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And Everything in Between Peter Galassi *Museum of Modern Art, New York*

The rise of modernist photography in the 1920s and 1930s contained the germ of many definitions of what the new art might be. Over the next half century, as obstreperous experiment deepened into sophisticated tradition, one definition proved especially fruitful: the photograph is a picture grasped from the over-abundant world of visual experience. The link between picture and experience is unbreakable but infinitely flexible. The art of photography lies in mastering that flexibility, not merely in one picture but in many, which together speak in one voice. This may sound obvious now. In 1930, as a deliberate exploit performed by one artist in full view of others, it was a new thing under the sun.

From 1932 to 1934, Henri Cartier-Bresson did as much as any other to shape that definition and its prospects. In a white streak of invention, he proved that a photographer can handle the world as freely as a sculptor handles clay, all the while pretending that he (or she) has touched nothing. A child playing ball before a weather-beaten wall becomes a figure of rapture isolated in the cosmos (pp. 92–3). A woman squinting in puzzlement at the photographer brings her younger self to life in the defaced poster behind her (p. 104). Who could have imagined that photography was capable of such alchemy? After the early work of Cartier-Bresson, who could deny it?

The momentum of those few extraordinary years was deflected in the second half of the thirties by Cartier-Bresson's detour into film-making and by his deepening engagement with the ever more alarming turmoil of Europe. From 1940 through 1943 he made no photographs at all, for doing so would have inconvenienced his German captors. He returned to photography in 1944 and over the next three decades created a body of work that remains unique in its scope.

Fifteen years ago I argued that there is a crucial difference between Cartier-Bresson's stunning innovation of the early thirties and the much richer achievement that came later.<sup>1</sup> In the earlier work, the decisive moment is a scalpel that cuts a fragment of perception from its context, displacing it into the realm of imagination. In the later work, the decisive moment is a net that

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gathers 'the significance of an event'<sup>2</sup> into the still frame, suggesting enough, I still believe. But this was hardly intended as the last word on the matter, to contradict myself.

To begin: that second definition of the decisive moment could not be. For there is no such thing as 'the significance of an event', at least not in the sense of the weight of a stone. Most of the time there was hardly an event at all, or at least one that he saw it for us in his picture.

In the early thirties, he had discovered that photography possessed a power to experience so radically that it could transform child's play into cosmic play. He used that very same power to strip experience of its *Rashomon* multiplicity, to isolate and reveal the one that he felt. The realist transparency of the thirties was no less artful than the Surrealist fantasy of the thirties.

The brilliance of this creative performance has been dulled by the countless self-elected followers who have misconstrued Cartier-Bresson's achievement. The 'precise organization of forms' (to quote again from *The Decisive Moment*) is a precondition of an articulate picture. The picture must then have something to say. On that score, too, Cartier-Bresson's work is rich in continuity.

'You must understand', he once explained, 'that the thirties were a special century.' I understood him to mean that modern technology and modern life had penetrated our lives as they have so deeply since. It took me much longer to understand in what ways, Cartier-Bresson's post-war world resembles his world of the thirties.

In the opening plate of *The Europeans* (1955), smokestacks rise against a blue sky. Greek stones.<sup>3</sup> But the next picture – a Greek farmer guiding a horse through a grove – might have been made in the fifteenth century, had photography then existed. It is instructive to consider how nearly true this is of the world he made throughout Cartier-Bresson's career.

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gathers 'the significance of an event'<sup>2</sup> into the still frame, suggesting the absent context. True  
enough, I still believe. But this was hardly intended as the last word on the matter. Permit me, then,  
to contradict myself.

To begin: that second definition of the decisive moment could not exist without the first.  
For there is no such thing as 'the significance of an event', at least not in the way we may speak  
of the weight of a stone. Most of the time there was hardly an event at all before Cartier-Bresson  
saw it for us in his picture.

In the early thirties, he had discovered that photography possessed the power to reinvent  
experience so radically that it could transform child's play into cosmic rapture. After the war, he  
used that very same power to strip experience of its *Rashomon* multiplicity of potential meanings,  
to isolate and reveal the one that he felt. The realist transparency of the post-war work is a fiction  
no less artful than the Surrealist fantasy of the thirties.

The brilliance of this creative performance has been dulled by the massive output of  
countless self-elected followers who have misconstrued Cartier-Bresson's style as a pictorial game.  
The 'precise organization of forms' (to quote again from *The Decisive Moment*) is merely the  
precondition of an articulate picture. The picture must then have something to say – about  
something. On that score, too, Cartier-Bresson's work is rich in continuities.

