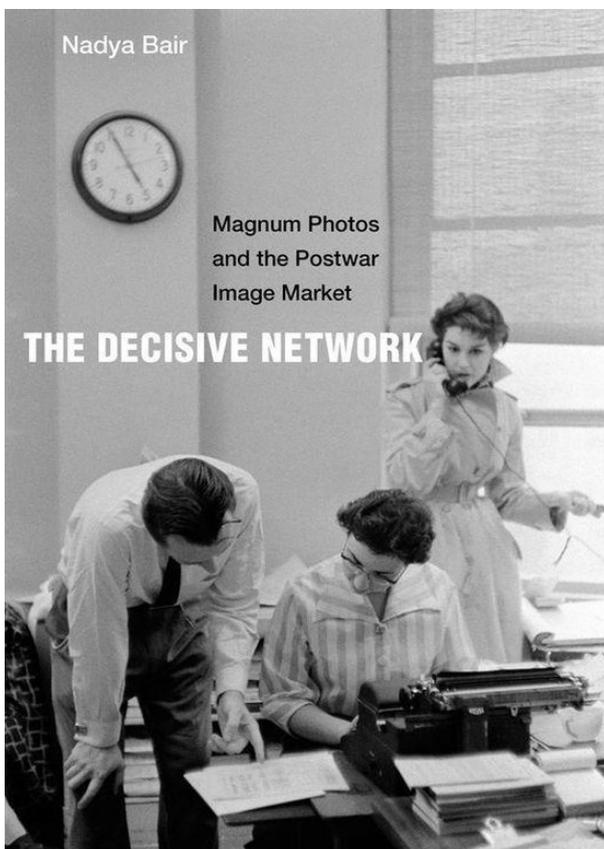


Book Review

## The Decisive Network



**Nadya Bair**, *The Decisive Network: Magnum Photos and the Postwar Image Market*. (Oakland: University of California Press, 2020), 322 pp., ISBN 978-0-520-30035-4 0520300351

### Reviewed *by*

Thomas Smits, University of Antwerp, Belgium.

In her book *The Decisive Network* (2020) historian of photography, mass media, and global visual culture Nadya Bair takes a fresh look at what is probably the most famous photographic agency in the world: Magnum. Founded in Paris in 1947 by Robert Capa, David Seymour, Henri Cartier-Bresson, George Rodger, William Vandivert and Maria Eisner, the members of Magnum became known for their ability to capture the ‘decisive moment’ with their cameras and their ‘concerned’ humanistic style of photography. Reproduced in illustrated magazines, books, and famous exhibitions, such as Edward Steichen’s *The Family of Men* (1955), Magnum’s pictures became icons of post-war news photography. Based on an impressive amount of new archival research, Bair critically engages with the myths that have come to define Magnum’s legacy. Following its photographers and the pictures they took all over the world in the first two decades of its existence (1947–1967), she skilfully resituates

Magnum and its most famous pictures series in the visual culture of the post-war period.

Bair's book not only presents new archival research, but also looks at Magnum through a new conceptual lens. In 1952, Cartier-Bresson famously coined the 'decisive moment' to describe the precise instant when form and content perfectly align on a picture. He believed that only truly exceptional photographers could capture this moment, knowing instinctively to take the shot at the exact right moment. In a smart play of words, Bair centres her book around the decisive *network* - the manifold connections between photographers, writers, spouses, secretaries, editors, darkroom assistants, publishers, corporate leaders, and museum curators - to explain the power of Magnum's pictures. Seeing photography as a collective enterprise that stretches over time, she argues that the interplay between nodes in a network, rather than the genius of individual photographers, *make* great pictures.

The shift from moment to network leads Bair to describe Magnum as a business rather than an ideological enterprise. Arguing that its famous founders and their editors were 'unabashed entrepreneurs' who understood that they needed to sell pictures as well as ideas about 'what those pictures could do', six chapters describe how the agency blurred the lines between news (chapter 2 and 3), travel (chapter 4) and corporate (chapter 5) photography. The sixth chapter notes how, from the early 1970s onwards, Magnum's pictures files were monetised and, after being spit into individual artistic *oeuvres*, used to uphold the

'mythologies about the origins of Magnum and its place in twentieth-century photojournalism.'

Chapter one places Magnum in the history of modern visual coverage of the news. Bair emphasises the importance of the Second World War for the founding of Magnum. It enlarged the demand for visual news, dramatically sped up the production of pictures, and brought the founders of Magnum together. All in all, the war shaped how Magnum would approach the business of photojournalism. Building on the different national backgrounds of its founders, Bair describes how the agency build an extensive transnational network of sales representatives who sold its pictures to publications in the United States and a range of European countries.

Chapter two discusses two famous post-war projects of Magnum: 'people are people', which inspired Steichen's *The Family of Men*, and Seymour's 'children of Europe', which, commissioned by UNESCO, documented the struggle of children to regain their childhood in the aftermath of the Second World War. According to Bair, these two projects have often been used to frame Magnum as an agency that mixed 'photography, advocacy, and news.' After critically engaging with these picture series, she argues that they are definitely not exemplary for the day-to-day activities of Magnum nor the values of its members. Chapter three follows the day-to-day work of Cartier-Bresson, Capa, and Rodger in the post-war years and zooms in on their freelance activities for the American illustrated magazine *Life*. In contrast to previous studies, which she sees

as portraying Magnum photographers as concerned ‘ideologue(s),’ Bair underlines the ‘pragmatic and adaptive’ nature of the photographers. Magnum’s members were more than willing to compromise, both on the artistic as well as the ideological front, to get published, especially if this involved the high fees that *Life* paid.

While Magnum is known for news photography, chapters four and five describe its connection to other lucrative markets. Chapter four discusses several assignments for the *Holiday* magazine, which sold American consumers visual stories that were ‘one part visual stereotype or tourist trap, one part glamor, and two parts color’. While histories of the agency often separate its news photography from its corporate work, describing it as a ‘necessary pact with corporate capitalism that photographers had to make,’ chapter five discusses the many corporate assignments of the agency in the 1950s and 1960s. According to Bair, this connection to corporate America went against the self-understanding of Magnum’s members and the image that it sought to project: ‘an organization of independent photojournalists who followed their interests rather than big money.’ Demonstrating the benefits of her decisive network approach, the two chapters

effectively show how the agency ‘blurred the boundaries between journalistic, travel, and promotional photography in the decade after World War II.’

In Bair’s efforts to underline the collective nature of news photography, the role of Magnum’s star photographers, or, in other words, their precise contribution to the collective, sometimes disappears from the analysis. How central are they in the decisive network? In line with this, the emphasis on debunking the myths of Magnum, which were often connected to its star photographers, sometimes distracts from the complex and multi-faceted history of the agency and its founders, which the book amply provides. All in all, *The Decisive Network* is a well-written book that presents a wealth of new archival research. Bair diligently reconstructs the connections between Magnum and its American and European clients, showing how the same pictures series were sold to multiple publications, often reframed, mostly by captions, to fit different markets, clients, magazines, and national contexts. The conceptual lens of the decisive network is a truly innovative way to better understand photographic production and will surely inspire new research in the coming years.

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