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HENRI CARTIER-BRESSON - SURREALIST AND HUMANIST

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INTRODUCTION

INTRODUCTION

Much has been written about the greatness of Henri Cartier-Bresson, more would detract from his work. His photographs are essentially straightforward and it is their simplicity which, ironically is also their strength. Lincoln Kirstein writes;

"He employs no gimmicks of craft, tricky composition, negative inversion, cropping is slight, artistic or artficed treatment if any is primary and simple like a head on collision. He is not making art but taking life." 1

This is one of the few accurate statements about the photographs. There have been misinterpretations, in particular by Roberta Hellman and Marvin Hoshino (Arts Magazine, May 1980) who criticize the photographs because of their lack of print quality, making the irrelevant comment that,

"not making the print himself has been Cartier-Bressons' one miscalculation,"

mentioning that the photographs are consistently better in reproduction (which is untrue) where the distracting issue of the print does not come up. It seems they have competely missed the reason why Cartier-Bresson began to photograph at all. He is continually, throughout his work, concerned with the subject matter and in particular with rare fleeting moments of time, which he has captured so frequently. The aesthetic is of no real concern to him apart from his brilliant sense of composition. Like Cartier-Bresson, the American photographer Helen Levitt (who was very influenced by him) came to believe,

"The artists task is not to alter the world as the eye sees it into a world of aesthetic reality, but to perceive the aesthetic reality within the actual world, and to make an undisturbed and faithful record of the instant in which this movement of creativeness achieves its' most expressive crystallization." 2

French photographer Jean Philippe Charbonnier confirms,
"It took me thirty years and a lot of pain to discover the truth of what Henri Cartier-Bresson always said. One should use ONE camera with one lens that coincides with your angle of vision, with the same film at normal speed, the rest is gimmick and hardware," (3)

On the other hand, there have been those who have gone to extremes of praise. The French writer and poet Yves Bonnefoy, who writes the foreword to the book "Henri Cartier-Bresson-Photographer" (Thames and Hudson 1980) compares him to a Zen monk. He writes,

"The intuition, the serene rapidity, the peace drawn from ceaseless tension, all these gifts of Cartier-Bresson are extraordinarily close to the spiritual readiness of a Zen monk. Like the Japanese duellist who must be one with his adversary and one with the world, he seems to have overcome his apprehension of death. He takes his photographs not from a particular point in space but from the acknowledgement of morality that makes him the contemporary of all lives and the neighbour of all things." 4

Such fatuous appreciation detracts from the work. Few people would deny Cartier-Bresson's great talent but Bonnefoy creates mystery where none exists. Lincoln Kirstein in his introduction to the book "Photographs by Cartier-Bresson," (Jonathan Cape 1964) equally goes over the top with,

"the ultimate image snapped at the peak of choice, is fixed through a complex chemistry of moral and muscular explosions like an orgasm." 5

The latter comment is extreme to the point of being amusing. It has been Cartier-Bresson's misfortune to have inspired more fatuous appreciations of his work than most photographers. The photographs have been admired for half a century but have received little sustained critical attention. In the absence

of such discussion our understanding of the work has been directed by two simplifying modes of interpretation. On the one hand Cartier-Bresson's photography is celebrated as the expression of an intuitive talent beyond the reach of historical analysis. On the other it is seen as an example of the capacity of the small hand held camera (In Cartier-Bresson's case the Leica) to seize a telling picture from the everyday world. Beaumont Newhall, writing about his interview with Cartier-Bresson for 'Popular Photography' (1946) mentions,

"What my friend had considered 'the Art of the Poetic Accident,' the result of chance snapshooting, proved to be based on strict discipline in the mastering of instantaneous, intuitive recognition of 'the decisive moment'-or more accurately, the decisive split second." 6

Cartier Bresson is indeed a master at capturing the "decisive moment" but there is much more to his photographs. One of the more recent surveys of his work, "Henri Cartier-Bresson-Photographer," (1980) which Yves Bonnefoy introduces is sequenced without regard to chronology or variation in style, and presents fifty years of work as a collection of isolated "decisive moments." Not once is the question raised as to what influenced and led Cartier-Bresson to take the photographs he took. Yves Bonnefoy's pretentiously phrased and ambiguous introduction does nothing to dismiss a myth that the work is that of a genius. However, Newhall anchors everything with one inspired sentence,

"Seeing comes before photographing." 7

Certainly it is Cartier-Bresson's vision which almost denies the existence of a recording camera. When one studies the photographs it is without reference to the type of camera used, the film grain, the print quality. It is his vision, at times deeply moving which is difficult to translate into words. John Szarkowski in his book "The Photographers Eye" (Secker and Warburg London 1966) refers to the power of the camera to

record the trivial, which suggests that the subject had never before been properly seen, that it was in fact not trivial but filled with undiscovered meaning. Cartier-Bresson focusses our attention on what we are aware of but rarely attend to.

Much of Cartier-Bresson's photography has been labelled under photojournalism. In 1947, nearly twenty years after he had begun to photograph, along with Robert Capa and David Seymour (Chim) he helped in the founding of the photographer's co-operative "Magnum" which became an influential force in photojournalism. His work was widely published in magazines and in a series of books, most notably, "The People of Moscow", "About Russia", "The Face of Asia", "Cartier-Bresson's France". The work reproduced in these publications only rarely reported newsworthy events. They provided more of a broad description of a place, its culture and its people. Cartier-Bresson himself writes,

"I have written at length about reportage because this is what I do. But through it I try desperately to achieve the single photograph which exists for its own sake" 8

The above statement provides an insight into how Cartier-Bresson viewed his position. There is a tendency to regard his entire career as a self-consistent unity with little attention to what formed his artistic outlook and particularly to the period in which Cartier-Bresson's early work belongs, the years before and just after 1930. In the field of photography it was an especially important period, in part because of the exchange between photography and the other arts. Trained as a painter, Cartier-Bresson formed his artistic outlook under the influence of Surrealism. His early photographs have nothing in fact to do with photojournalism. They are focussed on a much narrower range of subjects which tends to define his photographic technique and Surrealist influence that bit

clearer.

In the following chapters I will discuss Cartier-Bresson's early development, his contact with the avant-garde and the artistic ideas of his time, the political climate preceeding World War II and after, which undoubtedly affected his outlook leading him to view his photography with a more social as opposed to artistic relevance. Throughout his work Cartier-Bresson is never a detached observer, he does more than merely record. Photojournalism provided him with a challenge, yet the personal involvement is always more than apparent. By personal involvement I mean Cartier-Bresson's acute awareness of the changing flow of events. In effect, much of his work is concerned with time (as all photographs are) but with an awareness that a single precise moment captured, can reveal a poetry present in reality. In "The Decisive Moment" (1968) he writes,

"I prowled the streets all day, feeling very strung up and ready to pounce, determined to 'trap' life- to preserve life in the art of living. Above all I craved to seize the whole essence, in the confines of one single photograph, of some situation that was in the process of unrolling itself before my eyes" 9

It is interesting to note that Cartier-Bresson rarely recorded newsworthy events. There is little, if any, distressing note to his photographs. If one considers the work of Don McCullin, an equally great photographer, the element of grief, pain, torture, starvation and exploitation of the victims of our society, is so powerful in his work, that the photographs distress and frequently incite anger in the viewer. Cartier-Bresson is more of an anthropologist in approach. He documents societies, more often than not, deprived ones, but one senses his fascination with the primitive. For someone who was born

into considerable wealth, (his father was a rich industrialist), this fascination is not surprising in so far as the world which Cartier-Bresson chose to photograph was divorced from his own. None of his subjects display any signs of distress or real discomfort with their situations. Instead much of his work provides a celebration of life with its many oddities, which are accentuated when he captures situations in mid flow. There is concern in his work, yet he does not alert attention in the confrontational manner that Don Mc Cullin does. His is a quieter, poignant and more subtle approach. The relevance of the previous statements are to illustrate my point - Cartier-Bresson may work in a photojournalistic mode, yet he has never truly abandoned his initial influence - Surrealism. He is also a true humanist. The remainder of my thesis concerns these viewpoints which I will initially approach with an historical background to his early development and finally discuss in relation to his work as a whole.

1. Cartier-Bressons' Early Influences

When Cartier-Bresson was born in 1908 in Chetelat, near
Paris. The family lived in Paris where his father directed a
well known textile business that were the family name. They
were financially comfortable and socially well-placed. It was
about 1920 that Cartier-Bresson's father sold his share in
the family business and moved to the south of France, after
moving to
Nîmes, and his father was joined by his wife and
children.

From an early age Cartier-Bresson was already fascinated by
painting. He recalled:

"Painting has been my obsession from the time my 'cousin
Jean', my father's brother, took me down his studio
during the Christmas holidays in 1914, when I was five
years old. There I lived in the atmosphere of painting. I
knew the vocabulary: the oil, the paint's texture, a
studio of Claude, called me into all painting when I
was twelve." 1

When Cartier-Bresson refers to the painter Jean Cocteau, he
is not only referring to the famous French artist but also
to the famous French writer. Through Cocteau he met, among
others, the young surrealist artist Marc Chagall. In 1925
Cartier-Bresson entered the studio of André Lhote, who painted
in the style of Cubism. André Lhote would remain an
influence in Cartier-Bresson's photography.

"Remember when from your childhood were painter?" 2
Recalling his own father he says Cartier-Bresson's concept of
photography was not as much his attraction to the effects of
perspective was not in the technical aspect. The
attraction was aesthetic.

"I was excited, not by technical painting, but by the
expression of ideas, which sometimes was a great deal like the

Henri Cartier-Bresson was born in 1908 in Chanteloup, near Paris. The family lived in Paris where his father directed a well known textile business that bore the family name. They were financially comfortable and socially established. It was almost understood that Cartier-Bresson would make his career in textiles and so he entered business school. However, after failing to pass the "baccalaureat" examination after three attempts, any ambitions his father had formed for him were soon forgotten.

From an early age Cartier-Bresson was already fascinated by painting. He recalls,

"Painting has been my obsession from the time my 'mythical father', my father's brother, led me into his studio during the Christmas holidays in 1913, when I was five years old. There I lived in the atmosphere of painting; I inhaled the canvasses. One of my uncle's friends, a student of Cormon, initiated me into oil painting when I was twelve." 1

Here Cartier-Bresson refers to the painter Jean Cottenet. He also took lessons from Jacques-Emile Blanche during summer holidays on the channel coast. Through Blanche he met, among others, the young Surrealist writer Rene Crevel. At nineteen Cartier-Bresson entered the studio of Andre L'hote, who painted in the style of Cubism. Later L'hote would comment, in reference to Cartier-Bresson's photographs,

"Everything comes from your formation as a painter." 2

Painting may have helped to form Cartier-Bresson's concept of discipline, but no doubt his alertness to the effects of incongruity owes much to the Surrealist movement. This influence he has acknowledged,

"I was marked, not by Surrealist painting, but by the concepts of Breton, which satisfied me a great deal: the

role of spontaneous expression and of intuition and, above all, the attitude of revolt." 3

