SESSION 2011/12

Deadpan photography; an expressive genre and an invitation to the discussion. A call for new definition.

Author:

Marcin Klimek
08007001

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of BA (Hons) in Photography and Film
School of Arts and Creative Industries
Edinburgh Napier University
15 Dec 2011

WORD COUNT: 11 446

Supervisor: Dr Louise Milne
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First and foremost, I am privileged to be able to acknowledge my supervisor Dr Louise Milne, whose guidance, intellectual and professional support was exemplary. I would like to thank my partner, reader, critic and always constructive responder; Justyna Bakiewicz. I also owe an enormous debt to Natasja Bolton and Craig Drummond who in variety of ways left their mark on this paper.
ABSTRACT

The contemporary photography style is often associated with the word *deadpan*. In this study I evaluate the complex definition of the deadpan photography and reveal its multidimensionality. I analyse the history of the term deadpan and its similarity to various art movements such as New Objectivity, Precisionism or Surrealism. In addition, I investigate the similarities between the work of artists representing these styles and contemporary deadpan photographers. In what follows, I explore the semiological aspects of deadpan photography and I continue my semiological study by analysis of the most common subject matter for deadpan photographers, architecture, landscape creation and Sublime. Furthermore, through my academic literature, I evaluate the variety of different emotions and meanings conveyed by this aesthetic. The findings reveal the concern of the interpretation issue regarding to the deadpan aesthetic. By analysing the various photographs from the last century along with the contemporary fine art and documentary deadpan photography I discovered that deadpan photography, although often perceived as distanced and emotionless, is an expressive form of criticism, ideological debate or even a subjective manifest of personal emotions unrelated to global issues. My findings also demonstrated the importance of the semiology in the interpretation process. The study also revealed that deadpan contemporary photographers applying such techniques as frontality and referencing a Sublime aesthetic aspire to establish communication rather than avoid it.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS ........................................................................................................ ii

ABSTRACT ............................................................................................................................. iii

TABLE OF CONTENTS ........................................................................................................ iv

LIST OF FIGURES ................................................................................................................ vi

CHAPTER ONE .................................................................................................................... 1

INTRODUCTION .................................................................................................................. 1

CHAPTER TWO .................................................................................................................... 6

2.1 INTRODUCTION .......................................................................................................... 6

2.2 DEADPAN PHOTOGRAPHY DEFINITION .................................................................. 7

2.3 THE ENCYCLOPEDIC APPROACH AND FRONTALITY ............................................. 8

2.4 DEAD PAN AND IRONY .............................................................................................. 14

2.5 NEW OBJECTIVITY .................................................................................................... 16

2.6 PRECISIONISM .......................................................................................................... 20

2.7 SURREALISM, DADA AND NIHILSM ....................................................................... 24

2.8 CONCLUSIONS .......................................................................................................... 30

CHAPTER THREE .............................................................................................................. 32

3.1 INTRODUCTION .......................................................................................................... 32

3.2 SEMIOLOGY DEFINITION .......................................................................................... 34

3.3 PEIRCE, SAUSSURE AND BARTHES ........................................................................ 36

3.4 SEMIOLOGY, COLOUR AND DEADPAN ................................................................... 40

3.5 STEPHEN SHORE, THREE LEVELS OF IMAGE PERCEPTION ............................. 41

3.6 DEADPAN AND ARCHITECTURE .............................................................................. 44

3.7 CIVILISATION DISEASES AND DEADPAN ............................................................ 45

3.8 DEADPAN: ROMANTIC AND SUBLIME ................................................................. 47
LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1. Afghanistan Chronotopia: Landscapes of the Destruction of Afghanistan by Simon Norfolk (2003) .......................................................... 2

Figure 2. Black Country by Richard Billingham (2003) .......................................................... 3

Figure 3. Liz Shaking Fist at Ray by Richard Billingham (1995) ............................................. 4

Figure 4. El Paso Street, El Paso, Texas by Stephen Shore July 5, (1975) .............................. 8

Figure 5. Gas Tanks by Bernd And Hilla Becher, (1983-92) .................................................. 9

Figure 6. Breaker Boys Working In Ewen Breaker of Pennsylvania Coal Co. by Hine, Lewis Wickes, (1911) ................................................................. 10

Figure 7. House Portrait #1 by Graham Paul, (1979) ............................................................. 11

Figure 8. Exam 2, Exploratory Surgery, Cancer Wafer by Sarah Sudhoff, (2005-2006) .. 12

Figure 9. Buster Keaton, At the Venice Film Festival, Author Unknown, (1965) .......... 13

Figure 10. The Perisher submarine-commander exercise area, between Ayrshire and Arran by Simon Norfolk, (2006) ......................................................................... 15

Figure 11. Untitled, I Am An Eye. A Mechanical Eye by Albert Renger-Patzsch, (c. 1930's.) ........................................................................................................... 16

Figure 12. Shock Troops Advance Under Gas (SturmtruppeGehtUnter Gas Vor) From The War (Der Krieg) by Otto Dix, (1924) ................................................................. 18

Figure 13. Oxford Tire Pile #8, Westley, California by Edward Burtynsky, (1999) .......... 19

Figure 14. Respiration by Fritz Kahn, (1926) ........................................................................ 20

Figure 15. Tanks #1, Lithograph, British Museum by Louis Lozowick, (1929) ................. 21

Figure 16. Bandit's Roost, Considered The Most Crime-Ridden, Dangerous Part Of New York City by Jacob Riis, (1888) ................................................................. 23

Figure 17. Summer Evening by Edward Hopper, (1947) .......................................................... 23

Figure 18. Self-Portrait with Nude Model, Oil on Canvas by Otto Dix, (1923) ................. 24

Figure 19. Prager Strasse by Otto Dix, (1920) ...................................................................... 25

Figure 20. Elephant Celebes by Mark Ernst, (1921) ............................................................... 27
Figure 21. Monument a D.A.F. De Sade by Man Ray, (1933) ........................................... 28
Figure 22. Untitled (For Nadja), by Jacques-Andre Boiffard, (1928) ................................. 28
Figure 23. Golconda by Rene Magritte, (1953) .................................................................. 29
Figure 24. From Grabeland by Simone Nieweg, (1999) ....................................................... 34
Figure 25. Pyongyang V by Andreas Gursky, (2007) ............................................................. 37
Figure 26. From Bonn Project by Oliver Heissner, (2002-2005) ......................................... 41
Figure 27. From Bunker Project by Oliver Heissner, (1993-1994) ...................................... 42
Figure 28. NeueSymbolikIn Berlin by Kai-Olaf Hesse, (1998-1999) ................................. 43
Figure 29. Bryant Park by Axel Hutte, Germany, (2007) ....................................................... 44
Figure 30. Communication by Laurie Lipton, (2009) ............................................................ 46
Figure 31. From Bonn Project by Oliver Heissner, (2002-2005) ......................................... 47
Figure 32. Switzerland, Peter Zumthor, Architect; by Helene Binet ................................. 49
Figure 33. Cleveland by Margaret Bourke-White, (1928) .................................................... 51
Figure 34. Fort Peck, Montana by Margaret Bourke-White, (1936) ...................................... 52
CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Contemporary critics such as Diarmuid Costello, Margaret Iversen, Philip Gefter and Michael Fried, associate a specific contemporary photography style with the word *deadpan*. According to the Merriam Webster dictionary, the term *deadpan*, formed in North America and first used circa 1928, is an impassive matter of fact manner, associated with comedy and with synonyms such as catatonic, blank, empty or numb. It made me wonder why contemporary photography is often described with this word. While attending a lecture at the National Gallery in Edinburgh with Simon Norfolk, I focused my attention on the aesthetic and context of his work and its relation to political and warfare issues. I am most interested in what can be revealed behind the aesthetic defined as deadpan and the intentions of photographers like Norfolk and other contemporary deadpan photographers, who use this particular aesthetic to talk about various issues. I decided to explore the relation between this specific style, characterised by precise composition and use of colour (*Figure 1*), and the messages conveyed through it. I intend to explore what deadpan photography means and how communication is established through this sophisticated aesthetic. *Pan*, defined as face along with *dead* refers to a lack of expression, seriousness and detachment. The term originally describes a specific Anglo-American sense of humour (Dictionary Reference, 2011). The New York Times was the first journal which applied the word dead pan to describe “playing a role with an emotionless face”. In April 1929, the journal Variety makes the meaning clearer in this usage: “They clicked better at the Palace where the intimacy heightened the dead-pan comic’s expression.” In 1943, another form of the term

**Figure 1. Afghanistan Chronotopia: Landscapes of the Destruction of Afghanistan by Simon Norfolk (2003)**

![Afghanistan Chronotopia](image)

But I found it difficult to associate the general label of the style with emotionlessness, after I reviewed the work of contemporary photographers such as Norfolk, Billingham, Sudhoff or Burtynsky. Many of the images, in my view, communicated a whole variety of emotions, which I evaluate in the following sections of this paper.

