

Edward Hopper & American Culture: The View through Cinema & Architecture

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A basic index to the culture of any age is its architecture. Basic to the story of American culture in the twentieth century is the rise of cinema. Both architecture and cinema played a formative role in the development of Edward Hopper, making him a central and emblematic figure in the culture of twentieth-century America. The importance of architectural metaphors and cinematic perspectives in his painting was one of the major discoveries of my research, which now has spanned a quarter of a century and has resulted in fundamental exhibitions, the definitive biography, and the authoritative and authenticating catalogue of Hopper's oeuvre.

At a time when the America of the nineteenth century was rapidly yielding to the pressures of a new age, Hopper's unique vision inspired his friend the artist Guy Pène du Bois to write:

It would be well to examine the American scene. There must have been some difficulty finding it. It is extremely rare. It is composed of relics. Its active life ceased not later than nineteen hundred. Wherever a town has been progressive, and America is said to be progressive, the American scene has been wiped out of it.¹

Du Bois goes on to announce that Hopper is a "historical painter" who will "save our elephant" by recording American architecture destined to be lost to the forces of modernization that were then seen as transforming America. Du Bois declared that it was a badge of honor that Hopper painted "Victorian examples, still as death, as forbidding as their stark surroundings. The American scene is unquestionably ugly."²

Hopper's *House by the Railroad* (fig. 1, p.16) of 1925, features just such a memorable Victorian structure. The railroad intrudes upon what was once the proud dwelling of a privileged stratum in society, but is now on the wrong side of the tracks. Like so many houses near Hopper's hometown of Nyack, New York, in the depressed towns of the Hudson valley, this one has been by-passed by technological progress, passing hastily to the great city beyond. Here, as he would so often again, Hopper sets up a contrast between the dominant Victorian culture of his childhood and the new technologies of the twentieth century. This image evokes an enduring mood of universal loss and

a yearning for simpler, less complicated times. The compelling tension of his life was between the Victorian world of his childhood and the uncertain modern world which intruded on him daily.

House by the Railroad became especially well known because it was often shown at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, where in 1930 it became the first painting by any artist acquired by the new museum for its collection. A lonely house recalling the one in Hopper's painting has appeared in several films, most notably George Stevens' *Giant* of 1956 with sets designed by Boris Leven, Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* (fig. 2, p.17) of 1960, and Terrence Malick's *Days of Heaven* of 1977 with sets designed by Jack Fisk. (Although some have questioned whether Hopper's painting did, in fact, inspire the house in *Psycho*, the film critic Archer Winsten published the fact in 1960, based on a recent interview with Hitchcock.)³ That filmmakers would be drawn to Hopper's work is not surprising given his own profound affinity to the movies.

Hopper was early to develop a love of the cinema, which he maintained until the end of his life. Hopper's taste for cinema grew from perhaps surprising roots. When young Edward was growing up in the last two decades of the nineteenth century in Nyack, just up the Hudson River from New York City, cinema was of course unheard of; and when it became a popular attraction in the big city, it acquired a reputation for scandal that would make it suspect in conservative circles and small towns. Yet Nyack, which was favored as a summer resort for city-dwellers, did have its own playhouse, as did many small American cities and towns of the time. Edward's family attended plays regularly and the stage caught his imagination, inspiring youthful drawings and watercolors, even the project of building a model theater.

This childhood love of drama received professional reinforcement when Hopper went to New York City to study art in the first years of the new century. His favorite teacher, the charismatic Robert Henri, encouraged his students to go to the theater, even as he told them to look around them and paint what they saw in the city. Henri painted a portrait larger than life of a student who always remembered him with admiration: this was Josephine Nivison, who went on to become an actress and painter, even while teaching

school for support. Some 18 years later she would become Hopper's wife, his regular companion in going to theater and cinema, and his dramatic collaborator in creating the scenes and poses he painted.⁴ Among their other contemporaries at the school, Robin Webb would go on to become the noted actor Clifton Webb, while Vachel Lindsay would soon abandon painting, going on to gain prominence as a poet but also to write pioneering film criticism and help develop an esthetics for the cinema as an art.

When Lindsay in 1915 published *The Art of Moving Pictures*, it was the first important American work on film aesthetics. He had absorbed Henri's emphasis on theater and his openness to new forms of expression. In his chapter on "Painting-in-Motion," Lindsay even cited "a picture my teachers, Chase and Henri, were never weary of praising, *the Girl with the Parrot*, by Manet," and went on to suggest that cinema take a lesson from painting: Lindsay argued that in movies "coy interior scenes, close to the camera" would "show to better advantage when they seem to be paintings."⁵ The two teachers' praises of the Manet must have touched Lindsay's fellow student Hopper as well, for he produced an oil copy of the canvas (from the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York). Later he was to take Lindsay's analogy between painting and cinema in the opposite direction, eventually to organize many of his own interior scenes as if they were frames out of films, moving from motion to stills.

About the same time Lindsay was publishing film criticism, from 1915 through 1917, Nivison, who had studied acting in college and afterwards, acted in avant-garde theater including several productions of the Washington Square Players. A number of her colleagues in that New York troupe went on to have careers in the theater and the cinema. Nivison's dual enthusiasms for both media meant that the Hoppers actively followed the latest developments in the performing arts. Before Hopper ever produced a painting of the movies, Nivison had painted her own watercolor depicting the movie house in Gloucester, Massachusetts, which she showed in New York at the Whitney Studio's group show in 1927.

Hopper would go on to represent both the interior and exterior of movie houses in his work. His realist style makes his compositions seem simple and straightforward, but his

paintings often suggest further levels of meaning. A look at his paintings that depict architecture reveals how his buildings often have multiple implications.

