

# **Sacred and Secular Space in the Art of Casper David Friedrich and Edward Hopper: On Existence and Solitude in German Romanticism and American Modernity**

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## **Preface**

The theme at hand is something that occupied my mind for some time. The present paper is not merely an academic accidental happening, but has roots in my occupation with modernism in the visual arts.

American art, in the 1960s and 1970s, meant to Europeans Andy Warhol and pop art. Hopper was an unknown among mainstream of European museum visitors until the 1980s and 1990s. In America Hopper was better known, but still not necessarily a household name. The history of Hopper work exhibitions was initiated with a retrospective in 1933, then, again in 1950 at The Whitney Museum of American Art. Steadily Edward Hopper gained notoriety with his works, but didn't attain a pop art celebrity status such as Andy Warhol, Jackson Pollock, or Roy Lichtenstein. This was understandable since Hopper had the reputation, among art enthusiasts, of being solitary and metaphysical, leaning towards depressive responses among museum visitors. And America doesn't want to be reminded of the darker sides of life. Pollock, Warhol and Roy Lichtenstein can be adapted to cartoonish versions of a Mickey Mouse life style, but Hopper doesn't fit into the classic American dream and way of life.

At one point in the late 1990s and especially in 2000, on my annual visits to Berlin, seeing the works of Friedrich, it suddenly struck me that Friedrich had many common metaphysical aspects in his works that resemble Edward Hopper. With this consciousness I visited Hopper's works again at The Whitney Museum of American Art in the summer 2006. There was no doubt in my mind that the same metaphysics operated on the German romantic painter of the early 19th century, as did on his American counterpart in early, mid-20th century America. I was aware, of course, that Friedrich lived in a transformative period in Europe, from the Napoleonic wars to the Congress of Vienna in 1815, to the revolutionary periods of the 1840s, well described by Marx and Engels. Friedrich lived through the industrial revolution and its response romantic response, especially in Germany. Hopper experienced pre-World War One Paris as a young painter, then the Depression, the Second World War, and the Eisenhower years of an apparent idyllic America. My intuition, at first, about the common metaphysics of Friedrich and Hopper was not simply a comparative approach; of course, I had to compare their works, respectively. It was more, how did they respond to the external world in which they lived, knowing well that they lived in a transitional stage of their respective national histories. Both were very well aware that they lived in the past and that the future had already started to take on modernist forms surrounding them in New York City and northern Germany, respectively. I concentrated on their use of space, their understanding of human existence, in terms of that space, and its relations to, or absent of a deity. The paper will explore the metaphysics of space, of personal existence in that space, and the special relationship between human beings and deity

in the works of Friedrich and Hopper. Hopper's greatness, in the light of celebrity status of pop art culture, lies in the dramatic meaning of human existence in a world of modernity. Pollock, Warhol and Lichtenstein showed us the explosive response to modernity; Hopper shows us the solitary meaning of human existence without Disneyland.

#### Introduction (I): Edward Hopper

My first encounter with the early works of the American painter Edward Hopper (1882-1967), at the city art museum in the charming university town of Münster in 1981 (Landesmuseum Münster, Westphalia, Germany) was decisive for the first impression of an American painter, very little known, not the least understood, in Europe. I was a young assistant professor of philosophy and lecturer of modern art and aesthetics, in the philosophy and art history department at the local university at the time. I tried to make clear to my graduate students, who were only a few years older than I, what exactly "modern" meant in terms of artistic expression. The idea of postmodernism was not yet born.

