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## THE AESTHETICS OF SEDUCTION: EDWARD HOPPER'S BLACK SUN

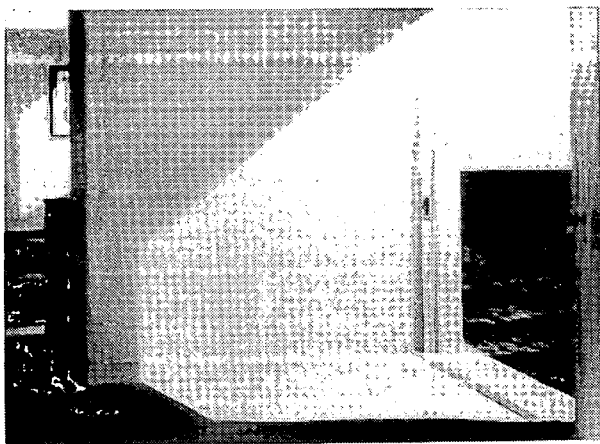
*Arthur Kroker*

Edward Hopper is the American painter of technicism. If by technicism is meant an urgent belief in the historical inevitability of the fully realized technological society and, if further, technicism is understood to be the guiding impulse of the American Republic, at least since the inception of the United States as a society with no history before the age of progress, then Hopper is that curiosity of an American artist who, breaking decisively with the equation of technology and freedom in the American mind, went over instead to the alternative vision of *technology as deprivation*.

### Quantum Physics as Decline

There is, in particular, one painting by Hopper which reveals fully the price which is exacted for admission to the fully realized technological society, and which speaks directly to the key issue of technology and power in the postmodern condition. Titled simply, yet evocatively, *Rooms by the Sea*, the painting consists simply of two rooms which are linked only by an aesthetic symmetry of form (the perfectly parallel rays of sunlight); which are empty (there are no human presences) and also perfectly still (the vacancy of the sea without is a mirror-image of the deadness within). Everything in the painting is transparent, nameless, relational and seductive; and, for just that reason, the cumulative emotional effect of the painting is one of anxiety and dread. *Rooms by the Sea* is an emblematic image of technology and culture as degeneration: nature (the sea) and culture (the rooms) are linked only accidentally in a field of purely spatial contiguity; all human presences have been expelled and, consequently, the

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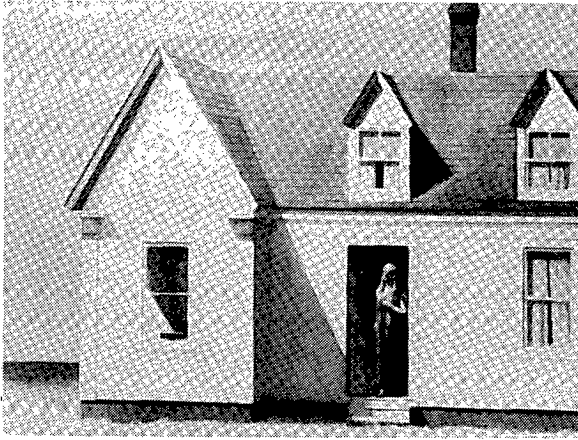


Edward Hopper, *Rooms by the Sea*

question of the entanglement of identity and technique never arises; and a menacing mood of aesthetic symmetry is the keynote feature. Indeed, what is *Rooms by the Sea* but a precise, visual depiction of the postmodern world as first presented in the disintegrative vision of quantum physics, a world in which science is the language in which power speaks to us today. Edward Hopper can paint technology as deprivation so well, just because he was the American artist who first stumbled upon the new continent of quantum physics as an exact, social description of American culture in radical decline. And, of course, since American culture, as the dynamic centre of advanced modernity, is world culture, then Hopper's artistic vision of the black sun which is the emblematic sign of technological society takes on a larger historical significance.

This is only to note that *Rooms by the Sea* gives us an early warning of the great paradigm-shift prefigured by the new cosmology of quantum physics. After all, quantum physics, which is the cutting-edge of the technological system of advanced modernity, holds to a purely relational (and hyper-Derridean) world-view: *aesthetic symmetry* (charm, truth, strangeness, beauty) is its key regulatory feature; random and unpredictable *jumps of quarks* from one energy level to another are its principle of action; purely contiguous relations of a spatial order across bounded energy fields are its horizon; structural relationships of similitude and difference are its basic geometry; an infinite regress of all matter, from the hyper-density of black holes to the purely disintegrative world of sub-molecular particles (the high-energy physics of bosons, leptons, and quarks) into the *creatio ex nihilo* of unified field theory is its central canon; and it now contains a fifth

