PHOTOGRAPHY TRUTH REALISM ILLUSION

THE NATIONAL COLLEGE OF ART AND DESIGN

PHOTOGRAPHY TRUTH REALSIM ILLUSION

THESIS SUBMITTED TO:

THE FACULTY OF HISTORY OF ART AND DESIGN AND COMPLEMENTARY STUDIES

IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE

FACULTY OF FINE ART

DEPARTMENT OF SCULPTURE

BY

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APRIL 1985

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CHAPTER 1

The Power to represent what the eye sees "realistically" is something mankind has been doing from early civilisation. This power of reappropriating what is three dimensional onto a two-dimensional plane has never been more accurately or successfully recored than in photographic medium, a power inherent in the very nature of photography.

Bernice Abbott an American photographer brought to bear much influence on the recognition of photography as a means of expression. She has written extensively on its uses.*1 She put forward in a conference in Aspen Institute Colarado her point of view that "photography has a strong affinity with writing and that in the USA this is to a glorious tradition of unsurpassed 'realist' writers". In her text she has reffered to Jack London's novel **Martins Eden**. She pleads not only for 'realism' but impassioned realism shot through with human aspirations and faith, 'life as it is', real characters in a real world - real conditions. Within her text she asked; "is this not exactly what is meant to do with the sharp, realistic, image forming lens".*2

Bernice Abbott gained a reputation as a documentary photographer and deliberately sited her work within the American tradition. This tradition was highlighted and illustrated by the Farm Security Administration (F.S.A) during the American depression of the thirties. Its objective was to document life on rural farms in order to assist poor farmers.

1:New York in the thirties. "The photographs of Bernice Abbott"
   Side Gallery 1977 p.23
2:Ibid.,

But more than this she identified this tradition as realist, photographing people realistically, as they were. It is of course important to establish what exactly Abbott means by 'realism'. She believed realism or a documentary value to be inherent in the photographic process itself and present in every 'good photograph' whose image had not been falsified by exaggerated technical manipulation. It is at most obtamistically a naive understanding of realism. Abbott says; "that the objectivity of the photographer was not the objectiveness of a machine, but a sensible human being with the mystery of personal selection at the heart of it.*3

Abbott paid particular attention to 'personal expression' and creative development, this also introduces the idea that far from being a neutral representation of pre-existing facts, realism may involve certain essential strategies. This concept seen by Abbott was that 'the second challenge for the photographer was to impose order onto things seen and to supply the visual context and the intellectual frame-work for the work and the viewer engaged with it'. This is clear in a sense that what Abbott called the 'aesthetic' factor in photography was not at odds with its documentary or realist purpose.*4 This is clear to some extent to sustain a level of complexity of the 'internal' features of Abbott's 'realism'. Realism is defined here at a level of signification, as the outcome of an elaborate constitutive process.

3:Ibid.,
4:Deduced from Walter Benjamin's <u>Art in the age of mechanical</u> <u>reproduction</u>

It can not be quantified that the realism of representation can simply be through a comparison of the representation with 'reality' somehow known prior to it realisation. The reality of representation does not correspond in any direct or simple way to anything present to us 'before' representation. It is rather the product of a complex process involving the motivated and selective employment of determinate means of representation.

Photographs are optical representations of the external world, the accuracy of the process provides the medium with a fundamental paradox and that is its 'realism'. Its root characteristic is also the source of the wide-spread and false belief that a photograph can not 'lie'; that it verifies what actually exists. However the mechanical nature of photography does limit the range of techniques and visual effects available to photographers and although the content of a photograph is obviously determined by the choice and treatment of subject matter, (the ideology of the photographer) the basic design and range of photographic tones and colours within the image is largely determined by the process itself.

It has been argued that the insertion of the 'natural and universal' in the photograph is particularly forceful because of photography's privilaged status as a guaranteed witness to the actuality of events represented. The photograph seems to declare; **'THIS REALLY HAPPENED'; 'THE CAMERA WAS THERE'; 'SEE FOR YOURSELF'** .*5 (see illustration 1) However if this binding quality of the photograph is partly enforced at a level of 'internal relations', by the degree of

5:Illustration No.1
 Duane Michals photographs with text; 'This Photograph is my proof.

THIS PHOTOGRAPH IS MY PROOF
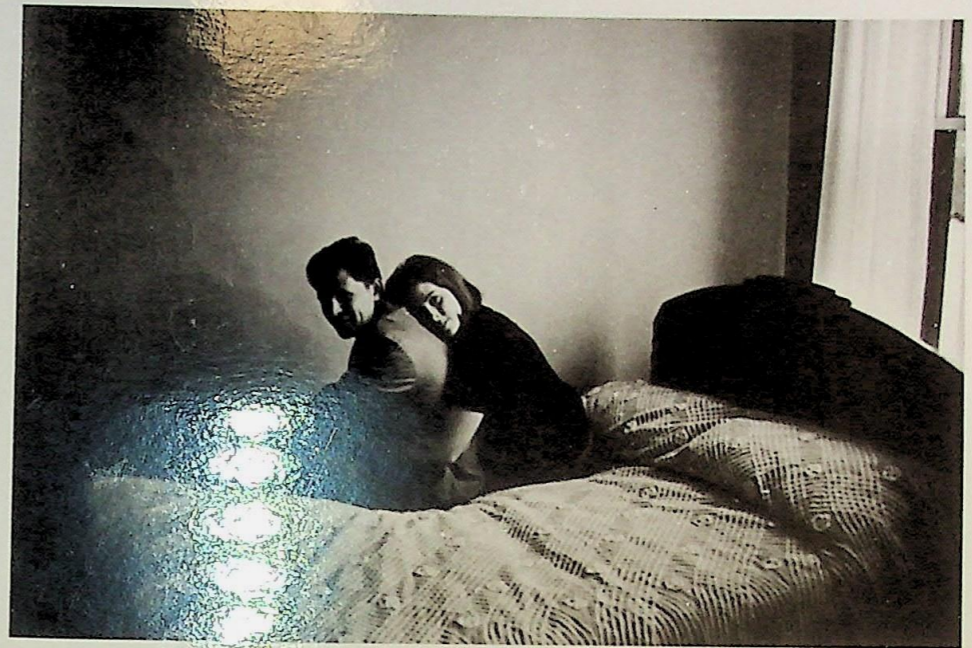
This photograph is my proof. There was that afternoon when things were still good between us, and we embraced and were so happy. She had loved me, Look see for yourself

1: 'This Photograph is my proof' - Duane Michals

definition, it also produced and reproduced by certain privilaged apparatuses, i.e. scientific establishments, goverment departments, police and Army surveillance with a power of authority so strong that human beings can be convicted within the judicial system on the basis of photographic evidence. But this power and privilage on photographic representation is not given to other apparatuses even within the same social institution; i.e. amature photography, art photography and only partially held by photo-journalism. Consider for instance under what circumstances would a photograph of the 'Lough Ness Monster' or an 'Unidentified Flying Object' become acceptable as proof of their existance.

