

Edward Hopper's Cinema Paintings. Film Palace Nostalgia, Usherette's Disillusionment, and Bomb Threats
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EDWARD HOPPER'S CINEMA PAINTINGS

FILM PALACE NOSTALGIA, USHERETTE'S DISILLUSIONMENT, AND BOMB THREATS

LAS PINTURAS DE CINE DE EDWARD HOPPER

NOSTALGIA DEL PALACIO DE CINE, DESILUSIÓN DEL ACOMODADOR Y AMENAZAS DE BOMBA

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ABSTRACT

Edward Hopper —who is known for his pictorial compositions reminiscent of film scenes and who inspired many filmmakers— went to the cinema himself very often. He also addressed cinema exteriors and interiors as a topic in some of his works. In the following, three central works on cinemas by Edward Hopper —*The Sheridan Theatre* (1937), *The Circle Theatre* (1936), and *New York Movie* (1939)— whose historical context has not yet been examined in detail will be analysed. With their sophisticated compositions, they are very illustrative of cinema history in particular and American history of the 1930s in general. Hopper draws attention to contemporary urban trouble spots for unrest enhanced by cheapening strategies in the film exhibition business. He also deals with the changed cinema experiences in the 1930s and deconstructs the glamour of the job of the usherette and exposes the alienation of their work.

KEYWORDS

Edward Hopper; film palaces; painting and cinema; usherette; American art

RESUMEN

Edward Hopper —muy conocido por sus composiciones artísticas que evocan típicas escenas de películas y que han inspirado a muchos cineastas— frecuentaba el cine muy a menudo y empleaba los exteriores e interiores del cine como tema principal de algunas de sus obras. A continuación, se analizarán tres obras icónicas sobre cines de Edward Hopper: *The Sheridan Theatre* (1937), *The Circle Theatre* (1936), and *New York Movie* (1939), cuyo contexto histórico aún no se ha examinado en detalle. Sus composiciones son muy sofisticadas e ilustrativas al mostrar la historia del cine y de la historia estadounidense de la década de 1930. Hopper llama la atención sobre los problemas urbanos contemporáneos sobre la inquietud por las estrategias de abaratamiento en el negocio de exhibición de películas. También muestra las experiencias cambiantes del cine en la década de 1930 y deconstruye el glamour del trabajo del acomodador y expone la alienación de su trabajo.

PALABRAS CLAVE

Edward Hopper; palacios de cine; pintura y cine; acomodador; arte estadounidense



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Edward Hopper—who is known for his pictorial compositions reminiscent of film scenes and who inspired many filmmakers—went to the cinema himself very often.¹ He also addressed it in some of his works in connection with his landmark topic of loneliness. In the following, three central works on cinemas by Edward Hopper whose historical context has not yet been examined in detail will be analysed. However, with their sophisticated compositions and several motivic refractions, they are very illustrative of cinema history in particular and American history of the 1930s in general.

In the 1930s, the position of cinemas changed, partly due to the economic crisis. The new cinema theatres were kept in the «Streamline Moderne» style, while cinema visits were also less elegant (Butsch, 2001, p. 111). Hopper addresses these new developments in the movie exhibition industry in his painting *The Circle Theatre* (1936) [Figure 1].



Figure 1. *The Circle Theatre* (1936), Edward Hopper, oil on canvas, 68.58 cm x 91.44 cm, private collection (image: Foster, C. E. et al. (2008). *Western Motel: Edward Hopper and contemporary art*, Nürnberg: Verlag für moderne Kunst, p. 39; © heirs of Josephine Hopper/Licensed by Bildrecht, Vienna)

This painting is inspired by the film theatre of the same name at Columbus Circle in New York. It was originally built as a vaudeville theatre by the architect Charles Chavenaugh in 1901. Already in 1906, Thomas W. Lamb rebuilt it again, and after only a few years it was used as a cinema.² The state of 1935 is documented in a drawing by Anthony F. Dumas [Figure 2]. Dumas' drawing may not be quite correct in perspective compared with another older coloured of the building [Figure 3], although the details of the front seem to have been captured accurately.

