

Cartier-Bresson and the Gare St. Lazare

By

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There's a short, interesting interview with Henri Cartier-Bresson on YouTube where Henri talks about his iconic picture, "Behind the Gare St. Lazare," in which a man jumps into the water from a ladder lying in water.

Henri tells how he put the camera's lens between two planks in a fence to shoot the picture, and couldn't see through the Leica viewfinder. It's one of a very few photographs Henri cropped, because the lens caught the board on the left and the board had to be removed. You can see the uncropped version in the book *Henri Cartier Bresson: Scrapbook*.

Henri says he couldn't see a thing through the viewfinder, but the interviewer, who's not named in the film clip, asks Henri whether or not he could see the man leaping. Henri answers, "No... no." The interviewer takes that to mean Henri couldn't see the man leaping at all, but it's pretty clear Henri meant he couldn't see the man through the camera's viewfinder. The interviewer says, "That was lucky," and Henri replies "It's always luck. It's luck that matters. You just have to be receptive, that's all." At that point you're left with the impression Henri was shooting blind and the result was pure luck. But in order to catch the man at the exact moment he jumped off the ladder Henri had to be able to see the scene through the crack between the planks.

Though Henri could see his subject perfectly well, he still had two problems to solve: focus and depth of field.

Cartier-Bresson shot "Gare St. Lazare" in 1932, the year the Leica II camera came out: the first Leica with a split-image rangefinder. If you assume Henri made the shot with the Leica II he easily could have used the camera's rangefinder to focus on the end of the ladder. All he had to do was move the camera's rangefinder lenses to the crack between the planks, and focus.

But Henri probably was shooting an earlier version of the Leica, and he probably used zone focus. Most of us who did street photography with film know what zone focus is, and have used it in situations where there isn't enough time to focus on a specific subject. I'd set my aperture at f/8 and focus my Leica M4, loaded with Tri-X, at about twelve feet. That gave me a zone of adequate sharpness from about 10 feet to 15 feet. If the light happened to be unusually good I'd stop down to f/11, and extend my zone of sharpness a couple more feet. Happily, with the almost instantaneous focusing capability of our current digital cameras, zone focus is a technique that can be consigned to memory.

Depth of field is a different and more difficult question to answer. In 1932 there was no Kodak Tri-X or Ilford HP4 with film speeds of ISO 400, nor was there even such a thing as an ASA or ISO

scale. The best guess I can come up with after some research is that Henri's film might have rated as high as ISO 80.

The day is overcast, yet the picture is in adequate focus from the foreground to the background, where haze becomes a limiting factor. The "Railowsky" advertisement on a wall in the background, with a dancer whose splayed legs echo in reverse the legs of the man jumping into the water, is in quite sharp focus. The man jumping into the water is softer. There's motion blur, especially in his upper body, but not enough to indicate a very low shutter speed. I'd guess shutter speed was at least 1/30th second, and Henri had to be using f/8 to get the depth of field represented in this picture.

Street photography can work without ambiguity, but ambiguity always is an important factor in the best street photography. One of the reasons "Behind the Gare St. Lazare" is such a hugely successful street photograph is that it's loaded with ambiguity. Why is the man walking over a ladder and jumping into the water? Why is the man there at all? Why is the ladder there, and why is it lying in the water? There's a second, mysterious man behind a fence in the background. Why is he there?

Henri Cartier-Bresson caught it all by poking a lens between two planks in a board fence. He said, "It's always luck. It's luck that matters. You just have to be receptive, that's all." Henri was lucky, but most importantly he was receptive. "Behind the Gare St. Lazare" is a lesson for anyone interested in street photography.