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Photography in the arts (BA)

ADAD5003

Word count:

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Question 2: “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 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?

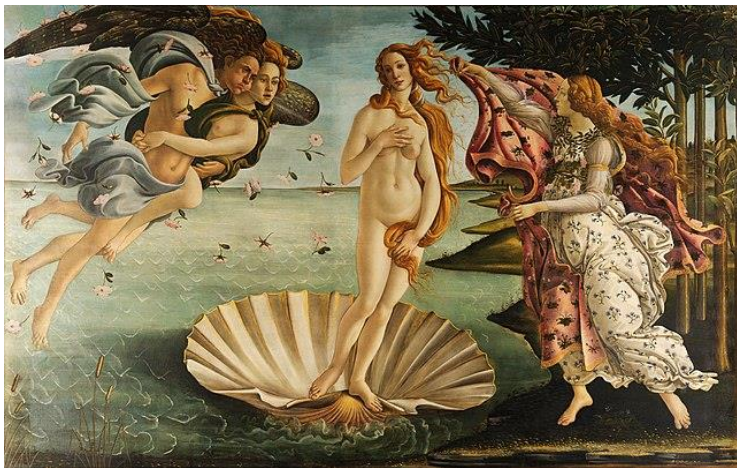
In this essay to understand Baudelaire's viewpoint we must understand both perspectives, as it will bring clarity to the context of his question as well as providing me with insight to matters for and against. I shall be looking at some lens-based art forms as well as text under theory to elaborate on why the 'monsters of fantasy' still allow artists to engage with 'what still exists' creatively.

Firstly, I will analyse how he states that it may be useless to represent to him what exists, it must be questioned why does he have such a strong opinion on representation within lens-based art being tedious and useless? Perhaps Baudelaire only sees a photograph as simply displaying what is, and not what's created or conveyed through the photographer's mindset and life? This can be referred to Rowland Barthes (1977) book titled the death of the author. Elaborated on by Lisa Butt's article inclusion to a paperback titled some trick

(2018)¹, she quotes Barthes; “the explanation of a work is always sought in the man or woman that produced it, as if it were always in the end, through more or less transparent allegory of fiction, the voice of a single person, the author 'confiding' in us.” Barthes also states that Van Gogh’s paintings were viewed through his prism of history of mental illness, Baudelaire’s poetry seen as inseparable from his tortured life of doomed love affairs, addiction and illness. This leads to question are the ‘monsters of fantasy’ simply constructs of realities pressures that challenge us through life. It could also be said to be manifestations of the mind, creating a distraction or departure from facing these pressures.

¹ Butts, Lisa some trick-the death of the author. Available at: https://www.bookbrowse.com/mag/btb/index.cfm/book_number/3751/some-trick#:~:text=Barthes%20says%3A%20%22The%20explanation%20of%20f,paintings%20are%20viewed%20through%20the (Accessed at 2018)

Baudelaire's preference on fiction explores a wider meaning as well as added background information. It is understandable why Baudelaire would choose to see more interest through constructed fictional creations as what exists is a singular point in time. Whilst fictional stories or literature can progress and repeat the process of creation through new relative content.



Fiction and fantasy have allowed artists to engage in what exists creatively is a much broader subject that contradicts

many things. For instance, the monsters Baudelaire refers to are his constructs within his literature and poems. They provide the narrative with an antagonist or purpose to a set tale. Artists like by painter Sandro Botticelli (1485) and his painting 'The Birth of Venus' would probably be more interesting for Baudelaire due to the ideology and visualisation of gods being materialised on a painting. As well as this it was from a time before Baudelaire himself where many artworks like this had influenced artforms across the world. Much like other fantasies and fictional constructs through history, this painting's centre piece is Venus (to the romans/Aphrodite to the Greeks) The goddess of love and beauty, as she stands naked on a shell presenting herself in an ethereal and luminous manner.