I started exploring this phenomenon further after thinking about the tone of Simon Norfolk’s (*Figure 1*) and Richard Billingham’s work (*Figure 2 and Figure 3*). Billingham’s work and its analysis revealed additional layers of this subject. Examining both images; *Figure 2*, Billingham’s hometown and *Figure 3*, a photograph of his parents, it became clear that they represent two different photographic styles though the term deadpan photography categorises them as the same genre. According to the Independent (2001)
Billingham is “a brilliantly deadpan performer, or genuinely the character he presents himself as being ideistically committed to the art of picture-making, socially guileless, and wary in the extreme of being misrepresented and misunderstood” (Jackson 2001). This statement expanded for me the existing palette of meanings associated with deadpan such as detachment and lack of emotions, and added new ones, for instance, nostalgia, idealism, anxiety and melancholy. I started to realise that the word deadpan often used to define contemporary photography is very complex in nature. This complexity in turn tells us much about contemporary cultural modes, which, along with this problematic term, I will investigate in this paper. The deadpan aesthetic in contemporary documentary photography has not been widely examined or explored. Therefore the first task of this paper is to analyse the term; deadpan photography, its history and definitions.

Figure 2. Black Country by Richard Billingham (2003)
I focus on post-war and contemporary photographers such as Bernd and Hilla Becher, Alexander Gursky, Oliver Heissner, Edward Burtynsky, Sarah Sudhoff, Helen Binet and Simon Norfolk. The style makes historical references to pre-war photography and artistic movements such as Precisionism, Machine Age and New Objectivity. These movements and the elements they borrowed from nineteenth century aesthetics, such as the frontality of the image, still have a significant presence in contemporary photography and in most photography writing. The study of semiotics has shown that photography should not only be perceived in its pure form or as the “window of the world” but also as a structuring space in which the viewer applies the series of signs that he is familiar with in order to understand the image (Burgin 1982). In this paper I contend that contemporary deadpan photography is surrealistic. I evaluate surrealistic terms such as Convulsive Beauty, Doubling and Spacing and their presence within contemporary deadpan.

In the second chapter, I explore the semiology of contemporary deadpan photography. I focus on the arbitrary relationship between signified (the content or meaning) and signifier (the form of the message) in relation to deadpan photography. Subsequently, I
refer to Structuralism, in the sense of the study of architecture and interiors, which are an important subject matter for deadpan photographers. Then, I focus on landscape and architecture creation and the relationship between urban and environmental anxiety disorders such as neurasthenia. Finally, I refer to the relationship between deadpan and semiology, and I analyse this subject thoroughly in Chapter 2. Deadpan photography, although often perceived as distanced and emotionless, is a form of criticism and ideological debate.

1 Neurasthenia is Greek for ‘nerve weakness’. The disease appeared in the late 1800s and it was identified and named when nervous illnesses and nervous breakdown became common in North America and Europe. The neurasthenia diagnosis fell out of use in the early 1900s. Its symptoms became classified under the broader category of neurosis. Neurasthenia had an unexpected resurgence in China in the late 1900s under the name shenjing shuairuo (Gijswijt-Hofstra 2001).
CHAPTER TWO

2.1 INTRODUCTION

In the first section of this chapter I analyse the contemporary writings about deadpan photography definitions. In doing so, I compare Bernd and Hilla Becher’s photographs to Paul Graham’s work, in particular the “House Portraits” project and also to Sarah Sudhoff’s self-portraiture work. I also refer to Becher’s work in terms of nineteen century photography and its archival and encyclopedic approach often emphasised by the frontality of the image which signifies an introduction to discussion rather than detachment. What is more, I focus on the elements of the deadpan definition such as irony. Then I talk about the relation between deadpan photography and the expressive art movements from the twentieth century such as New Objectivity and Precisionism. In order to shed light on this phenomenon, I analyse the work of artists such as Buster Keaton, Otto Dix, Fritz Kahn, Jakob Riis, Simon Norfolk and Edward Burtynsky. I also evaluate the notions of nostalgia, melancholy and idealism or visions about human perfection implemented in New Objectivity and Precisionism and its influence on contemporary deadpan photography. I focus on the relationship between those emotional expressions and the political and economical situations of the countries in which the work was created.

We can see the association between the contemporary deadpan photography and the photography of 1920s and 1930s and its ideological message by comparing the works from these two periods. In the last section I consider significant links and similarities between contemporary deadpan photography and Surrealism. We can then evaluate that
relation in terms of the semiological connections between both styles. Then I look in more depth at some semiological concepts to provide a deeper analysis in chapter 2.

2.2 DEADPAN PHOTOGRAPHY DEFINITION

“Deadpan photography often feels as if it’s presenting evidence or specimens, rigorously and dispassionately recorded, to study types, structures, forms” (Crook 2007,3). Cotton (2004) defines the deadpan aesthetic as detached, cool opposition to the sentimental and subjective. She argues that the main aim of this aesthetic, in its monumentality and visual clarity, is to produce a kind of emotional and individual perspective. According to Smee (2003, 1) “we no longer quite trust the truth-telling capacity of photography. The deadpan manner, by removing any hint of rhetoric or persuasion, does its utmost to avoid making any such claims for itself. Primarily, deadpan represented an Anglo-American type of humor of the nineteenth century and later became associated with the rhetorical mode for lecturing and speeches characterised by the monotone pitch of voice and emotionless face (Costello 2010). On the contrary, deadpan style was associated with theatrical variety of shows for the working class. It represented the humiliation, anxieties and psychological realism of those groups and rejection of social and cultural divisions (Knoper 1995). Thus, the “straight” aesthetics and social themes of the 1920s and 1930s at the roots of deadpan photography are also a response to the subjective and over sentimental photographic aesthetic of the early post-war period (Stimson 2004). The deadpan aesthetic often seems related to no apparent point of view (Gefter 2009). It presents itself as anthropological and scientific rather than as a critical and artistic approach (Jenkins cited in Fox 2001). One significant aspect of deadpan photography today is the use of color as a descriptive element, initiated by Stephen Shore in 1973. Shore associated colour with the expanded consciousness. As we see in Figure 4 the
Warholian repetition as visual monotone in his work has its roots in nineteenth century photography (Gefter 2009). It made me wonder how so many aesthetic decisions can be made, such as the choice of specific colours, in order to only express emotionlessness and detachment. At the same time, there is an apparent paradox here, since in my view, the term “expanded consciousness” used in much to refer to deadpan, in fact communicates emotional or ideological involvement rather than passiveness.

Figure 4. El Paso Street, El Paso, Texas by Stephen Shore July 5, (1975)

2.3 THE ENCYCLOPEDIC APPROACH AND FRONTALITY

Bernd and Hilla Becher’s work is a good example of the early deadpan approach (Figure 5). Becher’s documentation of industrial buildings and constructions draws on nineteenth century norms when photography lacked affectation and was also considered as an archivisation tool for such industries as botany, zoology, psychology and criminology (Stimson 2004).
This process started in 1852 when a French cloth merchant and photography student Louis Désiré Blanquart-Evrard published a series of encyclopedic photography albums describing remote places. From that point, photography was more and more used as tool for making archives and photographers were expected to encyclopedically register the surrounding environment, including the visual registration of human races, anatomical mutations, plant species and many other subjects (Rouillé 2005). Photographic archivisation therefore had an important role in colonialism. General Montauban reporting on his conquest of Beijing, stated that he regretted that he did not have a photographer with him who could have documented all the treasures that belonged to the Chinese Emperor before they were consumed by fire. He added that, a team of photographers would always accompany their expeditions (Alophe 1861). By the end of the First World War a profession of industrial photography had developed. Every industrial photographer was expected to produce a technically perfect and sharp image. This kind of photography was very popular in Germany in the 1920s and in the Soviet
Union; though it was pioneered in the USA. American industrial photography became not only a profession but also an expressive language of industrial cultural identity. Thus it is important to notice that the American industrial documentary photographers such as Lewis Hine (*Figure 6*) did not merely mirror industrialisation. The deadpan nature of Hine’s work was also associated with an image of modernity and the terror of capitalism (Roberts 1998). This is why the deadpan aesthetic shortly after its birth, under the name of an archiving tool, became a language for the manifestation of social struggle.

