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The Visual and Material Culture of Death in Commemorative Exhibitions in National Cultural Institutions in Ireland

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Introduction.

My background is in visual culture and museology and I am in year two of my PhD at the Graduate School of Creative Arts & Media at Dublin Institute of Technology. My research examines the challenges of depicting death through exhibition displays by analysing the types of artefacts and imagery commonly used in commemorative exhibitions. Using grounding principles of exhibition design, museology and material culture; my research questions the way in which exhibitions can influence contemporary perceptions of the past by displaying artefacts and objects as authentic witnesses to historic events.

For this paper, I will analyse museum displays by implementing methodology outlined by Whitney Davis in his 2011 publication *A General Theory of Visual Culture*. I will demonstrate how the display of everyday personal objects with visible traces of use in a national museum has transformed these ordinary objects into valuable material evidence of a significant moment in Irish history; how the understanding of these objects can be influenced by what surrounds them in displays; and how their presence in the museum fosters reinterpretations of the 1916 Rising.

1916 Rising.

The 1916 Rising is the pivotal yet highly contested moment in Irish history when militant republicans sought to seize political power from Britain, and declared - though unsuccessfully in the short term - an independent state. The harrowing history of the 1916 Rising and its legacy of struggles and divisiveness has required national cultural institutions to play a key role in the visualisation and public understanding of significant moments in history. This is executed by cultivating research and conserving collections, but it is principally achieved through displaying images, objects and texts to the public through museum exhibitions.

National Museum of Ireland (NMI).

The National Museum of Ireland (NMI) has a long history of hosting 1916 commemorative exhibitions. The first exhibition was in 1932 which was curated by Nelly Gifford Donnelly- a participant in the Rising who collected artefacts through personal connections and the 1916 collection was built around this.

The NMI stands apart as the pioneer in hosting 1916 exhibitions. Not only did it set the stage for the solidification of the need to preserve and present the material culture of Ireland, it also ushered in a new form of museum-society relations centred on public engagement and collection building.¹

‘Proclaiming a Republic’ exhibition.

The NMI’s 1916 collection now contains 15,000 individual items, 8,500 paper based documents and over 20,000 scanned images. The current exhibition ‘Proclaiming a Republic’ is the NMI’s eighth exhibition on the subject and has been the centrepiece to the NMI’s centenary programme. Housed in the Riding School at Collins Barracks, this exhibition reveals the physicalities of life in Ireland before, during and after the events of Easter Week in the form of 300 objects, articles and images.² It has been the largest display of 1916 material in the history of the institution and in terms of visitor numbers; it’s most successful to date.

Collections and exhibitions in the care of museums are subject to constant selection, manipulation and re-evaluation. The apparent completeness of an exhibition often renders its construction and the selection processes that were deployed invisible. I will now direct attention to the politics of display in two exhibitions in the National Museum of Ireland in an attempt to uncover how exhibition displays can perpetuate a particular vision of historic events which often goes unquestioned.

The Politics of Exhibition Display.

The politics of display I refer to as the role of exhibitions in the production of social knowledge. There are many crucial questions surrounding the politics of exhibition display including; what its components are; who its main constituents are; what its shaping forces are; and why some elements have been silenced and others triumphed.³

Decision making over commemorative activities is heavily influenced by more than a collective will to remember or forget. Professional memory workers (such as museum staff) must navigate a minefield of public demands and institutional conventions as they construct visual displays of historical events, especially those that involve periods of conflict.⁴

In order to unpack the politics of display within the national museum, I will implement the methodology of Whitney Davis from his 2011 publication *A General Theory of Visual Culture*.

¹ Autry, Robyn (2012) ‘The Political Economy of Memory: The Challenges of Representing National Conflict at ‘Identity Driven’ Museums’ in *Theory and Society*, 42 (1), 70.

² Gannon, Darragh (2016) *Proclaiming a Republic: Ireland, 1916 and the National Collection*. Irish Academic Press, Dublin. xvi,

³ Said, Edward (2001) ‘Afterword: Reflections on Ireland and Post-Colonialism’ in Carroll, Clare and King, Patricia (eds) (2003) *Ireland and Post-Colonial Theory*, Cork University Press, Cork, 180.

