

## INTRODUCTION

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**A**N ANONYMOUS PHOTOGRAPH TAKEN AT THE HOME of *Vogue* editor Michel de Brunhoff on August 27, 1944, just after the Liberation of Paris, shows a room packed with the day's leading photographers, magazine editors, and writers (fig. 1). Behind the dark-haired war photographer Robert Capa stands the *Life* editor John Morris. To Capa's left are the photographers David ("Chim") Seymour, in military uniform, and one over from him, Henri Cartier-Bresson. In the front row, Lee Miller is engrossed in conversation. Such figures had made World War II the most mediated event to date, yielding millions of photographs of the global conflict.<sup>1</sup> As their images circulated widely in the United States and magazine subscriptions soared, the reading public began to expect that every significant event should be documented photographically. Holding glasses of champagne and putting their arms around each other, the photographers and editors huddled close and smiled for the camera. The war was on its way to being over, and they were elated. Within days, however, their celebrations were to be overshadowed by concerns about their future. This shared worry is the starting point for this book,



**FIGURE 1**

A party at the home of Paris *Vogue* editor Michel de Brunhoff, August 27, 1944. Unidentified photographer.  
© Magnum Photos. Courtesy of International Center of Photography.

which asks, What happened to the extensive system of press photography once World War II ended?

Three years later, three of the people in this photograph—the Hungarian-Jewish-American Capa, the French Cartier-Bresson, and the Polish-Jewish-American Seymour—became the cofounders of Magnum Photos, a new picture agency that aimed to “carry on the business of photography in all its branches, in any part of the world.”<sup>2</sup> With one office in New York and one in Paris, Magnum inaugurated two new business policies: photographers were the shareholders of the organization rather than its employees, meaning they took charge of Magnum’s editorial direction as well as its finances. And Magnum photographers, not their clients, would own the negatives and their copyrights. Magnum began by supplying weekly and monthly magazines with in-depth photographic essays about events around the globe: the lives of regular people, political transitions, personalities and celebrities, fashion, business, and even animals and children. Not all of their coverage was exceptional or memorable, but many of their photographs became icons of the postwar world when they appeared in less ephemeral contexts such as photo books and touring exhibitions.

By the late sixties, the rise of television news and a burgeoning art market for photography signaled the start of a new era. Leading magazines and competing photo agencies began to close their doors, but Magnum survived. Now with offices in Paris, New York, London, and Tokyo and a roster of over ninety photographers, Magnum has become a highly

respected and recognizable photographic brand. The Magnum name is inseparable from the “concerned” and “humanist” images that its founders made in the tumultuous decades after World War II, and Capa and Cartier-Bresson have become household names. The agency’s identity has been built through dozens of coffee-table books, traveling exhibitions, and lavish catalogs that rehearse the agency’s commitment to editorial freedom and applaud the emotional power of its iconic photographs.<sup>3</sup> Such projects rarely reproduce the magazine spreads for which Magnum’s pictures were made.<sup>4</sup> And in the effort to cover the entire seventy-plus years of Magnum’s photography, publications and exhibitions lose sight of the historical specificity of the immediate post-1945 era.<sup>5</sup>

Looking at Magnum’s photography on its own terms sidelines a much larger history of publishing and the press of which Magnum was an integral part. Photography has always been a mass medium and a form of communication, even when it was valued chiefly for its aesthetic power.<sup>6</sup> We cannot study it without considering the industries and contexts for which it was made, or without asking how those industries facilitated photography’s aesthetic and technological development. Two other questions that inspired this book are as basic, and yet as complicated, as the first: What were the unique technological, cultural, and economic demands of photojournalism that Magnum navigated in the aftermath of World War II?<sup>7</sup> And if Magnum was so important to post-1945 photography, how do we know so little beyond its self-produced, mythical narratives?<sup>8</sup>

