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Book Review

Andromachi Economou, *Material Culture: Theory, Methodology, Evaluation. A Short Overview*, Papazisis, Athens 2014, pp. 243.

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The electronic journal *Ethnologia On Line* is an annual scholarly publication of the Greek Society for Ethnology, distinct from its annual printed journal *Ethnologia*. Its aim is to stimulate and promote discourse in the disciplines of Anthropology, Ethnology and Laography with an emphasis on issues of theory and methodology, while also giving anthropologists and ethnologists a venue to present their work speedily.

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Book Review: Andromachi Economou, *Material Culture: Theory, Methodology, Evaluation. A Short Overview.*

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Keywords: Material culture, materiality, anthropology of material culture, interdisciplinary approach of material culture, cultural technology, folkloristics in Greece, objects, "social life" of things, museums, museology.

Book Review

The book *Material Culture: Theory, Methodology, Evaluation. A Short Overview*, focused mainly on the research, study and evaluation of material culture artefacts, written by Dr Andromachi Economou, Research Director at the Hellenic Folklore Research Centre of the Academy of Athens, is filling a basic gap in Greek bibliography. This book, as it will become clear below, serves a dual purpose: on the one hand, it has the ambition –and manages– to be a brief guide, introducing the reader to material culture matters, both on a Greek and an international level, based on the developments in Europe and the USA, and, on the other hand, bring out, especially within the framework of global developments, the need for an interdisciplinary study of material culture, since this is a scientific field where the disciplines of social and cultural anthropology, ethnology and folkloristics "meet". Besides, the author has been dealing with the above social science fields for long, either while studying ethnology and social anthropology or while working for many years in research institutes, such as the Hellenic Folklore Research Centre of the Academy of Athens.

The book is both along the lines of the interdisciplinary approach of material culture matters and the complementarity of its various fields. Thus, the book is divided into three parts with further sub-chapters, one complementing the other. Moreover knowing one part helps the better and deeper understanding of the rest. In particular, the first part is *Material Culture as an Interdisciplinary Field:*



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Infancy, Course, Influences, and Schools, the second part is *Material Culture as a Research and Teaching Subject in Greece*, and the third part is *Material Culture and Museums*.

In particular, the first part entitled *Material Culture as an Interdisciplinary Field: Infancy, Course, Influences, and Schools* (pp. 19-103) is divided into seven sub-chapters with very rich, informative material on the history of the field of material culture within the framework of humanities and social sciences research from the 18th century until the beginning of the 20th century. The reader is in medias res introduced to matters on theory and history of material culture, and what is written on the definition and the meaning of techniques, technology, and technical culture in general (pp. 19-26), as well as the powerful effect of big theoretical trends in the study of material culture, such as Evolutionism, Functionalism, Structuralism, Structural Functionalism, Marxism etc. (pp. 26-32) are particularly enlightening –within an introductory framework.

Based on the aforementioned pillars, the writer analyses in individual sub-chapters the different schools of material culture: the "social life" of objects, as it was studied within the framework of cultural anthropology; the French school of ethnology with an emphasis on the work of Leroi-Gourhan, Mauss, Haudricourt; the British school of material culture; the more recent interpretative approaches on objects and techniques in semiology and consumption (Baudrillard, Bruno Latour, Bourdieu); the European ethnology and ethnography of material culture. Moreover, the relation of archaeology with anthropology and ethnology on the basis of material culture are also analysed. Dr Economou succeeds in presenting to the reader the basic points of the above –often demanding and not easily understood– theories in a way that is simple and easy to understand, without babbling. At the same time, she highlights the new trends in examining and approaching the objects, not only as "simple objects", but also as dynamic objects linked with the social, financial and cultural functions of everyday life.

In the second part, *Material Culture as a Research and Teaching Subject in Greece* (pp. 107-147), the course of study of material culture both as a taught subject in university departments and as a research subject in public or private research centres is analysed (pp. 107-130). The writer presents briefly but comprehensively the research on material culture, seen from the perspective of folkloristics since the beginning of the 20th century until today. She is correct to place Greek folkloristics within their social and historical framework, while highlighting the role of extra-



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academic folklorists, such as the remarkable work of Angeliki Chatzimichali or Dimitrios Loukopoulos, who, through systematic folkloristic research, managed to offer very important and systematic studies for their time. These studies approached, on the one hand, the matters in a holistic (comprehensive) way and, on the other hand, had a particularly intense social dimension. In a similar way, the writer refers to the development of new disciplines in Greece after the beginning of the '80s, as well as the adoption of new views in dealing with aspects of material culture (pp. 131-138). This refers to the introduction and development of social and cultural anthropology, as well as ethnology in Greece, which, by the means of an interdisciplinary approach of material culture matters, offered studies on the analysis and interpretation of the procedure of production and transformation of material goods; the social and cultural aspects of consumption; the social dimensions of material objects in various national and social groups in Greek space; the productive industrial activities in the urban space; and, in general, the working relationships; the significance of material culture in everyday life; the visual material culture; and the interpretation of visual products; modern art objects etc. While presenting the aforementioned developments and scientific activities, the writer provides rich bibliographic elements, as well as broader scientific elements for the course of these disciplines in Greece, in relation to the research on material culture, suggesting at the same time new subject areas to be studied and researched.

