

“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.” Baudelaire, Salon Review (1859)

Is Baudelaire’s position defensible in light of the case lens-based art-forms make to ‘represent what exists’? Or, from a contemporary perspective, do the ‘monsters of fantasy’ still allow artists to engage with ‘what exists’ creatively?

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Since the beginning, photography has been seen as something you can use as a form of documentation, as it was believed that photos showed the truth and what exists, its only in the last couple of decades that it has been seen as an art form. Photography was used to help painters but to also create what painters were producing (Tolmachev, 2019), with this a more accurate version of a scene would be created. This is probably why photography became a way of documenting things rather than use it to create artworks as it was an exact copy. Certain forms of photography can still be seen as documenting events/objects, but it is hard not to think that they may have been altered to show something else.

Charles Baudelaire was a French poet and art critic from the 19th century (Poetry Foundation, 2021) who had a certain view on photography which he spoke about in an essay called '*The Salon of 1859*', it was a review of the first art exhibition in Paris that included photography (Hannavy, 2013). Baudelaire believed that 'one of the greatest faults that an artist may possess'... is to believe that beauty resides in the exact rendering of nature in all her detail' (Hannavy, 2013), this shows that Baudelaire wanted to see something more than just what exists which from his view, photography couldn't give him. Baudelaire's point of view on art could be influenced by being a poet, with his own 'monsters of fantasy' being influenced by his own life events, such as the death of his dad and being sent away because of his behaviour (Conliffe, 2016).

A section of photography that has always had speculations towards it is spirit photography and it has been around for nearly as long as photography itself. Photography finally made it possible to see one's dead loved one, 'united two expressions of faith: one in the existence of invisible realities, the other in the camera's indifferent eye and unerring ability to arrest

the truth'(Harvey, 2007), which at the time, these new photos were very believable as it was easy to create them with double exposures. Photography has also been used to capture UFO and mythical creatures that people would have originally thought were completely made up or part of folklore. Over time it has been easier to debunk these photos as photo editing has become more popular, with more amateur photographers partaking in this type of photography.

William H. Mumler was an American photographer, who is thought to have started spirit photography with his ability to take portraits with the spirits of peoples loved ones. He was able to produce multiple portraits of people with a faint figure beside them who resembled a lost loved one (Piepenbring, 2017).



Fig.1

Mumler is most famous for his photo of the ghost of Lincoln with his widowed wife which was one of his last spirit photographs. Many people speculated the truth of his photos but when seeing him produce the photos, they could not argue with the legitimacy of his work (Piepenbring, 2017). It was never revealed how Mumler produced these images but many think that he did double exposures. As these were taken a time where photography was seen as showing what exists, it would have been difficult to prove that these images had been manipulated without physical evidence as 'A number of spirit photographers insisted that the success of the work was dependent on the use of their own equipment and

darkroom' (Harvey, 2007). It's understandable on why photographers keep their secrets to themselves as they would lose their credibility and possibly their many believers.



Fig. 2

Another spirit photographer who had a similar look and probably used similar techniques to William H. Mumler is photographer William Hope. When discovering he could produce these images, Hope created a group called Crewe Circle, a spiritual Group in Cheshire (McNab, 2018). Hopes succession in spiritual photography mainly comes from the time era that he was producing the photos in; the early twentieth century, as WW1 had just happened, and people were keen on having photos of their lost loved ones (McNab, 2018). This also bring up the morals of producing these types of images, were the photographers

wanting to see joy on their clients faces when they saw the faint figure of a loved one or, did they do these to make money and get famous.

Moving away from ghost photography, the Cottingley Fairies are a good example of artists using photography and their imagination and creativity to produce a series of photos that once convinced people that fantasy creatures were real.



Fig.3

Cousins Elise and Frances cut out images of fairies from books and positioned them in frame to make it look like they were real. Polly's father wasn't convinced that the photos were real but mother was convinced that the photos showed evidence that fairies were real as she was a part of the Theosophical Society (Lyster, 2017). The Theosophical Society was founded by Helena Blavatsky who believed to have psychic powers (Rudy, 2019). The Theosophical Society believes 'here is a deeper spiritual reality and that direct contact with that reality

can be established through intuition, meditation, revelation, or some other state transcending normal human consciousness'(Melton, 2020).

The photos were so convincing that even Arthur Conan Doyle was convinced that fairies were real. Conan Doyle was interested in spiritualism and was doing research from an article about fairies. It was only in 1983 that the truth about the photos was revealed (BBC, 2020). Conan Doyle also thought that William Hopes work was real and wrote a book called *The Case of Spirit Photography* which showed evidence that Hopes work was real and authentic (McNab, 2018).

These photographers work could be put in the category of fauxtography, which 'refers to fraudulent photography, where photographs are manipulated through photoshop or manipulated by other means to change the information they convey'(techopedia,2020).

These artists have used their imaginations and 'monsters of fantasy' with reality and were able to create convincing pieces of art. These show that photography doesn't just show what exists but also that photographers can create stories with their photos and connect people together with what they believe in. The acknowledgement that these photos show the truth has changed over the years from being seen as the truth to showing the artistry and talent of the photographers, mainly with the Cottingley Fairies as it was eventually revealed that the photos were faked and staged.



