Playwright-cum-revolutionary Jewish ethnographer S.Y. An-sky, in his well-documented expeditions to the Pale of Settlement at the turn of the twentieth century, came to regard Hasidim, in the words of Nathaniel Deutsch, as "proto-ethnographers." Hasidim modeled the fever to collect, assemble, and preserve oral and material Jewish culture that An-sky dreamed could be instilled in the zamler—the secular, Jewish, Populist, Russian revolutionary amateur ethnographer.1 But this history is not oft repeated. Indeed, the colloquial mode of representation is to regard Hasidim as non-coeval subjects of the contemporary—as fossilized, uncanny relics of an imagined past.2 This mode of representation not only obscures how Hasidim collect and document their own history; it even robs them of a history that can be obscured.

In The Visual Culture of Chabad, Maya Balakirsky-Katz offers an addendum to An-sky’s thesis. Hasidim (or, at the very least, Chabad Hasidim) are not only collectors of their own history; they are historical agents of their own representation. Throughout the book, Balakirsky-Katz brings the visual repertoire, the everyday materials dispersed and circulated throughout the living archive of the Chabad diaspora (what she calls “the Chabad image bank”)—from the high culture of the staged rebbe portrait to the low culture of the mass-produced kitsch rebbe keychain—to the front-and-center of its ideology. The author steers clear of what others might naturally fall prey to: deploying culture as a stand-in term for the reified, the ahistorical, the autonomous, the bound, the untouched.3 Culture is operationalized, rather, as the plastic and interstitial space inhabited between insider and outsider, between “image-maker” and “image-consumer,” as noted in the postscript (225). And if her deployment of “culture” is yet still too ephemeral and unqualified for skeptics of the “culture concept,” she more than compensates by grounding her argument in the history of Chabad


over the past one hundred and thirty years. Indeed, she argues for the dynamism of Chabad material culture and, through the process, transforms it into an object of political contestation. Although she cordons off the material from the ideological, she refuses to disentangle the two domains. The visual culture of Chabad does not simply “mirror” shifting ideological contours across the groove of its history, but rather, becomes a vehicle for driving the shifting ideology of its rebbe—and, in their absence, their faithful. In this waltz, the visual drives the ideological and the ideological drives the visual. Her work, in effect, does not simply fill the visual slot in the micro-industry of Chabad scholarship, which has proliferated after the death of Rebbe Menachem Mendel Schneerson. Instead of addressing a lacuna that may or may not need to be filled, the author brings the visual sphere to the center of contemporary questions around Chabad ideology—which has been decidedly oversaturated with textual analysis. By interrogating the visual, Balakirsky-Katz simultaneously addresses the problem that the “corporeal turn” in Jewish Cultural Studies identified—namely, the overly textual thrust of the field—and skirts the troubled relationship between “body” and “text” that plagued it.4

Freud noted in his seminal 1910 essay on The Antithetical Meaning of Primal Words that the sacred and the accursed both derive from the same primal Latin root, sacer. Although Freud submitted this, among other philological examples, to illustrate the problems that attend the hermeneutics of dream interpretation, as “dreams feel themselves at liberty, moreover, to represent any element by its wishful contrary,” a more general conclusion emerges: a thing and its opposite, despite all appearances, are both bound to the same source.5 And it is precisely the intimacy of this dialectical tension between attraction and repulsion that Balakirsky-Katz illuminates in reviewing Chabad’s attitude towards the image. Instead of abdicating for

3 Eric Wolf, Europe and the People Without History (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982).
neat resolution, she leaves these tensions unresolved: the secular banality of the image and yet the reverence it inspires; the mass production of the photograph and yet the intimacy it evokes; the unauthorized production of the image and yet its authorized circulation.

*Estranging the Familiar, Familiarizing the Strange*

In part one, Balakirsky-Katz introduces a familiar Hasidic object only to estrange it: the Hasidic master portrait. Bringing forth her interdisciplinary training as an art historian, she addresses the technical features of the portraits in question, their historical positionality vis-à-vis other rabbinic and non-Jewish portraits, and subtle allusions to common stylistic trends within the larger world of portraiture. The mise-en-scène of the portrait accrues a double meaning—indexing both the portrait’s production in the intimate and, at times, unseemly space shared between artist and rebbe (including one portrait scandalously rendered by a female artist), and its production as a cultural object within the changing world of portraiture. In painstaking detail, she traces how respective Chabad rebbes mobilized the changing semiotics of the portrait to re-present themselves to their faithful and solidify their legacy at moments of physical absentia, dynastic crisis, and Soviet persecution. Images simultaneously provided continuity and change, allowing a rebbe to tie his disputed position to an undisputed rebbe of old, while shifting his pose and surrounding to his liking. Wrapping the new (and seemingly heretical, as in the case of meditating upon the image of a former rebbe) in the clothing of the old, re-packaging innovation in the vernacular of tradition, surfaces as a prominent motif in her argument.6

But, in this multi-perspectival account of the portrait, she pays equal attention to theorizing its significance for the everyday Chabadnik—providing a view of the portrait from both the perspective of the leader and from his disciple, from above and from below. She traces the semiotic route of the portrait, how meaning triangulates and shifts between the vision of the artist, the intention of the rebbe, and its reception by the everyday Hasid. She grounds her analysis in strikingly accessible language, without reverting to the oftentimes dense, technical language of the semiotician. A rebbe’s austere pose accrues meaning through circulation larger than the one intended at the time of production; it becomes imbued with a particular meaning in the grammar of Hasidic visual hermeneutics. Indeed, as she lays out in the third chapter, “The Present Rebbe,” Rebbe Menachem Mendel Schneerson exhorted his followers, through a form of sympathetic magic, to bring the messianic era into fruition through imagining it and then rendering it visually. The materialization of the messiah, in effect, relied upon its physical and material instantiation in the visual domain. The posthumous proliferation of messianic images around the last rebbe (both authorized and unauthorized) must be contextualized, however—as she forcefully argues—beyond the waning years of his reign. In a deconstructive fashion, the author finds the antecedents, the Derridean traces, of the messianic impulse always-already at motion in the Chabad visual repertoire, far before the last rebbe came onto the scene.

*Rupture and Reconstruction*

In part two, Balakirsky-Katz moves beyond the portrait to other domains of Chabad visual culture. In chapter five, “The Geography of the Chabad World Map,” she investigates the rebbe’s transmogrification of the globe from a conspiratorial, anti-Semitic symbol of Jewish world domination to a geographically “boundless and portable space” for re-envisioning a once bounded Hasidic sect from Belarus (129). In chapter six, “The Court in America,” she turns to the architecture of “770,” the home of Chabad’s headquarters and its symbolic transformation into a messianic temple that, through its duplication across the diaspora, becomes untethered as the historical hoyf (court) of the rebbe. The design of the building is linguistically reincarnated after the death of the last Lubavitcher rebbe—from its banal valence in architecture to its deterministic valence in Chabad messianism. In chapter seven, “Counter-Zionism,” the author expands upon Schneerson’s global and expansionist vision by politicizing Chabad art, (re)positioning it as a terrain on which the territorially bound ideology of secular and religious Zionism could be challenged. As with the image of the globe, she focuses specific attention on Schneerson’s Maimonidean menorah as a “countersymbol” to the Zionist icon of the menorah. The

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