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Contemporary Media Forum

The Decisive Moment

In my research on photographic psychology and online photo-sharing communities (Suler, 2012), I have recently focused on one of the most fascinating and highly debated concepts in the history of photography: "the decisive moment." This concept was first proposed by Henri Cartier-Bresson, who is considered by many to be the founder of modern photo-journalism. He believed this moment occurs when the visual and psychological elements of people in a real life scene spontaneously and briefly come together in perfect resonance to express the essence of that human situation. Some people believe that the unique artistic purpose of photography, as compared to other visual arts, is to capture this fleeting, quintessential, and holistic instant in the flow of life. In the introduction to his book *The Decisive Moment* (1952, pp. 1–14), Cartier-Bresson said:

> I kept walking the streets, high-strung, and eager to snap scenes of convincing reality, but mainly I wanted to capture the quintessence of the phenomenon in a single image. Photographing, for me, is instant drawing, and the secret is to forget you are carrying a camera . . . There are those who take photographs arranged beforehand and those who go out to discover the image and seize it. For me the camera is a sketchbook, an instrument of intuition and spontaneity, the master of the instant which, in visual terms, questions and decides simultaneously. In order to 'give a meaning' to the world, one has to feel oneself involved in what one frames through the viewfinder. This attitude requires concentration, a discipline of mind, sensitivity, and a sense of geometry . . . It is putting one's head, one's eye, and one's heart on the same axis. It is a way of shouting, of freeing oneself, not of proving or asserting one's originality. It is a way of life.

Some contemporary photographers dismiss the decisive moment as an outdated idea because fast burst digital cameras in our contemporary age make it much easier to capture such fleeting moments. By taking many shots rapidly, without worrying about wasting film, you stand a much greater chance of securing that transitory instant – or, at the very least, you can look over your large batch of shots to find one that qualifies as a decisive moment.

While pondering these ideas, I found myself thinking about clinicians who offer many varied or lengthy interpretations to their clients, hoping that something will stick in their attempt to generate an important insight – what Freud would most probably consider "wild analysis." Such a strategy differs significantly than the traditional idea that the clinician offers one succinct, precise, and perfectly timed but intuitively spontaneous interpretation

that quickly hits the intrapsychic mark. Such a powerful interpretation in psychoanalytic treatment is the equivalent of Cartier-Bresson's decisive moment in photography. In fact, in the introduction to *The Decisive Moment* (1952), Cartier-Bresson cited the seventeenth century Cardinal de Retz who said, "Il n'y a rien dans ce monde qui n'ait un moment decisive" ["There is nothing in this world that does not have a decisive moment"].

No doubt that idea applies to any pursuit of psychotherapeutic change, including what has become a very popular endeavor in this age of digital photography and online photo-sharing: therapeutic photography (Weiser, 1993). Millions of people are now using their cameras as a tool for personal expression and insight. When people set out to do therapeutic photography, are they best off taking lots of photographs of almost anything that strikes them as interesting, hoping one of them will prove to be a personally therapeutic gem; or should they wait patiently as they look around their environment, relying on their intuition to spot a few decisive moments when everything inside and outside of them seems to "come together?"

FEATURES OF THE DECISIVE MOMENT

Consistent with Cartier-Bresson, my research into what people are saying online about decisive moments and therapeutic photography confirms the former point of view. In fact, what I discovered in these online discussions resonates with traditional psychoanalytic ideas about insight and change in psychotherapy:

1. Prior to the shot as well as in the resulting photograph, there is an intuitive sense of anticipation that something important is about to happen, similar to the experience of the client and the therapist just prior to the moment of therapeutic insight.
2. The photographer plays an inconspicuous role while capturing the meaning of the candid human scene unfolding before him, much as the clinician appears unobtrusive to the client during the intervention that leads to insight.
3. The emotional and psychological meaning of the decisive moment springs from the dynamic interaction of the experiences of subject and photographer, just as the dynamics of transference and countertransference – the "intersubjective field" between clinician and client – provides the springboard for effective insight.
4. For the photographer and clinician, there is the sense that the opportunity for the shot and therapeutic intervention is unique and fleeting, therefore requiring a precisely timed action.
5. The composition of the decisive moment photograph creates a feeling of balance, harmony, unity, and closure similar to the effect of the moment of insight in psychotherapy.
6. The decisive moment shot, as well as effective therapeutic interventions, do not simply happen by luck or chance; they are the product of a unique set of technical, cognitive, and emotional skills developed from extensive training, experience, and psychological knowledge of people.

