

Fear of the city 1882–1967: Edward Hopper and the discourse of anti-urbanism

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This paper traces the extent to which some of the major cityscape representations of the American 'Realist' painter, Edward Hopper, have contributed to the production and articulation of the discourse of anti-urbanism in American culture. Following an introductory background to this discourse, the paper discusses the development of Realism in American art, and how the urban representations that emerged were a response to the rapidly changing, early twentieth-century American city. A brief biographical account of Edward Hopper is presented to explore the intertextual influences behind his anti-urban sentiments, and how these translated into the unique form of Realism for which Hopper is renowned. This sets the stage for a reading of four key Hopper works that are suggestive of the anti-urban discourse: Night Shadows, Nighthawks, Approaching a City and Sunday. The powers of representation and the artist's popularity have fed into the discourse of anti-urbanism—a discourse that has a material effect on urban life in America.

Key words: discourse, anti-urbanism, cityscape, Edward Hopper, representation.

Introduction

But when in American history has there not been a fear of the city ... ? (Kazin 1983: 14)

In their seminal work on the intellectual roots of American anti-urban discourse, Morton and Lucia White observe that

enthusiasm for the American city has not been typical or predominant in our intellectual history. Fear has been the more common reaction. For a variety of reasons our most celebrated thinkers have expressed different degrees of ambivalence and animosity toward the city. (1962: 1)

The 'celebrated thinkers' to which they refer include Thomas Jefferson, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, Edgar Allan Poe, Henry James, Frank Lloyd Wright and Lewis Mumford. The writings of these individuals were seen to have left America with a 'powerful tradition of anti-urbanism' (White and White 1962: 3), a legacy of distrust, suspicion and prejudice towards urban areas which was installed and strengthened by frequent references to the joys of nature and the moral superiority of rural life. As Beauregard (1993: 14) argues, anti-urban sentiment has its origins in the introduction in large American cities of 'values and practices antithetical to those held

and followed by people living in rural areas'. The burgeoning system of capitalist accumulation in the nineteenth century and its manifestation in widespread industrialization and intense urbanization was viewed with dismay by subscribers to traditional rural values, who saw the cities as places which encouraged a 'severing of the ties to those basic human values that provide the foundation of a moral existence' (Beauregard 1993: 15). A negative discourse of the city, which began with the pastoral musings of Thomas Jefferson and was furthered significantly by the transcendental contemplations of Ralph Waldo Emerson, grew stronger and became embedded in social life through powerful representations of urban malaise in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century American literature, art and social theory. Far from being celebrated as signs of industrial and economic progress, American cities were often viewed as dirty and disease-ridden arenas of degenerate, immoral and corrupt behaviour, the exact and unruly opposites of small town and rural America, and therefore places which middle-class Americans would be wise to avoid for their own well-being.

It was to this body of anti-urban sentiment that European social theorists such as Ferdinand Tönnies and Emile Durkheim delivered their classic studies of the social and psychological effects of rampant urbanization (Knox 1994: 267–269). While it would be incorrect to describe their immensely influential and diverse perspectives on the changing patterns of social life in the city as anti-urban, it would be equally incorrect to downplay the role they had in reinforcing anti-urban sentiment. Tönnies's elaborations of the impersonal and superficial human associations of an urban *gessellschaft* society, the opposite of community (*gemeinschaft*), coupled with Durkheim's plaintive projections of the urban condition of *anomie* and the deviant behaviour which might accompany

social isolation and confusion, added fuel to the legacy of urban fear left by Emerson, Thoreau and the transcendentalists. The ideas and attitudes of the sociologists may have differed, but their writings on what can happen to societies and individuals when cities expand did little to reverse the tide of anti-urban thinking which had penetrated the public imagination, even if the city was not always portrayed as the demon it was made out to be by those who came before them. Blended together, this is the result:

The city was seen imaginatively as the heart of contemporary darkness, a secular Hell—temptation, trap and punishment all in one—exciting, rich in potentiality for the ambitious, threatening to the weak, destructive of traditional mores, creator of novelties, of anonymity, breeder of the pervasive modern diseases of *anomie*, alienation and *ennui*, a jungle of brick, stone and smoke, with its greedy predators and apathetic victims, its brutal indifference to either communal value or individual feeling. (Nochlin 1971: 151)

Many would argue that these anti-urban sensibilities have not disappeared from American culture, and much of this is due to the impact of images of dystopia we see in a variety of media, cinematic, literary, artistic and photographic representations of the American city. Davis (1998: 276) points out that Los Angeles has been destroyed 138 times in various motion pictures since 1909, and a look at recent movies set in New York such as *Seven* (1995), *Clockers* (1995), *Sleepers* (1996) and *The Bone Collector* (1999) would suggest to the public that the city is a place of violence, suffering, crime and filth which should be avoided altogether. This is confirmed by Janet Abu-Lughod, who points out the following with reference to the dystopian films set in New York:

A cursory survey of film titles highlights recurring themes: death, terror, stranger, phantom, wrong man, wrong number, lost, no way out, screaming, crying, alone, dark corner, victim, strangers, killer, double life, silence, shadows, crime, jungle, middle of the night, naked city, force of evil. (1999: 184–185)

Lees and Demeritt (1998: 335) provocatively term this anti-urban discourse as ‘Sin City’, something ‘only ever realised discursively, through powerful and materially productive practices of representation’.¹

In this paper I will look at some of the works of the quintessential American ‘Realist’ painter, Edward Hopper (1882–1967), to examine the ways in which this immensely popular artist represented the city, specifically New York, and assess how far the poetics and politics of representation (Cosgrove and Jackson 1987)—or what Barnes and Duncan (1992: 5) refer to as ‘the cultural practices of signification’—have contributed to the production and reproduction of the discourse of anti-urbanism in American society. The words of White and White adequately summarize the impetus for this paper:

Not only has the anti-urbanism of our intellectual tradition directly influenced the popular mind, but the tradition has probably had an even greater effect on ordinary Americans as it has been transmitted by writers who flourish somewhere between the highest reaches of our culture and the popular mind. (1962: 203)

I am interested in how anti-urbanism has been transmitted not by a writer but by an artist with a huge following, whose paintings are often seen as crystallizations of American landscapes, values and society at the time they appeared. However, I argue that the meanings conveyed by Hopper’s art are not bound to any time period; they live on through the legacy of

anti-urban sentiment by which he was influenced and to which he contributed. A closer reading of his portrayals of city life is necessary for a fuller understanding of such sentiments past and present. To provide the necessary theoretical framework for a consideration of Hopper’s work, I will begin by conveying and unpacking some of the complexity of the term ‘Realism’ in the visual arts, before exploring some biographical material on the artist to demonstrate the dawning of his anti-urban feelings and how they translated into his unique brand of Realism. The discussion will then proceed into a reading of four key Hopper images, before concluding with some comments on how work along these lines might be a useful and productive way of tracing and perhaps eradicating unfounded urban fears through sensitive and thorough attention to artistic representations of the city.

