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The Bullet in the Brick: Mediating Death in Museums

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The Bullet in the Brick: Mediating Death in the Museum

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Abstract

Objects derive their historical weight from the place where they are displayed and the authenticity surrounding them. An object which has received considerable media attention in the 'Proclaiming a Republic' exhibition at the National Museum of Ireland is a portion of a brick in which is embedded a bullet, which is said to have passed through the body of Francis Sheehy-Skeffington when he was executed by firing squad during the Easter Rising in Dublin in 1916. In an effort to hide evidence that the execution had taken place, Sheehy-Skeffington's body was hastily buried by the British Army and all bricks from the wall where he was executed which contained bullets were removed and replaced. Some years later, the brick and an authenticating letter was sent to Sheehy-Skeffington's wife who subsequently donated the item to the National Museum of Ireland in 1937. With its display in the National Museum of Ireland's milestone exhibition which opened in 2016, the brick has become symbolic as a tangible link to the death of a principal activist in Ireland's political history. By examining this brick as example of acquisition, donation, preservation and exhibition, my paper demonstrates how ordinary objects can make significant contributions to fostering understandings of history when they are authenticated and mediated within museum environments. This paper investigates the range of actions which took place in order to render this ordinary object as valuable material evidence of significant moments in history. This paper examines further how objects associated with death are used as mediation devices which curators employ due to their historical significance, visual impact and emotional strength.

Introduction

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. Francis Sheehy-Skeffington was a well known political activist in Dublin at the time. He was a committed pacifist, his views were opposed to the use of physical force and had no connection with the rebellion. On the second day of fighting when returning from the city centre to appeal for calm, Francis was arrested by British soldiers and brought to Portobello Barracks. Although a search revealed nothing more than a draft document to prevent looting in the city and no charge was made against him, he was detained for further enquiries. On Wednesday 26th April, Francis and two other arrested journalists were taken into the barracks yard and shot together with a volley by firing squad. Their bodies were wrapped up in sheets and hastily buried in the unconsecrated ground of the barracks yard that night. All the while, Francis' wife Hanna was without definite information as to what had happened to him. As a result of alarming rumours about him which reached her from various sources, her two sisters went to Portobello Barracks to make enquiries. After being dismissed by the officer responsible for Francis' death- Captain Bowen-Colthurst- that he had no knowledge of him whatsoever, Hanna got in contact with the Chaplain of the barracks and besought him for information about her husband. She was told he was dead and already buried.¹

¹ Royal Commission on the Arrest and Subsequent Treatment of Mr. Francis Sheehy Skeffington, Mr. Thomas Dickson and Mr. Patrick James McIntyre (1916): <https://archive.org/details/op1256532-1001>. Pg9-10. Accessed 04/04/2017.

The denial of information to Francis' wife was one of several actions that were taken in an effort to hide evidence that the executions had taken place. In witness statements given at the inquiry into the deaths of the three men, one prisoner stated that he heard the sounds of scrubbing and washing sounds in the yard for nearly two hours afterwards;² whilst another also confirmed hearing buckets of water and brass brooms.³ As the executions had taken place in a small yard by a firing squad of seven soldiers, the surrounding walls suffered damage from the impending bullets and indented several bricks (See *Figure One*).⁴ Some days later, an officer at the barracks had several bricklayers who were working nearby brought at bayonet-point to the wall where the shootings had taken place and instructed to repair the sections with telltale bullets by replacing the damaged bricks.⁵ One of the bricklayers had accidentally removed a brick from the barracks as it fell into his bag whilst working on the wall. Out of fear, he gave it to a bystander- Francis MacLoughlin Scannell- for safe keeping.⁶ After some years, MacLoughlin Scannell wrote to Francis' widow explaining the circumstances of how he acquired the brick which he claims contains the bullet which passed through the body of Francis Sheehy Skeffington when he was shot by firing squad. He wrote how he had kept the brick for several years but wished it to be in her possession. Hanna donated the brick to the National Museum of Ireland in 1937 where it has remained in the national collection and is currently on display in the milestone centenary exhibition 'Proclaiming a Republic'.

The brick itself is presented by the museum as material evidence of the attempt to cover the murder of the three journalists in Portobello Barracks at the height of the 1916 Rising. It has been the object of considerable attention on account of its indexicality- the immediacy of its contact with the executed body it has come to represent.⁷ Recognition of the bullet embedded takes viewers uncomfortably close to the realities of the rebellion: violence, destruction and the loss of lives.⁸ This object is a means to reflect on the agency and presentation of such museum artefacts associated with death and violence.

