

Photography is to
stand eye along
line of sight.
of life. —

Cartier-Bresson

Henri Cartier-Bresson
the man, the image & the world
A RETROSPECTIVE

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*Rem tibi quam nosces aptam dimittere noli;
Fronte capillata, post est occasio calva.*
Disticha Catonis, II, 26

There is nothing in this world that does not have its decisive moment'
Cardinal de Retz

Kairos : The Idea of the Decisive Moment in the Work of Cartier-Bresson Jean Clair *Musée Picasso, Paris*

What the ancient Greeks meant by the word *kairos* was what we today would probably call something like 'the right time'¹. It was a way of describing the opportune moment, the appropriate opportunity, the right occasion; a point, therefore, on a temporal scale, coming to mean 'time' itself in modern Greek.

Back in the archaic period, however, it was used to refer to a place, a critical position in space rather than time. In Homer, for example, *kairos* meant a nerve centre in the body, a crucial point, a vulnerable spot that could sometimes spell the difference between life and death.

In the many battle songs of the *Iliad*, there are several passages in which Athena, goddess of reason, intervenes on the hero's behalf by deflecting the path of the dart, arrow or spear that threatens him at the very last moment. She diverts it – in space – away from the critical spot, vulnerable place or *kairos* of the body, the chink in the armour that allows death to enter.

The original spatial definition of *kairos* relates to the eye's ability, back in a period of antiquity still governed by empiricism and largely ignorant of the art of measurement, to discriminate intuitively, to make a correct choice, to pierce exactly the right spot.

This ability, the clear-sightedness of a person who 'has a good eye', we might describe as *perspicacity* (to borrow from the Latin *perspicere*). Such a power of visual discrimination, such an ability to distinguish a particular point, anticipates what would later, with the development of modern geometry in the fourteenth century, become the art of perspective, a particular method of organizing space around a chosen point. A person with a 'good eye' possesses the ability to find the critical point around which the world organizes itself.

But this power of discrimination may be other things as well: it may be the doctor's power to discover, by means of palpation, the precise spot in the body, the lesion, weakness, or fissure, at which sickness entered. The doctor's skill resides in his ability to discern whether the wound is serious or not. *Kairos*, then, within the organism, is the essential and precise position of the wound, the body's vulnerable spot. Similarly, for the hunter, this power of discrimination lies in his skill at shooting an arrow accurately amid a tangle of undergrowth so that it hits its mark. For the helmsman, it is the art of detecting the way through a hazardous channel. And so on.

ethical framework and body of knowledge that are those of the ancient world. Implicit in the act is one of the most fertile and illuminating concepts of ancient philosophy. Its performance brings into play intellectual frameworks without which neither Greek tragedy, nor Plato, nor the Parthenon would ever have seen the light of day.

It seems that the photographer, armed with his small Leica, is none other than a reincarnation of the thinker at the dawn of our culture who established the very foundations of Western thought armed simply with a tablet and a stylus and guided very often by nothing more than his own sensibility and a few rare ideas of algebra and aesthetics.

When Henri Cartier-Bresson writes that a photograph, for him, is 'the simultaneous recognition in a fraction of a second of the significance of an event as well as of a precise organization of forms,' he is actually spelling out a rule of etiquette. To discover the 'decisive moment' is effectively the same thing as to arrive 'at precisely the correct time', neither too early nor too late; in other words, a rule of ethical and social behaviour on which an exact consensus can be reached with contemporaries. It is a question of being in tune with the times (and of being better at it than anyone else) like tuning an instrument before playing. By inference, it is also a rule of aesthetics, incorporating concepts of beauty, the measure or equilibrium of things and the *kairos* capable of apprehending them in an instant. Cartier-Bresson is saying the same thing as Plutarch in his *Moralia*: 'In all works of art, beauty is, so to speak, the product of a large quantity of numbers that achieve a single *kairos* by means of a system of proportion and harmony.'

