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**Book Review: Melnick, Mimi. *Manhole Covers*. Photographs by Robert Melnick. Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1994.**

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Paul Kingsbury

## Book Review

Melnick, Mimi. *Manhole Covers*.  
Photographs by Robert Melnick.  
Cambridge: The MIT Press,  
1994.

Let us recognize the liminal secretions of binaries: The rope, between man and superman. The ego, between id and superego. The text, between author and reader. And of course, the manhole cover, between stool and shoe. Even without its usual cover, the manhole can rest neatly on the cover of disclosure. Manholes. An arresting trope, echoing that masculinity, despite being renowned for a consistency of hardness, is prone to flops, fissures, and holes. And is it not life and life's fractures and coverings that Social Theory should seek to disclose? Indeed, there is a book that makes such a maneuver, but seeks to document and disclose the covers themselves.

An ordure-obscuring object that seems guileless and common-place becomes in Mimi Melnick's *Manhole Covers* (1994) a disk that rivals the beauty of a Spartan shield and the enigma of Mona Lisa's face reflected in a curbside puddle. Waffle designs, basket weave patterns, and non-penetrating pick holes, all fill the manhole's design gamut. Such fascinating and everyday objects are suspect to the empirical corruption of cartoons. Recall the cop car speeding past an easily drawn cityscape that repeats itself every three seconds. The undiscovered robber emerges from a manhole and removes the cover like a paper plate. One learns from the

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book however, that the average cover weighs at least 250 pounds.

So this is a book to admonish myths then? Not quite, the scholarly and writerly analysis of Mimi Melnick coupled with the photographic documentation of more than 200 North American manholes by her late husband Robert Melnick proliferate the magic of these urban sphincters. Each manhole cover is held in place by a frame or ring. These two pieces are 'married' or permanently paired in the foundry for a noiseless, non-rocking fit. The notion of the cover and ring 'marriage' alerts us to the manhole cover's leakage and loss of gender. Some of them have been renamed personhole covers and other assorted monikers by various city bureaus that seek to abolish sexism. Recently, manhole covers have been specifically designed to prevent the entrapment of spiked-heeled shoes. The issue of gender and masculinity in the book is kept largely underground and this seems a pity given the manliness of the *manhole cover* and its prevention or fear of leaking fluids.

*Manhole Covers* is a testament to designs that echo Piet Mondrian, William Morris, or the Picasso style figures on the Seattle Water Bureau covers. A cover by the Snead & Co. Iron Works, located in Louisville, Kentucky is embossed on the cover of the book, with the title and the Melnick's names carefully blended into the book/manhole cover's text. This book, I am sure, has given immense joy to St. Cloacina "the renowned goddess of the sewers." This book prevents the reader from an abysmal fall into the sewers of ignorance about the manhole cover topic. Though many of the ornate Stygian doorways are disappearing fast, Melnick's book suddenly makes the manhole cover *appear* in the quotidian *mise en scène* below one's feet.