'You must understand', he once explained, 'that the thirties were still the nineteenth  
century.' I understood him to mean that modern technology and commerce had not then  
penetrated our lives as they have so deeply since. It took me much longer to see how often, and  
in what ways, Cartier-Bresson's post-war world resembles his world of the early thirties.

In the opening plate of *The Europeans* (1955), smokestacks rise ominously behind ancient  
Greek stones.<sup>3</sup> But the next picture – a Greek farmer guiding a horse-drawn plough in an olive  
grove – might have been made in the fifteenth century, had photography (and Cartier-Bresson)  
then existed. It is instructive to consider how nearly true this is of a great many photographs  
made throughout Cartier-Bresson's career.



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*The Decisive Moment* (1952) shows us some skyscrapers, a highway, an oilfield, and the urban ugliness of an elevated metro. But these unsettling intrusions belong to the New World; they're all American. Otherwise, in a book that ranges throughout Europe, Mexico, and Asia, evoking the great upheavals of the globe at mid-century, the only sure evidence of mechanized modernity is a bicycle here and there and half a dozen vehicles powered by combustion engines, all of them half hidden in the background of a single photograph made in Rangoon.

Unencumbered by any assignment in his first years of photography, Cartier-Bresson had followed his nose to the neighbourhoods of the common people. The spirit of the pictures suggests that he found more vitality among the poor than among the proper. But there were plenty of poor who worked the machines of industry even in the thirties, and we do not see them, at least not at work. It was the unmodern poor who caught Cartier-Bresson's eye.

Even as the social scope of his work broadened dramatically after the war, Cartier-Bresson never relinquished his affectionate curiosity for the timeless patterns of human behaviour and their endlessly unique incarnations.<sup>4</sup> That first plate of *The Europeans* announces the conflict between ancient and modern as a salient theme of the post-war work, and so it is. But it shares our attention with many other themes, all of which existed long before the automobile: man and woman, young and old, rich and poor, the powerful and the weak, the individual and the group, the group and the crowd. Good and evil are there too, of course, but Cartier-Bresson usually lets us sort them out for ourselves.

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'Through living we discover ourselves, at the same time as we discover the external world.'<sup>5</sup> Doubtless Cartier-Bresson meant 'external world' metaphorically, to denote everything that is not ourselves. But in his case the external world meant literally the whole world, or nearly so. His legacy is not merely a very large collection of very compelling pictures. It amounts to a personal history of the twentieth century.<sup>6</sup>

In photography – especially hand-camera photography, above all the photography of people – intellect must express itself through instinct. There is no time to think. That is why most photographers are best at home, where meaning – of an accent, a gesture, a glance, a gathering – is grasped in an instant. Only Cartier-Bresson has been at home everywhere.

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It is remarkable enough that he was so often in the right place when Gandhi died, in China when Mao triumphed, in Khrushchev's battle. More remarkable still is what he did. To photograph the news, being in the right place to photograph history as it is lived in the street is something

The challenge of history was new to Cartier-Bresson, and the war goes a long way toward explaining why he took it on. His eagerness to go where and when he did, and it inspired him to go every evening to accompany the pictures he had made earlier in the day. The overlooked dimension of his work, now ripe for recovery – were not meant to be seen but to be put into his photographs with as much passion as he put into his photography. To see but to communicate – is what suited this fiercely independent (and fiercely disciplined) of the journalist.

But the challenge of the street was familiar. For all of its novelty, Surrealism had been an art of the studio and the salon. It was Cartier-Bresson who brought it into the street, and then into the world.<sup>7</sup> In purely stylistic terms, he was a pioneer of the early thirties without ever leaving Paris. But he did leave Paris. His eager curiosity to discover himself by greeting the world was the beginning of his photography from the very beginning. The challenge of history may be new, but he defined and mastered it was rooted in the adventures of his youth.

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'I have never been interested in photography.' When Cartier-Bresson often does, people who have given their lives to photography take it as a result, few seem to consider that he might mean it, which I believe

Some of his admirers were also provoked when he gave up photography so they failed to see how that ending explained the beginning, and for us, the picture is what matters. It's all we have. For Cartier-Bresson, before and after he released the shutter. Photography wasn't just an experience. It was a way of having experience, of being himself by being with all others. He sustained this radically expansive definition of experience.

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It is remarkable enough that he was so often in the right place at the right time: in India  
when Gandhi died, in China when Mao triumphed, in Khrushchev's Russia before anyone else.  
More remarkable still is what he did. To photograph the news, being there is nine tenths of the  
battle. To photograph history as it is lived in the street is something else altogether.

