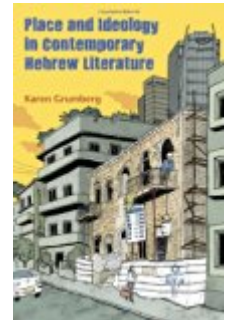


**Karen Grumberg.** *Place and Ideology in Contemporary Hebrew Literature*. Judaic Traditions in Literature, Music, and Art Series. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2012. 287 pp. \$39.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8156-3259-7.



**Reviewed by** Stephen Katz

**Published on** H-Judaic (May, 2013)

**Commissioned by** Jason Kalman (Hebrew Union College - Jewish Institute of Religion)

Attention to place in Jewish tradition has a long history, one refreshed by Walter Benjamin's attention to the "deserted places" at an entrance to Berlin's zoological gardens by an inconspicuous entrance at the Lichtenstein Bridge.[1] In recent times, this interest has engendered scholarly studies that explore space in a host of new and refreshing ways in Hebrew and Jewish literature. Karen Grumberg's *Place and Ideology in Contemporary Hebrew Literature* joins the discourse by foregrounding space afresh and adds new insights and nuance about "Israelis' understanding of themselves" as she brings to readers' attention the significance of place in literature (p. x). This well-researched study is supported by a plethora of theoretical works, one in which the author explores the relevance of "vernacular" spaces represented in contemporary Hebrew (Israeli) novels as sites of identity formation.

Grumberg, relying on John Brinckerhoff Jackson's designation of "vernacular," asserts that "a vernacular landscape ... is 'one where evidences of a political organization of space are largely or

entirely absent'" (p. 4). The innovative aspect of this approach is, as Grumberg claims, in that academic study has by and large passed over these "unsightly places" in preference for loci that are recognizably political and stereotypical of the Israeli sociopolitical landscape (p. 3). Not fully accepting this notion as applicable to the Israeli case--"for it would be difficult to argue convincingly for any place that is vernacular in the apolitical sense"--she modifies the notion of spatiality as a working model to refer to those spaces that are "not constructed or understood *primarily* as political or ideological" (p. 4). The study examines "vernacular" spaces represented in literature as a window "to illuminate the intricate processes by which ideology invades ... everyday lived experience, and shapes Israeli identity," for "the Israeli spatial vernacular as it is represented and produced in literature not only complements the Israeli political landscape but is actually inextricably entangled in it" as well (pp. ix, 5). Namely, vernacular spaces take on political significance merely by their analogy with the political landscape.

To illuminate the diverse ways in which vernacular spaces are exploited to voice differing attitudes, Grumberg focuses on representative novels by a number of prominent authors. Also, because “vernacular” spaces are so pervasive, the study highlights only a few select examples, including “the kibbutz, the garden, and the southern development town,” as indicative of the civilized and/or Zionist ideal of standing up against “chaos and primitive nature” (p. 6). For each of her selected loci, Grumberg focuses on one or two authors: Amos Oz for the kibbutz; Orly Castel-Bloom for the city and its streets, neighborhoods, hospitals, and porches; and Sayed Kashua for the Arab village. Yoel Hoffman and Ronit Matalon subversively draw attention to spaces other than those of Israel.

Selected works on the kibbutz from Oz’s oeuvre represent mainline, “normative” Zionist attitudes to space. The kibbutz as a spatial construct, claims Grumberg, can project attitudes that are ambivalent, ironic, and anxiety-filled vis-a-vis the Zionist promise, one only partially realized in practice. Yet Oz’s kibbutz, included in more works than she discusses in depth, is a more complex field of ideas than Grumberg lets on, leaving room for one to debate the interpretation that she offers. It harbors a multilayered referentiality to human aspirations and conflicting latent spirituality, a rationally constructed physical and social background against which human temperament remains unpredictable, a discussion that would have benefited from Avraham Balaban’s studies on Oz (*Beyn el lehayah: ‘iyyun bayetsirot shel ‘amos ‘oz* [Between God and beast: A study in the works of Amos Oz] [1986]; *El halashon umime-nah: lashon umetsi’ut biyetsirat ‘amos ‘oz* [Toward language and beyond: Language and reality in the prose of Amos Oz] [1988]; and *Between God and Beast: An Examination of Amos Oz’s Prose* [1993]).

