

Decolonizing Europe

Towards a methodological tool kit for the analysis of objects and the interpretation of museum representations of European history and culture

See also at Canvas the draft 'manifesto – towards a historical critique of exhibitions', by research master and PhD students at VU in the course 'Historians, heritage and the nation', March 2015. At the Decolonizing Europe-summer course (July 2018) the six 'dimensions' of a historical critique of exhibitions can be further developed, with Amsterdam as a lab to explore

Summer course students are invited to reflect on the following six focus points for a critical analysis of exhibitions that implicitly or explicitly address issues related to the colonial past. They will help to critically analyse the objects and stories presented to you. With the colonial past as a common theme, we expect that towards the end of the course, we will have gathered a whole range of critical observations that together will offer new ideas and insights about how and 'where' the colonial past continues to be present in contemporary European society.

Museums present their exhibitions in most attractive ways. Depending on the subject position of the visitor this may lead to an experience of identification or alienation and distancing, or a mix of these. Marketing strategies, but also common knowledge with respect to the institution and art/objects concerned influence visitor expectations. Museums present material traces of the past, and their histories therefore seem to be 'true'. Our six focus points may help to turn your visit into an investigation of this claim. They are not a check list; you will not be able to always deal with each dimension, however, just try to turn some of these into a focus for a reflection on your visit, while looking for the presence of the colonial past in contemporary representations of European history and culture.

a. Narrative dimension. The narrative dimension refers to the 'mental map' which the exhibition expresses through both textual and display devices. What narrative(s) does the exhibition construct? What visions of the world does it convey? What idea of narrativity is being presented, what notion of authorship? (historicity, historiography)

b. Academic dimension. The academic dimension will provide insight on the way current debates in academia are incorporated in exhibitions, to detect whether out-dated historical or anthropological views are presented. Which bodies of academic knowledge do the constructed narratives mobilise, or on the contrary, blatantly ignore? Which discursive formations do exhibitions affiliate and align themselves with and speak to? How does the exhibition position itself vis-à-vis scientific knowledge?

c. Materiality in and of exhibitions in tandem. Examining the material dimension addresses how the exhibition constructs its narratives. We can further disaggregate the material dimension into two categories: the objects on display and the display itself. In this, it is useful to attend to the following questions: Are the objects on display 'originals' or reproductions? Unique or multiple? Does the exhibition itself distinguish between objects according to a classificatory scheme? What are the strategies and technologies of display: what materials, colours, lighting and routing techniques are used? How are objects positioned: in closed showcases, open display, placed in a diorama, with or without captions, and what type of captions ('factual', interpretative, both)? What is the relation of the display to those in other exhibitions (implicit, explicit, and unacknowledged)?

d. Institutional context. Examining the institutional dimension provides insight into some of the structures and practices guiding the construction of meaning produced in the material and the narrative dimensions. Here too we disaggregate the institutional dimension into intra-institutional and inter-institutional. Intra-institutional refers to the function/meaning of an exhibition inside the institution hosting it. For example: what is the relationship of a certain exhibition with other exhibitions in the same museum? What institutional practices, discourses, traditions, and policies have contributed to shaping the meanings produced by the exhibition in question? Inter-institutional indicates the position of an exhibition in the 'museumscape'. What is the implicit or explicit relationship to other exhibitions and objects in similar or different fields? Here, issues of provenance, historical reference and hidden historical links become clear.

e. Marketing/trade. Addressing the marketing or trade dimension of exhibitions further illuminates some of the structures governing the meanings they produce by addressing both questions of finances and of consumption. A useful strategy is to 'follow the money': who or what commissioned and paid for the exhibition? What types of written and visual information are produced 'about' the exhibition and in which media are they produced (catalogue, press release, educational resources, and websites)? Who is the target audience, in other words, whom is the exhibition addressing? Does the exhibition confirm or disturb visitors' tacit expectations and view of reality? Conversely, does the exhibitional narrative challenge or contradict the marketed message of the PR department of the institution?

f. Political. Besides participating in discursive, material and institutional webs, exhibitions are also embedded in power structures. What are implicit/explicit historical references about political entities of belonging, such as nation, region, locality, transnational or imperial links? How does an exhibition construe notions of gender, race, religion, hard/soft identities and what role do they play?