Fig.4

The mid 20th century was the time for UFO photos, many of them being debunked but Paul Trent's UFO photo was different (Perry, 2019). Trent's wife was in the garden when they noticed a disc in the sky, she called over Paul who took two photos before the disc disappeared (Perry, 2019). UFO photos are always interesting as they could prove that we are not alone in the universe, but they are sometimes hard to believe that they are real events without physical evidence.



Fig. 5

Photos of mythological creatures, such as Bigfoot and the Loch Ness Monster, can fall into the same group of not fully knowing if they are real or not. With most being grainy and taken from a distance, any evidence that they are fake versions of the creature, or any manipulation has happened is lost. The well-known photo of the Loch Ness monster was taken by Robert Wilson and was printed in the Daily Mail. After seeing the photo many people thought it was a creature that had gone extinct many millions of years ago called a Plesiosaur (Tikkanen, 2020). This photo in general was not debunked but the idea that the Loch Ness monster being real was as there haven't been any convincing sightings of the Loch Ness monster; the many accounts have differed drastically from each other, that there has been no evidence of similar creature in the lake and that the lake is too small to house a Plesiosaur sized creature (Edwards, 2015). And even though there has been no evidence found that the Loch Ness monster and many other mythological creatures exist, because there have been stories about them for possibly centuries, many people still believe in them.

For photos such as UFO and Loch Ness photos, it's difficult to say if the photographers created the photos by setting a scene or manipulating the final photos, or if they are showing a rare moment, as a lot of the time the photos are poor quality, so any evidence of the photo being fake are hard to see. Whereas with the spirit photos, there are only a few photographers that did that style of photographer whereas there have been many UFO photos as most are from non-photographers.

Having looked at these photographers, with the idea that photography shows what exists, bring the question of why do people believe in these? Polls in 2014 showed that around 50% of people in England and America believe in ghost (Wen, 2014) with the percentage of people believing in UFO being around the same percentage (Laycock, 2016). With UFOs there have been many stories of people being abducted, such as Truman Bethurum. Bethurum said that he was 'taken aboard a spaceship from Planet Clarion, which he said was captained by a beautiful woman named Aura Rhanes.' (Laycock, 2016). Many of the stories about alien abduction are very similar so it does make it seem like these events are happening.

Depending on where you are from and your religion, ghosts are seen differently. In Asia, the belief that ghost are real is more widely spread with a handful of the countries having a festival called the '*Hungry Ghost Festival*', where it is thought that ghosts walk freely with the living (Wen, 2014). Beliefs like these seem to be more based around religion and culture, whereas in the western world, it is mainly used for tourism, shown by tourism sites showing around 10,000 supposedly haunted places (Wen, 2014).

In Conclusion, spirit photography allows photographers to creatively use what exist around them to create interesting photos that have fooled many people over the years. Many artists have shown that photography is not just to represent what exists but can also be used creativity and create interesting photos using a medium that is sometimes hard to manipulate, especially when photography first begun. Over time these have become easier to create, with many photos coming from amateur photographers or non-photographers as the software and cameras to create these has become readably available.

With William H. Mumler and William Hope, they were from a time where it was easy to create the images they were producing with still having a sense that its showing reality. Originally, their photos would have been seen as showing what exists and what people believed in, then ended up showing the creativity of the two photographers. The Cottingley Fairies have a similar situation, but instead of creating the photos for others, they made then for themselves and had no intention of them going public. The photos however became famous after one of the girl's mother showed it to the Theosophical Society she was a part of (Lyster,2019). The photos still show the fantasy of the two girls with an element of what exists.

The UFO and Lock Ness monster photos are hard to prove wrong, as the photos are very simple and don't have any visual evidence that they would have been set up. These photos and many others like then add to people's beliefs that mythical creatures exist, and that earth is not the only planet in the universe that is able to hold and create life. The UFO photos are more convincing as there are hundreds of them, whereas there are very few convincing photos of the Lock Ness monster.

There are always going to be people that believe these photos, even when they have been debunked, because some people want something to believe in and an idea that seems

completely made up could be true. Societies like the Theosophy Society, certain religions and culture are going to keep these beliefs alive and bring in more people over time.

From Baudelaire's point of view, at the time photography was seen as a way of documentation and showing what exists, but from the examples shown, artists were able to cheat the system. Its easy to argue with what he said about photography as there are multiple examples of photography not showing what exists and show many things far from real. As photography was just starting and taking over from painting, it would have started to show where painters changed aspects of scenes when they didn't fit with their visions. There were photographers that produced creative images such as Claude Cahun, but their photos were forgotten about. Photographers now have more creative control with their photos as you can manipulate and alter the images in editing more then you could before. Overall, I believe that artists are able to use their 'monsters of fantasy' creatively while working with 'what exists' no matter if that is the intention or not, it is difficult to create a piece of work that doesn't have some influence of imagination and solely relies on what exists around you. Photography brought a new breath of fresh air to the art world with being able to snapshot a second in time in an instant. Artist took this and were able to create pieces of artwork that fooled many if that was their intention or not. Their photos maybe simple but they do not just show what exist, they show their creative imagination.

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