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THE VISUAL TOOLKIT FOR CONSTRUCTING LIMINAL SPACE IN EDWARD HOPPER'S URBAN LANDSCAPES

Abstract. The article explores the visual mechanisms through which Edward Hopper constructs liminal space within his urban landscapes. The purpose of the research is to reveal how compositional geometry, light treatment, chromatic contrasts, and architectural symbolism generate the sense of transition, ambiguity, and existential suspension characteristic of Hopper's art. The study applies a combined formal-stylistic and semantic-symbolic method. The results show that Hopper's visual language systematically produces a model of liminality grounded in the tension between presence and absence, stillness and movement, light and shadow. Hopper's imagery – empty streets, desolate and alienating depictions of industrial buildings with "blind" windows, interiors deprived of both light and life, deserted railway stations with tracks leading "nowhere" – emerges as a symbolic boundary between the inner and the outer, the visible and the hidden, the real and the unreal. The palette and lighting blur the temporal threshold between dawn and dusk, creating an impression of an existential pause – a moment outside of time. Uncanniness is connoted through cool, desaturated colors; light that illuminates the buildings yet fails to penetrate inside; and the ambivalence of warm and cool tones. In the paintings where a warm palette dominates, the effect of warmth is "subdued" by deep shadows, the dramatic contrast of light and darkness, enclosed spaces, and the ambivalence of light sources, all of which generate a sense of temporal uncertainty and inner tension rather than warmth. The composition of these works simultaneously stabilizes and destabilizes perception, creating tension between the whole and its fragments, between compositional unity and Hopper's characteristic multiplication of frames, between the dynamism implied by the imagery and angles of the train, railway, etc. and the stasis created by the perfectly symmetrical positioning of objects that perceptually "fixes" them in place. Through numerous framing devices, intersecting horizontal and vertical lines, and perspectival ambiguity, the artist constructs spaces that oscillate between completion and indeterminacy. The study concludes that Hopper's visual toolkit – compositional geometry, tonal contrast, spatial layering, and symbolic illumination – constructs an experience of being "in between." His urban scenes function as metaphors for psychological and ontological thresholds, transforming the city into a frontier where opposites coexist and meaning emerges through ambiguity. These findings demonstrate how visual form embodies the concept of liminality and offer methodological insights into the relationship between space, symbolism, and existential experience in modern visual culture.

Key words: urban landscapes, painting, liminal space, Edward Hopper, visual toolkit.

ВІЗУАЛЬНИЙ ІНСТРУМЕНТАРІЙ ФОРМУВАННЯ ЛІМІНАЛЬНОГО ПРОСТОРУ В МІСЬКОМУ ПЕЙЗАЖІ ЕДВАРДА ГОППЕРА

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Анотація. У статті розглядається візуальний інструментарій, за допомогою якого один з найвідоміших митців Америки Едвард Гоппер конструює лімінальний простір у своїх міських пейзажах. **Мета дослідження** – виявити, як композиційна геометрія, світлове трактування, хроматичні контрасти та архітектурна символіка породжують відчуття переходу, саспенсу та екзистенційної

«невизначеності», характерне для його мистецтва. У дослідженні застосовані комбінований формально-стилістичний та семантико-символічний методи. Результати засвідчують, що візуальна мова митця систематично актуалізує мотив лімінальності, заснований на напрузі між присутністю та відсутністю, статикою та рухом, світлом та тінню. Образи Е. Гоппера – порожні вулиці, занедбані відчужувальні зображення промислових будівель зі «сліпими» вікнами, безлюдні пусті вокзали з залізничними коліями «в нікуди» – постають символічними межами між внутрішнім і зовнішнім, видимим і прихованим, реальним і сюрреалістичним. Палітра й освітлення розмишають часову межу між світанком та сутінками, створюючи враження екзистенційної паузи – миті поза часом. Відчуття моторошності конотується холодними, ненасиченими кольорами, світлом, що освітлює будівлі, але не проникає всередину, амбівалентністю теплих і холодних тонів. У картинах, де переважає тепла палітра, ефект від цих кольорів «подавляється» глибокими тіннями, драматичним контрастом світлотіні, замкненими просторами, амбівалентністю джерел світла, що створює відчуття темпоральної невизначеності та внутрішньої напруги, а не тепла.