Andre Breton's concept of the "accidental encounter of an umbrella and a sewing machine on an operating table" was intended to stress the value of the unexpected in making us pause and look. Similarly, the "fortuitous encounter" as Max Ernst called it, "upon a non-suitable plane of two mutually distant realities" and being able to "draw a spark from their juxtaposition" 4, has the same intention. Cartier-Bresson seizes the incongruities of reality and points to a meaning without sacrificing realism. Much of the well known and rather notorious work of the Surrealist photographers is set in a studio situation, where the subjects are arranged and at times extremely contrived. Collage often played an important part in these compositions. They were indeed surreal, dreamlike concepts of realities, at times verging on obsession as with Hans Bellmer's "La Poupee", a doll with exaggerated sexual characteristics. This Bellmer made himself and repeatedly photographed in various positions and environments. Surrealism celebrated the order of madness and nightmares and chance. Obviously it was the element of chance which interested Cartier-Bresson. Not surprisingly, he disliked posed photographs. He writes 'we must respect the surroundings which provide the subjects true setting, while avoiding all artifice which destroys the authentic image'. 5

While studying with Andre L'hote Cartier-Bresson saw and was moved by the work of such photographers as Andre Kertesz, Man Ray, Brassai, and Eugene Atget, but he himself had not yet begun to use a camera. Kertesz photographed images of ordinary life in the cities of Paris and New York. At times his photographs seem twisted out of their normality, not by Kertesz but by themselves into a subtle surrealism which one encounters

on a city street. He looked for exchanges and incidents which might prompt imagination and was continually on the alert for paradox. A photograph of 1927 shows a disabled veteran in a Parisian bistro apparently warming his wooden leg by a stove. Another photograph shows a priest, head bowed in concentration while prospecting for underground water with the aid of a forked twig. There is slight humour in his photograph "On the Quais, Paris 1926" where a bowler-hatted gentleman grasps a walking stick behind his back against two approaching cloth caps. Brassai expanded on similar subject matter, photographing Paris by night, its secret societies and underworlds. Like Kertesz he reveals "little happenings" intimate moments, glances situations which are casual, particular or out of step. The influence of Eugene Atget may be seen in some of Cartier-Bresson's early photographs. Atget was 'discovered' by the Surrealists, by Berenice Abbott in 1926 who was then an assistant to Man Ray in Paris. Walter Benjamin valued Atget very highly. Speaking about his haunting views of Paris he says,

"they are not lonely, but they lack atmosphere; the city in these pictures is empty in the manner of a flat which has not yet found an occupant. They are the achievements of surrealist photography which presages a salutary estrangement between man and his environment, thus clearing the ground for the politically trained eye before which all intimacies serve the illumination of detail." 6

Atget dealt with what was out there, rather than with his feelings, he invited his audience to inspect and to look rather than to dream.

Among the subjects which he photographed in series were shopwindows, street cafes, brothels, monuments, buildings, trees, gardens and architectural details most of which are devoid of people. The photographs evoke the presence of people in a very subtle manner. Objects bear the mark of human use

Andre Kertesz
Father Lambert,
France 1928.



On the Quais
Paris 1926.



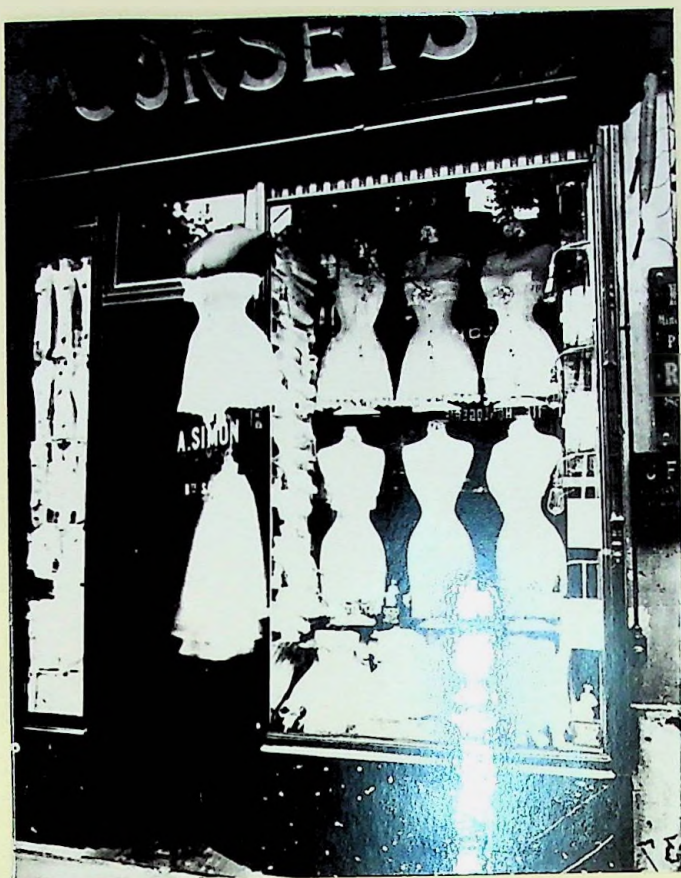
which prompts associations. Often there is an element of humour, as in his well known photograph of a shopfront full of women's corsets. There is also an uncanny feeling of surprise in this photograph, that of the 'found object' which refers back to the Surrealist value of the importance of the unexpected in making us pause and look. Cartier-Bresson took some similar photographs when he first began to work with photography, which point to this influence quite strongly. One category of Atget's work which the Surrealists admired was his photographs of mannequins where inanimate figures come half to life revealing a still drama, comic or eerie or both. Two early photographs taken by Cartier-Bresson, "Rouen 1929" and a later one "Budapest 1931", both of which include a mannequin, evoke this atmosphere. Accurate as always, John Szarkowski notes,

"his (Cartier-Bresson) more important debt to Atget however, is not a matter of style or technique, but is expressed in the awareness of life as an adventure revealed in unconsidered details, and in the aspect of the chance encounter of things." 7

The Surrealists recognised in photographs, moreover in Atgets, with his seemingly banal subject matter that ordinary photographs especially when divorced from their practical functions contain a wealth of unintended unpredictable meanings. They recognised the bizarre in the ordinary. Surrealism was defined from the start as a revolution in values, a reorganisation of the very way the real was conceived. Cartier-Bresson employed surrealist strategies with great wit and skill. Frequently his photographs leave the viewer slightly puzzled. At times he uproots ordinary fact or incidents from their expected spatial or narrative context. In a sense all photographs are details, framed and separated from the world at large. As Susan Sontag writes, they are,

"a neat slice of time, not a flow." 8

Eugene Atget
Boulevard de
Strasbourg Corsets,
1912.



