

NIRSA

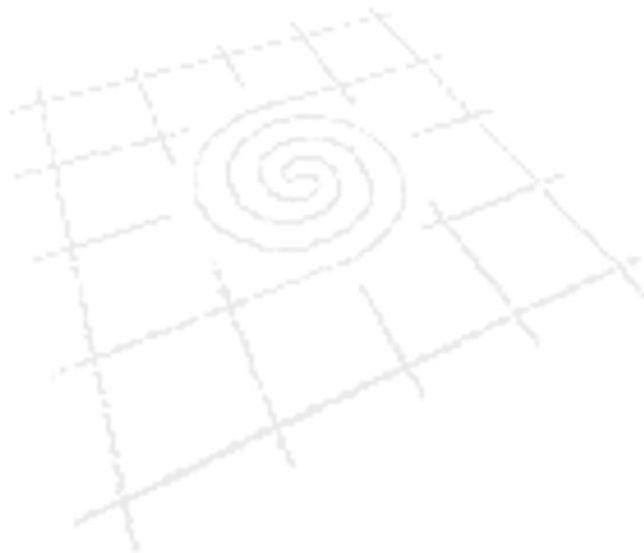
NATIONAL INSTITUTE FOR REGIONAL AND SPATIAL ANALYSIS
AN INSTITIÚID NAISIÚNTA UM ANAILÍS RÉIGIÚNACH AGUS SPÁSÚIL



NUI MAYNOOTH
Ollscoil na hÉireann Má Nuad

The Photograph and the Dolmen: the dialectics of visualization

Eamonn Slater



Iontas Building, National University of Ireland, Maynooth,
Maynooth, Co Kildare, Ireland.

Áras Iontas, Ollscoil na hÉireann, Má Nuad,
Má Nuad, Co Chill Dara, Éire.

Tel: + 353 (0) 1 708 3350 Fax: + 353 (0) 1 7086456

Email: nirsa@nuim.ie Web: <http://www.nuim.ie/nirsa>



An Roinn Fiontar, Trádála agus Nuálaíochta
Department of Enterprise, Trade and Innovation

HEA
Higher Education Authority
An tUdarás um Ard-Oideachas

The Photograph and the Dolmen: The dialectics of visualization.

Eamonn Slater, Dept. of Sociology and NIRSA

(eamonn.slater@nuim.ie)

Abstract:

This essay provides a dialectical analysis of how we attempt to visualize antiquity within modern suburbia. Beginning with an unfolding of the physical process of the photographic reproduction I want to suggest that this is the necessary material condition for the emergence of the process of visualization, in which the social process of interpretation now becomes the dominant moment. And by metabolizing these two processes a one-sided appropriation of an indefinite 'diversity of the world' is obtained, but this is necessary in order to separate an authentic historical entity from the blandness of suburbia and its constant tendency to aestheticize everything. Therefore, the photograph allows the 'captured' countenance of the historical object to be recontextualized away from its real concrete context to a textual form. Within, the visualization process takes on an abstract social in the narrative process and with regard to the reproduced image of the Ballybrack dolmen its takes on the specific social form of an archaeological cult form, which has become the particular exhibition form of the dolmen in the concrete setting of south Dublin suburbia. It is accordingly maintained by the state as it attempts to preserve and conserve it against some of the everyday activities of modern suburban living. Thus the dolmen is presented so that it can be photographed and this "photographability" is determined by the archaeological exhibition value.

Introducing the Ballybrack Dolmen as a Photographic Moment



Suburban Art or Ancient Artefact?

What we have before us is not a dolmen, nor a south Dublin housing estate, but a photograph of them and more besides. The argument which unfolds here is concerned with how we use the photograph to ‘visualize’ reality, and in this particular case of how we locate and record historical remnants that are present within a suburban milieu. Let us begin with the ‘obvious’ and our ‘natural vision’¹ in order to uncover how photographs are crucial moments in the process of visualization.

The photograph above displays a dolmen-type structure on a green area in the middle of a suburban housing estate. The physical artefact is framed by the presence of the

¹ Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations* (London: Fontana Press, 1992), p. 214.

row of semi-detached houses in the background, which not only locates it spatially in suburbia, but the ‘framing’ houses also suggest a time-period of Late Modernity.

The aesthetic forms of the surrounding estate houses tend to embed the artefact of the dolmen-like structure in its specific timeframe. The consequence of this apparent implosion of the timeframe is the tendency to push the dolmen-type object into being interpreted as an art form of modernity rather than an artefact of antiquity. And this ‘artful’ interpretation of the dolmen is reinforced by how the dolmen ‘piece’ is ‘obviously’ standing on a circle of sandy dirt. The circle effect itself within the grassed foreground supports the idea that its presence within the housing estate is a consequence of a conscious act to display. This apparent aesthetic form is further intensified by the contrast between the rough stone countenance of the dolmen and the straight-linear forms of the surrounding brick houses in the background, which tends to establish the dolmen-like object as a visual exotic contrasting itself against the backdrop of the bland ‘wilderness of suburbia’².

