

“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 given the case lens-based artforms make to ‘represent what exists’? Or, from a contemporary perspective, do the ‘monsters of fantasy’ still allow artists to engage with ‘what exists’ creatively?

1. Reconsidering Baudelaire: Historical Context and the Rise of Photography

The quote fed from the question states a response to the beginning of photography. From lectures from 1st year it is known that the first ever daguerreotype was roughly 20 years before this quote (Druet, 1985). Even in those days it was clear that photography was a scientific leap for capturing images compared to paintings. People now only had to stand still for a few seconds and not a few hours just to have a simple portrait. In my further research using the *Salon Review* it's apparent to me that he had a fear of the new scientific mechanical accuracy of a photograph as being a threat to art. Art that he himself was a critique of. His *Salon Review* was heavily critical of artists imitating the actual and not pursuing the beautiful (Baudelaire, 1859).

In a modern perspective however it's no longer so mechanical and threatening. Paintings still live today and the line of his dichotomy between the existing world and the imaginative monster seems reductive, photography, film, TV and other lens-based art has evolved into an extraordinarily diverse medium. Ranging from documentary reportage, poetic abstraction, digital fiction, conceptual experimentation, storytelling, cinematic imitation, the list goes on and on. The camera is no longer primarily the scientific, mechanical method of taking an image and recording it. Instead it's a tool for manipulating, bending and interrogating the visible image. Or it can maintain harking back to the simplest form of a recording machine.

So to defend Baudelaire's position today is not about his critique of capturing reality. But about mindless unthinking representation of that said reality. His “monsters aren't real monsters, they are metaphors of reality, a representation of reality” (Baudelaire, 1859). And photography

has repeatedly reinforced the idea that the image is not a mirror, but a form of thinking (Barthes, 1981). In that sense, Baudelaire's skepticism toward mindless realism aligns with contemporary critical analyses of photography as an ideological apparatus rather than an objective witness (Tagg, 1988).

2. Photography's claim to reality and how “representation” is actually constructed

When we look at photography's early arguments about being a truthful record of the world, it might seem like Baudelaire had a point about mechanical copying. But as I learned through more reading, especially from theorists like Sontag, Barthes and Tagg, photography isn't as objective as it was first imagined to be (Sontag, 1977; Barthes, 1981; Tagg, 1988). Even though a camera points at something real, the final image is still shaped by choices: what to include, what to leave out, how to frame it, how to light it, and how to show it later. Barthes famously described photography as a “that-has-been” (Barthes, 1981), but even he accepted that meaning comes after the fact, through interpretation, not just through the captured moment.

So even if a photograph shows what exists as the eye may see it, it never shows everything. It's always selective. This in turn manages to bring us closer to Baudelaire than I initially anticipated. He wasn't arguing against reality as a whole. He in fact was arguing against artists who just copied it without thinking or without transforming it. And when we look at photography from that angle, we see that the camera's realism doesn't cancel out imagination. It actually relies on it.

This becomes clearer when looking at actual examples. Walker Evans's so-called “straight” documentary style still depends on careful decisions that guide how we read American identity in the Depression era (Evans, 1938). Diane Arbus creates portraits that make ordinary people feel uncanny or unsettling. Her subjects become almost like Baudelaire's “monsters” (Arbus, 1972), except not in a negative way—they reveal deeper truths below the surface of daily life. And the Bechers, who photographed industrial buildings, weren't being mechanically objective at all. Their typologies create a systematic, almost abstract way of seeing (Becher and Becher, 1982).

Even in my own work, I had it described many times by lecturers and others as cinematic, performative, surreal and abstract. I in fact disown the idea that photography is just the recording device as my personal practice is to defy those rules. But it is undeniable that the perspective is hard to shift

All of these photographers ive mentioned deal with the real world. But none of them treat it as trivial. The world becomes a material that they shape, not something they just copy. So even when photography “represents what exists” (Baudelaire, 1859), it does so through creative construction. A deeply intuitive process that is an art. Baudelaire might have hated photography as a threat at first, but the evolution of the medium actually leans more in his favour than against him.

3. How contemporary lens-based artists use fantasy and construction to talk about reality

If we go on to take Baudelaire’s “monsters of fantasy” as metaphors rather than literal monsters (Baudelaire, 1859), then a lot of contemporary photography fits his idea very well. Many photographers and lens-based artists today create constructed scenes such as myself alot of what is seen is staged environments and rehearsed scenes. Other photographers lean into heavily digitally manipulated images. But these constructions aren’t always just for visual drama, they often comment on real social issues, emotional states, cultural pressures, or identity.

Cindy Sherman

Sherman is a personal idol of mine, being who I based a lot of my early work on, she is also the clearest example of fantasy being used to confront reality. She puts herself into roles that look exaggerated, theatrical, and sometimes deliberately disturbing. Her clowns, her distorted characters, her imitations of film tropes, all of these performances show how identity itself is constructed (Sherman, works from 1980–2011). In other words, Sherman’s fantasy is a tool for exploring real social expectations placed on women, and how images shape those expectations. Her work proves that the “monster” or the artificial role can tell the truth more effectively than a straightforward portrait.

Gregory Crewdson

Crewdson builds entire film set like scenes in the American suburbia. The lighting, the colours, the quiet tension, nothing is accidental. While the settings feel dreamlike or even strange, the emotions behind them relate directly to issues people experience: loneliness, boredom, pressure, desire, uncertainty (Crewdson, works from 2003–2005). His images are made up moments, but they feel true in a deeper sense. So again, fantasy becomes a method of accessing realities that exist beneath everyday appearances.