Answering these questions requires more than reading the Magnum photographs and stories that appeared in print, or studying photographers’ contact sheets to get a sense of their working process.<sup>9</sup> As Jason E. Hill and Vanessa R. Schwartz write in *Getting the Picture: The Visual Culture of the News*, “no understanding of a news picture and its significance can bypass the material history of the making of the picture itself, nor the history of the media institutions and people that organize such pictures and transmit them to an eager and interested public.”<sup>10</sup> In the effort to reconstruct Magnum’s early activities—that is, to understand Magnum’s practice and not just its images—I began to search for a paper trail, only to be told that no real archives existed.<sup>11</sup> Rehearsing key mythologies about photographers’ creative independence and their impatience with bureaucratic management models, foundation directors, curators, and photographers’ spouses said that Magnum photographers did not work from shooting scripts or keep notes. Sales and assignments were, apparently, discussed over the phone and sealed with a handshake over martini lunches. Yet as I persisted, I found thousands of pages of letters, contracts, scripts, and story research notes in dozens of private and public collections in the U.S. and Europe that attested to a different story. The papers I accessed were rich in detail about Magnum’s New York bureau and the agency’s American clients, and as a result, this book focuses mostly on the United States. With a different archival base, a compendium history could be written from the perspective of Magnum’s Paris operations, which dealt with European magazines.<sup>12</sup>

Photographers averse to business could not have gone into business for themselves. Magnum’s founders were unabashed entrepreneurs who had an expert understanding of the industry of photojournalism. Traveling to remote locations, the photographers sent

streams of letters and telegrams to office staff in New York and Paris about what they were learning and photographing. Through its international system of daily communication and coordination, Magnum anticipated magazines' demands for global picture stories. The agency cannily reimagined the popular genre of the human-interest story—about the extraordinary and ordinary events that happened to everyday people—on a global scale while partnering with powerful magazine editors to assure that their work was published.

The broad definition of photography with which Magnum worked beckons us to reconsider how we have been telling the history of the medium and to work across multiple fields, including art history, history, communication, and media studies.<sup>13</sup> For Magnum, photography was a profession, a technology, an impetus for global travel, a form of communication and entertainment, and a mode of expression. Its photography resulted in undeveloped film, contact sheets, and press prints as well as caption sheets and story research. And it was bound up with the supports through which it circulated, especially the magazine page. If the medium in which the agency worked had any single defining quality, it was overproduction. And perhaps most obviously, Magnum's photography was a commodity and a source of employment. Taking this expansive view of Magnum's photography is what allows me to tell a different story about the agency at a transformational moment for both photojournalism and for the world.<sup>14</sup>

## **HUMANISM AND CAPITALISM AFTER 1945**

The “postwar” world in which Magnum was founded was not exactly peaceful. The wave of decolonization wars beginning in the 1940s, coupled with the rise of the Cold War and its proxy conflicts, meant that numerous photographers took their cameras into new battles. Two of Magnum's founders died covering postwar conflicts in Indochina (Capa, d. 1954) and the Suez (Seymour, d. 1956). War photography, already central to the photographers' reputations in 1945, became important for Magnum's legacy. And yet it was actually a small fraction of what Magnum—or any other photographer—covered on a regular basis.<sup>15</sup>

Magnum produced and sold massive numbers of pictures from around the world, and it also sold ideas about what those pictures could do. Between the late 1940s and 1960s, the agency brought the aesthetic and production mode of news photography into new markets. Many of its photographs, from classic to now forgotten, were produced as humanitarian aid promotion or for travel campaigns, corporate public relations, and as advertising. Shot on the move with 35mm cameras, Magnum's photo essays exploited the human-interest angle and the spontaneous, action-packed look of journalism.<sup>16</sup> They helped transform corporate annual reports into captivating illustrated publications about their global operations. Even life insurance ads started to look like photographic news.<sup>17</sup> Magnum was at the forefront of these shifts, working systematically to make newsy pictures popular and ubiquitous.

