Henri Cartier-Bresson: From a higher reality to a respect for reality

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Henri Cartier-Bresson is an outstanding representative of a generation of artists who transformed photography into a recognised art form.

Last year, his ninetieth birthday was celebrated in Britain with a series of exhibitions and interviews, as well as a BBC documentary *Pen Brush & Camera*. The events concluded with the *Tête-à-tête* show at the Tate Gallery in Liverpool.

Cartier-Bresson began his artistic life not as a photographer, but as a painter—a passion that stirred him from early childhood. He once wrote, “Painting has been my obsession from the time that 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 canvases.” At the age of 12 he was introduced to the feel of oil painting by the same uncle, a gifted painter who was killed during the First World War.

After leaving school he entered the Paris studio of André Lhote, a lesser-known painter, whose ambition was to unify the Cubist's approach to reality with classical artistic forms. While painting, Cartier-Bresson read Dostoevsky, Schopenhauer, Rimbaud, Mallarmé, Freud, Proust, Joyce, Hegel and Marx. Lhote took his pupils to the Louvre to study classical artists and to galleries to study contemporary art. Cartier-Bresson's interest in modern art was combined with an admiration for the works of the Renaissance—of Paolo Uccello, Piero della Francesca, Masaccio and Jan van Eyck. He later said that, as far as art was concerned, Lhote “taught me to read and write. His treatises on landscape and the figure are fundamental books.... I saw him again shortly before his death [in 1962]. ‘Everything comes from your training as a painter,' he said of my photographs.”

Cartier-Bresson began to feel uncomfortable with Lhote's “rule-laden” approach to art. But his rigorous theoretical training later enabled him to fearlessly confront and resolve problems of artistic form and composition, not in painting but in photography. Schools of photographic realism were forming all over Europe, with differing conceptions on how photography should develop. The cry had gone up “Crush tradition! Photograph things as they are!” At the centre of this revolt was the Surrealist movement, founded in 1924.

In 1925, while still at Lhote's studio, Cartier-Bresson began attending gatherings of the Surrealists at the Café La Place Blanche. He met a number of the movement's leading figures. His closest friend was the young poet René Crevel, who later committed suicide. At the age of 17, Cartier-Bresson belonged to a different generation than the founding members of Surrealism. He didn't engage in the debates, but he listened and adopted conceptions that would shape his early artistic life. He said he had been “marked, not by Surrealist painting, but by the conceptions of [André] Breton, [which] satisfied me a great deal; the role of spontaneous expression and of intuition and, above all, the attitude to revolt ... in art but also in life.”

The Surrealists' "destination-less walks of discovery" around the streets of Paris influenced him. Peter Galassi, in his book *Henri Cartier-Bresson, The Early Work* (Museum of Modern Art, New York), explains: “Alone, the Surrealist wanders the streets without destination but with a premeditated alertness for the unexpected detail that will release a marvellous and compelling reality just beneath the banal surface....

“The Surrealists approached photography in the same way that Aragon and Breton ... approached the street: with a voracious appetite for the usual and unusual.... The Surrealists recognised in plain photographic fact an essential quality that had been excluded from prior theories of photographic realism. They saw that ordinary photographs, especially when uprooted from their practical functions, contain a wealth of unintended, unpredictable meanings.”

Cartier-Bresson grew up artistically in this stormy political and cultural environment and was aware of these possibilities, but could not find a way of expressing this imaginatively in his paintings. Frustration with his experiments led him to destroy the majority of his early efforts. Those that survive are well executed, but do not have a recognisable artistic language of their own.

In 1930 he left Paris for Africa and adventure. “I left Lhote's studio because I did not want to enter into that systematic spirit. I wanted to be myself,” he later wrote. “To paint and to change the world counted for more than everything in my life.” This connection between art and revolt against the bourgeois order was the critical element for him, but giving it expression remained a problem.

