

The Study of Digital Manipulation: Edward Hopper Style

The study and application of Edward Hopper's painting style to digital image manipulation

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The art movement today called Realism was first made popular in France beginning sometime around 1840 until close to the end of the century. The movement was established on the concept that the true nature of art should be to reflect life as it really was, in all its common activities. This ideal held that art should be free of the idealism and judgments observable in previous movements. French Realism was, in part, inspired by various political movements that occurred during the period. It was a time in which the people of France were attempting to gain a better lifestyle for themselves by demanding rights for the ‘common’ man as had been accomplished in America less than a generation earlier. In attempting to ‘accurately’ reflect life in all of its objective detail, French artists adopting a Realist approach worked to find the most ‘common’ examples of French life. They sought the people of the fields and villages and then depicted them in their most humble and mundane activities. The major ideas that fueled French realism are discussed within the writings of two different but influential artists of the period, Gustave Courbet and Ferdinand Leger. Only by understanding the principles of realism as they were developed in this first wave of artistic endeavor can one can begin to understand how they applied to the world of America as it emerged from the bloodiest war fought on American soil and became the hallmark of one of America’s favorite artists, Edward Hopper.

French artist Gustave Courbet (1819-1877) asserted that “painting is an essentially concrete art and can only consist in the representation of real and existing things” (cited in Finocchio, 2004). In his art and in his philosophy, Courbet’s chief technical concern seems to be an abandonment of the ‘rules’ of art, at least to some

degree, in favor of a more natural flow in both line and form. Courbet felt such rough elements of the painting were more accurate in attempting to represent the moment as it existed as well as the emotion of the moment in which the piece was created or the scene was witnessed. His close association with the 'realism' of life as it was experienced by the humble peasantry as well as in his own careful observation of it helped Courbet develop a more intense identification with his subject. By 1850, his ideas regarding what was real in the world and in art were becoming more defined. This is clear in a letter he wrote to a friend, "... in our so very civilized society it is necessary for me to live the life of a savage. I must be free even of governments. The people have my sympathies, I must address myself to them directly" (cited in Insecula, 2008). Within the philosophy of his Realist Manifesto, Courbet states the goal of Realist art is "to translate the customs, the ideas, the appearance of my epoch according to my own estimation" (cited in Finnochio, 2004). Within this approach, it is clear that Courbet held a concept of the real that was based almost exclusively upon the previously unrepresented classes of society and their unreported and unknown daily experiences. Approaching art from this perspective, though, Courbet was equally guilty of making decisions regarding what to paint based upon his own inner conceptions of what was 'common' and 'unrepresented'. As a result, he was essentially making up his own definition of society and presenting this definition to the world as 'real' based only upon what he subjectively chose to represent.

This attempt at objective yet still subjective approach to art can be seen in some of Courbet's artwork. Throughout many of his pieces, Courbet's images continue to concentrate on what he felt was most communicative regarding his concept of real. While this was not necessarily a dishonorable pursuit, it was misguided in assuming that

it was free of all subjective interpretation. For instance, in his painting “Young Women from the Village” (1852), Courbet presents a lovely pastoral image in which three young ladies from the village offer a poor farm girl something unidentifiable in the painting from a basket. Most assume it is some sort of food product that the farm girl has been living without, but in actuality, it could be something as frivolous as a silk ribbon with which to tie her hair. Regardless of the offering, this graceful act of charity on the part of the town girls is nearly lost in the overwhelming spaciousness of the surrounding landscape. This vast landscape is predominantly green broken only by the presence of a few cattle and a small dog, most of which are clustered relatively near the girls and thus not serving to help break up the sense of isolation and mutual need these girls have for one another. In this presentation, Courbet broke all traditional approaches to ‘pastoral’ art as well as the respected position of artists of the period. “His *Young Women from the Village* exhibited at the Salon of 1852, violates conventional rules of scale and perspective and challenges traditional class distinctions by underlining the close connections between the young women (the artist’s sisters), who represent the emerging rural middle class, and the poor cowherd who accepts their charity” (Finnocchio, 2004). Although Courbet is presenting young ladies, both of the town and of the field, he makes no attempt to beautify their images, giving them the traditional clothing of the region, adding stylish touches of the period or relieving the emotional impact of the powerful green hills and fields surrounding the girls, all of which would have been expected at the time. However, his images were capable of making an impact as was obvious in the continued focus on realism in the years to follow.