Therefore, from the angle of the above photograph the visual evidence can only suggest that the dolmen object is functioning more as a work of suburban art rather than as a remnant of the Bronze Age or the Stone Age. There is no other obvious evidence to counter such an interpretation. Therefore history as manifested in physical artefacts can get ‘caught up’ in the bland cauldron of suburbanization. These authentic historical entities therefore have a constant risk that their historical aspect within suburbia is likely to be obliterated by the dominating context of the modern ‘semi-detached’. But the suburbanization of Ireland’s ancient antiques is only a recent occurrence with the emergence of the Celtic Tiger.

² Lewis Mumford, ‘The Wilderness of Suburbia’, *New Republic*, vol. 28 (7 September 1921), pp. 44-45.

This chapter is about how Sociology can help to unravel a social practice which appears to be obvious to everyone - visualizing our immediate surrounds. Its very mundaneness suggests that there is no need to linger conceptually over such a trivial activity, however when we attempt to go beyond the surface appearance of visualizing we discover that it is a very complex process, which is made up of a number of internal processes. These abstract (hidden) processes, which are both physical and social in their determination, become metabolized in this overall process of visualization. In order to uncover its essential moments as a process I have chosen to examine in detail the empirical case of how historical monuments are 'presented' to be gazed upon in suburbia. The particular historical artefact I will be concentrating on is this 'dolmen' of Ballybrack, in south Dublin.

The 'Sprawling' Tsunami of Suburbanization and the Necessary Aestheticization of Everything in its Wake

During the Celtic Tiger, Ireland globalized. As part of this globalization, Ireland exported its 'Riverdances', its 'traditional' Irish pubs and images of fun-loving football supporters. Whether by design or accident, a 'feel-good' factor emerged about the Irish which has 'morphed' into a new global Irish identity. But back in Ireland there were also other changes occurring to our more mundane identities which were less obvious but more fundamental to the everyday lives of the ordinary people. We became 'suburbanites'! Nearly by stealth and certainly piecemeal, Ireland suburbanized. Fuelled by an astounding increase in car usage, our car dependency allowed us to travel greater distances especially between work and home. In the 1990s, the commuter belt around Dublin expanded up to 80 kilometres and beyond.³ Accessing 'An Lar' (city centre) from the newly emerging Greater Dublin became on certain routes a two-hour drive. And in this intensified mobility,

³ Corcoran, et al. (2010), p. 32.

our suburbs were also moving - moving outwards like a slow moving tsunami 'sprawling' over the green fields of the rural Ireland. In its wake, the 'natural' and productive ecosystems of the agricultural countryside were being substituted for the more 'refined' and manicured ecosystems of the suburban gardens.⁴ Therefore, under this tsunami wave of suburbanization, the physical context of the rural countryside and all that stood in it were being swamped by a process of aestheticization. This latter process is determined by the residents attempting to live the idyllic. Nothing can escape the sweet charm of the aesthetic, not even the truly ancient antiquities. Some of these artefacts that stood in the way of this swell were obliterated. What was allowed to remain were not only recontextualized within the confines of suburbia but they were also crucially 'conserved'.

The 'Big' house, tower houses, churches, crosses, dolmens, etc. were restored and their respective 'rot' was stopped. This rot is caused by the natural processes of decay that 'naturally' give the appearance of being old and historical to the edifices that they engulfed. But in the process of conserving these edifices, their ancient and historical 'aura' was 'peeled away', transformed and even transcended by the process of conservation. Firstly, vegetation such as moulds, lichens, moss but especially ivy was removed then the stonework was repaired in which fallen stones or bricks were replaced back into their perceived 'original' positions and finally if mortar was part of the original build, it was re-pointed. The visual consequence of these physical processes of conservation is that the 'ruins' now appear pristine clean and their historical aura has disappeared from the visual plane. In short, they have been visually aestheticized. So although these historical artefacts are authentic objects from the past their newly constructed conservation veneer gives them the appearance of being brand new. To counteract this effacement of history it is necessary to attempt to restore the authentic historical aura of these suburban artefacts and it is the

⁴ Slater and Peillon (2009).

photograph that has become the necessary mechanism in which we ‘visualize’ history within suburbia. This chapter is about this effort to regain the historical aura of a suburban artefact from the apparent dominance of the aesthetic process by using the medium of the photograph.