*Figure 6. Breaker Boys Working In Ewen Breaker of Pennsylvania Coal Co. by Hine, Lewis Wickes, (1911)*

The aesthetic of professional industrial photography also corresponds with the Becher’s approach. Their work was not a simple reproduction of the objects as they established a subjective cultural discourse. The frontality of the Becher’s photographs, a common compositional aspect of contemporary deadpan photography, is another crucial aspect of the deadpan aesthetic. For Hine, the frontality of the subject was applied to achieve a realist. Hine’s frontality, especially in his portraits, signified honesty and the metaphor of
beginning the conversation. It also exposed brutality, seen in Hine’s work to characterize the poor workers as passive objects of the capitalist labour process. Modernist painters considered frontality as a tension, creating factor, as a result of the dialogue between theatricality, when the participant is aware of his position in the image, and absorption, where the subject appears to deny the spectator (Roberts 1998). Very often the deadpan image carries that feeling of a brutally clinical representation of reality. The Becher’s systematic approach, although very straightforward, repetitive, emotional and melancholic (Stimson 2004), is simultaneously interpreted in many different ways. For instance, in 1979, Paul Graham applied a very similar approach in his ‘House Portraits’ project (Figure 7).

Figure 7. House Portrait #1 by Graham Paul, (1979)

Chandler, (cited in Graham and Mack 2009), defined Graham’s photographs’ aesthetic as hard, bright, brittle, frontal and typological and stated that his images are “devoid of
nostalgia”. Graham argued that the “House Portraits”, exhibited in Birmingham in 1980, were misunderstood by the British audience (Graham and Mack 2009).

The Dusseldorf Kunst Academy students used the word melancholy to describe their uncompromising and also subjective deadpan style (Gronert 2009). We can mention Sarah Sudhoff’s self-portraiture work here, a combination of an archival aesthetic and an overwhelming emotional load (Figure 8). Sudhoff’s work titled “Repository” is about her own cervical cancer surgery. She photographed herself in various medical spaces such as morgues, medical museums and hospitals. Sudhoff also applies the frontality mentioned above, typical of the deadpan aesthetic. Here it emphasizes the clinical, questioning and informative notion of her work. “Repository” is a project where artist touches on the fragility of human life, and she emphasises that by her archival approach. It made me understand that the most common definition of deadpan emotionless is a descriptor of the factual aspect of Suddoff’s photographs, but full understanding is only achieved after revealing the emotions and feelings behind it. This can be only gained by close familiarization with the text about the work, captions beneath every photograph and

Figure 8. Exam 2, Exploratory Surgery, Cancer Wafer by Sarah Sudhoff, (2005-2006)
the analysis of the semiological signs and colours, on which I focus on in Chapter 2. The other deadpan representations of modern life, such as those by the silent film actor Buster Keaton\(^2\) (Figure 9), emphasise how photographers at that time presented human as an object or as a combination of facts that show the world as confined and dysfunctional (Costello and Iversen 2010). For nineteenth century artists, one of the biggest dysfunctions and threats for individuality was the Communist Manifesto\(^3\) which aimed to treat all works of art and artists as a product of wholeness (Hobsbawm 1998). It made me wonder if artists such as Otto Dix who represented New Objectivity rejected that path and also decided to take a critical approach and point out the previously mentioned dysfunctions.

**Figure 9. Buster Keaton, At the Venice Film Festival, Author Unknown, (1965)**

\(^2\) Buster Keaton most famous from his deadpan sense of humor, in films such as The Navigator (1924), The General (1928), Steamboat Bill, Jr (1928), The Cameraman (1928) convey represents the same deadpan attitude (Costello and Iversen 2010)

\(^3\) Marx, Karl, Max Eastman, Vladimir Ilʹich Lenin, Karl Marx, Karl Marx, and Julian Borchardt. 1932. *Capital, the Communist manifesto, and other writings*. New York: Modern Library.
2.4 DEAD PAN AND IRONY

I also found interesting that although deadpan is associated with lack of emotions and, as the above works show, with the notion of idealism, primarily deadpan represented a type of comedy. Buster Keaton’s expressionless acting was an expression in its own right, and the closest definition of it is probably irony. As mentioned, Keaton’s style of comedy grew out of the struggle of working class people against industrialisation. Although this struggle was expressed differently by the New Objectivists or Precisionists, Keaton’s original comedy style, based on an ironic attitude toward reality could be also perceived as a form of ideological message. According to the Webster dictionary the word irony means “a pretense of ignorance and of willingness to learn from another assumed in order to make the other’s false conceptions conspicuous by adroit questioning.”

Further definitions relate irony to sardonic humorous criticism and also to skepticism. Irony, an element of deadpan, “the ablest weapon of oratory”, was firstly applied in 1533 and was also associated with condemnation or contempt: “When he callethone self naughty lad, both a shreud boy & a good sonne, the tone in ye proper simple speech, the tother by the figure of ironye or antiphrasis.”(The Oxford English Dictionary, 2nd Edition 1989, 281). My question here is, did Buster Keaton, through the deadpan humoristic style, attempt to manifest the situation of 1920’s working class people? I think he did, for example in films like “The Haunted House” (1921) in which he plays a banker and expresses an ironical attitude to money, banking institutions and banking system. I believe that this style is being applied again in today’s contemporary photography. The physical distance from the photographed objects, very common in contemporary deadpan photography, is increasingly applied in order to show as it were the full "image"
of the situation and underline its reference with the irony. The only difference is that we have replaced the problems of industrialisation with new ones such as political and military conflicts, or landscape alterations and its consequences. The Simon Norfolk photograph in Figure 10 is an excellent example of that irony in a contemporary world. Fundamental to that irony is the fact that Norfolk introduces us to the spacious and quiet landscape of Northern Scotland which at the same time is the biggest military base in the world, specifically for submarines. Having reviewed more of Norfolk’s photographs it made me wonder if any of the artists in the past, who operated under a similar aesthetic as Norfolk or Burtynsky also dealt with the subject of militarisation.

Figure 10. The Perisher submarine-commander exercise area, between Ayrshire and Arran by Simon Norfolk, (2006)
2.5 NEW OBJECTIVITY

According to Crockett (1999) the term *Neue Sachlichkeit* refers to an art movement representing the *zeitgeist* of the Weimar period. Defined as “New Matter-of-factness”, “New Resignation”, “New Objectivity” and “New Dispassion”, it emerged in the 1920s as a step forward after German Expressionism⁴. Correspondingly to contemporary deadpan photography, which opposes a post war sentimentalism, New Objectivity stood for objectivism, rejected the romanticism and idealism of its predecessors and was also fascinated with the mechanical age (Lowry 2011) (*Figure 11*). According to Cotton (2009) the Germanic style of contemporary deadpan photography has its roots in New Objectivity.

*Figure 11. Untitled, I Am An Eye. A Mechanical Eye by Albert Renger-Patzsch, (c. 1930's.)*

⁴German Expressionism emerged during the mid-1900s in Dresden and Munich. In contrast to Impressionist who aimed to mirror the nature, German expressionist painters expressed their feelings through distorting the reality with exaggerated colours, shapes and space. Nevertheless, the First World War heavily affected the Expressionists art turning it into the bitter protest (German Expressionism 2011).
There are significant similarities between deadpan photography criticising the post war subjectivist and sentimental approach and New Objectivism criticising Expressionism.

Dischinger in his artistic notes described New Objectivism as:

cold, interested, seeking the visual “shock” in drawing, the aggressiveness of precise reproduction, wherever possible going deeper into the most insignificant details, without losing the larger form. No claim to great gestures, not momentary, not excited, not loud, quietly reserved, seeking illusions in work rather than in the content of what is to be reproduced. Contemplative…non political, no criticism, no judgment of others, (no social criticism) (Michalski 1994, 111).

On the contrary, New Objectivity in its origin was critical of Expressionism. The artists who represented this movement such as Otto Dix, according to Michalski (1994), were deeply involved in political criticism and Dix himself stated that an artist should be politically involved in his work. Dix, like Norfolk, took critical attitude towards warfare, global militarisation and the interconnectedness of war (Figure 12). Dix communicated his ideas so well that in the early 1930s his work became a target for Nazis (Remer 2009). Contrast and the straightforward language of Dix’s approach corresponded with New Objectivity rules which underlined the clarity and lightness which referred to the clarity of mind, precision and objectivism (Rouille 2005).
Although there is a notion of idealism in both New Objectivity and Precisionism, some art teachers, such as Schlemmer, perceived it as a battle with chaos; "If today's arts love the machine, technology and organization, if they aspire to precision and reject anything vague and dreamy, this implies an instinctive repudiation of chaos and a longing to find the form appropriate to our times." (Schlemmer cited in Willet 1976, 117)

One might ask, what was considered as a tool or weapon for this battle? As in those days, along with the general technological progress, industrialisation, militarisation and in particular weapon production now seem to be most precisely organized industries. This raises a set of questions related to the previously mentioned chaos. Gumbrecht (1997) argues that the existential insecurity, financial problems and the unstable ground of German politics of the 1920s affected art and many German thinkers. For instance, Walter Benjamin expressed, in 1931, in his famous essay, “The Destructive Character”:

The destructive character sees no image hovering before him. He has few needs, and the least of them is to know what will replace what has been destroyed. First of all, for a moment at least, empty space – the place
where thing stood or the victim lived. Someone is sure to be found who needs this space without occupying it (Benjamin 1931, 1).