Demonstrating the multiplicity of attributes that spatiality has in Hebrew literature, the study

focuses on space as an expression of the sense of national and personal fragmentation, a departure from the established attitudes fostered in Zionist culture. Illustrated through the fiction of Castel-Bloom, the sense of the chaos pervading experience in the individual’s identity is depicted in terms of the heroine’s madness as a mark of personal alienation. A particularly insightful discussion focuses on the analogous relationship between the paralysis affecting the heroines, particularly of *Dolly City* (1992) but also in *Human Parts* (2002); their emotional states; and the chaotic urban setting in which they feel imprisoned. Castel-Bloom’s protagonists exist in an alien urban environment, a chaotic existence of being both in and outside the private realm, marked by metonymic features on the heroes’ bodies and as the alienated heroine negotiates existence in a hideous reality of streets, balconies, asylums, and homes. This discourse, as impressive as it is, begs the questions about how these observations are read in other works about city space, hospitals, asylums, and cemeteries by Yaakov Shabtai and Yoram Kaniuk, for example.

The exploration of space, while appearing to adhere to the Zionist national ethos in its embrace of all features of the land of Israel, is complicated when considering the Israeli Arab, Palestinian (or “Israeli Palestinian,” p. 6) experience. Using the Hebrew works of Kashua, and to a lesser degree Anton Shammas, Grumberg deals with Israeli Arab dilemmas in light of spaces, including issues of hybridized identities as Israelis, Israeli-Arabs, and Israeli-Palestinians. Spatial themes, liminal or other, in these writers’ works underscore the paralysis of the Arab protagonist in arenas that may be desirable but also confining, ranging from village houses as expressions of “*sumud*,” or belonging, and the checkpoint as a blocking force.

And while writers predominantly occupy themselves with Israeli spaces, Hoffman, of the Other Wave (*gal aher*) of Hebrew writers, and Matalon challenge the exclusivity of the Zionist

narrative in terms of the centrality of space by focusing also on diasporic vernacular arenas with which his protagonists maintain a tenuous though discernible tie. Their challenges extend the notion of territory as they appear to redeem, in part, the landscape of Europe, Arab lands or their synecdoche in the Israeli street--cafes, salons--for Hebrew writers of the present. Unlike the territorially fixed Palestinian narrative, Hoffman's view is of a slippery notion of space in his embrace of the European landscape. By this act, both authors imply that the Israelis are dominated, consciously and not, by European and Middle Eastern vernacular spaces to have successfully eradicated any affinity of the Diaspora through negating it.

Grumberg's study encompasses established and new scholarship and authors, who are on the cusp as representatives of the diverse attitudes on the discourse of space. She traces a developing progression from literal space to metaphoric and psychological, from Zionist to diverse, extraterritorial spaces. Readers are invited to witness the growth and evolving views as expressed in ever newer platforms. Yet one is left wondering whether anything specific distinguishes novels to the exclusion of other genres, and perhaps even the other arts (including the first "Israeli" movie, *Hill 24 Does Not Answer* [1955]) as a fitting and proper medium of study.

#### Note

[1]. In his poetic-philosophic vignette, "The Otter," in Walter Benjamin, *Berlin Childhood around 1900*, trans. H. Eiland (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2006).

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-judaic>

**Citation:** Stephen Katz. Review of Grumberg, Karen. *Place and Ideology in Contemporary Hebrew Literature*. H-Judaic, H-Net Reviews. May, 2013.

**URL:** <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=36955>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No  
Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.