal relationships leave both the past and future completely dependent upon the depicted present, and it is this aspect of liminality in particular that will be further analyzed in several of Edward Hopper's paintings.



Fig. 3 Edward Hopper, *Gas* (1940). Oil on Canvas, Museum of Modern Art, New York City.

A fascinating example of liminality in Edward Hopper's work appears in his 1940 painting *Gas*. Depicting an older gas station attendant quietly refilling the pumps as dusk encroaches, the scene was formulated as an amalgam of various gas stations around Hopper's home, creating an image that is at once unfamiliar and yet vaguely recognizable. It has been read by Linda Nochlin as perhaps one of Hopper's most politically motivated works, if unintentionally, as there is a "radical imprisonment of the static, energyless figure in his drab environment," one in which work itself becomes its own "still-life subject."²⁸ This extraordinary stillness, in which the worker appears trapped by his profession and the machines of his labor, is exacerbated by the uncanny emptiness and loneliness of the scene. As Carter Foster notes, "it is almost unimaginable that a vehicle would find the way from this filling station back to the road," as if anyone who manages to accompany the attendant will similarly be trapped within the confines of the scene.²⁹

While this narrativization is precisely what a recontextualization of Edward Hopper as magic realism seeks to move away from, Hopper likely experienced similar alienation while he was working as an illustrator. At one point, Hopper himself described his misery as a commercial artist, recalling that "sometimes I'd walk around the block a couple of times before I'd go in [to meet the clients], wanting the job for money and at the same time hoping to hell I wouldn't get the lousy thing."³⁰ Moreover, as he was working on *Gas*, he wrote a letter to his friend and fellow painter Guy Pene du Bois discussing the war in Europe and the fall of Paris, noting that "there is not much to be done about [it], except to suffer the anxiety of those on the side lines, and to try not to be shifted ourselves... Painting seems to be a good enough refuge from all this, if one can get one's dispersed mind together long enough to concentrate upon it."³¹ In the face of war and reflecting upon his commercial work, Hopper likely felt an alienation from society at large as he was pushed to the "side lines", rendered inconsequential in the face of war and chaos, much as the gas station attendant appears to be pushed to the "side lines" of society by the larger forces of capitalism. Although narrativizing the attendant's situation may lead to erroneous conclusions about the meaning of the painting and the historical context it was created in, the attendant ultimately appears to embody much of Hopper's own fears and frustrations at the time of painting.

It is perhaps this very feeling of entrapment that informed the temporal relationships within the image. As Dolores Mitchell explains, it is the "static composition, the firm drawing, the dense texture of the work [that] suggest a more permanent disjunction of experience" within *Gas*, one in which the attendant's situation appears not only inevitable but permanent.³²

The notion that no one is coming as the night winds down, and, more importantly, that the attendant exists within a constant cycle of preparing the pumps and waiting for the next customer, not only alienates the attendant from his work and from his customers, but from time as well. He is even alienated from himself, as “a key aspect of an attendant’s work—as ad campaigns stressed—was to project enthusiasm... he was expected to be an actor of sorts,” indicating that even if someone did arrive, the attendant would not be an honest version of himself, instead eschewing his emotions and personality in favor of becoming himself a machine of his labor.³³ There is thus a radical temporal disjunction in the attendant’s situation, as the viewer is at once expecting that nothing should change for the attendant, as implied by the heavy texture and static composition, while also continually waiting for him to enact his role as an attendant, placing him at the boundary between an unchanging present and an imagined future, never existing fully within either realm.

This is an inherently non-naturalistic temporal relationship with roots in film noir and, by extension, surrealism. As R. Barton Palmer notes, liminality “provides the paradoxical (and perhaps for this very reason, desirable) opportunity for human beings simultaneously to be in the midst of life and to overstep it,” an effect evident in *Gas*.³⁴ While Hopper’s realistic depiction of the gas attendant and his work allows the viewer to be “in the midst of life” and to experience the scene and the attendant’s world realistically, the timelessness of the attendant’s situation and his placement at the boundary between the present and an implied yet never-arriving future also allows the viewer to “overstep” reality and to experience both the attendant’s present reality and the future he awaits. Although visually the scene may appear to be aligned with the techniques of his fellow realists, its temporal relationships are much more disorienting and uncanny, distorting a linear chronology of the scene towards one that juxtaposes both the present and the future. Moreover, it is this strange temporal juxtaposition that promotes a mysterious quality of the scene that aligns the work with the magic realism characterized by Jeffrey Wechsler and H. Harvard Arnason.



