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The Eye Doctor's Vision: The Documentary Photography of Milton Rogovin

Milton Rogovin: The Making of a Social Documentary Photographer by Melanie Anne Herzog. Center for Creative Photography, the University of Arizona, Tucson, in association with University of Washington Press, 2006. 176 pages.

By Paul Von Blum

**Ralph J. Bunche Center for African American Studies and Departments of
Communication Studies and Art H, UCLA**

Milton Rogovin: Making of a Social Documentary Photographer is an outstanding combination of Rogovin's photographs and Melanie Herzog's text. It is a major contribution to the growing literature of American socially conscious art and exposes readers to a remarkable and durable contemporary photographer.

Born in 1909 in New York, Rogovin has produced stunning work for more than fifty years. His efforts link him to the greatest 20th century American social photographers: Jacob Riis, Lewis Hine, Dorothea Lange, Margaret Bourke-White, Gordon Parks, Walker Evans, W. Eugene Smith, among others. Trained as an optometrist, he moved to Buffalo in 1938. Politically active, he was persecuted during the 1950s anti-communist hysteria, severely impacting his optometry practice. Turning to documentary photography, he directed his social commitments to workers, people of color, and marginalized men, women, and

children in America and elsewhere. He has portrayed them as strong, dignified, and resilient in the face of oppression and deprivation.

Rogovin embodies the historic Jewish ideals of justice, equality, and compassion. Widely exhibited to huge national and international audiences, he has solidified his contributions to American art history. Throughout his life, he has stood defiantly with the poor and oppressed against privilege and power.

This volume is an imaginative collaboration of artist and scholar, providing an appealing selection of Rogovin's photographs. It also presents a cogent critical assessment of his artistic stature. Professor Herzog skillfully locates Milton Rogovin centrally within the tradition of American socially conscious photography.

Herzog encountered an unusual challenge in analyzing the photographer's contributions in their political, historical, and art historical contexts. When she began, she was presented with Rogovin's substantial autobiographical text. Begun in 1997, it covered his early life, his optometric training and work, his political activism, and his increasing devotion to documentary photography. Herzog had to write her own account, offering her critical inquiry while remaining faithful to his text. She accomplished her task superbly; the combined efforts of artist and scholar represent a splendid collaboration. The product is a remarkable fusion of artistic talent, personal memoir, and scholarly analysis.

Herzog argues persuasively that Rogovin is a contemporary heir of Lewis Hine, whose haunting photographs documented the challenging lives of early 20th century immigrants, child laborers, and urban slum dwellers. Like Hine, Rogovin sees his work as an impetus for social change. His images are inextricably related to deeper political struggles where artistic effort is inseparable from social activism.

The author details the other artistic influences informing Milton Rogovin's work for over fifty years. Riis, Bourke-White, Lange, and Evans produced thousands of socially conscious photographs, encouraging Rogovin to continue that tradition. Rogovin also encountered the socially committed prints of Francisco Goya, Honore Daumier, and Kathe Kollwitz. Herzog highlights his autobiographical account of these early influences, revealing his powerful linkage to the tradition of politically engaged art.

A crucial feature is Herzog's arrangement of the photographs and her specific analyses of their origin, quality, and impact. She documents his focus, with increasing effectiveness, on lighting, composition, camera angles, and other technical features. She details how his sensitive relationships with his subjects generated his engaging portrayals. Above all, she reinforces Rogovin's view that his photographs should be viewed collectively rather than as single images. This is crucial in understanding Rogovin's exemplary contribution to American photography. His works are narratives enabling audiences to empathize with entire groups of oppressed people *and* with individual subjects.

The photographs themselves are compelling. They include many examples of Rogovin's photographs of Buffalo's marginalized residents, which reflect the foundation of his entire career: "I try to understand the underlying causes of the idleness, the drugs, the prostitution, the graffiti, etc. [My] selection . . . is a political choice. . . to show that we are dealing with human beings."

Other themes reinforce that judgment. His Appalachian images confront the squalid conditions of life in that region. Like Walker Evans and Dorothea Lange in the 1930s and 1940s, Rogovin brings a public face to people who have remained invisible throughout American history. This documentation underscores the huge gap between American ideals and American realities.

Among the most remarkable photographs are images from foreign lands. His Mexican and Chilean works add a vivid international dimension to his career. His portrayals of miners and their families from France, Scotland, Spain, Cuba, China, Mexico, Zimbabwe, and Czechoslovakia are among the finest examples of worker photography.

Approaching the centenary of his birth, Milton Rogovin understands that images alone are merely one facet of the broader movements for social change. Like all great humanist artists, he wants his works to mobilize others to become social justice activists. His words eloquently express the credo of radical artists over the centuries: "It wasn't the photographer--his or her photographs-- but all hundred and one different blows added together to make a change."

One of the most endearing images is of Rogovin himself, sitting in a wheelchair at an anti-war demonstration in 2005, holding a sign reading "Dissent Is Democratic." This sustained political commitment, like his exceptional body of photographs, reflects the continuing legacy of an artistic giant.