Henri Cartier-Bresson, Rouen 1929.

But Cartier-Bresson often denies the viewer clues necessary for a plausible reconstruction of the scene from which the detail has been snatched. The enigmatic photograph "Valencia (1933)" is^s fascinating and deeply moving yet loses its mystery when we are told that the child in this photograph is merely playing a game arching his back to catch sight of a ball he has tossed in the air, out of the frame. Ben Maddow writes,

"The ball itself, the ordinary cause, is not seen; in fact it can hardly be guessed. Because now the child has been enlarged into a legendary figure. The wall behind him, with the whitewash coming off, is inscribed with fabulous organic shapes. The child is bending back but as if stabbed and suffering not pain but ecstasy. The slice of time has become enormous in importance and its hidden meaning is now perfectly plain, though so complex that it can hardly be written down." 9

An earlier photograph "Brussels 1932" places the viewer at an uncomfortable disadvantage. We can see everything but what the subjects of the picture are most eager to see. This photograph is quite similar to Kertesz's "Circus 1920" a shot of the backs of two people peering through a hole in a tent. Philippe Dubois (professor of Theory and Analysis of Photography and Cinema at the University of Liege) writes,

"A photograph only conveys presence, never sense." 10
This is certainly the case with many of Cartier-Bresson's photographs.



Valencia 1933.



Brussels 1932.



Andre Kertesz Circus 1920.

2. A Taste For The Primitive

While Cartier-Bresson was still quite young, he enjoyed a broad acquaintance among artists and writers in Paris. Through a mutual friend at L'hotel's academy he met Harry Crosby, the American poet. Harry Crosby and his wife, Caresse were wealthy Bostonians who had lived in Paris since 1922. They wrote poetry and published their own and others work under the imprint of the Black Sun Press. Apart from this they pursued an extravagant lifestyle. In 1928 they took a lease on an old mill near Paris which they called "The Mill of the Sun" and where they held frequent weekend parties. Among the regular visitors were Andre Breton, Max Ernst, Rene Crevel and Salvador Dali. Others whom Cartier-Bresson met at the mill were the young American art dealer Julian Levy, his Parisian counterpart Pierre Colle and Colle's associate the young Christian Dior. Through such a broad circle of acquaintance Cartier-Bresson had immediate access to the works and ideas of the avant-garde and also to it's network of patronage and supporters.

Cartier-Bresson's closest friend in the late twenties and early thirties was Andre Pieyre de Mandiargues, who would later achieve recognition as a poet and novelist. He recalls in an interview published in 1974 that,

"What is remarkable, if not extraordinary, is that we discovered at the same time, together or separately, most of the things that would become essential to us a little bit later. Cubist painting, Negro art, The Surrealist movement, the poetry of Rimbaud and Lautreamont, James Joyce, the poetry of Blake, the philosophy of Hegel, Marx and communism ..."

The two socialised together in Paris, and as Mandiargues recollects,

"The notion of amusement is characteristic of the bourgeois spiritual system that we wanted to destroy in ourselves, even if it meant wounding ourselves.

Moreover I was already fascinated by the dream and I wanted to find places, acts and people who gave me the illusion of a dream. In sum I asked for reality to become a dream. On occasion reality fulfilled my desire. For example when with Henri Cartier-Bresson I went to follow the lesson of Aragon in the brothels of provincial France, at Rouen or Nancy. In a spirit of burning purity of which most of our well heeled contemporaries would have understood nothing, but which the young people of today would understand right away, since it was a matter of undertaking a kind of 'trip', not terribly different from that sort they look for in hallucinogens." 1

Surrealism made a cult of personal experience and hence the reference to the "lesson of Aragon" indicates that both Mandiargues and Cartier-Bresson were aware of manuals of Surrealist behaviour, most notably Louis Aragon's "Le Paysan de Paris" (1926) and Andre Breton's "Nadja" (1928). Mandiargues, writing with reference to Cartier-Bresson's artistic development states,

"A kind of spontaneous activity, almost a game at first, had acquired a hold on this young painter, as poetry does with other young people. This happened without any idea of making a profitable career out of it for - to us two 'petits-bourgeois' youths barely out of adolescence and freed from the constraints of 'good society' - the very words career and even occupation made us at best feel quite sick! Something which our families were beginning to notice and without some concern." 2

Cartier-Bresson's taste for a bohemian life style can be further seen when in 1930 he embarked for Cameroon, and on the return voyage jumped ship at the Ivory Coast of Africa, then a

French colony. He stayed in Africa for about a year. In a general way, Cartier-Bresson's trip to Africa belongs to a broad stream of primitivism which is concerned with the idea that western civilisation has repressed an original vitality that can be re-discovered in primitive cultures. In modern art this became a central force in both aesthetic and intellectual terms. Cartier-Bresson would also have been aware of the poets Arthur Rimbaud and Andre Gide both of whom journeyed to Africa. For them, the essentially primitive lay not in African objects but in the place and its people. As Mandiargues has indicated, and which we may assume, the trip for Cartier-Bresson was more of a personal revolt. Primitivism focussed and directed his urge to escape the industrial, bourgeois society into which he had been born, not only on his trip to Africa but on a series of later trips made to Eastern Europe, Italy, Spain, Spanish Morocco and finally, Mexico. None of these places was as exotic as Africa but in them, more often than not, Cartier-Bresson sought out the poorest and most backward areas, whose rough street life and open sensuality evoke the vitality of the primitive.