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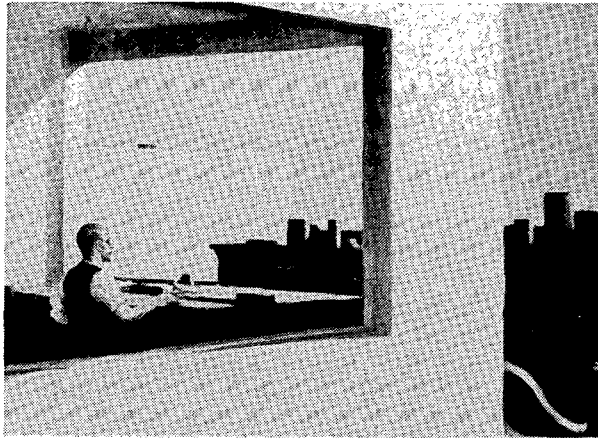


Edward Hopper, *High Noon*

force — the *hyper-charge* — which is the postmodern contribution to the old physical world of gravity, electromagnetism, weak and strong forces. Quantum physics gives us a world which is a matter of probability, paradox and irony; where singular *events* (with their representational logic) dissolve into relations across unbounded energy fields; and in which the dualisms of classical physics are rejected in favour of structural and, thus, morphological relations of identity and similitude. What is the world of quantum physics? It's what the French theoretician — Jean-François Lyotard — has described in *La condition postmoderne* as the age of the death of the *grand récits*; and what, before him, Michel Foucault said would be the spreading outwards of the discourse of a "cynical power": a power which speaking in the name of life itself would remain a matter of pure relationalism — "groundless effects" and "ramifications without root."

What is then the secret of *Rooms by the Sea*? It shows us that in the new world of technology to the hyper that power no longer speaks in the forbidding tones of oppression and juridical exclusion, that it no longer appeals for its legitimacy to the "grand récits" of classical physics, whether in the form of Newtonian politics, Hobbesian science, or Spencerian society; but that power, a "cynical power", reveals itself now in the language of an *aesthetics of seduction*. *Rooms by the Sea* is an emblematic sign of the relational power of technological society as the language of an aesthetics of seduction. Its design-logic is relational *not* representational (the sea and the sunlight exist only to show the absence of any references to nature); its figurations are sharply geometrical as if to remind us of the privileged position of mathematics in the new universe of science and technology; and

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Edward Hopper, *Office in a Small City*

its language is purely structural (there is no referential "event", only the empty ideolect of the image itself). What is particularly striking about *Rooms by the Sea* is the mood of anxiety, dismay and menace which it establishes as the emotional counterpart of the aesthetics of seduction. The door opens directly onto the sea; the sun is brilliant, but austere and cold; and the rooms are perfectly empty. This painting is not, of course, about "rooms by the sea"; it is about *us*: it is an exact clinical description of what we have become in the age of cynical power, in an age of excremental culture, the death of the social, and the triumph of the language of signification. *Rooms by the Sea* is, in a word, the truthsayer of a postmodern condition in which power speaks in the language of the aesthetics of seduction.

### The American Landscape

If Edward Hopper could paint the dark side of postmodernism so well it was just because his was that authentic American artistic vision which understood exactly, and with no reservations, the intimations of deprivation in the midst of the technological dynamo. It was Hopper's fate to understand that the will to technique — the coming to be of a society founded on the technical mastery of social and non-social nature — was the essence of the American polis. Hopper's paintings began, in fact, just at that point when technique is no longer an object which we can hold in front of ourselves as a site of contemplation, but when technique is us: when, that is, technology

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invests the realms of psychology, political economy, and social relationships. Indeed, what is most fascinating about Hopper's artistic works is that they represent a recitative of American "being" in the postmodern condition: *waiting* with no expectation of real relief from the detritus of the simulacrum; communication as radical isolation; *endless motion* as the nervous system of the culture of style; *radical dislocation* as the inevitable end-product of shifts in neo-technical capitalism; and profound *solitude* as the highly paradoxical result of a culture in which power reduces itself to an aleatory mechanism, and where even sexuality is fascinating now only when it is the scene of an "imaginary catastrophe" (Baudrillard).