1 The article is based on the research for one part of my Ph.D. thesis submitted at the Academy of Fine Arts Leipzig in March 2020. See «Hopper's Cool: Modernism and Emotional Restraint» (2015), Erika Doss.

2 *The Circle Theatre* was rebuilt as Columbus Circle Roller Rink in 1939 and subsequently demolished in 1954 (van Hoogstraten, 1991).



Figure 2. Circle Theatre (1935), Anthony F. Dumas, detail, pen-and-ink-drawing, 25.4 cm x 35.56 cm (original), New York, Museum of the City of New York, no. 75.200.113 (image: Museum of the City of New York, New York)



Figure 3. Columbus Circle, detail with Circle Theatre (ca. 1916), Leighton and Valentine Co., postcard, 8.89 cm x 14 cm, New York, Museum of the City of New York, no. X2011.34.2393 (image: Museum of the City of New York, New York)

It is clear from the postcards and Dumas' drawing that Hopper accommodates other shops to the right and left of the cinema entrance—in Dumas' picture there is only a painting shop—and changes the face of the building. To the left of the cinema entrance, a drugstore can be assumed in Hopper's painting. The entrance is not visible, but «Drugs» and «Soda» are advertised with lettering three times at different heights above it. Furthermore, «Candy» is promoted in the upper area and «Horton's Ice Cream» in the middle area with less clear letters. This ice cream manufacturer—a traditional New York company—could no longer keep up with larger, more mechanised production facilities and was bought by a larger company in 1928. From 1930 onwards, it no longer existed as an independent brand (E. B. Lewis is dead, 1936; Schneider, 2000).

To the right of the entrance in Hopper's painting is a red showcase with golden decorations and film photographs. Such a showcase is not included in Dumas' drawing. The display cases came into fashion at the end of the 1910s and were also installed at the Circle Theatre. However, in terms of style, they differ from those in Hopper's picture. In comparison with the drugstore on the left, it is conspicuous that in the small jewellery shop on the right side

of *The Circle Theatre* there is no advertisement in addition to the jewellery in the display. The business' name is also kept very simple. Thus, the jewellery shop looks much nobler than the one drugstore on the left. It is obvious that the topic of advertising is important for Hopper's painting. With the drugstore and the jewellery store, Hopper points to the marketing strategies employed by movie theatres, namely advertising as either a cheap or luxurious pleasure.

In connection with the transition to sound film —but also influenced by the economic crisis— the cinema experience in the US changed in the 1930s. In the large cinemas, stage shows were reduced or even abolished and admission prices were lowered. At the so-called «refreshment stands» in the lobby, the sale of drinks, popcorn, and sweets for consumption in the auditorium became more widespread. They offered important additional income and provided competition for drugstores and candy stores (Butsch, 2001). At the same time, the cinema worker unions resisted the wage cuts that were also taking place and organised strikes to protest against the long working hours, the low number of days off and the lack of holidays.³ Apart from these actions of the trade unions, bomb attacks were also carried out as a defence against «the perceived greed of theatre management» (Rhodes, 2012, p. 112). In 1935, a bomb destroyed the front and the ticket counter of the Circle Theatre, where a strike had been going on for several days before (Walkout averted, 1935). The operator of the Circle Theatre —the chain «Consolidated Amusement Enterprises»— was in dispute with the unions at that time over a reduction of the minimum wage by 41% (Bomb 2 Columbus Circle, 1935). In the year when Hopper created the painting, the relationship between the unions and the cinema operators was particularly tense and even more bombs were detonated, which also endangered cinema-goers (Rhodes, 2012).