Apart from personal revolt, Cartier-Bresson's rejection of his bourgeois upbringing was also inflected by the growing social and political turmoil of his time. In the thirties, Europe's economic collapse, the menace of Hitler and then Franco, added to that of Mussolini, created an atmosphere of crisis from which few felt immune. To a far greater degree than before artists and intellectuals felt compelled to take a stand. Young men of bourgeois families, such as Cartier-Bresson, felt particular pressure to commit themselves against their class, lest they be denounced as defenders of it. This period of deepening political crisis and growing moral awareness within the cultural avant-garde coincided with Cartier-Bresson's early maturity and undoubtedly affected him.

Not long after his return from Africa Cartier-Bresson began to travel again, often in the company of Mandiargues. In 1931 both men travelled extensively in Eastern Europe: Germany, Poland, Austria, Czechoslovakia and Hungary. At this time Cartier-Bresson used a wooden view-camera and a small roll-film camera he had bought in Africa. It was not until 1932 that he acquired a Leica and began to pursue photography seriously. He travelled to Spain, Spanish Morocco and Italy. While Cartier-Bresson's artistic ideas grew directly from his contacts with avant-garde circles, the work itself flourished in a completely separate realm of poor neighbourhoods, brothels, ruined buildings, open air markets and back alleys.

3. A Social Awareness

In 1934 Cartier-Bresson left for Mexico where he stayed for about a year. Culturally and politically, ancient and contemporary Mexico was of intense interest at this time to the European avant-garde. Andre Breton had travelled there, among others. Cartier-Bresson signed up as photographer on an expedition composed of about ten people which soon disbanded after they discovered their financial support had evaporated. With the painter Antonio Salazar, Cartier-Bresson left for Mexico city. During part of his stay here, he lived with the American Langston Hughes and the Mexican Andres Henestrosa both poets and the Mexican painter Ignac^cio Aguirre. Among his other friends were Lupe Marin (the estranged wife of Diego Rivera) and the Mexican photographer Manuel Alvarez Bravo. Hence one can see Cartier-Bresson continually kept contacts with the art world and consequently with its ideas.

Cartier-Bresson lived in one of the most sordid quarters of the capital, not far from the zones reserved for the underworld, prostitution, alcoholics and homeless. The majority of his photographs of Mexico were made here. Photographs such as "Calle Cuauhtemocztin, Mexico 1934" evoke the open and vulgar atmosphere. This picture of two Mexican prostitutes is striking both pictorially and psychologically. One prostitute, barely emerging from her window on the right confronts the photographer with chilling matter of factness. The other, her face a painted mask, projects her body outward, transforming herself into a phantasm of desire. One woman is sculptural, the other like a painting. One is aggressive but masklike and one direct but distant. The most erotic and provocative element turns out not to be the women but objects; the slit between the doors and the door pull, which separates the two and which excites a curiosity in the viewer. Similar direct confrontational portraits of prostitutes were made in the courtyard of a Barcelona whorehouse; the very long spiked



Calle Cuauhtemocztin, Mexico 1934.

heels of the women are drawn up with the knee bent so the point presses into the naked thigh. One can see the viewpoint of Surrealism toward reality most clearly in these early portraits.

In early 1935 Cartier-Bresson left Mexico for New York city where he had an exhibition of work along with Walker Evans and Alvarez Bravo at Julien Levy's gallery. He stayed in New York for a year where under an apprenticeship to Paul Strand he learned the basics of film direction. Toward the end of 1935 he applied unsuccessfully for a position as assistant director first to G.W. Pabst and later to Luis Bunuel, whom he had met earlier in Paris. Upon returning to Paris Cartier-Bresson offered his services to Jean Renoir, who after looking at his photographs took him on. From early 1936 until the outbreak of World War II in 1939 he devoted a great deal of his time to filmmaking. When he returned to Paris and began work with Renoir, Cartier-Bresson had been away from France for nearly two years. Changes were more than apparent. The political crisis in Europe had deepened considerably and the drift of French artists and intellectuals toward political commitment was also stronger.

Cartier-Bresson assisted Renoir with "La Vie est a nous" (Life is ours) 1936, a propaganda film for the French communist party and later in 1939 he himself directed "Victoire de la Vie" (Return to Life) a documentary on medical relief for Republican Spain. The film was intended to raise money for the relief program and like "La Vie est a nous" was propaganda. Several early photographs which Cartier-Bresson took in Spain could easily be mistaken as documents of the civil war there. Children playing among the ruins "Seville 1933" and a young man holding a child in "Madrid 1933" both depict the poverty of the years following the Great Depression in Europe. However it



Seville 1933.

seems irrelevant when they were taken, the compassion in these pictures renders them timeless. Working with Renoir certainly alerted Cartier-Bresson to a better awareness of social concerns, but the concern has always been present in his work, Renoir only heightened it.

The remainder of Cartier-Bresson's film work for Renoir was free from any political overtones. There is no doubt, Renoir influenced him. Unsentimental sympathy for the individual is a hallmark of his work. His films allow us to share in the tragedies and comedies of life around us in any setting, just as Cartier-Bresson's photographs do. Renoir's films, especially in the thirties were sympathetic to the left. Later Cartier-Bresson took a position as staff photographer for "Ce Soir", a communist evening daily founded in 1937 and edited by Louis Aragon. His photographs also appeared in the communist illustrated weekly "Regards". Among the other photographers which "Ce Soir" employed were Robert Capa and David Seymour. Cartier-Bresson's friendship with both of these photographers eventually led to the founding of "Magnum Photos" (an international photographers co-operative) in 1947.

