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## BETWEEN LIGHT AND SHADOW: SYMBOLISM AND LIMINALITY IN EDWARD HOPPER'S ART

**Abstract.** *The purpose* of this article is to examine how light and shadow function as key expressive and symbolic resources in Edward Hopper's paintings, enabling the construction of liminal spaces, existential ambiguity, and narrative indeterminacy. The study aims to demonstrate that Hopper's use of illumination is not merely naturalistic or atmospheric, but a systematic visual mechanism that conveys psychological tension, spatial thresholds, and symbolic meaning. **Research methods.** The research applies an interdisciplinary approach combining art historical analysis, visual semiotics, and theories of liminality. Selected works by Hopper, including *Nighthawks*, *Automat*, *Rooms by the Sea*, *Sunlight in an Empty Room*, and *House by the Railroad*, were analysed in terms of the role of light and shadow in structuring space, temporal perception, and affective impact. Special attention was given to contrasts between artificial and natural light, the ambiguity or absence of light sources, and the expressive function of shadows. **Results of the study show that** light in Hopper's paintings operates as a dynamic instrument of liminality. Artificial light produces a sense of temporal suspension, emotional alienation, and spatial isolation, whereas muted or sourceless light reinforces stasis and existential immobility. Shadows destabilize realist space, transform architectural forms into ambiguous agents, and participate in the creation of tension and symbolic meaning. Light and shadow together construct thresholds between interior and exterior, visibility and concealment, presence and absence, and familiarity and estrangement, generating a sense of being "between" spaces, times, and psychological states. **Conclusions.** The study concludes that light and shadow are central visual and symbolic devices in Hopper's work, encoding liminality across spatial, temporal, and existential dimensions. By foregrounding these strategies, the article contributes to understanding Hopper's realism as symbolic realism and provides a methodological framework for analyzing liminality in visual art.

**Key words:** Edward Hopper, liminality, light and shadow, symbolism, visual analysis, realism.

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## МІЖ СВІТЛОМ І ТІННЮ: СИМВОЛІЗМ І ЛІМІНАЛЬНІСТЬ У МИСТЕЦТВІ ЕДВАРДА ГОППЕРА

**Анотація.** *Мета статті* – дослідити роль світла і тіні у живописі Едварда Гоппера як ключових виразних і символічних засобів для конструювання лімінальних просторів, екзистенційної невизначеності та наративної незавершеності. Стаття показує, що використання світла у творах Е. Гоппера виходить поза межі натуралістичного зображення чи атмосферного ефекту, виконуючи системну символічну функцію, що передає психологічну напругу, просторові пороги та символічний зміст. **Методи дослідження.** Використано міждисциплінарний підхід, що поєднує мистецтвознавчий аналіз, візуальну семіотику та теорії лімінальності. Проаналізовано ключові роботи Е. Гоппера, зокрема «Опівнічники», «Кафе-автомат», «Кімнати біля моря», «Сонячне світло в порожній кімнаті», «Будинок біля залізниці», з урахуванням ролі світла і тіні у формуванні простору, сприйняття часу та емоційного впливу. Особливу увагу приділено контрасту штучного і природного світла, неоднозначності або відсутності джерел світла, а також експресивній функції тіні. Результати дослідження показують, що світло у картинах Е. Гоппера є динамічним інструментом лімінальності. Штучне світло створює відчуття часової зупинки, емоційного відчуження та просторової ізоляції, тоді як приглушене або безджерельне світло підкреслює застиглість і екзистенційну нерухомість.

Тіні дестабілізують реалістичний простір, перетворюючи архітектурні форми на амбівалентних агентів, що сприяють формуванню напруги та символічного змісту. Світло і тінь разом конструюють пороги між внутрішнім і зовнішнім, видимим і прихованим, присутністю і відсутністю, знайомим і відчуженим, створюючи відчуття перебування «між» просторами, часом і психологічними станами. **Висновки.** Світло і тінь у творчості Е. Гоппера є центральними візуальними та символічними засобами кодування лімінальності у просторовому, часовому та екзистенційному вимірах. Акцент на цих стратегіях поглиблює розуміння символічного реалізму художника та пропонує методологічну основу для дослідження лімінальності у візуальному мистецтві.