Having outlined the historic configuration of the brick, it is necessary to unpack the problematics of this presentation of an ordinary object as valuable material evidence of a significant moment in Irish history by implementing the methodology of Whitney Davis 2011 publication *A General Theory of Visual Culture*.

² Witness statement of Christopher Kearney. 1916 Press Cuttings Part 2: Bureau of Military History 1916 Press Cuttings (Part 2). http://www.bureauofmilitaryhistory.ie/files/Press_Cuttings_opt_02.pdf. Pg13. Accessed 04/04/2017.

³ Witness statement of William Boland. 1916 Press Cuttings Part 2: Bureau of Military History 1916 Press Cuttings (Part 2). http://www.bureauofmilitaryhistory.ie/files/Press_Cuttings_opt_02.pdf. Pg14. Accessed 04/04/2017.

⁴ Witness statement of William Boland. 1916 Press Cuttings Part 2: Bureau of Military History 1916 Press Cuttings (Part 2). http://www.bureauofmilitaryhistory.ie/files/Press_Cuttings_opt_02.pdf. Pg14. Accessed 04/04/2017.

⁵ Tallbot, Hayden (2012) Michael Collins' Own Story- Told to Hayden Tallbot. Military Studies Press.

⁶ Letter from F. McL. Scannell to Hanna Sheehy Skeffington (Presented to the NMI in 1937). NMI Archive No. NMIAI.AI.EWD 0091.003.00019 (1). Accessed 09/03/2017.

⁷ Pointin, Marcia (2014) 'Casts, Imprint and the Deathliness of Things: Artifacts at the Edge' in *The Art Bulletin*, Vol.96 (2). 170.

⁸ Pointin, Marcia (2014) 'Casts, Imprint and the Deathliness of Things: Artifacts at the Edge' in *The Art Bulletin*, Vol.96 (2). 182.

Whitney Davis as Methodology.

This methodology has been chosen as it conflates the formal and representational aspects of images and artefacts. Firstly Davis outlines that there are two subjects who address a single image or artefact: form-making subject (creators of artefacts in the past); and the formalist subject (viewers of artefacts in the present day).⁹ As this particular 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 or version of the world.

Davis treats artefacts as replete with aspects in the sense that every artefact has innumerable potential aspects capable of becoming relevant to a beholder. These various aspects of visual artefacts are organised into broad domains, the most relevant to studies in art history and visual culture being: form, style, iconography, iconology and depiction.¹⁰

This brick's form and style is the way it is because of a series of unintentional events- i.e. it only looks like it does by accident (when the bullet lodged it in); the brick was not intended to be made visible (as British authorities ordered the damaged bricks to be replaced in order to remove any traces of the executions that took place); and it was certainly not intended to be placed on display in a national museum. It is because of this un-intentionality and because its visible forms and motifs were not employed in a traditional, intended manner; that Davis' stylistic analysis cannot be implemented in the straight forward way that he has demonstrated with other historical objects such as paintings or sculptures.

One of the most important aspects that I have taken from Davis' theory is the notion of aspectual successions. Succession meaning the change of status of an aspect from unrecognised to recognised.¹¹ The history of the succession of vision to visuality is the main topic of Davis' theory. This occurs when formality, style and pictorality become recognised in artefacts.¹² To unpack this further formality he describes as what something arrays for us sensuously, style means looking like other things and pictorality which is the visual presencing of pictures.

The image of the brick in *Figure Two* is one which has been widely used in newspapers, promotional material and online resources; allowing its form, style and visual presence to become familiar to many. From a distance, one might mistake this brick as being an ordinary clay red brick displaced from an unassuming wall; but by looking closer at the configuration of this object, we can identify this is 'the brick with the bullet' because we recognise it from its placement within the museum. It is this recognition that demonstrates Davis' idea of the succession from vision to visuality.

⁹ Davis, Whitney (2011) *A General Theory of Visual Culture*. Princeton University Press, New Jersey. 54.

¹⁰ Kane, Brian (2014) 'Review of Whitney Davis, *A General Theory of Visual Culture*' in *The Art Bulletin*, Vol. 96 (4). 492.

¹¹ Kane, Brian (2014) 'Review of Whitney Davis, *A General Theory of Visual Culture*' in *The Art Bulletin*, Vol. 96 (4). 492.

¹² Davis, Whitney (2011) *A General Theory of Visual Culture*. Princeton University Press, New Jersey. 9.

I am interested in the succession of *a* brick with *a* bullet that killed *someone*; to recognition of *the* brick with *the* bullet in it which killed *the* Francis Sheehy-Skeffington and how its exhibition has fostered this succession.

