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## Original Research Article

# An Analysis of the Decisive Moment Structure in the Works of Combatant-photographers of the Imposed War

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## Abstract

**Problem statement:** The decisive moment theory by Cartier-Bresson is a perceptive intuition from Budism school. According to Bresson's theory, a photographer needs to engage himself in the event and put himself at the center of it. Subsequently, all structure pulses take that shape and by finding that moment, the photographer has found the decisive moment.

**Research objectives:** The goal of this paper is to see how Bresson's theory of the decisive moment is reflected in the works of three combatant-photographers of the Iraq-Iran war.

**Research method:** This research uses a descriptive-analytical method and the documents are collected by library research as well as field interviews with an emphasis on the decisive moment theory. These interviews have been conducted with three prominent and expert photographers as eyewitnesses of the events of the imposed war (Jang-e Tahmili), Ali Fereydouni, Saeed Sadeghi and Mehrzad Arshadi. The selection of the individuals in question was based on self-education. The selected individuals, in terms of need and necessity, undertook the photography of the space of the front line and the war and in this paper, they are referred to as combatant-photographer.

**Conclusion:** The present study seeks to address how the effect of decisive moment theory has been manifested in the works of combatant-photographers of the imposed war. The results of this paper indicated that photographic intuition, subconscious mind, mental perceptions, observing and timing, have been the central components of the theory. These components have led to self-learning and photographic discovery and intuition in the works of the above-mentioned combatant-photographers in a way that the theory can be observed and analyzed in their works.

**Keywords:** *Decisive Moment, Combatant-Photographers of the imposed War, War Photography, Henri Cartier-Bresson.*

## Introduction

Throughout the history of photography, war

photographers have been among the most active and courageous people. With the outbreak of the Iraq-Iran war, some combatants used their cameras as their weapon and experimentally recorded

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unique scenes of this war, which can be viewed from different photographic perspectives. Bresson's theory of "decisive moment" is one of the most effective approaches to documentary photography. Examples of this theory can be found in the works of some photographers of the imposed war. In all these examples some components are highlighted such as awareness and consciousness, the subconscious mind, intuition, sense and perception and inner intuition. According to Bresson, learning is achieved through observing, perceiving and striking the right balance between reason and emotion, searching, waiting and predicting how an image will be created in a specific instant (Newhall, 1980, 287). This paper is a case study analyzing the works of combatant-photographers of the imposed war, including Ali Fereydouni, Saeed Sadeghi and Mehrzad Arshadi, who consider the front line and the war as their school of photography. The fundamental question is how the elements mentioned in Bresson's theory of decisive moment are represented in the works of these photographers. The components referred in Bresson's theory in the moments of war photography have led to the recording of revolutionary (new) visual insights in the works of these combatant-photographers. Save for a few hints about the visual content of their works, almost no comparison has been made between these works and the proposed theories of photography; hence, the authors of this paper have branched out into dealing with these works using this approach.

### Research methods

This research is based on a descriptive-analytical study on how to demonstrate the decisive and perfect moment in the works of combatant-photographers of the imposed war, while relying on Bresson's theory of the decisive moment. Information was collected from two kinds of sources: first, through written sources and the library and second through the field and face-to-face interviews with imposed war veterans who were also responsible for photography. Among the self-taught photographers, we will be dealing with the

works of three of them, named Ali Fereydouni, Saeed Sadeghi and Mehrzad Arshadi. The selection of these individuals was based on the timely scope of their activity and performance. The analysis of the works was performed using a qualitative method.

### Theoretical foundations

The decisive moment was a theory of aesthetics proposed by Bresson, which was invented by his American publisher and proposed in the title of his escape pictures (Prakel, 2014, 132). The book was published in 1952 and the theory has long been an inseparable part of the principles of photography for documentary and news photographers. Bresson defines the decisive moment as receiving content and form simultaneously in a fraction of a second from an event to achieve a precise meaning (cited in Pimenta & Monte Serrat, 2015). His idea was influenced by various factors such as the ritual arts of the Far East, Buddhism and photographers such as Walker Evans and Andre Kurtz and schools such as Surrealism and the wave of direct photography, filmmaking and painting (Mardani, 2009, 1-2). Moreover, the origin of Bresson's phrase "decisive moment" may come from "Akaxana", which in Western art is defined as "eternal present" and is used to express "Diana" or the "one-way state of consciousness" (ibid., 13). Bresson defines this "moment" as decisive. In general, the concept of eternal present time and unconscious mind comes from the Buddhist school. In this view, humans should not rely on themselves in the world, because the self is not so real, but is one of the many forms of Maya. As a result, self-forgetfulness is the way towards reaching consciousness and awakening (Nhat Hanh, 1997, 15). Therefore, there is an eternal reality in the underlying layers of fluid forms, which requires a kind of consciousness to be achieved (Watts, 1987, 66).

