

Student name: Karol Leon Dierzuk

Student number: 2005002

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Lecturer: Paul Duerinckx

The aftermath of the 19th century Industrial Revolution had a profound effect on Charles Baudelaire as a Romantist poet. The movement highly valued individual expression, intense emotion and the sublime; Baudelaire himself mentions that the essence in Romanticism is 'not the subject nor depiction of truth, but the feeling itself' (1846). Having observed the ease of reproduction in then infant photography, he expressed concerns for the perceived lack of human element he thought present in traditional forms of art such as painting, poetry or sculpture (1859). In his 1859 Salon review, Baudelaire boldly proclaimed, 'It is useless and tedious to represent what exists because nothing that exists satisfies me. I prefer the monsters of my fantasy to what is positively trivial.' This highly subjective assertion, though provocative, is no longer applicable to not only photography, but the fine arts as a whole as it invalidates personal experience of artists around the world, ignoring reality in favour of fantasy.

Baudelaire's views are rooted in the context of 19th century France, where photography was still considered new, therefore it is appropriate to question how applicable those views are to world-wide photography of the 21st century. Today the medium has transcended its initial limitations, with photographers employing diverse techniques of digital editing which allow for what is, perhaps, the most robust form of self-expression to date. Photography is the most accessible it's ever been as ordinary people now participate in image making, leading to the true democratisation of photography (Sontag, 1977). This leads to artistic experimentation with self-expression, and liberation from traditional constraints put on artists (Benjamin, 1935). Photography now also allows women and people of other gender identities to participate, something that was not popular in Baudelaire's times (Rosenblum, 1994), but is no doubt a point of discussion today, as many document their life and express themselves creatively through lens-based mediums.

Baudelaire often referred to photography as a medium that takes away from art, its mortal enemy. However, by assuming one's superiority over the other, he found photography to be useful for one thing - flaneur's means of documentation.

The flaneur, who traditionally is portrayed as a male observer of urban life, finds the photographic medium as a useful *tool* of what he sees. Photography then allows the flaneur to produce memorabilia of what is real; to freeze a scene in time and produce a miniature of reality (Sontag, 1977). However, the notion of the flaneur, according to Baudelaire, cannot solidify itself on the idea of detachment if photography is only understood as a physical,

literal reproduction of the world, as the act of photographing is something that ties a person to the real, to the material. If one wishes to defend Baudelaire's ideology of the flaneur, then one must also understand the meaning of this in the modern world – the flaneur becomes something of a tourist, someone who finds life picturesque, takes a photograph and moves on (Sontag, 1977). This is why it's important to understand photography as a bridge between inward and outward, hidden truths and reality, not only as a firm copy of 'the real'.

Documentation and expression often go hand in hand with perception and memory. In *On Photography* (1977), Susan Sontag discusses the role of photography in shaping personal and collective memory. She argues that this depiction can be highly curative and show only a portion of what is real. When approaching a photograph, it can be read as subjective and objective at the same time, as truth and interpretation - all depending on the context of said photograph.

When looking at Wolfgang Tillman's *Fragile Waves* (2016), four figures are standing in the sea, waiting for a wave to come their way. Depending on the viewer, one might read this depiction as playful, another as scary, however without the context of the exhibition as a whole, the general message is clear - this image doesn't immediately read as political.



Figure 1, Wolfgang Tillmans, *Fragile Waves* (2016)