The second part continues with a short, but comprehensive and representative, presentation of research bodies involved in the research and preservation of material culture in the past. The period between 1911 and 1970, during which the research on material culture in Greece is established by institutes like the Hellenic Folklore Research Centre of the Academy of Athens and the Centre for Asia Minor Studies, is analysed. Moreover, the writer makes also a presentation of the current situation. She focuses on newer developments in the field of research centres during the 1970-2013 period with an emphasis on the running and multi-level action of the Peloponnesian Folklore Foundation, The ETBA Cultural Foundation, which has now been renamed to Cultural Foundation-Piraeus Bank Group and the Greek Section of The International Committee for Conservation of Industrial Heritage, TICCIH (pp. 139-147).

The book is completed with its third part, *Material Culture and Museums* (pp. 153-209). It is the follow-up of the previous chapters with regard to the theoretical itinerary and history of research



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on material culture in Greece and abroad, while giving examples of museums for its promotion and utilisation. This chapter also follows the logic of the previous chapters, i.e. that of the promotion and the analysis of European and Greek data. So, the writer talks briefly about the beginning of the creation of museums and their development, dating back in the 15th century, in Italy, up to the development of museum studies in the '70s and the sceptical approaches and analyses, by reviewing museology and museography of the '80s and the '90s (pp. 151-158). Then follows the chapter on European museum theory, where Dr Economou refers to the main points of European museum theory from the 19th century until nowadays with an emphasis on the French-speaking world (as the developments taken place there are not particularly known in Greece), in relation to the interaction between ethnology and museology. Emphasis is put by the writer on the structure and running of outdoor museums, open-air museums and eco-museums, with interesting information about their infancy and development, as well as technical culture museums and industrial archaeology museums within a cultural approach of the –often underestimated– technical industrial culture. The writer, in parallel with the presentation of theoretical concerns and examples, also makes suggestions on museums that could improve their functionality and make the exhibits easier to understand for their visitors (pp. 159-178). Based on the issues analysed on the trends that have prevailed in the past and prevail today in the field of museology internationally, the writer makes a sceptical presentation and scientific evaluation of the Greek folklore museums, which have been closely linked to both the trend of enforcing national ideology and the promotion of the notion of the nation-state. An emphasis is put on the Museum of the Historical and Ethnological Society of Greece, the Benaki Museum, the Museum of Greek Folk Art and the Folk Museums and Archives of the University of Athens, the University of Thessaloniki and the University of Ioannina, and then follow the newer developments in the museum policy of Greece: The ethnographic and technical single-topic museums, as well as museology in Greece are influenced by the European museum practice, which puts overall more emphasis on the social and cultural role of museums. The writer analyses examples of museum and research centre running, which are characteristic of the period after the mid '70s, such as the Peloponnesian Folklore Foundation, the museums founded based on the museologic program of the Cultural Foundation-Piraeus Bank Group, the Industrial Museum of Hermoupolis etc. (pp.179-203). Dr Andromachi Economou completes this interesting section on museums with an overall assessment of museum practices. It is mainly based on the central pillars for the running of museums, i.e. the collection of items, their exhibition to a broader audience and finally the communicative interactive



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relationship developed between the visitors of a museum and its exhibits, within the framework of the social, educational and, in general, communicative role of museums (pp. 205-209).

Then follows the bibliography from Greece and abroad (pp. 213-243), which is very informative for the Greek reader. The emphasis is put on books and articles from the French-speaking world, which are not widely known to the Greek readership.

To conclude, it could be mentioned that the book of Dr Andromachi Economou has multiple targetings and many recipients. It aims at presenting the establishment and development of material culture in Greece and abroad. At the same time, she has as a goal for her book to be a basic tool for the holistic research on material culture. She wants her book to be in essence an introductory guide on the research, interpretation and evaluation of aspects of material culture in Greece and internationally. But she does not neglect to contribute to the reflection on theoretical concerns and suggest new subject areas that scientists could further research. As for the readership to which this book is referred, we could highlight that besides the experts (teachers, researchers etc.) or the people initiating the study of the field of material culture (undergraduate or postgraduate students), Dr Economou's book can be read pleasantly by non-experts too, i.e. by people wishing to understand material culture and be informed about it.

