

The Perspectived Text

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The most important thing in the geometrical analysis of an artwork is to establish its perspective. And there are several perspectives that can be taken into account: colour, orthogonal, oblique, foreshortening, etc. Once the perspective has been defined, if the work in question is two dimensional, certain objects from the image get examined and their subordinate relationship to the perspective in question established. It is important to pose the question of the correlation of the object and major axes – the foundations of the perspective. Oftentimes it happens that the object itself is the major axis. When several objects are present, the analyst is obliged to observe and describe these relationships as well as geometrical laws overruling the work. In this process it can be found that several objects and several perspectives correlate. The importance of geometrical analysis is contained in its power to describe the spatial completeness of the work. In turn, the work itself gains importance in the moments when the level of complexity of spatial completeness gets perceived while geometrical analysis serves as a landmark in space. It is a moment in which the space of the work gets enveloped by the perspective understanding and gets understood – subordinate to the geometrical gaze.

„To understand a narrative is not merely to follow the unfolding of the story, it is also to recognize its construction in 'storeys', to project the horizontal concatenations of the narrative 'thread' on to an implicitly vertical axis; to read (to listen to) a narrative is not merely to move from one word to the next, it is also to move from one level to the next.“¹

Geometrical analysis is a coded system of signs. It is a tool for the viewing of reflective spatial phenomena systematically ordered in lines; it is the tool of lines. In one act of viewing a multitude of perspective intersections are woven out of linear intersections. The lines only get coded when the thought of it occurs. Certain lines are easier to code within a system of signs, i.e., it is easier to signify some lines since it is easier to draw them out in different, recognizable systems. To draw the lines out means to recognize the system. Or to – draw the system. Lines are drawn textually.

Barthes.

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During the analysis it is very practical to rely on the well-established, surefooted base. It almost goes without saying that the analyst's cookbook contains supporting lines that can be trusted and that are believed to be sufficiently hatched to get noticed. In the 1960s (and early

¹ Barthes 1977: 87

1970s) when works “Elements of Semiology”, “S/Z”, “Empire of Signs”, “An Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narrative”, “Rhetoric of the Image”, etc., were published, de Saussure’s lines signifier-signified-meaning seemed to form a structure with enough support for potentially stable theories while simultaneously leaving sufficient “space” in order for one’s own textual sketches to be drawn in such structuralist circumstances and times. Knowledgeable about linguistic notions and attainments of Martinet, Hjelmslev and Jakobson as well as literary-linguistic keys of Todorov, Propp, Germais – all of whom he refers to in his texts – Barthes is precise in using literary-theoretical systems in possession of geometrically inclined sentences as support for his sketches. Within such a code Barthes develops semiotic space. In this process – which is how he referred to formation of meaning; in an act where relationships between the signifier and the signified are uncovered², he justifies (i.e., names) the use of tools – signs. In such a context an algorithmic method was created which operates in the observed system through the very act of viewing itself. Barthes clarified that the semiological act does not deplete itself through relating the signifier to the signified since “the sign gains value in relation to its environment as well, which is why the mind – when signifying – does not resort to connecting but to dissolution.”³



Image 1. E. Hopper, *NY Movie*

² Barthes 1979: 313

³ Translated from Croatian: Barthes 1979: 313

Hopper. “Text is entrance into a network with a thousand entrances.”⁴

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The assumption that human perceptive abilities are defined systematically and marked by linguistic relationships between the sign, the signifier and the signified imposes itself as the right conclusion so long as we remain within the confines of a specific linguistic system. Every system would be unsustainable should it include units and methods that might negate or ignore it. The language as a system can offer but a fragmented description between its units and present it as finite and correct which does not necessarily encompass the process of meaning making, i.e., the quality of the relationship sign-signifier-signified. In his “Elements of Semiology” Barthes emphasizes on several occasions that the signified is not a “thing” but a psychological notion of a thing.⁵

At the same time, the act of signifying is impossible without a subject. The subject and the spectra of its psychological notions participate in the signifying game. Subject is the one playing it, its thoughts are both the vessels as well as the detectors of signs and have a sensory effect on the relationship of the signifier and the signified. It is impossible to view the painting “NY Movie” (or any other image for that matter) from the viewpoint that has not been presented to us. It is barely achievable to see the perspective that has not been determined by the analysis. Geometrical analysis of the painting in question indicates a combination of two perspective solutions – foreshortening and oblique perspective. Within the space they are provided with, both these perspectives are sovereign. A young woman (*usherette*) near the entrance to a cinema belongs to the coordinate system of the oblique perspective. The lights on the ceiling, the canvas and the chairs open the space up through foreshortening. These two perspectives are divided by the wall – a vertical following the oblique projection’s x-axis and simultaneously splitting the space of the painting in two – the tier of seats and the aisle next to it extended by the staircase. At this point the geometrical observation ends.

