

Automat - Edward Hopper (1927)

(Des Moines Art Center)

Automat (1927) is a painting by Edward Hopper which portrays a lone woman staring into a cup of coffee in an automat late at night. Art critics often cite the work as an example of urban alienation.

A young woman sits alone, the chair across from her drawn in close to the table. Her hat is pulled low over her forehead; her eyes are fixed on her coffee cup. Dressed in the armor of fashion, she wears her good clothes: a winter coat with fur at the collar and cuffs and a spring cloche with a brave bunch of cherries at the brim. But hat and coat do not quite go together, and, like the young woman herself, seem a bit tired and not quite up to date. As she sits without companionship in the automat (a restaurant whose mechanical delivery of entrees, drinks, and desserts made it a symbol of the streamlined Jazz Age) we can imagine she is one of those not quite at home in the modern era, someone trying to make do. The woman looks self-conscious and slightly afraid, unused to being alone in a public place. Something appears to have gone wrong. She unwittingly invites the viewer to imagine stories for her, stories of betrayal or loss. Not only her attire but also the organization of space subtly suggest the precariousness of her social position. Seated at the table nearest the door, she is at a carefully calibrated remove from the social flow. The restaurant (which we only know to be an automat from the title Hopper gave the picture; no rows of little glass doors with wedges of pie behind them are visible) seems vast and strangely empty; the window behind the young woman reflects nothing in the restaurant except the round ceiling lights--and they recede into an indefinite distance, while illuminating nothing of the world outside. As in so many of his paintings, Hopper manipulates space to heighten dramatic tension--a hallmark of his narrative style.

Automat for instance is a painting in which little appears to be happening. Hopper does not tell a story but paints a moment, a moment that includes loneliness, isolation, and a spell of the dark. A woman sits by herself, brooding. Behind the solitary woman is a large window, blackened by an impenetrably gloomy night. The window behind her shows nothing from the outside, except it reflects the twin rows of ceiling lights. The reflections of lights recede into the background giving a murky, tunnel-like effect, leading to nowhere. It does not reflect anything from the interior, not even the woman. If what the window reflects is what the painting reflects, nothingness exists in the woman's isolation. The radiator, crouching at the left of the painting, seems just as isolated as the girl in the composition, but almost looks more communicative than her. The lonely, solitary moment is caught in time. The viewer looks at this and immediately feel her isolation and loneliness as if it were his own. *Is she running away? What thoughts are in her mind as she stares into the cup? Is she awaiting an assignation which she fears? Has she received bad news? Or is she perennially unhappy?*

Hopper uses clear visual language to confront one of the most persistent themes found throughout modern art movements: solipsistic isolation. Here again he evokes expressionistic abstraction and discoloration to heighten the ambiance of loneliness and abandon that his subject suffers, and the effect is snaring and poignant. Automat

is one of the most personal of his paintings of women. While she is likely not alone in this café, she is alone in her thoughts. One is in a space where he normally would not belong, sharing a moment that in life would be intrusive, uninvited. But on following the path that the reflected lights have set for one is drawn deeper into the dark window, yet somehow still focusing on her. All one sees with her are lights and windows -- again, no doors.

Automat is a picture of sadness – and yet it is not a sad picture. It has the power of a great melancholy piece of music. Despite the starkness of the furnishings, the location itself does not seem wretched. Others in the room may be on their own, men and women drinking coffee by themselves, similarly lost in thought, similarly distanced from society: a common isolation with the beneficial effect of lessening the oppressive sense within any one person that they are alone in being alone. Hopper invites the viewer to feel empathy with the woman in her isolation. She seems dignified and generous, only perhaps a little too trusting, a little naïve – as if she has knocked against a hard corner of the world. The artist puts the viewer on her side, the side of the outsider against the insiders.

In roadside diners and late-night cafeterias, hotel lobbies and station cafés, one too may dilute a feeling of isolation in a lonely public place and hence rediscover a distinctive sense of community. The lack of domesticity, the bright lights and anonymous furniture, may be a relief from what can be the false comforts of home. It may be easier to give way to sadness here than in a living room with wallpaper and framed photographs, the décor of a refuge that has let one down. The figures in Hopper's art are not opponents of home per se; it is simply that, in a variety of undefined ways, home appears to have betrayed them, forcing them out into the night or on to the road. The 24-hour diner, the station waiting room or motel are sanctuaries for those who have, for noble reasons, failed to find a place of their own in the ordinary world.

A side-effect of coming into contact with any great artist is that through their work one starts to notice things one can understand, but previously hadn't thought worthy of consideration. One tends to become sensitized to what might be called the Hopperesque, a quality now found not only in Hopper's North American locales, but anywhere in the developed world where there are motels and service stations, roadside diners and airports, bus stations and all-night supermarkets. Hopper is the father of a whole school of art that takes as its subject matter threshold spaces, buildings that lie outside homes and offices, places of transit where the viewer is aware of a particular kind of alienated poetry. One feels Hopper's presence behind the photographs of Andreas Gursky and Hannah Starkey, the films of Wim Wenders and the books of Thomas Bernhard.

It's a curious feature of Hopper's work that although it seems concerned to show the viewer places that are transient and un-homely, one may, in contact with it, feel as if he has been carried back to some important place in himself, a place of stillness and sadness, of seriousness and authenticity: it can help one to remember oneself. This visual dynamic has a psychological equivalent within the viewer's own mind: he is

made aware of constellations of ideas and moods distinct enough to feel like different personalities – an inner fluidity which can on occasion lead him to declare, without any allusion to the supernatural, that he is not feeling as if the subject was indeed himself.