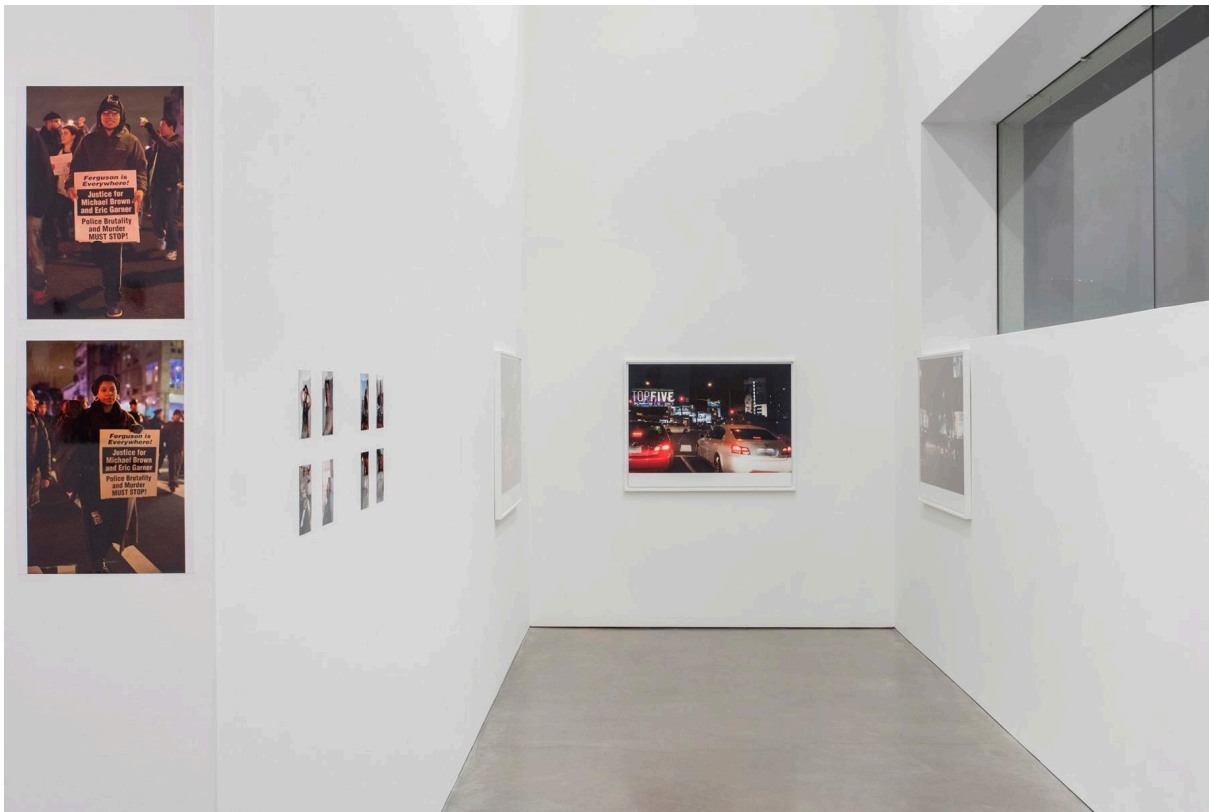


Figure 2, Wolfgang Tillmans at Regen Projects, Los Angeles, 2016

Yet when looking at Tillmans' 2016 exhibition at Regen Projects in Los Angeles, surrounded by portraits, pictures of fabric, experimentation on textures and documentation of protests on police brutality, the metaphor becomes obvious - what it feels like to swim against the current in the name of truth. And what is Tillmans' truth? In his own words 'The photograph may always lie about what is in front of the camera, but never lies about what is behind the camera. I found that to be absolutely true.' Given the context of his practice, especially motivated by his identity as a gay man, Tillmans advocates for authenticity and honesty. The notion of taking pictures to see the world (Tillmans, 2001) encourages fellow artists to understand the motion of producing art as an exercise to look inwards, as meaningful art is produced when the viewer relates to the artist through the medium.

