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2024

The Silence of Noise

Sasi Valiveti

Virginia Commonwealth University

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The Silence

Creative

By Sasi Valiveti
Virginia Commonwealth University

A thousand conversations, in which I blend with a subtlety of less than even a pin drop, flutter through the warm sunlit air. The soft aroma of lattes dance across the table joined shortly by a garden of omelets and french toast topped by a whipped cream swirl. When I speak, everyone looks my way and builds off my points, like a seemingly never-ending tower made of indestructible steel. As I take a bite of french toast, a fluffy white cloud floats directly above the glass ceiling of the café, the sunlight bending around it like a halo. My best friend embraces me from beside me. I say something, she says something back. Our conversation intertwines like the way we braid each other's hair into an infinite rope. But as I turn away for a second, the beams screech. When I turn back, the rope lies on the floor. Everyone still converses around us, smiles still on their faces. My friend beams at me as she waves goodbye, walking through the door to dissolve into the busy, modern world.

This is what I imagine as I observe when I observe the right half of *Nighthawks* by Edward Hopper; a mustard yellow door to the diner kitchen stands out against a mellow white wall mixed with peach and beige. The colors emphasize a warmth that only belongs to a diner in the city, with people bustling through the door every hour to pause their lives for a moment to take in the flavors that are so different yet the same, to observe the scene, possibly even to converse with others for once in a lifetime before diverting back into their own paths. Two steel coffee machines stand on the counter as an employee leans to prepare an order for the customer,

a woman with wavy hair as scarlet as her dress. Everything is like a motion picture, looping and flowing endlessly, never seeming to end.

According to Filip Lipiński, an author for the Oxford Journal of Art, this is how “...the image in the viewer’s mind activated by Hopper’s works – was not always another painting or image of reality, but a photograph or even a motion picture” (Lipiński 163). This idea is evident through the position of the elements of the painting, particularly the contrast between the right and left halves of the painting. The right side, if it is the only side visible to the viewer, would communicate a feeling of comfort and warmth associated with a diversion from the fast pace of the modern city; in contrast, the left side places the diner ominously in the middle of an empty urban crossroad. It is lit, however, blends more with the navy blue darkness of the night rather than the mellow shades of the wall and kitchen door. A notable aspect of the left side also reveals two men, one of who is next to the scarlet woman, his suit blending into the darkness. The other man sits on the counter, seeming to stare vacantly downwards. The light illuminates through the window outwards, placing the diner and all of the subjects within a spotlight. Hopper places the audience in the position of a viewer from the outside who gains an overview of the entirety of the scene. It is evident when observing one part is not enough; the overall scene from the viewer’s perspective, coupled with an individual viewing of the left side, clouds over the warm welcome communicated from the right side. Instead, it is a scene of melancholy and desolateness in which everyone is trapped in their own minds. No one can do anything but live and die at the same time because the way everything seems to be, like the mellow, welcoming feeling of a diner, turns out not to be true after all.

Now I blink again, only to be sitting in the café again, only I am observing the construction of an entirely new tower. I speak, but I am a ghost. I am there and everyone knows,

but I am not. Everyone is smiling and conversing, but I decide to eat instead. I feel a soft tap on my shoulder, but I do not look in her direction. Her words fall to the floor, breaking like glass, the particles piercing my flesh. From behind she embraces me, but it feels like death. I push my latte away. The garden omelet and french toast sit there half eaten. I shiver as the sunlight shines through the large windows. The rope and the corner beckoned towards me. I get up and leave. Everything becomes clearer, why they build what they build and why they tear them down; the words they choose to let float through their ears, and the ones they leave to shatter on the floor. The darkness is inviting in its truth, and from that moment it infuses me with life. I turn back to the table. My friend, who continues to laugh and smile, focuses on me for a mere second, and I smile though she does not see it, or me, anymore. I imagine an alternate scenario in my mind, that perhaps she did look back and see my smile, which caused her to gradually fade into darkness. As I exit the doors, I look back towards the café again, but there is no sunlight. Everything is duller, areas superficially bright. I do not see my friends, just employees performing their duties. The mahogany color fills the surroundings, blending with the street lights. Everyone is a ghost, traveling paths for reasons they only know of. A line of ghosts travel towards the station entrance and I join them, detached but together, building towers that are torn down after seconds. Years later, I reflect on the towers I have built and are still standing, but now I know that the golden ropes are an illusion.

