THE UNIVERSITY *of* EDINBURGH

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EDWARD HOPPER BEYOND THE COMMONPLACE.

A review of his work under the light of Walter Benjamin´s concept of poverty of experience.

Ana Pardo García

Abstract

The title of this dissertation —Edward Hopper beyond the commonplace— alludes to the fact that, although the work of Edward Hopper is widely acknowledged in the history of the twentieth century art, critical literature focused on it has resorted to a number of labels (Americanness, alienation, loneliness and the like) which, over time, have become clichés with very little critical insight and with very weak theoretical and visual foundations. My first aim is, therefore, to develop a different critical framework which is up to the task of analysing the indisputable visual relevance of Hopper's work. I shall argue that this critical support can be found in Walter Benjamin's concept of "poverty of experience", which I shall re-examine in the Part I of the dissertation. But my main aim is to test this framework in the analysis of Hopper's oeuvre, and to show that not only the notion of poverty of experience can enrich this analysis, but also Hopper's works can enrich the concept coined by Benjamin. So, in the rest of the dissertation, besides reviewing the existing literature, I shall construct an interpretative hypothesis to account for the interactions between technology and tradition underlying the development of American painting (Part II), the complex relationship between painting and technological reproducibility in Hopper's artistic project (Part III), and the emotional meaning of Hopper's pictures (part IV). I hope that this critical approach improves the understanding of Hopper's work and can be useful to a wider treatment of modern art history.

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INTRODUCTION: EDWARD HOPPER AND THE TRANSFORMATIONS OF EXPERIENCE

1. WHAT IS KNOWN (AND UNKNOWN) ABOUT HOPPER

Perhaps one of the main paradoxes about Edward Hopper is the fact that he is at the same time all too familiar and quite unknown. Familiar, firstly, because the valuable cataloguing work and biographical research of Gail Levin[1] outlines a complete historiographical map of Hopper's life and work (LEVIN: 1980; LEVIN: 2007, LEVIN:1995)[2] . Hopper is also familiar because of his considerable influence in contemporary art history: his inspiration is not only present in Pop art, but in works by recent sculptors, filmmakers and photographers [Figs. 1-2] His pictures have become part of the collective imagination worldwide, and they have been reproduced countless times

[1]Gail Levin (1948), an American art historian specialized in the work of Edward Hopper, has written numerous monographs about him, including biographical essays and the *Catalogue Raisonné* of his works; she has also edited Hopper's prints and illustrations and a book about the places depicted by Hopper. Her main works are listed in the Bibliography.

[2]Born in Nyack (Rockland, New York) in 1882, in a Baptist prosperous family of Dutch descent, in 1899, following his parents' advice, Hopper entered the Correspondence School of Illustrating. Then he studied engraving in the New York School of Art (also known as Chase School), being his teachers Arthur Keller and Frank Vincent DuMond. He also took painting lessons under the teachings of William Merritt Chase, Kenneth Hayes Miller and Robert Henri. Once he had finished his studies, in 1906, he travelled to Paris and stayed there for almost a year. He came back to Europe in 1907 and 1910 and did not leave the American continent again, but he often travelled to different places around the United States (with a marked preference for South Truro) and Mexico. He was an artist based in New York, where he rented a studio from 1913 until his death, in 3rd Washington Square North. In 1904, *The Sketch Book* published one of his sketches, but Hopper's first paintings did not cause any impact. He took part in an exhibition in 1908 in the upper floor of the old Harmonie Club, in a show organized by Henri's students, and also showed his works in the Independent Artists Exhibition organised in 1910 by Sloan, Henri, Davies and Kuhn (GOODRICH: 1978, 19, LEVIN, 1980: 26). But, again, the critics did not show interest. In 1913, during the Armory Show, he sold his first painting, but he did not sell any other in the next ten years. He called negatively the critics' attention in 1915, when he showed *Soir Bleu* in a collective exhibition organised by Henri in MacDowell's Club. The painting was considered too influenced by the European artistic movements in a moment in which American nationalism was at its peak. His fortune changed dramatically during the 1920s. In 1920 he had a one-man show at the Whitney Studio Club, an institution founded as a space where American painters could show their work. In 1923, thanks to his future wife, the painter Josephine Nivison, the Brooklyn Museum of New York exhibited his work. Critics saw in this exhibition the end of his Parisian nostalgia and his return to American themes. In 1924, The Frank K. M. Rehn Gallery organised his first solo exhibition in a commercial gallery, where he sold eleven watercolours and five oils. From that moment onwards, Hopper focuses on his oil paintings. In 1933 he had a one-man show at MOMA. In 1937, *Life* magazine observed that Hopper was "accepted as one of America's best living painters". By 1939, the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, the Brooklyn Museum, the Chicago Art Institute, the Fogg Art Museum, and at least nine other museums and galleries held Hopper's works. His paintings were shown in dozens of exhibitions throughout the decade, and prizes multiplied until his death in 1967, the same year when the IX Biennale de Sao Paolo showed his works along with the ones of Pop artists.

— from textbooks and monographs to mugs, posters and mouse pads, from Hitchcock to The Simpsons—, as if somehow they had been detached from his oils.

[Fig. 1] Edward Hopper, *Morning in a city*, 1944,112.5 x 152 cm Williams College Museum of art, Massachusetts.

[Fig. 2] Gregory Crewdson, *Woman at a Vanity*, 2004, 144.8x223.6cm Digital chromogenic print.

However, in a sense, Hopper is also a great unknown. He was extremely reserved about his work, and he gave only a few interviews and wrote a short number of statements on art. While the interviews are frustrating because of his evasive answers ("I don't have anything else to say"), his statements on art often include a quote from Goethe which summarizes his conception: "representing the world that surrounds me by means of the world that is in me" (WAGSTAFF: 2004, 17); but this romantic language strongly contrasts with the stark look of his paintings. He describes his method as painting from memory, So, the main responsibility for the interpretation of his works relies on critical literature. Among the texts consulted for the development of this PhD I would like to highlight Gail Levin's monographs (LEVIN: 1979, 1979-1, 1980, 1984, 1995, 1998 and 2007), containing a deep knowledge of Hopper's art and personality. Mainly chronologically ordered, monographs written by Wieland Schmied (SCHMIED:1995), Robert Hobbs (HOBBS:1987), Ivo Kranzfelder (KRANZFELDER:1998), Gunter Renner (RENNER:1991) or Walter Wells (WELLS:2008) hint at interesting elements of Hopper's oeuvre, addressing different issues recurrently pinned to Hopper's art. Scarce as Hopper´s statements were, the interviews and writings of those who knew Edward Hopper are also revealing and helpful to put his work in its context: among others are the book by Lloyd Goodrich (GOODRICH: 1978) and interviews with the painter conducted by J. Morse (MORSE: 1959), Katharine Kuh (KUH: 2000) and Brian O´Doherty (O'DOHERTY: 1988). Catalogues derived from Hopper's exhibitions from MoMa's first one-man show in 1933 onwards provide an interesting source of Hopper's critical readings, demonstrating a shift in approach, from an art-historical point of view to interdisciplinary studies. Equally interesting is the catalogue of the "Edward Hopper and the American imagination" exhibition held at the Whitney Museum of American Art in 1995 (LYONS AND WEINBERG: 1995), wherein several fiction writers such as Paul Auster, William Kennedy, Norman Mailer, Walter Mosley, Grace Paley or Ann Beattie contribute with short stories inspired by Hopper's scenes. The catalogue edited by Sheena Wagstaff for the Hopper's Tate exhibition in 2004 (WAGSTAFF: 2004) suggests multiple links between Hopper and film or photography. As Wagstaff points out, nowadays the more interesting contributions to understand Hopper's oeuvre can be found in articles. The ones by J. Gillies (GILLIES: 1972), L. Nochlin (NOCHLIN:1981), A. Hemingway (HEMINGWAY, A.: 1992) and J.P. Naugrette (NAUGRETTE: 1995) are discussed in different Parts of my dissertation. Among ones appearing more recently, I shall mention

those by Margaret Iversen (IVERSEN: 2003), W. Fluck (FLUCK: 2004), J. Updike (UPDIKE:2005), J. Barter (BARTER: 2007-1) and T. Ryall (RYALL: 2013).

In general terms, the main issue in Hopper literature is the social or sociological reading of the paintings. The emphasis in the search for social meanings in Hopper's works, I suggest, has not to do with particular ingredients of his paintings, but with the fact that they are realist paintings. The nature of such "realism" will be discussed at length in my thesis, but for the moment I would say that realism became an uneasy position in the twentieth century because of the increasing awareness that perceptual reality was being quickly and deeply transformed by technology, and that reality is, at least in part, a social construction plenty of hidden injustices. So, the relationship between reality and representation became conflictive: in artistic matters, reality seems to escape representation, and representation seems to escape reality. Realism often appears as an ingenuous or misleading artistic standpoint, as if figurative painting was only ethically (not aesthetically) justifiable as social realism. Although from the beginning it was clear that Hopper's work did not fit into this category, the dominant critical readings have always tried, so to speak, to redirect his paintings towards this meaning.

Three critical discourses

There are three main critical discourses about Hopper's work, which correspond to the three periods that can be discerned in Hopper literature. During the 1920s and 1930s, especially in the United States, Hopper's paintings were often celebrated as specifically American art, in a time when critics and museum officials were involved in the definition of American cultural identity. So, Hopper was often included in the "American scene" movement. He explicitly rejected such claim, but he felt part of the struggle for America's artistic self-affirmation. A second period begins in the post-war years, when Hopper is already a renowned artist, in which a new kind of critical discourse, that continues to this day, becomes dominant: the view of Hopper's work as focused on alienation and loneliness as consequences of industrial urban life. And, although not with the widespread acceptance as this last discourse, the third reading appears in the late twentieth century and remains so far: in this case, Hopper's works are interpreted as the

visual recreation of a male, white and bourgeois America addressed to a middle-class audience which mourns its fading (if it ever existed!) and enjoys the image of an unproblematic city, sidestepping "the other side" of New York and flavouring this recreation with a "cool" redefinition of alienation and a "neon-existentialist" aesthetics (FLUCK: 2004, 335). I shall not argue that these critical readings are *wrong*, but I do think they are unsatisfactory.

Regarding the first discourse, I have no doubt that Hopper wanted to be an American painter, but, even if his declarations about the 'American Scene' or about artistic nationalism are ignored, what, in Hopper's paintings, allows us to speak of their 'Americanness', excluding the crude fact that they were painted in America? The easily understandable efforts of Museum curators and critics to construct an internationally recognisable American art should not be confused with Hopper's artistic intentions or realizations, even if the appraisal of his paintings could benefit in the 1930s from such context. What is meant when it is said that his works are perfectly American[3]? The theoretical weakness of this claim is attested by the fact that, when the United States finally became an autonomous cultural power, the debate about American cultural identity immediately grew less important. The second one of the mentioned critical discourses, being by far the most prevalent, shows similar problems. It is undeniable that Hopper's compositions have something to do with modern life, and to a certain extent terms such as "alienation" or "loneliness" can express some features of the modern condition. But, is there a firm foundation to assert that Hopper's *Gas* [Fig.22] or *Office at night* [Fig.30] call into question the capitalist alienation of the worker? Is it justifiable to assume that *Morning sun* [Fig.51]or *New York Movie* [Fig.69] are metaphors of urban loneliness or to describe *Sunday* [Fig.63] as a comment on economic depression or *Nighthawks* [Fig.23] as a reference to the American mood after the Pearl Harbor bombing? What is the effective contribution of these terms —alienation, loneliness and the like— to the meaning of Hopper's pictures? Could it be said, as Hopper suggested about loneliness, that also "the alienation thing" is overdone? Both terms are external to Hopper's vocabulary. Particularly, 'alienation', when deprived of its specific meaning in the philosophical tradition of Hegel and Marx, becomes a vague psychological disorder

[3]Among others, Edward Alden Jewell wrote that "Edward Hopper, an American painter, paints only as an American can paint" (BARTER: 2007-1, 203-204).

affecting the figures in the paintings without anyone really knowing the reason behind it. The readings suggesting that Hopper paints the America of the Great Depression inform us about the context wherein Hopper is developing his art, but, do they not clash with the fact that his paintings never reveal an explicit criticism of the modern world, a nostalgic view of the preindustrial one or a progressive enthusiasm about industrial civilization?

The third critical discourse is, at first sight, the one which has a better theoretical foundation. One of its more interesting representatives, Andrew Hemingway, referring to the abovementioned images of Hopper as an advocate of American nationalism and as a critic of American capitalism, has written something that I find incontrovertible: both interpretations, he says, "need to be set within particular ideological frameworks and not treated as effects of some inherent quality in the works" (HEMINGWAY, A.: 1992, 399). Only I should add that this is also certain of the third image of Hopper, which Hemingway supports: Hopper as the painter of a "racial and masculine (…) nostalgic vision, which appealed to a particular bourgeois liberal fraction" interested in "a relatively innocuous realist art" (HEMINGWAY, A: 1992, 396). I am sure that Hopper's paintings, no more or less than many others, have been used with ideological purposes. And I am aware that Hopper was a male, white bourgeois citizen living in a racialized and masculinized capitalist society. But I am not sure that Hopper's paintings can be reduced to such sociological markers. I doubt that, as an artist, he was a supporter of American nationalism, just as I doubt that he was a critic of capitalism. But my question is: is there anything else than ideological frameworks in the appraisal of artworks? Should the critical discourse, in order to avoid such frameworks, be reduced to the evaluation of compositional and formal features, refusing any account of the *meaning* of such works? I do not think so. I do appreciate the intellectual struggle to highlight the ideological frameworks underlying aesthetic and artistic stands: they have a great critical relevance and they have a valuable informative weight in critical interpretation, as they bring to light the political and sociological background. But I oppose the reduction of art criticism to such a struggle and the reduction of artworks to such a background. I am suggesting that the predominance of social-ideological (and, so to speak, anti-ideological) critical readings of Hopper's work in terms of Americanness, alienation, loneliness or class-analysis are responsible for the facts that such work, notwithstanding its widespread outreach and acknowledgement, remains to a great extent unexamined, and that the questions about the reasons for such an acceptance and, therefore, about the cultural

meaning of Hopper's work remain open.

I shall not invoke on my behalf "some inherent quality in the works" of Hopper which would univocally lead to the meaning of the paintings that I shall propose. The "inherent quality" of the artwork are the formal and compositional features which, acting as the limits of interpretation, make possible a tentative critical reading aiming at improving the understanding of the work. Cannot this interpretation be founded on a theoretical framework not only constructed to support unconfessed political interests, but in the interest of knowledge? Although it sounds a bit old-fashioned, I am sure that this is also the ultimate interest of ideological criticism. I do not conceive of my interpretation as the right one (I do not even know if this expression makes sense regarding artworks) but only as another contribution to Hopper critical literature. However, I should not describe my project exactly as what Hemingway calls "yet another account of the meaning of Hopper's works" (HEMINGWAY, A: 1992, 399), but as an attempt to resurface Hopper's work (as a critical subject) out of the limited readings that years have piled upon it. Nothing can be done to overcome the silence of Hopper about his work, but something should be done, in my view, to overcome what Hemingway calls "the critical mythology" about Hopper, and to supply a better theoretical foundation for the critical discourse on his work, in order to re-evaluate the commonplace ideas about Americanness, alienation, loneliness or unproblematic art. Searching for this alternative theoretical framework, I have resorted to Walter Benjamin's writings on art, and especially to the concept of "poverty of experience". My reasons to approach Benjamin's thought as a critical tool in the interpretation of Hopper's work were threefold: the first and the main one is that the notion of modern art which Benjamin constructs in his writings on Baudelaire seems to be especially suitable to Hopper's conception of art. The second reason is that, when reading Benjamin's writings, I found that the concept of poverty of experience, precisely because it is developed by Benjamin in relation to the main issues facing modern art, is more useful to think about the experience of modernity appearing in Hopper's oeuvre than the topics that the topics of alienation or loneliness. The third reason is that, in *The work of art in the age of its technological reproducibility* (BENJAMINN: 2002-2), Benjamin provides adequate conceptual instruments to inquire about the relationship between painting and technological reproducibility, which is a major theme in Hopper's work. I shall discuss these questions in the next section, but before this, I would like to call attention to a methodological particularity of this

theoretical reference.

When I began studying Benjamin, I found out that, to make his notions suitable for the purposes of the critical discourse that I am exploring, I could not content myself with referring to the meaning of such notions as something commonly accepted and previously known by the reader, ignoring or overlooking their problematic features. The reason is that my dissertation is also written from the theoretical standpoint of art's autonomy, a standpoint obviously not shared by Benjamin. So, starting from Benjamin's writings, I have tried to construct a methodological and theoretical framework, without disregarding the problems and difficulties involved in such writings, and clarifying as far as possible my position concerning them. As I will emphasise, Hopper's view on modernity is not focused on the return to an archaic past or in the avant-gardist progression towards a utopian future, the two options that Benjamin thought to be the artwork's contemporary destiny: Hopper did not dream of a subjugation of painting to politics, but he claimed its artistic function. And he was seriously attentive to the figure of the modern individual. But his experience of the technological innovations in America still has something of the innocent attitude of surprise, mixing attraction and repulsion, which Benjamin masterly describes in his writings on Baudelaire's Paris; and even the city of Paris which Hopper visited three times was not so far from the city in which Baudelaire lived (certainly, Picasso and Gertrude Stein were already there, but Hopper was not involved in their circles). The evident relationship of Hopper's work with mechanically reproducible images, as in the case of Benjamin, cannot be reduced to the binomial alternative "rejection/acceptation". The question obsessively repeated in Benjamin's work —how is art possible in a word menaced by "the liquidation of the traditional value of the cultural heritage" (BENJAMIN: 2002-2, 103)?— is, to a large extent, also the question of Hopper's painting. And Benjamin's inventory of intellectual and artistic references contains a series of names (Bergson, Proust, Freud, Brecht, Simmel, Kafka or Kracauer) that, though most of them obviously were not among Hopper's readings, are, to my view, much more representative of the atmosphere of ideas, words and images of Hopper's times than other more contemporary authors sometimes used to interpret his works.

2. POVERTY AND EXPERIENCE

Walter Benjamin coined the expression “poverty of experience” (*Erfahrungsarmut*) in a short but important text from 1933: “Experience and poverty” (BENJAMIN, 1996-7, 731-736). As with many of his essays, its rhetorical efficacy lies on the strength of metaphors. His contemporary readers knew very well the poverty caused by the terrible German inflation in the 1920s. As a consequence of the financial crash, savings stored by many families lost their economic value before they could be inherited by descendants, who found themselves suddenly empty-handed. And, as a consequence of war, the material neediness tragically disturbed the plans of the majority of the population for the future, splitting their lives into two halves which could no longer compose a whole unity. Benjamin uses this commonplace of his time as a symbol of another kind of poverty, a cultural (“internal”, he says in one line) poverty. The story in the beginning of “Experience and poverty” shows clearly that, in a traditional society, the sayings and refrains, informally learned in an implicit way, are moral and materially useful to address basic needs even in an environment of material scarcity and without scholar education. What the article states is that, in the same way that inflation or war destroyed the transmission chain of material goods, something happened in this historic moment which devalued the stored experience of the communitarian memory. Considering the most dramatic of Benjamin’s examples, it could be said that the soldiers returning home in 1918 found themselves in a world which was no longer the one they left when they went to the frontlines in 1914. And in this new world their cultural heritage ─the learned experience ─ was as useless as the banknotes that war and financial breakdown turned into waste paper.

This “completely new poverty” is presented as a crisis of *culture* as a whole, a poverty of experience affecting *humanity*, what forces men to “start from zero”. That is what Benjamin calls a new state of barbarism in which the contemporary man, naked, “lies screaming like a new-born babe in the dirty diapers of the present” (BENJAMIN, 1996-7, 733). What is the source of this regression from culture to barbarism? In Benjamin’s text, it appears only named as “this tremendous development of technology”, and if we read just the first three paragraphs of the article, we could take Benjamin’s description as the mourning of the demise of the old concept of experience (SALZANI:

2009, 129).

But the following lines discard this impression. Certainly, for Benjamin there is an evil side to barbarism: the one of the privileged few who, because of their external wealth, can also conserve fragments of the old world where experience retains its internal richness, though they are surrounded by the new impoverished realm, something that the rest of the people cannot afford. But Benjamin had written that “only for the sake of the hopeless ones have we been given hope” (BENJAMIN:1996-6, 356), and this seems to apply to this tragic situation. Along with the traumatic image of the soldiers who return speechless from war, the avant-gardist artworks appear as illustrations of barbarism “in the good way” (BENJAMIN: 1996-7, 735), a poverty of experience that is a dignified poverty. They are the early monuments of a world as naked as this new-born contemporary man, something that Benjamin links to the new “glass culture” (BENJAMIN, 1996-7, 734). It is the same utopic world that emerges in the final lines of *The work of art in the age of its technological reproducibility* (BENJAMIN: 2002-2, 101-133) under the name of “communism”, a world that has overcome art and abolished aura (*Fiat mundus, pereat ars)*. And the reader feels that, in these texts, Benjamin “celebrates the dawn of a new era” (SALZANI: 2009, 129) and that, if technology creates the problem (the fall of the old world), technology can also solve it, raising a new one. This would be, perhaps, a very reductionist and simplistic interpretation, but the central role played by *The work of art in the age of its technological reproducibility* (1935-1936) in the theoretical reflections in the art criticism of the last decades has contributed to a “postmodernist” reading of Benjamin which has also attracted to its orbit “Experience and poverty”, promoting the analysis of the Benjaminian concepts of “aura” and “experience”, among others, in the light (often in the exclusive light) of this text[4] . The fact that some of Benjamin’s writings have been the object of a post-modernist interpretation is just consistent with his target of announcing a world which would come after modernity (although not exactly with the meaning which the term “post-modernity” has acquired in contemporary cultural criticism). I will not follow this interpretation, but it is interesting for the purpose of my argument to understand its roots in Benjamin’s text itself.

[4]On this predominance in Benjamin’s contemporary readings and its post-modernist interpretation, see COSTELLO:2015, 164-184.

Benjamin's work as a two way street

"Experience and poverty" is, in my view, one of the crossing points of two of the main movements running through Benjamin's intellectual project and personal biography. The first of these movements is linked to the historic and personal circumstances of Benjamin. After failing in his attempts to achieve an academic professional status, a change in his cultural perspective came about in the late 1920s through his contact with the Berliner avant-gardist troop that we know today as "Group G.", frequented by architects and other artists of diverse tendencies (especially Dadaists, Surrealists and Constructivists[5]). In his relationship with this group of artists, Benjamin received the influence of the technological optimism which dominated the atmosphere of these artistic movements, a feature that we can find from time to time in Benjamin's essays, as it happens in "Experience and poverty". In the decade of 1930, he adds to these intellectual ingredients his acceptance of Marxism, after his expedition to the USSR with Asja Lacis, his friendship with Bertolt Brecht and his reading of *History and Class Conciousness* by G. Lukács (JENNINGS: 2004, 20). In this historic moment, the communist experiment of the October Revolution appears to many thinkers as a political avant-garde more or less clearly linked to the artistic insurrection, and this is also the case of Benjamin. But to this practical engagement is added his theoretical embracement of materialism as a methodology for historical analysis. The clearest symptom of Benjamin's proximity to avant-gardism is his experimental book *One Way Stree*t (1928), composed as a literary *collage* or *photomontage* in which a great deal of avant-gardist techniques is used. It will induce a methodological shift that is the source of a lot of short and often hermetic texts, supported in symbols or allegories which, as in the case of "Experience and poverty", capture immediately the reader's attention. As it has been repeatedly observed (JENNINGS: 2004, 29), these texts are like flashes of lucidity in which, with a great economy of resources, a surprising abundance of imbedded signification effects are reached, with many resemblances of Kafka's writing style. All these essays are vibrant examples of the new kind of cultural criticism Benjamin was searching since the late 1920s, and the writing style he reaches in them constitutes the powerful attractiveness of

[5]Between 1922 and 1923 a new avant gardé movement emerged in Berlin, compose of artists from different nationalities and various aesthetical orientations. L. Moholy-Nagy, Mies van der Rohe, El Lissitsky, Hans Richter, Raoul Hausmann, Kurt Schwitters, Hans Arp, George Grosz, John Heartfield, Hannah Höch, Naum Gabo, Antonine Pevsner, Nathan Altmann, Mies and Ludwig Hilberseimer, Tristan Tzara, Man Ray and Max Burchartz were the members of this "Group G" (JENNINGS: 2004, 24).

his mature prose; but it is also the reason of the difficulties of clarification of many of his essays, whose hardly reducible ambiguity has produced sometimes, to my view, contradictory or opportunistic interpretations.

Probably, Benjamin himself was aware of these problems of interpretation. He always kept in mind the need of a more ambitious, complex and wider work about the culture of modern industrial cities, which would constitute the background in which these "snapshots" should be rooted and understood. This is the second of the movements I mentioned above: a sustained and long-range reflection on the meaning of experience. The persistence of his interest in this question is attested since 1913, when he writes an early article entitled "Experience" (BENJAMIN: 1996-2, 3-5), in which he considers its role as a rhetoric strategy used by adults to intimidate young people[6] . The question has gained density and importance in his essay from 1918, "On the program of the coming philosophy", where after a review of the meaning of experience in Kant's philosophy, he denounces an impoverishment of the concept of experience since the eighteenth century, when it loses an important part of its scope because of its restriction to experimental validity in scientific knowledge, missing its connection with language. He proposes then a wider idea of experience which would include all kind of cultural practises, even the religious ones (BENJAMIN,1996-4, 100-110). He comes again over this theme ─ the opposition between "experimental legitimacy" and "life experience" ─ in a quite cryptic essay from 1932 ("Zur Erfahrung"), where he says that "there is no greater error than the attempt to construe experience —in the sense of life experience— according to the model on which the exact natural sciences are based" (BENJAMIN: 1999-4, 553). The term acquires a stronger connection with historic present in "Experience and poverty" and other essays of the same years. Due to his intellectual philosophical and literary education, he was initially oriented to a systematic approach of his themes, like the one he practised in his early works (BENJAMIN: 1996-1 and 1996-3). But, forced by circumstances to leave academic discourse aside, he often writes in a sort of state of emergency, and he develops his leading investigations about this matter, commenced a decade before, in his last writings on Baudelaire, very particularly in his essay from 1939 "On some motifs in Baudelaire" (BENJAMIN: 2006), the only reasonably finished investigation of this kind

[6]Benjamin reminds this sense of the term in the first lines of "Experience and poverty", imaging the words of an old person about a young one: "'Still wet behind the ears, and he wants to tell us what's what!', 'You'll find out (erfahren) soon enough!'" (BENJAMIN, 1996-7, 731).

which, in other circumstances, would have been integrated in the *Arcades Project* (BENJAMIN:1999-7), where the systematic approach would have received the new writing form.

From my point of view, "Experience and poverty" is one of these short texts located between the two movements of Benjamin's project I have referred to: his political and aesthetical commitments (clearly exposed in the essay on reproducibility), on one hand, and, on the other hand, the larger investigation on modernism that he never accomplished to the extent he had planned. If this article is read only in the context of the essay on technological reproducibility (whose importance I am far from neglecting, as I hope to make clear in the following), one will focus either on an archaic world in which experience is not yet impoverished, or in a technologized world where this impoverishment is almost resolved. So, one will simply neglect the modern world in which the work of art has acquired its proper sense, that is to say, the world described in the writings on Baudelaire and, to my view, the only one in which the poverty of experience manifests itself in all its essence.

As I have suggested above, understanding the meaning of "experience" in Benjamin is not possible but by fixing attention on his writings on Baudelaire. Observed under the light of these writings, it becomes clear that the cultural poverty which Benjamin refers to is not only a punctual historic event occurred in the twentieth century, as it could be suggested by the mention of First World War in "Experience and poverty", but a specific and sustained process of transformation of the frames of experience and of the cultural structures of perception which defines the whole configuration of modernity. The historical horizon of a world without aura, completely immersed in the exhibition value of technological inventions like photography and cinema, as it appears in the essay on reproducibility, is very problematic in the background of Benjamin's writings on Baudelaire. Of course, the difficulty raised by this two ways of the Benjamin's theoretical street could be easily saved if it was possible to "complete" the chronological scheme by inserting his theory of modern culture (and of the artwork's place in it), contained in the essays on Baudelaire's Paris, between his views of the archaic world and of the political utopia, contained in *The work of art in the age of its technological reproducibility.* But the problem is that this intersection does not result in a consistent argument: the two ways do not always seem to belong to the same street.

The aim of my thesis is not to solve this problem (if a solution is ever possible). My purpose here is not to reconstruct the genesis and the complex structure of Walter Benjamin's thought, but to draw out from some of his writings the notion of "poverty of experience", which I consider key to understand the way in which Edward Hopper —who probably never heard about the author of "Experience and poverty"— illuminated the same transformations of modern age that constitute the object of Benjamin's work. In other words, it is possible to interpret the notion of "poverty of experience" in the spirit of Benjamin's essay on art reproducibility (and the results of this interpretation reflect an actual dimension of Benjamin's conceptions), but it is also possible to make it in the pathway of his writings on Baudelaire[7] . Indeed, my decision to follow this last path rather than the first is based on my confidence in that option to open more fruitful opportunities for art criticism, especially in the case of artists of the interwar period like Hopper.

Anyway, I shall not ignore the tensions of this interpretation with regard to the other option, and I will come back when necessary to these tensions, because the different cultural reactions to the impoverishment of experience that Benjamin registers in his writings, leaving aside the political issues (which will not be the matter in this thesis), allow to obtain an interesting map of the aesthetical conjuncture of the interwar period. And, to my view, this map could be specifically appropriated to the situation of visual arts in the first half of the twentieth century, because of the significant role that plays in it the debate between "mechanical arts" (like photography or cinema) and traditional painting.

& & &

[7]Nevertheless, even if "On some motifs in Baudelaire" is one of the clearest and most defined texts written by Benjamin, ambiguity or irresolution are never completely excluded from its pages, because they are an integral part of the author's style; so, my reading will be, in many points, unescapably interpretative, and sometimes I will go beyond Benjamin's words, in a direction which is not the only one possible, in an attempt to clarify their meaning.

The thesis is divided into four Parts, each consisting of two chapters. The first Part ("Art and the poverty of experience") is focused on the construction of the theoretical framework which will be the support of my approach to Hopper's works. According to the twofold character of Benjamin's approach, which I have just discussed, the first chapter ("The impoverishment of experience") is an analysis of the main themes of "On some motifs in Baudelaire", and the second chapter ("About cult and exhibition values") is focused on *The work of art in the age of its technological reproducibility* and the conceptual pair "cult value/exhibition value", which according to Benjamin is the methodological key to art history. However, I shall not consider the frameworks developed in Part I in terms of an abstract conceptual scheme which could be mechanically applied to artworks, as if such works were mere illustrations of the theoretical device. On the contrary, I will show that not only this framework can illuminate the meaning of the paintings studied in the next chapters, but also such works can illuminate, enrich, qualify and even modify and force further developments of the meaning of the conceptual scheme, which after all is only a tool for interpretation.

This is made clear in Part II ("Hopper's America"), dedicated to the identification of Hopper's place in American visual arts in the early twentieth century. In chapter 3 ("The image of America"), I will show that Benjamin's distinction of cult and exhibition can acquire a richer content when referred to the debate on American artistic identity, which at first sight appears as a confrontation between the upholders of the primacy of 'life' on art, and the defenders of art for art's sake. From chapter 4 ("A house by the railroad") onwards, every chapter will have, as its main reference, one of the major Hopper's paintings (although in the argument I shall also refer to other works). In this case, *House by the railroad* will be analysed according to a provisional interpretative hypothesis, which will be tested in the next Parts, and which includes a tentative explanation of the 'uncanny' atmosphere that critical literature has identified in many of Hopper's motifs. The main subject of Part III ("Nighthawks and painting in the age of technological reproducibility") is one of the most renowned of Hopper's paintings, *Nighthawks*. In chapter 5 ("Nighthawks: the sequels") I will discuss the affinity of Hopper's pictures with reproducible images. Because of this undeniable affinity, it has been frequently assumed the influence of photography and film on the painter, but this assumption, I shall argue, is not compatible with the fact that many of the images cited as an example of such influence postdate Hopper's canvases presumably inspired by them.

I will suggest another way of understanding this affinity, which will lead me, in chapter 6 ("Nighthawks: the painting"), to reformulate my interpretative hypothesis in an extended focus: instead of invoking an external influence of technological reproducibility on Hopper, I shall argue the presence of an internal cinema in his paintings.

Finally, in Part IV ("Hopper's times"), drawing the consequences of the hypothesis tested in the previous Part, I shall discuss the nature of the emotional charge of Hopper's images, paying special attention to the topics of "loneliness" and "alienation" mentioned in the beginning of this Introduction, and focusing on Hopper's representation of time. In chapter 7 ("The fading of the argument"), mainly referring to *Morning sun*, I shall insist on the paradoxical coexistence, in Hopper's paintings, of an obvious stage-design element and an equally obvious impossibility of attaching a narrative argument to the scenes, this being a manifestation of the poverty of experience, so to speak, as a positive feature in modern art. In chapter 8 ("A little theory of windows"), centred in Hopper's *Sunday*, I shall discuss the problems which arise in determining the quality of the (allegedly intense) affective mood of Hopper's pictures in the frame of the changes occurred in the pictorial representation of feelings, and I shall take the risk of naming a Hopper emotion or, in other words, the affective mood of modernity.

Although each chapter will be accompanied by illustrations that will help to give a better understanding of the hypothesis proposed, there will also be an Appendix with all the images mentioned in the text. Unless otherwise stated, all of them are oil on canvas. Bibliography includes the monographs and articles used to develop the visual part of the dissertation, the works by and about Walter Benjamin corresponding to the theoretical section and the rest of consulted texts[8].

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[8]As a general rule, I have used English translations of the works originally written in other language, when they existed and they were available for consultation. I have only resorted to German or French original texts to emphasise some concepts which could be ambiguous in translation (especially, in the case of Benjamin's writings, *Erlebnis*, *Erfahrung*, *Ferne*, *Abstand*, etc.) or when I have quoted Baudelaire's poems, whose translation is always an unfinishable task.

PART I: ART AND THE POVERTY OF EXPERIENCE

In this Part, consisting of two chapters, I shall develop the analysis of the impoverishment of experience in Benjamin's writings. My aim is to construct, by means of this analysis, the elementary theoretical tools of the critical framework I shall use to analyse Hopper's works. Some of the consequences of this critical frame will be elaborated throughout the progress of my argument, in an intimate connection with the problems awakened by the interpretation of the paintings which I will refer to. My proposal in this Part is to analyse the concept of poverty of experience through three features: (a) the transformation of the traditional idea of experience (*Erfahrung*) in a new kind of subjective perception (*Erlebnis*); (b) the reduction of the distances (including aesthetic distance) produced by the social applications of technological development; and (c) the failure of language traditions, that is to say, the new relationship between words and images created by the generalization of reproducibility; I will call this feature "the loss of words", because Benjamin exemplifies it with the image of the soldiers who return "in silence" (*verstummt*) from the battlefield; but it should be noted that this does not mean a literal loss of words, but a cultural silence or a loss of meaning in language. The first feature, which will be the object of chapter 1, is the only one of the three explicitly advanced by Benjamin. However, I find indispensable to a wider understanding of this transformation to refer to the philosophical background of the concept of experience, which operates as an implicit assumption in Benjamin's texts. Based on this background, I will try to make clear that, to my view, the impoverishment of experience is not a particular situation of European culture occurred in a precise moment, but a structural change in the conditions of experience that can be interpreted —this will be the main objective of chapter 1— as a change in the experience *of time*, something not openly stated by Benjamin. Moreover, I shall underline that, in "On some motifs in Baudelaire" (which will be my main reference text in the chapter), Benjamin's interest is always centred on the consequences of such a transformation in the realm of art and poetry.

Features (b) and (c) will be treated in chapter 2, where the main text considered is *The work of art in the age of its technological reproducibility.* The objective of chapter 2 is to clarify the concepts of "cult value", and "exhibition value", which are the centre of gravity of Benjamin's essay, and which will play a major role in my thesis. I shall insist in the fact that Benjamin presents this foundational ambiguity of the work of art as a methodological instrument for art history, and I shall try to strengthen this position with different examples. As I have just signalled, the expressions "reduction of distances" and "loss of words" do not feature in Benjamin's terminology, but they are part of my own approach to the impoverishment of experience. I argue that they are crucial to give this concept the weight that Benjamin himself assigns to it. Finally, in chapter 2 I shall also discuss the limitations of my commitment to Benjamin's theory of art as presented in the essay on reproducibility (especially regarding the heteronomy of art that he defends). Nevertheless, I shall try not to make this argument it in a purely external manner, but on the basis of the notions of cult and exhibition values that Benjamin himself proposes.

CHAPTER 1. THE IMPOVERISHMENT OF EXPERIENCE

Benjamin does not provide a definition of experience, but he approaches the subject through successive examples. Considering the philosophical relevance that he attributes to the question, I shall draft a brief scheme of the classic concept of experience in western thought, to make clear from it the anthropological meaning of this impoverishment ("1.1. Reflecting on experience"). I shall then develop the aspect of the poverty of experience most openly thematised —and terminologically marked— in Benjamin's writings: the transformation of the traditional experience into a new type of perceptual structure ("1.2. From *Erfahrung* to *Erlebnis*"). This implies a displacement from the original birthplace of the word "Erlebnis" to the realm of the industrial city and the mass culture, which will later be significant in my approach to modern visual culture in the twentieth century.

This process of transformation implies, firstly, the degradation of the traditional scope of experience, which turns into an aggressive environment in industrial cities. And, secondly, it involves the emergence of a protective strategy to face it, in the form of a systematic reconstruction of conscious perception ("1.2.1. The falsification of experience"). Such reconstruction might be considered as a counterfeit experience, but it does not diminish its practical relevance ("1.2.2. A plea for *Erlebnis*"). This reconstructed experience (*Chockerlebnis*) presents as an essential feature its "bad infinity", i. e., its attempt to disguise finitude. This feature can be found in high culture (the mystical or genial effort of exceptional individuals) and in the mass entertainment. The knowledge gained in these sections opens the way for my most personal contribution to Benjamin's interpretation: following this process of transformation as a qualitative change in the experience of time ("1.3. Modern times").

My second aim in this chapter is to focus on the main reason which moves Benjamin to this reflection: the possibility of art in conditions of poverty of experience. Once he has defined the traditional artwork in terms of experience, the question seems especially difficult. The modern artist cannot turn back to the traditional experience (because it is damaged by the breakup of tradition), but the protective reconstruction

erected to manage this breakup, no matter how useful it is for practical tasks, is aesthetically sterile ("1.3.1. Modern beauty: a general view"). Finally, I will signal a difficulty in Benjamin's writings, concerning the concept of modern beauty, its difference with the ancient notion of the work of art and its presumed political overcoming in an imminent future ("1.3.2. Modern beauty: a conflict of interpretations").

1.1. REFLECTING ON EXPERIENCE

The concept of experience has a very long history in Western thought. What are the links of Benjamin's notion of experience with this long tradition? Just because Benjamin does not offer an explicit definition of experience and does not present the background of the concept, I propose to take a brief look at its past in order to contextualize Benjamin's reflections. In the Western philosophical tradition, "experience" has been understood as a kind of aptitude combining two elements: (i) the knowledge of individual things, and (ii) the ability to capture similitudes between them by accumulative memory, finding repetition patterns which allow, by means of imagination, the application of this knowledge to new cases.

Focusing on the first element, it could be said that an expert man is someone who does not speak about things based on hearsay, but someone who knows things first hand and deals directly with them. But the second element ensures that this immediate handling, stored in memory, can make it possible to assign a meaning to the perceptive realm. Experience is, therefore, a process of accumulative apprenticeship (storing in memory past experiences) which draws from the past some awareness and projects it into the future. This is always a "trial and error" process, because future can always disappoint expectations coming from the past, compelling us to change the rule we are working with. But the newness cannot be thought but as an unexpected phenomenon occurring in the background of the customary (ARISTOTLE: 1975: A).

Analytically, these two elements can be distinguished, but it is clear that the first one (direct contact with individual events) is not enough to define experience, because nobody becomes expert only through the senses. The recurrence of these sensations (or similar ones), and its preservation in memory, is the condition to institute *rules* of relation relations between them. These relations *enrich* the information derived from the punctual or instant sensation; and, when projected to the future as expectations, they constitute a piece of knowledge about the matter which goes far further than what can be obtained

from the very sensation. Many of the thinkers who have written about this problem[9] have used music as an example to show this difference: what our senses actually perceive are only the single notes of a melody, which have no particular meaning as such. What gives them a meaning, turning them into a sequence with a beginning, a middle and an ending, is the connection we establish between them or, as I have just said, the discovery of a rule of connection that, retaining what we have heard before, allows us to anticipate what we will listen to after and, therefore, to enrich the single notes apprehending its melodic sequence, in the same sense that we enrich the individual sensations and turn them into a meaningful experience. There is no experience without sensation, just as there is no melody without notes, but there would not be experience or melody if there were only sounds or sensations. This second element, that permits us to go beyond sensation, is called, in this tradition, a *habit*.

Moving from individual to collective range, going from philosophy to anthropology, habits become patterns of social action supported by pragmatic beliefs, i. e., shared views whose validity does not come from theoretical reflection but from practical efficiency. From an anthropological point of view, the whole of these patterns, transmitted by tradition, is what can be called culture. As such, these behaviour's patterns exist as implicit rules. They are not the object of a theoretical teaching, but they are learned tacitly, with the exercise of a given *way of life*. So, experience shows from the beginning a chronological scheme, as it involves a connection between present (sensation), past (memory) and future (imagination). But, in collective terms, tradition is what sustains a *culture* in time, linking its past (stored in memory) with its future (which is expected to repeat such a past), in a cyclic conception of time. This is the reason why we often call societies which work in this way *traditional* societies. The connection between past, present and future (i. e., cultural time) is also the connection between past, present and future generations, which depends on the transmission of these patterns and on their projection to forthcoming times. As happens in musical examples, we could say that this cultural temporality has a narrative structure, because events occurring in it show meaningful connections, and are collectively experienced as a part of a whole story which can be told. And this narration is, in a certain sense, the narrative identity of such a culture.

[9]LOCKE: 1999: II, 28; HUME: 1896, I, II, 3; PEIRCE: 1986, 257-276; SARTRE: 2004, 192.

Every particular event happened to the members of this society takes part in such totality and finds in it its meaning.

To my view, in a very schematic form, this is the theoretical background in which Benjamin draws his concept of "poverty of experience". Let us note that the way in which the advent of an industrialized way of life has forced, according to Benjamin, a transformation of experience, affects the two ingredients I have mentioned. On the one hand, it involves hypertrophy of the first element, multiplication of sensations. But these sensations are seldom a direct contact with natural things: they are more and more technologically inflected. And, on the other hand and most outstandingly, the new technology has caused a sort of atrophy of the second element (memory and imagination), which makes modern men inexpert subjects, hardly able to make sense of what they perceive. It seems as if it were no more possible to draw from the past a useful knowledge for the future, because future is no longer a cyclic repetition of past, but a constant breaking of the cycle. And it is as if expectations were systematically frustrated by a newness which, instead of appearing in the background of the usual and customary, happens as an unconnected event which cannot be located in the timeline chain of sense. If the work of memory and imagination enriched sensation in traditional societies, the partial atrophy of these faculties is what impoverishes experience in modern societies. And this impoverishment has a fundamental effect on the role of art and artists. In fact, the impact of the transformation of experience is so important that it turns art, which was a well-adapted and well-defined activity in traditional societies, into something difficult and exceptional. To deepen this problem, I will develop what I have defined as the first feature of the impoverishment of experience, that is to say, the turning of *Erfahrung* into *Erlebnis*.

1.2. FROM *ERFAHRUNG* TO *ERLEBNIS*

The essay "On some motifs in Baudelaire" (1939), like the one the reproducibility of the work of art, reflects on the condition of art in modernity. Indeed, the first seeks to make clear the birth of modern art, whereas the second seems to describe (or rather to prophesize) its death. In Benjamin's descriptions, the foundation of modern art is a historic event[10] . On the contrary, the end of art announced in the writing on reproducibility is the utopian wish for a new historical (or maybe post-historical) age. But the post-war world did not fulfil such utopian expectations. Therefore, the status of art in a post-artistic era cannot be examined, because this era has never come into existence (or, at least, not in the way anticipated by the utopian hope). In contrast, the foundation of modern art can perfectly be the object of a cultural inquiry (and this is what Benjamin does in studying Baudelaire's procedures), and the knowledge so obtained about its nature can also help to understand the meaning of its possible decline in contemporary times. And the central issue in Benjamin's essay is the role of experience in the foundation of modern art. So, how Benjamin understands experience?

Experience (*Erfahrung*) "in the strict sense of the word" means, for Benjamin, that the individual past reaches its complete sense when it is combined, in memory, with the collective past (BENJAMIN: 2006, 316). And this happens, in traditional societies, by means of "rituals, with their ceremonies and their festivals" in special dates of the religious cult calendar. The task of art and poetry is intimately linked to these rituals. Benjamin does not pay special attention to this issue, but what is passed by tradition in these ceremonies is not exactly an actual historical event, it is rather a story repeated through the years, which includes non-realistic elements coming, so to speak, from a timeless anteriority, and whose credibility relies on the authority of tradition. Poetry and storytelling are a part of a communicational craftsmanship which mixes everyday life events with miracles and wonders in a way that is only understandable in the context of

[10]According to Benjamin, the work of its main founder, Baudelaire, "cannot be categorized merely as historical, like anyone else's, but it intended to be so and understood itself as such" (BENJAMIN: 2006, 318).

an organic community with a shared stock of accumulated lived practises and beliefs. Experience is “a matter of tradition, in collective existence as well as in private life. It is less the product of facts firmly anchored in memory than of a convergence in memory of accumulated and frequently unconscious data” (BENJAMIN: 2006, 314). So, it is not world war, economic inflation or technological development, but the complete fading of the traditional community produced by political and industrial revolutions in modern society as a whole which interrupts tradition and devaluates experience. This historical transformation is what Benjamin regards, probably under the influence of Lukács[11], as a “change in the structure of experience” (BENJAMIN: 2006, 314). So, if Erfahrung is mainly characterized by the fusion of individual experience and collective memory, the modern change in the structure of experience has to be defined by the divorce between public and private life and by the break-up between conscious perception and implicit memory.

As I have just argued, in “On some motifs in Baudelaire”, despite its modest title, Benjamin’s interest is fixed in the consequences of this devaluation of experience for art and poetry. He argues that an activity which was perfectly integrated with the structure of traditional societies (BENJAMIN: 2002-1, 143-165), has become difficult in modernity, because its primary source (collective memory) has lost its old weight. This historic condition is, according to him, responsible for the progressive replacement of the German traditional word to name experience, *Erfahrung*, with the term *Erlebnis* (as enhanced by postromantic writers) since the last decades of the nineteenth century[12] . It is remarkable that Gadamer, in *Truth and Method* also notes that the use of the word *Erlebnis* was generalized in high German culture from 1870 onwards, mostly because of the influence of vitalist thinkers, and this is especially notable in the work of Dilthey *Das Erlebnis und die Dichtung* (1905), whose ideas are based on an essay first published in 1877 by Dilthey about Goethe. According to Gadamer, there are two main connotations

[11]Benjamin first read *History and Class Consciousness* in 1924, when he was in Capri, and he appreciated that “beginning with political reflections, Lukács comes to statements in his theory of knowledge that are at least partially (…) very familiar, confirming my position” (letter from Benjamin to G. Scholem, 7 July 1924 [BENJAMIN: 1978, 350]).

[12]Following the English edition of his Selected writings (BENJAMIN: 1996-2006), many commentators translate *Erfahrung* as “long (or traditional) experience” and *Erlebnis* as “immediate (or isolated) experience” (among others, for example, MCCOLE: 1993). There is no perfect translation, but, although it may find some support in Benjamin’s literal expressions, the election of the adjective “immediate” to render *Erlebnis* is particularly confusing, because *Erlebnis*, for Benjamin, involves some kind of reflection, even if it is an unnoticed one (BENJAMIN: 2006, 319).

in this term: on one hand, the rejection of the "mechanisation" of modern experience in artistic creation, and, on the other, a nexus with the transcendent realm; the criticism of industrial society, says Gadamer, turned both terms *Erlebnis* and *Erleben* into "redeemer" words with a religious resonance in the first years of the twentieth century (GADAMER: 2004, 55). So, from the very first moment, the transformation is located in an aesthetic domain, where *Erlebnis* refers to an "experiencebased art" that would be the work of genius and which has nothing to do with the artistic procedures before Romanticism[13].

1.2.1. *The falsification of experience*

As I shall show, Benjamin firmly opposes to this conception of *Erlebnis* represented by the *Lebensphilosophie*, which he considers as a wrong reaction to the poverty of experience and as the intellectual origin of what he calls "the aesthetization of politics" — the political barbarism[14]. His main allegation against *Erlebnis* is that it is a somehow counterfeit experience.

The interlocutor chosen by Benjamin in vitalist philosophy is not Dilthey but Bergson, a thinker he both admires and criticizes at the same time[15]. For the author of *The creative Mind* (1934), "the past preserves itself by itself, automatically"[16] in an unconscious or implicit memory which has nothing to do with the psychological faculty of remembering. So, there is a radical distinction between perception (which includes conscious remembrances) and memory, the two elements of experience I named in

[13]Gadamer remarks that, from Ancient times to Baroque, experience is irrelevant in artistic matters, since "it is not the genuineness of the experience or the intensity of its expression, but the ingenious manipulation of fixed forms and modes of statement that makes something a work of art" (GADAMER: 2004, 62).

[14]*Lebensphilosophie* is a label referred to the anti-positivist reaction of German philosophy in the late nineteenth century (mainly associated with Nietzsche). In the twentieth century, it produced the methodological investigation about social sciences and humanities (W. Dilthey), the vitalist thought of H. Bergson or the radical aesthetics of Stefan George.

[15]For Benjamin, Bergson represents a conservative reaction to modernity (the rejection of the "mechanisation of modern experience" Gadamer referred to above), which he does not share, but he respects the French philosopher as a necessary thinker through which to understand Proust, whom he considers the main disciple of Baudelaire, the genuine founder of modern art and poetry.

[16]"There exists no special faculty whose role would be to retain the past in order to pour it in the present. The past preserves itself by itself, automatically" (BERGSON: 2002, 153).

"Reflecting on experience" (1.1). Perception is always selective and action-oriented, and we only bring back memories from the past to conscious perception when we find it useful for a specific action. This conscious memory, at the service of intelligence, is what Proust will call *mémoire voluntaire* (voluntary memory) or *memoire de l'intelligence*, "a by-product of Bergson's theory", in Benjamin's words (BENJAMIN: 2006, 316). The rest of the past —which is not valuable for action— remains separated from the waking perception, sealed off as part of what Bergson considered *mémoire pure*. Access to this pure memory is an exceptional experience (which Bergson calls *durée* and Benjamin equals to the romantic *Erlebnis*) requiring a special effort always related, as Gadamer recalled, to the figure of the genius, and therefore distanced from common experience, which is no longer accepted as valid for artistic creation[17] .

So, if one accepts Bergson's view, we should say that the creative action of the genial individual is the retrieval of all the lost richness of *Erfahrung*. But this is exactly what Benjamin refuses. On the contrary, he ranks Bergson's *durée* as the "quintessence of an *Erlebnis* that struts about in the borrowed garb of Erfahrung" (BENJAMIN: 2006, 336). In other words, *Erlebnis* would not be a regaining of *Erfahrung*, but a falsification of experience, a counterfeit experience.

Benjamin states, in a lapidary sentence, that the reason of this artificiality is that death has been excluded from *durée*. And he quotes an article by M. Horkheimer which is the source of this allegation. If one reads Horkheimer's essay, one finds a general protest against Bergson's *durée* as a metaphysic mask of the consolatory attempt of every theology to offer humankind salvation from death "by means of cant about an eternal reality with which we could unite ourselves" (HORKHEIMER: 1934, 164-175), in tune with the redeemer character of *Erlebnis* underlined by Gadamer. In Bergson's case, the eternal reality would be the continuous movement of the *élan vital*, the incessant and indivisible change of life impulse. But the question is that, even if something like this existed, it could not be experienced by mortal beings, precisely because of their finitude. So, the experience of durée can be only a fictitious experience (although a fiction with a psychological consolatory effect, indeed), not a real one. But Benjamin is more interested in another critical remark by Horkheimer: that the hypothesis of a metaphysical

[17]It is worth emphasising that Benjamin's exposition hardly does justice to Bergson's theory. This is even more striking in Horkheimer's criticism, which I will mention here below.

connection of the empirical present with an eternal past includes a negation of historic reality. On the basis of Benjamin's suggestions, it is possible to understand it in this way: the assumption that past can be fully retrieved by means of a metaphysic (or mystic) effort is not compatible with historical time, because events actually occurred cannot be recovered *as experience* by a merely methodological trend, but only by living tradition. And tradition is excluded from *durée*. It is excluded, among other reasons, because tradition implicates death (it is death what makes necessary the transmission of the experience to new generations). What *Erlebnis* conveys is not a collective historic past, but only a de-historicized illusion.

Benjamin concludes that "the durée from which death has been eliminated", that is to say, the *Erlebnis*, "has the bad infinity of an ornament" (BENJAMIN: 2006, 336). This hermetic conclusion hides, in my view, two extremely important references needed to capture the whole reach of Benjamin's thought: "ornament" and "bad infinity". I will develop them successively.

Addressing first the question of the ornament, the word itself suggests the image of an illusion: in an architectonic ornament, the gaze gets loose as in a labyrinth or arabesque, distracted and retained in an apparently endless trajectory. But the use of the word "ornament" can hardly be casual. In Benjamin's intellectual constellation, "ornament" points, on one hand, to the work of Adolf Loos (one of the names mentioned in "Experience and poverty" as an example of dignified cultural poverty), who sees architectural ornament as the expression of a degenerated culture and conceives cultural evolution as a progressive removal of ornament (LOOS: 1996, 226-227); on the other hand, it points to the cultural critic S. Kracauer, author of *The mass ornament* and intellectually very close to Benjamin. Kracauer used "ornament" to describe the patterns of movement characteristic of mass culture in the 1920s (KRACAUER: 1995, 325-327). Furthermore, as has sometimes been observed, "ornament" ─because of its proximity to "entertainment"─ could be a precedent of what later on will be termed by cultural critics as "spectacle" (OCKMAN: 2003, 74-91). In the same way that journalism displaces traditional storytelling as an instrument to learn about the life of the community, modern visual spectacles displace sacred rituals, and in both cases they exclude the participation of the reader or the viewer, who plays the role of a non-involved consumer.

Regarding the reference to "bad infinity", it is clear that it comes from Hegel's *schlecht Unendlichkeit*, a concept he formulates concerning Shelling's philosophical system in 1801. Hegel represents this concept with the image of a line running ever onwards (like a line of numbers). He considers this line as a "spurious" image of infinity, because it does not contain infinity in itself, but only a constant delay of the final moment (that is to say, the finitude), due to the endless progression of the series[18].

The connection between both references can be found in the Kracauer's analysis of the chorus line in the shows of the Tiller Girls, which reflect the mechanized movements of workers on the assembly line conveyor belt. Benjamin illustrates the process of adaptation to this technological second nature with two paradigms of the constant "sudden start" of modern life in the nineteenth century: the in-experience of the worker with the machine (as described by Marx), and the in-experience of the gambler (as described by Baudelaire)[19]. The comparison is relevant, because in both cases the timing of the activity requires a sequence of sudden starts without accumulation of experience. No matter how many times the game or the task is repeated, there are no earnings (what is gained in one round is lost in the next ones), as in Dostoyevsky's *The gambler,* (DOSTOYEVSKY: 1996, original edition 1866): it is as if the aim of the game was losing or, rather, just "the process of continually starting over". And Benjamin concludes that this isomorphism has been continued by the technological developments of the twentieth century: "What determines the rhythm of production on a conveyor belt is the same thing that underlies the rhythm of reception in the film" (BENJAMIN: 2006, 328). In a certain sense, all these movements are figures of the Hegelian straight line ever pushing forward in an infinite progression, and both conjure away the fact of death (they are potentially never-ending movements). It could be said that this bad or ornamental

[18]On the contrary, the "true infinity" (*wahrhaft Unendlichkeit*) could be represented by a circle without end or beginning, which is actually infinite because it is a completed totality (HEGEL: 1988). The origin of this Hegelian distinction is in the "Letter XII" of Spinoza, in which he defines the "false infinity" as the one constructed as an interminable addition of finite segments (SPINOZA: 1982, 231-235, letter dated 26-7-1663).

[19]"The jolt in the movement of a machine is like the so-called coup in a game of chance. The hand movement of the worker at the machine has no connection with the preceding gesture for the very reason that it repeats that gesture exactly. Since each operation at the machine is just as screened off from the preceding operation as a coup in a game of chance is from the one that preceded it, the drudgery of the laborer is, in its own way, a counterpart to the drudgery of the gambler. Both types of work are equally devoid of substance" (BENJAMIN: 2006, 330). We find the same remark in Kracauer, who observes the "lack of substantive meaning over and above" in the disciplined movement of modern dancing (KRACAUER: 1995, 67).

infinite is also a perverse eternity, like a perpetual condemnation or life imprisonment. Some important remarks concerning the "elimination of death" or the dissimulation of finitude can be found in "The Storyteller", where Benjamin says that the industrial revolution has changed the face of death, and "this change is identical with the one that has diminished the communicability of experience". In ancient times, dying was a social event: it happened in a room of the house but it was a public fact integrated with the life of the community. Modern society is, in contrast, organized to avoid the sight of death, which takes place in hospitals, far from public scene, and thus rooms in houses "have never been touched by death", so their inhabitants are "dry dwellers of eternity" (BENJAMIN: 2002-1, 151) in a space and a time without traces of the past. This "elimination of death", whether in popular fantasy or in metaphysical systems, whether in private rooms or in factories and theatres, is a characteristic feature of *Erlebnis*, which always masks its lack of experiential reality with the bad infiniteness of a substitute and ornamental (but, ultimately, false) eternity. But this falsification of experience has powerful practical roots. I shall comment on these roots in the following section.

1.2.2. *A plea for* Erlebnis

On the basis of the preceding arguments, one might conclude that Benjamin intellectually condemns this conception of experience as a theoretical mistake, so that the poverty of experience could be overcome restoring the correct concept. But it is important to signal that this is not the case: cultural poverty is a frame of experience, and the frames of experience cannot be removed by means of theoretical effort. This issue is, in my opinion, decisive for an understanding of Benjamin's seemingly ambiguous position regarding the poverty of experience (Is he against or in favour of it?).

In "On some motifs in Baudelaire", Benjamin, familiar with the nineteenth-century literature he had at hand in the National Library of Paris, makes an effort to look at the decline of traditional community through the gaze of the first occupants of industrial cities, often tinted with a nostalgic idealization of the virtues of pre-industrial world of *Kultur*, which did not seem then as far as it will do in the twentieth century. And he also

describes the essential items of modern society with the dramatic images taken from the shocked impressions of those who watched them for the first time in the early years of the industrial revolution: “Fear, revulsion and horror were the emotions which the big-city crowd aroused in those who first observed it”. This is the condition that in “Experience and poverty” appears as a new state of barbarism that forces men to “start from zero”[20] . The modern city crowd is yet another symbol of the bad infinity or the false eternity: walking silhouettes, apparently repeated, follow each other in a series of separate and potentially infinite images, like pieces on the assembly line or dancers in the chorus line.

Horror, revulsion and melancholy facing the “denatured life of civilized masses” and “the alienating, blinding experience of the age of the large-scale industrialism” are the motivations which led Bergson and others philosophers of life to reject this world without experience and to take shelter in “a complementary experience, in the form of its spontaneous afterimage, as it were” (BENJAMIN: 2006, 314). This complementary experience is *Erlebnis*, which they claim to be the true experience. For Benjamin, in contrast, *Erlebnis* is not a way of rescuing the lost tradition, but the sure signal of its impoverishment. The role that the mystic, aesthetic or metaphysic *Erlebnis* plays in high culture is played by the ornaments and spectacles of mass culture in popular entertainment, including the superstitious phenomena listed by Benjamin in “Experience and poverty”: “astrology and the wisdom of yoga, Christian Science and chiromancy, vegetarianism and gnosis” (BENJAMIN: 1996-7, 732). They are attempts to defend oneself from the “horror” of an environment where learning from experience has become impossible because the series of events starts from zero at every moment, leaving no place for accumulation in memory.

In this way, Benjamin gives back Bergson’s thought the historical background from which it was trying to escape. Following this interpretation, it could be said that the radical separations between past and present or between memory and perception are not

[20]Many times, when confronted to these paragraphs by Benjamin, contemporary readers may feel that these expressions are poetic exaggerations of the experience of modernity, which today do not appear so shocking to urban people in the post-industrial cities. But it is also possible that this impression is the result of an increasing of the discipline routines which we have unconsciously assumed as normal, and to which we have got used by training. In this sense, the exaggerated expressions used by Benjamin could be the reminder of a specific suffering of modernization that we ─the inhabitants of the modern world, exercised in accepting the poverty of experience─ have forgotten, but which is not less real for that reason.

ontological structures, but historical effects of the dissolution of experience (*Erfahrung*) "in the strict sense of the word". They are, indeed, the historical consequences of the break-up of the links between the individual experience and the collective one. This rupture is materialized in the divorce between the internal experience (now understood as the private experience of an isolated individual) and the external one. The external realm, in modern societies, abandons the pattern of traditional storytelling and adopts the discourse of information, characteristic of history, journalism, nature sciences and technology. The need for objectivity in the informative discourse forces it to appear as something independent from both the storyteller's and the reader's experience. This discourse, in Benjamin's terms, informs us about the past, but *does not transmit it*: life lessons cannot be extracted from it. This is why Benjamin identifies the hegemony of this informative discourse with the atrophy of storytelling that is, ultimately, the atrophy of experience (*Erfahrung*) understood as *Kultur* or tradition. So, when calling attention to the divorce between perception and memory, Bergson, without being aware of it, witnesses the fact that industrial society requires systematically a conscious attention that is constantly orientated to action, in tune with the recognised hyperactivity of modern life. And this privileging of action is what blocks what Proust called "involuntary memory" and impoverishes experience. So, taking into account this amendment, Benjamin accepts Bergson's critique of the scientific image of the world, which, rather than representing movement as a continuity, arrests it dividing it into single points. That is exactly what constitutes the snapping of the photographic camera: photography, so to speak, is a representation of movement wholly adapted to the nature of the mechanical rhythm which governs modern cities. And this is also the reason why the modern representation of movement as a succession of stops, materialized in movies ─photograms in motion─, is considered by Bergson a false movement. What Benjamin *does not accept* in Bergson's thought is the French philosopher's metaphysical alternative to this impoverishment of experience, i. e., the *durée*, this *Erlebnis* that pretends to be *Erfahrung*.

It is clear, thus, that *Erlebnis* is not exactly a theoretical error about the nature of experience, but a practical reaction to protect oneself against its impoverishment. Rather, it does not eliminate the poverty, but acts only as a compensation for it. This is more clearly expressed in what Benjamin calls the concept of *Erlebnis* "in the strict sense" (BENJAMIN: 2006, 318), which he constructs by repeating the process of "re-historization" operated with Bergson's thought with regard to the thesis of Freud in

Beyond the pleasure principle (FREUD: 1990) concerning traumatic neurosis. As Freud's essay was written in 1920, it sometimes refers to the "war neurosis" appeared after the First World War, which can be considered as the psychopathological version of the speechless soldiers described by Benjamin in "Experience and poverty". Freud defines consciousness as a psychic defensive mechanism against potentially traumatic experiences. This conscious activity operates a reconstruction of experience, excluding from it the problematic ingredients, which become unconscious and leave traces of their suppression in the form of blank spaces in personal biography. The outcome of this reconstruction is *Erlebnis*, that is to say, private experience: an impoverished and, to a certain extent, mutilated version of the experience. But, for Benjamin, these statements cannot be understood as mere affirmations about the structure of the psychic system. They have to be historically contextualized. It is not plausible that the normal operation of conscious intelligence had been turned into this defensive mechanism unless we assume that the experience of the shock had become historically the rule of perception in the collective life[21]. So, it is required to deepen this concept of shock, which plays such an important role in Benjamin's writings on modernity.

[21]I will propose a broader development of this theme in the fourth chapter.

1.3. MODERN TIMES

Which are the events that Benjamin calls “shocks”? It would result in a poor conception, completely unsatisfactory to understand Benjamin’s reflections, if they were reduced to physical upsets (in traffic or in factories) or to psychic traumas. As I suggested above, my main hypothesis in this chapter is that, when Benjamin speaks about an experience for which exposure to shock has become the norm, he refers, more or less consciously, to the habitual modern experience *of time*. In this sense, I should like to emphasise that the aforementioned Hegelian straight line of the bad infinity *is the privileged image of time in modern culture*: each second of this time is a finite point of the potentially infinite line, which jumps as the second hand on the clock face in the first image of Chaplin’s *Modern times* (1936). Every second is exactly alike the previous and the next ones; but it is also completely different and new, because the points of the line, as the jumps of the second hand of the clock, are not continuous but contiguous: one is next to another, but they are not connected, and each one starts only when the previous one has finished.

There is a philosophical tradition of this image of time. In the *Critique of pure reason*, Kant remarks that, although the straight line is a good metaphor for temporality, it is an imperfect comparison: the parts of the line are always simultaneous (they happen at the same time, and this makes the solid continuity of the line), whereas the instants of time are successive, and one comes only when the previous one has ceased (KANT: 1998, 180, original edition 1781). Some years before, in 1739, Hume had written: “’Tis a property inseparable from time, and which in a manner constitutes its essence, that each of its parts succeeds another, and that none of them, however contiguous, can ever be co-existent. For the same reason, that the year 1737 cannot concur with the present year 1738, every moment must be distinct from, and posterior or antecedent to another. ’Tis certain then, that time, as it exists, must be compos’d of indivisible moments” (HUME: 1896, I, 31). But he also gave a pictorial explanation of the illusion of continuity that Bergson will call the *cinematographic illusion*: “If you wheel about a burning coal with rapidity, it will present to the senses an image of a circle of fire; nor will there seem to be any interval of time betwixt its revolutions; merely because ’tis impossible for our

perceptions to succeed each other with the same rapidity, that motion may be communicated to external objects". (HUME: 1896: I, 35). This illusion, in Benjamin's terms, fills with imaginary data the blank spaces.

But, if we deactivate this illusion, each jump is a sudden start (and a sudden end), and there are always blank spaces between them[22]. These meaningless intervals turn every second into a possible shock, a death menace ("Three thousand six hundred times an hour, the second-hand / Whispers: 'Remember!'", writes Baudelaire in *The Flowers of Evil* [1857]): every finite point of the series *could be the last* (and, in a certain sense, is the last… and the first one). And the shock can only be cushioned by the arrival of the next point of the series, which, simulating infinity, denies finitude for the moment and displaces anxiety to the next one, whose occurrence is a new temporary conjuration of death, a new *Chockerlebnis*, as happens in the "Alabama Song" from Bertolt Brecht's *Mahagonny* (1927):

Well, show me the way
To the next whisky bar.
Oh, don't ask why.
Oh don't ask why.
For, if we don't find
The next whisky bar,
I tell you we must die (BRECHT: 2012, 14)

The operations —mentioned by Benjamin— of triggering, snapping, switching, pressing (today we could add "clicking") or shooting (a film or a gun) are all of them allegories of these jumps of *la Seconde*. As Bergson would have claimed, this is a mechanical time or a false movement, made of stops and starts (that is how Bergson refers to cinema), artificially fabricated and different from the continuous time of the spirit and the nondivisible movement of organic life. But, for modern cities inhabitants, machines are the actual producers of this new kind of social time, the time of inexperience, in which

[22]This image of time is opposed to the one of the "true infinity", i.e., the circle (the usual symbol of time in ancient societies) and the wheel of the year, where meteorological seasons merge with cult calendars. In the circle, movement is continuous and events do not come simply one after the other, but one as a consequence of the other: spring is born from winter, and the beginning of every turn is not a start form zero but the progression of a one and only process. It is not the image of a series, but the one of a totality.

the qualitative differences of the seasons and the sacred cults associated to them are abolished. Benjamin says that the activities of the industrial worker and the gambler, "forced to march to the beat of the second hand" (BENJAMIN: 2006, 331), are devoid of substance. In the same sense, it could be said that this mechanical time is empty and has no meaning, but precisely for this reason it can receive any content and any meaning[23].

As I suggested in "Reflecting on experience" (1.1.), in Benjamin's conception the experience of time in traditional societies takes the form of a narrative chain which connects past and present, and in this way experience "fills and articulates time" (BENJAMIN: 2006, 331). When this articulation is broken or damaged, the circle of time loses its consistency and turns into the bad infinity of the potentially interminable straight line, which continuously produces empty intervals that cannot be filled by memory. Only if events repeat themselves cyclically like the seasons, the experience of the previous generations can be useful for the next ones. But this is not the case when time runs in a line infinitely flowing from past to future and with no path of return, where every event must be immediately forgotten and forever lost to let the consciousness pay all its attention to the next one.

The defensive strategy of *Erlebnis* —i. e., the selective and pragmatic reconstruction of the time-line of the past, suppressing from it the dangerous or aggressive ingredients of actual experience which do not fit in such anxiolytic version— is a highly efficient one to parry the shocks of the mechanical-linear time. If these advantages seem to remain unnoticed to Benjamin's eyes, it is because, as I claimed above, the main objective of "On some motifs in Baudelaire" concerns this question: is art possible in modern society? How can art and poetry exist in the new conditions of cultural poverty created by the change in the structure of experience? And the first step taken by Benjamin to answer this question is that, leaving aside its indisputable performance to make the new

[23]In correspondence with the military image of "marching to the beat of the second hand", Kracauer wrote that modern social dancing has been reduced to a mere "marking of time" and "tends to become a representation of rhythm as such" (KRACAUER: 1995, 66). For him, the ultimate goal of this aimless "system" would be to reduce human movements to the rhythm of machinery. The impossibility to perfectly accomplish this goal is the source of the incurable anxiety of modern people and, perhaps, the reason why psychoanalysis, in charge of the treatment of this anxiety and its consequences, can be, like Freud wrote in 1937, "interminable" (FREUD: 2012, 373-405).

experience of time manageable, the anaesthetic product resultant of this process — *Erlebnis*— is "sterilized" and worthless for poetic experience[24].

Summarizing the conclusions reached up till now, I have shown that what Benjamin is thinking under the name of Poverty or experience is the process of erosion suffered by the traditional structures that make sense out of one's existence in society. He calls *Erfahrung* the core of this process, that is to say, the way in which the individual connects his own experience with the collective memory stored by cultural transmission. Thus, the bonds of the shared present with the also shared past and future, constitute the whole meaning of experience in its traditional sense. When the emergence of large-scale industrialism begins to erode these links, experience is broken in two halves: on one hand, the public realm, so far identified with the commonplace of *Kultur*, acquires the form of an unspeakable present without past or future, giving rise to a new experience of time, strongly symbolised by modern machines and industrial technology. On the other hand, memory and imagination, having lost their ties to the collective tradition, become the elements of *private* experience, *Erlebnis*, the new scene where such a detached subject tries to rebuild the meaning of experience, continuously denied by the mechanized time of perception.

But the relevant issue is that the transmission of experience was the first function of art and poetry in traditional societies, which explains why they become problematic when such a transmission is interrupted or damaged. How could art and poetry be possible when experience has become a succession of shocks starting and vanishing at every moment? How to speak of transmission of experience if it has been suppressed from the ordinary perception of reality and from the ordinary communication of such reality? On one hand, as I have explained, Benjamin rejects ahistorical attempts to retrieve lost experience by metaphysical or mystical means: when the past is a historical past, we cannot return to it by a voluntary effort, no matter how exceptional this effort may be (in other words: we cannot ignore death); it only can be recollected by tradition. But, on the other hand, he recognizes that the transmission of tradition is broken (or, at least, seriously

[24]It must be recognized that Benjamin's intuition has been somehow corroborated through the evolution of the term "Erlebnis", that has gone from having some aesthetic and religious resonances during the nineteenth century to become a fetish term in contemporary advertising, as when a certain good is presented as an *unvergessliches Erlebnis* (unforgettable experience).

damaged) by the "large-scale industrialism", and this break-up constitutes the poverty of experience. So, once again, how can art and poetry be possible in modern times?

In the context of Benjamin's writings on Baudelaire, this problem seems to have only two possible solutions. The first one, which he relates to the romantic image of the genius and to the *Lebensphilosophie* of Dilthey or Bergson, consists of conceiving the artistic (and philosophic) activity as a privileged (but nonetheless private) kind of experience which would be able to restore the links with the lost memory (now considered beyond historical time), and therefore a spiritual shelter from the new mechanized experience of time. As shown in Benjamin's attitude regarding Bergson, he judges this solution as a conservative or backward response to the poverty of experience. The second one, which he exemplifies with Baudelaire's poetry, is to a certain extent the opposite. Instead of rejecting the modern experience of time, Baudelaire submerges himself in it to show at the same time the destruction of the experience (*Erfahrung*), of which he is a witness, and the extreme penury of the attempts to compensate it (*Erlebnis*), filling his writings with the ambiguous feeling of desolate complicity with the modern urban crowd. This is, for Benjamin, the key to the fact that his work (although with some delay) finally reached the modern readers and became a leading model for modern lyric poetry. The (posthumous) universal acknowledgement of *The Flowers of Evil* and his poetic prose as peak paradigms of modern writing is the historic evidence from which Benjamin tries to bring out the secret of this success.