Baudelaire supports innovation and modernism but only in the context of fine art, as soon as the conversation changes to photography, he advocates against it (1859). This is further explored in Susan Blood's 1986 critique '*Baudelaire against Photography: An Allegory of Old Age*', where his aversion to photography becomes clear. Baudelaire critiques photography as it lacks human touch (Blood, 1986), however this statement loses validity when the definition of Romantist practice is brought back into picture. Real art, according to Baudelaire

(1846), is one that is a feeling, something later described by Roland Barthes as *punctum* (Barthes, 1988). The depth of emotion and memory is what Roland Barthes explores in his 1988 book *Camera Lucida* in which he touches on the love and loss associated with photography. Barthes ponders on dynamics functioning between *studium*, which is the cultural, social, and historical context of a photograph - that what makes it engaging to the viewer - and *punctum*, a point inside a picture that evokes an emotional response from the viewer. Barthes theorises that it's possible to explain *studium* logically and understand it, but *punctum* is only understood emotionally and depends on the viewer's personal experience. Because pictures can fix instant moments of life and historicise them endlessly, they become vessels of memory and emotion, inspiring our contemplation on what makes life meaningful. By piercing the heart of reality, the camera goes beyond a mere means of documenting it (Barthes, 1981). The camera becomes a window through which one can look in on other people's realities in an act of learning, loving and relating. Like in Tillmans' work, the viewer can better understand hidden truths about themselves, only now through observing other people's artistic practice.



Figure 3 - Laurence Philomene, *Puberty* (2019-ongoing)



Figure 4 - Laurence Philomene, *huldufolk*, 2019

Laurence Philomene, a non-binary photographer from Montreal, Canada, explores the metaphor of trans existence as everchanging nature, something fluid like the water and shifting like the Icelandic soil where their project *huldufolk* has been shot. To the outside viewer, these images might not represent much, however this quickly changes when one is able to identify what they're looking at - testosterone vials, injection needles, the artist looking at their changing body, once critically, another time embracing it. The meaning of those images is highly personal, however this is exactly the point Barthes made in *Camera Lucida* - punctum varies from viewer to viewer and often eludes descriptions (1981), but this is what makes art meaningful - it's 'soul' and ability to connect people. Documentation or abstraction, modern photography is a direct contradiction of what Baudelaire thinks of it, and certainly does not lack human touch, if anything it is full of it. Philomene's photographs allow viewers to observe life of a transgender person, and understand better that this is not a topic of a political debate, but reality for many people around the world (Mermaids, 2021) who due to restrictive and oppressive laws are struggling to live freely.

Photography can also be used as a form of rebellion. In Guy Debord's pivotal book 'The *Society of the Spectacle*' (1967) he brings to light the extensive use of images by modern

society, which in his opinion has made the image, and therefore the truth, inauthentic and unreliable. Debord still believes however that there is potential for art to subvert dominant ideology and challenge the status quo. He sees the Situationist movement, of which he was a part, as an example of artistic rebellion against the spectacle, advocating for the creation of 'situations' that disrupt the alienating routines of everyday life and encourage active participation and collective action. Photography can be seen not only as a means to capture reality, but also to form public opinion about said reality (1967). Through their artworks and personal experience, artists can raise viewers' awareness about the past and present, and give them a chance to express their dissent. In a world where images typically act as ways of creating disorientation and spreading misinformation, artists can still influence public opinion and challenge traditional concepts (1967). The unique medium of arts through photography and film can disrupt the mainstream narratives as unique focalised perspectives to prime ideologies and thoughts amongst the viewers.



Figure 5 - Roger Fenton *Shadow of the Valley of Death*, (1855)

Fenton's *Shadow of the Valley of Death* (1855) acts as a good example of misinformation in photography. It is widely speculated that the artist moved the cannonballs from the side of a road to its center (Sontag, 2003), thus creating an inauthentic depiction of his found reality. For years to come, war photography as such would be interpreted at face-value, and its

credibility unquestioned. Set in Baudelaire's times, this photograph reflects the needs of the *flâneur* who looks to depict the observed world in a way that may not be fully detached (Fournel, 1858) but rather driven by aesthetics (Gleber, 1999). If Baudelaire were to fully disconnect the concept of *flâneur* from his drive toward the decadent, he would lose the identity of flâneur.



