Rhetoric and Redress: Edward Hopper's Adaptation of the American Sublime

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Abstract

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Rhetoric and Redress: Hopper’s Adaptation of the American Sublime (80 pp.)

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The primary objective of this thesis is to introduce a new form of visual rhetoric called the “urban sublime.” The author identifies certain elements in the work of Edward Hopper that suggest a connection to earlier American landscape paintings, the pictorial conventions of which locate them within the discursive formation of the American Sublime. Further, the widespread and persistent recognition of Hopper’s images as unmistakably American, links them to the earlier landscapes on the basis of national identity construction. The thesis is comprised of four parts: First, the definitional and methodological assumptions of visual rhetoric will be addressed; part two includes an extensive discussion of the sublime and its discursive appropriation. Part three focuses on the American Sublime and its formative role in the construction of national identity, and on through the period of Westward expansion. The “urban sublime” is introduced in part four, in which the images are considered first, with regard to historical context, and then, finally, within the discursive forum of the “urban sublime.”

Approved: _______________________________________________________

Jeannette Klein

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I've always been interested in approaching a big city in a train, and I can't exactly describe the sensations, but they're entirely human and perhaps have nothing to do with aesthetics. There is a certain fear and anxiety, and a great visual interest in the things that one sees coming into a great city.

--Edward Hopper, in an interview with John Morse, June 17, 1959
Statement of Purpose

My overarching goal in this undertaking is to lay the groundwork for the establishment of a new form of visual rhetoric, which I am calling the “urban sublime.” I believe the twentieth-century American artist Edward Hopper (1882-1967)—who, in the interview excerpted above, effectively defined the “urban sublime” without actually naming it as such—manifests this new visual rhetoric in many of his works. Although a much more in-depth discussion will follow, in short, the “urban sublime” is part of a larger discourse surrounding the American Sublime, and it expresses a feeling of ambivalence experienced when confronted with images of urbanization on a grand scale. The intensity of this feeling varies, and indeed, whether it is experienced at all, depends upon a number of factors; most importantly, though, it requires knowledge of shared experience amongst a group of individuals (i.e. Americans) over (American) history. The effect of the “urban sublime” is enhanced, I think, by an awareness and understanding of the means used to communicate it, in this case, through the painterly sign.

Summarily, visual literacy—the ability to both “write” and “read” these visual texts—makes it possible to recognize, decipher, and respond to visual rhetoric. Because the American Sublime is itself part of still a larger discourse—namely, the construction of national identity—it is by no means strictly visual. Therefore, I am re-opening what I perceive to be an intertextual, diachronic dialogue, which has been translated into American landscape painting. The dialogue was begun in this country in the early nineteenth century, then continued through the period
of westward expansion, and reached its apex in the early 1900s—contemporaneous with the rise of the Machine, and the beginning of industrial modernity.

At this point, the dialogue appears to have been interrupted, but not abandoned, as I intend to demonstrate: Edward Hopper’s images of the American urban scene can be understood as an indictment of what was known as the technological sublime, a form of visual rhetoric which sought the representation of Americans’ wonder at the ingenuity of their own creations. Insofar as the technological sublime prefigured the “urban sublime,” the technological sublime was preceded by the sublime in nature—a more subjective, spiritual formulation of the sublime that encompassed the wide range of conflicting emotions brought about by contemplation of the relative insignificance of the Self to nature’s Other.

My purpose in writing about Hopper’s urban landscapes, specifically, may or may not have been his purpose in constructing them: It is not necessarily to draw a moral conclusion condemning expansionist ideology, but to reveal its changing pretext in the form of visual rhetoric. This necessitates a certain amount of deliberation upon what I perceive to be critical shortcomings resulting from endemic selectivity by other critics of Hopper’s work. In my research, I have found that much of what has been written seems to elude the central issue of why so many people are so similarly affected when confronted with his images.
This is another reason I am proposing that these works be situated within the discursive framework of the American Sublime.

Undoubtedly, Hopper’s paintings present a world that appears somewhat different from our own. But I do not believe, as so many of his critics apparently do, that the social forces in effect in this country at the beginning of the twentieth century can singularly account for the continued resonance and widespread appeal of his paintings; even today, the images have a powerful rhetorical effect on viewers, not only in the United States, but throughout the Western world. As is most often postulated, Hopper’s works may indeed be social documents, and they may just as well be allegorical illustrations of the early twentieth-century American psyche. In addition to this type of socio-cultural critique, Hopper’s most devoted critics, most notably Gail Levin, his biographer and the curator of the Hopper collection at the Whitney Museum—the largest in any single institution—gravitate toward a biographical methodology.

It is my contention, however, that none of these interpretations is in itself sufficient for a satisfactory reading of Hopper’s paintings. To support this argument, I will link the different interpretations by approaching the images from a rhetorical perspective, and hopefully, formulate a more complete interpretation—one that places Hopper’s paintings within a larger narrative. In this, I have no intention of attempting to counter, subvert, or undermine the postulations of the various Hopper critics I will cite throughout this essay; I aspire simply to introduce
an additional discursive forum within which to consider and discuss these works, and perhaps, others like them.
Introduction

In the May 19\textsuperscript{th}, 2004 edition of the London-based daily newspaper, \textit{The Guardian}, art critic Jonathan Jones began a review entitled, “All the Lonely People,” with the announcement of a new addition to that “peculiar class of objects and images for which someone coined the useful term ‘Americana’: the quintessential, familiar and recognizable stuff of US identity.” The subject of Jones’s commentary was an upcoming exhibition of Edward Hopper’s work at the Tate Modern, but the images to which he so ceremoniously ascribed the ‘Americana’ classification were not Hopper’s. Jones was referring to the photos that emerged from the Abu Ghraib prison scandal the month before. The photos, Jones suggested, were “fated to join Marilyn, Elvis, the stars and stripes and Edward Hopper’s \textit{Nighthawks}” as the latest manifestation of Americans’ “unique capacity for creating unforgettable visual icons.”

At first, Jones’s caustic correlation between the photos exposing “the nocturnal activities of America’s licensed torturers” and Hopper’s 1942 rendition of “four lonely people with no homes to go to who stretch dead time in an all-night diner” might seem like a journalistic misfire. Indeed, Jones himself readily acknowledged that they appear to have little in common. But he countered this caveat by qualifying Hopper’s work and the Abu Ghraib photos as examples of “America’s amazing capacity for self-projection.” He observed that “[Hopper’s] America,” like the prison photos, is “shocking, perplexing, and surreal.” And, Jones noted, “…although shot far from home, [the photos] are as resonantly,
instantly and hyperbolically American as Hopper’s houses that all look like they belong to serial killers.”