A hint of what was to come can be found in a drawing he produced when he graduated from high school in 1899. Hopper sketched himself clad in cap and gown with his diploma under his arm, walking out toward a distant mountain from the doorway of his family home on North Broadway in Nyack, New York. Lest his viewers miss the dual implications of the picture of leaving home, Hopper added two clues: a caption, "Out into the Cold World," suggests the loss of security, but then, he alludes to hope and opportunity by labeling the distant mountain in block letters, "FAME."

Caricatures with pointed labels remained a private form of expression for Hopper all his life. In particular, he dramatized the tensions of his long marriage, showing his wife even with claws, captioned "Pro-anger woman," himself with a halo, captioned "non-anger man." His self-caricatures exaggerate his awkward, lanky frame. Clearly, he had this self-image in mind when he gave the title *Self-Portrait* to a 1925 watercolor that shows a single gaunt narrow building that rises above an austere rooftop and dominates the skyline, its windows gloomy in the daylight. The original title, which also appears in his record books, must have puzzled viewers who could not have known his private image of himself, and he changed it to *Skyline Near Washington Square* by the time he sold the work in 1927.

An American Second Empire house similar to that in *House by the Railroad*, appears in *The Bootleggers* (fig.3, p.18), another of the canvases that Hopper painted in 1925. Three men in a motorboat pass before a house with a nineteenth-century Mansard-roof, next to which stands a lone figure. Hopper had also made etchings of such houses, which still survive along the Hudson River near his native Nyack. Prohibition had been in effect since January 1920 and violations were increasingly common. In February 1925, the Attorney General denounced the large number of foreign vessels smuggling liquor into the United States. The ships waited off shore to deliver their cargoes to small boats which transported the illicit goods to shore. It was one of these small launches or "rummies" in action that Hopper chose to depict. In the record book she kept,

Nivison described the scene as "very early A.M. Water & cloudy sky blue, white house, pale blue, roof dark, 3 red chimneys. Pale cement wall built on rocks, amber rock weed along edge of water. Ridge back of house dark dull green. 4 men (one left side of house) dull on dark business."⁶

Painting a forbidden enterprise in the teeth of Prohibition was typical of Hopper's contrarian bent. Although he never consumed much alcohol, his cynicism was such that he could not have endorsed the self-righteous vehemence with which the Women's Christian Temperance Union and the Christian Evangelical churches supported the Anti-Saloon League. Reacting to his own strict upbringing, he mistrusted religion, showing a skepticism like that of many of his artist friends, among them, George Bellows.

Bellows, an early critic of fundamentalist Christians and their crusades to outlaw "sinful" alcohol, made such antics the subjects of his art.⁷ For example, in his painting *The Sawdust Trail* of 1916, Bellows satirized the pro-temperance evangelist Billy Sunday. This notorious preacher was also the subject of Boardman Robinson's illustration for McClure's magazine in 1915, where two of the captions for sketches of him read: "To hell with the twentieth century" and "Booze is the dirtiest, most low-down, damnable thing that ever crawled out of the pit of hell!" Given this context, and Hopper's own sardonic bent, it may be no accident that the three red chimneys on the house in *The Bootleggers* appear as three crosses.

Hopper was not alone among his contemporaries in his nostalgia for an American past idealized for less complicated values and exemplary goodness. By 1921, Bellows had been arranging for his portrait subjects to pose in Victorian dresses in Victorian interiors, in imitation of the conventions of nineteenth-century photographs and lithographs. In *Lady Jean*, which Bellows painted during the summer of 1924, he employed a typical stiff pose and included easily recognizable bits of Americana, a hooked rug and country hutch. Both Bellows and Hopper also recalled the lost values of earlier times in their prints: Bellows in lithographs such as *Sunday 1897* (1921), and Hopper in etchings such as *House on a Hill* or *The Buggy* (cat.no.32) with its image of a couple riding in a horse and buggy before an elaborate Victorian house.

The conflict between the past and "the new generation" was a central theme of Ibsen's *The Master Builder*, which the Hoppers saw in a performance directed by Eva Le Gallienne on December 15, 1925.⁸ The painter of the undeclared content of *The Bootleggers* with its mockery of religion in society must have found compelling the defiant confrontation of Solness, the Master Builder, with God: "Listen to me, Almighty One! From now on I will be a free Master Builder, free in my sphere, just as You are in yours. I will never more build churches for You; only homes for human beings."⁹ Hopper had long admired Ibsen, and now his use of symbol within a context of seeming realism reinforced Hopper's own interest in painting realist pictures with implicit meaning.

Hopper's penchant for architectural styles of the past had also manifested itself when he and Nivison traveled to Santa Fe, New Mexico, in the spring of 1925. After crossing the continent in search of new subjects, he chose to paint watercolors of such traditional architectural themes as the towers of a Spanish Colonial church and adobe homes.

A fixation on the past appears also in Hopper's choice of subjects for the watercolors painted during the summer of 1926, which he spent in Rockland, Maine. They include *Talbot's House*, "a fine white Mansard," and *Mrs. Acorn's Parlor*, the Victorian interior of a local boarding house. He likewise evoked times gone by and lost values in *Haunted House* (cat.no.59), which he described as "an old boarded up boarding house near the ship yard." By choosing a title like *Haunted House*, he hands us a metaphor to characterize the role that such images of the past came to play in his pictorial imagination.

In *The City* (fig.4, p.20) of 1927, Hopper's fondness for Mansard roofs and his dislike of skyscrapers is evident, as he presented a skyscraper "cut off abruptly by the top of the frame," as Alfred Barr observed several years later, adding that Hopper's "indifference to skyscrapers is remarkable in a painter of New York architecture."¹⁰ Hopper's paintings reveal again and again how much he disliked skyscrapers. If he includes them at all, he makes them out to be interlopers, awkward and misplaced. He shared the climate of opinion that would find voice in critics like Lewis Mumford, who soon published articles with such titles as "Botched Cities" and "Is the Skyscraper Tolerable?"¹¹ For

the foreground. A silhouetted traffic light in the immediate foreground makes a dark, modern counterpoint to the classical capitals of the facade. The choice of an unexpected viewpoint and the careful selection of elements dramatize the force of Hopper's imagination. He brought together disparate layers and strands of the urban landscape, of commerce and entertainment, pointing out the contrasts, dynamics, and ironies of the city.