The representation of the mythological as well as the divine was very common in the renaissance as it was known for these concepts to be revered as well as worshiped. In Thomas Merton's analysis in *No man is an Island* (1955, p.35)² he talks about art and its ability to "allow one to find themselves and lose themselves at the same time" and that a "painting discovers spiritual vitality that lifts it above itself while presenting itself on a level of being it did not know it could." Merton's analysis provides us with understanding to how an image like 'the birth of Venus' presents itself. The power of such an image to immerse the viewer in fiction and fantasy worlds, while also discovering deeper aspects of our own selves. Through the interpretation of art, we explore the realms of imagination and emotion, experiencing a sense of escapism and self-discovery simultaneously. For instance,

² Murton, Thomas, (1955), Page. 35, *No man is an island*, Columbus, MS, U.S.A, Harper Collins publishers

Botticelli's painting invites us to enter a mythical world, where the goddess of love emerges from the sea, surrounded by symbolism of worship and beauty.

Over time these same concepts within artforms like these would stay the same, yet questioned for meaning and worshiped in historic value by people like Baudelaire and his understanding of this trait. Perhaps this is why lens based artforms lack his interest, the detail and ability to construct such an immersive reality.



The visualisation of this fiction would evolve, painted as one of Francisco Goya's (1819-1823) black paintings in his farmhouse titled 'Saturn devouring his son'³ is one of the most grim and dark artworks of its time. Goya's painting depicts the fearful Saturn devouring his son, out of fear of being overthrown, one could say that it is hand in hand

³ Goya, Francisco (1819-1823), Saturn devouring his son, Museo Nacional del Prado, Madrid Spain.

<https://www.museodelprado.es/en/the-collection/art-work/saturn/18110a75-b0e7-430c-bc73-2a4d55893bd6>

depicting / embodying the emotion of greed. Using one of the many quotes from Edgar Degas that can be found online (Denver art museum- A passion for Perfection, 2018)⁴ “Art is not what you see, but what you make others see”, this emphasises the power in these types of artforms and their underlying messages that provoke thoughts and inspire those who experience it. When we look at art like Goya’s it is not composed of the visual representation in front of us but rather the impact on our perception and understanding of the world and what’s around us.

As Saturn devours his son it invites us to engage with our own thoughts and emotions such as greed and how man’s lust for power can strip him of his humanity and make him

⁴ Denver Art museum (2018) available at the following:
<https://www.denverartmuseum.org/exhibitions/degas-passion-perfection> , <https://www.denverartmuseum.org/en/blog/20-quotes-edgar-degas>

monstrous. This is no image taken from a camera this was crafted perfectly to convey those exact messages.

Baudelaire raises a fair argument, when analysing works like these it highlights where he draws his opinions, reality has a firm and harsh grip on the world where so many people such as Baudelaire have lived through cruel times, and the existential pressures people and life throw. Why highlight what is real when you can escape to witness the birth of a god, or stumble upon a power mad driven monster of greed in the dark. It allows the mind to indulge in a reality totally different and new to our own.

On the other hand, Lens based art forms have the potential to do many things such as the following document, inspire, discriminate/offend, rejuvenate culture/movements and many more. The evolution of photography has opened doors

in the recent years to the development of diversity within its nature. With the use of techniques and features found in photography it can highlight things in a manner that differentiates from other art forms, for instance framing of an image's composition, rule of thirds, light balance, prop use and models along with so much more.

These have carried over years allowing artists to reimagine and create new works. It also is relevant for the physical practice, to an extent there are photographers who use such methods within modern documentary photography like Steve McCurry (Steve McCurry, 2023).

Many of his works are shot in a traditional documentary format and style, they are dedicated to real world scenarios e.g., *Monsoons and Conflict*⁵. McCurry is a prime example of

⁵ Steve McCurry (2023), available at:
<https://www.stevemccurry.com/>

a modern documentary photographer, as he is willing to document and highlight what exists through his work.

Similarly, he as an artist would not interest Baudelaire as although raising awareness, as well as providing his subjects perspective he does not engage with any form of fiction or fantasy.

