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I declare that all the material contained in this thesis is my own work.

AI ACKNOWLEDGEMENT DECLARATION

I confirm that I have not used any AI tools in the research and creation of this assignment.
I confirm that I have not presented any AI generated materials as my own work.
I confirm that I have copies of my drafts, notes, and other resources I used, which I may be asked to provide in evidence.

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Figure 2

Ruscha, E. (1963) *From* Twenty Six Gasoline Stations. Available at: https://www.bbc.co.uk/photography/genius/gallery/ruscha.shtml (Accessed: 30 April 2026).

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Rowell, G. (1990) *Winter sunset, Gates of the Valley, Yosemite National Park (California)*. Available at: https://davidduchemin.com/2014/10/study-the-masters-galen-rowell/ (Accessed: 01 May 2026).

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Parr, M. (n.d.) *From* Small World. Martin Parr / Magnum Photos. Available at: https://www.all-about-photo.com/photo-articles/photo-article/2038/martin-parr-small-world (Accessed: 01 May 2026).

Figure 5

Becher, B. & Becher, H. (1972) *Water tower, Dieulouard, Lorraine, France*. Available at: https://historyofourworld.wordpress.com/2009/10/21/basic-forms-of-industrial-buildings-bernd-hilla-becher/ (Accessed: 01 May 2026).

Figure 6

Hine, L.W. (1914) *Doffer boys*. Available at: https://www.latimes.com/entertainment-arts/story/2025-05-05/lewis-hine-child-labor-photographs-getty-museum (Accessed: 30 April 2026).

Figure 7

Lange, D. (1936) *Migrant Mother*. Available at: https://www.barbican.org.uk/read-watch-listen/curators-picks-dorothea-langes-migrant-mother (Accessed: 30 April 2026).

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Introduction

The new topographic style of landscape photography with its deadpan approach takes a restrained, non-didactic stance as well as informing the viewer of social change whilst avoiding a direct or moralising position. The viewer is instead invited to determine whether such change might be understood as loss, adaptation, or simply the ongoing reconfiguration of everyday space.

My photographic practice examines social change through urban landscape, using a deadpan approach to present the built environment as evidence rather than illustration. In preference to constructing a narrative, the work positions social transformation as an observable fact. The decline of pub culture in Britain, for example, has tangible effects on communities and their social infrastructures. Presenting closed and repurposed pubs as a sustained series, the images register this shift in contemporary society without prescribing how it should be interpreted.

My research has led me to focus on three interrelated concepts, *landscape*, *deadpan*, and *social change***,** each shapes how I understand and produce work. This essay investigates these terms, their theoretical and historical contexts, and the way they have informed my research and the development of my practice.

Deadpan

Dramatic images with clear authorial viewpoints, are often constructed to provoke immediate reaction. Their impact is instantaneous, directing viewers towards specific emotional or interpretive responses. Yet this immediacy can also limit engagement; the viewer processes information quickly and moves on. Deadpan images, by contrast, invite slower, more contemplative forms of looking. Their neutrality encourages the viewer to spend time within the scene, interpreting its meaning and cultural significance through their own experiences.

Deadpan photography is frequently criticised for apparent lack of emotion, a quality sometimes interpreted as apathy or indifference from photographers. Critics argue photographers have a responsibility to contextualise or critique what appears within the frame (Cotton, 2014). Furthermore, deadpan images have been accused of aestheticising the very issues they seek to address. This critique has been directed at New Topographics photographers, whose depictions of derelict buildings and industrial scaring arguably possess a formal beauty that can distract from the social or environmental concerns embedded within the work.

However, it could be argued the visual language of deadpan is built upon the photographer's deliberate attempt to remove overt emotion and political rhetoric. Whilst motivation for making images may be emotional or political, the scene is arguably presented with neutrality. Moreover, it is plausible to consider the photograph as evidence, allowing viewers to draw their own conclusions (Lančarič, 2017). Deadpan images attempt to avoid visual drama. The subject, rather than the photographer's perspective, becomes central. This approach reflects society and culture as they are, without directing viewers toward a predetermined interpretation. Although narratives

inevitably arise, information is presented with restraint and without didactic intent (Cotton, 2014).

