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Ph.D. Dissertation Title: Repetition: A Study in Visual Form using Selected Artworks by Edward Hopper

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Project Abstract:

An attempt was made to study the form, function and patterns of repetition as expressed in visual form. A selected series of paintings by the artist Edward Hopper spanning a period of over thirty years served as the data set and was examined using an integrative approach combining both psychoanalytic theory and art criticism. The paper explored firstly, how unconscious fantasies shaped the content of Hopper’s selected works, the function of the repetitive form of visual expression, and the possible psychic determinants. It was suggested that early childhood issues remained ongoing areas of conflict that continued to find repeated symbolic expression and influenced his portrayals of women, particularly those in this study, throughout his career.

Secondly, the specific patterns of repetition in terms of exact versus variable repetition as expressed in visual form were examined. Linguistic research suggests that exact linguistic repetitions are linked to unrepresented psychic contents and that when a person is able to use a narrative to describe the same event that is rich, imagistic and evocative, and not repetitive, that it marks a shift in psychic change in terms of a higher level of organization and representation of an experience (Halfon and Weinstein, 2013). This work examined whether the same may be applied to visual repetition. The paper concluded that it was possible to identify painterly equivalents of verbal repetition and that visual repetitive patterns may be valid markers for psychic change.
Thirdly, this work explored the presence of repetitive affect in the selected paintings and its possible meanings. Hopper’s artwork repeatedly evokes universal feelings such as “isolation” and “loneliness.” In addition, the selected artworks in this study repeatedly elicited dichotomous feelings such as “tense” and “calm” within the same artwork. It was suggested that differing levels of affect represented constitutional characteristics as well as underlying areas of conflict for the artist as projected repeatedly in visual form.

This study indicated that the process of repetition may be studied in visual form in terms of the expression of repetitive unconscious fantasy, visual patterns and affect. The varying forms of repetition could be observed and tracked across selected artworks and may be indicative of internal conflicts and/or psychic change. When working with patients who are artists or those more visually oriented, tracking repeated patterns expressed in their artworks may be clinically helpful in evaluating therapeutic progress.