The Photograph as a One-sided Appropriation of a Many-sided Reality: The Physical Form Within the Visualization Process

For Wendell Holmes the birth of photography signalled an earth-shattering change in the physics of perception, inducing a metamorphosis in the way people see and understand the world.⁵ It was according to Holmes a conquest of perception over matter, where the physical environment could be forced to yield its manifold appearances directly. The photograph’s ability to capture and preserve the disembodied countenance of things was a crucial mechanism in how form could be separated from matter. As a consequence, Holmes suggested that a new reality emerged in which the ‘image became more important than the object and would in fact make the object disposable’⁶. But the physical matter on which the necessary embodied countenance is embedded within, is only ‘disposable’ in the realm of photography, it continues to exist in the real world.

However, Holmes is right to emphasize how the technological process of photographic production created a new dimension in which the forms of reality can be detached from that reality. The medium of photographic reproduction enables images to exist independently of their mundane reality. In highlighting this distinction between the reality represented - ‘the disembodied countenance of things’ in the photograph and the real world - ‘the matter’, Holmes appears to be replicating a distinction that Marx also

⁵ Oliver Wendell Holmes, ‘The Stereoscope and the Stereograph’ (1859) in ‘The Atlantic Monthly’, reprinted in Beaumont Newhall (ed.) *Photography: Essays and Images* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1980).

⁶ Holmes.

recognized. In the following quotation from 1842, Marx is suggesting how we attempt to make sense of the world – a world that is an ‘unorganised mass’ whose contents are in a constant state of flux and movement. To this ‘manifold diversity of the world’, we tend to make one-sided interpretations:

...for one-sidedness can extract the particular from the unorganised mass of the whole and give it shape...By confining each of the contents of the world in a stable definiteness and as it were solidifying the fluid essence of the content, understanding brings out the manifold diversity of the world, for the world would not be many-sided without the many one-sidedness's.⁷

This ontological distinction being highlighted here by Marx is that between the ‘unorganised mass of the whole’ with its ‘fluid essence of the content’, in short - the real world, and the ‘one-sidedness’ of our ‘understanding’ of it, as we ‘confine’ the ‘contents’ of the world in our interpretation. The ‘stable definiteness’ of our everyday interpretative process is particularly pronounced in photography as Holmes has conceived it to be. Thus the photograph visually extracts the ‘disembodied countenance of things’ from the ‘fluid essence’ of the real world and thereby ‘solidifying’ a particular ‘one-sided’ image from an indefinite ‘diversity of the world’. Therefore, in this process of photographing not only are the countenances of reality disembodied and thereby isolated from their original ‘unorganised’ context, but they are also reinserted into a textual form, thus the form of the original countenances and their ‘captured’ contexts have been simultaneously transferred in the act of photographing.

The initial act in this process of transference is done by the photographer in choosing a particular aspect of that form to be captured on camera. Aspect is determined by direction, elevation and light, which is very much decided by the photographer in situ. And in doing so the photograph captures a ‘one-sided’ image from ‘the unorganised mass of the whole’ reality. This physical act of isolating is the beginning of the process of

⁷ Karl Marx, ‘Debates on the Law on Thefts of Wood’ (1842), *Collected Works*, vol. 1 (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1975).

visualization by which we continually ‘focus in’ on entities that we want to highlight. Thus it is the physical act of photographic reproduction that is the prerequisite condition in aiding us to visualize historical monuments.

The second and following-on process of the physical appropriation of the images is that of cropping where the reproduced surfaces are framed within a reconstituted context. The process of cropping itself can be seen as part of the production process within photography beyond the aperture ‘moment’, where the actual final ‘producer’ of the photograph may decide to isolate certain features of the original ‘raw’ photograph (the one caught in the initial moment of exposure) and thus eliminate others. As a consequence the ‘cropper’ of the photograph can physically refocus in on other moments of the reality appropriated and thus exclude others. Accordingly, this framing process is crucially about constructing a new physical context for the consumption of the selected image. In deciding the cropping dimensions for the captured images, the ‘developer’ is relocating not only the disembodied appearances of the objects/subjects of the real world but also imposing a new spatial relationship between a definite and determinate edge (mostly straight) of the photograph to the object(s) captured within the photograph itself. Herein lies the essential spatial form (determination) of the photograph. The frame of the reproduction simultaneously constructs a boundary to the scene captured in the photograph and in doing so conceals what lies outside the boundary and includes what lies within. In the ‘die-straight’ linearity of the framing process, there is an attempt to impose a new spatial re-ordering of a mundane reality where such a reconstituted order does not exist because it is essentially an ‘unorganised mass of the whole’⁸. For example the following photograph of a single ‘suburban’ weed ‘springing forth’ from a grass lawn canopy is a good example of the cropping process, and its inherent process of re-spatialization.