Furthermore, the distinctly neutral stance of deadpan photography can highlight the passage of time within the scene. Layers of cultural change, architectural adaptation, and environmental transformation become visible through the accumulation of detail. The image is composed of numerous small elements, each contributing to a broader understanding of place. In this sense, the viewer becomes akin to a conductor, orchestrating meaning from various components within the frame. The high level of detail encourages repeated viewing, revealing new information with each encounter. As Lančarič (2017) argues, the deadpan aesthetic functions as a systematic methodology for documenting environments, enabling viewers to assemble meaning from the many small components within the frame.

Therefore, cities are arguably an ideal subject for deadpan photography. Urban environments belong to no single individual, and each generation adds another layer to the city's fabric. Cities exist in a continual state of flux, shaped by cycles of construction, decay, and renewal. As Bright (2005) argues, deadpan photography is particularly suited to capturing such transitional moments, offering a precise record of the city at a specific point in time. What becomes evident in these images is the pervasive influence of capitalism. Shinkle (2012) notes that contemporary urban landscapes are deeply shaped by economic forces; buildings erected with little regard for environmental impact and abandoned once they no longer serve the demands of capital. Deadpan photographers, by turning their attention to the non exotic, often overlooked wastelands, serve to map and critique these processes through an emotionally distant visual language (Musvik, 2022).

Potentially, their neutrality exposes structures and systems that underpin urban life without resorting to overt political rhetoric.



Figure 1

Edward Burtynsky has, for decades, examined the environmental consequences of economic growth. His global photographic projects document humanity's reliance on oil, the infrastructures that sustain this dependence, and profound alterations inflicted on landscapes and cities. In *Oil*, (Burtynsky, 2009) (Figure 1) he reveals how the petroleum industry has shaped industrial and urban environments, highlighting the paradox of mobility as both a symbol of freedom and a driver of environmental degradation (O'Hagan, 2012). Whilst the subtext of his work points to ecological costs of oil, Burtynsky maintains a deadpan stance. Arguably, he presents evidence rather than judgement, leaving interpretation to the viewer. A similar neutrality characterises Ed Ruscha's *Twentysix Gasoline Stations* (1963), which reflects American car culture and its reliance on oil. Ruscha

offers no commentary, instead presents a sequence of deadpan images that



Figure 2

invite viewers to consider the cultural significance of ordinary sites (Figure 2).

Deadpan photography is arguably more relevant and important than images rooted in the sublime. Whereas sublime imagery often directs viewers toward awe or transcendence, deadpan grants viewers agency to draw their own conclusions. Moreover, deadpan images foreground subjects that might otherwise be overlooked, industrial zones, infrastructural remnants and marginal spaces, offering insights into cultural and economic conditions of their time. In doing so, potentially they articulate political and social critiques without adopting an instructive tone, allowing viewers to engage critically with structures that shape contemporary life.

Landscape

It could be argued the traditional definition of a landscape image is selective and historically loaded. A “landscape” is simply what can be seen when



Figure 3

looking across an outdoor space, yet the genre has long been shaped by expectations of beauty, harmony, and transcendence. Landscape photographs were often intended to prompt contemplation of nature and, by extension, a higher moral or spiritual order. As Burnett (2010) notes, the landscape's openness and non-specificity allowed viewers to project their own metaphors and meanings onto it.

Galen Rowell, an American landscape photographer, became renowned for colour images made in remote locations. Rowell sought to capture the awe-inspiring beauty of the natural world, and his work earned him the Ansel Adams Award for conservation photography. His images not only documented nature but also carried a strong conservation message. Rowell was committed to presenting nature as pristine and untouched, positioning himself physically within the landscape to achieve this effect (Meyer, 2024). (Figure 3) Working for *National Geographic*, he aimed to show audiences what they could not ordinarily see and, crucially, that which he believed needed protecting from human intervention.