The irony in all of this is that Sheena Wagstaff, the head of exhibitions and display at the Tate Modern, insisted it was not her intention to emphasize Hopper as an American painter. Rather, she said, she wanted to emphasize his appeal as “a universal artist,” because she feels he is “too often miscast as a regional or national artist.” She explained: “He is a crucially important American artist, but his real importance is completely international.” ¹

It would seem though, that it is impossible to divorce Hopper’s images from their inherent Americanness: Laura Cumming of the London Observer wrote, “It feels as if you’ve always known them, the paintings of Edward Hopper. America seems unimaginable without them.” ² Nigel Andrews of the Financial Times posited a connection between “that great American art called ‘Edward Hopper,’” and contemporary American pop culture when he suggested that Hopper’s “haunting canvasses” and episodes of Seinfeld are two sides of the same coin: “Hopper imagined the world of Seinfeld before [Jerry] Seinfeld. His twist on life is tragic; Seinfeld’s is comic.” ³

² Ibid.
Yet the affectionate tone implicit in Cumming’s and Andrews’s reviews of the Tate exhibition was the exception: In most cases, it seems Hopper’s paintings evoked the kind of cynicism voiced by Jones in the *Guardian*. Waldemar Januszczak of the *London Times* remarked that the show reinforced his belief that the New York of today—and by extension, the United States—is frozen in time, and “it is now London that is vibrant and unafraid of change.” He declared, “New York is stuck in its glum past. It is stuck in—well, an Edward Hopper painting.” In the July 10th, 2004 *Calgary Herald*, John Daniszewski wrote, “To British art-viewers and critics, Hopper exposes a barrenness in American life that is well-suited to a time when the ideal of America as a forward-thinking, optimistic country is under assault across Europe.” Jones may have been the only critic who posited a connection between Hopper’s paintings and the Abu Ghraib prison photos, but his was perhaps the most eloquent articulation of popular sentiment effected by the exhibition at the Tate Modern: “Americans have never looked as lonely as they do now—except in the paintings of Edward Hopper. America has never seemed as baffling and alien as it does at this moment—except through the eyes of Edward Hopper.”

Whatever its many other deficiencies—real or imaginary—American history has often seemed remarkably well-suited for fictionalizing. Considering the myriad of social and cultural issues that hover over our current national politics, one can easily designate any number of events or issues ripe for visual adaptation.

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4 Daniszewski, “A Gloomy American Dream.”
as low farce or high satire. There is, however, a broader point to (or result of) the construction of the American political narrative. It is easy to miss amid the steady drone emanating from the ranks of the ever-expanding punditocracy, but the responses of foreign critics to the recent Hopper exhibition at the Tate Modern serve as a reminder: A crisis of identity lay at the heart of the United States’ national epic. This has, of course, been the case from the very beginning, with the most significant corollaries—such as America’s relationship with its neighbors and its role in world affairs—all adapting over time to encompass, for better or worse, Americans’ preoccupation with their national identity.

In this context, that Hopper’s paintings evoked such outspoken cynicism from British viewers and critics toward American culture in general is not at all unusual. Nor should the relative ease with which viewers and critics connected the images to contemporary events in Iraq come as a surprise. The war in Iraq and the peculiarly American project of coercing the Middle East into a state of political self-reinvention in the interests of “national security” are among the leading political—and cultural—issues of the present-day. Jonathan Jones’s dubbing of Hopper’s iconic images of Americana and the Abu Ghraib prison scandal photos as “examples of America’s amazing capacity for self-projection,” links the two otherwise dissimilar image groupings on the basis of American identity construction.

The confident projection of American power and ideology into an alien political culture, rent by tribal divisions, mirrors back to us largely unexamined
assumptions about our own national identity and purpose. The role of identity politics in shaping American culture and ideology cannot be overstated. National identity is an imaginary construct—one that falls within the Barthesian formulation of ‘myth.’ Constructed from a pre-existing semiological chain, the function of the myth is two-fold: It both points to and states the existence of its signification as fact, thereby erasing intention and historical contingency. The myth is de-politicized and emptied of its history, affording it a “natural justification.”

Because the myth of “Americanness” appears to have been always already in existence, it is both a convenient cultural template, and an effective rhetorical device. Throughout American history, visual appeals to “Americanness”—as well as condemnation of certain activities, beliefs, or speech on the grounds that they are “un-American”—have historically proven, and continue to function as, an immensely powerful tool when deployed in the interests of the State.

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Part I. Visual Rhetoric

Definition and function

Because visual rhetoric itself has only recently become a topic of critical discussion, its discursive parameters both within and across disciplines are yet to be determined. There is considerable debate amongst art historians and theorists, for instance, about what can and cannot be admitted as objects of inquiry from the visual rhetorical perspective. The nature of the relationship between word and image—indeed, whether such a relationship needs to exist in order to consider the rhetorical aspects of an image—is another hotly debated topic. Traditionally, rhetorical theory has been reserved for the study of linguistic models of signification; that visual forms could also be considered from a rhetorical perspective is a relatively new idea. Since rhetorical theory was “created almost exclusively from the study of [verbal] discourse,” its application to visual constructs led to problems at the definitional level.

There are many “definitions” of visual rhetoric; predictably, some of them overlap, and some of them are at odds with one another. Additionally, how visual rhetoric is defined depends in large part on how it is being used in a particular study. Marguerite Helmers and Charles Hill explain the process through which scholars arrive at a “definition” of visual rhetoric as “necessarily post-hoc; that is, one discovers such definitional assumptions through the work, rather than

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explicating them (even to oneself) before approaching a scholarly project.”

This suggests to me that visual rhetoric can be conceived of as both a product of discourse, and a means of producing it: Sonja K. Foss seems to have arrived at the same conclusion, although she explains it in slightly different terms. She posits that visual rhetoric is both a “communicative artifact” and a “perspective on the study of visual data.” As a communicative artifact, visual rhetoric is what is produced when an artist selects certain visual elements and arranges them in such a way as to communicate meaning to an audience. As a product, or artifact, visual rhetoric delineates the relationship between a specific image and its referent, so the viewer is able to consider the rhetorical, rather than just the aesthetic, qualities of the work.

The definition of visual rhetoric as something material is sufficient for the purpose of locating the meaning produced within a single image, or even a group of images that fall into the same genre and were created around the same time. The problem with this definition is that it promotes a synchronic reading of the visual text: Defining visual rhetoric as the “tangible evidence or product of a [singular] creative act,” encourages the viewer to regard the work as a product of its time, always already a representation of the present—meaning the period during which it was created—rather than as part of a larger historical narrative.

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7 Helmers and Hill, preface to *Defining Visual Rhetorics*, x.
8 Foss, 304.
9 Ibid.
By contrast, defining visual rhetoric as a means of discursive production—Foss’s “perspective on the study of visual data”—makes it possible for the viewer to experience the work diachronically. The definition of visual rhetoric as a “critical-analytical tool or way of approaching and analyzing visual data that highlights the communicative dimensions of images or objects,”

allows the viewer to consider the meaning of a work or group of works, in addition to the meaning produced within them. As a product, visual rhetoric delineates the relationship between image and referent, and that relationship is not suppressed when visual rhetoric is defined as a means of discursive production. In the same way that the meaning of a sentence cannot be understood without prior knowledge of the meaning of each word used in its construction, in order to read visual texts diachronically—that is, in relation to one another—the viewer must first be able to read each one individually. When visual rhetoric is defined as a means of production, or “mode of inquiry,” its function is to delineate the relationship between works or groups of works from different time periods.