⁸ Marx, op.cit 1975.



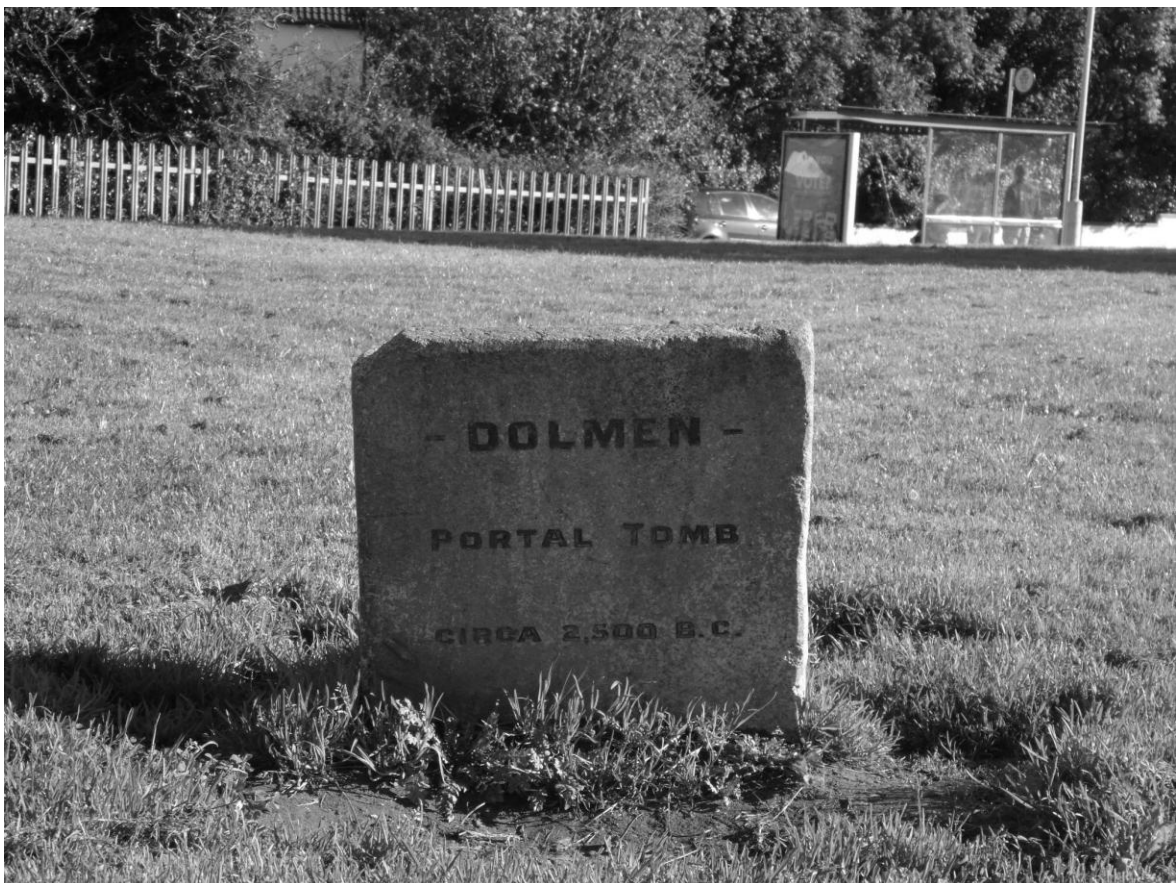
A suburban weed 'framed'!

In the essential rectilinear geometry of this photograph as constructed by the framing boundaries, the dock weed becomes established as the centre of this newly spatialized representation. And in this reproduction of reality the countenance of the objects of reality are put into new spatial arrangements with each other and with the newly imposed edges of the photographic frame. This is achieved by locating the weed's image where the abstract diagonals of the imposed rectangular frame meet. Accordingly, because of the ability of the framing process to construct a new form of synoptic perspective and thereby rearranging the spatial relationships between objects and entities photographically reproduced, an insignificant entity from the mundane world such as a weed becomes a focal point of attention. Therefore, on account of the constructed rectilinear geometry of

the photograph, the visible (its physical edge) and the invisible (the abstract diagonals) become the spatial principles of representation in which the photographic medium (form) attempts to control the reproduced visual contents of the real world.

The Necessary ‘Popping an Imaginary Social Soul’ into the Photograph

A few metres away from our ‘suburban artefact’ and just outside the imposed frame of our initial photograph stands a stone plaque, which contradicts the art form of our interpretation.