1.3.1. *Modern beauty: a general view*

In formal terms, the scheme of Baudelaire's procedure is clear: if *Erlebnis* is what sterilizes experience for poetry, the pathway to free experience from this anaesthesia is "the emancipation from *Erlebnisse*" (BENJAMIN: 2006, 318). But, as it has been shown above, if the protective shell of this defensive mechanism is removed, perception faces directly a *Chockerfahrung*, the nude experience of shock and of the blank spaces that ruin the plausibility of the selective reconstruction.

It could be said that the accomplished poem is the victory over such an enemy (the "sudden start"), but not in the sense that the poem overcomes the shock or the blank spaces; as I have claimed, there is not, in this context, an overcoming of the poverty of experience; rather, the victory means the ability of making poems *with* these shocks (not only *about* them): "Blank spaces hovered before him, and into these he inserted his poems" (BENJAMIN: 2006, 318). Baudelaire submerges himself in the mechanical rhythm, he dances marking the time, marching to the beat of the second hand, faces the "fear and revulsion" that the philosophers of life rejected but, so to speak, manages to sing off-beat, to inject the words of the poem in the interval between the beats, at the moment of anxiety unregistered by the clock and erased by the *Erlebnis* (the moment when it is not yet sure that there will be another second, another point in the line)[25]. This is why Baudelaire's verses have often the urgency of anxiety: their rhythm is made of subterranean shocks that collapse words.

Nevertheless, the success of this experiment is never granted: it does not depend on a voluntary effort, but upon chance. The division of the year into days of labour and cult dates or days of recollection is typical of traditional societies, in whose calendars "spaces for recollection are left blank, as it were, in the form of holydays" (BENJAMIN: 2006, 336). This division is lost in modern times, in which every second is exactly similar to the previous one and to the next one. The chance of a victory over the shocks, the possibility of making poems with them, depends on the discovery of what Baudelaire calls *correspondances*. In Benjamin's analysis, these correspondances have nothing to do with the mystic or synesthetic interpretation that the symbolist poets made of them, but refer to the ruins of the ritual cult elements that, as the lost halo of the poet in the prose piece by Baudelaire which closes Benjamin's essay, have fallen "in the mire of the macadam" (BENJAMIN: 2006, 342). These are the above mentioned "non-realistic elements" that the collective memory of traditional communities enclosed in its tales. Such elements have become implausible in modern societies and have been removed out of their old temples. The casual finding of one of these ruins, dispersed in the dirty streets of the city, is what gives the poet the opportunity of inserting a poem in the blank space

[25]Many years after, in the comic realm, the character of Charlot will practise the same "method" in Modern times, when, after having strictly adapted his body to the hysterical rhythm of the conveyor belt, gets a victory over the assembly line inserting a piece of "free time" within the iron discipline of the factory.

between two beats (or two seconds of the clock, two photograms of the film, two pieces of the conveyor belt, two dancers of the chorus line, two sterilized rooms, two faces in the urban crowd…). And this finding is what makes appear a holyday at the core of the bad infinity of labouring days or a miracle in the course of a time that has abolished miracles.

Some lines of "Experience and poverty" are repeated in "The Storyteller". But there is a remarkable variation. In "Experience and poverty", Benjamin said: "We have become impoverished" (BENJAMIN: 1996-7, 735), in the sense of «impoverished i*n experience*». In "The Storyteller", the sentence *Arm sind wir geworden* is transformed in *sind wir an merkwürdigen Geshichten arm*, "we have become poor in noteworthy stories" (BENJAMIN: 2002-1, 147). The noteworthy is not only the strange or the curious, but also the miracles and wonders that I have referred to above, which were an important element of traditional storytelling[26] . Benjamin suggests that Baudelaire's *correspondances* are precisely the ruins of such miracles and wonders excluded from nature and from society by the modern organization of time, the rags of the holidays and the cult dates omitted when calendars became timetables and schedules. The activity of perception and language during the working days is the *Erlebnis*, the heavy task of joining the instants of time trying to reconstruct with them a plausible and comforting time-line. But the unscheduled finding of a holyday is something that cannot be nor absolutely discarded neither absolutely planned ("They are days of recollection, not marked by any *Erlebnis*. They are not connected with other days, but stand out from time", BENJAMIN, 2006, 333). The "involuntary memory" of these secret dates, as practised by Proust, would be, for Benjamin, the sequel of Baudelaire's procedure and the core of "modern beauty" (BENJAMIN: 2006, 333) in contrast with the ancient one[27]. For the protagonist of *Á la*

[26]In the days of his investigations on the Trauerspiel, Benjamin had a great admiration for Carl Schmitt's theory of sovereignty, and probably took from his works the idea that, as the information discourse has banished the wonderful and the marvellous for being implausible in modern communication, modern science has eliminated the miracle from nature and the exception from human social life: "This pattern of thinking (…) is based in the rejection of all "arbitrariness" and attempts to banish from the realm of the human mind every exception" (SCHMITT: 2005, 41, original edition 1922).

[27]The allusion to this "secret dates" of history is also a favourite theme of J.L. Borges. The official dates of modern history are, for Borges, fabricated or simulated by governments by means of propaganda in the style of Cecil B. DeMille, and "have less relation with history than with journalism". The secret side of history is "more modest and (…) its essential dates may be, for a long time, secret (…) by its own anomaly". And art and poetry are the instruments of detection of these unnoticed dates (BORGES: 1964, 167). The connection with Benjamin is clearly established in JENCKES: 2007, 107.

recherche du temps perdu, over many years, his memories of Combray, where he had spent his childhood, were poor and undefined images: in Benjamin's terms, they *informed* him about Combray, but they did not *transmi*t to him the experience of his infancy. We could say that his experience of Combray was impoverished. And, although for Proust the rescue of the "true memory" of the past is the task of the poetic or artistic work, it only happens after the casual encounter with a humble madeleine, which acts as the 'magic object' that assures the contact with the transcendent realm in ancient societies, as if poetry had recovered the ritual character of the "ceremonies and festivals" of the traditional community.

But I would like to point out that the comparison with old rituals can only be metaphorical: Proust's character is, like Baudelaire himself, an enlightened citizen, a private individual living in a modern city, and his condition of poet or writer does not exclude him from his historic context. So, how can be interpreted the references to the "lost object" in which lies the power of the "true memory", waiting for the unplanned arrival of the poet as the Sleeping Beauty waits for the kiss of the Prince?[28] The question is important, because if the expressions "modern poet" or "modern artist" are not contradictory (i.e., if it is possible to be modern and, moreover, a poet), their meaning cannot be a return to the rituals and beliefs of the pre-modern culture. But Benjamin does not offer any explanation of this metaphorical language.

[28]When it comes to the references to the "magic object" rescued by the poet in his verses, it could be objected that these sentences belong to the realm of poetry: we no longer believe in the existence of "magic objects" with the miraculous power of interrupting historic time. Rather, we moderns are persuaded that it is the poet's gaze or the aesthetic appreciation what constitutes the artistic condition. However, there is something important in the insistence of Benjamin in characterizing the modern artist's work as "involuntary". The modern poet and the modern painter are no longer semi-gods or genial individuals who could invest arbitrarily objects with the aesthetic condition.

1.3.2. *Modern beauty: a conflict of interpretations*

If, looking for more precision, one moves to The work of art in the age of its technological reproducibility, one finds that "ancient beauty" is, for Benjamin, associated with religious beliefs and ritual practices. The beauty of ancient icons is, so to speak, the gaze that Gods focus on them[29]. Benjamin, like many other authors, assumes that the modern conception of the artwork results from the secularization of practises that, before the Renaissance, only took place in the realm of religious or magic rituals. Indeed, Benjamin seems to underline continuity rather than signalling differences: "the earliest artworks originated in the service of rituals —first magical, then religious. And it is highly significant that the artwork's auratic mode of existence is never entirely severed from its ritual function" (BENJAMIN: 2002-2, 105). But, does this mean that the artistic value of a modern artwork somehow derives from the sacred value of the cult objects in ancient practices, which live on in the profane cult or secular worship of beauty, and "prevailed during three centuries"? Of course, it could be said, as Benjamin suggests, that art has its own sacred places (Museums and Galleries), its own rituals (the exhibitions) and its own magicians and priests (artists and critics). But it is at least problematic to overlook the substantive difference between the (magic or sacred) cult value and the (profane or secular) artistic value, especially taking into account that the aesthetic appreciation has been constructed in relationship with the great social, political, economic, technological and cultural revolutions which configured modern world by means of a breakup of traditions coming from Ancient times. These revolutions include, as a distinguishing mark, the separation of the civil and the religious jurisdictions. Although it could be said (metaphorically) that art is the religion of modern world, artworks its cult objects, and museums its cathedrals, we cannot forget the connection of art as a social institution with the project of the Enlightenment as a whole and, specifically, the separation of powers, which does not only refer to political powers, but also to the autonomy of the diverse fields of human action, including the aesthetic sphere. On the contrary, Benjamin seems

[29]"Icons—the Christ in triumph in the vault at Daphnis or the admirable Byzantine mosaics—undoubtedly have the effect of holding us under their gaze. We might stop there, but were we to do so we would not really grasp the motive that made the painter set about making this icon (…). What makes the value of the icon is that the god it represents is also looking at it. It is intended to please God. At this level, the artist is operating on the sacrificial plane—he is playing with those things, in this case images, that may arouse the desire of God" (LACAN: 1981, 113).

to suggest that art's autonomy —which finds in Baudelaire one of its founding heroes— is only a "semblance" (BENJAMIN: 2002-2, 109), because art always has "its basis in cult". But, what is the meaning of "cult" when speaking of the aesthetic value of modern artworks? According to Benjamin, the dependence of the artwork on religious ritual is "parasitic" (BENJAMIN: 2002-2, 106), which seems to presume that the ritual is not its correct place. On the contrary, in the post-modern world which Benjamin announces at the end of this essay, the work of art will no longer depend upon rituals, but on politics. Is politics then its proper cultural place? This seems to be suggested in such an essay. But this creates a great problem: in the ritual realm, the objects which we now consider artworks were not yet so, precisely because of their exclusive sacred character. In the utopian coming world, in contrast, they will not be artworks anymore, because in such a world art will disappear as an autonomous cultural sphere separated from life, dissolving itself in politics. So, "modern beauty" —this moment in which artworks no longer depend on religion but still do not depend on politics— could be, perhaps, the only "non-parasitic" location of artworks, when they acquire the aesthetical autonomy characteristic of the Enlightenment project (BOURDIEU:1996, 60-68). But, of course, Benjamin *does not* say that.

It is very possible that Benjamin would not have shared this opinion, but I am quite sure of what is the "real" term of which all these expressions —correspondances, magic objects, halos, secret dates, cult ruins and *madeleines*— are metaphors: the modern reader, or the modern viewer. The fortunate discovery by the poet or the painter is not even a mere word or a simple image, but the unexpected revelation of a reader or a viewer able to correspond to such words or images. This reader is shaded and hidden in the anonymity of the crowd, he or she has no name, and this is why the possibility of reaching him or her is always uncertain. But, if the reader is finally met, the frightened scream the poet exclaims before being beaten by the crowd (BENJAMIN: 2006, 319) would have become the word of a language shared by this modest community. And this also means that the "nonrealistic elements" I have alluded to cannot be the ritual objects of a homogenous traditional community: because the reader or the viewer the artist looks for is not necessarily a member of the group sharing the same habits and beliefs, but an unknown and faceless passer-by, the words and images capable of detecting such a community have to achieve a level of universality incomparably superior to the acquaintance granted in the "rituals and festivals" .

By contrast, reading *The work of art in the age of its technological reproducibility* one might have the impression that there is no essential change in the status of artworks from prehistory to the nineteenth century, as if modern world —in which painting or poetry are no longer at the service of religion or magic— had no relevance for the problem. The next chapter will be an attempt to clarify these questions.

CHAPTER 2. ABOUT CULT AND EXHIBITION VALUES

In *The work of art in the age of its technological reproducibility,* Benjamin makes an original approach to the theory of art, which mainly consists of his distinction between cult value and exhibition value, conceived as the two poles of a tension that defines the work of art. My aim in this chapter is to clarify as far as I can this distinction, because I shall use it as a theoretical frame in the following chapters, relating it to Hopper's works and testing it in this way. Although Benjamin's essay is, without any doubt, the most published and cited of Benjamin's works, to my mind it has rarely been noted that, in it, he considers this polarity as a methodology for the history of art, and therefore as the distinctive mark of the artworks belonging to such history, which could be called *historical artworks*. I will accept this proposal for the period corresponding to the object of my research, but to give more consistency to this approach, my first contribution in this chapter (section "2.1. Benjamin as an art historian") will reconstruct the operation of this polarity in different periods of the history of art, based on the footnotes of the essay on reproducibility as well as on other essays, since he did not develop this project in detail. This is the reason why the first section is divided in two subsections (2.1.2. and 2.1.3.), corresponding to ancient and early modern times.

But later modern times, which would be the next episode of such a history of art, are nearly absent from the essay on reproducibility. This *interruption of art history* (section 2.2.) has to do with the fact that, although Benjamin speaks of "artworks", for him technologically reproducible images are progressively devoid of cult value and, therefore, they are in fact excluded from art history. Indeed, the artworks of the future, which according to him will be exclusively appreciated in terms of their exhibition value, are posthistorical works. I shall argue that Benjamin's polarity of antinomic values is so well articulated that, when the opposition is resolved in favour of one of the poles, the meaning of both values becomes more and more confused. Some of Benjamin's theoretical positions which are problematic from the standpoint I have taken in this thesis, will be examined in section 2.3. ("The obligatory misunderstanding"), which constitutes a second contribution to the interpretation of Benjamin's writings on art. The main problematic question concerns art's autonomy. Taking into account the leading role that

Benjamin ascribes to the Baudelairean conception of art in "On some motifs in Baudelaire", and considering that Baudelaire was, as Pierre Bourdieu has emphasised, one of the founding heroes of the struggle for art's autonomy in modern European culture, how does this square with Benjamin's position that art should be in the service of left politics? I think that Benjamin's ideological approach leads him to overlook certain aspects of the opposition of cult and exhibition in modern art, and I shall develop some of these issues beyond Benjamin's assumptions. I shall argue that the opposition can be useful to enrich the understanding of the debates on realism and on the relationship between form and content, which were so relevant in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when artists claimed the autonomy of the artistic form regarding any content or subject.

These developments will allow me to present a third contribution, oriented to a wider interpretation of the impoverishment of experience through two new features, which I shall add to the transformation of *Erfahrung* in *Erlebnis* treated in the previous chapter. I will call the first one *the reduction of distances* (section 2.2.1.), which is to a certain extent terminologically marked in Benjamin's texts by the opposition between the words *Ferne* (remoteness) and *Abstand* (distance). The second one, which I will call *the loss of words* (subsection 2.3.2.), is not clearly expressed by Benjamin, but only briefly mentioned when comparing the titles of paintings and the photo captions or filmic subtitles. However, I think that this observation opens the door to a very important aspect of the poverty of experience connected to the new relationship between words and images introduced by the reproduction devices and, in a way rarely noticed by Benjamin, by the appearance of paintings whose contents are not (in whole or in part) translatable to words. Bearing in mind that these are the three major issues I shall develop in this chapter, I will begin reviewing Benjamin's vision of the history of western art to make clear the continuity of the opposition "cult/exhibition" and to draw out in the process some aspects that will be useful in the following chapters.

2.1. BENJAMIN AS AN ART HISTORIAN

Benjamin summarizes the originality of the approach to art contained in his essay in these sentences:

> Art History might be seen as the working out of a tension between two polarities within the artwork itself, its course being determined by shifts in the balance between the two. These two poles are the artwork's cult value and its exhibition value (BENJAMIN: 2002-2, 106).

However, the terms "cult value" and "exhibition value" appear only in the sixth section of the essay[30] . Before this, without using the term "cult value", Benjamin d*oes speak of cult*, and in connection with this he develops some key notions for what follows. The most important is the *authenticity* of the original piece, the whole history of which (including physical and legal changes) is attested by tradition. And he opposes this originality to the lack of authority of reproductions made by hand, which risk being considered as forgery. He refers to "the unique value of the 'authentic' work of art". And he summarizes it in the term *aura*, which he refers, on one hand, to the insurmountable remoteness involved in the perception of the unique and permanent object; and, on the other hand, to the mentioned tradition that witnesses its temporal and spatial changes, guaranteeing its symbolic efficacy.

His account of art history begins in prehistoric times, stating that the value of the images used in magic rituals lies in their very presence, being only incidental their exhibition to human eyes, and because of this they are supposed to remain hidden from public view[31] . Let us note that the remoteness implied in the perception of the image is not only a spatial distance (indeed, every spatial distance is spatially reducible): not even the shortening of such distance deprives these images of their symbolic remoteness, because such transgression is a profanation and, therefore, it does not eliminate the sacred character of the ritual objects. And this means, in other words, that "the work of art in

[30]Benjamin does not trouble to define such terms. He assumes that his previous descriptions (in sections I-V of the text) are enough to understand their meaning. But I will show that this is not always easy.

[31]"Artistic production begins with figures in the service of magic. What is important for these figures is that they are present, not that they are seen. The elk depicted by Stone Age man on the walls of his cave is an instrument of magic, and is exhibited to others only coincidentally; what matters is that the spirits see it. Cult value as such even tends to keep the artwork out of sight" (BENJAMIN: 2002-2, 106). I shall add that this opposition between cult and exhibition can still be felt when, in a church, a warning informs the visitors that photographs cannot be taken during the cult.

prehistoric times, through the exclusive emphasis placed on its cult value, became first and foremost an instrument of magic which only later came to be recognized as a work of art" (BENJAMIN: 2002-2, 107). This is a very important warning, because in this sentence, even if his words are a bit confusing ("the work of art […] came to be […] a work of art"), Benjamin recognises, first, that the images at the service of magic *were not* (at least for their contemporaries) works of art; and second, that, even if he does not always respect this terminology, in the scheme he bears in mind there is no work of art without a dose of exhibition value, although it produces the tension between polarities; therefore, the coexistence of cult value and exhibition value is *the distinctive mark of the artwork*[32]. But, how does this tension operate in different periods of history?

2.1.1. *Cult and exhibition in ancient times*

To the prehistorical origin of the work of art Benjamin adds a sketch of its proper historic origin in the footnote n. 22 of the second version (1935-1936) of the essay on reproducibility (usually considered as the *Ur-text* of the article). There, he rolls back the polarity cult/exhibition to what he considers "the primal phenomenon of all artistic activity", the practice of mimesis (BENJAMIN: 2002-2, 127). Benjamin attributes to the mimesis two powers intimately mixed but analytically discernible, which he considers the origin of the distinction between cult and exhibition values. He names the first one "semblance" (*Schein*), and the second "play" (*Spiel*).

"Semblance" should not be taken here as the imitation of an existing presence but as the act of making appear —with *gestures* and *voice*—what lacks of a sensible presence at all. Mimesis would have an internal and spiritual meaning, not to be confused with the material copy of a pre-existent external figure. This first power of the mimesis is linked to what romantic aestheticians call a "symbol", that is to say, a sensible image which, by

[32] Attending to the analogy between this pair of values and the Marxist classic distinction between use value and exchange value, this can also mean that, when artworks quit magic and religion, they became a mix of artistic and economic value or, in other words, that modern artworks always are at the same time (but not to the same extent) commodities and aesthetical products.

its own internal power, evokes transcendent and supersensible realities. The mimic, in this exercise, so to speak, *becomes* what it mimes.

The second power of mimesis is different: the mime plays the object of his imitation, in the musical or dramatic sense of this word. Playing is, according to Benjamin, “the inexhaustible reservoir of all the experimenting procedures” of a technology which, in contrast with magic rituals, does not aim at mastering natural forces, but “aims rather at an interplay between nature and humanity” (BENJAMIN: 2002-2, 107). In the semblance, the symbol becomes what it represents, in the same way that the bread becomes the Christ’s body in Eucharist. The play does not point so far. In the semblance, the mime is possessed by the nature of the imitated thing. In the play, like in modern technology, there is a mediation, an artifice which somehow warns the viewer that what he is seeing is only a play. This duality of “semblance” and “play” reminds of the double function often attributed to art: the expressive dimension, which transmits emotions and states of mind, frequently related to colour in painting, and the representative dimension, that is to say, the representational content of the artwork (see, for example, WOLLHEIM: 1970), although in ancient art “expression” is not referred to the artist’s mind, but to transcendent forces. This could be an indication that the successful posterity of Benjamin’s distinction is rooted in the fact that, as one deepens it, its originality decreases.

2.1.2. *Cult and exhibition in early modern times*

Benjamin’s references to this duality in modern times are scarce in the essay on reproducibility. But in the book about the *Trauerspiel* (1928), he signals what, in my view, could be another precedent of the pair “cult/exhibition”, precisely in the distinction between *symbol* and *allegory*. There we find the thesis that, in the cultural periods in which the symbol (the first power of the mimesis) is dominating in artistic activity, cult value prevails over exhibition value. In the history of painting, an abstraction or idealization of forms is typical, for example, of the paintings of the Renaissance. Human bodies are idealized as transfigured by the light of eternity, which shines for a moment in the mortal flesh, and this internal bright is precisely the aura. Eternity lies in the heart of finitude. Human naked bodies, beyond their individual particularities, express an instant

of eternity in which their imperishable essence shines in their mortal existence. They are *symbols* of a flesh saved from death by the inner light emanating from them during that instant, a light which does not come from any external source, and which concentrates the *beauty* of paintings like Botticelli's *The Birth of Venus.*

Benjamin opposes symbol and allegory, the latter being usually defined as the representation of an abstract concept by means of a visual convention (and, to this extent, operating in terms of *Spiel* more than in terms of *Schein*). However, Benjamin's concept of allegory is more complex: "Whereas in the symbol destruction is idealized and the transfigured face of nature is fleetingly revealed in the light of redemption, in allegory the observer is confronted with the *faccies hippocratica* of history as a petrified, primordial landscape. Everything in history that, from the very beginning, has been untimely, sorrowful, unsuccessful, is expressed in a face, or rather in a death's head" (BENJAMIN: 1996-3, 166). Allegory, and, according to Benjamin, especially the baroque allegory, shows the degradation of time, discovers the mortality of bodies, as it happens with the death's head below the feet of Holbein's T*he Ambassadors*. If the symbol can be defined as an expression of poetry in history, allegory could be understood as the appearance of history in poetry, the decline of bodies from their eternal essence to their mortal existence. Perhaps for this reason, Holbein's skull can only appear in his painting as an abnormal object violating the rules of the composition. And this procedure, according to Benjamin, corresponds to a "crisis of the aura" and echoes in every historic moment in which its decline becomes evident. So, the *importance of the aura changes historically, and cult and exhibition values do not exclude one another*. *Artworks have always had both values: what changes historically is the proportion of their combination* (if one of them increases, the other one decreases[33]). However, this coexistence will be interrupted, according to Benjamin, by a process beginning in late modern times and culminating in the twentieth century.

[33]This idea has been somehow confirmed in our times: art museums contain paintings whose main characteristic is the aura. That is to say, there is an insurmountable remoteness in them and it could be said that it is precisely such a distance which grants the painting an "artistic" value. However, the relentless waves of tourists that, with their cameras, invade daily those museums crush the aura when reproducing those images in their digital devices.

2.2. INTERRUPTION OF ART HISTORY

Late modern times, which would constitute the next step in Benjamin's draft of art history, seem to be out of reach in *The work of art in the age of its technological reproducibility*. Artists like Derain and Rilke are only mentioned as the representatives of a historic epoch left forever behind, while the mechanical techniques detach persons and things "from the domain of tradition" and photography and film, as agents of serial reproducibility, act like the gravediggers of the aura. Even so, as I have signalled, one should say that the aura or the cult value which characterizes artworks cannot be, in this epoch, exactly the same ritual distance operating in traditional social structures, because these structures are declining in modern social life. Indeed, the modern attitude regarding artworks is usually thematised as *aesthetic distance*: an essential requirement to perceive, for instance, the fictional depth of a perspective painting and to understand the scene taking place within it, or to establish with the author of a fictional story a tacit pact accepting the rules of the tale. Although Benjamin seems to think of aesthetical distance as a by-product of ritual remoteness, in the essay on Baudelaire he marks it by means of the distinction, rarely noticed by scholars, between *Ferne* (remoteness) and *Abstand* (distance).

2.2.1. *The reduction of distances as a second feature of the poverty of experience*

I propose to interpret "remoteness" as what we usually find in modern figurative portraits. We find it especially in the figure's gaze, which creates an insurmountable interval, impossible to translate into units of objective measurement. However, it disappears "when the viewer steps too close to the depicted scene" (BENJAMIN: 2006, 341) and —I would add— also when she steps too far from it. It could also be said that the space of a painting is the implicit space of experience (*Erfahrung*): it creates a sense of depth precisely because it is not metrically expressed, for such expression would impede the understanding of what the painting wants to transmit. A literary notion can help to explain this point. The saying "Three things in human life are important: the first is *to be kind*; the second is *to be kind*; and the third is *to be kind*" is attributed to Henry James. I would like to suggest that this "kindness" could be understood as some sort of sense of respect regarding a secret which the story tells without making it explicit. I

daresay that the way in which the secret runs through the story, articulating it as an implicit enigma whose nature consists in the impossibility of being revealed, symbolizes the obligation of never trespassing the remoteness that creates that very peculiar mystery. It is never explicitly revealed *What Masie knew* (1897), what was the content of *The Aspern papers* (1888) or what secret the characters of *A turn of screw* (1898) share. In the same sense, people portrayed are not deprived from their mystery or their secret, but it is kept and transmitted without violating it, almost in a discreet way, akin to the transmission of tradition.

In contrast, "distance" (*Abstand*) is a measurable space which can be diminished or increased until every ambiguity disappears. For Benjamin, it has to do with technological reproducibility. In photography, everything seems to be on the surface, everything seems to be explicit. In the terms I have just proposed, it could be said that painting respects the remoteness as a characteristic of experience-*Erfahrung* and, therefore, aura can be perceived in it. The reduction of the distance which distinguishes photography from painting is not only a gradual approach to things: it changes the nature of the resultant image. The transformation of a measureless remoteness (*Ferne*) into a measurable distance (*Abstand*) implies an impoverishment of experience, a decrease of its aura which excludes the image of the realm of beauty (according to Benjamin, the beautiful has no place in technological reproduction). It belongs to the jurisdiction of *Erlebnis*.

Although Benjamin rarely develops explicitly the connection between the reduction of distances and the decline of the aura, it may be established without difficulty. It is worth recalling that the emergence of photography not only resulted in the democratization of the tradition of portraiture; photography was also used in medical and police practices, taking pictures of corpses, crime scenes or human body's organs. This kind of photography implies that its objects are devoid of any sort of aura or remoteness. Medical or forensic photography has to suppress the distance of respect and it should reveal any detail which the subject would prefer to conceal, disregarding moral or aesthetical conventions in favour of scientific interest or in order to solve a crime. The 'cruelty' of documentary photography opposes to the 'kindness' of figurative painting. Photography pursues what may escape the human eye and so, *ideally*, its products should be deprived of experience (*Erfahrung*). It shows us (ideally, I repeat) the aspect that things

would show *if we were not experiencing them*. This seems to be the essence of the exhibition value. So, although the opposition "cult value/exhibition value" *is not* the opposition between painting and photography, it is clear that, in the late nineteenth century, this is one of its main expressions. And it is also clear that, in this controversy, Benjamin has taken sides from the beginning with photography, although understanding the reasons for this position is not easy.

According to him, in nineteenth-century photographs, exhibition value does not completely lose ties with cult value. The "last entrenchment" of cult value in photography is witnessed by the "cult of remembrance of dead or absent loved ones", in which "the cult value of the image finds its last refuge" (BENJAMIN: 2002-2, 108). But once this last resistance is overcome, exhibition value will experiment, according to Benjamin, not only independence, but absolute self-sufficiency. Benjamin interprets this overcoming as "the liquidation of the value of tradition in the cultural heritage", which, in the terms of the essay on Baudelaire, technically is tantamount to the highest possible degree of impoverishment of experience. In Marx's terms, the use value of things has been replaced in modern times by their exchange value; in Benjamin's terms, cult value has been replaced by the value of exhibition. The process that had begun with photography ("*In photography, exhibition value begins to drive back cult value on all fronts…*") comes to an end with film. And for Benjamin this end is also the end of the history of art, that is to say, of the "tension between two polarities within the artwork itself", whose shifts would determine the different periods of that history. This (revolutionary) interruption of the history of art involves three issues, which will be the object of the following subsections: the surpassing of the opposition "cult/exhibition", the relationship between modern masses and avant-gardism, and the social and political function of art.

2.2.2 Surpassing the opposition between cult and exhibition

Before the modern era, there would have been only *quantitative* shifts in the opposition of cult and exhibition values. But, with the emergence of film

> (…) a quantitative shift between the two poles of the artwork has led to a qualitative transformation in its nature (BENJAMIN: 2002-2, 107).

I want to highlight the terms of this sentence, because, although it has rarely been noticed, Benjamin's description of the change *in the nature* of the artwork corresponds very closely to the most extended version of dialectic materialism: the movement of history whose internal contradictions turn quantitative changes into qualitative ones (as, in the customary example, the quantitative increase of temperature produces the qualitative turning of water into steam). What I am arguing is that Benjamin seems to be thinking this qualitative transformation as a *sublation* (in the terms of the Hegelian *Aufhebung*) of the antinomy between cult and exhibition values. As a result of this, the concept of exhibition value that is operating from this moment on is no longer opposed to cult value: it has overcome t*he very opposition between cult and exhibition values*, which has been resolved in favour of the latter[34]. And a strong indication that this is actually the case is the evidence (also neglected in most readings of this essay) that Benjamin is forced to implement *a new definition of exhibition value.*

According to the *old* definition of exhibition value, panel painting increased the power of presentability of the artwork compared with the fresco and the mosaic that preceded it, and the same happened with the portrait bust when compared with the statue in a temple. The reason is that a painting "can be sent here and there". And a photograph can be sent here and there much more quickly and easily than a painting. But, according to the new definition, the change of criterion is so strong that images which Benjamin had first considered as examples of a minor exhibition value with regard to painting (like frescoes and mosaics) are now redefined, under the new principle, as examples of a superior presentability. The qualitatively superior exhibition value that Benjamin assigns to film no longer relies on the fact that it "can be sent here and there": *the new and absolute exhibition value depends upon the fact that the work can be seen by a large mass of spectators at the same time*. The opposition is no longer between cult and exhibition, but between the individual reception (as a characteristic feature of easel painting) and the collective and simultaneous one.

So, this new definition not only differentiates painting from photography or film but, moreover, approximates film to music or architecture, and also to the artworks of the

[34]Let us remember Jameson's warning: "to resolve this opposition either way would destroy it" (JAMESON:2013, 21-26).

ritual age. In fact, Benjamin compares the power of the film with the one of the epic poem. This qualitative transformation means, therefore, the advent of a new type of artwork which, as an inverted image of cult objects, have *exclusively* exhibition value. The birth of cinema is, for Benjamin, the closure of the cycle initiated with the appearance of cult images (BENJAMIN: 2002-2, 124). Artworks are no longer objects of contemplation, but “means of entertainment”, so that “the greatly increased mass of participants has produced a different kind of participation” which Benjamin calls “reception in distraction” (BENJAMIN: 2002-2, 119). In contemplation, the viewer is “absorbed” by the painting’s scene; in the distractive reception, the image is absorbed by the masses (“their waves lap around it; they encompass it with their tide”, BENJAMIN: 2002-2, 119).

2.2.3 *The masses and avant-gardism*

Benjamin suggests that the modern crowd loves only the artworks susceptible of a simultaneous reception. Indeed, he says that the crisis of painting began in the late eighteenth century, when paintings were for the first time collectively exhibited in salons and galleries. When the masses enter the museums, they cannot “organize and control themselves in their reception”. And only the arrival of film has given them an alternative to this uneasiness. In the movie theatre, the masses not only receive the film collectively and simultaneously, but they respond to it with a unique voice, because “individual reactions are predetermined by the mass audience response” (BENJAMIN: 2002-2, 114). So, it is noticeable that the masses presented by Benjamin in the essay on reproducibility are not the “amorphous crowd” in the street which he describes in the essay on Baudelaire. They rather look like an organized and controlled body. It could be said Benjamin is observing the crowd in the same way that, according to his words in “On some motifs in Baudelaire”, Marx did it in the nineteenth century: realizing that “it was his task to forge the amorphous masses (…) into the iron of the proletariat” (BENJAMIN: 2006, 321).

But these masses do not appreciate so much the works of those avant-gardist movements which Benjamin supports (Futurism, Dadaism and Surrealism). The *anti-artists* delight in the destruction of cult value in their creations and stand for the abolishment of any contemplative distance: “Dadaists turned the artwork into a missile” which jolted the viewer (BENJAMIN: 2002-2, 118-119). For Benjamin, the masses misunderstand the avant-gardist works, but they are not responsible for this mistake. The cause of the misreading is that artists use the traditional procedures of literature or painting; so, the public does not understand that the works exhibited are not strictly artistic. Surrealist books, says Benjamin in 1929, are “demonstrations, watchwords, documents, bluffs, forgeries if you will, but at any rate not literature”, as the Surrealist pictures are not paintings or any other “artistic dabbling” (BENJAMIN: 1999-1, 212). Benjamin states that Dadaism was a sort of cinema before it existed: the film also aims to shock the public. But if the same shocks provoked by avant-gardist performances in the scandalized audience produce an enthusiastic acclaim when becoming the material of the Chaplin’s films, it is because the first ones have still a residual artistic appearance, while the second ones have fully accepted technological reproducibility.

However, the affinity of the masses with technological reproducibility does not only rely on the fact that they feel comfortable in the realm of the simultaneous and distracted reception. In technological development, says Benjamin, the masses anticipate the rehearsal of their liberation from hardworking, suffering and burdens. Technology’s achievements culminate, says Benjamin, in the remote-controlled aircraft which needs no human crew. Thanks to it, “the individual suddenly sees his scope for play (*Spielraum*) immeasurably extended” (BENJAMIN: 2002-2, 124). This upcoming age of abundance will be the end of the poverty of experience, not because the future men will be rich in experience, but because they will not need experience anymore. Machines, so to speak, will accumulate experience and will do the hard work, just like the remote-controlled aircraft. Meanwhile, men and women will play like children. “The primary social function of art today is to rehearse that interplay” (BENJAMIN: 2002-2, 107-108). But, what form will this *social function* of art take?

2.2.4 *The social function of art*

There is “a precondition for playing with natural forces”. Benjamin calls this precondition “the mastering of the elementary social forces” (BENJAMIN: 2002-2, 124) or the adaptation of “humanity’s whole constitution” to “the new productive forces” which technology has set free. The aim of revolutions “is to accelerate this adaptation”, because the mere development of the productive forces does not produce automatically new social relations. In sum, what Benjamin calls “communism” is the true gas pedal to speed history. This means “the enslavement of human beings to the powers of the apparatus” (BENJAMIN, 2002- 2,108). And this is the point where art can perform a social function. The avant-gardist products are not artworks, but political actions taking part “in the transformation of a highly contemplative attitude into revolutionary opposition” (BENJAMIN: 1999-1, 212- 216). Hence his affirmation that “for the first time in world history, technological reproducibility emancipates the work of art from its parasitic subservience to ritual” and “the whole social function of art is revolutionized. Instead of being founded on ritual, it is based on a different practice: politics” (BENJAMIN: 2002-2, 104-106).

To grant the acceleration of the progressive development of technology, art has to find an effective welding of the artistic revolt to the “constructive, dictatorial side of revolution”. The aversive response of the masses to the surrealist works is the evidence that this welding is yet insufficient (BENJAMIN:1999-1, 216). The contemporary function of art is “to train human beings in the apperceptions and reactions needed to deal with an apparatus whose role in their lives is expanding almost daily”, and the use of the reproducible images for mass mobilization is the “most difficult and most important task” of art (BENJAMIN: 2002-2, 108, 120). Of course, the political enslavement of the masses is a characteristic of Fascism and Communism. But, for Benjamin, the substantive difference is that Communism uses this enslavement as the previous step to put technology at the service of humankind, whereas Fascism aims at putting humankind at the service of technology to avoid its emancipation, “granting expression to the masses —but on no account granting them rights” (BENJAMIN: 2002-2, 121). From here, Benjamin concludes with the idea of a confrontation between two irreconcilable consequences for art: either art depends on politics, or politics depends on art. In my view, this is —in all respects— an obscure argument because, although one could find

easily examples of both policies, these extreme sentences seem to be only clearly intelligible if we reduce in them the meaning of "art" to "propaganda". And it is clear that this was not Benjamin's position[35].

What is the concrete link between exhibition value (in its new definition) and social progress? Why should the defence of cult value in artistic works be considered as a regression? And, why does the artistic policy of Fascism appear to Benjamin as "the consummation of the doctrine of *l'art pour l'art*" (which would be, so to speak, a radical upholding of artworks' cult value)? I would say that his rejection of cult value and his opposition to art for art's sake depend on several ideological decisions he has made at the point of departure of *The work of art in the age of its technological reproducibility*[36].

[35]Probably, the text in which Benjamin deals more specifically with this problem is "The author as producer", from 1934. Intended as an address to the Parisian "Institute for the study of Fascism", Benjamin exposes very clearly the position regarding art's autonomy shared by his communist audience. About "the question of the autonomy of the poet, of his freedom to write whatever he pleases", he says: "You are not disposed to grant him this autonomy. You believe that the present social situation compels him to decide in whose service he is to place his activity. The bourgeois writer of entertainment literature does not acknowledge this choice. You must prove to him that, without admitting it, he is working in the service of certain class interests. A more advanced type of writer does recognize this choice. His decision, made on the basis of class struggle, is to side with the proletariat. This puts an end to his autonomy. His activity is now decided by what is useful to the proletariat in the class struggle". Benjamin does not reject this position but he considers it insufficient: "The tendency of a literary work can be politically correct only if it is also literarily correct". And a literary work is literarily correct if it implies "progress of literary technique". So, how to decide what is progress or regression in literature? This seems to be a political decision, because Benjamin states that it depends on "the place of the intellectual in the class struggle". But his indications about the appreciation of such progress are anything but clear: he identifies literary progress with the dialectical surpassing of the "unfruitful antithesis of form and content" or of the "conventional distinction between genres, between writer and poet, between scholar and popularizer (…), between author and reader", and he stands for the overthrowing of "the barrier between writing and image", so that the writer, having become a photographer, is able to add to each picture "a caption that wrenches it from modish commerce and gives it a revolutionary use value" (BENJAMIN: 1999-7, 768-782). The internal debate of Benjamin about his political position as a writer seems to have been a permanent problem. His "Moscow Diary", written during the weeks he stayed in Moscow in 1927, shows clearly his indecision. In the entry corresponding to January 9, he writes about the convenience of joining the Communist Party, and he considers as a major drawback that it "means completely giving up your private independency. You leave the responsibility for organizing your own life up to the Party, as it were". Remaining outside the Party, he says, depends on "whether or not a concrete justification can be given for my future work, especially the scholarly work, with its formal and metaphysical basis (…) and whether, for the sake of my work, I should avoid certain extremes of 'materialism'". He also asks himself, regarding his work, "what is 'revolutionary' about its form, if indeed there is something revolutionary about it" (BENJAMIN: 1986, 66).

[36]These decisions can be summarized in the following thesis: (i) Benjamin wants to build an aesthetics of (historical) materialism, and this means for him accepting the Marxist dogma that the historical development of the productive forces (the economic base) transforms the conditions of production and, thus, the superstructure; this development is guided towards a goal: "the creation of the conditions which would make it possible for capitalism to abolish itself " (BENJAMIN: 2002-2, 101); (ii) as art is a part of the superstructure, the invention of photography, as a result of the technological development of reproducibility, according to the philosophy of history assumed in thesis (i), goes in the right direction ("photography […] emerged at the same time as socialism" BENJAMIN: 2002-2, 106); (iii) as photography implies an extraordinary increasing of exhibition value, attempts to retain the artwork's cult value (l'art pour l'art) are attempts to impede or delay the political triumph of socialism. In fact, in the last section of

These decisions are, so to speak, the consequences of Benjamin's political commitment and the militant dimension of his essay, and probably for this reason he does not explain, review or discuss them, and I will not either. But I would like to stress that this commitment obscured another possible and in my view indispensable consideration of the claim for cult value in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, which would complete the map of the western art in modernity, and which could enhance the usefulness of the polarity cult/exhibition beyond Benjamin's essay. Indeed, Benjamin also spoke of "the obligatory misunderstanding" of *l'art pour l'art,* saying that "it was almost always a flag under which sailed a cargo that could not be declared because it still lacked a name" (BENJAMIN: 1999-1, 212). So, I would like to discover the cargo that I think is sailing under that flag.

the essay, the polarity "cult value/exhibition value" becomes the polarity "fascism/communism". As I signalled in the Introduction, I shall not follow these assumptions, among other reasons to preserve the coherence of my approach, which is focused on the impoverishment of experience, a question that, shockingly, central as it is in Benjamin's reflections on art in the essay on Baudelaire, seems to have entirely disappeared from the one on reproducibility.

2.3. THE "OBLIGATORY MISUNDERSTANDING"

Benjamin's negative comments on art for art's sake is surprising in an admirer of Baudelaire[37]. It is certain that, around 1848, the poet had taken a violent stand against "pure art", calling it a "puerile Utopia" (BOURDIEU: 1966, 58). But it is not less clear that, in his essays on modern painting, he refused any social justification of art, supplying a perfectly structured theory of art for art's sake, which he embraced himself after the revolutionary years[38]. Reading the last lines of *The work of art in the age of its technological reproducibility,* where Benjamin identifies "the consummation of *l'art pour l'art*" with the aestheticizing of politics, by which humankind's annihilation becomes "a supreme aesthetic pleasure" (BENJAMIN: 2002-2, 122), one should say that he shares the criticism of art for art's sake that, in the nineteenth century, both bourgeois critics and the upholders of social art addressed to Baudelaire and his peers. That is to say, the allegation that, by putting life at the service of art, they violated the most sacred moral laws, like the immature and fatuous Dorian Gray. This was, in fact, the denunciation of "republicans, democrats and socialists" against Baudelaire, condemning "the 'egoistical' art of the supporters of 'art for art's sake'" and demanding that art and literature fulfilled a social or political function (BOURDIEU: 1996, 73). Benjamin correctly defines art for art's sake as "an idea of 'pure art" which rejects (…) any social function" (BENJAMIN: 2002-2, 106). But, is it sure that the rejection of a social function of art means, for a poet like Baudelaire, such egoistical aestheticism or such immoral submission of life to art's requirements? Defending the autonomy of aesthetic values is the same as defending an immoral aestheticism?

Benjamin does not only interpret artistic movements that try to retain the artwork's cult value as reactionary trends set against historical progress as represented by photography, but he also affirms that the stressing of the elements of colour in painting

[37]Commissioned by M. Horkheimer to write "a materialist article" on Baudelaire, Benjamin exposes his distancing from Baudelaire's positions in his essay "The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire" (BENJAMIN: 2006-3).

[38]"When Hugo writes to him that he 'never said Art for Art's sake, but Art for Progress sake', Baudelaire redoubles his contempt for the political priesthood of the romantic magus. After the militant period of 1848, he joins Flaubert in a disenchantment leading to a rejection of any connection with the social world and to an undifferentiated condemnation of all those who sacrifice to the cult of good causes, like George Sand, his bête noire" (BOURDIEU: 1996, 80-81).

associated with Impressionism —in a time when colour photography was not generalized— was a reaction to photography (BENJAMIN:1999-8, 6). This refers to a historic moment characterized by the professional rivalry between both arts. In a few years, photography deprived painting of a great amount of its exhibition value and, therefore, of its main social function: portraiture and interior decoration, especially attached to landscapes (BENJAMIN:1999-5, 520).

2.3.1. *Reinterpreting the poverty of experience*

But the painter's complaint regarding photography is not always an expression of the mentioned rivalry, but also a protest against the loss of autonomy which it implies. Benjamin states that "Photography greatly extends the sphere of commodity exchange, from mid-century onward, by flooding the market with countless images of figures, landscapes, and events which had previously been available either not at all or only as pictures for individual customers" (BENJAMIN: 1999-8, 6). But this flooding of photographic images means, for the artistic painter, an excessive dependence upon the market demands: "When the means employed by painters are taken up by fashion and by big department stores, they immediately lose their significance", said Matisse (MATISSE: 1978,100). This "significance" alluded to by Matisse is, in Benjamin's terms, painting's cult value. When Matisse says that the painting should offer "what photography cannot give"[39] or, in other words, what the camera cannot capture, he does not point to external objects (which can be perfectly photographed), but to *emotions, sensations or impressions* of the subject, that is to say, the personal involvement in experience that the prevalence of the informative discourse and mechanical reproduction have suppressed from representation.

All those terms refer to what I called before (in 1.1.) the first element of experience (the perception of an individual thing); but, in aesthetic terms, this element is not appreciated in its objective dimension, as a direct intuition of an external object (this function would have been assumed by the camera), but only as an *affection* of the subject — namely, an experience— that photography, not because of its mechanical nature, but

[39]"Today, thanks to photography, one can make such lovely reproductions, even in colour, that the duty of the artist, the painter, is to provide more: what photography cannot give" (MATISSE: 1978, 140).

due to their main social uses, usually excludes. These emotions are, undoubtedly, the part of the experience which cannot be reduced to exhibition value. So, could it be said that they concentrate the cult value of the image?

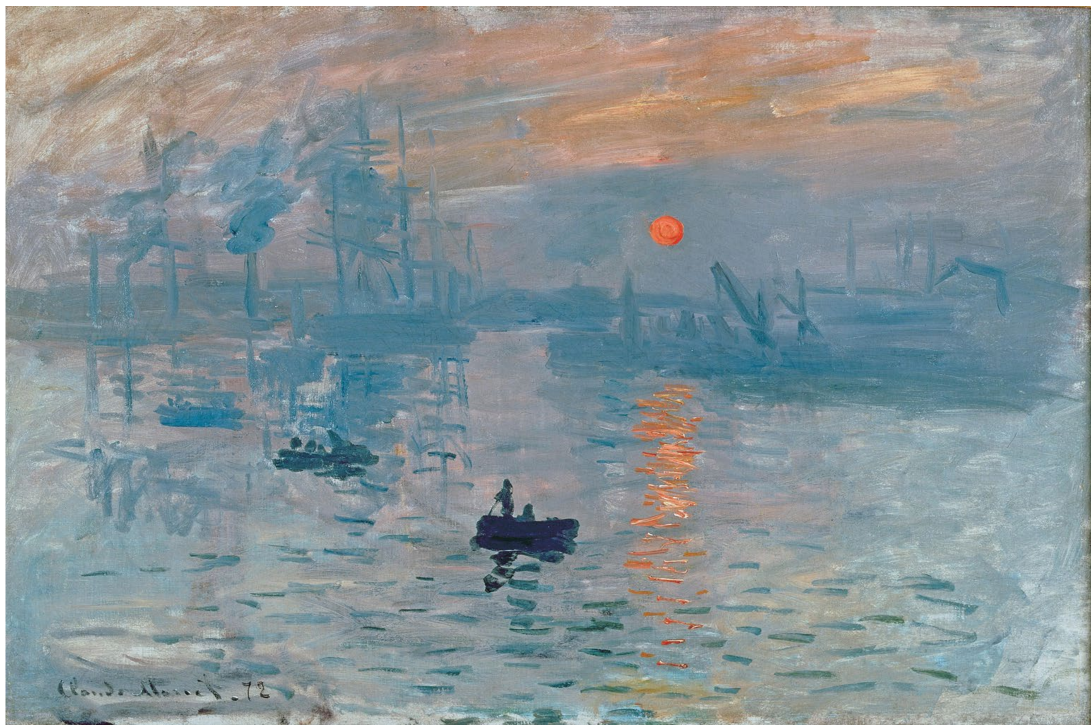
In fact, these sensations will only acquire cult value if they manage to reunite the "community of feelings" invoked by modern artworks. And the power to reunite this community corresponds to what I called the second element of experience, the one related to memory and imagination and, through them, to language. I propose a reinterpretation of the poverty of experience by means of the connection between experience and language which I referred to as an essential issue in Benjamin's writings since his essay on the tasks of the coming philosophy. I have mentioned the implicit character of the apprenticeship involved in the transmission of experience, and the fact that "life lessons" can be obtained from it, denote that the words and the stories (the "telling") which transmit the experience are narrowly interconnected with practices (the "showing"), as happens in handcraft training[40]. When Benjamin calls the aura of an object of perception (which he identifies with "experience") the constellation of associations which, coming from the "long practice" (*Erfahrung*), "cluster around" such object (BENJAMIN: 2006, 337), it implies that this constellation is not only made of images, but also of words ("Words, too, can have an aura of their own", BENJAMIN: 2006, 354). Words are implicit in things, and things are implicit in words[41]. The experienced man is one who always can tell what he is perceiving, who knows the precise word to name every concrete thing; and to know the name of the thing, in the realm of practice, means to know its use. Words help to structure the practice's apprenticeship, and practice helps to fill the worlds with meaning. This interweaving is inherited from the coexistence of gestures and words in the ancient mimesis, and it is expressed in the combination of cult and exhibition factors in the works of art —even if these factors are antithetic.

So, to make possible the community of feelings, sensations cannot break radically with the tradition shared by the viewers. The titles of classical paintings are often as

[40]Although he does not seem to call attention to this, everything Benjamin says about the ritual value of images has to do with the fact that such images are the "showing" dimension of myths and stories, which are in turn the "telling" dimension of the ritual objects.

[41]The reason why both a traditional handmade farm tool and a Louis XVI chest of drawers have aura, but the disposable cups and plastic spoons lack of it, is also that the former tells a story (the story of the long practice stored in it), whereas the latter, being single use instruments, cannot do so.

variable as their contemplation; many times they do not come directly from the painter, but from a long tradition established by their different viewers (their owners, the museums' curators, the critics or the public in general). So, the title takes part in the transmission of an experience in which words and images implicitly interpenetrate one another. The title is an indication of the secret transmitted by the canvas —without profanation or explication of its remoteness—, a secret which creates in the viewer's mind a wide range of possible interpretations. And the historical variations of the titles show that they are not exactly denotative designations, but rather connotative expressions of a figurative language. In many cases, the exhibition value of an image refers to its translatability to the words of the common language. In impressionist paintings, things exploded indeed in coloured points, but, through this impression, the collective world was still recognizable, although the rules of the perspective began to lose their previous power. The titles of the paintings still referred to figurative elements which helped the viewer to interpret the canvas ("Mont SainteVictoire", "Water lilies", "Starry Night", etc.), even if their representation was highly surprising. Certainly, this is the moment in which the painting's titles began to become quite unusual: Monet names his famous painting from 1872 *Impression, sunrise* [Fig.4], not "Dawning in Le Havre".



[Fig.4] Claude Monet, *Impression sunrise*, 48 x 63cm, Marmottan Monet Museum, Paris

The word "impression" does not refer, as in the other cases cited, to the *contents* represented in the painting, but to the impressionist form of the representation (which concentrates its cult value): it invokes *Ferne* (in fact, it is necessary to take some distance from the painting to avoid that the explosion of colours sweeps along the figurative scene). But, thanks to their helping handholds, the explosions of colours do not leave the viewer as speechless as the soldiers of World War in the middle of explosions and torrents of unknown forces. Monet's title is not only *Impression*, but it is also *sunrise*, allowing the viewer to tell what he is seeing.

And this is a way of recognizing that, no matter how valuable the painting is from the standpoint of cult value (what is alluded to by the word "impression"), it is not absolutely deprived of exhibition value (represented by the word "sunrise): Monet's painting is, to a certain extent, "realist". Fredric Jameson, an author often very close to Benjamin's spirit, has argued that realism, in literature, is a consequence of the tension between the two poles of language which Henry James called "telling" and "showing": "You tell, you recite the events/ you show them happening in the present of the novelistic scene". There are novelists fonder of telling and novelists with a major inclination to showing (like James himself, whose scenes are sometimes quite filmic), but there is no realist novel without both kinds of language. Jameson calls these poles "antinomic", in the sense that their conflict cannot be solved. If the tension was decided in favour of one pole or of the other, the result would be the breakdown of realism, because "to resolve this opposition either way would destroy it" (JAMESON:2013, 21-26). I think that the same thing happens with the antinomy between cult value and exhibition value, which is perhaps in the origin of Jameson's reflections.

2.3.2 *Art's autonomy and the opposition of form and content in the artwork as an expression of the tension between cult and exhibition values: the question of realism.*

Impressionist pictures were shocking to their first viewers precisely because what they showed had enough exhibition value to be recognized by the spectators. Manet's *Olympia* [Fig.3] seems to respect the same formal rules of composition as *The Venus of Urbino*, but it applies them to a content that the majority of its viewers found degraded This means that the conceptual pair "cult/exhibition" is also expressed in the pair "form/contents".

[Fig.3] Edouard Manet, *Olympia*, 1863, 130.5 x 190 cm, Orsay museum, Paris

And something similar happens in the realm of poetry. Certainly, Baudelaire wrote in his verses words that had never been before in a poet's tongue, but he did it with the most exquisite respect to the strict rules of metric and versification transmitted by tradition. Indeed, what his first readers found scandalous in the poems of *The Flowers of Evil* were their contents (so to speak, their exhibition value or what was *shown* in them), not their form (which concerns rather cult value). The same kind of astonishment was produced by Flaubert, who put the highest resources of French literary tradition (the cult value of narrative art) at the service of stories, facts and characters whose exhibition was perceived as morally inadequate as a literary subject. Baudelaire's poems shocked and scandalized his contemporaries, but the shock was not their goal. The poet tries to *detain* the shock with his poem, like the swordsman detains the fencing blow with his body. In

"On some motifs in Baudelaire", the crowd appears as an *element*, like air or water, the element in which the poet lives and through which he experiences the city. Of course, Baudelaire feels "fear, horror and revulsion" with regard to the crowd, he battles it, but he does it "with the impotent rage of someone fighting the rain or the wind" (BENJAMIN: 2006, 343), that is to say, always *from inside* ("the masses were anything but external to him"), because he also feels the "attraction and allure" of the crowd (BENJAMIN: 2006, 322). And Benjamin signals that this makes a difference with the points of view on the masses elected by other writers: Poe watches the crowd from the window of a public coffee house, Hoffmann from the corner window of his house (BENJAMIN: 2006, 321). Baudelaire is *in* the crowd, and looks into it for the love of the woman who makes her way past and, of course, for the attention of his reader ("Hypocrite reader —my fellow creature— my brother!"). The possibility of finding a "fellow-creature" into the serial line of faces in the crowd is as uncertain as the one of finding the lost halo in the asphalt; but it is a possibility because the masses "do not stand for classes *or any sort of collective*; rather, they are nothing but the amorphous crowd of passers-by, the people in the street" (BENJAMIN, 2006, 321, italics added).

In the Baudelairean poetics, the shock is a means to achieve the aim of the poem (so to speak, the vanishing aura). The shock is an unpleasant and not intended effect of which the poet takes advantage to reach his reader. This is the form taken in modern times by the combination of the collective and the individual experience. And, although with some delay, his language was fully accepted by his descendants as the common language of modern poetry, and the community of readers he was looking for finally recognized itself successfully in his writings, because he gave "the weight of experience (*Erfahrung*)" to its inexperience (*Erlebnis*) (BENJAMIN: 2006, 343). And he made this from the assumptions of art for art's sake. Baudelaire, Flaubert or Manet are trying to defend the independence of the form of the artwork (i.e., its cult value) from its contents, but these contents are still (at least partially) representational. And this is precisely what constitutes the reason of the scandal perceived by the viewers: they experience the inadequacy between form (cult value) and contents (exhibition value). The tension between both values is here stressed, but it is also evident that, therefore, these works preserve what I previously called *the distinctive mark of the artwork*, which precisely consists of this coexistence.

The stress on the tension comes from the artists' defence of the independence of the expressive factor with respect to the representational one, which is underlined with the formula 'art for art's sake'. But although this defence displays a popular image of such artists as socially dangerous people, the stigma of moral extravaganza attached to them might be the signal of a socially regressive resistance to the institutionalization of artistic freedom (which is indissolubly linked to civil liberties), even if this resistance comes from allegedly progressive sectors[42] . This is the reason why they can be considered as heroes in the struggle for art's autonomy. As Bourdieu says

> The upholders of art for art's sake (…) engaged in a labour that is located at the antipodes of a production subservient to the powerful or to the market (…) It is they who, making a break with the dominants over the principle of the existence of the artist as artist, institute it as a rule of operation of the field in the process of formation (…) If, in this collective enterprise (…), one had to choose a sort of founding hero, a nomothète (…), one could only think of Baudelaire (BOURDIEU: 1996, 62).

These words underline that the main signification of the autonomy which the painter claims this way is referred to a specifically aesthetic sphere of value and judgement, different from the spheres of market, morals or politics. But autonomy from politics, as an artistic position, is also a major *political* issue[43] .

Benjamin adds that "by the time Impressionism yields to Cubism, painting has created for itself a broader domain into which, for the time being, photography cannot follow" (BENJAMIN: 1999-8, 6). When he speaks of the claim for a "pure art" as a symptom of resistance to the industrial technology of reproduction, he says that this attitude does not only leave aside any social function of art, but also *any representational content* of it (BENJAMIN: 2002-2, 106). His literary example is Mallarme's poetry, but I shall argue that this also happens in abstract painting. Some avant-gardist painters reject the mechanically produced images and move towards abstraction, exclusively emphasizing the cult value in the artwork. Probably, if Benjamin had not adopted this

[42]"The defenders of the art for art's sake (…) assert the autonomy of the artist by opposing 'social art' and the 'literary bohemia' just as much as they oppose a bourgeois art which is subordinated (…) to the norms of the bourgeois clientele" (BOURDIEU: 1996, 342).

[43]In the essay on reproducibility, Benjamin rejects such autonomy: "insofar as the age of technological reproducibility separated art from its basis in cult, all semblance of art's autonomy disappeared forever" (Benjamin: 2002-2, 109). To my view, this opinion is linked to the commonplace of the Marxist materialism accepted by Benjamin in this essay: the autonomy of the superstructure can only be an ideological illusion, given the prevalence of the economic base.

position against art's autonomy, he could have taken advantage of the duality of cult and exhibition value to construct a better understanding of the rise of abstraction. Painting things somehow detached from the recognizable objects of the everyday perception is also an effort to avoid that the Erlebnis represented by photography in the illustrated magazines and anywhere else substitutes for the subjective experience, a struggle to impede the absolute victory of the impoverished images and, therefore, of the poverty of experience[44] .

2.3.2 *The loss of words as a third feature of the poverty of experience*

A proof of the intimate character of the link between cult and exhibition values is that, when the interweaving of both values disappear, also the words of experience (the words "with aura") vanish, and they need to be replaced by another kind of language. The poverty of experience also refers to the perplexity of someone who, like the soldiers of the First World War, finds himself among things which he cannot name (the "force field of destructive torrents and explosions", BENJAMIN: 1996-7, 732), or whose names mean nothing to him. It happens as if, after having lived during centuries in an implicit but narrow agreement, words and images began to separate from each other.

Benjamin signals that "prehistoric art made use of certain fixed notations in the service of magical practice". This can be compared "from a material point of view" with what happens in cinema. Even if the viewer adopts the same psychological attitude in front of the screen as when listening to a tale or a melody, he cannot really remember all the previous photograms when he watches the actual one (indeed, he *has not consciously seen such photograms*), and he cannot anticipate the next one, in contrast with what happens, for example, in traditional music: "in a film, perception conditioned by shock was established as a formal principle" (BENJAMIN:2006, 328). For this reason, as Benjamin says, explicit and imperative directives are again necessary "where the meaning of each single picture appears to be prescribed by the sequence of all preceding ones" (BENJAMIN: 2002-2, 109). In other words, directives become necessary when the images do not come from experience, but from the dissecting activity of the mechanic

[44]I will show in the next chapters the possibilities of this approach to account for what I would call the cult side of avant-gardism.

vision. And the sign of this need is the appearance of signposts under the pictures of the illustrated magazines: the image is substituted for the place photographed in it, like a prefabricated or ready-made experience; but, as every industrial object, it needs a verbal explicit directive to indicate which is the experience 'bottled' this way. *Erlebnis* is the proper name of this impoverished experience, which is actually *in-experience.*

Words have to be added to images because images, somehow, have run away from words[45]: they say nothing to the one who sees them. Words are not implicit in the images, by contrast with what occurred when images transmitted a living experience, and therefore they have to be inserted as "explicit and imperative directives" to learn their meaning: "For the first time, captions have become obligatory". When the publication of a photograph becomes the "standard evidence for historical occurrences" (BENJAMIN:2002-2, 109), these images appear to the reader as shocks (in the Benjaminian sense): he experiences photographs as real facts that, like the crime scenes which policemen observe when arriving in the scenery of a murder, cannot be immediately explained by words. The newspaper's reader "feels challenged by them" and he needs protection against this astonishing appearance. The caption is that protection, it says explicitly what has to be seen in the picture, leaving no margin for what Benjamin calls the "free-floating contemplation" which would be accurate in front of an artwork. Without such a footer, photographs are as deserted as the mentioned crime scenes. The imperative captions of the illustrated newspapers and the advertisements written in the subway walls or flashing in the street's neon are the instruction manual of the visual *Erlebnis*. They are not the words of experience, they do not tell the collective story, but they fill the blanks produced by the lack of experience and of stories.

Of captions Benjamin says that "it is clear that they have an altogether different character than the title of a painting" (BENJAMIN:2002-2, 109). In contrast with the title of a painting, the photo caption is needed when the image informs us visually about a fact, but it does not transmit us any experience, so it cannot suggest the adequate words to name it. It could be said that, when images replace things, captions replace titles. The

[45]Another sequence of the above cited film by Chaplin, Modern Times, shows the character of Charlot in a music hall where he unwillingly loses the words of the song he has to sing, which were written in his cuffs. His partner in the story, seeing his despair in the scenery, shouts to him: "Never mind the words! Sing!". But the viewer does not listen to these words (it is an almost silent film), but he reads them in the intertitle.

photo caption appears like something exterior and strange to the image, imposing from outside a univocal decoding system, as an order. Captions are always denotative prescriptions not only associated with journalism and film, but especially with the spheres of fashion and market commodities and to the one of the political slogans.

The modern visual scope is, according to Benjamin, deprived of experience and its roots do not lie in tradition. This is an impoverishment of experience, responsible for the fact that experience, in modernity, has become a sequence of shocks which merges itself with the anti-narrative sequence of the mechanical time of the clock. And this impoverishment is what the soldiers described in "Experience and poverty" feel when they cannot tell the things they have seen; or, could it be said, when the first element of experience (sensation) is separated from the second (memory and imagination). But, as Benjamin himself suggests, this poverty does not occur without providing a defensive strategy to control the shocks and, therefore, to hide or to dissimulate its nakedness to the eyes of those who suffer it. This is what Benjamin calls "the protective shell" of the Erlebnis, which suppresses the unlikely and virtually traumatic events. This defensive strategy is an integral part of the poverty of experience: it does not alleviate the scarceness; it only avoids that poverty can be painfully experienced as such. And that is the function of the images whose main value is their exhibition power (as well photographs as pseudoromantic landscapes). But, as Benjamin says, this protective shell eliminates the aura and is sterile if seen as material for the artistic work. The painter's eye, so to speak, cannot be a protective one. Indeed, impressionist paintings produced a shock in the public when they were exhibited for the first time: figures disintegrated in an explosion of colours and abstract forms. But this does not mean that impressionist paintings were not "realistic": this explosion was actually happening in the urban *Erfahrung*; things were really exploding in separate fragments or "impressions" at the rhythm of the shocks. The impoverishment of experience (that is to say, the technological fragmentation of experience) is responsible for the fact that these emotions, that in traditional culture were integrated in storytelling, had lost an important part of their narrative charge, becoming naked sensations that the protective shell of *Erlebnis* makes insensible. The task of the painter, as described in "On some motifs in Baudelaire", is to make sensible this insensibility.

But, in Benjamin's view, the radical bifurcation of cult and exhibition values marks the beginning of a period coming after art history, the post-historical condition of the work of art. The "approaching war" which he previews in 1933 (BENJAMIN: 1966-7, 735) will be, for him, the global confrontation of cult value (*Fiat ars, pereat mundus*) and exhibition value (*Fiat mundus, pereat ars*) in the European battlefields. Regarding art, he expected that the result of such conflict will be the final closure of the long "age of auratic perception that is now [in 1936] coming to an end" (BENJAMIN: 2002-2, 105, 127). All we can say is that reality did not fulfil in any manner what Benjamin had imagined. Among many other consequences, this meant that aura, even damaged, torn and plunged deeper into the macadam than in Baudelaire's times, somehow outlived this massive crisis in Europe as well as in the geopolitical locations anticipated by Benjamin as the post-historical sites of the non-auratic perception of the work of art. One of these sites was the Soviet Union. The other, the United States of America, due to the advanced development of the film industry in that country.

PART II: HOPPER'S AMERICA

This Part introduces the situation of American visual arts in the early twentieth century, in Hopper's formative years as a painter, and develops an analysis of his mature works, specifically focusing on *House by the railroad* (1925) [Fig.15], usually considered as a major example of it. I shall apply the theoretical frame developed in the previous Part to the objective of drawing the historical conditions of American art in general and of Hopper's work in particular. In the third chapter ("The image of America"), moving from the European view of America which is implicit in Benjamin's writings to the actual discussions of American artists and critics in the period. I propose a twofold consideration of the debate on visual arts in the United States: in historical terms, it is the conflict between those artists linked to modernist and avant-gardist trends, and those others who searched for inspiration in American themes, trying to construct an artistic approach to modern life rarely intended in art schools and academic institutions. But, in the terms of Benjamin's analysis, as I shall argue, this conflict could be seen as an expression of the internal tension between cult and exhibition in the modern artwork. Putting it in broader terms, both approaches belong to the general debate about the weight of technology and tradition in modern art, including discussions concerning the artistic use of technology and the technological use of art.

The impact of this general debate can be found in Hopper's painting to the extent that it is embodied in the dynamic tension which dominates *House by the railroad* [Fig.15] whose two main elements contain, respectively, the symbolic meaning of tradition and technology, as I shall argue in chapter 4 ("A house by the railroad"). After a review of some of the main critical statements on this painting, I shall introduce the impoverishment of experience in terms of the reduction of distances produced by the railway. But my point will be to elaborate a new interpretative hypothesis about how this objective transformation is reflected in a structural change of the subjective perception of space and time, and on Hopper's unconscious registering of such changes artistically. One of the remarkable results of this procedure is the fact that, instead of representing a landscape absolutely deprived of mystery by the technological intervention, *House by the*

railroad [Fig.15] shows the image of an uncanny building with a dark and menacing aura. But, how is this strange effect achieved?

CHAPTER 3. THE IMAGE OF AMERICA

My aim in this chapter is, on one hand, to establish the link between the previous Part about Benjamin and the analysis of Hopper's painting that will constitute the object of the rest of my dissertation, and, on the other hand, to make a first test of the theoretical frame I have designed to describe the situation of visual arts in America in the early twentieth century. In the first section ("The many faces of Americanism") I shall argue that this standpoint conflicts with the situation of American artists, who were involved in a long and complex debate about American cultural identity and the construction of a distinctive American art. And in this debate the terms 'art' and 'life' (and the relationship between them) were also a constant object of dispute. In the second section ("A landscape of controversy") I shall consider this debate through Benjamin's opposition of cult and exhibition values in the heart of the work of art, which to my view enriches the signification of the confrontation between 'realism' and 'abstraction' ("An excursus on the representational impoverishment in the abstract artwork"). Finally, in the last section ("Hopper's place") I will signal some of the peculiarities shown by Hopper's position in this landscape of controversy, stressing dissimilarities with painters who were apparently close to his aesthetic, such as John Sloan, heir of the Ashcan School in the decade of 1930. This is all groundwork for the interpretation of *House by the railroad* [Fig.15], the object of chapter 4.

3.1. THE MANY FACES OF AMERICANISM

Like Benjamin himself, many European thinkers and artists shared a vision of America as the naïve and primitive territory where the future of art will be constructed. But, what are the ingredients of a European image of America? And what role did this image play in the perception that local artists had of the artistic problems they faced? Many passages in Benjamin's writings express a positive attitude towards America in cultural matters, today often described as "Americanism"[46] . For example, Mickey Mouse features in the last pages of "Experience and Poverty" or these lines from *One-way-street*:

> Today the most real, the mercantile gaze into the heart of things is the advertisement. It abolishes the space where contemplation moved and all but hits us between the eyes with things as a car, growing to gigantic proportions, careens at us out of a film screen (…) in face or the huge images across the walls of the houses, where toothpaste and cosmetics lie handy for giants, sentimentality is restored to health and liberated in American style, just as people whom nothing moves or touches any longer are taught to cry again by films (BENJAMIN: 1996-5, 473)

This Americanism implies two elements. The first one is an old and stereotyped image of America as a "mythical" and virginal land (ignoring or disregarding the presence of Native Americans in the epic tale of the conquest). This America was neither modern nor ancient, but primal. It represented the elemental, the wild and the primitive. In a pejorative sense, the definition of the primitive is linked to the idea of the barbaric or the uneducated. However, primitive can also have a positive sense: that of the innocent or the unsophisticated, which has been present in literary tradition as a typical note of the American character. In the same way that their romantic predecessors had travelled to the north of Africa to experience an exotic otherness, artists like Duchamp or Picabia felt America as a country which was not under the burden of its history. Europeans usually compared the two different cultures, so that, as Corn states, "America's wild and primitive modernity served as rhetorical foil to Europe's tradition bound character (…). The New

[46]The search for the specific qualities of American art became a commonplace among artists and critics in the United States during the nineteenth century, so the question of "Americanness" in art was frequently discussed (McCOUBREY: 2000; NOVAK: 2007; TUITE-DOCHERTY: 2010). Besides its broad nationalist meaning, the term "Americanism" applied to art emerged probably in the twentieth century, in the first generation of American modernists, who no longer related Americanness to the iconography of the wild natural landscape of America, but to the products of industrialization and the problems posed by their representation (CAHILL-BARR: 1936; GELDZAHLER: 1965). Virgil Barker used the word in two articles in 1934 and 1936, "Americanism in painting" and "The search for Americanism", where he relies on the idea that Americanism was a European dream before becoming actuality in America (BARKER: 1934, 51).

World had all the headstrong energies of youth, Europe the mellowness of age" (CORN: 1999, 53). But these youthfulness and innocence have also a negative meaning: cultural underdevelopment. This was the reason for the trip around Europe which became mandatory as a culmination of the apprenticeship for those Americans who wanted to be considered as artists. Edward Hopper travelled to Europe in 1906, 1907 and 1908, encouraged by Robert Henri, although this European tour lost its relevance during the first decades of the twentieth century (HOBBS:1987, 25).

American artists faced, in the New York of the early twentieth century, the same problem that, according to Benjamin, Baudelaire tried to solve in nineteenth-century's Paris: how to create art under the sway of the poverty of experience. American artists could not search for the lost memory in their past in the same way as European artists did, because in America this European past implied dependence. But the poverty of experience is not only a negative feature, but an opportunity to set culture free from European colonialism. American artists did not have an institutionalized visual art in the national cultural tradition; on the contrary, they were trying to construct it. The artistic realm of the country during the first half of the twentieth century was characterized by a constant effort and a relentless dispute about the means to reach this goal, only achieved by the time when the United States became a global dominant power, after the Second World War. But the lack of a strong cultural tradition positions American artists in the middle of what is generally considered as the very core of modernity: industry, business, finances, advertising, mass culture, that is to say, the main features of the impoverishment of experience.

And this observation leads us to the second element of the European image of America: the fascination with industrial development, which is also present in Benjamin's texts. In the first decades of the twentieth century it was not unusual for Europeans to understand America as a politically and industrially developed but culturally underdeveloped country when compared to Europe, a sort of technological paradise which lacked tradition. As Wanda Corn puts it: "Europe was the seat of humanism, America of efficiency and industry (...) Europe had great artists, America great engineers. Europe had palaces and cathedrals; America had skyscrapers" (CORN: 1999, 55). Benjamin exposes his utopian idea of a post-art world with examples taken not only from the avant-garde context, but also from the cultural industry of the United States (films,

comics and cartoons) and, as it has been noted before, he appreciates these seemingly childish expressions of mass culture as the symptoms of a technology that develops the productive forces in the direction of a progressive liberation. Miracles, in technology and in nature, have become possible again.

So, if one puts together both elements of the European image of America — ultra-primitivism and ultra-technologization— , it can be said that this mythical vision is not far removed from the mix of "nature and technology, primitivism and comfort" that Benjamin perceives in Mickey Mouse's adventures, as if the two extreme ages of the artwork, the magical and the technological one, could reunite in a new world capable of making compatible the comforts of civilization and the exoticism of the *terra incognita*, which for Kracauer, by contrast, excluded one another (KRACAUER: 1995, 65-66).