Today, however, the agency's early photographs are known as humanist documents: pictures that, by focusing on everyday people and events, created an identification between the viewer and subject and thus instilled empathy for the universal human condition.<sup>18</sup> Such

pictures are often used as evidence of the founders' pacifism and their hopeful dream that by emphasizing interconnectedness, the very aesthetic of Magnum's photographs could help avert another global conflict.<sup>19</sup> Yet some of the best-known humanist pictures acquired their reputations not on their aesthetic merit, but because of the universalizing captions that first accompanied them in magazines.<sup>20</sup> Reprinted in books and exhibition catalogs for decades, the "careful humanist smokescreen" surrounding Ernst Haas's photographs of returning POWs in Vienna, or David Seymour's portrait of the orphan Tereska drawing her home, became accepted as the authoritative interpretation of Magnum's pictures.<sup>21</sup> At the same time, there is a lack of specificity about what humanist photography actually is.<sup>22</sup> Often the genre is defined by way of Edward Steichen's 1955 blockbuster exhibition *The Family of Man* (which featured dozens of Magnum photographs) as well as the scathing critique of the show by Roland Barthes.<sup>23</sup> When the exhibit came to France in 1956, Barthes famously accused Steichen of using photography to reinforce the saccharine tautology that everyone is born and dies without accounting for the weight of culture or history.<sup>24</sup> *The Family of Man* is also the point at which most "postwar" histories of photography begin: not in 1945, but in 1955.<sup>25</sup> We miss an important chapter in photography's post-1945 development if we continue to reduce it to humanism and the global circulation of *The Family of Man*.

Magnum opened shop at a moment when the scale and interconnectedness of the world captivated both the producers and consumers of popular culture: from Cold War warriors invested in the ascent of the American Century, to pacifists committed to seeing an international body govern "One World" in the atomic age.<sup>26</sup> These competing visions of the postwar world have occupied intellectual histories of the twentieth century.<sup>27</sup> Yet such ideas about the globe cannot be understood without considering the work of photography—and specifically, the work produced by Magnum's peripatetic, cosmopolitan photographers—in shaping global consciousness for a full decade before *The Family of Man*. Amid the escalation of the Cold War, Magnum's European photographers aligned their business practice within the liberal humanist ideology embodied by such organizations as the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). They shot pictures that, through careful editing and layout strategies, were used to uphold "the democratic principles of dignity, equality and mutual respect of men" promoted by the United Nations agencies.<sup>28</sup> But Magnum did not stop there. As early as the start of the Marshall Plan in 1948, postwar universalism gave way to the global expansion of American corporate capitalism and the rise of international travel.<sup>29</sup> Magnum rapidly kept up with and often anticipated the changing ways in which global consciousness manifested in the 1940s and 1950s.

Much of what later became reframed as "humanist" began as photography in the service of global capitalism, because corporations and global industries relied on the same human-interest aesthetic that Magnum produced for the press. Focusing on the lives of everyday people around the world, Magnum photographers shot travel features in Paris for the American magazine *Holiday* and explored oil reserves in Africa for the Standard Oil Company of New Jersey's house organ *The Lamp*. They capitalized on their cosmopolitan

reputations, allowing clients to promote them as progressive and cultured global emissaries. The photographers' international backgrounds and commitment to news reporting worked in the service of promoting global capitalism, its industries, and its products. Instead of taking on such assignments begrudgingly and with the fear of "selling out," photographers embraced the partnerships that allowed them to travel the world, master new technologies including color film, and produce work that they felt had documentary and aesthetic value. Today scholars are still more drawn to studying art and artists on the left rather than engaging seriously with those who worked in the service of American business and publicity.<sup>30</sup> Perhaps for better and worse, Magnum is part of a larger history of capitalist aesthetics after 1945.<sup>31</sup> Its own business imperative, coupled with its flexibility and commitment to high-quality photographic reporting, led photographers to work across a range of genres and markets, often at the same time.<sup>32</sup>