While Courbet's approach to Realism was accepted as a viable approach to art, his philosophy was contested to some extent by another French artist, Ferdinand Leger (1881-1955). Leger felt there was a need for a New Realism that would take into account the necessary and unavoidable biases of the artist. In his work and study, Leger realized that there was no possible means by which the artist could adopt a completely objective approach to his subject. "Realisms vary by reason of the fact that the artist finds himself always living in a different era, in a new environment, and amid a general trend of thought, dominating and influencing his mind" (cited in Harrison & Wood, 2003: 503). He seemed to agree with Courbet that art needed to be available to the public as its only means of being appreciated and thus achieving its maximum potential. Yet he claimed that in his own time, too much of the new modern art was retained within private collections of the rich and thus not available for public understanding. Leger's interest in new modern art was focused more on these social structures that kept the art from being viewable by the public rather than being too concerned with the actual content of the image. Instead, he concentrated on how to get the art of New Realism into the public domain, making it possible for the public to take part in the interaction between art, artist and audience. Only then could the public hope to gain some understanding of the images and appreciate the way in which it was capable of reflecting modern conventions, styles, issues and debates. This unique approach to art permitted Leger to abandon recognizable images in his art altogether as a means of focusing on the Realism of the emotion or internal concept. This type of approach can be found in paintings such as Leger's abstract cubist creation "Mechanical Elements" (1924).

Both of these French Realist artists shared a similar ideal of making the world of fine art available to the common masses, but they each approached the issue in their own way. Courbet felt the common people of France should be given immediate access to fine art by concentrating on subjects they would be able to identify with. In order to accomplish this, he felt the best path was to seek out those areas of life that he defined as 'common' and then to remain studiously faithful to the image he saw before him. Leger also felt the common people should be given access to fine art, but he saw Realism from more of a conceptual framework within which one might communicate basic ideas of form and relationship to the masses simply by making the finished artwork available to them rather than striving to concentrate only on those images the artist felt these people might understand. As a result of his philosophy, Courbet presents images 'real' enough that they could have been photographed rather than painted, but that are also not necessarily the objective example of the era that the artist had in mind. Leger recognizes the inability of the artist to completely remove his own subjective opinion of a given scene from his work and chooses to remain true to his ideas and ideals by abandoning the recognizable form altogether. However, it is difficult for even seasoned art critics to understand the basic ideas that Leger was attempting to communicate regarding the world of the real through his sometimes wildly abstract images that seem to find no basis in concrete reality. Thus, each artist presented an idea of realism as painting the actual emotions and significant content of a 'common' situation within their artwork, but neither was able to achieve the ultimate expression in which a sense of the 'real' was actually discovered free of artistic judgment or communicated in clear and distinct tones.

Many of these concepts of realism, both available through the analysis of the image and unavailable due to a lack of definition, can be discovered through the translation of this approach into the American art world. The American Realist period is largely recognized to have lasted from approximately 1865, the end of the American Civil War, until approximately 1910 and the emergence of the Modern period (Eliot, 1957). The educated world teetered between numerous different influences, not sure which way was the best way to express the rapidly changing attitudes then taking place in the country. The Industrial Revolution was in full swing during this period as many impoverished people from the South, particularly newly homeless black people, made their way north to work in the exploding numbers of factories being constructed. At the same time, a great many people of the South, particularly women, sought in vain for soldiers that would never return home as they struggled to keep farms and fields productive with a fraction of the help and at least a doubling of the expense of former days. Abraham Lincoln, a much beloved President in the north and the only hope for the south's reconstruction, was murdered in 1865, just at the beginning of this period, changing the mood of the country from one of optimistic hope for a more unified future to one of pessimistic blame and demands for restitution. Into this world entered Edward Hopper, one of the period's most well-known artists, whose images managed to capture the heart of this nation still struggling for a new definition. By understanding the world in which Edward Hopper created his memorable images, it is possible to analyze what made these images memorable and then apply these techniques to a more modern medium to address some of the questions of today.

Chapter 1: Art as symbol

Artistic efforts often provide useful tools for the study and understanding of complicated concepts in a variety of fields. In presenting an image of a given time period, artists are able to provide a 'snapshot', so to speak, regarding the culture and ideas in which they lived. In cases in which the artists choose to provide visual images in which the forms and figures are recognizable (as opposed to less recognizable forms such as Leger's abstractions), future generations are able to get a sense of how these people lived by examining shifts in depictions, deliberate misrepresentation and so forth that provide clues as to the underlying social structures. In learning to understand art in this way, it is helpful to understand the various ways in which literature has been read to as to expose these underlying elements. Social theorists and academics have often turned to literature as a means of examining events such as colonialism and cultural hybridity. As these concepts are difficult to define or explain, literature provides examples and analogies that bridge gaps in understanding as well as pose new questions to be answered. Understanding what these questions are provides clues as to how the art associated with the same period might communicate some of the major issues to be considered as art and literature are two aspects of the same creative drive. Concepts such as cultural hybridity have a great deal of relevance in the art world both when it comes to analyzing a work of art as well as understanding the position of the artist at the time the art was created. Although the term is often used to describe the unique situation of colonialism, in which a (usually) technologically dominant society manages to overpower a less developed nation, the concepts and issues exposed in colonialism studies are helpful in understanding the subjective position of the artist in attempting to depict the

mood of an entire nation. To understand how the concept of cultural hybridity is expressed, it is first necessary to have a broad idea of what colonialism indicates and how this concept evolved into that of cultural hybridity and its effects within the art world, particularly as these ideas are applied to the art world.