According to a critic of Hopper's work, "the memory of [Hopper's] paintings tyrannizes over the scene itself", generating the experience of "...a feeling of ontological overlap between what is considered real and what we believe to be 'just' an image.." (Lipiński 163). When viewed as a whole, *Nighthawks* appears to merely be a normal painting of a diner, the individuals within appearing to merely commit to a simple routine part of their lives. However, after taking

into account the right and left sides of the painting, the reason why Hopper chose that particular viewer's perspective is clear. I am the lone observer standing adjacent to the crosswalk watching the scene through the window, seemingly a diner running its regular operations, however, none of the heads twist towards me. I am neither invited nor discouraged to enter; my individual status is neither in question nor acknowledged. The scarlet woman appears to twist her head towards me, however her gaze is vacant. It is apparent, as my loneliness increases the awareness of my vision, that she is aware of my presence, however, in her mind it is equivalent to no one standing there at all. We may have engaged in a conversation in the past, however, through her gaze, it is equivalent to us never meeting at all. Our interaction has no meaning, our encounter being as meaningless as the blinking of eyes or the steps we take. She is fighting a battle with her mind, trying to achieve a goal that she only knows of, as are the other occupants of the diner. And on that path to achievement, I have no significant purpose.

I remember my friends and why they chose to tear down the towers we built; When we initially crossed paths, perhaps I mattered within that period of time in their path to achievement, which was something I never considered during our time together. The long conversations and embraces never mattered, or perhaps they did but lost meaning. I suddenly recognize that I am too working towards a purpose; it is why I never kept connections to the past and why a majority of it I chose to leave behind. Perhaps, I still saw them as useful and the moving past me is the cause of my loneliness and the desolateness I am reminded of when I see the scarlet woman. We are all in an endless repetitive animation, fighting and working for ultimate goals that only we are aware of, and what we only can work towards; everyone and everything out there is merely a resource available for use, and it's easy to forget that sometimes.

A critic of Hopper's works commented that "...the interpreter – the image in the viewer's mind activated by Hopper's works – was not always another painting or image of reality, but a photograph or even a motion picture" (Lipiński 163). I am not merely a viewer of this painting; I am a character within, viewing the diner from the outside from the perspective Hopper puts me in. The perspective allows me to observe the colors, shadows, and individuals; they move in an endless loop instead of hanging suspended in the air. The captivation comes not only from the animated style of the elements, but also from their placement and how they are portrayed. According to Lipiński, "...the bar window seems tilted to the inside and thus creates an intermediary space between the completely transparent pane of glass and the similarly transparent but materially concrete surface of the painting..." which creates a "...spatial wedge encourages the spectator to physically enter the painting and 'window dine', but at the same time, frustrates any such attempt..." (Lipiński 169), which produces that feeling of "ghostliness"; that the viewer is neither encouraged nor discouraged, but there is no meaning to their presence. Furthermore, "...the material surface of the painting is additionally 'glazed' in the mind of the spectator by its association with the window..." which results in a "...double coding of the illusion of accessibility enhances the paradoxical experience of access and its denial" (Lipiński 169).

Lipiński claims that this particular theme, a dominant theme in not only *Nighthawks* but also in Hopper's other works, is captured by the scenes in the movies of Wim Wenders. One particular scene he discusses places *Nighthawks* as "...a literal set for a film being shot as a part of the story..." in which "...the life of the protagonists and their private conversations merge with scenes of the film they are making" (Lipiński 171), which is representative of the animated nature of the subjects of Hopper's works. Lipiński notably discusses how the camera managed to

capture “...the complex relationship between the transparent window of the bar and the window of the painting as a screen of virtual transgression”, which Wenders admitted during an interview “...that the movie was a kind of tribute to Hopper’s ‘double isolation’..” and that it is “...this isolation, which is also related to the double mediation of reality, which makes *Nighthawks* a painting about the circulation of images..” (Lipiński 171). And it is indeed so.

In the background blending into the shadows, there is a row of buildings empty of life and light; it is only the diner that stands. The diner is the scene, still and eerie from our perspective. The individuals within merely live, vacantly staring ahead, all having their own will by the end of the day. Their past, possibly with each other, while remembered at the moment, will be forgotten as soon as they move to the next phase of their paths. What ties them together, though they are not aware, is the desire to be recognized with meaning and the loneliness that comes from that desire not being met. This is precisely how Hopper creates the theme of isolation in urban life, how no matter how much we interact and yearn with each other, we join the line of ghosts crossing and leaving, all just a loud flurry of images.

As I turn away from the diner and join the line of ghosts heading towards the train station, our shoulders brush and boisterous chatter fills the air moist with sweat. I do not speak, however my mind screams only not to be heard. There is only the silence of noise.

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