The following summer on Cape Cod was over before Hopper finally hit on a subject for a new oil, which he identified as "just a house and shed done directly from nature."¹⁵ Nivison conveyed more of the drama in his ultimate choice and highly individual execution of *Cape Cod Afternoon*, describing it as "that old house on Pamet River S. side — amazing old place — with every sort of excrescent hung on to it..."¹⁶ She concluded that her husband had "made a lovely canvas — for those who can see past the awful architecture & enter into its mood. Disassociated from human significance its abstract pattern is very handsome — going in & out of planes, shapes, angles, textures. The things that Braque has, plus."¹⁷

The picture inspired Nivison again more than two decades later, when she waxed even more metaphorical and romantic, personifying the subject as an "old house that had suffered many forms of fancy in the way of turrets & what nots... & quite pathetic sitting out its old age with eye lids dropped & utterly relaxed & deserted..."¹⁸ In more prosaic realism, the local paper reported that the subject was "a non-descript Summer cottage on Pamet Road South" owned by Frederick Meier, a retired businessman, who used the house only "occasionally."¹⁹ As Hopper transformed this summer place inhabited by a businessman into an abstract pattern, his mind dwelt more on compositional problems than those of the Great Depression. Yet his satiric bent is manifest in the decision to foreground the backside, subverting conventions of what makes a good view. The hencoop and barn belonged to the productive life of the old farm in the rural America Hopper cherished. They become picturesque ruins in a countryside reduced to a vacation retreat for wealth gained in the city. It remained for Hopper to select a viewpoint and imagine a composition that bring such changes and ironies to light.

No exaltation at finally getting a sky in spite of the phys-

ical obstacles, no sense of triumph in the quest, was allowed to outweigh Hopper's concentration on the formal values of the composition, the planes, lines and shadows of the old coop and the angles of the looming barn and house and pillared porches. In the record book, Nivison registered *Cape Cod Afternoon* with another metaphor, noting that the "shed goes in like entrance to a tomb — windows at L. of door with broken panes, some panes in, some out."²⁰

Drawn from memory rather than observation, the house in *The Lee Shore* of 1941, with its distinctive conical roof and columned porch, recalls riverfront architecture in Nyack, especially the tall house next to the home of the actress Helen Hayes and her husband, the playwright Charles MacArthur, where two years earlier Hopper had sketched repeatedly on location for a commission that he resented so bitterly as infringing on his independence. Hopper's title is that of a concise and emphatically allegorical chapter in Herman Melville's novel, *Moby Dick*, which he had read in the summer of 1938. Melville evokes the ship "that miserably drives along the leeward land" to suggest the soul that must avoid her home harbor in order "to keep the open independence of her sea."²¹

Hopper painted his most famous image, *Nighthawks* (fig.7, p.22) of 1942, just after the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941. The effect of this all-night diner is something like a human fish bowl, where we witness the vulnerability of those out in the night. Hopper had created a related situation in his *Night Windows* (fig.8, p.23) of 1928, which features a voyeur's view through a window of a woman undressing, observed unaware in the urban night.

Hopper had been contemplating a blank canvas since November and had only begun to paint as Nivison and everyone else in New York reacted to the events of the war. She described his mood in her diary entry for December 17, 1941:

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. He refuses to make for any more precautions and only jeers at me for packing a knapsack with towels and keys and soap and check book, shirt, stockings, garters- in case we ran to race out doors in our

nighties. For the black-out we have no shade over the sky light... but Ed can't be bothered. He's doing a new canvas and simply can't be interrupted!"²²

Arguably *Nighthawks* is Hopper's masterpiece, pulling together with heightened intensity themes and forms that critics and the public had long responded to in his work. This unique power of this image over the American imagination has a corollary in his behavior as he was executing the work. His cranky refusal to deal with the issues raised by the war and dramatized by his wife differs from the recalcitrance he would show when she tried to prick him out of depression to paint this or that church or that peak in the West. In this case, he was painting furiously with her loyal support, modelling as needed or keeping out of his way. What he was denying with so much rigor was the apprehension created by the war. The depth of his need to submerge such fears surfaces unconsciously in his bullying concentration and the painting's exceptionally disquieting power.

In 1944, Hopper once again employed urban architecture to suggest the presence of a human voyeur. As usual, Nivison posed for the erotically charged canvas, *Morning in a City*. Again preparatory sketches show that the Hoppers experimented with different scenarios. Various the female figure seats herself on a bed, or comes to stand before an open window, or stands isolated in space looking away to allow detailed drawing from behind, which is the position reemphasized in the canvas, giving some cause to Nivison's claim that Edward's favorite part of her anatomy was her "bottom." He endows her with red hair, yet her face looks more like Nivison than many of the women in his pictures. In the final composition, he exposes her to morning light that pours through draperies pulled back from a window, through which appear two windows opposite with half drawn blinds in a hint of peering eyes.