Realisms, representation and the city

A newcomer to the term ‘realism’ is faced with a bewildering array of meanings and concepts, and realism has consistently escaped tidy and simple definition. On one hand, this is due to the many different forms of Realism² within arts and literature (Social Realism, Baroque Realism, Photo Realism, New Realism and so forth), and on the other, the agonizingly complex history and nature of the philosophy, theories, methodology and practice of realism in Western scientific thought. In human geography, engagement with realist philosophies reached a peak in the 1980s, but as Cloke, Philo and Sadler (1991: 134) observed, there was considerable suspicion that some realist work was ‘founded on a less than full recognition of its complexity’ and that this led many authors to fall into a trap of ‘subscribing to the realist position in name but not in nature’. This is the

first of two reasons why realist approaches declined in number and significance during the 1990s. The second reason has been neatly captured by Derek Gregory in his entry on realism in the most recent edition of the *Dictionary of Human Geography*:

[O]ne needs to remember that ‘realism’ refers not only to a twentieth century philosophy but also to a mode of representation in the visual arts and literature which was particularly prominent in Europe and North America in the nineteenth century. This is not to say that realist philosophies require a realist aesthetics—they almost certainly do not—but simply to note that the attentiveness to theoretical work which realism succeeded in making so important for *analysis* during the 1980s was, in the next decade, extended to equally searching theoretical reflection on *description*. (2000: 675; emphasis in the original)

Gregory is referring to the ‘crisis of representation’ that has been a central concern of much human geographical inquiry since the cultural turn of the discipline. Realism as a philosophy of science was invaluable to the development of a more sophisticated understanding of the ways in which space is a key determinant in the structuring of social relations, but as times changed and post-structural sensibilities grew to question such structuring through its blurring of the boundaries between representation and reality, material and discursive, realism was nudged into the sidelines and ‘its star seemed to wane’ (Gregory 2000: 675).

One purpose of this essay is to consider how an engagement with Realism(s) in the visual arts, as opposed to realism as a philosophy of science, could inform cultural geographers seeking to understand and describe the material world through the discourses embedded within artistic representations of cityscapes. While the same undercurrent of a ‘real’ world of physical things existing independently of our senses and

perceptions is central to both artistic and philosophical forms of realism, there is much that is different about these forms that is well beyond the focus of this essay. It is the historical foundations of artistic Realism in the nineteenth century, and how these fed into early twentieth-century American Realism which was prevalent when Edward Hopper began his career, which provide an appropriate starting point for the analysis of his art.

Many people look at a Realist work of art, describe what they see as ‘realistic’, and without any questioning of the scene they have just observed think ‘that is how it is there’. Art historians, however, would be quick to inform us that this is naïve, and that Realism is far more complicated than simply a copycat image:

The commonplace notion that Realism is a ‘styleless’ or transparent style, a mere simulacrum or mirror image of visual reality, is another barrier to its understanding as an historical and stylistic phenomenon. This is a gross simplification, for Realism was no more a mere mirror of reality than any other style. (Nochlin 1971: 14)

For Nochlin, the aim of Realist painting was ‘to give a truthful, objective and impartial representation of the real world, based on meticulous observation of contemporary life’ (1971: 13). Throughout her landmark survey of nineteenth-century Realism, Nochlin reiterates the Realists’ desire for verisimilitude, and that their common tendency to see things ‘as they were’ was ‘inseparable from their general beliefs, their world, their heritage and the very quality of what they were divesting themselves of and rebelling against’ (1971: 51). Gustave Courbet, perhaps the most famous Realist of all, once wrote that

painting is an essentially *concrete* art and can only

consist of the presentation of *real and existing things*. It is a completely physical language, the words of which consist of all visible objects; an object which is *abstract*, not visible, non-existent, is not within the realm of painting. (quoted in Nochlin 1971: 23)

It is hardly surprising then, given the preoccupation with the physical, that many nineteenth-century Realists often chose to document the built environment of the city. Rarely, however, did Realists present us with close-ups of urban dwellers and the minutiae of social life within a metropolis. The classic nineteenth-century Realist depiction of the city is from a distance, the cityscape or vista, which precludes moral comment on the people within the city, and bolsters the notion of the Realist as a spectator of urban life rather than a more involved participant in it—something which had a profound influence on the city views of Impressionists such as Manet and Renoir (Nochlin 1971: 168–169).

Realist representations of the city were no less plentiful at the beginning of the twentieth century, but they took a quite different form to their nineteenth-century antecedents. The American ‘Ash Can’ School of painters, sometimes referred to as ‘The Eight’, were a group of urban Realists who had worked as illustrators for Philadelphia news journals before arriving in New York to study with the portraitist Robert Henri. The cityscapes of artists such as John Sloan, George Bellows and Everett Shinn produced between 1900 and 1913 were notable for their tendency to deploy the wide panoramas of the nineteenth-century Realists, but with far more attention to urban subjects and the crowded spaces of the transforming metropolis that surrounded them. This could have been a critical reaction to some Impressionist work, where people were often reduced to mere brush strokes because of the very distant perspectives employed by the

artists. According to Predeville (2000: 24), it was Bellows in particular whose paintings ‘most programmatically fulfil Henri’s injunction to his students to paint the *life* [my emphasis] of the modern city, implicitly that of its poor and immigrant communities’. Bellows was perhaps the chief reason why the painters of the Ash Can School came to be called the ‘New Realists’. What was new was a celebratory commitment to painting ‘ordinary’ people living *en masse* within the city, or as Predeville puts it, a sustained attempt to portray ‘the city’s physical substance uniting with the human life it contains to comprise a common material, a social fabric’ (2000: 31). Ash Can artists did not shun earlier forms of Realism; they too were concerned with the quest for ‘truth’ and were equally as meticulous in their attention to detail and rejection of abstraction, but the tenets of nineteenth-century Realism were refined and extended to provide a framework for an increased sensitivity to the human aspects of unprecedented urbanization. While not as concerned with social inequities and urban injustice as the Social Realists of the 1930s, the Ash Can artists’ lasting influence is the unification of the physical and the human in the urban milieu.