There is a distinct parallel between the German instability of the 1920’s, communicated through the specific aesthetic of New Objectivity, as well as the contemporary global issues conveyed through the deadpan photography of Simon Norfolk or, a contemporary landscape photographers such as Edward Burtynsky who deals with alteration in the landscape through pollution (Figure 13). Burtynsky’s work, although full of dynamic compositions and spectacular landscapes, criticises the aggressive consumption of natural resources.⁵ From the aesthetic point of view, the precision and visual clarity of Burtynsky’s photographs also corresponds with the aesthetic of New Objectivity and Precisionism. The photograph in Figure 13 presents two enormous piles of used tyres. The path between the piles takes us to the only bright part of the image, symbolising the nature, which is an allegory to the pollution created by human dominating the natural world.

Figure 13. Oxford Tire Pile #8, Westley, California by Edward Burtynsky, (1999)

2.6 PRECISIONISM

People of the first machine age invented technology fueled art movement: Precisionism, which glorified technology in dynamic compositions (Harris 1994). Weimar-era designers such as Fritz Kahn stressed the passion of technological post WWI visions (Figure 14). The lack of sentimentalism and monumentalism of Kahn’s work is expressed by the nostalgic notion of human perfection. People’s faces are emotionless so we perceive them more as a shape or still life. In Figure 14 body parts are presented as machine parts which correspond with other Precisionists’ work. Although “Respiration” represents the inside of the human, it somehow parallels contemporary deadpan portraiture for example Sarah Sudhoff’s work (Figure 8).

Figure 14. Respiration by Fritz Kahn, (1926)

Precisionism or Cubist Realism, like New Objectivity also underlines representations of geometrical architecture (Figure 15). The lack of human figures which is so common to
the deadpan photography aesthetic is defined as emotionless and distanced. It makes me wonder if Max Weber, in 1922, was right when he expressed his opinion about the condition of human within the industrial capitalist’s society. Is deadpan photography the aesthetic that corresponds with his words?:

No one knows yet who will inhabit this shell [of industrial capitalism] in the future: whether at the end of its prodigious development there will be . . . a vigorous renaissance of all thoughts and ideals or whether finally, if none of this occurs, mechanism will produce only petrification hidden under a kind of anxious importance. Specialists without spirit, libertines without heart, this nothingness imagines itself to be elevated to a level of humanity never before attained. (Weber 1958, 182)

Figure 15. Tanks #1, Lithograph, British Museum by Louis Lozowick, (1929)
There are further links between Precisionism, which can be compared to Weber’s industrial nothingness, and the Ashcan School in terms of visual clarity. Ashcan School, also called Ash Can School was the American, realist artistic movement of 1920s mostly referred to the representations and social issues on the streets of New York (Walter 2007). Ashcan artists instead of rejecting Chaos, were concerned with the social issues causing it in New York, and tried to understand them from the inside. In 1890 Jacob Riis, a member of the Ashcan School, published *How the Other Half Lives*, a detailed and in-depth essay on American slums in the 1880s. In his book Riis precisely described the unacceptable living conditions of the working class and shed light on how the underprivileged tenements were an environment triggering social diseases, such as crime and alcoholism (Pascal 2005). The precisionist aesthetic of Riis’ work (*Figure 16*), rather than the detachment from political issues, refers to his ideological involvement, which is similar to Norfolk’s or other deadpan photographers’ work. For Simon Norfolk, who titled one of his books: *For Most of It I have no Words*, the deadpan style was relevant aesthetic to talk about wars, genocides and worldwide economy driven by and triggering military conflicts. McManus (2009) equally sees that contemporary deadpan landscape photography as expressing radical social and cultural values and an ideological point of view. A similar aesthetic combination can be found in the work of other Precisionists. Edward Hopper’s work depicts lost looking lonely people and deserted cities during the Great Depression (*Figure 17*), (Art History Archive 2011). We might conclude Precisionism as an art movement along with New Objectivity, applied this, apparently, cold and detached aesthetic, to new ends, as an ideological and expressive language.
Figure 16. Bandit's Roost, Considered The Most Crime-Ridden, Dangerous Part Of New York City by Jacob Riis, (1888)

Figure 17. Summer Evening by Edward Hopper, (1947)
2.7 SURREALISM, DADA AND NIHILSM

Otto Dix made realistic war paintings, full of clear, ideological messages. He also depicted nudes and witches; personifications of melancholy which signified his inclinations toward the allegory (Figure 18). Thus, if we agree that deadpan has its roots in New Objectivity we have to reject the term “emotionless”. Some of Dix’s work from the 1920s was also very surrealistic which raises the question why the artist used these different styles (Figure 19)? The painting in Figure 19, aesthetically surrealistic or Dadaist, communicates idealistic, anti-Nazi messages.

Figure 18. Self-Portrait with Nude Model, Oil on Canvas by Otto Dix, (1923)
We see the legless man in uniform, the disabled beggar, the paper with the heading that says *Juden raus* and the variety of symbols, such as high heeled shoes and shop displays with sophisticated clothing representing celebrities or high class society. It is clear that Dix’s work criticised ignorance of society, emphasised by the chaotic composition, at a time when millions of people, mostly Jews, had been racially persecuted. According to Jay (1984), surrealists such as Breton, Eluard, Aragon, Peret and Soupault were heavily affected by WWI and as a result they became nihilistic in their approach. Surrealists expressed disappointment with the destructive civilization. This attitude shaped their art and also expanded to manifestos (Nadeau 1965). The surrealists and many deadpan contemporary photographers have some similar ideological motivations although the aesthetic differs. According to Roberts (1998), today, photography plays a defining role in representing radical transformation of reality.
Surrealism, a combination of Dada, anarchism and anti-positivism, intended to brutally destroy the harmony of everydayness in order to bring back the visionary freedom of the child’s mind. Both surrealists and deadpan photographers intend to improve, or at least raise a discussion about, world conditions. As Breton argued, “there is no true work of the mind that is not shaped by the desire for the real amelioration of the conditions of the existence of the whole world” (Breton cited in Roberts 1998, 99). Surrealists often produced optically distorted work where touch is privileged over vision (Jay 1984). They often challenged the rules of composition. Deadpan photography, however is frequently symmetrical and aesthetically very organised. Many contemporary photographers who practice the deadpan style use a large format camera; mainly used as an architectural camera as it never distorts the perspectives of buildings. But deadpan photography, focusing on the contemporary political and ideological issues, expresses them in a rather muted way. It makes me wonder if that muted, clinical and often robotic expression of, for example Heissner’s or Hutte’s (Figure 26, 27, and 29) work, could also be defined as nihilistic.

Mark Ernst’s painting, Elephant Celebes (Figure 20), resembles Becher’s gas tanks but is far more ambiguous. This ambiguity is often present in deadpan contemporary photography works, but the latter generally eschews Surrealist colour, dynamism, and, in this particular painting, human gestures. We see a sightless, boiler-like monster situated in a large open space, there are also indications of the background. In the front plane we see a headless mannequin beckoning the monster. This might be understood as an allegory of the headless or mindless human in control of industrialisation. The Elephant Celebes, although inspired by an archival illustration of a huge communal corn-bin published in an English anthropological journal can be read in many different ways as
can many deadpan contemporary photographs; undoubtedly a different set of emotions is communicated by Ernts’ Elephant and Becher’s Gas Tanks.