Photography is an industry that's developed potential of its own understanding, commented on by Jonathan Reader "The camera is an instrument that teaches how to see without a camera", Chris Gampat (2015)⁶ responds to this through his research profile. He states that a "camera is a tool that records facts about light, they make the darkness darker, edges more absolute or show a paleness devoid of life" he expresses that photography has the power to be not just

⁶ Gampat, Chris. The Phoblographer. (2015) Available at: <https://www.thephoblographer.com/2015/05/12/photography-isnt-just-taking-a-picture/> (last updated on 5/12/2015)

diverse but a palette of emotions and composition, allowing the artists to expand on fictional ideas or aesthetics. Perhaps this is a more modern viewpoint from present day as art has evolved much over the course of history.



The decisive moment coined by Cartier Bresson (The decisive moment, (1952)⁷ is a Fairley familiar term with lens-based

⁷ Bresson, Cartier. (1952) The decisive moment. Available at: <https://www.holdenluntz.com/magazine/photo-spotlight/henri-cartier-bresson-the-decisive-moment/>

art. Renowned for its compositional beauty that Bresson intended on capturing within a short time frame. The image shown above, a moment frozen in time where if seen by the naked eye, blink and you'll miss it. This movement is still discussed and adapted today. Bresson experiments with the sense of each image emitting a process of the fleeting, there are many images in this collection that are of similar features. Bresson's work in particular is special as they are more than frozen moments in time, it is geometrical balanced scene where said photographer clicks the shutter just at the right time, a moment of instant manifestation seen by the naked eye which in turn gets captured by a camera. Its essence is more than a simple image, the narrative displayed by the man jumping across a puddle has a story behind it, we are left to question why is he running? Or is he running towards something? Why is he shaded darker than the rest of the image? Why does the water look so clear?

A narrative that presents itself with no means of text that leaves viewers with that mindset, analysing and trying to understand the world of that scene. This notion of the Cartier Bresson's decisive moment left an imprint on the history of photography and lens-based art for being mythological in ways, this is explained within Nadya Bair's (2016)⁸ article: "The photographer's artful cessation of the subject in motion was enough to imbue the captured event with significance, whether or not the recorded scene had its own historical import." Nadya refers to the ability to formulate a reality through still imagery. So, this form and mindset towards lens-based art had been cemented into the industries culture and development much like myth, due to the unique and

⁸ Bair, N. (2016). The Decisive Network: Producing Henri Cartier-Bresson at Mid-Century. *History of Photography*, 40(2), 146–166. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03087298.2016.1146445>

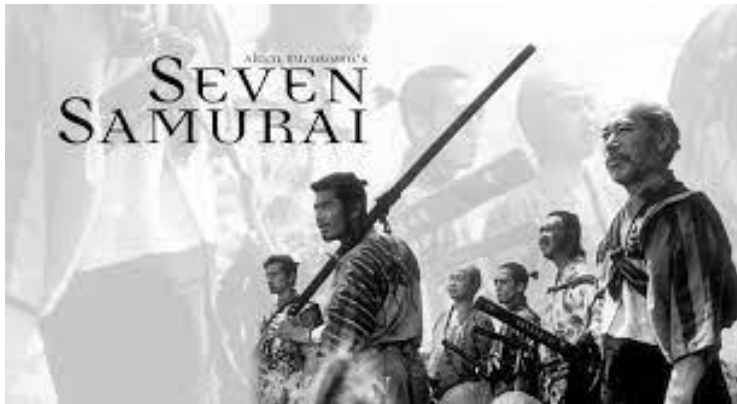
revolutionary technique Bresson revealed to the world through images like the one above.

The viewpoints and standards that came about for photography after Bresson's influence sparked something new but granted Baudelaire was from a different time completely, the level of conceptual understanding of imagery hadn't been established at that time. Due to this highlighting a scene's stationary existence and narratives through the style of Bresson's work would not only be uncharted territory for Baudelaire it would not have had the same consideration that it had by Bresson in the 50s. Yet, it must be said that this should not dismiss the ability of Cartier Bresson's influence through his work on lens-based art.