Douglas Tallack’s suggestive essay on the attempts of the Ash Can School to represent a rapidly changing New York is notable for its argument that the artists within the School were so caught up in an effort to ‘know’ the city that they often chose ‘fictional’ points of view from which to document their many thoughts and impressions derived from being ‘caught up in the routines of the city’ (2000: 30). Thus the social fabric which Predeville posits is, to Tallack, an amalgam of different scenes blended together into one representation of ‘an urban environment which threatened defeat for individuals and groups who could not get some epistemological grasp on it’ (2000:

26). It was this ‘threatening’ urban environment that saw the permanent settlement of Edward Hopper in 1910. Hopper studied with Robert Henri from 1902 to 1906 at the New York School of Art, which has often led to erroneous associations of Hopper with the Ash Can School (the fact that George Bellows was a classmate of Hopper’s adds to the confusion). Hopper’s Realism, however, is unique, and as we shall see later in four of his paintings, very different from that of the Ash Can painters, and also different from the overt displays of social concern and political protest of 1930s Social Realists such as Reginald Marsh and Philip Evergood. The reasons for Hopper’s idiosyncrasies can be discerned from some biographical material, to which I now turn.

Edward Hopper

[T]o understand ... representations fully we must know something about the context of its authors and audience. (Barnes and Duncan 1992: 4)

Great art is the outward expression of an inner life in the artist, and this inner life will result in his [*sic*] personal vision of the world. (Edward Hopper 1953, quoted in Hobbs 1987: 64)

This paper began with some comments on the antipathy towards urban places common to American intellectuals (Beaugard 1993; Kazin 1983; White and White 1962). Hopper was also a man of great intellect, somewhat of a recluse who spent a lifetime reading poetry, literature, drama and philosophy, absorbing what he learned from books and observed from life, and applying it to canvas. His childhood was spent in an upper-middle-class Dutch settlement near the Hudson River in New York State, a world away from the expanding metropolis to the south where he would make his name and live

permanently from 1910 to his death in 1967. The roots of his approach to the city can be seen in a compelling discussion of his childhood by Gail Levin (1995a), who shows us that the place in which he was raised was one where nature, community, religious education, patriotism and duty were seen to lead to a ‘solid moral existence’. However, the author points out that the 1890s, the decade of Hopper’s adolescence, marked ‘the passage from the strong moral principles of rural and small-town America into the beginning of urban and industrial development that eroded the traditional ways of life and produced growing alienation’ (1995a: 12). Levin identified this period as the root of the conflicts that Hopper lived throughout his life:

All his life Hopper felt acutely the conflicts between traditional and modern, rural and urban, American and foreign ways. He would return to explore them again and again in his work. (1995a: 111)

Crucial to the development of Hopper’s attitude towards the city were the writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau, two individuals who were known for their dislike and distrust of city life in favour of romantic notions of the entwining of humans with nature, and with whom Hopper felt close intellectual affinity (Schmied 1995: 10). On Emerson, Hopper once told an interviewer ‘I admire him greatly. I read him a lot. I read him over and over again’ (quoted in Hobbs 1987: 65). Levin (1995b: 109) believes Hopper held Emerson in such high esteem that he ‘sought to express the Emersonian vision by transforming reality into art’. White and White (1962: 30) call Thoreau’s classic *Walden* [1854] a ‘bible of anti-urbanism ... The values it espouses are essentially those of the isolated individual, living in nature and free of social attachments’. This is interesting, for most of

the people in Hopper's urban paintings are isolated individuals who appear out of place, detached from the city both socially and spatially as it changes around them, and seemingly bewildered by the threat to 'nature' posed by the built environment (Hobbs 1987; Lyons 1995). Thus the concept of intertextuality in artistic representation—that texts draw on other texts which are themselves based on yet more texts (Barnes and Duncan 1992: 2)—becomes clearer and credible when considering the works from which Hopper drew inspiration. Another writer who harboured an approach to the city to which Hopper could relate was Henry James, whose *The American Scene* (1907) was full of negative portrayals of a New York placed in cultural opposition to European cities, not least because James had been absent from America for a quarter of a century. Hopper spent his early twenties in Paris, which he described to be 'very graceful and beautiful ... after the raw disorder of New York' (quoted in Levin 1995a: 279), and the year James's book was published was the same year Hopper returned to New York from Paris. Levin informs us that *The American Scene* was avidly consumed by Hopper as it viewed modernity and urbanization with suspicion, and returning to New York after a lengthy absence made rapid urban change all the more tangible and unsettling to the artist (1995a). The appearance of skyscrapers in New York's cityscape was seen by James and then Hopper as representative of encroaching, unwelcome modernity—a theme which is never far from a Hopper painting and usually depicted with trepidation and uneasiness. Take the following observation, again by Levin:

He [Hopper] rarely represented skyscrapers at all, and when he did, he reduced them to fragmentary glimpses or intrusions on the cityscape ... His recurrent visual ironies on the manifestations of modern

life suggest his highly ambivalent attitude toward the changes occurring in twentieth-century society; it is his profound alienation from contemporary life that makes his art so characteristic of modernity itself. (1995a: 229)

Hopper lived through a time of continuous changes to the cityscape, and changes in the neighbourhood where he lived, Greenwich Village, were as profound as in any area of the city. Hopper was dismayed by the 'crushing of Washington Square' by the erection of tall buildings around the park which he saw as 'huge coarse and swollen mounds—blunt, clumsy and bleaching the sunlight with their dismal pale yellow sides' (Levin 1995a: 247). Such signs of unruliness and dislocation were serious violations of all that he had been brought up to believe, that humans should be in harmony with nature and situated away from anything which would disrupt this most Victorian, even puritan, way of existence. The workings of modernity were antithetical to a man who disapproved of social and structural change, of overcrowding, of disorder. In fact, one wonders why he wanted to live in such a heavily populated area at all after reading the remarks of his long-suffering wife, Jo:

Ed is anything but a social being and he won't bother himself with people at all. He's not a bit nice and gracious to the people I've introduced him to—people we meet on the street—he won't go anywhere to meet any of my friends. (quoted in Levin 1995a: 177)

Although not an outright misanthrope, Hopper was a deeply private man lost in the worlds of his art and his passion for reading. He lived in New York City for most of his adult life, yet it is hard to find a Hopper painting where this city is celebrated or loved, or presented with any optimism. Much of this arose from his

observations of social life in New York during the inter-war years of Prohibition and Depression; strikes, unemployment, protest, poverty and uncertain futures had a profound effect on his vision of the city. Hopper saw what could happen to a city when its growth was explosive, when its economy collapsed, when some of its people were left behind and struggled to make sense of the transforming world in which they lived.