This situation may have motivated Hopper's choice of the subject, as he seems to draw symbolically attention to this underground bomb threat. For example, the view of the cinema entrance is ostentatiously obstructed by a subway kiosk of the Interborough Rapid Transit Company in Beaux-Art style, which was installed at Columbus Circle in 1904. In fact, there was one in front of the cinema [Figure 3]. However, Hopper seems to have placed it a bit further to the left, so that the subway entrance is located directly in the middle of the entrance to the cinema, blocking the view of it. The grey frosted glass panes of the subway kiosk do not seem light and airy in Hopper's painting as in reality, and the entire subway kiosk has a threatening effect. This is further accentuated by the empty newspaper stand in front of it. As the black of the kiosk merges with that of the cinema and jeweller's shop fronts, the subway entrance appears even more monumental and reminds one of the Hellmouth.⁴ The frightening atmosphere is also underlined by the greenish-cold light. The black, dangerous-looking subway kiosk and the alien-seeming decoration of the pagoda-like cinema portal —which seems to be inspired by the so-called Exotic Revival style— also contrasts the delicate, light-coloured building façade and the columns with the Ionic capitals and gilded areas.⁵

In connection with the subway kiosk —which apparently symbolises the danger of bombs coming from underground— the two red lights and the observer's point of view in front of the first one in the foreground also become understandable. These elements have been pointed out by researchers without clarifying their meaning thus far.⁶ Automatic traffic lights became popular in New York in the mid-1920s and replaced traffic towers with police officers. After 1934 in particular, New York Mayor La Guardia installed a particularly large number of new automatic traffic lights (Traffic Lights Increased, 1936). Hopper chooses a simpler traffic light model with two signals in red and green.⁷ In the mid-1930s, traffic lights were still a relatively new and much-discussed urban phenomenon in terms of cultural history, as is

3 See «Movie Operator Uses Screen For Plea to People» (1937).

4 The New York subway is known to be compared to hell (Brooks, 1997).

5 The white wall area takes up more space in Hopper's picture than it did in reality in the 1930s, since the jewellery storefront does not rise as high in the picture.

6 See for instance «Hopper and the theater of the mind. Vision, spectacle, and the spectator» (2002), Robert Silberman.

clearly evidenced by a large number of letters from readers about traffic lights in the New York Times. Hopper has thus integrated a special urban warning signal into his painting.

The traffic lights and the other red elements at the cinema entrance dramatise the scene (Levin, 1995). They seem to give a decided warning against going to the cinema in view of the difficulties in the cinema business and the bombings in the second half of the 1930s. By contrast, the gilded columns are a reminder of a more elegant era and a different cinema theatre culture. Thus, Hopper's painting *The Circle Theatre* probably not only addresses the contrasts between old and new, as diagnosed by poet Mark Strand (2001). The threatening-appearing cinema is rather intended to draw attention to the problems of the film industry at the time, whose «cheapening strategies» changed the cinema culture and caused social unrest (Butsch, 2001, p. 111). Hopper's integration of the no-longer-existing ice cream brand Horton in his painting also points to more fundamental problems caused by the increased economic competition in connection with the financial crisis. Hopper thus deals with the film industry as one of the most important American leisure industries in his painting, which is exemplary of the economic competition that leads to inhumane conditions and causes social unrest.

In Hopper's painting *The Sheridan Theatre* (1937) [Figure 4] the interior of a movie theatre plays a prominent role. The viewer's eyes fall over a balustrade on the first floor on a rotunda-like lobby of a movie theatre. On the left, a male guest reaches a staircase landing, where an usherette is standing.⁸ Much more attention is drawn to a female figure, who is situated more in the foreground on the right. She is looking over the balustrade and can only be seen from behind. Her curvy body, the golden blond hair, and the especially high black pumps are inspired by Mae West.⁹ The actress ranked among the top ten box office stars in 1936 (Watts, 2003). West wore a red dress in the film *Go West Young Man*, which was released about two months before the painting was completed.¹⁰



Figure 4. *The Sheridan Theatre* (1937), Edward Hopper, oil on canvas, 43.5 x 64.1 cm, The Newark Museum, Newark, New Jersey (image: The Newark Museum, Newark, © heirs of Josephine Hopper/ licensed by Bildrecht, Vienna)

7 For general information on traffic lights, see «The Origins and Globalization of Traffic Control Signals» (1999), Clay McShane, for those in New York see *New York City's red and green lights: a brief look back in time* (2015), Steven Gembara.