Cartier-Bresson began photography with intensely private and artistic aims but one cannot expect that someone would remain untouched by the political turmoil of his time. The threat of fascism was so palpable in the mid-thirties that the atmosphere was one of urgency in which private artistic practice took second place. Cartier-Bresson's apprenticeship to Renoir, coupled with the challenge of newspaper work, along with his experience of World War II (he was in captivity for 35 months) changed his outlook and his work. His subject matter broadened to become less intensely personal. Writing about reportage he says,

"The photographer cannot be a passive spectator; he can be

really lucid only if he is caught up in the event" 1
Cartier-Bresson's newspaper work of the late thirties and then his freelance reporting after the war became far more responsive to social as opposed to personal concerns. With the formation of "Magnum Photos" he accepted the challenge of photojournalism. In "The Decisive Moment" (1968) he writes,

"There is subject in all that takes place in the world, as well as in our personal universe. We cannot negate subject. It is everywhere. So we must be lucid toward what is going on in the world and honest about what we feel. Subject does not consist of a collection of facts, for facts in themselves offer little interest. Through facts however, we can reach an understanding of the laws that govern them and be better able to select the essential ones which communicate reality." 2

4. A Matter of Selection

Cartier-Bresson continually selects. His experience of film making may have provided this discipline in so far as his photographs evoke the climax of a situation; the freezing of a series of images and movements in a single scene. By its very nature, the motion picture comes closer to reality than any "still". The photographer who wants to record reality confronts a problem very different to that of the film maker. We live in a flux of events and our impressions never stand still. Whether we walk or merely shift our head, whether we change our fixation or our focus, even a static object will always present to us a flow of continuously changing aspects. It is in movement that objects reveal their shapes. The experience of looking at a static photograph however, differs radically from the sight of the real world. The scene, which is snapped, firmly locked within the four sides of its frame, does not change, we can examine it at our leisure and focus on each of its parts. Cartier-Bresson's method of selection has always been strongly evident. In early photographs, such as "Madrid 1933" the scene is so harmonious that it evokes a sense of animation. This photograph has been quite deliberately composed with a shallow space, closed off by a wall which provides a backdrop for the figures; mostly of children in the foreground who become flattened as a series of shapes against it. The surprise appearance of a fat man in the centre of the scene separates it from being just a well composed picture. It creates a sense of drama between his character and the children who appear quite mischievous as well as innocent. The wall itself, with its random pattern of black windows accentuates the cartoon-like profile of the man.

Nearly all Cartier-Bresson's photographs exhibit that visual balance, and only rarely does he fail to give a touch of animation. His photographs hold our attention mainly because of his alertness to the unexpected but also to his perfect

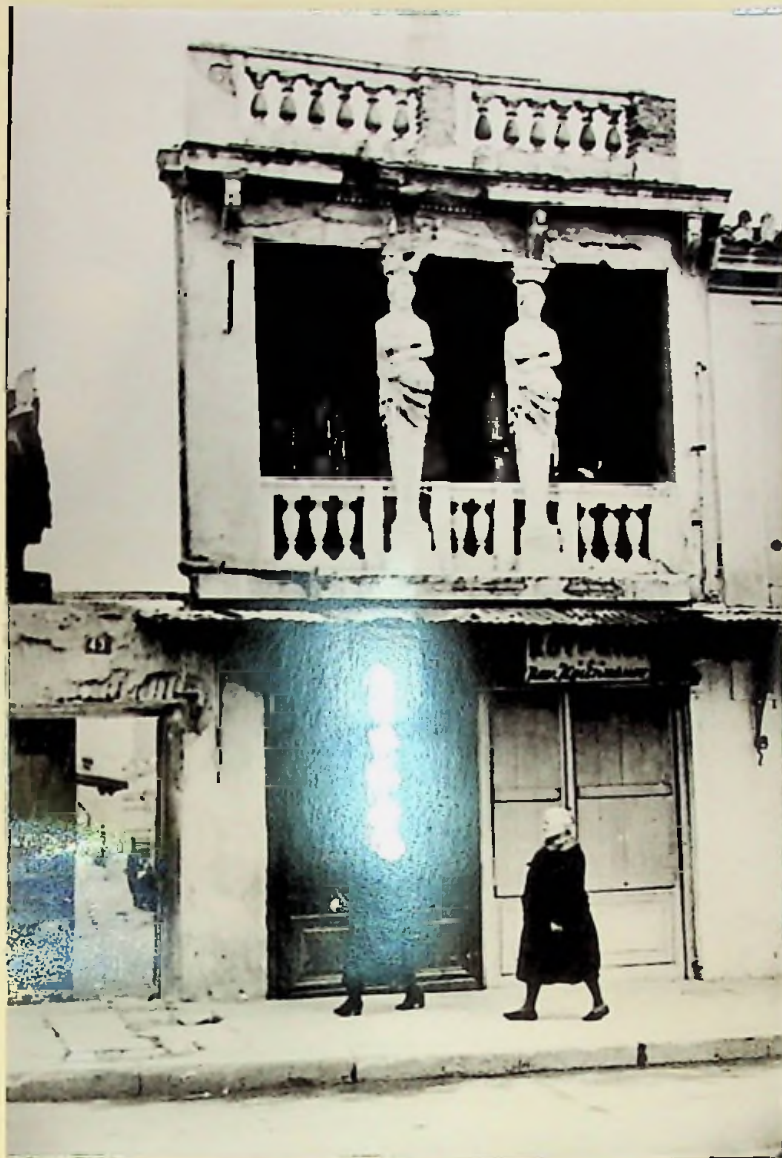


Madrid 1933.

sense of timing. Obviously he waits for the "decisive moment" when life enters the scene and completes the design at just the right point in his composition. As I have mentioned, Cartier-Bresson's alertness to the effects of incongruity owes much to Surrealism. His photographs make us pause and look. It is the thin division between surrealism and realism which is the strength in his work. The two plump and similarly dressed women walking under a partly demolished building in "Athens 1953" would hold little interest except Cartier-Bresson has caught them at their most animated. They are comically mimicked by two identical sculpted figures who form the buttresses of the ruined architecture overhead. A later photograph, "Museum Naples 1963" is a beautiful comment on the fascination of two children with a classical sculpture, a female figure who seems to have stooped to speak with them. Behind their backs, the strategic position and pose of another classical figure creates a small drama. A later photograph "Simiane-la-Rotonde, France 1970", freezes a pattern of pairs; two girls, two boys, two dogs, two adults, all at a perfect distance from one another, which separates their differences while at the same time accentuating their similarities.