Indeed, an earlier sketch of Hopper's classic painting, *House by the Railroad*, was called simply "An American Landscape". We might say that all of Hopper's artistic productions represent an interrogation of the "psychological" American landscape: one which is charged by the driving spirit of technicism; and which is typified by a growing radical impoverishment of American existence. And, just as the original sketch for *House by the Railroad* moved from an unfocussed naturalism to the geometrical lines and angular deprivations of the final painting, so too Hopper's vision as it moved from the externals of technological domination (the political economy of *House by the Railroad* and *Gas*) to the psychology of technological society (*New York Office*, *Western Motel*, *Approaching a City*) and, thereupon, to the aesthetic symmetries of *High Noon* and *Rooms by the Sea* traced the landscape of "technique as us" from its surface manifestations to its investiture of the interstices of American being. Thus, Hopper's artistic rendering of the deep deprivations of technological society move from the plane of physical dislocation (*Four Lane Highway*) to psychological displacement (the radical solitude of *Excursion into Philosophy* and *Western Motel*) and, thence, to social displacement (*Early Sunday Morning* is a grisly example of Sartre's culture of "alterity") and culminating in the perfectly aesthetic (because so well harmonized and symmetrical) and perfectly impoverished visions of *High Noon*, *People in the Sun*, and *Rooms by the Sea*. This is just to say, though, that Hopper's artistic vision is unrelenting. Nietzsche might have begun *The Will to Power* with the fateful words, "Nihilism is knocking at the door; whence comes this most uncanniest of guests", but Hopper does him one better. His artistic productions are a grisly recitation of the fact that the *catastrophe* of nihilism which Nietzsche, living in the nineteenth-century, could only predict, has, for Hopper, already happened. The figures in *People in the Sun*, *Excursion into Philosophy*, and *Western Motel* are not waiting for the coming of a radical crisis. On the contrary, they can be so inert and so overcome with a sense of melancholy resignation *because the catastrophe has already taken place, and they are its victims and not so happy survivors.*

### Excremental Culture

Hopper's artistic vision might be studied then as a brilliant, visual history of the disaster triumphant which has overwhelmed American public and private life in the late twentieth century. In his works, we are in the privileged position of being present on the dark side, the side of the excremental vision *par excellence*, of technological society. Even the position of observation is perfect: Hopper situates us as voyeurs (*Office in a Small Town, Night Windows, Morning Sun*) observing victims of a catastrophe. The reduction of the observer to the position of voyeur and of the human figures in the paintings to melancholy victims is accompanied by another great reduction. It is often said that Hopper, in the best of the romantic tradition, uses the artistic device of "windows" to disclose the tension between nature and culture or, at least, to introduce some sense of electric tension to otherwise dead landscapes. This is profoundly mistaken. The windows in his paintings are, in fact, *trompe l'oeils*, diverting our attention away from the fact (and thus emphasizing) that there is no "inside" and "outside" in these artistic productions. Just like the simulated (and post-classical) world of power which they so brilliantly, and painstakingly, portray; what we see on the *outside* of the windows is actually what is happening to us on the inside as we are processed through the designed world of the technological system. And, as if to give a hint that the woman in *Western Motel* is coded by the perpetual motion of the automobile, that the worker in *Office in a Small City* is coded by the logic of bureaucratic industrialism, or that the male figure in *Excursion in Philosophy* is coded by Sartre's logic of the "vacant look"; the windows are perfectly transparent, perfectly mediational, and perfectly empty. In Hopper's world, a circular logic of sign and event is at work. Culture is coded by the signs of nature; nature is processed by technique; and *we are coded* by the false appearance of antinomic reciprocities between nature and culture. This means, of course, that Hopper's American landscape understands technique to be much more than machine objects, but as a whole system of cultural preparation, a theory of labour as estrangement, and, most of all, a relational power system designed to exclude the human presence.

Two paintings, in particular, are emblematic of Hopper's searing vision of postmodern as excremental culture. Titled *High Noon* and *People in the Sun*, these are grisly and overwhelmingly sad portraits of a deadness of the spirit and of a radical impoverishment of the human vision which has been achieved in the last days of contemporary culture. Here, even nature is menacing (the austere and cold sunlight of *High Noon*), the poses are grotesque (the "people in the sun" of leisure society in their business suits), and there is an overwhelming sense of psychosis within the vacant acts of waiting (for nothing) and looking (to nowhere) of the woman in *High*

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*Noon* and the leisured Americans (as victims) of *People in the Sun*. In these two paintings, what is presented in all of its pathos and in all of its "intimations of deprivation" is a brilliant vision of technology as degeneration. And, just as Jean-Paul Sartre predicted that the contemporary century would culminate in the detritus of the culture of "alterity", Hopper has given us a vision of such an excremental culture in all of its hysteria. Perhaps what is most unsettling is that Hopper's artistic vision can be so authentically American just because in these scenes of technology as deprivation, we can also recognize that it is *us* who suffer most deeply the "intimations of deprivation" of the fully realized technical system. What is *real* cultural degeneration, *real* excremental culture? Well, for Hopper at least, the answer is clear: it is the coming to be of a society founded on the equation of technology and freedom. Hopper is the artist of the chilling vision of the *black sun*. He is, in the prophetic sense, the truthsayer of the deadness within an American, and thus world, culture which reduces itself to the Nietzschean vision of "a little voluptuousness and a little cynicism".

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