Gail Levin

Edward Hopper's Loneliness

SHORTLY AFTER CHRISTMAS DAY 2020, AT THE HEIGHT OF THE CURRENT pandemic, a friend forwarded to me a Facebook post by someone I did not know, captioned: "We are all Edward Hopper Paintings Now." The images that accompanied this post are of four canvases of solitary figures that Hopper painted late in his long career: *Office in a Small City* (1953), *Sunlight in a Cafeteria* (1958), *New York Office* (1962), and *Intermission* (1963).

Among the pictures thus singled out and labeled in this post, only one—*Sunlight in a Cafeteria*—allows even a hint of the possibility of direct communication between people. Yet the only two people present sit at separate tables. Hopper cast the man in semi-shadow, while he illuminated the woman with a beam of brilliant sunlight entering through a plate glass window. The man is glancing out towards the window as the woman demurely looks down, not making eye contact with him. One could conclude that Hopper saw these two people as different as night and day, unlikely to mingle and assuage their loneliness.

In fact, the Facebook post echoes an earlier article by Jonathan Jones that appeared in the *Guardian* on March 27, 2020, during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic. It was captioned: "'We are all Edward Hopper paintings now: is he the artist of the coronavirus age?" As it turns out, Jones stated that he was quoting from "a WhatsApp compilation of Hopper scenes: a woman alone in a deserted cinema, a man bereft in his modern apartment, a lonely shop worker and people sitting far apart at tables for one in a diner." He added, "As

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is the way with memes, it's hard to tell if this is a serious comment or a glib joke with a side order of self-pity" (Jones 2020).

Elaborating, Jones asserted, "Modern life is unfriendly in the extreme for Hopper. It doesn't take a pandemic to isolate his poor souls." He went on to describe "cold plate-glass windows, towering urban buildings where everyone lives in self-contained apartments, gas stations in the middle of nowhere—the fabric of modern cities and landscapes is for him a machine that churns out solitude. Nor do his people find much to do with themselves" (Jones 2020).

Yet while loneliness has long been recognized by observers as a pervasive theme of Edward Hopper's art, becoming almost a cliché, the meme attracted fresh interest during the COVID-19 pandemic, drawing writers to revisit it with increasing frequency and focus. Journalists in particular during the initial months of imposed social distancing were contacting me as someone who had written extensively on Hopper's life and art, from a comprehensive biography (Levin 1995a) to a catalogue raisonné (Levin 1995b, v. 1–3). All their e-mail queries wanted to find out about "Hopper and loneliness." This flurry of focused interest in loneliness on social media produced in time feature articles from the *Guardian* to the *New Yorker* to YouTube and Facebook to countless blogs—yet all of them rehash what we already know about Hopper.

So far, however, no one to my knowledge has bothered to ask what Hopper himself actually experienced during the influenza pandemic of 1918 and whether we can see any response to it in his "realist" art. Yet the "1918 Flu" was said to have been "the most deadly pandemic in human history" (Hagan 2020), so how can Hopper, then in his mid-thirties, have ignored it? From September 1918 until April 1919, more than 50 million people died as a result of the flu, and some 675,000 of these flu-related deaths occurred in the United States. Some cities practiced quarantine, self-isolation, school closures, and "social distancing" in successful attempts to reduce weekly death rates between September 8, 1918 and February 22, 1919 (Hagan 2020).

At the time the influenza pandemic began, Hopper, long out of art school, was not yet established as a painter. Though 36, he was still single and struggling to support himself by working reluctantly as a commercial illustrator. Taking on commissioned work that he never enjoyed, he nonetheless managed to eke out a modest living: "I was always interested in architecture, but the editors wanted people waving their arms," he lamented (Winsten 1935). Every summer, he managed to escape the heat of New York City by fleeing to various artist colonies in New England—from Gloucester in Massachusetts to Ogunquit and Monhegan Island in Maine—where he could paint.

During the early spring of 1918, Hopper visited a shipyard in Brooklyn to observe the scene he used to create his entry in a poster competition sponsored by the United States Shipping Board Emergency Fleet Corporation. Hopper had been illustrating regularly for the *Morse Dry Dock Dial,* a trade journal for the shipping industry edited by Bert Edward Barnes, who had encouraged him to enter the competition. Barnes had even offered to have one of his brawny young employees, Pete Shea, model for the heroic figure that is the focus of Hopper's poster. Hopper called his entry *Smash the Hun* (Levin 1979, 24–27). Although he later dismissed his efforts on this poster as "pretty awful," at the time he welcomed the acclaim, when he came in first among the 1400 contestants and won the $300 first prize (Levin 1995, 117).