Fig. 4 Edward Hopper, *Nighthawks* (1942). *Oil on Canvas*, Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago.

By far his most iconic painting, Hopper’s *Nighthawks* from 1942 is another example of liminality as a non-naturalistic device that would be expected from the work of the magic realists. It depicts a bar somewhere in Greenwich Village, the New York City neighborhood where Hopper lived. Yet, like *Gas*, it was likely created from an imaginative synthesis of different establishments, as many attempts to locate the bar have proved fruitless. The bar contains four figures, including a server, a man with his back turned towards the viewer, and a man and woman who face the viewer and appear to be somehow connected, yet ultimately have an ill-defined relationship vaguely suggested by their proximity.

The painting was produced in December of 1942 in an environment of mass fear and panic, which in turn greatly impacted the conception of the work. Josephine wrote in a letter that she perceived Hopper's focus on the painting to be "preternatural", especially "in view of the alarm and agitation that gripped all of New York and certainly herself in the wake of the Japanese bombing of Pearl Harbor on December 7."³⁵ Even more extreme was Hopper's supposed refusal to acknowledge some aspects of the war, even though his letter to du Bois indicates it had deeply impacted him. For example, Josephine notes in the same letter that "Ed refused to take any interest in our very likely prospect of being bombed - and we live right under glass sky-lights and a roof that leaks whenever it rains... Ed can't be bothered... I can't see why anyone refuses to take an interest. E doesn't want me even in the studio."³⁶ The painting was likely the refuge from the war that Hopper described in his letter to du Bois, providing relief to Hopper's feelings of being "sidelined" and left as a witness to the large machines of war and chaos around the globe.

Interestingly, the viewer, too, is a helpless witness to the scene. A chalk drawing in preparation for the final painting indicates that Hopper originally intended to include a door into the bar, yet the final version omits this feature, encouraging the viewer to enter the scene through a large glass window amid the allure of an island of light in the darkened cityscape, while also frustrating any attempt to do so with no clear entrance. It is this paradox of access and its subsequent denial that forces the viewer to remain outside of the bar and renders them deaf, listening only to the quiet nighttime street. Yet, the upwards movement of the server's head implies conversation, sparking in the viewer a competition between an enforced silence and the imagined sound of communication. As Rolf Renner notes, it is this "contrast of movement and stasis" that "...seems generally to signal these psychological problems of communication" between both the viewer and the scene and the figures within the painting.³⁷ The viewer is thus constantly on the boundary between a silent experience of the scene and on in which they are strangely transported inside the bar, capable of hearing the figures converse, yet never quite existing fully in either state. It is this uncanny removal of the viewer from both the physical and temporal realms that the scene and its figures exist in that, as was evident in *Gas*, alienates and isolates the viewer from the scene. Furthermore, the liminality of the viewer's position creates a surreal disjunction between being able to exist within the bar and among its customers, allowing one to share in the emotions present in the bar, while also being locked out of the bar and having those same emotions forcibly drawn out in the viewer's imagination. It is this inability to accurately and wholly communicate with the scene and its figures that perhaps parallels nationwide troubles with emotional candor and unity at a time when Hopper likely saw these as threatened by the war.

Even if Hopper was seeking refuge from the war in his art, he was still taking part in the "Artists for Victory" exhibit at the Metropolitan Museum of Art as a panelist. But even there it seems there was a distinct avoidance of acknowledging the war outright by the artists involved. As Manny Farber writes in his *Magazine of Art* review for the exhibit in December 1942 (the same month that *Nighthawks* was painted), "out of 468 I think there are only three war pictures... It is as though American painters are so tied to copying scenes on tables, out the window, or on the model stand that they will have to see the war to paint it."³⁸ Moreover, "...there seems to be a definite fear behind the pictures in this exhibit of saying something the spectator will have to look at silently and without even mental phrases."³⁹ Unlike many of the works being produced by American artists during the period and for the war effort, *Nighthawks* is able to conjure the feelings of alienation and isolation brought on by the war without even the slightest reference to what was going on in Europe by forcing the viewer into a liminal state between silence and conversation or unity and isolation.