It is only where this functioning of photography within certain ideological apparatuses is ignored that the question of privileged status can be transferred to the alleged 'intrinsic' nature of photography. Thus even where it is accepted that the choices of events, aspect, angle, composition, and depth, represent a whole complex chain of ideologically significant and determinate procedures, it has in a pre-manipulative, a rhetorical level which exists ideally. Roland Barthes imagines a 'neutral', innocent, or Edenic state of the photograph as if there was to begin with a brute photo, (Frontal and clear, or straight forward) on which man disposed, thanks to certain techniques, signs drawn from cultural codes.*6 The word 'neutral' should raise some alarm to the conception of which is precisely ideological. If you consider the documentary work by Walker Evans, Dorothy Lange and many others for the F.S.A. this notion of neutral holds solid (we encounter the frontal and clear ideology). It is itself locatable within a historical typology of photographic configuration; it is the characteristic format of

6:Roland Barthes Image Music Text 'Rethoric of the image'
  p.45 Publisher Flamingo

photographs in offical papers and documents and also predominates in that purer strain of pedigree photographs 'straight photography' - said by so many critics and ideologues to embody 'universal truths'. about existance, about beingness.*7

It is not my intention to get entangled in a heated debate on philosophical concepts of 'truth' but within the context of the essay I feel it necessary to draw from that body of knowledge in order to analyse misconceptions regarding 'Photographic Truth; and Realism'. I have presented Bernice Abbott's truth function of photography or 'documentary value'. Consequently it is also necessary to discuss truth within a social economic and political context, since it is within this institution we read and understand images. Having looked at the intrinsic nature of he photographic process and analysis of operation within certain privileged apparatuses within a given social formation, consider the question of 'truth' which is not only the truth function of photographs, what Susan Sontag has called (quote) "the usually shady commerce between art and 'truth', they are lost, or become valuable, are bought or sold, they are reproduced; stuck in albums, tacked on walls, printed in newspapers collected in books. Cops alphabetise them; museums exhibit them".*8 Photographs and photographic practise appear as essential ingredients in so many social rituals - from custom checks to wedding ceremonies, from public committal of judicial to private receipt of sexual pleasure.

7:Walter Benjamin, A Short History of Photography
   trans. Stanley Mitchell, screen, Vol.13.,1972 p.7
8:Sontag On Photography Penguin 1979

Consider looking at the specific premium put on 'truth', in realist works. The French Philosopher and historiam Michel Foucault has argued that there is a constant articulation of power on knowledge and knowledge on power. The exercise itself creates and causes to emerge new objects of knowledge and accumulates new bodies of information:-

The exercise of power is perpetually creating knowledge and conversely knowledge constantly induces effects of power. The truth of this knowledge is neither outside power nor deprived of it. It is rather that the product of a multiplicity of constraints, which in turn induce the regular effects of power. Therefore it is not the struggle for 'truth' but rather of a struggle around the status of truth and economic role which it plays.*9

What defines and creates 'truth' in any society is a system of more or less ordered procedures for the production regulation, distribution and circulation of statememts. Through these procedures 'truth' is bound in a circular relation to systems of power which produce and sustain it, and to the effect of power which it induces and which, in turn, redirects it. It is this 'dialectical' relation which constitutes what Foucault calls 'a regime of truth'.

9:Michal Foucault <u>The Political function of the Intellectual</u>
  Racial Philosophy, Summers, 1977 p.13

Each society has its regime of truth, its 'general politics' of truth:- that is the types of discourse it harbours and causes to function as true; the mechanisms and instances which are valorised for obtaining truth; the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true.

So 'truth' it appears is a tangible thing, shifting from one balance to another depending on the society and politics within which it is seen. Likewise photographic truths bear witness to certain events and act as proof of the moment in time.*10

The signification of photographic practise holds rhetorical interpretation of the signifying image, the signification of meaning varies within different apparatuses.

'I took a photograph of a man taking a photograph of the Chattanooga Choo Choo - a tourist photographing a tourist. We were both there for more or less the same reasons and we each needed a snapshot to prove it. Such is the nature where the photographic evidence of a quick snap can take on more significance than the experience itself. Photographs become commodification of experience'.*11

10:Ibid., No.5(illustration No.1)
11:John Carson. From American Medley catalogue installation and performance piece. Published by Bluecoat Gallery, Spectro Arts workshop & Basement.

Photographs are tokens of exchange, rarely do people take
photographs as art objects or snapshots of their holidays with the
notion of hiding them in a drawer or handbag (although they
sometimes end up there), they are items of discourse. A discourse
can be defined in rather formal terms as the set of relations
governing the rhetoric of related utterances. The discourse is,
in the most general sense, the context of the utterance, the
conditions that constrain and support its meaning, which determine
its semantic target. This general definition implies of course
that a photograph is an utterance of some sort or other, that it
carries or is a message. Also definition implies that it is an
incomplete utterance a message that depends on some external
matrix of conditions and presupposition for its readability. That
is the meaning or readability of any photographic message is
necessarily context determined. To formulate further this
message;-

> 'A photograph communicates by means of
> association with some hidden text; it is
> this 'text' or system of implicit
> linguistic propostion that carries the
> photograph in a domain of readability,
> (using the word **text** is by way of
> implication), to extract meaning one must
> formulate signs interpreted through
> discourse by means of language.*13

(Written and spoken language will be dealt with later as these are
important aspects as a means of communicating discoure).