The effects and aftereffects of colonialism have been a subject of great consideration on the academic front for a long time and have recently, within the past few decades, become the focus of a number of postmodern artworks and artists. “Colonialism is a practice of domination, which involves the subjugation of one people to another” (Kohn, 2006). Strictly speaking, the concept of colonialism applies only to the action of transferring people from a dominant territory, such as England, to a new territory, such as Africa, with permanent intentions in mind. This wide-spread and permanent relocation effort is typically also characterized by an expectation that the transferred people would strive to establish a new home rule over the new territory. This means that the settlers would be expected to continue to adhere to their former styles of dress, modes of behavior and observance of cultural standards rather than attempt to learn from or blend in with the people already living in the area. It was also expected that these settlers, these explorers into the wild, would make every effort to convince the local people to change their ‘heathen’ or ‘uncivilized’ ways in order to come into a more equitable compliance with the colonizing culture’s ideals. While this was considered justifiable action because of the vast differences in technologies and governmental systems, it was perhaps unavoidable as was demonstrated in the case of Courbet, the artist who attempted to present an objective view of ‘common’ life while serving instead to define it for the world. In most cases, complete subjugation was not the goal but rather an evolution of

culture was expected while the dominating culture enforced its beliefs on the native culture. The practice of colonization was seen as important because “a temporary period of political dependence or tutelage was necessary in order for ‘uncivilized’ societies to advance to the point where they were capable of sustaining liberal institutions and self-government” (Kohn, 2006). As the world engaged more and more readily in the process of colonialism, this ‘temporary’ arrangement became much more settled. “In the nineteenth century, the tension between liberal thought and colonial practice became particularly acute, as dominion of Europe over the rest of the world reached its zenith” (Kohn, 2006). This tension has been expressed in the arts and in literature ever since, getting enough attention to develop a term of its own – cultural hybridity – which is perhaps more applicable to the concepts involved in the expressive quality found in the arts of American Realism.

Cultural hybridity is typically considered to evolve out of societies characterized by colonization. The common belief of colonialism is that a dominant culture can simply be ‘laid over’ the top of a native culture like a comforting and inclusive blanket, eventually smothering the native culture and replacing it with that of the dominant. The idea of cultural hybridity takes on greater subtlety, however, as it suggests a blending of cultures in which aspects of each become welded together with the effect of creating an entirely new society. “According to Roland Barthes, a ‘third language’ evolves that is neither the one nor the other” (Raetzsch, 2003). The Barthes theory holds that while individuals necessarily continue to live within the language and customs of their local social realm, they develop new language usage and customary behavior designed to function more effectively within the greater world of the colonizers or the natives,

depending upon the culture of origin. “Between these two languages we have to negotiate meaning, structure impressions and define our own personalities” (Raetzsch, 2003). Although it was largely held that the dominant culture would have influence over the other, meaning change occurred in only one direction as the colonized attempted to conform to their new masters’ culture, the message here is that the symbols and codes people use to judge their place in society are altered regardless of which culture they are in – each adapts to meet the other somewhere in the middle. This suggests that the process of cultural hybridity may not be confined to only those cultures that have been the subject of colonialism, but may also apply to those moving between cultures through more equitable trade agreements or even through deliberate attempts, such as that made by Courbet, between classes.

The complexity of this process can be discovered by considering the various cultural signs and symbols that one uses to communicate within a given group and how these same signs and symbols might be interpreted differently when placed in another group or setting as Baudrillard suggested (Chirolla & Wang, 2005). There are many examples available of how this occurs, one of which concerns the traditional color of the bridal gown. Women in many parts of the world including America and China are now typically married in a white bridal gown, which is directly tied to the European wedding. In the European culture, traditions associate the color white with ideas of purity and innocence. However, the traditional color for Chinese wedding gowns prior to European influence was red, a color associated with good luck because of its ability to drive away evil spirits. Because of the West’s tendency to associate this color with ideas of prostitution or ‘unclean’ women, fewer and fewer Chinese women today are comfortable

including red in their wedding celebrations, particularly in the bride's attire (Chirolla & Wang, 2005), although they may include the color in the accent colors. "But whereas Baudrillard describes this as the vanishing point of meaning, it could also be inverted and stated as the explosion of meaning. Signs from any place in the world are open to further combination, variation and subversion the moment they become mediated" (Raetzsch, 2003). In other words, Baudrillard's ideas in which the meanings of signs and symbols are rendered entirely meaningless may also open new avenues for nuances of meaning as a result of multiple interpretation possibilities. This is largely the focus of much of Barthes' work.