Contemporary stage photographer Jeff Wall puts decisive moment as the following: "I reconstruct the previous 'decisive moment' considering the criteria of the present time, in order to find a better way

to achieve a better future” (Wall, 2001, 30). In his book named *Photography and Photographers*, Lyons has defined the decisive moment as the miraculous psychological climax of the moment of coincidence among composition, feeling and meaning (Lyons, 2009, 79). In addition, Bresson himself in his book has another definition of the decisive moment as well, which is expressed as recognition of the moment of importance of an event in a fraction of a second, as well as finding the exact form and composition that properly account for the spirit of that event (Cartier-Bresson, 1952, 9).

Maryam Shamakhani also defines the decisive moment as follows: We are the passive spectators of a constantly moving world. In fact, the only moments of our creativity are those fractions of a second when we activate the camera blocker (Shamkhani, 2011, 301). In the book of war photography, Janbozorgi examines the history of war photography in the world and believes that most war photographers had started their learning with the outbreak of the imposed war and their school was the front line (Janbozorgi, 2004, 75). Also, Morteza Payeshenas thinks of the impact of war on Iranian photography to be unique (Payeshenas, 2008, 20) and Reza Khamesi states that the photographs of the imposed war, contrary to the violence and destruction caused by the war, show a sacredness on the front line and in the war (Khamesi, 2011, 1).

### War photography

It was the photographer and the reporter who created personal views during the war time and showed the war and its consequences through their photos and their subtitles. The occurrence of several wars and the urge to integrate war-related photos and reports into the news has paved the way for a new generation of photographers who are known as “War photographers” (Janbozorgi, 2004, 9).

Wars are divided into two kinds in terms of causes and roots: Wars of belief and wars with carnal and material roots. The first type occurs as a result of belief and ideology and the second type is mainly

due to political and economic goals (ibid., 5). The main pillar of the ideological wars are the people’s forces and the imposed war of Iran is the kind of wars that could create value structures. New forms such as spiritualism, value of martyrdom, role modeling, resisting in front line of the enemy, struggling against domination and self-belief to form a common mental space between people and lead to the formation of a new identity among them (Darzi Kolayi & Agha Hosseini, 2012, 3). Here, the front line was not just a battlefield, but an environment to provide a new model of living, finding meaning and forming a collective identity (Jahangir, Pashaour & Yovalari, 2017, 597).

### Factors involved in the formation of the decisive moment

In order to understand and get a more accurate notion of Bresson’s decisive moment, we must specify some criteria to establish the principles of achieving it. Table 1 based on the some references mentioned in the table, discusses the factors involved in the formation of the decisive moment in a new category.





### Photography of the imposed war

With the outbreak of the imposed war, many photographers who undertook the photography of the war were combatants who served as an amateur and self-taught photographers on the front lines and in the war. Therefore, the mission of these people, along with other combatants, was to narrate courage and martyrdom spirit on the front line (Saremifar, 2019). Many photographers have known and learned photography through the imposed war. One group was trained briefly and another one experimented with the camera and took pictures. Saifullah Samadian played a major role in shaping the visual documents of the war by forming a group of forty witnesses and providing a brief training in photography. This group, like the Basij volunteers, had to go to the front line to defend their homeland according to their ideological and religious duties (Fereydouni, 2015).

Table 1. Factors involved in the formation of the Bresson's decisive moment. Source: authors based on the sources mentioned in the table.