In these years of drudgery, when Hopper supported himself working as an illustrator, he had to relegate most of the time he spent painting to his summer vacations in New England. Walking along the shore in Gloucester on Cape Ann in Massachusetts, or in Maine in Ogunquit or on the cliffs of Monhegan Island, he produced a series of landscapes and seascapes in which people, whom he later complained he had had to depict "grimacing and posturing" in so many of his commissioned illustrations, seldom figure (Goodrich 1971, 31). Even as Hopper struggled to gain acceptance for his paintings, he found it easier to show and sell his etchings. It is in these etchings that we might first observe Hopper's response to the pandemic and its imposed social isolation.

Flu illnesses were first reported in the press in April 1918. According to scientists, "The first pandemic influenza wave appeared in the spring of 1918, followed in rapid succession by much more fatal second and third waves in the fall and winter of 1918–1919, respectively." (Taubenberger and Morens 2006). By the summer of 1918, however, Hopper, having won the poster contest, retreated from the hot city for the cooler fresh air of Monhegan Island, Maine, anticipating another season painting outdoors. The foreboding news of July 3, 1918, would eventually reach the vacationers on this remote Atlantic island retreat some 12 nautical miles off the mainland. That day, American newspapers were assuring their readers that a Spanish passenger liner that had arrived in an Atlantic port "was thoroughly fumigated and those on board subjected to thorough examination by federal and state health officers" (Simins 2017).

Returning to New York City that autumn, Hopper would have heard ominous reports of a 40 percent decline in shipyard productivity due to flu illnesses in the midst of World War I (CDC n.d.). Public health officials had begun alerting the population about the dangers of coughing and sneezing and making careless disposal of "nasal discharges." That autumn (according to a 1958 World Health Organization report), there was imposed a "restriction of movement of individuals, avoidance of crowds in cinemas, public meetings, etc.," though the term "social distancing" was not yet in use to characterize these practices, having originally been used to discuss class and race rather than contagion due to physical proximity (Scherlis 2020).

The Committee of the American Public Health Association began to encourage stores and factories to stagger opening and closing hours. People were advised to walk to work when possible, instead of using public transport, in order to prevent overcrowding. It is possible that some of the early advice to avoid public transport inspired the nearly empty train interiors we see in Hopper's etchings beginning in 1918.

Comparing Hopper's images of train interiors to Theresa Bernstein's 1916 painting *In the Elevated* (figure 1) is suggestive. Bernstein

(1890–2002) was Hopper's acquaintance and near contemporary; the two were in a group show that opened at the MacDowell Club in late April 1918. Bernstein's oil painting is pre-pandemic; she depicted many passengers. The elevated train is nearly full. But two years later, in 1918, when Edward Hopper etched *Night on the El Train* (figure 2), he shows the car nearly empty, populated only by one couple. There is no question that by this time Hopper had stopped depicting the groups of people who had populated some of his own earlier canvases, while painting crowds continued to appeal to some of his contemporaries, such as Bernstein, who loved to paint masses of people gathered together in social situations.

To compare Hopper with Bernstein is to see artists of very different personalities and temperaments (Levin, ed. 2013, 15–68). Bernstein's 1914 *The Readers* (figure 3) depicts a crowded room at the New

Figure 1. Theresa Bernstein, *In the Elevated,* 1916, oil on canvas, 30 x 40 inches, de Young Museum, San Francisco, California, museum purchase, 2011.2.

Figure 2. Edward Hopper, *Night on the El Train,* 1918, etching on paper, plate: 7 3/8 x 7 13/16 in., private collection.

York Public Library, while Hopper prefers to paint solitary figures reading, such as the lone woman in his 1925 watercolor, *Model Reading* (figure 4), or in his canvas, *Compartment C, Car 293* (1938). Bernstein's *Polish Church: Easter Sunday Morning* of 1916 shows close-up portraits of worshippers crowded together, reading their prayers. One might say that Bernstein excelled at painting crowds—from *A Suffrage Meeting* in 1914, to some of the vast audience listening to Paderewski (*Carnegie Hall with Paderewski*, 1914), or the elegantly dressed socializing in *The Opera Lobby* (1915). While Hopper's theater scenes were nearly empty, Bernstein's were filled. She also painted parades with massive crowds: *Suffrage Parade* in 1915; *Flags of the Allies* in 1918, depicting Fifth Av-

enue in New York during World War I; and the immense gathering for the benefit of wounded soldiers on the beach in Gloucester, Massachusetts, depicted in *Grecian Pageant* (1918). Bernstein painted the poor crowding a ship's deck in *The Immigrants* of 1923, and a massive crowd at a socialite-sculptor's reception in *Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney's Reception* in 1924. Hopper, an artist who showed and sketched in life drawing sessions at Whitney's Studio Club, might have attended the latter party, but he would never have wanted to paint it.