13:From Diploma Essay; 'Photographic discourse and Ideology'
   Mick O'Kelly 1984 p.4

Consider for instance the establishment of a rudimentary discourse
situation surrounding image (No.2) if shown to a native of a
primate tribe in Africa e.g. the   flown to Israel. This
image would be unrecogniseable to the native until the detail of
the man is pointed out. This inability seems clear enough to
anyone living in a culture which is unconcerned with two
dimensional, analogue mapping of three-dimensional 'real' space.
Under these propositions the photograph is unmarked as a message,
its a 'non-message' until it is framed or put in context
linguistically by an interpretor or anthropologist. Acknowledging
that this is a message or a sign which can only be read after
learning first that a 'reading' is an appropriate outcome of
contemplating a piece of glossy paper. 'Photographic literacy is
learned'. This image appears to manifest an illusory independence
from the matrix of suppositions determined by its readability.

Having looked at other apparatuses which accept the photograph as
true, (having a truth value), this image challenges this paradox.
Photography so often is used either to sell something or as a
proof of an event, its with a more comprehensive understanding to
its limit or rather the restriction put upon it by the
photographer that we appreciate the implicity of the
quasi-formalist notion that the photograph derives semantic
properties from conditions that reside within the image itself.
(the significance of connotations and denotations will be dealt
with in greater detail later). Anyone with an elementary
knowledge of photography will understand that this image has been
falsified by exaggerated technical manipulation, consequently it
is within a coded language familiar to film and painting. This

Illustration No.2 Duane Michals: Self Portrait with my Guardian
Angel

SELF PORTRAIT WITH MY GUARDIAN ANGEL

My guardian angel's name is Pete. He was born in 1892 and died in 1931. Pete had been a merchant seaman all his life, and he drowned in a terrible storm in the North Sea During his lifetime.
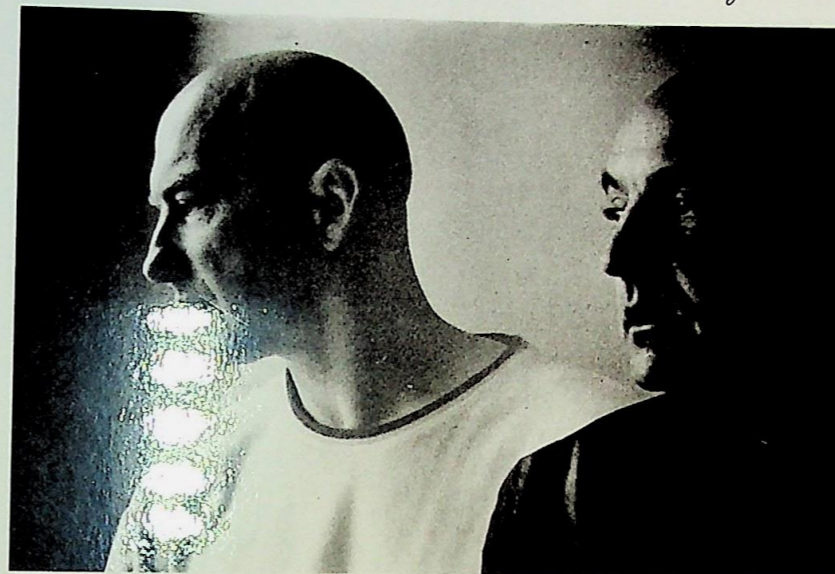
he never became what he might have been. Pete guides me and watches over me.

2: 'Self Portrait with my Guardian Angel' - Duane Michals

might be described as the 'grammer' within which we encode and decode messages. These are achieved by such techniques as 'blured vision' or camera movement causing a rippling effect which may indicate a dream-like quality. Most people are familiar with these techniques and recognise them when they occur.(Image No.3) Works on different levels, as a single image it has more drawing like quality closer to poetry and painting than film. Extracting a message is possible by three levels of meaning. Firstly; it is a self portrait representing two-dimensionally what is in actuality three-dimensionally on light sensitive paper, this could be called the obvious meaning. Secondly; the work deals with the metaphysical. We are told that Michal's Guardian Angel is called Pete. Although a guardian angel does not possess mass or volume, the transparant tonal quality of the photo legitamises Pete's existance using a photographic discourse as proof. Without knowing or being able to recognise from any prior knowledge which one is Michal's and which is Pete, we identify one from the other; Michal's on the right and Pete on the left. This is because of the connoted message familiar to the above apparatuses mentioned. The transparant tonal quality signifies the metaphysical presence of Pete while the darker tones signify Michal's. Thirdly; the photo deals with a time scale not that this is uncommon to photography but what is rhetorical about this is it deals with a time scale from the past and present simultaneously. We know that the self portrait is a representation of Michal within our life time but show Pete who is humanly of an earlier period in history but within the realism of the photographic process as a metaphysical presence. We cannot be innocent of photographs nor afford to neglect an analysis of the apparatuses at work in bringing through the context within its readability. We may, live

the space of the picture, its 'reality', its ideological field. (in the sense which Benjamin describes). If we permit the image to draw us into its allegory, we are drawn into its orbit into the gravitational field of its 'realism'. There it holds us by the force of the 'Past' as successfully as it now exertes the force of the 'present'. If the majority of photographs raises barriers to their close inspection, making protracted analysis seem 'excessive' then these photographs invite a closer view. The further one penetrates the more one is rewarded by the minutiae of detail suspended in the seemingly transparant emulsion. We may experience a loss of our own reality an exchange of presence from image to viewer and vice-versa, an invitation to dream in the ideological space of the photograph. It is perhaps important to mention that dreams have a meaning and are far from being fragmentary activity of the brain.(so the authority claim)*15 When the work of interpretation has been completed, we perceive that a dream is a fulfilment of a wish.