Композиція творів одночасно стабілізує та дестабілізує сприйняття, створюючи напругу між цілим та його фрагментами, між композиційною єдністю та характерним для Е. Гоппера множенням кадрів, між динамікою, що імплікується образами і ракурсами потяга, залізниці тощо, і стазисом, створеним ідеально симетричним розташуванням об'єктів один до одного, що перцептивно «закріплює» їх на місці. Завдяки численним прийомам обрамлення, горизонтальним і вертикальним лініям, які перетинаються, і перспективній невизначеності художник створює простори, що коливаються між завершеністю і недомовленістю. У результаті дослідження доходимо до висновку, що візуальний інструментарій Е. Гоппера – композиційна геометрія, тональний контраст, просторове накладення та символічне освітлення – конструкує досвід перебування «між». Його міські сцени є метафорами психологічних і онтологічних порогів, які перетворюють місто на прикордонну зону, де співіснують протилежності, а сенс виникає через неоднозначність. Завдяки дослідженю показано, як візуальна форма втілює концепцію лімінальності, її запропоновано методологічні ідеї для її подальшого дослідження.

Ключові слова: міські пейзажі, живопис, лімінальний простір, Едвард Гоппер, візуальний інструментарій.

Problem Statement. The phenomenon of liminality as a category defining threshold, transitional, and boundary states of human experience represents one of the most relevant topics in contemporary interdisciplinary studies, given the “coordinating role of liminality for any type of reconstruction and renewal of models and paradigms” [1, p. 126]. In the humanities, the concept of liminality is widely applied to the analysis of spatial, psychological, and existential boundaries; however, its visual manifestations in twentieth-century painting remain virtually unexplored. The work of Edward Hopper, which centers on solitude, alienation, and the tension between interior and exterior spaces, constitutes a unique artistic field for the visualization of threshold states. The condition of in-betweenness – transitional or intermediate – is present in many of Hopper’s paintings and manifests itself both literally and symbolically.

Scholars note that Hopper’s paintings often exhibit “strange, frequently disturbing overtones that are difficult to explain through the lens of realism” [2, p. 13], presenting “an ambivalent world in which the things that comfort us and the things we find disturbing implicitly testify to their common origin” [3, p. 42]. This world is visualized by Hopper particularly in his urban landscapes, which evoke a sense of liminality – simultaneous presence and estrangement, movement and stillness, silence and tension.

Therefore, the analysis of the visual means of constructing liminal space in Edward Hopper’s

urban landscape allows for a more precise conceptualization of the liminal in visual art and provides new methodological guidelines for interpreting painterly space from this perspective, which determines the relevance of the present study.

Analysis of Recent Research and Publications. Liminality is defined in research as a border space, a transitive and ambivalent zone of the “betwixt and between”, as “moments in time and out of time,” a transition from an established system to an alternative one, and as “a realm of pure possibility whence novel configurations, ideas, and relationships may arise” [1, p. 97]. Scholars identify several typical features that give urban landscapes a sense of liminality in the viewer’s perception: the absence of exit, the unconventional arrangement of objects, distortion of proportions, the simultaneous presence of the familiar and the unfamiliar, and the absence of expected human presence [4].

Only a limited number of works – mostly essays published in online periodicals – are devoted to the phenomenon of liminality in art. Among scholarly studies, the problem of liminality from an art-historical perspective has been examined in only a few publications: in Віїрнера Амблард’s article [5] analyzing liminality in the works of Chinese artist Chen Hanfeng; in Chloe West’s master’s thesis [6]; in a chapter of a collective monograph exploring the relationship between liminality and art [7].