### **NETWORKS AND COLLABORATION**

Magnum's photographers could not have accomplished any of this alone. Despite the habit of studying the work of individual artists, often dubbed creative geniuses, this book argues that Magnum photographers were core members of a larger "decisive network" that included writers, spouses, secretaries, editors, darkroom assistants, publishers, corporate leaders, and museum curators. My title invokes Henri Cartier-Bresson's theory of the "decisive moment," which equated the ideal photograph with the intuitive skill of the photographer who could notice and swiftly capture a perfectly balanced scene.<sup>33</sup> This concept places all of the attention on the individual in his moment of inspiration and action.<sup>34</sup> Yet magazine editors often identified the "decisive moments" in Cartier-Bresson's negatives, which he usually shipped undeveloped to New York. Cartier-Bresson's wife Ratna Mohini worked with him in the field, often writing the captions and story texts that allowed editors to arrange his pictures into the photo essays that later brought him fame.

My shift from "moment" to "network" is metaphorical as well as methodological: it asks that we see photography as an ongoing, collective process in which it is difficult to draw a clear boundary between the actions of a photographer and those of his collaborators.<sup>35</sup> This approach necessarily harkens to a longer study of networks in the social sciences, and particularly one that Howard Becker called an "art world": a "network of people whose cooperative activity, organized via their joint knowledge of conventional means of doing things," plus their ability to mobilize resources, "produces the kind of art works that art world is noted for."<sup>36</sup> Thinking about Magnum as a network means looking at the entire system of commercial photography rather than focusing on singular individuals or objects, and it means noticing when technologies shaped human activity.<sup>37</sup> My goal is to show not simply that everything is connected, but rather that some connections are decisive. For instance, I consider how photographers' shared wartime experiences with editors and moviemakers, or their relationships with their spouses, shaped the kind of work they made and sold after World War II. In other cases, I identify moments when photographers' passports determined the kind of stories they covered, or how the agency's sales network determined why certain images

appeared as news in *Holiday* rather than *Life*, or in England's *Illustrated* magazine rather than *Picture Post*.<sup>38</sup>

Yet the most fundamental repercussion of moving from “moment” to “network” is recognizing that autonomous activity is itself a myth.<sup>39</sup> Many people in the business helped Magnum photographers to attain their technical, creative, and economic successes. They edited their film, laid out their pictures into stories, captioned photographs, and pitched their work to clients. That process of collaborative postproduction has long preoccupied historians of film and the book.<sup>40</sup> Yet in photo histories, such figures often occupy the same position as John Morris does in the Paris Liberation party snapshot: peering over the heads of famous photographers, struggling to be seen. By putting photo editors and other professionals in the spotlight, this book joins new scholarship that looks at photojournalism as an inherently collaborative process.<sup>41</sup> Magnum photographers' status as artists, meanwhile, mattered little until years later, when their post-1945 work began to be displayed in exhibitions and republished in photo books. In those contexts, which I examine in the last chapter, critics and curators pitted photographers' individual visions—whether personal or political—against the commercial and editorial constraints of photojournalism.<sup>42</sup> What made Magnum's network decisive, then, is not only that it ensured that photographers' pictures could be made, sold, and circulated, but that it also shaped our very conception of the meaning of those pictures as something other than commercial photography.