Factors involved in the formation of the decisive moment	Description of factors	Bresson's works
1. Awareness and consciousness	<p>Consciousness can be compared to unconsciousness in Buddhism. The first step to attaining awareness and consciousness is self-forgetfulness and mental purification. The pure mind is ready to accept any range because of being a superior mind. Therefore, the choice is not intentional and, as in a documentary by Buchler (<i>Henri Cartier-Bresson: The Impassioned Eye</i>, 2003) Bresson puts it, "photography is only the recording of a moment without thinking".</p>	 <p>Apiece of work, Cartier-Bresson, 1933. Source: www.magnumphotos.com.</p>
2. Timing	<p>According to Bresson, the photographer should be paying attention to time and anticipate the moment of content formation to take shape. Choosing the right moment is choosing a dynamic reaction and photographers essentially transform the movement of life into a motionless and static form and the viewer uses his/ her imagination to turn the immovability back into a form of movement. (Baumeister, 1960, 136). In this regard, Bresson believes that thinking should take place both before and after taking a picture, rather than during the process (Yvonne, 1961).</p>	 <p>Alley (Paseo del Prado), Bresson, 1932, Prado Marseille. Source: www.magnumphotos.com.</p>
3. Anticipation and mental imagery	<p>The photographer must be ready to meet the subject based on previous experiences and similar mental imagery and to anticipate the evolution of form in space that advances with the content before reaching the "decisive moment" (Hirsch, 2000, 306). Mental anticipation and imagery in Bresson's works, relies on both feeling and calculation (Coe, 2000, 260). Lessing believes that in order to describe an event or action, the moment before the event is much more appropriate than the happening moment because the viewer has to mentally construct the continuation of the event using his/ her imagination (cited in Tuask, 2009, 149).</p>	 <p>The Cyclist, Bresson, 1932. Source: www.magnumphotos.com</p>
4. The relationship between the photographer and the subject	<p>Bresson emphasizes the coordination of subject, camera and photographer. A decisive moment occurs when the three factors are converged in the same direction. Human dignity is a necessary subject for every photographer and photography cannot be successful unless it is inspired by human love and relationships and expresses human in the moment of facing his/ her destiny (Lyons, 2009, 82).</p>	 <p>Francis Bacon, Bresson, 1972. Source: www.magnumphotos.com.</p>
5. Composition	<p>The composition is formed at the moment of photography, not after it because the content and form appear together and therefore, the composition is an integral part of photography (ibid., 87). There can be found a new form of plasticity that is a result of instant lines created by subject movements. The photographer must capture this moment and constantly keep its balance.</p>	 <p>Cyclades, Cartier-Bresson, 1961. Source: www.magnumphotos.com.</p>
6. Considering the margins of the photo	<p>In his specific definition of aesthetics, Bresson has made the most use of the margins to emphasize and express the main subject as far as he could. In his photographs, the margins do not diverge attention from the main subject, but focus on the subject. In order to achieve this goal, according to Bresson, "a state of awareness and anticipation is required to create a coordination of problems in the subject and margins" (cited in Mardani, 2009, 48).</p>	 <p>Koen Yamaguchi, Bresson, 1965. Source: www.magnumphotos.com.</p>

Rest of Table 1.

<p>7. Total perspective</p>	<p>Bresson’s viewpoint as a whole goes back to his background in painting and filmmaking. Suzanne Suntag defines painting as “a carefully selected interpretation” and photography as a “carefully selected image” (cited in Azari Arqandi &amp; Pourmand, 2016, 52). Using his experiences of painting in photography, Bresson emphasizes the delicacy of his special aesthetics and believes that photography is an instantaneous reaction and painting is a meditation (Cartier-Bresson, 2013, 14).</p>	 <p>Scano, Bresson, 1951. Source: www.magnumphotos.com.</p>
<p>8. Full-frame image</p>	<p>Bresson is the founder of the “full-frame aesthetics” theory, which is based on creating a single image during light exposure to the film, as well as separating the photographer’s mental response from its physical process and the photographer’s responsibility ends right after the photo is taken. Bresson always used to present his photos in black frames or round negative perforations (Hirsch, 2000, 350).</p>	 <p>Be Jing, Bresson, 1948. Source: www.magnumphotos.com.</p>
<p>9. Photo report</p>	<p>Sometimes a single photo can be a complete report. According to Bresson, this single image is a joint product of the mind, eyes and heart. He states that I dreamed of capturing the whole essence of a situation within the limits of a single photo while it was happening before my eyes (Suntag, 2010, 202). Although every subject has a strange temptation, the photographer must be able to resist the temptation and free him/herself of it as a photo is a report of the result of the photographer’s reaction to an event (Mardani, 2009, 53).</p>	 <p>Shanghai China, Bresson, 1948. Source: www.magnumphotos.com.</p>
<p>10. Subject matter</p>	<p>The most prominent point in Bresson’s work is his profound vision of human characteristics. Bresson was one of the first photographers to psychologically examine people’s daily lives using photographs and images (Ladd, 2015, 3). In almost all of his works, there can be found an emphasis on the presence of human beings in relation to their environment. For Bresson, portraits are full of codes and signs that indicate identity, social class and numerous issues (Cartier-Bresson, 2013, 9).</p>	 <p>Marcel Duchamp, Bresson, 1968. Source: www.magnumphotos.com.</p>