A year later, Hopper painted two chaste houses, titled *Two Puritans*. He began "making little sketches" for a new painting just after a trip to Hyannis on September 24, 1945.²³ On October 1, the Hoppers drove to Orleans and he "made drawing of house he means to use. Tall, simple, dignified white house, as simple as they come..."²⁴ The next day, he stretched a canvas and the day after that, he "drew in composition on canvas in charcoal. Now he finds he isn't

quite ready to begin yet, has to get clearer idea."²⁵

On October 9, the Hoppers drove to Orleans because Edward wanted "a grey day to look at trees without sun or shadow on them."²⁶ They went shopping in Provincetown a week later, and Edward made a sketch of "branches of elm tree with dripping foliage for his picture."²⁷ Years later, Nivison recalled that she had "named that canvas & was very proud of myself, that just the way those 2 houses look, upright, staid, yes purified..."²⁸ She also noted that there had only been one house "in the fact but E. put in another...palely loitering no sky, they loom tall & pale & purified." Her emphasis on the "purified" quality of the canvas that was eventually titled *Two Puritans*, brings to mind Guy Pène du Bois's earlier insight that Hopper "turned the Puritan in him into a purist, turned moral rigours into stylistic precisions."²⁹ The title also suggests Hopper's self-portrait caricature for his wife in which he included a copy of George Santayana's novel, *The Last Puritan* of 1936.

The two houses seem strangely animated. The windows, shutters, and doors read almost like facial features, elements of personalities that make their presence felt. In this sense the houses may symbolize the tall Hopper and his petite wife, both of whom steadfastly refused to be swayed by fad and fashion. This anthropomorphizing of architectural features recalls the work of Hopper's friend Charles Burchfield.

In 1949, the doorway of his boyhood home once again held Hopper's attention, during a period of anxiety over complications caused by prostate surgery. It was April 4 when Nivison recorded observing him begin painting "a little picture on a wood panel — a staircase going down to open door & hall lamp suspended. Said memory of a repeated dream of levitation, sailing downstairs & out thru door."³⁰ The next day she noted that he was still "working on small panel — stairs down & outdoors into moonlight — but has so little heart to the work facing such uncertainty."³¹ On April 9, he was at it again, but the next day a call came to say that a semi-private hospital room had become available for him. Together they made their way down the steep steps and over to New York hospital. On the easel the small panel of "sailing downstairs and out through door" stood unfinished. The choice of material had been peculiar. Wood was a support he favored only much earlier in his ca-

People sometimes assume incorrectly that this picture was Hopper's last, for it seems to reduce reality to its barest outlines, affirming the ability to see sunlight that he associated with life itself. In passing from drawing to canvas, he eliminates the solitary figure from the sketch that Nivison concealed, making it clear that he had no intention of just varying simply the series of compositions with lone females for which she had posed in these two years. All that remains is the intense focus of the eye on the play of light. The viewer whom Hopper so often made party to skewed or ambivalent glances, here becomes coopted to a purified vision. It may be this that Hopper meant when, asked what he was after in this picture, he replied: "I'm after ME."⁴²

On Armistice Day in 1965, Edward signed the last painting that Nivison entered summarily in the book:

Two Comedians (fig. 10, p.27), Finished Nov. 10, 1966 in S. Truro studio. W. & N. Herger canvas, thick single white prime linen canvas — smooth as double would be, but less apt to crack than double. W. & N. lead white & colors. Linseed oil with turpentine. 2 white figures against dark stage, slightly green at R. (foliage).⁴³

On November 14 she wrote Margaret McKellar at the Whitney Museum: "E. H. is bringing back a charming 29 x 40 canvas of a dark stage (and what a stage, strong as the deck of a ship) & two small figures out of pantomime. *Poignant*." To Lloyd Goodrich, who had arranged Hopper's retrospective at the Whitney in 1964, she later stated that the painting represented Edward and herself.⁴⁴

As Hopper explored his idea, he drew the male figure leaping into the air while the other figure clambered up onto a small stage. In another drawing, he imagined the male graciously handing the female through an exit, with spectators appearing behind a low barrier. In the canvas, he raises both figures up to the solid stage, with its border of artificial woods, where they link hands and prepare to bow, their free hands poised as if about to gesture in deference to each other.

By presenting Nivison as Pierrette, Hopper pays homage not only her cherished memories of her early acting career but also to her active collaboration as his model. He allows her the recognition she had long sought, casting her as his partner, sharing the spotlight and the honor on

the stage after a well executed performance. With the final curtain, the house lights go out and the resulting darkness suggests to Hopper both the end of the performance and of life itself.

The comedians in their white costumes with ruffled collars recall Pierrot and Pierrette of the *commedia dell'arte*, which provided a frequent theme in the French symbolist poetry that the Hoppers first quoted to each other in courtship.⁴⁵ Above all, the Hoppers only five years before had been enchanted by Marcel Carné's classic film, *Les Enfants du Paradis* (fig. 11, p.27), which tells of Jean-Gaspard Debureau, the nineteenth-century French actor whose renditions of Pierrot redefined understanding of the *commedia*.⁴⁶

Hopper's sense of his own parallel with Pierrot reflects his consciousness of the loneliness the artist shares with clowns and other entertainers, in their roles as outsiders. In *Les Enfants du Paradis* the haunting images of Paris triggered nostalgia, with memories of the clowns and painted ladies in the "carnival" Mi-Carême in 1907, but then the focus on the plight of Pierrot in Hopper's 1915 recollection of Paris, the monumental canvas *Soir Bleu* (p.38), where the brooding clown with large lips bears a striking resemblance to the artist himself.