Kairos exists in the blink of the photographer's eye, it is the phenomenon of hitting the mark in space and of hitting it at precisely the right time. Up it pops, at the exact dazzling moment when the screen of the world seems to open up, tear apart, yawn or gape before you, only to close up again immediately afterwards. It is, to introduce a semi-religious concept, the *propitious* moment, the moment when the gods smile upon you. It is seizing chance on the wing. It is the unreflecting gesture that lands exactly where it is supposed to – the winged gesture. In Homer there are many references to 'winged words'. The comparison is with arrows: *mots justes* are words that carry, words that are accurately aimed. The photographer anticipates just such a successful flight when he asks you to 'watch the birdie'. In the blink of his eye he unleashes something like one of Homer's winged words, something that hits the mark, something light, quick and insubstantial. Almost like a shaft of wit. It is, if you like, Henri Cartier-Bresson at play, a sort of subversive Scarlet Pimpernel underneath his disguise as the perfect gentleman, the sober reporter of twentieth-century life. You can see what it was in him that made him brush with the Surrealists, admiring as he did their taste for the bizarre, for strange juxtapositions and the fantastic.

At the same time, it is what distinguishes him from them in that it interrupts the smooth logical flow, it is also the opposite of chance. *Kairos* is a correct decision, one that happens when it should. It is on the side of necessity, not contingency, as in ancient Greece along with *kallos*, 'beauty', and *summetria*, 'harmony', the harmony of the parts in relation to each other and of the part to the whole. The decisive point, is a point of equilibrium. It has nothing to do with the chaotic, it is disrupting the phenomenological order.

That is the fundamental difference between Cartier-Bresson and the Surrealists. It has often been claimed that in his early work he was heavily influenced by the so-called 'objective' magic of chance. Another friend of the Surrealists, Jacques Lacan, developed a world view very similar to theirs. He has identified the cornerstones of his clinical practice, viewing it as the *encounter with the real*, the re-emergence and persistence of signs under the pleasure principle. He did not doubt about, was because he was influenced by André Breton, an artist who believed in a sort of primitive magic. Cartier-Bresson is a different case altogether. He is not subject to things to chance. As an artist, he is in control of phenomena – sun, wind, the movement of leaves or crowds – just as he is also in control of the camera. He is able to predict them. *Kairos* is that control.

Thus the photographer is someone who remains always alert, never succumbing to *acedia*, or 'nonchalance', even though he is surrounded by the visual world, the unceasing and unpredictable bustle of existence.

'Nonchalance' was the word Cartier-Bresson used to describe the attitude of 'what does it matter to me?' or, in modern parlance, 'it's not my problem'. In a world of generalized indifference so common among our own contemporaries, where nothing matters, it matters at every moment, he never lets his eye wander. He is like those holy men in the Far East who ensure the prayer wheel never to stop, the world would come to an end. The photographer is like them. The roll of film in his camera is his prayer wheel. He is the priest who preserves it and keeps it safe. It is because there are images of the world before our eyes.

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At the same time, it is what distinguishes him from them. If *kairos* is the opposite of *logos*,
in that it interrupts the smooth logical flow, it is also the opposite of *tuchè*. *Tuchè* is chance, and *kairos*
is the opposite of chance. *Kairos* is a correct decision, one that has its effect where it should and
when it should. It is on the side of necessity, not contingency, and that is why it was classed in
ancient Greece along with *kallos*, 'beauty', and *summetria*, 'harmony', which for the ancients meant
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That is the fundamental difference between Cartier-Bresson and his Surrealist friends. It
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so-called 'objective' magic of chance. Another friend of the Surrealists, the eminent psychoanalyst
Jacques Lacan, developed a world view very similar to theirs. He made *tuchè*, or chance, one of the
cornerstones of his clinical practice, viewing it as the *encounter with reality*, evidence of the return,
re-emergence and persistence of signs under the pleasure principle.² But that, we should be in no
doubt about, was because he was influenced by André Breton, and not because he believed in any
sort of primitive magic. Cartier-Bresson is a different case altogether. He never, in my belief, left
things to chance. As an artist, he is in control of phenomena – sunshine and shade, brightness, the
movement of leaves or crowds – just as he is also in control of events, to the extent at least that
he is able to predict them. *Kairos* is that control.

Thus the photographer is someone who remains always on the alert, without ever
succumbing to *acedia*, or 'nonchalance', even though he is surrounded by the constant confusions
of the visual world, the unceasing and unpredictable bustle of events.