A caption in the real world

Inscribed on this gravestone-like plaque is ‘Dolmen – portal tomb – 2,500BC’ and it accordingly proclaims an archaeological form to the artefact. This latest representation

challenges not only the art form determination of the artefact but also exposes the one-sidedness of the opening photograph and how it was physically framed to exclude this 'in situ' narrative. This one-sidedness is manifested in 'tunnelling' the gaze of the photograph observer towards the artefact but simultaneously away from the also present 'framing' caption within the real context of the housing-estate green. But crucially, there is change in the contextual form of interpretation, from an exclusively visual form, where interpretation is naturally open-ended ('many one-sidednesses') to a narrative form, in which the written caption on the stone plaque attempts to impose its interpretive form on real object 'presented'. Therefore, the presence of the stone plaque must be seen as an attempt to overcome not only the exclusive 'visualness' inherent in mundane reality, but also the potential many 'one-sided' interpretations that 'naturally' occur within the visual plane. Consequently, this particular written-in-stone caption becomes the dominant interpretative form - when it is 'brought into the picture', so to speak. Chris Corlett in his survey of South Dublin antiquities and specifically in his discussion of the Ballybrack dolmen demonstrates his awareness of how the visual form dominates the essential historical form in the suburban context: '[p]resently situated within a residential estate, it bears more resemblance to a modern sculpture than to an ancient memorial tomb.'⁹

Artefactual or monumental history therefore is not inherently obvious on the surface appearance of suburban society; it needs to be interpreted through narration! But captions are rarely present within the real world - the Ballybrack stone plaque being an exception. Therefore, the real historical artefacts of suburbia have to be 'located' firstly by photographing them and then narrating upon within texts. These are the unfolding necessary moments of the visualization process. By visually reproducing the countenance of the historical artefacts from the 'unorganised mass of the whole' real world in

⁹ Christiaan Corlett, *Antiquities of Old Rathdown* (Bray, Co. Wicklow: Wordwell Ltd., 1999), p. 102.

photographing them, they become distinguishable from the suburban ‘mass’ in their photographic containment. It is at this point in the unfolding of essential structure of the visualization process that the framed and cropped images become available to be analyzed. Composing the narrative either within the text or as caption is in fact an attempt to use the image data to support the trajectory of the analysis in the narrative process. Certain visual contents will be highlighted, but not all, from the photographic form as they appear to exemplify the logic of the written analysis. But there is a danger inherent in this necessary act of appropriation. A photograph can not only illuminate a textual point, it can in certain cases challenge that narrative interpretation by allowing the reader/gazer the opportunity to re-assess the visually-reproduced imaginary and re-interpret the textual account. Therefore, the photograph will always ‘say’ more than the accompanying narrative does, because it reproduces the actual physical countenance of the entities photographed rather than just an abstract conceptualization of those captured images. The reason for this potential threat of an alternative interpretation of the photograph is that the logic of narrative analysis is linear while for the visually reproduced it is centrifugal.¹⁰ With regard to our case study of the Ballybrack dolmen, the accompanying narrative within the following text, attempts to establish an archaeological authenticity to the object displayed:

The prehistoric megalithic portal tomb of Ballybrack Dolmen. It is the ‘genuine article’, based on archaeological evidence, despite being located on the edge of a housing estate with ensuing graffiti. Built of very hard wearing local granite, it shows little sign of weathering, even after thousands of years!¹¹

This quotation appears to be aware of the tension between the tomb, being a ‘genuine’ megalithic artefact and ‘despite’ its presence within a suburban housing estate and its graffiti daubing. This apparent contradiction is a result of the actual physical artefact being simultaneously a moment in a number of diverse processes. These processes are

¹⁰ John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London: Penguin, 1972).

¹¹ Web page - Scenes from

manifesting themselves in the real world as part of the spatial configuration of suburbia and in using the surfaces of the dolmen as a text to reproduce graffiti. These real concrete processes are opposed by the narrative process which exclaims the genuineness of its historical origins 'based upon archaeological evidence'. These real grotesque processes are visually reproduced in a number of following photographs, but its essential historical process is not, because it cannot be. The historical process and its particular moment of manifestation here are only revealed through a textual narrative, where the actual archaeological evidence is not visually presented but only referred to. As a consequence, the abstract historical/archaeological soul has been popped into the reproduced countenance of the dolmen in this particular photograph within this narrative. But this is only one trajectory in which the imaginary social form is embedded in the dolmen artefact (its reproduced image) to produce its 'genuine' authenticity as a historical entity. There is also a potential opposing trajectory where the abstract social soul - the aura is 'transferred' from the dolmen to a number of surrounding built entities. Pearson has identified a pre-modern example of this type of interpellation:

Nearby stood a villa-style house of Victorian date, which, taking its name from this ancient monument was called Glen Druid. Having lain derelict in the early 1980s, all the granite gate piers were demolished.¹²

Tom Fourwinds has stated that this type of auratic interpellation continued into modernity:

'Until the mid-twentieth century it (the dolmen) stood in a farmer's field, but it now stands in the centre of a communal green, at the front of the Cromlech Fields Housing Estate'.¹³

¹² Peter Pearson, *Between the Mountains and the Sea: Dun Laoghaire-Rathdown County* (Dublin: The O'Brien Press, 2007), p. 120.