15:Freud <u>The Interpretation of Dreams</u> Penguin 1976

CHAPTER 2

Within the last fifty years of this century considerable attention
has been paid to the mechanics of signification, works of great
relevance to those concerned to construct meanings from
appearances. Leaving aside film, the influence of such theory
within art has so far been confined to a very few of those
manifestations which have attracted the journalistic tag
'conceptual'. One thing conceptual art has done apart from
underlying the central importance of theory is to make the
photograph an important tool of practise. The consequence of such
moves has been to further render the categorical distribution
between art and photography ill-founded and irrelevant. If you
consider Bernice Abbot's ideology on photography regarding its
truth or documentary value the basis of any mood or feeling
photographs might produce as much as any overt 'message' they
might be thought to transmit, depend not only on something
individual and mystrious but rather on our common knowledge of
typical facts and values; in other words on our knowledge of the
way things (objects) transmit and transform ideology, the way in
which photographs in their turn transform these. To appreciate
such operations we must first loose any illusion about the
neutrality of objects before the camera.

John Hilliard employs narrative for the basis of the majority of
his work. **Depression/Jealousy/Agression,*1** (see illustration
No.3) employs the device of altering focus to produce three images
of the same event. This work exploits cinematic codes provoking a
narrative reading by the successive disclosure of information:
moving from a close up of a bearded man with a sullen expression
to a kissing couple in the middle ground of the room, to a mirror
in the centre background which reflects the back of the man and
over his shoulder the camera which is recording the scene.
Similiarly as in photo-novel, captions explain the images and
reinforce a textual reading based on stereotypes. However the
final image and caption subvert such a reading or at least
contextualise it. The text gives a narrative description of an
action in time beyond the scope of the still image. With a few
brisk steps the man moved; to place himself in front of the
intrusive photographer who was already rapidly taking pictures of
the unsuspecting couple. 'Any scandle at this stage would have
been disastrous'*2. This makes the camera implicated in the
narrative as an abstract agent of society of law as a social
institution represents an important development from the abstract
epistenology of the 'conditions' worked. This piece of work
equates the spectators view point with that of the camera which is
threatened by the subject in the photography rendering the viewers
position an uneasy one.

1:Illustration No. 3: John Hilliard
  Depression/Jealousy/Aggression I.C.A. Catalogue 1985.
2:From I.C.A. Catalogue 1984 John Hilliard

3: 'Depression/Jealousy/Aggression' - John Hilliard

It also draws attention to the camera as a machine bringing about an awareness of its application, shifting of focus and depth of field, demonstrating the signification of objects before the camera as anything but neutral where rhetorical readings or meanings stem from the ideology of the photographer, each piece drawing attention to different signifying elements within the same frame.

Obviously photographs only take place where there is light and a substance which reflects light. The substance is the stuff of our material enviroment; amongst it we discriminate between hard and soft, animate and inanimate and so on; we discriminate between physical things. It is these things of which photography provides pictures, but 'things' or 'objects' are never just simply things to us. Externalising his physical, man ascribes a use-value to things about him (for instance he opposes the edible to the inedible). Furthermore he intervenes in the enviroment, reforming through his labour the substances given in nature. A stone which is first a brute physical substance becomes here a hammer there an axe. The axe and the hammer may be said to belong to the same object system within which, in spite of their similarities, they are differentiated according to observable characteristics; bluntness on the one hand, sharpness on the other. These characteristics are at once a sign of their actual or potential use and the trace of man's activity upon them. Obviously they are no longer mere fragments of rock. Although remaining substantially identical they are now formally differentated, they have taken on a 'meaning'. Moreover, all previous 'inate' stones in the environment are now overlain with projected signification. Without labouring the point I would like to draw an analogy within photography,(see illustration image No. 4 "Cause of Death",John

Hilliard 1974), looking at the 'Cause of Death' the title itself raises expectations of the discovery of truth but this is frustrated through the manifestly distorting nature of the devices of photography, closure of image and text a parody reportage. The same image of the man is shown four times, the angle of the camera lens is in exactly th same position. But disclosing partial information and introducing different elements connote different meanings for each image, **Crushed, Drowned, Burned, Fell.** Similiarly with the stones, looking at this photographic work and drawing attention to specific detail gives rise to different signification between the elements.

Illustration No.4 John Hilliard "Cause of Death" I.C.A. Catalogue 1974.

4: 'Cause of Death' - John Hilliard

Differences imposed upon material substances are transformed into sound. The variants bluntness and sharpness become designated by conventions of sound variation. Humanly produced cries, themselves at first brute physical 'sound substances'; become here the word 'blunt' there the word 'sharp'. Here Crushed there Burned, Fell etc., The human labourer must learn how to differentiate and compose his materials. He must learn how to form what is natural (the stone, his cries) into what is cultural (the axe, and the word). Language is an artifact among other artifacts, an instrument among other instruments by which man organises his enviroment. Its a 'tool' used to perform a certain class of operations in the enviroment, its however a double privilaged tool: not only providing the means of socialising all instrumental operations but also, the means of constructing those abstrations which locate these operations within culture.

In the very moment of their being perceived, objects are placed within an intelligible system of relationships (no realigy can be innocent before the camera). They take their position, that is to say, within an ideology. By ideology I mean, in its broadest sense, a complex of propositions about the normal and social world which would be generally accepted in a given society as describing the actual; indeed necessary nature of the world and its events. An ideology is the sum of taken for granted realities of everyday life; more precisely; the common frame of reference for the project of individual actions. Ideology take an infinite variety of forms, what is essential about it is, that it is contingent and that within it the fact of its contingency is suppressed.

It is in this taking for granted as natural and immutable that which is historical and contingent that we encounter idology in the classical Marxist sense. In this sense the essence of ideology is that it represents the individual's false 'consiousness' of his actual conditions of existence. For instance Marx and Ruskin declared "that the belief common to both factory owner and factory worker that labour may be fairly bought for wages is a mystification".*3 The illusion conceals the fact that, as the value of a commodity depends on the labour invested in it, the owner is appropriating as profit what belongs by right to the labourer; profits are unpaid wages. Where such a conception is embedded in the prevailing ideology, it will also be embodied in prevalent forms of language. It is common for instance to speak of people 'making money' out of speculation in stocks or currency. These people do not make money in any literal sense; that is the business of the Royal Mint. Neither do they create wealth which is done by those engaged in productive labour.