This same spirit can be found behind the statements on art made by Duchamp in America[47]: he saw in that innocent barbarism (or barbaric innocence) the realization of an avant-gardist utopia where art and life merge. Rather than struggling to create its own culture, America, according to Duchamp, would have to accept its own lack of education and to think of itself as a society which had overcome culture and art in the elitist, decadent and old European sense. This is close to what Benjamin calls, in the final lines of "Experience and poverty", outliving culture. Americans were not the ones who had to travel to Europe (or to go French) to educate themselves; rather, Europeans had to travel to America to become absolutely modern.

However, the idea of America surpassing of art, quite attractive for European immigrant artists, was not so appealing for American artists. For American painters, the emancipation from European cultural tutelage did not only mean a rupture with European tradition, *but also with the European image of America*, still impregnated with colonialist prejudices. Indeed, the positive Americanism of French artists, like the one shared with Benjamin, could be less innocent than it seems. Wanda Corn suggests this issue when she calls attention on the "double agenda" proposed by Apollinaire in 1916: "modernizing to stay nationally competitive", that is to say, "grafting elements of American style modernity onto French tradition and self-images" to assure "the survival of their own art

[47]"If only America would realize that the art of Europe is finished —dead— and that America is the country of the art of the future" (New York Tribune, September, 12, 1915).

traditions, now threatened by shifts in global power" (CORN: 1999, 103-105). For this reason, the cultural and artistic independence from Europe requires questioning both the ultraprimitivistic and the ultra-technologized images of America.

And this task in turn implies relativizing the idea that there is no cultural tradition in America apart from popular religion and mass culture. In this sense, it represents a decisive step the series of writings produced by Lewis Mumford after 1926, the year he published *The Origins of the American Mind*. In this and subsequent writings, Mumford constructed a canon of intellectual founders of modern American high culture: Whitman, Melville, Emerson, Thoreau and Eakins, among others. He also established a new kind of link between Europe and America, preserving the maternal connexion and, at the same time, surpassing the relationship of dependence. One of the most interesting points of Mumford's position is that he identifies "American" with "modern" to the extent that he locates the breakup with the old world *in Europe*, where "fossilized" medieval culture was replaced by a new abstract culture "deliberately indifferent to man's proper interests". It was Europe, according to Mumford, that produced that culture and, by doing so, "already had one foot in America". That is to say, America would be the name of the accomplishment of that new order, and the American man would be the "naked European", unable to continue with his tradition and therefore forced to create an unexpected future. Mumford understands the emerging American culture as a way of rehumanizing the world. Taking Melville's suggestion ("we are the pioneers of the world") as a starting point, America's past is assumed as broader than the European one because of the cultural variety brought by massive immigration. He also emphasises the connection between science and technology to redirect culture towards "humankind interests" (MUMFORD:1926, 30). In this project, rather than trying to overtake tradition through technology, technology extends the limits of a tradition which would be no longer merely European, but generically *human*. So, America does not mean only primitivism, because it has a high culture tradition; and because of it, America does not mean only technology: it announces a deeper kind of humanism. This reconstruction of American cultural roots, even if it refers especially to literary tradition, will be significant in discussions of American visual arts in the twentieth century. And this remark becomes more important if we take into account that Duchamp's and Picabia's version of avant-gardism was not the only artistic trend to arrive in the United States from Europe in the interwar period: also cubist and abstract painting were attentively received. And a time

will come when, in America, abstraction will be interpreted as one of the possible symbols of such a generic humanity.

3.2. A LANDSCAPE OF CONTROVERSY

After having offered a general view of the discussion about artistic American identity in the first decades of the twentieth century, I shall now look closely at the artistic transformation conducted by American artists, underlining the opposition of the movements led, respectively, by Alfred Stieglitz and his circle, and Robert Henri and the Ashcan school. My main contribution to the understanding of this discussion will be its interpretation by means of the polarity of cult and exhibition values (subsections 3.2.1. and 3.2.3.), to which I shall add a reference to the trends to abstraction which will be so relevant in American art after the Second World War, also interpreted under this theoretical standpoint as an impoverishment of the artwork's exhibition value (subsection 3.2.2.).

To enter the landscape of these American discussions, I will take as a starting point the description that Edward Hopper makes of such a landscape. In 1927, he wrote —in quite aggressive terms— about what he called "the horde of camp-followers, publicity-seekers and imitators who attach themselves to all movements in art" (HOPPER: 1927, 177). He was referring to some of the artists who followed the path of the avantgarde, which had reached America through the Armory Show and the so-called "first circle" of the photographer Alfred Stieglitz in the *291 Gallery* in New York ("Little Galleries of the Photo-Secession"). However, Hopper himself recognised that it was the first time in this period that there was an opportunity for autochthonous artists to interact with the incentives coming from elsewhere (OTTINGER: 2012, 46). Hopper opposes these "imitators", who were unable to emancipate themselves artistically from Europe, to those artists who were attempting to create a national American art. He identifies the last ones with the movement led by the Ashcan School, which he defined as the first movement truly important for the development of a national artistic consciousness in his country (OTTINGER: 2012, 46), a movement both original and intelligent enough to create an American "tang of the soil" able to be independent from its "French mother" (HOPPER: 1927, 177).

Leaving aside the 'historical justice' of these declarations, the distribution of the scenery suggested in them reflects a real polarization in American visual arts in the 1920s. This polarization was represented by the rivalry between the leaders of the two groups in

which it was embodied: Alfred Stieglitz (1864-1946) and Robert Henri (1865-1929). To put it in broad terms, these two men had different origins, personalities, education and artistic profiles: Stieglitz was an intellectual and an aesthete, highly influenced by the European avant-garde and disdainful of the approval of the general public (BOCHNER: 2005); Henri rejected the notion of art for art's sake (HOMER: 1988) and, although he is often considered as an artistic nationalist, his Americanism, inherited from Whitman, includes a strong ingredient of universality, which will also be present in Hopper[48]. From 1910, when the groups led by each of them presented separated exhibitions, it was clear that Stieglitz considered Henri and his pupils "conventional if not retarded", while for Henri the art shown in Stieglitz's 291 Gallery was "faddish and undemocratic" (ROSE: 1967, 40)[49]. However, both shared a rejection of academic painting and both identified this rejection with the need for an American autochthonous art. But each of them understood this need in radically opposed senses. In the language of their times, this opposition positioned Henri and his disciples as realists, because for them life was a higher value than art, while the group of artists led by Stieglitz considered art as the highest value and their works were often accused of abstraction. Here we find an echo of the debate on art's autonomy I have referred to in the previous chapter.

These two movements have been studied by the art historians of the period whose works I will quote and discuss along these pages[50]. Nevertheless, I shall argue that the conflict in question is not only the result of personal preferences or alternative schools, but expresses, in the specific conditions of the American context in the early twentieth century, the conflict between artwork's cult value and exhibition value. This analytic frame becomes especially useful if it is reduced to the background which is, after all, the

[48]"Always we would try to tie down the great to our little nationalism; whereas every great artist is a man who has freed himself from his family, his nation, his race. Every man who has shown the world the way to beauty, to true culture, has been a rebel, a "universal" without patriotism, without home, who has found his people everywhere, a man whom all the world recognizes, accepts, whether he speaks through music, painting, words or form" (HENRI: 2007, 144). On the influence of Whitman on Henri, which this last transmitted to Sloan, see BOHAN: 2012.

[49]"For his followers, Stieglitz was a mythic crusader against the vulgarity of 'commercial America', the paterfamilias of American Modernism battling 'Babbitry'. Conversely, his critics deemed him either a P.T. Barnum figure, or a false prophet, at the head of an exclusive and affluent artistic cabal" (HARAN: 2007, 336).

[50]Without claiming to be exhaustive: CAHILL, and BARR: 1934, ROSS, N. and CATEFORIS: 1997, CORN: (1999), DOSS: 2002, FOSTER: 2004, GELDZAHLER: 1965, GREENBERG:1993, HASKELL: 1999, ROSE, B: 1968, TUITE and DOCHERTY: 2010, ZURIER: 1996 and 2006.

only one strictly developed by Benjamin, that is to say, the transformations of the image's technologies and the attempts of art to give a response to them.

3.2.1 *From the cult value standpoint*

Let us begin the analysis with the group led by Stieglitz, the main advocate of European modernism in America, and also the main defender of a modernist America.

As I have just said, both Stieglitz and Henri rejected academic painting. But Stieglitz, closer to the European scene, understood this fight as a rebellion against the Western pictorial tradition. Nobody knew exactly what the visual meaning of a genuinely American art could be; but, to the extent that it had to include a rupture with Europe, for Stieglitz's circle, the way in which avant-gardist painters were trying to break with the mainstream of their own tradition could act, at least, as an inspiration for American painters to do the job they were supposed to do. Avant-gardism was, as a minimum, a path to an authentically American art.

In this path, cubist and abstract painters seemed to obey an intellectual or spiritual motivation that, in a certain sense, opposed the 'materialistic' face of Americanism[51]; one can remember the strong defence of the spirit in the writings of Klee, Mondrian, Kandinsky or Malévich. Stieglitz knew very well this pictorial spiritualism, because he had published excerpts from Kandinsky's text *Concerning the spiritual in Art* in his photographic journal *Camera Work*, in 1912, and he had purchased Kandinsky's *Improvisation 27* (*Garden of Love II*) in the 1913 Armory Show. Of cubist paintings, Sartre said in 1940 that the forms we grasp in them "are certainly not the forms of a rug, a table or anything else that we ordinarily grasp in the word"; they have matter, depth, density, so they are *things*; but they are the kind of things "that I have never seen nor will ever see" (SARTRE: 2001, 295); and, could it be added, that t*he camera will never*

[51]This aspect of the circle has been analyzed by K. Wilson in "The Intimate Gallery and the Equivalents: Spirituality in the 1920s Work of Stieglitz": "Stieglitz's spiritual beliefs carried with them an explicitly modern air: they were tinged with anxieties about the loss of human reality in a postwar age of extreme mechanization, and they were infused with an incongruous market sensibility" (WILSON, K.: 2003, 764).

capture. This domain where the mechanical reproduction of images cannot follow is what the Stieglitz's circle points to with the words "art" or "beauty".

Stieglitz was a supporter of art for art's sake, and he insisted on quality (on the artistic quality of artworks), that is to say, on cult value. But one should not forget that he was a photographer (for example, the photographs he took of Duchamp's Fountain can be counted among the few remaining traces of the original object). Photography, for him, had not the nature of an aura reducer or an Erlebnis-maker, as it is described by Benjamin. What Stieglitz appreciates in photography is not what Benjamin considers its main achievement, i.e., its exhibition value. Bringing it to the terms I am proposing, it could be said that, in a direction exactly opposite to Benjamin, he understood "photography as art" (which Benjamin thought of as the subject of an unfruitful debate, BENJAMIN:1999-5, 520). As Rose attests, Stieglitz "conceived of photography as an increasingly abstract medium, in which images are divorced from any other than formal meaning" (ROSE: 1967, 41). It is clearly so [Fig.5], but, where does this project come from?

Despite his interest in a distinctive American art, in his early writings Stieglitz openly recognises his link with the English tradition founded by P.H. Emerson, naturalistic or pictorial photography[52]. Emerson, who was himself interested in Stieglitz's work, was the favourite authority he invoked to fight "one of the most universally popular mistakes that have to do with photography", its assumed mechanical nature: "A great paradox… is the assumption that because photography is not 'hand-work', as the public say –therefore is not an art language. This is a fallacy born of thoughtlessness (…) we find there is very much 'hand-work' and head-work in it"[53].

[52]In an article called "A Plea for photography in America", published in 1892, he complains about American photography when compared to the work of the "English fellows": "What we lack is that taste and sense for composition and for tone (…), when we go through an exhibition of American photographs, we are struck by the conventionality of the subjects chosen (…) the same unfortunate attempts at illustrating popular poetry". And he declares that the "exquisite atmosphere effects" (the aura?) which lack in American photography make the difference between a photograph and a picture, that is to say, "a photograph of artistic value" (STEGLITZ: 1983, 179, 181).

[53]These are the words of Emerson in Naturalistic photography, quoted by Stieglitz in his essay for Scribner's Magazine "Pictorial Photography", in 1899 (STIEGLITZ: 1983, 186).

[Fig.5] Alfred Stieglitz, *The hand of Man*, 1902 Gelatine silver print, 34.4x27 cm, The Art Institute of Chicago.

Stieglitz attributes this mistake to the popularization of the hand-camera and the industrialization of the process ("Don't believe you became an artist in the instant you received a gift Kodak on Xmas morning", STIEGLITZ: 1983, 190), to the extent that, when the public is informed about "the plastic nature of the photographic process", the need for the photographer to "be quite as familiar with the laws of composition as is the landscape or portrait painter" and the complexity of the printing processes, the result is so far "from the stiff, characterless countenance of the average professional work" that the reaction use to be saying: "*but this is not photography!*". On the contrary, Stieglitz, who distrusted terms as "art-photography" or "pictorial photography", thought that photography was really such, and "that which the world is accustomed to regard as pictorial photography is not the real photography, but an ignorant imposition" (STIEGLITZ: 1983, 189). In other words, his efforts were dedicated to endowing photography with the same cult value that can be found in paintings. Far from dispelling the aura, his photographs try to restore it to the places and the people in his portraits. Stieglitz fought against, so to speak, the technological reproducibility of images in its very birthplace. His was a claim for recognition of photography "not as the handmaiden of art, but as a distinctive medium of individual expression" in which the style was as perceptible "as it is that of Rembrandt or Reynolds" (STIEGLITZ: 1983, 190, 187).

Obviously, this conception of photography was influenced by painting[54], but, in turn, in the case of Stieglitz, it influenced the painters close to his Gallery.

After having closed it in 1917, in 1925 Stieglitz, leaving aside European modernism, reopened his gallery renaming it as *Intimate Gallery* (in 1929, he renamed it again as *An American Place)*. It was made clear then that, along with artists such as O'Keeffe, Dove, Hartley, Marin, Demuth and Paul Strand, among others, his project was to define the elements of an American high *visual* culture, trying to achieve an American subjective emotion which could represent a distinctive visual style. "[Georgia O'Keeffe] is American. So is Marin. So am I (…) Haven't we any of our own courage in matters 'aesthetic'?" (STIEGLITZ: 1983, 212). Stieglitz did not want to renounce to high culture or to leave aside tradition to go beyond Europe; he wanted to elaborate a new high cultural tradition. The spiritual features of this culture should avoid reduction of American to popular cultural icons linked to the economic growth and the development of marketing. For this reason, in visual terms, these artists felt forced to break any connection with the procedures of mechanical reproducibility of images which dominated the market realm[55] . Despite their strong anti-puritanism, for them, the only way to search for cult value was to maintain an aesthetic 'religiousness' or spirituality which was also a form of affinity with what I have called "the cult side" of European avant-gardist movements. In a letter to Heinrich Kühn, in 1912, he writes: "Now I find that contemporary art consists of the abstract (without subject) like Picasso etc. and the photographic. The so-called photographic art, whether attempted with camera or with brush" (STIEGLITZ: 1983, 194).

The artists of Stieglitz's circle never looked for the acquiescence of the public: their art was addressed to informed critics and private individuals with an advanced aesthetic taste. But this does not mean that they were not interested in social progress. Rose says that they considered social progress not as a task of arts, but as a condition for artistic creation and aesthetical appreciation: "Social progress, they thought, would issue

[54]In collaboration with the amateur photographer J. Keiley, Stieglitz improved a glycerine-developed platinum printing process that proved to be among the most painterly photographic methods ever devised (METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART: 1978, 24).

[55]"They repeatedly described the camera as an extension of Stieglitz's own body, and his photographs as an extension of his spirit. As a result, they claimed that Stieglitz had achieved a profound physical and spiritual union both with his machinery and with the subjects he photographed" (BRENNAN: 1997, 156).

from sensual liberation (…). The question of whether the repressive, inhibiting anti-visual of the Puritan legacy had permanently crippled the American ability to have an aesthetic experience was asked more than once" (ROSE: 1967, 50). But some remarks should be added to the questions of "social progress" and of the defence of the visual.

Regarding social progress, Stieglitz did not simply expect that social progress helped in the appreciation of his works. He understood the "Photo-secession" as a sort of cultural revolution: "In all phases of human activity, the tendency of the masses has been invariably towards ultra-conservatism. Progress has been accomplished only by reason of the fanatical enthusiasm of the revolutionist, whose extreme teaching has saved the mass from utter inertia". So, he understood the "secession" as "a protest against the reactionary spirit of the masses" (STIEGLITZ: 1983, 190). And, regarding the question of visuality, one could ask: if the Puritan legacy is 'anti-visual', why these artists opposed the images of popular culture, which, like the "toothpaste and cosmetics for giants in the walls of the houses" mentioned by Benjamin, were, one should say, exceedingly visual? Of course, they did not demand a higher exhibition value. Indeed, the constant allegation that their images were not realistic refers to the low exhibition value of their works; but, for them, it did not mean that they were not interested in reality. When these artists discarded the image of the city as a series of successive stills seen from the earthbound perspective of a pedestrian who observes the buildings from a single vantage point, they also made it for realistic reasons. As Corn writes: "For them, the new city demanded an approach and style as disjunctive and shrill as the urban environment itself " (CORN: 1999, 175)[56] .

But the point is that the reality they were looking for was not the external reality of the industrialized public realm, but the interior reality of affections. And affections are on the side of cult value, which is the centre of the aesthetic experience. When Stieglitz claimed "the right of the picture to speak for itself, without being subjected to total exhaustion through verbalization" (ROSE: 1967, 41), he was taking a stand in defence of the autonomy of the artwork's form in the sense I have developed in the previous chapter. Because, as I have argued, the translatability of the image into words is a mark of its exhibition value. So, Stieglitz's claim is not only the visual, but the specific kind of visual that separates art from the merely representational images.

[56]In 1902, Stieglitz declared that the Flatiron Building was to America "what the Parthenon was to Greece" (STIEGLITZ: 1946, 189).

However, neither the cubo-futurist painters nor expressionist ones, neither photographers nor watercolourists of Stieglitz's circle dared to completely abandon figuration. Certainly, as I have indicated, the main charge against them was that their works were undemocratic, elitist and subjected to foreign (i.e., not American) conventions. Indeed, they did not create an internationally recognizable American art as such: they mainly focused on New York ("the city of the future", according to Picabia [PICABIA: 1913, 11]), and more specifically on Manhattan and its skyscrapers, which was the most appealing place for Europeans. But, as Corn concludes: "they did not so much create a new iconography as refined as the one invented by the generation of 1890-1910" (CORN: 1999, 175), the cubo-futurist one. For this reason, they were often perceived, as Hopper perceived them, as "imitators".

3.2.2 *An excursus on the representational impoverishment in the abstract artwork*

Looking at the legacy of this movement, it could be said that its relative failure (in the search of a strictly American art) was not due to its excessive detachment from the representational pole of the artwork, quite the opposite: it did not go far enough. If cubism and abstract art can be seen as the struggle of painting to grant for itself a specific domain different from photography and film, it implies a meaning of the autonomy of art slightly different from the signification I have alluded to in chapter 2. Now, autonomy is not only referred to the cult value which is specific to art, but to the cult value which is specific to painting, and this second sense of the autonomy of painting was later decisive in the emergence of abstract expressionism, as it is shown in the work of critics like Clement Greenberg. But this development implies an aspect of the impoverishment of experience different and somehow opposite to the one foreseen by Benjamin.

So, this is one of these occasions in which the distinction of cult and exhibition values can provide a service beyond Benjamin's standpoint, showing us another meaning of the claim for cult value that is also related to the loss of words as a feature of the poverty of experience. Although it implies a slight displacement in time regarding the opposition between Stieglitz's and Henri's positions, I find indispensable its development

to complete the map of artistic options in which Hopper's artistic project acquires its whole meaning. When asked about abstract expressionism, Hopper reluctantly recognized it as a real influence for Europe, somehow reverting the aesthetical dominance of France over America, which had lasted "*more than thirty years*"[57]. But he judged it as a "skilful invention of the intellect" or a "stimulating arrangement of color, form and design" which tried to replace "the essential element of imagination" or "the pristine imaginative conception" (MORSE: 1959). How should these statements be interpreted?

If painting has to fix its specificity with regard to other arts, and literature is one of these other arts, this struggle implies its autonomy with respect to verbal language. Paradoxically, the time in which painting begins to define itself as a language, is also the time in which it separates more strictly *from* language. And this is emphasised by the fact that the images shown in abstract painting are radically untranslatable to the words of experience. I have referred to this circumstance as the third feature of the poverty of experience (the loss of words).

In front of a completely abstract painting not only the viewer, but also the painter *has no words* to describe what is on the canvas. Now, it *does* mean that the artist is as mute as the soldiers described by Benjamin in the middle of explosions and torrents of unknown forces. This is perhaps the reason why, by the beginning of abstract painting, titles like "Composition VII" [Wassily Kandinsky, 1913], "Composition II in Red, Blue and Yellow" [Piet Mondrian, 1929], "White on white" [Kazimir Malevich, 1918] or even "Without title" became ubiquitous, which doubtless appeared a strange innovation to contemporary viewers. Mallarmé said in 1891 that "To name an object is to suppress threequarters of the enjoyment of the poem" (MALLARME: 2003, 700). This contributes to accentuate the visual shock produced by the image of a non-recognizable thing, offering an empty verbal indication which does not allow such stupefaction to be overcome. It assures the occurrence of a "true experience" (*Erfahrung*), which, in Benjamin's terms, cannot appear but as a shock, precisely the shock that the reproducible *Erlebnis* tries to dodge. The struggle of the new painters of the twentieth century is

[57]Hopper says to John Morse that "The domination of France in the plastic arts has been almost complete for the last thirty years or more in this country". Then, Morse asks Hopper: "We, in effect, are influencing France. Do you find that to be true today?", and he answers: "I think it is so, but I am not quite sure" (MORSE:1959).

intended to break the protective shell of *Erlebnis*, which means to escape at the same time from mechanical images and from verbal translation of affections.

The painters who are trying to settle in this domain inaccessible to reproducibility do not only need to reject mechanical images, which have absorbed any representational content, but also the captions which reduce any visual ambiguity and turns every image into a univocal and objective evidence. The abstract title of the abstract painting gives the work a mark of distinction, distancing it from the realm of commodities, by which the painter affirms his authority as an author. But, as long as the painter cannot give a title which transmits to the viewer the implicit experience of the painting's contents, his strict designations are also a symptom of the poverty of such experience. For sure, nobody can deny that the artist has painted his experience. He cannot put his experience into words for the same reason that he cannot paint figurative or recognizable (verbally translatable) objects. So, his experience is a private one, what is the very Benjaminian definition of *Erlebnis*. He can say he has painted a sensation or an emotion of what he has seen, but the public exhibition of his painting will reveal that the viewers feels the same poverty of experience before the painting and its deceiving title: not only they cannot recognize a nameable or familiar object in the canvas; they are also incapable to name or to recognize the emotion which they are supposed to be seeing. How could it be expressed *the representational impoverishment* of modern painting better than saying that it depicts things whose names we ignore, things for which we have no words? Returning to Monet's example used in chapter 2, the *impression*, divorced from the *sunrise*, is now an *expression* which *shows* something than nobody can *tell*; and the title is a phrase *telling* something in which nothing is *shown*. This is, perhaps, what Paul Klee —another of the heroes of dignified poverty in Benjamin's "Experience and Poverty"— wanted to express in his famous declaration that "the people are missing"[58], that is to say, that there is no common language (not even a visual one) shared by the painter and the public.

In the first decades of the twentieth century, it was common among some critics and artists to treat Cubism and abstract painting as parts of a new visual language. Although it at first awakened popular aversion, the argument went, people would come to understand the rules and accept them. But this never happened. And this failure of

[58]"This last force is lacking for want of a people that carries us", he wrote in 1924 (KLEE: 1980, 33).

reconciliation between words and images (a metaphor of the rupture between cult and exhibition values) is another symptom of the poverty of experience as a “loss of words”. The existence of a visual code of abstract (or cubist) forms which would express the emotions and the states of mind, a spiritual painting opposed to the mechanical procedures of the reproducible images which reflect the external world, has been refuted as an ingenuous illusion. And, in the absence of such a code, the artist could only preserve his aspiration to create a new language invoking his exceptional authority —that is, his genius— to impose a private visual lexicon upon viewers (and this authoritarianism was not far away from the attitude of some avant-gardist artists). Not only the cruelty of documentary photography, but also the severity of abstract painting could represent the opposite to the kindness of figurative art. Despite its critical acclaim, the aversion, the indifference or the incomprehension of the general public was always an essential feature of avant-gardism, a sort of guarantee of authenticity (“one requirement was paramount: to outrage the public”, BENJAMIN: 2002-2, 119).

In the absence of this language and this community, it can be said —and this is probably what motivates Benjamin’s admiration for Klee— that, at least, the painter has made visible and has “dignified” this poverty in terms of experience, the *Erfahrung* which the *Erlebnis* tried to suppress from perception. Indeed, the naked or unnameable images of abstract expressionism are in tune with the ideal of the Mumford’s canon in this sense: the humanity they reflect, because of its nakedness, cannot be American but in the sense that it aims at being generically human.

So, Hopper’s statements quoted in the beginning of this subsection must be taken as a proof of his attachment to what I called the “distinctive” conception of the historical artwork, which cannot be completely deprived neither of cult value nor of exhibition value, even if they are as antinomic as the “telling” and the “showing” of literary realism. Was this reaction of Hopper a consequence of the teachings of Robert Henri?

3.2.3 *From the exhibition value standpoint*

As I have done in the case of Stieglitz’s circle, I will analyse in this subsection the American discussion from the standpoint of Robert Henri and the Ashcan school, to which

later, in the decade of 1930, will be added a third polemic instance: the regionalist movement of the American scene.

The anti-academicism of Robert Henri was, in a certain sense, more immediate and ingenuous than Stieglitz's revolt: for Henri, the formula "academic painting" designed only American academic painting. And, as Rose points out, "in America, the academies were hardly more than organizations that held annual exhibitions" (ROSE: 1967, 11-12). His rebellion was not against Western tradition, but against "the sheer mechanical process" practised in the art schools of his time. But this also means that Henri's heroes were not European artists like Monet, Duchamp or Picasso, but American painters (whom Stieglitz would have considered representatives of an outdated notion of art) like Winslow Homer and, especially, Thomas Eakins, who was forced to resign from Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts for removing a loincloth on a male model in a class with female students. Although the historical significance of this anecdote has been perhaps overrated, it stood as a symbol of the anti-academic spirit.

Let us put this argument in terms of the debate I am describing. As is usual in art history, when the meaning of beauty and fine arts is felt by young artists to be monopolized by academic conventions —"the corruption of reactionary and official art", in Hopper's words (OTTINGER: 2012, 27)—, the main claim of the rebel painters cannot be beauty or art, but what Henri called *life*, even if painting directly from life could mean a collision with the interests of art and beauty. Criticizing abstract painting, Hopper said that "The term 'life' as used in art is something not to be held in contempt, for it implies all of existence, and the province of art is to react to it and not to shun it" (MORSE: 1959). But, what is the meaning of 'life' in this use of the opposition between art and life? The claim to ignore conventions, although primarily referred to academic rules, also included eventually the conventions of French modernism and avant-gardism: notwithstanding the anti-conventional character that modernism had in Europe, it was perceived by American artists whose pictorial past was not the one of the European painters as a foreign convention, without roots in local traditions. What is usually called the realism of the

movement led by Henri (the Eight or the Ashcan School[59]) is this desire of making pictures from *American* life.

It is notable, when considering the focus on 'life' in these movements, that Eakins was also a photographer, and this practice was not for him separated from his artistic work. But unlike Stieglitz he was not exactly an artistic photographer, rather his interest in photography was a scientific one, in the mode of Renaissance artists who were interested in the science of their times so as to improve their artworks. As a follower of Edward Muybridge's experiments, Eakins was interested in capturing, by means of photography, the movement of the human body —that is to say, its life—, and considered this study as a part of the knowledge of anatomy required for the craft of painting, which is clearly connected with the episode of the loincloth. Henri said: "Eakins was a deep student of life and with a great love he studied humanity frankly. He was not afraid of what this study revealed to him" (HENRI: 2007, 90). His conception of photography, therefore, unlike the Stieglitz's, does match with Benjamin's view: the camera removes the veil of respect which covered human body and deprives it of aura; photography is able to *reproduce* life without aesthetic or moral consideration and thereby reduces physical and cultural distances.

But painting from life also meant that Eakins looked for inspiration in American themes, and he counselled his students not to waste their time travelling to Europe. "If America is to produce great painters and if young art students wish to assume a place in the history of the art of their country, their first desire should be to remain in America, to peer deeper into the heart of American life" (GOODRICH: 1974, 271). But, which are the themes of American life that the painter should be interested in? From the time of Eakins to the time of Henri, American life underwent a radical transformation. As Hobbs informs us, from 1890 to the First World War, nearly sixteen million people, mainly European, entered the United States and settled in the industrial cities (HOBBS: 1987, 89). The reality these artists aimed to paint was now characterized by industrial expansion, and the growth of cities as manufacturing centres attracted thousands of

[59] Rebecca Zurier, Snyder and Mecklenburg give a broad interpretation of the group formed by Robert Henri, William Glackens, George Bellows, George Luks, Everett Shinn and John Sloan in the book "Metropolitan lives" (ZURIER: 2006).

immigrants. So, the movement that painters had to capture was no longer the one of living animals or human bodies, but that of the urban crowd of industrial cities. However, there were few precedents for these subjects in American art. There was still some persistence of the romanticism of the Hudson River School, modernised by trips to France and the influence of Impressionism, which had been until that time the most modern movement from Europe. This combination of American Idealism and French Impressionism (along with other European influences) appeared as an aesthetic defence against the transformation of experience derived from the industrialization of the city. Such transformation was often understood as dehumanized or at least as an environment where humanity was under threat and displaced by something inhuman or even anti-human, usually represented by technology. Where humanity has lost its privilege because of the development of technology, beauty cannot be found (let us remember Benjamin's statement that the beautiful has no place in technological reproduction). And this was the main motivation for many American painters taking shelter in domestic interiors and introspective paintings in the same way that John Singer Sargent did, using seventeenth-century's portraits, such as the ones Van Dyck painted, as inspiration for their works. For this reason, in order to paint a city life which had been rarely represented before, resorting to spontaneity and breaking academic rules were constantly invoked in Henri's teaching. The problem was how to introduce in the artwork some *representational contents* until then excluded from artistic *exhibition.*

A recent and modest support for this task of painting from (urban-industrial) life did exist, not in the academy, but in newspapers: "In the decade between 1890 and 1900, before newspapers had adapted the photograph to the requirements of daily publications, artists-reporters, following the footsteps of Homer, who had sketched civil war battles, functioned as photographers do today, rushing to fires, strikes, murders, mine disasters and other sensational events" (ROSE: 1967, 16). The frenetic rhythm of the modern city was indeed the reason for the emergence of the new career of newspaper illustrator, and this became a professional opportunity for most of the artists linked to the Ashcan School. Because of their previous experience as illustrators in Philadelphia, many of them worked for different newspapers and magazines in New York. Their job consisted of sketching in situ any sort of event —from daily life to crime scenes— and then developing it in a more detailed way at their office desk.

In other words, they were photographers *avant la lettre*, and the elaboration of the sketches in the newspapers' headquarters was the equivalent to the photographic process of development and retouching of photographs. The drawings made by illustrators, just because they were made "for the purpose of establishing evidence", had to present the same scientific neutrality as Eakins' shots of human movement, neutralizing the distance of respect to the subject depicted. In the same sense that, according to Benjamin, the rhetoric of journalistic objectivity excludes the subjective experience of the storyteller, the artists who worked as graphic reporters were forced to remove the veil of prudery that prevented academic art from painting these themes because they were not included in the repertory of 'beauty'. Newspapers were not made to show beauty, but to show life: "Because of their newspaper experience, [Ashcan artists] were able to capture what the camera could record in a split second snap of the shutter, they became expert as well at depicting figures in motion and the psychological nuances of gesture" (ROSE: 1967, 16). But the fact that they were photographers without a camera does not only mean that their pictures had an exchange value (the city had also become a marketable subject), but also that, from the visual point of view, the main feature of their works was exhibition value.

The critical allegation of 'ugliness' was often addressed to the Ashcan School. Indeed, the pejorative sense of the term "Ashcan" referred to the sordid nature of their pictorial motifs: alleys, trams, bridges, night clubs, movie theatres, stores and restaurants (RYALL: 2013,162): these were the themes which academic painting threw in the ashcan of ugliness. Some critics called the members of the School the "Apostles of ugliness" or "the revolutionary black gang" (DOSS: 2002, 35). But, what does "ugliness" mean in this context[60]? The maladjustment of the new urban experience and traditional aesthetic representation is what is expressed by the Benjaminian concept of the "decay of the aura". Benjamin defines this decay as the fall of a veil. In *The Communist Manifesto*, Marx and Engels used this metaphor to describe a world where all that is sacred is being profaned by "egoistical calculation" (MARX-ENGELS: 1848, 16). The demystification of social life, the disenchantment of the world or the decline of transcendence —symptoms of the impoverishment of experience— would be then the cause of that ugliness.

[60]Henri often complained about the idea that there are "ugly" subjects for painting: "'Why do you paint ugly and not beautiful things?' The questioner rarely hesitates in his judgment of what is beautiful and what is ugly (…) Beauty he thinks is a settled fact. His conception also is that beauty rests in the subject, not in the expression. He should, therefore, pay high for Rembrandt's portrait of a gentleman, and turn with disgust from a beggar by Rembrandt" (HENRI: 2007, 136).

However, *ugliness* is an aesthetic category: it does not refer to reality itself but to its representation. This representation, linked to the new technological media (newspapers, photography and cinema), is perceived as ugly since those new media create a naked urban image that lacks aura. So, what contemporary critics of the Eight called ugliness ("Is it fine art", one critic asked, "to exhibit our stores?", ROSE: 1967, 25) is not the condition of some subjects represented by these painters, but the status of a kind of image deprived of cult value or of artistic quality and sterilised for poetry, becoming non-aesthetic or anaesthetic.

> By making many reproductions it substitutes a plurality of copies for a unique existence. And in permitting the reproduction to meet the beholder or listener in his own particular situation, it reactivates the object reproduced. These two processes lead to a tremendous shattering of tradition which is the obverse of the contemporary crisis and renewal of mankind (BENJAMIN, 2002-2, 103-104).

The "unique existence" is what traditional painting aims to express. Photography is "a device for giving events the character of a shock, detaching them from the contexts of experience" (BENJAMIN: 2006, 351); it fragments the totality of the "unique existence" of human beings and reproduces it in the context of the viewer, which is foreign to such experience, like a single photographic frame extracted from the series of the shots of the living movement taken by Muybridge or Eakins.

Obviously, the proto-photographic drawings of newspaper illustrators were not considered as art by Henri. Newspaper illustration and political cartooning counted among the popular sources of the effort to make pictures from life, but they were not at all its final result. Because of their professional training in rapid execution and spontaneous style, very far from the parameters of those artists around Stieglitz's circle, the Ashcan painters felt able to solve the question posed by the city as an aesthetic problem: how could something that had not, until then, been considered worth of being the subject of a painting be represented? How to capture those settings that were devoid of an aura? Artists looked for new pictorial solutions to this dilemma, looking for inspiration in both popular and historical sources. Although their work shared the same worries that were present in newspapers, entertainment pamphlets and documentary photographs, they aimed at finding new *artistic* ways to represent those subjects and different ways of thinking about them. In their paintings, the Ashcan School artists tried

to interpret and visualize the social dynamics which was constantly transforming New York city, and this approach produced a need for creating images which did not yet exist, to picture the new urban phenomena. With some exceptions, they usually captured specific moments, sites or seasonal activities which were every so often included in the title of the painting. This procedure leads to a way of understanding the city brick by brick, event by event, as in the different acts of a stage play or the different episodes of a drama whose argument is partially unknown to the viewer.

[Fig.6]. Robert Henri, *Sylvester – Smiling*,1914, 61 x 50.8 cm., Private Collection.

Henri's students wandered the streets in search of subjects, and he encouraged them to translate their sketches into paintings[61] . For him, sketches played a similar role to the Eakins' photographs. But, in this translation, what was mainly exhibition value should be enriched, acquiring a cult value when becoming painting. According to the objective of capturing immediate life, in his class Henri defended the spontaneous pictorial technique, and encouraged his students to work quickly: "Work with great speed (…) Finish as quickly as you can. There is no virtue in delaying23 (…) Do it all in one sitting if you can. In one minute if you can (….) The most vital things in the look of a face or of a landscape endure only for a moment" (HENRI: 2007, 24). "He even forbade

[61]"The sketch hunter has delightful days of drifting about among people, in and out of the city, going anywhere, everywhere, stopping as long as he likes—no need to reach any point, moving in any direction following the call of interests. He moves through life as he finds it, not passing negligently the things he loves, but stopping to know them, and to note them (…) Like any hunter he hits or misses (…). Those who are not hunters do not see these things" (HENRI: 2007, 13-14).

the use of small brushes in the class because they fostered an emphasis on delicate detail" (HASKELL: 1999, 66); the usage of thick paintbrushes emphasised flux in urban traffic (ZURIER: 2006, 173). Zurier also recalls that memory and a quick perception of reality were essential skills for the accomplishment of the newspaper illustrations (ZURIER: 2006,122). But, for Henri, memory is not only a professional skill of the visual reporter, but it also plays an important role in artistic painting, and this methodological indication will leave a deep trace in Hopper's conception of painting: after the first impression (related to what I called "the first element" of experience), to which the painter must remain always faithful, "work should be done from memory" (which belongs to the "second element" of experience). "The memory is of that vital movement. During that moment there is a correlation of the factors of that look. This correlation does not continue. New arrangements, greater or less, replace them as mood changes. The special order has to be retained in memory—that special look, and that order which was its expression. Memory must hold it" (HENRI: 2007, 24).

But, what is the ingredient added by these brushes, the element which transmutes sketches into artworks or, in Benjamin terms, adds cult value to exhibition value? What transforms the quasi-photographs in art is painting, which, in Henri's words, adds humanity to the dehumanized life of the city. "Because we are saturated with life", he wrote, "because we are human, our strongest motive is life, humanity; and the stronger the motive back of a line, the stronger, and therefore the more beautiful, the line will be" (HENRI: 2007, 110). What "the Eight" or the Ashcan School wanted to highlight was the possibility of finding beauty, life and humanity precisely in those subjects which both academicism and ultra-modernism eliminated from their focus: "Henri's position made it possible for the artist to reject academic practice and official taste without embracing the modern attitude or any of its implications. It offered a third choice to American artists who were repelled by Post-impressionism as they were by Neoclassicism" (ROSE:1967, 39). The claim for humanity in these paintings is what separates them from newspaper illustrations, even if newspapers were an occasional training for it. Henri's pupils were trying to humanize the industrial city life, not merely to illustrate it [Fig.6].

The finished painting is, for Henri, "a complete statement of just what you feel most important to say about the subject" (HENRI: 2007, 171). So, we come back to the *impressions, affections or emotions* which become the domain of art when technology

appropriates the sphere of objectivity. These feelings seem to concentrate the cult value of artworks. But, if stressing these emotions had driven the artists of the Stieglitz's group to approach to abstraction, the artists in Henri's orbit thought, as Hopper put it, that "the inner life of a human being is a vast and varied realm and does not concern itself alone with stimulating arrangements of color, form, and design" (MORSE: 1959), that is to say, it retains also an exhibition value. The word *humanity* seems to suggest that the artistic quality of these images is founded on a moral or social intention, often underlined by Henri's defence of democratization of art. But, like Haskell and Rose underline, Ashcan school painters were much more interested in the agitation of streets, parks, beaches and night scenes, in the immediacy and intensity of the movement, than in social, ethnical or economical inequalities (HASKELL: 1999, 62): "their works carried no didactic social message other than a feeling for humanity in all of its possible conditions" (ROSE: 1967, 16). So, returning to my argument, I would say that Henri's approach could be called a *visual democratization* more than a social or political issue. The American realism democratises images in the sense that makes pictorially viable some contents which previously were not, like photography made possible the exhibition of things that until them were veiled or forbidden to the eye. But the main idea behind the Ashcan School movement should not be understood as a social approach. The claim for humanity underpins an aesthetic rather than a social intention, rooted in the rejection of the elegant subjects of high society and of faddish modernism.

Now, if we accept that the intention of the Ashcan School is a modernization of painting that brings it closer to real life, what is the pictorial strategy used to achieve this? They allude to the very vitality of the impulse to paint the urban industrial life and to the confidence in spontaneity; they defend the cause of democracy in art to search humanity among the restless urban hustle, in the very core of this "ugliness" that has been made visible, in this reality without aura whose space and time are the result of mechanical reproduction. But allowing free spontaneity to face the task of painting beyond all kind of prejudices is not enough to produce a pictorial style. Like experience, painting is also a matter of tradition. So, these artists had to resort to some painting procedures drawn from a pre-impressionist tradition. In order to turn the industrial city exhibition value into something pictorially acceptable and therefore into something human and beautiful, that is to say, in cult value, they turned their subjects, as Renner says, into picturesque scenes (RENNER:1991, 30). In order to establish a link —which until that moment had not

existed in American painting— between art and the modern city represented by New York, they searched for beauty in a picturesque way. They looked for high contrast and irregularity of forms, relying on the humanizing usage of anecdotes that they had learnt from illustration. And they naturalized the urban landscape, which allowed them to remain in tune with the traditional rules of landscape painting. This is why Zurier states that this resort to the picturesque must be understood here as an "aesthetics of accommodation" which tries to naturalize what could be considered as strange and to turn it into an object of visual pleasure, to domesticate the urban chaos and to control its novelty subjecting it to a pictorial code which was already in use in the last decades of the eighteenth century (ZURIER: 2006, 163). Doubtless, through this technique, the Ashcan School artists created, for the very first time, images where the urban traffic influx and crowds were present, a subject that had been left aside in American painting until then (HASKELL: 1999, 161-173). But it could hardly be said that, acting this way, they created a new —and American— pictorial language recognised by a "community of feelings".

And this is perhaps one of the reasons why, in the 1930s, the social regionalism of the "American Scene" movement somehow took up the baton from the aesthetic nationalism of the Ashcan School. The label "American Scene" points to the title of a renowned travel book by Henry James. It could be a signal that the explicit vocation of this group belongs to the realm of "showing" and, in this sense, to the exhibition value of the artwork. Anyway, the works of Benton, Wood, Curry, Bohrod and Burchfield, who were the main artists of the movement, were not only in a clear opposition to modernist trends, but shared a reaction to the social transformation which followed the Great Depression in America. John Dewey, in an article entitled "United States, incorporated", called this transformation "the dominant corporateness": he focused on the growing importance of corporations in economic life:

> We may then say that the United States has steadily moved from an earlier pioneer individualism to a condition of dominating corporateness. The influence business corporations exercise in determining present industrial and economic activities is both a cause and a symbol of the tendency to combination in all phases of life. Associations tightly or loosely organized more and more define the opportunities, the choices and the actions of individuals (DEWEY: 1931, 37).

So, Eakins' claim to concentrate on American themes acquired a new meaning, and so did the definition of an autochthonous American painting. The objective was no longer to pay attention to industrial city life, but to preserve the traditional American types (the farmer or the small trader), whose virtues —expressing the spirit of the age of pioneers— were supposed to define American cultural identity; an identity which was now being threatened by the centralization of federal government and the large corporations with their executives and bureaucrats. This nostalgic interest in rural American folk heroes as symbols of the true American identity gained a large audience, partially because it appealed to popular taste and partially because it was widely disseminated throughout the country by mural painters such as Mitchell Siporin, Boardman Robinson, George Biddle and Anton Refrieger, "commissioned to decorate local banks, railway stations and public buildings like post offices, as part of the public works programs inaugurated by the New Deal to employ those artists out of work because of the Depression, something that would be continued by the Federal Art Project and the WPA" (ROSE: 1967, 125).

In this decade, Hopper was often included in the American scene group by critics —including the influent Lloyd Goodrich, former director of the Whitney Museum and an attentive follower of Hopper's career. He profoundly rejected such a description:

> The thing that makes me so mad is the American Scene business. I never tried to do the American Scene as Benton and Curry and the Midwestern painters did. I think the American Scene painters caricatured America. I always wanted to do myself. The French painters did not talk about the 'French Scene' or the English painters about the 'English Scene' (…) The American quality is *in* a painter ─he does not have to strive for it (SCHMIED: 1995, 8).

Probably, Hopper's allusion to caricature is related to the confusion, often present in Benton and Curry, of folk tradition and popular culture, what sometimes drove them to add Chaplin or Disney characters to the list of American traditional figures. And, also in this case, Hopper is probably right when he discards this local or nostalgic effort of the American Scene as the path for constructing an American art.

But here again, I shall argue the advantages of the theoretical framework I am proposing, relying on Benjamin's opposition of cult and exhibition values, to reinterpret this period of art history in the United States and to establish the link between modern

painting and poverty of experience. The interesting point is the parallelism between the posterity of the movements of the American Scene or the Ashcan School and the movement represented by the Stieglitz's circle. As I have signalled, the main allegation against Dove, Hartley, Marin, Demuth, Strand or O'Keeffe was their approach to abstraction or, in other words, their deviation from the exhibition value of paintings; a deviation that, as I have also suggested, is a form of poverty of experience. But, over time, it will not be the reduction of this inclination to abstraction but, on the contrary, its radical accentuation what will lead the abstract expressionists to success where their predecessors did not accomplish an original visual language.

Something similar seems to happen to realist American painters in the territory of "showing". In this case, the main reproach addressed to realist painters was their excessive insistence in exhibition value and the corresponding deficit of cult value, i.e., of artistic quality in their paintings, because of the proximity of their images to the ones of mass culture. And it is curious to observe that, in the 1960s, pop art painters of the United States attain international acknowledgement as American artists precisely by intensifying this approach to mass culture, that is to say, increasing the exhibitive factor to the extent of making some critics doubtful about the cult value of their works. Something that, again, could be considered as a form of acceptance of the impoverishment of experience in modern images.

Those who took part in the debate about American artistic identity were interested in defining cultural contents as essentially American (contrasting them with those which would be essentially European). But, while this debate was at its peak, diverse and even opposed and contradictory cultural subjects were considered as essentially American: such varied styles as the anti-academicism of Eakins, the urban picturesque works of the Ashcan School, the Americanism of the European avant-gardists immigrated after the First World War, the regionalism of the "American scene", the works of the Stieglitz's group, the abstract expressionism and, of course, Hopper's paintings, were labelled as "American art". But perhaps this enormous variety in the definition of cultural identity is not such a strange issue if one recalls that, as Knutsson states from an anthropological point of view, cultural identity can never be defined only in terms of given cultural contents: it is constructed fundamentally through antagonisms which rely on the interactions between different groups fighting over a certain territory or resource, and

every so often a radical change of content is necessary in order to preserve the antagonism and, therefore, identity (KNUTSSON: 1998, 86-99).

3.3. HOPPER'S PLACE

The above brief description of American artistic panorama attempts to achieve a better understanding of Hopper's place in the scheme of the visual debate in America. The interpretation merely drafted in this section will be fully developed in the following chapters.

Although, listening to Hopper's words, one should say that he is clearly aligned with the aesthetic position of the Ashcan school, Hopper's paintings somehow question this impression. Of course, he remains faithful to the rule of finding beauty hidden in the ugliness of the accelerated urbanisation-industrialization process. For this reason, he is in direct rivalry with the social uses of photography, to which he is also close in his job as an illustrator. As I have also recalled, in the 1930s, the polarity represented in the United States by Stieglitz and Henri is replaced by the antagonism between the tendencies to abstraction (whose main figure is Stuart Davis) and the regionalism of the "American scene"[62]

In his article for *Reality*, Hopper distinguishes two different interpretations of the term modern: one, quite restricted, defines artists as "modern" if they cultivate the "technical innovations of the period" they belong to; the other sense, broader and essential to Hopper, refers to the "truth" that the artwork implies, no matter the historic period in which it was made, and this "truth" turns the modernity of those paintings into something that cannot be ever outdated[63]. In other words, he opposes the American scene because he retains a classical (universalistic) conception of art, but he also discards abstraction because he trusts in the possibility of a universal art not absolutely divorced from the "essential element of imagination", that is to say, exhibition value. So, in the system of coordinates of American visual arts in the early twentieth century, the natural drive of Hopper's painting would have been to continue Henri's way, something represented in those days by the artistic work of John Sloan.

[62]Davis declared that he also painted the American scene, although he condemned provincialism: "I use, as a great many others do, some methods of modern French painting which I consider to have universal validity" (ROSE: 1967, 76).

[63]"In its most limited sense, modern in art would seem to concern itself only with the technical innovations of the period. In its larger, and to me irrevocable, sense, it is the art of all time of definite personalities that remain forever modern by the fundamental truth that is in them" (MORSE: 1959).

But, even if Hopper's theoretical position is this, the evidence shows that his paintings differ substantially from Sloan's. Hopper seems to be aesthetically close to the painters from the Ashcan School, but neither his methods nor the resulting work can plausibly be included into that movement; his paintings look for poetic features in the new context of the industrial city, but his technique differs from the one Sloan or Henri defend. If the main goal of the Ashcan School members was to naturalize the strange and turn it into something visually appealing or worth of being aesthetically captured in a painting, it could be said that Hopper seems to turn the natural into something strange. Hopper practises an *aesthetics of the unacommodation*: his characters seem to be constantly on the move, in transitory spaces, not comfortable at all; and the technique he uses has nothing to do with the picturesque.

Hobbs, who has called out multiple differences between Hopper and the Ashcan School, observes that, in *Manhattan Bridge Loop* (1928) [Fig.7], the urban landscape lacks any remarkable or peculiar element, as if the "anti-heroic" qualities of the lonely passer-by, shrunk in comparison with the concrete blocks, were being stressed.

[Fig. 7] Edward Hopper, *Manhattan Bridge Loop*, 1928, 88.9 cm × 152.4 cm, Addison Gallery of American Art, Andover, MA.

Moreover, Hobbs compares Sloan's painting *A window on the street* (1912) [Fig.8] with *Eleven A.M.* painted by Hopper in 1926 [Fig.74].

[Fig. 74] E. Hopper *Eleven A.M*,1926, 71.3x91.6 Smithsonian American Art museum, Washington D.C

In both paintings, the viewer is turned into some sort of voyeur of a moment in the private life of the character. However, whereas Sloan's painting is somehow enriched with the anecdotal elements and with the tradition of art history (it has some sort of connection with Rossetti's or Burden's paintings, where every so often women lean on windows), Hopper's scene is deprived of these resemblances and background, turning the naked figure into some kind of emblem of the heart renting aridity of urban life (HOBBS: 1987, 33). Rose says that "Hopper saw only the doomed yearning of lonely figures in cold offices and desolate hotel rooms" (ROSE: 1967, 81).

[Fig. 8] John Sloan, *A Window on the street*, 1912, 66 x 81.28 cm., Bowdoin college Museum of art.

In *The City* (1927) [Fig. 9], we find a building somehow located halfway between Manhattan's Germania and the one in *House by the Railroad* [Fig.15]; seemingly outdated when compared with its context, the windows of the house are empty and dark (with the exception of one of them, which has a colourful awning). In the square below, human figures seem to be walking, but their profile is blurred and their bodies seem to be moving with difficulty, leaning in the direction of movement, as if the wind was pushing them, suggesting, according to Renner, a certain degree of anxiety that contrasts with the apparent serenity of the painting (RENNER: 1987, 48; WELLS: 2008, 74).

[Fig.9] Edward Hopper, *The City*, 1927, 93.98 x 69.85 cm University of Arizona Museum of Art

In these comments, the commonplace on Hopper's paintings appears summarized: voyeurism, aridity of urban life, desolation, loneliness, anxiety. These topics will be presented in relation to Hopper's critical reviews in the following pages, as evidence of something whose foundations are, however, very far from being clear. And, as I have already suggested, this is the main reason why I have resorted to the notion of poverty of experience developed in the first Part, looking for some means to read this kind of material. The source of all these psychological readings seems to rely on some features that come apparent if one briefly compares how Hopper and Sloan capture the city. In both cases, many of the paintings from their formative years share the dark palette and the tonalist influence of their teachers, as we can see if we put together *Queensborough Bridge* [Fig.17], a Hopper's oil dated in 1913, and *The City from Greenwich Village* (Sloan, 1922). But even through a superficial comparison, the enormous differences are more than evident.

[Fig.10] John Sloan, *Six O'clock, Winter*, 1912, 66.36 x 81.28 cm, Philips Collection, Washington, DC, US; [Fig.11] Edward Hopper, *Railroad Train*, 1908,61.6 cm × 73.66 cm Addison Gallery of American Art, Andover MA

When juxtaposing *Six O'Clock, Winter* (Sloan, 1912 [Fig.10]) with an early work of Hopper such as *Railroad Train,* dated in 1908 [Fig.11], it is clear that something has changed: from the work by Sloan to the one by Hopper one might say that experience has been impoverished. In Hopper's painting, humanity seems to have disappeared, and with it any trace of anecdote (the seemingly cheerful small talk between the pedestrians, those travellers waiting at the platform or the tenacity of the workers holding a big box in Sloan's oil), only the slope and the smoke of the train engine are visible, along with its opaque and impregnable wagon's windows. Sloan's houses are almost always inhabited and they suggest liveliness and encounters, anecdotes, activities and life scenes (the women walking on the pavement in *Street, Lilacs, Noon Sun* [1918], the comfortable house in *Our red Cottage, Gloucester* [1916], the family scene portrayed in S*ally and Paul, Reds and Greens* [1914-1918]), while Hopper's houses are often empty or devoid

of any activity, as suspended in time and space. But, as Henri wrote, "It may be that what we take for absence of humanity is the very presence of it" (HENRI: 2007, 95).

When comparing a painting of Sloan such as *Sunset, West-Twenty third Street* (1906, [Fig.12]) with *City Roofs* (Hopper, 1932, [Fig.13]) or *Roofs of Washington Square* (Hopper, 1926, [Fig.14]), not only a difference in the palette it is visible, but also the anecdote which would justify the scene (the female character standing on the roof hanging out the clothes) has disappeared, and the variety and irregularity of details has been replaced by the homogeneity and serial repetition of skyscrapers' windows, chimneys and skylights, without any trace of human presence. Whereas in the paintings of the Ashcan school there is always something remarkable, picturesque or interesting, the striking element in Hopper's paintings is that there is nothing striking in and of itself; everything seems to be monotonous and lacks novelty. It is worth mentioning that Hopper himself once said, when talking about *Office at Night* (1940, [Fig.30]): "I hope it will not tell any obvious anecdote, for none is intended"[64]

[Fig.12] John Sloan, *Sunset, West-Twenty third Street ,* 1906, 61.91 x 92.1 cm, Joslyn Art Museum, Omaha Nebraska

[64]The statement is attached to the letter of August, 25,1948 to Norman A. Geske, director of Walker Art Center, which had acquired the painting the same year (WAGSTAFF: 2004, 18).

[Fig.13] Edward Hopper, *City Roofs*, 1932, 73.7 × 91.4 cm, Whitney Museum of American Art , New York; [Fig.14] Edward Hopper, *Roofs in Washington Square*, 1926, 33.34 × 49.37 cm, Carnegie Museum, Pittsburgh

& & &

As a preliminary conclusion, it could be said that Hopper's concerns as a painter seem to be finally far removed from the discussion of Americanness. Of course, he does not share the avant-gardist program of a surpassing of art. But his previously quoted statement about the American scene that "the American quality is *in* a painter" is ambiguous. On one hand, it means that he finds absurd trying to be American in *painting*, like Benton or Curry; on the other hand, the sentence seems to assume that the American quality of the painter is directly expressed in *his paintings*. However, whilst it is a matter of fact whether the painter is or is not American, it remains problematic how to decide whether his painting is or not. To deepen this question: the universalist nationalism proposed by Mumford turns out to be paradoxical; if Americanness is an expression of naked humanity, it would mean that this cultural identity consists of giving up any national identity. And this paradox is present in Stieglitz's Americanism ("Of course by American I mean something much more comprehensive than is usually understood –if anything is usually understood at all! –Of course the world must be considered as a whole in the final analysis", STIEGLITZ: 1983, 212) as it is in Henri's patriotism ("My love of mankind is individual, not national, and always I find the race expressed in the individual. And so I am 'patriotic' only about what I admire, and my devotion to humanity burns up

as brightly for Europe as for America", HENRI: 2007, 141). Perhaps this is the reason why Hopper concluded that "the question of the value of nationality in art is perhaps unsolvable" (MORSE: 1959).

As for the controversy between cult and exhibition factors in American art, as I have stated, Ashcan School paintings escape from the rivalry with photography because, rather than merely *showing*, they also *tell* a story (even a formal story in their picturesque contrasts), an anecdote or some sort of aesthetically attractive irregularity which would somehow contain a dose of cult value, an ability to move the viewer. On the contrary, Hopper's frugality of details, the nakedness of his paintings, and the fact that he seems to be *showing* the poverty of experience of modern life, would suggest a lack of cult value. However, he does not simply eliminate the anecdote or the story as he replaces contrast and irregularity by serial monotony: he makes the viewer feel their absence. The narrative ingredient does not exactly disappear but turns itself into something disturbing or unreal.

I have called Hopper's position classic only in the sense of his attachment to what has been described in previous pages as the problem of modern beauty: if the approximation between Benjamin's polarity (cult/exhibition) and the dualism of Henry James (telling/showing) which Jameson proposes as a definition of realism is acceptable, as I have suggested above, it could be said that Hopper keeps on besing realist because he refuses to resolve the polarity in favour of cult value, as it happens to a certain extent in abstract painting. But it is clear that he also refuses a kind of painting which would have only exhibition value: art is an experience of the aura. But aura cannot be experienced in the modern world but as what is disappearing from the image because of the reduction of distances —the transformation of *Ferne* in *Abstand*. With the help or the Benjaminian instruments profiled in Part I, the next chapter will examine a particular incarnation of this problem in one of the Hopper's major works.

CHAPTER 4. A HOUSE BY THE RAILROAD

Although I will also refer to other Hopper's paintings, this chapter focuses on a single work, *House by the railroad*, 1925, [Fig.15], a painting often taken as marking Hopper's artistic maturity. In the first section (4.1., "House by the railroad"), after a brief and preliminary description, I will show how the formal opposition which dominates this composition has been considered as a symbol of an opposition in the contents, leading to interpretations of the painting as a nostalgic view of outdated rural America marginalised by the consequences of the technological revolution, what I find to be an unsatisfactory reading. So, I shall return to the visual analysis to deepen the mentioned formal opposition and in its rich metaphorical meaning, taking one of its outstanding formal features (the impression of the instability of the house) as the driving force of my argument.

As a first step to an alternative approach, I shall examine a further development of the second feature of the poverty of experience I referred to in chapter 2 to redefine the cultural coordinates in which this painting (and many other works by the artist) can be understood. In the second section (4.2., "The house in the window"), I shall propose an interpretative hypothesis to account for the tension between the house and the railroad and also for the particular impression awakened in most viewers by this house. This analysis will be important for the chapters that follow this one, in which I shall extend my hypothesis in order to test it in other works.

4.1. *HOUSE BY THE RAILROAD*

The building that stands out in the composition is quite asymmetric and relatively narrow. The tower and the porch, along with the high and long windows, echoes the style of Second Empire architecture, very popular in the late Victorian era, also called “Mansard-Style”. Indeed, Helen Appleton Read defined in 1933 this roof as one of Hopper's key elements. Hopper himself commented on the “hideous beauty” of “pseudoGothic, French Mansard, Colonial, mongrel or what-not” houses, with their “eye-searing color or delicate harmonies of faded paint, shouldering one another along interminable streets” (HEMINGWAY, A.:1992, 383).

[Fig.15] Edward Hopper, *House by the Railroad*, 1925, 73.7 x 61 cm , Museum of Modern Art, New York

It could be said that the house follows the European tradition that Hopper had already captured in his early French works. It stands alone, on the other side of a railroad that longitudinally cuts through the lower side of the painting. The blue tonality of the

house seems to be in tune with the colour of the sky, in the same way that the usage of red tones, visible on the chimney, echo the colour of the slope and the railroad on the foreground. Whereas one of the facades, rather than merely illuminated, seems to emanate its own light, shadows dominate the tower, the terrace and the porch, whose entrance remains also hidden because of the presence of the railroad. The long windows of the house, whether they are open or closed, do not allow the viewer to distinguish the interior of the building, turning into something impossible to determine —except through mere speculation— whether the house has been abandoned or is inhabited.

4.1.1 *A dominant interpretation*

As a starting point, let us review some of the main critical contributions to the interpretation of the painting.

Based on her deep knowledge of Hopper's corpus, Gail Levin has described *House by the Railroad* [Fig.15] as the first painting where the artistic maturity of Hopper is made completely visible (LEVIN: 1980,48). From a strictly biographical standpoint, it was certainly the first painting by the artist acquired by MoMa in 1930[65]. Throughout this decade, the increasing relevance of Hopper as an artist allowed him to leave aside his work as an illustrator, of which he had never been very fond. Shortly after, in 1933, MoMa organized a monographic exhibition. At this juncture, then, Hopper became a "professional" artist. But this is only a biographical circumstance, external to the painting itself. So, where does the artistic importance of this work in Hopper's career lay? The "maturity" has to be noticed in the painting itself, in its formal approach and in the subject, which somehow must be singularly significant in order to represent the artistic self-affirmation of the painter. What is more, if we assume the inaugural nature of this painting, the interpretation of its meaning should be taken as the starting point or as a miniature prototype towards a general interpretation of Hopper's work.

[65]Shortly after the museum's founding in 1929, the controversial MoMa's exhibition "Paintings by Nineteen Living Americans" showed six Hopper paintings, including House by the railroad, which was donated to MoMa at the show's conclusion by Stephen C. Clark; it was the first oil to enter the museum's permanent collection (BARTER, 2007,139).

[Fig.16] Edward Hopper, *American Landscape*, 1920, 31.1 x 18.4 cm, Philadelphia Museum of Art.

There is, in Hopper's visual approach to this theme, an invitation to think from the very beginning the relation of the house and the railroad as an oppositional one: the horizontality of the railroad opposes to the verticality of the house. Most critical interpretations are inclined to give the spatial opposition social significance): a conflict between an innocent past and modern life and its complexities. Levin suggests that this conflict is made visible in Hopper's works after 1920. She considers the engraving dated that year, *American Landscape* [Fig.16], as the direct predecessor of *House by the Railroad* (LEVIN: 1980, 40). Indeed, in this engraving we can see some cows going through the railroad and a house standing on the other side, as it happens in the 1925 oil paint. However, the details of the engraving (the anecdote of the cows) distract the viewer from the starkness of the solitary house that in House by the railroad, according to Levin, not only represents America's simpler past, but also America's rootless society (LEVIN: 1980, 39- 40). Hobbs, who also compares this painting with the same engraving, understands American landscape as an image of an interrupted landscape, thinking of the small farms on the other side as out of sync with the new technology (HOBBS: 1987, 56).

According to Strand, one of the main reasons for the popularity of the painting is its representation of the house as a "rebellious" element against the railroad. The house,

Strand says personifying it, seems to turn its back to the viewer, and it defines, in the simplest terms, an attitude of resistance, declining established hierarchies, but also it surrenders, in a dignified way —majestic and insubordinate at the same time—, to what is inevitable (STRAND: 2008, 43).

This seems to be a possible starting point for the dominant and widely spread social interpretation of *House by the railroad* [Fig.15], as an example of which I will take the reading of Hobbs, who also promotes a social reading of *Queensborough bridge* [Fig. 17] to which I will refer below. He suggests that the issue in many mature artworks of Hopper during the decade of 1930 is the opposition of industrial and agrarian points of view at a moment when battles between farmers and railway companies were at their peak. (HOBBS: 1987, 109). In *Cape Cod Evening*, painted in 1939, Hobbs claims that both the house and its inhabitants seem to be the victims of progress, understanding the painting as expressive of the situation that the rural areas of America were undergoing. The end of the agrarian age would turn those farmers into emblems of an anachronistic way of life (HOBBS: 1987, 110). Wells also signals that Hopper's railroad tracks could be understood as a temporal journey from the cultural-historical past into the present, as if alluding to America's transition from their earlier agrarian times that were coming to an end, leaving space for the urban industrial dominance (WELLS: 2008, 154).

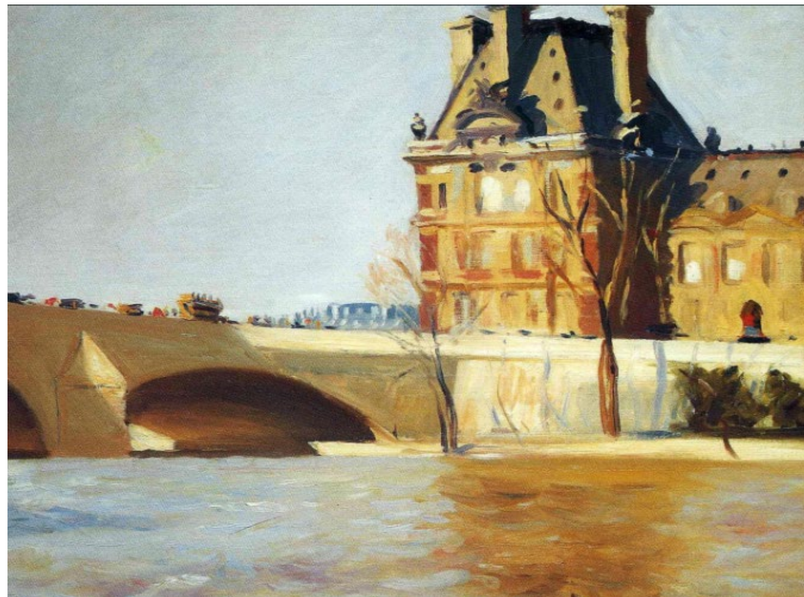
But, no matter how Hopper himself felt concerned about this debate, I do not think all those visual contrasts are enough to support this kind of social reading. This reading suggests a homesick interpretation of the artist's intentions in favour of the rural past and against the industrialization procedures. But Hopper remained faithful to Henri's principles and he was not interested in social commentary but in an artistic expression of the changing circumstances of the modern world. Hopper's oeuvre cannot, therefore, be explained either as a critique against or as a celebration of progress. Indeed, this social interpretation of Hopper's works is a continuation of the allegation of ugliness or lack of artistic character directed first against the Ashcan school paintings and, after, against Hopper himself from the sphere of abstract expressionism[66], as if his insistence on figurative painting could only be ethically (not aesthetically) justified as social realism.

[66]"In December 1946, Greenberg stated that a new artistic category should be invented for Hopper's achievements. According to him, his means were epigonal, paltry and impersonal; but his sense of composition offered an insight into the state of American life not found in literature. Hopper was simply a

4.1.2 *Back to the painting*

So, I must return now to the painting and its formal features, in search of a more plausible approach.

In Hopper's work there seems to be something like a visual pattern which is recognisable in *House by the railroad* [Fig.15]: a house seen from a low angle with the entrance and the site made invisible by a visual obstacle which introduces movement in the canvas. One of the first examples of this pattern is *Le Pont Royal* (1909) [Fig.18], where a house of the same style appears, and the vision of its location is obstructed by the bridge, with a rising movement running to the left of the picture.



[Fig.18] Edward Hopper, *Le Pont Royal*, 1909, 61 cm × 73.8 cm, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York

Both painted the same year, Bridge over the Seine and Le Pavillon de Flore depict a similar house by the river, in the last case with some buildings obscuring the ground floor. In the engraving *American Landscape* (1920), the whole first storey of the house is

bad painter, Greenberg concluded, but if he were a better one, he probably would not be such a great artist" (KRANZFELDER: 1998,177).

hidden behind the slope under the railroad —a slope that, by the way, had already appeared in *Railroad train* (1908). Also, in *The railroad* (1922) there are several houses by the railroad, and a slope which only permits a view of the rooves. The same happens in *New York, New Haven and Hartford* (1931), although in this case there are not the sloped terrain or the railroads what hides the entrance of the house, but some trees. The same visual pattern, without the railroad, returns in *From Williamsburg bridge* (1928) [Fig.19], but in this painting the bridge that hides the basis of the houses is decreasing. And houses with an invisible ground are shown, by means of the low angle, in *The bootleggers* (1925), where the "same" building from House by the railroad [Fig.15] appears, in *Lighthouse Hill* (1927) or in *Corn Hill* (1930) [Fig.20]; the same effect, with a high angle, is obtained in *The city* (1927) [Fig.9], in *Lighthouse and buildings* (1927) or *Burly Cobb's house* (1933). Examples could multiply.

[Fig.19] Edward Hopper *From Williamsburg Bridge*, 1928,74.6 cm × 111.1 cm, Metropolitan Museum of art.

[Fig.20] Edward Hopper, *Corn Hill*, 1930, 72.39 x 107.95 cm , McNay Art Institute,San Antonio

This pattern is characterised by the systematic appearance of an oblique line, which introduces movement in the scene (present in most of Hopper's works). Trying to clarify the use of the word *movement* in visual arts, Rudolph Arnheim shared in 1954 the position of Kandinsky about the terminological misunderstandings associated to this term, and proposed to replace it with the expressions "directed tension" or "visual dynamics": "Oblique orientation is probably the most elementary and effective means of obtaining directed tension. Obliqueness is perceived spontaneously as a dynamic straining toward or away from the basic spatial framework of the vertical and horizontal"[67]. Moreover, when this oblique line is a railroad, the continuous sequence of the ties invites the viewer to visually follow the tracks in the direction of the tension outwards the canvas.

House by the railroad [Fig.15], as I just signalled, is horizontally divided in its lower part by the railroad, although that horizontality is rather at an angle, creating some sort of diagonal which emphasizes the feeling of deepness. The house itself also seems to lean slightly, although the vertical lines, as Kranzfelder signals, are parallel to the

[67]After exposing a lot of examples from classical paintings, and having mentioned the train rails as a case of such dynamic tension, Arnheim adds: "Similar dynamic effects are obtained by photographers when they tilt the camera or change the angle of the original negative in order to add an element of heightened life or excitement. The cubists and expressionists gave violent action to their subjects by building Eiffel Towers, churches, trees, or human figures out of piles of oblique units" (ARNHEIM: 1974, 424-428).

painting's margins (KRANZFELDER: 1998, 86-87). As in many of Hopper's paintings, it is suggested the presence of an imaginary internal viewer[68], and in this case the point of view of this implied beholder is quite unusual: the scene is observed from the same height of the slope, so it is seen from a low angle. The impression that the house lies behind an assumed horizon lends it an eerie look. Hopper does not eliminate the laws of perspective, but he alters them, creating discomfort and even vertigo. Gillies claims that in *House by the railroad* [Fig.15] there is a two-point perspective: on one hand, the horizon line, which in this case would be the basis of the house, or the railroad tracks, and which would help the viewer to orient oneself. The foreground wedge, on the other hand, indicates a rising conformation of earth between this line of sight and the horizon line. However, there is no convergence between them, and depending on the vanishing point chosen, the horizon line would be on the top of the first story's windows or on its basis. Gillies also points out —and this is in my view a relevant observation— that this painting exemplifies what he calls "an abuse of parallel perspective" in Hopper, "for all the apparent horizontals would lead to a vanishing point that remains outside of the canvas". The top line of the foreground wedge becomes a line of convergence, and the line of the railroad ties becomes an illusionary parallel, stabilizing the painting and creating the effect of two-point perspective. Thus, the external viewer is confronted with a choice of horizon lines and a choice of spaces: whether the picture plane is parallel or oblique requires a decision, because "the convergence of horizontals suggests an oblique plane, but the sharp-edged focus and the pronounced base conflict with this choice" (GILLIES: 1972, 407). This visual instability is what produces the feeling that the tower of the house is leaning to the right, a feeling which increases if we look at the section of the painting featuring the railroad. If we look again the whole picture, the rising of the slope running to the left in the painting somehow compensates this inclination, suggesting the illusion that this rising diagonal is the real basis of the house. The instability of the building in *House by the railroad* [Fig.15] could be a mere effect of this tension and of the fluctuation between the two possible perspectives observed by Gillies. The effects of signification that this instability produces in the spectator will be the guiding thread of my main argument in this chapter.

[68] I will further develop this issue in chapter 6.

4.1.3. _The dynamic tension between the house and the railroad_

The kind of conflictive relationship represented by the house and the railroad was not always present in Hopper's works. In a painting such as *Valley of the Seine*, made in 1908, the enormous engineering work of the bridge, and the train with its white vapour, seem to harmoniously coexist with the small town at their feet. In other works, the role of the railroad is played by a road or a bridge which marks the dynamic contrast between the stability of the houses and the "movement" element that opposes it; so, the conflictive relationship appears, as it happens in *Burly Cobb's house* (1933); but, in contrast to *House by the Railroad* [Fig.15], the houses or the visible architectural elements are contextualized: it is made clear that the houses represented belong to rural architecture, and, therefore, they are located appropriately. In *Railroad Sunset* (1929) [Fig.21], the "empty" building which stands facing the twilight is a Railroad Switch Tower, and therefore it is also in its rightful place by the railroad. Something similar happens in paintings such as Le Pont Royal, painted fifteen years before *House by the Railroad* [Fig.15], or *The City* [Fig.9], where urban buildings are also located in their context (Paris and New York respectively).