¹³ Tom Fourwinds, *Monu-mental about Prehistoric Dublin* (Dublin: Nonsuch Publishing Ltd., 2006).



Believe it or not?

Thus, ironically the real concrete artefact has given an historic value to its modern immediate built environs, but that constructed context has created an all-embracing exhibition value, that puts the historical ‘authenticity’ of the artefact in doubt. The transfer of the historic aura has occurred within the street sign, but the absurd location of the dolmen within the suburban estate puts the credibility of all – the signage and the dolmen to the test. But if this is challenging the overall project of visualizing the historical dimension of suburbia, the word ‘fields’ pushes it beyond belief, as the following testifies:

Ballybrack (dolmen) is situated on the beautifully named Cromlech Fields. Someone thought long and hard about that one! It isn’t fields at all, but a council estate outside Dublin, but never mind.¹⁴

¹⁴ thermodernantiquarian.com

The ‘popping of an imaginary soul’ of ‘ Fields’ onto a built-up housing estate was done by a local government functionary, who penned the ‘beautifully named’ Cromlech Fields for this social-housing scheme. Therefore, it was the local state that not only built the housing estate but named it as well. And it is that state’s actions that created these contradictions, which have put the dolmen of Ballybrack into. However, the abuse does not just emanate from the state alone but also from civil society. Unknown members of society have been using the actual capstone of the dolmen as a site of representation itself – for graffiti!

Two views of this rather forlorn little dolmen miraculously surviving suburbia. Note the perfect cup-mark in the left-hand picture – where you can also see traces of the red paint which the capstone was once daubed.¹⁵

But this daubing of paint is not a ‘one-off’ event as a following-on comment suggests:

The red paint has disappeared from the capstone now, but some white paint has appeared on one of the portal stones.¹⁶

The paint daubing and its removal has to be seen as an ongoing conflict between the state and the ‘graffiti artists’, the latter attempting to impose a particular ‘artistic’ exhibit value on the dolmen while the state cleaners attempt to retain an unmediated exhibition value with regard to the appearance of the dolmen. But by actually using the artefact as the ‘text’, the graffiti artists attract not only moral condemnation for their endeavours but also allows one commentator the opportunity to even identify these purveyors of such a ‘fiendish’ act of desecration:

It has somehow escaped the road-building process and nearly managed to escape the rigours of modern life. There are, unfortunately traces of red spray paint to be seen on the capstone, added no doubt, by some angst-ridden teenagers with nothing better to do – a sad reflection upon our times.¹⁷

But these ‘angst-ridden teenagers’ are only imagined to be culprits - they may not be.

However, in proposing them as such, this perspective has produced a ‘one-sided’

¹⁵ Tom Fourwinds – web page.

¹⁶ 13th May 2006.

¹⁷ fourwinds, 200?

interpretation of a ‘many-sided’ world - thus ‘framing’ the teenagers! But the onslaught on the aura of the Ballybrack dolmen is not just undermined by adolescent exuberance or whoever but also by the imagined activities of children using the artefact as a climbing frame or by local dogs using it as a toilet location.¹⁸ Unlimited access to the artefact is therefore causing problems to maintaining the exhibition and historic values of the Ballybrack dolmen.

Accessibility: Its Physical and Social Forms

Accessibility to the dolmen emerges as another level and the subsequent process that mediates our suburban artefact. What is unusual about the Ballybrack dolmen is that it is not on private property while the other six dolmens of South Dublin are.¹⁹ This accessibility is determined by Ballybrack dolmen’s location on an open common green, which can cause problems, as one commenter has suggested:

Open access monuments are shown little respect and are often mistreated, but they do still exist. There was broken glass and crisp packets strewn all over but the stones retained some beautiful markings and at least they hadn’t been too badly damaged over the years.²⁰

Therefore, although complete open accessibility can challenge and may even undermine the historic value form of the artefact as it allows mundane social activities to occur on or around the dolmen. However, on another level it does however allow ease of access for potential connoisseurs of suburban antiquities to visit:

Bizarrely located in the green area of a housing estate in the southern suburbs of Dublin...What it lacks in ambience it makes up for in ease of access as the aforementioned bus stop makes this probably the easiest portal tomb for anyone to visit in the Dublin area.²¹

¹⁸ Shadowandstone.com

¹⁹ *Did You Know: Forgotten Aspects of our Local Heritage* (Dublin: Heritage Office of Dun Laoghaire-Rathdown County, 2009).