How, then, do all these influences and changes translate into the unique form of Realism for which Hopper is renowned? Broadly defined, Hopper's urban work is a twentieth-century joining of nineteenth-century transcendentalist beliefs with nineteenth-century Realism's tendency to document and interpret city scenes in a relentless quest for a hidden 'truth'. The products are far from convivial 'stills' of the American city that evoke senses of loss, loneliness, alienation and despair—mournful commentaries on the unhappy material consequences of rampant, erosive modernity. Hopper scholar Robert Hobbs elaborates:

Seen by themselves, these stills are mysterious and haunting. They evoke a desire for the rest of the narrative, and they powerfully convey the break-up of the storyline, the disjunction that is characteristic of modern life. In this manner they awaken in the viewer a desire for the whole, and thus elicit feelings of isolation and loss. The feelings of loneliness experienced by viewers of Hopper's art ... come from the fact that a continuum has been broken. The machinery of industrialism is no longer operative, and the illusion of progress as a motivating life force is no longer believable. By stripping modern life of its illusions of momentum, Hopper leaves his viewers isolated; he shows the breakdown of traditional spiritual underpinnings in the modern world and reveals a poverty of a society that has forsaken

a meditative calm for a frenetic view of progress. (1987: 18)

Hopper's besmirchment of the entire modern age attracted attention because it appealed to the anti-urban imaginings of much of middle-class America. His work struck a chord with Americans seeking to express their nostalgic yearnings for past times and places:

Hopper presents glimpses of private lives of quiet despair lived within the public arena. And though much of his art is centered on the failed relationships between people or the alienation of people from their environment, Hopper can also get an almost inexplicable sense of yearning and loss ... Some of his appeal may lie ... in the desire to see something American, and by inference, something virtuous, in a landscape that now only exists in small remnants. (Lyons 1995: xiii)

The American landscape idealized by Emerson, Thoreau and their many followers was eroded by modernity's leading edge of urbanization, and in the visual arts it is the work of Edward Hopper that documents this process with the most regular and solemn introspection. Perhaps it is Prendeville (2000: 79) who provides the most precise summation of Hopper's Realism when he states that the locations the artist depicts are 'in-between' places, which 'we are familiar with yet not at home in'.

With this highly abbreviated summary of his main influences and select character aspects in place, I now want to look at four of his well-known pieces, *Night Shadows* (1921), *Nighthawks* (1942), *Approaching the City* (1946) and *Sunday* (1926) as examples of representations of the American city as a place of isolation, fear and loss. They are paintings which are suggestive of the anti-urbanism mentioned throughout this discussion, and their popularity has perhaps served to uproot the

discourse within the spaces of the artwork and send it away from New York, intensifying the anti-urban sensibilities that have pervaded American culture for so long.

Night Shadows

Night Shadows (1921, see Figure 1) is at first glance a simple sketch of a lone figure advancing along a deserted sidewalk under a streetlight, a somewhat innocuous, gritty and dreary image that does not warrant immediate intellectual scrutiny. However, if we pay closer attention to the meanings and messages beneath the image, or ‘textualize’ the streetscape in order to view it as ‘a signifying system through which a social system is communicated, reproduced, experienced and explored’ (Duncan 1990: 184), *Night Shadows* becomes as eerie as its title suggests. The contrast between the areas under the streetlight and the shadows caused by the presence of the corner store is particularly striking, showing Hopper’s tendency towards using different degrees of light to enhance the threatening, alienating postures of buildings, and how they separate the figures in his scenes from the worlds in which they find themselves. The figure in the image is anonymous and mysterious, a night-time walker with a large shadow doubling the menacing effect of the unknown. Rolf Renner observes that the shadow of the streetlight post cutting across the brightest area ‘generates an unmistakable sense of menace ... as if the man’s walking route were taking him beyond a divide and into a danger zone’ (1990: 41). The dramatic juxtaposition of darkness and light, the former used to legitimate the ‘norm’ of the latter and strengthen the comfort and safety that comes with a sense of the familiar, perhaps hints at Hopper’s suspicious and cautious approach towards urban places.

Hopper scholars have commented on the high viewpoint of *Night Shadows*, suggesting that it is the most important factor in the generation of the painting’s haunting mood, ‘creating a sense of tension that is almost cinematic in its effect’ (Levin 1995b: 117). Hopper was a frequent patron of cinema and theatre (Levin 1995a; Lyons 1995), and much of this can be seen in his ‘stills’ of New York, where he ‘achieves an effect akin to that of a tracking movie camera whose frame impassively unites its contents’ (Prendeville 2000: 79). The dividing shadow of the streetlight post leaves us on the edge of our seats, wondering what the next frame will be. Where is the pedestrian going? Why is he there? What will happen to him? What is around the corner in the darkness? As Prendeville neatly summarizes, the emptiness of Hopper scenes ‘illustrates what is generally the case: rather than imagining situations, his paintings offer spaces for imagination’ (2000: 79). The anti-urbanism in *Night Shadows* is communicated not so much by what we can see, but by what we cannot see—that which is left to our imaginings, to which the pedestrian is approaching. Hopper thus follows a trend in nineteenth-century Realism, where paintings ‘were socially inflammatory not so much because of what they said ... but because of what they did not say’ (Nochlin 1971: 46). The simplicity of the sketch, nothing more than light, building and figure, bolsters this effect, lending clarity to a simple yet stern suggestion that urban spaces at night are to be approached with caution. Along these lines, Hobbs (1987: 50) shows the power of the discourse embedded within the scene when he argues that the ‘ordinary nature of the buildings and street endows the work with poignancy since it suggests that drama could occur anywhere in the United States’. The time of day and the anonymity of both figure and location conspire to send an anti-urban message away from where it was