### Analyzing the moment structure in the works of combatant-photographers of the imposed war of Iran

Most of the photographs left from the imposed war are the works of self-taught photographers in the war. In their viewpoints, issues related to aesthetics could not be learned, but they must be perceived through perception and intuition. For this combatant-photographer, being present on the battlefields was the best school and teaching place. They believed in the photographic moment and thought that a photographer’s responsibility ends with his/her photo taken. By comparing a photograph of Ali Fereydouni (Fig. 1) and the Cartier-Bresson’s own

work (Fig. 2), the formation of the decisive moment can be assessed in both works. For example, in both, it is obvious that the photographers had paid attention to the margins of the image, overall vision, composition, report photo, timing and subject matter with human relations. Of course, Ali Fereydouni admits that at the beginning of the war, Saifullah Samadian explained the basic principles of the decisive moment to him had referred to this concept orally and verbally (Fereydouni, 2008). Regarding the photographic moment, Fereydouni states: I believe in the pure photographic moment. The photographer ends his mission as soon as he presses the shutter button. No Intrusion and



Fig. 1. Badragheh, by Ali Fereydouni, 1982. Source: Fereydouni, 2014.



Fig. 2. Cardinal Pasley, by Cartier-Bresson, France, 1938. Source: www.magnumphotos.com.

disruption should take place after photography. The choice is after the view finding, not after photography processing and when printing. By cutting the photo, the effectiveness will definitely diminish. Moments are flowing, they do not even repeat themselves to be reached. Many photographers think of the event, not in pure moments and may be able to capture it with burst frames. But perhaps the pure and fateful moments are among the many frames that have been lost (Fereydouni, 2015). He thinks of these moments as: I once had taken my best photos when the martyrs had given themselves to me and this was not based on my will (Saremifar, 2019) (Figs. 3 & 4).

In Saeed Sadeghi's view, photography of the scenes of the imposed war as an inner passion and he describe it as the following: "I went to the front line based on my inner love, which is built

upon human relationships and I was able to find a gentle emotion in that violent atmosphere. In our war, the softness of life overcame the violent nature of the dominant military movements and the motivation for resistance and self-sacrifice was formed, which made me fascinated by these moments and unconsciously and involuntarily, I recorded a photo of it" (Sadeghi, 2009). Ali Fereydouni describes the decisive moment as: "I and a handful of photographers heard the word 'decisive moment' directly from Saifullah Samadian in the last one or two years of the war and got involved with it. At the same time, as the head of IRNA photography, he influenced the thoughts of a number of photographers, including Ali Fereydouni, Saeed Sadeghi, Ahmad Nateghi, Martyr Dariush



Fig. 3. Moment of Martyrdom, by Ali Fereydouni, 1986. Source: Fereydouni, 2014.



Fig. 4. Comrades, by Ali Fereydouni, 1982. Source: Fereydouni, 2014.

Goodarzinia, Javid al-Athar Kazem Akhavan, Arab Ali Hashemi, etc.” (Fereydouni, 2015). Still, with a review of his previous photos, we can get find the decisiveness of the moment in those works.

Since intuition, perception and unconsciousness play a role in the formation of Bresson’s decisive moment, the issue has indirectly influenced the photographs of the imposed war, especially the above-mentioned ones. Saeed Sadeghi puts in this say: “I lived the moment first and then I took photos, in a frame my feelings and desires met with the subject and a connection was made between me and the subject. I became so accustomed to my camera that it became like a part of my body and my eyes merged with the camera and that was the most important way to communicate. I was lost in the incident with the camera. The two combatants’ eyes met with my eye and the eyes of the camera and made a tangled situation” (Sadeghi, 2009) (Figs. 5 & 6).

Among other successful combatant-photographer of the war was Mahzad Arshadi. He was a warrior who suddenly decides to take some photographs of the war. His photographs of the imposed war show signs of perceiving the basics of the “decisive moment”, which includes photographs of the people’s lives and warriors in the city, outside the city and on the front lines (Fig. 7).

He became very fascinated by photography when seeing the book “Abadan That Fights” by Bahman Jalali (Arshadi, 2009). Bahman Jalali is one of the

photographers who was influenced by Bresson’s theory and in 1987, he translated the book of “Photography and Photographers” in collaboration with Vazarik Darshakian, a book that was in regard with several photographers, especially Bresson. Therefore, he can be considered one of the important figures in making news and documentary photographers familiar with Bresson’s theory of decisive moment. By a close look at the photographs in the book “Abadan that Fights” we can observe the impact of Bresson’s theory on him (Fig. 8).

## Discussion

We can observe the factors involved in the formation of “the decisive moment” in Bresson’s works and, subsequently, in the photographs of combatant-photographers in Table 2. In Table 3, we can see an analysis of their works using the approach of Cartier-Bresson’s theory. Therefore, data analysis of these tables can be studied to achieve a better result. The data in this table are extracted from direct interviews, analysis of effects and the basics of “the decisive moment”.