The production of visual rhetoric is both tactical and strategic. At the tactical level, construction of the painterly sign involves the systematic translation of verbal constructs, or tropes, into visual ones that, if appropriately arranged (as in spoken language), reveal the pragmatic component—the logic, or meaning—behind it. The reading of the work is semiotic in the Saussurian, or structuralist, sense, because it requires only that the viewer have the ability to recognize the

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10 Ibid., 306.
11 Ibid.
visual forms within the painting and determine their relationship to one another. At this level, the rhetorical dimensions of the work have not yet come into play, because its meaning is, to quote Norman Bryson, “defined entirely by formal means, as the product of oppositions among signs within an enclosed system.”

If the meaning of the work is to be understood as visual rhetoric, it must be defined not only by formal means, but also in terms of its relationship to the outside world. The meaning of the painterly sign becomes rhetorical when its relationship to what Bryson calls the “social formation” is recognized. The social formation encompasses the whole of discursive (economic and political) practices; institutions, such as education, government (the State), and religion; and value systems, or ideology. The production of visual rhetoric by the artist, as well as the viewer’s interpretation of the sign from the visual rhetorical perspective, is strategic, because of the “immanently social character” of the sign. Because the “interindividual territory” within which the signifying practice takes place is “ruled by a law of ‘co-operative production,’” the codes of signification and recognition used must be intelligible throughout the social formation. Neither artist nor viewer “may modify the topology of the discursive formations too greatly without defeating what had been his or her own (strategic) purpose, i.e. recognition of the modification.”

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12 Bryson, preface to Vision and Painting, xii.
13 Ibid., 139.
14 Ibid., 161.
In accordance with John Walker’s and Sarah Chaplin’s proposal in “Visual Literacy and Visual Poetics,” my understanding of visual rhetoric assumes a certain level of visual literacy, and contextual, if not historical knowledge, on the part of the viewer. The artist presumably possesses this compulsory understanding, whether or not he or she is aware of it. Visual rhetoric therefore imposes upon the viewer a certain amount of responsibility as a reader of a text or narrative, which is in this case, a visual one. Hence, both artist and viewer actively contribute to the production of visual rhetoric.

In Roland Barthes’s “Rhetoric of the Image,” it was established that the term ‘text’ is not to be restricted to verbal language—written or spoken. According to Barthes, a single image is also a “text”—a pictorial one that can, but does not necessarily need to be accompanied, or “anchored,” by verbal explication. From Barthes’s assertion, I have inferred that a series of images—as is the case with the changing formulations of the sublime—can therefore be conceived of as a ‘narrative,’ or single ‘texts’ that unfold sequentially into one another.

As noted earlier, the discursive parameters of visual rhetoric have yet to be established, but Helmers and Hill have identified an inclination—perhaps borne out of necessity—toward intertextuality: “In English studies, there is no vocabulary for discussing images, or perhaps we might say that there are so many disciplinary-specific vocabularies that we in English have to borrow

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W. J. T. Mitchell’s perceptive observation that “transferences from one art form to another are inescapable,” underscores a need for intertextual dialogue in discussions involving visual rhetoric. While I agree with Helmers and Hill that “the idea that verbal and visual modes of representation could be understood as symbolic practices, each with a signifying grammar, is a powerful argument for the founding of a visual rhetoric,” I also believe that making this interdisciplinary connection an obligatory condition for visual rhetoric to function effectively undermines its potential for critical consideration as an independent method of communication. Therefore, I am choosing not to pointedly address the issue of interdisciplinary relativity as necessarily directive in this essay, compelling though it may be. Rather, I am treating each formulation of the visual rhetoric of the sublime as, again, to quote Sonja K. Foss, “a communicative artifact.” In this way, I think, I am reversing one of Barthes’s two “linguistic messages”—anchorage—thereby privileging the visual over the verbal material.

Visual Rhetoric and the sublime

I am not asserting that the images constructed in accordance with the conventions of the sublime in nature, the technological sublime, and the “urban sublime” were composed primarily within ekphrastic discourse, although this is a position that could very easily be supported by literature and critical commentary

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17 Helmers and Hill, 2.
18 Ibid.
19 Ibid.
20 Foss, 304.
contemporaneous with each formulation of the sublime. Michael Beehler, Joseph Kronick, Barbara Novak, and Donald Pease are just a few of many who have aligned the visual rhetorics of representing the sublime in nature and the technological sublime with writers whose concerns and language coincide with those of contemporary landscapists. For example, American Transcendentalists Henry David Thoreau, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Walt Whitman are commonly associated with landscapists who worked within the rhetoric of representing the sublime in nature. This is, however, a connection upon which I will deliberate intermittently, because as Helmers and Hill have suggested, “This type of sophisticated reading between disciplines…offers the next step to…a bridge between disciplines.”

Considering the consistently psychological and nationalist spirit of the American sublime throughout history, a crucial concept in this essay is the location of the viewer in time, relative to the execution of the works being discussed. According to Helmers and Hill, “images work on us synchronically and diachronically.” Artists and their contemporary viewers experience images synchronically; conversely, retrospective viewing is diachronic. A viewer contemplating an image created in the past is affected by his or her contextual knowledge of not only the period during which the work was executed, but of previous periods as well. In his opening paragraph to *The Magisterial Gaze*,

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21 Helmers and Hill, 18.
22 Ibid., 12.
23 Ibid., 12-13.
Albert Boime points out the tendency toward synchronic structuring within individual nineteenth-century landscape paintings: “Almost invariably the compositions were arranged...either assuming the elevated viewpoint of the onlooker or including a staffage figure seen from behind that functioned as a surrogate onlooker.” Boime interprets the spatial trajectory as a visual translation of metonymy, which “embraced past, present, and future, synchronically plotting the course of empire.”

I am extending this explanation of diachronic viewing—logically, I think—to include subsequent periods, including, but by no means ending with, the present. This allows for the discussion of the visual rhetoric of representing the sublime to take the form of an open-ended polylogue, which is communicably structured according to verbal tenses—past, present, and future—typically reserved for spoken or written language. The awareness of historical contingencies in the consideration of these works is what makes the perpetual production of meaning of the painterly sign possible.

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25 Ibid.
Part II. Discoursing the Sublime

Definition

The existence of the sublime is, of course, contingent upon the inability to define it. Like rhetoric, the term is grounded in the study of verbal discourse, and its inherent etymological ambiguity has lead to its widespread and often misguided discursive appropriation. The word sublime has its roots in Latin; it literally translates to “below the lintel”—i.e., as high as one can go in a constructed opening, just under the limit. In psychological terms, that which is said to be sublime is productive of the strongest emotion the mind is capable of feeling. The term “sublime” is so loaded in its significance that it seems to be a rather plastic concept. It is necessary to discuss, at least briefly, the origin of the sublime and its subsequent manifestations in order to better understand its role in the construction of American national identity.