When writing a book review, besides the contents and the ideas of the writer that can be evaluated, you can also realise more personal elements that represent the course and personality of the writer. These elements may act on a secondary level, but are also important when reading the book. So, firstly, I would like note that the work of Dr Andromachi Economou is written in a style that is simple, unadorned and understandable, even though it refers to complex theoretical issues. She tries –and manages– to make clear and understandable all theoretical evolutions of material culture, which a student or researcher cannot know. The fact that the book's style is unadorned and understandable is a big advantage, given that it is often the case in recent decades that books published on theoretical issues are to a big extent incomprehensible by a wider audience. Secondly, I would like to refer to the experiential relation connecting the writer with all the matters raised in her book, as the occupation with matters of material culture has been her "life's work". Mrs. Economou has studied for many years folkloristics and archaeology at the School of Philosophy (Department of History and Archaeology) of the University of Athens, as well as ethnology and social anthropology at the Ecole



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des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales (EHESS) in Paris, specialising in material culture. She has worked for thirty years both in research centres (The ETBA Cultural Foundation which has now been renamed to Cultural Foundation-Piraeus Bank Group and the Hellenic Folklore Research Centre of the Academy of Athens) at the University of Thessaly and the Hellenic Open University. I believe that her academic experience and activity is transmuted in a rich and creative manner into her book *Material culture: Theory, Methodology, Evaluation. A Short Overview* and this is something that the reader definitely perceives even by reading the first pages of the book.

In conclusion, it could be suggested that Dr Economou's book is successful in the goals set by the writer since the beginning: it evaluates the historic and scientific course of the field and exposes clearly the scientific approaches of social and cultural anthropology, ethnology and folkloristics in the field of material culture in Greece and abroad. Her evaluation is fair, scientifically robust and calm, without exempting or underestimating any discipline. It is a major advantage when a writer can appreciate events and facts in their real, objective, and not their "invented" dimensions. Moreover, she manages not only to promote the material side of objects, but also, by giving ethnographic and museum examples, she manages to highlight the objects as acting and dynamic objects within society, as material objects of the culture they express, and, at the same time, as objects which form identities, mentalities and behaviours within the modern social structures. Last but not least, she also concludes with a suggestion which differs from the usual: the practical use of material culture within the framework of the current financial crisis, which is taking the form of a deeply social crisis. Thus, she highlights the material culture not as a "museum" field, but as a scientific field closely linked to reality, by suggesting ways by which the studies and the overall research on material culture could be used, not only in a museum perspective, but also as a means of modern apprenticeship in the fields of the technical culture, which are today, in the framework of the financial crisis, recovering and in demand.



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Βιογραφικό

Ο Γιώργος Κούζας γεννήθηκε (1981) και μεγάλωσε στην Αθήνα. Σπούδασε φιλολογία και λαογραφία στο Πανεπιστήμιο Αθηνών και ειδικεύτηκε στα ερευνητικά πεδία της αστικής λαογραφίας και αστικής εθνογραφίας. Η διδακτορική του διατριβή αναφέρεται στο φαινόμενο της επατείας, όπως διαμορφώνεται στον αστικό χώρο σήμερα. Έχει εργαστεί σε ερευνητικά προγράμματα για την εργασία, τη μετανάστευση και την κοινωνική περιθωριοποίηση ομάδων του πληθυσμού, στο Πανεπιστήμιο Αθηνών και το Πάντειο Πανεπιστήμιο. Έχει μετάσχει σε συνέδρια στην Ελλάδα και το εξωτερικό, ενώ εργασίες του έχουν δημοσιευτεί σε ελληνικά και ξένα περιοδικά. Την περίοδο 2015-2016 εργάστηκε ως μεταδιδακτορικός ερευνητής στο Πανεπιστήμιο Αθηνών. Κατά το ακαδημαϊκό έτος 2016-2017 διδάσκει λαογραφία στο Πανεπιστήμιο Πελοποννήσου.

Biography

George Kouzas was born in 1981 in Athens. He studied philology and folklore at the University of Athens and elaborated his thesis on the sectors of urban folklore and urban ethnography, and in particular on beggary in Athens today. He has worked in research programs at the University of Athens and the Panteion University, in relation to the work, the immigration, and the social marginalization of population groups. He has published articles in Greek and foreign magazines. He worked as a post-doctoral researcher at the University of Athens (2015-2016). During academic year 2016-2017 he teaches Folklore at the University of Peloponnese.