That Cartier-Bresson created reports of exemplary quality, there is no doubt, but it is just as certain that he didn't search for 'the report' but for the special picture. In comparison, such reporters as Weegee and William Klein invite their audience into the thick of the action. Their confrontational style implies an aggression, exploitative at times, particularly with Weegee, where the shock of an event achieves the visual impact of the photograph. Cartier-Bresson is more sensitive to the importance of the apparently trivial and is certainly more humane and compassionate in approach. Weegee also searches for the 'special' picture. However for him, more often than not, it concerns subject matter which is

Athens 1953.



Museum, Naples 1963.



Simiane la-Rotonde, France 1970.

marginal or offbeat. His photographs also have the feeling of being seized, of being snapped - but only when something is newsworthy. He appears as more of an aggressive trespasser (particularly when he uses a flash bulb) than a participator. He is the 'true' newspaper man, lying in wait of the 'event'. Susan Sontag writes,

"The camera doesn't rape or even possess, though it may presume, intrude, trespass, distort, exploit, and at the farthest reach of metaphor assassinate - all activities that, unlike the sexual push and shove may be conducted from a distance and with some detachment." 1

Cartier-Bresson maintains his distance but he is rarely if ever detached. There is always a sensitivity in his approach, never aggression. His subjects rarely appear as if they have been confronted with a camera. Whether poignant, tense or humorous the photographs of human encounters he has taken always seem to transcend the momentary situation and tempt us to spin out the story; an elderly couple in Irvy-sur-Seine, France 1955, the family at Lock at Bougival, France 1955, the gossiping woman in Thessaly, Greece 1962 all hold our attention because they relate more than just the instant in which they were taken. His observations of individuals in all their loneliness displays the same sensitivity of approach. More than once he has photographed a woman sitting on a bench as if forlorn and unhappy; the woman under a tree on a park bench, (Unknown Location 1952), another one in Hyde Park (1938). One elderly woman puffing contentedly on a cigarette (Silifke, Turkey 1965) appeals to our imagination, and so do the men sadly sitting lost in their thoughts in 'Avenue du Maine', Paris, 1932 and 'Ascot, England 1955.' There is solitude even in a crowd as exemplified by the sad brooding man in an Indian Refugee camp (1947). There is deliberate withdrawal as with the pictures of readers absorbed in their books or papers, like the woman in a New York subway (1959) or the two men in Moscow pushing prams



Irvy-sur-Seine, France, 1955.



Lock at
Bougival, France,
1955.



Hyde Park, 1938.



Avenue du Maine, Paris 1932.



Ascot, England 1955.

with their noses in their papers (Sunday, Moscow 1973). Cartier-Bresson took many moving pictures of sleepers. One of his more striking photographs is of the figure of an Indian sleeping in the shadow of an elaborate structure, pointing the contrast between two worlds - a dreamworld and the realworld the man will wake up in, (Ahmedabad 1967). A more humorous picture shows a man sleeping among the litter beneath the waiting crowd in Trafalgar Square, at the time of the Coronation of George V (1938). There is still an element of the surreal and unexpected here.

Just as many of Cartier-Bressons' photographs may be described as Surrealist subjects rediscovered in the street, a few others instantly evoke a Cubist influence. Andre L'Hote, whom I have mentioned, painted in this style but Cartier-Bresson's awareness of Cubist-like graphic patterns may owe more to such photographers as Laszlo Moholy-Nagy. By the mid twenties photographers had learned that by shooting at odd angles, from very close up or far away, or by eccentric framing or by exploiting designs of light and shadow, they could achieve Cubist-like compositions. In "Cubism and American Photography 1910-1930" (1981) John Pultz and Catherine B. Scallen observe,

"Certain premises of cubism determined its dominant influence on photography; the emphasis upon the object in its most reduced structural form; the differentiation of materials and surface texture of objects; and the fascination with the paradox of representing three dimensions on a two dimensional surface." 2

In "The New Vision" a review of the principles of the course of instruction at the Bauhaus, Moholy-Nagy writes,

"Cubism utilised photography in its' study of surface values. Photography in turn awoke to the possibilities of its own province after a decade of Cubist experiment." 3



Ahmedabad, 1967.

At its' worst the new style descended into mere pattern making in which the subject, no longer a centre point, became part of the Cubist design. But at its' best the new photography provided a fascinating and puzzling contest between three and two dimensions. Many of Cartier-Bresson's photographs which reflect this influence are both psychologically as well as spatially disorientating. Let us consider again his photograph taken in Mexico "Calle Cuauhtemocztin, 1934." By slightly deflecting his camera from the flat plane of the door, Cartier-Bresson has joined the two women together in the warped plane of the picture, which simultaneously attracts and repels. In this photograph there is an intersection of Cubist and Surreal influences. The figures appear surreal in appearance, the composition is Cubist in it's sensitivity to the shapes of objects and flattened perspective. A much later photograph taken in Naples 1963, employs the same flattening of perspective. Here he creates a pattern of architectural elements which is interrupted by the appearance of a woman. This figure would appear insignificant only that the accentuated features of a gargoyle in the foreground creates a sense of eerie drama. "Roman Amphitheatre Valencia Spain 1933" is treated with a similar flattening of perspective as is "Salerno Italy 1953" although neither become mere patterns. Hence, Cartier-Bresson may use this Cubist-like technique of composition but the subject matter never takes second place. The intersection of Cubist and Surrealist conceptions of photography marks the spot where Cartier-Bresson took them up. For him Cubism was not a series of abstract forms to be superimposed on reality, nor was Surrealism merely a library of wierd or uncanny subjects. In his work the two artistic systems operate as one.

