

“EDWARD HOPPER AND HEIDEGGER: The Unveiling of Solitude”

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Abstract: The purpose of the article is to analyze how Edward Hopper portrays solitude of the contemporary man through his pictures. Hopper’s esthetic is based on the empty existential life of the urban man, and his pictures show images of men and women alone among things like a suitcase, chairs, etc.

Keywords: Solitude - Contemporary - Existence - Esthetics - Image.

Heidegger’s text entitled *The Origin of Art* begins with two phrases that serve as a basis for understanding artistic creation. “The artist is the origin of the work. The work is the origin of the artist.” This mutual relationship between artist and work, where there is neither subject nor object, develops circularity between them, grounded in art itself. Referring to art, Heidegger clearly states that: “Whatever art may be, it has to be captured from the work. Whatever art may be, we can only live from the essence of art” (Heidegger, *A origem da Obra de Arte* 12). This is why Heidegger says: “To find the essence of the art, which actually lives within the work, we seek the actual work and ask it what it is, and how it is” (12). To inquire about the work is essentially to ask about the actions of the artist involved in creating it. The work cannot be seen just as something envisaged by means of allegoric representation, be it in the form of sculpture, painting, or writing.

It’s all about the very act of unveiling the art that occurs in the creation by the artist. This is not a simple subject in which everything is already found as a substrate, as creation is not limited to the artist’s subjectivity. The artistic undertaking may be understood in the context of Heidegger’s thinking as the process of unveiling the art itself as a significant possibility of its being in its uniqueness. An artist is the one involved in the process of disclosing the very essence of art among all other things. The artist’s determination has always been in the very act of following the original meaning(1) of the art unveiled in the things with which she/he works, be it at their shop, on their computer screen, on stage, and so on. In their creative act, the artist captures what is present in the work itself. Creation, according to Heidegger, is the letting-emerge (*das hervorgehenlassen*) in a product (*das Hervorgebrachtes*). The work-becoming-work (*das Werkwerden*) is a way of coming-to-be and of art actually taking place. For this reason, the artist is the one who is always open to the original meaning of art in its artistic unveiling that occurs in the creation act as a truth that shows through things artistically made.

Heidegger refers to art as being the creating safeguard of truth in the work. Art is, therefore, an outcome and an event of truth. When creating, the artist is not involved with his or herself, i.e. with subjectivity, but with the truth of the very creation she/he develops as art. This is why language, for the artist, is expressed as an act of creation of extraordinary meanings. Only by going out of the linguistically commonplace can the artist create open space in their art-making, to implement truth in the work of art. An artist is the one who unveils, in their act of creating, the

very being of the things that are hidden in the everyday linguistic objective actions. To go beyond what is presented as obvious, by means of targeted language structures, is the concern of the artist, who delves into the work of disclosing the being, in the significant uniqueness of his or her being.

The artist's task is to capture, in their creative act, the work within its original meaning. In the act of making the work, the artist causes its truth to surface, to enable it to emerge from the linguistic objective actions imposed by everyday discourse. The uniqueness of the work and its truth as embodied in its own determination, without the camouflage of the objective action language which prevents it from expressing what it is in its own meaning, authentically manifested in the work. By unveiling the work of art through a creative act, the artist undertakes the task of saying what the being is in its aesthetic expression. This is why one of the greatest American painters of the 20th Century, Edward Hopper, is capable of conveying through his paintings of simple everyday scenes the lonely and painful universe of the urban man, who in his daily life goes to cafes (picture 01), builds buildings (picture 02), travels (picture 03), plays the piano (picture 04), but without anyone paying attention to him. There is no *other* in Hopper's paintings, or else, the other is not a nobody, because no one is a nobody, or in a heideggerian sense, if there is another who is not a a nobody. In spite of an apparent solipsism introduced in Hopper's paintings, our own indetermination is what is at stake by means of distancing people.

The everyday scenes in Hopper's paintings lose all their objective character of buildings, houses, bars, suitcases or roads to reveal the pain and solitude shown in the being's dimension in its artistic uniqueness. Hopper's work unveils the existence of urban living revealed in glances, gestures, and the distant relationships between individuals among things, such as suitcases, chairs, bar counters, cars, a bed, etc. Existing among things, Hopper's urban man reveals his loneliness as someone surrounded by objects and not as another, for example a book (pictures 05, 06, 07), that appears as a constant element in the composition of his paintings. Expressing the pain and loneliness of the urban man, Hopper does not deal with the subjectivity of individuals, but in the distant and empty way of existing in the cities in which they are existentially tossed. So, what is left for Hopper's men and women is to contemplate the horizons of the open windows that get sunlight.

Maybe one of the most striking works by Hopper is *People in the Sun* (picture 08). It depicts a group of people that, albeit sharing the same sunlight, are isolated, distant from one another (picture 08a). None of them speaks nor do they make any signal to each other. Loneliness emanates from the picture by means of the look cast towards the sun (picture 08b), or a man casting his gaze to a book (picture 08c). No one bothers anyone, no one disturbs anyone. There is no life shared between any two people in the picture, each one is turned into himself, not in a merely narcissistic sense, but in a way to express his or her own solitude through sad expressions (picture 08d).