Hopper, it is true, painted empty urban scenes well before the pandemic of 1918. Following art school, in the fall of 1906, Hopper, like many of his contemporaries, went off to Paris to paint. There, although he focused on architecture, in the spring of 1907 he occasionally depicted crowds seen from a distance, such as the figures walking

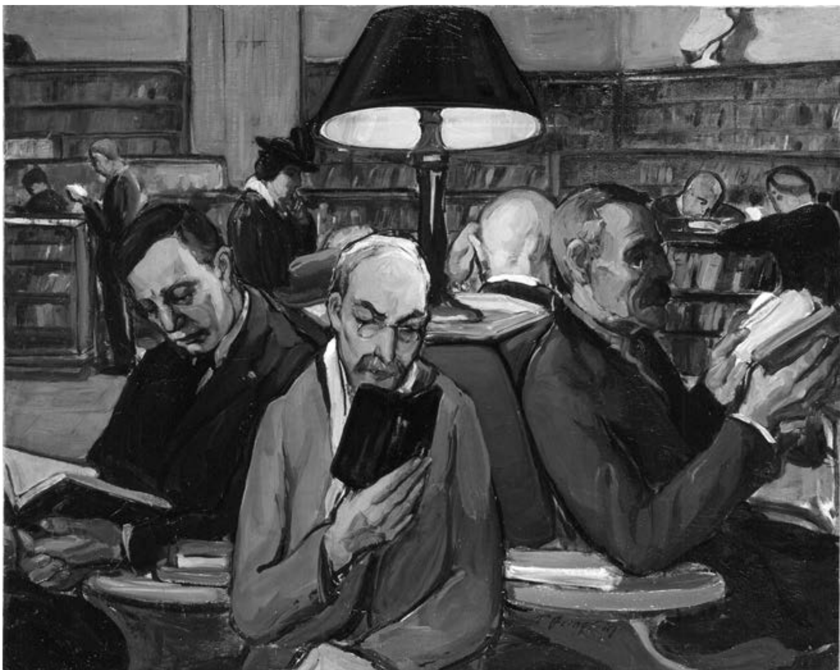

Figure 3. Theresa Bernstein, *The Readers,* 1914, oil on canvas, 40 x 50 in., National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., gift of Martin and Edith Stein, 2018.146.1.

Figure 4. Edward Hopper, Interior *(Model Reading)*, 1925, watercolor on paper, 354 × 506 mm, Art Institute of Chicago, Olivia Shaler Swan Memorial Collection, 1933.487.

across the Seine on the pedestrian bridge, in *Le Pont des Arts*. He rendered these figures on the bridge as tiny indistinct brushstrokes. Most of Hopper's Paris oils, however (as opposed to his figurative sketches on paper), lack figures. These are the works that Emily Burns has recently analyzed, which, she points out, "suggest extended grounding in space, architectonic study, carefully structured compositions and improbably depopulation" (Burns 2019, 113). Hopper's *Pont des Arts*, however, with its parade of summary figures just passing by, escapes her analysis. She further argued, "The lack of inhabitants jars any sense of the familiar and projects an imaginary city that is empty. These impossibly empty representations create a sense of the uncanny for the viewer, who without a bustling crowd to join, has no place to enter or exit the compositions. Hopper's compositional strategies reinforce the separation between the viewer and his urban scenes" (Burns 2019, 113).

Back home in New York, Hopper continued to paint and to exhibit, although he struggled to earn his living by selling illustrations. If we examine, for example, *New York Corner* (1913) and *Soir Bleu* (1914), which he first exhibited together in an earlier group show at the MacDowell Club in February 1915, we see Hopper depicted a throng of people on the sidewalk in the former canvas and a closer view of seven people in an outdoor French café in the latter. Because of the inclusion of so many figures, these canvases feel more like scenes by Bernstein or by Hopper's friend, John Sloan (1871–1951), whom he first encountered briefly when Sloan served as a substitute teacher during Hopper's last year of study at the New York School of Art. While Hopper painted another crowd of pedestrians in 1916, this time gathered near a streetcar, in a brightly colored canvas that he called *Yonkers*, he would spurn depicting such groups almost entirely for the rest of his career.

What intervened was the threatening pandemic of 1918–19 with its warnings to keep a safe distance from crowds. It appears that if the pandemic did not inspire Hopper to focus on painting solitary figures and couples rather than crowds, it nonetheless may have given him permission to stop depicting large groups of figures. "Social distancing," it seems, was made for Hopper!

Post-pandemic, Hopper painted five distinct figures and a distant head in *New York Restaurant* (ca 1922). Then, two couples dine in his 1929 canvas *Chop Suey*, but Hopper clearly had already begun to focus on pictures with solitary figures, or, at most, a couple. His 1927 theater interior, *Two on the Aisle*, shows a couple arriving early and a solitary woman seen from behind, sitting in an otherwise unoccupied box in the still empty theater. While Hopper shows us six theatergoers in *First Row Orchestra* (1951), his wife, Jo, aware that his inclusion of so many figures was for him relatively rare, noted in the record book she kept: "Older man in back entirely lacking in distinction. 2nd row not allowed any importance." (Levin 1995b, v. 3, 336). Only in Hopper's two Civil War history paintings, *Dawn Before Gettysburg* of 1934 and *Light Battery at Gettysburg* of 1940, which stand apart from

his usual subjects, did he include more figures: 10 soldiers and eight soldiers, respectively.