A technique which Cartier-Bresson occasionally employs to point to a meaning without sacrificing realism is the inclusion in



Naples 1963.



Roman Amphitheatre, Valencia, Spain, 1933.

his picture of man-made images and inscriptions. Posters such as the advertisement for women's corsets in "Cordoba, Spain 1933" mimicks the gesture of a woman standing in front of it, establishing with her a dialogue concerning the relationship between youth and age, fantasy and fact. Another photograph, a portrait of Andre Pieyre de Mandiargues, is a somewhat witty comment on his large nose which is echoed in a triple caricature directly behind his head. In "Barcelona 1933" a woman walking under an advertisement for umbrellas, oblivious to the painted figures overhead, bends one of her arms in a position which almost exactly mirrors one of them. An early photograph "Barrio Chino, Barcelona 1933" makes one marvel at the degree to which Cartier-Bresson was favoured by luck. It needed not only a good eye but also an extraordinary coincidence to find a man sleeping under a chalk drawing which almost echoes his expression. Similarly one of his most famous photographs "Behind the Gare Saint Lazare Paris 1932" exhibits the same coincidence. Here a man jumping to avoid getting his feet wet is echoed by the posters in the background. Most of these latter photographs I have mentioned were made in the early thirties long before Cartier-Bresson turned to photojournalism, but he has never lost his sense of wit or paradox. Two photographs taken in Mexico in 1964 employ the same juxtapositioning of real world and man-made images. One of these shows a young boy running at a speed down a dusty street, while behind him, a wall (which in Cubist-like style flattens the pictorial space) holds the commercial image of a large painted watch. The language between the two hints in a subtle manner at the passage of time, the race against time. Another photograph taken in Mexico the same year shows a small girl transporting a framed painted portrait of an older woman, (a possible relative) which draws comparison between innocence and maturity, youth and old age. Few juxtapositions are more pointed than the cross with the inscription "Jesus is coming

Cordoba,
Spain 1933.



Barcelona, 1933.



Barrio Chino, Barcelona 1933.

Behind the
Gare Saint-
Lazare.
Paris 1932.



Mexico 1964.

soon" in a scene of squalor and desolation, "Tennessee 1947." Cartier-Bresson's photographs frequently exhibit this drawing together of contrasts, comparisons, and contradictions. There is often a deeper meaning below the surface of his pictures which like 'found objects', trivial at first, are given importance because he has caught them at their most expressive.

In the introduction to Cartier-Bressons' book "About Russia" published in 1974, he states,

"I am neither an economist nor a photographer of moments, and I am not much of a journalist either. What I am trying to do more than anything else is to observe life."¹

It would seem from the above statement that journalism has been the occasion not the reason or motive force for his photography. Beginning in the late thirties his work changed in so far as he became more open to worldly as opposed to personal and artistic concerns. His range of subjects broadened, implying a less intensely personal view of the world. Yet the work is always sensitive to the language of things. Cartier-Bresson's secret of course is not realism but selection. He observes life in the act of living, taking single moments from the flux of events, with keen eyes that are attentive to enigmatic details and ambiguous spaces. The majority of his photographs display his alertness to the effects of the unexpected which suggest that he never truly abandoned his Surrealist sensibility. The arrangement of parts in his photographs takes on a spirit and meaning in itself. They are never merely "decisive moments." The viewer is touched by the emotion, particularly compassion, in his work. In my introduction I quoted Lincoln Kirstein's statement that,

"... he is not making art but taking life."

Nonetheless, this does not mean that our minds must accept what our eyes tell us; that the pictures dispense with art in favour of life. It means that for an instant, made permanent, there was no difference between the two. Cartier-Bresson has uncovered an unfamiliar and compelling reality beneath the surface of the familiar.

FOOTNOTES

Introduction

1. See; - page 4, Kirstein, Lincoln. Newhall, Beaumont.
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2. See; - page 49, Agee, James "A Way Of Seeing"
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3. See; - page 141, Walsh, George. Naylor, Colin.
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4. See; - page 6, Bonnefoy, Yves. (foreword).
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5. See; - page 3, Kirstein, Lincoln. Newhall, Beaumont.
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6. See; - page 283
7. See; - page 284, Newhall, Beaumont.
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8. See; - page 4, Cartier-Bresson, Henri.
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9. See; - page 12, Petruck, Peninah R.
"The Camera Viewed." Vol.2.
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Chapter 1

1. See; - page 11, Galassi, Peter.
2. See; - page 12, "Henri Cartier-Bresson - the early work."
Museum of Modern Art, New York 1987.
3. See; - page 117, Mora, Gilles- "Henri Cartier-Bresson"
"Les Cahiers de la photographie"
(Paris) no.18. 1986.
4. See; - page 286, Scharf, Aaron.
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5. See; - page 2, Cartier-Bresson, Henri.
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6. See; - page 136, Jeffrey, Ian.
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7. See; - page 22, Szarkowski, John.
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8. See; - page 17, Sontag, Susan.
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9. See; - page 2, Maddow, Ben.
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(review of Cartier-Bresson's 1947
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10. See; - page 242, Lemagny, Jean Claude.
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1. See;-page 14/15, Galassi, Peter.
"Henri Cartier-Bresson - the early work"
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2. See;-page 4, De Mandiargues, Andre Pieyre.
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1. See; - page 3, Cartier-Bresson, Henri.
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2. See; - page 16, Petruck, Peninah R.
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1. See; - page 13, Sontag, Susan.
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2. See; - page vi, Pultz, John.
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3. See; - page 272, Scharf, Aaron.
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Conclusion

1. See; -preface. Cartier-Bresson, Henri,
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