Holland and its magnificent museums were located next door to the German province of Westphalia, not to mention the world famous Kröller-Müller Museum at nearby Otterlo that houses the works and archives of Theo van Doesburg, among its permanent collections. Doesburg was one of the Dutch pioneers of modernism in art and architecture, influencing Walter Gropius and the foundational ideas of The Bauhaus School of visual, fine and applied arts, in 1919 at Weimar, during its initial stages. The other world renowned Dutch artists, participating in the making of modern visual and graphic arts were Piet Mondrian and M.C. Escher. Hopper is not to be found among European academic treatments of modernity in the arts. For some time he was misunderstood as a mere realist, depicting mundane American sceneries, land- as well as cityscapes. Honor came late in his life in the America of 1930s. Yet, uncharacteristically there was nothing to laugh about in Hopper's work. The landscape works of the Hudson Bay School, foremost the German immigrant Alfred Bierstadt, depicts the Grand American West, as a metaphor of God's own country. The American Dream is heralded. Hopper arises out of the Ash Can School which comes to terms with the more grim and realistic side of that American dream. America, by the time Hopper evolves as a mature artist, transforms itself from an agriculture rural land into an industrial giant. Yet, social critique is not to be entertained except in the reform educational programs of John Dewey and the novels of Theodore Dreiser and John Dos Passos. And America's intellectuals and the rich and famous met in the Latin quarters of Paris and Shakespeare&Co. Bookshop operated by Adrienne Monier. Gertrude Stein, the young Hemingway, as well as the unknown Picasso, and James Joyce inhabit this extraordinary literary and artistic community. Hopper travels to Paris, has heard of Stein, never of Picasso, and goes his own way. He is a loner and not much a social type needing inspiration in Paris Café's. Upon his return to America, he gets a reverse culture shock that took him about ten years to overcome. He faced the reality of America and its society and not its dream. Hopper's later modernity emerges from this culture shock. Indeed, the genius and metaphysical input in Hopper's work was not understood for some time.

During the summer of 2006 I had the fortunate experience of being able to revisit Hopper's early works and admire his metaphysical realism at The Whitney Museum of American Art in New York and at the newly renovated National Gallery of American Art in Washington, D.C. In the meantime the announcement is made that a great retrospective of Hopper's works will be presented at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts and the National Gallery in late

2007, early 2008. At last Hopper has come home, full circle, appreciated as an iconic figure depicting the experience of 20th Century American modernity and its consequences.

On a deeper level Hopper's work portrays the intense contradiction of the American psyche between dream and reality. The reality etched and frozen in the paintings, representing public space such as cafeterias (not the old European kind such as Paris or Vienna), diners, motels, gas stations, rail road tracks, hotel lobbies, offices, cinemas, theatres, and simple stark cityscapes; in short, the items that make up the secular mundane space of everyday America. This was the America emerging into an urban society, experiencing the Wall Street Crash and the ensuing Depression for the majority of Americans, despite F.Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*. The so-called Golden Twenties were golden only for a few, while the intellectuals fled to Europe, the masses tried to survive on the promises of the American Dream. There are no children to be seen in Hopper, nor are the skyscrapers depicted. Hopper gets caught between America's genteel tradition and the emerging industrial giant, between the Colonial Mansion and the Skyscraper, as George Santayana expressed it. There are no teeth-showing-smiling-white-middle-class-blue-eyed-blond-haired people, only solitary human figures, frozen in Hopper's paintings. The blood freezes at times. The viewer is transfixed into a meditative, if not, melancholic mood.

There is a preciseness and final reality to Hopper's work that reminds a philosophic mind immediately of Ludwig Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*. The introductory proposition tells us directly of the state of affairs in the world: "Die Welt ist alles was der Fall ist" (The world is all that is the case). This is also Hopper's secular space in which a 19th century American society (in Wittgenstein's case it was the Habsburg Austrian-Hungarian Empire) is pushed into urbanized industrialized cities, forcing the American Dream upon the "huddled masses", lured from poverty stricken old Europe. Yet, the Dream, at times, turned into a nightmare for many. In Hopper's work we find an intense "Sachlichkeit" (a sort of formalistic case-studies), depicting solitary human figures in empty space, and a nightmarish existence revealing the dark side of the American psyche, as one contemporary writer puts it aptly.<sup>1</sup> But there is also nature expressed in his early watercolors, dazzling blue of local nautical themes, prehended at his South Truro, Cape Cod vacation studio. Lighthouses and sceneries surrounding the pretty New England coastal village of Gloucester; this is Hopper, the nature thinker of the natural elements. There are the Times of Day, morning, midday, evening, and night supporting symbolic characteristics in a sort of Gestaltpsychology, reminiscent of Casper David Friedrich's treatment of nature and time.

The sunlight appears in a dream-like space: simple rooms, empty of anything, only sunlight playing geometry of light and shadow (e.g. *Sun in an Empty Room*, 1963). And there are the solitary figures, frozen in intense meditation on mundane problems of daily life (e.g. *Automat*, 1927). There is the depression depiction of couples (e.g. *Summer Evening*, 1947; *Second Story Sunlight*, 1960); they are compressed into Newtonian space, bodies, solitary, stationary, not in motion. The figures look fixated into "empty space" and are part of that space, unromantic, detached, asexual, and resigned. The world is all that is the case. The solitary human figures accept their fate, contrary America's advertizing image of the "happy-go-lucky Tarzan and Jane". There are no families, no children, no balloons, not 4th of July celebrations. Despite the anxiety evoked, Hopper's paintings asked for compassion by the viewers of his solitary figures, because they look soo familiar.