'Nonchalance' was the word Cartier-Bresson used to accuse people whose attitude was
'what does it matter to me?' or, in modern parlance, 'it's not my problem': that routine expression
of generalized indifference so common among our own contemporaries. For the photographer, the
world does matter, it matters at every moment, he never lets his eyes stray from it. He is not unlike
like those holy men in the Far East who ensure the prayer wheels are kept turning. If they were
ever to stop, the world would come to an end. The photographer is the guardian of the visible world,
and the roll of film in his camera is his prayer wheel. He is the physician of the visible world. He
preserves it and keeps it safe. It is because there are images of the world that it continues to exist
before our eyes.

For he has the capacity to capture the precise moment when events make sense within
the order of the logical universe, at the same time that they arrange themselves harmoniously within

the order of the physical universe. When *logos* and *cosmos* come together, that instant in which the order of the world releases a meaning, like a poem in celebration of the event, that is *kairos*.

That brief and intense moment when the world, so to say, reveals itself, before the waters roll back and chaos returns, when light and shade are perfectly in balance before they merge, in which form emerges from amid a confusion of forms – that moment the photographer, the patient observer of the world, is there to capture.

‘Our eye should constantly measure, evaluate. We modify perspectives with a gentle flexing of the knees, we make lines meet simply by moving the head a fraction of a millimetre, but that can only be done with the speed of a reflex, so that it prevents us from trying to make Art.’

The photographer manoeuvring his camera, lining up his view of the world and determining the moment for his shot, is no more reliant on a science of photography than the hunter, the physician, the orator or the potter were reliant in their art, their *technè*, on the abstract rules of a universal science (destined one day to materialize as the rules of scientific perspective, for example, or dictates on colours from the French Academy). No, the photographer goes with the flow, he lets himself drift, while remaining always on the watch for the slightest thing that might happen.

In the *Republic*, Plato was the first to identify this inability of the human mind to apprehend, not the incidental, but the universal amid the endless confusions of the real world: ‘The differences of men and their actions, and the endless irregular movements of human things, do not admit any universal and simple rule. And no art whatsoever can lay down a rule which will last for all time.’

Faced with the fleeting nature of the visible world, and unable to draw his inspiration from the canons of any ‘Art’, the photographer, who deals with the relative and not the absolute, with incident and not substance, resorts to a sort of pre-scientific approach. This form of subliminal recognition has ‘the speed of a reflex’, as Henri Cartier-Bresson puts it, which, if directed towards the currents of the real world – borne along like a barque on the waters – is the same as that associated with the *kairos* of antiquity.

This type of mercurial, or perhaps hermetic, intelligence is effectively of the same order as the archer’s skill with his bow, his ability to fire his arrow without reflection, with all his being mobilized and directed towards his goal. It permits self adaptation to the constantly shifting and unstable nature of things by a necessary and continuous flexibility. In this way it is able to operate in an infinite variety of circumstances.

The type of interruption discussed above, that leap of the sensibility associated with *kairos* as it breaks through the prevailing *logos*, is exactly the same as what Cartier-Bresson – that

light-footed Hermes (god not only of commerce but of robbers) – so and violation: ‘I walked the whole day on tenterhooks, searching for photos, as it were, in flagrante delicto.’

But even in his criminality, that thief of reality, the photographer because he is faced with the problem of a reality that cannot be reduced to a simple understanding (or because no universal body of knowledge can be constructed) that the man of the real world par excellence that is the photographer, reporter, relies instead on that infinitely subtle understanding deployed by all those who practise hunting, war or navigation: not rational calculation but the instinctive recognition of the decisive moment that is *kairos*. The jockey, the helmsman, the cab driver – all possess a singular flair, a cunning intelligence, an intuition of form, that Jean-Pierre Vernant, not without justification, equates with the *kairos* of the world to logic nor to academic art, and capable only of being applied to the needs of the world.

The photographer’s eye, like the physician’s or the hunter’s, is attuned to the infinite variety of shifting circumstances of the world one speaks of as opportunities. The photographer deals with the particular case, eschewing any universal concept. Among all the possible factors of reality, he recognizes the *kairos*, when a particular image makes sense amid the chaos. *Kairos* is not a generalizing, of prognosis and of cure. Like any great artist, the photographer helps us bear it and even love its burdens, because he isolates the point of intersection between the past and the future: the point of intersection between the maturation of the past and the future in the making. He effects his intervention in the flow of time with the precision of a click: he clicks the shutter, dividing time into two, with all the precision of a balance.