Display of the Brick.

The collection, preservation and display of the brick by the NMI exemplifies the succession from visibility to culturality. It moved from being a visible artefact to being a culturally visible artefact once the bullet was lodged in it, once it was preserved and collected; and crucially, once it went on public display.

In terms of its display, the brick is displayed in a relatively isolated manner (See *Figure Three*). It stands in a large glass case exhibited alongside the 'Vote for Women' badge which was pinned to Sheehy Skeffington's jacket when he was executed and removed by the medical officer.

Displaying both these artefacts together invokes in the viewer the melancholy of an absence that is most definitively that of death.¹³ However, one does not understand this immediacy with death at first glance or even by looking closely at these objects. In order to understand how these objects are freighted with dramatic consequences, we must examine the elements which are not immediately intelligible/recognisable.¹⁴ Display labels are the device that allow us to do so in its current public display.

Viewers would not know that Sheehy-Skeffington was a pacifist who was violently executed and whose death aroused public revulsion; just by looking the artefact alone. Many of the readable dimensions of the brick are not visible by close looking. This is where Whitney Davis' methodology comes into play.

Object Analysis.

So far, preliminary findings of my analysis of this artefact have presented several findings which may have an effect on how the object is displayed in future exhibitions as museum curators were unaware of the information. For example, I discovered that it was Colonel McCammond who ordered the bricks to be removed on Sunday 7th May- this was 11 days after the execution. His reasoning for the marked bricks to be taken out and replaced by others was so that military prisoners exercising in the yard might not see them.¹⁵ If this was the reason, why wait 11 days before removing said bricks?

This order was crucially given one day before the bodies were exhumed in the barracks grounds and reinterred in Glasnevin Cemetery. Sheehy Skeffington's father was present at the exhumation so was this order carried out in anticipation of outsiders entering the barracks, seeing the damage to the wall and the brutality of the killings?

¹³ Pointin, Marcia (2014) 'Casts, Imprint and the Deathliness of Things: Artifacts at the Edge' in *The Art Bulletin*, Vol.96 (2). 172.

¹⁴ Davis, Whitney (2011) *A General Theory of Visual Culture*. Princeton University Press, New Jersey. 127.

¹⁵ *Sinn Fein Rebellion Handbook* (1917). Compiled by the "Weekly Irish Times, Dublin. Irish Times Ltd, Dublin. 219.

I have also uncovered witness evidence that there were approximately 15 bricks marked with bullets in the yard hours after the executions were carried out. Witness William Boland stated: "I did not count them (the bricks), but on the right of the wall there were about six bricks- battered- that was at the height of Sheehy-Skeffington and about the same number of marks about the height of Dickson, and six or eight bricks battered at the height of McIntyre".¹⁶ This witness statement brings the authentication of this artefact into question as there were quite a number of bricks in the yard where the three men were shot, that were indented by bullets.

Finding out if this is the *exact* brick that is said to have *the* bullet which passed through the body of Sheehy Skeffington would be an immense challenge; but my interest lies in the way this artefact is *presented in the museum*, rather than whether or not it is the actual brick it suggests to be.

Conclusion.

In this paper, I have instigated a conceptual analysis of the fundamental terms of engagement with a museum artefact using Whitney Davis' *General Theory of Visual Culture*. When implemented with other artefacts in other exhibitions, this methodology allows me to further question the implications of museums presenting mundane, uncertain objects as heroic, authentic witnesses to historic events.

By investigating the range of successions which took place in order to claim this ordinary object as valuable material evidence of a particular historic event, I have indicated the conscious effort that museums make to display an authentic material legacy of the past. The way in which museums present such artefacts as undisputed material evidence should be addressed further as this is bound up with how we continue remember and present the past.

¹⁶ Witness statement of William Boland. 1916 Press Cuttings Part 2: Bureau of Military History 1916 Press Cuttings (Part 2). http://www.bureauofmilitaryhistory.ie/files/Press_Cuttings_opt_02.pdf. Pg14. Accessed 04/04/2017.



Figure 1: Portobello Barracks Yard.

Image Source: <http://irishvolunteers.org/dublin-volunteers-ira/cathal-brugha-barracks-formerly-portobello-barracks-picture-shows-the-spot-where/>



Figure 2: The Bullet in the Brick. Image Source: <http://www.museum.ie/Historical-Collections>



Figure 3: The Bullet in the Brick on Display at the National Museum of Ireland. Image Source: Author's own, taken 25th March 2017.

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