

PATRICK O'CONNOR

PARIS BLACK AND WHITE

BRASSAI: NO ORDINARY EYES

★

By Alain Sayag and Annick Lionel-Marie

(Thames & Hudson 320pp £48)

NEGROPHILIA: AVANT-GARDE PARIS AND BLACK CULTURE IN THE 1920S

★

By Petrine Archer-Straw

(Thames & Hudson 200pp £14.95)

IF COLOUR PHOTOGRAPHY had been perfected earlier, we would now have a quite different notion of what Paris was like in the 1920s. The clothes, the decor, the make-up and street-life must have been a riot of brilliant *fauve* contrasts. When Josephine Baker stepped on the stage in Paris for the first time in 1925, part of the sensation she created was due to the contrast between her beautiful black body and the pink and gold costume of feathers and beads that she was wearing. No matter how many times we may read about this, and even if one looks at the paintings and lithographs of the time, what is fixed in the communal memory is still the black-and-white images that both of these books use.

Gyula Halász, who was to adopt the nom de guerre of Brassai, arrived from Transylvania, via Berlin, in 1924. While still learning French he fell in with a group of Hungarian ex-pats, among them André Kertész, Vincent Korda and Lajos Tihanyi, and through them he began to meet all the foremost artists working in Paris at the time, everyone who was anyone, from Picasso and Le Corbusier to Jacques Prévert and Henri Langlois. In his first book, *Paris de nuit*, Brassai published a series of photographs which, while influenced by Atget, whose work he had admired, took everyday objects and images of workers, industry and back-street life, and created from them a mood of melancholy and tension which was to inspire many imitators and chroniclers.

Henry Miller arrived in Paris the year Brassai's book was

published, and wrote: 'Deprived of the miracle of color, registering everything in degrees of black and white, Brassai nevertheless seems to convey by the purity and quality of his tones all the effects of sunlight, and even more impressively the effects of night light.' The cranes silhouetted against the night sky by the side of the Canal Saint-Denis, the baker glimpsed through an iron railing shovelling the bread into his oven, the empty *pissotières* and the close-up of some matches lying on a page of newspaper — all are imbued with the same slightly threatening *film-noir* qualities that he brings to the glamorous artists in their studios, or to the transvestites and prostitutes in the smart bars.

The extent to which Brassai was inspired by the cinema, and the influence he had over film-makers such as Marcel Carné, are demonstrated by the progression from photographs to stage to screen that came about in 1945. One of the earliest ballets by Roland Petit, *Le Rendez-vous*, with music by the Hungarian Joseph Kosma, used sets by Brassai which were huge blow-ups of some of his night-time images of empty Paris streets. Carné was so enthusiastic about the ballet that he took its music and characters and had Prévert turn them into the script for *Les Portes de la nuit*. Throughout the film one seems to be watching Brassai's photographs come alive, and, as Miller noted, 'Whatever aspect of the city his eye seizes upon, the result is a vast metaphor.'

Brassai's photographs give the impression of catching fleeting moments, but most of them seem to have been posed and worked out in advance. One of the most touching, the shot of a young couple kissing in mid-air in a funfair swingboat, is revealed to be the result of a fairly elaborate set-up. The page of contact prints shows the young man turning to the camera, as if listening to instructions, and the final published image is the tenth frame. To 'cull the ephemeral beauty of the present moment' was Brassai's own explanation of his work, although as Alain Sayag writes, he 'always recoiled from anything that could be called news photography'. The day the Germans marched out of Paris, he almost lost his life when he attempted to take a photograph out of the bathroom window and was shot at by a sniper; so instead of photographing the street-fighting, he turned his lens on the shattered mirror above the wash-basin.

One of the most famous photographs in Brassai's book *Le Paris secret des années 30* is of a dancer at the Bal Nègre in the Rue Blomet. Caught in mid-Charleston, her head thrown back in what Brassai calls the 'hysterical sorcery' that permeated the club, she seems to be releasing energy to the somewhat demure-looking spectators. 'Forgetting that contact with a Negro had once been shocking,'



Brassai: melancholy mood

he writes, 'every evening luxurious automobiles unloaded hordes of elegant society neurotics.'

This fashion for African and Black American art is the theme of Petrine Archer-Straw's short but well-argued book. She throws out all the usual assumptions about the 'freedom' and 'acceptance' that famous figures like Langston Hughes, Josephine Baker and Henry Crowder were said to have found in Paris in the 1920s and instead goes back to the origins of French colonialism and fascination with fetishism, to draw a much more complicated picture of the influence of African sculpture on the Cubists and of African-American music on the dances and pop songs of the time.

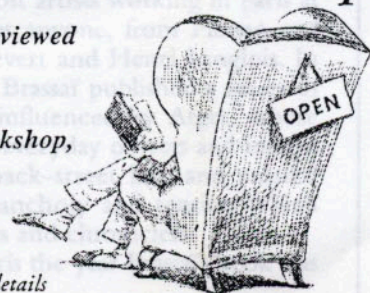
The avant-garde artists who claimed to be so liberated were in their way blind to the inherited racism of much of the material they sought to emulate.

Even Nancy Cunard, with her pioneering anthology *Negro*, was, in Archer-Straw's view, using a form of 'positive discrimination' to idealise and stereotype 'black vitality'. By taking a broad view, from nineteenth-century advertising and salon painting through the work of Gauguin and on to Picasso and Matisse, Archer-Straw opens up several interesting contrasting notions about 'white self-interest under the guise of patronage'. She is better on the visual arts than she is on music or theatre, and makes one major error in placing Josephine Baker's banana dance in *La revue nègre*. This famous number was created for Josephine not by the black choreographers with whom she came to Paris, but by the white impresarios at the Folies-Bergère. It was they who saw Josephine as the 'savage' emerging from the jungle, ignoring, as did all the Parisians, the fact that she and all the other poets, dancers and musicians were the product of an urban American culture which went largely unrecognised in their own country.

To order these books at a special price from LR Bookshop, see p 47

Literary Review Bookshop

To order any book reviewed
call 020 8324 5510
or post orders to
Literary Review Bookshop,
250 Western Avenue,
London, W3 6EE.



See order form for more details