The expression making money presents us with a mystification, a sort of knack of conjuring money out of this air, the less utterable fact that wealth is again merely being appropriated. Forms of artifacts as much as forms of language serve to communicate ideologies. For instance if clothing were simply functional, then it is highly unlikely we would see either the static uniformity of dress in the People Republic of China or the dynamic uniformity of dress on Grafton St. on a good summers day. Each ostensibly a functional material item which appears in the world is classified as an object variant and integrated into on object variants, the richer the semantic possibilities.

3: Unto this Last by John Ruskin
   Chpt. 'The veins of wealth'.
   Edited by P.M. Yarker
   Publishers Collins 1970

(more is said with motorcars in the West than in the East). It is
not simply a matter of 'status symbols' a notion as ambiguous as
it is ubiquitous. The total ideology of society is imprinted in
its production and consumption of materials objects. Even the
natural landscape is appropriated by ideology, being rendered in
anthropocentric perception, beautiful, hostile, or picturesque.

All that constitutes reality for us is then impregnated with
meanings. These meanings are the contingent products of history
and in sum reflect our ideology. The awareness of this may be
retrospective reflection but not at the moment of perception.
Objects presented to the camera are already in use in the
production of meanings and photography has no choice but to
operate upon such meanings. Finding meanings in images can come
about in various ways. In understanding denoted and connoted
reading of images we may distinguish between the interal message
and the symbolic message this becomes operational; (we rarely
encounter at least in advertising) a literal image in a pure
state. (by pure I mean having an obvious meaning) Even if a
totally 'naive' image were to be achieved it would immediately
join the sign of naivety and be completed by a third
symbolic-message. The characteristic of the literal message can
not be substantial but only relational. It is first of all a
message by eviction, constituted by what is left in the image when
the signs of connotation are mentally deleted. As an example(see
illustration No.5)
(a critical analysis will be dealt with in the summary). This
evictive state naturally corresponds to a fullness of
virtualities; it is an absence of meaning and yet full of all
meanings (without there being a contradiction in terms). This
could be said to be the third level of meaning.

Illustration No.5 One part of a work Zoo by Victor Burgin
Block No.7. p.20-21

The plan is circular: at the periphery an annular building; at the centre, a tower pierced with many windows. The building consists of cells; each has two windows: one in the outer wall of the cell allows daylight to pass into it; another in the inner wall looks onto the tower, or rather is looked upon by the tower, for the windows of the tower are dark, and the occupants of the cells cannot know who watches, or if anyone watches.

5: 'Zoo, Sex Text Politics - Victor Burgin
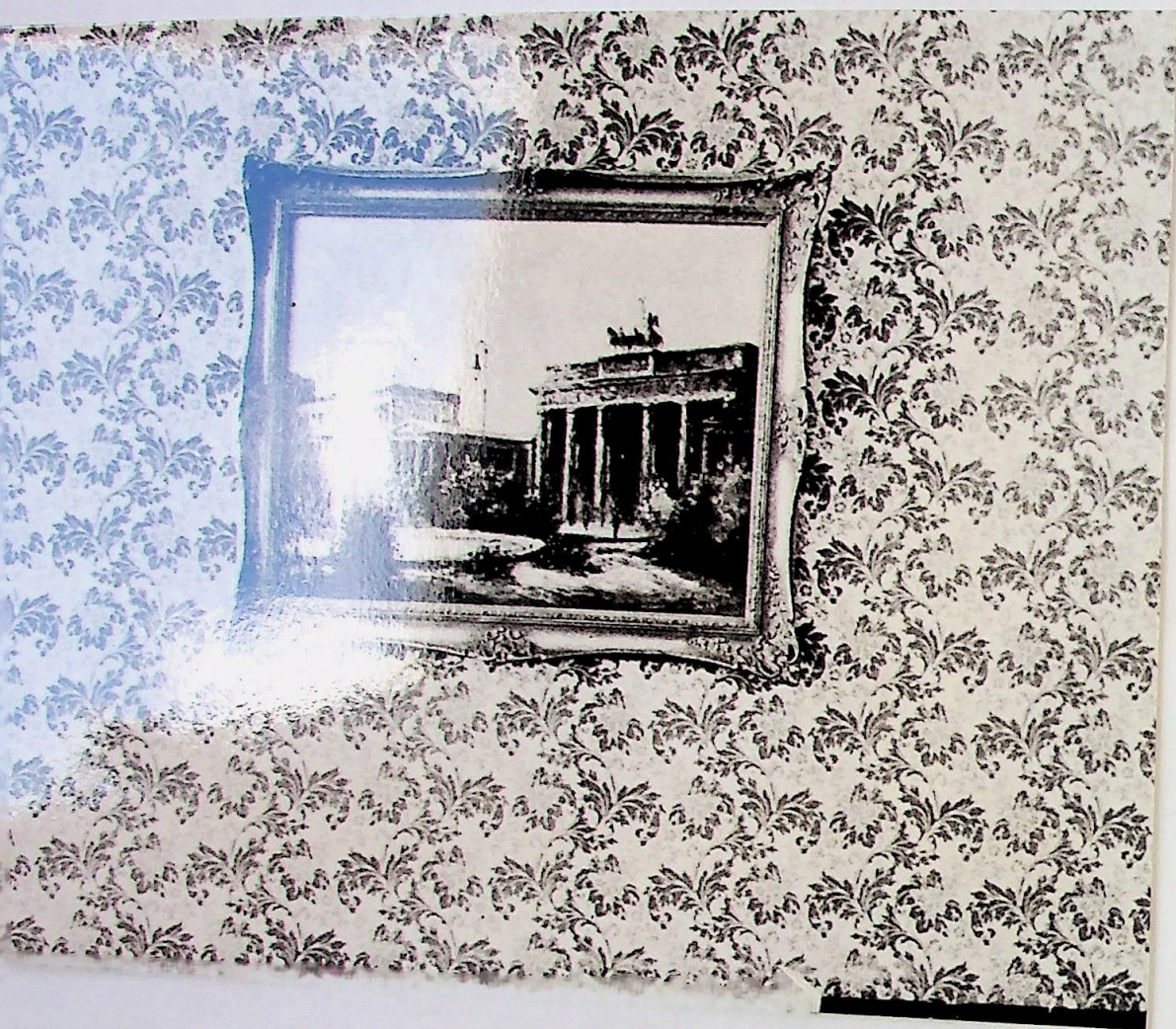
The utopian character of connotation is considerable re-inforced
by a paradox i.e.(a press photograph) in its literal state and by
virtue of its absolutely analogical nature, seems to constitute a
message without a code. However using structural analysis must
differentiate for all kinds of images only the photograph is able
to transmit the literal information without forming it by means of
discontinuous signs and rules of transformation, (with specific
comparison to drawing, even drawing leaves something out and is at
all times influenced by style).