As far as we know, Edward Hopper’s work has been analyzed through the lens of liminality in

only two studies: Michael Motok's article [2], which examines liminal figures and the means of creating spatial infinity in Hopper's paintings in the context of "magical realism", and Jean Gillis's article [8], which explores liminality in a narrower sense – as the actualization of the sense of timelessness in Hopper's paintings. The phenomenon of liminality in Hopper's art (without explicit use of the term) is also indirectly discussed in E. S. Burns's article, which investigates the artist's depictions of empty Parisian spaces and concludes that these incredibly vacant images evoke a sense of the supernatural for the viewer, who has no way to enter or exit the compositions [9, p. 113].

Studies related to the visualization of liminality in Hopper's paintings also include research focusing on the related motif of loneliness, since the means of expressing solitude often overlap with the techniques used to convey liminality. In particular, this topic is discussed in Gail Levin's article "Edward Hopper's Loneliness" [10], David Jenkins's "Loneliness, Art, and the City" [11], and a joint study by Joseph Stanton [12] and Camela Cube [13], which examines the methods through which Hopper's paintings achieve symbolic and dramatic intensity. In Mark Strand's articles and lecture series [14; 15], approaches are proposed for interpreting Hopper's works through the "formal properties" of his images, which "convey the quality of desolation" [16, p. 342] through Hopper's characteristic "geometric imperatives associated with absent or isolated vanishing points" [16, p. 257] and trapezoidal forms.

Thus, the analysis of the visual means of constructing liminal space in Hopper's urban landscapes, examined in terms of the interrelation between formal techniques and meanings, remains largely unstudied and fragmented.

The purpose of this study is to analyze Hopper's urban landscapes in terms of the visual means of constructing liminal spaces and states. The methodology employed in the article combines formal-stylistic and semantic-symbolic analysis. The formal-stylistic analysis makes it possible to examine composition, perspective, color, and chiaroscuro as visual strategies for representing the phenomenon of liminality in the artist's urban landscapes. The semantic-symbolic analysis aims to elucidate the symbolism of details in Hopper's urban landscapes and to trace the symbolic function of space (the street and the city as liminal spaces).

Presentation of the Main Material. In creating images of "threshold" urban spaces, Hopper not only depicts urban or natural scenes but also constructs a metaphorical model of urban existence

on the edge – between presence and absence, light and shadow, transience and eternity. The cities in Hopper's works resemble ghosts – empty and deserted – emerging in such paintings as "Dawn In Pennsylvania" (1942), "Early Sunday Morning" (1930), "Paris Street" (1906), "The El Station" (1908), "Approaching a City" (1946), and others.

The visual means employed by Hopper to create a sense of the "threshold" quality of urban spaces are examined in this article through the analysis of several emblematic works: "Pennsylvania Sunrise" (1942), "Approaching a City" (1946), and the etching "Night Shadows" (1921). In these works, the visualization of liminality is achieved through a complex system of architectural, compositional, coloristic, and chiaroscuro devices.

The painting "Approaching a City" (1946) is marked by the complete absence of the human element in the urban landscape. The very space of the painting is transitory: the train, platforms, or tracks imply movement, waiting, and transition rather than dwelling. The train itself is not shown; it is unclear where it has come from or where it is going. It is a moment *before* or *after*, existing "outside" of completed meaning – a state of passage, uncertainty, and threshold. The railway tracks lead into the depth, drawing the gaze inward – a visual path *into* uncertainty. The platform, tracks, roof, and signal poles become more than just background elements; they function as active components of the visual narrative, emphasizing the boundaries – between the city and its outskirts, between motion and stillness.

The act of approaching the city is conceptualized as an immersion into the unknown and into anxiety, visualized through the oppressive presence of an industrial colossus – faded, grimy buildings whose interiors are devoid of both light and life, with blind, "dead" windows, an empty strip of dirty yellow wall, and railway tracks that seem to cut into the picture. Life vanishes beyond the high wall that borders the railway. The rails (as well as the title of the work) point to the metaphor of movement and change, while architecture serves as a metaphor for the boundary. Composition, perspective, light, and color converge to convey not completion but simultaneous approach (movement) and pause. The painting invites one into a state of waiting – and it is precisely waiting and uncertainty that constitute the key elements connoting liminality. The viewer experiences a subtle unease – not comfort, not safety, something "in between". Commenting on the painting, Hopper noted that among other things, he sought

to convey the fear a person feels when entering or leaving a city – that is, at the liminal point of transition between two spaces and the psychological states associated with it.