He jumped ship and lived in French colonial Africa. There he survived by shooting game and selling it to local villagers. Affected by the suffering he witnessed in the French colonies, Cartier-Bresson said of its impact on his artistic conceptions, “The adventurer in me felt obliged to testify with a quicker instrument than a brush to the scars of the world.” He made tentative experiments with photography—only seven photographs survive—but continued to paint. He returned to France after suffering an attack of black water fever. Back home, he deepened his contact with the Surrealists. He saw a picture by the Hungarian photographer Munkacsi, entitled, “Three Boys at Lake Tanganyika.”

Cartier-Bresson describes the impact this made on him: “The only thing which completely was an amazement to me and brought me to photography was the work of Munkacsi. When I saw the photograph of Munkacsi of the black kids running in a wave I couldn't believe such a thing could be caught with the camera. I said damn it, I took my camera and went out into the street.”

In 1923 the German Eranomax camera was invented, which enabled photographs to be taken in bad light. The Leica followed—a small, lightweight, hand-held camera—which Cartier-Bresson adopted in 1932. He described it as an extension of his eye. The anonymity it gave him in a crowd or during an intimate moment was essential in overcoming the formal and unnatural behaviour of those who were aware of being photographed. It opened up new possibilities in photography—the ability to capture the world in its actual state of movement and transformation. “For me, the camera is a sketch book, an instrument of intuition and

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spontaneity, the master of the instant which—in visual terms—questions and decides simultaneously," Cartier-Bresson wrote. "In order to 'give a meaning' to the world, one has to feel oneself involved in what he frames through the viewfinder. This attitude requires concentration, a discipline of mind, sensitivity, and a sense of geometry. It is by great economy that one arrives at simplicity of expression."

Between 1931 and 1935 he travelled in Eastern Europe, Spain and Mexico. He lived amongst the poor. The writer André Pieyre de Mandiargues accompanied him and witnessed the emergence of his genius for photography "through a spontaneous activity, which, rather like a game at first, forced itself on the young painter as poetry may force itself on other young people. Not with any thought of making a profitable career out of it....

"For him the beauty of the picture is to be found in unveiling a certain mystery, and in the shock of the fantastic, where tragedy is mixed with comedy ... rather as in the best stories of Hoffman, Poe, Balzac, Kafka and Maurice Blanchot, or in the old Chaplin and Keaton films, which must surely have helped him find his way."

One picture, "Valencia 1933," is of a young child throwing a ball in the air. It rises out of sight into the sun. His eyes turn white; a hand rests on the wall. The moment of repose, as he senses the ball rising, is blissful. He experiences the event as though his inner spirit, his instinct, suddenly surfaces.

Cartier-Bresson's photographs of this period excite feelings for life's infinite sensual complexities. His work stimulates an imaginative appreciation of reality. Their language is visual, yet they are closer to the poetic images of the great Surrealist writers. They are all the more astonishing for being extracted directly from life. Surrealist artists discovered "found" or "ready-made" objects in the street and transformed them by adding another object or altering their environment. Cartier-Bresson's pictures are "found" in the street, in poetical juxtapositions that occur in the movement of everyday life. "As I photograph with my little Leica, I have the feeling that there is something so right about it: With one eye that is closed one looks within. With the other eye that is open one looks without," he wrote. Cartier-Bresson's eye travels between the inner and outer world of his subject. His most successful pictures capture those moments when a pulse runs between the inner self and impacts on the self's outer appearance.

His first-ever exhibition was held in Mexico in 1935, and then at the Julien Levy gallery in New York. At the age of 27, he was increasingly putting his faith in the Stalinist Communist parties. In New York, he stayed with the composer Nicolas Nabokov, who explains Cartier-Bresson's growing concern at the deteriorating political situation: "We had long talks mostly on morals and politics. I suppose both of us were radicals. But to Cartier-Bresson the Communist movement was the bearer of history, of mankind's future—especially in those years, when Hitler had saddled Germany and when a civil war was about to explode in Spain.... Fortunately, Henri Cartier-Bresson was never dogmatic or didactic about his beliefs or his learning."