In the photograph - at least at a level of the literal message -
the relationship of signifieds to signifers is not one of
transformation but of 'recording', and the absence of a code
clearly reinforces the notion of the myth of photographic
naturalness; the scene is there, captured mechanically, not
humanly (the mechanical is here a guarentee of objectivity). This
you might say is at the level of denotation. The intervention of
the photographer on the photograph (framing, distance, lighting,
focus, speed) all effectively belong to the plane of connotation.
(As mentioned earlier); it is as though in the begining there were
a brute photograph(frontal and clear) on which the photographer
can lay out with the art of various techniques, the signs drawn
from cultural codes. The consciousness the photograph involves is
indeed truly unprecedented, since it establishes not a
consciousness of the 'being there' of the thing (which any copy
could provoke), but an awareness of its 'having-been-there'. Just
as in Duane Michals with this Guardian Angel, what we have is a
new space-time category; spatial immediacy and temporal
anteriorty, the photograph being an illogical conjunction between
the 'here - now' and the 'there - then'. It is thus at the level

of this denoted message or message without a code that the
unreality of the photograph can be fully understood; its unreality
is that the 'here - now', for the photograph is never experienced
as illusion, is in no way a presence(claims as to the photographic
must be delfated); its reality of having been there from which we
are being sheltered. This kind of temporal equilibrium (having
been there) probably deminishes the projective power of the image
(very few psychological tests resort to photographs while many use
drawings), the 'this was so' easily defeats the 'its me'.

The denoted image reminds me of a mirror which always reflects
objectively. This comes to mind remembering an incident which
occured recently. Our young son who is two years old preceives
himself and myself as always being in the picture in the bathroom
even when else where in the house. He has mistaken our reflected
likeness for our actual presence, now he is a little older still
showing signs of confusion when enquiring of his presence and the
likeness of himself in the photograph. This Edenic state of
denotation is at all times objective and innocent without a code.

At all events, the denoted image, to the extent to which it does
not imply any code i.e.(news and advertising photos); plays a
special role in the general structure of the iconic message which
we can begin to define or make clear (in discussing the third
level meaning next), the denoted image naturalises the symbolic
message, it makes innocent the semantic artifice of connotation,
(by semantic I mean cultural influences) which is extremely dense
especially in advertising imagery. If we look back at Duane
Michal's 'This photograph is my proof'. Although this photograph
and text reads like poetry and hold connotative implications,

there non the less remains in the photograph in so far as the
literal message is suffcient, a kind of natural 'being-there' of
objects. Nature seen spontaneously to produce the scene
representated. A pseudo-truth is secretly substituted for the
simple validity of open semantic systems; the absence of a code on
the one hand disintellectualizes the message because it seems to
find in nature the signs of culture. If accepted, this becomes an
important historical paradox; the more technology develops the
diflusion of information (notably of images) the more it provides
the means of masking the constructed meaning under the appearance
of the giving meaning.

Not all images work on three levels of meanings but many do, the
first meaning is at an informational level or its obvious reading
which gathers together everything to be learned from elements
within the image (the bare message), secondly is the symbolic
level. Its mode of analysis would be a semiotics more highly
developed than the first, a second or neo-semiotics, open no
longer to the science of the message but to the science of the
'symbol'. Taken in its entirety, this second level is that of
signification. The third level of meaning relates to that of a
metaphor where the interrogative reading lies precisely on the
signifier and not on the signified, This is a combimation of the
three. It can be seen that the signs of the third message (the
symbolic message, culture or connoted) are discontinuous even when
the signifier seen to extend over the whole image. It is none the
less a sign seperate from the others; the composition carries an
aesthetic signified in much the same way as an utterance although
segmented is a seperate signifier in language. Thus dealing with
a normal system whose signs are drawn from a cultural code (even

if the linking together of elements of the sign appears more or
less analogical). What gives this system its originality is that
the number of readings of the same image varies according to
individuals. The variation in readings is not however, anachic,
it depends on different kinds of knowledge, - practical, national,
cultural, aesthetic invested in the image and these can be
classified and brought into a typology. If you like it is as
though the image presented itself to the reading of several
different people who can perfectly well co-exist in a single
individual one lexia mobilises different lexicons. (A lexia is a
portion of the symbolic plane of language which corresponds to a
body of practices and techniques.*4 This is the case of different
reading of the image, each sign corresponds to a body of
'attitudes' - tourism, housekeeping, knowledge of art - certain of
which may obviously be lacking in this or that individual. We,
when formulating our feelings or emotions about images, works of
art, the one we love, good and bad food, articulate these feelings
through language. The image is penetrated through and through by
the system of meaning, in exactly the same way as man is
articulated to the very depth of his being in distinct language.
The language of the image is not merely the totality of utterances
emmitted, e.g.(it is at the level of the combiner of the signs or
creater of messages), it is also the totality of utterance
received.*5

4:In the Saussurian perspective, speech(utterances) is above all
that which is emmitted, drawn from the language systems(and
constituting it in return). It is necessary today to enlarge the
notion of language, especially from the semantic point of view:
language is the 'totalizing abstraction' of the messages emmitted
and received.
5:Ibid.,(From No.6 Chapter 1)

Although this is not the time nor place to discuss this point, it is an interesting notion concerning works of art, the concerns about their making and significance of their audience. The significancy of their making surely is to emmit an utterance remains with the signifier, this depending on the knowledge or disposition of the viewer, the total effect of the work is not known. The difference between different 'art works' is, some become the consumer of ideas, while others demand the enviroment to construct meanings. One artist who uses photographic works in a conceptual way is Victor Burgin. I wish to discuss some of his work to support this thesis.

Burgin works with photography and text, superimposing one over the other and uses 35mm format exclusively. His work is didactic, with a political leftist ideology.

In support of different levels of meaning,*6 this piece of work is four photographs, two with text and two without. In viewing the first half (see illustration), there is a photograph of a woman with text alongside and the adjacent one is of the Braudenburg Gate (taken in a cafe), the work is about the Berlin everyone knows, even though they may never have been there, associations of the Berlin wall enclosure, isolation. The Berlin of the twenties with its reputation for 'decadence' sexuality, its cosmopolitan character. The conceptual notions of not the real Berlin but the city of the mind. Arriving at the main railway station in Berlin (Zoolgishe Garten) you would be surrounder by an enclosure of the Zoo alongside the station and sex shops (shows) called 'peep-shows'. The enviroment is familiar and consistant where a naked girl dances on a small revolving stge with booths all round

6:Ibid.,(Illustration No.5 Chapter 2)

which can be entered; and by putting a coin in the slot you get a peep at the girl. The text on this image describes the structure of the Panoptican prison. This is a prison where all the inmates can be watched from a single central tower. It is this building which Foucault has used as a metaphor for our contemprorary forms of society-under-surveillance.

A geographic knowledge of Berlin is required towards reading this work as not too far away from the 'peep-show' is the wall with men peeping through slits, in concreate boxes. Thus the work is about obvious links or associations between these different forms of surveillance. This voyearism is a componant of scopophilia (sexually based pleasure in looking); this sexually gratifying look and the object of this look is mostly directed at woman in our society. The woman in the peep-show is an object of desire, this could be an obvious reading of the photograph. The link between this and the photograph on the right, the picture of the Brandenburg Gate has to do with 'photography' and the 'Gallery Space'. On one level the connections are made through an aperture, one the aperture of a photograph opens up a hole in the Gallery wall and the other aperture of the booth in the 'peep-show'. The function of the aperture is pertaining specifically to photography as part of that apparatus mentioned earlier, different areas of 'surveillance'. It is at a conscious level of reading of the photograph of the girl in the 'peep-show' where, aware of the peep hole in the booth and the peep hole of the aperture of the camera. The cross connections are the frame of the painting. Consider the idea of the frame as an aid to 'looking' as a scopophilic device, like a key hole these connections are common to both photographs, but act on a level of

formal connections nevertheles are more than just visual design.
Consider other connections which are more to do with content more
in line with the over all theme of the piece based on contrast as
much as similarity. Both the woman and the gate are in a manner
of speaking, objects of desire, one object is cast in the
discourse of sexuality while the other is cast within the
discourse of politics and history.

While reading levels of meaning from the first part of the work of
the girl in the booth connoted and denoted meanings are for me
more obvious whereas a knowledge of German history and politics is
required to deduce those meanings implied by the artist. For me
its either cryptic or show my ignorance of German History.
Through the course of the interview Burgin explains "that the
picture of the gate is old Berlin before the war. He explains
that many roads have been left running straight into the Wall,
often with decaying signs from the immediate post-war period,
telling you you are leaving the American, English, or French
sector. Its a way of treating the division of Berlin and so of
Germany as a whole, as a purely temporal abberration. The
p[ainting hanging in the cafe can be seen as contributing to the
pervasive disavowal of the real situation."*7

7:From Sex Text Politics Block No. 7 p.20-21

Thus the desire spoken of or implied is a desire of the refutable
past of the undivided Berlin. Desire for something or object is
an indication of something which seems to be lacking inside us.
Is this not the very reason why people got to 'peep-shows',
something from their past which has not been complete or
fulfilled. Consequentally it is this desire for the pre-war
Berlin Gate which acts as a symbol, an object in a metaphorical
sense will fulfill the devision in modern Berlin. Tony Godfray
pais more attention to the wallpaper than the Brandenburg Gate,
his associations where connections between the wallpaper as
formalist drawings and pattern and pin-up of nude women. As a
part of the main narrative this supports and demonstrates he
extent of cultural reasonances of this particular piece which I'm
sure is common to all imagery.

CHAPTER 3

It is almost as unusual to pass a day without seeing a photograph
as it is to miss writing. Within one institutional context or
another - the press, family, snapshots etc., photographs permeate
the environment, facilitating the formation/reflection/inflection
of what we 'take for granted'. The daily instrumentality of
photography is clear enough, to sell, inform, record, delight.
Clear, but only to the point at which photographic representations
loose themselves in the ordinary world they help to construct.
Recent theory (by the forementioned writers) follows photography
beyond where it has effaced its operations in the
'nothing-to-explain'.

It has previously been most usual (we blame the interia of our
educational institutions for this) to view photography in the
light of 'art' - a source of illumination which consigns to
shaddow the greater part of our day-to-day experience of
photographs. What has been most often described as a delicate
difference of opinions of 'art-history' brought about by the
invention of the camera, a strong cast within the familiar
confines of a succession of masters, 'masterworks and moments', a
partial account which leaves the social fact of photography
largely untouched.

As previous discussed photography sharing the static image with
painting, the camera and film tend to be placed between these two
mediums, but is encountered in a completely different way from
either of them. Not only are photographs neither an accumulation
of stills to make a film but for the majority, paintings and films
are only seen as a result of a voluntery act which quite clearly
entails an expenditure of time and/or money. Although photographs

may be shown in Art Gallerys and sold in book form, most photographs are not seen by deliberate choice, they have no special space or time allotted to them, they are apparently (an important qualification) provided free of charge. Photographs offer themselves gratuitously, whereas paintings and films readily present themselves to critical attention as objects, photographs are received more as an enviroment. As a free and familiar coinage of meanings, largely unremarked and untheorised by those amongst whom it circulates, photography shares an attribute of language. However although it has long been common to speak loosely, of the language of photography (this is quite distinct from the language of images dealt with earlier), it was not until the late 1960's that any systematic investigation of forms of communication outside of natural language was constructed from the stand point of linguistic science, such early 'semiotic' studies and their aftermath, have radically reorientated the theory of photography. This is what semiotics has brought to bare on photography over the past 20 years.

