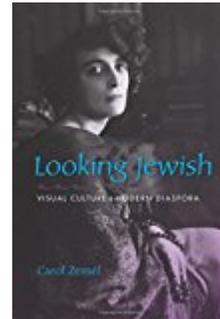




Carol Zemel. *Looking Jewish: Visual Culture and Modern Diaspora*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2015. 216 pp. \$45.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-253-00598-4.



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Envisioning and Engendering Postmodern Diasporism

In *Looking Jewish: Visual Culture and Modern Diaspora*, Carol Zemel asks, “What would it mean not only to imagine but also ‘to picture’ in Jewish?” (p. 3). Her response focuses on the ways images in particular have been a means of identification and signification for Jews in the diaspora. “The Shoah in Europe almost erased—but did not silence—Jewish culture in the area.” Nevertheless, Zemel argues, the main center of diasporic Jewish culture “shifted to multicultural North America, where, spurred by the expansive formats of postmodernism, it continues to thrive” (p. 13). Zemel argues that diasporism is especially well suited to postmodernism because postmodernism disavows “master narratives and exclusivist canons” (p. 11). Zemel asserts that diasporism embodies postmodernism by integrating multiple communities, narratives, and audiences rather than using a single region or ideology.

Her first chapter addresses photographic images of shtetl life, especially the Pale of Settlement created by the Russian Empire, which have been much reproduced. Alter Kacyzne’s photograph *Giving a Hint* (1924), pictur-

ing Jewish schoolboys in kheder, is especially prominent in YIVO materials. Zemel notes, “the locale is Lublin, but the obscuring shadows in the image mask the specificities of setting and render it generic: this is any prewar kheder in the Pale [of Settlement]” (p. 19). Zemel compares Kacyzne’s photo to Moshe Veorobeichic’s image of an old man walking down a street in *The Day Is Short* (1931). She observes, “both are aged and both are picturesque.” Though they feature different subjects, “both images subject a traditional society to the modern viewers’ scrutiny” (p. 20). Both photos demonstrate the phenomenon of “backshadowing,” a term borrowed from Michael Andre Bernstein and a practice that Zemel examines throughout her text. Neither picture is viewed today without the lens of the Holocaust: viewers know that those featured in the images almost certainly died, whether because of general historical knowledge or specific captions and/or publication formats that remind us as much. Zemel thus demonstrates that photographs both testify to the past and have a future life of their own. Her analysis recovers the contexts in which photographs were originally

produced and traces how they have been reviewed in the North American diaspora.

Each of the following chapters then addresses various artists and visions of diaspora: Bruno Schulz's modernity, Roman Vishniac's "photo-eulogy of Eastern European Jews," gender and the representation of men and women, and lastly contemporary diasporic values (p. 80). Concentrating on a different theme and deploying multiple lenses of analysis, Zemel also deconstructs the role that various media play in the visions of diaspora and the values projected therein. Analyzing the role of photography in image production, Zemel considers how various genres of photographs influence the possible interpretations: documentary photographs offer audiences something quite different from "radical forms of modernism," for example (p. 45). Throughout her examination of diasporic practices of "picturing Jewish," Zemel especially examines stereotypes. They betray ambivalence, about others and about oneself—either as an individual or as a member of a group. Although Zemel devotes chapter 4 to gender—"Difference in Diaspora: The *Yiddische Mama*, the Jewish Mother, the Jewish Princess, and Their Men"—gender is not isolated to that chapter. For example, she observes of Schulz, "Again and again, the compositional force of these images returns us to the begging or devotional male form, while the woman-idol, the idolatrous signifier of some unseen power, is animated, not from within, but by her devotees and worshippers" (pp. 64-65). Zemel carefully deconstructs how artists depict gender, including Schulz's insecurity, search for self, and anxious male gaze. In tandem with this gender analysis, Zemel evaluates the form of Schulz's work, allowing gender and formal analysis to provide deeper insight into how we might best view Schulz's work or diasporic art more generally. "However personally involved the artist was with such eroticism, the Schulz-featured supplicant in the images should not be seen as unmediated self-portraiture." Rather, she argues, these depictions of self assert an "authorial 'I' or rather "'me.'" In so doing, Zemel does not read his work so much as "personal disclosure" as "a space of sociality and social metaphor" (p. 67). In addition to gender, Zemel offers a close study of how Jews have envisioned sexuality, including queer sexualities. She argues that "gay and lesbian sexualities ... dislodge the rigid boundaries of Western machismo" (p. 135).

As Zemel analyzes such work as that of Vishniac, she voices her own experience viewing the images as sites of identification. In this way, she questions the differ-

ence between current viewing contexts and the reception of these images earlier in the twentieth century. She thus asks how these images construct viewers: "as a tourist? historian? cultural spectator ... a Jewish mourner, or even a returned émigré?" (p. 82). These questions are significant because from a twenty-first-century position, the lens of the Holocaust enshrouds the images and limits their possibilities for signification. But this is because "death [is] retrospectively attached for the figures" (p. 83). This retrospective attachment and knowledge is what transforms his photographs into eulogy: had the subjects/objects of the images not been murdered, these photographs could have been something other than eulogy. The largest question viewers face in these images, in some sense, is what genre they are viewing. Zemel argues that to locate the visual texts, "the images, captions, commentaries read as genre description not as narration or contextual history" (p. 86).

Zemel concludes that metaphor or allegory pervades diasporic work, making possible the "instantiation of multiple subjectivities," multiple readings, and openness of these works to multiple audiences (p. 159). Therein she asserts the significance of self-recognition over any single style in the construction of Jewishness but also the possibility of interacting with multiple non-Jewish identities. Throughout *Looking Jewish*, Zemel reads images through Freudian analysis, with some comparison to Sigmund Freud himself as a primary subject of study and some use of Freud as providing a secondary analytic methodology. Zemel uses this analysis to break down images of Jews, including the contributions that some Jewish artists made to the production of Jewish stereotypes. Zemel argues that tracing these self-stereotypes provides maps or gauges of Jews' perceptions of their own success in various diasporas.

Zemel's work is an important contribution to theoretical conceptions of diaspora. Additionally her work is significant for those working to expand attention given to visual culture in Jewish life and to rethink Jewish art history, offering astute case studies of images of and by Jews in several different contexts. *Looking Jewish* is relevant for scholars of many different geographic regions because of Zemel's attention to the way various histories are repictured, including North America, Western Europe, and Eastern Europe. This demonstrates Zemel's commitment to using diaspora as a way of analyzing how communities understand multiple geographies and identifications.

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