Hopper's love of cinema seems closely connected to his love of things French. His last painting was inspired by a French movie situated in Paris, where his first reported contact with film had occurred, at the beginning of his career, when the would-be painter went to the French capital to enlarge his horizons after leaving art school. He thought the experience momentous enough to report it in a letter to his father back in Nyack: "A few nights ago I went to see the pictures (cinematograph) of the Burns-Johnson fight — it looked as if Burns didn't even have a "look in" from the start although he seemed as good a boxer but not so big or powerful." This was the screening of the December 26, 1908, boxing match in which Jack Johnson, who was black, defeated the white champion Tommy Burns and took the heavy-weight title.⁴⁷

The victory was widely seen as a threat to reigning doctrines of white superiority; and the part cinema played in displaying Johnson's prowess fueled racist demands to censor films.⁴⁸ That such interracial bouts were then illegal

in New York, California, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin clearly added to Hopper's desire to watch the event on film in Paris, where other pleasures forbidden back home (such as prostitutes) had captured his attention.⁴⁹ Furthermore, the cinema back in Nyack was not considered respectable for those of the Hoppers' upper-middleclass background. Indeed the shabby nickelodians on Manhattan's Fourteenth Street (where Hopper had rented a studio during his last years of art school) alarmed social reformers who insisted that pimps and "white slavers" lurked outside.⁵⁰

Our next record of Hopper and film comes after his return to New York, when he found it necessary to support himself by working as an illustrator, an occupation he despised, as he later made clear: "Sometimes I'd walk around the block a couple of times before I'd go in, wanting the job for money and at the same time hoping to hell I wouldn't get the lousy thing."⁵¹ He never tired of reiterating his antipathy: "Illustration didn't really interest me. I was forced into it in an effort to make some money. That's all. I tried to force myself to have some interest in it. But it wasn't very real."⁵²

It came as a change, then, from the hated advertisements and illustrations for magazine features, when in March of 1914 Hopper got a commission that required him to look at movies and create poster images to promote them. From the "U.S. Printing & Litho Co." he got ten dollars for each poster plus another two dollars for watching the film. To be sure, the plots and themes of the silent films he was paid to watch and promote resemble those he had suffered in the magazines, since both media aimed to attract the popular audience.

Themes that loom large include money, crime, exotic adventure, sudden reversal: *Dance of Mammon*, *Mendel Beilis under Arrest*, *The Master Criminal*, *She of the Wolf's Brood*, *The Lunatics*, *Petrof the Vassal*, *The Horrors of War*, *Whom the Gods Destroy*, *Chasing a Million*, and *The Gape of Death*. Most were produced by Eclair, The Société Française des Films et Cinématographes, which acquired a reputation for excellent photography.⁵³ Eclair operated a studio and factory in Fort Lee, New Jersey, across the Hudson River from New York City, from 1911 until March 1914, when fire destroyed it. Hopper delivered "The Gape of Death," his last poster for U.S. Printing and Eclair, on May 23, 1914. Earlier in the month he had done two others

on war and fate. No copies of the posters or the films for which Hopper made posters are known to have survived. However, the active themes of some of his extant unidentified illustrations suggest that they may have been intended for the cinema. When war broke out in August 1914, Eclair's American film production ceased and Hopper lost a favorite client.

Although he complained that the popular fiction he illustrated was too sentimental, Hopper liked watching movies. Among his surviving illustrations for unidentified projects are *Don Quixote* and *Joan of Arc*, either or both of which may have been intended as posters for movies: a film version of *Joan of Arc* was released in 1914 and one of *Don Quixote* followed in 1916. Despite Hopper's enthusiasm for cinema, however, he complained of the rules laid down for making movie posters, rules like those for illustration that were meant to assure acceptance by a broad American public: "Say the movie was about the Napoleonic wars. I'd do the soldiers in French uniforms of that period. They'd make me re-do them and put them in khaki uniforms and campaign hats like American soldiers."⁵⁴ Catering to the stereotypes of a mass market would never be his forte. He had nothing but contempt for the cheery images of Norman Rockwell: "Does everything from photos; they look it, too."⁵⁵ Pandering to vulgar opinion went against the grain of Hopper's self-conscious irony, his deep transformation of reality, and his study since boyhood of soldiers and war.

Even as he was making the film posters, Hopper flew in the face of contemporary moralism in what was his largest and most ambitious painting to date. The theme of prostitution was agitating public opinion and had inspired such vehement moralistic attacks as the film *Traffic in Souls*, which in 1913, attracted thirty thousand viewers for its opening week in New York. The film capitalized on the panic over "white slave trade," a crusade against prostitution and immigration promoted by Progressive-era reformers, the discussion of which itself produced a *frisson*, even while fueling public discourse on sexuality.⁵⁶ As a result, movies, restaurants, and even ice-cream parlors were declared to be "dangerous places for young girls to attend unescorted."⁵⁷

In the midst of this public furor, Hopper chose to paint his *Soir Bleu*, invoking themes that were at the center of the

controversy. He captioned the only surviving drawing for this large canvas, a sketch for the man on the far left, "un Maquereau," literally, "a mackerel," which is French slang for a procurer. The term "French maquereaux" was notorious. In New York alone, they were said to be operating in force: one report claimed that four hundred "French maquereaux" were "known to have women in houses" of prostitution, explained that many of the houses were "run under the guise of massage parlors," and declared that "many of the women in these houses are French."⁵⁸ For the popular American mind, Paris was "The Modern Babylon," the capital of "debauchery," and the "headquarters of the worldwide white slave trade of the present time."⁵⁹

In view of this climate of opinion, it seems hard to escape the conclusion that Hopper appears to have known exactly what he was after when he painted his scene which suggests a Paris café, a point underlined by the French title *Soir Bleu*: the popular audience that had so far eluded him. There would be no mistaking that the erect woman with the heavily painted face is a prostitute who seeks clientele in the soldier, the clown, and beret-clad artist seated in the outdoor café. The figures are limned in a monumental and static way that recalls the cinema of the time.

The controversy touched by the film *Traffic in Souls* and *Soir Bleu* symptomized a profound social change, which Hopper and his generation lived at first hand. In 1914 the sexual values of the American middle class were on the threshold of a decisive transformation. There was at best an uneasy balance between the old and new, causing strife between the last of the proper Victorians with their strong tie to the American Puritan tradition and the proponents of radically new social behavior. Such themes of conflict and change in sexual mores, which still endure as an underlying theme in American movies, continued to engage Hopper and are evident in his paintings.