Hopper, although a puritan at heart, embeds Freud, psychoanalysis, sexuality and voyeurism in his work. It is not a vulgar sexuality, but sexuality unfulfilled. The essence of the

American Dream, unlimited quest for anything, finds its limitation in the sexuality of Hopper's work. It doesn't elicit romantic sensibility, not to speak of the erotic, but yearns for an unfulfilled romantic relationship and passionate longing, where there is none. The Puritanism of his solitary figures is telling. The tension of unfulfilled passion is transformed into a habitual voyeurism especially in the later works by Hopper. In fact he invites the viewer to become a voyeur him/herself. The alternative is boredom, such as the couple, depicted as middle-aged couple, bored with each other, even shows a slight disguised contempt for the self and the other (e.g. Sea watchers, 1952). Yet, at times, Hopper's voyeurism is not that of an aggressive pathological gaze titillated by kinky sex and eroticism, but that of a dreamer, wishing secretly to meet the perfect girl next door. It reminds us more of the latter-day 21st century cybersex engagement, clean and safe, on the one hand, frustration and aggression on the other. Empirical reality celebrates a late triumph over virtual reality. It's more of the "cunning" of the body over reason, to use a Hegelian metaphor. Hopper was not averse to literature and philosophy. In fact, he was a great consumer of classical as well as modern literature, from Emerson to Hemingway. And Plato was not far behind (e.g. Excursion into Philosophy, 1959). The flesh is captive in Plato's ideal form as well as cyberspace, trying to find a way out, only to experience a rude awakening that mundane reality is a more complex affair than the information of the cyber-search-engines suggests to us. Of course, this goes beyond the times of Hopper, but the consequences of Hopper's message, encoded in his work, travels with us to contemporary America and the world of (post)modernity.

#### Introduction (II): Casper David Friedrich

Friedrich (1774-1840) was born in the small coastal university town of Greifswald and died in the great cultural city of Dresden, Saxony, Germany. Friedrich's work and life belongs to northern Germany, specifically the Baltic regions of Greifswald, Stralsund, Rostock (former East Germany). The nearby islands of Rügen (e.g. Chalk Cliffs of Rügen, 1818) and Hiddensee is exhibited as choreography in Friedrich's work, as did Cape Cod for Hopper. Both Hopper and Friedrich, lived in a transitional period of their nation's history: the former from small town rural USA to the big city, the latter the revolutionary developments from the French Revolution to Napoleonic wars, to the Congress of Vienna under Metternich. Intellectually, Friedrich's life span over the entire creative process in literature, art, philosophy, education to become the classical age of German culture, or simply, the Age of Goethe. Luminaries such as Novalis, Schleiermacher, Friedrich Schlegel and his brother August Wilhelm Schlegel, Ludwig Tieck, Fichte, Hegel, Schelling, and the entire Jena circle promoting the romantic Weltanschauung, as well as women's emancipation from a paternalistic authoritarian family structure, make up the universe of Friedrich. And not to mention Goethe, Schiller, Heinrich von Kleist, and not the least Schopenhauer's mother Johanna, an intelligent, witty and clever woman, who immediately grasped the significance of Friedrich's work<sup>2</sup>.

The north German patrician city of Hamburg has always been known to support the arts. The art historian Erwin Panofski, the philosopher Ernst Cassirer, and, not the least, the financier and renaissance scholar Aby Warburg, made pre-Nazi Hamburg world famous in the world of cultural studies. Aside the legendary Warburg library (now part of the University of London), the Warburg family contributed to the foundation of the Hamburg city museum, the Kunsthalle, next to the crystal-palace-type Hamburg rail station, one of the great centers in Europe that honors art, especially German art of the 19th century. Substantial works by the German romantic painter Casper David Friedrich can be studied, first hand, at the Kunsthalle,

while the remainder of his work, since the reunification of West and East Germany, can be admired in the newly renovated Alte Nationalgalerie in the center of Berlin.