The theories of Roland Barthes

Much of communication in visual art is accomplished through the process of semiotics. Generally defined, the term 'semiotics' is used to describe the process in which one analyzes the 'signs' of a given culture for suggestions of what it means at varying levels of understanding. For example, a blue sky in Western tradition might mean simply a clear day, but it might also mean heaven, God, purity of thought, clarity of spirit and infinite possibility among other things as multiple possible levels of understanding. "Semiology therefore aims to take in any system of signs, whatever their substance and limits; images, gestures, musical sounds, objects, and the complex associations of all these, which form the content of ritual, convention or public entertainment: these constitute, if not languages, at least systems of signification" (Barthes, 1964). Semiotics is defined by Professor Umberto Eco as "a discipline for studying everything which can be used in order to lie" (1976). Essentially, the term

refers to any combination of language, expression, image, color, shape, placement and a number of other contextual clues that the artist brings together as a result of his or her own interpretation of the signs and symbols available to their knowledge so as to convey a sense of meaning to a particular cultural group. To assist discussion of these various elements of meaning, Barthes has developed specific terms that place these elements within an understandable framework.

Some of the primary elements used in images, whether painted, photographed or designed, include the triple threat of signifier, signified and sign. This can actually be envisioned as a math equation in which signifier plus signified equals sign. Essentially, the signifier can be thought of as “the form which the sign takes” while the signified is “the concept it represents” (Chandler, 2006). Although there has been some adjustment to the way in which these terms are used in today’s art world, the signifier can be considered to be the actual image that one sees and is thus the most basic element of the equation. When one encounters a door with the word ‘enter’ printed on it, the signifier is the actual printed letters ‘e-n-t-e-r’. The particular shape in which these letters are presented – wide apart and in elementary block letters or slanted sideways in an elegant script – is also part of the signifier. In this example, the signified includes the verbal word enter, the concept that one is invited to pass through the door, that the store behind the door on which the word is printed is open for business and perhaps, depending on the shape of the letters, even the tone of the business (i.e. – a children’s store or a fashion boutique using the earlier example of letter forms). By the same token, the silhouette of a woman can be understood as a signifier, as can the hourglass shape and four lines with which she’s comprised. The signified in this case includes the combination of the

geometric shapes to denote the figure of a woman, thus referring to the female half of the population. The broader meaning can be determined to mean that what lies beyond the door marked with this symbol is for women only and in modern-day contexts, typically indicates that women can expect to find gender-specific public restrooms behind these doors. Thus, for every word or image that can be conveyed, there can be some further meaning. The meaning and the form combined are thus two halves of the sign – the understanding we have of the word or image we are presented with.

However, this further meaning is not limited to a specific set of possibilities as the sign takes on greater significance. Instead, it can be interpreted in a number of ways depending on the way in which the sign is used, the combination of signs it is grouped with and the context in which these signs are placed. This combination of signs takes on further meaning in the form of connotation and denotative meaning. This can be envisioned as an additional equation of meaning as the connotative and denotative elements combine together to form the deep ideological myth, thus signifying the culture to which the presentation is intended to communicate. “Barthes’ notion of myth is that of a socially constructed reality that is passed off as natural. Myth is a mode of signification in which the signifier is stripped of its history, the form is stripped of its substance, and then it is adorned with a substance that is artificial, but which appears entirely natural” (Ryder, 2004). In other words, the symbolic meaning of the word ‘enter’ can be stripped of all typical meaning and re-instated in a new context to where it discovers new meaning. The depth of the meaning communicated depends entirely upon the degree to which the message sender (the artist) and the message receiver (the audience) share the same cultural myths and symbolisms as well as the artist’s ability to successfully select

and combine the images of this cultural group so as to connect with a particular ideological concept (Chandler, 2006). Thus, semiotics is revealed as the means by which images convey a sense of identification with a particular culturally similar audience, reinforcing their similarities and providing a sense of shape and meaning. At the same time, these images are able to introduce others to the inner meanings of this audience's experience. With this 'scavenger map' of images, the culturally different society is able to begin adapting their signs and symbols more toward the center in the process of cultural hybridity.

Chapter 2: Characteristics of American Realistic painting (20 pages)

Early American style (1882-1967)

George Bellows

Robert Henri

Everett Shinn

Comparison with Hopper

Chapter 3: Discovering Hopper (20 pages)

Analysis of paintings

House by the rail road

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Chapter 4: What comprises 'Hopperesque'? (15 pages)

28 characteristics

color usage

use of light

emotions

interaction

psychological dimension

Chapter 5: Photography as conceptual art (10 pages)

Philosophy

Composition

Comparison with realist painting

Conclusion (2 pages)

Applying concepts discussed to modern art

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