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# Photographic Strategies

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## ABOUT RUSSIA

by Henri Cartier-Bresson. New York: Viking Press, 1974,  
141 photographs, \$18.95

and

## FLAMENCO GITANO

by Charles Berger. Mill Valley, Calif.: California Artisan Press, 1974,  
36 photographs, \$75.00

*Reviewed by Howard S. Becker*

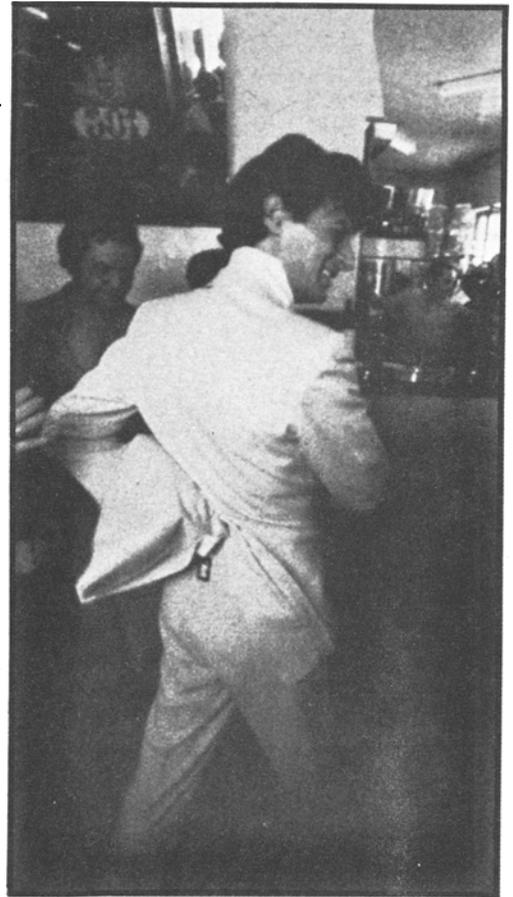
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Photographers often try to characterize a country or people in a book-length sequence of photographs with a minimal supporting text. The books reviewed here are two very different versions of such a project. Both give the reader some strong impressions of the people and places they portray. Each suggests the opportunities and limitations of one among many possible ways of doing the job.

Every visual literate knows Cartier-Bresson's work, if not his name. His photographs have appeared in major magazines around the world, in galleries and museums, and in books for over forty years. Now in his late sixties, he has produced an impressive series of studies of the people of Europe, Asia, and the United States. He perfected an anecdotal form in which the elements of a situation expressed themselves both as the culmination of a small story and the formal resolution of contending visual forces. The

result was a photograph of what he called, in a memorable phrase, "the decisive moment." It is not excessive to say that Cartier-Bresson taught us all to understand and appreciate decisive photographic moments and to read from them the character of a nation, a people, or a time.

As he pursued these remarkably condensed images from one place to another over the years, the stylistic devices and the kinds of stories he had to tell became more apparent, as did both their strengths and their limitations. The strengths are obvious enough: a sophisticated economy of means, reminiscent of and relying on our familiarity with French, especially impressionist, painting; a cultured sensibility, keenly aware of the social and political nuances of a situation; and a broad comparative point of view, cosmopolitan and intellectual. He takes our familiarity with the form for granted, as he has every right to, and we