I knew about Friedrich's work through my studies of classic German idealist philosophy, especially the poet Novalis, the Schlegel brothers and the Jena romantic circle, the theologian Schleiermacher, and, of course, the philosopher W.F. Schelling. It was only through a second careful observation in Hamburg, then subsequently Berlin, that I started to appreciate Friedrich's work on his own terms, namely in metaphysical categories. Considering that the reunification of Germany was recent, I had the good fortune of being able to attend a philosophy conference at the University of Greifswald, the birthplace of Friedrich, located on the Baltic Sea, and part of the former East Germany, that is to say, long isolated from the West. The exposure to the cultural sites of East Germany, to those born after the Second World War, was a revelation. The works of Friedrich was part of that newly emerging process of a renaissance in the quest for German identity, between East and West. In a sense, Friedrich, as well as Hopper, function in the long run, as cultural markers for a newly emerging identity process, in both Germany and America, and ushers into a curious type of modernity. Both, Hopper and Friedrich are witness to this transformation based on the transitional historic character mirrored in the *Zeitgeist* in which they lived. In that sense, too, a comparison between the work and life of both painters is challenging. It tells us something about artistic expression, historical manifestation, and identity formation of a society and its culture. Already in the early 19th century, the German dramatist Heinrich von Kleist noted the genius of Friedrich in one of his critical reviews in Berlin. However, the native son of Greifswald was soon forgotten. During Imperial Germany and its industrialization, romanticism, and anything associated, was considered "kitsch culture". The painter Carl Friedrich Spitzweg was considered the epitome of kitsch painting. Many lower-middle-class families in Germany had a copy of Spitzweg hanging in their bedroom or kitchen. Casper David Friedrich was already too mystical in their eyes, while the official Kulturindustrie, as Adorno noted, couldn't associate romanticism with serious art. Expressionism, *Sachlichkeit*, and Bauhaus were the bench markers of serious cultural achievements for critical avant-garde in cultural magazines. Friedrich was totally forgotten. However, after reunification and the fall of the Soviet Union the comprehensive oeuvre of Friedrich was able to be seen and appreciated. Substantial works of his still can be admired in the Hermitage of St. Petersburg; some of Friedrich's works were destroyed in the bombings of Hamburg and Berlin during the Second World War. In the late 1980 Hamburg Kunsthalle presented a comprehensive retrospective. Slowly critical reviews began to have a more favorable opinion of Friedrich's work and realized a profound misjudgment, for some time, of his metaphysical insights into the relationship between nature, humankind, and deity. No doubt, Hopper must have intuited these insights on his European excursions, during his travels to Paris, to Hamburg and Berlin. In the meantime Friedrich was even discovered as a painter of ecological consciousness.

In America Friedrich was totally unknown, until a special exhibition of German romantic painters, such as his friend Georg Friedrich Kersting (1785-1847), another friend Philipp Otto Runge (1777-1810), and not the least Friedrich, was presented at the Pierpont Morgan Library in New York City in January 1995. At this point, the rediscovery and reception of the works of Casper David Friedrich is in full swing in Continental Europe. During my stay in Greifswald, in October 2003, I was able to follow the footsteps of the actual sights of Friedrich's works, at the nearby island of Rügen and Hiddensee, which was famous as the spa of Weimar Republic's intellectuals.

On my annual visits to Berlin seeing the works of Friedrich, it struck me suddenly that Friedrich had many things in common, not the least a special kind of metaphysics, in his works that resembles Hopper, but not in a familiar way. I tried to figure out what exactly they had in common, and I sensed, some biographical and historical research was necessary, in order to “catch” both unguarded. In the meantime, of course, due to specialist scholars in art and cultural history, foremost Gail Levin for Hopper, and Wieland Schmied for Friedrich, my suspicions have been substantiated due to their excellent research. My intention at this point, of course, is a philosophic assessment of how meaningful the work of both painters is for our broader understanding of modernity, artistic expression of those elements in culture that go unnoticed, in a the time, in which a specific art is produced. Hegel dictum, considering the thematic treatment of owls and dusk in Friedrich’s work, with the flight of the owl of Minerva in dusk, the process of understanding slowly starts to reveal itself. The visual expression and thoughtful insights into the human soul in the works of Hopper and Friedrich gives consolation to those who feel obliterated by the new age of audio-visual-cyber-space.