8 The half-long hair of the person checking the cards indicates that the person is a woman. But Carter E. Foster (2013) identifies the employee as a man.

9 Hopper's wife pointed out that the figure had a «Mae West effect» (Levin, 1995, p. 292).

10 *Go West Young Man* (Hathaway, 1936).

The title *The Sheridan Theatre* clearly refers to Hopper's inspiration for the subject of the painting, namely a cinema in Greenwich Village. It opened in 1921 as the Mark Strand Sheridan Square Theatre and operated under the name Loew's Sheridan Theatre from 1926 onwards. The Sheridan Theatre is described as a film palace in the secondary literature on Hopper, without characterising it in a more differentiated way and without considering its development from 1921 to 1937. Hopper also makes some significant changes in the presentation of the theatre, which have not yet been more precisely identified in the research literature (Foster, 2013). When the cinema opened in 1921, it was the first purpose-built movie theatre beyond New York's «Theatre District». Its construction costs amounted to approximately 700 000 USD, and around 2700 spectators could be seated in the cinema.

The characterisation of the building as a «dynamic, exotic space» by art historian Robert Silberman in an article on Edward Hopper is incorrect (Silberman, 2002, p. 145). The interior design of the Sheridan Theatre is not influenced by exotic styles, but rather by the neo-Renaissance style and Georgian architecture (Anonymus, 1922, p. 18). Hopper has taken up the elegance and the colours of green, ivory, and gold of the real Sheridan Theatre in his painting.¹¹ In the early-1920s, it was regarded as one of the «most beautiful movie theaters» on the east coast (The Quill, 1921, p. 23).¹² The elegant interior design of the Sheridan Theatre was also aimed to attract residents living in the surrounding artists' quarter of Greenwich Village.

After about two years the attention of the audience and the media shifted to other new movie theatres. To compete with them, the Sheridan Theatre was equipped with better projectors, new decorations, and a larger orchestra in 1927 (Here's candidate, 1927). But by 1930, it was only considered a «neighborhood theatre», although its operation remained profitable for the next few years (Managers round table club, 1930; Inside Stuff – Legit, 1934). Thus, at the end of 1936, Hopper chose the cinema—which was already 15 years old at the time—as his subject. In the picture, the many traces on the carpet may betray the year of construction already some time ago. However, the elegant historicist style of the painted lobby was also no longer in vogue.

It is very conspicuous that Hopper made the building even larger than it actually was, because the entrance area of the Sheridan Theatre actually extended only over two floors, as can be seen in a contemporary photograph [Figure 5] and a sketch by Hopper.¹³



Figure 5. Sheridan Theatre, New York, lobby and mezzanine promenade, photograph (ca. 1921-1922) (image: Architecture and Building, February 1922, 54(2), plate 26)

11 See the advertisement of Frank Adam Electric Co. in *Exhibitor's Trade Review* (1921).

12 See also «Pleasing Varied Cosmopolitan Tastes» (1922).

13 See *Study for The Sheridan Theatre* (1936–37), Edward Hopper, chalk on paper, 11.4 x 18.1 cm, New York, Whitney Museum of American Art, inv. no. 70.963. See also the contemporary description in Anonymus, (1922).

However, Hopper added another floor with a balustrade above the mezzanine in his painting, so that the theatre seems to have two balcony areas. Of course, these are familiar from opera and theatre architecture.¹⁴ By adding another level, the cinema looks more imposing in his painting. In addition, Hopper's room shines in a light that oscillates between yellow, orange-red and gold. The Sheridan Theatre was indeed distinguished at its opening by a special lighting system.¹⁵ The lighting in the foyer —accentuated by Hopper— is very promising: it is kept warmer and more positive than the cold brightness, which is significant for other works by the American painter (cf. for instance the above-analysed painting *The Circle Theatre*, figure 3).