Figure 20. Elephant Celebes by Mark Ernst, (1921)

So why should we discuss Surrealism and deadpan photography together? What is the rationale for so doing? Breton, the founder of Surrealism stated that “for a total revision of real values, the plastic work of art will either refer to a purely internal model or will cease to exist” (Breton 1925, 28). Breton, argued that it was not possible to treat photography as a part of surrealism till Man Ray started the La Revolution surrealiste and created images of greater power than most of the surrealist paintings (Figure 21) (Krauss 1986). Here is a paradox, the photograph in Figure 22, which today could be defined as deadpan was created by Boiffard, Man Ray’s assistant in 1928. This exceptional image, although aesthetically very different from Ray’s photograph in Figure 20, was used as an illustration in Breton’s semi-autobiographical and non-linear novel ‘Nadja’ (Goodden 2007). On the contrary to Ray’s photographs and surrealist paintings, the image created by Boiffard is full of symmetrical straight lines, sharp angles and it
represents an empty street. This aesthetic difference does not mean that Boiffard's photograph cannot be surrealist. According to Breton, the Automatism, so clearly visible in New Objectivity and Precisionism, is an unconscious region of the mind.

Figure 21. Monument a D.A.F. De Sade by Man Ray, (1933)

Figure 22. Untitled (For Nadja), by Jacques-Andre Boiffard, (1928)
The straight and sharp photographs following the New Objectivity aesthetic, created under the Surrealist label were problematic for the critics. What made them different was the peculiarity of the subject matter (Krauss 1986). Breton points out the phenomenon of “doubling” within surrealist photography as a reference to the semiology of language. Surrealists often copied the same motif in one image or painting which, as Breton argues, was a deliberate action to create the signifier of the signification, called doubling (Figure 23). Magritte’s painting is an example of doubling created by repetition of all object within the frame. Another aspect that challenges the relation between photography and reality is “spacing”. An example of spacing is the boundary of the image, its frame, to cut out the element from reality. This starts to be a signifier of signification. He emphasizes the break in continuity of the real and the frame caused by the camera’s ability to find and isolate the symbols from the world’s constant production of signs (symbols) (Krauss 1986).

Figure 23. Golconda by Rene Magritte, (1953)
Similarly, contemporary deadpan photographers such as Heissner or Norfolk, very often produce organised and symmetrical photographs with many duplicated objects. The surrealists’ liked the idea of using photography for this purpose precisely because that paintings and drawings were only icons whereas photographs indexical signs. The further result is a paradox that photography produces the present reality as a sign of what is absent. Breton called that phenomenon Convulsive Beauty and perceived that concept of reducing an experience of reality into representation as a core of Surrealism. Hence, photography cannot be perceived as an interpretation of reality but as a record of rather semiotically coded reality (Krauss 1986). Deadpan contemporary photography, with its straight and often sharp and clear aesthetic puts a strong emphasis on every detail of that code.

### 2.8 CONCLUSIONS

In this chapter I examined the wide range of existing definitions describing deadpan photography. Then I explored the similarities and differences between the aesthetics of the nineteenth century archival photography and contemporary deadpan such as the Bechers. Furthermore, in order to gain a better understanding of deadpan I analysed the first traces of this phenomenon in Buster Keaton performances which resulted in important findings that Keaton’s acting communicated the class struggle and humiliation of working class people. What is more, the deadpan evolved out of the realism and the feeling of disconnection as a result of industrialization. The nineteen century archivisation in photography repeated and underlined by Bechers symbolized an industrial attitude to the world and an instrumental use of photography. These findings motivated me to
analyse some contemporary deadpan photographs such as the work of Norfolk, Sudhoff or Burtynsky and their interpretations in Chapter 2. I discovered the strong emotions in Sudhoff’s work, and the notions of idealism, criticism and irony in Norfolk’s and Burtynsky’s photographs. Additionally, I evaluated the work of Dusseldorfers, often associated with the term deadpan, defined by such words as nostalgia or melancholy. These findings and previously mentioned contradictory interpretations of some contemporary deadpan photographs motivated me to focus on the semiology in the next chapter. I also compared deadpan photography to such art movements as New Objectivity, Precisionism or Ashcan School which revealed the strong ideological or emotional involvement of such authors as Dix, Hine, Hopper or Kahn and also confirmed my previous findings. I noticed that for artists such as Dix or Hopper, the architecture was a common subject matter on which I also focused in chapter 2. In what followed, I analysed the backgrounds of the emotional expressions of the 1920s’ artists and I discovered their roots in political and social issues such as militarisation, wars, social divisions and dictatorships. I discovered the relationship between deadpan and Surrealism. It became apparent, that contemporary deadpan often applies the surrealist’s techniques which refer to semiology such as doubling and spacing. Furthermore, I revealed that the context of the surrealist works, as well as deadpan’s, often corresponded with the social struggles and, for instance, criticised the social ignorance of the Nazi dictatorship. Finally, in the last section I associated the complexity of the deadpan definition with the semiology on which along with such terms as nostalgia, romanticism and sublime aesthetic I focus in the next chapter.
CHAPTER THREE

3.1 INTRODUCTION

We have seen that contemporary deadpan photography is a complex structure with many interpretation opportunities. The literature on photographic creation processes and on the communication between an author and his/her audience, makes it clear that we should analyse these processes in relation to semiology.

In the first section I defined semiology as it is significantly related to the process of image perception. Next, I focus on semiological systems associated with Western nations as the deadpan photography discussed in this paper is mostly created by Anglo-American or European artists. The context of the previously mentioned works also refers to the issues of Western cultures. Therefore, I analyse the transfer of meaning and the signs communicated within contemporary deadpan photography. Stephen Shore argued that we can read the image on three levels; physical, depictive and mental. Shore’s levels derive from semiological studies, especially his level consisting of the mental models which help to establish the communication between the photographer and the audience.

In the next section I analyse mental models and semiological aspects of three contemporary deadpan photographers’ work. I focus on the semiology of colour which I believe also constructs the meaning of the photographs and, triggers different emotions that significantly affect an understanding of the image.

Finally, I reject the theory that deadpan photography depends on a purely logical language. Brakhage supported by Munstenberg argues that film cannot be compared to language as mind operations, thought creation and intellectual processes are primordial.
The useful comparison of deadpan contemporary photography to surrealism as we have seen introduces this theory.

For the majority of deadpan photographers, landscape, architecture or empty interiors is tellingly common subject matter. Dusseldorfer's considered such imagery as the photography of the future, and for example Nieweg’s photography (Figure 24) was perceived as very melancholic but far from sentimental (Gronert 2009). Melancholy, according to the Oxford English dictionary, is a depression associated with nostalgia defined as “a feeling of pensive, typically with no obvious cause”. I would argue that the emptiness and emotionlessness of photographed spaces with regards to contemporary deadpan photography is also a manifestation against the quick growth of European cities resulting in new social diseases associated with previously unknown spatial conditions (Vidler 2000). For Benjamin Walter, Siegfried Kracauer and Georg Simmel who represented the Frankfurt Schools of Social Research the modern city, an anxiety trigger, created such new diseases as agoraphobia, paralyzing anxiety or neurotic behaviors (Williams 2004).
What are the architecture creation processes and the messages conveyed through the different architectural structures? I evaluate the relation between a common subject matter of deadpan photographers and new social diseases which were born in the technologically dependent modern cities. Finally, I focus on the link between photography and psychoanalysis with regards to image perception.

3.2 SEMIOLOGY DEFINITION

Semiology also known as Semiotics is the study of signs and symbols and their use or interpretation proposed in early 1900s by Ferdinand de Saussure and Charles Sanders Peirce (Oxford dictionary 2011). The link between semiology and contemporary deadpan photography is complex. First of all, semiology similarly to contemporary deadpan
photography decentralises the human figure and ceases to consider him as a main source of meaning (Barthes 1968). Semiology of the deadpan aesthetic which, with its precision and compositional perfection, emphasises the sign as its form of communication, which is also the core of semiological studies. Moreover, in this paper, in contrast to Kant who argued that we all have built in templates\(^6\), I refer to the empiricist theory that we are born as a blank page, and our perception of the world comes from our experience and the learning process (Locke cited in Carr 2010). These personal experiences are crucial as they also dictate the subjective perception of photography. Barthes (1968) argued that semiology is not limited to images but also includes gestures, musical sounds, objects and the complex communication between all of these which refers to language structure and establishes the general, multilayer human communication. Peirce (1955), writing even earlier, referring to the visual arts, discussed semiology as the transfer of meaning and argued that this transfer and its final stage, the meaning, are never repetitive or predictable processes. The most problematic part of the process is the interpretation of the sign which varies depending on the background of the viewer such as education, culture and experiences. A relationship exists between Peirce and Saussure’s studies who defined the transfer of meaning as a signification. As Saussure pointed out, to categorise the reality into understandable “language”, we need signifiers, the communication system created by the culture and society which is assigned to the particular culture (Crown 2007). In terms of the deadpan contemporary photography I refer to Barthes’ thesis that a semiological approach is inevitable in order to understand the deadpan meaning and one has to look beyond an aestheticism and formalism (Eco 1976).