To find out what contributed to this dramatic change, we must ask if there is any extant evidence to shed light on what made Hopper turn away from painting groups of people. Could he have stumbled on this formula during the 1918 pandemic? Did he internalize the idea of what we today call "social distancing"? More importantly, could this sense of imposed isolation have suited Hopper's introverted personality? Now is the time we can take a closer look and investigate, too, the widely perceived association of Hopper's art with loneliness, asking when and where it all began.

Compare, for example, Hopper's etching of 1921, entitled *House Tops* (figure 5), wherein a lone woman is seated in front of a window on an elevated train in New York City, with a similar situation in an earlier train interior in a 1918 newspaper cartoon by Gaar Williams (1880–1935), a cartoonist for the *Indianapolis Star* (figure 6). Both Hopper's and Williams's images are rendered with fine black lines on a white ground. Although the type of seats differs in the two train interiors, the structure of the train car, with its windows and curved ceiling, and even the two artists' angles of vision appear remarkably similar.

In Williams's cartoon, a man wearing an exaggerated 10-gallon hat sticks his head out the window, either to enjoy the view or to get some fresh air; the cartoon shows a raised window shade and lines indicating air currents. We see the man in the tall hat greeted by a man in the next seat, who is shown dressed as a Spanish bullfighter, wearing the traditional *traje de luces* (suit of lights), including a short jacket, knee-length skintight trousers, and the round hat of a Spanish *matador,* whose designated role is to kill the bull in a bullfight. This imaginary matador is actually a skeleton, a symbol of death and mortality, and a banner coming from his left sleeve identifies him as the personification of the Spanish flu. The speech balloon of this figure of death asks ominously, "WELL HOWS THINGS WITH YOU THIS MORNING?"

Figure 5. Edward Hopper, *House Tops*, 1921, etching on paper, plate: 5 13/16 x 7 13/16 in., private collection.

Figure 6. Gaar Williams, "How to Get a Seat: Open a Window and Pretend You're Looking at the Scenery." Cartoon for the *Indianapolis News*, Sept./ Oct. 1918.

We now know that the 1918 influenza pandemic was inaccurately called the Spanish Flu because many censors from governments engaged in World War I played down early reports of the flu in order to maintain morale during the conflict. Yet, in neutral Spain, newspapers were free to report the pandemic's true effects, including the serious illness suffered by Spain's King Alfonso XIII. Such reporting caused the flu to be associated with Spain, creating the false impression that Spaniards were suffering more than people elsewhere or even that the influenza pandemic had begun in Spain.

In Hopper's etching of 1921, which he titled *House Tops,* he portrays a woman at a train window, but we can see that she, like the figure in Williams's cartoon, is not just there for the view. Hopper shows us that the window is raised so that she can breathe some fresh air. But unlike the figure of death in Williams's cartoon, Hopper's man in a hat, the only other figure visible in the car, sits passively, his elbow resting on his large package, as he ignores the woman.

The emphasis on getting fresh air while on the train, as seen in both these images, reflects the pandemic advice of New York City's health commissioner, Dr. Royal S. Copeland, whose greatest anxiety in 1918 was public transportation, which he worried was the most dangerous of all public places due to the extreme crowding imposed. He believed that sick people feel compelled to go to work, but not to theaters or churches (Navarro and Markel 2016).

A year earlier, in 1920, just as the pandemic was abating, Hopper, whose prints were then attracting more attention in art circles, produced *House by a River,* an etching depicting a tall Victorian mansion on the Hudson River, near his hometown of Nyack, New York. The house towers over a solitary standing man who appears pensive as he looks out, his boat pulled up on the shore. Here Hopper seems to have come up with what would later resonate in his paintings: a mood that others read as loneliness, not solitude. The adjective "lonely" conveys unhappiness because of feeling isolated from desired contact with other people, whereas "solitary" means only living alone or being by oneself—perhaps by choice.

A lonely mood is also read by viewers looking at Hopper's 1921 etching *Night Shadows* (figure 7). A view from above, with a bird's eye perspective, shows a solitary man, accompanied only by his shadow, walking down the empty street at night. *Night Shadows* is probably Hopper's best-known etching because it was marketed by the *New Republic* magazine in December 1924 in a much larger edition than was his usual practice, as part of an "American Etchings" portfolio. Its wide dissemination through advertising in print media helped establish Hopper as an artist of loneliness.

