

J. Pedro Lorente, *Reflections on Critical Museology: Inside and Outside Museums*, London and New York: Routledge, 2022, hardback £44.99; E-book £15.29, pp.116, 14 BW illustrations

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This 'short book' (as the author himself describes it on the first page) goes a long way into making the reader reflect on the trends and ideas connected to 'critical museology'. The author J. Pedro Lorente does not rush into defining the term, however.

He considers defining the term to be in contrast with critical museology as such, which advocates above all for the importance of 'personal criteria and dissent' (83). The structure of the book itself supports this process: from the 'echoes' of the first chapter to the final considerations and definitions of the last one, the author proceeds to unfold the meaning of 'critical museology' instead of defining and trying to delineate it.

The book starts with a short introduction where the author situates his work in time and presents his personal stance. He sets his goal to provide 'a concise review of the conspicuous critical developments in museums and museology' (3), arguing that there is a close connection between theory and praxis, as they feed each other systematically. The argument then develops in five chapters.

In Chapter 1, Lorente summarizes the milestones and legacies of 'new museology', since this is usually connected to and confused with 'critical museology'. It offers a historical outline of the development of critical museology, starting from the 'new museology' and progressing up to the current state of 'critical heritage studies'. Readers will find this review balanced and witty, appraising in a concise yet complete manner all the important literature and 'schools of thought' that led to 'critical museology'.

Chapter 2 focuses on the educational services of museums, which according to the author constitute the way that critical museology is put into practice. The chapter discusses the ways museums have expressed their critical approaches. It is divided into two parts: in the first, the author focuses on institutional critique and the ways art has been used as a tool to initiate this critique. The second part focuses on interpretation and the use of questions in the interpretive approach of museums delivered mainly through texts. Examples from a variety of exhibitions following critical museology approaches are given, allowing the author to provide a wide breadth of case studies from across the world. In this 'historiography' of critical museology exhibitions and museums, a reference to what I consider one of the earliest examples of critical museological praxis combined with theory is notably missing: the exhibition having the question mark even in its title, ?Exhibition or Curator's Egg presented at the Ashmolean Museum in 1991-1992, and curated by Mary Beard and John Henderson.

Chapter 3 shows how people, both visitors and museum professionals, have affected the change of paradigm in museology. In the first part of this chapter, Lorente offers a brief review of the developments in methods of display, focusing in particular on the art museum. Although I am not sure that I would agree with all of his examples of how critical museology is presented in different institutions (for example, is the New Acropolis Museum a good example of 'critical museology'? Many authors studying the museum since its opening will disagree – see for instance Plantzos 2011; Gazi 2011; Tzortzaki 2019), the author makes a compelling argument as he claims that the way we display art and offer access to it is indeed a form of interpretation and can be a critical one (or not).

Critical museology may simply mean enhancing access to museums and collections, as Lorente claims on page 51, after offering examples of opening the storage spaces for special groups of visitors and the 'general public'. Opening the museum for all visitors is a choice that brings an institution to the forefront of 'critical museology'. I find Lorente's approach very balanced as he makes clear that we need to keep an equilibrium between 'winking' to our

colleagues by offering alternative readings of art, while at the same time making our collections physically, emotionally, and intellectually accessible to all our visitors who do not necessarily share professional insights or (want to) participate in academic debates. Critical museology does not mean creating narratives for our colleagues alone or introducing ground-breaking views that mean very little to people outside the *métier*.

Chapter 4 discusses critical (or less critical) reflections of museums in terms of their histories and past – usually in the form of exhibitions. Often these reflections refer only to museography. However, Lorente encourages institutions – offering many examples of museums around the world – to use these meta-narratives not just to discuss their past, but most importantly to plan their future. One of the great advantages of this book is the variety of examples used to illustrate the arguments: they come from international institutions in different continents and provide a wealth of different approaches, all solidifying the main argument of the book: critical museology is a way of thinking about the museum and not a ‘school’ or a ‘trend’ limited to specific parts of the world or specific institutions alone.

In the final chapter, Chapter 5, the author presents a critical self-reflection and a summary of the points discussed in the previous chapters. Here, Lorente offers in a final note the definition he has developed for another book project:

Taking the cue from the so-called “new museology”, which contested institutional officialdom preaching social engagement and community empowerment, this critical reformulation has focused on the representation of minorities or peripheral cultures, the reconsideration from postcolonial perspectives of ethical dilemmas about the exhibition and return of indigenous materials, the impugnation of dominant narratives, etc. Instead of celebratory discourses, a critical stance favours interrogations, dialectic counterpoints, plural stories and self-referential reflexivity, both in museum practice and in museological thinking (87, note 1).

This small paragraph can serve both as a definition of ‘critical museology’ and a summary of this book. A ‘small’, witty, self-reflective book that makes a very intellectually enjoyable read.

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References

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- Tzortzaki, D. (2019) ‘From the Ideal to the Spectacular: Hellenic Antiquity and the Discourse of Authenticity’, *Museologica Brunensia*, 8 (2) 2-14.