**Ключові слова:** Едвард Гоппер, лімінальність, світло і тінь, символізм, візуальний аналіз, реалізм.

**Problem statement.** At the turn of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, the focus of attention in various fields of the humanities has increasingly shifted toward categories that reflect ambivalence, uncertainty, and the psychological and emotional disorientation of the modern individual, as well as phenomena of anomaly, surrealism, paradox, absurdity, and transgression. Within this constellation of issues, the phenomenon of liminality occupies a central place. It is understood by scholars as a state of ambiguity, the “presence of the familiar within the unfamiliar, as well as freedom from conventions and rules” [1, p. 95; 2], a “formless” reality marked by the disruption of expected sequence and predictability, a condition of being between categories – existing prior to classification or resisting it – as well as a transformation of the empirical outside into the transcendental, that which lies beyond ordinary experience and conventional conceptions of space and time [3, p. 22].

Initially identified as a component of rituals and rites of passage, the concept of liminality has since been incorporated into research agendas across multiple branches of the humanities. Only a limited number of studies, however, have examined this phenomenon from an art-historical perspective, despite the fact that visual art, in our view, is capable of embodying all major dimensions of liminality. These include the focus on uncertainty – manifested through ambivalence and irrationality; diffusion – characterized by blurring and elusiveness; the focus on renewal – associated with the potential for transformation and the acquisition of unusual features; and the focus on anomaly – expressed through the deviance of images, departures from familiar configurational models, as well as spectrality, mysticism, unnaturalness, or the supernatural.

In this respect, the work of Edward Hopper is of particular scholarly interest. As researchers have noted, Hopper’s paintings create a sense of existential emptiness and metaphorical indeterminacy, fixing the depicted scene in a suspended space–time and generating an atmosphere of the uncanny and the supernatural, while depriving the viewer of the possibility to either “enter” or “exit” the represented

space [4, p. 113]. Despite this, the study of liminality in Hopper’s art remains limited to isolated works that primarily focus on spatial and temporal indeterminacy, oneiric effects, narrative incompleteness, radical depopulation, and the sense of the uncanny. Moreover, scholars generally refrain from using the term liminality itself. From the perspective of visual techniques such as light and shadow, the motif of liminality – so far as we are aware – has not been examined in either domestic or international scholarship. This gap accounts for the scientific novelty and relevance of the present article, especially given the extraordinary role that light and shadow play in Hopper’s paintings.

**Theoretical Framework.** To the best of our knowledge, the phenomenon of liminality in Edward Hopper’s work has been the subject of explicit scholarly analysis only in a limited number of studies. In particular, the concept of liminality is employed directly in Michael Motok’s article [5], where liminal figures and techniques for creating spatial and temporal indeterminacy in Hopper’s paintings are examined within the framework of magical realism. However, even in the absence of the term “liminality” as an explicit theoretical category, a substantial body of scholarship effectively addresses the same phenomena through adjacent aesthetic and narrative concepts.

Thus, a number of studies interpret Hopper’s work through parallels with the stylistics of film noir, a genre often described as the most “liminal” in cinematic art. Similar to film noir, Hopper disrupts “general narrative norms” [5, p. 14], and each of his key works contains subtle manipulations of reality [6, p. 85], producing an oneiric, dreamlike effect [5, p. 16]. This tendency to blur the boundaries between the real and the imagined simultaneously expands the interpretative field of Hopper’s work beyond the framework of film noir.

In this respect, Hopper’s oeuvre also reveals affinities with surrealism and symbolism [7]. In particular, the proximity of some of his works to surrealist aesthetics was noted by Levin [9], a prominent scholar of Hopper’s art, who explained through these parallels

both the non-naturalistic forms within the artist's realist paintings and the persistent sense of narrative incompleteness characteristic of his works. Similarly, art historian Rolf G. Renner observes that Hopper's paintings exist within an "ambivalent, Freudian world" [10, p. 42], giving rise to a dichotomy between symbolism and naturalism, the boundary between which may be almost imperceptible [10, p. 32]. It is precisely this ambivalence that creates the conditions for interpreting Hopper's paintings as spaces of constant 'in-betweenness'.

A logical continuation of this line of inquiry is the scholarly focus on the spatial and temporal indeterminacy of Hopper's paintings, which is either explicitly or implicitly described as liminal. Motok, for instance, identifies the spatial liminality of Hopper's most famous work, *Nighthawks* (1942), in the surreal rupture between the possibility of being inside the diner and the viewer's enforced exclusion from it. As a result, the viewer is positioned in an intermediate state between silence and conversation, unity and isolation [5, p. 20]. Such an experience of space as unstable and 'threshold-like' is further reinforced by the artist's formal compositional strategies.