At this point we it is difficult to ascertain whether we are travelling backwards to Plato’s Cave or escaping into the sunlight. Again, at The Whitney Museum of American Art in the summer of 2006, I consciously re- visited Hopper’s work again and caught myself thinking of Friedrich. There was no doubt in my mind that the same metaphysics operated on the German romantic painter of the early 19th century, as did on his American counterpart, in the early to 20th mid-century America. The viewer is aware that both lived in transformative revolutionary periods described by Marx and Engels. Friedrich lived through the German industrial revolution and responded accordingly. Yet, we are not simply interested in his response; we discover that he had something more to offer than mere response, namely metaphysics of transcendence of space, humankind and deity. He offers us a new relationship between nature, the human, and deity (e.g. Monk near the Sea, 1808/09). Friedrich and his generation had to come to terms with the consequences of the French Revolution and the Industrial Revolution. Greifswald was a province of the Kingdom of Sweden at the birth of Friedrich and later was incorporated into the Prussian domain. Hopper still experienced the pre-World War One Paris as a young apprentice painter, then the Depression in America, the Second World War, and the Eisenhower years of an apparent idyllic America. Both painters were very much aware that they lived in a critical historical period of their nations’ history. They struggled with their authentic identity and that of their respective societies. Both were introverts, melancholic, lived a frugal life style and loners. They were very much aware that they lived in the past, but couldn’t escape the future. Instead to succumbing to nostalgia they took on the challenge of the modern and reshaped the dialogue with their peers and the subsequent generations. This is one of the reasons why, at first glance, Friedrich and Hopper seemed to appear old fashioned and conventional in their work. It takes patience, historical knowledge, and some insights into developmental psychology in order to come to terms with the internal struggle both painters got involved. The new age of IT has no sense for this sort of time consumption. Thus, considering the space and time limitation in the life of any researcher, I focused on the metaphysics of space and the human existence therein that evolves in the art work of Friedrich and Hopper. For America, while Warhol, Pollock and Lichtenstein respond to the commercial and anarchic, if not to say childish aspects of American modern culture, expressions in American society, it is Hopper who demands meaningfulness of life and social responsibility. The qualitative challenge for philosophy between Friedrich and Hopper is the absence of deity in the latter, and the conscious effort of revelation of a deity in nature, in the former. Both, however,

struggle with the oncoming modernity, with the solitary existence in a modern world, while the question of deity in modernity is left open.

### Dialogue of the inner Life

Friedrich and Hopper spoke of the expression of the inner life of an artist. It is the eye's mind that is decisive in both cases. The empirical eyes that see daily life transforms the common perception into meaningful expression of the inner life of the artist. This is a psychology of the self expressed in paint on canvas. Hopper felt that if we could write about any sort of human experience; have the adequate vocabulary, what is the need of painting, or art, for that matter? In a letter of 19 October 1939, Hopper writes to a friend and art dealer, "You are asking me to do something which is perhaps as difficult to do as painting is; this is to explain painting with words." 3 Hopper was not a discursive thinker or painter. His strength was intuition or, more precisely, intellectual intuition. His concentration is not the design, the color, and harmony itself, but the transformation of empirical reality (human experience) into a structure that lends meaning to his experience. In the 1939 letter he speaks of "a synthesis of my inner experience".4 He may have had Bergson in mind, but, no doubt Goethe and the German romantics, such as Novalis, were closer to his heart. Max Beckmann, another leader in interpreting modernity and the city in Berlin, spoke of the "objectivity of inner vision." 5 For Hopper there is an inner vision, but no objectivity thereof. This inner vision is closely tied to the internal life, to the inner experience of the subject that makes up the intimate lived experience. And, again, in the important 1939 letter he makes the point, "So much of every art is an expression of the subconscious, that it seems to me most all of the important qualities are put there unconsciously, and little of importance by the conscious intellect." 6 Thus, human experience turns out not simply a mere reproduction of what the eyes see, but the result of the dialogue of the internal life of each person, be he painter, musician, or philosopher. The discursive aspects of whatever is experienced is actually the outward manifestation, such as the written script, of that dialogue the constructs meaning to the artist, or any person. This is the reason why we need interpretation, why, as Hopper put it, it's so difficult to put painting into words.

