

Summary

The Virtual Hopper. Images in a Remembering Look

The Virtual Hopper concerns Edward Hopper's painting, analyzed in terms of its relation to the broader field of visual culture, with a particular focus on painting, photography, cinema and popular culture. The book offers an analytical response to the phenomenon of this American painter's art both as it relates to the tradition of painting in general and to its rich "afterlife" in the 20th and 21st centuries. Viewing Hopper's work from the perspective of its diffusion requires a methodological framework focused on the dialogical relations that can exist between images and a diverse array of media.

An extensive introduction explains the book's theoretical framework. First, Jacques Monory's *Hommage à Hopper* (1971) is discussed in terms of its dialogical relationship to Hopper's *oeuvre*, as it quotes both Hopper's work and photographic and filmic images, combining them on the surface of the canvas. Monory's image becomes emblematic of the differential, virtual screen produced between Hopper's work and the visual associations and memories of other images generated by his paintings in the spectator. These images engage in a play of difference, transforming the viewer's perception of them and, as a result, their meaning. While the outcome of such a visual dialogue in the case of artists is a new image, for art historians and critics, the process results in a new text.

HOPPER in the title becomes an active signature that creates a dense visual network, an active field of traces – a proper name that designates a particular visual quality, not the person himself. Thus the artist's intentions do not govern the meaning of the work but the response the work generates in the spectator. I propose thinking about Hopper as a cultural text, a visual network woven from both his paintings and their traces found in other images referring to them. The book's primary concern is thus with THE LIFE AND AFTERLIFE OF IMAGES, and not the life of the artist. Such an approach, which responds to the impact images have on spectators in the era of "pictorial turn" with diverse channels of their circulation, leads to a radical redefinition of the traditional model of the artistic monograph.

The crucial category of VIRTUALITY refers to the impact Hopper's paintings have on viewers, the importance of memory and imagination

in response to them; it refers to the often forgotten Latin meaning of *virtus* as “the power to act effectively and have influence without the intervention of matter”. The term has been also long used in philosophy as a synonym for “potential”, as in waiting to be actualized. Virtuality in Henri Bergson’s philosophy – which is very important for this book – means the immateriality of memory and its active role in the process of perception, which is always connected with the memory-images it triggers. Thus the “virtual Hopper” refers to the sphere of functioning of Hopper’s pictures as memory-images and visual traces, between the actual image and its memory; it also expresses the potential and often actualized power of these images to generate and dialogize with other images, to circulate in a variety of visual realms, to multiply and destabilize meaning and provoke memory-related or phantasmatic projections. Seeing Hopper’s works in dialogue with other images is facilitated by such qualities in the painting as synthetic, minimalist realism, the marginalization of painterly matter and chromatic harmonies (“inherent reproducibility”), “empty” fields of canvas, and narrative ambiguities. Another side of “the virtual Hopper” is pictorial traces, elements of other works which awake the memory of Hopper’s work, ready to be actualized and remembered, engaged in a differential dialogue, while remaining physically absent. Therefore, to describe the look that the virtual Hopper invites, I use Kaja Silverman’s notion of a REMEMBERING LOOK.

My use of another key term – IMAGE – was inspired mostly by Hans Belting’s anthropological approach to images which get re-mediated and re-activated both as actual or mental/memory entities. I theorize the circulation of images and the crystallization of their meanings by referring to the theory of INTERTEXTUALITY (J. Kristeva, R. Barthes, J. Derrida) and its notion of the text as a network of signifiers, differing and deferring any ultimate meaning. While intertextuality accounts for the diffusive aspect of Hopper’s afterlife, I draw on the art-historical HERMENEUTICS of the image, which favors the “internal” meaning of works of art to analyze the visual, picture-specific premises of their dialogical way of being. The combination of these two approaches, allows the interpreter to “introduce the other” into a detailed reading of individual works and the other way round – to think about Hopper’s traces without losing sight of the work they refer to and virtually transform. To describe such a combined citational, intertextual mode for the reception of these works and the perceptual effect they have on viewers, I have coined the term PERCITATION (perception + citation).

The above-described perspective also implies an unorthodox understanding of HISTORY, especially the history of art, as a field of continuous

construction and re-vision in the relationship between past and present. The temporal complexity of images and their meanings is unavoidably embedded in the historical and cultural position of the spectator. I refer here to Mieke Bal's idea of preposterous history and Georges Didi-Huberman's discussion of anachronism, which he claims is inherent in art history.