The view in Hopper's *Night Shadows* is strongly evoked in a passage by William Faulkner in his 1932 novel, *Light in August:*

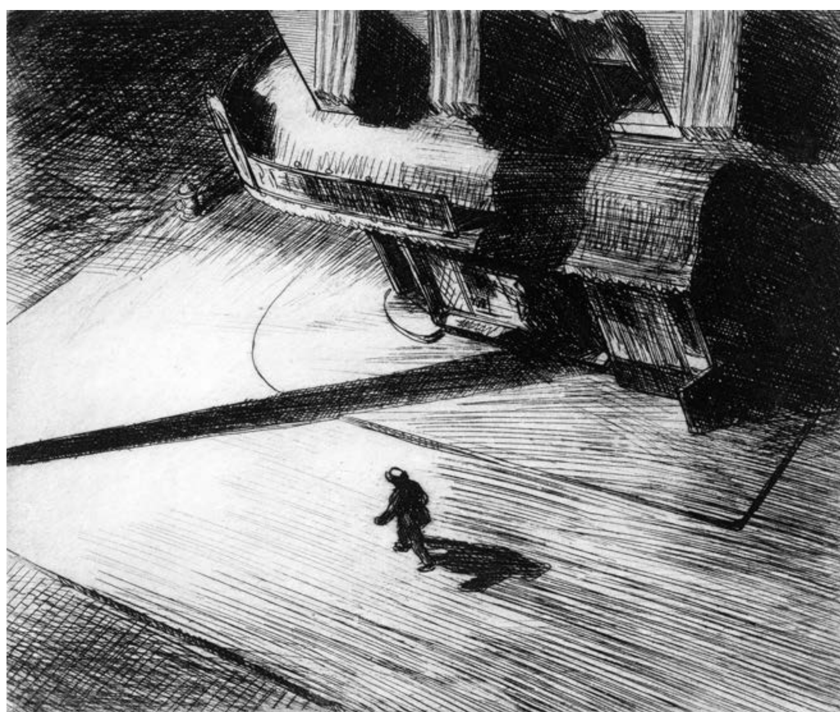

Figure 7. Edward Hopper, *Night Shadows*, 1921, etching on paper, plate: 6 7/8 x 8 3/16 in., private collection.

> The street, a quiet one at all times, was deserted at this hour.... He now had the street to himself. Nothing can look quite as lonely as a man going along an empty street. Yet though he was not large, not tall, he contrived somehow to look more lonely than a lone telephone pole in the middle of a desert. In the wide, empty, shadow-brooded street he looked like a phantom, a spirit strayed out of its own world and lost. (Faulkner 1932, 106)

Faulkner, who both painted watercolors and made illustrations, also published fiction in the *New Republic.* Thus, it would not be surprising to see Faulkner respond to Hopper's image that so strongly suggested loneliness, almost making an unacknowledged ekphrasis, a detailed description of a work of visual art as a literary device.

Years later, in 1960, when the curator and critic Katherine Kuh asked Hopper about the theme of loneliness, he responded with the hindsight of someone in his late seventies: "It isn't at all conscious. I probably am a lonely one" (Kuh 1962, 134). By then he had long since titled an etching of 1923, a scene of urban desolation, *The Lonely House* (figure 8). There, Hopper depicted two children playing together alongside a solitary building. They aren't lonely, he lets us see, but the house is. He makes us feel its bleakness and isolation. *The Lonely House* lacks neighbors.

"Hopper had caught one phase of America, its loneliness and its visual exhilaration: the loneliness of even occupied houses," proclaimed the architectural critic Lewis Mumford in the *New Yorker* in 1933, at the time of Hopper's first retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art (Mumford 1933, 62). When that show traveled to the Arts Club of Chicago, the critic and champion of modern art, C. J. Bulliet, called him "the poet in paint of loneliness" and applauded his "subtlety of psychology." His article, in the *Chicago Daily News,* was captioned, "Hopper Poet of Solitudes Just Deserted" (Bulliet 1934, 28).

The theme of loneliness in Hopper's work received new currency in July 1940, when the *Toledo Sunday Times* published an article,