His camera is his balance. Like a judge, he weighs up the world, like a woman with her scales, weighing the motes of light that are her pearls. He predicts in a millisecond what is about to happen next – which may be the fall of the government. ‘The condensed form of thought that is the law,’ Cartier-Bresson puts it so acutely, ‘has a great power [which is] that of what we see, and that implies great responsibility.’

Human time is not homogenous time. It has its ups and downs. It is a time of ripening and of decay. And sometimes, rarely, a

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and violation: ‘I walked the whole day on tenterhooks, searching the streets in order to snatch
photos, as it were, in flagrante delicto.’

But even in his criminality, that thief of reality, the photographer, is also its judge. It is
because he is faced with the problem of a reality that cannot be reduced to a universal rule of
understanding (or because no universal body of knowledge can be congruent with the real world),
that the man of the real world par excellence that is the photographer, and even more so the
reporter, relies instead on that infinitely subtle understanding deployed not only by entomologists,
but by all those who practise hunting, war or navigation: not rational cognition, not wise *logos*, but
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helmsman, the cab driver – all possess a singular flair, a cunning intelligence, that *métis*, or hybrid
form, that Jean-Pierre Vernant, not without justification, equates with *kairos*, susceptible neither
to logic nor to academic art, and capable only of being applied to the multiple and protean realities
of the world.

The photographer’s eye, like the physician’s or the hunter’s, is capable of singling out from
the infinite variety of shifting circumstances of the world one specific sequence of risks and
opportunities. The photographer deals with the particular case, extrapolating from no law or
universal concept. Among all the possible factors of reality, he recognizes the decisive moment,
or *kairos*, when a particular image makes sense amid the chaos. *Kairos* is the art of predicting and
particularizing, of prognosis and of cure. Like any great artist, the photographer cures us of real life,
he helps us bear it and even love its burdens, because he isolates the point at which two timescales
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Cartier-Bresson puts it so acutely, ‘has a great power [which is] that of a making a judgment on what
we see, and that implies great responsibility.’

Human time is not homogenous time. It has its ups and downs. It speeds up and slows
down. It is a time of ripening and of decay. And sometimes, rarely, a time of immobility, or a time

of catastrophe. Time is living. It is not the same as the time of machines, which is a time of repetition, that produces identical objects. Human time waits, hopes and finds. It is the time associated with the work of art, not the production line. *Kairos*, in this context, relates to man's intimate understanding of time, more to do with Mnemosyne, sweet memory, than with Chronos and his terrible scythe. It is because he remembers that he can predict, it is because he has seen that he can anticipate. A doctor should never forget that he is dealing with time when he attends a patient who is, as we say, 'chronically' ill. Nothing repeats itself. The photographer, the artist, they are the proof of it. The photographer never stands still, because he remembers. His mastery is not academic but 'chronic', or 'temporal', he is the master of time. Hence that meteoric sensibility of Cartier-Bresson. It is bringing the temporal back to the spatial sphere: pinning down the *kairos* of a moment, the weather at a particular moment of the day, in a particular place. Some of Cartier-Bresson's finest photos are studies of weather conditions, cloud lifting in India, evening shadows in Flanders. I understand why he was so fond of Bonnard.

Anyone who knows him, anyone who has ever seen him walking, light, airy, on the tips of his toes, anyone who has seen him taking photographs, his camera concealed in his palm, silent, invisible, will not be too surprised to discover in him a resemblance to the famous statue of Kairos by Lysippus, described in an epigram by Posidippus in the third century BC in which the following dialogue takes place between Kairos and a passer-by:

You, who are you?
I am Kairos, the master of the World!
Why do you run on tiptoe?
I am always moving on.
Why do you have winged feet?
Because I fly like the wind.
Why do you hold a blade in your right hand?
To remind men that I, Kairos, am sharper and swifter than anything.

Jean Clair is Director of the Musée Picasso, Paris

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1. For the following account of *kairos*, we are indebted to Monique Trédé's *Kairos*. *L'Esprit*, 1992. Also recommended to any reader wishing to learn more about the subject are: 'L'art en psychothérapie', in *Médecines de l'âme*, Paris : Fayard, 1995, and the entry on 'L'art' in *La Pléiade*, Gallimard, 1988, p. 1521.
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