



Cartier-Bresson, *Shanghai*, 1949

*Henri Cartier-Bresson and the Artless Art*. By Jean-Pierre Montier. Trans. Ruth Taylor. 328 pp. + 10 col. pls. + 289 b & w ills. (Thames & Hudson, London, 1996) £50 (HB). ISBN 0-500-54204-X.

To turn the pages of this beautifully produced monograph is to be struck once again by the compelling power of Cartier-Bresson's work—it hardly seems possible that such images could be achieved with that dumb, literal medium, street photography. The best pictures appear to make a strange sense, both formally and in what they say about people and their relations. To begin to understand how such photographs were made and, perhaps more importantly, how they were used and to what effect would be a valuable task, though one which would take the enquirer far beyond the study of photography or even art alone.

Text and images are evenly balanced in this well illustrated book which juxtaposes Cartier-Bresson's photographs and drawings, with the emphasis laid justly on the former. The visual comparisons are often well judged, and along with Jean-Pierre Montier's detailed and sensitive descriptions, they permit some understanding of the photographer's habitual formal devices.

Yet this strength is also a product of the book's great weakness. Montier views Cartier-Bresson's work as a unity, allowing visual comparisons which span many decades as well as different media. The chapters, punctuated by sketchy biographical segments, are ordered according to what Montier takes to be the governing concepts of the work seen as a whole. They bear such titles as 'The Geometrician' and 'Zen Archery'. Montier's tone is reverent, fixed on the spiritual, even sacred, aspects of the work, the photographer's practice and his state of mind, attuned to the 'decisive moment'. His view of the work's essential unity leads Montier to discount differences, blur distinctions, and even to see contradictions as favouring wholeness. Of two pictures of fathers with their children (one taken in 1933, the other in 1980), he revealingly remarks: 'Apart from the difference in tone between the two images, one suggesting happiness, the other despair, they are essentially conveying the same message.'

Montier's references are extensive and eccentric, used more often to validate than illuminate the work. It certainly makes sense to think about Bergson in relation to Cartier-Bresson (and Surrealist photography more generally) but not if he is viewed as a source of contemporary wisdom. Even James Frazer is deployed, not as primary material, but as an authentic account of the doings and beliefs of 'primitive' societies.

There is a relative dearth of serious literature about Cartier-Bresson which this book, with its consistent historical weakness, cannot remedy. The discussion of Surrealist

photography is particularly poor, assuming that it could only be manipulated and studio based, and that therefore—his own statements notwithstanding—there can be nothing essentially Surrealist about Cartier-Bresson's pictures. This is to ignore both aspects of Cartier-Bresson's subject matter (especially in the 1930s) and his entire method of working: found objects snatched from 'life', recognised unconsciously, registered mechanically in silver and then not interfered with in the printing—as is well known, even cropping the image was forbidden.

What this book does provide is a long, ahistorical appreciation of Cartier-Bresson's art. Although the thesis on which it was based was written without the photographer's assistance, Montier plays the role of Cartier-Bresson himself in voluble, philosophic and literary mood, seamlessly interspersing the photographer's many statements and his own gloss. Possible critiques of Cartier-Bresson's work or of documentary photography as a whole are barely registered; instead, the 'dance' of the photographer 'instinctively' assumes the rhythm of his subjects, wherever or whoever they may be.

And this concentration on Cartier-Bresson the artist leads to the most remarkable lacuna of the book for, despite its insistent philosophising about the interaction of the photographer and the world, there is almost nothing about the people and events he photographed. This was, after all, a photographer who took pictures of China undergoing revolution and of the liberation of the Nazi concentration camps. 'The photograph is a small weapon for changing the world', said Cartier-Bresson at one point, but it is hard to make sense of such a statement in a text from which the world is absent. Nor are there many hints about Cartier-Bresson's relation to realism (something of an issue in the 1930s) nor of his politics. Rather the text is a pseudo-philosophical pool the surface of which history has barely disturbed. Through thinking about how Cartier-Bresson worked with politics, with events and with people, the work may be enriched. Without such explication, his extraordinary

photographs remain a frustrating, if lucrative, enigma, a blank screen on which the various desires of the present may be projected.