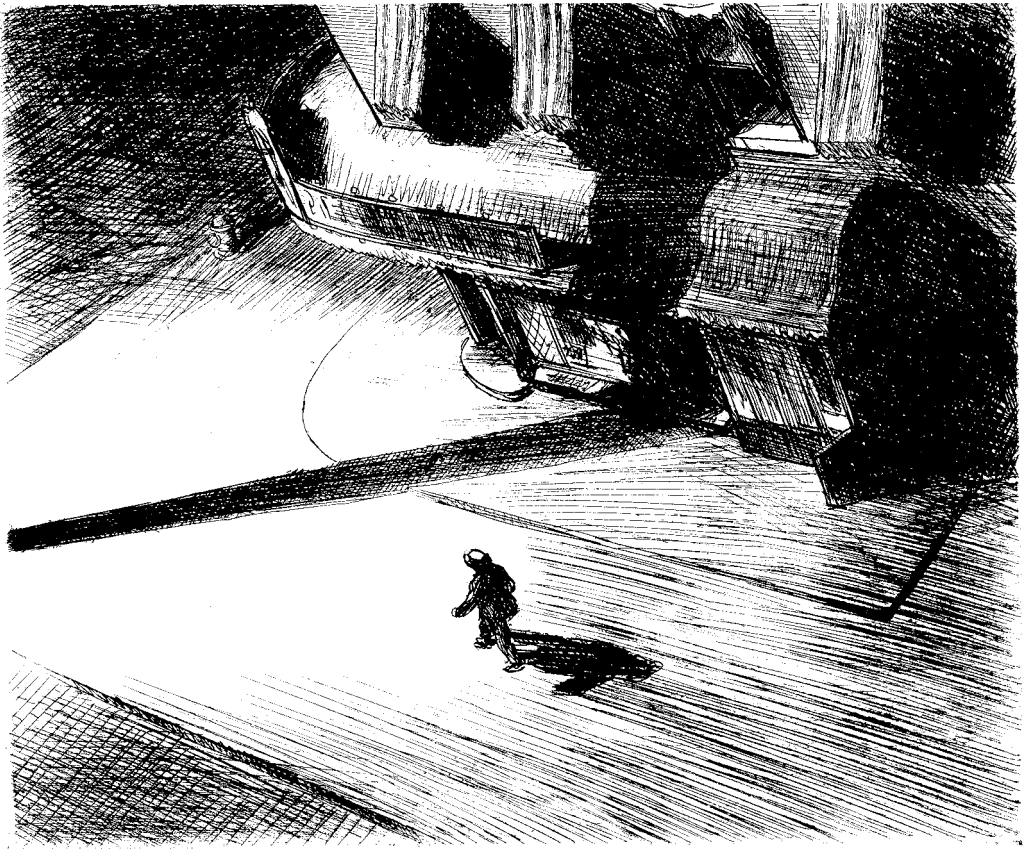


Figure 1 *Night Shadows*. Edward Hopper (1921). Etching. Reproduced with permission of the San Diego Museum of Art (Museum purchase through the Edwin S. and Carol Dempster Larsen Memorial Fund).

produced, tapping into an American imagination already imbued with unruly images of what lurks in cities at night.

Nighthawks

Unconsciously, probably, I was painting the loneliness of a large city. (Edward Hopper, quoted in Levin 1995a: 349)

A New York night is once again the setting for Hopper's most famous work, *Nighthawks*

(1942, see Figure 2), and once more the apparent simplicity of the painting masks its hidden discursive undercurrent. Hopper contested those viewers who looked beneath the surface, saying that the work showed little more than 'a restaurant on Greenwich Avenue where two streets meet' (quoted in Renner 1990: 80), but there are some key indicators that help us to generate disquiet in a scene which has a calm surface appearance, and thus situate the composition firmly within the anti-urban mould. Like *Night Shadows*, it is a scene of contrasting

qualities of light, but this time between inside and outside. The only light for the empty streets comes from within the restaurant, amplifying the motif of darkness outside and intensifying the painting's communication of loneliness. Nowhere is this more effective than in the darkness behind the couple at the counter, which sits uneasily with the restaurant's bland cream interior and its glaring lighting. Hobbs contends that it is the use of light that is responsible for the mood of the entire scene:

Circular in form, this building is an island that beckons and repels; and the fluorescent lighting is intimidating, alienating, and dehumanising. It creates an unreal and artificial feeling of warmth, an atmosphere that is clinical and more in tune with a laboratory than a restaurant. (1987: 129)

There is contrast within the restaurant too—the third character at the counter with his back to us, nearest the street, seems more in tune with outside than inside relative to the others, and less of an extra on a deserted stage, perhaps because of his positioning and solitude. This creates a sense that the couple facing us are alienated from their surroundings, literally 'out of place' in a space which stands for little other than isolation.

Hopper was fascinated with cinema, and it is no coincidence that *Nighthawks* was painted at a time when the *film noir* genre was beginning to penetrate American public discourse. Levin (1995a: 408) notes that the genre's 'potent dramatic scenes and generally pessimistic outlook on life appealed to Hopper', and the Hopper city has much in common with the *noir* city as articulated by Frank Krutnik's subtle reference to Marx:

Dark with something more than night, the noir city is a realm in which all that seemed solid melts into the shadows, and where the traumas and disjunc-

tions experienced by individuals hint at a broader crisis of cultural self-configuration engendered by urban America. The noir thrillers replace the certainties of *It's A Wonderful Life* with a more nuanced, more disorganized, much bleaker vision. (Krutnik 1995: 99)

Krutnik brilliantly reveals how *film noir* embodied and fed the anti-urban sentiments of movie-goers through its depiction of cities as disorderly, diseased, corrupted, dark, abysmal, threatening, and most relevant to this essay, 'curiously empty' (1995: 91). While many of Hopper's urban representations could be stills from a *noir* thriller, it is in *Nighthawks* where references to the *noir* city can be discerned with most ease—the strong theatrical light, the curiously empty streets, the mysterious figure with his back to us, the dark, forbidding spaces of the corner and buildings behind the diner. The title of the painting also suggests *noir* themes of people preying on others in the dark spaces of the unsafe city. The interlocking scripts of alienation, isolation, loneliness, fear and a suggestion that something disorderly might occur outside immediately generated a sympathetic response from art critics and the public alike—the painting was soon recognized as an important American artefact and sold to the Art Institute of Chicago soon after its completion, where it remains today. *Nighthawks* also demonstrates a technique which Hopper used again and again in his work. He could have painted a far more threatening city, with more dubious characters, with litter on the streets, signs of crime, more suffering—yet he refrained, preferring to avoid extremities and thus suggesting, as he did with *Night Shadows*, that these scenes *might* be around the corner by way of the emptiness of the cityscape. An empty city at night, captured at standstill, is always more threatening, more sinister, than an animated or extreme portrayal of urban fears.



Figure 2 Edward Hopper, American, 1882–1967, *Nighthawks*, 1942, oil on canvas, 84.1 × 152.4 cm, Friends of American Art Collection, 1942.51, © The Art Institute of Chicago. All Rights Reserved.