Among the techniques used to create spatial liminality, scholars note Hopper's distinctive framing of objects and architectural forms, which appear disproportionately large or even infinite, extending beyond the boundaries of the frame and thereby distorting the viewer's perception of spatial relations [5; 6; 9]. This effect is further intensified by the creation of an illusion of endless space through the "denial of the horizon," whereby horizontal and tangential lines across the composition fail to coalesce into a clearly defined horizon line [8].

Spatial disorientation, in turn, is closely intertwined with the disruption of conventional perceptions of time. Temporal disorientation in Hopper's paintings is emphasized in the works of Mitchell [11], Motok [5], Pascal Bardet, and Gillies [8]. Dolores Mitchell, in particular, notes that temporal liminality is vividly manifested in *Gas* (1940), where the frozen composition, the generalized yet disturbingly recognizable image of the gas station, and the pervasive sense of permanence create the effect of "arrested" time. This places the figure between an unchanging present and a future that is never actualized [11, p. 75].

Thus, the temporal dimension of liminality complements the spatial one, forming an integral threshold chronotope.

The phenomenon of the "threshold" and the "boundary" is also examined in detail by J. Stanton,

who, without employing the concept of liminality, emphasizes that Hopper's scenes are "almost always on the edge," both literally and metaphorically [12, p. 24]. Stanton substantiates this claim by arguing that Hopper creates a "tension between the stability of focal time and place and the instability of the open (unconstructed) world that lies beyond or surrounds this stability." Moreover, "the figures in Hopper's paintings are perceived as being on the boundary (between interior and exterior) or as standing in a particular relationship to that boundary" [12, p. 24]. These observations highlight not only the formal but also the existential nature of liminality in Hopper's art.

Thus, a substantial body of art-historical scholarship effectively interprets Hopper's painting through a liminal lens, focusing on spatial and temporal indeterminacy, the motif of the boundary and the threshold, oneiric effects, narrative incompleteness, radical depopulation, and the pervasive sense of the uncanny. Liminality – regardless of whether the term is explicitly employed or implicitly derived from art-historical analysis – emerges in Hopper's paintings at the intersection of several dimensions: spatial, temporal, narratively incomplete, and existential. Its realization is enabled by such specific features of the artist's visual language as the denial of the horizon, the illusion of infinite space, the distortion of linear chronology, the ambivalence between the familiar and the disturbing, and the positioning of both characters and viewers on the boundary between interior and exterior.

At the same time, the role of light and shadow as instruments for articulating liminal motifs and states, and for constructing the distinctive symbolism of Hopper's realist paintings, has not yet been the subject of a dedicated scholarly investigation. This gap defines both the focus and the objectives of the present article.

**The aim** of the present study is to analyse the role of light and shadow in Edward Hopper's paintings as central expressive and symbolic resources that generate liminal spatial configurations, temporal suspension, and existential ambiguity, thereby revealing the mechanisms through which realist visual language produces liminal meaning.

**Results and Discussion.** In Edward Hopper's paintings, light emerges as a key expressive device that structures the dramaturgy of pictorial space. Light in Hopper's work functions as a distinctive code through which the narrative and the inner states of the characters are revealed. Although the light he depicts is realist in appearance, it almost invariably carries an

element of symbolism and metaphorical meaning: it transforms everyday scenes by endowing them with psychological tension, connotations of unnaturalness and alienation, as well as simultaneous feelings of protection and vulnerability. Moreover, light operates as an unfinished narrative code through which the story of the scene is only partially disclosed.

The role of light is particularly pronounced in such paintings as *Automat* (1927), *High Noon* (1949), and *Morning Sun* (1952), where illumination appears to expose an internal pause within the figure and functions as a marker of an existential state, fixing a moment of introspective suspension. Analyzing *Pennsylvania Coal Town* (1947), which depicts a man lifting his gaze from a rake toward a light source whose rays plunge the building façades on either side into deep shadow, Strand observes that it is precisely light that “creates a sense of transcendence, as though some revelation were near, as though some transforming testimony were encoded in the light... We are drawn into a vision whose source lies beyond us and whose operation is difficult to grasp... All we can do from where we stand is to meditate on the unspoken barriers between us” [13, p. 27–28].