Five years after *Soir Bleu*, Hopper's continuing need to earn by illustrating forced him to produce a less morally ambiguous image, which was also his first depiction of cinema as a subject. In *World Outlook*, the magazine of the Methodist Episcopal Church, for May 1919, drawing in black ink, Hopper depicted several members of an audience watching a film that showed two mountain climbers in an alpine landscape. Hopper made this and other illustra-

tions for an article entitled, "Instead of John Barleycorn," a reference to the church's promotion of alternative activities to saloons on the eve of Prohibition, which did not take effect until January 1920.⁶⁰ The caption for Hopper's illustration, "Movies give cheap, democratic amusement," and the others for the same article reveal how the evangelical churches and the Women's Christian Temperance Union were seizing on the cinema as a means to get men out of saloons. This, at last, would make going to the movies a respectable activity for the American family.

The year 1927 marked an epochal change in the cinematic medium. October saw the release of *The Jazz Singer*, starring Al Jolson. For the first time, a movie came with its own singing and spoken dialogue. The addition of sound heightened the illusion of reality in movies. As early films had begun to develop as narratives, rather than as mere spectacles or amusing entertainments, the audiences began to demand "a perfected illusion of reality."⁶¹

Having first admired how "lifelike" certain early films were, audiences soon brought with them raised expectations for "concrete 'evidence' of reality."⁶² Hopper all his life dismissed movies he considered deficient in "reality," notably Alexander Hall's *Pursuit of Happiness* (1934), which was based on a stage play about a Hessian conscript in the American Revolution who defected when George Washington offered a bribe of free land. When Hopper saw this comedy in 1934 with his wife, she recorded his response in her diary: "E. says pity they couldn't give it any reality at all. So much available in architecture & costume — why not give any of it the dignity of reality."⁶³

Likewise, Hopper rejected Jean Cocteau's *Orpheus* of 1950, which he no doubt found too fantastic. On the other hand, he praised Vittorio de Sica's Neo-Realist film, *The Bicycle Thief*, of 1949. Such an insistence on realism also became an important goal of Hopper's own painting. As early as 1907, he had praised Rembrandt's *Nightwatch* in exactly such terms, describing the monumental painting, upon seeing it in Amsterdam, as: "the most wonderful thing of his I have seen, it's past belief in its reality — it almost amounts to deception."⁶⁴

Only three months after the debut of sound, Hopper first chose the cinema as a subject for an original work of his own. It was on January 15, 1928, that he made a dry-

point — one of the last prints he ever produced — which he referred to variously as *The Balcony* or *The Movies* and that represents two women seated in a movie theater, seen from above. Both subject and pose recall a theater scene — *Two on the Aisle* — painted on canvas the year before, only now Hopper has made the transition to cinema, doing so, we should note, in a medium that earlier had served him in exploring new themes and making the transition to his mature style.⁶⁵

The “Movies” once established as a subject, would come to engage him ever more deeply in the 1930s, when Hopper produced three major paintings on the theme. Less than a year after he painted *The Circle Theatre* (1936), Hopper returned to the theme of cinema in his painting, *The Sheridan Theatre* (1937), which depicted one of the movie houses he frequented, conveniently located near him in Greenwich Village. He emphasized the movie palace’s evocative dim lighting. He sought to duplicate this effect while working on the picture by forcing his wife to shut herself off in their little bedroom during the day to allow him work alone in the darkened studio, which also served as their living room. Painting what his wife dubbed “a Mae West effect,” Hopper focused on a solitary blonde woman in a tight red skirt leaning provocatively against an interior balustrade.

Hopper began the third of these great movie paintings, *New York Movie* (fig.12, p.31), in December 1938 at the Palace Theater, where he used conte crayon to sketch the interior. In her diary, Nivison recorded his progress on this picture in careful detail. More than fifty sketches later, only after visits to several different movie theaters, he would be ready to paint. After collecting enough data to begin, he returned to his studio, where he sketched out the setup in charcoal on canvas. Nivison, wearing slacks and with her hair hanging down, posed for him as a movie usherette. Except for mealtime interruptions and a brief break for Christmas, he worked day and night. On the thirtieth of December, he was still visiting movie theaters in the mornings and painting in the afternoons. The work in progress dominated the Hoppers’ lives. On New Year’s Day, Nivison commented in her diary: “E. in studio wrestling with a dark movie interior. It is such a difficult subject. Dark is always so difficult.”⁶⁶

The next day, Nivison noted that Hopper had a good day at work on his painting and that she had stayed shut up in the bedroom. A day later, she settled back into her role as model when she posed for the two moviegoers “in black hat with veil & fur coat, then little brown cloth hat with gala feathers & linen collar. They are to sit in the dark, but if any stray ray hits them they must be right...”⁶⁷ Before his dealer could see the new work, Hopper suffered a last-minute crisis of confidence. On January 21, Nivison noted that he had been at it since before Christmas and was “discouraged about the original idea, the *raison d’être*, always escaping, evaporating with every stroke added — the distance increased, denied, made into something different,” even though, she said, he was “getting depth, solidity.”⁶⁸ Five days later, he once again had her pose out in their cold hall for the figure of an usherette holding a flashlight. On February 2, they delivered the newly titled *New York Movie* to his gallery, where the glee — it was “greeted like a newborn heir” said Nivison — testified to acute awareness of how difficult it had been for her husband to work.⁶⁹