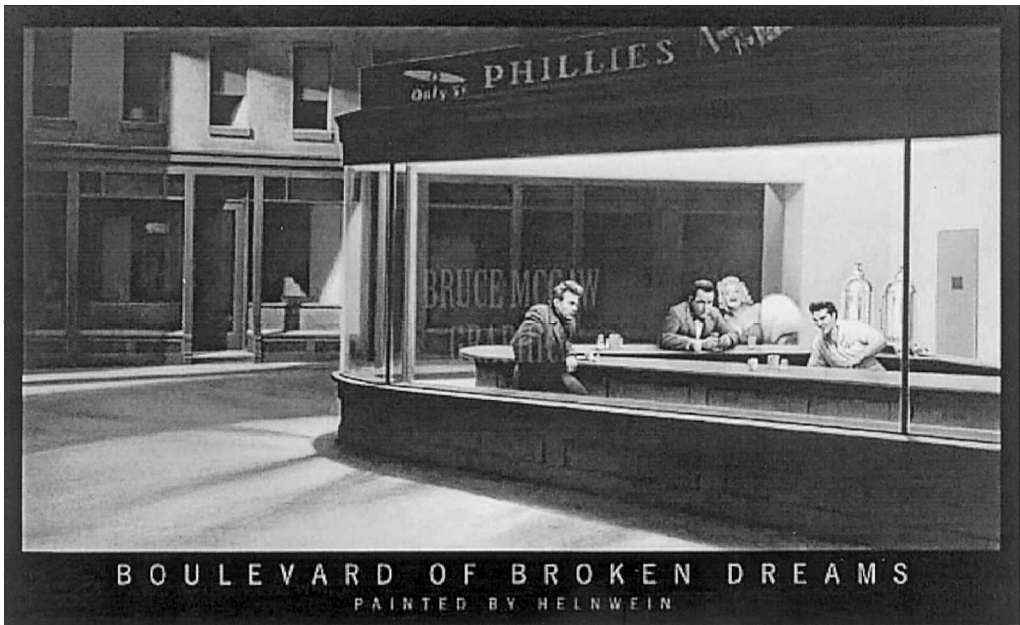


Figure 3 *Boulevard of Broken Dreams*. Gottfried Helnwein (1987). Reproduced with kind permission of the artist.

Nighthawks is one of the most famous paintings in the history of American art, full of the anti-urban messages which pervade American public discourse. It has received numerous adaptations, underscoring its influence and the sympathetic response of the public to the 'nocturnal urban disquiet' it communicates (Levin 1995b: 115). Among the more famous of these is the 1987 poster of the Austrian artist Gottfried Helnwein (see Figure 3). This parody is interesting for the characters that Helnwein chooses to occupy the diner in place of Hopper's anonymous figures. James Dean, Humphrey Bogart, Marilyn Monroe and Elvis Presley are American icons whose private lives were as tragic as their public lives were remarkable, and all four of them can be seen to embody the Hopper theme mentioned earlier, of

'private lives of quiet despair lived within the public arena' (Lyons 1995: xiii). It says much about the mood of *Nighthawks* that these celebrities all had lonely lives and tragic deaths, and were isolated from the world around them through their adulation and status. The world outside the diner is the arena in which the dreams of these celebrities and their followers were broken, and in this interpretation the diner can be viewed as providing Hobbs' 'unreal and artificial feeling of warmth' (1987: 129), a brief respite from the world that ultimately defeated them. By placing four American icons into an icon of American art, Helnwein opens up *Nighthawks* to closer iconographic inspection, exposing the symbolic meanings of the painting to cement its position as a landmark of twentieth-century anti-urbanism.

Approaching a City

I've always been interested in approaching a big city by train; and I can't exactly describe the sensations. But they're entirely human and perhaps have nothing to do with esthetics [*sic*]. There is a certain fear and anxiety, and a great visual interest in the things that one sees coming into the city. (Edward Hopper, quoted in Levin 1995a: 388)

The 'fear and anxiety' to which Hopper referred when approaching a city by train were explored in another popular composition, *Approaching a City* (1946, see Figure 4). Hopper showed a connection to earlier Ash Can Realism when he referred to this work as 'improvised memories pieced together' (Levin 1995a: 388), and the painting certainly has the broad, wide-angle lens vista of the urban Realist tradition, but what is different from earlier Realism is the complete absence of a human element to the city. Here is a landscape that was created by humans, but from which they are now absent—is Hopper commenting that what they created is in fact unliveable and dehumanizing? The scene is suggestive of isolation, of emptiness—we are presented with a bleak, deserted cityscape that creates, yet again, a mood of loneliness. Street life is eliminated by the high wall bordering the rail tracks—again, we are left wondering and imagining what can be in the spaces beyond the frame we are viewing. What is it that Hopper has omitted, and why? Part of the appeal of Hopper's works and, it could be argued, of many negative representations of the city, is their tendency to pose questions which only the viewer can answer. As Hobbs (1987: 70) says with reference to the artist's later works, their success 'depends on the way viewers are forced to leave their seats and perform the roles he has scripted for them'. The city is presented as static, awaiting our attention, everyday life freeze-framed

into a mournful world of lament at the modern age and its material expression in rampant urbanization. The viewer is left intrigued as to why the artist chose to ignore the millions of people involved in such rapid development and bustling 'progress'—the sea of humanity which one normally associates with New York. Hopper's New York, as shown in *Approaching a City*, is a dormant place which people have either abandoned or not yet graced with their presence. When questioned about this recurrent theme of his cityscapes, Hopper replied 'I don't know why [I do this] except that they say that I am lonely' (quoted in Levin 1998: 6).

The architecture shown in the piece makes a significant contribution to this mood—the buildings are bland in colour, stained with pollution, especially the industrial colossus that dominates the picture, and the rooms within the buildings are devoid of both light and life. The rail tracks dive into a tunnel that disappears from view; for Hopper, city life did not have a light at the end of the tunnel. Instead we are left with the impression that approaching a city is all about entering darkness, uncertainty, a world where human warmth, nature and emotion are swallowed whole. We are accorded a glimpse of blue sky, but the influence of nature is shut out by a scene which is dominated by the built environment—the latter, as in all of Hopper's city portraits, defeats the painter's transcendentalist attachment to the former to leave us with a scene that is haunting for both its inhospitability and its plaintive musings on urban life (or lack of it). Time, like space, is also suspended—nothing is approaching the city other than the viewer, and there is little in this scene that gives grounds for optimism or excitement as we approach. The eerie silence of the scene, rather, fosters varying shades of unease in our approach—tension, trepidation, tentativeness.