\(^6\) Kant argued that we are born with built in templates which are fully responsible of our perception of the world. The nature predominantly dictates our behavior (Carr 2010).
3.3 PEIRCE, SAUSSURE AND BARTHES

Structuralism was a method of interpretation and analysis of aspects of human cognition, behaviour, culture, and experience, which focuses on relationships of contrast between elements in a conceptual system where the doctrine that structure is more important than function. Originating in the structural linguistics of Ferdinand de Saussure, and extended into anthropology by Claude Lévi-Strauss, structuralism was adapted to a wide range of social and cultural studies, especially in the 1960s, by writers such as Roland Barthes, Louis Althusser, and Jacques Lacan’ (Oxford Dictionary 2011). Prior to the evolution of semiology, the sign and structure were unified under the Structuralist movement, which aimed to reconceptualise the social sciences and adopt programmatic statements (Culler 2002). Structuralists look for structures in perceptions of reality, as opposed to determinists who considered it as a relation between a cause and effect. The Structuralists take a position of an independent observer (Seiler 2005), which might be an explanation of why so many deadpan photographers represent wide perspectives, such as Gursky (Figure 25). But I cannot agree that the deadpan photographer restricts himself to observing. The majority of the photographs represented here are rather carefully structured combinations of signs which are not accidental or purely observatory.
Saussure (1959), who perceived language as a system of signs, and semiology as a part of linguistic studies, argued that the meaning of the sign and the message it conveys can be found in the historical study of languages and their origin. He mathematically defined a sign as a summary equation of signifier and signified where signifier is a physical sign that carries the meaning; a signified is a meaning perceived equally for individuals from the same culture and the sign is the sum of these two. Saussure introduced the term; denotation, which refers to the informative meaning of the sign. For instance, if two photographs represent the same mechanical reproduction of the image but the aesthetics are opposite, the first one, warm colours and the other, harsh contrast, black and white, their denotative meaning is the same. It is important to note that Barthes
(1968) developed that theory and argued that meaning is found when connotation is added which represents the interaction and is its result when the sign meets the viewer's feeling (Barthes 1968). Peirce referred to Barthes' theory by stating that our perception of sign is not fixed as different viewers associate different emotions and experiences with signs (Crown 2007). In order to clarify the semiology of meaning creation, on the basis on the above definitions and semiological terms I refer to the three orders of meaning.

The first order is the denotative reading of the photograph, focusing only on the objects, ignoring the aesthetic. In the second order the denotation meets with connotation and the wide range of cultural associations are being created. In the second order, the object's perception drifts beyond its physical layer and starts to associate with the viewer's cultural references which finally creates a cultural image of the world, the third order of meaning. In the third order of signification, the ideology and mythology reflecting the social and institutional structures are being conveyed (Seiler 2005). Eco (1976, 1) argued that:

> the more semiology advances, the more it recognizes the social motivations –transformed into communicative motivations and rhetorical determinations – of those aspects of our behavior which are presumed to be creative and innovatory. This is not to negate the possibilities of innovation, of challenge to and criticism of the system, but to know how to recognize them where them where they really exist, and to see in what conditions they were able to be established.

The perception of deadpan contemporary photography should be supported by careful semiological analysis, in particular the signs, which trigger our connotations and finally the ideological meaning of the photograph. In addition, considering Volosinov's (1973) perception of sign, it is clear that contemporary deadpan photography cannot be perceived as detached. Volosinov (1973) argues that the very nature of sign is ideological. He perceives the nature and the function of sign as descriptors of the cracks
and irregularity of the surface called social life. The source of these irregularities is a simple conflict of social interests within the majority of communities also defined as a class struggle.

Every sign, as we know, is a construct between socially organized persons in the process of their interaction. Therefore, the forms of signs are conditioned above all by the social organization of the participants involved and also by the immediate conditions of their interaction. .... This is the order that the actual generative process of language follows: social intercourse is generated ...; in it verbal communication and interaction are generated; and in the latter, forms of speech performances are generated; finally, this generative process is reflected in the change of language forms. (Volosinov 1973, 21, 37).

If the semiological sign is a part of a language, the language and politics are indistinguishable. What is more, if the addressee of speech is not specified, the speech itself is still a social product (Volosinov 1973). The majority of the contemporary deadpan photographs mentioned above, are the signs, or the construction of signs. Thus, it is clear that deadpan aesthetic represents the social struggle and it often, if not always, manifests the ideology created by the author who cuts out the signs from the reality and rearranges them into a new order in a new frame. Another, significant semiological aspect of contemporary deadpan is colour. Costello and Iversen (2010) used the term ‘monotone colouration’ to associate it with the flattening out of expression. Here is another paradox. Simon Norfolk’s photographs from Afghanistan are considered deadpan but they have a strong warm, orange tone which I believe is associated with nostalgia rather than lack of expression (Figure 1). Moreover, how the war photographer can be expressionless and detached?
3.4 SEMIOLOGY, COLOUR AND DEADPAN

Colour, from the semiological point of view, is also a meaning creating factor. One of the definitions of the context created with colour was associated with the term: grammar (Kress and Van Leeuwen 1991). Grammar is commonly associated with convention, rules of behavior or linguistic practise. If grammar defines the particular group of people using the same language, the meaning of colour is also understood differently within different social groups. As already mentioned, understanding will never be universal for one large group of people (Kress and Van Leeuwen 2002). The process of understanding the colour, and the meaning it creates, is analogical to the sign and signifier relation. In Figure 26, Heissner’s photograph introduces us to the notion of the institutional world emphasised by the signs representing power and authority. In addition, the domination of the grey colour, symbolizing compromise, dignity and authority (Smith 2011) in association with the auditorium full of symbols of power, creates a certain meaning. To me and my signifiers, based on, as mentioned above, my personal experiences and education, the combination of steel eagle and German flag in a court room produces a firm context. Considering the fact that I was born and grew up in Poland, the country tormented by the Nazi and Soviet dictatorship, I find this combination intriguing and almost ironic as it is obvious that dictatorships never go along with dignity and compromise. In this case the perception of an image is very subjective, therefore I analyse the other methods of interpretation.
3.5 STEPHEN SHORE, THREE LEVELS OF IMAGE PERCEPTION

Shore argues that, in order to understand the image we need to perceive it on three levels, namely physical, depictive and mental. He emphasizes that the creating and viewing process should also be divided into the same three levels to allow the viewer to fully understand the message the photographer is trying to convey. In what follows, I focus on the mental level as I believe it is also closely related to semiology. Perception on the mental level requires such factors as the frame, vantage point, time and focus. It is important to note that the process of conveying the message is also non visible and the mental level establishes that non visible communication. “The basic material of photographs is not intrinsically beautiful. It’s not like ivory or tapestry or bronze or oil on
canvas. You’re not supposed to look at the thing, you’re supposed to look through it. It’s a window.” (Grundberg citing Szarkowski 1984, 12)

The mental level is the “window”, the level which allows us to look ‘beyond’ or ‘behind’ the photograph and to find the connection between what we see with our own mental models. In my opinion in Heissner’s photograph, the mental level descriptors are the symmetrical building as a focal point, and the strong composition, frame and tones. Having referred to my own mental models, Heissner communicates loneliness, lack of hope or pessimism emphasised by the monumental, inhuman and dominative structure (Figure 27). According to Shore, the photographer’s role is to control these models in order to establish a communication with his audience (Shore 2009).

**Figure 27. From Bunker Project by Oliver Heissner, (1993-1994)**

Kai-Olaf Hesse, who also does not perceive his work as emotionless (Figure 28), argues that contemporary deadpan photographers rather than conveying the message in their
photographs, demand that the viewer to bring their own thoughts and feelings into the process of looking. By this approach photographers attempt to trigger discussion on the basis of the context of the photograph rather than giving the viewer a ready statement, so common for photojournalism à la Henri Cartier-Bresson. What makes contemporary deadpan photography different from photojournalism is a strong use of metaphors and symbols which demands that the viewer bring his own thoughts, feelings and knowledge in order to look at the photograph. Hesse argues that the contemporary photograph is not subconsciously expected, an answer or the truth, it is rather the introduction to discussion based on the questioning (Colberg 2007).