## Conclusion

The results of this article indicate that we can observe the main factors involved in the formation of the decisive moment in the works of Ali Fereydouni, Saeed Sadeghi and Mehrzad Arshadi who are mentioned as combatant-photographers in Table 3.



Fig. 5. Freedom of Khorramshahr, by Sadeghi, 1982. Source: Sadeghi, 2016.



Fig. 6. Khorramshahr, by Sadeghi, 1980. Source: Sadeghi, 2016.



Fig. 7. A piece of work, by Mehrzad Arshadi, 1984. Source: Soleymani & Mirhashemi, 2019.



Fig. 8. Abadan, by Bahman Jalali, 1980. Source: Jalali, 1981.

Table 2. The factors involved in the formation of “the decisive moment” in Bresson’s works and in the photographs of combatant-photographers. Source: authors.

Factors involved in the formation of the decisive moment	Name of photographer
Zen Buddhism - Akaksana - Diana - Surrealism - Andre Kurtz - School of Explicit Photography	Henri Cartier-Bresson
Oral education by Saifullah Samadian	Ali Fereydooni
Oral education by Saifullah Samadian	Saiid Sadeghi
Observing the book “Abadan That Fights” by Bahman Jalali	Mehrzad Arshadi

Moreover, there can be observed a manifestation of other factors such as content, emotion, photographic wandering and intuition, which are effective in perceptual self-learning to find the decisive moment in their works.

- The content component is seen in the decisive moment in a human-centered manner and in a similar level to Bresson’s. In the works of combatant-photographer Ali Fereydouni, most focus is on faces, while in Saeed Sadeghi’s works on the flow of life and in Arshadi’s works, the emphasis is on the daily life in Khorramshahr and is parallel to the form.

- In Bresson’s works, the feeling is the same combination of form and content in a logical point of view. In the works of Ali Fereydouni and Saeed Sadeghi this feeling dominates form and content and also in works of Mehrzad Arshadi, same as Bresson, the feeling is at the same level as form and content.

- Photographic wandering is one of the most important factors among the main elements of Bresson’s decisive moment, which has taken place as a conscious exploration of the environment in his works. This factor in Ali Fereydouni’s works is seen as a curious



Table 3. Analysis of their works using the approach of Cartier-Bresson's theory. Source: authors.

Factors involved in the formation of works	In the works of Ali Fereydouni	In the works of Saeed Sadeghi	In the works of Mehrzad Arshadi	In the works of Bresson
Composition	Dynamic and has the priority over content	Dynamic and content-oriented	It is more important than the content	Dynamic and has the priority over content
Photographic awareness and consciousness (awakening)	Sacrifice, nationalism and spirituality	Liberation, nationalism and humanity	Sacrifice, defense your city and spiritual	Full consciousness (awakening)
Anticipation and mental imagery	It can be observed in some works	It can be observed in some works	It is important in most of the works	It can be observed in all works
A photo, a report	So important	Important	So important	So important
Total perspective	Observable	Observable	Observable	Emphasized
Full-frame photography	Important and consciously	Important	Important and consciously	Important and consciously
Time	Important	Important	So important	So important
The relationship between the photographer and the subject	Emotional and spiritual	Emotional and humanistic	Emotional and spiritual and consciously	Consciously
Paying attention to the margins of the image	Less important than the main subject	Less important than the main subject	As important than as the main subject	As important than as the main subject
Subject matter	Emphasis on human presence and face	Emphasis on human	Emphasis on human in relation to the environment	Emphasis on human in relation to the environment and everyday life

liberation, in Saeed Sadeghi's works as goal-centered and in Mehrzad Arshadi's works as random.

- In addition to the above-mentioned factors, the photographic intuition and perception are the most effective factor involved in the formation of Bresson's decisive moment. In Bresson's works, these two factors can be observed as an inner and conscious perception, while in the works of Ali Fereydouni, they are viewed as a spiritual view and inner perception. In the works of Saeed Sadeghi the factors take the form of human emotion and in the works of Arshadi they are spiritual and conscious.

In general, in works of Mehrzad Arshadi, the decisive moment seems to be more concise and closer to Bresson's works. This is due to the fact that according to Mehrzad Arshadi, his photographic vision is formed under the influence of Bahman Jalali's works from Abadan in the imposed war with the title "Abadan That Fights". Moreover, it is of note that in the photography of the imposed war, the approach and the viewpoint of combatant-photographer towards the moment's structure in the

subconscious mind, have led to the formation of perfect moment in their works.

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