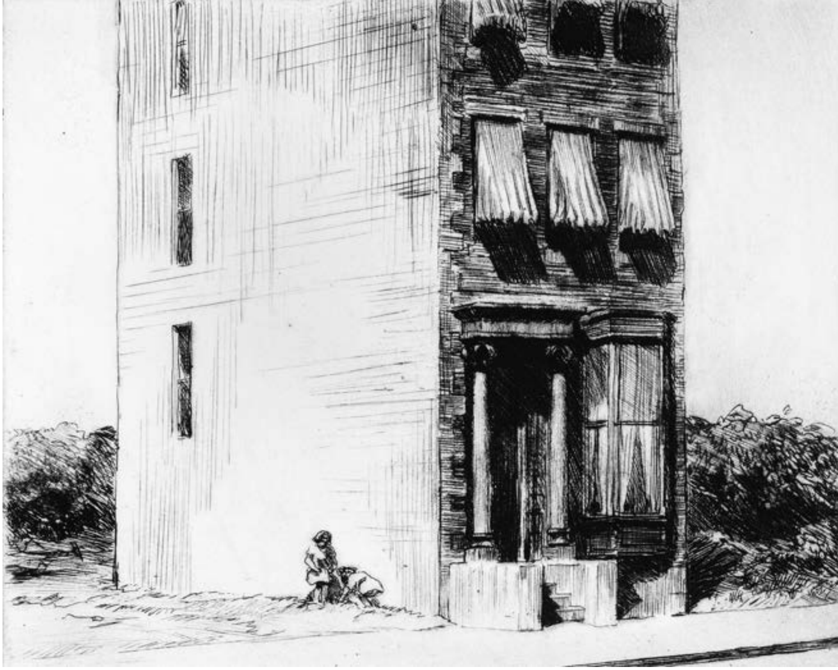

Figure 8. Edward Hopper, *The Lonely House*, 1923, etching on paper, plate: 7 13/16 x 9 13/16 in., private collection.

by the art historian Frank Sieberling, captioned, "Movie Scene Subject of Oil Painting: Loneliness of Big City Stressed by Artist: the pathos of the big city, the loneliness of the individual in an impersonal setting" (Sieberling 1940, 8). At the time, Hopper's canvas *New York Movie* (1939) was being shown as part of the Twenty-Seventh Annual Exhibition of Selected Paintings by Contemporary American Artists at the Toledo (Ohio) Art Museum. In this picture, the audience is mostly absent, and a solitary usherette, appearing lost in her own thoughts, leans against the wall of the nearly empty theater. Perhaps her presence alone, while there is a couple in the audience and, potentially, also in the story on the screen, makes her seem even more lonely.

For the director Herbert Ross, Hopper's *New York Movie* and *Nighthawks*, painted just three years later, evoked loneliness so effectively that Ross based two scenes in his 1982 film directly on these

paintings, essentially bringing them to life on the screen in his film, *Pennies from Heaven*, which is set in Depression-era Chicago. *Nighthawks* (figure 9) takes a cue from film noir, which emphasized themes of aloneness; its dark brooding aspect and pessimistic mood harken back to German expressionist cinema.

Years after I began publishing about the cinema as an important source for Hopper (Levin 1980), Lars Trodson, an American journalist, proposed a plausible cinematic source for the composition of *Nighthawks*: a single shot in the proto-noir film *Stranger on the Third Floor*, directed by Boris Ingster and released on August 16, 1940, with art direction by Van Nest Polglase and cinematography by Nicholas Musuraca. This cinematic image has a convincing resemblance to the space of Hopper's *Nighthawks* (Trodson 2015).

Eight years after Ingster's film was released, on January 16, 1948, when Hopper showed *Nighthawks* (1942), *Dawn in Pennsylvania* (1942), and *Rooms for Tourists* (1945) along with five new works, all of them seemed to convey the thematic category of loneliness. His output was meager enough that his gallery had had to borrow back the older canvases from their owners for the occasion. Reviewing Hop-

Figure 9. Edward Hopper, *Nighthawks*, 1942, oil on canvas, 33.1 x 60 in., Art Institute of Chicago.

per's show at the Frank K. M. Rehn Gallery in New York, Henry McBride, the art critic for the *New York Sun*, wrote about Hopper's "aura of intense loneliness—always this artist's main theme" (McBride 1948, 23).

When Katharine Kuh asked Hopper to elaborate on what he thought about *Nighthawks,* which she suggested was "lonely and empty," he responded: "I didn't see it as particularly lonely. I simplified the scene a great deal and made the restaurant bigger. Unconsciously, probably, I was painting the loneliness of a large city" (Kuh 1962, 134). By the 1960s, Kuh was writing about looking into Hopper's windows into "impersonal offices, hotel rooms, and diners," where, she explained, "a silent frozen loneliness takes over" (Kuh 1971, 246).

So where does the loneliness that so many respond to in Hopper's images come from? It would seem that it is a coming together of his extremely shy, introverted personality, encouraged by cues about social distancing picked up and emphasized during the 1918–19 influenza pandemic. The visible imposed isolation during the pandemic seems to have made a lasting impression on the reticent Hopper, who had grown up the child of an outgoing and confident mother and a meek and bookish father, who was a bit of a lackluster shopkeeper.

Hopper's extreme height (six feet, five inches), especially for his times, set him apart from his contemporaries and made him a bit of a target. He often drew himself as awkwardly long and scrawny. His insecure self-image and perceived awkward physical presence contributed to his sense of feeling isolated from the rest of the boys. This aspect of his identity shows up in some of his self-portrait sketches where he compares himself to others, such as *Edward Hopper Boxing with Wallace Tremper*, a pen-and-ink sketch from 1900 (Levin 1995a, 33).