[Fig.21] Edward Hopper, *Railroad Sunset*, 1929, 74.5 cm × 122.2 cm, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York

There are other examples in Hopper's oeuvre during the decade of 1930 where buildings seem to be isolated or decontextualized, such as *Ryders House* (1933), *South Truro Church* (1930), or *Corn Hill* (1930) —although, in this last one, houses are grouped together. However, in these paintings there is no trace of the industrial communication technology to contrast with the traditional, rural or natural element. It might be argued that *House by the railroad* [Fig.15] reunites three different elements that define the painting. First, the element of tradition, represented by the house; secondly, the interpolation of the technological element; and, thirdly, the isolation of the house, producing decontextualization. The conflict between the house and the railroad —which is not always made clear in Hopper's oeuvre, but here is visualized in a very explicit way— is, therefore, rich in symbolic significations: the dynamic tension between the technological and traditional elements is the visual support for other metaphorical meanings; it can be related to the conflict between tradition and technology, between Europe and America, and between past and present. Let us see this closer.

Train scenes (engines, railways and the interior of train coaches) are not rare in Hopper's oeuvre (*Railroad train*, 1908 [Fig.11] *Freight Car at Truro, 1931, D. & R G Locomotive, Locomotive and Freight car*, 1925 are some examples). Hopper was intrigued by trains, railroads and train stations (*The El Station*, 1908, *Dawn in Pennsylvania*, 1942), and they often seem to carry a symbolic significance, be it a sense of change, continuity, mobility, or the rootlessness of modern life. It could be said that both the house and the railroad share the same space but not the same time. Because of its imperial architecture, the house seems to be outdated in relation to the moment in which it is being represented. The railroad, which may be considered responsible for the isolation of the house, points to the future, to the modern world. The house, on the contrary, is a symbol of the past (the seventeenth century, when François Mansart employed extensively in France the type of roof named after him, and the Paris of Napoleon III, who commissioned Haussmann to redesign central Paris in this style). And this temporal difference suggests another one. The past and the present that the Second Empire house and the railroad respectively symbolize, indicate not only a quantitative difference (past comes before present) but also a qualitative one between two heterogeneous temporalities which point to different geographies. The house is a qualified and differentiated space, with an architectonical and social meaning, whereas the railway belongs to a homogeneous, indifferent and unqualified space, a quantitative reality. When

shortening distances, the train seems to reduce differences, whereas the house seems to underline them. But let us note that those industrial constructions whose main function is that of communicating, connecting and shortening distances, create however an effect of decontextualization, distance and separation. The railroad interrupts the spatial continuity between the houses and its surroundings, which acts in the painting as a suggestion for the temporal comparison between past and present.

Whatever the context the house may have ever had in the American territory, its origin is doubtless European. So, it could be said that it is not Hopper who has uprooted the house from its context, but somehow the house has lost its original meaning in the same way the European tradition has lost it when introduced in the modern world, whose technological dimension has been turned into a privileged symbol of America. The tension between past and present, suggested by the contradictory juxtaposition of the majestic house and the monotonous railway, is also a tension between Europe and America, between tradition and modernity, to the extent that the meaning of America seems to absorb all the processes of industrialization and the increase of speed as something characteristic. As if moving the house from European to American territory was part of the process of the loss of context, as if America was some sort of perfect example or prototype of the modern world, a land without context or a scenery whose context consists precisely in the lack of context.

As in many other Hopper's paintings, in *House by the railroad* [Fig.15] there is a complex relationship between closeness and distance. What I am arguing is that closeness and distance are metaphorical and not only physical: the house is far from us, in a past that we cannot bring back no matter how close we come to it. And the railways are close not only in visual terms: they are immediate to our modern experience, as constitutive elements of our perceptual landscape, and they will always be, no matter how far we try to escape from them. But, in another sense, railways are what will take us far away when we board the train, not only physically speaking but also visually, when we follow their route in Hopper's painting. And the house that stands outlined against the threatening landscape without defined clouds or clears is right in front of us, as something immediately captured by our look that keeps our eyes fixed on it, while the railway goes across the picture and gets lost into the infinite out of the painting.

4.1.4. *Railroads and reduction of distances*

But it is clear that, after the considerations made in the first Part, railways can be interpreted as an agent of the second feature of the poverty of experience, the reduction of distances I spoke of in 2.2.1. This interpretation, also charged with social and cultural significations, relies on the Benjaminian theme of the decline of the aura. I conceive of this further development as a way to move forward a critical hypothesis susceptible of being tested in the analysis of *House by the railroad* [Fig.15]. I will show that this interpretation is fruitful, first, to enrich the significance of the conflict between the house and the railroad; and, second, to shed light on the very particular aspect of the building.

But, why should we accept that the decline of the aura means a reduction of distance? And, how is it directly implied in the social meaning of the railway? Indeed, Benjamin defines aura in terms of *remoteness*. Aura characterizes the perception of an insurmountable distance, "however close it may be" the object of such perception. He attributes this remoteness to the fact that the object in question belongs to the domain of tradition: "the aura attaching to the object of a perception corresponds precisely to the experience [*Erfahrung*] which, in the case of an object of use, inscribes itself as long practice" (BENJAMIN: 2006, 337). So, we could say that aura is the signal or the richness of experience provided by cultural tradition. In this sense, it is clear that spatial distance is the material support of a symbolic or cultural one, which is actually insurmountable. The naming of the "object of use" as a sediment of experience in which the aura is also perceived indicates that, in traditional societies, even the common devices of everyday life —and a house is, so to speak, the main of these devices— are, in a certain sense, sacred objects affected by the symbolic remoteness which, in modern times, will be secularized as aesthetic distance. In an extensive sense, it could be said that *every* object (including natural beings) is loaded with tradition and, therefore, participates in the aura

So, the decline of the aura in modern societies, as another name for the impoverishment of experience, has to be also expressible as a reduction of distances. As usual in Benjamin's thought, this reduction is articulated by technological innovations coming from the industrial revolution. And this way we come from the house to the railroad. Indeed, the shortening of distances produced by modern technology has *two complementary dimensions*. The *first* one refers to the industrial transportation devices,

especially trains and automobiles in Benjamin's times. Railroads are not only a mere element of modernization and industrialization, but one of the foundational planks of the national construction of the United States. Railways are part of the development of national identity. In the epic tale of that national construction, which movies have often made visible, trains are an essential element for the unification of territory. They bring closer elements that, in the vast land of the United States, are socially, culturally, climatologically and even linguistically heterogeneous. They shorten distances between faraway places and connect regions that had been until then isolated or barely accessible. At the same time that it unifies territory, the railway also creates a standardization of time which makes uniform the different time zones it passes through, guaranteeing temporal equivalences that allow us to calculate the length of the trip and the departure and arrival times. The revolution in transportation which took place in the late nineteenth century and the first decades of the twentieth century contributed to the dissolution of the mystique of faraway places, since for the first time everyone could reach them easily. It could be said that those faraway places could only keep their mystery halo as long as only a few people had seen them with their own eyes, while for the rest the sense of these places were confined to more or less romantic stories or visual evocations. The significant growth of long-distance trips brought new travellers closer to places which otherwise they would have never even dreamt of visiting. Sigfried Kracauer expressed this effect in his essay on "Travel and dance": "The more the world shrinks thanks to automobiles (…) and airplanes, the more the concept of the exotic in turn also becomes relativized. This relativizing of the exotic goes hand in hand with its banishment from reality (…) As a result of the comforts of civilization, only a minute part of the globe's surface remains *terra incognita* today". But it does not mean that modern travellers have an *experience* of the far places they can visit: "strictly speaking, the travel that is s*o a la mode* actually no longer enables people to savour the sensation of foreign places: one hotel is like the next, and the nature in the background is familiar to readers of illustrated magazines" (KRACAUER: 1995, 65-66).

It cannot be said more clearly that the experience of these foreign places has been replaced by an *image* of them. And this image comes from the *second dimension* of the shortening of distances, that is to say, the mechanical procedures of reproduction of

images[69]. The idea that photography extinguishes the aura of the object, liquidating its uniqueness, is a well-known topic in the Benjamin literature. But, in Benjamin's terms mechanical images are deprived of cult value (they *show* the object, but they do not *tell* its story). This way, the shortening of spatial distances implies the decline of the aura because it is associated with mechanical and mass reproduction of images of foreign places. These images —not the places depicted in them— are what modern man *sees*, not only when he is travelling to foreign places, but also when he moves into the city: the infinitely reproduced images occupy the vision and replace experience. As stated by another tireless reader of Bergson: "the photograph is not a figuration of what one sees, it is what modern man sees. It is dangerous not simply because it is figurative, but because it claims to *reign over vision*" (DELEUZE: 2003, 11). It could be said that they are "false" (they are not the real places depicted, they do not transmit the experience of those places), but it does not eliminate the fact that these images are the very objects constituting the fabricated space in which the modern city dweller lives. If, as above suggested, in a certain sense every object in traditional societies has an aura, also in a certain sense, every object in the modern ones is deprived of aura, i.e., of tradition.

The modern private experience is not only that of the single individual, but also that of the anonymity of the passengers of the public means of transportation (buses, railroads and trams), like the ones depicted in Hopper's *Chair car* (1965); one of them is reading, but reading, in many Hopper's scenes, is a defensive reaction of those who find themselves for the first time, with the arrival of this new means of transportation, in "situations where they had to look at one another for long minutes or even hours without speaking to one another", as says Simmel in a quote recalled by Benjamin (BENJAMIN: 2006, 341). And modern external experience is now, for example, that of the landscape seen from a train window, like the bridge appearing in Hopper's *Compartment C, Car 293* (1938) while the woman in her seat leaves through a magazine: images in the window follow one another as illustrations in the pages of a magazine.

[69]G. Freund has signalled the historic coincidence of both phenomena: "The network of railroads around the world covered over 618,000 miles by 1880. Also in 1880, a newspaper carried the first photograph reproduced by purely mechanical means, a process that was to revolutionize the way events were seen and transmitted […] The introduction of newspaper photography was a phenomenon of immense importance, one that changed the outlook of the masses. Before the first press picture, the ordinary man could visualize only those events that took place near him, on his street or in his village. Photography opened a window, as it were. The faces of public personalities became familiar and things that happened all over were his to share. As the reader's outlook expanded, the world began to shrink" (FREUND: 1980, 103).

The mechanical production of movement, which characterizes industrial times, has given birth to different transport media which turn the old remoteness into a measurable distance potentially susceptible to be traversed by anyone. In this way, a new experience of space, which we could name "abstract", appears: the one that is incarnated by the new railroad plans and their schedules (one of these schedules is what the woman in *Hotel Room* [1931, Fig.48] holds in her hands). In them, travels are presented as mere geometrical lines without a figurative link with "real" (perceptual) space, and the places are signalled as dots with the names of the train stations, illustrating the fact that, as Kracauer said, "travel has been reduced to a pure experience of space" (KRACAUER: 1995, 66).

Referring to Hopper's Gas [Fig.22], Mark Strand remarks:

> With the exception of the tamarack, Hopper's trees are generic. They look theway trees do when we drive by them at fifty or sixty miles an hour. And yet his woods have a peculiar and forceful identity. Compared to the woods that precede them in American painting, they are sombre and uninviting. The wilderness of Cole, Church, and Bierstadt was panoramic, open and available. It overwhelmed but did not threaten. Its enhancements were inspirational, not fearful. It was a vast theatre in which the moment of creation was enacted again and again. For Hopper, the wilderness is nature's dark side, heavy and brooding. In Gas the shadowy woods seem poised, ready to absorb the viewer as well as whoever happens to be travelling down the road between them and the gas station (STRAND: 2008, 38-39).

[Fig.22] Edward Hopper, *Gas*, 1940, 66.7 x 102.2 cm, Museum of Modern Art, New York

Indeed, although Strand does not develop this statement, such generic and "threatening" nature can be found, for example, in *House at dusk* (1935) [Fig.33], *Compartment C, Car C 293* (1938), *Cape Cod Evening* (1939), *August in the city* (1945) [Fig.36], *Seven A.M* (1948) [Fig.70], *Cape Cod Morning* (1950)[Fig.35], *Sunlight on brownstones* (1956), *Western Motel* (1957)[Fig.67], or *Second Story Sunlight* (1960).

Unfortunately, Strand limits his observation to Hopper's woods, what impedes him from noticing that, in Hopper's works, this kind of *generification*, as I shall argue, affects not only the natural environment, but also buildings (as happens in *House by the railroad* [Fig.15]) or even people. Despite his incidental comparison of the generic trees with the perspective of the driver, neither Strand makes a clear connection between the technological intervention of landscape and the uninviting look of Hopper's nature, nor he notices that the driver sees the trees *through the window* of his car (and windows are not minor ingredients in Hopper's work). I will explain the relevance of this observation in the next section.

4.2.THE HOUSE IN THE WINDOW

Having highlighted these points, I will face in this section the construction of my interpretative hypothesis about *House by the railroad* [Fig.15]. Expressed in simple terms, my assumption is not that Hopper has painted the house from the railroad (it is known that Hopper painted always in the studio and from memory, although he used to make some sketches in situ), but that he has tried to paint the house as it could be seen through the window of a moving train and, therefore, that the virtual viewer who observes the building inside Hopper's oil is moving. Besides giving my reasons for this interpretation, I will argue that this simple assumption acquires a deeper meaning when located in the context of the impoverishment of experience implied in the reduction of distances produced by the railroad

Besides the previous visual analysis, I would like to begin underlining that if, as I have argued in chapter 2, figurative representations not only point to a resemblance regarding perceptual experience, but also translatability to words: in realist art the title of the painting should be taken as an important indication. It is clear in this case that, whatever had happened to the house to have become so unstable, it must be related to the fact that the building is *by* the railroad. The title is, indeed, an indication in the sense that the interpretation should not be focused either on the house or on the railroad, but on the relation between them.

And the point I am making is that, although it has been rarely observed, one of the most evident peculiarities of Hopper's oil is that, in it, the house is *watched from the railroad*. That is to say, the railroad is the internal standpoint chosen from which to present the house. All the critical reviews of this painting focus on the house, perhaps because it is assumed that there is nothing remarkable to say about the railroad. The painting makes visible the most essential parts of this simple structure: rails and ties. Seen from a moving train, parallel rails create a sensation of visual (and virtually infinite) continuity, but the perpendicular ties break from time to time —from space to space— this continuity (and these interruptions are not less virtually infinite). So, the resultant visual experience of the space is that of constant continuity and constant fragmentation: except for the curves, parallel lines seem to remain still, but perpendicular ties jump out of view one after the other all the time, creating, with a systematic frequency, little visual shocks. It is just as

evident that railroads, described this way, are another figure of the Hegelian bad infinity alluded to by Benjamin, which I previously defined as a line running ever onwards (corresponding to the rails), producing a constant delay of the final moment of its finitude (represented by the ties). Kracauer said that the modern patterns of movement are at the same time the aesthetic reflection of industrial work discipline and a way of sinking into a state of relaxation and indifference that compensates for the uneasy effects of such tension (KRACAUER: 1995, 325-327). This explains that this apparently trivial movement can be a relaxing spectacle, a distraction from the downtime of a railway journey.

I also stated that the Hegelian straight line of the bad infinity is the privileged image of time in modern culture: every second of the clock, every jolt of the industrial machine, every *coup* of a game, every photogram of a film, every piece on the conveyor belt, every dancer on the chorus line, every hotel room, every face in the urban crowd, is exactly like the previous and the next ones; but it is also completely different and new, because each one starts only when the previous one has finished. Continuity is, as in the case of the visual experience of rails and ties in movement, an optical illusion produced by the speed. And this also illustrates the basic feature of the poverty of experience: in modern times, learning from experience has become impossible because the series of events starts from zero at every moment, leaving no place for accumulation in memory. And this means that the sudden start is the actual rhythm of the modern experience of time. The meaningless intervals between the ties turn out every second in a possible shock, an occasion for derailment.

As Benjamin recalls, Freud defines the function of the conscious mind as a protection against external stimuli which might produce a shock. The source of Benjamin's concept of shock is not only Freud, but also Simmel. In *The metropolis and mental life* (SIMMEL:1976), Simmel speaks about the "intellectualization of perception" needed to face the overabundance of visual and aural stimuli in an industrialized environment, where perception becomes sudden and discontinuous. In order to process this overload of speedy information, the level of consciousness must be increased to anticipate mentally a possible shock, being prepared for it before it occurs (KOEPNIK: 1999, 144-145). We have seen that Benjamin's concept of shock could also include "everyday shocks" like, for example, the impacts produced by the sensationalistic

headlines of newspapers or the unexpected appearance of an image in a car window. This tireless activity of intellectualized perception constitutes private experience as a defence against the blank spaces which menace with potential failure the continuity of thought, assigning a precise point in time to every event in consciousness, even "at the cost of the integrity of the incident's contents" (BENJAMIN: 2006, 319). The failure of this activity leads to trauma: an event which cannot be integrated in consciousness. It must be suppressed to construct a consistent narrative. But, in doing so, an empty space appears in one's personal experience. The experience is impoverished due to the practical need of surviving what cannot be experienced (the trauma). According to Benjamin's reading of Freud, the dangerous components of the external incident are kept in an unconscious compound of lasting impressions which have never been consciously and explicitly lived and have never been turned into *Erlebnis*. Meanwhile, in the conscious mind, events vanish leaving no trace.

In many of Hopper's works, apparently trivial images are, indeed, treated with extreme attention. But this also happens to the car driver, who is forced to practise this intellectualized perception. The driver must be very aware of what goes through the window and then fix it quickly to detect any signal of danger, although in most cases it will be an irrelevant element which has to be discarded; and it will be immediately forgotten in order to leave space for the next one. This constantly renewed attention awakens a new type of visual acuity which has a paradoxical character: the continuous presentation of novelties is linked to a certain degree of monotony and even to a feeling of boredom. But the repetition of what has been already seen involves pleasure or relaxation: every avoided surprise, every discarded danger, every missed shock, creates a feeling of relief, because remoteness (*Ferne*) is reduced to a measurable distance (*Abstand*). Benjamin says that "in the protective eye, there is no daydreaming surrender to distance and faraway things. The protective eye may bring with it something like pleasure in the degradation of such distance" (BENJAMIN: 2006, 341), that is, in the disintegration of the aura. If the attention of the viewer is stimulated by the constant appearance of "novelties", boredom happens because the space observed is merely a distraction (especially if the viewer is in the back seat of the car). In this sense, it is an unattended space, insignificant and at the same time specially remarked due to the act of driving (when talking about cars) or to the speed of the passing images through a train window.

Needless to say here that these sort of spaces are found in many of Hopper's "exterior" paintings, especially in those cases where railroads or highways appear: *House by the railroad* [Fig.15], *Railroad sunset* [Fig.21], *Early Sunday morning* [Fig,42], or *Gas* [Fig.22]. These are some of the most significant examples where both the landscape and the architecture portrayed are seen as something general and not deeply detailed. In the same way, Hopper's interiors (hotels, apartments, cafeterias) are every so often the representation of the urban materialization of unnoticed and ephemeral space, not worthy of detailed attention. This is the "distracted attention" of the traveller on the move between origin and final destination, because those are spaces without a clear origin or destiny.

So, not only can one imagine the traveller absent-mindedly observing the moving rails, but the passenger in the train carriage trying to reconstruct a visual continuity and a consistent time-line from the fragments of space seen in the window-pane. Railways give way to a landscape characterized by the poverty of details, since the specific features are lost due to the fact that the speed of the transport media is higher than the speed of walking, and therefore than the possibilities of a clear visual perception, which can only be recovered once the vehicle stops. In Hopper's paintings, houses, streets or the general landscape are "impoverished", leaving only a brief and schematic image, in tune with the ghostly house by the railroad. Those are images seen through a glass window, and "it is no coincidence that glass is such a hard, smooth material to which nothing can be fixed. A cold and sober material into the bargain. Objects made of glass have no 'aura'. Glass is, in general, the enemy of secrets" (BENJAMIN: 1999, 733-734).

This is not a merely quantitative phenomenon, derived from the speed of movement and therefore from the rapidity of the images passing by, which do not allow the viewer to construct a whole story from all those fragments, which could be considered almost as flashes. There is also a qualitative element: mechanical movement is made of "jumps" (like the movement of the second hand in an analogue watch), discontinuous moments and shocks. It is a movement based on mechanical momentums (the rocking of the train which travellers experience especially when they try to move between different cars). This mechanical rhythm, besides increasing attention, modifies perception when compared to the one of animal-drawn transport, according to Bergson's distinction

between the continuity of the movement derived from living beings and the discontinuity of mechanical movement. The traveller is not really aware of the distance or the approaching of objects that pass by, but they appear suddenly as surprises (as unexpected images) in “the process of continually starting all over again” [BENJAMIN: 2006, 331). And this requires an especial type of visual attention, which prevents us from fixing our gaze on a determinate object because the next image appears before the previous one has been completely perceived, and it is essential (for the driver of a car, for example) to stay alert to such surprises. Hopper’s look as an artist is like this, since it is especially aware of those brief images that strike the viewer´s eyes when they try to fix them. Let us hear the testimony of a fictionalised railway passenger in 1918:

> I glimpsed in the window-pane, above a little black copse, serrated clouds of downy softness in a shade of immutable pink, dead and as seemingly indelible now as the pink inseparable from feathers in a wing or a pastel dyed by the fancy of the painter. But in this shade I sensed neither inertia nor fancy, but necessity and life. Soon great reserves of light built up behind it. They brightened further, spreading a blush across the sky; and I stared at it through the glass, straining to see it better, as the colour of it seemed to be privy to the profoundest secrets of nature. Then the train turned away from it, the railway changed direction, the dawn scene framed in the window turned into a village by night, its roofs blue with moonlight, the wash-house smeared with the opal glow of darkness, under a sky still bristling with stars, and I was saddened by the loss of my strip of pink sky, when I caught sight of it again, no reddening, in the window on the other side, from which it disappeared at another bend in the line. And I dodged from one window to the other, trying to reassemble the offset intermittent fragments of my lovely, changeable morning, so as to see it for once as a single lasting picture (PROUST: 2003, 233).

What Proust describes this way perfectly summarizes the modern experience of time and space I have been describing. The train rails act like the surgeon described by Benjamin: “he greatly diminishes the distance from the patient by penetrating the patient’s body” (BENJAMIN: 2002-2, 115); in the same way, railways do not “respect” the natural shape of the landscape or the cultural articulations of the communities established on it; they fragment, cut off, separate with the power of the technological means of industrial construction. The train’s car window is the visual experience corresponding to this fragmentation: as Proust says, the window is the frame where these broken fragments appear: landscapes, houses or villages are violently torn away from their places, deprived of their remoteness and brought to an immediate proximity to the passenger, only separated from the jumping, decontextualized and disconnected images by the glass of the pane. From this sudden discontinuity of images and this succession of landscapes without a meaningful sequence, the passenger has to implement the process

of intellectualized attention which characterizes Erlebnis. Film editing will provide, later on, the very paradigm of what Benjamin calls *Erlebnis*, which actually is a selective *montage* of an experience (*Erfahrung*) made of shocks. And this is, *avant la lettre*, the task undertaken by Proust's character moving in an "oblique perspective" from a window to the other one, "trying to reassemble the offset intermittent fragments" with the purpose of constructing with them "a single lasting picture".

Obviously, Proust gives in this way a superior example of mastery in the protective defence of private experience against external shocks which could become traumatic. But this activity is only understandable if, historically, the production of shocks —blank spaces that break the continuousness of time— has become the rule in the external or public realm. This is the only possible explanation of the fact that the isolation of the perceptions that the conscious mind cannot control, and their relocation in a temporal sequence, had become the "peak achievement of intelligence" (BENJAMIN: 2006, 319). This operation reconstructs the integrity of experience in order to avoid the traumatic risk, in the same way that the city pedestrians have to look around quickly to be aware of traffic signals at the cost of disregarding some parts of their surrounding background. Hence, *normal* experience in modern society is the experience of shocks (*Chockerlebnis*), the fragmentation of space and time, but not in the sense that the subject goes through this experience or experiments with the shocks, but rather in the sense that he himself elaborates, reconstructs and controls them to prevent collapse. Only if this control is successful, as happens in Proust's description, a real or possible trauma can become a spectacle which one can watch like a movie, without being a part of it or menaced by it. For instance: the non-relation and mutual indifference of those who walk or travel together and merged in the city crowd becomes manageable only by means of this attitude of *Chockerlebnis*. If this protective mechanism stops working, the passer-by will experience a sudden start, a face to face encounter with another passer-by whom he has nothing to say, because they have no relation or common past, and he will have to confront this shock without the help of previous experience. In other words, *Chockerlebnis* is the defensive strategy to avoid *Chockerfahrung*, the chaotic encounter with an impoverished experience that, having become independent from collective memory, is full of blank spaces which produce "fear, revulsion and horror" (BENJAMIN: 2006, 327) or anxiety. But also "love at last sight", as Benjamin suggests about Baudelaire poem "To a passer-by".

Thus, if there is a failure of shock defence (that is to say, a breakdown of *Erlebnis* and, therefore, a real experience of shock, *Chockerfahrug*), the effect, says Benjamin, would be “a sudden start”. But that means that the sudden start is the actual rhythm of modern time. Therefore, the obligation of starting from zero is not a particular situation occurring in the first decades of the twentieth century, an extreme consequence of world war and the financial crash (although these facts make it come apparent dramatically), but the normal condition of industrial civilization. Technology, if not the cause of this new “barbarian” rhythm of social life, is the way in which citizens learn their new environment: “technology has subjected the human sensorium to a complex kind of training” (BENJAMIN: 2006, 328). Benjamin mentions a lot of examples of this rhythm concerning the innovations appeared since the mid-nineteenth century, examples that “have one thing in common: a single abrupt movement of the hand triggers a process of many steps”; from striking a match to picking up the phone, all the “countless movements of switching, inserting, pressing, and the like” (BENJAMIN: 2006, 328).

But it could be possible to add to these examples the in-experience of the train’s passenger. Most railway passengers associate the visual experience of the “continuous discontinuity” of rails and ties with the train’s rattle, that is to say, the movement (and the sound) that reveals to them that the floor under their feet is not smooth and immobile. The bodily sensation of a slight loss of balance which has to be compensated for at every instant would be, if the passenger keeps eyes closed, the only evidence of a displacement in the space. When the passenger opens the eyes and looks out the car’s window, the visual experience of the landscape will reproduce the one of the railway: continuous movement continuously fragmented, in which images follow one after another jumping out of view at every moment like the railroad ties.

I am arguing then, for the hypothesis, that the standpoint chosen by Hopper from which to paint the house suggests that the house is painted *as seen from the window of a moving train* Something like this has been suggested by Kranzfelder, though apparently only in a metaphorical sense, because, obviously, the rails in the painting discount it explicitly[70] . But it is also evident that an explicit indication could not be given at all: in

[70]“The image has the character of a snapshot taken from a moving train, except the rails themselves are visible in the picture. We have the impression of frozen motion, yet within the frame, within the actual

no case would it be possible to *paint* a sudden, instant and ephemeral image appearing in the windowpane of a train carriage (only instant photography could produce something like this). What I am suggesting is not that the house is painted from a train, but that it is painted *as it might be seen* in this way or, in other words, that it is painted as if it was an instant photograph taken through the train window.

Perhaps it would be better to say that Hopper is painting the house as if his canvas was a camera, but only by immediately adding that precisely it is not and it cannot be. Photography, in the ideal sense often assumed by Benjamin, destroys the aura (BENJAMIN: 2006, 338). Painting, in contrast, retains it. A photograph of the house would have been, in this sense, merely *Erlebnis*, image without remoteness. The painting of the house, however, is one of a house which has lost its aura, has been uprooted and has become a two-dimensional image transitorily attached to the glass of a window. So, also the painting should depict a house without aura. Or maybe not exactly. I wrote before that "aura or remoteness cannot be experienced in the modern world but as what is disappearing from the image". Photography would show a house without aura. Painting (at least Hopper's painting) *shows the lack of aura* of the house, which is not the same thing. Hopper is not painting a house, but the perception of a house. And, as I have argued, aura is not a property of objects but of the perception of such objects. And the same can be said of its lack. Maybe this is the reason for the uncanny feeling often related to the painting.

4.2.1. <u>*A dark aura*</u>

So, we come to the last, and in a certain sense the main question posed by *House by the railroad*: what is the reason for the impression of a sinister character in the building represented in the painting? A key point to this question is, I shall argue, that the house (as it happens to other objects in Hopper's work) is *on the other side*, separated from the foreground by a metaphorical barrier that seems to exclude it from reality, giving it the kind of unapproachability that Benjamin attributes to the aura. And this seems to be a leitmotiv in Hopper's work. But, why is this a dark aura or a menacing remoteness?

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image, there is no movement at all. It is as if we were standing on a camera dolly during the making of a film, watching the landscape roll past us" (KRANZFELDER: 1998, 82).

I have mentioned uncanniness because, in the case of this painting, the vast majority of commentators experiment more than a simple instability: “Set in broad daylight”, says Margaret Iversen, “it is none the less the darkest painting of a house I know” (IVERSEN: 2003, 412). Others underline its dreamlike or spectral presence, as if it was part of a ghost town (RENNER: 1987, 72). Wells signals that Hopper seems to strip the house from any recognizable attribute: there is not an entrance path, no garden or trees or neighbourhood, there are no signs that the house might be inhabited (WELLS: 2008, 110). Kranzfelder underlines that the house seems to be literally levitating over the viewer, separated from any known reference (KRANZFELDER: 1998, 87), as if the environment, in Schmied’s words, would have “removed itself from our grasp” (SCHMIED: 1995, 94- 100).

Perhaps it could be thought that these remarks are a retrospective consequence of the fact that the picture was Hitchcock’s model for the frightening Bates’ house in his 1960 *Psycho*, somehow creating a successful filmic cliché for horror movies. But, as early as in 1931, Guy Pene du Bois suggested that Hopper’s houses were “haunted”; and, probably thinking of this painting, he called Hopper’s Mansard houses “still as death and as forbidding as their stark surroundings”. For Brace, too, all of Hopper's houses are haunted, and he asserted the strangeness and mysteriousness of their presence (HEMINGWAY, A.:1992, 393).

I have already signalled different formal elements which can contribute to this impression. The murky, almost threatening, undefined sky, the high contrast between light and shadows, the absence of any signs of human beings, the low angle, etc. The feeling of an unbalanced composition derived from the crosswise lines of the railroad hiding the entrance of the house suggests that the house itself is wrongly settled or in a state of decay. However, do all those elements justify the eerie feeling of strangeness? A French Mansard roof house is not an unusual figure in the American territory. Indeed, a local legend of Haverstraw (a village situated about an hour’s drive from New York) affirms that Hopper was seen in 1924, with a portable easel, painting from the train station the house with mansard roof which still stands there in the Route 9W, 18 Conger Avenue built in 1885, really very similar to the building of *House by the railroad* [Fig.15]. Jo Hopper denied such a direct inspiration and argued that, as usual in Hopper’s works, the house is not the

picture of a particular building, but an artistic reconstruction based on numerous houses mixed in memory; in any case, the anecdote suggests that it was a rather familiar vision.

The strangeness has to be, therefore, a consequence of Hopper's treatment of this image. Doubtless, the viewer may well assume that the installation of the railway has isolated the house from its surroundings, dispossessing it of its solemn and monumental beauty, and has transformed it in an outdated or marginal object (as happened, by the way, to the Bates Motel when the new highway was built), not very suitable for habitation; and one can even imagine that the arrival of the railway has provoked the departure of its inhabitants, condemning the house to ruin. But the result of this isolation would be a house in state of decay which will awake compassionate or nostalgic feelings in the viewer. However, as I have just signalled, this is not the case in the testimony of most of the art historians: they do not experience the house with compassion or nostalgia, they find it "dark", "dead", "haunted" "hostile", as part of an evil, menacing or malign landscape which is not only excluded from its familiar context, but excluded *from reality*. A supplementary explanation is needed to justify this disturbed feeling.

If the house in Hopper's painting were to be simply considered as representative of "traditional societies", and the railroad as the technological instrument which reduces its unapproachability, how should we explain the ghostly condition of the building, which, according to this reduction, should have lost all its remoteness? Symbolic or cultural remoteness is often aesthetically underlined in modern artworks under the category of the sublime, as in the landscapes of the Hudson River school, but Hopper's paintings no longer fit into this category since, as I have insistently repeated, vision is blocked by the presence of the railways. The railroad track, made to shorten distances, deprives the house of its context and, somehow, keeps its aura as something unachievable. It extends across the painting something that obscures what remains on the other side, as *if the house was not actually there*.

It could be said that the building in *House by the railroad* [Fig.15] has been subjected to a process of isolation like the one described by Freud in *Beyond the pleasure principle,* existing to control dangerous stimuli, and therefore it appears in the middle of nowhere and produces the sensation of haunting. The familiar house becomes strange or spectral when it is deprived of its surrounding, as if the artist was "giving events the

character of a shock, detaching them from the contexts of experience", in Benjamin's words. The visual instability of the house is reinforced by its lack of spatial definition: there is absolutely nothing which could give the viewer a clue as t where the house is located.

The building shown in the cited *Le Pont Royal* [Fig.18] seems to be limited by the wall and the bridge, and the horizontality that dominates the painting gives a certain air of protection to the entire composition. However, in *House by the Railroad* [Fig.15], the feeling of an irregular horizontality makes the house fragile, illogical and disconnected from the landscape that surrounds it. Not only does the painted building lack context, but there is no other natural element, not even clouds in the sky, to help fix any particular moment of the day. The very idea of "meaning", in the visual realm, is related to the possibility of locating every element of a composition in the sequence it is supposed to belong to, so that its coherence or incongruity may be considered. If the house may have had any context at any point, it is now completely lost and, if anything, it somehow seems to shine in its splendid isolation, as in other Hopper paintings such as *High Noon* (1949) or *South Carolina Morning* (1955).

The railroad is, in this case, the element that creates the rupture in the sequence and eliminates all meaning, the barrier that blocks the viewer from creating some sort of visual or narrative continuity between the building and its surroundings. Following Iversen's discussion of the painting, it could be said that there is an uncanny quality to Hopper's paintings, the feeling that something familiar has been turned into something strange, according to Freud's definition of the uncanny (IVERSEN: 2003, 417). Wells also thinks that, if the house represents the past, it seems to state itself as a long lost memory suddenly recovered, as a place everyone has known and lost which suddenly reappears from the point of view of a child standing close to the rusty railway (WELLS: 2008, 77). It would suggest a psychoanalytic interpretation of the house, so to speak emerging from Hopper's childhood unconscious memories, as a figure of the Freudian "return of the repressed", so strongly invoked by Hal Foster (FOSTER: 1996).

But maybe Hopper's uncanniness could be seen differently. I would add that, in the same way that Freud defined the uncanny as a familiar element turned into the strange by repression, it seems that in many of Hopper's paintings some elements of the past

(either natural or artificial ones) become uncanny not because of unconscious repression, but because of modernization and industrialization, which turns them into something strange, depriving them of the context which would give them a meaning. The house, as an anachronism, seems to be doomed by modern industry and transport, but at the same time it stands, perhaps in a much less explicit way. If, at first sight, the house, in its stony strength, seems to be the fixed element of the painting, and the railway, on the contrary, the one that introduces the feeling of movement in the solid scene, a further observation could suggest that Hopper's painting represents the immediate aftermath of the passing train, which somehow seems to drag the house with it and, at the same time, leaves behind the trembling building. Of course, the physical building is not trembling after the train leaves. But the image of the building does trembles in the train's window. And, of course, the house is not there (in the window). As I have repeated, the house is separated from the imaginary internal viewer through the railway —and railways were every so often at that time surrounded by warnings against crossing— as a barrier: the frontier of modernity itself, the transformation of time and space and, therefore, the transformation of sensibility. Once this frontier has been crossed, there is no turning back. Or, it would be better to say, there is no turning back except where there is a failure of the alluded self-defensive mechanism of Erlebnis; in such a case, the past —which has not disappeared— returns as uncanny, the lost aura of tradition and beauty comes back turned into a dark halo or a menacing shadow. That is what I was arguing when I suggested, at the end of the previous subsection, that painting, in contrast with what Stieglitz would have called professional or commercial photography, does not show a house without aura, but the lack of aura of the house.

In Hopper's mature works where this tension between traditional (or natural) elements and technological devices appears, the element altered by the uncanniness is never the modern or technological one, but precisely the traditional or natural one, as it follows from my previous quotation of Mark Strand. This natural but obscure element seems to be always on the other side of the railroads and roads or at its edge, as happens in *Gas* (1940)[Fig.22] , in *August in the City* (1945)[Fig.36] , or even in the mountains seen through the window in *Western Motel* (1957)[Fig.67], which once more stand in the

other side of the road[71]. This is the reason why I cannot share Hobbs' suggestion to include *Queensborough bridge* [Fig.17] in the examples of paintings somehow related to *House by the railroad* [Fig.15](HOBBS: 1987, 111).

In *Queensborough bridge* [Fig.17], it is the bridge what appears as a menacing and strange or sombre element. And this is precisely what distinguishes this painting from *House by the railroad* [Fig.15]. First, from a merely formal point of view, it could be said that this painting does not belong to Hopper's mature style: the palette is too dark and too dependent on tonalism. But the important point is that the technological element is what in this case has been turned into something strange, whereas the traditional one (the wooden house) is not represented as uncanny, but as defenceless. There are numerous examples where nature in Hopper's canvases is turned into something uncanny or eerie, precisely because of its generic and blurry features, nearly indistinct, with colour inclining to black, forming a dark and sometimes heavy and compact mass.

[Fig.17] Edward Hopper, *Queensborough Bridge*, 1913, 152.4 x 88.9 cm, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York

[71] And, although there is not an explicit barrier as the one made by roads or railways, the same sort of "strangeness" is made visible in paintings such as Stairway (1919) [Fig.58], Cape Cod Evening (1939), in Cape Cod Morning (1950) [Fig.35] or in House at Dusk (1935) [Fig.33].

So, it could be said that *House by the railroad* [Fig.15] is, expressed in these terms, a failure of the protective activity of distracted attention: *Chockerfahrung*. The activity of recomposing visual reality, which is operating in the tireless visual attitude of Proust's passenger, cannot insert the image of the house in a consistent totality: therefore, the house appears as a traumatic shock or as the evil image whose uncanny aura emerges unexpectedly, not only as a sudden start, but even as a sudden stop, the "non-realistic element" that interrupts the railway's continuous line. In the polarity of exhibition value and cult value, the house doubtlessly corresponds to cult value: it concentrates the aura, the traditional element, and it *should* tell a story (that is to say, belongs to the territory of the "telling"), while the railroad is the agent of the showing activity, what deprives the house of its aura and exhibits it in its extreme nakedness. But, paradoxically, Hopper's exhibition value, when showing the house, displays not only a house without aura, but the dissolution of the traditional veil turned into a dark and uncanny remoteness.

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Summarizing, I would say that the hypothesis that the house is painted as if seen from the window of a moving train is a clearer explanation of the instability of the building than the ones habitually given in the Hopper literature and, furthermore, of the ambiguity of the perspective and the rivalry of vanishing points (something unavoidable if the eye is moving). It is not the house, but the viewer, who is actually unstable, subjected to changes of direction of the railway and to the bending of its trajectory, and constantly affected by the slighter or stronger loss of balance caused by the rattling of the train's wheels. And this is what makes the viewer constantly shift between parallel and oblique perspective, like Proust's character passing from one window to the other. It would also explain why the movement blocks the viewer from being fully aware of those details which constituted, in other time, the "personality" of the house —which is another way of obeying Henri's lessons about not descending to detail and focusing on movement. It is not the image of a real house but the result of the generification produced halfway of instant undetailed vision and memory. The instant vision corresponds to the first element of experience, which in the modern world is technologically mediated, and the generic

corresponds in it to the disqualified character of the mechanical space and time; memory, as imagination, correspond to the second element of experience, which in this case describes a very different kind of abstraction: the one that characterises Hopper's creative process. So, the insistence of Hopper in the role of memory in his paintings refers to what Proust would call the involuntary memory more than to the so-called photographic memory. Together with homogeneous space and measurable time, there is a "lost time" or a "lost space" which, although unattainable —they are beyond the barrier that the railway represents—, is a part of modern experience.

It could be said that this lost time is poetically recovered by the painting, but not as a private property that the individual would incorporate to his conscious biography. Modern poetry is also "touched by death" —therefore the dark aura of the house by the railroad. Modernity means poverty of experience; poetry means the experience of this poverty. The richness of experience is retrieved by poetry in the only way that it can be experienced in modernity: as "something irretrievably lost" (BENJAMIN: 2006, 333). The house comes from *another time* inserted in historic time, that is to say, in the railroad, without being a part of it or an event of the chronological series, without having its place in the timeline. But this other time does not fight against ordinary or historic time in a battle with a final winner: both times are not horses running the same race, they are counted by non-commensurable clocks that, in some odd way, are coupled to one another. As happens with the opposition of the house and the railroad, the necessary relation of art with this other time does not compensate for its loss, does not integrate it in the chronological series, but makes it present as not disposable. It is neither the bad eternity of the conveyor belt nor the true infinity of the season's circle: it is a line made of shocks in which, from time to time, hazardous circles may appear in the blank spaces between shots, as turbulences in a flowing stream, where experience becomes again possible. These exceptional moments are not an *alternative* to the straight line of modern time, they are not spaces where the artist or the viewer could take shelter from the modern crowd. They do not constitute a richness which could be accumulated to fight the poverty of experience or a spectacle which could be enjoyed or consumed, but they are what makes such a line, such a crowd and such poverty accessible to experience.

PART III: *NIGHTHAWKS* AND PAINTING IN THE AGE OF TECHNOLOGICAL REPRODUCIBILITY

My main subject in this Part is one of the most celebrated of Hopper's works, *Nighthawks*. [Fig.23] I shall dedicate the fifth chapter to reflect on the affinity of this painting with the realm of photographic and filmic images, and to discuss in such a context the presumed influence of film noir on Hopper's works. Towards the end I shall suggest another approach to the relationship between *Nighthawks* and cinema, and, in chapter 6, based exclusively on the painting, I shall develop this approach as an extension of the interpretative hypothesis set out in chapter 4 regarding *House by the railroad* [Fig.15], with the aim of testing it in other works by Hopper in the last Part of my dissertation.

CHAPTER 5. *NIGHTHAWKS*: THE SEQUELS

Nighthawks (1942, [Fig.23]) has been buried by the series of reproductions which have transformed it in a commonplace of contemporary visual culture. I shall analyse the peculiar relation of the painting with reproduction in the first section (5.1. “Nighthawks and technological reproducibility”). One of the key objectives of this chapter will be to clarify the nature of the affinity of this painting with the realm of the photographic and filmic images, as an introduction to a process affecting Hopper’s work as a whole. This affinity underpins the widely held view that cinema, specifically film noir, influenced Hopper’s painting. In section 5.2. (“Hopper and film noir: telling and showing”), I will explore the literary and scenographic sources of this film genre, questioning the basis of this assumed influence. Anyway, since the affinities between Hopper’s painting and cinema are indisputable, another kind of explanation for this commonplace is needed. I shall develop my alternative explanation in section 5.3. (“Why paint reproducibility?”), focused on two issues: on one hand, the confusion of form and contents in which the iconic recurrence of the scene is partly based; and, on the other hand, the reason why Hopper is close to the technological revolution in visual culture associated with photography and film (5.3.1. “An inner cinema”). Finally, I shall argue what I find to be the reasons for the apparent need for filling up the narrative void of *Nighthawks* with ever new plots (5.3.2. “Reasons for re-contextualization”).

5.1.*NIGHTHAWKS* AND TECHNOLOGICAL REPRODUCIBILITY

Nighthawks [Fig,23] is, doubtless, one of the Hopper's most famous works. The Art Institute of Chicago acquired the canvas months after the artist finished it in 1942. From the outset, it became a popular picture and was openly and positively accepted by the critics and the public in general. Hopper himself considered it one of his best paintings. Shortly after purchase, the painting was shown in numerous art exhibitions and state fairs of the time, to the point that, as early as in 1953, it required conservation and restoration work (BARTER: 2007-1, 204). In the following decades, and until nowadays, it has been relentlessly reproduced or imitated in popular culture: in advertisements, photographs and films.

[Fig.23] Edward Hopper, *Nighthawks*, 1942, 84.1x 152.4 cm, Art institute of Chicago

Of course, many other paintings have suffered this process of photographic reproduction during the twentieth century, as the work of art entered what Benjamin calls "the age of its technological reproducibility". But the way in which *Nighthawks* [Fig.23]

has become an iconic subject of contemporary visual culture is a different kind of case. It is therefore worthwhile describing this difference. As the mechanical means of visual reproducibility reached technological consistency, many paintings considered as especially significant for the history of art were subject to constant reproduction. This happened, for example, with Da Vinci's *La Gioconda*, Velazquez's *Las Meninas* or Vermeer's *The Girl with a pearl earring*. In these cases, Benjamin's general formula of the impact of technological reproduction on art applies: works like the above mentioned are not initially conceived for massive reproduction, so, when they suffer this process, it threatens "the authority of the object, the weight it derives from tradition" or, in other words, its aura, increasing its exhibition value and diminishing its cult value (BENJAMIN: 2002-2, 102-106). Unlike the original painting, the reproduced image can reach the viewers in their own time and place, detaching contents from the tradition which they belong to, and subjecting them to situations that the original could never attain. That is to say, photographic reproduction menaces the artistic authority of these works, revoking a part of their ritual power, and adds to them something that they did not have originally: an overdose of reproducibility. Nonetheless, although reproductions increase the familiarity of the public with these works, their artistic authority and, therefore, their cult value cannot disappear completely, because the aesthetic appreciation of the original work as a paradigmatic representation of a period of the history of art is, ultimately, the reason for its persistent reproduction.

But *Nighthawks* [Fig.23] has not received such an overdose of exhibition value because of the artistic authority of Hopper as a painter, nor because of its signification in the history of art. On the contrary, it has been easily absorbed by photography and film *as something already photographic or filmic,* giving the impression that these replicas are not the reproduction of a work not initially conceived for it, but "the reproduction of a work designed for reproducibility" (BENJAMIN: 2002-2, 106), and therefore prompting the notion of an influence of photography and film on Hopper's painting.

Nighthawks has been frequently quoted in cinematography. Examples include: *Profondo Rosso* (1975), where Dario Argento tried to reproduce the diner in the painting; another recreation of the diner appears in *Pennies from Heaven* (Herbert Ross, 1981), one of the few examples that cannot be categorised as a thriller, where the space is used as the meeting point of a couple during the Depression years; in *The end of violence* (1997),

Wenders used the diner as part of a film set; in *Hard Candy* (Slade, 2005), the protagonist couple meet in a place called “Nighthawks diner”, and the female character shows up wearing a T-shirt with the painting of Hopper painting on it; the painting is present as an indirect inspiration for the scenography of other films such as *Days of glory* (Malick, 1978), *Blade Runner* (Scott, 1982), *Paris, Texas* (Wenders, 1984) or *The Neon Bible* (Davies, 1995), not to mention Hitchcock’s films, in which there are numerous Hopperesque quotations. And the painting has been used in TV shows such as the animated sitcom *The Simpsons (Homer vs. The Eighteenth Amendment*: 1997) and the C.S.I. 2006 promotional season posters. But this remarkable reproducibility, far from absolutely depriving Hopper’s *Nighthawks* of it of its aura, has transformed it into a peculiar cult image, in a sense not reducible to the one in which Benjamin uses this term. It seems that, while the significant paintings mentioned above as an example have lost a part of their original aura because of their technological reproductions, there are other paintings that, like *Nighthawks*, have acquired a sort of cult value (which they did not have originally) *precisely because of their reproducibility*.

Doubtless, the history of every artwork also includes the history of its reception. But let us note that the quotations and contextual reinterpretations of *Nighthawks* [Fig.23] are not exactly receptions in the sense of the word commonly accepted in art-historical hermeneutics. The chain of receptions always refers to the original, and to “a tradition which has passed the object down as the same, identical thing to the present day” (BENJAMIN: 2002-2, 103). That is not the case with these reproductions; the continued actualizations rely on the impact already produced by the reproductions. Do all these visual quotations risk burying the work that Hopper, before triggering the chain of receptions, considered “one of the best things I have ever painted” (BARTER: 2007-1, 196)? “I seem to have come nearer to saying what I want to say in my work, this past winter, than I ever have before”[72], he wrote in 1942. But, what did Hopper want to say in *Nighthawks*? The meaning of Hopper's painting is always taken for granted.

The approximation between painting and technologically reproduced images reminds us of the formation of some modern painters as illustrators for magazines, newspapers and the advertising industry, associated with the urban development of the

[72]Letter from Hopper to D.C. Rich, on May 13, 1942; D.C Rich Papers, Art Institute of Chicago Institutional Archives (BARTER: 2007, 196).

big cities in the early twentieth century, something that I referred to in chapter 3. This approximation was experimentally accentuated, with artistically subversive purposes, by some avant-gardist movements. And this extreme closeness of painting and technological reproduction found an explicit status in Pop art from the decade of 1960 onwards. I speak about "explicit status" because, in the case of Pop, it is clear that many of the filmic and photographic images chosen by the artists were already presences on colour TV and in the newsreels of the decade of 1950 in the United States; and Pop artists were affected by them as viewers before they used them. Is this also the case of Hopper? It could be said that the recognition by the public of the visual icons used by Warhol and other Pop artists aided the massive diffusion of their works, but, is the recognition of a commonplace also the cause of the long-term visual success of *Nighthawks*?

The affirmative answer to both questions seems to be, at least, one of the main assumptions of critical readings of this canvas, usually understood as a "cinematographic" scene strongly related to film noir, evoking the mysterious atmosphere of Hollywood Bmovies from the 1940s using scenarios with high contrasts of light and shadow and unusual angles, elements which contribute to creating the air of danger that characterizes such films[73]. So, it has become typical to consider *Nighthawks* as evidence of the influence of film ─and specifically of film noir─ on Hopper's paintings. But, what is the basis for establishing this influence once we separate the painting from all those appropriations and reproductions that have turned the scene into a cliché of modern visual culture?

[73]Levin, among others, claims that "the setting of Conference at Night, with its strong theatrical light, was probably inspired by the movies, particularly the urban melodramas now known as film noir." (LEVIN: 1980, 63).

5.2. HOPPER AND FILM NOIR: TELLING AND SHOWING

To support this influence, critics highlight two main reasons. The first one is *biographical*: as Hopper himself stated, he was fascinated by the movies of his time, and during a certain period he went to the cinema more than once a week (LEVIN: 1980, 57). He considered a film such as *The savage eye* (Joseph Strick, Ben Maddow, Sidney Meyer, 1960) ―which contains a sequence of a man with a hat and a woman casually together in a diner's counter― a true reflection on the American society of his days (LEVIN: 1980, 58). However, this biographical aspect refers to a purely external connection. In some of his works, theatres or film houses are turned into the main subject of the canvas (among others, *Two on the aisle* [1927], *The Circle theater* [1936, Fig.72], *Sheridan Theatre* [1937], *New York Movie* [1939][Fig.69], *Girlie show* [1941][Fig.61], *First row orchestra* [1951], *Intermission* [1963] [Fig.54] or *Two comedians* [1965]). Nevertheless, Hopper never refers to his passion towards films as an influence or inspiration for his paintings, but as mere entertainment: when he was unable to paint, he went to the movies (LEVIN: 1980, 58). When talking about movies, he does not mention noir films or gangster movies which were released at his time —although he might have seen them, of course. So, this argument seems too weak to support an explicit influence.

[Fig.24] *The savage eye* (Strick, Maddow and Meyer, 1960)

Much more relevant is the second reason, regarding aesthetic resemblances between the ambience that noir films create and Hopper's paintings, *Nighthawks* [Fig.23]

being one of the most frequently mentioned as linked to this film genre (RYALL: 2013, 167). As film historians and theorists claim, contrary to what happens with other cinematographic genres, "film noir" was neither a category accepted by the film industry nor by the broad audience of the moment. It is a label coined by the French critic and filmmaker Nino Frank, who, acting as a curator *avant la lettre*, used the term in the summer of 1946, when five recent American films arrived in *Paris: Murder, my sweet* (Edward Dmytryk), *Double Indemnity* (Billy Wilder), *Laura* (Otto Preminger), *The woman in the window* (Fritz Lang) and *The Maltese Falcon* (John Huston), this last being frequently considered as the first film of the noir genre. In these five films, Frank and other film critics found contents and formal elements which differentiated them from other Hollywood productions of the pre-war period.

From the side of "telling", that is to say, concerning the literary inspiration of film contents, these five films were screen adaptations of so-called "hard-boiled" American crime novels. The Parisian screenwriter Marcel Duhamel had started translating these stories into French in 1945, and he created a new collection of books as part of the Gallimard publishing house called "série noire" (hence the name of the film genre), which achieved great success not only in the commercial sense, but also among philosophers, artists and intellectuals[74]. This common literary source would explain the narrative and thematic similarities found in those five films.

From the side of "showing", or film scenography, there is a wide consensus about its main source: the mise-en-scène of French poetic realism and —especially— German expressionism of the previous decades (KRUPTNICK: 1991, 15). It is generally admitted that film-directors and cinematographers visually translated the contents of detective and police stories with the assistance of this inspiration. I shall analyse these two aspects successively in the next two subsections.

[74]Sartre confessed, in his autobiography, that he read the "Série Noire" more readily than he did Wittgenstein (SARTRE: 1964, 76). And the issue of the number 1000 of the collection was celebrated with an article by Gilles Deleuze (DELEUZE: 2002, 114-119).

5.2.1. <u>*The criminal plot*</u>

Concerning the literary ingredient, it has been said that *Nighthawks* [Fig.23] "mirrors Hopper's cognizance of the 1930's film themes and subject matter, especially the gangster theme" (DOSS: 1983, 21). And Hopper's painting has been presumed to echo the feeling of global anxiety which seems to be a part of the atmosphere of film noir, introducing characters, visual elements and even sets from hard-boiled modern novels (BARTER: 2007-1, 209).

It is remarkable that, in most cases, the connection between noir films and Hopper's paintings is mediated by the assumption that the plot of detective novels and thrillers of these years contain social criticism, or even a countercultural perspective (RYALL: 2013, 160), which opposes the hopefulness of the "American dream" and the (ideologically distorted) optimistic view of industrial society offered by Hollywood's superproductions and comedies in the 1940's (CHOPRA-GANT: 2006, 4). According to Warren Susman, the "most important contribution of a major subgenre of detective and gangster movies in the forties, film noir", was "to reduce the optimistic American vision to dust" (SUSMAN: 1989, 29), that is to say, it was a denial of the conformism of "official" American culture (WARSHOW: 1970, 136). Krutnick defines the noir city as "a realm in which all that seemed solid melts into the shadows, and where the traumas and disjunctions experienced by individuals hint at a broader crisis of cultural self-configuration engendered by urban America" (KRUTNICK: 1991, 91). In this view, film noir was the cultural manifestation of the "sombre underside that contrasts markedly with the allegedly optimistic public face of the period" (DIMENDBERG: 2004, 8):

> It is the underlying mood of pessimism which undercuts any attempted happy endings and prevents the films from being the typical Hollywood escapist fare many were originally intended to be. More than lighting or photography, it is this sensibility which makes the black film black for us (PORFIRIO: 1996, 80).

If one accepts the validity of this interpretation of film noir (something that is not unconditionally necessary[75]), the assumed connection between thrillers and Hopper —

[75]It is not completely clear that the "hard-boiled" fictions which supplied the narrative contents of Hollywood B-movies contained an (even implicit) social criticism (it would be difficult to find a crisis of self- configuration in the movies cited as the origin of the label "film noir", whose stories find always a happy or, at least, heroic resolution). Police and detective stories have always been favoured in the popular

"probably the most cited of all American painters in relation to film noir" (RYALL: 2013, 165)— will immediately lead one to see Hopper's scenes under this "mood of pessimism", as if his paintings reflected the "bareness and lack of fulfilment" of the American dream (ROSE: 1967, 214) and the "dysfunctional relationships" of the disenchanted citizens (LYONS AND WEINBERG: 1995, xii). What I am arguing instead is that the thesis of an influence of film noir on Hopper's works could be, at least partially, another attempt to endow these works with social meaning. Although these assumptions are widely held and rarely questioned in the critical essays on Hopper, can we really postulate that the themes of film noir have an actual presence in Hopper's paintings? Is there any visible threat in any of his works? Is there any sign of violence or crime in his characters, who often are merely waiting?

When John Updike reviewed the catalogue of the exhibition *Edward Hopper and the American Imagination*, he signalled that only five out of all the short tales included in the book were specifically about Hopper, while the rest of them were included under the presumption of being Hopperesque. However, whereas in these stories we might find "the bottom end of the social scale" —from murders to violence and bums—, Updike remarks that none of these elements are to be found in Hopper's scenes. His scenes may be stark and austere, but they are free from any social or economic content (UPDIKE: 2005, 180). I think Updike is right: there is nothing in Hopper's paintings —and there is nothing specifically in *Nighthawks* [Fig.23]— which could suggest violence, slums or criminal underworld and the midst of assaults and murders. At most, it could be said that the urban landscape of *Nighthawks* [Fig.23] —the naked street and the empty windows of the shops

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culture, in spite of their simplicity and the repetition of the plotlines. According to Benjamin, the historic process of modernisation implies the discredit of the shared narratives that in traditional societies gave a full and transcendent meaning to the everyday life, linked to the normative character of religious beliefs. In modern times it is not impossible to have traditional and transcendent beliefs, but those beliefs are turned into private ones, and they must respect the others' private beliefs and, therefore, accept a pluralism of life's projects which cannot be reduced to a unique and common plotline. This is responsible for a certain "thirst for meaning" and for the feeling of homesickness and nostalgia of the lost community. So, a very attractive way of quenching that thirst consists of imagining —only as a fiction or as entertainment—, behind all those partially unsatisfactory impersonal relationships of a society regulated by the rule of law, an invisible and powerful collusion of "dark forces" which allows the citizen to "re-enchant" the city adding the missing supplement of sense. This is the reason why this "confabulation" should take the form of a mystery that is hard to unravel, of an uncanny plot, because only when the collusion seems to have an evil nature its secrecy seems justified. In this sense, the noir plot could be described as an adequate "entertainment" for modern citizens more than as a social critique of the ideological daydreams of capitalism (something similar was suggested by Umberto Eco in 1976, see ECO: 2001). This excursus does not affect the assumed "influence" of film noir on Hopper's paintings, but I hope it could help to clarify what Hopper wanted to say when he confessed that movies were for him —like for most of the viewers— just "entertainment". And entertainment is not a minor issue.

around the diner— is "stark and austere", poor in experience or "deserted" like a crime scene (BENJAMIN: 2002-2, 108). But this could be said of any corner of the modern city, where unknown people gather in anonymity, surrounded by what Benjamin called the experience of shocks: "isn't every square inch of our cities a crime scene? Every passer-by a culprit?" (BENJAMIN: 1999-5, 527). The painting does not provide enough evidence to presume a particular "dangerous event" of the kind one could find in detective mysteries, but only the generic insecurity associated with the rhythm of the modern city.

[Fig.25] Walker Evans, *South Street, New York*, 1956, Gelatin silver print 16.2 x 25.1cm, Private Collection.

However, *Nighthawks* [Fig.23] is persistently linked with the noir city: the assumption that something dangerous *may* happen outside the diner —that is to say, something that *does not* happen in the painting's contents— has found an immediate feeling of empathy among the critics as well as on the general public. One would say that, facing the absence of these contents of violence and danger in *Nighthawks* [Fig.23], some critics have interpreted this absence as a proof of their implicit presence. Gordon Theisen has described the painting as a "desolate, alien, denatured, perverse, desperate" masterpiece (THEISEN: 2006, 232) which portrays a city close to the one depicted by Herbert Asbury in *Gangs of New York* (1927). In this book, Manhattan is seen as a city in which "its impoverished, congested and disease-ridden slums might have been all too successful experiment in breeding homicidal thugs, who by and large ran the city from their filthy hovels, nickel whiskey joints, rigged casinos and bordellos masquerading (but barely) as dance halls, from the years preceding the Civil War through the early decades

of the twentieth century". Obviously, these contents *are not present* in Hopper's painting, but Theisen's hypothesis is that their absence suggests a repression of them, which makes it possible for the artist to glimpse the city "from the other side of a claustrophobic urban nightmare of vice and violence" (THEISEN: 2006, 59). So, this chaotic nightmare (the "Bside" of the American dream) would be unconsciously present in Hopper's work only by its suppression, a suppression that Theisen finds somehow "visible" in the painting. Undoubtedly, this appears an abuse of interpretation, but the obstinate insistence on finding in Hopper's *Nighthawks* [Fig.23] what obviously is not in it remains to be explained.

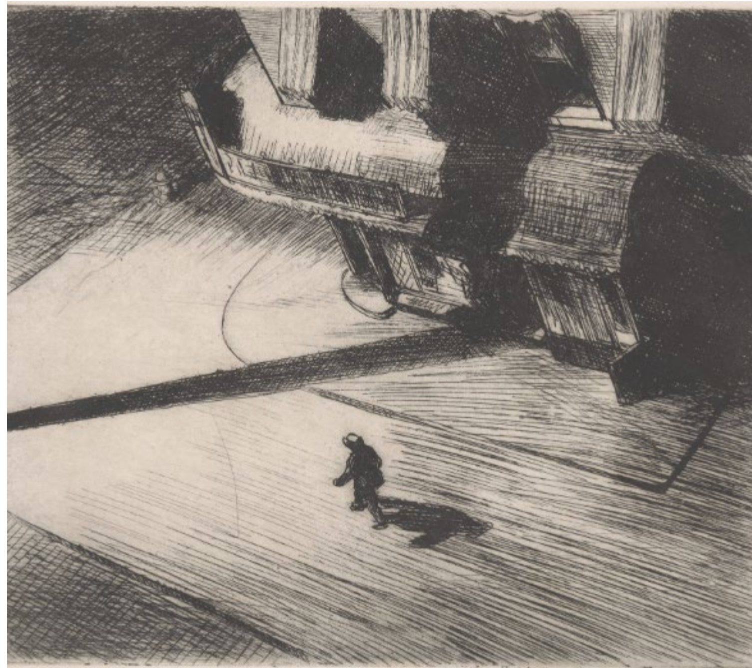
5.2.2. *Night Shadows*

If we discard a direct connection between the contents of the crime novels and Hopper's art, the only remaining support for the relation with film noir is the scenography. This relationship is often based on unspecific and vague impressions, as also occurs in the link between Hopper and photography[76] .

Nighthawks [Fig.23], Levin suggests, is an "essentially dramatic [scene], capturing the sinister aspect of a disquieting urban night" (LEVIN: 1980, 160). Rather than focusing on formal elements, the hypothesis seems to depend on "the somber mood evoked by the lighting effect" (DOSS: 198 3, 21), that is to say, on the shadows in contrast to the artificial lighting and the usage of odd angles that awake a sentiment of strangeness in the scene (WARKEL: 2008, 23). This could be a strong foundation for the "influence" I have been considering, because there was, in Hopper's immediate artistic context, something like a tradition of interweaving American realism with expressionism (HIRSCH: 1981, 82-83) to depict the image of the city, as can be seen in the works of John Sloan, George Bellows, Franz Kline, Reginald Marsh or Martin Lewis (HIRSCH:1981, 82-83). But there is a chronological difficulty that stops us from openly

[76]There could be some parallelism with photographers such as Walker Evans or John Guttmann. There are, indeed, some aesthetic resemblances (if we compare the photo shown in the text —Walker Evans, South Street, New York, 1956— with Early Sunday Morning, or the series of Evans' photographs of Victorian houses), such as the clarity in the composition or the impact of the main elements represented in the photography. However, rather than influence, one should talk about affinities (BOZAL: 2012, 14), and, once again, Hopper's artwork does not suggest to the social charge that especially Walker Evans photos do.

talking about a direct influence of film noir on Hopper's paintings: many of the recurring elements in Hopper's works —the deserted streets, the apartment views, train railroads, hotel rooms, gas stations and so on— are already present in Hopper's work as early as in the 1920s. Limited to black and white by its own technique, the engraving *Night Shadows* (1921) [Fig.26] seems to suggest something uncanny or mysterious, and it could be related to the Expressionist tradition rather than to film noir.



[Fig.26] Edward Hopper, *Night Shadows*, 1921, 17.6 x 20.7cm, etching, Museum of Modern Art

The bird's eye perspective may be related to the influence of French impressionist painters, who used this method to celebrate modern urban cities. But Hopper seems to use this angle of vision to underline the isolation of the lonely figure walking through an empty street. It has been claimed that this engraving somehow anticipates some of the visual elements of film noir. Hobbs notes that "the print foreshadows (…) many scenes from 1940-1950 film noir" (HOBBS: 1987,56). Erika Doss similarly concludes that Hopper "parallels or anticipates the stylistic development of film noir in the early 1940's" (DOSS: 1983, 21). That is to say that the development of Hopper's subjects is either simultaneous to or precedes film noir, but is not subsequent to it. In sum, "foreseeing", "anticipating" or "foreshadowing" film noir is contradictory with "being influenced by

film noir". In other words, most of the aesthetic and formal elements used by Hopper in his paintings, and that every so often have been considered as betraying the influence of film noir, were already in his works even before he achieved his artistic maturity. In addition, let us remember that, with the exception of *The Maltese Falcon* (1941), the other four films abovementioned in the origins of the label "film noir" are from 1944, two years after *Nighthawks* [Fig.23].

There are many reasons to argue that the influence happened in the opposite direction[77]. That is to say, that Hopper influenced film noir, and indeed in some cases this influence is documented. *In Force of Evil* (Polonsky, 1948), Polonsky asked his director of photography to achieve "the Hopper effect" in the film, showing him some reproductions of Hopper's paintings (RYALL: 2013, 46). This same influence may also be presumed in films such as *Scarlet street* (Lang, 1945) or *Asphalt Jungle* (Huston, 1950), *Some came running* (Minelli, 1958) or *His girl Friday* (Hawks, 1940) —in these two last examples, the influence would come from *Office at night* (1940) [Fig.30]. A scene which recalls the situation of the characters of Nighthawks can be seen in *Dial 1119* (Mayer, 1950, [Fig.27]).

[Fig. 27] *Dial 1119* (Mayer, 1950)

[77]Something similar could be affirmed in the case of photography. Hopper did not get along with the camera ("I once got a little camera to use for details of architecture and so forth, but the photo was always so different from the perspective the eye gives, I gave it up" [O'DOHERTY: 1965, 77]); but his influence on photographers is undeniable. Leaving aside Walker Evans, whose first exhibition in the MOMA coincided with the first Hopper's retrospective, his stylistic mark is clearly visible in artists like Diane Airbus (1923-1971), Joel Meyerowitz (1938), William Eggleston (1939), Gregory Crewdson (1962) or Gabriele Croppi (1974).

The influence is also obvious in *Psycho* (Hitchcock, 1960), where, as I recalled before, the Bates' mansion was inspired by *House by the railroad* (1925) [Fig.15], and the influence of *South Truro Church* (1930) may also be present in the 1963 Hitchcock film *The Birds* (NAUGRETTE: 1995, 56). The whole scenography of *Rear window* (Hitchcock, 1954) makes us think of Hopper's *Night Windows* (1928) [Fig.39]. And, as I have stated before, a list of films arguably inspired by Hopper's paintings continues through the second half of the twentieth century until today.

About this question of the "influence", Naugrette has proposed an especially interesting hypothesis, because it brings together the two sources of film noir. According to his view, Hopper's images would have been used as a mediation between novels and films: the atmosphere created by Hopper would have helped filmmakers (without Hopper's acquaintance) to construct the iconography they needed to transform the "hard-boiled" novels of the 1920s and 1930s, by which they were inspired, into the movies of the 1940s and 1950s (NAUGRETTE: 1995, 56). This assumption has reached a great success in critical literature. For example, the characters in *Nighthawks*' [Fig.23] have been linked to *The glass key* (HAMMETT: 1931), in which Hammett describes "a hawk-nosed, long-chinned pale man, a predatory animal of forty or so" who sits near "a softly fleshed red-haired girl with eyes set apart" (BARTER: 2007-1, 208). This is in tune with Higashi's claim that the autochthonous sources of the scenography of film noir (American realist painting) have been often underestimated in favour of German expressionism (HIGASHI: 2007, 354). And Christopher states that Hopper, among other painters of his generation, made a "seminal contribution (...) to the visual underpinnings of the film noir: its intensely luminous detail, jagged perspectives, vertiginous heights, hallucinatory geometry, and bold compositional methods" (CHRISTOPHER: 2006, 15). So, the hypothesis would be that *in the beginning* writers influenced Hopper, and *after* Hopper influenced filmmakers.

But this hypothesis presents two serious gaps rarely noticed by its supporters (not because of negligence, but because, as it is usual to do, they assume the affinity between Hopper's painting and crime fiction instead of examining it). The first one is that there is no evidence of the influence of crime novels on Hopper (and at first sight the genre does

not fit in his confessed literary preferences)[78]. So, how did these fictions catch Hopper's attention? I shall discuss this in the next subsection (5.2.3., "The end of the naïve poetry"). The second is the difficulty, to which I will refer in 5.2.4. ("A circular argument?"), to explain how filmmakers could perceive in Hopper's paintings (which, to our knowledge, have not relation with crime fiction) the adequate iconography they needed. I shall argue below that, when trying to fill these gaps a new approach appears that allows us to explain the reasons for the presumed affinity.

5.2.3. The end of naïve poetry

Regarding the first gap (the influence of literary fiction on Hopper), I would like to highlight that, although Hopper never spoke a word about hard-boiled stories, he confessed his admiration for Hemingway. In his letter addressed to the director of *Scribner's Magazine* in 1927, Hopper wrote:

> I want to compliment you for printing Ernest Hemingway "The Killers" in March's Scribner. It is refreshing to come upon such an honest piece of work in an American magazine, after wading through the vast sea of sugar-coated mush that makes up the most of our fiction. Of all the concessions to popular prejudices, the side stepping of truth, and of the ingenious mechanism of the trick ending there is no taint in this story (BARTER: 2007-1, 208).

The words used by Hopper in his letter ("honest piece", "truth"), and his critical references to prejudices, mush and trick ending are not very precise, but they unequivocally draw attention to the realism of Hemingway, opposed to the illusionism of "the most of our fiction". The typical Hemingway's sentence is acknowledged because, in it, the not-said is more important than the explicitly said. Like Hopper's works, it *shows* much more than it *tells*; or, in Benjamin's terms, the weight of exhibition value exceeds the one of cult value (an imbalance that —as a loss of words— is a feature of the poverty of experience).

[78] 5Naugrette himself suggests that also in this case the influence could have been the other way round: he considers A couple of writers [CHANDLER: 1951] as a pastiche of different paintings by Hopper, which goes in the opposite direction of his assumption.

But, how should we understand Hopper's appreciation? It seems to be on the same wavelength as Henri's invitation (which Hopper himself explicitly shared) to "remove the loincloth" of prudery and convention and not to ignore "life". And it also points in the same direction that Benjamin's observations about the modern aim to "peeling away" the object's shell (which is also made of words and tales) and to destroy its aura (BENJAMIN, 2002-1, 519). Surely, it does not mean that writers or painters of other periods were alien to reality or farther from it than the modern ones. The truth is that it was reality itself what changed with technological and social revolutions. And this change operated a disruption in the balance of "showing" and "telling" which articulated the frames of the experience. This is what produces in young artists the impression that old manners are not realistic and that a readjustment is needed. In Hopper's words, "the province of art is to react to it and not to shun it", and he finds in Hemingway's prose such a reaction.

So, it is not casual that this disruption of experience is felt as an impoverishment of "telling" (the cult value associated with tradition) or as a complementary increase of "showing". When tradition becomes outdated, the "non-realistic" elements, which I previously described as characteristic of traditional storytelling, lose their credibility, because such credibility relied on the authority of tradition. The mixing of everyday life events and miracles and wonders becomes implausible in modern societies. Or rather, historical transformations make appear as non-realistic narrative and representational structures those which before such transformations were experienced as plausible. Therefore, the feeling of the new realists that, putting it in Schiller's terms, "the age of the naïve poetry" has come to an end. Benjamin calls attention to "the listener's naive relationship to the storyteller" in traditional narrative, and he suggests that "the art of storytelling is reaching its end because epics is dying out (…) The first true storyteller is, and will continue to be, the teller of fairy tales" (BENJAMIN; 2002-1, 140). But the modern reader can find this naivety obsolete and "sugar-coated", and he can experience marvels as a "side-stepping of truth". And when storytelling decays, in absence of the words of traditional experience, things appear *shown* in stark nakedness. The 'cruelty' of the exhibition contrasts with the 'kindness' of storytelling.