Hopper was thus reordering reality and the viewer's relationship with it to allow them to bear witness to the uncanny dichotomy of his period, one in which people were intimately involved in the war and aware of the dangers it posed to American life, and at the same time were disconnected and alienated from the very people who could help alleviate those fears and provide a sense of unity. It is this uncanny reordering and juxtaposition that promotes an unnatural silence and stillness within the painting, and that ultimately lend a magical realist perspective to Hopper's work. Moreover, it is by accepting the presence of surreal temporal and experiential relationships between the subject and the viewer that feelings of alienation and isolation felt within Hopper's work can be more thoroughly understood and analyzed. Infinite and iterating forms are another non-naturalistic device that Hopper seems to have consciously employed in his work. Specifically, he frames objects and spaces in a manner that allows the viewer to perceive them as much larger and more expansive than they really are, which is further emphasized by his figures' gazes out towards what Carter Foster describes as an "unfathomable distance."⁴⁰

The idea of depicting a feature of an object or space as extending infinitely was first identified in the magic realists by Franz Roh, who described these motifs as exemplifying the artists' goal of "attempting to locate infinities in small things," ultimately distorting the viewer's understanding of the spatial relationships within a larger physical reality.⁴¹ An interesting example of such a motif comes in one of Hopper's early successes, the 1930 painting *Early Sunday Morning*. Noted for its eeriness and unnatural silence, the image depicts 7th Avenue in New York City with a shadow streaking across the lower half of the image,= which is a particularly strange feature considering that 7th Avenue runs from North to South, indicating that no such shadow would be seen on the street. This may have been intentional, however, as Hopper aimed to make the scene feel strange and otherworldly, as further exemplified by the fact that an early preparatory sketch indicates there was once a person in the fourth window from the left, which, in the final image, is the only upper window without a clear view into the room⁴²



Fig. 5 Edward Hopper, *Early Sunday Morning* (1930), Oil on Canvas, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York City

To further warp our perception of the image, Hopper also intentionally made the building appear to extend infinitely beyond the frame. He seems to have been thinking about such framing effects as a student and for much of his early career as it is a noted feature in many of Degas' paintings, an artist who Hopper is known to have studied and been particularly fond of. Hopper was once even asked in an interview with Brian O'Doherty, a lifelong friend of Hopper's and a fellow artist, whether he ever thought about the frame in relation to his paintings, to which he responded "The frame? I consider it forcibly," indicating that this interest appears to have gripped him throughout the conception of many of his paintings.⁴³ This interest in framing also has important roots in filmmaking. As Andre Bazin notes, by nature of the camera and its field of vision, what the screen depicts appears to be "part of something prolonged indefinitely into the universe," providing a small window into a much more expansive reality.⁴⁴ Hopper echoes this idea in describing the goal of *Early Sunday Morning*, stating that he wanted "to give a sense of continuation beyond the scene."⁴⁵ Thus, by framing the building in *Early Sunday Morning* in such a way that the viewer cannot identify the ends of the structure, the building is allowed to continue infinitely outwards in the same way that one can assume that the space presented by a camera extends far beyond what is depicted. This contributes to the uncanniness of the scene as it warps the viewer's understanding of the spatial and physical relationships present in the painting, while also ensuring that the viewer holds incomplete information about the larger reality being depicted. It is this focus on warping or reordering reality in such a way that the image appears incomplete, eerie, and otherworldly that is a shared feature of both Hopper's work and that of the magic realists.



Fig. 6 Edward Hopper, *Manhattan Bridge Loop* (1928). Oil on Canvas. Addison Gallery of American Art, Andover.

A similar focus on making a specific feature appear to extend infinitely beyond the frame is seen in Hopper's 1928 *Manhattan Bridge Loop*. The painting depicts a large horizontal form that extends across the lower half of the image, dwarfing a man walking along the left side of the painting. As is seen with *Early Sunday Morning*, the framing of the image is conducted in such a way that there is no indication that the wall ends, as it even appears to get larger as it moves towards the right side of the image. Hopper, in writing to Charles Sawyer in 1939, notes that in creating this painting he aimed to emphasize the horizontality of the wall in "an effort to give a sensation of great lateral extent."⁴⁶ The goal of such a feature was, as Hopper states, "to make one conscious of the spaces and elements beyond the limits of the scene itself," forcing the viewer to consider that the physical reality they are witness to is far more expansive and, by extension, remains largely unknown.⁴⁷ This goal of warping the perspective of reality to make viewers aware of a larger truth about it was, as famed film critic Parker Tyler notes, something Hollywood was already engaging in, as the reality in film "had in various ways to be "made up" but only in order to be more itself."⁴⁸ Similarly, specific aspects of Hopper's work are intentionally "made up" or framed in a manner that brings the viewer closer to a specific understanding of reality, namely that it is far more expansive and unknowable to the viewer and that, by extension, the viewer is a minimal agent within a system far larger than themselves.