A Roman philosopher of the first century CE known as Longinus (his true identity is unknown) coined the term ‘sublime’ to refer to “the echo of greatness of spirit,” or “the moral and imaginative power of the writer (or speaker) that pervades a work.”\textsuperscript{26} Centuries later, travelers began using the word in their descriptions of certain landscapes. The sublime contrasted with the picturesque, and the emphasis was on sensation: “the picturesque was pretty, and of a human scale; the sublime was vast, powerful, forbidding, terrifying, awe-inspiring; and

\textsuperscript{26} Claudia Bell and John Lyall, The Accelerated Sublime, 5.
held the possibility of death." The term gained wider currency in the mid-eighteenth century when the British philosopher and politician, Edmund Burke (1729-97), used it to account for the widespread realization that certain aesthetic experiences deeply affect viewers without necessarily being “beautiful.” In his 1757 treatise, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, Burke observed that the most powerful human emotions are evoked not by the visual experience of physical “beauty,” but by the sensation of pain or fear, or both.

In reality, such emotions are unpleasant, but when experienced from a “safe distance,” pain and fear—and by extension, anxiety—can be thrilling, or ‘sublime.’ The sublime experience, Burke wrote, produces a “delightful horror,” distinct from the emotion inspired by beauty, which he related to the feeling of “love, or some passion similar to it.” It is important to note here, for reasons that will be discussed later, that Burke did away with the previous distinction of the sublime being brought about primarily through visual experience.

Burke described sublime experiences at length, touching upon encounters with darkness, power, emptiness, vastness, difficulty, magnificence, and suddenness. He also cited specific examples of the sublime from nature, literature, and art. To Burke, starry nights, thundering waterfalls, raging storms, and roaring animals were all sublime. Although his *Philosophical Enquiry* contained no advice for the

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27 Ibid.
29 Ibid.
artists of his time, it nonetheless had a considerable impact on the contemporary art world, because it encouraged a new role for art—a role that was neither to entertain pleasantly, nor to moralize or educate, but to release a flood of emotions in the viewer. Burke did not restrict evidence of the sublime to any single period in history. He maintained that the sublime could, but did not necessarily have to be found in nature, and references to it existed in the art and literature of various time periods.

The sublime is not an aesthetic modality because it cannot be depicted—in addition to being undefinable, it is also unrepresentable, so images that are said to exhibit the sublime are actually media through which the artists attempt to bring about the experience of the sublime. If the sublime experience could actually be attained by simply looking at a painting, the relationship of the sublime to the painting would be metonymical, which entails a causal change of name. The painting would be transmuted into something greater than itself—a conduit, or vehicle—whereby this profound experience is brought to bear.

If this were possible, then it follows that the sublime is something that can be measured proportionally, relative to the artist’s ability to encapsulate it, which is again, impossible, because the sublime itself refers to something immaterial, and cannot be contained within any system of representational conventions. The language of the sublime is that of the superlative; the language of the beautiful, the comparative. The rhetorical formulations of the sublime however, are

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30 Walker and Chaplin, 120.
artifacts, the parameters of which are delineated according to circumstantial context. So in actuality, while a painting in itself cannot effect the experience of the sublime, it can produce an awareness of the sublime.

For example, a painting that places the viewer on the edge of Niagara Falls obviously does not place him or her in immediate peril, but it can conjure up anxiety to a certain extent, triggering muted feelings of fear or terror associated with the reality of being in such a precarious, indeed life-threatening situation. Therefore, it follows that all images constructed according to the evolving rhetorical parameters of the sublime aspire to a common end—this being the taming, or dilution, of the sublime experience. These works seek to enhance the thrill of the sublime experience by tempering the necessary component of psychological discontent. In this way, the self-imposed anxiety that inevitably arises from subjecting oneself to conditions that trigger negative emotions such as anxiety, fear, or terror, becomes pleasurable.

Structure

At this point it is necessary to clarify my understanding of the nature of the process through which the meaning of the American sublime has shifted throughout history. In “Image, Discourse, Power,” Norman Bryson defines discourse as “the evolutionary topology of language,” determined and necessitated by changing relationships between signifiers.31 If this process is in fact, a discourse, the structure of which is determined by “recurrent affiliation from

31 Bryson, 137.
signifier to signifier,” then the rhetorics of the sublime are signifiers, and this
discursive formation is based on the changing relationship between them. The
idea of the sublime itself as a signifier is inherently paradoxical, because it is
never clear what exactly it is that the sublime signifies. The idea of the sublime
exists, but in order for it to become a part of discourse—to be included in the
“topology of language”—it has to be signified by something. This something, I
suggest, is rhetoric.

The sublime is located at the “center” of this discourse, the structure of which
is determined by shifts in its signifier, the rhetoric, which is communicated by the
coherent organization of certain pictorial tropes into visual texts. But if the idea of
the sublime-as-signifier is inherently paradoxical, so too, is the idea of the
sublime-as-center. In “Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human
Sciences,” Jacques Derrida points out that in general, structuring a discourse
around a center is “contradictorily coherent,” but it seems that structuring a
discourse around the sublime is especially so. It is even more relevant in this
case, because the rhetorical manifestations of the American Sublime over history
occurred, in part, because of a shift in the collective understanding of what
constitutes the sublime, and what does not—or did, but does no longer. It seems
almost as if Derrida himself is addressing the contradictory idea of the sublime-as-
center when he observes that, “…it has always been thought that the center,

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which is by definition unique, constituted that very thing within a structure which
while governing the structure, escapes structurality.”

If, as Derrida suggests, “the entire history of the concept of structure…must be
thought of as a series of substitutions of center for center,” and this history is
altered because of an “event”—which Derrida calls a rupture—it could be posited
that the history of the American Sublime follows the same trajectory: The
replacement of the sublime in nature with the technological sublime, and of that
with the “urban sublime” is, effectively, a history of substitutions for the center,
necessitated by ruptures in the structural organization of the discourse
surrounding the American Sublime. The idea of the sublime—the signified—is
altered as a result of the rupture, and so the rhetoric—the signifier—changes, but
remains in tact, because it is always already located outside of discourse—not at
the center of it.

Further, Derrida’s examination of Kant’s parergon in The Truth in Painting is, I
think, worth noting here, for two reasons: First, it parallels my understanding of
the relationship between the sublime and its various forms of (visual) rhetoric; and
second, because it both explains and supports my position that the sublime is not
simply a category of aesthetic experience, such as the beautiful or the
picturesque. In Kant’s analysis, the parergon constitutes a type of border that is
attached to an ergon, or work. Parerga, in Kant’s view, are necessary, but usually
unfortunate peripherals, such as a picture frame or drapery on a statue, the

33 Ibid.
34 Ibid.
function of which is to enclose or bracket the work. They are useful rhetorical devices, because they attract attention to the work by circumscribing its contents, therefore distinguishing the “aesthetic object” from everything around it. Because the *parergon* is a part of the work, but is at the same time separate from it, it detracts from the “intrinsic beauty” of the work, and interferes with its value and meaning.