Zanele Muholi

Muholi's self-portraits in *Somnyama Ngonyama* use exaggerated contrasts and dramatic props. The photographs look stylised and almost surreal at times. Yet the purpose is to reclaim visual representation for Black queer identities (Muholi, 2014). The “fantastical” appearance is a way of amplifying issues around race, history, and visibility. This is where Baudelaire's idea becomes interesting: the imaginative transformation isn't escaping reality but confronting it head on.

Hito Steyerl

Steyerl takes fantasy into the digital realm. Glitches, virtual imagery, broken files, these are her “monsters” (Steyerl, 2012). But they are tied to real world problems that make me and you feel something deeply saddening, intense or anything. She had troubles such as unwarranted surveillance, global capitalism, digital labour, and political control. Her work shows that digital fantasy is part of how we live today. It shapes how we understand truth and how power operates.

Across all of these examples, the imaginative and the real aren't opposites; they work together. This is exactly where Baudelaire's comment becomes useful: the “monsters” aren't about rejecting the world but about challenging how we see it. At least that's how i interpret it

4. How documentary photography also uses imagination

It might seem like documentary work is the opposite of Baudelaire's view because a documentary is supposed to deal with real events and real people. But the more documentary

work I read about, and work with, the clearer it becomes that it is also shaped by imagination and interpretation.

Nan Goldin's photographs are real moments, real friends, real relationships. But the warm tones, the flash, the intimacy, the emotional closeness, all of these elements create a specific way of seeing her world. There's truth, but it's filtered through her presence and her personal experience (Goldin, 1986). It becomes emotional truth, not just factual truth.

Alec Soth's projects take this further. *Sleeping by the Mississippi* feels almost like a road trip through a dream version of America. Something you'd see in Bruce Springsteen albums lyrics, the America behind the eyes. The images are real, the people are real, but the sequencing, colours, and recurring symbols turn the work into a poetic narrative (Soth, 2004). It's not fantasy in a literal sense, but the atmosphere he creates is shaped by imagination and feeling.

LaToya Ruby Frazier uses documentary tools to expose systemic racism and postindustrial decline. But her multi-generational portraits and controlled compositions add layers of symbolism (Frazier, 2012). Her work proves that documentary doesn't have to be plain or neutral. It can be expressive and transformative while still addressing real issues.

So even the genre that supposedly sticks closest to reality depends on interpretation. This makes Baudelaire's critique more relevant than it first appears. The problem isn't representing what exists. The problem is doing it without thought.

5. Digital photography and how fantasy has become a normal part of the real world

In today's digital age, the boundary between reality and imagination has blurred even more than in Baudelaire's time. Software manipulation, AI-generated faces, virtual environments, these tools change how we understand what a photograph even is. People are already sceptical of images, and rightfully so. My dream to move on in lens based work is threatened by it.

This makes the concept of "monsters of fantasy" more fitting now than ever (Baudelaire, 1859). Our visual world is full of artificial constructions. And yet many of these constructions are tied directly to real issues. For example, Sacha Goldberger's *Super Flemish* series uses Renaissance

portrait style to comment on heroism and pop-culture obsession (Goldberger, 2019). Laurie Simmons uses dollhouses and miniatures to talk about gendered domestic expectations (Simmons, 1990). And AI-generated portraits raise questions about authenticity, identity, and who gets represented.

So in a digital culture, fantasy isn't separate from reality, it's part of how we experience reality. This means Baudelaire's argument about the dangers of mindless imitation actually anticipates the way digital images now demand critical thinking.

6. Is Baudelaire defensible today? A more balanced view

So the question becomes: can we defend Baudelaire's position today? If we take him literally and say it is "useless" to represent what exists (Baudelaire, 1859), then no, we can't defend that. Photography has proven that representing real life is important for history, politics, memory, activism, identity and so on.

But if we read him as criticising shallow or unthinking copying, then his point becomes more relevant. He wanted art to elevate or challenge reality, not just repeat it. And contemporary photography shows exactly this. Whether through staging, emotional truth, symbolism, digital alteration or documentary framing, most meaningful photography today is not sad mindless reproduction.

Fantasy, in this broader sense, allows artists to:

- question how reality is shown
- express truths that aren't visible on the surface
- critique power structures
- imagine new ways of seeing
- and reveal hidden political or emotional layers

So yes, his position is defensible. But only when we reinterpret his "monsters" as symbols of creative thinking rather than literal inventions (Baudelaire, 1859).

7. Conclusion

Baudelaire feared photography would make art boring by turning it into mechanical copying. But history has shown the opposite. Representing what exists is not trivial because no representation is ever neutral. Photography has grown into a medium that can document, question, manipulate, analyse, or reimagine the world.

Fantasy and reality aren't two separate territories. They constantly overlap. And photography sits right in the middle of that overlap, using reality as a base but imagination as a tool. Baudelaire's "monsters of fantasy" fit comfortably into modern practice because they represent the creative and critical energy that keeps photography alive (Baudelaire, 1859).

So the idea isn't that artists must choose between the real and the imagined. Instead, they use imagination to get closer to the truth of real experience. In that sense, the monsters don't distract from reality, they help us understand it. And that is beautiful

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