Hopper paralleled the magical realist and filmic tendencies to warp the viewer's conception of reality to create a new way of looking at the world and expose some hidden quality of life, specifically espousing feelings of minimization and depersonalization in the face of an enormous, largely unknown reality. Infinities in Hopper's work are not confined to boundless forms and structures, however, but can also be found in the form of unending expanses of space. A good example is found in *High Noon* from 1949. Depicting a woman staring into the vast plains that surround her house towards, as Carter Foster described, an "unfathomable distance", the image is in an unusual one in Hopper's catalog due to the unusual methods of preparation he employed. For instance, to study the shadows and light and precisely recreate the way they fell across the building, Hopper built a small cardboard model of the house and placed it in the sunlight, which is a vastly different approach compared to his usual tendency to mentally combine numerous locations and objects into a new, vaguely recognizable image.⁴⁹ It is this aim to recreate a scene mechanically and physically that parallels the creation of movie sets and props and that also connects Hopper to the magic realists according to Jeffrey Wechsler's definitions.



Fig. 7 Edward Hopper, *High Noon* (1949). Oil on Canvas. Dayton Institute of Art, Dayton.

Yet the ideas and techniques that guided Hopper in composing this image may have played a more nuanced role in warping the viewer's perception of the scene. For instance, as author and art historian Jean Gillies tracks throughout many of Hopper's paintings, there is a persistent "denial of the horizon" in which the horizontal and tangential lines throughout the composition do not form a clear horizon line in the image.⁵⁰ *High Noon* is similarly composed, providing no clear indication of depth or recession within the image, allowing the landscape that surrounds the home to recede an enormous distance outwards, appearing unnaturally large or infinite. Interestingly, this fabrication and warping of space and its distorting effects on the viewer's understanding of the physical realm of the image is once again paralleled in film. As Parker Tyler notes, depth in film was particularly difficult to recreate, but one manner of doing so was through the use of over-sized sets to preserve the illusion of depth and closeness.⁵¹ Similarly, by making the space surrounding the house appear to extend infinitely, the house being depicted is made to feel more intimate by thrusting the viewer, like the camera, towards the scene. Hopper's aim to frustrate the viewer's attempt to create a logical and realistic extension of their space not only helps disorient the viewer and warp their perception of a physical reality, but also helps to minimize and isolate them by making them appear small and insignificant in the face of the vast expanse of space that surrounds them. By accepting some non-naturalistic depictions of space in Hopper's images, then, alienation and isolation are once again revealed to have a cause without a need to narrativize the work.



Fig. 8 Edward Hopper, *Rooms by the Sea* (1951). Oil on Canvas. Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven.

A similarly infinite spatial arrangement is found in *Rooms by the Sea* from 1951. Often described for how dreamlike it appears and for its resemblance to the work of surrealist Rene Magritte, it is an approximation of an actual view through one of the doors of Hopper's summer home in South Truro, Massachusetts.⁵² As is seen with *High Noon*, although the scene is based in a physical reality, either from a model or from an actual view, the viewer's perspective is distorted or framed in such a way that the image no longer appears wholly realistic. For example, as curator Pamela Koob notes, an additional "inner realm" is suggested in *Rooms by the Sea* "by the surreal absence of land in the view through the doorway and the central role of light, with its references to the fluidity and power of contemplation."⁵³ However, while Koob believes that the absence of land and the lighting in the scene drives the viewer inwards to an "inner realm", there are numerous Hopper paintings painted above the ground in a crowded cityscape, such as *Office in a Small City* from 1953, and the absence of land in such paintings does not seem to have a similar contemplative effect as *Rooms by the Sea*. Instead, it is specifically the way in which the view through the doorway continues infinitely that alienates the viewer and minimizes their position in a larger physical realm.