Hopper's allusion to the "trick ending" is very interesting, because it points to the "ingenious mechanism" that, in traditional popular tales, resolves the plot. And what most

critics signal as a keynote issue in Hopper's pictures is, precisely, that the plot is unresolved (as it happens in "The Killers") or, perhaps, irresolvable[79]. But I should argue that this is also a distinctive trait of American literary realism. In the novels of Francis Scott Fitzgerald, the characters and actions rarely find a final revelation. The social goals of the main characters of *The beautiful and the damned* —he desires to become a writer, she wants to be an actress— are sustained all through the book, but they blur over the years, as the glamour of the jazz age vanishes. In the pages of *The Great Gatsby*, many assumptions about the past of the protagonist are made, but the origin of his fortune is never revealed, and the facts of his biography remain unknown, except that he knew Daisy Buchanan in his youth; the mystery is not resolved, but definitely lost, by his death. What I am arguing is that, when Hopper shows his admiration for "The Killers", the point is for him the prose (a formal feature, if I may term it thus), not the criminal underworld appearing in its contents. Hopper was not interested in gangster plots, but in realism in art.

Of course, Hemingway was not a crime fiction's writer, but if authors like Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler were considered as the fathers of the specifically American detective fiction, substantially different from the English mystery narrative, this is due to the harsh and unemotional style of their stories. Hammett or Chandler were, so to speak, the popular version of the direct style prose of the writers of the so-called "second American Renaissance" of the twentieth century, which included authors like John Dos Pasos, F. Scott Fitzgerald, William Faulkner or Ernest Hemingway. So, the autochthonous literary source of *the language* of the "hard-boiled" fictions is the use of realistic and naturalistic techniques distinctive of these writers of the "lost generation". This remark (and the reference to Hemingway) is absent from Naugrette's reflections.

5.2.4. <u>*A circular argument?*</u>

Let us consider now the second gap of Naugrette's hypothesis (how filmmakers could perceive in Hopper's paintings the adequate iconography they needed?). The fact

[79]I shall develop in detail this subject in chapter 7.

that they did it seems to be hard to deny. Hemingway's "The Killers" takes place mainly in a diner (*Henry's Diner*):

> Outside it was getting dark. The streetlight came on outside the window. The two men at the counter read the menu. From the other end of the counter Nick Adams watched them (Hemingway, E:1991, 172).

At the beginning of Hemingway's text, it is five o'clock, and there is still sunlight in the street. But there are not many visual indications to imagine the space, aside from the fact that all diners are quite similar. When Robert Siodmak turned the story into a movie, in 1946, it is already dark in the diner's scene, and the streetlights are switched on. Besides the marked contrast of light and shadows, the angle of vision and the urban landscape are not very different from the ones in *Nighthawks* [Fig.23].

[Fig.28] *The Killers* (Siodmak, 1946) and *Nighthawks* details (Hopper, 1942)

Some other similarities can be found in the attitudes and postures of the characters, in the objects on the counter, in the stools and the bar equipment, not alluded to in Hemingway's short story [Fig. 28]. Not to mention that there is a gas station outside the diner which might remind us of Hopper's *Gas* [Fig. 29].

[Fig. 29] *The Killers* (Siodmak, 1946) , *Nighthawks* (Hopper, 1942) and *Gas* (Hopper, 1940)

Of course, it can always be said that these resemblances are a mere coincidence, because Hopper's picture and Siodmak's movie belong to the same decade and the same country. But it would be a mistake to overlook the fact that, in the same way that Hemingway might have inspired Hopper for *Nigthwaks*, Hopper might have inspired Siodmak for his film about Hemingway's story. As I signalled above, what Hopper emphasises in Hemingway's fiction is its literary *form*, which appears as realistic because of the predominance of exhibition value on cult value —but this raises the question: why the increase of the exhibition factor in an artwork should be perceived as realistic?

Nevertheless, the fact is that such form appears linked to a determined content (the plot of Hemingway's short story). On the other hand, when the filmmaker has to translate this story into images, he does not only count on the contents of the plot, but also with the linguistic style of the dialogues of the script. But why, when it comes to choosing a scenography, he looks at Hopperesque models? Where lies the filmic affinity of Hopper's painting?

Naugrette's answer consists of assuming a previous influence of filmmakers on Hopper. He describes Hopper's painting as cinematographic in broad terms: he refers to Hopper's use of high angle (*The city* [1927][Fig.9], *House at dusk* [1935][Fig.33], *Office at night* [1940][Fig.30] *New York Movie* [1943][Fig.69]), low angle (*House by the railroad* [1925][Fig.15], *Lighthouse hill* [1927], *Pennsylvania coaltown* [1947][Fig.31]) or zoom (*Chop Suey*, [1929][Fig.32], *Room in New York* [1930][Fig.41], *Hotel Room* [1931][Fig.48]), and he suggests that Hopper transforms the viewers into moviegoers travelling from the darkness of the stall section to the lighted screen where the action is going to take place (NAUGRETTE: 1995, 60).

[Fig.30] Edward Hopper, *Office at night*, 1940, 56.4 cm × 63.8 cm, Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, Minnesota

[Fig.31] Edward Hopper, *Pennsylvania coaltown*, 1947,71.12x 101.6 cm, Butler Institute of American Art, Ohio

[Fig.32] Edward Hopper, *Chop suey*, 1929, 81.3 x 96.5, Private Collection

Although the argument is clearly circular (Hopper influenced filmmakers, but filmmakers influenced Hopper), it has, to my view, an important advantage compared with the one of most of the previously cited critics: Naugrette is not speaking of the influence *of film noir* on Hopper's paintings, but of the influence of *film technique* in general on Hopper's work. Even so, how should we interpret such suggestions? Do they mean that Hopper is copying from film techniques? Stating that Hopper frames reality according to the procedures of cinema, Naugrette concludes that Hopper "not only paints America, he paints a series of American clichés" because he "appropriates the clichés, the stories and the procedures of cinema for his art (…), aiming for the role of the projectionist of the American scene" (NAUGRETTE: 1995, 57-61). I sympathise with the idea of an internal presence of film techniques in Hopper's work, but I cannot agree with the kind of direct appropriation of such techniques or of a projection of clichés that Naugrette seems to suggest.

5.3.WHY PAINT REPRODUCIBILITY?

In the first section of this chapter I left some questions unanswered: where does the affinity of *Nighthawks* [Fig.23] with technological reproducibility lie? Why do viewers recognize it over and over again as some form of "dèjá vû", as if there were not an original painting but only reproductions, as if it had only exhibition value? Now I shall answer that the main reason for it is not in the painting itself, but in what is represented in it. Let us note that what is reproduced in all the "quotations" of *Nighthawks* [Fig.23] I alluded to is not an actual place located in New York's Greenwich village: what is being quoted is a scene that during the second half of the twentieth century became an iconic and autonomous subject separated from its physical space. Hopper himself claims that the painting could have been inspired through the walks around that neighbourhood, but he rejects any coincidence with a concrete place[80]. The reason is the same as in the case of *House by the railroad* [Fig.15]: the method of the artist consists of a process of abstraction and simplification based on previous direct observations and sketches, which is finished in the studio, just as the "draughters-reporters" of the Ashcan School sketched the newspapers illustrations in the streets and then finished them at the office desk. Explained this way, it does not seem to be an especially original procedure: it could be said that many artists have worked this way: some painters in the seventeenth century, like P.J. Saenredam, painted cathedrals which were somehow the result of an exercise of the same kind of abstraction. But there is an important difference in the case of *Nighthawks* [Fig.23] and other Hopper's paintings. The difference is that, beyond the process of abstraction developed by the artist, *the object depicted is in itself the result of abstraction*. The process of abstraction not only takes place in Hopper's mind, but in the public realm. The kind of diner chosen by Hopper is an abstract or generic space ("the American diner"). There is not an original diner that other commercial premises imitate or reproduce: every diner is like the other, there is not a first one, but a large series of reproductions.

In other words, what Hopper paints is not an original, but a reproduction (the reproduction of an ideal architectural matrix originally made to be infinitely reproduced).

[80]Some have tried to locate Hopper's diner in an actual place, and it has been suggested that it might have been in Mulry Square, where Seventh Avenue South, Greenwich Avenue and West 11th Street meet (MOSS: 2010).

It could be said that also Gothic cathedrals repeat a scheme, but before industrial construction it does not mean the same thing. Each Gothic cathedral has its own personality, linked to its architectural and local history. Diners, on the contrary, are characterized by not having any personality and being indifferent to their surroundings[81] . Because of this, everyone recognizes them as "already seen": this is the key to the affinity of *Nighthawks* [Fig.23] with reproducibility. It has not to do only with the form of the painting, but mainly with its contents. And, as I argued in chapter 2, the contents of a painting are related to its exhibition value. But the point I am making is that, although the high dose of exhibition value of *Nighthawks* [Fig.23] makes it a realist picture, it cannot be reduced to such value. Hopper's work *is not* a reproduction, although what he paints it is, and although he paints it underlining its reproducibility.

Among other modern industrially constructed spaces, the diner is an architectural incarnation of *Erlebnis*: it "sterilizes" experience. The big glass window is a defensive tool against an *Erfahrung* which has become dangerous because of the lack of a collective narrative. The physical isolation or the "sealed" space does not only mean psychic loneliness in a negative aspect; it also means aseptic protection from the unqualified risk of the shocks: this indeterminate danger of the city, and not a particular criminal event or gangster plot, is the dark aura floating over the diner. When describing Nighthawks, Wells states the following:

> Hence the Phillies 5-cent cigar sign above the window, echoing the popular shibboleth that 'what this country truly needs is a really good five cent cigar'[82]. At a mystic level, where dreams payout, Nighthawks serves that need. Its vivid tableau represents a small but profound important victory: a holding action against the void (WELLS: 2008, 214).

[81]Indeed, diners themselves represent the culmination of the serialization of a rootless space that can be located anywhere. This is made evident in the definition given by the American Diner Museum as "prefabricated structures built at an assembly site and transported to a permanent location for installation to serve prepared food". The idea of a place in which food could be served to anyone at any time was put into practice by Walter Scott in 1872 (although his business was rather what today could be considered as a food truck). However, diners did not acquire their characteristic decoration until the 1920s and 1930s, when they adopted "the streamlined look of Art Deco" that switched in the 1950s to new materials such as Formica or stainless steel, and neon lights were used as luminous signs in all of the more than 6000 that dotted the country following the same pattern (SISSON: 2017; BLAKEMORE: 2017, HURLEY: 1997).

[82]Theisen informs us that the "5 cents cigar" is made possible because they were rolled by machine rather than by hand, "an innovation that came about in the 1930s, when cigar interests were trying to regain market share from cigarettes, which had been rolled by machine since de mid 1880's" (THEISEN:2006, 72).

I do not think that *Nighthawks* [Fig.23] “serves that need” of defeating emptiness. I would say rather that *diners* of the kind represented in the painting serve it (the victory over the void is not a negligible aspiration). Awareness of this confusion of the painting with what is represented in it is a first step to appreciating the canvas as an artwork.

5.3.1. *An inner cinema*

Nevertheless, is Hopper’s methodological abstraction of the same kind as the industrial scheme infinitely reproduced in diners throughout the American urban landscape? Does he paint, as Naugrette says, “a series of American clichés*”?*

Not only as a moviegoer, but also as a film poster designer[83], Hopper was widely aware of the visual clichés or stereotypes of his times and of the urban mythologies that were part of the new framing of experience (the lonely man, the woman waiting, the empty house, and so on). And this awareness underlies his paintings and his realism. This realism does not capture a copy of reality, but it must be understood as *the painting of a reproduction*. He paints the image of a reality which has previously been turned into an image, the kind of image which has somehow replaced, in American iconography, the reality corresponding to traditional experience. And this replacement has taken place in the dawning of an age which, as it has been suggested above, will transform exhibition itself into a new kind of cult value. This has, doubtless, contributed to the influence of Hopper's scenes in films and has provided many of his paintings with a high coefficient of reproducibility. But it has also undermined the visibility of some of his works (especially *Nighthawks* [Fig.23]), due to its overexposure. Because the diner represented in the painting belongs to the realm of reproducibility, often the painting is overlooked as if it was some kind of a reproduction exclusively defined by exhibition value. But the fact

[83]Hopper “began a series of movie posters for U.S Printing & Litho Co. (...) In range of plot and theme, the silent films Hopper was paid to watch and promote resemble the magazine commissions. Both aim at the expectation and interest of the popular audience: Dance of Mammon, Mendel Beilis under Arrest, The Master Criminal, She of the Wolf's Brood, The Lunatics, Petrof the Vassal, The Horrors of War, Whom the Gods Destroy, Chasing a Million, and The Gape of Death. Most were produced by Eclair (...) Eclair had a studio factory in Fort Lee, New Jersey, from 1911 until March 1914, when fire destroyed it (No copies of the films for which Hopper made posters appear to have survived). When war broke out in August 1914, film production ceased and Hopper lost a good client” (LEVIN: 2007, 94-95).

that Hopper was aware of visual clichés does not mean that he, as an artist, accepted them[84].

> [Hopper] complained of the rules laid down for making the posters, rules like those for illustration meant to assure acceptance by a broad American public: 'say the movie was about Napoleonic wars. I'd do the soldiers in French uniforms of that period. They make me redo them and put them in khaki uniforms and campaign hats like American soldiers'. Catering to the stereotypes of a mass market would never be his forte (LEVIN: 2007, 95).

Of course, Hopper strives to paint the poverty of an experience full of visual stereotypes. He cannot reduce painting to photography or cinema, *because the visual experience of such reduction is precisely what he wants to paint (not to reproduce*). But one cannot paint something which belongs to the sphere of reproducibility in the same way that one can paint from nature. It seems to be obvious that Hopper does not resign himself to repeat the visual clichés of his time (one could even say that some of these stereotypes are his own creation). Rather, he uses them as the starting point of his work. In a certain sense, Hopper's work is to cinema what the works of the Ashcan School were to photography. Hopper's painting is not just visual knowledge of reality, but visual knowledge of previous visual knowledge, of a reality already transformed into some sort of savage cinema by new mechanical media[85] .

The features that seem to link Hopper's paintings with film noir (the horizontality of his paintings, the absence of impasto or visible brushstrokes in his oils and the uncanny atmosphere that some critics specifically refer to this genre) point to a technical and internal connection (rather than a biographical or external one) between painting and cinema. And this kind of connection cannot be explained in terms of influence but as a way of accounting for a visual reality produced by technological media, corresponding with the physical reality of a city erected by industrial machinery. Hopper does not reject the new visual reality, the new space created by films and photography in the form of stereotypes. He does not try to go back in time to classic painting looking for shelter from those mechanical procedures, but "to react to it and not to shun it". He turns this filmic experience of reality into painting, which incurred some resistance, because painting was not considered appropriated to represent reproducible items, associated with ugliness.

[84]1"I was a rotten illustrator -or mediocre anyway", confessed Hopper (GOODRICH: 1978, 21).
[85]I will explain in a greater depth this point in the next chapter.

Hopper himself was aware of this ugliness when he returned from Paris: "It seemed awfully crude and raw when I got back. It took me ten years to get over Europe" (LEVIN: 1980, 26).

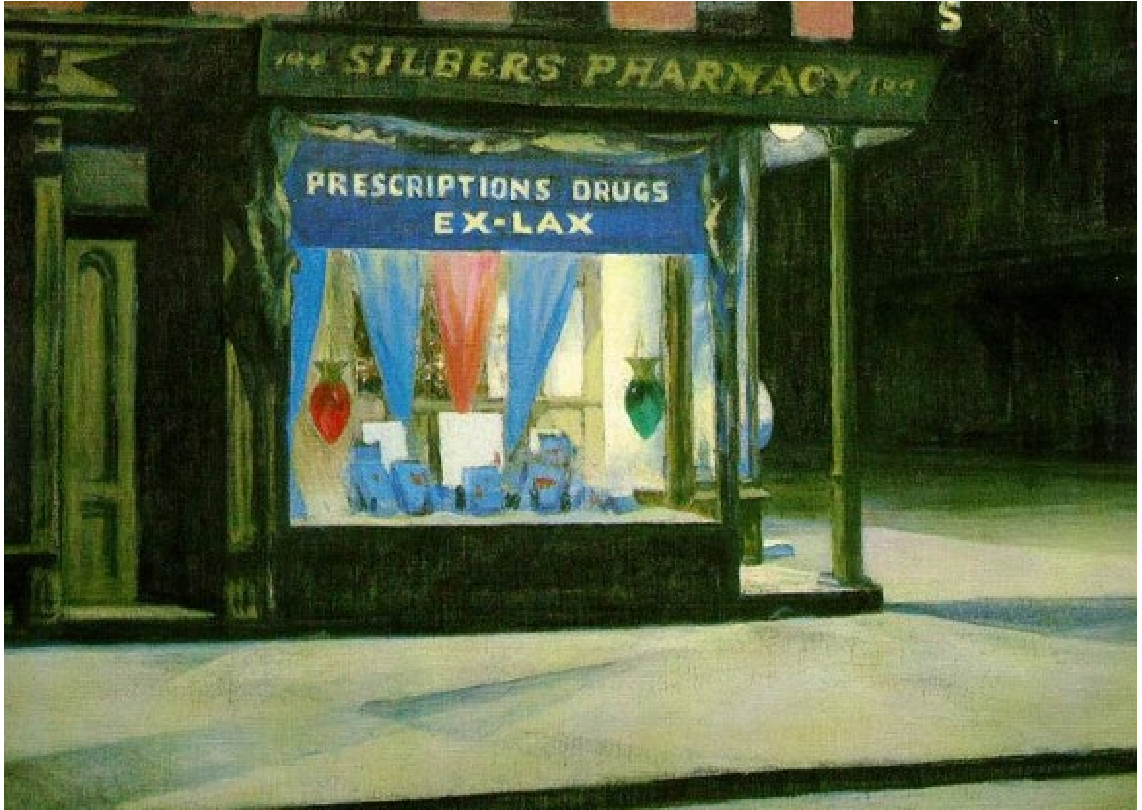
Indeed, not only the "*travelling* effect" of Hoppers horizontals seems to emulate movement, as it happens in Nighthawks, but it is also certain that Hopper's paintings seem to be framed as if applying filmic methods. Beyond any doubt, the most important of all the frames is, in Hopper, the window (and the most important of all windows is, probably, the one of *Nighthawks*). Concerning windows seen from the street (the only ones I will consider for the moment), Hopper painted them in many ways: seen from far (*From Williamsburg bridge* [1928][Fig.19], *House at dusk* [1935][Fig.33]) or at close range (*Apartment houses* [1923][Fig.34] Room in New York [1932])[Fig.41], with human presence (*Cape Cod Morning* [1950]) [Fig.35] or without it (*August in the city* [1945][Fig.36]), storefronts (*Early Sunday Morning* [1926][Fig.42], *Drug Store* [1927][Fig.37], *Seven A.M.* [1947])[Fig70] or offices (*New York Office* [1962] [Fig.38],), opened (*Night windows* [1928][Fig.39]) or closed (*Rooms for tourists* [1945]). In *Nighthawks* [Fig.23], the painting itself works as a movie theatre rather than as stage design. Hopper drags us through the scene, as if we were looking through a camera travelling over imaginary rails from the shadows of the dark street to the bright light of the diner, visible because of the glass window. *Hopper's windows are screens*. But the relevant point is the way in which Hopper developed a cinematographic technique, internal to his painting and with its own logic.

[Fig.33] Edward Hopper, *House at dusk,* 1935, 127 x 92.71 cm, Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond

[Fig. 34] Edward Hopper, *Apartment houses* 1923, 60.96 x 73.5 cm, Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts

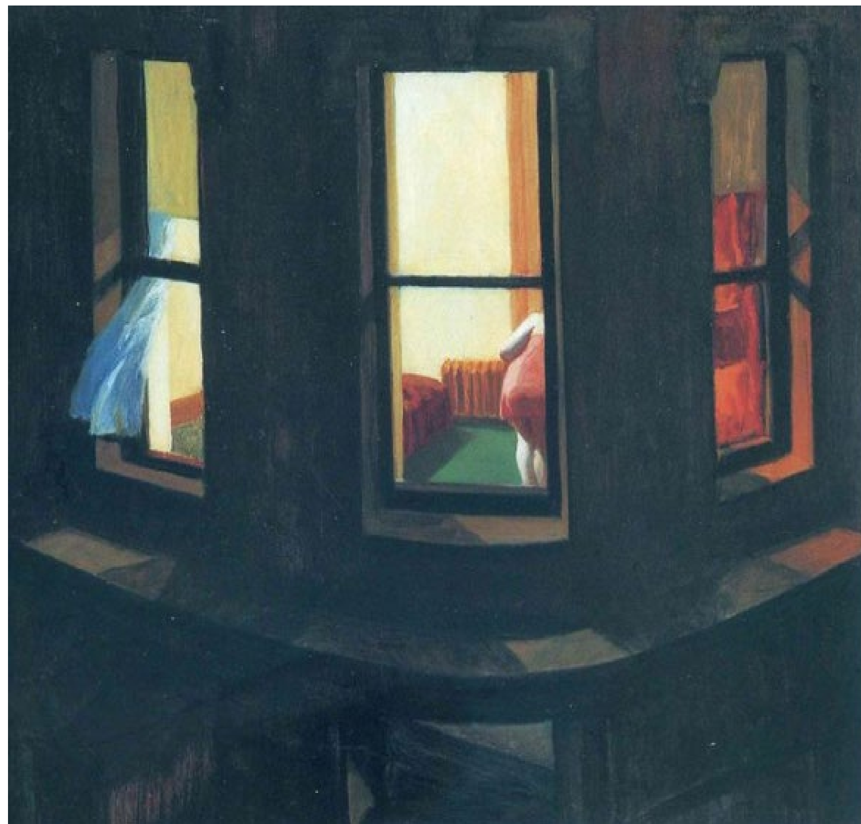
[Fig. 35] Edward Hopper, *Cape Cod Morning,* 1950, 86.7 x 102.3 cm, Smithsonian American Art Museum

[Fig.36] Edward Hopper *August in the city,* 1945, 58.4x76.2 cm, Norton Museum of Art, Florida



[Fig.37] Edward Hopper, *Drug Store,* 1927101.92 x 73.66cm, Museum of Fine Arts Boston

[Fig.38] Edward Hopper, *New York Office* , 1962, 101.6 x 139.7, Montgomery Museum of Fine Arts



[Fig. 39] Edward Hopper, *Night windows,* 1928, Museum of Modern Art, New York

When in chapter 4 I advanced the hypothesis that the building in *House by the railroad* [Fig.15] is painted "as if it was an instant photograph taken through the train window", and when I said that Hopper was painting the house "*as if* his canvas was a camera", I also said: "but only by immediately adding that precisely it is not and it cannot be" (section 4.2). In other words, the emphasis of my hypothesis is, as I shall argue in the next chapter, in the *as if*, that is to say, in the *metaphorical* presence of an internal camera or an inner cinema (not a direct external influence) in Hopper's painting.

But, what is the importance of *painting* the scene? What adds painting to the sphere of reproducibility? If painting "maintains the distance" that photography or film tend to abolish, it could be said that, suspending the denouement, Hopper, like Hemingway in "The killers", "keeps the secret" just when it is about to become evident that there is no secret at all: remoteness only appears in the moment it is about to disappear and to be turned into mere distance. It is not just a matter of giving some sort of implicit remoteness (through the painting) to what is characterised by simple distance (films and photography), as if the aim was adding an aura to what, by its own definition, lacks it. The question is, once again, how to paint (and, therefore, how to turn into experience) this lack. I now want to consider this point further.

5.3.2. <u>*Reasons for re-contextualization*</u>

In *The work of art in the age of its technological reproducibility*, Benjamin differentiates two types of relation between artworks and reproduction: "to photograph a painting is one kind of reproduction, but to photograph an action performed in a film studio is another" (BENJAMIN: 2002-2, 110). In the first case, *what is reproduced* (for example, Rembrandt's *The Night Watch*) is a work of art, but *the photograph of Rembrandt's work* is not a work of art[86] . In the second case, what is reproduced (for example, the final dialogue of Rick and Lisa in Michael Curtiz's *Casablanca*) is not a work of art, but only a single scene from a longer script, and the *filmic* reproduction of

[86]It may be well the case that an artistic photograph of Rembrandt's painting is considered as a work of art, but what Benjamin means is that a photograph of a painting is not a work of art simply because it reproduces a work of art.

such performance is not a work of art either, but only a little piece that in the final work of art —the finished film— can even be discarded during editing. But there is a third case not considered by Benjamin but essential to Hopper's painting: "to paint something which has become technologically reproducible". Here, w*hat is painted is not a work of art, but the painting can be such a work*. Under which conditions?

As it has been noted, *Erlebnis* implies a certain "reconstruction of experience" (like the one made by Proust's character through train windows), based on pragmatic motivations, which I have compared with the filmic editing process: the isolation of the perceptions that the conscious mind can control, and its relocation in a consistent temporal sequence by giving up the integrity of experience in order to avoid a traumatic risk. That is to say, *Erlebnis* is like a selective *montage* of the *Erfahrung* made of shocks. When Hopper paints this Erlebnis (not only the diner, *but also the way in which it is perceived*), the painting of Erlebnis is not itself *Erlebnis*, but *Erfahrung*: he makes visible the incongruences set apart in the pragmatic reconstruction (so to speak, he shows some of the frames discarded by the editor). In the syntactic dimension of the painting, these incongruences relate to the vagueness of the horizon line, the instability of volumes and the uncertainty regarding the viewer's position[87]. In the semantic dimension, they refer to the dissolution of the storyline in frozen frames without resolution of the tension, and to the impenetrability of the meaning of the scene. The painting is not *Erlebnis* (it could not be, because *Erlebnis* is aesthetically sterilised). The painting is *Erfahrung*, but not *Erfahrung* without *Erlebnis* (which might be a definition of the objectives of abstract painting), but *Erfahrung* of *Erlebnis*. That is why it contains a high dose of exhibition value, *but not only exhibition value*.

I previously asked (in 5.2.4.) why an increase of the exhibition factor in an artwork should be perceived as realistic by the artists and writers of Hopper's generation. The answer to this question is that realism, in art, does not mean faithfulness to a self-subsistent external reality, but a certain artistic approach to reality that is somehow in the spirit of the times, and that in this case consists of the augmenting of exhibition value, or rather of a decrease of the "telling" dimension of realism due to the decay of traditional shared narratives not only in the artwork, but in the social perception of reality in general.

[87]I will discuss these aspects, also appearing in Nighthawks as in House by the railroad, in the next chapter.

Hence the impression that reality has become harsher or devoid of emotion, "poor in noteworthy stories", as Benjamin said. But this impoverishment of the plotline, the absence of an ending —because the old narrative closing procedures are now felt as non-realistic, as a "trick ending"—, is a feature of the modern experience of space and time, and it is an attribute of the realistic approach to it. When Hopper's paintings are said to be "frames taken out of a sequence", it means that what is *shown* in them is separated from a storyline and a denouement which could be *told*. Events, at least narratively relevant events, seem to be excluded. Something might have happened before the scene we are watching in *Nighthawks* [Fig.23]; something could happen in the next instant. But at this moment *nothing* is happening in the diner. The characters are waiting. When the time comes, they will leave the diner without saying goodbye to each other and get lost in the night, every one of them to a destiny which remains unknown to us. But in the minute chosen by Hopper, the time has not yet come, the argument is suspended.

The repeated efforts of Hopper's interpreters to fill the painting with stories are attempts to *correct* the incongruences alluded to above and to ease the tension (or, as we might also say, to ease the pain of the poverty of experience), as are the never-ending "recontextualizations". Most of them are directed to eliminating the uneasiness resolving the uncertainty. Theisen, for example, fills the painting with all kinds of contextual readings throughout the decades of the twentieth century: in 1900, the couple of *Nighthawks* would be marginal and damned; in 1925, they would be two "charged-up hipsters"; in 1933, Bonnie and Clyde; in 1975, they would be proposing group sex to the waiter, and so on (THEISEN: 2006, 122). Hobbs, for his part, insinuates a possible relationship of the painting with the feeling of loneliness in American society after the years of the Great Depression. But, leaving aside the fact that 1942 is quite a distance from 1929, what could suggest, in the painting, economic crisis? Hobbs also argues that Nighthawks was painted at a time when "young people were sent off to the armed services and the entire country was caught up in the war effort", and invokes a link with the pessimism derived from the bombing of Pearl Harbor. He recognizes, however, that, even if "the fact of the war causes one to wonder exactly who the *Nighthawks* really are", the characters "do not seem to be (…) military personnel" (HOBBS: 1987, 131). So, why should we think that the rest of the inhabitants of the city have quietly gone to bed after hearing war news and the characters in the diner are the last patriots left to reflect on them? I previously called Theisen's interpretations of *Nighthawks* "abusive", yet they are

not more audacious (just more concrete) than the assumption that the characters are doomed by the pessimism produced by the fall of the American dream, the Great Depression, the loneliness of modern city or the Pearl Harbor bombing.

The painting seems to be especially amenable to all these readings, in the same way that it appears particularly appropriate for filmic quotations and for reproduction in advertisements, popular culture and gadgets. But the point is that, whereas the viewer fights to reconstruct the storyline trying to reconstruct the horizon line to stabilize the self, Hopper does not permit this correction. We already know the reason: *Erlebnis*, although it calms the tension for a while, sterilizes experience for artistic purposes. If, as I have just said, *Erlebnis* is the montage of *Erfahrung*, painting dismounts *Erlebnis* —so the incongruences appear— to make of it a genuine *Erfahrung*. To paint the *Erlebnis* means to make the experience of the in-experience, to make in-experience (the poverty of experience) accessible to experience. For this reason, the various readings hung on *Nighthawks* do not have longevity. And this answers another remaining question: what I called the obstinate insistence on finding in Hopper's *Nighthawks* [Fig.23] what obviously is not there.

CHAPTER 6. *NIGHTHAWKS*: THE PAINTING

In the previous chapter I discussed the affinity of Hopper's painting with reproducibility in general terms, and particularly the affinity between *Nighthawks* [Fig.23] and the long series of its reproductions and appropriations, which have had important effects on its interpretation I aimed to unfetter the picture from those appropriations and to reformulate its relationship with reproducibility. Now, in this chapter I will focus on the painting itself, and my main objective is to expand upon the previous suggestion of a sort of (metaphorical) "inner cinema" immanent in Hopper's paintings. I will comment first (in section 6.1. "The scene") on Nighthawks' characters, on Hopper's use of light and his spatial technique. In the course of these comments, several questions will arise, leading to a discussion of Richard Wollheim's influential distinction of the internal and the external spectator of a painting (6.1.3., "Wollheimian interlude"). I will show how this distinction can help to make Benjamin's metaphorical language more plausible, especially regarding the —often underestimated— Benjamin's definition of the aura in terms of gaze (6.2., "Spectators and expectations"), which I consider essential for the analysis of the painting. As a result of this discussion, I shall propose an extended reformulation of the hypothesis presented in chapter 4 to achieve a deeper understanding of Hopper's work, which will provide the answers to the questions posed in the first sections (6.3. "An extended hypothesis on *Nighthawks*").

6.1. THE SCENE

I shall begin with a description of *Nighthawks* [Fig.23] because, as I have signalled, constant reproductions and remakes of it have made the painting almost invisible. First I will focus on the figures appearing in the painting.

6.1.1. *Actors without aura*

The waiter, dressed in a white uniform, leans down, his head slightly up. His half opened mouth could suggest that he is about to start small talk with the two clients seated at the bar. However, the web of gestures and glances puts this suggestion aside: neither the man nor the woman, seated side by side with their arms leaning upon the counter, look at him. The woman's gaze seems to be fixed in the sandwich she is holding on her right hand, as in hesitation, perhaps lost in her own thoughts, unaware of things around her. Something similar happens with the figure of the man whose facial features, according to Jo Hopper’s diary’s notes, inspired the name of the painting because of his prominent nose (BARTER: 2007-1, 197-206). His gaze seems to be lost in the distance; he, too, is immersed in his own thoughts or maybe just letting time go by. Looking closely at the painting, we conclude that the waiter is not looking at the clients. His face seems to be illuminated by a beam of light coming out of nowhere, and his eyes are perhaps focused somewhere outside the glass window of the diner. It is a gaze immersed in some sort of professional ennui, the gaze of someone whose main occupation is that of waiting.

All we can say about the fourth character, with his back to us, is that he is wearing, like the other man in the painting, a fedora-type man’s hat, still popular in the United States of the 1940s, as it can be seen in films and advertisements of the period. He is seated at the other side of the bar counter, and he could be looking at its surface, or merely focused on his drink, ignoring both the waiter and the other two clients. The empty glass close to this figure indicates that there might have been someone else seated to his right, someone who has recently left the diner and whose absence allows us to have an entire panoramic view of the waiter and the couple. The scene seems to have been meticulously constructed so that the characters’ gazes do not meet one another at any point and, at the same time, none of them attempts to make eye contact with the viewer. It could be said

that the painting is designed to avoid a hypothetical exchange of glances which could be an emerging gesture or even evoke a word, something that could create a link, though precarious, which could break the silence that dominates the composition and the indifference that every one of the figures seems to feel towards the rest. It would be too risky to infer that the woman and the man who are on the same side of the bar counter are a couple. The feeling that the woman's left hand is about to touch the man's right hand is quickly refuted because of the cigarette he is holding, which excludes any attempt of connection.

It has become customary, in the case of *Nighthawks*, [Fig.23] to look for Hopper's inspiration in some of the French impressionist paintings representing cafes. The same paradoxical relation between closeness and distance that I have noticed in *House by the railroad* [Fig.15] can be found in such paintings. In these spaces, characters seem to achieve some sort of physical proximity without intimacy or any previous acquaintance between them. Barter suggests a comparison with Manet's *At the Cafe* (1878) [Fig.40], where it is not clear what kind of link the different characters who appear in the scene share (BARTER: 2007-1, 198). The man leans slightly towards the woman behind him and opens his mouth as if to speak. Even so, is he talking to her or to an unseen figure? She, on the other hand, does not look at him, her hand rests upon a chair, as if to push it away, whereas the woman on her left is clearly separated from them. This ambiguity of being together in the same space, though separated, is also present in Hopper's painting: the members of the hypothetical couple of *Nighthawks* [Fig.23] do not look at each other, although their hands almost meet in the bar counter. It could be understood as an indifferent closeness, as in Degas' *L'Absinthe* (1876), or a purely accidental one, as in the couple in Toulouse Lautrec's *At the bar* (1898).

[Fig.40] Edouard Manet, *At the cafe*, 1878, 78 × 84 cm., Oskar Reinhart Foundation, Winterthur, Switzerland

These similarities, however, also seem to highlight differences. In the French paintings, the ambiguity of closeness and distance relies almost always on the hustle and bustle that derives from the crowding and jostling of people in a limited space. The hubbub of the Parisian Foule which obsessed Baudelaire ("his Paris is invariably overpopulated", BENJAMIN: 2006, 322) is linked to the social emergence of the masses, which was the subject of a great number of thinkers since the late nineteenth century[88] and, according to Benjamin, also the privileged laboratory where modern poetry was distilled. But that crowd seems to be missing in Hopper's paintings. Rather than piling up the figures in his paintings, Hopper seems to treat them in a more conventional way, giving them, as Barter says, space to breath (BARTER: 2007-1, 198), maybe because he is more interested in assuring the general visibility of the space and its components, as can be observed in some of his late works, where human figures disappear. This is what seems to emphasize the feeling of loneliness and empty space that is usually pinned to Hopper's scenes, when compared to the overcrowding and confusion that dominated Impressionist paintings, and

[88]Among others, Le Bon [*Psychologie des foules*, 1895], Freud [*Massenpsychologie und Ich Analysis*, 1921], Ortega [*La rebellion de las masas*, 1929], Reich [*Massenpsychologie des faschismus*, 1933], Canneti [*Mass und Macht*, 1960]) and, of course, Benjamin himself.

this is still true of an early Hopper work like *Soir Bleu* (1914), where the atmosphere of Parisian cafes is still present and characters show links between them. Nevertheless, even if formal or compositional motivations can be adduced to explain this procedure, a first question arises: if Hopper's characters —at least the ones in *Nighthawks* [Fig.23]— belong to the urban realm of "the modern masses", why is the crowd almost always absent from his oils?

This individualization of the characters has been related to the Hopper's so-called "voyeurism", an idea probably derived from his use of perspective: the painter usually allows us to observe the characters he depicts without them noticing they are being watched (REISS: 1973, 84, NOCHLIN: 1981, 138). In *Nighthawks* [Fig.23], we have a wider perspective and more visual information than the characters do. We are aware, at least partially, of the exterior of the diner, we have a panoramic view of the scene that the characters are incapable of noticing, and we can see what they all have behind their backs. More importantly, we have the feeling (enhanced by the transparency of the windows) that, as in many other Hopper windows, such as *Night Windows* (1928)[Fig.39] or *Room in New York* (1932)[89][Fig.41], the characters have been caught unawares at some moment of their daily routine, as if they were subjected to some sort of surveillance[90].

Relying on the lack of a visible entrance to or exit from the *Nighthawks*' diner, and on "the ugly ochre door with a tiny square window in it", Theisen explains this feeling of surveillance comparing the scene with a prison cell, playing with the idea that "New York may be said to function as a kind of prison" (THEISEN:2006, 58, 72). However, I shall discard this interpretation in the following lines.

[89]Although examples multiply: Apartment Houses (1923), August in the city (1945) Cape Cod Morning (1950) Office in a Small city (1953), New York office (1962), etc.
[90]I will discuss Hopper's voyeurism in detail in chapter 8.

[Fig.41] Edward Hopper, *Room in New York*, 1932, 73.66 x 93.02cm, Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery and Sculpture Garden, Lincoln, NE

The figures indeed seem to be locked in the space they occupy, perfectly isolated even when in company. However, the interpretation of this condition in the sense of police or political surveillance is even more forced that the supposition of a criminal plot, which I have discarded in the previous chapter. Especially because in Hopper's paintings, although certainly there is no accumulation of figures and the characters are distinctive enough to be differentiated, except for a small number of portraits, there is no actual individualization: Hopper's characters are types —even stereotypes—, they do not represent actual people. This ambiguity awakens a second question: who —or what— are they?

In fact, *Nighthawks*' readings which point to the subordination of the characters to the space they inhabit refer to a circumstance which has been insistently underlined by critics, and has not to do with "power" but, again, with scenography. This mise-en-scène element —the exhibition dimension of a theatre play, its "showing" aspect— is as clear

in Hopper's images as the feeling that the characters are located in a decor in order to be observed. There is a certain visual resemblance between the buildings in the background of the painting and the ones that we might find in other oils: *Early Sunday morning* [Fig.42], painted more than a decade earlier, in 1930. We discover there the same kind of architecture, the same colour palette and almost the same frugality when it comes to the details of the store windows, which do not reveal what kind of business do they host[91]. It is assumed that *Early Sunday morning* [Fig.42] was inspired by Jo Mielziner's stage design for Rice's play *Street Scene* (1929)[92]

[Fig..42] Edward Hopper, Early Sunday Morning, 1930, Whitney Museum of American Art, 89.4x153cm, Whitney Museum of American Art

[91]In both paintings there is only one element which reveals more detail: in *Early Sunday Morning* is the characteristic barber pole; in *Nighthawks*, it is the partially lighted cash register inside one of the buildings (WELLS: 2008, 172).

[92]"On February 14, 1929, Hopper and his wife saw Elmer Rice's *Street Scene* (…) Hopper's *Early Sunday Morning* of 1930 is the quintessential street scene. The buildings are viewed at an angle from above as if seen from a building across the way. In fact, the Hopper's saw Mielziner's *Street Scene* set from the second balcony, and it is this experience that may have suggested the slightly elevated vantage point found in *Early Sunday Morning*" (LEVIN: 1980, 57-58).

So, we could say that those buildings play the role of a theatre set, which would explain the vagueness. Warkel claims that Hopper's most intriguing works are his interiors, "composed like stage sets with appropriate stage lighting" (WARKEL: 2008, 29). It might be argued then, with Wells, that Hopper acts like some sort of theatre scenographer: his compositions are often proscenium-like, the light is directed (and so are shadows) and characters depicted frequently seem to be posing (WELLS: 2008, 215).

However, there is a strong drawback to this hypothesis. Benjamin notes that "the aura surrounding Macbeth on the stage cannot be divorced from the aura which, for the living spectators, surrounds the actor who plays him" (BENJAMIN: 2002-2, 112). That is to say, the aura of the theatre actor is linked to the role he plays in the story and, therefore, to the character's involvement in the plot. On the contrary, Hopper's characters seem to have no aura because they do not play a concrete role, and this is the reason why we cannot decide who they are. The storyline is, to the players, as tradition is to social agents, and the poverty of experience is to modern individuals as the poverty of argument to the players. The "frozen" moment captured by Hopper is not a relevant scene belonging to a plot, but a trivial instant without a special signification. And this is emphasized by the fact that the characters' visible or imagined gazes are empty or lost. Over and over again, in articles and monographs written about Hopper, critics insist on terms such as loneliness, alienation, despair or sadness as the typical states of mind of Hopper's characters. But much as one wants to get closer to the figures, their faces reveal boredom, or, in general terms, are distracted, haunted or indifferent, appropriate to the spaces they inhabit, which are not particularly oppressive but anodyne or transitory, without mystery or secret. I agree with Updike's observation that, if we were to understand Hopper's scenes as theatre sets, his paintings could only depict the first scene the viewer sees when the curtain goes up and nobody knows the storyline in which the characters are going to be immersed (UPDIKE: 2005, 184). They are, like Pirandello's actors, "characters in search of an author". So, this hypothesis that Hopper's characters must be considered as if they were actors is not consistent enough to answer the question about their identity, because it opens a new interrogation: why have these actors lost their aura?

6.1.2. *Light and Space*

I will focus now on light and space, because, as in many other paintings, the figures represented might not be the central issue. Perhaps we should take seriously the Hopper's incidental statement that he was not interested in drawing people "grimacing and posturing" (as it was common during his work as an illustrator): "maybe I am not very human. What I wanted to do was to paint sunlight in the side of a house" (LEVIN: 1980, 139). And light and space constitute the elementary structure for any *exhibition*.

The powerful artificial light is the only source visible in the scene. It has been defined sometimes as "dehumanizing", because of the cold tones used by Hopper. Indeed, this coldness affects the whole atmosphere of the painting. The light not only illuminates the building's interior, but also spills over into the street and onto the buildings in the background of the composition[93]. And, as in many other Hopper's paintings, the main feature of this light is its excessive intensity. As the artist George Segal once claimed, one needs sunglasses to enter Hopper's paintings (SCHMIED: 1995, 100). This seems to enhance the idea that that the characters are under the spotlight, in a theatre where the diner window would be like the "fourth wall" of a stage.

Hopper divides the surface of the canvas into differentiated zones of colour and value, outlining the diner to separate the fluorescent light from the shadows. But the excess of light has an ambiguous effect on objects and human figures. On one hand, it shapes them with contour lines and hard edges, creating volume and solidity; on the other hand, far from bringing out the details of things and faces, as Gillies rightly suggests, the overexposure "burns" them and hides their features (GILLIES: 1972, 405), as can be clearly seen in a painting like *Chop Suey* (1929) [Fig.43]. Profiled by the cold light, like the bright and frosty milk glass of *Suspicion* (Hitchcock, 1941), the objects in the counter of Nighthawks' diner seem to confirm Benjamin's observation that "warmth is ebbing from things: the objects of daily use gently but insistently repel us" (BENJAMIN:1996-5, 453).

[93] Archibald J. Motley Jr, a Chicagoan who painted scenes of the city's speakeasies, was interested in the qualities of light, especially night-time and artificial light. He declared Hopper's painting "the best example I have seen of (artificial interior) lighting", and it inspired his 1943 painting *Nightlife* (BARTER: 2007-1, 203- 204).

[Fig.43] Edward Hopper, Chop suey (detail), 1929

All of them come from industrial construction or mass production: they are not transmitted by the authority of tradition; human cultural experience is not accumulated in them. They *inform* us about their functions (by means of the instruction manual attached to them, often reduced today to a set of photographic images), but they do not *transmit* us any experience: they are poor in experience. Benjamin would say that they have no aura as a result of how they have been produced. The frugality of details that we can see inside the diner is also noteworthy: walls are naked, and with the exception of the empty glass on the right side of the man with his back to us, there are few elements of tableware anywhere to be seen. So, if there are not especially relevant things to be seen, this raises a third question: if nothing shown is important, why this excess of light?

In depicting the huge window, the other main feature of Hopper's spatial technique is revealed. The directionality of the painting, dominated by horizontality, suggests the movement of urban dynamics. As Theisen notes, we can find it in the window, in the bar counter, in the sequence and repetition of the stools, in the pavement, in the row of

windows of the same shape and size in the buildings on the background, and in the architecture of the diner itself (THEISEN: 2006, 73). It is as if it propelled our glance across the surface, preventing us from entering inner depths.

If we accept that there are two procedures to produce the illusion of three dimensionality in a painting, recession in depth by colour and value graduation, and the linear relationships of forms, we could say that Hopper mainly uses this latter. So, his works rarely rely on the graduation of light and shadows, and both rival in the surface of the canvas a bit like the same colours echo inside and outside the diner. This contributes to giving *Nighthawks* [Fig.23] the air of what could be called a "total frontality": the farthest zones, instead of fading away by the distance, are focused with the same accuracy as the nearest ones, as if the viewer's focus was at the same time everywhere and, as Lawson said about this use of perspective, "seeing clearly what he is not looking at" (GILLIES: 1972, 406). But, although the space is constructed following linear perspective to suggest depth, as I have remarked in the case of *House by the railroad* [Fig.15], the horizon line is not clear. The diner is like an odd isosceles trapezoid that marks the vanishing point outside the composition. But the street and the buildings in the background claim another vanishing point which does not accord with the one implied by the diner, so it is difficult to locate a fixed point of view for the beholder. This instability of the ground awakens two possible associations (which are not mutually exclusive): (i) that the viewer is to imagine spectatorship in motion; and (ii), that the viewer cannot perceive the space shown in the painting as an extension of her own perceptual space. The fourth question is, thus, how should we interpret this visual uncertainty?

6.1.3. *Wollheimian interlude*

In order to clarify all the above observations about the viewer of *Nighthawks* [Fig.23], I will resort to the way in which Richard Wollheim presents, in his book *Painting as an art*, the distinction between "the spectator *of* the picture" and "the spectator *in* the picture" (WOLLHEIM: 1987, 101-185). Although I am aware of the distance between Wollheim's theoretical and methodological framework and Benjamin's, which I am using in my dissertation, I suggest that a fruitful parallelism between them on some issues that

are crucial for my argument can be experimentally developed: on the question of mimesis, from which derives the polarity "cult/exhibition", and the implicit character of aura's remoteness, which I discussed in chapter 2. What is the interest of reformulating Benjamin's notions in terms of Wollheim's internal spectatorship? As I shall argue, this reformulation is a key tool to make more plausible the hermetic and metaphoric definitions of aura in terms of *gaze*, and therefore a basis for further development of my suggestion about the presence of an imaginary "inner cinema" in Hopper's works.

For the purposes of this parallelism, I will leave aside many of the complexities of Wollheim's argument, and I will retain from it just the issues that can be useful in the analysis of *Nighthawks* [Fig.23]. For the moment, I will summarize these issues by saying that, although is an ingenuous assumption that the real spectator can literally "enter" a painted representation, in a certain kind of paintings the *spectator* of the picture is allowed to enter the represented scene *imaginatively*: the spectator is able to imagine himself "as if " inside the picture. For this to be possible, the painter has to have constructed a place for an internal (but unrepresented) spectator near the viewpoint from which the scene is painted.

For me, the important point in this position is the expression as if. This expression leads us to what Kant called *das Reich des als ob*, the realm of the "as if". The function of Wollheim's implicit spectator, not represented but immanent in the represented scene, is to allow the external spectator to play at being inside the picture, just as an actor *plays* a role in the stage. It is, to my view, very relevant that Wollheim calls the internal spectator *the protagonist* of the picture. This designation could suggest a literary comparison. The thesis of the internal spectator is, in other words, constructed through an analogy with the protagonist of literary fiction. Indeed, the role that Wollheim assigns to the internal spectator ("he can see everything that the picture represents and he can see it as the picture represents it […] He is, I shall say, a total spectator" [WOLLHEIM: 1987, 102]) reminds us of the function of the *omniscient* narrator in literature. The protagonist or the narrator of a modern novel is, so to speak, the device that allows the reader to experience the events of the plot *as if in* the fiction and to perceive action from within the plot. To achieve this objective, the reader should operate a narrative identification with the protagonist: imagining himself or herself *as if* the protagonist. It could be said: the reader *plays* the role of the protagonist. This reminds us of what Hopper called "the essential element of

imagination", whose importance in the structure of the experience I have underlined in chapter 1.

The indication that this identification has to be an *imaginary* one is central in the argument, because if this requirement is not fulfilled mimesis fails[94] . If failure can be excluded, and if there is effectively a place for the spectator *in* the picture, the spectator of the picture will have "distinctive access to the contents of the picture" (WOLLHEIM: 1987, 129). For Wollheim, this means, on one hand, access "from within" the space represented in the picture, *playing the part* of the internal spectator who watches the scene; this is the representational dimension, corresponding to the "showing" or the exhibition value. And, on the other hand, it means access to the "mind" of the internal spectator, being, so to speak, "possessed" by the repertoire of affections of the internal spectator; this is the expressive dimension, corresponding to the "telling" side of the scene or to its cult value. And, as with exhibition and cult values, when the side of "telling" gains importance, the side of "showing" loses it[95].

So, it is assumed that the painter represents in the picture the *gaze* of the internal spectator (what he can see): not only the contents of such a gaze, but also the emotional colouration of the internal spectator's affections concerning what he is looking at. The possibility of this imaginary identification involves an interweaving of both dimensions (the emotional identification helps to complete the representational one, and vice versa). And this double contribution seems to be in tune with what I have been calling "realism". When the external spectator can even attempt an imaginary access to the implicit internal space of the picture, we could say that it is a "realist" picture, not an "illusionist" one.

In the case of painting, in chapter 2 I have associated aura with the remoteness implicit in the gaze of the person represented in a traditional portrait, which implies a mystery or a secret that the painting transmits (as an experience) but does not betray it (as information). And I have interpreted this remoteness as the cause that makes the

[94]I am not referring to the cases —mentioned by Wollheim— in which the imaginary identification is attempted but not achieved (because the painter did not locate successfully an internal spectator in his work), but to those in which the identification cannot be even attempted.

[95]"In some cases, the affective contribution that identification with an internal spectator makes to pictorial comprehension will be much greater, in other cases it will be comparatively less (…) where the affective contribution is greater (…) we should adopt a more relaxed attitude towards the precise location of the internal spectator" (WOLLHEIM: 1987, 183).

represented space irreducible to the explicit dimensions of the space of the representation. Now, Wollheim also insists on the *implicit* condition of the internal spectator. Both spaces, explicit and implicit, cannot be confused, but there is a possibility of gaining access from the first to the second. To the extent that the external spectator never loses the sense of reality (and of its difference with fiction), this access does not mean an explicit revelation of the "secret" that the scene conceals (this revelation would mean the "inauthentic" confusion of the spectator *of* the picture with the spectator *in* the picture, or in any case an ingenuous illusion): it could be said that the internal spectator *transmits* the secret to the external one —this is the core of the "distinctive access"—, but what is transmitted is an experience and, therefore, probably nothing that could be translated into explicit *information*. So, the picture itself keeps the secret or, in other words, retains its aura.

Now, I suggest that all the difficulties in entering the space of *Nighthawks* [Fig.23] (the unstable position of the beholder, the insecurity about the standpoint and the horizon line, the lack of spatial continuity, etc.) should be interpreted as the difficulties of the spectator of *Nighthawks* [Fig.23] to identify with the spectator *in Nighthawks.* Wollheim indicates that, in some cases, "the external spectator (…) can allow the internal spectator to drift". This is especially important in Manet's paintings, whose "internal spectator is essentially a mobile spectator. He must be free to prowl through the represented space (…) and therefore there could not be one point of view exclusively associated with him" (WOLLHEIM: 1987, 161). In other words, different perspectives on the contents of the picture, which would be "really" successive, are "imaginarily" represented *as if* they were simultaneous, and this is characteristic of the spatial (modern) representation of time, as I have argued referreing to Hume and Kant words. The external spectator's acceptance of Manet's works is, so to speak, subordinated to the possibility of looking at the picture through the wandering internal spectator's eyes. According to Wollheim, if such internal spectator cannot be explicitly represented it is precisely because the picture's point of view could not support his presence, given "the indefinitely many viewing points through which he would pass on his wanderings through the represented space". In fact, Wollheim says that, if he was actually represented, his presence would give "the impression of being totally *arbitrary*". This is what happens, I suppose, with the arbitrary customer appearing

in the mirror of *Un bar aux Folies Berger* (1882)[96][Fig.44]. Manet's indiscreet revelation of the figure which should have remained unrepresented happens precisely because, like the defocused faces of the King and the Queen in the mirror of *Las Meninas*, he is the privileged spectator (FOUCAULT: 2002, 3-18). But, is there an internal spectator in Nighthawks? Is there, in general, a privileged spectator in Hopper's paintings?

[Fig.44.] Edouard Manet *Un bar aux Folies Berger*, 1882, 96x130cm, Courtauld Gallery, London

Discussing Wollheim's theory, Wilder has called attention to some paintings by Vermeer —an author often admired for the "photographic quality" of his images. In these works, even if the viewpoint from which the scene is painted is conceivable as a spatial continuation of the room in which the figure is placed, an obstacle appears —sometimes a "fortification" of objects—, so that when "attempting to identify with this point of view, we" —the spectator *of* the picture— "are faced with barriers that allow us to experience a poignant and necessary absence". In his view, these barriers do not exclude "the spectator standing *before* the painting, but a presence now potentially internal to the scene", that is to say, the spectator *in* the painting (WILDER: 2011, 600-611). I have also mentioned in chapter 4 the presence, in some Hopper's works, of visual barriers that seem

[96]A lot of critical literature has been written on this painting and its circumstances: see ROSS, N.: 1982, CARRIER: 1990, FASCINA: 1994, CLARK: 2003, HOUSE: 2004, FLAM: 2005, and especially *12 views on Manet's Bar* (COLLINS: 1996).

to block the access of the viewer to the subject of the painting, like the tracks of *House by the railroad* [Fig.15]. I suggested then that, in these cases, what lies on the other side of the barrier acquires the condition of the "uncanny".

In *Nighthawks* [Fig.23] there is a barrier or an obstacle. Not only does the distant standpoint from which the scene is framed, separate it from the (internal) beholder with a long section of pavement: the window here is the main barrier to entering the diner. Wollheim invites us to imagine Manet's internal spectator "who tries, tries hard, tries importunately, and fails, to gain the attention of the figure who is represented as there in the space". When this expectation is disappointed, Wollheim continues, we can experience "some of the tedium, some of the frustration, some of the sense of rejection, that must attend any attempt to establish contact with the represented figure" (WOLLHEIM: 1987, 160).

My suggestion is that the failure of the implicit viewer's attempts to gain the attention of the figure, just as the visual obstacle which blocks the access of the viewer to the subject of the painting may not be a casual but a structural feature in modern painting. And this structural disappointment has to do with the displacement, in the work of art, from the ritual to the exhibition value, this considered as a feature of "realism", to which I referred in the previous chapter (5.2.4. and 5.3.2.), as a result of the loss of authority of traditional narratives.

Balance between fiction and reality acquires a peculiar signification in modern art. It has become customary to accept that modern painting differs from what I previously called (in Schiller's words) "the age of naïve poetry" precisely because of its rejection of a certain ingenuity. In other words, what once was faced in paintings as realistic, that is to say, the appearance of the scenes shown as views of an immediate reality directly captured by the artist, has become, in modern times, suspicious of illusionism and retouching, in the same sense of the "side-stepping of truth" that Hopper found unacceptable compared with the outspokenness of Hemingway's style. In French painting, Manet has been often considered as a privileged paradigm of what Clement Greenberg called "frankness" towards the spectator which is typical of modern art (GREENBERG: 1993, 86). This frankness has a wide range of meanings: in one of its extremes (the one to which Greenberg refers), the question is the formal fact that modern

painters openly emphasised the flat surfaces on which they were painting, and in this way they highlighted the autonomy of the painted surface (something that Hopper himself discreetly practised in his early years, when his French influence was stronger, for example, in the expressive brushwork of Railway Train, from 1908). At the other extreme, the question is the content of the paintings. In his essay on Manet, Bataille —the thinker whom Benjamin confided his manuscripts when he was forced to leave Paris in 1940— saw in *Olympia* [Fig.3] an attempt to break "with the lies that the eloquence had created" in the mainstream of the tradition, not only with the illusion of depth (BATAILLE: 1955, 63). Bataille underlines Manet's "indifference" in *The execution of the Emperor Maximilian* (1869), accomplished with the same coldness as if he was painting a flower or a fish. This exclusion of sentimentalism can be also related productively to Hopper's rejection of "popular prejudices" and "sugar-coated mush" in his appreciation of Hemingway's straightforwardness. And this straightforwardness is, in turn, related to Manet's frankness towards the beholder: Bataille speaks of Manet's disdain for the sentiments convenus and the "multiple conventions" of the preceding period. And Bataille gives this gesture the weight of a transgression or even of a "crime".

But, somewhere in between these two extremes, the *disenchantment* of painting operated by Manet involves a change in the kind of look that the spectator must address to the canvas: Bataille emphasizes that the painter removes Olympia from Olympus and returns her to the world of prosaic beings ("*au monde des êtres prosaïques*", BATAILLE: 1955, 63). Manet's figure is not exactly a Goddess; she is also Victorine Meurent, his model. So, his frankness is also expressed in the fact that his characters are no longer to be seen only *as if* they were heroes or goddesses; they can *also* be seen *as if* they were models posing in the painter's studio. The painted scene keeps on being fiction, but it is also a fiction that reveals itself as such, not wanting to "deceive" the viewer. As we have seen, *Un bar aux Folies Bergère* (1882)[Fig.44] contains a self-declaration of its fictional condition in the strange disappearance of the customer reflected in the mirror, who would be expected to be in front of the waitress, in the foreground of the picture. Paradoxically, this implicit confession that uncovers the painter's artifice —which a scandalized spectator could experience as an extreme optical error—, precisely because it turns off the excess of illusion characteristic of the age of the naïve poetry, now is somehow felt as an ingredient of artistic realism. Removing Olympia from Olympus is, to a certain extent,

depriving her of the aura of divinity still present in Titian's *Venus*. And this is in tune with Hopper's actors without aura.

6.2. SPECTATORS AND EXPECTATIONS

Returning to my Benjaminian trajectory, in this section I shall develop an approach to the modern gaze to support my suggestion of a structural disappointment of expectations as a feature of such a gaze. I shall argue that modern gaze is characterised by a photographic or filmic way of seeing, one Benjamin calls “the protective eye”. The camera is a symbol (or an allegory) of this gaze, and to my view this is the reason why Benjamin states that photography is linked to a general crisis in the structures of perception, and also the key of his metaphorical references to a “culture of glass”. As streets are filled with the serial spaces of industrial construction, the gaze of the passer-by is filled with stereotyped images, which are the perceptive strategy that corresponds with that new reality. To prepare a final interpretation of *Nighthawks* [Fig.23], I shall distinguish two kinds of protective eye: the camera-like gaze as an embodiment of the defensive *Erlebnis* (subsection 6.2.1.), and the gaze of those who have been trained by the dynamics of the city in a new way of being watched without returning the gaze, as if they were film actors or photographic models.

6.2.1. *A gaze without eyes*

According to Benjamin, inherent to human gaze, no matter what one is looking at, there is the expectation that “it will be returned by that on which it is bestowed. Where this expectation is met, there is an experience of the aura in all its fullness” (BENJAMIN: 2006, 338). The expression “no matter what one is looking at” is quite strange, because Benjamin’s sentence makes us think of human relations. But, he continues, an object — not a person— can also be invested “with the ability to look back at us”. Obviously, he is speaking metaphorically, but as he does not make it clear, the reader is introduced in a quasi-magical environment. Indeed, his first example of this inhuman aura are ritual objects and images. But also the traditional objects of use have aura, the aura of tradition, the authority of the experience of many generations through the years, which *looks at us* from such object. But this can also occur, I shall add, in the case of a painting, as when we expect a returning gaze from Manet’s waitress.

Anyway, considering the problem from the standpoint of modern societies, it could be said that every industrially produced object lacks "eyes" with which to look at us. And there is *one* of these objects in which this inability to look back is especially relevant, because it appears often named —and perceived— as an "eye": the photographic or filmic camera. The first men who looked at the camera in the nineteenth century confronted it, unavoidably, with the expectation of the return of their gazes by the mechanical eye. But the camera never looks back at us (hence the impression that it "sucks" or "swallows" our gaze): it registers our look without experiencing it (the words "sensibility" or "impression", when applied to technology, lose their subjective meaning and describe only mechanical processes). This fact, says Benjamin, had to be felt as "inhuman" or "deadly" by the first ones to be exposed to it. The "inhuman" is the way in which, as I suggested above, the camera reduces or eliminates the moral and the aesthetical remoteness in which the aura consists.

This "inhumanity" of the camera is widely explained by Benjamin in the essay on reproducibility with the metaphor I have already mentioned, which approaches the action of the painter to the one of the magician, and the action of the cameraman to the one of the surgeon (BENJAMIN: 2002, 115). The painter, says Benjamin, maintains "the natural distance" with the model whose aura is trying to translate to the canvas, and even when he approaches to observe a detail, the distance is maintained "by virtue of his authority". His picture is intended to symbolize the spiritual unity of the model in the portrait's gaze. In contrast, the cameraman "greatly diminishes the distance" because he does not look at the model (he "abstains from facing him man to man"): like the surgeon, he penetrates him, fragments his image in different shots as in a post-mortem dissection, and after that he assembles these pieces to construct of a new reality which, as the bad infinity, is made of finite frames whose aspect of continuity is, like the one of Hume's burning coal, the illusion produced by a motion which goes faster than human eyes.

After stating that "photography is decisively implicated in the phenomenon of a 'decline of the aura'" (BENJAMIN: 2006, 338), Benjamin frequently speaks as if the lack of aura was the main feature *of certain kind of objects*: those which the camera has captured, turning them into reproducible images. But, despite the hypnotical power of Benjamin's prose, the idea that the camera "absorbs" or "destroys" the aura of paintings, landscapes or human faces is only a very appealing metaphor, constantly repeated in the

studies on Benjamin, but it cannot be taken literally. Let us say that, if the reproducible images can "reign over vision", as suggested by Deleuze's (See chapter 4, 4.1.4.), and if they can replace the visual *Erfahrung* with the optical *Erlebnis*, it is because *the camera does not affect objects*, but rather the way these objects are perceived or, in other words, *the camera affects the modern gaze*. Benjamin himself says that "The crisis of artistic reproduction that emerges in this way can be seen as an integral part of a crisis in perception itself" (BENJAMIN:2006, 338). When speaking about the modern individual who moves through the traffic, Benjamin mentioned the "technological training" needed to successfully survive this new environment. I would say that, in the visual realm, a gaze can lose its remoteness, its depth, by means of technological training: the training of the camera-like inquiry which produces the self-protective eye can only be acquired by a widespread adoption of a photographic way of seeing which does not "profane" remoteness as the transgression of a ritual, it simply becomes blind to the phenomenon of the aura.

And this is the profound reason for the affirmation that the "objects made of glass have no aura". Certainly, in this context Benjamin refers to buildings, but he adds that the architects of these buildings "have created rooms in which it is hard to leave traces" (BENJAMIN: 1996-7, 734), as seems to happen in the diner in *Nighthawks*', completely wrapped in a glass.

Let us say that, if diners are —among many other modern spaces— the urban incarnation of *Erlebnis*, the inhuman eye of the camera is its appropriate visual reception, that is to say, the *right* way to visually perceive the new mechanical reality of the industrially produced and reproduced space and time. One cannot *look at* a technological reproduction in the same way one looks at something natural or original. There is, as Benjamin says, a change in the frame and the conditions of experience. So, the visual equivalent of the abstract "schemes" or "concepts" underlying the serial spaces like the diners, is the cliché or the stereotype. What is, then, a stereotype or a cliché? It is an image specially charged with exhibition value. That is to say, an image that, as Marx stated in 1858 talking about money, has the same status than the electric spark[97]: it does not

[97]"It circulated not because it was worn, but it was worn to a symbol because it continued to circulate (…) it never appears as exchange value in a state of rest or even a commodity in a state of rest. The reality which in this process the exchange value of commodities assumes, and which is expressed by gold in circulation,

circulate because of its value, but it is valued precisely because it circulates, because of its potential reproducibility.

Benjamin says that glass is the worst enemy of secrets, but the secret is exactly what is retained in the eyes of the character portrayed by the painter to which I referred above. I would say that the meaning of this reference to "glass culture" is not completely intelligible if we do not assume its metaphorical charge: *the protective shell of the Erlebnis*, so often alluded by Benjamin, can be imagined as if made of glass because its vision can be imagined *as if* safeguarded by the glass of the camera's lens, as an allegory of the photographic way of seeing. In this context Benjamin cites those lines from Brecht's poem:

> *The man who hasn't signed anything,*
> *who left no picture,*
> *Who was not there, who said nothing:*
> *How can they catch him?*
> *Erase the traces.* (BRECHT: 1987, 31)[98]

But, although he associates these words with "the detective novel", they can be perfectly applied to the cameraman: in the ideal self-image of photography, he has not signed anything, he is deprived of the authority of the painter, he was not there, he said nothing, all the work is done by the camera, he has not experienced anything, he is nobody (how can they catch him?). In the same sense that the surgeon's hands —protected by "glass" gloves— , his eyes leave no traces when penetrating things with the camera. Benjamin compares the protective eye with the gaze of a wild animal, always vigilant of its immediate surroundings, searching at the same time for the signals of a possible prey and ones of a possible predator; so acts the eye of the city passer-by, who tries to avoid risks and to grasp opportunities, and also the one of the factory worker on the conveyor belt.

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is merely the reality of an electric spark. Although it is real gold, it functions merely as apparent gold, and in this function therefore a token of itself can be substituted for it" (MARX: 2010, 349).

[98]Benjamin quotes Brecht's poem to enforce this idea of a glass-culture. But it is noticeable that, while he celebrates the arrival of such culture without secrets, Brecht's poem is not, on the contrary, so enthusiast: he tells the story of a man who, after entering the city, does not recognize neither his friends when they knock at the door nor his parents when he meets them in the street, a man who disowns his words and dies without a gravestone. In Brecht's poem there is no sign of the attitude of celebration of this traceless biography which seems evident in Benjamin's comment.

6.2.2. *Eyes without a gaze*

Barter suggests a comparison between the gaze of the waitress in Manet's Un bar aux Folies Bergère and the gaze of the waiter in *Nighthawks* (BARTER, 2007-1, 198). The comparison is opportune given Hopper's interest in nineteenth-century French painting (in 1962 he affirmed: "I think I'm still an Impressionist", LEVIN: 1980, 26[99]). It is also plausible because, in both cases, we find blank stares or empty eyes. However, in my view, although both characters have the same position, there is a substantial difference between them: Hopper's waiter *is watching*, even if one cannot say what is he looking at; Manet's waitress, on the contrary, *is being watched* by the client in front of her, but she is not looking at him.

In Hopper's works, we can find a "waiting-and-searching" eye in the women of *East side interior* (1920) [Fig.45], *Tables for ladies* (1930) or *Cape Cod Morning* (1950) [Fig.35] and in the men of *Two on the aisle* (1927), *Hotel by a Railroad* (1952) [Fig.53], *Office in a small city* (1953[Fig.71]) or *Sunlight in a cafeteria* (1958) [Fig.46]. The waiter's gaze in *Nighthawks* [Fig.23] also belongs to this kind of "protective eye". It is also the gaze of the traveller looking through a train's window and attempting to reconstruct a totality out of the fleeting images in such a frame, avoiding the "shocks" that fragment the landscape.

[99]The affirmation is more important than it might appear. Although Hopper often uses Romantic, Goethian or expressionist metaphors to define his conception of art, the indelible mark of Impressionism appears in his intention to stay true to the visual impression: "I am a realist, and I react to natural phenomena" (KUH: 2000, 139). Benjamin's comparison of the painter and the magician refers to the long tradition of symbolism in art, in which the act of painting is thought as expression of the spiritual unity of the model. Hopper seems to be very far from this tradition. Even if he uses sometimes this traditional language, he neither behaves with his models with the authority of the magician nor do his human figures suggest spiritual unity (on the contrary, it is usually assumed that they express alienation).

[Fig.45] Edward Hopper, *East side interior*, 1922, 20x25.1cm, Metropolitan Museum of Arts, New York.

[Fig.46] Edward Hopper, *Sunlight in a cafeteria*, 1958, 102.1x153.7cm, Yale University Art Gallery

But this is not the gaze of the waitress in Manet's *Un bar aux Folies Bergère.* [Fig.44]. Among others, Wollheim has noticed that in Manet's painting we often find "figures who, at the moment at which we see them, are turned upon themselves by some powerful troubling thought: they are figures who are temporarily preoccupied, figures who have retained and cherish, who cosset a secret, to which their thoughts are now reverted. A moment later and the mood may dissipate, but, until it does, they are absent from the world" (WOLLHEIM: 1987, 141). This awareness of being watched without returning the gaze is also present in many of Hopper's works, predominantly in female characters; it is the case of the women appearing in *Automat* (1927)[Fig.47], *Hotel room* (1931)[Fig.48], *Room in New York* (1940)[Fig.41], *Girlie Show* (1941)[Fig.61], *Summer evening* (1947)[Fig.62], *Hotel Window* (1955), *Sunlight in cafeteria* (1958)[Fig.46], *New York Office* (1962)[Fig.38] or *Intermission* (1963)[Fig.54], but also of the men in *Sunday* (1926)[Fig.63] or *Hotel Lobby* (1943)[Fig.65]. And this is also the case in the "couple" in *Nighthawks* [Fig.23].

[Fig. 47] Edward Hopper, *Automat*, 1927, 71.4x91.4cm, Des Moines Art Center, Des Moines

[Fig.48] Edward Hopper, *Hotel Room*, 1931, 152.4x165.7cm, Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza, Madrid

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I have signalled that Benjamin reminds us that the first men who looked at a camera did not meet their expectations of a returning of the gaze. But in the same way that the eyes of the city dwellers were trained to look at the world as if they were looking at a photograph or a film, they also learnt to be watched by others as if they were being filmed or photographed by a mechanical device. This apprenticeship is the reason for the advent of a new kind of cultural eye which is, to some extent, the complementary of the protective eye. An eye appearing completely unprotected —deprived of remoteness and, therefore, without depth and without gaze— which represents the inverted image of ritual situations. If the experience of the aura is the one of a gaze received beyond our expectations (because it comes from an object without human eyes), the experience of its decline occurs if the expectation is not met *when we look at a human being*. Benjamin gives many examples from Baudelaire's verses in which human eyes appear to have lost their ability to look. Even when these eyes look at us, they do it with "mirror-like blankness", showing only "the more complete viewer's absence" (BENJAMIN: 2006, 340), as happens in the second group of Hopper's paintings I have just mentioned, and specifically in the gazes of the man and the woman together by the counter in *Nighthawks* [Fig.23]. This experience of empty eyes makes us think of the dynamics of the city crowd, the relations of spatial proximity without community, like the anonymity of the passengers of the public means of transportation (buses, railroads and trams), who found themselves for the first time, in the nineteenth century, in "situations where they had to look at one another for long minutes or even hours without speaking to one another", as Simmel notes in a quotation cited by Benjamin (BENJAMIN: 2006, 341). And a masterly illustration of the situations alluded to by Simmel can be found in Walker Evans' subway portraits, where the blank look in the faces of passengers strongly reminds the attitude of the clients of *Nighthawks*' diner [Figs. 49-50].

[Figs. 49-50] Walker Evans, 1941, *Subway portraits*, Gelatine Silver Prints, 17,6 x 19,1 cm., MoMa Collection.

But there is a charm in these eyes which know nothing of remoteness — Baudelaire has "yielded to the spell of eyes-without-a-gaze", says Benjamin. It is not exactly the charm of beauty, although its "dullness" could be one of beauty's adornments (BENJAMIN: 2006, 340), as in the impression of indolence, lethargy, laziness or indifference in female figures of beauty in the tradition of painting. However, in this case the spell "detaches itself from Eros" (BENJAMIN: 2006, 339). And this is also the strange beauty we find in the empty eyes of so many of Hopper's figures. The appeal of this body without an owner, or these eyes without a gaze, constitutes the properly modern experience of the aura, that is to say, the experience of its vanishing.

6.4. AN EXTENDED HYPOTHESIS ON *NIGHTHAWKS*

The argument so far enables an answer to the question about the lack of aura of Hopper's models or actors: this lack would not be possible if they were theatre actors, but only if they are film actors. Barter says that, rather than people caught in the middle of an action, *Nighthawks*' characters are like actors in a film set, who are waiting for the take to start (BARTER: 2007-1, 198). I profoundly agree with this observation, but to me it acquires a deeper meaning if we add Benjamin's remark that in the film studio, "the aura that envelops the actor vanishes, and with it the aura of the figure he portrays" (BENJAMIN: 2002-2, 112). In the shooting process, the actor is still not the character of his role; the role and the character will be constructed, if ever, during the process of editing. Like the inhuman eye which looks at him, the actor is, for the moment, no-one. His personality is absent from his body just as the viewer is absent from the "mirror-like" eyes. He does not look at the camera —it would break the spell of the fiction—, he does not oppose a gaze which would create an unapproachable gap. On the contrary, the camera can shorten the distance to him as necessary, as the forensic photographer does with the corpse, in successive shots which are not the successive chapters of the story that will be seen on the screen, and whose final location in the finished film, if they are not discarded, could be separated by many other images in the timeline. By this apathy, "glances may be all the more compelling, the more complete the viewer's absence that is overcome in them" (BENJAMIN: 2006, 340).