Derrida explains the *parergon* as that which “inscribes something which comes as an extra, exterior to the proper field…but whose transcendent exteriority comes to play, abut onto, brush against, rub, press against the limit itself and intervene in the inside only to the extent that the inside is lacking. It is lacking in something and it is lacking from itself.” Derrida destabilizes Kant’s inside/outside structure, by pointing out that the *parergon* does not end at the boundaries of the work, but itself has to be framed; this framing continues, then, continuously and indefinitely, as the discourse surrounding the work evolves, as it will inevitably do, because it cannot be determined to which realm the *parergon* is to be assigned: the interior, “transcendent values of the art work, or the exterior, contingent world” around it. Derrida poses this question, and introduces the prospect that it can be either, neither, or both. He thereby dispenses with the notion of the Kantian “aesthetic object” altogether, and undermines the assumptions on which the traditional

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categories of “aesthetic experience”—the beautiful, the picturesque, and the sublime—rely.\textsuperscript{37}

Derrida uses Kant’s formulation of the beautiful as an example to demonstrate that the notion of the sublime as a category of aesthetic experience is especially problematic, not because of categorical (\textit{parergonal}) \textit{opposition} between the sublime and the beautiful, but because by definition, the sublime has no \textit{parergon}.\textsuperscript{38} In order for the sublime to be considered on the same terms as the beautiful, it would have to signify an object with limitations, the presence of which give the object its form. Unlike the beautiful (or the picturesque), the sublime, says Derrida, “is to be found…in an ‘object without form’ and the ‘without-limit’ is ‘represented’ in it or on the occasion of it, and yet gives the totality of the without-limit to be \textit{thought}.”\textsuperscript{39} This is why the beautiful can be called an “aesthetic category,” but the sublime cannot—art gives form by limiting, through use of the various forms of \textit{parerga}; it is also why “the sublime is encountered less easily in art than the beautiful, and more easily in [the experience of] ‘raw nature.’”\textsuperscript{40}

\textit{Operation}

It could be said that the sublime signifies the unknown—or as yet unknowable—and is therefore a signifier for all that exists \textit{outside of discourse}, at a given time. Over history, then, as things that were previously unknown, or thought to be unknowable, become known, this information is continuously

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item\textsuperscript{37} Ibid.
\item\textsuperscript{38} Derrida, \textit{Truth in Painting}, 127.
\item\textsuperscript{39} Ibid.
\item\textsuperscript{40} Ibid.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
circumscribed by discourse. The shifting rhetoric of representing the sublime is, therefore, an *evolutionary* process, which does not imply *progression* or *regression*. Rather, it is a matter of *adaptation* as necessitated by changes in American paradigmatic ideological values, which tend to conflate evolution with progress. Hence, the distinction between synchronic and diachronic viewing is a key component in my proposal of the “urban sublime,” because it seems that each step in this evolution is the product of what Víctor Burgin articulated in “Art, Common Sense, and Photography,” as the ‘third effect,’ in which “two images side by side tend to generate meanings not produced by either image on its own.”

In light of this, the images created according to the conventions of the sublime in nature placed next those created in the spirit of the technological sublime produced a ‘third effect.’ Here, the ‘third effect’ is the awareness of a shift in ideological values, which could be realized synchronically by viewers living at the time during which the technological sublime emerged as a rhetoric of visual communication, or diachronically by those living in subsequent periods.

Therefore, the same principle holds true for the shift to the “urban sublime.” Hopper, for example, being of the generation during which another shift in the social formation occurred, may very well have been aware that the technological sublime was becoming outmoded as the American Industrial Revolution reached its apex during the Great Depression, when confidence in capitalism was wavering. The shift to the “urban sublime” is the result of another ‘third effect’

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41 Burgin, 44.
stemming from a change in ideology similar to the one that fueled the shift from the sublime in nature to the technological sublime—this being a growing awareness amongst Hopper’s contemporaries that American values and practices were at odds with one another.

Hopper acknowledged the escalating apprehension surrounding this ideological paradox through his use of realism, from which has arisen a critical misconception surrounding his images featuring disturbingly all-too-familiar glimpses of early twentieth-century Urban America—an issue to which I will return momentarily. Regarding these consequential ‘third effects’: I believe the shifts in American ideology resulted in coexistent constructions of the sublime as it was visually manifested according to political and socio-economic circumstances which were, and are, constantly in flux.
Part III. The American Sublime

National identity and landscape painting

From its inception at the beginning of the nineteenth century, American landscape painting was overwhelmingly romantic. The earliest landscape painters’ primary concern was aligned with that of the cultural, political, and religious leaders of their time—this being the formulation of identity for the young nation. To this end, these artists turned to what was then the United States’ most distinctive feature: its vast, largely untamed wilderness.42

Early landscapists such as Thomas Cole, Frederic Edwin Church, and Albert Bierstadt, dedicated themselves to the most spectacular features of the land—the mountains, rivers, and seas; the influence of humans and their works was largely ignored. The early genre painters focused on rural life and avoided the city and the effects of cultivation and industry. The American impressionists focused on the pastoral, idyllic aspects of the country.43 Until the end of the nineteenth century, few artists had attempted to picture the American city. Even fewer had attempted to do so honestly.

Then, in the first decade of the twentieth century, a group of young realists—among them William Glackens, Robert Henri, George Luks, John Sloan, and Everett Smith—revolted against the academic idealism of established art. Collectively known as the Ashcan School, these artists found inspiration in the

43 Lloyd Goodrich, Edward Hopper, 5.
daily lives of New Yorkers.⁴⁴ These artists were, however, still somewhat romantic: Stylistically, their work was reminiscent of the pre-Impressionist naturalism of Manet and Degas.⁴⁵

For Henri and his followers, the American city, town, and countryside were of supplemental importance to human character and occurrence. Sloan, being the most realistic of the group, was the only one who put the city itself on the same level as its human inhabitants. Sloan's work, along with that of Henri's students, George Bellows and Glenn Coleman, represented the most complete portraits of the American city until Edward Hopper—who himself studied under Henri at the New York School of Art from 1900-06—began to paint the very essence of industrialized America in a decidedly realistic, often intensely disturbing manner.⁴⁶

The sublime in nature

At this point it is necessary to depart from Hopper and his time and return to the beginning of the previous century and the landscape paintings through which the visual rhetoric of the American sublime was introduced. Recall that it was the aim of the early landscape painters to help establish the identity of their new nation through depictions of its wilderness and natural phenomena. In so doing, these artists sought a visual interpretation of a "Christianized naturalism," in which God and nature were one and the same. In this way, God's nature became God

⁴⁵ Goodrich, 5.
⁴⁶ Ibid., 5-6.
in nature, and the landscape artists who effectively depicted this abstract concept were spiritual leaders. Artists like Cole, Church, and Bierstadt believed they were morally compelled to present their viewers with the natural embodiment of God Himself. It was from this idea of God in nature that the American concept of the sublime was derived.