Cartier-Bresson was fascinated by the possibilities of the moving image. It is said that his bursts of creativity in photography were intervals between his interest in other forms of artistic expression. He studied film in New York under Paul Strand. Possibly he was trying to discover, as in Africa, an instrument that would be even more immediate than his camera in capturing the scars of the world.

His concerns over the rise of fascism were growing. This was a tumultuous period in politics and in his artistic evolution, in which he was reconsidering the relationship between art and social revolution. On returning to Paris in 1936 he assisted the director Jean Renoir on his 1937 propagandist film, *La Vie est à Nous* [*People of France*], for the left Popular Front government. Cartier-Bresson criticised the film as "doctrinaire", but at the same time he said it expressed the "great feeling" there was for the "Front Populaire." During the Spanish civil war he co-directed an anti-fascist film with Herbert Kline, promoting the Republican medical services. Cartier-Bresson himself filmed a group of young children playing in the streets. This brief sequence is very beautiful, catching the children's unaffected joyful movement. For him, the freedom of childhood had become a symbol of liberty. He worked as an actor in Renoir's 1936 film *Un Parti de Campagne* [*A Day in the Country*], also in the 1939 *La Règle du Jeu* [*The Rules of the Game*], where he was second assistant. Renoir made him act, so he could understand what it felt like on the other side of the camera.

Cartier-Bresson explains his artistic and personal responses to his experience with film: "A movie director for me is a fiction writer. It's telling the story, which is a wonderful thing, and directing and I'm incapable of giving orders to an actor ... it's not my world." He was dissatisfied with what he perceived as a lack of spontaneity in the detailed planning and construction needed for filmmaking. It is not necessary to agree with Cartier-Bresson about film to understand that photography was better suited to his artistic talents and temperament.

He turned to the political struggle and put his art at the service of the French Communist Party. Between 1937 and 1939 he was a photographer for the party's evening newspaper *Ce Soir*. The paper's editor was former Surrealist poet and writer, Louis Aragon. During these times many artists abandoned their own independent creative work and subordinated themselves to the service of Stalinism. Aragon is a case in point.

At *Ce Soir*, Cartier-Bresson joined Robert Capa and David Seymour. They were given more freedom than other photographers, but were obliged, as he explains, to photograph "'chiens ecrasés' [literally "run-over dogs"—slang for mundane news shots], on a regular basis." He turned to photographing "the masses", and his pictures took on a documentary, sociological character, different from his earlier Surrealist-inspired photographs. Galassi explains it in this way: "Beginning in the late 1930s, Cartier-Bresson's attitude towards his own work began to change, and with it his style. In broad terms the shift in attitude may be described as a greater openness to worldly or social as opposed to personal and artistic concerns."

It is difficult to know how much artistic independence Cartier-Bresson retained from the Stalinist apparatus during this period. At the outbreak of the Second World War, he joined the French army's film and photographic unit. He was captured with 1.5 million others, just as the French bourgeoisie signed the pact that would create the pro-fascist Vichy regime. He was a prisoner of war for three years and worked as a forced labourer under the Nazis.

In 1943, on his third attempt, he escaped from a prisoner of war camp, working on a "safe" farm before travelling to Paris to join the resistance. There he worked with the underground in a photographic unit recording the Nazi occupation and the liberation. During this time he took some of his most enigmatic portraits, of Matisse, Braque and others. On one occasion, he returned to the farm and discovered that, two days before, all those who had helped him had been exposed by an agent and sent to the Buchenwald death camp.

In 1944-45, he worked on another documentary film, *Le Retour* [*The Return*], sponsored by the US Office of War Information, which showed the return of French prisoners and displaced persons. He took his film crew to record scenes that did not need constructing and with players who did not need directing. He was using the film camera to capture the same movement of reality that he sought through his Leica. One scene, where families gather at a train station to meet their sons, brothers and lovers, shows an almost unbearable unleashing of suppressed passions.