The irony of this approach is twofold. Firstly, in order to capture such images, photographers inevitably disturb the environments they seek to represent as untouched They create paths, carry equipment and physically enter fragile ecosystems. Secondly, their images often inspire others to visit the same locations in an attempt to recreate the photographs. As Martin Parr demonstrates in *Small World (*2024*)*, photographs of natural wonders generate a desire to witness those wonders firsthand (Figure 4). This demand frequently leads to construction of infrastructure to accommodate tourists, resulting in overcrowding and, ultimately, the degradation of the very landscapes that were initially celebrated (Dyer, 2024).



Figure 4

Yet people do not live in untouched pastoral scenes. The landscapes inhabited are shaped, engineered and often scarred by human intervention. Whilst such changes may be viewed negatively, they are also arguably unavoidable. Robert Adams (1974) argues that humans must come to terms with their relationship to the land as it actually exists. To experience a sense of inner peace, he suggests, people must acknowledge the full geography

around them, not merely picturesque fragments. Even the altered landscape, he argues, contains an inherent, if complex, beauty.

Moreover, as capitalist development accelerates, it becomes increasingly difficult to find places untouched by human activity. Dunaway (2010) observes that Lewis Baltz's photographs offer a critique of consumerism, foregrounding the effects of capitalist systems on the built environment. His work demonstrates landscapes need not conform to traditional ideals of beauty, instead, they can reveal structures, systems, and ideologies that shape contemporary life.

The exhibition, *New Topographics: Photographs of a Man-Altered Landscape* (Jenkins, 1975), challenged the prevailing ideals of landscape photography at a moment when the genre remained tied to notions of beauty, sublimity and moral uplift. The exhibition included ten photographers, among them Lewis Baltz, Robert Adams and Stephen Shore. The exhibition has since been credited with defining a previously unnamed photographic sensibility.



Figure 5

Bernd and Hilla Becher's work exemplifies this shift. Over a forty-year period, they photographed industrial structures such as water towers, coal bunkers and gas tanks. These forms reveal, with unusual clarity, the extent of human activity upon the landscape. Bernd Becher was fascinated by these utilitarian constructions, and the pair developed a rigorous method of photographing them head-on, under overcast skies, and with consistent framing. Trees, road signs and other surrounding elements were often included to establish scale and situate the structures within their environments (Figure 5). Although the images did not convey an overt political message, Bernd was acutely aware that many of these structures were disappearing as Germany transitioned into a post-industrial era, and he sought to document them before they vanished (O'Hagan, 2014).

Furthermore, the Bechers 'systematic approach, and their presentation of the photographs in typological grids, pushed the work into the realm of conceptual art. Their typologies emphasised repetition, variation, and the underlying logic of industrial design, inviting viewers to consider these structures not as eyesores but as part of a broader cultural and architectural history (de Duve, 2020). It could be argued that this form of photography is more relevant to contemporary life than depictions of unaltered landscapes that may remain unchanged for millennia. The Bechers foregrounded the landscapes people actually inhabit, shaped, engineered and continually transformed by human activity. Images produced in the 'New Topographic' methodology will be far more relevant in the future as students aim to understand what has gone before and how society and culture has changed through the years.

Social Change

The use of photography to document deprivation, social need and structural injustice has long been instrumental in advocating reform. Lewis Wickes Hine became renowned for his photographs addressing child labour. Children were routinely employed in hazardous environments, working long hours under harsh conditions (Figure 6). Hine's (1914) work has been praised not only for a sympathetic approach but also for influencing the eventual passing of child labour legislation (Handy et al., 1999). Although Hine considered himself an artist, the restrained and formulaic composition of his photography was not