In interior scenes, intense illumination produces an effect of emotional exposure. In *Room in New York* (1932), for example, the bright overhead light accentuates emotional distance as an insurmountable boundary between the figures, who are narratively presented as a married couple yet appear as strangers, separated from one another. The bright “inevitable” light that “exposes” the truth is complemented by faces immersed in deep shadows, which blur the couple's facial features and embody alienation and separation.

In *Night Windows* (1928), light intrudes into private space, blurring the boundary between intimate interior life and the voyeuristic act of observing it from the outside. Through the brightly lit interior, the viewer is invited to cross the boundary established by the geometric composition of three black windows, creating a dramatic backdrop of the illuminated interior against the backdrop of the dark night. Light is juxtaposed in the painting with areas of shadow and darkness, heightening the sense of alienation and anonymity. The eerie, almost theatrical, electric light of the stage, contrasting with the blackness outside the window and the shadows, emphasizes the vulnerability of intimate life. The darkness leaves the observer protected under the cover of night, completely anonymous, while human life is mercilessly exposed, as if under stage lights. This theatricality lends a mystical

quality to realism. The play of light and shadow creates a sharp contrast, creating a kind of threshold between voyeuristic display and concealment.

Hopper frequently employs strong artificial lighting that generates an atmosphere of unnaturalness, sharply separating interior from exterior space and distancing the depicted scene from the viewer's everyday experience. The contrast between the excessively illuminated interior and the darkness outside in such paintings as *Nighthawks* (1942) and *Automat* (1927) produces emotional dissonance, evoking feelings of unease, tension, and temporal indeterminacy. The interior space is perceived as an island of light surrounded by darkness, where illumination marks a threshold between the ordinary and the symbolic, intensifying the surrounding darkness and reinforcing a state of anxious suspension.

Analyzing *Nighthawks*, Hobbs notes that “the fluorescent lighting is frightening, alienating, and dehumanizing. It creates an unreal, artificial sense of warmth – an atmosphere more reminiscent of a clinic, or rather a laboratory, than a restaurant” [14, p. 129]. Such intense localized interior lighting becomes a source of illumination for the space outside; it simultaneously belongs to the café interior and to the space beyond it, producing an effect of being “between inside and outside.”

In *Automat*, the bright artificial yellow light is reflected in the window like a mirror, visually multiplying the space and creating an interior–exterior duality, as well as a sense that the viewer is positioned between two worlds – of vulnerability and peace. The illuminated space of the café contrasts with the inky black window, beyond which no life is visible and only the identical rows of lamps are reflected, creating a sense of a closed pause. The outside world seems switched off. This creates a feeling of being between moments: not quite here and not quite there. The inky black light of the window and beyond, and the reflection of the lamps, belong simultaneously to the café space and the space beyond, creating an effect of “between inside and outside.” The large black window behind the woman practically fills the entire background, but we do not see the street – only the black background and reflection. The intense localized light inside – the illuminated woman, the table, the cup – contrasts with the external black zone, reinforcing the connotation of tension, ignorance, and anxiety. The lights from the lamps not only expand the space, they literally rush into the darkness, into the abyss that unfolds behind the girl. The darkness seems to thicken around the figure, creating a sense

of tension and danger emanating from the painting and reinforcing the viewer's sense of being caught between two worlds.

Similarly, the intense fluorescent lighting at the gas station in *Gas* (1940) evokes connotations of both unease and emotional tension, marking a transitional state that combines protection and vulnerability.

At the same time, Hopper frequently employs subdued lighting that intensifies a sense of stasis and temporal suspension, as in *The Coast Guard Station* (1927), *The Coast Guard Station, Two Lights, Maine* (1927), *High Noon* (1949), *Interior by Moonlight* (1923), *Office in a Small City* (1953), *Mansard Roof* (1923), *Hotel Room* (1931), and *House by the Railroad* (1925). In *The Coast Guard Station*, light appears to have no identifiable source; rather than illuminating the scene, it produces a sense of estrangement. Light reflected in the windows of Hopper's buildings may vary in intensity, yet it consistently conveys their impenetrability, preventing the viewer from seeing inside (*House by the Railroad*, 1925; *Early Sunday Morning*, 1930).