Hopper, who himself suffered from intermittent depression over the course of his lifetime, must have identified with the lonely and the depressed. Early in his career, when first visiting Paris in 1906, he observed the aftermath of a suicide, four people standing on the walkway along the Seine around the body of someone who had just jumped from a bridge. He chose to record this event in a drawing

with a dark mood that he called *On the Quai: The Suicide*. Even a few years earlier, while studying illustration, he chose to illustrate the Victorian Thomas Hood's 1844 poem, "The Bridge of Sighs," about a young woman's suicide; she too had committed suicide by jumping off a bridge, after she was thrown out of her home.

As late as 1951, Hopper painted *Rooms by the Sea,* a view from his Cape Cod home and studio, where the view out the open door over the bay appeared to be just the sea, which, from the angle he chose, seems to come right up to the door. Jo wrote to her husband's dealer, Frank Rehn, that this canvas was "A queer one—could be called 'the Jumping Off Place'—we can't count on that one ever being sold—even by a wizard like you" (Levin 1995a, 442). Jo's association of this painting with this title suggests that Hopper was again dealing with depression. The Hoppers both liked to read essays by Edmund Wilson, who had written a piece about San Diego called "The Jumping-Off Place" for the *New Republic* ~~that~~ for December 23, 1931, in which he described a seaside hotel on the West Coast, where "the suicide rate is twice that of the Middle-Atlantic coast" (Wilson 1931, 156–58).

If we compare Hopper's depressive personality with that of Bernstein, who easily painted crowds, we find that she was an ebullient character who, despite prejudice against women artists, experienced early career success, easily made friends, and was active in organizations for women artists. Toward the end of her extraordinarily long life, she reflected: "Possibly my greatest talent has been my will power to overcome the hurdles of physical handicaps and to gallop away from unpleasant situations into the field of love, of friendship, and of cooperation" (Bernstein Meyerowitz 1991, 128). From 1919, Bernstein nurtured a stable and supportive marriage to a fellow artist, the painter and printmaker William Meyerowitz (1887–1981).

In contrast, Hopper married an artist, Josephine Verstille Nivison (1883–1968), in 1924, when both were in their early forties. Despite her help in getting him included with her in a large group show at the Brooklyn Museum—one that launched his career in 1923—he disparaged her ongoing artistic ambition for the rest of their lives,

frustrating her and complicating their relationship. He preferred to limit his wife's roles to supporting his work as his live-in model and secretary.

Interestingly, such different artists as Hopper and Bernstein appealed to the collector Duncan Phillips, whose museum in Washington, D.C., now houses his acquisitions. In his book *A Collection in the Making,* Phillips called Bernstein "a painter of appealing individuality and commendable courage for difficult undertakings. She seems to be enamored of the effect of color and light simplifying a throng of people and often she attempts, from a safe distance, to suggest the movement of a crowd" (Phillips 1926, 73). The second of her works that he purchased in 1927, *Garnersville*, depicts Bernstein's glimpse in 1921 of small-town life in New York state, which she described as having "a large crowd of picnickers watching a juggler and various performers" (Bernstein Meyerowitz 1991, 90).

Phillips also acquired multiple works by Hopper, about whom he enthused in his writings. In November 1926, he purchased Hopper's new canvas, *Sunday*, which portrays a disconsolate lone man seated on a street curb. For Phillips, *Sunday* represented "a Middle Western town" (Phillips, 1926, 69), despite the fact that Hopper could have told him of its roots in Hoboken, New Jersey, to which he had traveled from Manhattan by ferry. Phillips saw literary connections to Hopper, whom he wrote "wishes to make American realism in painting as rank with the odor of our own back streets and as unafraid of the homelier facts about our national life as the novels of Theodore Dreiser, Sinclair Lewis, and Sherwood Anderson" (Phillips 1926, 69).

Hopper considered Dreiser and Lewis "too mid-western for me," but, with unusual enthusiasm, called Anderson "a good writer" (Levin 1995a, 200). Anderson's stories, such as those collected in *Winesburg, Ohio* (1919) with their images of emotionally sterile small-town and urban life, naturally appealed to Hopper and his own experience of alienation. Hopper and Anderson share the theme of isolation in the midst of urban life. "Loneliness," one of the stories in *Winesburg, Ohio*, is particularly relevant, for it tells of a man who, like Hopper, had hoped to become an artist in New York City:

> When he was twenty-one years old Enoch went to New York City and was a city man for fifteen years. He studied French and went to an art school, hoping to develop a faculty he had for drawing. In his own mind he planned to go to Paris and to finish his art education among the masters there, but that never turned out. (Anderson 1919, 118)

Unlike Anderson's character, Hopper did get to go to Paris, making three separate trips in the years just after art school (1906–07, 1909, and 1910). Upon his return, however, he settled in New York City, only to have to work as an illustrator. Thus, Hopper resembled Anderson's frustrated character who ends up earning his living working as an illustrator at an advertising firm. If Hopper read this story when it was first published in 1919, he would have been struggling to support himself working as an illustrator, which he too found disheartening. Eventually, the solitary figures Hopper painted in either public or private interior settings also appear vulnerable like those in Anderson's stories. In Hopper's bleak, dispirited view of the city, the few figures who populate the vast urban space are reduced to insignificance.