However, this infinite space is not formed by unclear horizon lines, as was evident in *High Noon*, for the horizon is clearly depicted at the interface of the water's dark blue and the sky's white clouds. Instead, the space appears infinite and unending because of its relationship to other Hopper paintings which have clearly defined walls or blockades that inhibit the extension of the viewer's space. For example, Parker Tyler noted in 1957 that if one looks throughout any Hopper painting, the viewer will always "meet a kind of wall, whether sky or wood, cloud, brick, or plaster."⁵⁴ In looking out of the door in *Rooms by the Sea*, then, it is the absence of any wall until one meets the sky that helps to propagate the watery region and emphasize the enormity of the space beyond the door. Moreover, it is this lack of barriers that also creates a strange juxtaposition of being trapped within the walled house and exposed to the immense, seemingly unending sea beyond, at once making the viewer feel entrapped by the room and minimized by the world beyond the door. Thus, as Carter Foster notes, it is within walls that "the distance or gap between an engagement with the 'real' and our inability ever to pin down that depiction" seems to coalesce, and by removing such walls in the space beyond the doorway, the viewer's grasp of the scene as a realistic depiction of the space further breaks down.⁵⁵ As seen with *High Noon*, distance in *Rooms by the Sea*, in its seemingly infinite and unending nature, should not be mischaracterized as voyeurism, as the viewer is not kept apart from the scene nor the figures within it. Rather, distance has the opposite effect of pushing the viewer inwards into the scene by minimizing them in relation to the surrounding expanse of space. Winfried Fluck echoes this sentiment by noting that "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."⁵⁶ Albeit not a window, the door in *Rooms by the Sea* functions in the same way as it reveals to the viewer a unconquerable area that isolates and alienates them.

By examining Hopper as a magic realist, one can evaluate these infinite spaces and their distorting effect on the viewer's perception of the physical realm, and thereby avoid narrativization in answering larger questions about why Hopper's works impact us in the way they do.

Characterizing both liminality and infinities within several of Hopper's paintings reveal new insight into why such compositions may exude feelings of alienation and depersonalization even though they are found in paintings with no clear narrative. Moreover, ideas taken from film and Hopper himself help to reinforce why reading his work as magic realism is not only justified, but also productive. Continuing along such analyses, an additional direction of analysis will be considered, one that views Hopper's figures as stoic and defiant characters in the face of rapid depersonalization and isolation as a result of modernization. Moreover, in tracking how such a reading may align with public inquiries into Hopper's work, a new answer to the Hopper Paradox may be provided.

3. Defiance and Modernism

Edward Hopper is paraphrased as saying that it is stylish to eliminate the human in painting, suggesting that at that point, "why not toss away brushes and go in for weaving rugs?"⁵⁷ Reading Edward Hopper as magic realism has helped to avoid narrativizing work that was never meant to be storied, yet it is important to acknowledge that the figures in Hopper's paintings do ultimately serve a purpose, and by analyzing their placement and role in the larger visual and spatial realities Hopper created, a new image of what these figures may signify can be illuminated.

Hopper, for instance, seemed to be bothered by the national inability to communicate and to express the emotions that many Americans, in some form, seem to have been sharing about the Second World War. As art and film theorist Rudolf Arnheim suggests, the omnipresence of the radio helped foster a modern world in which "everyone is shown the same thing, does the same thing and so everyone becomes the same," contributing to the feeling that people were confined to express certain emotions and that there were select topics acceptable to discuss, as evidenced by the "Artists for Victory" exhibit that largely avoided depicting the war.⁵⁸ Hopper himself came to understand the effect such discourse has on society, as evidenced by his letter to du Bois in 1940 in which he discusses how his wife Josephine "burst into tears among all the groceries in a store here in Wellfleet when she heard of the fall of Paris, and was patted and consoled by the grocer's wife" who appeared "puzzled to know why anybody should actually weep over something happening so far away from Wellfleet."⁵⁹ Hopper appears similarly perplexed by the Americans who were unable to empathize or validate the fear that their fellow countrymen were feeling during the war, and may have used his art to draw attention to these deficient social bonds and modes of communication and, more importantly, perhaps instill some feelings of defiance and unity in doing so.