The painting thus becomes a visual metaphor of liminality. The railway tracks dive into a tunnel that disappears from view. The tunnel resembles a cavernous mouth leading into the unknown, which evokes a sense of entrapment, with no apparent exit. Approaching the city is an immersion into the unknown and loneliness, into a world where human warmth, nature and emotions are completely absent. Despite the predominance of warm hues – sandy, light brown, dark brown, and dirty yellow—the painting conveys no warmth. Warm colors coexist with more muted, cool tones, creating not a sense of warmth but rather an impression of inner tension. The palette and lighting suggest either dawn or dusk – the moment of transition between day and night, a state of *in-between*. Deep shadows seem to “lock” the space, evoking a feeling of enclosure and unease.

Ultimately, both the invisible traveler in the painting and the viewer find themselves in isolation and a strange imprisonment between the visible and the unknown, the past and the future, which is simultaneously predictable and unknown.

In *Dawn In Pennsylvania* (1942), the effect of an unnatural, even supernatural emptiness and a certain surreal quality is created through a combination of images: a deserted railway platform, a gloomy cityscape in the background of a painting with seemingly abandoned industrial buildings with “blind” windows, the rear section of a static, abandoned railcar, and a sooty sky that contrasts with the painting’s title, “Dawn” – all of which generate a sense of tension and unease. The ominous atmosphere of the painting is intensified by dramatic contrasts of light and shadow, conflicting light sources that simultaneously suggest both sunrise and sunset, a cold palette composed of blue and gray tones of varying brightness, and an asymmetrical black band obscuring part of the sky and echoing the black chimneys. The sense of ambiguity is created by the contrast between the optimistic connotations associated with the word “dawn” and the painting’s palette, dominated by dark blue, gray, and black tones.

The painting generates tension between the whole and its fragments, between the compositional unity and Hopper’s characteristic multiplication of frames: the frame of the painting is internally echoed by the lines of the platform, its roof, the massive column, and the pole on the right. Another source of tension lies in the opposition

between immobility, stasis, and potential activity. The fragmented image of the train implies motion beyond the left edge of the frame, evoking the scene of a departing train. At the same time, the almost perfectly symmetrical position of the train in relation to the cart on the right perceptually anchors it in place, creating an almost photographic stillness.

The railway platform itself can be viewed as a non-place in the anthropological sense – a transitional, liminal space that emphasizes the feeling of waiting or passage.

The black smoky sky, the large black platform roof extending beyond the frame, and other black elements contrast with the warm golden hue on the roof of the rusted train car. This contrast is emblematic of ambivalent sensations – on the one hand, emptiness and desolation, connoted by images of industrial decay, and on the other, a latent potential for hope, indexed by the golden ray of light on the train car.

In both paintings, the deserted industrial structures with closed doors and “blind”, unarticulated windows are depicted not merely as architectural objects but as symbolic boundaries – between the interior and the exterior, the real and the imagined, the living and the lifeless. Contrasts of color, texture, and light, the ambivalence of warm and cool tones, and the static, symmetrical compositions create an effect of suspended time – a kind of existential pause.

In these paintings, as in Hopper’s other urban landscapes, the architectural structures and voids of the cityscape function as spatial metaphors of transience. The city in his depiction appears not as a place of life but as a kind of “*in-between zone*”, where the familiar coordinates of time, movement, and social interaction dissolve. Empty streets, closed facades, the absence of people, and “dead” windows create an atmosphere of unnatural silence and estrangement. Architecture, deprived of the human element, acquires a self-sufficient subjectivity: it becomes a metaphor for absence and existential anxiety, a sign of transition between the known and the unknown, the recognizable and the mysteriously unfamiliar, the realistic and the unnatural. The buildings stand close together yet seem disconnected, each existing as if in its own isolated world. Contrasting light sources, where sunrise and sunset merge into a single tonal unity, form a threshold temporal space that evokes in the viewer a sense of existential uncertainty.