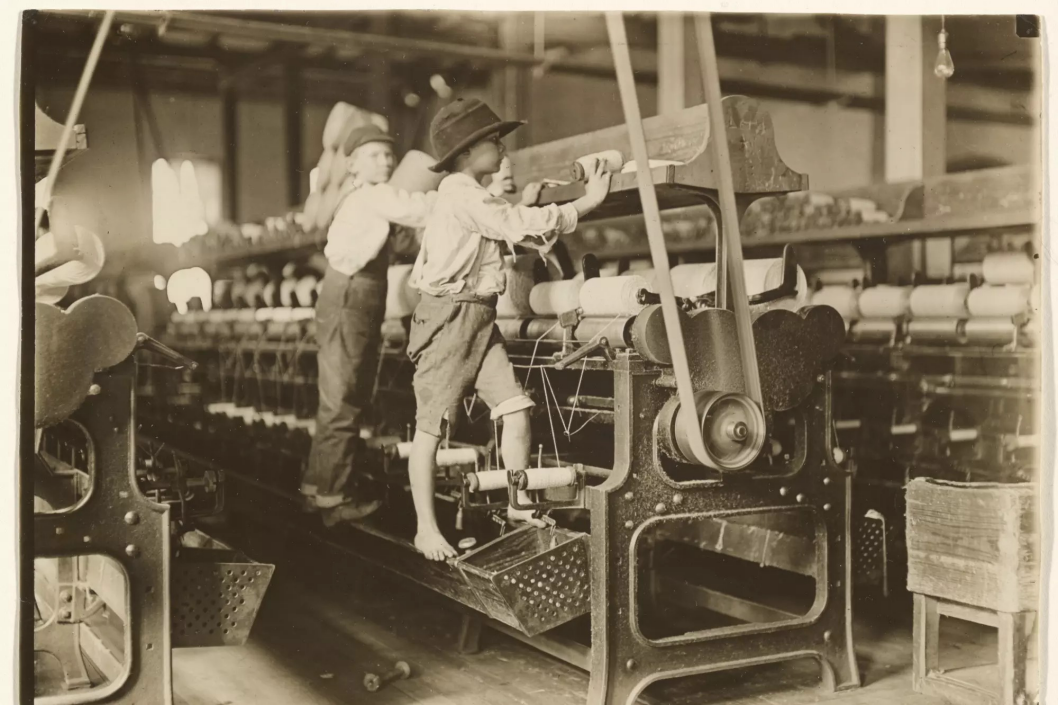


Figure 6

fully appreciated until many years later. His work sought not only to reveal what required correction but also to highlight what should be valued within society (Cappa, 1968).

Furthermore, the social consequences of neoliberalism, including the emergence of the "hollow state" and the withdrawal of meaningful care from

communities, are starkly illustrated in *Survival Programmes: In Britain's Inner Cities* (Battye et al., 1982). The authors argue communities were wholly unprepared for rapid social and economic changes imposed upon them, changes that politicians insisted were beneficial. The book documents the scale and complexity of inner-city deprivation, with the photographs forming a narrative that operates independently of the accompanying text.Therefore, it can be argued photographers have often been driven by an impulse to illuminate poverty and deprivation with good intentions.

However, the desire to produce impactful or emotive images can, at times, overshadow the aim of promoting social change. A photographer may capture

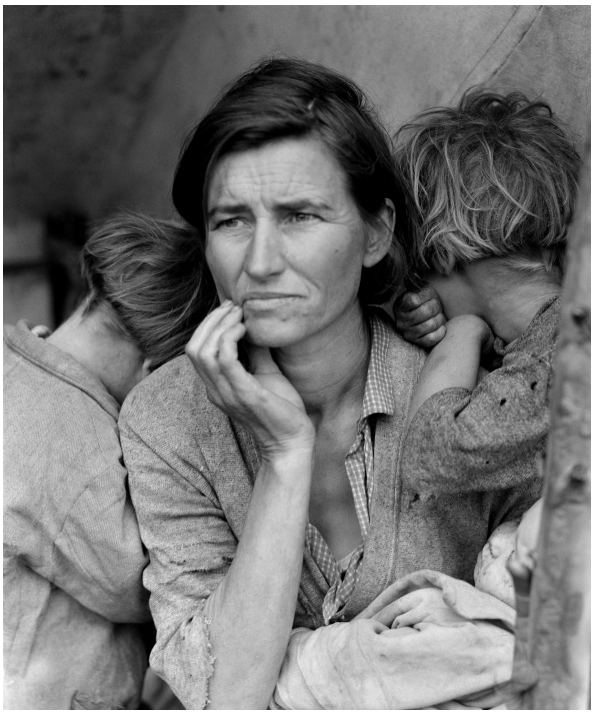


Figure 7

a particular expression or mood to construct a compelling narrative, even if this risks distorting the lived reality of the subject. This criticism has been directed at Dorothea Lange's *Migrant Mother* (Figure 7), arguably her most iconic image and one that came to define her career. Whilst the photograph was widely published and undoubtedly raised awareness of the hardships