American artists, specifically the early landscapists, explored the sublime in a more specific context: For them, God was the most sublime subject of all, and God Himself was present in the pristine, unbridled wilderness and extreme natural phenomena of the frontier. Landscapists such as Cole (1801-48) and Church (1826-1900) exhibited the sublime in nature by minimizing or altogether eliminating human presence and exaggerating vastness and verticality, and through extreme contrasts of light and dark.

In contrast to the dramatic depictions of these two artists, some painters opted for depictions of the American landscape that were relatively small and intimate. The uniform quality of light in their paintings suggested a more tranquil, contemplative atmosphere, which led to their distinction as “Luminists.” These artists were connected with the American Transcendentalist movement, of which Emerson and Thoreau were the leaders. For them, spiritual transcendence was achieved through quiet repose within the silence of nature.

Burke’s formulation of the sublime is most useful in the context of this essay. According to DeLuca and Demo, “For Burke, the sublime is an intense passion

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48 Ibid., 135.
rooted in horror, fear, or terror in the face of objects that suggest vastness, infinity, power, massiveness, mystery, and death.\textsuperscript{49} God, being the most unfamiliar and unfathomable of all subjects, was therefore the most sublime; natural phenomena, were, by extension testaments to God’s greatness.\textsuperscript{50}

In order to effectively create a visual interpretation of the sublime, landscape artists eliminated or drastically downplayed the presence of humans and the evidence of their impact on the land. The land itself was independent of humans; through the use of vibrant color and painstaking manipulation of light, the landscape was afforded its own commanding presence, as seen in Cole’s \textit{View of the Round-Top in the Catskill Mountains} (Figure 2), and \textit{Distant View of Niagara Falls} (Figure 3); Bierstadt’s \textit{Among the Sierra Nevada Mountains, California} (Figure 4); and Church’s \textit{Twilight in the Wilderness} (Figure 5), and \textit{Mountain Landscape (Our Banner in the Sky)} (Figure 6).

\textsuperscript{49} Kevin Michael Deluca and Anne Theresa Demo, “Imaging Nature,” 58.
\textsuperscript{50} Ibid.
Figure 2. Thomas Cole, *View of the Round-Top in the Catskill Mountains*, 1827, oil on canvas, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.
Figure 3. Thomas Cole, *Distant View of Niagara Falls*, 1830, oil on panel, The Art Institute of Chicago.
Figure 4. Albert Bierstadt, *Among the Sierra Nevada Mountains, California*, 1868, oil on canvas, National Museum of American Art, Washington, D.C.
Figure 5. Frederic Edwin Church, *Twilight in the Wilderness*, 1860, oil on canvas, The Cleveland Museum of Art.
Figure 6. Frederic Edwin Church, *Mountain Landscape (Our Banner in the Sky)*, c. 1861, oil on panel, San Francisco Museum of Fine Arts.
The technological sublime

Even as they strove to formulate a national identity by virtue of God’s presence in the natural wonders of the American wilderness, the earliest landscape painters were aware of—and grew increasingly disturbed by—the hypocritical implications of the sublime in nature. If God was in nature, and humans were destroying nature in the name of progress, were they not “leveling what William Cullen Bryant had called God’s first temples?” To counter what was essentially “an attack on America’s religion of God in nature,” Americans in the nineteenth century were forced to rationalize the unchecked exploitation of their natural resources. The doctrine of Manifest Destiny, which instilled the belief that progress and expansion was part of God’s plan for America, provided this justification.

Consequently, the sublime in nature was no longer the appropriate rhetoric within which American painters were compelled to create their landscapes. The railroad enterprise, being central to the goal of expansion, became the defining technological icon of the nineteenth century. The introduction of this engineering marvel to landscapes such as George Inness’s Lackawanna Valley (Figure 7), Andrew Melrose’s Westward the Star of Empire Makes Its Way—Near Council Bluffs, Iowa (Figure 8), and Fanny Palmer’s Across the Continent: Westward the Course of Empire Takes its Way (Figure 9), “nourished the American passion for the utilitarian.” At the same time, it provided the basis for the new visual

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52 Ibid.
53 Ibid., 166.
rhetoric: the technological sublime, in which humans’ wonder at the ingenuity of their own—not God’s—creations, is implicit.

Just as it had developed concurrently with the culmination of the sublime in nature, the technological sublime reached its peak at the same time Hopper was composing his urban landscapes. The works of the so-called Precisionists, two of whom were Charles Sheeler and Ralston Crawford, celebrated industry and technology during the Depression in an effort to boost economic morale.54 Here, as in Sheeler’s American Landscape (Figure 10) and Suspended Power (Figure 11), and Crawford’s Overseas Highway (Figure 12), the built structures assume a monarchal monumentality that speaks to an apparent identification of utilitarian efficiency with moral uprightness.

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Figure 7. George Inness, *The Lackawanna Valley*, 1855, oil on canvas, The National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.
Figure 8. Andrew Melrose, *Westward the Star of Empire Makes Its Way—Near Council Bluffs, Iowa*, 1867, oil on canvas, Private collection.
Figure 9. Currier & Ives (Publishers), After Frances (Fanny) Flora Palmer, *Across the Continent: Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way*, 1868, lithograph, colored by hand, drawn on stone by James Merritt Ives, Newberry Library, Chicago.
Figure 11. Charles Sheeler, *Suspended Power*, 1939, oil on canvas, Dallas Museum of Art.
Figure 12. Ralston Crawford, *Overseas Highway*, 1939, oil on canvas, The Regis Collection, Minneapolis.
Part IV. The “Urban Sublime”

The Social Formation

“Great art is the expression of an age, and that age itself must be great. Ours is not; it has nothing to express.”

--Harold Stearns, From America and the Young Intellectual, 1921

To be sure, the “quintessential realism” of Hopper’s work provides a most intriguing framework within which to investigate their relationship to the social formation. Indeed, this seems to be the preferred methodology adopted by most of his serious critics. Hopper, being a member of the generation that matured during World War I, also lived through World War II. He witnessed the economic extremes of the Roaring Twenties and the Great Depression; in his paintings, a sense of loss of faith in capitalism—to which industrial and technological progress is inextricably linked—is pervasive.

The above quote by Harold Stearns echoes the sentiment of that generation, whose artistic, literary, and cultural leaders were highly critical of nearly all aspects of American life. According to Matthew Baigell, by the early 1920s, these leaders had launched a widespread attack on the nation’s past and its present direction. In articles, essays, novels, and poetry, these critics voiced their disdain for the country’s Puritan and Victorian heritage, its present moral and spiritual apathy, its artistic impoverishment, and a populace that was psychologically browbeaten by “intellectual know-nothings.”