The void that the viewer fills is especially apparent in such artworks as Hopper's *Automat*. The composition lacks a stable point; one's eyes roam uncertainly from the figure to the black window and from the lights to the window. This reciprocal relationship between the young woman and the viewer, both drawn to quiet contemplation through a black void, is impossible without a viewer. The painting "chooses one;" One completes it. Most basically, this is why Hopper's works feel universal — they distill expressive content into a single, easily readable moment that corresponds emotionally and logistically to the lives of modern viewers. Hopper paints situations, and even more importantly, characters with whom almost any viewer can instantly identify.

Edward Hopper belongs to a particular category of artist whose work appears sad but does not make one sad – the painterly counterpart to Bach or Leonard Cohen. Loneliness is the dominant theme in his art. His figures look as though they are far from home. They stand reading a letter beside a hotel bed or drinking in a bar. They gaze out of the window of a moving train or read a book in a hotel lobby. Their faces are vulnerable and introspective. They may have just left someone or been left. They are in search of work, sex or company, adrift in transient places. It is often night, and through the window lie the darkness and threat of the open country or of a strange city.

Yet despite the bleakness Hopper's paintings depict, they are not themselves bleak to look at – perhaps because they allow the viewer to witness an echo of his own griefs and disappointments, and thereby to feel less personally persecuted and beset by them. It is sad books that consoles most when one is sad, and the pictures of lonely urban settings that one should hang on his walls when there is no one to hold or love.

Static Image Techniques

Other important **graphic** and **visual features** are found in such static images as pictures, photographs, or posters.

- **Shape**

The term **shape** is used to describe how the different elements of an image fit together and how shapes in an image combine to achieve a particular effect for a purpose.

- **Colour**

Colour is more than decoration. Colours, whether described in words or shown in images, often have symbolic significance that contributes to meaning. Red might indicate blood or anger; black may evoke evil or grief; blue can convey sadness or depression - or, in other circumstances, calm. The choice of colours, such as the use of **primary colours** (red, blue, and yellow), and the intensity or brilliance of the selected colour, all affect the impact of the image and therefore its effectiveness in communicating. **Local colour** refers to the natural colour of an object; for example, yellow is the local colour of a lemon. In a **monochrome**, different tones of the one colour, described as different **hues**, are used.

- **Depth**

As with the visual effect of a stage, **depth** may be important. Although most static images are two dimensional, their effect may be three dimensional because of the impression of depth given by the placement of people, animals, objects, or words in the **foreground** in relation to the **background** "behind" them.

Sometimes referred to as **depth of field**, this is also significant in film. Depth of field enables relationships between the visual elements to be communicated to the viewer.

- **Proportion**

Proportion is also a significant feature to consider in reading or presenting static images. A comic-strip frame or a poster may contain several different elements, usually combining images and words and in different sizes. They may be represented as bigger or smaller in relation to one another than they might be in real life. The size of the different

elements, and the ways these sizes are combined, will lead the viewer or reader to interpret them differently. Size, which is relative, will help determine the dominant image and concept.

- **Use of space**

The **use of space** is how the different elements are placed in the complete image. Examining the use of space extends the concept of layout, exploring not only how the elements are placed in relation to each other but also how and where they are combined and placed on the page or screen. The use of space includes the use of **white space**, where nothing is printed. White space is critical in helping highlight graphics and illustrations, throwing them into relief and creating visual interest to convey a vivid message, such as "Watch This Space".

The use of space is a consideration in selecting how headings should be highlighted. Upper case or bold formats tend to use more space, and italics generally use more space than underlining. The use of **borders** within the page redefines its space according to the purpose, the audience, and the desired effects.

- **Paper**

The paper on which any static image is printed is itself a significant visual feature. The weight of the paper, its texture, its opacity, and whether it is embossed or watermarked, glossy or flat, or white or coloured are all related to the purpose, the audience, and, inevitably, the cost. Students can explore the language of paper and paper products by investigating the qualities of different papers and making their own, linking their investigation of visual language to objectives in the area of technology.

- **Composition**

Composition is the process of organising the forms, shapes, colours, and any words and so on into a balanced and rhythmical design. Composition is based on conscious choices made with the purpose, topic, and audience in mind. These choices influence our reading or viewing accordingly.

Composition involves selecting and ordering the visual elements and using space to achieve the appropriate effect and to communicate the originator's message. Designers

usually look for **balance** in a static image, and they relate dissimilar elements to each other in such a way that the overall image is completely unified.

In a **closed composition**, the space depicted with its forms is designed to be complete in itself, whereas **open composition** appears to be only part of a larger space beyond the boundaries of the image.

Composition clarifies the focus of the static image. The central focus or **dominant image** may be obvious from its positioning, often at the centre of the static image, or it may be more subtle. Movement that carries the eye from one part of the image to another also assists this design focus.

Students need to take composition, balance, layout, lettering, size, style, font, spacing, shape, colour, depth, proportion, the use of space, and the technology used into account when making choices in presenting their information and ideas. They need to consider the same matters whether they are viewing the daily newspaper or presenting a student newspaper as part of the English classroom programme.

Close reading and exploring the visual language in static images helps students to understand the ways they can combine verbal and visual elements effectively.

Students exploring visual language and thinking critically about it are shown at work investigating packaging, marketing, and the presentation of compact discs and music videos in parts four and five of the 1995 eTV series, *Getting the Message*. This series makes links to the objectives of the technology area of learning.

Summary of Terms

| | | |
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| graphics | tones | white space |
| graphic features | hues | borders |
| visual features | depth | composition |
| shape | foreground | balance |
| colour | background | closed composition |
| primary colours | depth of field | open composition |
| local colours | proportion | dominant image |
| monochrome | use of space | |