Friedrich uses the vocabulary of the romantics. He too speaks of the inner life; he speaks of the inner voice that the painter should listen. As he points out one time, "Der Maler soll nicht bloss malen, was er vor sich sieht, sondern auch was er in sich sieht." 7 Again, it is the inner voice which he identifies as deity. It is at this point that Friedrich and Hopper diverge. Hopper inner voice is that of a puritan secular American who is on his way to modernity. Friedrich is still within the confines of old Europe and its traditions. The religious is still very much part of his vocabulary and psychology. But it is a religiosity that is set into an existential framework. There are no biblical stories to be had on his canvas; there is an intense search for meaning in nature, not in the laboratories of the sciences, but in the loneliness of his soul. In terse statements such as, "Einsamkeit gebrauch ich für das Gespräch mit der Natur." 8 Friedrich enjoyed wandering on the island of Rügen, the coastal Baltic Sea, and mountainous regions such as the Riesengebirge (central Germany). Listening to his inner voice meant to express this silent language in terms of the cycles of life (e.g. Cycle of Life, 1835). We see natural phenomena such as dawn, dusk, and mist, fog, set in mountainous regions, cemeteries, or coastal plains, as an expression of the twilight of life. Hegel would have said the "gray zone" of life, in which reality comes to terms with itself, never pure, always in a dialectic relationship with its constituent parts. There is an extraordinary spirituality in Friedrich cast in the tension between the inner voice and the creative artist. One of the reasons why we don't find human faces or portraits in Friedrich's

work is precisely that the viewer is “forced” to listen to what he or she sees. Like in Hopper’s world we find solitary figures, we always see their backs, and wonder, why not the faces? Hopper’s faces are motionless; Friedrich offers the viewers visions of sundown’s, moonrise, or nautical horizons. It is the vision of the inner voice, in which listening and perception are intertwined. The craftsmanship is the artist’s method of externalizing this inner vision by simply handling items in space and time, in terms of light and shade, “... Anordnung der Dinge und Verteilung von Schatten und Licht.”<sup>9</sup> In Friedrich and Hopper’s work the viewer becomes part of the painting, part of the situation depicted on canvas, part of the listening of what the artists want to say. This is the reason why both artists seem, at first glance, simple and straightforward, that is the reason why they were not appreciated for some time by their contemporaries. The viewer must learn to listen to what is underneath the paint, color and composition. He or she must discover the metaphysical aspects of that dialogue of the inner life in order to participate in prehending the inner vision of the artist. There is no doubt in my mind that if Friedrich and Hopper would have been able to meet, face to face, compare their works, they wouldn’t have needed to say one word, they would have listened to each other’s voice in silence, and intuitively understood the meaning of each other’s inner life.

### Solitude and the modern World

The experience of solitude is one of the basic themes in the works of Hopper and Friedrich. In the former is an expression of anxiety, at time alienation of the self. The inner voice is cut off from the listener. The listener can no longer hear what the voice is saying, because the modern world has become too noise. Solitude is expressed by the solitary human figures in Friedrich. However, in his work solitude is not a modern phenomenon of alienation, but a matter of meditation. At times we find a couple, Friedrich portrays himself and his wife, either back turned towards the viewer, or simply a profile of female figures, standing at a window watching the ships sail by, or friends contemplating sundown or moonrise (*Woman at Window*, 1822; *Walk at Dusk*, 1830). It is an inward solitude and not necessarily an expression of alienation. Friedrich senses the modern world, but he doesn’t live in it, nor does he wish. His works are reflective and uses the symbolism and language of the romantic protest against an oncoming world of industry and speed. The romantic protest is a protest on behalf of spiritual values as against the materialistic age of commerce, rail road tracks, and urbanization. Friedrich is a Platonist. This can be sensed especially in his paintings characterizing the Baltic Sea, sailing boats, the sunlight, the moonlight, and the idea of revelation of nature. His is not a Newtonian universe of bodies and items in absolute space and time. His is a universe that is timeless in which space appears in spiritual symbols and life undergoes the cycles of nature, from birth to death. He thinks in terms of archeology and geology; nature as mountain, nature as the sea, nature as an oak tree, nature as light and shadow.