In his pictures, the American master unveils the movement or the struggle to transcend the void in urban spaces (picture 09), whose existential determinant is the distance between individuals. The overcoming of such distance in Hopper's works takes place by means of another kind of distance, the contemplation of glances smoothly moving away from that empty situation where everyday human relations are. It is the way of being of everyday human relationships, in its modern urban existence, that makes it possible for Hopper to understand that art can only unveil as the painting of contemplative people among constructions and objects, while following the meaning of being immersed in living isolated relationships in a time whose being is not having an open relationship between people who live together in the same space. Hence the lonely and contemplative faces in Hopper's paintings. The aesthetic language Hopper develops in his paintings reflects, therefore, a

landscape of his time. However, his language is not merely subjectivity of his self, his ego as an artist, but of his involvement with the very being of his time.

To Heidegger, language does not strive to express, firstly, the self. For this reason philosophers like Charles Taylor draw attention to the aesthetic effort by modern poets, like Rilke, to articulate something that is beyond the self. There is the source of the struggle of certain modern cultural sources against subjectivism.

Language cannot merely be seen as an instrument for capturing the subject's determinations as expressive activities, as in the case of artistic creation. Our focus is not on capturing subjective determinations through a designative language. Taylor quotes Heidegger to say that man is not the creator of language; on the contrary, language is his master ("Language and Human Nature" 239). It is language that allows us to go meet the being in the entity.

Upon verifying that vision, still influenced by romanticism, prevails in contemporary society, that expressive activities developed by the individual will give him assurance to express what is proper to his self, Taylor analyzes the non-subjective character of the expressive conception of language. For him, Heidegger becomes, by means of the conception of his language, a radical anti-subjectivist(239). Heidegger is one of the prophets of "letting things happen", one of the great critics of modern technological conscience, which advocates the notion of reason as an instrumental reason (246). It is in this way that Heidegger contributes with his modern hermeneutics for understanding the work of Edward Hopper, who might be mistaken for a painter of North American landscapes with their country homes (picture 10), towns (picture 11), subways (picture 12), and trains (picture 13).

Hopper is not a painter of landscapes or picturesque scenes in bars or cafés, but one that manages in his artistic undertaking to create things like a house, luggage, sunlight, bodies, glances, armchairs, bedrooms, etc., unveiling in his work their uniqueness in a contemporary way, based on the distancing between individuals (picture 14).

It is the distance as an existential phenomenon that makes possible unveiling loneliness in Hopper's work. The painting *Excursion into Philosophy* (picture 15) presents a couple where the woman is lying with her back turned to the man who, sitting by an open book (picture 15a), is focused on himself, oblivious to the sun coming through the open window (picture 15b), the half-naked woman asleep (picture 15c), and even the book itself (picture 15d). Hopper makes a kind of ironic contrast between the woman's body and the book. The book is aligned with the woman's naked buttocks. The exposed buttocks seem to try to dialogue with the open book, each one introducing itself to the other, in spite of their different determinations: the buttocks in the sensitive field, the book in the intellectual field. Nevertheless, this sensitive-intellectual dialogue becomes impossible due to the distance of the man (picture 15e), engrossed with himself. It is the male figure that instills loneliness in the thematic composition of the painting: the sunlight, the open window, the book, the woman, the man, the picture hanging on the wall (picture 15f).

There is no dialogue, as everything becomes distant from the dualism installed by the self-centered act of the man opposing his insight to what surrounds him, not as self-affirmation, but as the impossibility of facing life with someone else. This opposition shows as a distancing between the self and the world, or even between the self and the other. The duality Hopper introduces in his painting shows the difficulty our contemporaries have to join their inner (or subjective) life, and the external reality or, perhaps, what is created with what is given. The expression of the man in *Excursion into Philosophy* (picture 15g) thus shows the true work of Hopper as the unveiling of loneliness as a way of being in present times, whose existential determination is presented as a

deeply divided self, a self where reason is set apart from feelings, sensitivity, the body, the other (who is nobody).

A self that is indifferent to the significant determination of the being of entities, as it is not possible to capture them from the modern-cartesian project of an individual beholding a methodologically safe and dominant knowledge. The contemporary self understands its being within a comprehensive structure no longer based on a safe procedural reason(2), but on the discovery of the void in this safe reason, which instead of bringing certainties, points to distancing and loneliness.

NOTES

1) In this aspect, we can see the relationship between Heidegger's concept and Heraclitus' Logos, which makes explicit in his thought the need man has for following the meaning of things. Hence, Heraclitus says that the common should be followed, and not what each man understands as a product of his own personal understanding.

2) Taylor concludes that modern reason is no longer substantive, but procedural. Hence it is through reason that we cannot describe foundationalism procedures. On the other hand, in this description of the reasons for the fundamentals of knowledge, only the apodictic mode of reason is indeed satisfactory. For Taylor, this apodictic feature of reason serves only to free us from bias or other people's thoughts that could lead us to mistakes. However, the procedural reason does not favor the agent's knowledge regarding the nature of the human agent. The Cartesian individual, as a trustee of procedural reason, is limited to the ability of building rationales according to the proper patterns of evidence.

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