

## Exploring the Interrelations Between Literature and Museums

Sanna-Mari Niemi

University of Helsinki

sanna-mari.niemi@helsinki.fi; <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2193-6820>

### Abstract:

The edited volume *Transitzonen zwischen Literatur und Museum* (eds. Matteo Anastasio and Jan Rhein) introduces a wide spectrum of interdisciplinary and intermedial approaches to how literature and museums can intertwine, reflect upon, and enrich each other. It explores the meanings as well as potential of such convergences from the perspectives of both literary narrative and museum practices. As such, the book presents a valuable contribution to literary, cultural, media, and museum studies.

### Erforschung der Wechselbeziehungen zwischen Literatur und Museum

#### German Abstract:

Der Sammelband *Transitzonen zwischen Literatur und Museum* (Hrsg. Matteo Anastasio und Jan Rhein) stellt ein breites Spektrum interdisziplinärer und intermedialer Ansätze vor, wie sich Literatur und Museum gegenseitig verschränken, reflektieren und bereichern können. Er erforscht die Bedeutung und das Potenzial solcher Konvergenzen sowohl aus der Perspektive des literarischen Erzählens als auch der musealen Praxis. Damit leistet das Buch einen wertvollen Beitrag zur Literatur-, Kultur-, Medien- und Museumswissenschaft.

### How to cite:

Niemi, Sanna-Mari: "Exploring the Interrelations Between Literature and Museums [Review of: Anastasio, Matteo and Jan Rhein (eds.): *Transitzonen zwischen Literatur und Museum*. Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter, 2021.]." In: KULT\_online 65 (2022).

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.22029/ko.2022.1288>



Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International

## Exploring the Interrelations Between Literature and Museums

Sanna-Mari Niemi

University of Helsinki

Anastasio, Matteo and Jan Rhein (eds.). *Transitzonen zwischen Literatur und Museum*. Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter, 2021. 282 pages, 99,95 EUR. ISBN: 978-3-11-069151-1.

What can museums bring to the mediation and reception of literature? What kind of hybrid relations, intermedial references and ‘contaminations’ (Irina Rajewsky: *Intermedialität*. Tübingen and Basel 2002) exist between literature and the museum exhibition medium (p. 4)? Furthermore, what can representations of museums in literature tell us about museums and exhibition practices, and vice versa? These are the kinds of questions that the edited volume *Transitzonen zwischen Literatur und Museum* inquires into. Enacting its title of being a transit zone, the book takes its readers on a fascinating journey: the stopping points include writers’ homes and other destinations of literary tourism, artistic and literary exhibitions, and literary works dealing with questions of museal display.

Since the so-called “boom in museum studies” emerged around the mid-1980s, the museum exhibition as a (multi-)medium has become a focus of growing interdisciplinary interest (p. 1). In the fields of literary and cultural studies, the interrelations between museums and literature have become an interesting research topic as well. The editors note that traditionally the topic has been approached through the questions of whether and how the literary can be displayed, and how museums and collecting have been used as a motif in literature, especially in the 19th century (p. 1, 3). Yet, the potential of using the toolkit of literary studies to enhance our understanding of museums goes way beyond this — especially when the museum exhibition itself is read as a text, as has been suggested in more recent research literature. In accordance with this view, the edited volume introduces new theoretical and methodological approaches to establish “the museum or the expository dispositive in its entirety as an object of literary study” (p. 3–4, my translation). It takes into consideration the diversity and artistic creativity behind various exhibition strategies, as well as the semiotic and narrative aspects linked with exhibiting the literary in museums (p. 1, 4).

Edited by Matteo Anastasio and Jan Rhein, the volume includes eleven contributions, eight of which are in German and three in English. The authors come from the fields of literary and cultural studies, museology, and architecture/scenography, and some have practical experience around museums and exhibiting. The book is divided into four sections (freely translated from German here): Reading and Writing Exhibitions, Museum Representation and Representation in the Museum, Media Concurrence and Transgression, and Literary Settings and Exhibition Spaces. As the titles evidence, the possible approaches to the theme are manifold, from the processes of creating and reading literary exhibitions to reciprocal reflections between literature and museums, and from inter- and transmediality to literary tourism.

An interest in (inter-)mediality (e.g. Jaeckel, Rhein), as well as acknowledging and appreciating the special nature of the museum as a narrative environment (e.g. Bosshard, Schaff, Zeissig) come across as central themes in the contributions. Several authors examine how the embodied, multi-channeled, and spatial nature of the museum exhibition affects the visiting/reading experience, emphasizing for instance the immersive, participatory, and meta-reflexive qualities of reading in museums (e.g. Gfrereis, Ilbrig, Rhein).

Through examples and more in-depth case studies, the book introduces a wide range of interrelations between museums and literature from across Europe. Noting an increasing convergence between literature and museums in recent years, Jan Rhein takes his examples from France, where several authors have both written about and participated in exhibition practices, and where museums, including the prestigious Louvre, have devoted special exhibitions to authors and their works (p. 163). As reasons for this development, Rhein names on the one hand the expansion of practices of communicating and marketing literature beyond the printed book, and on the other, the opening of museums towards more creative exhibition practices with guest curators and rising visitor-centeredness (p. 163). As a result, a discussion has evolved around new transmedial forms of literary narrative, now also created in and through museum space. One way to approach this topic is through the concept of *néolittérature*, as suggested by Magali Nachtergaele (“Écritures plastiques et performances du

texte: une néolittérature?”, in: *Le bal des arts: Le sujet et l'image: écrire avec l'art*. Ed. Elisa Bricco, Macerata 2015, 307–325).

Jean-Max Colard introduces another kind of museum-related text type having flourished in France, namely, the exhibition preface that has inspired authors to meditate on the relations between verbal and visual arts since the late 19th century. Colard also brings forth a curious new phase of the exhibition preface, namely, an exhibition that works as a preface in itself. Such a ‘preface-exhibition’ can introduce exhibition programs and encourage a reflection of exhibiting strategies and exhibition texts (p. 32–33).

While museums foster physical collections, throughout history museums have also operated on the level of imagination. This aspect is particularly palpable in writer’s houses, where literary creation and physical realities of authors’ lives overlap. In their contributions, Maria Gregorio traces a “literary mind map” of Europe’s museums and Matteo Anastasio focuses on relations between literature and the city through Fernando Pessoa’s Lisbon. Sophie Soccard’s exploration of Agatha Christie’s Greenway and Barbara Schaff’s analysis of Jane Austen’s House in Chawton illustrate how writers’ houses utilize objects, stories, architecture, and embodied experience to bring visitors closer to authors and their fictional works. New materialism and the concepts of resonance (Stephen Greenblatt: “Resonance and Wonder.” *Bulletin of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences* 43 (4), 1990, 11–34) and authenticity become meaningful tools in their approaches.

The edited volume shows that literary studies have plenty to offer to the study of museum exhibitions and their narratives. It thus presents a valuable contribution to literary, cultural, media, and museum studies. As convergences between literature and museums have become increasingly multifaceted in the recent years, there is a lot to discover further.