Hopper was painting at a time that such a message of defiance and stoicism was likely very moving to Americans who had, in rapid succession, encountered two World Wars, the Great Depression, and international turmoil. The public, as Erika Doss notes, largely "...blamed themselves for their grim circumstances, tending to feel shame at their inability to cope rather than overt hostility to a technological and economic order they did not always understand."⁶⁰ Society was changing quickly and in strange ways, but the anger and hurt people felt had no clear target and was instead internalized. Art historian Michael Leja echoes this sentiment, noting that people tended to believe that their moral weaknesses were the cause of their declines.⁶¹

Sociological studies from the time found similar feelings of widespread helplessness and impotence, including a 1935 sociological study titled *Middletown in Transition* that found that middle-class residents of Muncie, Indiana felt as though they were outsiders, "losing contact with and access to centers of power."⁶² If such feelings of impotence and hopelessness were common, they were certainly not commonly expressed as an emotional "cool", to use Erika Doss's terminology, was demanded by society. In painting *Gas*, Hopper not only draws attention to the alienating and confining forces of modernism, but perhaps is also portraying the attendant as a stoic figure in the face of these larger forces. If the attendant is trapped in a lonely state in which he must be an "actor", wholly removed from himself and the merits of his labor, he at least prepares for the moment he is proved wrong in preparing the pump for the next customer, who may break the cycle of isolation and alienation and offer an opportunity to emote honestly rather than as an actor. Koob identifies similar defiance in *Nighthawks*, pondering whether the magnetism of the work could be due to "a fiercely expressed, heightened state that included defiance, determination, and perhaps even a form of patriotism?"⁶³ Art critic and self-described anarchist Allan Antliff, too, believes that the creation of art can be anarchistic in its own way through "repudiation of conventional ways of thinking and free manifestation of individuality."⁶⁴

Along these lines of thinking, if *Nighthawks* reflects Americans' inability to communicate at a time when Americans perhaps most needed to, it also shows people who, at the very least, made the trek to the lonely bar, from which only the smallest of changes could push the attendants into unifying conversation. This is, perhaps, one of Hopper's own artistic goals, as he admired in Charles Burchfield's art an ability to liberate "subjects from the taboos of their times", and perhaps similarly attempted in his own art to uplift viewers past their helplessness and despair by indicating that change is only one small moment away for the gas station attendant and the diner attendees, and so too it is for the whole of the populace.⁶⁵

The infinite spaces and iterating forms within Hopper's work creates scenes that are similarly uplifting, displaying the defiance of the modern person against radical alienation and depersonalization. Infinity is an inherently difficult concept for humans to conceptualize and much less visualize; rendering them anyway becomes a defiant and rebellious act because doing so forces viewers to acknowledge these infinities for the larger purpose of portraying the alienating and minimizing nature of modernism. If the building in *Early Sunday Morning* was, as American writer Sinclair Lewis notes, one that many Americans would have identified as a relic of an outdated, "backwards" period, then depicting the building as unending and infinite while attempting to find beauty within it was its own rebellious commentary on American history and what modernism had changed about American society.⁶⁶ If infinite spaces are meant to depersonalize and minimize, then the woman peering out her door in *High Noon* refuses to be forever enclosed in her home, instead staring directly back at the very thing that attempts to erase her presence from the image. The viewers themselves take up a role in *Rooms by the Sea* that is strikingly similar to the woman in *High Noon*, becoming defiant fighters against the rapid onset of modernism as they too come face to face with the mechanism behind their isolation and alienation. And perhaps this defiance, an enormous show of courage against the abstract, intangible depersonalizing agents of modernism, is precisely what Franz Roh characterized in the work of the early magic realists, noting that they attempt to show that "the miniature can express the maximum all by itself."⁶⁷