As at *Ce Soir*, Cartier-Bresson faced interference in his work. He was obstructed when he tried to shoot his own scenes and an entire reel was edited out. He describes his desire, as the post-war era began, to be free to use his art to create a better world. "I felt close again to André Breton and

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to his attitude: 'First of all, life!' It was later that I became a photographic reporter."

In 1947, during a reunion of *Ce Soir* photographers, David Seymour and Robert Capa persuaded Cartier-Bresson to join Magnum. Along with George Rogers they formed an influential co-operative that attracted photographers of the calibre of Werner Bischof and Ernst Haas. Cartier-Bresson described its significance at the time: "To be autonomous is something very important. It means you're not on a payroll of anybody, you can decide what you want to do" and you could "put your own questions". The stated purpose of Magnum was to "feel the pulse" of the times.

Some of their first projects were "People Live Everywhere", "Youth of the World", "Women of the World" and "The Child Generation". Their aim was to use photography in the service of humanity, giving birth to the conception, most associated with Cartier-Bresson, of "life photography". Magnum provided some of the most arresting and popular images of this period.

How had the political struggles of the 1930s and the war affected Cartier-Bresson's views on photography? He explains, "I became less interested in what one might call an 'abstract' approach to photography. Not only did I become more and more interested in human and plastic values, but I believe I can say that a new spirit arose among photographers in general; in their relationships not only to people, but to one another."

A conflict between abstract and concrete schools in painting, film and photography erupted in the post-war period. Cartier-Bresson made clear where he stood. But the true "pulse" of that time was not the rise of a Communist utopia. It was the savage betrayal by Stalinism of the revolutionary movements that gripped the world following the defeat of fascism. During this period, Stalinist political and artistic conceptions—the promotion of "Soviet" or "Social Realism"—acted as a dead hand on the artist's interpretation of the world. But there were still traces of Cartier-Bresson's earlier genius in some of his work.

Photojournalism was not Cartier-Bresson's first aim, but when he turned his Leica to social upheaval he was unequalled in capturing elements of the process of social change. From 1947 to 1949 he travelled the world, including the United States, India and China. He was in China during the last six months of the Kuomintang dictatorship, and the first six months of the Maoist regime. One famous picture from this period is of a scramble for gold, issued by the Kuomintang at a Shanghai bank, as the value of the Chinese currency plummeted. The crowd, a mixture of desperate people from all classes, is crushed, as they hold each other up, on a thin path over a ditch. Heads appear from the strangest of angles and places. The picture expresses the mass of contradictions faced by the Kuomintang and Chinese society.

It was while he was in China that Cartier-Bresson developed an interest in Buddhism and a fascination with its approach to external reality. What interested him was the Buddhist idea of disrupting nature as little as possible. It seemed to express an unformed direction in his photography of seeking to capturing things "as they are", which was a far cry from the artistic vision of the Surrealists.

In 1952 he was preparing a retrospective book and wrote a number of essays, which have become known as "The Decisive Moment". Whilst talking to the painter Pierre Bonnard, he took a photograph. Bonnard asked him why he made the shot at that precise moment. Cartier-Bresson replied, "Why did you just put that touch of yellow on your painting?" They both laughed, recognising that they understood each other. Cartier-Bresson adds, "Bonnard said intelligence is necessary and instinct. But finally instinct has a priority on intelligence, and I think this is fundamental. In the present world I think very often this is upside down—a dry conceptual intelligence. Intuition is lost—intuition, sensitivity and imagination."

The *Tête-à-tête* exhibition included video footage of Cartier-Bresson at work on the streets of Paris. He moves with great speed, instantly sees, rises on his toes, puts his camera to his eye and click! He was immersed in the act of creation, discovering simple truths through a synthesis of technique, intuition and freedom of thought.