Figure 28. NeueSymbolikIn Berlin by Kai-Olaf Hesse, (1998-1999)
3.6 DEADPAN AND ARCHITECTURE

Man created landscape is an active construction of cultural signs and also an “unwitting autobiography reflecting our values, aspirations and even fears” (Lewis 1979). According to Rose (2002) landscape is a cultural representation and power-laden systematisation rather than an innocent reflection of the world. “By controlling physical symbols dominant classes are able to reproduce their control over the ideology under which people are socialized into society. Landscapes are thus one of the means of regulating the social behavior of the people inhabiting them” (Moore 2000, 459). Axel Hutte’s work corresponds with the notion of control and social behavior as in Figure 29 he created a significantly constructed, mysterious and unreachable urban reality, emphasised by the dark tonality of night. In Hutte’s photograph there is no connection with the ground and all buildings, which are transparent and dynamic during the daytime, are presented as a series of black blocks or rather floating lights as we hardly see the walls.

Figure 29. Bryant Park by Axel Hutte, Germany, (2007)
Architects associated with the style of these buildings, such as Paul Scheerbart stressed that “our culture is in a sense a product of our architecture” (Scheerbart cited in Conrads 1970, 32) and that if there is a need to raise culture to a higher level, the transformation of the architecture is inevitable. Scheerbart (1970) also argued that glass architecture, which exists in the light of the sun and moon, is an introduction to a new culture. He compares glass architecture to the representation of the diamonds of the Earth and also uses the term a “paradise on Earth” (Conrads 1970). Additionally, architecture is also often presented as the space conveying negative feelings.

3.7 CIVILISATION DISEASES AND DEADPAN

Mountford (2010) applied the term “deadpan urban dystopia” in her short theatre play review to describe the environment of the play. In what follows I evaluate the link between the deadpan representations of architecture and interiors in relation to civilisation diseases. Laurie Lipton also linked both terms (Figure 30) in “Communication”. She referred to the dystopia, but the aesthetic and the subject matter of her work rather corresponds with the deadpan style. The telephonist figure as shown in Figure 30, isolated and emotionless, imprisoned in the room with limited space, full of cables and without connection to the outside world, emphasises the negative aspects of the industrialisation process also highlighted by the Stier’s psychiatric research. What is described above closely resembles the environment in which neurasthenia; a disease caused by the overload of electrical signals, occurs which heavily affected Berlin society in the 1920s (Killen 2006).
Bentham (1787) argued that an architectural system is the system in which total control can be exercised over the human being. Heissner, in his photographs mainly focuses on empty spaces, cold institutional interiors and monumental architecture which refers to the fact that society depends on the structural division into institutions (Markus 1993). Heissner’s work, full of straight lines and sharp angles (Figure 31) refers to Bachelard’s (1994) theory that the round archways create a soft atmosphere and are more welcoming, as they related to the anatomy of the body, whereas hard lines and sharp angles refer to machine production and the rejection of the human being. According to Muynck (2005) the modern city in the first half of the twentieth century had an embracing function but after the second wave of industrialisation created alienation and a feeling of unreality. The private spaces emphasized fear became neurotic and fully controlled. Freud evaluated that the threat of loss of self and abandonment is the basis of anxiety. The signals of anxiety such as anticipation, resistance and isolation in relation to consciousness (Hemmung 1926) seem to be similar to the most common definitions of
deadpan. It raises a question as to what lies at the core of the most common subject matter of deadpan photography and if it is always related to anxiety?

**Figure 31. From Bonn Project by Oliver Heissner, (2002-2005)**

3.8 DEADPAN: ROMANTIC AND SUBLIME

Stimson (2004) pointed out that one of the intentions of deadpan photographers was to be more objective, true and less sentimental. In contrast Meltzer and Sandra (2004) emphasised that “every creative artist produces the world on his own. Even if he believes himself to be a complete realist and sets himself the task of faithfully reproducing the external world, he, in fact, only uses, the elements of the existing external world to create the reality of his own. “(Meltzer and Sandra 2004, 46)
Deadpan is also a response to the subjective and over sentimental photographic aesthetic of the early post-war period (Stimson 2004). Considering my review on the semiology and the ideology of sign, even if the artist produces a world of his own, this world is a social creation of signs. In addition, as Volosinov (1973) argues, the sign represents the struggle and every “own world” is an expression and manifest in a sophisticated way which is the deadpan aesthetic. For Helene Binet this struggle is a variety of positive feelings about the surrounding world and a need to control and own the visual representation of it.

What is the first reason to do the photograph? I think it’s an interesting question and somehow it’s the same for every artist, being musician or an artist, photographer or an architect. At the end, maybe we’re all quite romantic and there is a very strong relation with the world that is surrounding us, and we have the desire to identify ourselves with it and maybe to appropriate it. I mean, art and photography are a strong way to appropriate the world. With photography you frame it and you control it and then it becomes yours. The desire to produce an image is about this tension between our feeling and the landscape (or the architecture, which is just a form of landscape). (Interview for Scopio Magazine 2010, 86.)

Helene Binet is an artist who describes her own work as a communication of romanticism, and emotions and she also expresses that through the deadpan aesthetic (Figure 32). She perceives buildings as constructions that have a specific location and function and speak their own language and generate emotions (Ise 2008). The meaning of Binet’s work, in contrast to Norfolk’s or Burtynsky’s photographs is less idealistic as there are fewer connotations to the facts. It is an expression of her personal emotions and the architecture in her photographs has a function of encouraging them. Helene Binet is an interesting example of a deadpan artist who also creates a world of her own but deprived of obvious political signs; it starts to work on a
different, less ideological level. It raises a question if photography corresponds with mind processes or the semiotic language?

Figure 32. Switzerland, Peter Zumthor, Architect; by Helene Binet

3.9 MIND AND LANGUAGE ANALOGIES

According to Vygotsky, the beginning thought and language are separate and independent activities. He refers to the fact that children and animals create thoughts independently without an ability to express them. Heath (1981) argues that thought and language were primitive actions which do not have different generic roots, they both developed from work and practice. Moreover, he stresses that the laws constructing thoughts and inner speech are exactly the same as the laws ruling the composition and form of art works. When one becomes an adult one’s thoughts are structured in a similar way as language, governed by the system of social codes and rules one is brought up
within. The same statement has been confirmed by Stan Brakhage (2001) who argued that, questioning any child’s drawing by calling it scribbles will make the child defend it. The child perceives the scribbles as a reality because it is not grown enough to understand the system of social language. Brakhage (2001) argued that film language construction is based on social language rather than inner thoughts. Furthermore, he pointed out that the invention of words stopped the creation process. Brakhage (2001) also argues that there were many other ways of interpreting and naming everything around us before that invention. In addition, he concluded that after the first word appeared in our life, the mind’s eye lost its innocence and started to classify reality by creating symbols and signs. Brakhage (2001) he criticizes language for being constructed of stereotypes and repetitions instead of pure thoughts. As we have seen, the interpretation of contemporary photography still varies which proves that the repetition of stereotypes is not that significant. As we have seen, the word; stereotype, considering the semiology, is also a complex term whose meaning depends on a social group. Brakhage (2001) pointed out that only an infant can see the world with a mind’s eye that has not been taught the language of signs and social rules. It made me think that Binet’s work because it is based on mind analogies rather than semiology of language can be referred to as Gestalt psychology which considers the brain as having self-organizing tendencies. Gestalt psychology, in contrast to the elementaristic position, manifested perception of the world as unitary wholes rather than a complicated sum of parts (Kantowitz 2009). Binet’s work, presenting architectural constructions as whole units can also be perceived as an admiration of their greatness. I noticed the same approach in photographs created by Heissner, Hutte and many Dusseldorfer residents. It leads to a conclusion that contemporary deadpan is also “Sublime”.
3.10 SUBLIME

Sublime was based on a phenomenon of reflecting the light of the large body and hitting the surface of the eye with one instant. If a human ear receives a single strong signal, its interior organs vibrate and if the signal is repeated it creates a tension because of an expectation of another stroke. To obtain the continuation and to emphasise the sublime effect, the repetition of the signal, in particular the big object, its uniformity, tone, colour and shape must be achieved (Figure 33, Figure 34) (Burke, Womersley 1998). All these aspects are often present in deadpan photography series. In Heissner’s work the consistency and repetition of composition and colour is significantly manifested. In Simon Norfolk’s work a repetition of subject matter and a warm tone is also a strong meaning creating factor. If we look at other photographers’ work such as Gursky, Burtnsky, Hutte, Bechers and in general Dusseldorfer we also notice the different types of typological approaches and repetitions of shapes, compositions and colours which corresponds with the Sublime aesthetic.

Figure 33. Cleveland by Margaret Bourke-White, (1928)
On the contrary, one must acknowledge that if Burtynsky or Norfolk openly associate their work with the textual manifest, it is obvious that the meaning of their work is beyond an admiration of greatness. In this case the Sublime notion of their work should rather be perceived as an additional layer of it which, as it is based on psychology of viewing, guarantees the viewer’s attention.