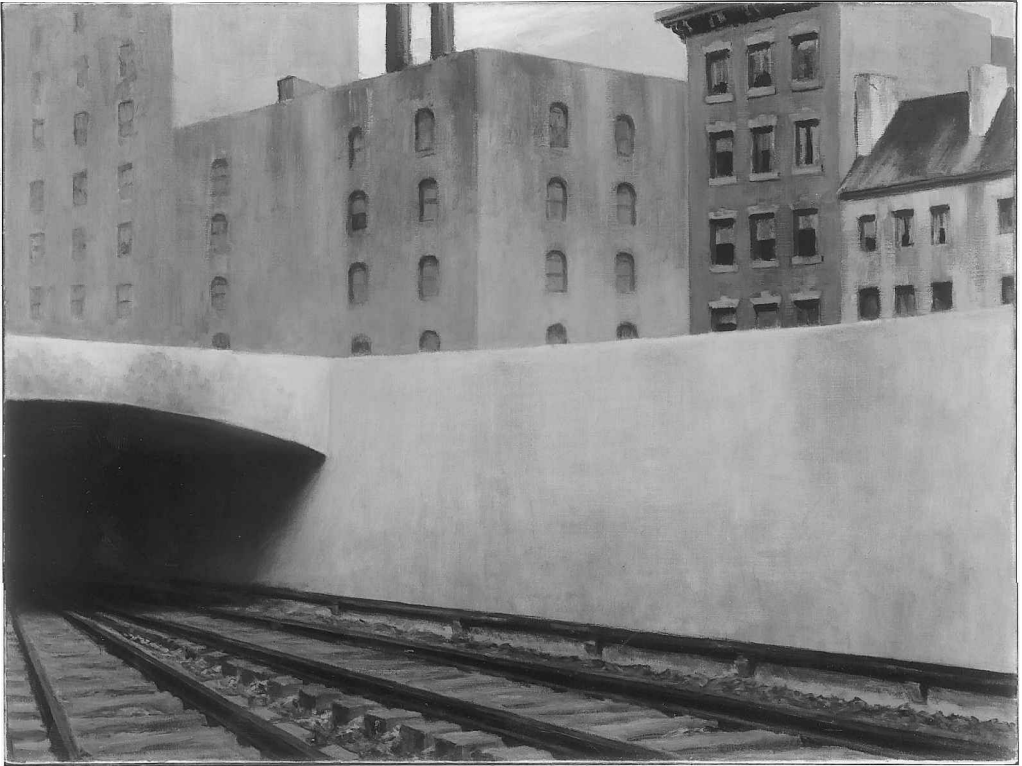


Figure 4 *Approaching a City*. Edward Hopper (1946). Oil on canvas. Reproduced with permission of The Phillips Collection, Washington, DC.

Sunday

Figure 5 shows a solitary man in contemplative mood sitting in front of a store. Hunched forward and appearing bored and disconsolate, it is a forlorn and lonely scene which again deals with themes of emptiness, isolation and loss. Although the man is shown on Sunday, his day of rest, the store behind him is empty, lacking window displays or any other suggestion that it is ever open for business. We are left wondering if this is the storeowner, his livelihood in tatters, who is living his life in perpetual Sunday, reflecting on his losses and worrying about what to do next. While the painting pre-dates the Depression, it is a por-

trayal of an individual bypassed by the optimism and opulence of the Jazz Age, someone struggling to make sense of what has happened to him and his business as the world has changed around him. Hopper's profound suspicion of modernity is suggested by the nineteenth-century storefronts—they have become the walls of a twentieth-century ghost town, and like the man who sits before them, relics of an age which Hopper preferred, an age of small, modest businesses and architecture of a more human scale.

While it could be argued that the painting has a 'small town' feel, it was in fact based on Hopper's frequent sojourns to the city of Hoboken, New Jersey, just across the Hudson



Figure 5 *Sunday*. Edward Hopper (1926). Oil on canvas. Reproduced with permission of The Phillips Collection, Washington, DC.

River from New York (Levin 1995a: 197). Levin documents that early reactions to *Sunday* were notable for their tendency to describe its 'Americanness' in both place and subject. Perhaps this is because the title has universal significance, or because the location is unidentifiable—this could be any city in the USA. Most relevant to this discussion, perhaps the Americanness comes from the depiction of a city street that has come to exclude and alienate one of its residents. The storekeeper is left helpless and idle, exhibiting vulnerability rather than confidence by staring into a space

to which he no longer belongs, and the viewer is left almost wanting to console him. It is this side of the painting which tells us much about Hopper's unique brand of Realism. The viewer becomes more involved than in earlier American Realism for two reasons. First, the city is completely devoid of any optimism, depressing rather than liberating, lamented rather than celebrated; and second, city people appear emotionally weak and lost in their own melancholy thoughts, detached from the world around them in a near-catatonic state. Is this man socially isolated because he is suffering

from Durkheim's condition of *anomie*? In a study of the New York photographs of Andre Kertesz, many of which have a Hopper theme of the individual imprisoned in the modern city, David Seamon (1990: 48) follows Heidegger's phenomenology to call this second reason 'presence-to-hand', or 'situations where we meet the world as an entity separate from us, as a thing of concern'. The effect on the viewer of one Kertesz photograph entitled *Battery Park* (1948), where two isolated figures survey a bleak view from a wintry wharf, is as follows:

Our attention moves to the solitary man and we sense a mood of melancholy and solitaire. The bleakness of the weather, the isolated stance of the human figures ... evoke a feeling of loneliness and draw us, the beholders, into this emotional sphere, while at the same time we look on, perhaps relating the scene to a similar moment in our own lives or imagining the inner situation of the man on the wharf. (Seamon 1990: 49)

While the form and content of the image is, of course, different from Hopper's *Sunday*, there is much in Seamon's analysis that is applicable to an iconography of Hopper's cityscapes. In *Sunday*, we certainly imagine the 'inner situation' of the man on the boardwalk, how the city may have fashioned that situation, and why this man appears to have been left behind by the optimism of the time. Again, a Hopper painting provides spaces for imagination, not least because it is concentrated Hopper—lonely, silent, reflective, melancholy, empty.

Conclusion

As geographers, the textualized behaviour that concerns us is the production of landscapes; how they are constructed on the basis of a set of texts, how they are read, and how they act as a mediating

influence, shaping behaviour in the image of a text. (Duncan and Duncan 1988: 120)

Some time ago now, James Duncan and Nancy Duncan (1988) argued that the 'riddle of landscape' may be solved by viewing landscapes as part of 'discursive formations'.³ They contended that if we leave landscapes unquestioned, then 'concrete evidence about how a society *is* organized can easily become seen as evidence of how it *should*, or *must* be organized' (1988: 123). For these pioneers in the cultural geography of visual images, the discourses embedded within landscape representation are part of a system of social reproduction and regulation, and landscape needs to be re-read with a sensitivity to discourse if we are to understand and address the social and cultural implications of forms of representation. In this essay I have attempted to reveal and elaborate the anti-urban discourse embedded within the cityscapes of Edward Hopper, but have said less about the material effects of this discourse on American society. An appropriate conclusion, then, is to consider how Hopper's work might have contributed to the wider antipathy to cities which can be witnessed in the USA, and how this antipathy is materialized in a negative approach to urban affairs.