In the first part of the book, titled *Hopper's Text*, I analyze the expanded discursive field around the American artist's work, the textual infrastructure of the virtual Hopper. The first chapter, *The Unspeakable Picture*, is devoted to the issue of HOPPER'S SILENCE. I argue that despite the apparent withheld narrative and the muteness of the paintings, there is a continuous "visual dialogue" between images. The *topos* of pictorial silence is subverted by a vivid inter pictorial and intermedial exchange – which gives voice to the otherwise "silent" works. The second subchapter concerns the problem of MELANCHOLY IN HOPPER, viewed through Julia Kristeva's work on melancholy, which accounts for the lacking affect, and the ascetic or minimalist painterly idiom, also relevant in Hopper's case. The viewer assumes the role of the psychoanalyst: with his or her archive of images, s/he is one who "saves" the pictures from their melancholic solitude and symbolic inertia. The third part of the first chapter is devoted to THE AUTHOR'S TEXT, a reading of the artist's statements and selected "biographems". I carefully read Hopper's statements and demonstrate his incapacity to fix the meaning of his work, and how much space is left for interpretation, which facilitates the future "afterlife" of his works. Through the image we recuperate and re-construct authorial intention as a textual being, not a controlling entity.

In the second chapter, *Tracing Hopper*. I place Hopper in a HISTORICAL CONTEXT and analyze the dense network of references in the literature to a variety of tendencies or styles and to individual artists. An overview of these texts demonstrates that attempts to classify Hopper's work, to find an already familiar, "ready-made" language or a stylistic label to talk about his work, have never been successful or satisfactory, and that Hopper's work has always resisted such attempts. The span of references is very broad and thus telling: from Vermeer to contemporary art, including photography, film and new media. The traces of Hopper's pictures, comprising a heterogeneous fabric of references, overcome stylistic and temporal constraints and, though diffused, invite spectators to revisit Hopper's work.

Next, I describe a renewal of interest in the artist's work, a HOPPER RENAISSANCE, that began in the 1980s, a decade marked by both a renewed interest in painting and, paradoxically, a postmodernist collapse in media specificity and belief in iconic transparency. Separate subchapters are devoted to the issue of photography and cinema in the context of Hopper's

work. References and comparisons to these media appeared as early as the 1930s and 1940s. However, surprisingly, it was Clement Greenberg who first noticed and stated what I claim to be one of the most important qualities of Hopper's painting – its media-related differential specificity. But not until the 1980s did it become the object of more in-depth discussion, sometimes resulting in contextual, inter pictorial exhibitions.

The third chapter, *Pictorial Constellations*, concentrates on EXHIBITIONS of Hopper's work set in the context of other images. I analyze the spatial arrangement of items in gallery spaces and reproductions in catalogues, which can be discussed in terms of PICTORIAL CONSTELLATIONS. They represent realizations of Hopper's works' "desire" to dialogize and be seen with the other – the afterlife of his works that constitutes the "virtual Hopper". The theoretical framework here is connected to the original ideas and subsequent revisions of Aby Warburg's *Mnemosyne* atlas, André Malraux's *Museum Without Walls* and Walter Benjamin's concept of dialectical image.

The fourth chapter, *Seeing (with) Hopper*, is framed by the notions of repetition and difference. It starts with a subchapter devoted to the INTERNAL REPETITION of compositional structures and motifs, which creates the visual quality of THE HOPPERESQUE: a set of immediately recognizable patterns to which Hopper returned in many pictures. This, in turn, is related to the phenomenon of "seeing with Hopper" – the experience of remembering his works in their absence, outside of the context of art, in everyday situations. The hopperesque is discussed here in terms of the discourse of the *picturesque*, the overlap of pictorial convention and reality; tellingly, it is a compound in which the word "picture" is replaced by "hopper". In the last subchapter, I discuss the experience of *déjà vu* and the Freudian uncanny, often brought up in texts on Hopper. The *déjà vu* – the "already seen", which relates to Derrida's differential "always already", aptly summarizes the experience of Hopper's pictures: always having been already seen.

The second part of the book, *Analyses – Close-Ups*, consists of four chapters devoted to inter pictorial, "virtual analyses" of Hopper's paintings in dialogue, or rather polilogue, with other works of art in diverse media. One chapter each is devoted respectively to painting, photography, film and popular culture. In the last case, the main focus is on the reception of one of Hopper's painting: the iconic *Nighthawks* (1942). Each interpretation, as the titles of the chapters suggest (e.g. *Close-up: painting* etc.), takes a closer look at one or more works, a record of the process of seeing that is activated by the memory of other images – both those mentioned in the literature on Hopper, and those I introduce. This, in turn, generates a discussion of diverse issues related to modes of seeing and representation, the politics of

vision, the cultural context, etc. Each interpretation tells a different pictorial story specific and shows the productive power of Hopper's paintings in terms of the meanings they generate.