Despite struggling with his recurring bouts of depression, the pessimistic Hopper was an able painter. He was able to create *Nighthawks* (1942), a memorable image, arguably his masterpiece, which is today perceived and celebrated as an icon of loneliness. As such, *Nighthawks* has been frequently parodied. The space of Hopper's café has been repopulated by many cultural icons, some real, some imaginary: Santa and his reindeer, the Simpsons, Disney ducks, and pop stars, including Marilyn Monroe, Humphrey Bogart, Elvis Presley, and James Dean, as well as political celebrities from Donald Trump to Bernie Sanders in his mittens. Clearly, Hopper's set is apolitical: one size fits all memes. Others have conducted searches for the actual location in New York that could have inspired it. Hopper himself claimed that *Nighthawks* "was suggested by a restaurant on Greenwich Avenue where two streets meet" (Kuh 1962, 134).

Generation after generation seems to rediscover *Nighthawks* as emblematic of loneliness. During the current pandemic, *Nighthawks* seemed to embody how people felt in a time of enforced social distancing. How was Hopper able to create such an enduring image of loneliness? Looking once again at the emptiness in his early compositions in Paris, which Emily Burns noted lacked a "place to enter or exit the compositions" (Burns 2019, 113, we see that the mature Hopper invented a new compositional strategy, drawing upon the cinema and theatrical sets. He learned to dissolve the separation between the viewer and his urban scenes. Hopper began to invite the viewer into his rather abstract set. He created a set in which many viewers could identify and insert themselves into his composition, instantly imagining themselves as a part of the drama in place of his anonymous characters.

Hopper's palette in *Nighthawks* might well owe a debt to Vincent Van Gogh's *Night Café* of 1888, another painting that can be said to be an icon of loneliness. Critics have repeatedly compared or contrasted *Nighthawks* with *Night Café*; indeed, Van Gogh's own description of *Night Café* emphasized qualities similar to those of *Nighthawks*. As in *Night Café*, Hopper's palette in *Nighthawks* emphasizes red and green with yellow nocturnal light. In 1929, the critic Forbes Watson contrasted Hopper and Van Gogh: "As a matter of fact there is a limit to every painter's art and, as so truly said, every positive quality: Otherwise, there might be in the same artist the flaming fire of a Van Gogh and the ungainly sobriety of a Hopper: The two qualities are contradictory" (Watson 1929, 107). Evidence suggests that Hopper knew Van Gogh's painting, especially since Stephen C. Clark, one of Hopper's major patrons, purchased it. *Night Café* was exhibited from November 19, 1934, through January 20, 1935, at the Museum of Modern Art in its *Modern Works of Art: 5th Anniversary Exhibition*, which Hopper certainly would have seen, since it included his own *House by the Railroad* (1925) and followed his own retrospective there just a year earlier. Hopper had a chance to see *Night Caf*é again at the Museum of Modern Art in the Van Gogh exhibition of 1935, written about by

Walter Pach, Hopper's friend, neighbor, and classmate (Pach 1936, 9). While painting *Nighthawks*, Hopper probably saw *Night Caf*é once more in the exhibition *Eleven Paintings of Vincent van Gogh* at the Paul Rosenberg Gallery, New York, January 5–31, 1942.

Hopper left symbolic content to the viewer's imagination. The result is certainly more a created illusion than a copy of reality. He used light to concentrate our attention on the essentials, eliminating extraneous detail and casting the unimportant in shadow. Light serves to communicate the emotional tone of the entire picture. That this restaurant seems to many viewers to be a rather ghastly, sinister, almost nightmarish place owes in part to the harsh effect created by overlighting the interior. This picture is not a mere record of a situation that Hopper had stumbled upon, but a carefully conceived scenario where light, composition, and content play major roles. This is Hopper's theater, and here he was a punctilious director with a vast knowledge of artifice. The lighting effects also suggest the cinema; both the posture and the placement of the figures are intentional. He considered the orientation of his buildings with all the aesthetic concern of an architect. His geometric shapes work in harmony like those of a great graphic designer or an abstract artist. Hopper's conception of *Nighthawks*, drawn from the literary and visual sources that he admired, was essentially dramatic, brilliantly capturing the sinister and lonely aspect of a disquieting urban night.

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