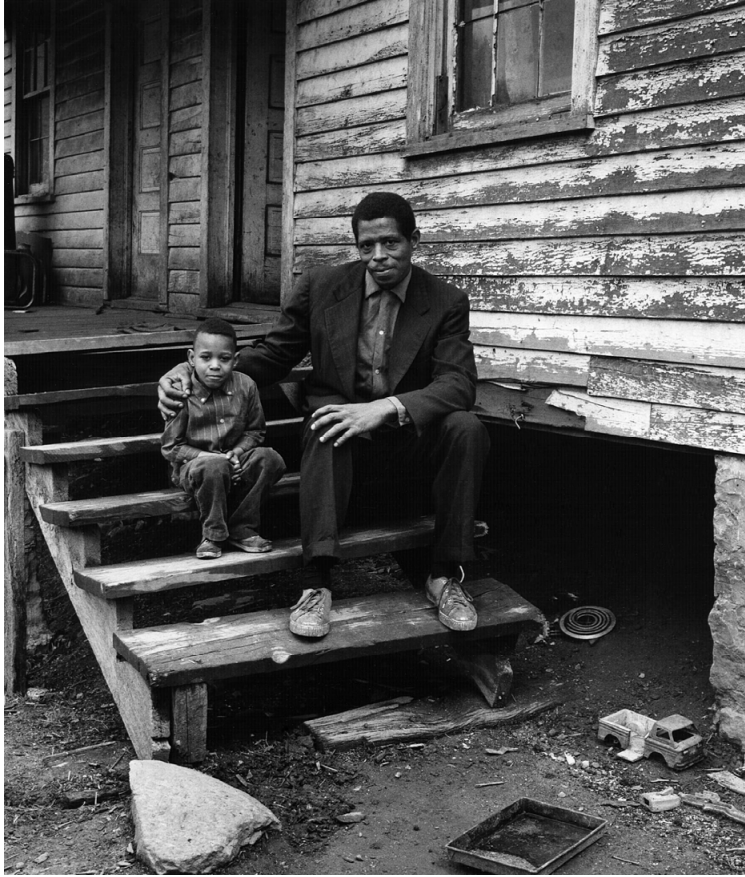


Figure 1 Appalachia, 1962-1967

This powerful vision of the stark realities in Appalachia reveals a man and his son struggling to maintain a close and loving bond even while living in a crumbling residence in a desolate region. Despite their hardships, their dignity and resilience prevail over their material poverty.



Figure 2 Native Americans and Lower West Side, 1973

Focusing on the most invisible minority in the United States, Rogovin portrays a mother and her children, maintaining family cohesion in their harsh urban setting. His durable commitment to racial minorities, especially their enduring dignity, pervades this image.

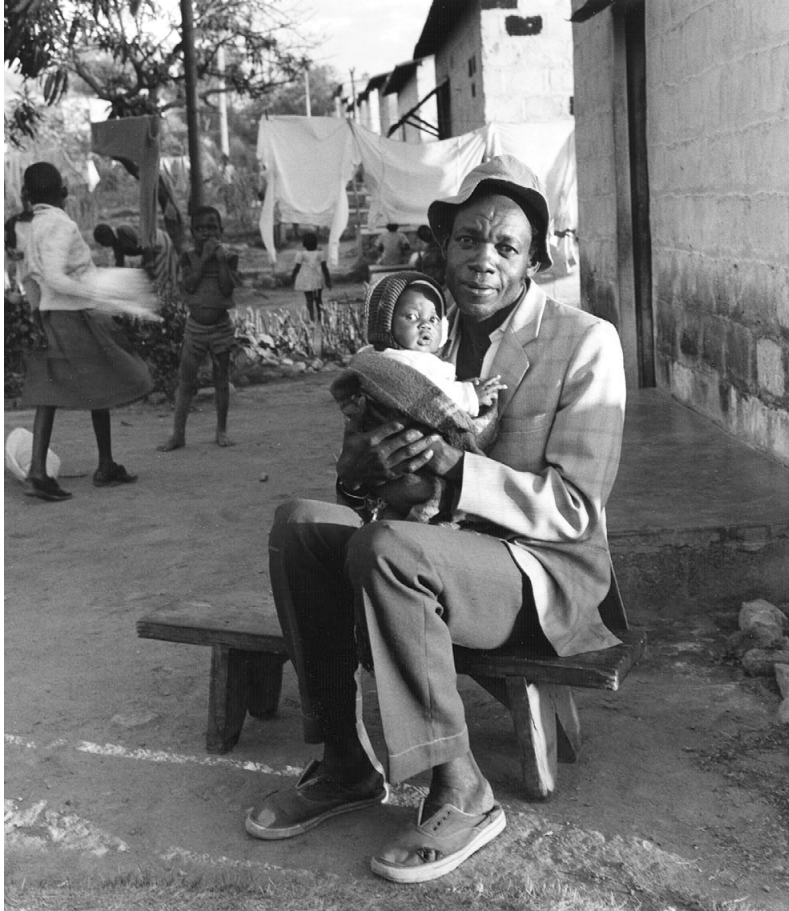


Figure 3 Families of Miners, Zimbabwe, 1989

The man's expression reflects his deep compassion for his baby, despite his ripped and laceless shoes and his cramped and uncomfortable quarters in a miner's village. Rogovin's portrait of tenderness reflects his lifelong humanist vision as a documentary photographer