Fig 6 - Akira Kurosawa *Rashomon* (1950)

Akira Kurosawa's 1950 film *Rashomon* challenges views on objective truth by presenting multiple conflicting accounts of the same event, leaving the audience uncertain about what actually occurred. The film's narrative structure revolves around a crime - a murder of a man and the assault of a woman - that is recounted from different perspectives by four characters: the bandit, the wife, her samurai husband's ghost and a woodcutter who witnessed the events. Each retelling of the story contradicts the others, leaving the audience to question the reliability of each narrator and the nature of objective truth (Anderson, 2016)

The film left a strong impression on the Western audience and was the first Japanese film to gain international attention at Venice Film Festival in 1951. The *Rashomon* effect, named after Kurosawa's work, refers to the phenomenon in which different witnesses or participants provide contradictory accounts of the same event. This concept has been widely studied in psychology, sociology, and criminology, highlighting the subjective nature of memory, perception, and interpretation (Anderson, 2016) The *Rashomon* effect challenges the

assumption that there is a single objective truth that can be definitively determined, instead emphasizing the complexity and variability of human experience.

Similarly, just like there is no objective truth in the context of interpersonal relations, there is no objective truth on superiority of artistic medium. Baudelaire invalidates photography and subsequently, other lens-based mediums due to his limited understanding of what a camera is capable of. He cannot be fully blamed for this as in the 19th century photography was still at its very early stages, however his inflexible ways of thinking make his statements from the Salon of 1859 truly upsetting. Susan Blood attributes Baudelaire's hostility toward change to his old age (Blood, 1986), however in *An Allegory of Old Age* she also mentions that had he written the Salons at a younger age, he would have reassessed his moralist views on photography in favour of more positive arguments (p.821).

Baudelaire's statement from The Salon of 1859 ignores the potential of art to engage with life in a meaningful way. His views firmly reflect the cultural and technological context of the 19th century and highlight his limited thinking. Baudelaire's skepticism toward photography as a medium lacking depth stems from his personal anxieties and difficulty in challenging the new, changing world of the 19th century; hence why his opinions must be reconsidered in light of the evolution of photography and lens-based mediums in the 21st century.

Today, photography has transcended its initial limitations, becoming a multifaceted, interdisciplinary medium that allows for diverse forms of self-expression and artistic experimentation. Through digital editing techniques and the democratisation of image-making, photography has become more accessible than ever, empowering individuals from all walks of life to engage with the medium and express their unique perspectives.

Moreover, photography has the power to challenge narratives, shape public opinion, and document the complexities of contemporary life. Artists Wolfgang Tillmans and Laurence Philomene use photography as a means of self-exploration, social commentary, and political activism, inviting viewers to contemplate hidden truths, personal experiences, and collective memories, far from what Baudelaire perceived as 'trivial'.

While Baudelaire's skepticism toward photography has been rooted in his romantic ideals of individual expression and emotional depth, it is essential to recognise the transformative potential of photography as a bridge between inward and outward, fantasy and reality - something that Baudelaire failed to consider. By embracing the inherent subjectivity and ambiguity of photography, the viewer can appreciate its capacity to evoke emotions, spark

conversations, and challenge perceptions of the surrounding world. By assuming the superiority of fine art and inferiority of photography as a mere tool of the flaneur, Baudelaire closes his mind to the changing environment. Through his moralist, decadent approach, Baudelaire impedes his ability to learn about the world, ignoring how lens-based art encourages one to do so by looking equally inward as outward.

In a world where truth is often subjective and elusive, photography offers a powerful means of exploring the complexities of human experience and connecting with others on a deeply emotional level. As society continues to navigate the ever-changing landscape of image-making and visual culture, it is essential to approach photography with an open mind and a willingness to engage with its profound capacity for reflection, empathy, and connection.

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