faced during the Great Depression, Florence Thompson, the woman depicted, later criticised Lange for staging the image and misrepresenting her circumstances. Thompson also expressed discomfort that the photograph continued to define her as the face of poverty long after her situation had improved (Cotton et al., 2020).

Furthermore, although highlighting social issues in order to force change may be an honourable pursuit, it can be argued that simply presenting society as it is can offer a more authentic means of documenting social transformation over time. The photographer may ultimately serve the community more effectively by showing things as they are, rather than constructing a predetermined narrative. Jack Kerouac (2024, Introduction), writing about Robert Frank's *The Americans*, observed," The pictures don't editorialise or criticise or say anything but this is the way we are in real life". This sentiment underscores the value of an observational approach that resists overt moralising, allowing the complexity of social reality to speak for itself. As Joel Meyerowitz (2018, p.56) puts it, "I'm pleased when a photograph provides a space for someone to simply enter into it, where time can be spent just looking and where one can decide for oneself what might be of interest".

Photographs that adopt a more objective viewpoint are arguably accessible to a wider audience, allowing viewers to interpret the images through the lens of their own experiences and concerns. During the development of *Coalfaces,* a project examining the Afan Valley communities in post-industrial Wales, the artists felt a responsibility to reflect the communities in a positive and dignified manner. The people of the valley were struggling to come to terms with life in the aftermath of mine closures. Their historical purpose and collective identity had been eroded by political decisions in which they had no agency. Despite this sense of isolation and abandonment, their situation is far from unique. Communities across the world have faced a similar plight as industrial

structures collapse and economic certainties disappear (Schone and Carr, 1996).



Figure 8

The images in *Coalfaces* present a matter-of-fact depiction of everyday life in the Afan Valley (Figure 8), resisting sentimentality whilst acknowledging resilience. Although rooted in a specific geography and history, the work resonates with a much broader audience. Its observational approach enables viewers to recognise parallels with other post-industrial landscapes, reinforcing the idea that local experiences of loss, adaptation, and endurance form part of a wider global narrative.

Whilst it may be argued that even photographers associated with a deadpan aesthetic inevitably influence the viewer through choices of camera angle, contrast, and composition. Such images do not overtly impose a point of view. Instead, they create the conditions for the viewer to form their own interpretation. This restraint is central to the work of artists such as Stephen

Shore and Joel Sternfeld, who frequently photograph scenes head-on in order to minimise rhetorical force. Their frontal approach reduces the expressive conventions traditionally associated with landscape or documentary photography, allowing the scene to be encountered with a degree of neutrality. In doing so, they foreground the everyday without directing the viewer toward a predetermined emotional or moral response. Philosopher Kate Soper (2011) argues that the relationship between humanity and nature must be understood as a totality. The world is shaped through human activity, whilst human identity is in turn formed through its embeddedness in the material environment.

Conclusion

Research into the concepts of deadpan, landscape, and social change has opened further questions that will shape the next stage of my work. The question of whether deadpan landscape photography can be understood as contemporary art has, to a large extent, been resolved. The New Topographics photographers have long been recognised within the art world, and their work continues to circulate in major institutions and respected galleries. What remains open, however, is the question of whether this mode of photography retains its relevance in the present moment, particularly within a rapidly shifting social and environmental context.

A more fundamental question also emerges from this research, which will inform my research for the next academic year: *through photography, should the man-altered landscape be criticised, celebrated, or simply accepted as a condition of contemporary life*?

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