In *Rooms by the Sea* (1951) and *Sun in an Empty Room* (1963), by contrast, sunlight becomes an active subject – the sole agent of action. *Sun in an Empty Room* depicts an unfurnished interior in which the sunlight entering through a darkened window resembles moonlight more than daylight. The central compositional element is a column of shadow cast by the sunlight onto the L-shaped back wall, echoing the darkness outside. In *Rooms by the Sea*, there is “no middle ground or shoreline” [13, p. 55], and the emptiness of the room is intensified by a trapezoid of sunlight. The viewer's perspective is distorted or framed not only through the “surreal absence of ground beyond the doorway,” but also through the central role of light itself, with its references to transience and the power of contemplation [7].

The liminality of these paintings may be described using Strand's characterization of them as a “vision of the world without us”; this is not merely a place that excludes us, but a place that is “emptied of us” [13, p. 58].

In Hopper's work, light often functions as a sign of intrusion from outside, violating the intimate privacy of those inside – as in *Chop Suey* (1929) – or, conversely, as a means of constructing a boundary between exterior and interior, as in *Rooms for Tourists* (1945), where light acquires a distinctly mystical quality. Here, the source of light appears to emanate from the house itself, as if the building “radiates” or irradiates light [9, p. 42; 15]. At the same time, the

house is illuminated from outside by an undifferentiated light source in such a way that exterior and interior light meet in front of the building. This produces, as Levin notes, a strange and alienating effect [9, p. 42] – one that simultaneously conveys comfort and uncanniness.

Lighting also renders Hopper's works cinematic: contrasting patches of light, illuminated geometric planes, and sharp boundaries between lit and dark areas all contribute to a sense of a frozen film frame, torn from a continuous sequence.

Hopper's use of shadow and chiaroscuro modeling further endows his paintings with symbolic ambivalence. In *Lighthouse Hill* (1927), despite the bright blue sky and an ostensibly tranquil subject matter, Hopper's treatment of shadows transforms the scene into one that is tense, unsettling, and ambivalent in its connotations. Not only is the façade of the cottage cast in shadow, with its blackened windows facing the viewer; the shadows seem to advance toward the viewer across the gently sloping hill. The impression is that the house itself spreads its darkness throughout the painting, directing it toward the spectator. In this regard, Levin observes that through the interplay of light and shadow the work produces a sense of “transition,” in which buildings function not merely as “border markers of civilization” but as entities endowed with their own ambivalent forces [9, p. 39].

In *The Coast Guard Station* (1927), the buildings are “held captive by harsh chiaroscuro,” which places them “at the disposal of invisible forces” [9, p. 39]. In *Approaching a City* (1946), deep shadows appear to “close off” space, generating a feeling of enclosure and unease. In *House by the Railroad* (1925), sharp shadows combined with muted colors create an atmosphere of mystery and the uncanny.

**Conclusions.** This study has demonstrated that light and shadow in Edward Hopper's painting function not merely as compositional or atmospheric devices, but as central symbolic instruments for articulating liminality. Through the strategic use of illumination, shadow, and chiaroscuro, Hopper constructs spaces suspended between interior and exterior, presence and absence, familiarity and estrangement, thereby placing both characters and viewers in a persistent threshold state.

The analysis shows that light in Hopper's works operates as an ambivalent semiotic resource: it may signify exposure, intrusion, and emotional vulnerability, while simultaneously suggesting protection, isolation, or contemplative withdrawal. Artificial lighting, in particular, intensifies the sense of spatial and

temporal dislocation, producing scenes that appear detached from linear chronology and everyday experience. Conversely, muted or source-less light reinforces stasis, temporal suspension, and existential immobility.

Shadows and light–dark contrasts further contribute to the symbolic destabilization of realist space. Buildings, interiors, and landscapes are transformed into liminal zones governed by ambiguous forces, where architectural forms act not only as boundaries but as active agents shaping affective and perceptual experience. This interplay enhances the cinematic quality of Hopper’s paintings and foregrounds their narrative openness and ontological uncertainty.

By foregrounding light and shadow as key mechanisms of liminal symbolism, the article fills an important gap in Hopper scholarship and demonstrates

that liminality in his work is not limited to spatial or temporal ambiguity alone, but is systematically encoded through visual techniques that operate at the intersection of symbolism, realism, and existential reflection.

Future research may extend the present analysis by examining other visual parameters in Hopper’s work, such as framing, perspective, and color, in relation to liminality. Comparative studies with cinematic traditions, particularly film noir, could further clarify the narrative and psychological functions of light and shadow. Additionally, interdisciplinary approaches drawing on visual semiotics or phenomenology may deepen the understanding of how liminal states encoded through illumination are perceived and interpreted by viewers.

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