⁴ Barthes 2002: 12

⁵ Barthes 1979: 309



Image 2. E. Hopper, *Nighthawks*

The painting “Nighthawks” follows precise geometrical patterns of perspective narrowing, and all the objects in the painting are subordinate to this perspectivation. The one consuming this perspectivation is the subject which outside the image could also be called an object, and the correlation is quite obvious, i.e, geometrically given; the subject takes part in the perspectivation by having a viewpoint. In most of the art of painting the viewpoint is set. In Hopper’s work there is often just one viewpoint which frequently corresponds to the point of the perspective (as is the case in paintings 3, 4, 5). By its definition, a viewpoint is a somewhat paradoxical phenomenon. It is at the same time limited by the perspective and dependent on an object. The so-called optical illusions are possible precisely thanks to this fact. There is a dividing line between the subject’s potential for observation and perspectives that a certain work brings forth. The subject can be capable for different kinds of seeing through which the work assumes all the characteristics that the subject is ready to name. In other words, those signs which the subject is able to recognize shape the relationships between the subject’s signifier and the signified. Because the viewpoint belongs exclusively to the subject, each act of viewing – signifying – is an extension of the perspective line between objects in the painting and the subject which constitutes a physical object outside the painting. By *viewing* in such a manner; signifying, geometrization or textualization of the viewed is *a gate into the network with thousands of gates*. It is a network that is constantly created and abolished and its duration lasts as long as the gaze.

Hopper.

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„There is a world of difference between the most complex randomness and the most elementary combinatory scheme, and it is impossible to combine (to produce) a narrative without reference to an implicit system of units and rules.“⁶

While observing Hopper's paintings several randomly chosen different individuals spoke of: *rhythm, indifference, emptiness, loneliness, distance, horizon, uncertainty, vacuum, bewilderment, autism, intuition, fear, measure, inhibition, lost, barren, reachable, space, nuisance, point, waiting, rejection, anxiety, no, ascension, silence, absence, isolation, vacancy.*

The connection between these associations is found in their spatial segment. Spatiality is an important semantical segment. All of the stated notions are directly connected with spatial experience, except for (perhaps) *indifference, bewilderment, fear, loneliness, anxiety, silence, insecurity*. The paintings 3, 4, 5 allow for viewing by means of foreshortening. The viewpoint corresponds to the lines of foreshortening, and the station point is found in the vastness. When it comes to painting “Carolina Morning” the station point of foreshortening corresponds to the point of the horizon.



Image 3. E. Hopper, *Carolina Morning*

Foreshortening was a *discovery* redirecting painting from previous iconographical flatness and opening up the third dimension. Even just by itself it opens up space and elongates it due to the fact that its lines reach the vanishing point of the gaze. Hopper made good use of the

⁶ Barthes 1977: 80-81

infiniteness offered by such a perspective. Indeed, should the gaze at least for a minute not rest on female figures it will escape into the vastness of the space behind them. Such a one-dimensional solution forces the observer's eye to escape from one very unstable point on the axis of the perspective towards the vanishing point which literally imposes and sets itself apart from all other points in the painting. In this way, an elusive, almost mute disproportion has been achieved between the indisputably static quality of objects in the painting and the dynamism that these same objects enforce on the viewer, the eye, the lens. These objects – standing women, facades of buildings, the door knob or the window, are without a doubt still, but are placed at such points in space that the eye can take them in as dynamic; the perspective commands it to do so. Such perspective-content solution is a trickery of some sort, in which notions – objects tell one story and exhibit the opposite. This artifice and the disproportion are not obvious *at first sight*. The eye follows, the eye performs perspective lines, while the subject, familiar on the linguistic and semiological level with all of the content, makes associations, signifies from the *attainability* and *emptiness*, across *vacuum* and *stuffiness* to *absence* or *non-presence*. Along the way, it registers psychic and emotional sensations such as *indifference*, *bewilderment*, *fear*, *loneliness*, *anxiety*, *silence*, *insecurity*, and *waiting*. That which is **absent** from these paintings is our expectation. The eye flees and cannot settle on an object. The notion travels along with the eye, and to create a notion means to have the tendency to stop, signify, define, act in relation to a model. These paintings offer no notions and therefore create insecurities – spatial or of any other kind, feelings of anxiety and stuffiness because the fear is most often an automatic reaction to control the unknown. As far as bewilderment goes, most people, when faced with an inability to control, will react in bewilderment, wanting, as any system would want, to secure its well-known patterns and its familiar performances. While this goes on, the system-eye- language-point on the axis has nothing else to do but wait while the gaze passes by and catches a more stable sign in the language, i.e, in the space. Characters in Hopper's paintings are often said to be absent, hiding emotional instabilities of their own worlds, melancholic sadness or impossible or even desperate loneliness.⁷ Could be. But that which is certainly absent from them is our gaze which (in Barthes' terms) makes the signified possible for the subject, as an unsure, elusive, unsustainable psychic notion, while the signifier stands in place, collected, for example cutting out paper in the window of a New York office.