55 Heinz Liesbrock, Edward Hopper, 10.
This pervasive depression was undoubtedly related to the conditions imposed by the rise of the Machine Age, which was defined by the standardization of industrial production, working and living conditions—indeed, of life itself.\footnote{Ibid.} Hopper was acutely aware of the effects of this standardization on American life. Generic titles like \textit{Approaching a City} (Figure 1), \textit{The City} (Figure 13), and \textit{Morning in a City} (Figure 14) attest to this observation.

Additionally, the standardization of the machine is visually communicated through the purposive, measured use of definitively geometric shapes to dictate the overall compositional program. This is clearly visible in the architectural forms, as well as in the recurrent 'lightfalls,' Hopper’s signature “trapezoids of light,”\footnote{Susan Alyson Stein, “Edward Hopper: The Uncrossed Threshold,” 414.} and shadows—as seen for example, in \textit{Early Sunday Morning} (Figure 15).

Lewis Mumford summarized the general attitude toward the Machine Age and its institutions when he wrote, “We have had the alternatives of humanizing the industrial city, or de-humanizing the population. So far, we have de-humanized the population.”\footnote{Ibid.} This de-humanization is apparent in Hopper’s figures. He often only put one person in a painting. If there are more, they usually do not interact with each other. They are often immobile, and they stare blankly. They seem to lack self-assurance and self-identity. When they walk or move, as in \textit{Manhattan Bridge Loop} (Figure 16) and \textit{Pennsylvania Coal Town} (Figure 17), their actions are mechanical—robotic, even. It appears as though they have been stripped of
their humanness. This de-humanization is a recurring theme throughout Hopper’s career.

As noted earlier, Hopper also seemed to infuse a certain degree of skepticism toward capitalism into much of his work—particularly his depictions of American vernacular architecture. He painted the single-family American house so many times it could be said he painted various stops on the road to the American Dream itself. At the high end of the socio-economic spectrum, in stark contrast to the ramshackle structures occupied by immigrant fishermen in Gloucester, Massachusetts, and modest dwellings as seen in Solitude (Figure 18), looms the grand French Second Empire-style mansion in House by the Railroad (Figure 19). It is an imposing domain, representing the world of the Vanderbilts and Carnegies—a symbol of enduring lineage and wealth.

Paradoxically, this structure seems to have succumbed to the forces of modernization through which it was erected. Abandoned and dilapidated, the railroad in the foreground speaks of the invasion by industrialization into the private, domestic sphere. The front door has been blown out, attesting to the loss of a secure family sanctuary. Hopper’s houses, across the socio-economic board, are visually inaccessible. As such, they expose the increasing disparity between the social strata, and comment on the economic limitations imposed on the lower and middle classes as they attempted to realize the American Dream.

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61 Ibid.
62 Ibid., 107.
Figure 13. Edward Hopper, *The City*, 1927, oil on canvas, University Art Gallery, University of Arizona, Tucson.
Figure 14. Edward Hopper, *Morning in a City*, 1944, oil on canvas, Private collection.
Figure 16. Edward Hopper, *Manhattan Bridge Loop*, 1928, oil on canvas, Addison Gallery of American Art, Phillips Academy, Andover, Massachusetts.
Figure 17. Edward Hopper, *Pennsylvania Coal Town*, 1947, oil on canvas, The Butler Institute of American Art, Youngstown, Ohio.
Figure 18. Edward Hopper, *Solitude*, 1944, oil on canvas, Private collection.
Rhetorical devices

The overwhelming sense of loss of faith in industry and the widespread disdain of Hopper’s generation with American life in general can be viewed as a twentieth-century attack on the technological sublime. It is my contention that as industry and progress became increasingly rampant during the first half of the twentieth century, Americans once again became distressed by the seemingly unstoppable conquest of the Machine. Another justification, and consequently, another rhetorical formulation of the sublime, was in order.

Hopper’s images, then, can be re-examined within the context of this new rhetoric, the “urban sublime.” His work, like that of the early landscape painters, is infused with strong subjective emotion. And, as in the earlier landscapes, this emotion is concentrated not on humans, but on their environment. In the early twentieth century, however, that environment was drastically transformed: Hopper’s “landscapes” consist of the structures and objects humans have built; the focus, then, is nature, transformed by human influence.

Most often, Hopper treated the city the way his predecessors treated the wilderness, and subsequently, technological icons: He infused his buildings with greater individuality than his figures. The structures appear totally autonomous, free and unbound; they supplant—and assume the significance afforded to—the natural and technological elements in earlier landscapes. These new landscapes, like those composed within the rhetorics of the sublime in nature and the
technological sublime, are often devoid of the human figure; when humans are present, they are decidedly insignificant.

Minimizing or eliminating the presence of the human figure is common to all three visual rhetorics of the sublime, and connotes silence, which is a type of discursive space, as Rosalind Krauss explored in “Photography’s Discursive Spaces: Landscape/View.” In spoken rhetoric, purposive silence is what seems to be, by virtue of the absence of language, a kind of linguistic trope in itself. Therefore, silence, and by extension, the experience of the sublime, are appositionally related to a particular type of gap—one that forms a philosophical blind spot that both results from and signals a lapse in comprehension—what Derrida referred to as a rupture.

According to Jean-Francois Lyotard, it is during these gaps in comprehension that “conceptual colonization” can occur. In his view, this is when the individual is most susceptible to the rhetoric of the economic “genre” that Lyotard, and perhaps Hopper, mistrusted the most: “the instrumental, economic discourse of capitalism.” Subjecting oneself (or being subjected to) the suspension of discourse—to the sublime—has the potential to destabilize the structure of the social formation. This potential is offset by the tactical determination, by signifying practice, of the conditions on which contemplation of the sublime is allowed to take place. Hopper, in forcing the viewer to gaze into, rather than merely glimpse these rhetorical moments of ‘silence’ in daily life, transforms routine into ritual. He

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64 Ibid.
might have been asserting that those moments should not be disregarded as bridges between past and present, as they normally are. Instead, they should be respected for what they say: They are the visual equivalent of the trope, 'neither here nor there.'

Additionally, as was the case with the works of his predecessors—and in some cases, his contemporaries—Hopper's compositions suggest a subjective point of view that implies the presence of the viewer situated in the space in front of the scene. As a result, these works are structurally dependent upon the viewer. The outward gaze of a figure in a painting is one way of establishing this relationship with the viewer, as is the utilization of a steep or extreme viewpoint, as in The City (Figure 13) and Night Shadows (Figure 20). Earlier landscapists employed both these techniques to achieve the same effect.