²⁰ themodernantiquarian.com

²¹ shadowandstone.com

Therefore, the ‘ease of access’ is being determined not only by its suburban context and the types of transportation associated with that location – motorised, car and bus but also it is not located on private property. Private property in the context of protecting national monuments becomes a moment in a specific social process of accessibility, where a potential connoisseur needs to get permission from the property owner to gain access. Thus the property owner becomes the custodian of such monuments on account of legal form of trespass. As a consequence, the intending visitor has to engage in pre-planning activity by seeking permission to enter the property. This legal and social barrier is removed in the case of our Ballybrack dolmen.

Also unlike the non-urban/suburban location for antiquities, there is none of the usual physical barriers such as cross-country trekking and wall climbing, which is the usual rite of passage to rural monuments. As a contrast, access to our suburban dolmen is quick and easy as is the wont of suburban locations and potential connoisseurs are advised to ‘catch it while you can’ because ‘it is always worth stopping off at’. And the reason suggested why people should ‘catch it’ is because it appears to possess simultaneously an authentic historic value with a bizarre contextual exhibition value, and their synthesis produces the Ballybrack dolmen as an exotic destination:

Well, as I always say – This place is incredible. Scott ascribed an almost comedic value to its location. I think I have to agree somewhat. Still, it’s such a contrast to what people expect that it is always worth stopping off at.²²

The Ballybrack dolmen as represented in this quotation is as a ‘playful’ location, where one can one enjoy the authentic with the inauthentic and thereby the many one-sided interpretations inherent in such postmodern scenarios. But this ambiguity has to be overcome in order to visualize the threatened historical aspect of the dolmen.

²² Posted Wednesday, 1st May 2002.

The Emergence of the Archaeological Cult Form and its Attempted Contemporary Dominance

However, the cult value that determines the contemporary artefact is not the original one, which the ancient builders of the tomb were guided by in their construction techniques. We are unable to resurrect the original historic value, but what we are able to do is to suggest that it certainly did not look like what we have in the Cromlech Fields. Somewhere in the depths of history the original cairn of earth and stones have been removed, which has revealed the present-day skeleton-like sculpture we now call a dolmen. Even as far back as the eighteenth century, the cairn mound of the Ballybrack dolmen was not only missing, but the remaining exposed skeleton stone structure was very much neglected as Gabriel Beranger testified in 1777:

[I]t is so much encumbered with all kinds of prickly brambles that there was no coming near the supporters to measure them. Even to see them, two of my friends were obliged with their sticks to keep the brambles down, until I copied their forms.²³

So in fact what we have today is indeed more of an internal structural frame than a completed tomb - an abstract sculptural form! And with the missing physical pieces, there is no possibility of ever accessing the original aura of this now desecrated Ballybrack tomb. But a historic value form still encapsulates the remaining artefact, a one which emanates not from the past but from modernity - from the contemporary archaeological community. Chris Corlett, himself an archaeologist, proposes such an archaeological value form to our dolmen, under the title of 'Sacred Sculpture':

Today the dolmen at Ballybrack near Shankill appears more like a modern sculpture in a residential estate than a sacred tomb built over 5000 years ago. In the face of such threats it is all the more important that we celebrate our unique

²³ Corlett, p. 87.

archaeological surroundings in order to preserve them for the speculations of future generations.²⁴

The constructed 'sacredness' of this quotation is not associated with the idea of venerating the dead, nor respecting their eternal resting place, but in preserving the artefact 'for the speculations of future generations' of archaeologists! It is at this point that the abstract forms of historic value and exhibition value are synthesised and consequently mediate each other. Accordingly, the archaeological form of the artefact merges with its sculptural form as the preservation of the physical structure of the dolmen is a necessary condition for the future archaeologists to survey and speculate on through an examination of its potential exhibition value - that is to be not only deemed sacred in an archaeological sense but also that it can be crucially visualized in its archaeological form without its real concrete context of suburbia. In short, the essential problematic nature of Ballybrack dolmen is the need for archaeologists to visualize it with its 'authentic' soul preserved (its archaeological exhibition value form).

Conclusions

In the end of our dialectical odyssey through the 'eclectic' fragments, which were subsequently uncovered about the Ballybrack dolmen, whether as a text or as a photographic image ended up as diverse moments of various processes, which combined to form the process of visualization. The visualization process is not just about maintaining the contemporary value of the dolmen - its physical existence in the real concrete world, but it is crucially about preserving its exhibition value as a potential photographable artefact, which archaeologists can use to speculate about, without any disturbing presence of graffiti and the 'semi-d'. These latter societal forms are themselves exhibition value

²⁴ Corlett, p. 1.

forms and ‘challenge’ the exhibition value of the dolmen itself as determined by its archaeological form.