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THE GOOD HOUR

The decisive moment photograph does not occur as an isolated shot. There are no photographers, even the great ones, who go out with their cameras, take one spectacular shot, and then return home. The decisive moment emerges in the context of an entire shoot of some kind. Some photography sessions lead to a great decisive moments shot, and some do not. Is there a difference between the two?

Here I am reminded of ideas about the "Good Hour" in psychoanalytic therapy – the term originally proposed by Kris in his classic article "On some vicissitudes of insight in psychoanalysis" (1956). The Good Hour starts off with a negative tinge. The person feels frustrated, angry, or disappointed. However, these feelings are then neutralized and transformed into a more productive energy that pushes one's mind towards personally meaningful insights. Dreams or memories begin to break through defenses into conscious awareness. New elements of one's experience begin to fit into the context of previous experiences as if they had always been familiar. Associations suddenly converge. What was at first flat and intellectual becomes real and concrete. There is the feeling that what one is thinking, feeling, and perceiving comes from an unconscious realm where they have already been prepared, formulated, and integrated – a kind of subconscious incubation. It is a reaction to and a synthesis of previous psychotherapeutic work. The Good Hour, in which people feel autonomous and independent in their search for meaning, differs from the "Pseudo-Good Hour" in which they might seem to be perceiving life in a new, more fruitful way, when actually their perception is motivated by a conscious or unconscious goal to please someone, gain praise, or defy an authority.

These ideas echo what Cartier-Bresson said about the spontaneous resonance of the visual and psychological elements of the decisive moment shot, as well as suddenly realizing and capturing the underlying meaning and emotion of human life. He in fact compared photography to the psychoanalytic couch, while Kris believed the psychological processes occurring during the Good Hour resemble those in artistic endeavors. Integrating the factual elements of the situation being photographed with one's subjective reaction to and interpretation of that scenario, the decisive moment shot is the therapeutic "Aha!" moment of realizing oneself within the human condition. It is the moment of clarity and insight, of making concrete and real the meaning that was previously intellectual and flat. It is not about getting that great shot to please authority figures or to prove one is better than others. It is about oneself in the world of human experience. Some subconsciously formed insight is lying in wait, anticipating the opportunity to express itself. The decisive moment shot catalyzes its emergence.

For people who pursue therapeutic photography, any particular shoot can become a kind of psychoanalytic therapy session leading to the experiential release of some insight that was previously unconscious. Clearly, Cartier-Bresson saw it the same way when he said that photography "is a way of shouting, of freeing oneself, not of proving or asserting one's originality. It is a way of life."

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Like psychotherapy, photography expresses life itself in the merging of the subjective and objective worlds.

Despite these striking parallels between the Good Hour and the shoot leading to the decisive moment photograph, some photographers might object to the idea that the shoot starts off with a negative tinge, including feelings of tension and aggression. However, Cartier-Bresson himself hinted at this idea when he made such statements as: "I kept walking the streets, high-strung, and eager to snap scenes of convincing reality . . . " and " . . . The creative act lasts but a brief moment, a lightning instant of give-and-take, just long enough for you to level the camera and to trap the fleeting prey in your little box." Susan Sontag (1977) similarly described how photography entails the aggressive aspects of the hunt. Kris' insights simply clarify how this form of psychological tension and aggression is controlled, neutralized, and redirected – in the case of photography, redirected into the decisive moment of capture. As any artist knows: doubt, frustration, anger, grief, or any other emotion of a negative tinge provides more fuel for creative expression and capture than "feeling kinda good."

Updating the idea of the Good Hour, we might add that it is one that stimulates what both photographers (Karr, 2011) and psychoanalysts (Epstein, 1995) would call "mindfulness." It is the ability to see things clearly, freely, as they truly are in and of themselves. It involves the full awareness of oneself, but also the ability to transcend the self in order to experience the moment for what it is, rather than for just how one's mind shapes it. As Bion (1967) said about the psychotherapy session, the clinician must enter into it without memory, desire, or understanding. As Cartier-Bresson said about photography leading to the decisive moment, "It is a way of shouting, of freeing oneself, not of proving or asserting one's originality. It is a way of life."

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John Suler, PhD
Rider University,
Lawrenceville, NJ, USA
suler@rider.edu

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