⁴ Autry, Robyn (2012) ‘The Political Economy of Memory: The Challenges of Representing National Conflict at ‘Identity Driven’ Museums’ in *Theory and Society*, 42 (1), 60.

Whitney Davis' Subjects.

Firstly Davis outlines that there are two subjects who address a single image or artefact:⁵

- Form-making subject (creators of artefacts in the past)
- Formalist subject (viewers of artefacts in the present day)

As my research is based upon museum exhibitions, I propose to add another subject category to include the role of exhibition makers as they are key to making decisions about what artefacts we see and how they are presented visually for the formalist subjects (viewers of the exhibition). This I will address as the 'visuality-making subject' because in visuality; one does not see the world, but a particular image/version of the world. I will discuss later how exhibition displays can foster visuality.



Figure 1: Courts Martial and Executions section of 'Proclaiming a Republic' exhibition at the National Museum of Ireland.

'Courts Martial and Execution' Zone.

The 'Courts Martial and Execution' section of the 'Proclaiming a Republic' exhibition details the last moments of the executed leaders of the 1916 Rising by describing their final meetings with families and displaying artefacts- many of which were in their possession before they met their death by firing squad in Kilmainham Jail. Each individual is represented in the display by a pull out drawer with a document relating to their death; a photograph on the colour panel above; and a material object in a glass case with an accompanying display text (See Figure 1). By placing the objects in a glass case, each object is accorded a particular value, interpreted and explained.⁶ To consider objects biographically is to reveal something not only about the objects themselves but also about those who acted upon them.⁷

⁵ Davis, Whitney (2011) *A General Theory of Visual Culture*. Princeton University Press, New Jersey. 54.

⁶ Lidchi, Henrietta (2013) 'The Poetics and the Politics of Exhibiting Other Cultures' in Hall, Stuart, Evans, Jessica & Nixon, Sean (eds) (2013) *Representation (Second Edition)*. Sage, London, 146-147.

⁷ Albano, Caterina (2007) 'Displaying Lives: The Narratives of Objects in Biographical Exhibitions' in *Museum and Society*, 5(1). 17.

James Connolly's Bloodstained Vest.

The artefact which materially represents James Connolly is this bloodstained vest which according to the *Proclaiming A Republic* (2016) publication by curatorial researcher of the exhibition Darragh Gannon, shows the location of his first wound.⁸ The stain on this vest would indicate that the stray bullet he received on Prince's St went into the back of his left arm.

Traces of use embedded on objects (such as this bloodstain); are what arguably authenticate biographical relics, rendering them 'true' to the biographical subject.⁹ This bloodstained vest is emblematic of how an exhibition display has embraced the complex, conflict-ridden and tragic spectrum of a historic moment in the past.¹⁰ This artefact is freighted with dramatic consequences and its display invokes in the viewer the melancholy of an absence that is most definitively that of death.¹¹

Display Label.

The accompanying display label reads that the marked bloodstains are from the injuries Connolly received during Easter Week; offering visitors a vague time period in which the bloodstains occurred. The display text also states that 'The vest, along with the shirt he wore over it, was returned to his family after execution and his daughter Nora, kept it until she deposited in the National Museum'. This selective information gives viewers an insight into the actions surrounding the collection and acquisition of this artefact; and offers an understanding the range of actions which take place in order for an object to become part of a display. The way an object is used, how it is moved around and its very survival is an indication of value and meaning.¹² The information in the display label places the vest alongside another item of clothing within the 1916 collection.

James Connolly's Bloodied Undershirt.

Connolly's undershirt is on display in a separate military exhibition in the same museum- the Soldiers and Chiefs exhibition; which is the only permanent exhibition in the NMI (See Figure 2). In the display label placed alongside this artefact, Connolly's undershirt is placed in a specific location- the GPO. Both display labels start with visual concrete information- what viewers can see; and work from the specific to the general. Display texts in museums can provide a basic starting point for directing viewers towards the politics of exhibition- the unseen features of artefacts such as their creation, acquisition and historical background. Examining the details of these unreadable dimensions also gives insights into the intentions of the visibility-making subject. This can uncover aspects of the biography of the object which may be manipulated in order to appropriate the

⁸ Gannon, Darragh (2016) *Proclaiming a Republic: Ireland 1916 and the National Collection*. Irish Academic Press, Dublin. 108.