The feeling of liminality in Hopper’s scenes becomes even more pronounced in paintings that

incorporate a solitary human figure into the urban space – a lone presence often reduced to a barely perceptible silhouette, emphasizing the loss of human scale within the environment and symbolizing the rupture between the individual and the external world. Such is the case with the lone figure in the etching “*Night Shadows*” (1921), which appears alienated from the cityscape – a condition intensified through compositional techniques and chiaroscuro modeling.

In *Night Shadows*, the bird’s-eye perspective shows a solitary person walking along an empty nighttime street, accompanied only by his own shadow. The unusual angle of the composition highlights the vulnerability of the lonely passerby and gives it a voyeuristic, even sinister, quality. Scholars of Hopper’s art note that the most significant factor in creating the painting’s tension is precisely this elevated vantage point, which “creates a sense of strain, almost cinematic in its effect” [17, p. 117]. The tension is heightened by deep vertical and horizontal shadows, with light merely emphasizing their presence. The linear strokes of the engraving are used to accentuate the spot of light falling on the dark, almost empty street.

The varying degrees of illumination, contrasting the lit areas under the streetlight with the darker zones cast by the corner building, intensify the ominous, alienating appearance of the architecture. The narrow, wedge-shaped shadow of the streetlamp crossing the road forms a kind of threshold that must be crossed to enter deeper darkness and the unknown. As Rolf Gýnter Renner observes, the shadow of the streetlight cutting across the brightest area “creates an undeniable sense of threat... as if the person’s walking route leads them beyond the dividing line into a dangerous zone” [3, p. 41]. The lone, anonymous figure walking beside an enlarged shadow is both enigmatic and unsettling, doubling the threatening effect of the unknown.

Conclusions. The analysis of Edward Hopper’s urban landscapes demonstrates that the artist’s visual language systematically constructs a unique model of liminal space – one that captures the human condition suspended between presence

and absence, movement and stillness, reality and a certain surrealism of images. Through his architectural compositions, manipulation of light and shadow, and deliberate exclusion or isolation of the human figure, Hopper transforms ordinary urban environments into metaphorical thresholds – spaces of transition, ambiguity, and existential reflection.

The artist employs a complex system of architectural, compositional, chromatic, and chiaroscuro techniques, evoking a profound sense of “in-betweenness”. Empty streets, sealed facades, and “blind” windows operate as symbolic borders between the inner and outer, the visible and the hidden, the real and the unreal. The cold, desaturated color palette, the ambivalence of warm and cool tones, and the merging of dawn and dusk within a single frame dissolve temporal boundary, generating the impression of an existential pause – a moment beyond time.

The spatial and psychological emptiness in Hopper’s works reflects not more urban solitude but a deeper metaphysical condition. His architecture acquires subjectivity, while the isolated or absent human figure becomes a marker of estrangement and transition. The elevated perspective, fragmented lighting, and interplay of illumination and darkness transform the street into a visual metaphor for the threshold between safety and uncertainty, consciousness and the unknown.

Thus, Hopper’s visual toolkit – his compositional geometry, treatment of light, tonal contrasts, and symbolic use of space – serves not only to represent urban landscapes but to reveal their liminal essence. The city becomes a psychological and ontological frontier, a zone where opposites coexist and meaning emerges through ambiguity.

The findings of this study clarify the mechanisms by which visual form can embody the concept of liminality in art. They also suggest broader methodological implications for analyzing the interrelation of space, symbolism, and existential experience in modern visual culture – demonstrating that Hopper’s urban landscapes remain not only aesthetic but also philosophical meditations on the nature of human existence “between worlds”.

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