What, then, distinguishes Hopper's work from that of the Precisionist movement, placing it within the rhetoric of the “urban sublime?” There are several pictorial devices that do this, and I think their having been heretofore overlooked as such must relate back to the widely disseminated, although fundamentally problematic notion that Hopper was an American Realist. This designation is most certainly based on a naturalized assumption, that art is necessarily the expression or reflection of the age during which it is produced. ‘Realism,’ because the term implies transparency and verisimilitude, is particularly vulnerable to this misconception.

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65 Margaret Iverson, “In the Blind Field: Hopper and the Uncanny,” 424.
Indeed, the apparent simplicity of Hopper’s urban subject matter—cityscapes and the mundane, daily activities of urban dwellers—bely the significance of its rhetorical value as part of a larger, more complex visual narrative. The artist’s biography is central to this consideration of his work as documentary: Hopper’s experience as a witness to the economic instability of the 20s and 30s and both World Wars adds to the allure of this type of interpretation. It is not difficult to understand why his critics have consistently labeled him a Realist, and tend to discuss his work solely within a social or biographical framework.

However, many of these same critics have also recognized that there is an undeniable psychological element to the images as well. Bearing in mind the fundamentally psychological nature of the sublime, I submit that Hopper’s images are not merely denotative copies—they are connotative constructions cloaked in a patina of plausibility. These works convey the idea, or psychology—not the actuality—of a place.

Of marked importance in establishing the visual rhetoric of the “urban sublime” is the polarity of Hopper’s subject matter when compared to that of the earlier landscape painters. In order to communicate the idea of the sublime to the viewer, his predecessors limited themselves to the most spectacular of scenes. The real astonishment of Hopper’s images—and indeed, of the “urban sublime” itself—is accomplished through skillful exploitation of the iconic power of ordinary American things, as if “every white clapboard house in his paintings is auditioning for a part in an unsettling national epic, and every lonely person sitting in a room
Unlike his predecessors, Hopper realized the potential of invasive, yet strangely nonconfrontational communication through the contemplative rendering of the commonplace.

Hopper’s America is in many respects a “cartoon country,” caricatured, exaggerated, impossible—and real. It is an empty space, even though it has been colonized—a wilderness with gas stations, diners, movie theaters, and store fronts. He understood and visually codified the nation’s well-homed penchant for revising its identity—which is closely related to its tumultuous relationship with “progress” and mass-production of goods, but also of lifestyle, and of indelible iconographies. The sentiment of Hopper’s era with regard to the established culture, to the inexorable force of industrialization and its depreciative effect on the significance of nature, and to humanity’s position and direction in the modern world, is expressed using the visual language of the ordinary.

Hopper rarely commented on his own work—or anyone else’s for that matter—but when he did, his language was as rhetorically effective as the images about which he was speaking. This uncharacteristically lengthy quote from his tribute essay on Charles Burchfield, whose work he greatly admired, attests to the potential of the sublime in the banal:

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67 Ibid.
No mood has been so mean as to seem unworthy of interpretation. The look of an asphalt road as it lies in the broiling sun at noon; cars and locomotives lying in God-forsaken railway yards; the steaming summer rain that can fill us with such hopeless boredom; bland concrete walls and steel construction of modern industry; mid-summer streets with the acid green of close-cut lawns; the dusty Fords and gilded movies—all the sweltering, tawdry life of the American town. And behind it all, the sad desolation of our suburban landscape. We derive daily stimulus from these, that others may pass with indifference.69

Of considerable importance in all three formulations of the visual rhetoric of the American sublime is the presence—or at least the awareness—of God. The sublime in nature, as the most overtly religious of the three, insisted upon the presence of God within nature. The technological sublime served to alleviate the cognitive dissonance that arose from the realization that God’s presence in nature was in direct conflict with its inevitable destruction resulting from the advancement of industry. What role, then, does this God play in the “urban sublime?” The natural elements of light and wind, recurring in many of Hopper’s images, serve as synecdoche for God Himself, in the same way He was previously embodied by natural phenomena.

In city scenes, light and wind are mysteriously integrated. As in the work of the early landscape painters, light and shadow have an unfathomable quality. The elemental energy conveyed by the light and shadow found in nature overpowers the human sphere. In the “urban sublime,” windows, for example, are often perceived only as form and color—light and shadow formed by artificial means.

69 Iverson, 416.
these instances, they do not allow the viewer to look inside, whereas the light used to convey the sublime in nature is illuminating. In the same way—and perhaps to the same end—Hopper’s ‘lightfalls’ often create a meditative space not just for the figures in the painting, but also for the viewer.

Wind is a curious element as well. An implied element in the early landscapes, it is rarely present itself, but indications that it has been a powerful force, such as a fallen tree or broken branch, are clearly presented in the quiet, yet intensely contemplative scene. When wind is used as an active force, it is relegated to a mere vestige—expressed in cloud movement, far removed from the location of the viewer. In Hopper’s “landscapes,” though, it is an invasive presence when introduced into scenes overtaken by a commanding stillness. In *Evening Wind* (Figure 21) and *Night Windows* (Figure 22), the wind is a mysterious visitor—an intruder, even. In each of these, the wind, not the woman, forms the compositional focus.\(^70\)

Hopper’s paintings of vernacular architecture could also be said to exude a sense of religiosity. In these images, it is almost as if the houses themselves have a quasi-religious appeal. Their monumental, mausoleum-like brightness and structural simplicity call to mind the Precisionist aesthetic. The houses convey the sense of an impenetrable space; recalling Hopper’s figures’ eerie detachment, it seems as though the lack of relationship between exterior and interior could be considered a characteristic of spaces conceived within the rhetoric of the sublime:

\(^{70}\) Stein, 157.
In this case, it is not unlike the stark contrast between Nature and Machine—between “God’s first temples” and humans’ urban meccas.
Conclusion

Images that deal the rhetoric of the sublime are recognized as such because they point to the existence of something beyond the known world, the awareness of which produces both exhilaration and anxiety. They appeal to and stimulate the human imagination, but also serve as a reminder of its containment within the corporeal form, of physical and intellectual limitations. Depictions of the landscape accomplish this visually, through the suggestion of vast distances, extreme heights and depths; of blinding light and impenetrable darkness; of acceleration and absolute stillness; of danger, and sometimes, death. The frame and the surface of the painting therefore, function both literally and metaphorically as a reminder of the periphery, of ultimate enclosure.

For Hopper, the most honest encapsulation of the “urban sublime” was inherent in the “casual juxtapositions and dichotomies that characterized American life.”71 This is an observation which, appropriately enough, allows for the ‘third effect’ out of which the shifts in the rhetorics of the sublime emerged to recur over and over again: A ‘dichotomy’ is a special type of bifurcation in which a single component with two seemingly contradictory imperatives is split accordingly, and continues to divide in this manner repeatedly, each time yielding a ‘third effect’ with a whole new set of circumstantial conventions. This prefigures the likely conception of yet another sublime—one that, in the aftermath of the

71 Mecklenburg, 132.
Industrial Revolution, in the advent of the Information Age, will be multi-layered and continuously compounded—as any rhetoric of the sublime would have to be.
Bibliography