The pursuit of an unadulterated archaeological exhibition value has impacted back onto the photographic aspects adopted by photographers. This trend is manifested in photographs that attempt to highlight the ‘authentic side’ of the dolmen - those one-sided representations that do not display neither the ‘semi-d’ backdrop nor the graffiti daubing on the capstone. Of all of the innovative strategies adopted to avoid the ‘unsightly’, the most extraordinary is the one that used a night-time flash that only revealed the dolmen and simultaneously kept the suburban context hidden in the darkness of the night. Another aspect used was a worm-like view, which put the sky into the frame so to speak as the backdrop but simultaneously ‘constructed’ monumental-looking structures to our dolmen. The diversity and the bizarreness of these aspects, have an essential trajectory in that they all attempt to re-establish the lost aura of the real artefact by consciously engaging in a one-sided appropriation of reality rather than attempting to reproduce the real and the visible contradictions of the Ballybrack dolmen. Ironically, Benjamin’s non-reproducible aura is now being reproduced in the form of exhibition value - the photograph. These images are idealistic appropriations that are physically reproduced through a so-called realistic medium, which supposedly ‘cannot lie’. Thus the inherent one-sidedness of photography is as much a product of the aspect adopted as well as the imaginative creation of the photographer. Therefore, idealism enfolds materialism in the ‘art and science’ of photography.

If we insert the word photograph for commodity in Marx’s following quotation in which Marx is discussing the complexity of the commodity form in modernity, we can succinctly summarize the mystical character of the photograph:

A *photograph* appears, at first sight, a very trivial thing, and easily understood. Analysis shows that it is in reality a very peculiar thing, abounding in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties.²⁵

Thus if the physical photograph is a mere moment in the visualizing process, that process possesses more metaphysical complexity than a particular moment of the photograph, because that moment is not only temporal but also structural within the overall process of visualizing.

Therefore, with regard to the specific case study of this chapter, the Ballybrack dolmen, its appearance is being maintained and thus conserved in a way that is determined by how the state retains an archaeological framework of presentation. This essential archaeological form has attempted to not only preserve the monument by stopping the natural agents of decay, but also to visualize it within the suburban context, so that an archaeological connoisseur can gaze upon the past by looking at the present artefact, stripped of its historical veneer - frozen in time as if it is a photograph.

Postscript: Let us conclude as we began with a photograph and one of our Ballybrack dolmen. In checking the references from the internet, I came across this photograph of our



²⁵ Marx, 1976 p. 163 Altered by the author.

dolmen from the 1970s where it was encaged in a fenced-off enclosure. Within it was preserved but not conserved as indicated by the lichen growth on the capstone. But crucially it could not be photographed in its archaeological form as the wired fence formed an impenetrable frame that could not be surmounted.

Bibliography

- Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations* (London: Fontana Press, 1992)
- John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London: Penguin, 1972).
- Mary Corcoran, Jane Gray and Michel Peillon, *Suburban Affiliations Social Relations in the Greater Dublin Area*. (2010).
- Christiaan Corlett, *Antiquities of Old Rathdown* (Bray, Co. Wicklow: Wordwell Ltd., 1999)
- Did You Know: Forgotten Aspects of our Local Heritage* (Dublin: Heritage Office of Dun Laoghaire-Rathdown County, 2009).
- Tom Fourwinds, *Monu-mental about Prehistoric Dublin* (Dublin: Nonsuch Publishing Ltd., 2006).
- Oliver Wendell Holmes, 'The Stereoscope and the Stereograph' (1859) in 'The Atlantic Monthly', reprinted in Beaumont Newhall (ed.) *Photography: Essays and Images* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1980).
- Karl Marx, 'Debates on the Law on Thefts of Wood' (1842), *Collected Works*, vol. 1 (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1975).
- Karl Marx, *Capital*, vol.1 (London: Penguin Books, 1976)
- Lewis Mumford, 'The Wilderness of Suburbia', *New Republic*, vol. 28 (7 September 1921)
- Peter Pearson, *Between the Mountains and the Sea: Dun Laoghaire-Rathdown County* (Dublin: The O'Brien Press, 2007)
- Eamonn Slater and Michel Peillon, 'The Suburban Front Garden: A Socio-Spatial Analysis', *Nature+Culture*. (2009).

Illustrations

- 1 Photograph Ian Mitton.
- 2 Photograph Martin Cregg
- 3 Photograph Siobhan Slater
- 4 Photograph Siobhan Slater

A version of this article is to appear in a book, *Visualising Dublin*, edited by Dr. Justin Carville.