> *The stage actor identifies himself with a role. The film actor very often is denied this opportunity*. His performance is by no means a unified whole, but is assembled from many individual performances (BENJAMIN: 2002-2, 112).

In other words, the uncertainty about the identity of Hopper's characters is not a subjective impression of the viewer: they actually do not know yet who they are, which role will they play in the story or what the development of the plot will be.

Furthermore, the affinity between Hopper's scenes and cinema —not only the sudden image in the window of a moving car, but rather the separated frame of a film roll— could also help us to understand the lack of continuity of the space of the painting

with regard to the perceptual place of the viewer. In a theatre, the stage is located in the same space as the viewer, and this makes it very important to have a good seat from which to watch the action. And, although the spectators are not involved in the play, they occupy the same room, and interaction is always possible (for example, through applause or barracking, or if an unexpected accident happens in the hall). In a cinema, on the contrary, the space of the screen and the space where the viewers are seated are not continuous or congruent, not even in terms of scale. The screen (an island of light in the dark room where the audience seats) is equally visible for all the viewers, everything is on the surface and the standpoint loses relevance: the light does not come from above, as in the theatre, but from inside the screen, in the same way that the light, in *Nighthawks* [Fig.23], comes from inside the diner. The screen operates here as the fourth wall. Every detail can be brought to the foreground by means of the close-up. And this shortening of distances avoids the relevance of a “privileged spectator”. Benjamin refers to this circumstance when he says that modern times have abolished “correct distancing” and that it is no longer possible to take a standpoint by means of perspective and prospects: “Now things press too closely on human society” (BENJAMIN:1996-5, 476).

Moreover, this could also supply an answer to the first question I posed before: ‘why the crowd is almost always absent from Hopper’s oils, if his characters are so often representatives of this modern crowd?’. When the film actor “stands before the apparatus”, says Benjamin, “he knows that in the end he is confronting the masses. It is they who will control him. Those who are not visible, not present while he executes his performance, are precisely the ones who will control it. This invisibility heightens the authority of their control” (BENJAMIN: 2002-2, 113). According to Benjamin, the crowd was never represented in Baudelaire’s work because he was always *inside* it, so he could not reach the distance necessary to watch it from outside. In the same way, it could be said that the crowd, rarely present in Hopper’s paintings, is implicitly included in them. His characters, seemingly lonely and isolated, are like actors in a film set under the watchful eye of the crowd, which is not literally present in the studio but it is implicitly felt as the destiny of the shooting process, when the images were confronted with the darkness of the cinema’s seating area. And let us notice that, although the street of the *Nighthawks*’ diner seems to be illuminated when watched from outside —almost as in the “day for night” cinematographic technique—, for the figures inside it, bathed in the powerful artificial light, it will appear to be in the dead of night.

The painting offers a general shot of the diner, but the building cannot be 'entered' by an imaginary mobile spectator. This last is strongly underlined by the glass window, which allows us to watch the whole scene, but prevents us from "touching" the interior (glass surfaces, as Benjamin says, exclude footprints), and even more by the fact that we cannot distinguish any entrance, as if it was a "sealed space" withdrawn from its surroundings, as we have also observed in *House by the railroad* [Fig.15]. The space displayed on the screen is, for the viewer, impenetrable: this viewer cannot interact at all with those actors who are not present, and can only see —in a privileged sense—, but cannot "touch" the movie, which is absolutely separated off, just as the scene of *Nighthawks* is isolated from the viewer by the huge glass window. An interesting factor in this isolation has been noted by Wells: the glass window also implies a sense of absence of speech or sound. Even if there was anything which could produce any sound, like a jukebox, the window would make it inaudible (WELLS: 2008, 213). I shall add that silence —one of the elements that differentiates Hopper's art from other American realist painters— is exactly what is required in a film set during a take: the place where the action happens becomes impenetrable and subjected to silence while the camera is filming. In the same way that events in Hopper's paintings seem to be on standby, so does the diner. It becomes an "island of light" in the middle of a dark and empty street. It immediately attracts our attention and focuses it on what is happening inside, and at the same time it shadows the rest of the elements outside the building, as occurs in a film set while the camera is filming.

So, I am suggesting a substantive extension of the hypothesis presented in chapter 4, deepening the idea that the modern gaze is the object of Hopper's painting. Reformulating it in the terms that I have just borrowed from Wollheim, I would say that, if there is an internal spectator in Hopper's *Nighthawks* [Fig.23], such a spectator is imagined as a metaphorical camera, that is to say, as a protective eye or a gaze without eyes. I am aware that it is a radical hypothesis, and that it exposes itself to some critical objections. Why not say, for example, that the scene in *Nighthawks* [Fig.23] is the "fixation" of a brief view seen from a moving car across the street? This would explain a part of its mystery: the driver has a momentary global perspective of the diner and its occupants, but is unable to know what will happen after that. In this case, the image *does* remain suspended or frozen for a moment before the driver's eyes. In other words, it is

impossible to know what the next film frame will be, because in the next moment the scene will have vanished from the car window. What is gained with the hypothesis just advanced? In the case of my interpretation of *House by the railroad* [Fig.15], I underlined that I was not suggesting that the building is painted from a train, but that it is painted as *it might be seen* through the train window. Now —to qualify the radicalness of my choice—, I have to emphasise that, although for the sake of argument I sometimes put it in such terms, I am not arguing that Hopper paints a photographic or filmic reproduction of a diner, but that he paints the diner as it is observed by the protective eye whose privileged allegory is the camera. Retaining this imaginative or metaphorical sense is my way of remaining in the realm of the "as if " and the reason for the formulation of my approach in Wollheimian terms (as if Hopper's internal spectator was the camera). Furthermore, my aim is not to reduce Hopper's painting to a camera-like vision of the city, but, on the contrary, to argue that the fact of painting (not reproducing) this "inhuman" gaze makes it accessible to experience and, therefore, in a certain sense it humanizes such vision. Certainly, I cannot present evidence to support this interpretation, beyond the fact that it is able to exclude the social or psychological readings I have criticized above, and that it provides "distinctive access" to the painting.

For example, it allows to explain more adequately the uncanniness of what, in Hopper's paintings, is located beyond the barriers (in *Nighthawks*, beyond the glass window): the position of the spectator *in the painting* is excluded (or challenged), not in the sense that there is no internal spectator at all, but because the internal spectator is the inhuman gaze of the camera: *nobody* ("The man who hasn't signed anything, who left no picture, who was not there, who said nothing") is looking. Or, in other words, anybody — not a privileged spectator, but *anybody* who is able to peer through the camera's viewfinder "window"— can look. And this does not only affect those who watch, but also those who are watched. Included in my hypothesis is that it is possible to gain a better understanding of Hopper's painting if we *imagine* the characters of the scene *as if* they were film actors in the studio during a shooting session.

If so, this would impede them from returning the gaze to the internal spectator (that is to say, to the camera): as I said before, this would break the spell of the fiction. The camera can wander around the diner, shooting from any angle as a "total spectator"; it can zoom in and out on the characters, and the seeming spatial incongruences will not

be the effect of the different perspectives, but of the different takes in the filming process. However, the mechanical gaze cannot go beyond the glass of the window —i.e., through the glass of the lens—, which is the protective shell of *Erlebnis*. The glass is the worst enemy of secrets and crusher of aura. The camera's eye *does not* expect a returning gaze —it avoids such return. But the point is that we (the external spectator) *do*. And the fact that our expectation is disappointed (giving place to the tedium, the frustration and the sense of rejection mentioned by Wollheim) is what provokes the fanciful projection of possible plots or denouements of the scene (which would count, so to speak, as a returning of the gaze of the characters). All of them are, so to speak, the attempts of the spectator to attract the attention —the gaze— of the characters in the glass cell. And all of them fall apart one after the other as we study the painting. The reason is that, for Hopper, such a happy end would be a "trick ending". The camera's eye shows us a scene without aura. The painter's eye, when painting this "inhuman" gaze, shows us the lack of aura of the scene. The difference between both operations could seem a small variance, but it contains the secret of Hopper's painting. The protective eye of the camera-like gaze surrounds the diner in a glass cell; but I argued in chapter 2 (2.3.2.) that the painter's eye cannot be a protective one. Painting breaks the protective shell of the diner provoking the sombre mood emanating from Hopper's scene.

Whatever is the case in Manet's paintings, in the case of Hopper's internal spectator, the fact that the characters do not return the gaze to the camera does not mean that they do not pay attention to it. On the contrary, the empty eyes and the lost or distracted gaze are precisely the way in which the actors show their attentive awareness of its presence, in the same sense that the distracted glances or the simulated reading are a protective response to the urban public spaces shared with strangers, typical of passers-by in the city streets, passengers of collective transports and casual clients of hotels or diners. The gaze of those who look as if they were nobody, and the one of those who are watched as if nobody was watching them, are the two halves of technologically reproduced images and also of the urban modern experience: "the characteristics of the film lie not only in the manner in which man presents himself to mechanical equipment but also in the manner in which, by means of this apparatus, man can represent his environment" (BENJAMIN: 2002-2, 114). Hopper's painting is realistic, but not because it depicts an immediate reality, but because such immediate reality is no longer accessible but through the reproductive mechanism. When people get used to representing their

environment by means of this apparatus and photography becomes "the standard evidence" for real facts, "because of the thoroughgoing permeation of reality with mechanical equipment (…) The equipmentfree aspect of reality here has become the height of artifice; the sight of immediate reality has become an orchid in the land of technology" (BENJAMIN: 2002-2, 112). That is the reason why Hopper needs an "inner cinema" to paint "realistically" reproducible reality.

The empty gazes here are not only a feature of film actors, but also a trait of urban anonymity. And, as Benjamin speaks about a charm of these empty eyes, also it must also be underlined that the anonymity of urban life cannot be thought only in negative terms linked to anxiety or alienation, or perhaps it would better to say that alienation may not be such an evil thing. Anonymity in a big modern city has a lot of advantages. First of all, the opportunity to be a stranger in spite of physical closeness, without the need to reveal anything to each other, without sharing the same experience. Notwithstanding my previous comments, I agree with Theisen when, reflecting on *Nighthawks* [Fig.23], he writes: "Anonymity itself becomes a kind of sanctuary. We no longer worry about retaining the sense of personal identity, the connections, the ties that a mechanized all too mobile society undermines. In fact, we discover a dizzying freedom upon letting it all go. Just as we have no idea who the man with his back to us is, no one has any idea who we are, what we may or may not be capable of, as we sit there at the counter, sipping our coffee. We might be anyone" (THEISEN: 2006, 44-48).

This is perhaps a keynote in the development of American individualism, which includes the opportunity of becoming anybody and "starting from zero" at any time. As Richard Sennett says, modern democracy demands that citizens learn to live with strangers and as strangers. He recalls Simmel's statement that "the urbanite is a stranger". And he focuses on New York by 1900, "the complex world of immigrants on the Lower East Side squeezing hard south against Wall Street, north against the bourgeois, WASP residential neighbourhood around Washington Square", where Hopper lived most of the time.

Evoking Simmel's writings, Sennett adds that "in crowded streets and squares, the freedom of strangeness, the freedom of alterity, played itself out. In public, the urbanite dons an impassive mask, acts cool and indifferent to others in the street"; and he also

notes that some American disciples of Simmel depict the city "as a mosaic of different roles in different places", which he associates with Baudelaire's *flâneur* (SENNET: 2008, 114-117). The charm that Benjamin links to the "eyes without a gaze", which I previously described as the properly modern experience of the aura, is perhaps the aesthetic side of this political and ethical freedom. Like the signatories of Hobbes social contract (evoked by Mumford's and Melville's identification of "Americans" with the members of a naked humanity), the characters in *Nighthawks* have nothing in common, that is to say, nothing ─the nothingness that Baudelaire experiences in his poem Le gout du néant, the emptiness of modern time─ is precisely what they have in common: the experience of their inexperience, the experience of nothingness.

However, as I said concerning the impoverishment of *Erfahrung*, the vanishing of the aura cannot be thought of as a punctual event or a historic fact that happened at a given moment. Concluding his portrait of Baudelaire, Benjamin says that the poet has "named the price for which the sensation of modernity could be had: the disintegration of the aura in the *Chockerlebnis*" (BENJAMIN: 2006, 343). But this conclusion should not be interpreted, I suggest, as meaning that Baudelaire disintegrated aura to write his verses, as Nero set Rome on fire in order to play his lyre. From the point of view that I have adopted in this thesis, what Benjamin calls "the sensation of modernity" is the perceptual incarnation of the new cultural conditions created by technological and political revolutions. And if the question is the possibility of art in modernity, my answer would be that aura or remoteness cannot be experienced in the modern world but in the moment of its vanishing or, in other words, as what is disappearing from the image. Modern eyes can only perceive the aura in its decline, and remoteness when it is ready to fade. In *The work of art in the age of its technological reproducibility*, Benjamin suggests that, in a coming future, this decline or this fading could no longer be perceived, and that it will be the signal of the extinction of modernity and of the absolute impossibility of the modern artwork. But, for the time being, I would not say that Baudelaire was the last poet who saw the aura (at the cost of its collapse), but one of the first who discovered the way to fairly experience it in a time precisely characterized by its vanishing. Everything that, in the legend of his life, makes him appear as a hero or as a martyr, has become, thanks to him (if not only him), the professional *ethos* of a not particularly heroic standardized job, the job of the artist (BOURDIEU:1996, 270-274). This experience of the vanishing of the aura is not only, as Benjamin says, the law of Baudelaire's poetry (BENJAMIN: 2006,

343). It is the law *of* modern poetry. To sum up, the disintegration of the aura does not mean its complete elimination or a radical abolition of remoteness, but a poetic experience of its vanishing, of its presence in the form of elopement, perhaps its uniquely suitable appearance, at least for the inhabitants of modernity.

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My extended hypothesis about *Nighthawks*' gives an account of its cultual impoverishment or, in other words, of the predominance of the exhibition value in it. But, according to my understanding of Hopper's realism, it should also have a certain dose of cult value, which would derive from the fact that he *paints* reproducibility. Besides what it does show, what does it tell? Of course, there is no explicit revelation, but, is there a secret? If, as I am advocating, the dimension of "telling" relates to what Wollheim calls the repertoire of affections of the internal spectator, what are in this case such affections? Most commentators argue that Hopper's paintings have an intense emotional charge, but are unable to describe these emotions in any detail. If this specificity is difficult to provide it is because what I have called Hopper's internal spectator is frustrated by the absence of an essential thing that Wollheim requires from him: "The spectator in the picture", says Wollheim, "need not to be a particular person (…) But (…) what he must be is a person. He must be a perceiving, thinking, feeling, acting, creature. What he cannot be is a mere disembodied eye" (WOLLHEIM: 1987, 130). The lens of the camera, which is the only kind of imagined spectatorship available in *Nighthawks* is exactly that: a disembodied eye. The following chapters deal with this problem.

PART IV: HOPPER'S TIMES

My aim in this last Part, consisting of two chapters, is to explore the consequences of the hypothesis of the camera as an internal spectator in Hopper's paintings. As I have suggested, this involves a reconsideration of the widely discussed question of the affective mood underlying such paintings. Throughout these two chapters, I shall focus on two different paintings: *Morning sun*, [Fig.51] painted in 1952, and *Sunday* [Fig. 63], painted in 1926, during an early stage of artistic maturity. The temporal gap of almost three decades between the two paintings will help me to show the continuity in Hopper's style and the recurrence of the same words and themes in the emotional response of critics and viewers.

CHAPTER 7. THE FADING OF THE ARGUMENT

In treatments of the emotional charge of *Morning sun* [Fig.51] , but also of other Hopper paintings where more than one figure is depicted, the most frequent term invoked is, doubtless, *loneliness*. I will show in the first section (7.1. "Critical readings of *Morning sun*") that comments on emotional bleakness, isolation and sadness are the norm. However, Hopper himself opposes this reading, which he considers as an unnecessary psychological "addition" by the viewer to something that he insistently describes as the effect of light on a surface (the surface of a wall, but also the skin of a body, where light turns into value and colour). And Hopper himself said that this might mean that, as a painter, he was not very human —which is probably not solely an ironic comment. "Not very human", in a certain sense, might describe the places resulting from the technological fragmentation of space. In 7.2 ("On news items"), I shall discuss the perceptive management of those spaces, which requires a relevant fragmentation of experience, exemplarily achieved by new means of expression: journalism, photography or film. These means share the attempt to eliminate the presence of an involved participant (the internal spectator or the storyteller) in favour of the cold objectivity of the machine. This is connected with the experience of space and with the blockage of narration in Hopper's works (7.3., "Perception and narration in Hopper"). I will call the kind of space represented in Hopper's canvases, which I began to highlight in the fourth Chapter, the space of any-place-whatever, defined by the dynamics of the *no longer… not yet…*, that is to say, transience and temporariness. And these same dynamics dominate the experience of time corresponding to such temporariness: the *any-instant-whatever* strongly associated with the filmic image. This context implies a challenge for modern art, especially if it aims to preserve a commitment to realism. On one hand, art cannot simply reject the new experience, seeking shelter in an outdated image of the world. On the other, painting or literature cannot be reduced to journalism, film or photography (i.e., means of reproduction of the new reality). Translated into the question of the affective element of painting, this challenge is expressed in the fact that, when the traditional narratives lose their social significance, the emotional charge associated with them also tends to disappear. So, which feelings are to be associated with the new experience of space? This is the background against which I shall explore the possibility of another kind

of reading of *Morning sun* [Fig.51], returning to the hypothesis tested in chapters 4 and 6 (7.4., “In the film set”).

7.1. CRITICAL READINGS OF MORNING SUN

[Fig.51] Edward Hopper, *Morning Sun*, 1952, 101.98x 71.5, Columbus Museum of Art, Columbus, OH, US

Morning sun [Fig.51] is the next to last example of one of the most common subjects in Hopper's oeuvre: women standing or sitting by a window (*A woman in the sun* [Fig.52] , dated in 1961, was the last one).

[Fig.52] Edward Hopper, *A woman in the sun*, 1961, 101.9x152.9cm, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York

In the centre of Hopper's composition, we can see a woman wearing a short pink slip sitting on a bed, her hands around her bare legs, pulled up to her chest, with her red hair tucked back on her head in a bun. Renner defines her heavily made-up face as almost rigid or as an expressionless mask (RENNER: 1991, 59). She sits on the bed, facing the window. Her visible right eye appears sightless, which prevents us from adopting the common assumption that she is looking out of the window. The woman is bathed by the sun —or according to Strand, sculpted by it (STRAND: 2008, 68)—, and the cold light seems to wash out the colour intensity of the dress, whose tones also seem to be cooled down by the sunlight covering the pale skin of the woman. Wells signals that shadow has been overstated by Hopper, especially in the shoulder as well as in the underside of the chin (WELLS: 2008, 95). Although, as Souter writes, "the woman is less important that the light that strikes her" (SOUTER: 2012, 234), it is usually assumed that the figure is included to capture a mood or suggest a psychological effect. So, we come again to the question of the repertoire of affections associated with the represented figure. In this case, like in almost every Hopper's painting, the main feeling mentioned by the critics is loneliness. So, let us examine what Hopper called "the loneliness thing".

7.1.1.*The loneliness thing*

Although what Hopper said about it is that "the loneliness thing is overdone" (O' DOHERTY: 1964, 72), it is commonly accepted as the main subject of his paintings. Linda Nochlin suggests that "emotional or existential bleakness" is always "proposed by the single figures" in Hopper's paintings, as in *Morning sun* [Fig.51]. As I have stated above, this argument can also be found in essays about paintings such as *Nighthawks* [Fig.23], where multiple figures appear. What these paintings bring to light is the absence of an exchange between the characters (as happens in *Sunlight in a Cafeteria* [Fig.46] or *Sunlight on Brownstones*, 1956). And loneliness is often inferred from this absence. In fact, Nochlin adds that not even "the presence of the couple offers an alternative (…) On the contrary, the very proximity of man and woman seems to suggest even greater isolation, a more unbridgeable gap or lack of communication" (NOCHLIN: 1981, 138). Even when there are reasons to think that there is a close social or affective proximity between the figures (as in *Hotel by a Railroad*, 1952 [Fig.53], *Excursion into Philosophy*, 1959 or S*ummer in the city*, 1950), it is suggested that it has been interrupted (Wells argues that, in *Hotel by a railroad* [Fig.53], the man who looks through the window is actually considering suicide, WELLS: 2008, 95).

[Fig.53] Edward Hopper, *Hotel by a railroad*, 1952, 101.9 x 79.37, Hirshorn museum and sculpture garden, Smithsonian museum

Theraux described the “melancholic loneliness” of Hopper's paintings as an “almost unbearable sadness, as if joy's highest refinement was born on a needlepoint of pain” (THERAUX, *apud* ENGEL: 1990, 211). Fryd, from a psychoanalytical point of view, understands Hopper’s figures as victims of a traumatic loss, suggesting that Hopper's empty rooms could represent “the womb in which the subject (...) is returned to the body of the mother” (FRYD: 2003, 61), as if they were memories from intrauterine life before birth. Schmied suggests that the woman in *Morning sun* [Fig.51] seems to be looking, as if hypnotized, her gaze “musingly out the window as if wondering whether this might be the first day in a new life” (SCHMIED:1995, 74). In this line of transcendental readings of *Morning sun* [Fig.51], Wells doubts whether the light that bathes the woman reveals a feeling of hope or despair, and, in this last option, he states that the “hardly gratuitous” green tone of the external window frame could symbolize a private traffic light indicating to the figure that is time to leave (WELLS: 2008, 95), without really giving any explanation as to where this assumption comes from and why should the woman should be full of hope or deep in despair (since she does not look especially happy or sad to be bathed by the light). And Reiss, referring in general to Hopper’s figures, finds them immersed in “desolate moments of silence (...) in their lonely, almost catatonic stillness” (REISS: 1973, 85).

But, are all these interpretations justified in Hopper’s paintings? As I signalled before, I should not say that they are wrong, but I do think they are unsatisfactory. For example, why does the mere fact of facing a single figure seems to be enough to suggest “emotional bleakness”? Must every single figure without company be emotionally disconsolate? Are there no easier ways (or at least not desperate ones) of being alone (especially when it comes to Hopper, who was a reader of those thinkers who, as Emerson or Thoreau, had strong conceptions of individual autonomy and considered that a certain degree of isolation was a virtue rather than privation)? To what extent can one talk about a feeling of loneliness, or even about the expectations of the figure in *Morning sun* [Fig.51]? Contrary to what happens with the woman in *Cape Cod Morning* (1950) [Fig.35], the one in *Morning Sun* [Fig.51] does not seem to be expectant; she does not lean towards the sun. So, what is this assumption based on? Why should it be supposed, without hesitation, that since the woman’s gaze is —so to speak— far away, as Wells states, she has nowhere to go, no liaison to keep, and “she is profoundly alone” (WELLS:

2008, 95)? Could it not be stated that the female figure is instead "profoundly happy" in her privacy?

One can assume, for example, that the female figure in *Automat* [Fig.47]is waiting in vain for a date that will never be accomplished; in tune with this, in those paintings of Hopper where women look through windows or stand in the doorstep of a house, it could be said that they are waiting for their lover or for a family member to arrive, but this assumption is no more plausible than the one that they are merely at a moment of rest, a trivial break from their jobs or their daily routine, trying to entertain themselves. There is nothing in those paintings that could make the viewer choose the sentimental interpretation better than the trivial one, for, as I stated before, Hopper suppressed anecdote, which, among his peers linked to the Ashcan School, constituted the main subject of the painting. Everything seems to indicate that the loneliness of the figures is, like Hopper used to say, added by the viewers.

Perhaps because of this difficult connection of Hopper's figures to an inner feeling of loneliness, other authors, such as A. Muñoz Molina, suppose that the internal mood should be interpreted as solitude (MUÑOZ MOLINA:1998, 49). That is to say, their lack of company could be explained by the fact that they have been caught in an introspective or even a meditative moment[100]. James Peacock suggests that the woman in *Morning sun* [Fig.51] is "seemingly transfixed (…) by profound metaphysical thought" (PEACOCK: 2006, 82). According to this interpretation, Hopper's figures would be remote but intimately engaged, as suggested by O'Doherty, focused but apparently indifferent; passive but internally active (O'DOHERTY: 2004, 89). And this would explain why the figures are, as Warkel remarks, devoid of any sort of interaction and communication with what is around them (WARKEL: 2008, 11).

This is a rather suggestive proposal, but it also seems to be refuted by Hopper's paintings. In tune with what happens with the emotional reading of the woman's attitude in *Automat* [Fig.47] this transcendental interpretation clashes with the fact that, rather than retired into their own intimacy, Hopper's figures seem to be either completely absorbed by the activity that occupies them (as in *Girl at a Sewing Machine*, 1921, and

[100]Talking about Hopper's representation of figures reading in his canvases, O'Doherty signals that, in this activity "loneliness is not an issue" (O DOHERTY: 2004, 89).

in *The Barber Shop*, 1931, among others), or completely distracted, merely letting time pass by. Would it not be a misinterpretation to claim that the main figures in Hopper's *People in the sun* (1960) or *Intermission* (1963) [Fig.54] are in a deep state of private reflexion? Could they not be compared to Bartleby, the Melville's scrivener, who seems to lack an inner self[101]? Focusing on facial expression —Warkel claims that Hopper's figures never smile or frown (WARKEL: 2008, 11)—, one has to bear in mind that they seem to lack personal and well-defined features, and most seem even interchangeable, blurry[102].

[Fig,54] Edward Hopper, *Intermission*, 1963, 101.6x152.4, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art

The same difficulty has also prompted the idea that the loneliness of Hopper's figures is not a psychological but a philosophical one. In my previous quotation from Nochlin's article, she speaks of "emotional *or existential* bleakness" in Hopper's works where a single figure appears. When the figure's desolation is understood as metaphysical

[101]"For me, no other painter created such a vision of us all as Bartlebys in a world so starkly real that we are moved to cry out for our own sake, like Melville: 'Ah, Humanity!'" (REISS: 1973, 84). It could be imagined as if, each time the anecdotal element that Hopper himself tried to expunge from his canvases is intended as an explanation of the composition, the figure answers: "I would prefer not to".
[102]Kranzfelder claims that facial features are of little relevance in Hopper's oeuvre (KRANZFELDER: 1995, 129).

rather than emotional, it does not refer to personal loneliness but to the absence of meaning existentialism describes. Moving to another Hopper's work, Nochlin states:

> Seen through a window, from outside looking in, the couple in *Room in New York* suggests Camus's image of the Absurd: a talking figure seen through the glass door of a telephone booth, so that the movements of his mouth and his gestures appear meaningless. Yet Hopper's figures can never even talk: they are enclosed in their own poses, spaces, and, presumably, inner reverie (NOCHLIN: 1981, 138-139).

As Camus is commonly labelled a "philosopher of the Absurd", Hopper should be interpreted as the painter of existential lack of meaning, which would explain the strangeness of his scenes and the desolation of the characters he portrays. The original text to which Nochlin alludes is this:

> The air of derisory intelligence, those nuances in the absurd of a man talking on the telephone are, if I do not hear what he is saying, a fascinating spectacle -but after all they teach us only our bias of looking without understanding.

The observation, as I shall argue below, is highly relevant to approach Hopper's paintings. But the point is that *this quotation was not written by Camus*. It comes from a text written in 1954 by Maurice Merleau-Ponty (MERLEAU-PONTY: 1964, 311-313), who, although integrated with the Existentialist movement, was not a philosopher of the Absurd at all. In this article, Merleau-Ponty does not try to illustrate the existential nonsense but, on the contrary, he remarks the "dreamlike lucidity" or the "stupefying emotion" created when images are separated from their context of signification. I will return to this important remark in 7.2. But, before this, let us consider another emotional signification that critical literature relates to Hopper's oils.

7.1.2. *Isolation, voyeurism*

Some critical comments give the isolation and loneliness of Hopper's female figures a more intentional meaning, Although the woman portrayed in *Morning sun* [Fig.51] seems to be self-absorbed and unaware of being observed, Schmied interprets Hopper's usage of light as something blinding, "almost as designed for an inquisition" (SCHMIED: 1995, 103). It is generally assumed that the isolation of Hopper's figures is emphasised by the geometric reflections of light. The emptiness of the wall in *Morning*

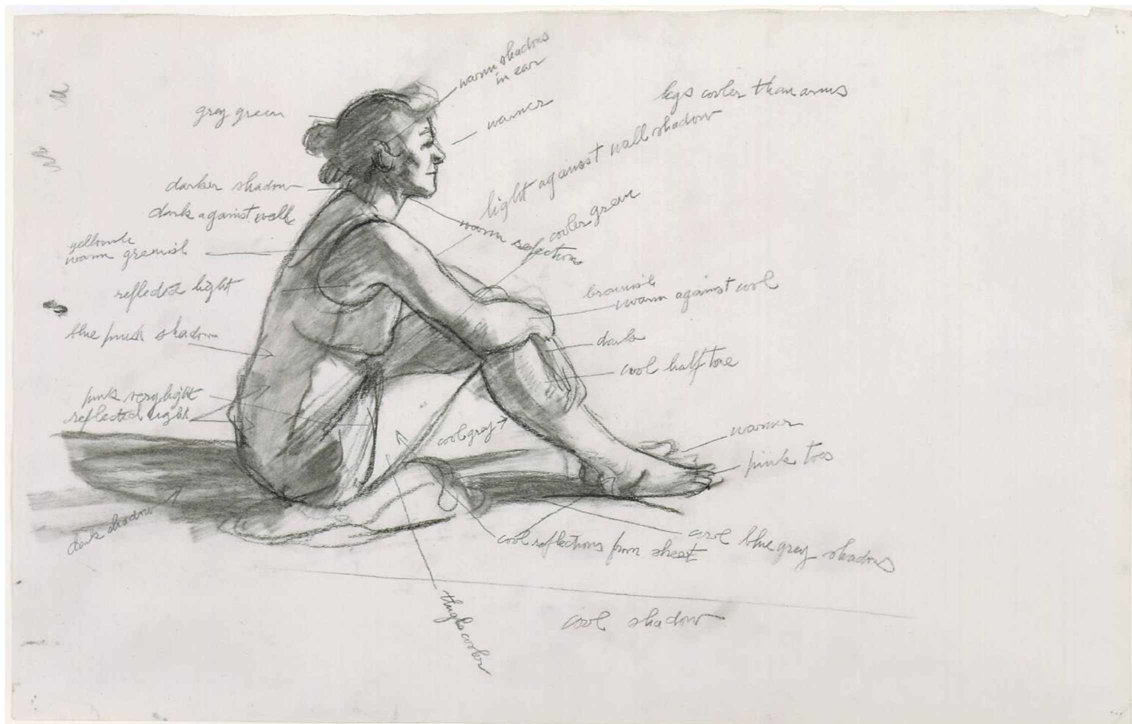
sun [Fig.51] is only interrupted by a sharp patch of illumination coming from a window which has no visible curtains. Light casts a geometric form, as it happens in many Hopper's interiors (*Girl at Sewing machine*, 1921; *The Barber Shop*, 1931, *Room in Brooklyn*, 1932; *Office at night*, 1940 [Fig.30]; *Conference at night*, 1949 [Fig.55]; *Summer in the city*, 1950; *Rooms by the sea*, 1951; *Hotel by a railroad*, 1952 [Fig. 53], etc.). Rectangle, parallelogram, rhomboid or trapezoid, the cause is usually a window (sometimes a door). As Wagstaff has argued, "these abstract forms of light are compositional figures themselves, a carefully positioned painted presence in bedchambers, offices, lobbies and sitting rooms, sharing occupancy of a room with painted human characters" (WAGSTAFF: 2004, 26).

[Fig.55] Edward Hopper, *Conference at night*, 1949, 70.4x101.6cm, Wichita Art Museum

Light, in Hopper, seems to fix the figures into the space they occupy. "Windows and the shape of light from windows tend to lock the static figures into place, repeating interior configurations rather than offering alternatives to them" (NOCHLIN: 1981, 138). Indeed, in many paintings (*Girl at a sewing machine*, 1921, *Eleven A.M*, 1926, [Fig.74] *Hotel Room*, 1931[Fig.48] *Room in Brooklyn*, 1932, *Morning in a city* [Fig. 1], 1944,

Summer in the city, 1950, *Hotel by a railroad*, 1952 [Fig.53], *South Carolina Morning*, 1955, *Excursion into philosophy*, 1959, *Sunlight in a Cafeteria*, 1958 [Fig.46] among others), Hopper confines his figures in those geometric shapes (the rectangles, or trapeziums of light). But, if we assume that light, that has no warmth, enhances the isolation of the figures, why should it be deduced from it that, although they may have hopes and expectations, they are, in Schmied's words, destined to remain alone (SCHMIED: 1995, 100-105)? The figure is either partially or in its entirety framed by the reflection of the light on the wall or the floor, although often is slightly displaced with respect to the frame created by the shaping of light due to the window, which contributes to the already notable impression of imbalance or movement. But, should we conclude from this shaping that the represented figures are in despair because of such a confinement?

Among others, Yves Bonnefoy has stressed the relevance of one of the remaining drawings made by Hopper for *Morning sun*[Fig.56]. He says that it is "a spectral analysis of sorts of our presence in the world" (BONNEFOY: 1995, 157).



[Fig.56] Edward Hopper, *Study for Morning Sun*, 1952. Fabricated chalk and graphite pencil on paper, 12 30.6 × 48.1 cm. Whitney Museum of American Art, New York

This compositional draft is a clear example of how Hopper worked: projecting his paintings like an engineer or an architect trying to assure every detail of the composition before the building is actually constructed. But regarding the meaning of the light, Hopper's abovementioned response to Katharine Kuh about his 1960 painting *Second Story Sunlight* remains valid: "any psychologic idea will have to be supplied by the viewer" (KUH: 2000, 139).

Hopper's declaration refers exclusively to an external viewer, the only one who could be held responsible for an interpretation that, because it depends on the state of mind in which the spectator looks at the painting, could be thought to be arbitrary. But, could it be possible to consider an affective attitude coming from an internal beholder who shares the represented space in which the figure rests? It is not clear if Kranfleder's statement that "the viewer of Hopper's scenes is always displaced from the scene, and somehow turned into some kind of observer against his will" (KRANZFELDER: 1995, 37) refers to an internal or to an external spectator, but it suggests a more specific meaning of the figure's confinement. Especially in those paintings where a woman is represented alone in a room, Schmied argues that the absence of a partner makes the figure vulnerable and "marked by disappointment" (SCHMIED: 1995, 75), in need of protection, defenceless; a feeling that, according to Renner, is emphasised by the exposed legs and arms of the figure in *Morning sun* [Fig.51] (RENNER: 1991, 57). In the cited article, but now, specifically referring to the pictures of a woman alone in a room, like *Morning sun* [Fig.51], Nochlin continues:

> No opening vistas offer release here. It is perhaps to Ingres's women enclosed in the harem, existing for the visual delight of the viewer-possessor, women whose confinement in an interior adds to the fantasy the pleasure afforded by the image of naked, feminine vulnerability, that one might look for precedent here, except that Hopper's is a puritan's harem (…) An atmosphere of hushed eroticism intersects with the imagery of isolation, with the nude or semi-nude figures viewed from the distanced vantage point of the voyeur rather than being identified with the act of viewing themselves (NOCHLIN: 1981, 138)

The subject of a half-naked woman on a bed is a visual commonplace in the tradition of painting, where the female nude (or semi-nude) figure has had many different readings, not only erotic ones (although eroticism has generally been linked to all of them). The social and historical reasons for it are evident, but the precedent of Ingres' harem, as Nochlin implicitly recognizes, is not entirely applicable to Hopper's painting,

because of what she calls Hopper's "puritanism". But, what does Puritanism mean here (it is difficult to think of a "puritan harem"!)?

Ingres' harems refer to the exotic orientalism of western nineteenth-century culture, and they are associated with luxury, warm atmospheres and exuberance: in Benjamin's terms, they are endowed with aura —they include a lot of veils—, *Ferne* (the remoteness of the Middle East) and story-telling (many tales —perhaps a thousand and one— are floating in the air). The harem's eroticism, therefore, belongs to the realm of tradition and of what I have been calling "implicit knowledge"; in this case, the implicit image of the male fantasy linked to this orientalist exuberance in foreign places. Benjamin describes this eroticism as "the rapture of a man whose every fibre is suffused with eros" (BENJAMIN: 2006, 324). Nothing of this atmosphere can be found in Hopper's scenes. No matter how much sunlight they include, they are radically cooled by the colour palette and the poverty of details. This is, perhaps, the reason why Nochlin speaks of Puritanism. But if Puritanism means an attempt to hide the nakedness, the opposite seems to be the point in this type among Hopper's paintings, a type in which —especially in *A woman in the sun* [Fig.52]—nudity is stark and almost cruel (although not obscene). This starkness is not only related to the cool tones used to paint the skin or to the exposure of the body, but to the indolence of the figures and, above all, to their distracted eyes, as it is shown in the right eye of *Morning sun*'s figure [Fig.51][103]. Benjamin carefully distinguishes eroticism from the charm of those "eyes that could be said to have lost the ability to look", adding, as I have signalled, that this kind of gaze detaches *sexus* from *eros* (BENJAMIN: 2006, 339). The words used by Proust to describe Albertine's paleness seem appropriate for the woman represented in *Morning sun* [Fig.51]: "She resembled the kind of fiery yet pale Parisian woman who is not used to fresh air and has been affected by living among the masses, possibly in an atmosphere of vice —the kind you can recognize by her gaze, which seems unsteady if there is no rouge on her cheeks" (and the woman in *Morning sun* [Fig.51] seems to have rouge on her cheeks).

So, resorting once more to the hypothesis discussed in the previous Part, in my view this detachment from eros is not the consequence of Puritanism, but of the cooling of the scene when the role of a human internal spectator is replaced by the camera. In

[103]But also in the emptiness of the eyes of the female figures in Nighthawks, Automat or New York Office, even if they are fully dressed.

other words, it is an effect of the reduction of distances, the transformation of *Ferne* into *Abstand*, that diminishes the aura still appreciable in Ingres' *Little Bather* or *Inside a harem* (1828) and increases the exhibition value of the scene of *Morning sun* [Fig.51]. I think this intensification is behind the comments on "voyeurism" and "exhibitionism" in Hopper's works. In sum, the reduction of the distance and the corresponding increase of exhibition value do not point to a puritanical attitude but, on the contrary, "they reveal the stigmata which life in a metropolis inflicts upon love", turning the implicit charm of eroticism into the explicit appeal of sex. The erotic pleasure of the Sultan's ecstasy has been replaced here by the sexual shock "which only a city dweller experiences" (BENJAMIN: 2006, 324)[104]

[104]Bringing together the Freudian and the Marxist concepts of fetishism, Benjamin found in the commodification process of modern societies the clue to this transformation: sex and money make everything explicit (which has little to do with the harem's atmosphere). The prostitutes appearing in Baudelaire's writings represent, for him, the turning of the body into a sexual commodity. But, what is the relationship of these commodities with the visual sphere? This is, to my view, the right context in which to consider the question of Hopper's alleged voyeurism. I shall discuss this theme in more detail in chapter 8 ("The city on display").

7.2. ON NEWS ITEMS

In this section I shall begin my search for an alternative reading of *Morning sun* [Fig.51], not linked to the topics of loneliness or confinement discussed above. On the contrary, I will associate the problems of identifying emotions in Hopper's paintings with a crisis of perception that, as Benjamin suggests, is also a crisis of art. As it is clear from the cognitive approach, emotions are not blind drives, but an integral part of cultural structures which also include narrative frames in which images acquire meaning. When these structures change, new forms of representation appear that raise unexpected issues for artistic traditions. This happens with the emergence of journalism, photography or film, which respond to social and cultural transformations creating practices and languages which exclude or problematize some essential configurations of literature or painting.

Merleau-Ponty's statement cited above, which Nochlin wrongly attributes to Camus, belongs to an essay called "On news items" (that is to say, that section that the French daily press calls *faits divers*, assorted facts), the kind of events not integrated in any particular narrative, which call the attention of the reader precisely because he perceives them as sensational or exceptional: "The news item (…) strikes us because it is a life's invasion of those who were unaware of it" (MERLEAU-PONTY: 1964, 313). Benjamin signals that events are turned into something private (*Erlebnis*) when the possibility to integrate them into the experience decreases. And "newspapers constitute one of many indications of such a decrease" (BENJAMIN: 2006, 315). It is not, according to him, a side effect, but the main purpose of journalism, "to isolate events from the realm in which they could affect the experience of the reader" (BENJAMIN: 2006, 315-316). The journalist (at least the accident and crime reporter) shows us a scene that, like the one of *Morning sun* [Fig.51], is entirely external to the lives of the readers of the news items, who cannot integrate those *faits divers* in a meaningful context. Of course, it could be said that this estrangement produces "existential bleakness", but it is interesting to "re-historicize" (using Benjamin's words) this impression of lack of sense associated with Hopper's figures to check to what extent it points to an issue completely different from either psychological or metaphysical loneliness.

The same thing expressed, in the realm of words, by the fragmentation of the narratives in the journalistic discourse, turning experience into a series of "shocks", is expressed, in the realm of images, by the process of visual fragmentation characteristic of photography and cinema. Let us go back once more to the difference between continuity and contiguity which I mentioned when discussing the images of time. I said then that, as the Hegelian "true infinity", the visual continuity of a spatial line results from the fact that the points which compose it are simultaneous. According to Bergson, the same thing happens when we listen to a melody: even if the sounds are successive, to perceive them as an indivisible tune it is necessary to keep them all in mind at the same time, to capture them in one another as a whole, creating a qualitative and progressive totality (i. e., a duration) that differs in nature from the quantitative succession of the notes (BERGSON: 1910, 100-101, original edition 1889). This mutual interpenetration also characterizes the craftsmanship of the storytelling. The parts of the story come not only one after the other, but they are in a relation of reciprocal implication, as the parts of an organism. Like music or poetry, painting is an imaginative representation of this organic totality of experience. Of course, the strokes of the brush are successive, but it should not be said that they are merely contiguous. It is not certain that each one begins only when the previous one is finished: the painter is able to return to the previous one and to amend its intensity or its longitude, because it is always produced and observed as a part of the synthetic whole.

This is not true when it comes to the technological procedures used to tell a story, for example, in a film. The movie frames are actually successive and contiguous, as are the different shots. The continuity of the narration is an illusion produced by technological methods after the shooting, during the editing process. Throughout my argument, I have stressed that the Benjaminian concept of *Erlebnis* can not only be illustrated, but actually clarified by the filmic procedure of montage. Unlike the organic totality of life, the final result of montage is an illusion: an illusion of continuity and an illusion of totality. On the contrary, the organic totality is something given by nature.

In the realm of words, the discursive fragmentation attested by Merleau-Ponty is the way in which language corresponds to the dissolution of collective narratives as a consequence of the urban fragmentation of space and time. The generalization of journalistic procedures produced a crisis of the novel, but it also gave rise to new

novelistic forms able to respond to the challenge of the fragmentation of experience. Whereas the main examples of the novelistic narration supplied by Merleau-Ponty come from the nineteenth century, we can appreciate these new novelistic forms in works like the cited *Manhattan Transfer* (John Dos Passos, 1925), *The Great Gatsby* (F.S. Fitzegarld, 1925) or *Berlin Alexanderplatz* (Alfred Döblin, 1931).We could not say that these works are *journalistic*: indeed, in a certain sense, they are anti-journalistic to the extent that they defend the heritage of literature against the threats of the fragmentation of the discourse; but to achieve this goal they accept experimentation with the new media, and up to a point it changes the synthetic totality and the linear continuity of the classic structures of the novel inherited from the nineteenth century.

In the realm of images, impressionist and post-impressionist painting, along with other contemporary movements, are attempts to face the new context with the tools of painting. As I have stated, in the United States the members of the Ashcan School were at first some graphic chroniclers of everyday events, and Hopper himself worked as an illustrator. In the previous Part, I signalled how Hopper uses metaphorically photographic and filmic procedures. George Dyer has written that "Hopper could, with some justification, claim to be the most influential American photographer of the twentieth century —even though he didn't take any photographs" (DYER: 2005, 173). But the snapshot is "a device for giving events the character of a shock, detaching them from the contexts of experience" (BENJAMIN: 2006, 351), and not for integrating them into a narrative. This is the origin of the impression that we are not able to fully understand Hopper's paintings because "we know very little about the reality depicted" (SCHMIED: 1995, 40-41). I am arguing that it happens for the same reason that we know very little about the people described in the "news items".

But I have also emphasised that this does not mean that Hopper's paintings could be reduced to the role that photographs play in journalistic reporting. The final result of these experiments belongs to painting, in the same sense that *Manhattan transfer* or *Berlin Alexanderplatz* belong to literature. Although Hopper experiments with this new frame of visual experience, there is an important difference between Hopper's paintings and journalistic illustrations, advertisements and movies: it is obvious that sensationalism is excluded from Hopper's works. Unlike the press headlines, but also unlike the anecdotic or picturesque canvases of his colleagues of the Ashcan School's, space in Hopper is

always uniform and repetitive, and the events occurring in them are the kind of facts which could never occupy the headline of a newspaper, not even a modest place in the "news items" section. There is no sensationalism in Hopper because there are no particular sensations or feelings that one can identify, in the same way that no one can be identified in the crowd of the street passers-by. That is the reason why every sentimental interpretation of the figures' attitude ends up failing. The inability of the viewer of Hopper's works to find the horizon line or to orient himself in the space-time line of the picture is a sign that his works, although they do not follow the avant-garde rule, do not arrive at the same kind of spatial continuity or temporal totality characteristic of nineteenth-century painting.

Merleau-Ponty opposes the journalistic procedure of the news items to the literary structure of the novel. In a novel, the reader knows the context where the event comes from, because the writer "lends himself to the character" and allows the reader listening to the inner monologue. The novelist explains through the narration the gestures we see and the voices we hear: imaginatively getting inside the mind of the character, we see things from that perspective, according to the role of the protagonist or the narrator I referred to in the previous chapter. For Benjamin, the essential difference between traditional storytelling and the informative discourse of journalism is that the main aim of the latter is to inform about the event, whereas traditional narration "embeds the event in the life of the storyteller in order to pass it on as experience to those listening". When the informative discourse, and eventually the sensationalism of the striking headlines acting like shocks, is substituted for narrative transmission, we are facing one of the main characteristics of the poverty of experience (BENJAMIN: 2006, 316).

I have already argued that the role of the internal spectator of a painting is very similar to one of the storyteller (and even to the one that Merleau-Ponty assigns to the narrator). In other words, the (ideal) disappearance of storytelling in favour of the objective information, in the sphere of discourse, would have its equivalent, in the visual sphere, in the (ideal) disappearance of the internal spectator (the one who shares the figure's space and story) in favour of the neutral eye of the camera. And this is exactly what Benjamin calls the increasing of the exhibition value which defines the modern visual experience, mediated by technology. So, Benjamin's statement which I have so much paraphrased (that journals *inform* about the events, but do not *transmit* them), could

be translated, in visual terms, as “photography (or film) shows the events, but does not tells them”. The very effect of an empty room or a deserted space awakened by the nude walls in *Morning sun* [Fig.51] can also be found in paintings such as *City roofs* (1932, [Fig.13]), *Rooms for tourists* (1945) or *Drug Store* (1927, [Fig.37]), where there are no human figures and, therefore, no clues leading us to talk about loneliness (if this means that the represented figures feel alone). In these cases, one does not face the lack of a desired company, but the absence of human presence or, in other words, some sort of inhuman presence (as the one foreseen in the darkness or the thickness of Hopper’s trees). This could be the reason why, if the rule to assume the existence of internal spectatorship is that our identification with it must offer better access to the painting, in Hopper’s scenes it does not seem to be working. Not because there is no internal spectator at all, but because, in tune with the hypothesis I advanced in the previous Part, Hopper’s internal spectator is the camera. This assumption suggests —and that is the origin of the uncanny feeling— that perception is no longer directly controlled by human beings.

7.3. PERCEPTION AND NARRATION IN HOPPER

In this section I shall explore the way in which the aforementioned crisis of perception is related to the representation of space and to the narrative failure in Hopper's works. This failure, I shall argue, marks the difference between a painting like *Morning sun* [Fig.51] and the historical precedents that can be thought to be an inspiration for it. My first point regards Hopper's spaces.

7.3.1. *Any-place-whatever*

The scarcity of details and the bareness of the background in *Morning sun* [Fig.51] are noticeable even when compared with other Hopper's interiors such as *Hotel Room* [Fig.48] (1931), and it has often raised the feeling that this painting is particularly stark and abstract. The walls are empty, and the only visible object is the bed, covered with a white sheet. There is a conscious rejection of decorative aspects, even the ones which could be obtained using colour. The canvas is simplified, with repetitive chromatic schemes, and the harmony of colours is subordinated to the tempered sobriety of the tone. Volumes and backgrounds become central, with different levels of complexity. Lines are sharp and clear, and the geometrical structure is rigorously composed, dominated, as usual, by the horizontality, which runs until the limits of the canvas. As Boccali notes, also in this case it forces the viewer to imagine elements and forms located outside the scene (BOCCALI: 2015, 158). The viewer's impression is that the room is very small and, as in other mentioned paintings, there are no visible entrance or exit.

In the third chapter, I referred to an "aesthetic of the un-accommodation" in Hopper. This has to do, firstly, with the uncomfortableness of the place the figures occupy: As Renner signals, the woman in *Automat* [Fig.47] would be an example of this (RENNER: 1991, 65). Although sometimes the discomfort seems to come from the narrowness of the space, in other cases it derives from its excessive amplitude: Troyen underlines that the apartment of *Room in New York* [Fig.41] "seems impossibly small, barely wider than a closet, and shallow, with the door on the far wall firmly shut", while the apparent cosiness of *Room in Brooklyn* "is called into question by the seeming enormity of the room behind the seated figure" (TROYEN: 2007, 86). In *Morning sun*

[Fig.51], the discomfort is emphasized by the stiffness of the woman's position. Schmied signals that Hopper's human figures seem to be always on the move, trying to leave a space they will never be able to move away from (SCHMIED: 1995, 84). Maybe for this reason O'Doherty suggests that, in spite of the stillness which dominates most of Hopper's images, everything that seems massively stable is, if you look closer, in transit (O'DOHERTY: 2004, 89).

But it is evident that this discomfort comes, in most cases, from the fact that the represented figures inhabit what I have called "abstract or generic spaces", produced by the industrial means of transport. The logic of theses spaces —embodied in the road maps and railroad schedules— is precisely the one of the temporary place —*no longer* a starting point but *not yet* the final destination. Most of Hopper's paintings present this kind of transitional spaces: stairs[105], bridges[106], streets[107], paths, motorways, railroads[108], not inhabitable but provisional, almost always with horizontality dominating the scene, something that, as I stated previously, characterizes the mechanical movement of the new forms of travel (cars, trains and buses) and that every so often suggests that Hopper's images are scenes seen from a moving train or car, which would explain the poverty of details. The traveller often observes the new space as a sequence of moving images *in the windows*—the windows of cars or trains on the move, but also the windows of the buildings or the storefronts as seen while walking in the streets. And sometimes, as in *House by the railroad* [Fig.15], buildings themselves incarnate these moving images, acquiring a mysterious and ghostly presence.

However, this technological revolution does not merely create a new external space, but also a new species of interior: hotels, motels, rooms for tourists, diners and cafeterias. Those are spaces strictly constructed to provide a temporary habitation for those passers-by and travellers who are in transition and whose displacement has been

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[105] Including, among others: *Stairways at 48 rue de Lille* (1906), *Steps in Paris* (1906), *The Quai des grands Augustines* (1909), *Stairway* (1919), *The Baptistery of St Johns* (1929), *The Barber shop* (1931), *New York Movie* (1939), *Sunlight on Brownstones* (1956), etc.

[106] *The Bridge of arts* (1907), *Valley of the Sein*, (1908), *Bridge on the Seine* (1909), *The new bridge* (1909), *Bistro* (1909), *Le pont royal* (1909), *Queensborough bridge* (1913), *Train and Bathers* (1920), *From Williamsburg Bridge* (1928), *Manhattan Bridge Loop* (1928), *Bridle Path* (1939), etc.

[107] Examples multiply: *Paris street* (1906), *American village* (1912), *Night shadows* (1921*), Early Sunday morning* (1930), *Shakespeare at dusk* (1935), *Sun on Prospect street* (1935), *Nighthawks* (1942), etc.

[108] *Railroad train* (1908), *American landscape* (1920), *The Railroad* (1922), *Railroad crossing* (1926), *Freight Car at Truro* (1931), *House by the railroad* (1925), *New York, New Haven and Hartford* (1931).

made possible precisely because of the new transport media. This very character of temporariness and inhabitability affects many of the Hopper's interiors (from train cars to hotel rooms, theatre stalls, shops or offices, rent apartments, restaurants or cafeterias[109]): in these places, the occupants or the passengers are constantly replaced by other transitory guests as time goes by, and it could be said that the lack of personality of Hopper's figures depends on such substitutability. The figures in these spaces are *no longer* in their place of origin, but they have *not yet* arrived at their destination. The dynamics of the *no longer... not yet…* is what defines the space that Hopper is trying to depict: it could be called the *any-placewhatever*, and the contrast between light and shadows in Hopper's works is some sort of plastic incarnation of that tension.

Houses inhabited tell us, in their own architecture, a story (they have, as to say, a beginning, a middle part and an ending —the daily routine starts in the kitchen and ends in the bedroom), and they have qualified places defined by the different tasks and moments of the day, the year or the season. They are full of personal details added by their inhabitants: "there is no spot on which the owner has not left his mark —the ornaments on the mantelpiece, the antimacassars on the armchairs, the transparencies in the windows, the screen in front of the fire" (BENJAMIN: 1996-7, 734). On the contrary, transition spaces are serial, monotonous, uniform, deprived of any detail which might enrich experience. They have a standardized and repetitive architecture that tells no story, and they do not have any background revealing any sort of anecdote, since they are meant to have multiple and different occupiers through time. It is often said that, in Hopper's late works, human presence becomes more disquieting —a disturbance within the peace of blank walls and half-shaded windows—, and the faces acquire what Updike calls a "worried and worried at-sharpness" (UPDIKE: 1995, 191), until this presence disappears in *Rooms by the sea*, painted in 1951, or in *Sun in an empty room* (1963) [Fig.57]. Of course, this disappearance can be seen as a meditation on the painter's impending demise (Hopper was 81 in 1963), but there is no need to insist any further on the fact that these spaces (both interior and exterior ones) are the main subject of many of Hopper's paintings all along his life (notoriously *Stairway* [1949, Fig.58]).

[109]*Blue night* (1914), *New York restaurant* (1922), *Automat* (1927*), Chop suey* (1929), *Table for ladies* (1930), etc.

[Fig. 57] Edward Hopper, *Sun in an empty room*, 1963, Whitney Museum of American Art

[Fig.58] Edward Hopper, *Stairway*, 1949, Whitney Museum of American Art

If most of them awake a feeling of emptiness is precisely because they are designed to be constantly emptied and filled again with new hosts: it will happen every time the waiter in the diner of *Nighthawks* [Fig.23] picks up the glasses on the counter or every time the housekeeper of *Apartment houses* [Fig.34] fixes the room, so that if the

guest returns to the place after this emptying he will feel as if "someone had obliterated 'the traces of his days on earth'" (BENJAMIN: 1996-7, 734). These are spaces which no human being can belong to, they remain alien and exterior even to those who occupy them, spaces without experience or poor in experience, since the experience of the previous inhabitants do not enrich the experience of the next ones, who only come to occupy that space when the traces of the previous ones have been entirely erased. Contrary to what happens in the room of a house, where the owner of the property would feel rather disconcerted if his own traces disappeared, in a hotel room, as I recalled, disappointment would happen if someone discovers in his room the traces of someone else.

7.3.2. *Any-instant-whatever*

In the third Part I focused on the resistance of Hopper's paintings to social interpretation. Now, I shall argue that it could be only a particular case of a general rule underlying his images: Hopper's paintings do not only reject the kind of script characteristic of film *noir*. They are resistant to any kind of plot and, therefore, to any kind of ultimate resolution of the tension that fills the scenes. Hopper's paintings do not make any plotlines explicit. And this, rather than comforting the poverty of experience of the inhabitants of modernity, unveils it in an unequivocal way[110]

Wells has written that Hopper's stories "remain insufficiently examined", but he adds that it would be possible to overcome this insufficiency "if only we knew how better to read them". But that "better reading" is difficult because, like the image of the house by the railroad suddenly appearing in the train's window, the scenes are "frozen frames lifted from narratives". Something similar has been stated by Schmied: "On first sight it seems easy to think up a plot for Hopper's scenes, but the *impression* is misleading". The

[110]This may be the reason for the privileged relationship of Hitchcock with Hopper's paintings (perhaps the deepest among the series of film-directors affected by Hopper's images): Hitchcock was called the master of suspense, and what is suspended in his stories is the whole meaning of the plot, often riddled with all sorts of false clues to disorient the spectator. However, Hitchcock's tales, like detective or crime novels, finally resolve the mystery. This never happens in Hopper's scenes, where, in the same way that the horizon line remains uncertain, one cannot choose just one possible way to continue the story.

plot seems to be hidden “just beneath the surface”, but “as soon as we begin, we realize how little we know about the reality depicted. As little as we know about people met on the train, in a café or at a party”, and “the deeper we attempt to penetrate into Hopper’s world, the more hermetic it becomes. In the end is silence” (SCHMIED: 1995, 40-41).

Wells attributes this “impossibility of denouement” to the difference between narration and painting:

> When a moment is frozen, suspended, as in a painting or a drawing, no resolution of its underlying narrative is possible. Stories, novels, plays and narrative poems all by their nature pass through an increasing complication of storyline toward climax, then resolve things (...) Painting, on the other hand, makes the instant permanent, fixing it midstory. However much the implicit complication, there is no resolution. The narratives that underlie Hopper's paintings, their resolutions blocked by the image's fixity, are turned endlessly back in upon themselves, giving them the quality of a recurrent dream (WELLS: 2008, 12).

The comparison is very suggestive, and the image of the “endless recurrence”, besides matching the Hopper effect, may be another way to mention the essential reproducibility of these scenes. But if the only explanation for these features is the differentiated nature of literary narration and pictorial representation (or, in other words, the limitations of the classic formula *ut pictura poiesis*), how could it be explained that the same irresolution does not affect every painting in the history of art? A comparison can be useful here.

Hopper’s insistence in the theme “woman by the window bathed by the sunlight” has made some critics (HOBBS: 1987, 139; OTTINGER: 2012, 54-55) think of two classic themes in western painting: Danae impregnated by Zeus in the form of a shower of golden rays (as depicted, for example, by Jan Gossaert [1527] or by Rubens [1636]), and the Christian Annunciation (as, for example, in the *Cestello Annunciation* by Botticelli [1490] or in the panel for the *Isenheim Altarpiece* by Matthias Grünewald [1512-1516]). In some cases, both themes appear mixed, as in *The Virgin Annunciate* by Carlo Crivelli (1482 [Fig.59]), where the Annunciation comes over the Virgin in the form of golden beams. Both references seem to point to a spiritualized or sublimated sexuality, something that has been usually linked to this series of Hopper’s paintings. Another

possible source often mentioned by some critics is Caspar David Friedrich, especially *Woman before the Setting Sun* (1820) and *Woman at the window* (1822)[111] [Fig.60].

[Fig.59] Carlo Crivelli, Carlo Crivelli, *The Virgin Annunciate*, Panel, 36.2 x 45.5 x 2.0 cm (height in centre, 60.2), Städel Museum, Frankfurt am Maine

[111]This last hypothesis is highly influenced by the work of Robert Rosenblum, Modern painting and the northern romantic tradition, in which the author follows the expressive line going from the Flemish and German painting to Romanticism, and mentions Hopper's space structure as reminiscent of Friedrich's: a deep foreground inviting the viewer to step onto a vast extension more accessible to the mind's emotions than to the reach of the human body (ROSENBLUM: 1975).

[Fig.60] Caspar Friedrich, *Woman at the window*, 1822, 73x44cm, Altenationalgalerie, Staartliche museen zu Berlin

Concerning the tradition of Annunciations, Boccali, in a phenomenological approach to *Morning sun* [Fig.51], speaks of "suspension of the representation" in favour of the pure appearance of the thing (BOCCALI: 2015, 160): the window would show the imminence of the mystery without offering a narrative figuration of it (we cannot see what is outside), just through the presence of the window's threshold. Also, Mark Strand finds the thickness of transcendence in these Hopperian scenes of women illuminated by the light coming from a window. He speaks of a "revelation in the light" and says that *Morning sun* [Fig.51] "is almost an Annunciation" (STRAND: 2008, 68).

However, the emphasis should be here in the almost, because, after all, Strand himself recognizes that, as in *Nighthawks* [Fig,23], we, as viewers, are watching the scenes from the shadows (that is to say, we are outside the circle of light). Although it has been said that this light in Hopper creates some sort of aura, as an attempt to restore remoteness to what does not have it, truth is that in Hopper's paintings the opposite happens. Rather than transforming and sublimating impoverished spaces, light makes their nakedness more visible and plain. The life of the woman in *Morning sun* [Fig.51] is

alien to us, but, at the same time, it is fully exposed in all its nakedness and external appearance. Bonnefoy calls these paintings "Annunciations without theology or promises" (BONNEFOY: 1995, 155). It means that in *Morning sun* [Fig.51] there is no messenger and, above all, there is no message: the letter received by the woman is a blank sheet coming from an unidentified source. But, what is an Annunciation in which nothing is announced? Sacred thresholds are supposed to link incommensurable spaces, but the space outside (the repetitive windows of the brownstones visible through the window) and inside seem to be exactly the same (even colours are very similar inside and outside *Morning sun*'s room).

It could be said that, until a certain moment in the history of painting, there was an implicit narrative —the Bible, Ancient Mythology, great historic events or the routines of the season —, virtually shared by every viewer, related to the "multiple conventions" what Bataille spoke of in his *Manet*. Surely, the discredit of these shared narratives in modern times, and the divorce between words and images, which I have signalled as the third feature of the poverty of experience ("the loss of words"), are some of the main reasons why paintings lose a part of their meaning and become mute to the viewers (captions, so to speak, are more and more imperative where implicit knowledge is replaced by explicit instructions). The loss of the shared narratives is actually a cultural impoverishment of artistic images, because it is associated with their loss of cult value. This loss, not the differentiated nature of literary narration and pictorial representation, is what makes us aware of "how little we know about the reality depicted" and what makes it impossible a narrative resolution of Hopper's images.

In Christian painting, the pictures show facts or plots that are well known by the viewers, and painters never reproduce a timeline from the beginning to the denouement. Although these paintings rely on stories that are familiar to the viewer, they do not depict the complete story (they cannot do this by definition), but the relevant moments of the plot (for instance, *The Creation of Adam* by Michelangelo). This does not mean that early modern painters only represented the crucial or the privileged moment of the story, being the task of the viewers inferring what had happened before and what would happen after. As Lubbock signals, the painters of Christian art tried to create some kind of synopsis of the entire episode, by breaking the scene "into a series of subsidiary events in framed cartoon-like images", or including different episodes "in a single relief panel or painting,

the device often referred to as continuous narration". However, as Lubbock himself remarks, the painters' audience was literate enough to be aware of the plot of the biblical or mythological scene represented, "having the knowledge, visual and literary, to recognise the subjects of their images and to reflect upon them in an imaginative way" (LUBBOCK: 2006, 282-283). So, *due to the well-knit course of tim*e underlying these narratives, not even the most momentary of their images can be considered as a "frozen frame". The dynamics of the frozen frame points to another experience of time, defined by the poverty of stories.

Concerning the connection with Friedrich —whose interiors also show great austerity—, it could be said that his paintings are a good example of romantic symbolism. In them, even the tree that appears in *Old Oak in Morning Light* (1822) symbolises a heroic resistance, a meaning reinforced by the poetic light and the suggestion of infinite distances. On the contrary, as Nochlin argues, the gas station of Hopper's *Gas* (1940) [Fig.22] does not represent a transcendental idea beyond the mere existence of the object itself (NOCHLIN: 1981, 136). The process of abstraction which drives Hopper to the painting does not seem to result in a symbolic image. In a stronger sense, Renner claims that Hopper's paintings are not especially accessible to symbolic interpretation. Rather, they focus steadily on the signs themselves. Renner speaks about "an uncomplicated and unprejudiced pleasure in the signs of civilization", common to Americans (Raymond Carver or Thomas McGuane) and Europeans in America (Peter Handke, Wim Wenders). According to him, this technique is what took Hopper beyond modernism: rejecting both mimetic representation and expressionist abstraction, "Hopper's art rediscovered what lays on the surface. And indeed, it is an art that often resists psychological or symbolic decoding. A surface is a surface: the signs mean nothing beyond themselves" (RENNER: 1987, 28). In a similar sense, Koob states that Hopper accords with what Baudelaire called "the heroism of modern life", so he "does not tell stories —he depicts life" (KOOB: 2004, 58) or, in the words of Schmied, "Hopper told no stories about things or people, he simply showed them" (SCHMIED: 1995, 59). And, as I have stated, the natural extensions (like forest or sky), which in Friedrich could be considered as a symbol of spiritual grandeur, in Hopper acquire a dark aura, like the green colour with strong black pigmentation, low luminosity and deep saturation that characterizes his trees.

What a painting like *Morning sun* [Fig.51] lacks, when compared to its presumed mythological, Christian or Romantic inspirations, is aura. Whether aura is defined in terms of the cult value supplied by tradition or of the remoteness provided by differentiated spaces, it is clear that from the painting have disappeared the shared narratives which implied a qualitative experience of time (mythological or theological stories) and the aesthetic and symbolic richness of Danae's bed or of the Virgin's room have become the any-place-whatever of the temporary stay (no longer… not yet…). The sunlight coming from the window is not very far from the cold, discomforting and a bit distressing illumination of the electric or fluorescent light that bathes train cars, hotel rooms or cafeterias. I said that the dynamics of the frozen frame points to another experience of time, and this other experience, as it is suggested by the expression itself, is in tune with the film reproduction.

In his comments on Bergson, Deleuze reminds that modern Mechanics, unlike the ancient conception of movement, consists of "relating movement not to privileged instants, but to any-instant-whatever"; and the emergence of the snapshot, derived from this scientific revolution, is the origin of the cinema as "the system which reproduces movement by relating it to the any-instant-whatever" (DELEUZE: 1986, 4-6). In traditional paintings, the moment depicted is not "frozen" or "suspended": it represents a more or less climactic moment of a process whose achievement synthetizes the beginning and the end of the story. It includes, though implicitly, *the before* and *the after* of the instant depicted. This does not happen in Hopper's paintings, which never reflect the privileged moment of an action or an event, but any-instant-whatever in the course of time, because they do not refer to a shared narrative with a beginning, a culminant climax and an ending (which is the mark of "experience" in the Benjaminian sense), but to the modern temporality of the everydayness as a sequence of empty instants which can be filled with whatever events. This would be another consequence of the assumption of the camera as Hopper's internal spectator. Every moment of this time is any-instant-whatever, and the snapshot is not like an irrelevant moment of a traditional story; it is another kind of image corresponding to an (impoverished) experience of time without culminant moments.

It could be said that the function of light in Hopper's works is precisely to reveal this poverty, illuminating the figure's metaphorical nakedness. It has been already shown

in *Nighthawks* [Fig.23] : rather than suggesting the different links between the four figures located on the right side of the painting (a crowd, if we compare it with most of Hopper's works), light seems to be illustrating the lack of any link between them, the absence of a plot which could gather them all together in a shared story. It underlines the negative fact that they have nothing in common, that they do not share a collective narrative. This lack of cultural warmth is, so to speak, the semantic result of the use of cold light and cool tones that lower the temperature of the diner. What the scene reveals is not a relevant moment in the life of the characters. What light stresses is the irrelevance of the scene itself, the lack of a plot, perhaps because, as suggested by Wells, the image, though arrested in time, is an isolated frame separated from a whole still unknown to the viewer What seems puzzling is the connexion between light and serial or indifferent spaces. The same question raised regarding the spaces which seem to be observed from a back seat window —the viewer wonders why are they being represented if, at first glance, they do not seem to have anything relevant in them at all—, could be asked about Hopper's light. If it has been often called excessive, it is not because there is, formally speaking, an excess of light, but because the generosity of light contrasts with the apparently irrelevant elements which are illuminated by it. In *Morning sun* [Fig.51], light illumines a space that could be considered insignificant, not worthy of artistic representation. If Hopper has turned those spaces into privileged objects it is not merely because he tries to show a compassionate glimpse of what is presumably trivial or unimportant. The persistence in this motif, the insistence in shedding light on non-places is, on the contrary, an attempt to stress the importance of their meaning. To visualize those spaces and turn them into a subject worthy of being painted is a way of emphasising their relevance: their quantitative relevance (because these are spaces in which modern men and women spend an essential part of their existence), and, above all, their qualitative importance, since they define the kind of spatiality which characterizes industrial modernity.

So, Hopper's light is not focused on the action or the conclusion of a story. There is no action, and therefore there is no conclusion or resolution. There is not a denouement because there is not a tie. *Morning sun* [Fig.51] is not exactly an Annunciation in which *nothing* is announced, but an Annunciation in which nothing (the lack of transcendence) is announced. If thresholds and windows in Hopper are privileged spatial devices it is not because of their liminar condition (*liminalità*) affecting the "grammar" of the sacred

space, which communicates the visible and the invisible (CALABRESE: 2006, 49-50). It is just because, passing through them, light represents, in Wagstaff's words, "the relations of emptiness and possibility, of within and without" (WAGSTAFF: 2004, 26). Analysing *Morning sun* [Fig.51], Stremmel finds in the canvas what he considers as a "constant in Hopper's pictorial output (...) the relationship between interior and exterior —separate, yet linked by the motif of the window" (STREMMEL: 2004, 58). But to this I shall add that, linking the inner space with the external one, windows create a familiar form of the anyplace-whatever: the window *is no longer inside* the place, *yet not outside it* (or vice versa). The viewer's eye is immediately attracted by what remains outside (if the scene takes place in an interior space) or by what is inside (if the window is seen from outside), but what stirs Hopper's interest is not what is outside or what happens inside. Rather, it is the window itself what demarcates the frame and shapes the light. And, precisely because of this, anecdote is minimized or eliminated[112].

The layout of the figure does not stage a concrete storyline that the viewer can unravel. At the most, it highlights the fact that an existing plotline is needed as an assumption to attract the (external) viewer's attention to a scene. But, at the same time, this expectation vanishes as the viewer continues to observe the scene. As a result of the intense light, this absence is turned into something starkly visible. *Hopper, painter of absences, illuminates the disappearance of the plot, the fading of the "argument"*.

[112]An exception could be Four Lane Road (1956), that seems a kind of parody related to Gas, with some of the "caricature" features that disgusted Hopper in "American Scene" paintings.

7.7. IN THE FILM SET

Finally, it is time to implement these observations on Hopper's representation of space in the frame of the interpretation I am arguing. To test my hypothesis once more, let us imagine that, in *Morning sun* [Fig.51], rather than taking the female figure as an erotic object for an invisible voyeur, and rather than assuming that, for some strange reason (or even for no reason at all), the woman is condemned to a state of loneliness and emotional or existential despair, she is merely posing while she is being painted, as Josephine Hopper used to do for her husband's paintings. Perhaps she is looking through the window, but not because there is an object outside which catches her attention; her attitude echoes the one of the woman in *Nighthawks* [Fig.23], that is to say, she tries to distract herself during a quiet moment: she is bored. Therefore, she is not looking at something in particular. She simply occupies her waiting time looking randomly through the window. Of course, the painter needs to distance himself from her in order to represent her image. But, for the painter, the woman ceases to be Jo Hopper and becomes "any-woman-whatever", something very noticeable if we compare Hopper's female figures, all probably modelled on Jo Hopper, with the portraits that Hopper painted of his wife (*Jo sleeping*, 1924, *Jo painting*, 1936, *Jo in Wyoming*, 1946), in which we can see actual human features, very different from the abstract or mannequin-like qualities of those other representations of women. In other words, just like Hopper's spaces or landscapes are not representations of particular places, Hopper's figures are not portraits of particular persons, and this is underlined by the clear distinction between the anonymous and generic figures of most of his paintings and the few real portraits he made.

In order to take one more step towards my hypothesis, let us move now the model from the atelier of the painter to the photographer's studio, to a film set or a theatrical stage, in an interlude where there is no action (either the scene has come to an end or perhaps it has not started yet). The nakedness of the walls in *Morning sun* [Fig.51] suggests this kind of space, a place that cannot have any particular nature because it has the power of being transformed into any kind of place (an eighteenth-century room, a marble staircase for a wedding, and so on). I have called Hopper's space *any-place-whatever*, but it is remarkable that the *any-place-whatever* par excellence is the studio, the stage or the film set (in this last case, a space as desolate and undefined as a little circle of light in the middle of an abandoned and messy garage), a space that is necessarily

a neutral and unqualified place and, for this reason, it is able to receive any quality. This space, when talking about the film media, is also dominated by the horizontality of the camera, which moves over rails in the *travelling* shot.