⁹ Albano, Caterina (2007) 'Displaying Lives: The Narratives of Objects in Biographical Exhibitions' in *Museum and Society*, 5(1). 20.

¹⁰ Bonnell, Jennifer, Simon, Roger I. (2007) 'Difficult' Exhibitions and Intimate Encounters' in *Museum and Society*, Vol.5 (2). 67.

¹¹ Pointin, Marcia (2014) 'Casts, Imprint and the Deathliness of Things: Artifacts at the Edge' in *The Art Bulletin*, Vol.96 (2). 172.

¹² Coombes, Annie E. (1988) 'Museums and the Formation of National Cultural Identities' in *Oxford Art Journal*, 11 (2), 89.

artefact to the institutional objectives of the exhibition. The way in which an artefact or image is displayed in an exhibition can foster this manipulation and secure a particular visuality.



Figure 2: James Connolly's Bloodstained Undershirt on display in 'Soldiers and Chiefs' exhibition at the National Museum of Ireland

Ireland in 100 Objects.

This undershirt was featured in the *History of Ireland in 100 Objects* initiative which began as a column in The Irish Times by Fintan O' Toole and culminated in an illustrated book, website and series of stamps. A collection of one hundred objects were selected to illustrate Ireland's history and in doing so, direct readers to where each object is on public display.

On the accompanying website, Connolly's undershirt is featured in a lesson plan for Leaving Certificate History which uses the object to materialise, concretise, represent and symbolise ideas, memories and narratives. Through these processes, abstract ideas and temporally distant events can be grasped, the verbalisation of thought is facilitated and reflections on experience and knowledge are mobilized.¹³

Display of the Object.

¹³ Hooper-Greenhill, Eilean (2000) *Museums and the Interpretation of Visual Culture*. Routledge, London, 111.

This relic is a powerful object bearing the indexical trace of physical presence through bodily residues. Given that the power of the 1916 Rising lay in its symbolism as much as in its strategy, the display of the undershirt is symbolically potent. Made even more so by the way in which the arms are out-stretched; resembling a crucifixion and congealing the transfiguration of the leaders into martyrs. The presentation of the object has had a profound effect on other visual interpretations of the artefact.



Figure 3: *Connolly's Shirt Re-Mortgaged 2015*. Oil and baked earth pigment on canvas, 155x104cm. Copyright: Rita Duffy

Rita Duffy.

'1916 In Contemporary Art' at the Crawford Art Gallery is an exhibition of personal artistic interpretations by contemporary artists, and provides a compelling multiplicity of responses to the turbulent year 1916. One of which was *Connolly's Shirt Re-Mortgaged 2015* by artist Rita Duffy and continues Duffy's research into the history of clothing in the context of Irish history. Connolly's shirt floats as a spectral presence over an unfinished house, from which a diminutive figure flees.

Duffy has interpreted this image directly from its display in the NMI, confirming how outside the confines of the NMI, this shirt has a semiotic value which is assumed to align with the continuing struggles of a nation.

Conclusion.

Museums are interesting objects of study as they are emblematic of the way visual regimes influence and shape our views on the world.¹⁴ This paper has outlined how the contents of exhibition displays stand as witnesses to events and reinforce their significance.¹⁵ This paper has highlighted how the display of Connolly's bloodstained clothing has created a semiotic potency with the object and shows how the traces of use humanises and dramatises the events of 1916 in a material way.

Each choice (in an exhibition display) has consequences for what meanings are produced and how meaning is produced.¹⁶ The way in which museums present artefacts and images should be addressed further as this is bound up with how we continue remember and present the past.

¹⁴ Noordegraaf, Julia (2004) *Strategies of Display: Museum Presentation in Nineteenth- and Twentieth- Century Visual Culture*. NAI Publishers, Rotterdam. 11.

¹⁵ Hooper-Greenhill, Eileen (2000) *Museums and the Interpretation of Visual Culture*. Routledge, London, 146.

¹⁶ Hall, Stuart (2013) 'Introduction' in Hall, Stuart, Evans, Jessica & Nixon, Sean (eds) (2013) *Representation (Second Edition)*. Sage, London. xxiii.

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