In the less than three-year period that produced these three canvases on the theme of the movies, Hopper managed to see quite a few films. The artist Richard Lahey recorded a conversation he had with Hopper who admitted: “When I don’t feel in the mood for painting, I go to the movies for a week or more. I go on a regular movie binge!”⁷⁰ Escaping to the movies, what caught Hopper’s fancy was often not the usual American fare of comedies, musicals, Westerns, gangsters, and detectives, but something foreign or otherwise offbeat. In 1937, he enthused over Walt Disney’s *Three Little Pigs*, one of the new animated films, in which, wrote Nivison, Hopper especially liked the scene when the big, bad wolf tells the little captured pigs to say “Ahhh!” then stuffs an apple in each mouth and pops them in the oven.⁷¹ While individual films would continue to inspire Hopper, his fascination with “the movies” as a subject for his painting reached its peak during the late 1930s, coinciding with “Hollywood’s technical supremacy,” which enabled America to dominate the world film industry.⁷²

Twenty-five years passed before Hopper painted his next and last depiction of a movie theater: *Intermission* of 1963. “I got the idea in one of the movies around here,” he told an interviewer, admitting: “I had it for a year. I think it’s

a low-budget film made in 1955, distinguished by Paddy Chayefsky's screenplay about the romance of two lonely people in the Italian area of the Bronx.⁸¹

As early film directors took up the viewpoint of the person in the scene, the medium-shot most interested Hopper, whose viewpoint in his art was often that of the voyeur peeping in a window. Hopper commented how much he enjoyed stealing glances into brightly lit interiors while riding the Elevated train around the city at night. Indeed, he admitted that just such experiences had inspired his paintings *Night Windows* (1928) and *Office at Night* (fig. 14, p.33). In each, a woman appears as an erotic image, an un-touchable object of desire. Hopper's pleasure in snooping was also abetted by the darkness inside the movie theater, where the brightness of the screen in its dark environment offered a simulation of reality and enhanced his sense of "voyeuristic separation" from the object of his desire.⁸² Such eroticism at a distance is a repeated theme in the movies, most notably in Alfred Hitchcock's films, such as *Rear Window*.

The compositions of Hopper's pictures also demonstrate an affinity to films by Hitchcock and others. As in Hitchcock, Hopper sometimes elected to observe his subject unaware from up above. His etching *Night Shadows* (1921) suggests a cinematic point-of-view, as does his canvas *The City* (1927). Often, as in these examples, our point of view in one of Hopper's scenes recalls a characteristic camera-angle. In *Office at Night*, we have a high-angle shot, but in his canvas *New York Interior* (fig. 15, p.34), where we observe a couple in an interior, we peer at them across the window sill, just as if we were peeping in through a spying movie camera being wheeled up on a crane.

Hopper's habit of simplifying details or paring down the elements also suggests parallels with the cinema, where sets and controlled lighting achieve similar effects. The influence of the cinema on Hopper's work is also suggested by the picture format he consistently chose: the horizontal rectangle. Indeed, he rarely ever varied this preference in shape in his mature work.

Discussing his interest in the cinema in an interview, Hopper volunteered: "If anyone wants to see what America really is, go and see a movie entitled *The Savage Eye*."⁸³ What Hopper must have admired in this gloomy documen-

tary-style film about disintegrating relationships made in 1959, by Ben Maddow, Sidney Meyers, & Joseph Strick, was the painfully alienated mood so powerfully expressed. That same year he painted just such a morose state in his canvas, *Excursion into Philosophy* (cat.no.76), which portrays a couple in a spartan bedroom, where the male appears tensely tormented. As Nivison acted out her husband's imagined role for this female, she remarked that she, the veteran actress, to get into the part, would have to play dead, reminding us that the depressed Los Angeles divorcee in *The Savage Eye* committed suicide.

Hopper's recurrent visual ironies on the manifestations of modern life suggest his highly ambivalent attitude toward the changes occurring in twentieth-century society. While he wholly rejected skyscrapers, airplanes, jazz, abstract art, and the new independence for women, he enjoyed the freedom and convenience of traveling in his own automobile and the escape of going to the cinema. Yet it is his profound alienation from contemporary life that makes his art so characteristic of modernity itself.

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Notes

1. Guy Pène du Bois, "America's Curious Predicament in Art," *Creative Art*, 11, September 1930, p.33.
2. Du Bois, "America's Curious Predicament in Art," p.33.
3. Archer Winsten, "Outrages," *New York Post*, June 13, 1960.
4. For more on Nivison, see Gail Levin, *Edward Hopper: An Intimate Biography* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1995; Berkeley: University of California Press and Munich: Paul List Verlag, 1998). Although Nivison changed her name to Jo N. Hopper, I continue to use Nivison in this essay to avoid confusion with her husband.
5. Vachel Lindsay, *The Art of Moving Pictures*, (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1915; reprinted Liveright Publishing Corporation, 1970), pp.125 and 130.
6. Jo Hopper record book II, p.71, noted in 1956, at the time the painting was sold. For these record books, see Gail Levin, *Edward Hopper: A Catalogue Raisonné* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1995).
7. Robert L. Gambone, *Art and Popular Religion in Evangelical America, 1915-1940* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press), pp.62-63.