The correspondences of the film theatre visitor on the right and the interior design are also striking. These are achieved —among other things— by the placement of the protagonist as well as by the colour scheme. An arch begins behind the woman who is reminiscent of Mae West. She looks like a caryatid, and her head seems to replace a capital, especially since the decoration on the column on the left at the same level is held in similar colours as the woman. The interior design generally echoes the female figure in colour. The colouring of the balustrade corresponds to that of the woman's legs, the reddish wall covering and the lower part of the ceiling lamps to her skirt, the ceiling beginning on the second floor that radiates in light gold to the blonde of hair. Even the white of her jacket finds a counterpart in the ceiling area. The curves of the woman's body also find an echo in the rounded architectural elements.

These ostentatious visual parallels seem to indicate that it is not only film divas like Mae West who are supposed to repeatedly entice film consumers to visit the cinema (Kuhn, 1985). In their heyday, the luxurious film palaces were also intended to stimulate the imagination of visitors and entice them to frequent visits to the cinema, and thus they were essential to the film industry in the 1920s. For example, Marcus Loew —whose cinema chain also operated the Sheridan Theatre from 1926 cleaves to the maxim «We sell tickets to theaters not movies» (Melnick, 2012, p. 82). In contrast to the threatening *Circle Theatre*, the *Sheridan Theatre* in the 1936/7 painting seems nostalgic, with its emphatically higher lobby and warm light. The integration of the female «Rückenfigur» (figure from the back) standing on the right — which picks up on a classic topos of longing from the Romantic period— also fits in with this (Rühse, 2013).¹⁶ With his idealised portrayal of the *Sheridan Theatre*, Hopper pays homage to the seductive power of older movie theatres. However, the divergences between the era of cinema palaces in the 1920s and the time of the painting's creation in the second half of the 1930s are included. Thus, with her modern trouser suit, the usherette does not truly fit in with the older interior. When the building was constructed in the early-1920s, usherettes in the *Sheridan Theatre* wore longer velvet jackets with large bows that resembled baroque men's clothing, as well as painters' caps that blended well with the artists' quarter of Greenwich Village [Figure 6].

14 See for instance *Lost Broadway Theatres* (1997), van Hoogstraten.

15 See the aforementioned advertisement of Frank Adam Electric Co. in *Exhibitor's Trade Review* (1921).

16 However, the romantic longing for divine experience is interpreted secularly by Hopper.



Figure 6. Two usherettes of the Sheridan Theatre, New York (1922), photograph (image: *Exhibitor's Trade Review*, February 25, 1922, p. 909)

In addition, the red skirt of the visitor standing on the right of the balustrade forms a striking contrast to the more discreet tones of the interior design. Although the outfit is suitable as evening wear, it looks provocative and therefore slightly less tasteful. Moreover, the visitor does not lean very elegantly on the balustrade.¹⁷ The cheeky films with Mae West — on whose appearance the female visitor is based as above-mentioned — also differ from the filming of Charlotte Brontë's novel *Jane Eyre*,¹⁸ with which the Sheridan Theatre was opened and with which a programme statement for it was made back then. Another striking element is the atmosphere of isolation and loneliness created in Hopper's *The Sheridan Theatre* through the separation of the woman standing on the right from the people on the left. Beyond that, there are no other persons to be seen. Only the footprints on the carpet on the right draw attention to the frequency of the cinema. Like in other pictures by Hopper, this forced emptiness is intended to express an inner state of modern urban life, whereby the choice of the subject in *The Sheridan Theatre* seems to have been inspired by the changes in cinema in the 1930s (Levin, 1995; Doss, 2015).

After the economic crisis, there was only a brief setback in cinema attendances: in 1936, there were 88 million cinema-goers, almost as many as in 1930 (90 million) in the US (Butsch, 2001). According to a newspaper report from 1934, the Sheridan Theatre was also profitable (*Inside Stuff - Legit*, 1934). However, in the 1930s, fewer people visited the mezzanine, lobby and other social spaces on the promenade because it was also possible to enter cinemas in the US between screenings (Butsch, 2001). Going to the cinema was thus less of a social event and instead more lonely, anonymous and commercialised in the second half of the 1930s, which may have inspired Hopper to create the painting (Butsch, 2001).

¹⁷ Even the usherette at the back left of the painting *The Sheridan Theatre* does not lean very elegantly against the banister.