Semiotics or semiology, is the study of signs with the object of identifying the systematic regularities from which meanings are constructed. In the early phase of 'structuralist' semiology Roland Barthes*8, first published in 1964, close attention was paid to the analogy between natural language (the phenomonan of speech and writing) and the visual 'languages'. In this period work dealt with the codes of analogy by which photographs denote objects in the world. (this is the summary of the previous discussion)

8:Roland Barthes <u>Writing Degree Zero & Elements of Semiology</u>
Publishers Jonathan Cape 30 Bedford Sq. London 1984

The code of connotation serves a secondary system of meanings and the 'rhertorical' codes of juxtaposition of elements within a photograph and between different but adjacent photographs. Work in semiotics showed that there is no 'language of photography' no single signifying system (as opposed to technical apparatus) upon which all photographs depend ("in the sense in which all English ultimately depends upon the English language")*9. There is rather a hetrogeneous complex of codes upon which photography may draw. Each photograph signifies on the basis of a plurality of these codes, the number and type of which varies from one image to another. Some of these are (at least to first analysis) peculiar to photography e.g. the various codes built around 'focus' and 'blur'. Furthermore it was shown that the putatively autonomous language of photography is never free from the determinations of language itself.

We rarely see a photograph in use which does not have a caption or a title, it is more usual to encounter photographs attached to long text or copy superimposed over them. This holds across the board from 'art' photography to psychiatic hospitals and police surveillance. Even a photograph which has no actual writing on or around it is traversed by language when it is 'read' by a viewer for example an image which is predominantly dark in tone carries all the weight of signification that darkness has been given in social use, many of us interpretants will therefore be linguistic, when we speak metaphotically of an unhappy person being 'gloomy'.

9:From Diploma Essay Photograph discourse & Ideology
   Michael O'Kelly 1984

The intelligibility of the photograph is not as obvious as it appears, photographs are text inscribed in terms of what we may call photographic 'discourse' but this discourse like any other engages discourse beyond itself, the photographic text like any other is the site of a complex intertextuality at a particular cultural and historical conjecture. Those prior texts, those presupposed by the photograph are autonomous, they serve a role in the actual text but do not appear in it, they are as it were latent to the manifest text and may only be read across, photographic imagery is typically laconic (an effect refined and exploited by advertising).

Treating the photograph as an object text semiotics show (particularly those of Barthes) that the notion of the 'purely visual' image is nothing but an Edenic fiction. Further to this however, whatever specificity might be attributed to photography at the level of the 'image' is inextricably caught up within the specificity of the social acts which intend that image and its meanings. If this point is accepted Bernice Abbott's ideological criteria for photographic truth or realist purpose (documentary value) does not hold as absolute truth, at the most her attempt to show documentary truth can only at best transend appearances of reality. News-photographs help transform the raw material of historical flux into the product of 'news' domestic snapshots help legitimise the institution of family etc., For many photographic practise given materials are transformed into an identifiable type of product by men and women using a particular technical method and working within particular institutions. The significant structures which early semiotics found in photography are not spontaneously self-generted, they originate in determinate modes

of human organisations. The question of meanings therefore is constantly to be referred to the social and psychic formations of the author/reader, formations existently simultaneous and co-extensive but theorised in seperate discourse.

Earlier writing of Barthes set out to uncover language like organisation of the dominant myths which command the meaning of photographed appearances in our society. More recently theory has moved to consider not only the structure of appropriations to ideology of that which is 'uttered' in photographs, but also to examine the ideoloical implications inscribed within the performance of the utterance. This enquirey directs attention to the object/subject constructed within the technical apparatus itself. The signifying system of photography like that of classical painting at once depicts a scene and the gaze of he spectator, an object and the viewing subject. The two dimensional analogical signs of photography are formed within an apparatus which is essentially that of the camera obscura of the Renaisance.

The camera obscura with which Niepce made the first photograph in 1826 directed the image formed lens via, a mirror on a gound glass screen-precisely in the manner of the modern single lens reflex camera. Whatever the object depicted, the manner of its depiction accords with the laws of geometric projection which imply a unique point-of-view, taken by the camera, which is bestowed upon the spectator. To the point-of-view the system of representation adds the form (which can be traced back to easel painting), through the agency into a coherence which it actually lacks.

The structure of representation point-of-view and frame - is immediately implicated in the reproduction of ideology (the frame of the mind of our point of view). More than any other textual system the photograph presents itself as 'an offer you can't refuse'. The characteristics of the photographic apparatus positions the subject in such a way that the object photographed serves to conceal the textuality of the photograph itself, substituting passive receptivity for active critical reading. Earlier I spoke of photographic literacy, when confronted with puzzle photography of the "what is it"? variety (usually familiar object shot from unfamiliar angles) we are made aware of having to select from sets of possible alternatives, of having to supply information the image itself does not contain. Once we have discovered what the depicted object is however, the photograph is instantly transformed for us; no longer a confusing conglomerate of light and dark tones of uncertain edges and ambivalent volumes, it now shows a 'thing' which we invest meaning with a full identity, a being. With most photographs we see, this decoding and investiture takes place instantaneously, unselfconsciously, naturally; but it does take place, the wholeness coherence, identity, which we attribute to the depicted scene is a projection, a refusal of an impoverished reality in favour of an imaginary pleutitude.

Final illustration No. 6
Duane Michals 'My failed Attempt to photograph reality'

A FAILED ATTEMPT TO PHOTOGRAPH REALITY

How foolish of me to believe that it would be that easy I had confused the appearances of trees and people with reality itself, and I believed that a photograph of these transient appearances to be a photograph of it. It is a melancholy fact that I can never photograph it and can only fail. I am a reflection photographing other reflections within a reflection.
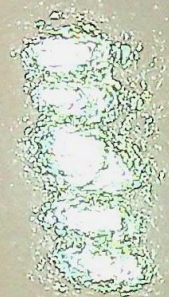
6:'A Failed Attempt to Photograph Reality' — Duane Michals

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