In a critical review of Friedrich’s famous painting *Monk by the Sea*, 1808/09, the dramatist Heinrich von Kleist immediately understood the radical nature of what is depicted: a solitary human figure, a monk by the sea, listening to his inner voice, while a few seagulls fly about and the sea and the clouds almost merge into a sort of dark blue rainy type of day. The monk stands on an edge of sandy dunes formation devoid of flora and fauna. To the modern viewers it gives a feeling more of a moonscape than a scene from earth. The solitary figure moves on the psychological edge of loneliness, very close of being forsaken, close of feeling abandoned, and only the seagulls seem to listen to his inner voice. The painting, as the dramatist noted seems modern. No doubt Hopper would have immediately recognized the

spiritual value and essential inner vision of Friedrich. This is close to his, however, devoid of deity and the spiritual. In Hopper puritan secular modernity breaks into the open and there is no escape. Friedrich seems to want to contain this modernity and opts for containment on terms of transcendence. He is hinting at a possible modern world with transcendent foresight. Kleist closes his critical piece, "... wie die Apokalypse ... so ist es, wenn man es betrachtet, als wenn einem die Augenlider weggeschnitten wären."<sup>10</sup> This is strong surrealist language: apocalypse and as though our eyelids have been cut off.

A comparison between Friedrich's painting *On the Sailing Boat*, 1818/19, at the St. Petersburg Hermitage, and Hopper's iconic painting *Nighthawks*, 1942, we can discern a precise difference between solitary and loneliness. In *Nighthawks* we find a strange atmosphere of people, although sitting in a diner on a winter night, have nothing to say to each other. They make the impression of human beings defeated, purposeless, and just sitting there waiting something to happen, knowing nothing will happen. Tomorrow will be like the next day. There is a couple who have nothing to say to each other. They seem to know each other, or even married, and feel bored with each other. There is no kindness, no love, no feeling of closeness, mere anxiety, killing time. A recent book by Gordon Theisen gives us a thoughtful glimpse of the ramification of *Nighthawks*.<sup>11</sup> The work is a chilling reminder of the underside of American social life and the consequences of an economic system that shows no compassion for losers. Hopper shows us wax figures like in a museum, called a diner with fluorescent light, in a modern world, cold, meaningless, devoid of any values. Friedrich's couple *On the Sailing Boat*, find themselves on the deck of the boat, near to each other, kneeling, and looking towards the coastline of the Baltic Sea towns of Stralsund and Greifswald. Apparently the couple is on their honeymoon; the viewer can't see their faces, only the backside of the male figure and the profile of the female figure. They seem to be contend, don't speak, are silent, but, nevertheless, seem to listen to their inner voices, while holding hands, while dusk is upon them. It's a silent and solitary painting, Platonic in nature, not aggressive, but benign, almost naïve, by modern standards. But the two figures seem are on a voyage, their future, they have each other; there is meaning in their life. There is no alienation and anxiety as we find in Hopper's diner. The two paintings elicit the question: what happened between the times of these two paintings? The one painted in the birth year of Karl Marx, the other on the eve of Pearl Harbor.

An existential painting by Hopper entitled *Excursion into Philosophy*, 1959, is not that well known, perhaps because it is in a private collection. Considering the puritan nature of the American public, doubt thought whether this painting could be shown in a public exhibition. Many would even consider the painting pornography, to use a mundane term. I could only imagine that the painting could have been shown somewhere in Europe, Paris or Berlin, around 1968, where pornography, kitsch, cartoon, pop art and high brow art were sort of mixed with a sense of irony and humor. In 1959 there was no such humor or irony in Eisenhower America. The painting shows a simple bedroom, open window, summer time, sunlight telling us it's before noon, a rectangular hard-box-like-bed, a youngish middle-aged man sitting on the edge of the bed, showing an intensive face with a meditative expression, looking towards the floor; right next to him an open book, and behind him, lying and leaning hard against his back, a young mature woman, wearing a pink nightgown drawn up her legs, her posterior exposed to the viewer.<sup>12</sup> The painting, without the book, would have been shocking enough for a puritan mind. Two people just finished satisfying their sexual appetites, the one tired and asleep, the other about to leave, a face in anxiety, they don't seem to be a married couple; modern summer time vacationers. Yet, it's the book and its content that makes the difference. Hopper's *Sketchbook* tells us that the painting was executed at his