So, the hypothesis of Hopper's spaces as film sets, without resorting to loneliness or to isolation, would explain the reduction of distance or the intensification of exhibition value in *Morning sun* [Fig.51], the make-up in the woman's face (nobody can be in front of the cameras without make-up, it is a technological requirement) and the "cooling" of any kind of eroticism because, when translated into explicit exhibition, eroticism becomes "sex-appeal" (as it is attested in ordinary language, which does not consider film stars as emblems of love or passion, but as "sex-symbols"). And it also makes plausible the feeling of the enigmatic presence of an unrepresented viewer (the film actress knows she is "confronting the masses", as Benjamin says, even if the set is nearly deserted). If the figures facing the light are bathed by it while its source remains hidden (*East side interior* [1922] [Fig.45], *Morning in a city* [1944, Fig. 1], *Pennsylvania coal town* [1947, Fig.31], *Cape Cod Morning* [1950, Fig.35], *Office in a small city* [1953, Fig.71], *People in the sun* [1960], *A woman in the sun* [1961, Fig.52]), this sign of transcendence —the light source is always beyond the scene— is not necessarily attributable to spiritual reasons. If there is a secret concealed in most of those Hopper's paintings where light bathes the canvas without letting the viewer know the source from where it comes (and it happens in almost every Hopper's painting, both in exterior images like a *High Noon* [1940], among many others, and in interior ones, such as *Nighthawks* [Fig.23] , *Hotel Room* [Fig.48] or, *Room in New York*, [Fig.41], it could be said that, at least at some point, this secret was revealed from an ironical point of view in *Girlie Show* (1941) [Fig.61].

[Fig.61] Edward Hopper, *Girlie Show*, 1941, 81.3x 96.5, Collection de Fayez Sarofim

[Fig.62] Edward Hopper, *Summer evening*, 76.2x106.6, Private Collection

Here we cannot see where the light source comes from, but the subject that we will find in other Hopper paintings which could be considered more serious (*Morning in a City* [Fig.1], *A woman in the sun* [Fig.52]), that is to say, the naked woman bathed by a light beam drawing geometric shapes into the space, is here shown without any sort of mystery: light comes from an electric source, and the space is a stage lighted by it; the spotlight follows the figure across the stage, assuring that she is always under the light circle, as if a travelling was taking place. The painting is turned once again into some sort of screen which attracts the viewer's attention. It could hardly be argued that the performance which is taking place in the *Girlie Show*'s [Fig.61] stage has an argument: although it apparently has beginning, climax and denouement, it is clear that the modest storyline is only a pretext for something belonging to the realm of "showing" in which there is little to tell. If this painting could be considered as a key for those representing

the same subject, it could be understood as a suggestion in the sense that both women and men in Hopper's paintings (*Office at night* [1940, Fig.30], *Conference at night* [1949, Fig.55], *Summer evening* [1947, Fig.62]) are illuminated like actors in a film set or in the photographer's studio. Light falls upon the main figure in *Girlie Show* [Fig.61] (from an evident, although unrepresented, spotlight) as it falls upon others Hopper's figures, although this might be some kind of joke on the part of Hopper ("Ah, that was the light source!"), so that the fact that the figures are bathed by light from a hidden source reminds us that, in films, the light illuminating the scene cannot be visible, since if it was the composition would lose its plausibility. And the fact that we cannot look through the window in *Morning sun* [Fig. 51] is, so to speak, a framing problem (and it could not be ignored that we could be facing a faux window which is part of the stage design, and this could be the reason why we are not able to see clearly the view it may offer). We might be observing an actress in a moment where the cameraman is shooting before any action takes place. She knows she is being observed, but not as if she was in a harem; she knows she is being filmed or photographed (hence the makeup), but at the same time she must fake (as an actress or a model who has to ignore the presence of the cameraman), therefore the estrangement of the situations that Hopper presents, their artificiality. And the attitude of the actress (the "eyes without a gaze") is, in turn, a prototype of the attitude of people walking or travelling around the city under the watchful eye of unknown citizens. However, it is evident that the painting cannot be reduced to the performance represented in it. So, once more, where is the difference?

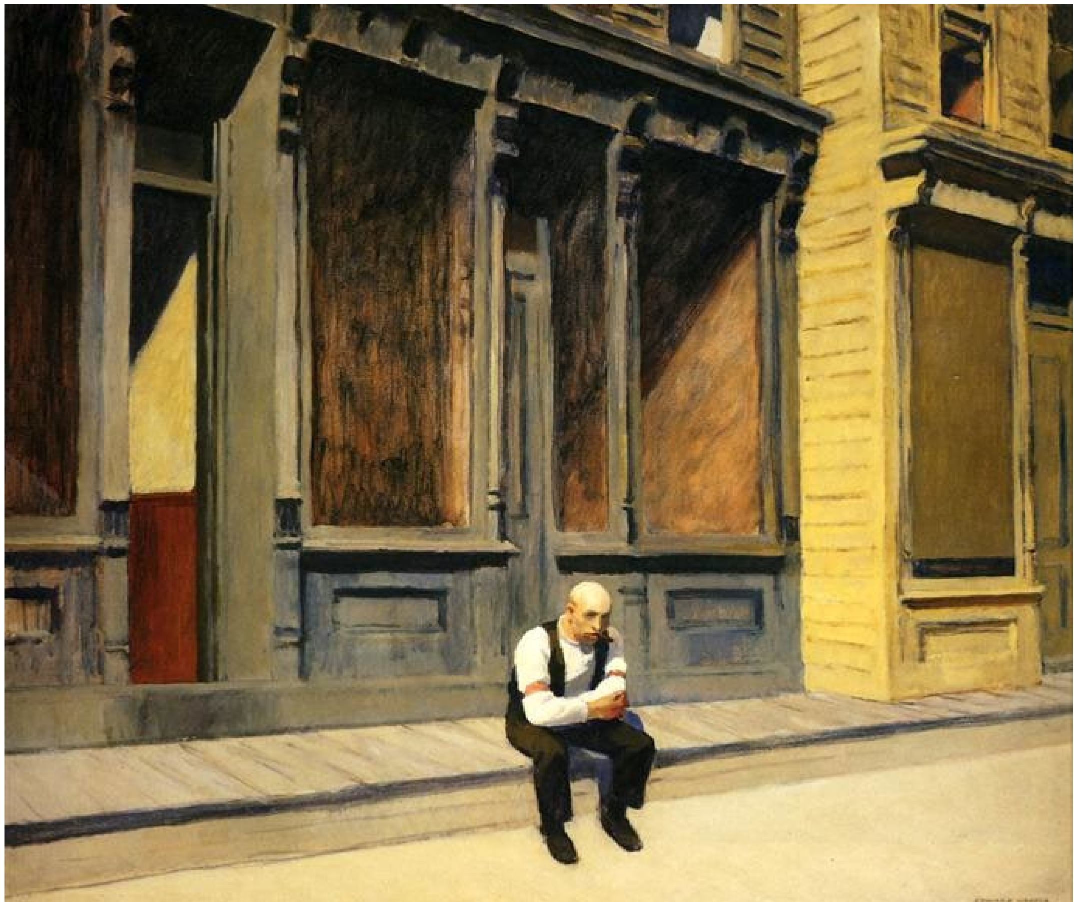
It could be said, in sum, that the reason why the explanations of Hopper's works in terms of loneliness seem to fail is that they are attempts to fight the main evidence coming from his oils. This evidence, which Hopper bluntly reduces to his will to paint the reflection of light in a surface, is the impoverishment of the shared narratives underlying traditional culture. As the mourning for such impoverishment seems to be as essential to modern culture as the impoverishment itself, when we associate the term "loneliness" with Hopper's paintings we are doing two things at once. First, we are expressing the pain caused by the diminishing of meaning as a consequence of the ruin of the shared stories. Second, we are trying to heal this pain appealing to substitute arguments: the social plot of exploitation or the psychological plot of frustration. But, as the abovementioned critics confess, perhaps against their will, if these issues are pursued to the end, the plot breaks down, because Hopper rejects such substitution.

In the case of Hopper, this response cannot be delinked from a peculiar consciousness of the fragmentation of the experience, and its main concern is not the construction of an alternative plot to those who suffer as a result of the loss of the traditional narratives, but the always restarted attempt to make the lack of a common argument the argument of his canvases. In the previous chapter, I wrote that the camera's eye does not expect the returning of the gaze (on the contrary, it avoids it), but we do expect it (what explains our disappointment). Hopper's paintings are a *human* vision of the *inhuman* gaze of the camera (the light in his scenes is subhuman, not transcendent). They are not able to give back humanity to those deprived of it (this would be a "trick ending"), but painting makes visible its absence —something that the mechanical eye cannot achieve by mere reproduction. What makes uncanny Hopper's trees and what makes desolated his interiors is the disembodied eye of the camera. However, such uncanniness and such desolation do not come from the camera, but from the gaze of a human spectator who paints the inhumanity of such a light. So, Hopper's images have a lot of exhibition value, they show more than they tell, but finally he is a realist, and his scenes *tell* something (something embedded in the affective mood of the paintings), even if it is only the impossibility of telling. The transmission of this impossibility as an experience has to do with the cultural heritage as a purpose of artistic activity, although the conditions of this transmission are substantially different from those of traditional societies.

But, if there is no point in defining this affection containing the cult value of Hopper's paintings as "loneliness", how should we call this strange feeling linked to the vanishing of the argument?

CHAPTER 8. A LITTLE THEORY OF WINDOWS

In this chapter, I will first linger on the dominant social readings of *Sunday* (1926, [Fig.62]), in which —as in the comments on other works— the term "alienation" comes up over and over again (8.1., "Critical readings of Sunday"). But, what is the precise meaning of this term and to what extent does it shed light on Hopper's visualization of situations? To focus on this issue, I return to the roots of the term and of its generalized use in contemporary culture (8.1.1., "An excursus on Alienation"). But this genealogy leads us to a Hegelian-Marxist intellectual atmosphere which is distant from Hopper's standpoint and from the purposes of most of his critics. So, if we take this term out of its context what is its meaning? And what is gained by applying it to the descriptions of visual art? Why should it be thought appropriate to Hopper's oils, which do not seem to have a clear social intention?



[Fig.63] Edward Hopper, *Sunday*, 1926, 86.36x73.66, The Philips Collection, Washington, D.C

Secondly, relying on a last reflection on the unfinished *Arcades Project* of Benjamin, I will develop a distinction between *images* and *stories* which has found relevant defenders among filmmakers, and I will suggest that the images that capture Hopper's attention are, so to speak, ones containing the meaningless fragments discarded in the process of *montage* of the city: the waiting, dead time of makings-of and outtakes (8.2., "Images or stories"). Another consequence of my hypothesis of the camera's eye as an imaginary internal spectator in Hopper's paintings is the coldness of Hopper's interiors and exteriors, even if they are bathed in a powerful sunlight (8.2.1., "A man in the sun"). This raises the question about the status of time in Hopper's works and about the temporal signifiers in their titles. Moving to the other key element of *Sunday* [Fig. 63], the empty storefronts in the background of the composition (8.2.2., "The empty storefronts"), I will discuss the usual meaning attributed to them and I will show that storefronts are part of the large collection of windows in Hopper, which make us think of the city as scenery composed by shop-windows with a purely representational value. The role of the camera's lens is here associated with window panes, and both are interpreted in the sense of the cooling-effect, which drowns objects and people in the icy water of the technological production and reproduction of images. I will use the image of the city-on-display to approach the mannequin-like aspect of most of Hopper's figures (8.2.3., "The city-ondisplay") and the meaning of their waiting attitude.

But the main theme of this chapter is the affective coloration of Hopper's paintings. There was a time (perhaps "the age of naïve poetry") when looking at the figures' faces in a painting was enough to recognize the emotion represented in their gestures. But this age came to an end when faces in paintings became blurred, unclear, fuzzy, distorted, or when they simply disappeared from the canvases. Is this a simple change *in the representation* of emotions, or does it involve a change in emotions themselves? Is there a modern mood that should be added to the list of the human passions coming from the classical tradition? Or this addition is not possible because the modern mood is inconsistent with the old categorical frames? Could this strange mood ever have a name?

8.1. CRITICAL READINGS OF SUNDAY

First of all, let us familiarize ourselves with Hopper's *Sunday* [Fig.63] and the main readings of it in critical literature. At first sight, *Sunday* [Fig.63] seems to be a simple street scene. In the centre of the composition, a middle-aged man, in his shirtsleeves, his collarless vest unbuttoned, what for Troyen suggests the uniform of an office clerk not quite dressed for work (TROYEN: 2007, 86). His arms folded in his lap, he smokes a cigar while seated on a wooden sidewalk. A row of what seem to be timber-built shops occupies the background. The fact that the shutters of one of the shops is down, and the absence of window displays or any other suggestion that the other shops may ever be open, plus the fact that there is no movement behind them, signals that they may be permanently closed, although it is not completely clear if they are closed just because of the weekend. Stasis and silence dominate the scene, as well as horizontality, which leads the viewer to believe that the scene may be located in a small town or perhaps in the outskirts rather than in a big city where verticality rules, although there are no elements that clarify this. Both the sidewalk and the street are empty —indeed, the street is so bare that Wells has said it almost looks as if the painting was not finished (WELLS: 2008, 28). There are no other passers-by, no cars, no tourists or strangers. The light source is out of the composition, falling from the upper-right side of the painting and apparently dominating the scene, but it does not seem to correspond with the shadows of the painting, especially if we focus on the man's shadow. Light has no warmth, and, if anything, it seems to bleach the colours of the different elements of the composition. The diagonal composition is unbalanced, and for Troyen "the sidewalk, rushing out of the picture plane toward an unspecified destination, underscores the sense of the figure being left behind" (TROYEN: 2007, 86). Although it has been argued that Hopper paints human figures in a small scale, if compared with their surroundings, to reflect the idea that man is nothing than a speck in the vast universe (and *Sunday* [Fig.63] would be an example of this, SCHMIED: 1995, 44), the most widespread readings of this picture argue that it concerns the maladjustments of the inhabitants of small rural areas and small towns to big cities. Reiss argues that Hopper portrayed the quiet desperation of a truly silent majority, showing a nation of strangers and exiles as if framed by windows with the "maddening memorability of a voyeur's daydream" (REISS: 1973, 84). Other strategies in this same line had been attempted: Troyen claims that the Jazz Age had ignored small business in rural areas, focusing only in big cities and overlooking the small ones and the many

shopkeepers and small-town workers whom the "economic boom of the 20's left behind" (TROYEN: 2007, 86)[113]. For Hobbs, Hopper's paintings of people staring at light could also manifest a mood of the aftermath, the strain and feeling of loss experienced by a generation of men and women who once felt important because of their contributions to the war effort, concerned with the lethargy and depression often experienced by those who have been traumatized by too much change (HOBBS: 1987, 145).

However, I doubt that the painting has a clear social intention. Hopper's observations of social behaviour are generally presented without sentimental involvement, and this certainly applies in this case. But, as my interest in this Part is to deal with the repertoire of affections in Hopper's paintings, it is unavoidable to admit that, along with loneliness, alienation is one of the affections most commonly mentioned in critical reviews of Hopper's pictures. This is true of the book Alienation by light in Hopper (TYLER:1948) and of recent scholarly papers (DALIRIAN: 2005, BALLSCHMIEDE: 2014, GULAN: 2014). Let us remember that the title of the Nochlin's article which I quoted in the previous Chapter is "Edward Hopper and the imagery of alienation". Nochlin sees in Gas, for example, "a potent image of a particularly American version of the condition of alienation"; she also states that "the spaces of urban recreation are equally, for Hopper, the loci of alienation". As for Hopper's paintings in which offices appear, Nochlin emphasises that "office work, the white collar condition, had often been examined in the literature and the sociology of the thirties, forties and fifties as the situation in which the condition of alienation reached its most classic form". And she attributes to Hopper a sense of criticism regarding the "objective condition" of the subjects of his paintings and the elaboration of a "formulaic reduction, resorting to a convention for depicting alienation in which mere isolation of the figure and simplified structure of composition, with an accompanying aridity of surface, 'stands for' the modern existential condition", adding that other paintings, like *Girlie Show* [Fig. 61] give "an image of alienation that is daring and moving at the same time" (NOCHLIN: 1981, 136-141).

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[113]The man under the sun has been thought as an illustration of the father figure from Booth Tarkington's Alice Adams, the Pulitzer Prize winning novel written a few years before. In the novel, the mood is one of pathos. However, in the painting, the sense of enervated neutrality seems ambiguous and modern: the seated man is a universal figure, detached, and without motivation, will or destiny (TROYEN: 2007, 86).

Barbara Rose writes: “Hopper is a sufficiently profound artist to have been able to generalize the sense of loneliness and alienation felt by many Americans into a universal theme” (ROSE:1986, 50). Hobbs also argues that Hopper conveys a feeling of alienation which must be experienced by observers in order to understand the true subject of his art. Hopper's works would not then be then the illustration of an idea, but an equation for feeling (HOBBS: 1987, 59). The photographer Gregory Crewdson, talking about Hopper, says that “The sense of alienation is also there in the way he uses the interior of the room – the mirrors, the architecture, the décor” (CREWDSON: 2004). In sum, as Winfried Fluck says: “whenever scholars, journalists, or students try to explain the appeal of Hopper’s pictures, they talk about a world of alienation”, and he finds surprising the fact that pictures of alienation can become popular cultural icons. Nevertheless, he explains this fact by arguing that Hopper “provided for a ‘cool’ redefinition of alienation as gratifying self-possession”[114]. But, is it clear what are we meaning when we use this term and why should Hopper’s figures be associated with alienation? How are we to understand alienation? As the result of the social transition provoked by the emergence of big industrial cities? As a national crisis of identity? If we accept Nochlin’s proposal, should Hopper’s picture be related to “the alienation from history as a shared past”? To “the alienation of the worker from the instruments and products of his labour” (a Marxist meaning of the term that “Hopper has, perhaps unconsciously, bodied forth”)? Or to “the alienation of the man-made and human realms from the realm of nature” (these being the three different definitions of the term used in her essay [NOCHLIN: 1981, 136])? Where does this notion come from?

8.1.1. *An excursus on Alienation*

As I suggested in the Introduction, the term “alienation” is external to Hopper's vocabulary. Although we are used to assuming that alienation is a characteristic condition of modern life, the origin of the impact of this term is due to the great success of Georg

[114]“When Hopper’s paintings were shown at the Ludwig-Museum in Cologne in 2004, newspaper reviews indulged in the description of this aspect of Hopper’s work. The Berlin newspaper Berliner Zeitung, for example, claimed: “His paintings are terribly quiet dramas of alienation and a lack of social relations” (Berliner Zeitung 29.10.2004, 26, my translation). And the review in the paper Der Tagesspiegel began with the observation: “There it is again, this feeling of being deserted, lonely, alienated: the Hopper feeling” (Der Tagesspiegel 11.10.2004, 28, my translation)” (FLUCK: 2004).

Lukács' book *History and Class Consciousness*, first published in 1923, which I previously described (in chapter 1) as one of the readings that determined Benjamin's rapprochement with Marxism. In the long preface to the re-issue of his work in 1967, Lukács retrospectively goes over the repercussion of the essay, and he claims that this impact can be explained because, in his book, "alienation" (a term "which has its theoretical and methodological roots in the Hegelian dialectic"), "for the first time since Marx, is treated as central to the revolutionary critique of capitalism" (LUKACS: 1967, XXIII). Alienation, then, would be the condition of a historic figure —the factory worker— which has been deprived of his physical and psychological features by capitalism. That is to say, human characteristics are "objectified" during the process of work, and are turned into something external and alien.

To this, Lukács add anything to the term Entäusserung that is located in the same zone of influence of what the young Marx had called "objectification" (*Vergegenstandlichung*), and that, in *History and Class Consciousness*, it is used almost as a synonym for other concepts such as "estrangement" (*Entfremdung*) or "reification" (*Verdinglichung*). This conceptual constellation refers to what I defined as the "dehumanization" of the worker in the industrial process, which reduces subjects to abstract and calculable qualities and leads to "the progressive elimination of the qualitative, human and individual attributes of the worker"; this dehumanization also reaches into the psychological sphere, that in Taylorism separate the worker from personality in order to facilitate the industrial rationalization (LUKACS: 1971, 88).

This was not, obviously, the meaning of *alienation* in Hegel's writings. The Hegelian meaning can be summarized by saying that the external object of experience is nothing but the result of the estrangement of the self-consciousness regarding itself and, therefore, what should be an inner quality is understood as an external one. Nevertheless, Luckács states that the identification of this philosophical meaning with the worker's "alienation" (the turn of some subjective qualities into objective ones by the rationalization of industrial work) would have produced in his readers the delusion that "the logico-metaphysical construction of the Phenomenology of Mind had its authentic realisation in the existence and the consciousness of the proletariat" (LUKACS: 1971, XXIII), as if the proletarian revolution was the consummation of Hegelian philosophy and, so to speak, the perpetration by human subjects of the entire appropriation of the

world. This culmination of history should be reached, in Lukács work, through the acceptance by the workers of the Party's point of view, which would represent the proletariat's objective interests (and, at this moment of the historic evolution, the interests of humanity). This identification with the Party would be the means to overcome alienation for the working class, that is to say, the means of becoming aware of its true interests.

Lukács himself (in 1967) regrets having given birth (in 1923) to this misunderstanding by constructing alienation as a romantic, idealistic and naïve concept: "this fundamental and crude error has certainly contributed greatly to the success enjoyed by *History and Class Consciousness*" (LUKACS: 1971, XXIII-XIV). The mistake consisted, as Lukács self-critically acknowledges, in defining alienation "in purely Hegelian terms" (p. XXII), that is to say, in idealistic terms. The fragility of this interpretation is revealed when we ask ourselves how to overcome alienation or how to create a non-alienated situation: "As, according to Hegel, the object, the thing [the external real world], exists only as an alienation from self-consciousness, to take it back into the subject would mean the end of objective reality, and thus of any reality at all" (LUKACS: 1971, XIII-XIV). This unsustainable identification of self-awareness with the destruction of reality is produced, according to Lukács, when we forget that subjects are always partially a result of the social organizations they inhabit. Therefore, the opposition between the social organization as something blind and external, and the individual as being able to stand outside of these organizations, is not valid, because this static image of the man is "the poorest and empty determination of all" (ADORNO: 2003, 440-456).

The discussion of Lukács' self-criticism is important because, I think, the same defect he describes can be found in almost all the essays that use the term "alienation" to explain Hopper's paintings: it is not possible to infer from these accounts what a nonalienated situation would be (let alone how this might be made manifest in visual terms).

There is no need to insist on the fact that neither Hopper nor most of his critics operate in this Hegelian-Marxist philosophical and political orbit. When alienation is mentioned in this context, Hopper's paintings are not meant to be understood as part of the "revolutionary critique of capitalism". Lukács mentions one of the reasons why the

concept of alienation started to have a different meaning at the same time that *History and Class Consciousness* became so widely read. Around 1927 (when Heidegger's *Being and Time* was published), the conceptual contents of “alienation” are progressively translated from Marxism to Existentialism, and the concept loses its social roots and it is configured as a feature of the *condition humaine*: the feeling of a lack of meaning to life was the empirical manifestation of transcendental freedom, that is to say, the warning that only human free actions can bring meaning into the existence (I discussed this point in the previous chapter). Again, most of Hopper’s critics who use the term alienation are no more committed to an existentialist interpretation of the concept than to a Marxist one. And this is the reason why “alienation” is often perceived as a strange psychological disorder (“being out of one-self”) whose causes are unknown, although they are often referred to the element of dehumanization as something that characterises modern societies, in terms of the loss of the support of traditional communities. It could be said then that, if we leave aside the social background (which, although it does not explain Hopper's paintings, at least gives the readers some information about their historical context), the clichés about loneliness, isolation and alienation are reduced to psychological feelings.

Undefined as a specific disorder, however, and only presented as a vague feeling, we know nothing about its concrete origin or, as Lukács would say, about what a non-alienated situation might be. We feel we are saying something (something relevant) about Sunday [Fig.63] when we present it as an “illustration” of alienation in modern life, but, does saying that the character is alienated adds anything to the interpretation? There is, doubtless, a certain relation between the figures in Hopper’s paintings such as *Sunday* [Fig.63] or *Pennsylvania Coal Town* (1947) [Fig.31], among many others. Indeed, it looks like most of Hopper’s characters share the same condition, but, why should this condition be called alienation? Do we gain better access to *Hotel by a Railroad* (1952) [Fig.53] or to *Summertime* (1943) if we imagine that the characters are facing their transcendental freedom or suffering for being out of themselves? Does it add something to our perception of the paintings? Under the impression that something significant is being stated, the resort to alienation suggests only that something is happening in those scenes and that it is not clear what it is; the term alienation reveals the absence of a word to describe what is happening to the figures. But this difficulty naming the affection of Hopper’s characters remains, as I will show, an interesting clue to discover its nature.

In Hopper literature, “alienation” lacks a defined meaning to clarify the mysterious air of Hopper's characters; the word substitutes for the impossibility of naming the enigmatic emotional charge of Hopper’s images. When the term is used as a descriptive or meaningful one, could it be explained whether or not the woman reading what seems to be a magazine in *Compartment C, Car 293* (1938), and the one opening a filing cabinet in *Office at night* (1940)[Fig.30] or the one fixing a room in *Apartment houses* (1923) [Fig.34] are *alienated* in the same way? What would be the visual appearance of non-alienated characters in such cases? When using this term as if it illustrated a previously known idea, what happens is that we fill with a visual content a meaningless word. All this suggests that in the critical literature on Hopper, alienation is in fact a vague social-psychological term for the notion of loneliness, a notion that I analysed in the previous chapter. For this reason, I shall attempt in the next section another kind of approach.

8.2. IMAGES OR STORIES

The main questions raised by *Sunday* [Fig.63] according to the existing literature were these ones: what role does the man play in it? Who is he and what is he doing? Is he waiting for the store to open? Does he own any of the stores on his back? Is he waiting for the customers to arrive? What will happen next, will it ever even happen? But all these questions assume that Hopper's *images* are part of a *story*. I shall argue differently.

Before taking a last step, and in order to recapitulate the argument that I have developed so far, I would say that, in the modern city, we do not only deal with what happens in external reality when it is technologically transformed, but also with the way in which we can represent this very space. The task of modern individuals is to temporally organise these representations of an external reality modified by technology. Focusing on reproducibility is relevant in this issue, because this is also the task of "a work of art that is completely subject to or, like the film, founded in, mechanical reproduction".

In a world where immediate reality has disappeared due to its constant permeation by the mechanical equipment, the technological production of movement gives way to a new type of impoverished experience (*Erfahrung*) of external reality: the landscape breaks down into shocking images, disconnected or fragmented spaces which change suddenly; but the traveller or the passer-by tries to accomplish a reconstruction of the wholeness of the trip through the "protective eye". The result of this reconstruction also impoverishes experience (*Erlebnis*), but differently than fragmentation. The fragmented perception is poor because it loses the organic totality of experience. The reconstructed perception is poor, in contrast, because in order to rebuild such totality, it leaves a trail of more or less important meaningless discarded fragments, a residue of the *any-place-whatever*. Cinema offers, so to speak, a prototype model of this double process: filming and editing.

When it comes to filming, the time of the cinematographic image is what Bergson called the "spatialized" or the "mechanical" time, which does not follow the articulated and living continuity of a movement with a beginning, a climax and a denouement, but it is produced by the imperceptible succession of fixed images (frames) whose speed

exceeds the one of the human eye. This procedure, that Bergson named “the cinematographic illusion”(the illusion of movement achieved by the consecutive static images) was often considered at the time as the discovery of the secret of movement in Marey’s, Muybridge’s or Eakins’ experiments, and consists of splitting movement into photographic snapshots, which Duchamp translated into painting in *Nude descending a Staircase n. 2* [Fig.64], a painting which caused a revolt in the audience when it was exhibited during New York’s Armory Show in 1913, not far from the first painting that Hopper was able to sell, *Sailing* (1911).

[Fig.64] Marcel Duchamp, *Nude Descending a Staircase n.2*, 1912, 147x89.2cm, Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia

The story (its development from the beginning to the ending) is, in the movies, the result of the editing process: just like the speed of the succession of frames hides its fixity, editing hides the way in which images are tangled to create a meaningful argument. We do not register the gap between one frame and the next; we are not properly aware of the images, which are subsumed into the flow of the story. It could be said that these unseen images, these scenes that are hidden in the editing process of experience, are the ones that catch Hopper’s eye. This is why Hopper eliminates the narration which would bind together the scenes as a way of telling a story, preserving them only as images. This dead time of cinematographic images is the model of the inactivity of the man depicted in

Sunday [Fig.63], and it defines modern time at least in such a characteristic way as the febrile activity of movement and action in industrial cities.

In the line of thought that begins in One-way street and which should have finished in the *Arcades Project,* Benjamin was trying to build an intellectual, aesthetic and political opposition to the *montage* of the *Erlebnis*. When this montage is not considered as a merely individual strategy to manage the fragmentation of experience, but as a montage of history, that is to say, as a collective attempt to create an illusion of historical continuity, it appeared to him as destined to barbarism "in the wrong sense". Consequently, he was trying to design an alternative to this historical montage, different from a return to the lost organic totality of nature and society. The key to this alternative strategy would be *another concept of montage*, no longer the one of classic filmic editing (or the factory's assembly line), but that intended by avant-gardism in procedures such as *collage*, *photomontage* and the like, procedures that Benjamin himself used in *One-way Street* and that would have been the architectural keystone of the *Arcades Project*. Regarding this project, only the first half was achieved (though we cannot know to what extent): a compilation, so to speak, of the (literary and visual) images that historiography has discarded as useless or troubling for the construction of the world history. The second half, i.e., the editing of such texts and images in order to construct an alternative to *Erlebnis* and which would represent a total redemption of the forgotten fragments is, at least in my view, missing (that is why I have not speculated about it, about its possible forms or its possible traces in Benjamin's writings here). The first half, however, even if detached from such a plan of final redemption, can illuminate Hopper's work.

Wim Wenders, who was a painter himself before being a filmmaker, has said that images do not necessarily lead to something else, rather, they are able to stand by themselves (WENDERS: 1988, 29). Time in images is not the same time as in a story; it is rather an interlude, an eventless time in which action is frozen. The image, when isolated from the sequence where it was integrated we feel it as a moment when something is about to happen or when something has just happened. "Stories are to me as vampires trying to suck the blood from the images", says Wenders; but, at the same time, he admits that stories "make life bearable and are like an assistance against terror" (WENDERS: 1988, 31). This is the main reason why images, isolated from their story, in spite of its apparent insignificance, have a threatening charge. These reflexions apply to Hopper's

work: not only because his paintings, clearly, save some moments and places which could be considered disposable or irrelevant from the point of view of the story, but also because this rescue retrieves an essential experience of modern time and space. Hopper's windows are not *collages* or *photomontages*, but they are still a recollection of the visual debris of modernity, the discarded images threw away by the restless activity of the "gaze without eyes" (the montage of the bad infinity of the city), which has never been transformed into *Erlebnis*. So, the task of the painter who experiments with the new images is close to the one of the ragman —so often invoked by Benjamin— who collects fragments of discarded or disregarded urban views to compensate for the poverty of his experience. As Kranzfelder has signalled, the words Hopper used to describe Burchfield's paintings could be applied to his own works:

> No mood has been so mean as to seem unworthy of interpretation; the look on asphalt road as it lies in the broiling sun at noon, cars and locomotives lying in Godforsaken railway yards, the steaming summer rain that can fill us with such hopeless boredom, all the sweltering, tawdry life of the American small town, and behind all, the sad desolation of our suburban landscape. He derives daily stimulus from these, that others flee from or pass with indifference (KRANZFELDER: 1995, 137).

Hopper is certainly not indifferent to the hopeless boredom of the city. If one imagines *Sunday* [Fig.63] as a frame taken out of a film, the man is like an actor without a role to play, alien to the montage of the story. This does not represent a situation of isolation (except in the sense that the film set or the stage scenery is isolated from the public). In the same way that Hopper is interested in the empty spaces and anonymity places of geography, he is also attracted by the idle time and the non-narrative holes of stories, where nothing has happened yet or where the action is already over, and in which the absence of words stresses the exhibitive proficiency of the image. Hopper himself is extremely reluctant to explain the meaning of his scenes and he often answered the interviewers who asked for this meaning: "I don't have anything else to say", meaning that if he would have been able to say something with words, then there would have been no need of painting it. In the abovementioned text, Wenders also said that the word (*Wort*) belongs to an answer (*Ant-Wort*), and the answer belongs to a story (WENDERS: 1988, 30). This idea of an autonomous image is central to the visual arts of the twentieth century, and perhaps surprisingly is quite alive in the way Hopper, when paying attention to these images which fill the downtime of a story, produces a suspension of the narrative. One of the reasons why some frames are discarded in the film editing process is that they

are "boring" (they interrupt the continuity of the story). It has been said that Hopper's art is a "mythification of the banal" and that, in this sense, it is linked to Surrealism (KRANZFELDER: 1995, 115-116). But, in Hopper's case, rather than a surprising or sensational image, what we find is a rare attention to what is usually insignificant. Rather than merely emphasising banal or quotidian situations, most of the innovative and distinctive qualities of Hopper's paintings derive from his will to put the resources of his art at the service of spaces and times designed precisely to draw no attention or to go unnoticed because their only purpose is to link one place or one instant with another.

So, what follows from this distinction of images and stories is that, in contrast to what I mentioned about Christian painting, the succession of Hopper's pictures in a panel could never result in a "continuous narration", precisely because they are not the episodes of a narrative argument. When the figures do not hold any kind of conversation between them it would not mean any particular lack of communication; it may simply occur that we are watching a scene without dialogue, maybe one of the frames discarded in the final montage. And there is no dialogue because Hopper is more interested in the purely visual elements of the scene (the "images" and not the "stories", using Wenders' terms). Benjamin said that in silent movies, written captions were used to guide the viewer, and they were as if imperative orders which indicate the meaning of the story (BENJAMIN: 2002-2, 105). We could say then that the titles of Hopper's paintings (*Sunday, Morning sun*) should be taken as passwords which somehow free the images from the story corset, so that the feeling of lack of resolution would have, in this case, a positive meaning[115]. For this reason, in the next section I shall call attention to the meaning of the title "Sunday", in order to reopen the debate about Hopper's representation of time, which plays an important role in the determination of the affective mood of his images.

[115]"Despite their dramatic potency, the stories implied in Hopper's pictures seem to lack motive or resolution. They are strange, unyielding" (TROYEN: 2007 83-84).

8.2.1. *A man in the sun*

The previous distinction of images and stories can be useful to answer a question often raised in Hopper literature: are Hopper's images an attempt to represent a timeless moment?

Regarding paintings like *Sunday* [Fig.63], Gillies suggests that the image in them represents a "timeless space" (GILLIES: 1972, 404-412). The origin of this suggestion is clear: if we think of time as the order of succession of the events, when there are no events, the feeling of time disappears. So, it would be more exact to speak, as Schmied does, of "an eventless play" (SCHMIED: 1995, 72). But the absence of events —and they certainly are lacking in Hopper's pictures— cannot be reduced to the absence of time. While time, in traditional societies, is experienced as something inseparable from specific events (planting, harvest, religious ceremonies), the modern experience of time is one of a form not linked to explicit contents, a form in which any content can be hosted or, in other words, a frame in which anything —any-event-whatever— can happen. If there is an attitude in which this specifically modern experience of time is shown, that is precisely the attitude shared by most of Hopper's figures: the attitude of waiting. And the more undefined is what the figures are waiting for, the more intense is the perception of time passing, to the extent that it could be said that, in many Hopper paintings, time passing is the only thing actually "happening". When there is no action or movement, when there is nothing to do but waiting, as it seems to happen in *Sunday* [Fig. 63] but also in *Morning sun* [Fig. 51], *Eleven AM* [Fig. 74] *Automat* [Fig.47], *Two on the aisle* (1927), *Sheridan Theatre* (1937), *Hotel Lobby* (1943, [Fig. 65], *Hotel Window* (1955, Fig.68] or *Intermission* [Fig.53], "the perception of time is supernaturally keen" (BENJAMIN: 2006, 336).

[Fig. 65] Edward Hopper, Hotel Lobby, 1943, 81.9x103.5cm. Indianapolis Museum of Art

[Fig.68] Edward Hopper, *Hotel Window,* 1955, 101.6x139.7cm, The Forbes Magazine Collection

To the experience of an unqualified spatiality, poor and anodyne, that Hopper seeks out, corresponds a temporality which shares the same characteristics. This is the time taken up in long trips (let us think of the never-ending roads and train tracks traversing the United States). Lost, unoccupied, free or meaningless time. There is

nothing particular in the hours that go by, it is not lunch time or work time or time for any particular activity. In Sunday [Fig.63], light constructs the feeling of waiting and the space where it happens. The viewer contemplates the scene, is aware of the different elements appearing on the painting, but cannot tell what is exactly happening and why (BOZAL: 2012, 19). Gillies has signalled that the frozen appearance that has been repeatedly argued in Hopper's oeuvre is due to the instability of ground that I mentioned when talking about *House by the railroad* [Fig.15]: “In the paintings of Edward Hopper, space has been structured so that the horizon line is denied”, and therefore the viewer cannot find the point where the sky meets the ground and he is not able to link his own space with the one represented in the painting (GILLIES: 1972, 410). But, in the same way that one cannot infer from this that Hopper’s painting are “spaceless” (there is space in them, but it is an undefined or unstable one), the absence of time cannot be assumed from the fact that, so to speak, the timeline is denied (there is time, although without being possible fixing the moment, which seems always located after or before a chronologically determinable event).

Hopper seems to represent a break during the working hours, the kind of lost time spent in transport media while going from one place to another, in a bar or in the threshold of a house, or looking through the window while waiting for a particular event. In the same way that the any-place-whatever cannot be located but *between* one place and another (between the inside and the outside, in the windows or in hotel rooms, interior spaces which are nonetheless external to their inhabitants), the any-instant-whatever does not determine a particular time, but what happens between particular times. Like trivial hotel rooms, which do not tell a story (rather, they monotonously repeat the same sets), the in between times do not have a specific beginning or ending. The strain caused by the *no longer... but not yet...* is not merely the spatial uncertainty between the inside and the outside, but also a temporal vagueness between before and after. Waiting time does not have any before or after, because it is *between* a *before* and an *after* which are not represented in the painting. Many of Hopper’s external spaces are located at two lights, in that time of the day that is no longer day time but not yet night time. And the same ambiguity runs through the transient nature of their figures. The couple at *New York Restaurant* (1922) [Fig.66], has just started its lunch or is about to finish it? The same question could be asked when analysing *Hotel Lobby [*Fig.65], *Hotel Window* [Fig.68], *Western Motel* (1957) [Fig.67] or *New York Movie* (1939) [Fig.69]: has the movie just

started or is it about to finish? Indeed, looking through a window of both a hotel room or a train or car is a way of wasting time, a moment in the day when there is nothing to do but waiting for the time to come to do this or that. It could be said that it is not a time which can be measured by a clock: it is not yet the time, or is no longer the time to do something. This denies the idea of the Ecclesiastes that there is a time for every activity, or the one of Hesiod that each day corresponds to a task. It is a day without work, without any activity (Sunday).

[Fig.66] Edward Hopper, *New York Restaurant*, 1922, Muskegon Art Museum, Michigan

[Fig.69] Edward Hopper, *Western Motel*, 1957, 7.8x128.3cm Yale University Art Gallery.

[Fig.67] Edward Hopper, *New York Movie*, 1939, 81.9x101.9cm, Museum of Modern Art, New York

Terms such as *afternoon, evening, night, sunset, dusk, morning, noon, two lights*, or even *Summer, August* or *Sunday*, often present in the titles of Hopper's works, are vague for a modern viewer (since the inhabitants of modernity use precision watches). But in the ages when there were no precision machines to measure time, they were rather qualitative definitions, all of them referred to atmospheric or meteorological phenomena. Time depended on the movements of the stars, and these movements also signalled agricultural labours and religious celebrations (*Sunday*). On the contrary, the temporal determination by means of a number (as in titles like *Eleven A.M* [1926, Fig.74] or *Seven A.M*. [1947, Fig.70]) refers to the modern notion of time as a continuum, quantitative rather than qualitative, which can be cut at any point and has no specific content (anything can happen at any point of the line). As I have suggested before, this difference between the quantitative and the qualitative time is related to the difference between the images in classic painting (where one can always infer what happened before the event represented in the image and what will happen next, because the story told is previously known to the viewers) and the frames from a film, which, when isolated from the whole, do not reveal much information. The ambiguous character of the "hours" in Hopper's paintings, the fact that those hours (whether or not expressed with chronological accuracy), as moments of waiting, are not related to any specific action or event, is linked to the ambiguous character of the places where they occur. In conclusion, a representation in which there is no action or movement is not excluded from time; on the contrary, it is an attempt to show "pure" time, without any external reference.

[Fig.70] Edward Hopper, *7 A.M*, 1948, 76.7x101.9cm, Whitney Museum of American Art

Let us note that the titles of Hopper's paintings can hide an ironic wink (WAGSTAFF: 2004), playing with literal and figurative meaning. In the case of *Sunday* [Fig.63], it could be said that there is a word play on the literal meaning of "Sunday", i.e., the prevalence of sun in the scene. So, the "day" we are seeing in the picture is a Sunday, or just a sunny day?

8.2.2. *The empty storefronts*

In order to resolve this dilemma, some critical comments turn to the other element that, along with the figure and the sunlight, dominates the picture: the storefronts. It is noticeable that, in *Sunday* [Fig.63], the figure is not behind the window or behind the glass, but outside; and, notwithstanding the visual relevance of the storefronts, Hopper has not represented the glass in the windows, which enhances their apparent emptiness. This has been frequently interpreted as the sign of a crisis, which would explain the

inactivity of the figure in the sidewalk. But, what kind of crisis are we facing in this picture?

Of course, the mainstream of Hopper literature points to a sociological interpretation of this emptiness. Slater argues that the 'nineteenth-century' storefronts[116] suggest Hopper's opposition to modernity and his preference for that age of small, modest businesses and its architecture of a more human scale (SLATER: 2002, 149). For Wells, the painting is almost discouraging since it was painted on a date in which economic prosperity still ruled. "If the painting had been called *Thursday* or *Monday*, we would think its utter absence of commerce a prescient foreshadow of the Great Depression (there aren't even signs in the windows). Were it painted in 1932, we would jump to political interpretation. But it is Sunday in 1926, and each storefront, so far as we can see, is a void" (WELLS: 2008, 28). Although Kranzfelder has underlined that the date of the picture does not allow to link it to the age of Depression (KRANZFELDER: 1995, 137), Schmied suggests that, long before it actually happened, Hopper's canvases foresaw the dispirited mood that would spread through the United States territory and that, when the time came, the new circumstances suddenly gave currency to the compositions Hopper had been painting since the early twenties (SCHMIED: 1995, 13), which is a mysterious hypothesis. As I said in chapter 5 about the presumed influence of film noir on Hopper, "foreseeing", "anticipating" or "foreshadowing" is contradictory with "being influenced by". So, which is the great depression that Hopper depicts in *Sunday*, in a period of relative economic prosperity? Why should we be afraid of or depressed on Sundays? What is the difference between work days and Sundays? In modern, mechanical or mathematical time, this difference is as difficult to establish as it is difficult to find the difference between contiguous hotel rooms or diverse western motels. Sunday is the day when one does not have to work, but the hours of the day are exactly the same as the hours of a working day, the time of this day does not have a qualitative difference with the time of the rest of the week, the sun shines on the street like any other day. The hours

[116]Evidence of how the storefronts looked like in the late nineteenth century and in the early twentieth century can be found in photos such as *Brown Bobby greaseless doughnut*, dated in 1925, by Harris and Ewing; or *West Danville, Vermont, Frank Goss, seventy-one year old farmer, in front of Gilbert S. Hastings's general store and post office reading his mail,* which includes a postcard saying that his last year's hired man "won't be around for haying this year on account of he's in Californi' in the Navy, by Fritz Henle, dated in 1942. This and many other examples can be found at http://www.loc.gov/pictures/collection/fsa/ (last checked 19-08-2019).

come one after the other in the same sequence they do on workdays, because the impoverished time is meaningless.

The hours are empty in the same way the storefronts and the windows of the street we see. We can go back in time as far as we like, the instants of time will be exactly the same as the present moment, we will not find difference; we can look over every room in the hotel, every motel in the road, we can go across the whole street, as *Early Sunday morning* [Fig.42] suggests; but every room, every motel and every house will be empty, because every room is any room and every motel is any motel. A contemporary of Hopper who can hardly be accused of incompetence in economic matters, J.M. Keynes, illustrated this experience of time, typical of "the strenuous purposeful money-makers", with a scene from Lewis Carroll's Silvie and Bruno that perfectly identifies the bad infinity which pretends to avoid death by means of a forged eternity: in the middle of one of his lessons for the children, the Professor is interrupted by a knock at his door. He asks who is calling.

> "Only the tailor, sir, with your little bill," said a meek voice outside the door.
> "Ah, well, I can soon settle his business," the Professor said to the children, "if you'll just wait a minute. How much is it, this year, my man?" The tailor had come in while he was speaking.
> "Well, it's been a-doubling so many years, you see," the tailor replied, a little grufy, "and I think I'd like the money now. It's two thousand pound, it is!"
> "Oh, that's nothing!" the Professor carelessly remarked, feeling in his pocket, as if he always carried at least that amount about with him. "But wouldn't you like to wait just another year and make it four thousand? Just think how rich you'd be! Why, you might be a king, if you liked!"
> "I don't know as I'd care about being a king," the man said thoughtfully. "But it dew sound a powerful sight o' money! Well, I think I'll wait"
> "Of course you will!" said the Professor. "There's good sense in you, I see. Good-day to you, my man!"
> "Will you ever have to pay him that four thousand pounds?" Sylvie asked as the door closed on the departing creditor.
> "Never, my child!" the Professor replied emphatically. "He'll go on doubling it till he dies. You see, it's always worth while waiting another year to get twice as much money!"[117]

So, the strenuous money-makers are the prototype of those "dry dwellers of eternity" who wander through hotel rooms, storefronts, motorways and streets looking

[117]Keynes adds that "The 'purposive' man is always trying to secure a spurious and delusive immortality for his acts by pushing his interest in them forward into time (…) Thus by pushing his jam always forward into the future, he strives to secure for his act of boiling it an immortality (…) Perhaps it is not an accident that the race which did most to bring the promise of immortality into the heart and essence of our religions has also done most for the principle of compound interest" (KEYNES:1963, 358-373).

for a Sunday always deferred for the afterlife. The experience is enriched by memory and imagination only when tasks have a beginning and an end like a melody or a tale, and the end of the task signals the holy day (or, rather, the holy day is the one thing capable to put work to an end). But this never happens in compound interest, as it never happens in the assembly line: the line stops when the working day finishes, but the work is not done (the point of detention is arbitrary). The next morning the line will start again at the same point and the same piece of work will appear at the very same place, as if time had not gone by. "Time in hell (...) is the province of those who are not allowed to complete anything they have started" (BENJAMIN: 2006, 331). What is the man in *Sunday* [Fig.63] waiting for? We could say he is waiting for Sunday, waiting for something that could *make* Sunday, that could give a full meaning to the sequence of the hours and that could only be found out of the series of linear time, randomly, as the unexpected incident that creates a holiday moment in the assembly line of Chaplin's *Modern Times* (1936), which I alluded to above. Keynes himself was extremely optimistic about the possibility of a generalized Sunday for humankind in the here and now, and he predicted (in 1930, just after the 1929 crash!), that the definitive resolution of the "economic problem", (the main problem since the appearance of man on earth) could arrive in a lapse of a hundred years. But he was also extremely pessimistic about the consequences of such an earthly Sunday: "Yet there is no country and no people, I think, who can look forward to the age of leisure and of abundance without a dread (…) for the first time since his creation man will be faced with his real, his permanent problem —how to use his freedom from pressing economic cares, how to occupy the leisure, which science and compound interest will have won for him". He mentions the epitaph written for herself by an old charwoman, in which she described her life in eternity as "doing nothing forever and ever", not even singing the sweet songs she will listen to in heaven. And Keynes concludes: "Yet it will only be for those who have to do with the singing that life will be tolerable —and how few of us can sing!" (KEYNES:1963, 358-373). This could be, to my view, a more pertinent commentary than the foreseeing of economic crisis to illuminate the emptiness of the storefronts in *Sunday* [Fig.63]

8.2.3.<u>*The city-on-display*</u>

Sunday's storefronts belong, of course, to the long series of windows in Hopper's oeuvre. And in this long series there is a visual analogy between the windows of houses and hotels and shop-windows. In this section I shall sketch a little theory of Hopper's windows, aiming at encompassing the painter's insistence on this motif.

Pointing to the difference between the view of Marx on the city as a collection of commodities and the one of Benjamin, Susan Buck-Morss writes:

> For Benjamin, whose point of departure was a philosophy of historical experience rather than an economic analysis of capital, the key to the new urban phantasmagoria was not so much the commodity-in-the-market as the commodityon-display, where exchange value no less than use value lost practical meaning, and purely representational value came to the fore. Everything desirable, from sex to social status, could be transformed into commodities as fetishes-on-display (BUCKMORSS: 1989, 81-82).

This observation makes us think of the city as a scenery composed by a series of windows with a "purely representational value" —a series, not a synthetic totality. And here we come to an explanation about the comments on Hopper's voyeurism. The representational overload not only refers to the commodification process (Hopper does not speak about commodities in the Marxist sense, and neither is he a critic of capitalism), or —in the pictures of women by a window— to the commodification of the female body (powerfully expressed in the windows of the Red Light district of Amsterdam or of Hamburg's Reeperbahn). In Hopper's paintings, we can also find some male characters framed by the light coming from a window, sometimes alone, like in *Sunday* [Fig. 63] or in *Office in a small city* (1953) [Fig.71], sometimes with female figures (*Office at night*, 1940 [Fig.30], *Conference at night,* 1949 [Fig.55]). And in *Nighthawks* [Fig.23], as I have stated, the entire diner can be understood as an island of light or even as a panoptic or a panorama where the characters are trapped. So, what is shown in such windows is not just a collection of commodities or, if so, they are visual commodities with a purely representational value. Just as the traumatic neurosis of war are the psychopathological version of the loss of words observed by Benjamin as a general feature of modern society, voyeurism and exhibitionism are the psychopathological expressions of the normal operation of the eye in the everyday life of the modern city I have explored in the previous chapters: voyeurism corresponds to the scopophilia, the predatory activity of the

"protective eye" trained by the camera and severed from its object by the lens' glass. It is the "gaze without eyes" which produces private *Erlebnisse* one after the other to compensate his poverty of experience and to overcome shocks. Exhibitionism corresponds to the uncanny or dark aura of the "eyes without a gaze" contained in the little boxes of light which are constantly consumed (in visual terms) and discarded as waste (visual) material by the city dweller. This visual consumption —the reduction of the scenes to purely representational value— expresses, in the field of images, the translation of the implicit into the explicit which characterises sex and money. But, as I will argue, this is not the role of Hopper's images and, in this sense, his canvases are not the works of a voyeur, whether normal or pathological.

[Fig.71] Edward Hopper, *Office in a small city,* 1953, 71cmx102cm, The Metropolitan Museum of Art

[Fig.72] Edward Hopper, *The Circle Theater*, 1936, 68.58x91.44cm, Private collection

It is interesting to notice that, with the exception of *Drug Store* [Fig.37], painted in 1927 —and even there the exposed objects are quite vague—, in most of Hopper's paintings where shop displays appear, they are empty (*Early Sunday Morning* [1930, Fig.42], *The Circle Theater* [1936, Fig.72], *Nighthawks* [1942, Fig.23], *Sunlight in a Cafeteria* [1958, Fig.46], *New York Office* [1962, Fig.38]). And this absence of goods, more than suggesting the shortage of materials that sociological interpretations of Hopper have tried to underline, seems to echo the poverty of experience, in the same way that, in Benjamin's writings, the material scarcity is an allegory of cultural penury. That is why I suggested above that Hopper's gaze is not one of the voyeur. Hopper's windows cannot be reduced to opportunities to steal a furtive pleasure (as Baudelaire says). The "gaze without eyes", as the appropriated device to move around the industrial space of the city, frames the shocking images appearing on passing as photographs —"what modern man sees". And the nakedness of those who become objects of such a gaze is, like the one of the mannequin, the sign of their lack of a story (and their persistent silence). Like the

mannequins of the shop-windows, Hopper's figures show a very particular kind of nakedness, which is not cancelled by the fact that they wear a dress: the mannequin has no dress of its own, since only living bodies can actually be dressed or naked, and for this reason it can wear any dress without thereby ceasing to be naked. This is exactly the nakedness or Hopper's characters (whether they are male or female and whether it is emphasized or not by the explicit nudity of the bodies).

[Fig.73] Edward Hopper, *Automat* (detail) Des Moines Art Center

Benjamin suggests that the "rouge on the cheeks" or on the lips (a must for the female mannequin's face) implies the submission to fashion, which (because of its fight against natural decay) hides the organic features and approximates human faces to the ones of mannequins in shop-windows, an effect also observed in Hopper's faces. In *Automat*, painted in 1927, the window behind the figure creates an eerie feeling. On one hand, all we can see reflected on it is the row of electric bulbs that illuminate the restaurant repeated ad infinitum, preventing the viewer from seeing what is outside. On the other hand, the window reflection tells us that the woman sits apparently alone in the cafeteria. Some critics suspect that the title of the painting itself could have a second meaning: at first sight, it names the kind of cafeteria where the woman is, a quite popular space during the early 1920s, a non-place in the terms proposed by Marc Augé in 1995, where there is no need to communicate or to identify oneself in order to consume a product (AUGE:

2009); but it could also refer to the woman's attitude, whose stiffness has been often compared with the one of a mannequin. Strand has called into attention the fact that she may be sitting in some sort of limbo, for there is no way of locating the scene anywhere —-it could be either a big city, a small town or the third moon of Jupiter (the storefront is another case of the any-place-whatever).

The same could be said about a late painting of Hopper, *New York Office* [Fig.38]. Even the tonality used here reminds us somehow of the one in *Nighthawks* [Fig.23], although the scene takes place in daylight. But again, the scarcity of details, the fact that the streets are as empty as in any other of Hopper's paintings where a storefront is represented, the double barrier which separates the viewer from the figures (first the road on the lower part of the painting, second the window glass) creates a feeling of isolation and silence. The woman could be either a receptionist or a paper figure, like a sticker pinned in a window.

Just as the mannequin can wear any dress because it has no dress of its own, the figures appearing in Hopper's windows can be (superficially) adapted to any story, because, as the anonymous passer-by in the city crowd, they have not a story of their own (of course, the passers-by have their private stories as particular individuals, but not as "the amorphous crowd of passers-by, the people in the street" [BENJAMIN: 2006, 321], that is to say, not as signatories of the social contract). The emptiness of their eyes is, in Hopper, the major symbol of this nakedness. In the shop-windows of the city streets, the powerful lighting does not avoid the coldness of the space: the blurry objects of *Drug Store* are drowned in the icy water of egoistical calculation, as Marx and Engels said, and the glass of the window is made of that ice.

And the same happens with the camera's lens; it "cools" what is taken in, in spite of the powerful lightning of the set, reducing the image, by means of the technological calculation of the mechanic eye, to exhibition value (what cannot be shown does not count). I would call this mannequin-like look of Hopper's figures another consequence of the assumption of the camera as the internal spectator in his paintings. As I have shown, over-illumination does not warm bodies and objects, it burns colours and cools tonality. Just as Benjamin says (in his essay on the concept of history of 1940) that sometimes the future acts like a film developer on some images of the past (BENJAMIN: 2006-1, 405),

it could be said that, in Hopper paintings, the abusive light is the *painting developer* of the lack of interiority. The figures do not have a story, and therefore any story can be "hung" on them. However, although this global focus on Hopper's windows improves the understanding of the figures, it does not seem to make progress the question about the nature of the feelings associated with them. It could also be said that these figures do not have any particular feeling, and for this reason any particular feeling can be attributed to them. The first name of this irresolvable nakedness is poverty of experience. And the *any-feeling-whatever*, which so many comments on Hopper's painting try to capture with the terms "alienation" or "loneliness", is the mood of urban modernity. Just as the writer tries to give a name to this immersive but elusive emotion, Hopper tries to paint not only what the modern individual sees, but also what the modern individual feels, which does not exactly mean reproducing views and feelings (painting requires a distinctive sort of distancing), although probably it is impossible if one has not seen those views or has not felt those unnamed feelings. In the next section I shall take the risk of giving this feeling a name.

8.3. NAMING THE UNNAMED EMOTION

In the previous chapter, I noted that "until a certain moment in the history of painting, there was an implicit narrative —the Bible, Ancient Mythology, great historic events or the routines of the season —, virtually shared by every viewer". And I suggested that the decline of this homogenous narrative community was one of the problems that late modern painting had to face. But to make clear my final position regarding the main question of this Part, that is to say, the unnamed feelings associated with Hopper's paintings, I shall in this section give a more detailed analysis of the historical decline of pictorial narrative.

I have stated before that the emotions or impressions (linked to an emphasis on colour) claimed by modernist painters cannot be reduced to exhibition value or, in other words, to figurative data. But this assertion may seem strange, because there is, in western painting, a long tradition of figuration of emotions, which also relies on the transmission of experience. For the popular classes, as Benjamin recalls, tradition has been for a long time transmitted by means of stories, oral tales and images (especially sacred images), and to the tale or the image was usually added moral advice which contained a guidance for life. For the upper classes, this apprenticeship of tradition included a selection of texts of the classic ancient authors. Since the Renaissance, the so-called *Humanities* were an essential source for the practical knowledge of *humankind*, because books treasured the *sapientia* or *scientia civilis*, an experience credited by the authority of great ancient moral wisdom, essential for public oratory and for prudence in political decision making. Humanities, in sum, taught the essential resorts of human passions; and, without knowing these resorts, concepts like freedom, virtue or justice were socially impracticable (GRASSI:1988). Such passions were the diverse affections of the mind, the emotional drives which are embodied, on one hand, in the voice (traditionally considered as the expression of pain and pleasure) and, on the other hand, in the facial *gesture*. The systematic theory of the different passions can be tracked in western culture from Aristotle's ethics to Hume's *Treatise of Human Nature*, through the works of Descartes or Spinoza.

The practical systematization of these passions, in the field of the human voice, is codified in the music of the Renaissance and the Baroque, especially in the tradition of

the Italian opera; and, in the field of human visage, it takes part in the apprenticeship of painting, as it is registered, for instance, in the work of Charles Lebrun on facial expressivity, which puts in visual terms the qualitative distinction of rage, pain, love, veneration, hope, admiration, etc. (ROSS, S: 1984, 25-47). The system of the human passions guides many visual allegories in painting, in the same way that the system of the seasons, the senses or the virtues, and all those systems are an image of the consistency of traditional culture. The painters represent these passions, and the viewers recognize it. Then, why should it be difficult for them *to name* an emotion or, in other words, to present it in figurative terms? Perhaps because, as happens with shared narratives, since a certain historic moment onwards, this scheme is no longer operative to express the feelings of the inhabitants of the industrial city.

In fact, this categorical scheme seems to be entirely damaged when, in the late years of the nineteenth century, Freud makes his "dissection of the Personality". What Freud discovered there was not a system of qualified and differentiable emotions (jealousy, joy, sadness or melancholy), but a disqualified and abstract flow of desire ─which he called libido─, disconnected from any particular object and, therefore, disposable to charge any real or imaginary one: "We cannot do justice to the characteristics of the mind by linear outlines like those in a drawing or in primitive painting, but rather by areas of colour melting into one another as they are presented by modern artists" (FREUD: 2001: XXI, 79). That means a breakdown of traditional Humanities and, therefore, another conception of humanity: this abstract and unqualified flow is a new image of man, as it appears in the undifferentiated flow of human labour that Marx wrote about, or in the naked humanity expressed in Herman Melville's story about Bartleby, the Scrivener. This crisis in the pictorial representation of affections underlies the difficulty of naming the feelings of Hopper's figures.

According to Fredric Jameson, in the late nineteenth century, an unknown affective tonality took the place of the old system of the human passions; an affection which cannot be named, because it is not in the traditional list of these emotions. If it was a mere negligence of classic authors, it could be easily remedied, finding its rightful place in the classification. But this addition is not possible because the new affection absolutely overwhelms the old code. Jameson says that, even if we cannot name it, it is possible to listen to this new tonality in the "Tristan's chord" from the Prelude of Wagner's *Tristan*

and Isolde (JAMESON: 2013, 39-44). Each time the melody begins, the listener clearly perceives the tonality and imaginatively joins the (musical) argument from the beginning, anticipating its possible ending; but each time the Tristan's chord appears, the narrative is suspended, the tonality becomes undefinable, and the dominant and tonic notes are not identifiable, so the melody seems to dissolve in this uncertainty in the end of the piece. In the margin of the music sheet, Wagner wrote in 1859 these very significant words:

> Henceforth no end to the yearning, longing, bliss and misery of love: world, power, fame, splendour, honour, knighthood, loyalty and friendship, all scattered like a baseless dream; one thing alone left living: desire, desire, unquenchable, longing forever rebearing itself, ─a feverish craving: one sole redemption – death, surcease of being, the sleep that knows no waking! (WAGNER: 1995, 387).

Reading this sentence, it is clear that, in contrast to the passions excited by Verdi's music, whose names we perfectly know by heart (pride, compassion, anger, fear and so on, can be seen in the character's face and can be heard in his voice), here we confront an unnamed and non-representable emotion which has no qualitative divisions but a chromatically variable, undecidable and unstable intensive nature, with nothing to do with the old calculus of nameable passions. Although in a very different context, Hopper's images are testimonies of this same crisis of emotions

Hopper's use of colour range is also peculiar. He explains something of the technical procedure he follows in his interview with John Morse in 1959, confirming his fascination with light as a means of expression:

> I have a very simple method of painting. It's to paint directly on the canvas without any funny business, as it were, and I use almost pure turpentine to start with, adding oil as I go along until the medium bec omes pure oil. I use as little oil as I can possibly help, and that's my method (MORSE: 1959).

It is, indeed, a very simple method: the solvent, spread over the canvas, thickens and builds forms which remain always clear and transparent, because the weight of the colour is diluted, vibrating in a neutral brightness. Moreover, Hopper purges light of any traces of colour, using a brilliant white (zinc or lead white) without yellow pigment. Duncan Phillips, who purchased Sunday [Fig. 63] in 1926, said: "The light conveys the emotion which is a blend of pleasure and depression —-pleasure in the way the notes of yellow, blue-green, grey-violet and tobacco-brown take on a rich intensity in the clear air —and

depression induced by this same light and these same colors as we sense them through the boredom of the solitary sitter on the curb" (PHILLIPS: 1926).

I would say that Baudelaire names this unnamed emotion at the very beginning of *The Flowers of Evil*, in his dedication to the reader. There, the poet lists "the population of demons" contained in the human brain (rape, poison, the dagger, arson…), and he warns:

> *Mais parmi les chacals, les panthères, les lices,*
> *Les singes, les scorpions, les vautours, les serpents,*
> *Les monstres glapissants, hurlants, grognants, rampants*
> *Dans la ménagerie infâme de nos vices,*
>
> *Il en est un plus laid, plus méchant, plus immonde!*
> *Quoiqu'il ne pousse ni grands gestes ni grands cris,*
> *Il ferait volontiers de la terre un débris*
> *Et dans un bâillement avalerait le monde;*
>
> *C'est l'Ennui! — L'œil chargé d'un pleur involontaire,*
> *Il rêve d'échafauds en fumant son houka.*
> *Tu le connais, lecteur, ce monstre délicat...*[118]

Hopper's *Sunday* could be considered as a visual comment on Baudelaire's verses. This is the unnamed emotion whose name those who talk about voyeurism, alienation or loneliness seek: the dreadful fear of facing the permanent problem of freedom for those who had forgotten how to sing. What I said above about waiting and silence is reinforced when connected to boredom: "Waiting is, in a sense, the lined interior of boredom (…) we are bored when we do not know what we are waiting for (…) Boredom is the threshold to great deeds" (BENJAMIN: 1999-7, 855).

But, what is the great deed in *Sunday* [Fig.63]? As I have stated, Benjamin associates spleen (as another possible term to refer to the unnameable emotion) with the non-accomplished poems or prose texts of Baudelaire, that is to say, those in which the poet fails to revive the experience in the streets of the industrial city. But these poems "are in no way inferior to those in which the correspondances celebrate their triumphs". (BENJAMIN:2006, 335). I referred to them in chapter 1, suggesting that, in these cases, the poet manages to make out of this failure of poetry a poetics of the failure. It is, in Benjamin's words, a collapse of the experience which it is implausible to associate "with a visual image", producing, as in Wagner's Prelude, "a sense of boundless desolation".

[118]Translation in Eli Siegel, Hail, American Development (New York: Definition Press, 1968).

These words of Benjamin are a comment on one line of Baudelaire poem *Le gout du néant*: “Spring, the beloved, has lost its scent” (*Le Printemps adorable a perdu son odeur*). This phrase could also be interpreted, in my view, in the sense that the word (“Spring”) has broken its link with the experience of the thing (the scent) and, therefore, it has become meaningless, because no image can fulfil it. And the converse produces the same feeling: to see something for which there are no words.

Seeing the thing without hearing its name and, in general, seeing without hearing, is, according to Simmel, an uneasiness “characteristic of the sociology of the big city” (BENJAMIN: 2006, 341). Something of this kind seems to happen when we compare the title of Hopper’s *Sunday* with the scene represented in the canvas: “for someone who is past experiencing, there is no consolation” (BENJAMIN: 2006, 335). This lack of correspondence between voices and images is in the basis of the experience of the unnamed emotion: the nothingness, the inconsolable yearning of the desire which has lost its object, is the affective tonality of modernity.

Perhaps the most adequate comment to Hopper’s *Sunday* [Fig.63] was made by someone who, probably, never saw the picture:

> The man who loses his capacity for experiencing feels as though he has been dropped from the calendar. The big-city dweller knows this feeling on Sundays. The bells, which once played a part in holidays, have been dropped from the calendar like the human beings. They are like the poor souls that wander restlessly but have no history (BENJAMIN: 2006, 336).

Somehow, Hopper captures the stillness of an apparently irrelevant moment where virtually anything could happen. Even *Sunday*. The holy event does not occur in the painting, but the failure of poetics could imply, in the painting, a poetics of the failure, as the vanishing of aura creates, following Benjamin, an aura of the vanishing.

Boredom, *ennui* or spleen are, in fact, possible names for the affective tonality of modernity, and they are also the content of the emotional charge of Hopper’s images. But the point —and what makes Hopper’s paintings valuable — is that spleen, *ennui* or boredom (words which are also synonyms of “poverty of experience”) are precisely what cannot be experienced in the city on display. They are not directly perceivable because

they are, so to speak, hidden behind the glass of shop windows; or better, we are protected against them by the complex of entertainment, ornament and spectacle, the orgy of exhibition value that is *Erlebnis*. This does not mean, however, that the bad infinity of the ornament is a remedy against *ennui*. The attitude of the passer-by who stops a minute to have a look at the shop window is not an alternative to boredom (as was storytelling with regard to routines of craftsmanship), but the very core of boredom itself, which shows its nature in these meaningless lapses. Paraphrasing Benjamin, it could be said that boredom is the quintessence of an entertainment that struts about in the borrowed garb of experience. When Hopper opens the windows, or when, as in Sunday, removes the glass from them, we can see what the city on display hides, i. e., that storefronts are *always* empty (or, at most, they only contain a cash register or a counter), because they are always ready to be emptied and refilled with different —but equivalent— items, just like hotel rooms, train cars and gas tanks. In this sense, Hopper's paintings *tell* us what windows actually *show*, shed light on their emptiness.

When analysing *House by the railroad* [Fig.15], I suggested the presence, in Hopper's works, of a "lost space" or a "lost time", often submerged in a dark aura. This time is not before or after the present time, neither is this space inside nor outside actual space, but they are embedded in actual space and time in a seemingly aberrant way; and I said that, although perceived as something unattainable or irretrievable, it is as essential to the modern experience of homogeneous space and measurable time. In *Sunday*, this is the meaning of the sombre and empty shop windows in the background, in which the absence of any reflection makes invisible even the glass —the worst enemy of secrets. It belongs to the dark kingdom of that demon uglier than jackals, panthers or serpents, the exquisite monster who would "make rubbish of the earth" and would "swallow the word" in his yawning. The quiet man in *Sunday*, sitting on the wooden sidewalk out in the sunlight, is waiting for nothing: he is facing what Keynes called "his real, his permanent problem".

CONCLUSIONS: AN INSTANT IN TIME, ARRESTED.

In the following pages, as a series of conclusions, I shall summarize the main results achieved throughout the dissertation, trying to highlight how it has helped to fill some gaps that had been, until now, unexplored in Hopper's literature. At the end of these lines, I shall also refer to the potential directions of research opened by my thesis.

Edward Hopper was a silent man. This gives the rare statements he made about his work a particular value. Like his paintings, these statements are never spontaneous. On one hand, Hopper's silence and reluctance attest that he did not consider necessary to verbalize the meaning of his painting; in other words, for him visual expression was enough. But Hopper's silence before his paintings is connected with the silence that dominates most of his represented scenes. It could be said that he wants the viewer to listen to the silence. This could be interpreted as a sign of the claim for visual autonomy characteristic of modern painting. But it could also mean that the motifs he chooses, for some reason, escape words, as if they were beyond or below the verbalization threshold. The silence of Hopper *about* his works and the silence *of* Hopper's works might remind us of the speechless soldiers described by Benjamin, who return home from the front lines unable to tell the things they have seen, because the transformation of the field of experience has placed them among things whose names seem to have lost their customary meaning —as happens with most of Hopper's titles: "Sunday", "Morning sun", "Eleven A.M.", etc. This loss of words is the key image to Benjamin for what he calls "poverty of experience" (BENJAMIN: 1996-7, 732), an expression that seems to match perfectly with the atmosphere of Hopper's pictures (bare walls, empty streets, impersonal rooms, stereotyped interiors, deserted exteriors).

But, on the other hand, when Hopper finally gives up and decides to make a statement, he follows the same method as with his paintings: a lot of sketch work and an accurate execution. So, the statements are the result of long meditation and a very careful choice of adequate words. Once the words are spoken, as once the paintings are finished, Hopper gives no more explanations. He repeats them as a long-sought and fortunately found formula containing a treasured secret which, however, the audience often finds enigmatic. And this also reminds us of the effect of his paintings: they awake the feeling that a relevant message is contained in them, but at the same time it seems that this message is undecipherable. According to Brian O'Doherty, in the retrospective exhibition organized by Lloyd Goodrich at the Whitney Museum in 1964, Hopper asserted one of these infrequent comments on his paintings: "Each picture", he said, "is an instant in time, arrested, and acutely realized with the utmost intensity" (O'DOHERTY: 1981, 133). Surely, Hopper was summarizing in this sentence something important about his intentions as an artist, but the words are far from being easy to interpret. In a sense, we could think of every painting, at least from the scenes on the ancient Greek vases onwards,

as the immortalization of an instant. However, what happens if, instead of thinking of classical artworks, we listen to Hopper’s words while looking at the impoverished landscapes or the empty eyes of the figures in his paintings?

1. *The ambivalence of the historical artwork*

My critical framework to approach Hopper's work is Walter Benjamin's theory of the modern work of art, which I have discussed in the first Part of my thesis. The reason for this choice is that the conception of art exposed by Benjamin in *On some motifs in Baudelaire* (chapter 1) seems to be very close to the way in which Hopper understands the task of the artist, as can be concluded from his approach to visual reality. This can also be expressed by saying that Hopper, as an artist, although of course without using Benjamin's terms, is engaged with the essential *ambivalence* of the artwork. Leaving aside what Benjamin calls prehistorical artworks, the historical works of art are composed by cult and exhibition values. Even if he is not fully aware of it, Benjamin's definition implies that a painting has always an irresolvable ambiguity, so that exhibition value always needs to be "completed" by cult value and vice versa. I have proposed reformulating such a condition in these terms: *what a painting shows always refers to what it tells —although this reference can be 'dialectical' or paradoxical, and what a painting tells always refers, (although this reference can be enigmatic or puzzling) to what it shows.* But an explanation is needed to fix the meaning of these terms.

Benjamin's expression *exhibition value* points to the condition of a work conceived to be shown to spectators. But it is clear that he thinks of exhibition value not only as the condition of a work able to be *exhibited to someone,* but also as the condition of a work which *exhibits something*. When he argues that photography, because of its higher exhibition value, replaced painting as a provider for decorative landscapes in the nineteenth century, this not only means that photographs are more accessible than paintings, but also that the representational content of such pictures becomes in this way more accessible. This reference of exhibition value to figurative data is even more clear when Benjamin presents the attempts of "pure art" to give up any representational content as attempts to achieve independence from exhibition value. And the German expression used by Benjamin to refer to "representational content" (*gegenständlichen Vorwurf*) could also be translated as "figurative content" or "figurative reference". Benjamin does not discuss this question, but I focus on it to clarify the ambivalence of the historical work of art.