The challenge of history was new to Cartier-Bresson, and the sobering experience of the  
war goes a long way toward explaining why he took it on. His eagerness to know history as it  
happened prompted him to go where and when he did, and it inspired him to write long captions  
every evening to accompany the pictures he had made earlier in the day. These captions – an  
overlooked dimension of his work, now ripe for recovery – were not merely part of his job. He recalls  
that he put as much passion into them as he put into his photographs. That passion – not just to  
see but to communicate – is what suited this fiercely independent artist to adopt the guise (and  
the discipline) of the journalist.

But the challenge of the street was familiar. For all of its pretensions to reinvent life,  
Surrealism had been an art of the studio and the salon. It was Cartier-Bresson who had taken it  
into the street, and then into the world.<sup>7</sup> In purely stylistic terms, he could have spun his magic  
of the early thirties without ever leaving Paris. But he did leave Paris, and France, and Europe.  
His eager curiosity to discover himself by greeting the world was the driving force behind his  
photography from the very beginning. The challenge of history may have been new, but the way  
he defined and mastered it was rooted in the adventures of his youth.

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'I have never been interested in photography.' When Cartier-Bresson says this, as he  
often does, people who have given their lives to photography take it as a provocation, which it is.  
As a result, few seem to consider that he might mean it, which I believe he does.

Some of his admirers were also provoked when he gave up photography in the 1970s, and  
so they failed to see how that ending explained the beginning, and everything in between. For  
us, the picture is what matters. It's all we have. For Cartier-Bresson, what mattered most took place  
before and after he released the shutter. Photography wasn't just a way of making sense of  
experience. It was a way of having experience, of being himself by being among others – any and  
all others. He sustained this radically expansive definition of experience for nearly half a century.

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When (inevitably) he began to withdraw from the fray of ceaseless travel and fresh encounters, photography (inevitably) lost its central place in his life. The occasional photographs he has continued to make – portraits drawn from his large circle of intimates and vast circle of acquaintances; piquant observations snatched in passing here and there – only reinforce the point.

It is the mystery and splendour of photography that the essence of the art has little to do with photography itself. The making of the picture – especially Cartier-Bresson's kind of picture – is simple and quick. The hard part is everything else: the whole of the photographer's relationship to the world.

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1. *Henri Cartier-Bresson: The Early Work*, exhibition catalogue, New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1952.
2. Henri Cartier-Bresson, *The Decisive Moment*, New York: Simon and Schuster, 1952.
3. Henri Cartier-Bresson, *The Europeans*, New York: Simon and Schuster, 1955. Cartier-Bresson's 'smoke-stacks are in the style of the late nineteenth century,' adding that 'the middle ground has its own touch, invisible in the picture, but clearly audible at the time when it was made.' To my knowledge, however, he did not photograph the airfield.
4. It was not until 1969 – thanks to a commission from IBM, no less – that Cartier-Bresson photographed the airfield. The prevailing tone of comic irony echoes the note that Chaplin had struck in 1936, as he was embarrassed in the face of his contraptions.
5. Also from the introduction to *The Decisive Moment* but here translated anew from the French (Paris: Editions Verve, 1952, n.p): 'C'est en vivant que nous nous découvrons, en même temps que le monde extérieur.'
6. I owe this observation to Lee Friedlander, and I thank him for it.
7. It would be fair to object that Louis Aragon's *Le Paysan de Paris* (1926) and André Breton's *Le Manifeste du Surréalisme* (1924) introduced Surrealism into the street, and both novels did help to shape Cartier-Bresson's aesthetic sensibility. Nonetheless, especially in realm of the visual arts.



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3. Henri Cartier-Bresson, *The Europeans*, New York: Simon and Schuster, 1955. Cartier-Bresson's caption points out that 'the smoke-stacks are in the style of the late nineteenth century,' adding that 'the middle of the twentieth century contributed its own touch, invisible in the picture, but clearly audible at the time when it was made: the noise of jets at the neighboring airfield.' To my knowledge, however, he did not photograph the airfield.
4. It was not until 1969 – thanks to a commission from IBM, no less – that Cartier-Bresson would produce *Man and Machine*. The prevailing tone of comic irony echoes the note that Chaplin had struck in 1936, as if man were condemned to perpetual embarrassment in the face of his contraptions.
5. Also from the introduction to *The Decisive Moment* but here translated anew from the French (*Images à la Sauvette*, Paris: Editions Verve, 1952, n.p): 'C'est en vivant que nous nous découvrons, en même temps que nous découvrons le monde extérieur.'
6. I owe this observation to Lee Friedlander, and I thank him for it.
7. It would be fair to object that Louis Aragon's *Le Paysan de Paris* (1926) and André Breton's *Nadja* (1928) had taken Surrealism into the street, and both novels did help to shape Cartier-Bresson's aesthetic of the early thirties. The point stands nonetheless, especially in realm of the visual arts.