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A Decisive Moment, France, 1932

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Does the accepted view of photojournalism rest on the myth of the decisive moment? Analyses of Henri Cartier-Bresson's work, and in particular *Paris, la Gare St. Lazare* (1932), certainly seem to. They tend to focus on the combination of chance and skill needed to produce the clever image's strong formal elements: the scene's echo in the poster of a dancer in the background; the doubling of the man in his reflection; the tension between stillness and motion; and the geometry of its composition.¹

This particular photograph has come to embody Cartier-Bresson's ability to freeze the "decisive moment."² The photographer's 1952 photo book by that name first introduced this interpretative term to rebut charges that his photos lacked technical skill.³ The idea redefined good photography as the "simultaneous recognition, in a fraction of a second, of the significance of an event as well as of a precise organization of forms which give that event its proper expression."⁴ Cited and evoked in almost every Cartier-Bresson exhibition and review since, the decisive moment still dominates interpretation of his work.⁵ By encouraging attention to singular pictures such as *la Gare St. Lazare*, not known to have been published in any particular photo essay, the concept has dominated Cartier-Bresson's corpus and propagates an idea of the singularity of the photograph that obscures the collaborative nature of the profession.⁶ At the same time, it has allowed his photographs to avoid definitive categorization, moving fluidly between photojournalism, photographic publications, and art.

The myth of the decisive moment, as well as the Magnum cooperative's general practice of republishing work in photo books and art publications, has helped mask the photo story's importance to Cartier-Bresson's career and photojournalism writ large. Cartier-Bresson's 1952 essay explains that the photographer needs multiple photos to convey the entirety of an event or situation. Only "rarely" can she produce a "single picture [which] is a whole story in itself."⁷ As early as 1970, *New York Times* photo critic Allan Douglass Coleman argued that the essay's reduction to its title "distort[ed] our perception of Cartier-Bresson."⁸ Instead Coleman proposed labeling Cartier-Bresson the master of the "picture-story," which would encompass his varied output, from "classic" pictures to "functional images, [. . .] employed in reinforcing central ideas or probing tangential ones."⁹

By anchoring the photograph's excellence in the instant of its capture, the myth of the decisive moment erases the teamwork that underlies all photographs, photojournalistic or otherwise. Cartier-Bresson did not, as a rule, work in the darkroom, and thus depended on developers for his prints. His 1952 essay also stresses the importance of the picture editor and the "layout man" who create whole



Figure 1.12 Henri Cartier-Bresson, *Paris. Place de l'Europe. Gare Saint Lazare*, 1932. Reproduced courtesy of Magnum Photos.

stories out of the photographer's "raw material."¹⁰ Indeed, although subsequent interpretations of Cartier-Bresson's work have emphasized his vehement rejection of cropping, the same essay admits that "the layout man will often have to crop one picture" in order to give each page "its own architecture and rhythm."¹¹ Even Magnum relied on a picture editor, John G. Morris (its first executive director). Despite Cartier-Bresson's own insistence, the myth has relegated postproduction work to secondary importance.

The decisive moment has simultaneously freed Cartier-Bresson from any one identity as a photographer. Fellow photographer and Magnum co-founder Robert Capa warned Cartier-Bresson early in his career not to let "himself be labeled a surrealist." While Capa had encouraged him to adopt a photojournalistic identity, later considerations of his work sloughed off even this label.¹² Yet in the seventy years since *The Decisive Moment's* publication, the idea has seemed equally applicable to the breadth of Cartier-Bresson's photographic practices and contexts.¹³ Critics and scholars have used it to describe non-newsworthy photographs such as *la Gare St. Lazare* and current events such as George VI's coronation parade.¹⁴ In 1952 photographer Walker Evans, for example, summed up the decisive moment as the ability to both open the shutter to catch a subject in motion and deliver "the definitive summation of a topical event."¹⁵ In contrast, just three years later, Georges Hourdin, a French critic writing for *Le Monde*, attributed the decisiveness of the "really decisive images" of Cartier-Bresson to their "universal value." They were images, he insisted, "upon which one can fruitfully meditate at one's leisure."¹⁶ This discourse has thus given the photographer an identity that works in and beyond the immediacy of news photography.

Notes

- 1 See art historian Carol Armstrong's deft description in "Automatism and Agency Intertwined: A Spectrum of Photographic Intentionality," *Critical Inquiry* 38, 4 (1 June 2012): 710. Art historian Ernest Gombrich declared it "the luck of a lifetime:" "Henri Cartier-Bresson," in *Henri Cartier-Bresson: His Archive of 390 Photographs from the Victoria and Albert Museum* (Edinburgh: Scottish Arts Council, 1978): 10.
- 2 It is the only illustration for "The Decisive Moment" essay in Henri Cartier-Bresson, *The Mind's Eye: Writings on Photography and Photographers* (New York: Aperture, 1999).
- 3 The term appeared first as the title (and a subheading) of the English-language edition. The French title translates to "images on the sly." Henri Cartier-Bresson, *The Decisive Moment* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1952); Henri Cartier-Bresson, *Images à la sauvette* (Paris: Éditions Verve, 1952). For more about how the idea migrated to France as the "instant décisif" see Agnès Sire, "De l'errance de l'oeil au moment qui s'impose[. . .]," in *Revoir Henri Cartier-Bresson*, eds. Anne Cartier-Bresson and Jean-Pierre Montier (Paris: Editions Textuel, 2009): 55–67.
- 4 Cartier-Bresson, *The Decisive Moment*: np.
- 5 Clément Chéroux, "Le 'tir photographique,'" in *Revoir Henri Cartier-Bresson*, 50.
- 6 The Fondation Cartier-Bresson's clippings files do not include an "original" photo-story. The 2014 retrospective at the Centre Pompidou, however, combatted this myth by resituating much of Cartier-Bresson's other work in the context of the photo story.
- 7 Cartier-Bresson, *The Decisive Moment*, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1952).
- 8 A. D. Coleman, "Photography: More Than the Decisive Moment," *New York Times*, 29 March 1970.
- 9 A. D. Coleman, "Photography: More Than the Decisive Moment," *New York Times*, 29 March 1970.
- 10 Cartier-Bresson, *The Decisive Moment*, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1952).
- 11 Cartier-Bresson, *The Decisive Moment*, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1952).

- 12** Yves Bourde, "Un entretien avec Henri Cartier-Bresson," in *Henri Cartier-Bresson 70 photographies* (L'école d'art de Marseille-Luminy, 1977) np.
- 13** It has persisted in the *New York Times*, for example, since the 1950s.
- 14** See for example: Walker Evans, "Cartier-Bresson, a True Man of the Eye," *New York Times*, 19 October 1952; Armstrong, "Automatism and Agency Intertwined."
- 15** Evans, "Cartier-Bresson, a True Man of the Eye," *New York Times*, 19 October 1952 (original emphasis).
- 16** Georges Hourdin, "Henri Cartier-Bresson," *Le Monde*, 23 November 1955.