The Cambridge Dictionary says that a painting or a drawing is figurative when it "represents something as it really looks, rather than in an abstract form". The opposition "figurative/abstract" is clear, but the difficulty relies on the expression "as it really looks". Many of the early manifestations of painting, undoubtedly considered as figurative, were representations of divinities, angels or miracles, and it is not plausible to think that they were based on such beings or events "as they really look". Furthermore, Romanesque, Gothic or Baroque paintings were perceived by their viewers as representing things "as they really look", notwithstanding the remarkable differences between the representations of the same subjects in such periods. This suggests that, as Ortega y Gasset wrote in 1950 about Velázquez, visual reality is never perfectly finished —that is the difference between reality and myth (ORTEGA Y GASSET: 1989, 475). This gives the word "figuration" a meaning closer to one it has in expressions as "figurative language": pictorial representation is not, thus, reproduction of reality, but a metaphorical or indirect figuration of it. This margin of uncertainty, I shall add, is what allows that very different representations can be perceived, in different times, as the *valid* representation of reality "as it really looks", that is to say, as the visual reality that all the viewers share in common. But this recognition cannot be the exclusive result of the fact that it has representational content. To reduce the margin of uncertainty of reality (i.e., in order to appear as *the valid* representation of it), the picture needs also cult value: it needs to produce in the viewers a community of feelings related to tradition (and these feelings are what cannot be reduced to exhibition value). This validity is the *value* of cult value. For this reason, in the accomplishment of this validity, an important part is played by artists' and poets' sense of connecting with implicitly shared feelings (chapter 2).

2. *Between caricature and decoration: Hopper and American art*

In the second Part of my dissertation I suggested that, in American painting during the early twentieth century, this community of feelings was often thought of as the community of *American* feelings, whether by focusing on American contents (the "American scene") or by searching for the American spirit in the realm of formal features (Alfred Stieglitz's circle). Hopper felt uncomfortable among the American scene painters who, in his terms, "caricatured America". I have recalled that this reference to "caricature" might point to some paintings of Benton or Curry, which included Chaplin or Disney characters; but as he also suggests that if British or French painters had painted "the British scene" or "the French scene" they would have caricatured France or Great Britain, the reference becomes more meaningful. In the days when cult value in painting could be reduced to the ritual celebration of sacred history, the community of feelings gathered around it could be identified as the particular community which shared the religious belief. But, even if modern art can be seen as the secularization of religious practices, it is clear that, as a consequence or the Enlightenment, something important changed in this respect (chapter 1).

The community of feelings gathered by the artwork acquires in modern culture a more universal scope than it had in traditional societies: it is rather an aesthetic community which stands as a sensible symbol of the moral community of human beings, and therefore it cannot be confused with a concrete political society. This makes increasingly problematic the public recognition of the validity of the artwork. On one side, the increased complexity of aesthetic judgement produces the effect that some representations addressed to a particular community can appear —from an artistic point of view— as "caricature", that is to say, as non-realistic, paradoxically, precisely because they aim at representing a perfectly homogeneous community; on the other side, it widens the public discussion about cult value and triggers the birth of art criticism in its modern sense.

This issue is strongly attached to the American debate on cultural identity. I have signalled the relevance of Hermann Melville as a dominant figure in Lewis Mumford's writings on American cultural tradition (chapter 3). And Melville wrote that

> There is something in the contemplation of the mode in which America has been settled, that, in a noble breast, should forever extinguish the prejudices of national dislikes. Settled by the people of all nations, all nations may claim her for their own (…) We are not a narrow tribe of men, with a bigoted Hebrew nationality —whose blood has been debased in the attempt to ennoble it, by maintaining an exclusive succession among ourselves. No: our blood is as the flood of the Amazon, made up of a thousand noble currents all pouring into one (…) for unless we may claim all the world for our sire (…) we are without father or mother (MELVILLE: 1850: 214).

Closer to Hopper, his painting teacher Robert Henri stated: "My love of mankind is individual, not national, and always I find the race expressed in the individual. And so I am 'patriotic' only about what I admire, and my devotion to humanity burns up as brightly for Europe as for America" (HENRI: 2007, 141, quoted in chapter 3). In his essay on Baudelaire, Benjamin says that experience, "in the strict sense of the word" (*Erfahrung*) is experience of community, of collective memory. But the aesthetical (and tentatively ethical) community which recognizes itself in modern artworks is neither the traditional community nor the collective of members of a state, a nation or a social class. Benjamin himself seems to bear in mind something similar when he describes the community in which Baudelaire searched for his "fellow-creature" saying that "they do not stand for classes or any sort of collective; rather, they are nothing but the amorphous crowd of passers-by, the people in the street" (BENJAMIN, 2006, 321). So, Hopper's statement about caricature could be understood in the sense that, even accepting that feelings are socially constructed, in modern art they can hardly be reduced to *national* feelings. This is suggested by his conclusion that "the question of the value of nationality in art is perhaps unsolvable" (chapter 3). Of course, the community of feelings invoked by most of the American Scene painters was the restricted community of a white, male and middle-class America, but Hopper's *aesthetic* opinion would have not changed if the 'caricatured America' had appealed to a black, female or proletarian community, although in this case the artistic value had been sacrificed for the sake of good causes, as contemptuously said Baudelaire referring to Victor Hugo (chapter 2).

Furthermore, Hopper also showed his disagreement with the artistic American movements that searched for the American Mind in the cubo-futurist language and, later, with what he considered "the invention of arbitrary forms" in abstract painting. Goodrich says that Hopper never "conceded the fact that abstract art also had emotional and ideational content —to him it was just decorative" (GOODRICH: 1981, 126-127). I agree with the idea that Hopper overlooked the emotional content of abstract painting, but I

think that the reference to its decorative nature hides something deeper. Abstract painting uses to be understood as an *expression* of the inner world of the artist. So, why cannot be included in the realm of figuration, if it also seeks out an indirect representation of reality? The reason is that inner realities are not spatial beings and, therefore, they have not any visual appearance. In figurative painting, these internal emotions can only appear as what qualifies, disturbs or upsets the representational contents. But, when these internal emotions are to be expressed without reference to such contents, we are not dealing with figuration, but with the invention of a “figure” for something that does not have one. That is why Hopper speaks of “arbitrary inventions”. *He certainly disregards the achievements of abstract painting, but although in an unkind language, he is identifying its main problem, which is not that the representational content is recognized as valid, but that the internal emotions expressed without figurative reference can be experienced by the viewers as the feelings of a community*. It is when they fail to be recognized in this way when they risk becoming what Hopper called “arbitrary inventions”, or just “decoration” (chapter 3). It could be said that, for Hopper, when the constitutive ambivalence of the artwork is resolved in favour of exhibition value, it becomes a caricature, and when it is resolved in favour of cult value it becomes decoration.

3. <u>*About Hopper's realism*</u>

This is a very important claim, because it does not only points to what Hopper considered "American art", but to what he understood as "realist art". The reason why he feels the American Scene as a caricature is the same underlying his view of the most of American literary fiction as a "vast sea of sugar-coated mush", as noted in the third Part. Hopper makes this statement in support of Hemingway's prose, which is generally characterized because it *shows* —with unusual straightforwardness and lack of sentimentalism— much more than it *tells*. There is no need to insist on the fact that, moving from literature to painting, a similar effect is characteristic of Hopper's works: they also show much more than they tell, what brings us back to Hopper's silence and to the definition of the pictures as instants arrested in time. Some of the scenes depicted in the Greek vases, to which I referred above, are representations of a particularly intense moment of an action that the viewer can tell, that is to say, the viewer knows what has happened before such moment and what will happen after it. The picture, so to speak, more than arresting an instant in time, aims at showing the tension that links the *before* and the *after* in a complete movement. In contrast, Hopper's paintings are often described as "frames taken out of a sequence", and it means that what they show is not an integral part of a narrative structure which could be evoked from the image depicted, but any instant whatever in the course of time —a time, so to speak, marked as non-relevant (chapter 7). For example: any assumption about what happened before or what will happen next to the scene represented in *Nighthawks* is arbitrary. In the instant depicted by Hopper *nothing* is happening. The figures are waiting and the argument is suspended. So, the weakening of the narrative background produces a decline of cult value and increases the exhibition factor, even if what is shown seems to be irrelevant. But paying attention to the non-relevant could be a relevant concern. I have suggested that the modern representation of time or, in Benjamin's terms, the impoverished experience of time, is a succession of empty or irrelevant instants (chapter 1). What Benjamin calls poverty of experience is precisely the decay of the shared narratives which gave cultural time beginning, climax and denouement. The point is that Hopper excludes from his paintings any storyline and any kind of anecdote because the contrary would mean for him "caricature" or "sugar-coated mush". And, as in the case of Hemingway's prose, this is for him the keynote of realism (chapter 5). *But "realism", in art, cannot be identified as fidelity to a permanent and unchanged external reality, as if writers or painters of other*

periods would have been alien to reality or farther from it than modern ones. It was reality itself what changed with technological and social revolutions. And this change operated a disruption in the balance of cult and exhibition values which articulated the frames of experience (chapter 7). In Baudelaire's criticism of the Parisian Salon of 1859, the poet opposes those representations that "are closer to the truth because they are false" to the ones of the landscape painters, who "are liars precisely because they fail to lie" (BENJAMIN: 2006, 341). In my view, he is referring in the first case to a certain *disenchantment* of painting (chapter 6). These representations can be called "false" not in the sense that they lie to the viewer but, on the contrary, because they contain a self-declaration of its fictional condition: not only they emphasise the flat surface of the canvas, but they also confess to the beholder, for example, that the figure in Manet's *Olympia* is not a Goddess, but a model. In a similar sense, the explicit stage-design aspect of many of Hopper's pictures uncovers the painter's artifice, and in this way they are "closer to the truth" than those others which, instead of searching for their acknowledgement as the visual shared reality in the community of feelings of the anonymous crowd, offer to a preselected community the myth of a perfectly finished reality (thus, they lie) and the prefabricated feelings that it explicitly demands (thus, they fail to lie)So, the silence of Hopper's paintings strictly corresponds to what Benjamin defines as impoverishment of experience (decrease of cult value), but it also attests that this impoverishment is not only a negative phenomenon, but a result of the universalization or the community of feelings that the artwork looks for, and of the problematic nature that the aesthetic evaluation of the works acquires in this context. Taking as an example Monet's painting *Impression, sunrise* (1872), I have argued that the title of the painting suggests in itself a certain balance of cult and exhibition values (chapter 2). The word *Impression* refers to the *form* of the representation (which concentrates its cult value). This formal treatment of visual reality makes that things seem to explode in coloured points. And, as I have recalled, it is not an arbitrary invention: reality was actually exploding in separate "impressions" at the rhythm of the technological fragmentation of experience, which is responsible for the fact that emotions, that in traditional culture were integrated in storytelling, lose an important part of their narrative support, becoming some sort of naked sensations. I have also referred to this condition as the progressive separation of the two ingredients of the classical concept of experience: sensation (direct contact with external reality), on one hand, and memory and imagination (integration of individual intuitions in a temporal meaningful

sequence), on the other (chapter 1). But, in Monet's title, the word *sunrise* refers to the collective visual world, still recognizable behind such explosion of light and colour. So, although somehow perturbed, the balance between cult value (Impression) and exhibition value (*sunrise*) is preserved[119]. Could this also be said of Hopper's paintings?

[119]Although it might be a highly idealized view, probably we all tend to imagine classic artworks as examples of a perfect balance between telling and showing (or cult and exhibition), and this is, perhaps, an important part of the meaning of the term "classic" in the realm of painting. But probably modern painting cannot be thought but as a form of unbalance related to a classical point of equilibrium.

4. *The rivalry between painting and photography*

In Hopper's mature paintings, very far from the impressionist palette of his Parisian years, one should say that the primacy of exhibition value is so marked that cult value (what the picture tells or its emotional charge) is nearly unidentifiable. Does it mean that the value of Hopper's works can be reduced to exhibition value? I have suggested above that Hopper's formula "an instant arrested in time" does not refer to narrative time, but to the experience of time as a succession of empty or irrelevant instants, that is to say, the modern experience of time. Now, I shall add that the *visual* experience of such a time is the keystone of photography and film technologies and, by extension, of a kind of visual perception which finds in technological reproducibility its model (chapter 6). Here is, to my view, the reason for the undeniable affinity of Hopper's pictures with photography or film recognised in Hopper literature. After all, is not also the ambition of photography arresting an instant in time? Should we assume that, in Hopper's statement, the "instant arrested in time" is not referred to the classical image of the artwork as the eternalization of a privileged moment but to the arbitrary dissection of whatever instants by means of the snapshot?

I have signalled in the third Part that many paintings considered as especially significant in art history have become visual icons (that is to say, have acquired a high exhibition value) because of technological reproduction. But a painting such as *Nighthawks* has not received such an overdose of exhibition value because of its signification in the history of art. On the contrary, it has been easily absorbed by photography and film *as something already photographic or filmic*. It seems that, while —for example— *La Gioconda* has lost a part of its original artistic authority because of technological reproductions, *Nighthawks* has acquired a sort of cult value precisely *because of its reproducibility,* giving the impression that the replicas are not the reproduction of a work not initially conceived for it, but "the reproduction of a work designed for reproducibility" (BENJAMIN: 2002-2, 106), and therefore prompting the notion of an influence of photography and film (specifically film noir) on Hopper's painting (chapter 5).

But one should be careful with this notion, which I have discussed in the fifth chapter of my dissertation. Concerning the narrative arguments of film noir, which come

from the so-called "hard-boiled" American literary fiction, there is nothing in Hopper's pictures that could suggest something like a criminal plot. So, the burden of proof for such influence lies exclusively with the film scenography. And although many analogies can be signalled in this sense, the vast majority of the cinematographic examples adduced in support of the claim post-date *Nighthawks*, and all signs indicate that, if there was an influence, it was in the opposite direction (what, in some cases, is documented): it is Hopper who influenced filmmakers. For this reason, I have suggested another way of thinking about this affinity of Hopper's images and reproducibility (chapter 6). But to explain it I have to return to my argument on realism. I have just written that visual reality is never perfectly finished, and that this is the reason of the historic variations of the criterions of validity for visual representations. However, the emergence of photography seems to question this statement. It could be said that, in a sense, visual reality was not perfectly finished *before* photography, *but photography, appearing as reproduction, not figuration*, *is perceived as a perfectly finished and profiled image of reality "as it really looks"* (this is, I think, the meaning of my quotation of Deleuze in chapter 4 that photography "claims to reign over vision"). This claim is, for sure, in the basis of the harsh rivalry between photography and painting which was a major issue in the cultural debate of the late nineteenth century. According to Benjamin, most of the artistic movements appeared since then could be explained as the attempts of painting to create for itself a domain into which photography (and, afterwards, cinema) cannot follow (BENJAMIN: 1999-8, 6).

Benjamin suggests that the definition of the artwork given by the Baudelairean Paul Valéry is precisely constructed to grant the difference: "We recognize a work of art by the fact that no idea it inspires in us, no mode of behaviour it suggests we adopt, could ever exhaust it or dispose of it" (BENJAMIN: 2006, 337). To clarify the meaning of this sentence it should be added that, for Benjamin, it involves the assumption that artworks can be experienced as the only objects that, in the modern public realm, retain "the ability to look back at us". And that is what Benjamin calls aura. I have exemplified this effect by the gaze of the figure in a portrait: the moral distance which characterises human relations is symbolized in it by the aesthetical remoteness of beauty (chapter 2). What the portrait's figure reflects back to us is, says Benjamin, a gaze "of which our eyes never have their fill", because it is made of the same stuff on which desire "continuously feeds". The inexhaustibility of this gaze is the unapproachability of its remoteness, and artworks

live from this never-ending source, namely the aura. By means of the imitation of the human ability to look back, says Benjamin, art retrieves the beautiful “out of the depths of time”. On the contrary, photography is characterized by the reduction of distances (which I have considered, along with the loss of words, a feature of the poverty of experience). Photography brings closer things that, before its emergence, could only be seen, if ever, from afar, and it turns the inexhaustible remoteness of the gaze into a distance which can be reduced as necessary, suppressing ethical and aesthetical restrictions. The conclusion follows: “The distinction between photography and painting is therefore clear”, writes Benjamin, “to the gaze that will never get its fill of a painting, photography is rather like food for the hungry or drink for the thirsty” (BENJAMIN: 2006, 338), that is, a substitute and ephemeral satisfaction which delays hunger till the next frame of the photo (or the film) roll, till the next snapshot, till the succeeding neon of “the next whisky bar” (as can be heard in Bertolt Brecht’s *Mahagonny*) or, it could be said, to the next diner, the next hotel room or the next gas station. So, what Benjamin summarizes as “the bad infinity of ornament” opposes to the inexhaustible endlessness of the aura (chapter 1).

But, could Valery’s definition be applied to the impoverished landscapes or to the empty eyes of the figures in Hopper’s paintings? Where is the remoteness of these pictures? Should not it be said, instead, that they are the result of the reduction of distances and the vanishing of the aura? Are not the spaces represented in Hopper’s pictures much closer to the bad infinity of the serial diners than to the “gaze of which our eyes never have their fill”? Are not the characters in these pictures figures without gaze and without aura?

5. *Three remarks on Hopper and technological reproducibility*

My first remark on the affinity of Hopper's pictures and reproducibility is that it does not concern the painting itself, but *what is represented* in it. As with other paintings, Hopper insisted on the fact that the diner appearing in *Nighthawks* is not a particular place existing in Greenwich Village or in another New York neighbourhood. At first sight, this could be related to Hopper's method of "painting from memory", starting from multiple direct observations and sketches later depurated in the studio. But in this case the lack of particularity involves something else: the object depicted (the hotel room, the diner or the gas station) is in itself the result of abstraction (chapter 5). It is a generic space ("the American diner", in the case of Nighthawks). There is not an original diner that other commercial premises imitate or reproduce, but a large series of reproductions of a concept or a scheme. Because of this, everyone recognizes it as "already seen": the American diner was familiar to most Americans in Hopper's times, and it has been reproduced all over the world with the help of Hollywood movies. *So, the affinity of Nighthawks with reproducibility has not to do with the form of the painting, but mainly with its contents.*

My second remark on this issue concerns Hopper's realism, which I have characterised by a sort of 'coldness' and lack of sentimentalism and by a predominance of exhibition value (it shows more than it tells). Now I shall be more precise: one cannot paint something which belongs to the sphere of reproducibility in the same way that one can paint from nature, because reproducibility has not only transformed reality, but also its perception. When Benjamin says that the technological impoverishment of experience is a change *in the structure* of perception, he is not saying that the use of machines modifies the neuro-biological organs of sensation. He is saying, I argue, that it transforms the way in which human subjects *imagine* their perception of the world (film technology affects "the manner in which, by means of this apparatus, man can represent his environment", BENJAMIN: 2002-2, 114). During the course of history, technology, based on the knowledge of nature existing at each period, is not only a tool for adapting to the environment or dominating nature. It is also a means for *imagining* the operation of nature. The ancients imagined nature as a large living being because animals were their main available technology to manage their environment, in the same way as the moderns imagined nature as a machine because machines were their main tool for its transformation. Technologies of image reproduction depend on a particular state of

scientific knowledge (Mechanics) in which time, in its mathematical formulation, is represented as an infinite series of empty, equal and disqualified instants, not linked to any contents, and therefore they involve this *image*, which is the basis of the modern experience of time. That is why photography and film technologies condensate the *visual* experience of such a time.

Benjamin clearly argues that, considered as mere reproductions, photography and film have exclusively exhibition value, which for him means that they have nothing to do with beauty. On the contrary, they have to do with the practical need for managing an experience which, as a result of the technological transformation of the social realm, has lost its traditional support and has turned itself into some kind of obstacle course in which perception is constantly menaced by the lack of continuity (what Benjamin calls "experience of shock", *Chockerfahrung*). The paradigm of the perceptual skills required to manage everyday life in the urban-industrial space and in the new means of transport is, for Benjamin, the technological training of perception. The main achievement of this training is what Benjamin calls *Erlebnis*, a new kind of experience (*Chockerlebnis*) which allows modern individuals to reconstruct, with the fragments captured in their activity, a substitute for the lost totality of traditional experience. Erlebnis is, in Benjamin's terms, the protective shell in which the modern gaze —"the protective eye"— looks for shelter from the fragmentation of experience. Among other modern industrially constructed spaces, the diner in *Nighthawks* is an architectural incarnation of *Erlebnis*: a big glass window is a defensive tool against an *Erfahrung* which has become dangerous because of the lack of a shared experience (chapter 1). The physical isolation not only means loneliness, but also protection from the unqualified risk of the shocks that tear apart experience in the street: this indeterminate danger of the city, and not a particular criminal event or gangster plot, is the dark mood floating over *Nighthawks*' diner.

And if diners are an urban incarnation of *Erlebnis*, the inhuman eye of the camera is the *right* way to visually perceive the new mechanical reality of space and time. *The camera, which is made to reproduce, is the adequate gaze to capture things originally made to be reproduced*. Benjamin says that "objects made of glass have no aura". He is referring to buildings with "rooms in which it is hard to leave traces" (BENJAMIN: 1996-7, 734), as seems to happen in the diner in *Nighthawks*, completely wrapped in glass. And I have argued that the protective shell of *Erlebnis* can be imagined *as if* made of glass

because its vision can be imagined *as if* safeguarded by the glass of the camera's lens, as an allegory of the coldness of the photographic way of seeing (chapter 6). So, Hopper's painting is not just visual knowledge of reality, but visual knowledge of previous visual knowledge, of a reality already transformed into some sort of savage cinema by new mechanical media. *It could be said that Hopper's painting is not realistic because it depicts an immediate reality, but because immediate reality is no longer accessible but through the reproductive mechanism*. When photography becomes "the standard evidence" for real facts, "because of the thoroughgoing permeation of reality with mechanical equipment (…), the equipment-free aspect of reality here has become the height of artifice" (BENJAMIN: 2002-2, 112). And my last remark about this matter is that, *for this reason, Hopper needs an "inner cinema" as an artifice to paint "realistically" reproducible reality* (chapter 6).

Therefore, I have argued an internal connection (rather than a biographical or external one) between Hopper's painting and cinema. And this kind of connection cannot be explained in terms of influence but as a way of accounting for a visual reality produced by technological media, corresponding with the physical reality of a city erected by industrial machinery. Hopper's realism must be understood as *the painting of a reproduction*. Doubtless, this has contributed to the widespread influence of Hopper's scenes in films and has provided many of his paintings with a high coefficient of reproducibility. But this attention to *what is represented* in Hopper's paintings has also undermined, due to its overexposure, the visibility of *the representation* of such subjects (that is to say, the fact that Hopper does not reproduce, but he paints reproducibility). Because the diner represented in the painting belongs to the realm of reproducibility, often the painting is overlooked as if it was some kind of a reproduction exclusively defined by exhibition value. But the fact that Hopper was aware of visual clichés of his times does not mean that he, as an artist, accepted them (chapter 5).

6. *Art as photography?*

In sum, I am pointing to an alternative relationship between photography (or film) and painting, and a different form influence, although in quite hermetic terms, is suggested by Benjamin in his *Little history of photography*. There, he signals an exception to his general affirmation that photography destroys the aura: the early photographs from the nineteenth century. The essence of his argument is contained in this statement:

> No matter how artful the photographer can be, no matter how carefully posed his subject, the beholder feels an irresistible urge to search such a picture for the tiny spark of contingency, of the here and now, with which reality has (so to speak) seared the subject, to find the inconspicuous spot where in the immediacy of that long-forgotten moment the future nests so eloquently that we, looking back, may rediscover it (BENJAMIN: 1999-5, 510).

It is clear that Benjamin's vocabulary in this quotation belongs to the realm of the aura: the "here and now" takes part in his definitions of the phenomenon[120] and, as I have just underlined, the capability to look back is also characteristic of it. But I should ask: is the "inconspicuous spot" mentioned by Benjamin only a temporary feature of primitive photography, which will disappear soon after, "as the exhibition value (…) shows its superiority to the ritual value" (BENJAMIN: 2002-2, 108)? I am not suggesting that, contrary to what Benjamin affirms, *every* photograph retains the aura. I agree with what he says when talking about Atget's photographs, so appreciated by the Surrealists and by Berenice Abbot: "they suck the aura from reality like water from a sinking ship" (BENJAMIN, 1999-5, 518). Rather I am suggesting that this sinking ship is another metaphor for the vanishing of the aura. The same historical reasons which prevented Baudelaire from trying to follow the traces of Lamartine, Hugo or Musset in order to be a great poet, make the *Ferne* of the romantic view (*Fernsicht*) of this ship appear as a lie (as Baudelaire felt about the landscapes of the Salon of 1859) or, in other words, as a counterfeit experience (*Erlebnis*). In modern times, the remoteness of that ship can only be experienced when it is sinking, and can only be captured as the water which is bailed to keep it afloat.

[120]"(…) its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be. This unique existence of the work of art determined the history to which it was subject throughout the time of its existence" (BENJAMIN: 2002-2, 102).

Benjamin claims that we must discard the unfruitful debate of "photography as art" and turn to look at "art as photography" (BENJAMIN: 1999, 520). How to understand this strange turn? I argue that this does not mean that art should be replaced by photography (although Benjamin sometimes seems to be inclined to this conclusion), but a more complex idea. Whatever had happened in previous periods, now art cannot ignore the new industrial reality, the mechanical space and time which has become a sort of second nature whose visual perceptibility is being constructed by the new technological media.

Photography no longer rivals with painting for the *representation* of reality, it aims at visually *constructing* the new (technologically produced) reality. The fact that, even so, as Benjamin signals, captions are needed to interpret photographs, attests that photography still belongs to the realm of figuration (and, according to the upholders of artistic photography, it can never be reduced to a merely mechanical reproduction). Or, in other words, it attests that, considered as a mere reproduction, it lacks the dose of cult value necessary to awaken a community of feelings.

This photographic perception is an impoverished experience because it discards the "tiny spark of contingency" in order to make manageable the new reality. And this can be expressed, in Benjamin's language, by saying that technological reproducibility, so to speak, instilled in perception, results in an image which has only exhibition value, with no trace of cult value. In this new environment, art has to search for the "inconspicuous spot" wherein the future nests in a long-forgotten moment so that we may rediscover it. This spot is what turns into experience (*Erfahrung*) what had become inexperience (*Erlebnis*).

By formulating the hypothesis of an "inner cinema" in Hopper, I am not arguing that Hopper paints a photographic or filmic reproduction of his subject, but that he paints the subject *as if* observed by the protective eye whose privileged allegory is the camera. When analysing *House by the railroad* in the Part II of the dissertation, I proposed to consider it "as if it was an instant photograph taken through the train window" or "as if the canvas was a camera", but I emphasised that I was referring to the *metaphorical* presence of an internal camera (not a direct external influence). In Part III, I reformulated my hypothesis in the terms of Richard Wollheim's thesis that a certain kind of paintings

allow the external spectators to enter the represented scene *imaginatively* if they identify themselves with a metaphorical (unrepresented) internal spectator for whom the painter would have constructed a place near the viewpoint from which the scene is painted. My proposal, thus, is that, *if an internal spectator can be located in some Hopper's pictures, such spectator should be imagined as a metaphorical camera, that is to say, as a protective eye*.

Notwithstanding the parallelism with Wollheim's theory, this proposal presents some significant differences with it. The main one is that Wollheim's internal beholders are *total spectators*, i.e., they play, in painting, the same role that the omniscient narrators play in literature, so that, by means of imaginative identification with them, the readers or the viewers gain total access to the represented space due to privileged spectatorship. In contrast, in Hopper's paintings the position of the total (internal) spectator is excluded (or challenged), not in the sense that there is no internal spectator at all, but because the internal spectator is the inhuman gaze of the camera: as happens in journalism or in the kind of realist fiction that Hopper admired, the "voice" of the storyteller is excluded or minimized in order to grant the cold objectivity of the viewpoint. So to speak, *nobody* is looking; or, in other words, *anybody* — not a privileged spectator, but anybody who can peer through the camera's viewfinder "window"— can look. And this does not only affect those who watch, but also those who are watched. Included in my hypothesis is that it is possible to gain a better understanding of Hopper's painting if we *imagine* the figures in the scene *as if* they were film actors in the studio during a shooting session, what is something very different of comparing them to stage actors (chapter 6). The reason is that, as Benjamin states, while stage actors are always surrounded by the aura of their characters (that is to say, their role in the play), film actors in the studio are not yet any character and do not play a precise role (these matters will be only resolved in the editing process after the shooting).

Here lies, to my mind, a possible explanation for the fact that the returning of the gaze "of which our eyes never have their fill" is absent from most of Hopper's paintings. If the auratic perception is, according to Benjamin, the experience of the returning of the gaze coming from an unanimated being (for example, a painting), what we find in these empty eyes is exactly the opposite: the expectation of such returning is disappointed when we look at a human being, as it is masterly illustrated in Walker Evans' subway portraits

(chapter 6). My suggestion is that the failure of the returning of the gaze is not a casual but a structural feature in modern painting. And this is the strange charm that we find in the empty eyes of so many of Hopper's figures. *The appeal of this body without an owner, or these eyes without a gaze, constitutes the properly modern experience of the aura, that is to say, the experience of its vanishing*. And the charm of these eyes which know nothing of remoteness is what, in Hopper nudes, detaches *sexus* from *eros* (BENJAMIN: 2006, 339): as it can be especially observed in *A woman in the sun*, the figure's nudity is stark and almost cruel (although not obscene). This starkness is not only related to the cool tones used: it is an effect of the reduction of the distance and the corresponding increase of exhibition value, the camera-like coldness which turns the implicit charm of eroticism into the explicit appeal of sex (chapters 7 and 8).

Nevertheless, as happens with Wollheim's internal spectator, Hopper's internal camera is a spectator in motion (the horizontality or the obliqueness of the camera moving over rails as if in a travelling shot). And this mobile (internal) spectatorship, that is to say, the assumption of a mobile point of view, could be also the reason of the perspectival incongruences observed in the Hopper literature: the rivalry of different horizon lines which produces fluctuation between parallel and oblique planes, the unstable position of the spectator, the lack of spatial continuity or the visual uncertainty about the standpoint. These 'incongruences' are the equivalent, in Hopper's works, of the "tiny spark of contingency" or the "inconspicuous spot" mentioned by Benjamin. They are not features of *what is represented* in the painting (its exhibition value), but of the painting itself. My aim is not to reduce Hopper's painting to a camera-like vision of the city, but, on the contrary, to argue that *the fact of painting (not reproducing) this "inhuman" gaze makes it accessible to experience and, therefore, in a certain sense it humanizes such vision*.

What the modern artist looks for is neither the sublime remoteness of romantic landscapes nor the infinite snapshots of the flashing neon which mark the blink of the city streets, made just to turn all remoteness into a reducible (and reproducible) distance and, if possible, in an instant immediacy. In Baudelaire's writing about the *Perte d'auréole*, the poet's halo has fallen in the mire of the macadam. Likewise, the broken aura of contemporary things does not inhabit the moving red neon sign to which they are reduced in the twentieth century's urban scenery, but the "fiery pool reflecting in the asphalt" its light (BENJAMIN: 1996-5, 476). Hopper's painting is, so to speak, this reflection. The

inexperience —the “instant arrested in time”— can be reduced to exhibition value, but — this is Hopper’s commitment— it can also be painted. This might be the meaning of the strange project of “art as photography”.

7. *"With the utmost intensity"*

The camera's eye *does not* expect a returning gaze —it avoids such return. But we (the external spectators) *do*. And the fact that our expectation is disappointed is what provokes the fanciful projection of possible plots or denouements of the represented scenes. All of them are, so to speak, the attempts of the spectator to attract the attention —the gaze— of the empty eyes of the figures in the glass cell. And all of them fall apart one after the other as we study the painting. The reason is that, for Hopper, such a happy end would be a "trick ending", as he says about the "sugar-coated" American fiction (chapter 5).

Hopper's silence is hard to bear —not only for critics, but also for viewers. So, a lot of soundtracks have been proposed to avoid it. The repeated efforts of Hopper's interpreters to fill the painting with stories are attempts to correct the incongruences alluded to above and to ease the tension (or, as we might also say, to ease the pain of the poverty of experience), as are the never-ending "re-contextualizations". These efforts express the mourning for the diminishing of meaning as a consequence of the ruin of the shared stories and the crisis of the conventions about figuration of emotions to which I have referred in Part IV. But they also express the struggle for healing this pain appealing to substitute arguments, being the main ones the social plot of alienation and the psychological plot of loneliness. The paintings seem to be especially amenable to all these readings, in the same way that they appear particularly appropriate for film quotations and reproduction in advertisements, popular culture and gadgets. The point is that, whereas the viewer fights to reconstruct the storyline as he tries to reconstruct the horizon line to stabilize the self, Hopper *does not* permit this correction. And, as those who make such claims confess, if these issues are pursued to the end, the plot breaks down, because Hopper rejects such substitution. For this reason, the various readings hung on Hopper's works do not have longevity. In contrast to Benjamin, *Hopper did not intend to put art at the service of good (or wrong) causes —denouncing alienation and loneliness or promoting American identity—, but conceived of his work as a visual investigation about the modern gaze* (chapter 4).

Photography and film are the perfect visual embodiment of *Erlebnis*. And *Erlebnis* implies a reconstruction of experience, based on pragmatic motivations, which I have

compared with the film editing process: the isolation of the perceptions that the conscious mind can control, and its relocation in a consistent temporal sequence by giving up the integrity of experience in order to avoid a traumatic risk. That is to say, *Erlebnis* is like a selective *montage* of the *Erfahrung* made of shocks. Although it calms the tension for a while, it is "sterilized" for artistic purposes, says Benjamin, because experience is absent from it. Benjamin calls this pragmatic reconstruction an impoverished experience because, as happens in the film editing process, the price to be paid for the consistency of such reconstruction is the removal of the discordant fragments of experience incompatible with it —the tiny spark of contingency—, which remain unexperienced. The protective eye cannot go beyond the glass of the window —i.e., through the glass of the lens—, which is the protective shell of *Erlebnis*.

When Hopper paints this protective shell (not only the diner, the hotel room or the gas station, but each one of these subjects "as it really looks", that is to say, t*he way in which they are perceived*), the painting of *Erlebnis* is not itself *Erlebnis*, but *Erfahrung*, experience, because it makes visible the incongruences set apart in the pragmatic reconstruction (so to speak, it shows some of the frames discarded by the editor). I have just said that *Erlebnis* is the montage of experience, but this editing process should not be considered just as an individual strategy to manage the fragmentation of experience, but as a collective attempt to create an illusion of historical continuity. Also in this case in contrast to Benjamin, Hopper does not try to find another kind of montage (i.e., he does not appeal to another vision of history). *By means of painting, he dismounts the editing process —so the incongruences appear— to make a genuine experience of the visual debris of modernity, the discarded images threw away by the restless activity of the protective eye (the montage of the city), which have never been transformed into Erlebnis*. These are Hopper's "instants arrested in time". So, the task of the painter is close to the one of the ragman —so often invoked by Benjamin— who collects fragments of disregarded urban views to compensate for the poverty of his experience (chapter 8). The fact that such visual fragments are silent scenes could be (metaphorically) explained because such fragments are precisely the ones that have been excluded from synchronization with the soundtrack of the city tale (so, the voice which tells the story cannot be heard in them, or the captions which imprint a meaning to images cannot be read). *What is represented* in Hopper's pictures is "what modern man sees". But *the* (pictorial, not photographic) *representation* of what modern man sees makes visible in

the subjects the “tiny spark of contingency”, the “inconspicuous spot”, the visual incongruences or the fissures in the glass lens —in other words, what modern man does not see: the failures in the protective activity of *Erlebnis*. Hopper’s windows are his entire recollection of the failures of visual *Erlebnis* in the modern city (chapter 8). *Arresting these instants, Hopper liberates them from their subordination to the storyline. That is why they are silent*.

Hopper’s scenes are always dominated by homogeneous space and measurable time. But, by arresting an instant or by isolating a place, he manages to make appear a kind of silent “lost time” or “lost space” that, although excluded from the plausible and protective reconstruction of experience by conscious perception, can be recognised by the viewers as an unnoticed but extended part of their experience of space and time: the waiting spaces of inactivity, the empty times of boredom (chapter 8). Neither is this time before or after any other time (it seems to be out of the chronological series, “arrested”), nor is this space (like windows) inside or outside actual space. As essential to the modern experience as homogeneous space and measurable time, lost spaces and times are perceived as something unattainable or irretrievable. Hopper often emphasises this condition by a metaphorical visual barrier, like the tracks of *House by the railroad* or the *Nighthawks*’ glass window which seem to exclude from reality what is beyond such barrier (chapters 4 and 6). But, instead of suggesting the kind of remoteness that Benjamin attributes to the aura, it surrounds the subjects with a dark shadow or a menacing look, so that what lies on the other side of the barrier acquires the condition of uncanny. I have argued that this barrier can be imagined as the frontier of modernity (that is to say, the transformation of space and time and, therefore, of perception). Once this frontier has been crossed, there is no turning back except where there is a failure of the self-defensive mechanism of *Erlebnis*; in such a case, lost times and places return as uncanny, what is the same as saying that Hopper tells, by means of them, not a scene without aura, but the lack of aura of the scene. I would say, paraphrasing Benjamin, that *a picture without cult value (a picture which does not tell anything) is one kind of representation, but a picture which represents such deprivation is another*.

In the syntactic dimension of the paintings that have been analysed in this dissertation, the abovementioned compositional incongruences relate to the vagueness of the horizon line, the instability of volumes and the uncertainty regarding the viewer’s

position. In the semantic dimension, they refer to the dissolution of the storyline in frozen frames without resolution of the tension, and to the impenetrability of the meaning of the scene. The painting is not *Erlebnis* (it could not be, because *Erlebnis* is aesthetically sterilised). The painting is *Erfahrung*, but not *Erfahrung* without *Erlebnis* (which might be a definition of abstract painting), but *Erfahrung* of *Erlebnis*. That is why it contains a high dose of exhibition value, but *not only exhibition value*. To paint *Erlebnis* means to make the experience of the in-experience, to make in-experience (the poverty of experience) accessible to experience. The camera's eye shows us a scene without aura. The painter's eye, when painting this "inhuman" gaze, tells us the lack of aura of the scene (this is the painting's cult value). The difference between both operations could seem a small variance, but it contains the secret of Hopper's painting. The protective eye of the camera-like gaze surrounds the subject in a glass cell; but the painter's eye cannot be a protective one (chapters 2 and 6). Because of this, the instant arrested in time must be acutely represented "with the utmost intensity". *Painting breaks the protective shell provoking the sombre mood emanating from Hopper's scenes*.

Precisely because Hopper's intention is not, as it was the case in avant-gardism, to overcome the very notion of "art", his oils fit in Benjamin's category of historical works of art, that is to say, their exhibition value is referred to their cult value. Of course, this reference is shocking, because, given the irrelevance and emptiness of the represented "instant arrested in time", it could be thought that cult value is absent from the picture. But even when cult value is (in whole or in part) missing, the painting shows, in the failure of the reference, its own inability to tell a story[121]. If the failure is not a casual disappointment, but an intended feature —as it seems to be the case in twentieth-century realism—, I argue that it can be interpreted as synonymous with "vanishing of the aura".

[121] What Hopper overlooks about modern abstract painting is that it also belongs to the realm of the historical works of art. In my dissertation, I have used Benjamin's distinction of cult and exhibition values to develop another kind of impoverishment of experience not envisaged by him. I could summarize it by saying that, even if cult value is the main concern of abstract painting, it is never self-sufficient —the canvases are conceived for exhibition. What an abstract painting tells about internal emotions always refers, (although this reference can be inscrutable or perplexing) to what it shows. And even when exhibition value is (completely or partially) missing, the painting shows, in the failure of such reference, its own inability to show a shared recognisable and communicable world. In twentieth-century pictorial abstraction this frustration is not an unexpected setback, but a systematic result, and this is another expression of the vanishing of the aura. This reinforces what I have called the essential ambivalence of modern painting, that is to say, its insurmountable twofold condition.

But, how could a non-relevant instant reunite a community of feelings? In the case of Hopper, I have argued that this community is closer to what Georges Bataille called the community of those deprived of a community (BLANCHOT: 1984, 9) or, as could be also said, the community of those who only have in common their poverty of experience. This experience (*Erfahrung*) is what the *Erlebnis* piously hides behind its strenuous protective action to prevent shocks, trying to deny its poverty (its lack of *Erfahrung*) and pretending to fill its emptiness with the ornamental infinity of protective eye; but this reparation can never be achieved. Indeed, it cannot even make a modest progress, because, as in the Danaids' punishment, the basin has no bottom and loses its content at the same time that is filled, compulsively repeating "the process of continually starting over" of the clock from which is trying to escape, blocking in each attempt the access to the only thing which could fill the empty vessel or stop the bad infinity of the conveyor belt. This thing — which, in fact, is no-thing— is, in the most fortunate case, what I called "the accomplished poem", a compound of poetic time which halts the assembly line or the hypnotic ornament; when this accomplishment fails —and perhaps this is the most genuine nature of the modern artwork—, the poem or the painting is a procedure to turn that failure into a communicable experience. In both cases, art is *another way* of surviving the poverty of experience *without denying its reality or, in other words, without rejecting or overcoming modernity.*

Although I do think I have answered the major questions I proposed throughout the chapters, further developments are possible. I feel that this research has opened the road to new fields of investigation which could benefit from the approach I have developed. The concept of poverty of experience and the polarity cult/exhibition, as they have been reinterpreted in this thesis and as they have been enriched by the analysis of Hopper's works, could inspire the continuation of work at least in two main paths. The first one, which I would call 'historical', could be an investigation of American modern painting in the decades of 1960 and 1970, especially focused on Pop art, which many times I have felt very appealing while I was writing my dissertation on Hopper. This would deal, so to speak, with the posterity of aura in postmodernism and with the conflictive developments towards conceptualism. The other direction, which I would call 'thematic', would consist of an extension of the focus to other European and American artists who share the same period considered in this dissertation, which could help to

complete the map of the artistic options in the interwar period and to expand the limits of the critical approach.

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INTRODUCTION

[Fig. 1] Edward Hopper, *Morning in a city*, 1944, oil on canvas, Williams College Museum of art, Massachusetts, 112.5 x 152 cm.

[Fig. 2] Gregory Crewdson, *Woman at a Vanity*, 2004 Digital chromogenic print, 144.8 x 223.6 cm.

PART I

[Fig.3] C.Monet, *Impression, sunrise*, 48 x 63cm, Marmottan Monet Museum, Paris

[Fig.4] E. Manet, *Olympia*, 1863, 130.5 x 190 cm, Orsay museum, Paris

PART II

[Fig.5] A. Stieglitz, *The hand of Man*,1902 Gelatine silver print, 8,9x11,9 cm The Art Institute of Chicago

[Fig.6] R. Henri, *Sylvester – Smiling,* 1914, 61 x 50.8 cm., Private Collection.

[Fig. 7] E. Hopper, *Manhattan Bridge Loop*, 1928, 88.9 cm × 152.4 cm, Addison Gallery of American Art, Andover, MA.

[Fig. 8] J. Sloan, *A Window on the street*, 1912, 66 x 81.28 cm., Bowdoin college Museum

[Fig.9] E. Hopper, *The City*, 1927, 93.98 x 69.85 cm University of Arizona Museum of Art

[Fig.10] J. Sloan, *Six O'clock, Winter*, 1912, 66.36 x 81.28 cm, Philips Collection, Washington, DC, US;

[Fig.11] E. Hopper, *Railroad Train*, 1908,61.6 cm × 73.66 cm., Addison Gallery of American Art, Andover MA

[Fig.12] J. Sloan, *Sunset, West-Twenty third Street* , 1906, 61.91 x 92.1 cm, Joslyn Art Museum, Omaha Nebraska

[Fig.13] E. Hopper, *City Roofs*, 1932, 73.7 × 91.4 cm, Whitney Museum of American Art , New York;

[Fig.14] E. Hopper, *Roofs in Washington Square*, 1926, 33.34 × 49.37 cm, Carnegie Museum, Pittsburgh

[122] Unless indicated otherwise, the works are oil on canvas.

[Fig.15] E. Hopper, *House by the Railroad*, 1925, 73.7 x 61 cm , Museum of Modern Art, New York

[Fig.16] E. Hopper, *American Landscape,* 1920, Etching, 31.1 x 18.4 cm, Philadelphia Museum of Art

[Fig.17] E Hopper, *Queensborough Bridge*, 1916, 88.9x152.4cm. Whitney Museum of American Art

[Fig.18] Edward Hopper, *Le Pont Royal*, 1909, 61 cm × 73.8 cm, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York

[Fig.19] E. Hopper *From Williamsburg Bridge*, 1928,74.6 cm × 111.1 cm, Metropolitan Museum of art.

[Fig.20] Edward Hopper, *Corn Hill*, 1930, 72.39 x 107.95 cm , McNay Art Institute,San Antonio

[Fig.21] E. Hopper, *Railroad Sunset*, 1929, 74.5 cm × 122.2 cm, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York

[Fig.22] E. Hopper, *Gas*, 1940, 66.7 x 102.2 cm, Museum of Modern Art, New York

PART III

[Fig.23] Edward Hopper, *Nighthawks*, 1942, 84.1x 152.4 cm, Art institute of Chicago

[Fig.24] The savage eye (Strick, Maddow and Meyer, 1960)

[Fig.25] W. Evans, *South Street, New York*, 1956, Gelatin silver print 16.2 x 25.1cm., Private Collection.

[Fig.26] E. Hopper, *Night Shadows*, 1921, 17.6 x 20.7cm, etching, Museum of Modern Art

[Fig. 27] *Dial 1119* (Mayer, 1950)

[Fig.28] *The Killers* (Siodmak, 1946) and Nighthawks details (Hopper, 1942)

[Figs. 29] *The Killers* (Siodmak, 1946), Nighthawks (Hopper, 1942) and Gas (Hopper, 1940)

[Fig. 30] E. Hopper, *Office at night*, 1940, 56.4 cm × 63.8 cm, Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, Minnesota

[Fig.31] E. Hopper, *Pennsylvania coaltown*, 1947,71.12x 101.6 cm, Butler Institute of American Art Ohio

[Fig.32] E. Hopper, *Chop suey*, 1929, 81.3 x 96.5, Private Collection

[Fig.33] E. Hopper, *House at dusk*, 1935, 127 x 92.71 cm, Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond.

[Fig. 34] E. Hopper, *Apartment houses* ,1923, 60.96 x 73.5 cm, Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts

[Fig. 35] E. Hopper, *Cape Cod Morning*, 1950, 86.7 x 102.3 cm, Smithsonian American Art Museum

[Fig.36] E. Hopper, *August in the city*, 1945, 58.4x76.2 cm, Norton Museum of Art, Florida

[Fig.37] E. Hopper, *Drug Store*, 1927101.92 x 73.66cm, Museum of Fine Arts Boston

[Fig.38] E. Hopper, *New York Office* , 1962, 101.6 x 139.7, Montgomery Museum of Fine Arts

[Fig. 39] E. Hopper, *Night windows*, 1928, Museum of Modern Art, New York

[Fig.40] E. Manet, *At the cafe*, 1878, , 78 × 84 cm., Oskar Reinhart Foundation, Winterthur, Switzerland

[Fig. 41] E. Hopper, *Room in New York* [193273.66 x 93.02cm, Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery and Sculpture Garden, Lincoln, NE

[Fig..42] E. Hopper, *Early Sunday Morning*, 1930, Whitney Museum of American Art, 89.4x153cm, Whitney Museum of American Art

[Fig.43] E. Hopper, *Chop suey* (detail), 1929

[Fig.44] E. Manet *Un bar aux Folies Berger*, 1882, 96x130cm, Courtauld Gallery, London

[Fig.45] E. Hopper, *East side interior*, 1922, 20x25.1cm, Metropolitan Museum of Arts, New York;

[Fig.46] E. Hopper, *Sunlight in a cafeteria*, 1958, 102.1x153.7cm, Yale University Art Gallery

[Fig. 47] E. Hopper, *Automat*, 1927, 71.4x91.4cm, Des Moines Art Center, Des Moines

[Fig.48] E. Hopper, *Hotel Room*, 1931, 152.4x165.7cm, Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza, Madrid

[Figs. 49-50] W. Evans, 1941, *Subway portraits*, Gelatine Silver Prints, 17,6 x 19,1 cm., MoMa Collection

PART IV

[Fig.51] E. Hopper, *Morning Sun*, 1952, 101.98x 71.5, Columbus Museum of Art, Columbus, OH, US

[Fig.52] E. Hopper, *A woman in the sun*, 1961, 101.9x152.9cm, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York

[Fig.53] E. Hopper, *Hotel by a railroad*, 1952, 101.9 x 79.37, Hirshorn museum and sculpture garden, Smithsonian museum

[Fig,54] E. Hopper, *Intermission*, 1963, 101.6x152.4, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art

[Fig.55] E. Hopper, *Conference at Night*, 1949, 70x100cm, Wichita Art Museum, Kansas

[Fig.56] E. Hopper, *Study for Morning Sun*, 1952. Fabricated chalk and graphite pencil on paper, 12 1/16 × 18 15/16 in. (30.6 × 48.1 cm). Whitney Museum of American Art, New York

[Fig. 57] E. Hopper, *Sun in an empty room*, 1963, Whitney Museum of American Art

[Fig.58] Edward Hopper, *Stairway*, 1949,40.6x30.2cm Whitney Museum of American Art

[Fig.59] C. Crivelli, *The Virgin Annunciate*, Panel, 36.2 x 45.5 x 2.0 cm (height in centre , 60.2), Städel Museum, Frankfurt am Maine

[Fig.60] C. D. Friedrich, *Woman at the window,* 1822, 73x44cm, Altenationalgalerie, Staartliche museen zu Berlin

[Fig.61] E. Hopper, *Girlie Show*, 1941, 81.3x 96.5, Collection de Fayez Sarofim

[Fig.62] E. Hopper, *Summer evening*, 76.2x106.6, Private Collection

[Fig.63] E. Hopper, *Sunday*, 1926, 86.36x73.66, The Philips Collection, Washington, D.C

[Fig.64] M. Duchamp, *Nude Descending a Staircase n.2,* 1912, 147x89.2cm, Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia

[Fig.65] E. Hopper, *Hotel Lobby,* 1943, 81.9x103.5cm. Indianapolis Museum of Art

[Fig.66] E.Hopper, *New York Restaurant*, 1922, Muskegon Art Museum, Michigan;

[Fig.67] E. Hopper, *Western Motel*, 1957, 7.8x128.3cm Yale University Art Gallery;

[Fig. 68] Edward Hopper, *Hotel Window,* 1955, 101.6x139.7cm, The Forbes Magazine Collection

[Fig.69] E. Hopper, *New York Movie*, 1939, 81.9x101.9cm, Museum of Modern Art, New York

[Fig.70] E.Hopper*, 7 A.M*, 1948, 76.7x101.9cm, Whitney Museum of American Art

[Fig.71] E. Hopper, *Office in a small city*, 1953, 71cmx102cm, The Metropolitan Museum of Art; [Fig.72] [Fig. 72] E. Hopper, *The Circle Theater*, 1936, 68.58x91.44cm, Private collection

[Fig.73] E. Hopper, *Automat* (detail) Des Moines Art Center

[Fig. 74] E. Hopper, [Eleven A.M,1926, 71.3x91.6 Smithsonian American Art museum, Washington D.C.

WORKS CITED BUT NOT REPRODUCED IN THE TEXT.

V. Kandinsky *Improvisation 27 (Garden of Love I*I), 1912 120.3x140cm, The Metropolitan Mkuseum, New York

E Hopper, *Sailing*, 1911, 60.96x 73.66cm, Carnegie Museum of art, Pittsburgh

J. Sloan *The city from Greenwich Village*, 66.04x85.73 cm, National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C

J. Sloan, *Street, Lilacs, Noon Sun*, 1918, 50.80 x 60,96 cm, The Kraushaar Gallerries, New York

J. Sloan, *Our red cottage*, 1916, 40.64cm x50.8cm, Private Collection

J. Sloan, *Sally and Paul, Reds and Greens*, 51.12 x61.6cm, Private Collection

E. Hopper, *Cape Cod Evening*, 1939,76.2x 101.6cm, National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C

E. Hopper *Bridge on the seine*, 1909, 60x73.3cm, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York

E. Hopper, *Le Pavillon de Flore*, 1909, 60x73.2cm, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York

E. Hopper, *The Railroad*, 1922, Etching, 19.9x 24.9cm, The Metropolitan Museum, New York

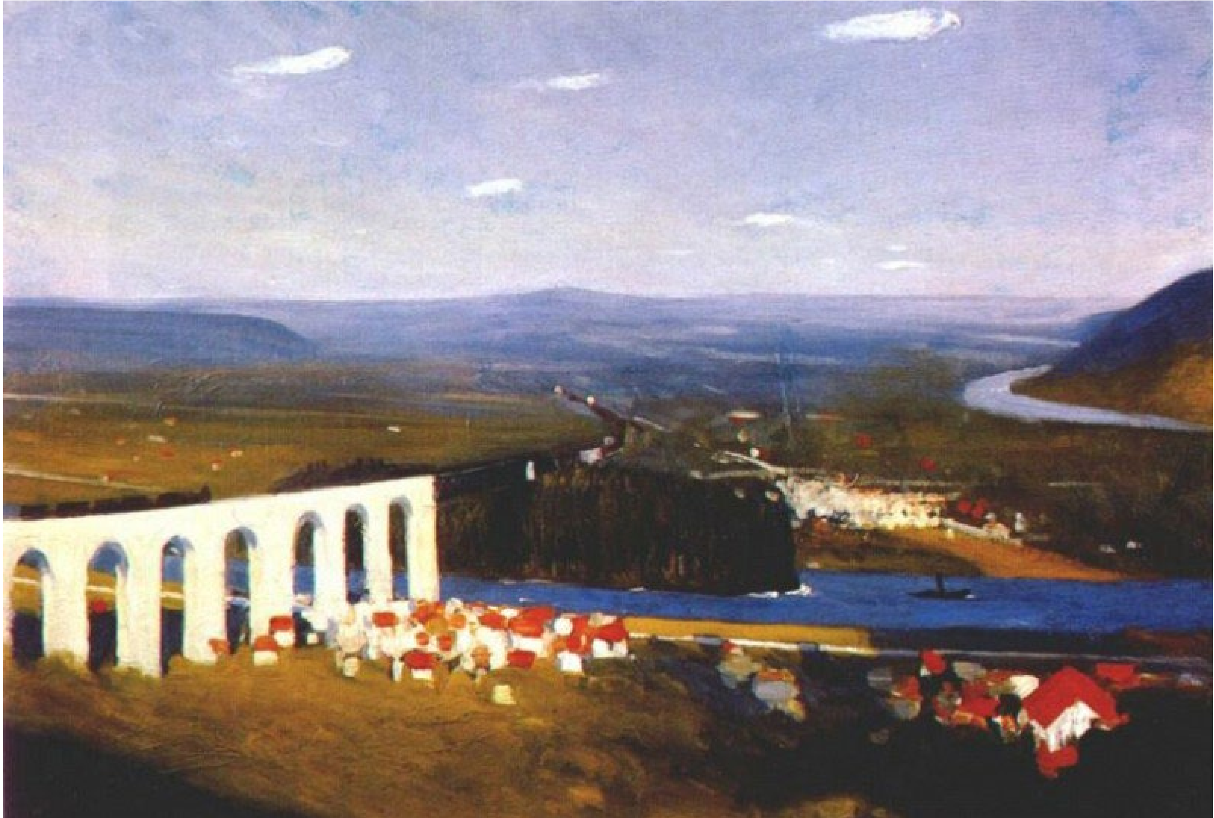
E Hopper, *New York, New Haven and Hartford,* 1931, 127x81 cm, Indianapolis Museum of Art

E Hopper, *The bootleggers*, 1925, 76.52z96.52cm Currier Museum of Art, Manchester, New Hampshire

E. Hopper, *Lighthouse Hill*, 1927, 71.76x100.33cm, Dallas Museum of Art

E. Hopper, *Lighthouse and Buildings*, 1927, 34.3x49.5cm, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

E. Hopper, *Burly Cobb's house South Truro*, 1933, 64.1x92.1cm, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York



E. Hopper, *Valley of the Seine*, 1909, 66x96.4cm, Whitney Museum of American Art

E. Hopper, *Ryders House*, 1933, 91.8x99.99cm, Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington D.C

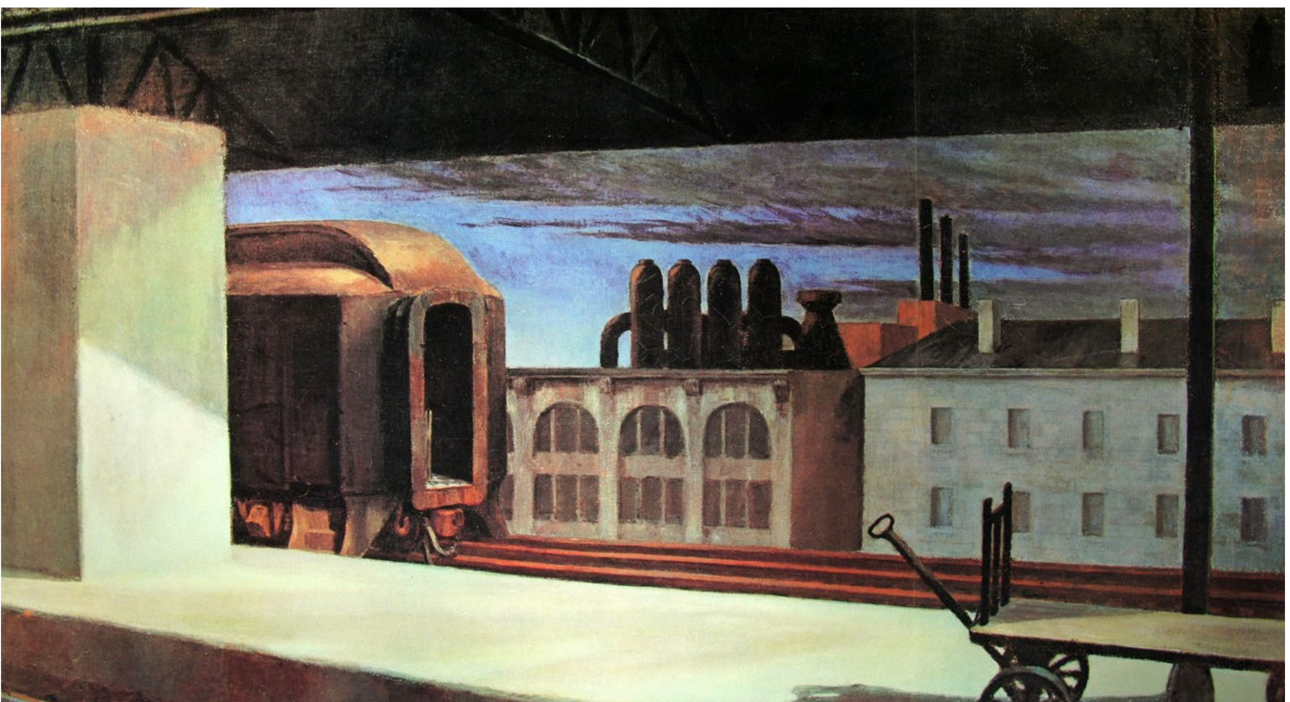
E. Hopper, *South Truro Church*, 1930, 9.53x22cm, Private Collection

E. Hopper, *Corn Hill*, 1930, 72.39x107.95cm,McNay Art Museum, San Antonio, Texas

E. Hopper, *Freight Car at Truro*, 1931, 50.2x34.9cm Watercolor, Private Collection

Edward Hopper, *Locomotive*, 1925, Watercolour and graphite on paper, 35.2x50.8 cm., New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

E. Hopper, *The El Station*, 1908, 51.4x74.5cm. Whitney Museum of American Art, New York



E. Hopper, *Dawn in Pennsylvania*, 1942, 61.91x112.4cm, Terra Foundation for American Art, Chicago

E. Hopper, *Chair Car*, 1965, 127x101.6cm, Private Collection

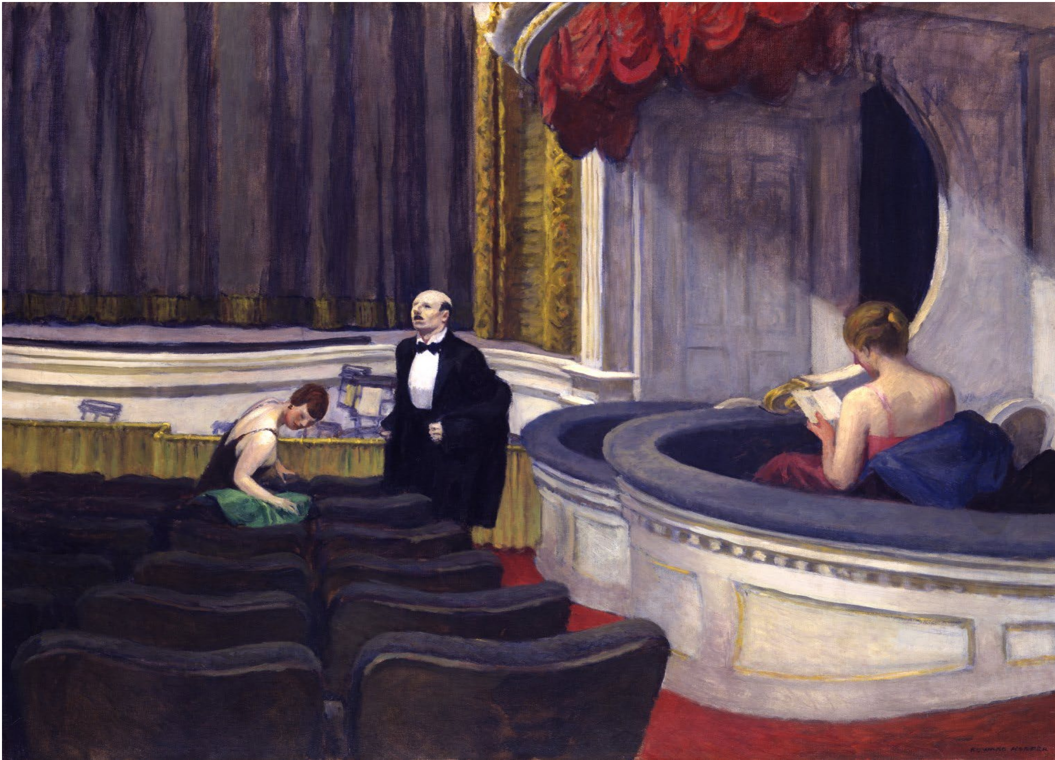
E. Hopper, *Compartment C , Car 293*, 1938, IBM Corporation Collection

E. Hopper, *Sunlight on brownstones*, 1956, 77.05x101.88cm Wichita Art Musem

E. Hopper, *Second Story Sunlight*, 1960, 102.1x127.3cm, Whitney Museum of American Art , New York

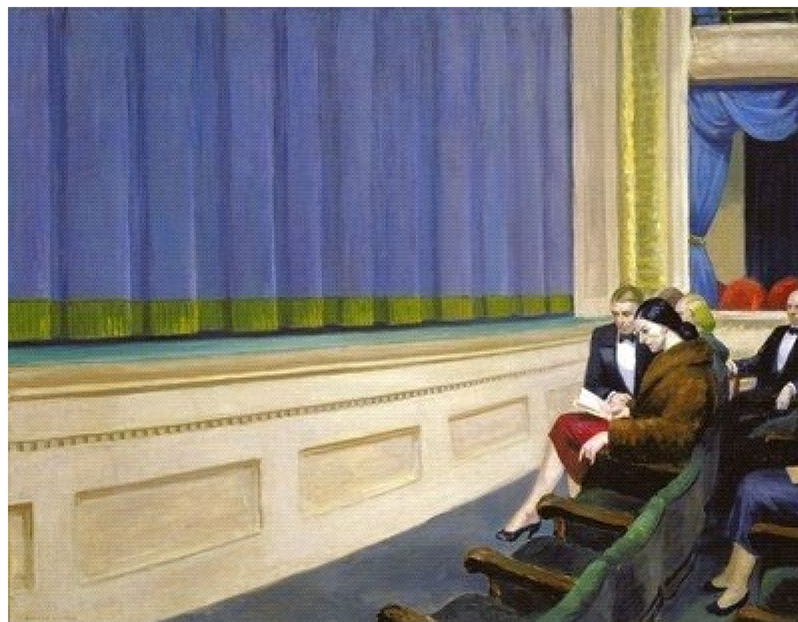
E. Hopper, *High Noon*, 1949, 70x100cm, Dayton Art Institute, Ohio

E. Hopper, *South Carolina Morning*, 1955, 77.2x102.2cm, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York



E. Hopper, *Two on the aisle*, 1927, 102.2x122.6cm, Toledo Museum of Art

E. Hopper, *Sheridan Theatre*, 1937, Newark Museum



E. Hopper, *First row orchestra*, 1951, 79x101.9cm, Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden

E. Hopper, *Two comedians*, 1965, 73.7x101.6cm, Private Collection

E. Hopper, *Rooms for tourists*, 1945, 76.2x101.6cm, Yale University Art Gallery

E. Degas, *L'Absinthe,* 1875, 92x68cm, Musee d' Orsay, Paris

Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, *Le bar,* 1898, gouache sur cartone, 81,5 x 60 cm Kunsthaus Zürich, Zurich.

E. Hopper, *Soir bleu*, 1914, Whitney Museum of American Art, 91.8x182.7cm

D. Velazquez *Las Meninas*, 1656, 3.18x2.76m, Museo Nacional del Prado

E. Manet, *The execution of Emperor Maximilian*, 1868, 2.52x2.05m, Kunsthalle Mannheim

Titian, *Venus of Urbino*, 1534, 1.19x1.65m, Uffizi Gallery

E. Hopper *Tables for ladie*s, 1930, 122.5x60.25cm, Metropolitan Museum of Art

E. Hopper, *Excursion into Philosophy*, 1959, private collection

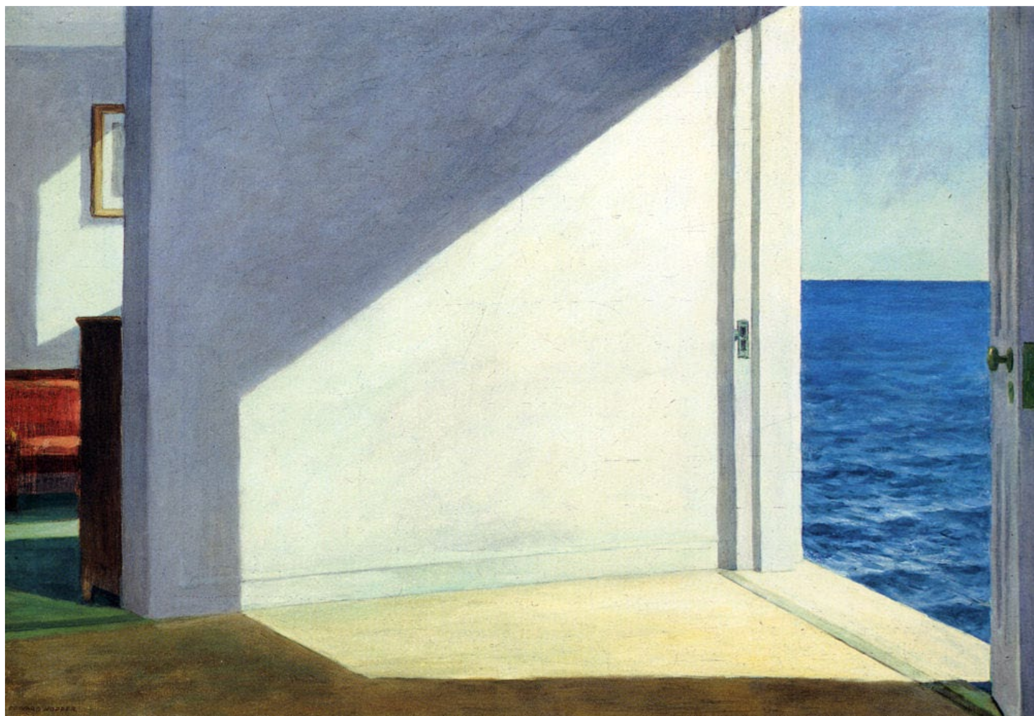
E. Hopper, *Summer in the city,* 1950, 76x51cm, Private Collection

E. Hopper *Girl at a sewing machine,* 1921, 48x46cm, Thyssen-Bornemisza Museum, Madrid

E. Hopper, *Barber Shop*, 1931, 60 in x 78 in, Neuberger Museum of Art

E. Hopper, *People in the sun*, 1960, 102.6x153.4cm Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington

E. Hopper *Room in Brooklyn*, 1932, 73.98x86.36cm, Museum of Dine Arts, Boston



E. Hopper, *Rooms by the sea*, 1951, 74.3x101.6cm Yale University Art Gallery

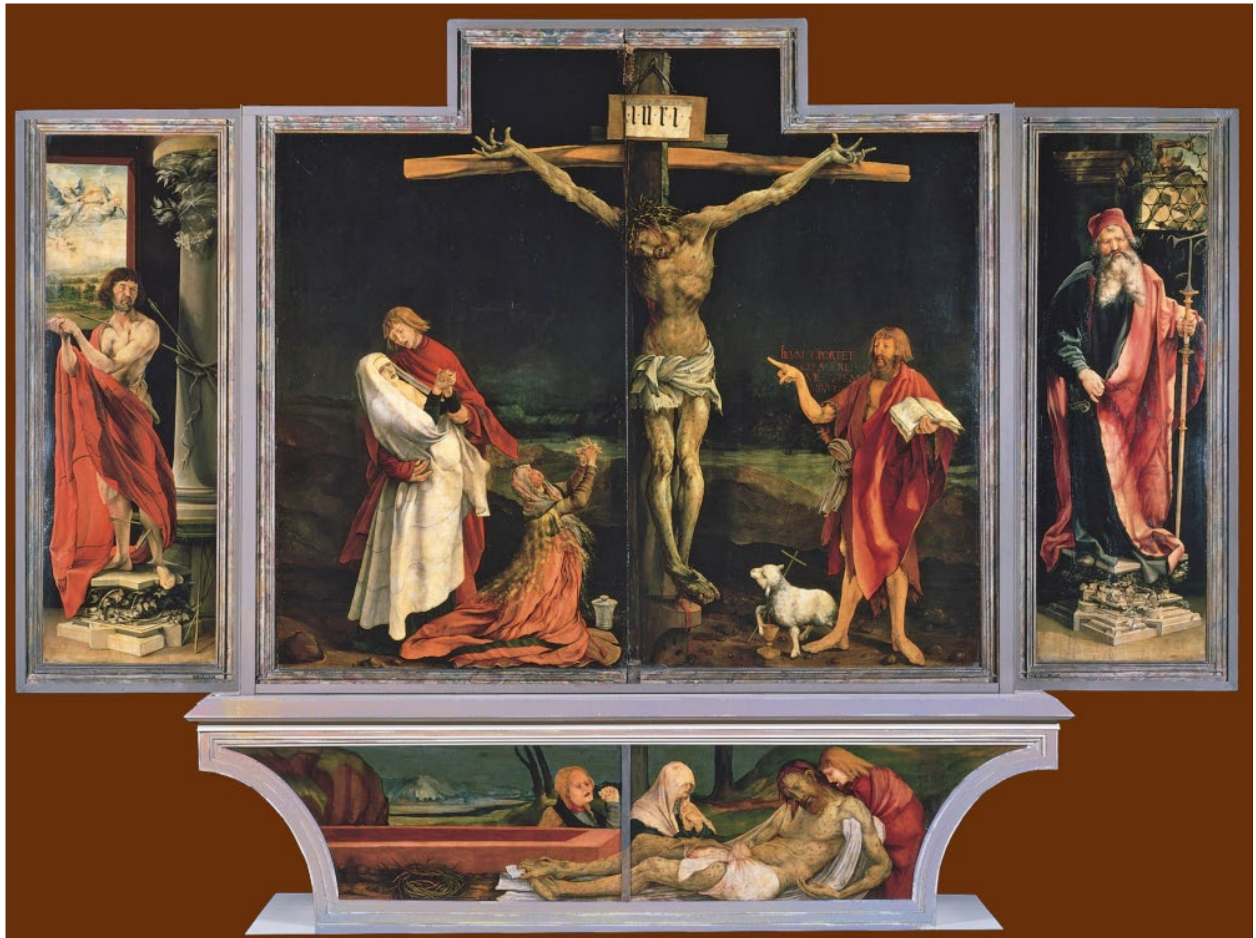
E. Hopper, *Morning in a city*, 1944, 112x153cm, Williams College Museum of Art, Williamstown

J.A Ingres, *The small bather*, 1826, 32.7x25.1cm, Phillips Collection, Washington

J.A Ingres, *The Turkish Bath*, 1863, 1.08x1.08m, Louvre Museum, Paris

C. Friedrich, *Woman before the rising sun, (woman before the setting sun)*, 1818,22x30cm, Museum Folkwang, Essen

S. Botticelli, *Cestello Annunciation*, 1489, 150x156cm, Uffizi, Florence



M. Grunewald, *The Isenheim Alterpiece*, 1512-1516, Unterlinden Museum, Colmar, France