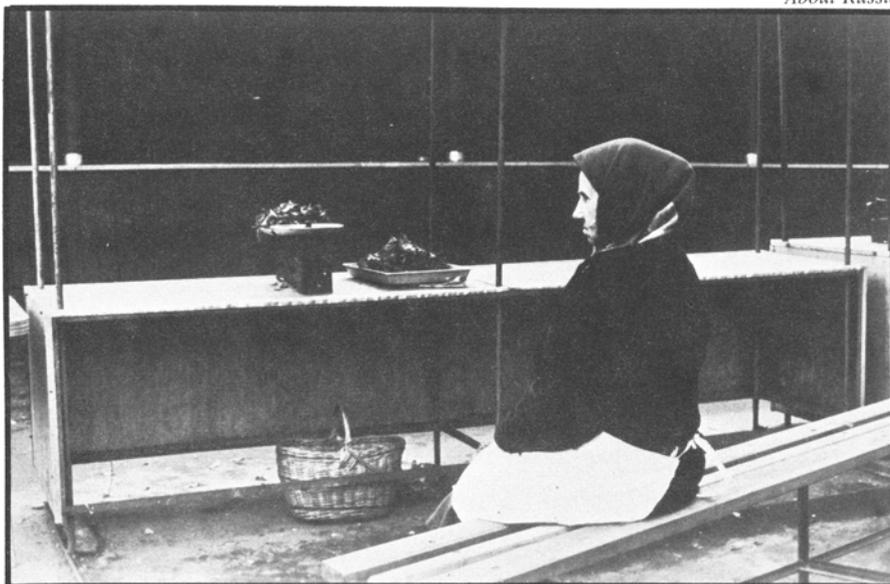


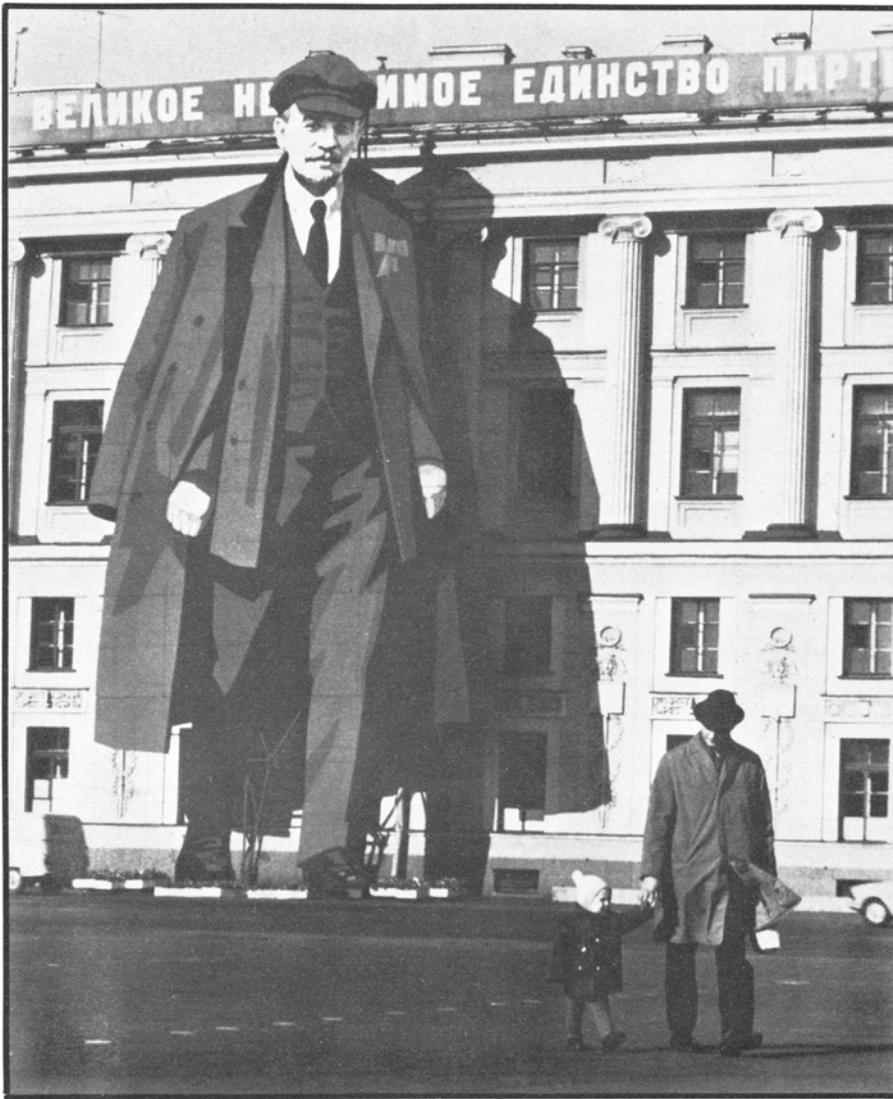
*Flamenco Gitano*

have no trouble seeing his meaning. It is easy to read his photographs, not because they are easy to read but because we are so experienced in reading them.

These qualities do not preclude some weaknesses. He limits himself largely to what can be seen publicly: many images are made in the streets and countryside, many more in schools, factories, churches, museums, scientific institutes, and other semipublic places. He does not say how long he spent on this trip to Russia; but you can see that when he was not walking about the streets, he was making semiofficial visits to all these public places. That decision was no crime, but it means that a dimension of Russian life (many dimensions, probably) do not appear. It means, for instance, that the politically dissident scientists whose activities have attracted so much attention do not appear, although plenty of other scientists do; it means that the Gulag Archipelago does not appear, though plenty of happy serious workers do, as well as plenty of geographically out-of-the-way places; it means that while we see a lot of beautiful scenery, we do not see any of the pollution that accompanies the mammoth industrial complexes pictured.

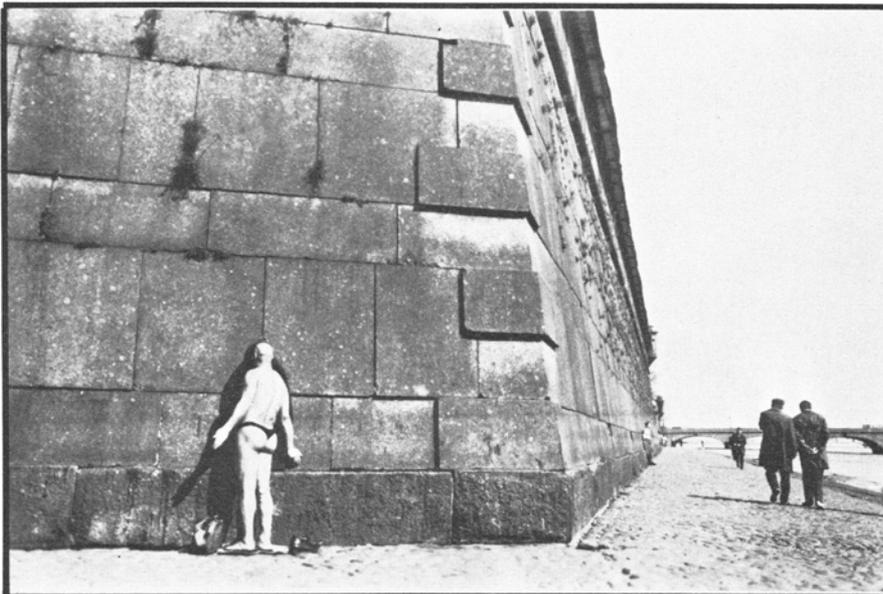
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Cartier-Bresson is not an apologist for Soviet Russia. These gaps are of a piece with the lack of any images of home life or of informal indoor gathering places; they are gaps that grow inevitably out of the constraints of photojournalism. You cannot visit so many places as are pictured here, cover so many miles, and simultaneously settle into the extended visit that would allow close familiarity with particular people and areas, that would allow the gaps to be filled.

