

Rothstein's First Assignment: A Story about Documentary Truth. Prod. and dir. by Richard Knox Robinson. Ekphratic Productions/Cinema Guild, 2011. 72 mins. (<http://RothsteinsFirstAssignment.com>)

The photographer Arthur Rothstein was only twenty years old in October 1935 when he embarked on his first assignment for Roy Stryker at the U.S. Resettlement Administration (later to become the Farm Security Administration). Rothstein's job was to document the people living in an area of the Blue Ridge Mountains of Virginia that would soon become the new Shenandoah National Park. The government was resettling (and, in some cases, forcibly evicting) the residents. "Their entire way of life was going to be destroyed," Rothstein told Richard Doud, in a taped 1964 interview excerpted in this film. "This record that I made I think served a very useful purpose. It showed how a certain group of people

in the United States lived at a particular time, and they no longer exist." During the week Rothstein lived in a small cabin in the Corbin Hollow area, he took approximately two hundred photographs, which survive in the Farm Security Administration Photograph Collection at the Library of Congress. Seen today, Rothstein's photographs provide a remarkable portrait of a proud people and their rural community only ninety miles from Washington, D.C., but worlds apart otherwise.

The filmmaker Richard Knox Robinson has much sympathy for the residents of the Blue Ridge Mountains who were displaced from their homes in the mid-1930s. Through contemporary interviews with approximately ten of their descendants, as well as archival film footage and newspaper clippings, Robinson revisits many of the injustices perpetrated against them, including the horrors of their institutionalization and sometimes-forced sterilization at the State Colony for Epileptics and Feeble-minded in Lynchburg, Virginia.

Other scholars have documented the ways the people of the region were misunderstood and deceived by outsiders, but Robinson is the first to try to make Rothstein complicit in those actions with three serious charges:

(1) *Rothstein not only staged his documentary photographs but also deliberately ignored the forced evictions taking place at the time.* On October 3, 1935, law enforcement officials handcuffed and removed Melanchthon Cliser from his home near the entrance to what would become the national park. No one knows if Rothstein was even in Virginia on this date because he kept no research notes on this assignment, but Robinson [in a voice-over] smells a rat: "Okay, he is working for the Resettlement Administration, and he doesn't photograph someone who has been evicted, but he photographs an apple vendor. What's going on here? And he doesn't just take a snapshot, he takes a staged photograph." Indeed, this particular photograph does appear posed, since the apple vendor stands stiffly and looks directly at the camera, but Robinson provides no evidence that the photograph was staged or manipulated by Rothstein in any way. Not guilty.

(2) *Rothstein lied about his photographic technique.* In an excerpt from the Richard Doud

interview, Rothstein explains, "I developed a certain sense of design and order and composition . . . and combined that with the use of the miniature camera . . . and doing all these things, I came up with—at *that* time, what seemed at *that* time—to be remarkable photography." Robinson, however, again smells a rat. Closely examining Rothstein's photographs, Robinson discovers light leaks, which he believes could come only from a large-format camera, not the handheld miniature camera mentioned by Rothstein. "He is not hand-holding it," Robinson maintains in the film.

These are staged photographs, with the camera on a tripod, and I said, 'this is odd, Rothstein doesn't even mention it.' . . . So the question becomes "what is Rothstein's real objective?" Why is he taking the photographs that he is taking, because it doesn't seem to correspond with what he says in the Richard Doud interview.

Again, Robinson presents no evidence that any of Rothstein's images were staged—only that he used a large-format camera, which presumably means that the subjects are posing, not caught in candid moments. However, Rothstein never claimed his subjects did not pose, nor did he claim that all of his photographs were taken with the Leica (smaller-format) camera. Not guilty.

(3) *Rothstein is somehow connected to the forced sterilizations taking place at the state colony.* Robinson devotes roughly one-eighth of his film to the tragic history of the colony, which viewers may find puzzling until close to the film's end when Robinson reveals that the first residents of Corbin Hollow committed to the colony were two children; the date was November 1, 1935. Then Robinson cuts to a newspaper article, "Blue Ridge Hillbillies Get a Transfer—From 19th to 20th Century," as he solemnly intones, "November 3rd, the *Washington Post* puts out an article with Rothstein's photographs, where he has two people in the article that he photographs—a schoolteacher and a mountain woman—and that mountain woman is the mother of the two children that had been committed two days before the article was published." Robinson then cuts to a long quotation from James Agee's *Let Us Now*

Praise Famous Men (1941), in which Agee condemns those who, “in the name of science” or “honest journalism,” depict “the nakedness, disadvantage and humiliation” of human beings, for others to see. In this case, Robinson’s charge is as vague and circumstantial as it is absurd. Rothstein’s photograph of the mother in October 1935 had nothing to do with sending her children to the colony. Not guilty.

Robinson’s filmmaking technique is sometimes as unorthodox as his charges against Rothstein. Most mystifying are three clips from *The Beverly Hillbillies*, which Robinson inserts into *Rothstein’s First Assignment*, perhaps to suggest a common misunderstanding of mountain folk—from the Blue Ridge to the Ozarks. However, this should not give Robinson license to punctuate several of Rothstein’s

sentences from the 1964 interview with excerpts from the television program’s laugh track, as if to suggest that Rothstein’s statements about photography are ridiculous. Guilty.

Although the subtitle of Robinson’s film is *A Story about Documentary Truth*, seekers of such truths are advised to go elsewhere. Highly recommended is Errol Morris’s *Believing is Seeing: Observations on the Mysteries of Photography* (2011), which closely examines two of Rothstein’s best-known Great Depression-era photographs—“Dust Storm” (1936) and “Cow Skull” (1936)—and the complex circumstances of their creation.

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