Another form of lens based is cinematography, this is a skill that has been evolving much like photography has throughout the years. And Baudelaire certainly wouldn't understand or know of this style of lens-based imagery as it is many years after he passed in 1867, the earliest form of film was created by Eadweard Muybridge (horse in motion, 1878)⁹ and his film changed the concept of a moving image entirely, the series of photographs that captures the gallop of a horse is a great example of how art can represent the moving in ways the eyes cant. Many more films would be made following Muybridge's discovery, and one in particular is a true example how fiction and stories can allow artists to engage in what exists creatively. Akira Kurosawa is a Japanese director who produced one of the most influential and

⁹ Horse in motion (1878) made by Eadweard Muybridge, Library of congress prints and photograph division. Available to watch at : <https://www.google.com/search?client=safari&rls=en&q=horse+om+motion&ie=UTF-8&oe=UTF-8#fpstate=ive&vld=cid:f0aab4ac,vid:heRuLp7CyTM,st:0>

outstanding films of his time, that still is used to the day to rediscover and elaborate the values of imagery¹⁰.



Seven Samurai is a film that depicts a town of farmers who are threatened by bandits. With no means to defend themselves they hesitantly hire samurai to help protect the town and its folk. The reason this film allows artists like Akira Kurosawa to engage in what exists creatively, is by allowing a story's narrative as well as its complex and diverse characters to

¹⁰ Seven samurai (1955) directed by Akira Kurosawa, Toho co., Ltd available to watch at: <https://www.bilibili.tv/en/video/2040661359>

explore themes of honour, sacrifice and the complexities of human nature through the artistic choices he made in cinematography. Costume design and set production represents the world of the samurai and the challenges they face, whilst experimenting with many storytelling themes and structures to create a unique / captivating flow the moving image. Kurosawa's film pushed the boundaries of lens-based art with these techniques.

Another reason why Kurosawa's is how he uses natural forces to mirror natural expression, an example of this is when a character has developed in a stage of grief or anger there will be a perfect balance of rain or fire towards the back of the scene to mirror these natural emotions. As well as this it formulates a strong character arc for viewers to understand and relate to. Speaking of character arcs Joseph Campbells

book (1990 pg. 76)¹¹ supports this process. He talks about development within fictional characters and their worth to the narrative, Campbell states “There is what I would call the hero’s journey, the night sea journey, the hero’s quest, where the individual is going to bring forth in his life something that was never beheld before.”

This symbolises the transformative storyline that these collection of images with many scenes and characters face challenges and ultimately returning changed. We can see that the pattern of the samurais who are called upon to protect the village have to stand and confront many obstacles like the bandits as well as social interaction with the village. This resonates with viewers as it reflects bravery and personal growth to an individual, and although the film is not real it

¹¹ Campbell, Joseph (1990), The hero’s journey. available at: https://www.google.co.uk/books/edition/The_Hero_s_Journey/OLIxpiKJraoC?hl=en&gbpv=1&dq=joseph+campbell%27s+a+hero%27s+journey&printsec=frontcover

creates the illusion that it is, due to its expanded world full of relatable human emotion combined with a fictional driven narrative. Baudelaire would not have known the capability imagery like this could be achieved through lens-based art, and even to the extent of influence that Seven samurai has had within other artist and films e.g., Star Wars and the magnificent seven.

Artforms like the ones discussed grants us clarity into Baudelaire's perception of an author's creation, for instance he has experienced many trauma and failed love affairs which probably led him into creating fictional fantasy through poetry as an escaped from the reality. It must be argued if that is the case, is Baudelaire's outlook on lens-based art negative because he perhaps chooses to see that it is simply what he sees with his eyes? This must be questioned as many artworks that have been discussed show that lens based

artforms are not complete polar opposites to other art such as painting's ability to capture such messages.

I believe that although poetry and paintings convey messages through fiction and fantasy more broadly. Art like photography has the ability to allow the viewer to really visualise what those messages and constructs amount to, through subject material like the composition of a figure and its background or the character development of a films narrative. Baudelaire simply could not understand this as things have changed much over the course of history, lens-based art has progressed and evolved tremendously that now his statement is dated and not entirely true.