## **THE PHOTO AGENCY AND POSTWAR VISUAL CULTURE**

As a photo agency, Magnum aimed to maximize sales and image circulation. Its operations thus offer a macro perspective on the production of postwar visual culture—a story that is bigger than Magnum itself and that cannot be gleaned from looking at individual photographers or even the picture stories in such high-circulating magazines as *Life*. Following the agency's pictures into their many print contexts reveals visual and thematic connections across different magazines (i.e., from *Life* to those targeting women or travelers) and shows how the many settings for photography (from editorial essays and advertisements to photo albums and exhibitions) were in conversation with each other. In this book, Magnum is the lens through which the cultural and visual history of the post-1945 period comes into focus. Its cast of characters is by necessity extensive—spanning heretofore anonymous Magnum staff as well as the people who commissioned and edited the photographic content of a host of magazines, including *This Week*, *Ladies' Home Journal*, *Saturday Evening Post*, *Life*, *Holiday*, and Standard Oil's *The Lamp*. The people discussed here lived, documented, and mediated the public's comprehension of such issues as European reconstruction, the founding of the state of Israel, and the introduction of the tourist fare on airplanes. Like recent media histories by Anna McCarthy and Fred Turner, this book reconstitutes the diverse networks of professionals who shaped the public's comprehension of politics and culture after World War II.<sup>43</sup> Yet while Turner and McCarthy suggest that network television and multimedia displays made photography obsolete as a source of information and entertainment soon after 1945, I demonstrate that Magnum's embrace of noneditorial markets



and other sites for photography, including corporate annual reports, made the aesthetic of the news a feature of everyday life well beyond the pages of magazines.

This book tells a chronological and overlapping story about Magnum's first two decades, from the agency's inception in 1947 to the rise of Magnum's sister organization, the International Center of Photography, in the late 1960s amid the closure of illustrated magazines and a growing art market for photographs. Each chapter responds to specific myths about the agency while unearthing the intellectual and cultural climates and economic markets in which Magnum produced its pictures. We will see that Magnum's activities were deeply embedded not only with the history of magazines, but also within the changing fields of American journalism, sociology, geography, public relations, and advertising. Based on the available archival evidence, I have chosen projects for each chapter that allow us to see not only how a photo story was made and sold, but also how it subsequently worked within or challenged Magnum's legacy. Some of the projects I discuss are considered canonical (for instance, Seymour's 1948 "Children of Europe" portfolio for UNESCO) while others (such as George Rodger's mid-1950s work for Standard Oil in Africa) are largely unknown. Yet all of the cases reflect a kind of historical amnesia: they show that we have inherited an incomplete picture not only because some episodes have been excluded from the historical record, but also because other stories have been told the same way too many times.

Part of the work of unraveling Magnum's mythologies is seeing how embedded the agency was in the larger business of making and selling photographs. The book therefore begins by situating Magnum into the longer history of photo agencies from the late nineteenth century to the end of World War II. It then shows how exactly Magnum ran its business: the many capable women it hired for its New York and Paris offices, how staff and photographers stayed in touch through formalized memos and weekly reports, and which magazines the agency cultivated as its primary markets in the U.S. and Europe.

The next four chapters turn to the most important markets with which Magnum worked, reconstructing the networks of professionals in those markets and looking in depth at how select Magnum photographers met the creative, journalistic, and logistical demands of their assignments. Because Magnum worked with each of its major markets from the start, these chapters all begin in the late 1940s but then progressively move the agency's history forward, reflecting the importance of editorial work in the late 1940s and early 1950s (chapters 2 and 3); the advent of travel photography in the early to mid-1950s (chapter 4); and the centrality of corporate photography by the 1960s (chapter 5). I show that Magnum's photography always blurred the line between news and something else, and that this is precisely what allowed their pictures to circulate widely and accrue cultural and monetary value. One of the main reasons that its photographs could appear in so many different settings is because of the high demand for human-interest pictures from around the world. The agency's early history thus opens onto a parallel story about how images of ordinary people were put to use by different kinds of players, from magazines reporting on news headlines to international companies eager to boost their public image.



The last chapter shows how in under twenty-five years, Magnum's active picture files—from which editors used to request images to illustrate news or publicity stories—began to be broken up and transformed into archives that represented photographers' unified oeuvres and that were used to uphold lasting mythologies about the origins of Magnum and its place in twentieth-century photojournalism. But to understand what Magnum's picture files even contained, we have to start at the beginning: when Magnum's founders decided they would try to satiate "the picture hunger of man."<sup>44</sup>