⁷ Cook Alone, Together, http://www.artseditor.com/html/features/0407_hopper.shtml
Graffeo



Image 4. E. Hopper, *New York Office*

Hopper's paintings are actually optical illusions. They make us think one thing and then do the exact opposite on the optical level. This relationship is paradoxical and it forces one to think they are viewing (searching with their gaze) something to which they are oblivious. Meanwhile, what is *really* happening is that the eye wanders restlessly across the objects and the established spatiality, and the thought mimics the eye. The abovementioned quotation has been taken from Barthes' decomposition of different relationships in what he calls modern poetry. Similarly, the tricks are the "abode", they are ingrained in the function of viewing, they are implied but are also absent. Since functions of viewing possess their own grammar, their own lines, viewing takes place across these lines but in relation to the object it is un-signified which is why it resembles no more than the mere buzzing of the eye, like *sound and sign without foundation*, moving across parodies of the relationship of the expected and the absent.



Image 5. E. Hopper, *Automat*

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“...reading is a form of work (lexeological act); its method is topological. Task is to move, to shift systems...whose perspective ends neither at the text nor at the 'I' in operational terms; the meanings I find are established by their systematic work...”⁸

For Barthes every reading is a metonymical endeavour of the language.⁹ In the thirty years of its development, cognitive linguistics has been trying to establish its credibility by negating the postulates of structural linguistics that have still been deemed holy. In this sense its biggest breakthrough (or the biggest sacrilege) lies in the fact that it has accepted the metaphor (and in its later developments the metonymy as well) as the basic cognitive process during the creation of meaning. Accordingly, every linguistic understanding and every semantic field are created along the lines of metaphor and metonymy. As an essential linguistic act, the act of reading operates with an infinite array of cognitive processes and just as in the act of looking, its perspective does not finish neither in the text nor in the subject but in the cognitive interplay of all the participants of the reading act. If we can say that the viewer of a painting and its appertaining objects is the subject as well as “an object outside the painting”, among other things, then the meaning of the viewed is formed on the linear relationship of available perspectives which are geometrical (structural), psychological, sociological, aesthetic, etc. This is what is called “I in operational terms”¹⁰, I that is linguistically, i.e., metaphorically conceived. Cognitive linguistics has also opened space for

⁸ Barthes 2002: 10

⁹ Barthes 2002: 10

¹⁰ Barthes 2002: 10. “I in operational terms”

conversation to take place on linguistic realities and their cognitive constructions or proposed schemes. “The viewpoint” that has been integrated in narratology “long ago”, stays mostly inside the text. In the art of painting or in the process of looking, due to its physical givenness, the viewpoint is outside the (painting’s) frame. This commonplace fact alters the rhetoric of the painting compared to the utterance of the text. This viewpoint is always either lonely or isolated since it is just a point, merely an indication of space. Something similar to foreshortening stretching on both sides (like a tunnel) in the painting and in the eye of the viewer – on each side station points end in infinity.



Slika 6. E. Hopper, Approaching a City

With such a correlation, language is never innocent, just like the viewer it is creatively predisposed, its lines stretching out to the station point. The subject is not innocent either because it is using the language as much as it is being used by it. Only the eye has at least some optical freedom to move, as long as it is unaware of perspectives.

STOP ■

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Images source

Image 1, Hopper, E. 1939, NY Movie, <http://www.canvasreplicas.com/Hopper.htm>

Image 2, Hopper, E. 1942, Nighthawks, <http://www.canvasreplicas.com/Hopper.htm>

Image 4, Hopper, E. 1962, New York Office, <http://www.canvasreplicas.com/Hopper.htm>

Image 5, Hopper, E. 1927, Automat, <http://www.canvasreplicas.com/Hopper.htm>

Image 6, Hopper, E. 1946 Approaching a City, <http://www.canvasreplicas.com/Hopper.htm>

Image 3 Hopper E. 1955, California Morning <http://www.tendreams.org/hopper.htm>