He describes this as "putting one's head, one's eye and one's heart on the same axis. One must seize the moment before it passes, the fleeting gesture, the evanescent smile.... That's why I'm so nervous—it's horrible for my friends—but it's only by maintaining a permanent tension that I can stick to reality."

The writer Malcolm Brinnin described Cartier-Bresson's physical state during and between these decisive moments. His "eye is polyhedral, like a fly's. Focusing on one thing, he quivers in the imminence of ten others.... When there's nothing in view, he's mute, unapproachable, humming-bird tense."

Cartier-Bresson examines the synthesis between knowledge, humanity, technique, form, chance and sheer intuition. The "decisive moment" is when all these elements come together and interact with the subject, thus transcending the everyday and revealing something of the nature of life.

The value of his portraits has been debated amongst artists and art critics. Some say they are more like caricatures and do not in the main reveal much about his subject. Others believe they are profound insights into human nature. His "humanistic" approach to his subjects did allow him a glimpse into the nature of his subject. His purpose was to place his camera "between the skin and the shirt of a person" regardless of their social position. This humanism dominated in Stalinist-influenced artistic circles. Did it express a retreat in Cartier-Bresson's cultural and historical understanding; almost a reversal of his earlier views on art, philosophy and history?

During his recent BBC interview, Cartier-Bresson made a point of summing up, at the age of 90, his own artistic outlook. He cites the views of the English philosopher Francis Bacon (1561-1626) that "The contemplation of things as they are, without error or confusion without substitution or imposture is, in its self, a nobler thing than a whole harvest of inventions." Cartier-Bresson adds, "That is a respect of reality."

Bacon laid the foundations of the modern approach to scientific research. He accumulated a mass of factual material and, through it, sought insight into the laws of nature. But there is an artificial connection made here between art and science. The artist is not the same as the scientist. The artist cognises the external world through images. Cartier-Bresson's later work gives the distinct impression not of probing the laws of his own artistic vision, but of exploring the world separate from that distinctive vision. Hegel, in his *Philosophy of Art* describes the "subjective mind" as the "spirit of art".

Does his interpretation of Bacon represent a retreat from artistic truth—an acceptance of reality "as it appears to us"? Cartier-Bresson had believed that the purpose of art was revolutionary, to transform the world. Now he speaks of "things as they are". It is almost as if the artist has turned from cognising the world to becoming an impassioned recorder of aspects of its appearance. There is a connection here with Cartier-Bresson's interest in Buddhism and the Buddhist approach to nature external to themselves.

From the mid-1970s, he painted and drew pictures and turned away from photography. He recently illustrated a new release of Aragon's *The Peasant of Paris*. He describes this turn as a kind of "test", but offers no further explanation. After a lifetime of developing his artistic vision through photography, he now says, "All I care about these days is painting—photography has never been more than a way into painting, a sort of instant drawing." The problems of his approach to reality are not overcome in his paintings and drawings. It is difficult to explain, but they seem to exude a sense of resignation.

With his return to painting, Cartier-Bresson now comments on the limited potential of photography. This reflects a narrowing of his attitude to photographic art. When young, his photographs unleashed the

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enormous artistic potential of the camera. Now he describes what he believes to be the “transient” nature of photography, comparing it to the disappearance of the art of stained glass windows after the Middle Ages.

The process that led Cartier-Bresson to abandon photography and return to painting is no doubt complex. Possibly he was motivated by a desire to recapture the freshness, excitement and idealism of his youth. But did it also express a germ of recognition that what had animated his artistic life from the beginning—“the desire to paint and to change the world”—had been ruptured through the experiences he had and the choices he had made throughout his life?

Some of Henri Cartier-Bresson's work may be viewed at these sites:
http://www.ndirect.co.uk/~gormley/master.html

http://artcyclopedia.com/artists/cartier-bresson_henri.html

http://www.esinet.net/personal/eric/hcb/home.html

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