Jean-Paul Sartre, writing in 1947 in *Qu'est-ce que la littérature?*, seems to have been moved by a similar view of life in America, stating that: "As for Americans, it was not their cruelty or pessimism which moves us. We recognize in them men who had been swamped, lost in too large a continent, as we were in history, and who tried, without traditions, with the means available, to render their tuptor and forlornness in the midst of incomprehensible events."⁶⁸ Hopper was not only depicting the very men and women who were "lost in too large a continent", and, perhaps more accurately, lost amid the continent's rapidly changing social and commercial structures, but was also depicting those very same people continuing their lives "with the means available". At a time of wide spread feelings of hopelessness, confusion, fear, and impotence, this defiance would not only have been uplifting, but affirming, validating the anxieties of the few who found themselves in bars late at night, hoping for unifying conversation yet finding none. This reading of Hopper's figures as defiant amid the depersonalizing and minimizing forces of modernism seems to track throughout the popular discourse on Hopper's work as well, as more of this uplifting, therapeutic character is recognized as time passes. For instance, in the early part of Hopper's career, journalists tended to write as though Hopper captured some "feeling" about modern life, even if such a feeling was largely unidentified. A 1927 article from the New York Times entitled "Three Races: An American, a Slav, and Some Japanese Painters" describes Hopper as a painter who "has been at one with the living spirit of his age."⁶⁹ An article only three years later titled "A Fine Native Showing: Big Exhibition in Washington Reveals Contemporary American Art at Its Best" describes Hopper's work as containing "a sort of electric current, eloquent of young aspiration and revelatory of keen, immediate contacts with the spirit of our age."⁷⁰ Some journalists even identified non-naturalistic forms within Hopper's work. A 1929 article in *Vanity Fair* by Forbes Watson notes that "Hopper has, to an unusual degree, an understanding of what, for lack of a better term, might be called the dignity of weight. His imaginative grasp of the weight of things, the solidity of matter, is the anchor that keeps his somewhat sardonic humour from taking him too far," which seems to echo Roh's characterization of the magic realists' attempt to find the "spirituality" and "radiation of magic" that objectivity excludes.⁷¹ These articles may point to the fact that even while Hopper was beginning to gain recognition as an artist, the public identified in his work a universal aspect of modern life that was not found in the objective, mimetic renderings of life, but that is conveyed to the viewer subliminally through non-naturalistic forms, exposing the "electric current" and the "dignity of weight" of the modern age.

However, as Hopper's career progressed and passed, the discourse surrounding his work and its subject changed dramatically. A 1991 article in *The New York Times* describes a fourth grade teacher, Robert Coles, who showed Hopper's art to his class, noting that it "stirred fourth-graders to gloomy statements and anxious questions", evoking comments like "those people should get out and go take a long walk in the country; then they could unwind."⁷² In thinking about why Hopper's art is so evocative to even a very young audience, Coles notes that Hopper's "unconscious knew well not only how to supply energy to a wonderfully gifted talent, but also knew well how many Americans, at least some of the time, both live and feel."⁷³ Beyond capturing a "feeling" of modern life, as many articles during Hopper's career tended to describe, the American public eventually began to recognize that Hopper's work also captured some universal aspect about the American people in general. Another more recent article describes a memoir written by Olivia Laing entitled "The Lonely City: Adventures in the Art of Being Alone", which looked at how Edward Hopper, along with other artists, "might help [the author] out of her despair, while also considering the possibility that loneliness might transport her into 'an otherwise unreachable experience of reality'."⁷⁴ Laing furthered her commitment to Hopper's work as therapy when almost exactly 4 years later she wrote another article describing how Hopper's art may be used to approach loneliness in the face of the Coronavirus pandemic. Laing is not the first, however, to view Hopper in this therapeutic manner, as even some psychologists, like Stephen Safran, have considered using his art in psychotherapy.⁷⁵ To Laing and Safran, Hopper not only depicted the loneliness and alienation of modern life, but as I have argued, also provided a way to overcome them.

Perhaps the most poignant analysis of the defiant, therapeutic nature of Hopper's work comes from John Canaday writing at the end of Hopper's career for *The New York Times*, who identifies inner privacy "as the last fortress against the assault of mass living" and notes that Hopper's figures somehow "...manage to be not quite defeated without even knowing that they are in battle against a dehumanizing force."⁷⁶ These figures may be as anxious, helpless, and confused as many Americans were in the face of the rapidly changing nature of modern life, but they themselves were also, to Hopper's eyes, the very beacon of hope they were looking for. Canaday even notes that Hopper perhaps was "sustained by the same spirit that save his paintings from sadness in spite of their recognition of the human dilemma," namely the conviction that "the sum of all the prosaic bits of the world adds up to life, and that life in its sum is meaningful."⁷⁷

In conclusion, Edward Hopper, widely considered a realist, was greatly influenced by the same ideas that inspired the surrealists and magic realists, and these ideas have subsequently found their way into Hopper's work; recontextualizing his art as magic realism is thus not only accurate from an aesthetic and historical context, but also provides new directions for understanding Hopper's cultural impact as a whole. Moreover, a new answer to the Hopper Paradox emerges, one in which his figures can be viewed as fighters against the rolling tides of modernity and its tendency to depersonalize, minimize, and alienate. The similarities we find between Hopper's world and our own is then not a pessimistic point about the persistence of loneliness and alienation in the modern world, but instead a confirmation of humanity's refusal to succumb, a refusal to be forced out of the present and locked into the past. It is, at its heart, a touching look at the unbreaking nature of the human spirit.

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