Another weakness comes from our familiarity with Cartier-Bresson's grammar. Because we have seen him do these things before, it is all too easy—too easy for him to make the images, which thus have a tendency to become mechanical and to lack the unexpected witty twist that gave his earlier photographs their bite; and too easy for us to read them, to see the point even when it really is not there, to attribute profundity to its surface marks. Take, for instance, the photograph in the Palace Square in Leningrad. The father looks down on his child just as the giant statue of Lenin looks down on him. It seems to be a comment on something about Russian political life, but it is no more than a trick, a platitude expressed in a visual platitude. We do not have to work for the meaning of these images, because it is all apparent. Fortunately this is only a tendency in the book, and many fine photographs more than make up for it. They show Cartier-Bresson in fine form.

Charles Berger's *Flamenco Gitano* adopts a very different strategy to describe, as he somewhat surprisingly says, "the music of the gypsies living in Spain." The book is composed of four sequences of photographs (two containing eight images, one ten, the other nine) plus a one-image epilogue. The first shows a master guitarist and his brother-in-law, a singer, playing in a country inn; the photographs follow one another closely and might have been made during ten or fifteen minutes. In the second a younger man tops off thirty-six hours of singing and dancing with a drink in a local bar; it covers a similarly short time. In the third the same young man joins gypsies from other towns for an informal fiesta. They dance and sing outdoors in a white-walled courtyard. The last ("Raices") starts with the proposition that "the roots of flamenco are in the home" and shows us portraits of four generations of one family. Each series is made up of one photograph to a page; the facing pages contain a verse from a *flamenco cante* with an English translation.

Berger has not made the photographs in a way that was easy for him or for us. He has manipulated the original color photographs extensively, although not in an obvious or gimmicky way. Rather, he has used a screen to increase their graininess and controlled the color beyond what ordinary processes allow (by making his own color separations). The same white walls look—in successive plates—white, yellow, green, blue, and brown, and these variations in color become part of Berger's expressive means. These manipulations blur many of the figures into their surroundings, as does the grainy texture, and one often has to fight to see the figures in their background. I do not know how that device will wear over time, but right now it serves to prevent rapid scanning of the kind Cartier-Bresson's photographs invite. It forces one deeper into the pictures, into the people, into what they are doing.

We can go deeply into these pictures because Berger has gone deeply into the life of the people in them. They have an "inside" feeling of the kind I complained of as missing in Cartier-Bresson. The people know Berger as he knows them, know him well enough that his photographing them means no more to them than would being photographed by any other friend. And he knows



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them well enough to be there, for instance, the morning that Miguel Funi, looking done in after his thirty-six-hour party, stops off for just a little more at a friend's bar.

This inside knowledge is the only thing that makes the project workable, because we are after all being asked to grasp an entire culture on the basis of a few parties, the aftermath of another, and some assorted members of an extended family. It is a lot to

try to get out of so little, even with the help of the verses from the *cante*.

It is the reverse of the Cartier-Bresson strategy. Berger may know more, but all he tells us about is these few people and parties. They are very intimate scenes. No schools, no churches, no factories, no streets, no one at work, no parades—just what we must take, for lack of anything else, as the essence of *gitano* life. From the way they look, dress, and hold themselves, from the few visible buildings and artifacts, we can try to construct—with the hints Berger gives us in verse and in color—the feeling of that life. And we have to construct it, digging the raw materials out of the prints and seeing what we can make of them. Further, it is the *feeling* we have to construct, rather than the more ethnographic matters Cartier-Bresson provokes us into thinking about.

Berger has taken a lot of risks. Do they work? I think so. I found myself deeply absorbed in that world of guitars and song, of solemn dignity and drunken good times, of brilliant sun and tired shadow. I know something I did not know before, which must be an important test.

Both these books are beautifully made. Cartier-Bresson's images are reproduced beautifully. The Berger book (a limited edition of 250 copies) is a jewel of careful craftsmanship, from the exquisitely printed photographs to the handset type, the introductory drawings, and the heavy paper on which it all appears.

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