8. This is documented by the collection of ticket stubs that Edward saved, writing the titles of each play on the verso.
9. The Master Builder in *Six Plays by Henrik Ibsen* (New York: Modern Library, 1957), p.505.
10. Alfred Barr, *Edward Hopper Retrospective Exhibition* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1933), p. 14.
11. Lewis Mumford, "Is the Skyscraper Tolerable?" *Architecture* 55, February 1927, pp.67-69 and "Botched Cities," *American Mercury* 18, October 1929, pp.143-150.
12. See also Merrill Schleier, *The Skyscraper in American Art, 1890-1931* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1986), pp.93-94.
13. Edward Hopper to Donald Adams, letter of August 7, 1955.
14. Edward Hopper, quoted in Brian O'Doherty, "Portrait: Edward Hopper" *Art in America*, 52, December 1964, p.80.
15. Edward Hopper quoted in Katharine Kuh, *The Artist's Voice* (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), p. 131.
16. Jo Hopper diary entry for October 27, 1936.
17. Jo Hopper diary entry for October 27, 1936.
18. Jo Hopper diary entry for September 19, 1960.
19. "Artist Found Prize Subject Outside Truro," *Cape Cod Standard-Times*, May 4, 1937.
20. Jo Hopper Record Book II, p. 17.
21. Herman Melville, *Moby Dick*, 1851, reprinted (New York: Penguin Books, 1992), Chapter XXIII, pp.116-17.
22. Jo Hopper letter to Marion Hopper, December 17, 1941.
23. Jo Hopper diary entry of September 24, 1945.
24. Jo Hopper diary entry of October 2, 1945.
25. Jo Hopper diary entry of October 4, 1945.
26. Jo Hopper diary entry of October 9, 1945.
27. Jo Hopper diary entry of October 17, 1945.
28. Jo Hopper diary entry of October 10, 1951.
29. Guy Pène du Bois, Edward Hopper, p.8.
30. Jo Hopper diary of April 4, 1949.
31. Jo Hopper diary of April 7, 1949.
32. Jo Hopper diary entry of July 17, 1951.
33. Jo Hopper diary entry of September 23, 1951.
34. Edward and Jo Hopper to Frank Rehn, letter of October 7, 1951.
35. Robert Hatch, "At the Tip of Cape Cod," *Horizon*, III, July 1961, p. 11.
36. Edmund Wilson, "The Jumping-Off Place," *New Republic*, 69, December 23, 1931, pp.156-8.
37. Brian O'Doherty, *American Masters: The Voice and the Myth* (New York: Random House, 1973), p.26.
38. Quoted in O'Doherty, "Portrait: Edward Hopper," p.80.
39. Hopper quoted by O'Doherty, *American Masters*, p.26.
40. O'Doherty, *American Masters*, p.26.
41. Record Book (III, p.83).
42. O'Doherty, *American Masters*, p.26.
43. Record Book (III, p.89).
44. Lloyd Goodrich, *Edward Hopper* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1971), p.154.
45. For other examples in modernist painting, literature, theater, ballet, opera, music and film, see Martin Green and John Swan, *The Triumph of Pierrot: The Commedia dell'Arte and the Modern Imagination* (New York: MacMillan Publishing Company, 1986).
46. Green and Swan, *The Triumph of Pierrot*, pp.4-6.
47. Johnson-Burns Fight produced by Gaumont / William A. Brady, distributed by Jury's Imperial Pictures, United Kingdom, 3000 feet and 4000 feet.
48. See Dan Streible, "A History of the Boxing Film, 1894-1915: Social Control and Social Reform in the Progressive Era," *Film History An International Journal*, 3, 1989, p.243.
49. See Levin, *Hopper: An Intimate Biography*, pp.60-63.
50. See Eileen Bowser, *The Transformation of Cinema 1907-1915* (Berkeley: The University of California Press, 1990), pp.37-38, quotes Dr. Anna Shaw, a feminist reformer, as saying "There should be a police woman at the entrance of every moving picture show and another inside. These places are the recruiting stations of vice."
51. Edward Hopper, quoted in Alexander Eliot, "The Silent Witness," *Time*, December 24, 1956, p.37.
52. See Gail Levin, *Edward Hopper as Illustrator* (New York: W.W. Norton Inc., 1979, p.2.)
53. Anthony Slide, *The International Film Industry: A Historical Dictionary* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1989), pp.119-122.
54. Quoted in William Johnson unpublished interview, p.10.
55. Quoted in Brian O'Doherty, "Portrait: Edward Hopper," p.77.
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57. D'Emilio and Freedman, *Intimate Matters*, p.208.
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59. Bell, *Fighting the Traffic*, p.25.
60. Charles Stelzle, "Instead of John Barleycorn," *World Outlook*, 5, May 1919, p.12.
61. Rollin Summers, *Moving Picture World*, as quoted in Bowser, *The Transformation of Cinema*, p.55.
62. Bowser, *Early Cinema*, p.55.
63. Jo Nivison Hopper, unpublished diary entry for December 11, 1934.
64. Edward Hopper to his mother, letter from Berlin of July 27, 1907.
65. See Gail Levin, *Edward Hopper: The Complete Prints* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., Inc., 1979; Munich: Schirmer / Mosel Verlag G.M.B.H., 1986).
66. Jo Hopper diary entry of January 1, 1939.
67. Jo Hopper diary entry of January 12, 1939.
68. Jo Hopper diary entry of January 21, 1939.
69. Jo Hopper diary entry of February 2, 1939.
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71. Jo Hopper diary entry for January 23, 1937.
72. Louis R. Reid, "Amusement: Radio and Movies," in Harold E. Stearns, ed., *America Now An Inquiry into Civilization in the United States* (New York: The Literary Guild of America, Inc., 1938), p.22.
73. Quoted in O'Doherty, *American Masters*, pp.13-14.
74. James Flexner, quoted in Gail Levin, ed., "Six Who Knew Hopper," *Art Journal*, 41, summer 1981, p.134.
75. Flexner, quoted in Levin, ed., "Six Who Knew Hopper," p.134.
76. Jo Hopper Record Book III, p.81.
77. Edward Hopper quoted in Raphael Soyer, *Diary of an Artist* (Washington, D.C.: New Republic Books, 1977), p.72.
78. See Levin, *Hopper: An Intimate Biography*, p.175.
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80. Jo Hopper diary entry for February 10, 1956.
81. William Johnson interview with Edward Hopper, October 30, 1956.
82. See Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," in *Visual and Other Pleasures* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), pp.17 and 23.
83. Quoted in O'Doherty, "Portrait: Edward Hopper," p.76.