The quotation that begins this concluding section is particularly useful in thinking about Hopper's legacy. The texts on which his scenes were constructed were anti-urban—Jefferson and the pastoral ideal, Emerson and the transcendentalist imagination, Henry James and the suspicion of modernity, *film noir* and the city as empty, threatening and dehumanizing. Through this intertextual inscription of his urban fears, Hopper offered his viewers spaces for imagination, ensuring that 'how they are read' is usually a sympathetic mixture of yearning for past times and things lost, and trepidation with which we view the urban arena

where his lonely and mournful characters wait for our attention. It is his isolated individuals who ‘act as a mediating influence’, as the beholders can identify with and imagine their loneliness, which then ‘shapes our behaviour’. We imagine that this is what the city does to people—it alienates, excludes, diminishes our significance—and thus the city is now feared, avoided and vilified. Whether it was Hopper’s intention to tap into the anti-urbanism of his viewers is open to debate, and indeed something we may never know, but there can be little doubt that Hopper fed the ‘American imagination’ (Lyons and Weinberg 1995) with the anti-urban discourse that can be detected in his art.

Gregory (1994: 11) defines a discourse as ‘the ways in which we communicate with one another, ... that vast network of signs, symbols, and practices through which we make our world(s) meaningful to ourselves and to others’. Following Habermas, Gregory argues that such communications are context bound, ‘embedded in a particular here and now’ (1994: 13), but shows that there has been little to stop discourses ‘travelling’ and disconnecting from the social and spatial contexts in which they emerged. In this paper I have argued that Edward Hopper made a significant contribution to the production and dissemination of an anti-urban discourse, and it needs to be demonstrated that this discourse is not just developed in place but something *which takes place* away from its context. As Henriques, Holloway, Urwin, Venn and Walkerdine (1984: 106) argue, every discourse is ‘the result of a practice of production which is at once material, discursive and complex’. The poetics and politics underpinning Hopper’s representations of the American city are not confined to the image—a discourse has emerged which informs others of the American city and the material effect of this discourse is to shape attitudes towards urban

affairs. As far back as 1962, White and White stated that

[t]he fact that our most distinguished intellectuals have been on the whole sharply critical of urban life helps explain America’s lethargy in confronting the massive problems of the contemporary city in a rational way. (1962: 200)

Thirty years later, Beauregard (1993) traced the discourse of decline and reached a similar conclusion, arguing that the sheer volume of negative journalistic and intellectual representations of city life was inhibitive towards a sensible, sustained agenda of tackling America’s urban problems. It is the central argument of this essay that, through a unique form of urban Realism, Edward Hopper has contributed to the fear of the American city generated by other major figures before, during and after his time. In a superb exploration of New York’s literary history, Shaun O’Connell (1995) documents an ambivalent attachment to the city from the cumulative effect of two kinds of writing—those which show the place to be ‘remarkable’ and those which show it to be ‘unspeakable’. There is nothing remarkable about Hopper’s New York—looking at *Nighthawks*, unspeakable things may be around the corner; *Approaching a City* is all about a journey into unspeakable darkness, where *Night Shadows* rule and the streets always seem to have the forlorn emptiness of *Sunday*.

‘Landscape’, argues Don Mitchell (2000: 144), ‘is part of a system of social regulation and reproduction because it is *always* an inseparable admixture of material form and discursive sign’. The lethargy in addressing urban affairs identified by White and White (1962) still persists in America, and sustained attention by cultural geographers to the material effects of discursive practices of signification is

important if we are to demonstrate that urban representations may not be indicative of an external reality, and that landscapes in fact produce and reproduce a 'reality' which inhibits reform, obscures the positive aspects of urban life, and augments the individual and institutional fear of the American city.

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Notes

- 1 So powerful, in fact, that negative urban images from America serve to legitimate urban reform in Canadian cities.
- 2 To avoid confusion, Realism in the visual arts will be presented with a capital 'R', realism as a philosophy in lower case.
- 3 For a more extensive discussion, see Mitchell (2000: 142–144).

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Abstract translations

Peur de la ville 1882–1967: Edward Hopper et le discours anti-urbaniste

Cet article mesure en quoi certains des paysages urbains du peintre «réaliste» américain Edward Hopper ont contribué à la production et à l'articulation du discours anti-urbaniste de la culture américaine. Faisant suite à un survol introductif de ce discours, l'article examine le développement du Réalisme dans l'art américain et voit en quoi les représentations urbaines en découlant sont des réponses aux changements rapides ayant affecté les villes américaines au début du *xxe* siècle. En vue d'explorer les influences intertextuelles derrière ces sentiments anti-urbains et en quoi ceux-ci se traduisent en une forme de Réalisme qu'on accorde à Edward Hopper, je fais un court exposé bi-

ographique du peintre. Ceci prélude à une lecture de quatre pièces clés dans l'œuvre de Hopper, soit autant d'exemples évocateurs du discours anti-urbaniste: *Night Shadows*, *Nighthawks*, *Approaching a City* et *Sunday*. Le pouvoir des représentations et la popularité de l'artiste ont nourri le discours anti-urbaniste—un discours ayant un effet matériel sur la vie urbaine aux États-Unis.

Mots clés: discours, anti-urbanisme, paysage urbain, Edward Hopper, représentation.

Temor de la ciudad 1882–1967: Edward Hopper y el discurso del anti-urbanismo

Este papel examina hasta que punto algunas de las grandes representaciones del paisaje urbano del pintor realista estadounidense, Edward Hopper, han contribuido a la producción y la articulación del discurso sobre el anti-urbanismo en la cultura de los Estados Unidos. Después de la información introductoria sobre este discurso, el papel habla del desarrollo del Realismo en el arte estadounidense y de como las representaciones urbanas que salieron respondían a los grandes y rápidos cambios que tenían lugar en las ciudades americanas a principios del siglo veinte. He incluido una breve historia biográfica de Edward Hopper para poder explorar las influencias ínter textuales detrás de sus sentimientos anti-urbanos y para mejor entender como éstos eran traducidos en la forma tan única del Realismo por lo cual Hopper es reconocido. Luego hay interpretaciones de cuatro de las obras claves de Hopper que ejemplifican el discurso anti-urbano: *Night Shadows* (*Sombras Nocturnas*), *Nighthawks* (*Gavilanes Nocturnos*), *Approaching a City* (*Acercar una Ciudad*) and *Sunday* (*Domingo*). Los poderes de representación y la popularidad del artista han llegado a formar parte del discurso sobre el anti-urbanismo—un discurso que tiene un efecto material sobre la vida urbana en los Estados Unidos.

Palabras claves: discurso, anti-urbanismo, paisaje urbano, Edward Hopper, representación.