In the chapter *Close-up: painting*, works by Hopper such as *Morning in a City*, *Room in Brooklyn*, *Apartment Houses* or *Portrait of Orleans* interact with Jan Vermeer, Vilhelm Hammershøi, Edgar Degas, pop-art, Robert Morris and Ken Aptekar (along with other "side-references" to images in other media). The interpretations, supported with attentive analysis to certain details, make two or more images differentially "adhere" and interconnect. What is usually merely boiled down to a remark on similarity and possible influence is developed here into an extensive analysis. The assumption that the other is not only outside, but also inscribed in Hopper's work, presupposed or "desired" by it – entitles the interpreter to weave other images into his reading of a picture and does justice both to the visual characteristics of an individual picture and, without losing touch with "the visual", its functioning in a broader cultural context.

The chapter *Close-up: photography* starts with a concise overview of the historical and theoretical relation between photography and painting. I then discuss Gail Levin's book/photographic project *Hopper's Places*, using photographs of real places painted by the New York artist. I think of them as photographs of virtual paintings "developed" in Levin's mind when seeing a "Hopper place". This is the case when we take photographs reacting not so much to the view of reality as to what it makes us remember. The following subchapters concern dialogues between Hopper's paintings and works by such artists as Walker Evans, William Eggleston, Jeff Wall, Per Bak Jensen, Joel Meyerowitz, Cindy Sherman and Gregory Crewdson. In the course of the analysis, a variety of theoretical issues are brought up, such as the relation between a painting and reality as mediated by photography, and the Lacanian notion of the "photographing gaze". Subchapters on dialogues with works by Crewdson and Sherman, with their cinematic quality, create a smooth transition into the next part, which concerns film.

The next chapter, *Close-up: Film*, regards Hopper in a cinematic context. Following a theoretical discussion of Raymond Bellour's "unattainable text" and Roland Barthes "third meaning", which are relevant for the filmic still-like quality of Hopper's images, I look at the artist's works through the lens of films in which his works are quoted in variety of ways. One of them is the form of an intentionally staged *tableaux vivants*: the case of *New York Movie* and Herbert Ross' *Pennies from Heaven* or *Woman in the Sun*, and Andrzej Wajda's *Sweet Rush*. There are also less obvious cases, such as the visual associations with Yasujiro Ozu's "pillow shots" and Michelangelo

Antonioni's filmic sequences, e.g. from *La Notte*. A separate subchapter is devoted to Hopper's famous *House by the Railroad* and Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho*, in which I pose the question if Hitchcock's film quotes Hopper's house or Hopper's painting of a house as a specific pictorial proposition. Percipitonal experience of film shows that both above-mentioned aspects of the painting-film relationship complement each other. Finally, I look at the project *Strings of Time* by the renowned Polish intermedia artist Izabella Gustowska, who made a number of videos, which intricately combine Hopper's works with filmic fragments, audio-visually entwining the two. I claim that her "figurations of the virtual" most successfully realize this idea and visualize the space of "the virtual Hopper". To sum up, Hopper in film, both intentionally quoted or as an unintentional visual effect generating the memory of his works, should be regarded as a practical realization of the cinematic effect often mentioned by scholars writing on Hopper, including its stilled quality with the potentiality for movement and its multilayered temporality. Hopper in film is virtuality in motion and time.

The last chapter is devoted to an extensive reading of one **ICONIC PICTURE**: *NIGHTHAWKS* – the most famous of Hopper's works, and the one most often cited in art and popular culture – in the context of numerous *Nighthawks* re-makes. The analysis is framed by two crucial notions: **DISSEMINATION** (according to Derrida's use of the term) and **DESIRE** (in the Lacanian sense), which seem to best describe the work's inclination to be repeated and transformed, as well as the spectator's analogical response to such a pictorial situation. I demonstrate how this productive visual structure is constructed, and explain the mechanism generating such a variety of actual or virtual projective (phantasmatic) responses on the part of the spectator/artist – both among professionals and amateurs. The pictorial structure in *Nighthawks* constitutes a frame for other paintings and pictorial narratives. This exceptional painting becomes both a screen and, from a different perspective, a fold that is capable of generating and receiving (the two of which are, in fact, inseparable) countless projective responses. As a result, *Nighthawks* reveals itself as a "painting about the circulation of images".

Finally, it is essential to read the book along with the rich set of illustrations. The logic of many fragments of the text, especially in the second, analytical part, needs to be viewed alongside specific images. The idea behind these sets of pictures is to a certain extent inspired by Aby Warburg's *Mnemosyne* panels showing the travelling of visual forms across centuries. The illustrative section of the book is simply called *Hopper's Mnemosyne*.

THE CONCLUSION is open-ended, reflecting on the fact that “the virtual Hopper” is a work in progress; the artist keeps on being quoted, and my analyses could not possibly exhaust the potential for the productive reading and experiencing of Hopper’s art. There are always more “Hopper projects” under way, more upcoming exhibitions, book covers, cartoons and films quoting Hopper’s works. All of this confirms the overall idea of the book, and accounts for the phenomenon of Hopper’s painting, both its universal and “local” appeal, and its active presence in contemporary art and visual culture.