¹⁸ *Jane Eyre* (Ballin, 1921).

New York Movie [Figure 7] from 1939 is another important painting in Hopper's oeuvre that is situated in a cinema. In contrast to *The Sheridan Theatre*, the cinema employee is not only a secondary character in *New York Movie*, but rather the main protagonist. The usherette—who is in the right half of this picture—leans inwardly against the wall of the hall in the corridor.¹⁹ The cinema interior is based on the Palace Theatre in Times Square, although Hopper integrated elements from other theatres (Foster, 2013). The usherette is wearing a pantsuit uniform that was typical of the time. She is supporting her head with one hand, referring to the «gestus melancholicus». In the left half of the painting, some cinema visitors can be seen from behind in front of a cinema screen with a mountain scene. Two row barriers act as a clear visual blockade between the area of the audience and that of the employee.



Figure 7. *New York Movie* (1939), Edward Hopper, oil on canvas, 81.9 x 101.9 cm, Museum of Modern Art, New York, object no. 396.1941 (image: Museum of Modern Art; New York, © heirs of Josephine Hopper/ licensed by Bildrecht, Vienna)

The sad usherette also deconstructs the glamorous image of her job, which was supported by films like *The Good Fairy* with an usherette as the main character.²⁰ However, the usherette's daily work routine was tough, with long working hours and low income (Balogh, 2017). They came primarily from the working class. In the 1930s, their salaries were reduced. They now assisted the visitors less; instead, they had to control them in the first place (Butsch, 2001). Thus, it becomes clear that the usherette is leaning against the wall in Hopper's painting because she is supposed to oversee the cinema hall. The usherettes were not allowed to watch the film during working hours (Balogh, 2017). The melancholically inward look of the usherette in Hopper's painting may draw attention to the alienated and unfulfilling control job of the young cinema employees. It also alludes to the fact that behind the cinema as a place of longing is an economically-active business organisation in the leisure industry.

Hopper depicted the usherette with an elegant, slender figure and beautifully-coiffed blonde hair. The usherettes were also very attractive in real life, as mainly good-looking young women were chosen for the job (Balogh, 2017). Thus, not only the films functioned as mediators of desire and fantasy, but also the usherettes. They should also encourage viewers to repeatedly

¹⁹ The usherettes have long been neglected by research and are now thoroughly researched by Eva Balogh (2017).

²⁰ *The Good Fairy* (Wyler, 1935).

consume films (Balogh, 2017). By taking up the topics of desire and simple employees of urban entertainment establishments, Hopper created a contemporary version of Édouard Manet's *A Bar at the Folies Bergère* (1882).²¹ In *Manet's A Bar at the Folies Bergère*, the depiction of the barmaid after T. J. Clark (1986) expresses social alienation (see also Allan, 2019).

The Sheridan Theatre, *The Circle Theatre* and *New York Movie* make it clear that Hopper does not just pick up on the topic of loneliness in simple variations (Doss, 2015), but that he also critically refers to current concerns in each of his paintings. The analysed paintings demonstrate Hopper's preoccupation with the big city life, his passion for cinema and his attention to the changed cinema experience in the 1930s. The latter becomes especially clear in the painting *The Sheridan Theatre*, which can be seen as a nostalgic homage to cinema palaces of the 1920s, with melancholic undertones due to the change of cinema culture. In addition, Hopper painted the dangerous-looking *The Circle Theatre* during the time of bombings in cinemas at Columbus Circle in New York to draw attention to contemporary urban trouble spots for unrest enhanced by cheapening strategies in the film exhibition business. He also deals with the changed cinema experiences in the 1930s. Moreover, he critically examines the working surroundings of cinema staff in the painting *New York Movie* and deconstructs the glamour of the job of the usherette and exposes the alienation of their work.

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21 *A Bar at the Folies Bergère* (1882), Édouard Manet, oil on canvas, 96 x 130 cm, The Courtauld Gallery, London © The Samuel Courtauld Trust, The Courtauld Gallery, London. See Berkow (1996).

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