3.11 CONCLUSIONS

I evaluated the definition of semiology as it is an inevitable part of deadpan photography analysis. I also analysed Peirce, Saussure and Barthes studies with regards to their semiological theories in order to demonstrate that awareness of certain semiological aspects such as denotation and connotation as well as an understanding of the relation between sign and signifiers are both essential phases when giving an insight into deadpan photography features. I also examined Structuralism which is a foundation of semiology. What is more, I explored three level image perception based on the relation between the denotative and connotative reading with regards to Eco’s theories. By
analysing one of the Heissner’s photographs (Figure 24) I evaluated the semiological meaning of colour in deadpan photography in order to underline that deadpan photography conveys emotional and ideological meanings rather than being detached or deprived of an apparent point of view. I also shed light on Shore’s three levels of image perception as this demonstrates additional dimensions to deadpan photography and its connotation with semiology. In this respect I could not omit the architectural aspects of deadpan photography as it is significant subject matter for most deadpan photographers. I also felt the need to evaluate the link between the deadpan representations of architecture and interiors in relation to civilisation diseases as it a very common subject matter for deadpan photographers. In what followed, by analysing Helene Binet’s work we have seen that deadpan is full of emotions and romanticism. I focused on Brakhage’s argument, supported by Vygotsky, and referred it to photography, with regards to the analogy between film and mind processes rather than film and language. Finally, I compared deadpan photography and a Sublime aesthetic, an appreciation of greatness as another layer of this aesthetic.
CHAPTER FOUR

4.1 FINAL REMARK

As deadpan photography moves to become a very common aesthetic in contemporary photography, in this paper, I explored and widened its complex definition contributing to an expanding awareness of the communication methods that deadpan establishes. The main finding of this study is that deadpan aesthetic, although often perceived as emotionless or detached, conveys a wide range of emotions; it can be very expressive, critical and ideological. The importance of this study comes from the fact that the commonness of the deadpan aesthetic in contemporary photography requires an involvement in the process of viewing in order to fully understand the photograph.

In order to evaluate the deadpan communication methods I reviewed a wide range of journal articles, books, dictionary definitions, websites, magazines, and interviews with respected photographers. I analysed the work of Bernd and Hilla Bechers, Simon Norfolk, Paul Graham, Edward Burtynsky, Oliver Heissner, Andreas Gursky and Sarah Sudhoff whose photographs I found intriguing and relevant for this study.

Firstly, I conducted an insight analysis of the deadpan definition and its roots in such art movements as New Objectivity and Precisionism. The first traces of deadpan and the role it played revealed its ironical, ideological and critical character. I also revealed the strong similarities to archival photography and then New Objectivity and Precisionism. I came to the conclusion that, the variety of emotions and expressions triggered by historical events such as industrialisation and the World Wars had influenced the artist who represented the above mentioned styles. I noticed the same phenomenon of
communicating strong emotions and manifestations behind the contemporary deadpan aesthetic. I analysed the work of Dix, Riis, Hine, Kahn and Hopper along with Dusseldorfer and as mentioned, Graham, Norfolk, Burtnynsky, Hesse and Sudhoff which contradicted Cotton’s (2004) argument and revealed the multilayered messages and similarities between these works and also a whole variety of emotions such as anxiety, nostalgia or idealism. I also discovered that the frontality of the image applied in these works is in fact an introduction to discussion which confirmed the thesis of this paper. It became clear that all artists who communicated through a style similar to contemporary deadpan photography (a detailed, sharp and straight aesthetic) emphasised the fear of war, the chaos caused by the political instability of the 1920s and dehumanisation as a result of industrialisation. The work they created, rather than emotionless, was full of struggle and emotions. Furthermore, I shed light on Surrealism and I revealed a strong connection with contemporary deadpan as it applied the same semiological techniques such as doubling and spacing. These findings confirm my argument that there is not much new in deadpan and it applies the communication mechanisms invented almost a century ago. It also creates a question why deadpan is considered as something new if there are so many examples of it in the past?

In further research I came across the problem of misunderstanding or different interpretation of the aesthetic of deadpan which focused my attention on the analysis of semiology. Deadpan photography, in contrast to post war photojournalism a la Cartier-Bresson, is not a ready product but rather an invitation to discussion as previously mentioned which requires an effort and engagement in order to participate.

It became clear that an inevitable element of this discussion is the semiology of the photograph. Therefore, I analysed the majority of terms related to semiology and it
became apparent that the connotative aspect of reading a photograph plays an important role in understanding the image. Thus, one has to acknowledge that semiological perception of an image is also variable. My findings revealed, that the most problematic is an interpretation of the sign as personal experiences, education or culture often dictates the subjective perception of it. With regards to Volosinov’s (1973) argument that every sign is a struggle it made me aware that many deadpan photographers, especially the educated ones, are aware how and where a particular sign creates a meaning.

My analysis of Shore’s three levels of image perception revealed that a photographer is the one who carefully designs the photograph by implementing certain semiological signs in order to achieve communication with his audience. I used the statement “his audience” to point out that an author carefully selects members of his audience for whom the photograph will “work”. I came to the conclusion that if a particular photograph is not understood, it means that either the author made a mistake in the semiological designing process or the person who views the photograph is not his addressee. Furthermore, the whole argument about semiology which creates meaning also supports the thesis of this paper that deadpan photography is never detached and if one perceives it as detached it is only because an author wanted you to do so. Following that, one has to acknowledge, that the previously mentioned detachment and emotionlessness is only one of the basic semiological signs of a particular image and that further analysis must be conducted in order to understand the meaning.

Another finding is the subject matter of deadpan photographers which is predominantly architecture and landscape. I analysed contemporary writings related to architecture and it became clear that landscape, in particular an altered landscape, often symbolises the social values or the transitions of the particular place or country. As an example, I used
the work of such photographers as Norfolk, Hutte, Heissner, Gursky and Hesse. I discovered the links between architecture and culture (Scheerbart 1970) and I also shed light on the photographs of Hutte and Heissner which correspond with the visions of urban dystopias. In what followed, Lipton’s work gave a basis for the argument that many artists by means of architectural photography communicate more complex ideas or manifests. For instance, I associated Lipton’s work with neurasthenia, a German social disease caused by the overload of electric signals in workplaces. Having analysed the arguments of Bentham (1787), Markus (1993) and Lewis (2010) with regards to an architectural system in which total control can be exercised over the human being, it became clear that for many deadpan photographers landscape communicates and reflects the social struggle, its fears and other issues. One of the best examples is Burtynsky’s or Gursky’s work which perfectly describes human actions, often without showing a human presence.

In addition, I explored Helene Binet’s work which also supported my thesis as it communicates such emotions as romanticism. She pointed out the notion of framing, controlling and finally owning the photograph as well as a tension between the artist and the architecture. Moreover, unlike Norfolk or Burtynsky, lack of political or ideological aspects in her photographs adds additional dimension to the complex definition of the deadpan aesthetic. My conclusion here is that Binet, in contrast to photographers who carefully design meaning for their work, acts more spontaneously. That phenomenon made me focus on the Vygotsky studies related to the mind and language analogies. Having reviewed the studies of Vygotsky and Brakhage it became apparent that the human brain, although it often refers to social structure, has self-organizing tendencies. These tendencies were thoroughly examined by Gestalt psychology and, in contrast to the above mentioned semiological studies and Shore’s meaning construction, it
underlines the perception of the unitary whole rather than parts. In further studies I discovered that the perception of the unitary whole is related to Sublime; an admiration of greatness which creates different, less critical and less ideological meaning. My final evaluation proved that Sublime itself, physically irresistible admiration of greatness, is not complex enough to become a big part of the deadpan photography definition but it is successful in attracting the viewers’ attention. In terms of the meaning of the style it must be acknowledged that if deadpan aesthetic emphasised the fear of war, the chaos caused by the political instability of the 1920s and dehumanisation as a result of industrialization, it is popular again now because of the military conflicts, the disruption of extreme climatic events and the uncertainty of the economic downturn.
REFERENCE LIST


Goodden, Nat. 2007.Jacques-Andre Boiffard. Cultural Cartography,


Pascal, Janet B., Jacob Riis: Reporter and Reformer (Oxford University Press, 2005), 87


BIBLIOGRAPHY

JOURNAL ARTICLES


**BOOKS**


Gronert, Stefan. 2009. Dusseldorf School of Photography. Schirmer/Mosel Verlag GmbH.


Pascal, Janet B., Jacob Riis: Reporter and Reformer (Oxford University Press, 2005), 87


ONLINE SOURCES