vacation studio at South Truro, Cape Cod, in August 1959. The reader finds an entry, "Plato reread too late." 13 His wife Jo, an artist in her own right, verifies in her scrapbook that Hopper started to read Plato late in his life. Apparently he "reread" portions of Plato for meditative purposes. Hopper was an avid reader of classics and, no doubt, this was not the first time he had read Plato. Thus, his entry "reread" makes sense. However, what sense in the painting, considering the risqué situation? It is difficult enough to present philosophy to the average middle-class puritan mind in America, but, in addition, this eroticized, close to kinky sex suggestive posture of the young lady. And then, suddenly, Plato's Republic! This was a meditative painting that took eleven days to complete, according to Hopper's sketchbook. The book is presented half open. We can speculate and check and find that the man read Chapter Five of the Republic that deals with the construction of a Politeia (a city state) that promotes laws for beauty, goodness, and justice. It deals with the question as to who qualifies to be a true philosopher and who not. Needless to say, Hopper lets his man have doubts as though he would qualify a true philosopher. He shows in stark contrast the world of ideal forms and ideas and empirical reality. Plato's work draws the line in the sand. Which way to go? The man is not portrait as a typical Christian sinner who thinks about going to confession, after the holidays, but who scrutinizes his inner voice as to what he's into. And she remains silent, no face, just posterior. In the viewer there is certain uneasiness, maybe a smile, some irony, but certainly temptation. This is not a joyous meeting of lovers or revelation of passion or simply a compassioned show of companionship. Hopper shows us the relevance of Plato's idea in a modern world. But it is a modern world of Puritanism, Max Weber's iron cage, of emptiness, sheer exhibition of lust, and the woman could be anybody. It shows a painting that would describe the phenomenon of "liquid love", used by the Polish sociologist Zygmunt Bauman.<sup>14</sup> Love in the modern world, solitary, lonely, satisfaction orientated, and nameless. Anybody will do. The couple in the excursion painting could be the couple visiting late night the diner in Nighthawks. Perhaps Plato was not the right equation for their kind of society. In the meantime they must see how they free themselves from the iron cage.

## **Conclusion**

We tried in this essay to come to terms with the work of Friedrich and Hopper. Of course, I could not treat all the topics that would have been relevant in such a comparative and cultural analysis treatment. Yet, this was not simply a comparative treatment as the perspective reader has noticed. It tried to come to terms with two extraordinary human beings, living in different centuries and circumstances, yet, sharing many interesting ideas with a vision. The qualitative difference between the two is the spirituality and deity. In Friedrich we still find the force of that traditional bondage between humankind and deity. In Hopper it has vanished. This may not have been necessarily Hopper's personal view. He certainly remained a puritan all of this life. How he felt about deity is difficult to fathom. What make him great are his subtle simplicity, authenticity, and the right intuition at the right time. He is honored, rather late, in the worlds' major museums and art history books. Hopper represents the kind of America that is not seen around the world, it is not anti-American, it is deeply American, and authentic genuine American sense of existence. It is not mainstream America, but the stark truth of the dark side of the Dream. Because he comes to terms with this dark side he gives hope in terms of consciousness. Philosophy teaches that those who know the difference are in a position to do something about the underside of life. In that sense Hopper was a philosopher and did understand his Plato and seemed to vindicate himself in the Excursion into Philosophy. Friedrich, on the other hand, gives us an alternative option as to modernity with spirituality. Perhaps his work is too tradition laden to be properly received by

a modernist public. Yet, it is of interest that there is an enormous demand for his work and the recognition due to him is happening in a great retrospective of his entire oeuvre in Europe in 2007, while at the same time the modern public gets ready to give a great retrospective to Hopper in Boston and Washington, D.C., in 2008. Perhaps this is more telling than meets the eye.

## Endnotes

1 See Gordon Theisen, *Staying up Much too Late: Edward Hopper's Nighthawks and the Darkside of the American Psyche*. New York: St Martin's Press, 2006.

2 See Wolf-Dietmar Stock, et al., *Casper David Friedrich*. Fischerhude: Verlag Atelier im Bauernhaus, 193, passim.

3 See Hopper's Scrapbook ([www.americanart.edu](http://www.americanart.edu))

4 *ibid.* passim.

5 Cf. Wieland Schmied, *Edward Hopper: Portraits of America*. Munich: Prestel, 1995, 45.

6 Cf. Hopper's Scrapbook, passim.

7 Cf. Stock, backcover.

8 *ibid.*, 7.

9 *ibid.*, 68.

10 Cf. Stock, 28.

11 *ibid.*, Theisen.

12 Cf. Gail Levin, *Edward Hopper: The Art and the Artist*. New York: The Whitney Museum of American Art, 1980, 261.

13 See Hopper's Sketchbook ([www.hopper.org/sketchbook](http://www.hopper.org/sketchbook))

14 Cf. Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Love*. Oxford University Press, 2005.

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