



Art Virtual Learning

**11<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> /College**

**Photography**

**Seeing-The Decisive**

**Moment**

April 14<sup>th</sup>, 2020



11<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup>/College Photography  
Lesson: April 14<sup>th</sup>  
K. Campbell

**Objective/Learning Target:**

To learn more about Decisive Moments in Photography so you have a better understanding Before the project. Students will read 1 of 2 articles and write a paragraph reflection.

\*\*\*This is optional for those not enrolled in Dual Credit, Dual Credit, submit in our google classroom.

## Seeing Unit

### Day 2

The Decisive Moment (optional lesson for non dual credit college photography students)

#### Bell ringer:

What do you think a Decisive Moment is in photography?

**Task:** Read 1 of the 2 articles

[Decisive Moment 1](#)

[Decisive Moment 2 landscapes](#)

**Printed versions of articles are in last pages of slides.**

**Task 2:** Write a reflection paragraph

Write a reflection paragraph (5+sentences) on your reading, please state in your paragraph or heading which article you are reflecting upon. Reflection can include: what you found interesting in the article, what you may wish they clarified better, and/or any ideas of how you might go about photographing a Decisive Moment. From your reading and writing, the objective is that you better understand what is a Decisive Moment in Photography.

**Additional optional supports to practice Seeing The Decisive Moment:**

Pick a different Museum tour from a favorite museum, there are several to choose from at the link below.

[Museum Tour](#)

Were any of the artworks depicting a Decisive Moment?

### *The Psychology of the "Decisive Moment"*

I dedicate this article to the memory of Richard Zakia, whose support and insights made it possible. This research was funded by a grant from Rider University.



In 1952 Henri Cartier-Bresson, a founder of modern photojournalism, proposed one of the most fascinating and highly debated concepts in the history of photography: “the decisive moment.” 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 situation. Some people believe that the unique purpose of photography, as compared to other visual arts, is to capture this fleeting, quintessential, and holistic instant in the flow of life. For this reason, many photographers often mention the decisive moment, or similar ideas about capturing the essence of a transitory moment, when they describe their work.

Now that I've proposed this deceptively simple definition of the DM, I'd like to explore the concept in more depth. Although Cartier-Bresson introduced this idea and is often viewed as the master of the DM, other photographers after him have expanded, revised, and challenged his concept, resulting in considerable complexity about what exactly the DM is. As a scholar specializing in the psychological study of photography and images, I find all of their ideas fascinating. Despite the fact that Cartier-Bresson's thoughts have become the *cri de corps* among many photographers, especially photojournalists, they express their ideas mostly in philosophical and artistic terms. I see embedded in their discussions important ideas in psychology that have not been fully explored and articulated – some of those ideas being elements of classic psychology, while others coming from cutting-edge psychological theories. As a reference point for my exploration of this elusive DM, I periodically will refer to quotes from Cartier-Bresson. They are widely cited online, although I have not always been able to verify the original source – which makes the concept even more mysterious and mythical, especially given how hard it is to acquire Cartier-Bresson's iconic, rare, and expensive 1952 book *The Decisive Moment*. Regardless of their questionable veracity as true quotes, they all fall within the voice of what Cartier-Bresson might have said. In this article I will also frequently refer to his famous photograph that some have called *The Puddle*, which was taken in a construction area behind the Gare St. Lazare train station in 1932 Paris. Many photographers consider it the quintessential DM photo.

Before beginning an in depth exploration of the DM, let me first briefly summarize my conclusions about what it entails. For those readers who want a quick thumbnail overview, I offer this list below. You might also want to skip down to the section entitled “Skills in Capturing the Decisive Moment.” For those readers who want to understand my reasoning behind this list, I hope what follows in this rather lengthy article suffices.... And so, here, as I see it, are the ten key features of the “perfect” DM photo:

1. A sophisticated composition in which the visual coalescence of the photographed scene capitalizes on the principles of Gestalt psychology to create a “prägnanz” atmosphere of balance, harmony, simplicity, and unity.
2. A sophisticated background to the subject that interacts both visually and psychologically with the subject in a synergistically meaningful figure/ground relationship.
3. The visual as well as psychological anticipation of completion and closure, which often surfaces as a visual

gap, interval, or suspension of some kind.

4. An element of ambiguity, uncertainty, and even contradiction that rouses the viewer's curiosity about the meaning or outcome of the scene depicted.

5. The capture of a unique, fleeting, and meaningful moment, ideally one involving movement and action. 6. A precisely timed, unrepeatable, one-chance shot.

7. An unobtrusive, candid, photorealistic image of people in real life situations.

8. A dynamic interplay of objective fact with subjective interpretation that arouses meaning and emotion about the human condition.

9. The overarching context of a productive photography session - or "good hour" - that starts with tension, then culminates in a personal and artistic realization that is the DM image.

10. The DM photo as a product of a unique set of technical, cognitive, and emotional skills developed from extensive training and experience in photography, as well as from a psychological knowledge of people.

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#### The Decisive Moment in Landscape Photography

BY SPENCER COX 35 COMMENTS

The name Henri Cartier-Bresson does not immediately remind most people of landscape photography. It shouldn't; he wasn't a landscape photographer! Instead, of course, Henri Cartier-Bresson was a street photographer — arguably the founding father of the genre. However, although he rarely took photos of nature, his intimate approach to street photography still has value to people who prefer the company of grand landscapes. One technique is especially worth learning, no matter what genre of photography you do: the *decisive moment*.

#### Table of Contents

- What is the Decisive Moment?
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#### 1) What is the Decisive Moment?

Sometimes, a photograph is taken at such a perfect moment that it feels as though no other point in time could express the *essence* of the event so perfectly. Henri Cartier-Bresson defined that as the decisive moment.

How does this work in practice? Every time that someone moves — or does anything, really — there is some point along the way which perfectly encapsulates the moment. If someone jumps, it is the moment that they are in the air. If someone catches a baseball, it is the moment their glove touches the ball. Henri Cartier-Bresson aimed to capture this exact moment in his street photos.

In street photography, one good way to capture the decisive moment is to stand in front of an interesting background and wait for something to happen. The goal is to be prepared. For example, if you point your lens at a billboard advertising cat food, it is inevitable that someone will walk their dog past the location. If you are ready to take a quick photo, you could capture an interesting and ironic image.

This is, admittedly, a simple example from someone who rarely takes street photos. Instead, I tend to photograph nature and landscapes. So, why is the decisive moment relative to such a different type of work? Quite simply, *everything moves*. Even landscapes, which tend to be relatively static, move and change dramatically as the day goes by. This means that you can apply the concept of the decisive moment just as easily.

#### 2) Landscape Photography

On the recent Photography Life visit to Grand Teton National Park, our first goal was to find a good location to take sunset and sunrise photographs. I assume that this is the case for many landscape photographers — you go out in the middle of the day, search for locations, and find somewhere interesting to set up for sunset.

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This process is also known as scouting, and it is one of the hallmarks of landscape photography. Every time that you visit an interesting location, even if the conditions aren't right for taking photos, you can still lay the groundwork for a successful photograph in the future. For example, take a look at the image below: