

Dutch Mourning Politics: The Theo van Gogh Memorial Space¹

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Abstract

On November 2, 2004, the provocative film director and publicist Theo van Gogh was murdered by a Dutch-Moroccan Muslim fanatic. The assassination occurred in Amsterdam, in the context of Van Gogh's habit of commenting bluntly on just about everything, including Muslims, and his film *Submission*, which highlights the relation between the abuse of Muslim women and the Koran. A large ephemeral memorial took shape on the spot where Van Gogh died in the days that followed.

Taking the Van Gogh memorial as its empirical focus, this paper attempts to broaden the prevalent perspective of ephemeral memorials as localised spatialities by approaching them as performative, mediatised spaces that supersede their material boundaries. In this perspective, ephemeral memorials appear as ritualised sites that not only 'are' but at the same time 'act' and interact with the social reality that constitutes them. This contribution highlights the interdependency between specific practices of mourning, the sites that evolve from it and the hierarchies and power relationships involved in the media coverage. The article frames the material development of the Van Gogh memorial during the one week of its existence together with its development as a medium within the contemporary Dutch public debate. It draws its major theoretical inspiration from Victor Turner's 'social drama', and Nick Couldry's 'myth of the mediated centre'.

On Tuesday morning, November 2, 2004, shortly after 9 AM, my husband called me at work to tell me that the radio news had just reported the shooting of a man on the Linnaeusstraat in Amsterdam, and that the victim was probably Theo van Gogh. It was as yet uncertain whether or not Van Gogh, if the announcement indeed concerned him, had survived the attack. Within an hour, all uncertainty was gone: Van Gogh, a well-known Dutch film director and provocative publicist on the issue of Islam and immigration, was dead. The killer, a man in Muslim attire, was arrested after a brief exchange of gunfire with the police in nearby Oosterpark.

As a researcher in the areas of mourning and public ritual, I cancelled all of my appointments for the day and the days to come, to leave right away for the scene of the catastrophe. I had no doubt that the spot where Van Gogh had died would become the nation's focus of attention for days, and that a large ephemeral memorial would appear there. Whenever there is an incident that leads to a death nowadays – whether it is a murder, a work-related accident or a traffic accident – in the Netherlands, as in many other places around the world, it almost inevitably provokes various public responses of grief and mourning, of which, more often than not, the creation of a temporary memorial will be part. Within this setting, people generally follow certain scripts from a shared ritual repertoire, which requires no formal influence or instruction. These public commemorative practices therefore develop in accordance to general expectations and within a given framework (Doss 2006, 2008; Kear, A. and D.L. Steinberg 1999; Santino 2006; Stengs 2007, 2009; Walter 1999).² Indeed, in response to Theo van Gogh's death, a high-profile death with significant political impact, a large ephemeral memorial did take shape on the Linnaeusstraat. In addition, albeit on a more modest scale, Van Gogh's house also became a site of commemoration and protest.

Taking the Linnaeusstraat Theo van Gogh memorial as its empirical focus, this contribution argues that ephemeral memorials may be considered as ritualised sites that not only 'are' but at the same time 'act' and interact with the social reality through which they are constituted. In other words, ephemeral memorials are performative practices. Hence, we should not think of 'the' Theo van Gogh memorial as just a material structure that existed for a certain period of time, but as a site that passed through a continuous sequence of varying forms, intentions and interpretations. It is my objective to highlight the interdependency between specific practices of mourning, the sites that evolve from them and the media. The media, in this perspective, do not appear as independent channels that broadcast 'news' by reporting on 'current events'. Instead, they may be seen as mediating sites and practices that impinge on and are an intrinsic part of the politics of mourning, thus creating the social spaces in which such sites may be located.

Nick Couldry's concepts of 'ritual space of the media' and 'media rituals' constitute the important theoretical tools in my analysis of the Theo van Gogh memorial. To grasp how the media mediate and co-create the social world, we need to ask questions about power. Couldry's objective is to deconstruct 'the belief or assumption that there is a centre to the social world, and that, in some sense, the media speaks "for" that centre,' i.e., 'the myth of the mediated centre' (Couldry 2003, 2). The naturalness of this assumption reveals the high concentration of symbolic power with which media institutions are generally invested. In order to move beyond a narrow perception of media rituals to particular actions at particular moments in particular places, Couldry emphasises that ritual actions happen in a social space, the construction of which should be the main topic of investiga-

tion, thus promoting the study of ritualization rather than of rituals (Couldry 2003, 12, 29-30). In contemporary society, the media are essential in defining social space: '[W]e can only grasp how some media-related actions make sense as ritual actions, if we analyse a wider space which I call the *ritual space of the media* (Couldry 2003, 13).' Media make social space into ritual space because they define power and the way power is dealt with, while obscuring the nature of power and its very existence. This wider space encompasses all social life in which, from everyday practices to more condensed forms of actions, 'media-related categories' and 'media-related values' are reproduced (Couldry 2003, 14, 29-30). The most important categorical differentiation made by the actors in this social space is the difference between things (persons, actions, events) 'in' (on, or associated with) the media and things not 'in' the media. The attribution of a more intense degree of reality to things 'in' the media than to things not 'in' the media (Couldry 2003, 27, 48) leads to the former being placed above the latter in a hierarchical relationship.

At first glance, one would expect the murder of Van Gogh to evoke a nationwide-shared response of shock and abhorrence. Yet, the murder, itself already a culmination of societal conflicts about immigration issues, acted as a catalyst that intensified these conflicts and allowed them to be played out in the open, in the consequential memorial practices. I would argue that these conflicts were for a large part precisely about access to the media, existing power relations and established opinions. I will follow Eyerman in using Victor Turner's model of social drama to understand the events that followed the murder (Eyerman 2008, 4, 14-16). Social dramas are, in Turner's words, 'units of harmonic or disharmonic social process, arising in conflict situations.' (Turner 1987, 4) Turner distinguishes four phases: 'breach, crisis, redress, and either reintegration or recognition of schism' (Turner 1982, 69, italics in original). A social drama unfolds after a severe breach of a norm (the murder, in our case), followed by a mounting social crisis: 'a momentous juncture or turning point in the relations between components of a social field' (Turner 1982, 70). Next, adjustive and redressive mechanisms appear that counter the widening of the crisis. In the aftermath of Van Gogh's murder, as I will show, the two phases of 'crisis' and 'redress' occurred in the period between the actual murder and Van Gogh's funeral. 'Crisis' and 'redress' have a strong potential to reveal, because of their liminal characteristics: they are interjencies (or interjacent phases) linking more stable periods of the social order (Turner 1987, 4). During these phases, antagonisms and fissures that underlie and structure day-to-day interactions and power relationships may suddenly come to the surface. I have therefore chosen to limit myself to the ten-day period between the murder and the funeral. Here my approach differs from that of Eyerman, who also seeks to assess the murder's long-term effects on Dutch society, and considers the phase of 'redress' to be much longer (cf. Eyerman 2008, 15-16).

My ethnographic research on the genesis of the Van Gogh memorial started with my departure for the Linnaeusstraat that Tuesday morning around 10 AM, and ended nine days later with the memorial's removal at 8 AM on Wednesday morning, November 10th. Van Gogh was killed a mere five minutes by bicycle from my home, which meant I could stay in the Linnaeusstraat almost all the time.³ Since an ethnography encompassing the entire period of the memorial's existence would be too detailed for the purpose of this article, I have selected certain moments, situations and practices that I consider the most enlightening.⁴

The first hours

The first question when I began to write the ethnography of this memorial was 'where to start?' Where to pinpoint the inception of the memorial? In general, what is the actual moment when a memorial comes into being? At face value, the placing of the first flower or attribute in memoriam of the victim would seem a self-evident starting point, as only then does a memorial actually begin to take its material shape. From another point of view, however, this act is as much the outcome of a chain of actions as it is a starting point: before the eventual act of placing the actor has bought his flowers or written his note, journeyed to the site, after having made up his mind to do so. Another 'natural' starting point of an ethnography would be the murder itself, a starting point I have chosen elsewhere, like many other authors on related topics. However, a murder only becomes a social reality when it is made public through the media. Therefore, I have taken the moment when the news reached me, albeit indirectly, as the starting point of my ethnography.

The radio announcements of an event like the Van Gogh murder may seem the mere passing on of a fact, or a piece of information. However, as I have already indicated, such news has immediate effects in the world and should therefore be seen as a mediation. The symbolic power invested in the media gives their voices the authority required to be effective, that is, 'worthy of being believed, or, in a word *performative*' (Bourdieu 1991, 69-70, italics in original). The Van Gogh murder news established what may be understood as a rupture, a distortion of the equilibrium of relationships that constitute society, an instant suspension of everyday life (cf. Turner 1987, 24). Such suspensions have temporal and spatial dimensions. Temporally, the news of the murder suspended everyday schemes and routines, making people do other things than they would normally have done, and allowing them the time to do so. Time that was already fixed and scheduled became open and empty. Spatially, the news suspended the normal functions of the place where the murder had happened – a bicycle lane and the adjacent main road and sidewalk – and transformed it into a place of mourning, debate and protest, and a hotspot of nationwide attention. This once ordinary part of public space was now delineated as out of the ordinary. To substantiate

what the opening of this, both temporally and spatially, liminal space implied in the case of the Van Gogh murder, I will present a selection of the encounters I had with people on the Linnaeusstraat in the first hours after Van Gogh's death, as well as of my observations of the transformations that the Linnaeusstraat itself underwent.

I arrived in the Linnaeusstraat within two hours after the assassination. As expected – my own actions were in any case entirely based upon the anticipated actions of others – quite a number of people had already gathered, between fifty and one hundred. The street was fenced-off with barriers on both sides, guarded by police officers: Van Gogh's body was still lying there, halfway between the two fences, hidden from view by a blue tent. I decided to stay at the barrier on the Oosterpark side, intuitively the 'main entrance' to the street because this side faces the city centre. The broadcast bus of the NOS, the Dutch national broadcasting organisation, arrived at the same time as I did. Quite a few journalists and their entourages were already present.⁵ More than a mere symbolic boundary, the barriers from the outset functioned as the material demarcation, separating those allowed inside (people 'in' the media, in this case photographers, cameramen and reporters) from 'ordinary people' (i.e., people 'not in' the media), and visualising Couldry's analysis of the naturalised hierarchy and power inequality that go with this categorisation. Simultaneously, the barriers illustrated the strong attraction of 'the place', which as I will explain below, may be understood as the attraction of 'the real' (cf. Lisle 2004, 15).

Everybody present was waiting for the things to happen, which basically meant, as I felt it, the removal of the barriers. Our attention was powerfully drawn to that spot halfway down the street, to the blue tent, the waiting ambulance and the investigators moving around in their astronaut-like attire. During that first hour of waiting, people were quiet, standing around and occasionally engaging in soft conversations. The shared knowledge of what had happened still consisted of sketchy details: the identity of the victim, the ethnic background of the killer, and that Van Gogh had been shot, and possibly a knife had been left, stabbed into his body.

A man, probably in his sixties, standing next to me answered to my question on why he had come, that he felt that by doing so he made a sign of respect to the victim, and that he felt the urge to 'have been there.' He had experienced this feeling before, in particular when Pim Fortuyn had been murdered [see note 2], but also when other people had been killed by 'senseless violence'.⁶ Usually, he added, such events happened somewhere else, in another city and too far away for him. He was unable to leave his wife alone for long, so he never actually went. But the Linnaeusstraat happened to be rather nearby. He had a general feeling that 'society was in decay'. 'Therefore, I had to come and see for myself. In fact, I want to have been there where it happened because this murder will have a great impact.' His explanation points to the interwoven significances of 'place' ('the

place where it happened’) and physical presence (the urge of having been there in person). The man felt the rupture and was seeking to locate himself physically in the event, in this ‘history in the making’, by going there.

These motivations and sentiments are by no means unique or exceptional. Virtually all sites of violence or catastrophe attract vast numbers of people who come to see the sites for themselves. Lisle, in her analysis of tourists ‘gazing at Ground Zero,’ rejects the easy interpretation that these people are just unreflective and merely disaster tourists, because this interpretation ‘fails to account for why people feel the need to gaze upon sites of tragedy in person’ (Lisle 2004, 16, italics in original). Instead, she connects our desire to ‘consume sites of atrocity’ with our desire to touch ‘something real’ (Lisle 2004, 4, 15). Such sites, in her interpretation, are considered the only places left untouched in a world where ‘everything else is mediated, simulated, banal’ (Lisle 2004, 15). The seductive element is their quality of authenticity, the promise of access to the real.

At that moment (about 1 PM), there was no time to reflect on what I was being told. All of a sudden a potted plant in a circle of six round, golden burning candles had appeared on the other side of the barrier. It must have been placed there less than a minute earlier, but unfortunately I had missed it. A man in the crowd standing in front of the plant pointed out the woman who had placed the attributes. I approached her to ask why she had done so, and how she had chosen these attributes. At first, I thought I understood what she was saying, only to suddenly realise I did not.

She started telling me that she was a very, very open-minded person. But that this event was the ‘bloody limit’; that it actually was beyond comprehension that something like this could happen. So far I felt we were on the same track, but then, she began repeating that she was a liberal and hospitable person, and that she had travelled around the world, meeting all kinds of people abroad, and did not resent foreigners at all. But now it had become clear that all of these Arabs really did not belong in our country, and that it would be much better if they all just left: all of them, right now, back to where they had come from. And that it had come this far, gotten this bad, was definitely the fault of Job Cohen [Amsterdam’s mayor], and his soft policies. She was also upset with having to wait here, with nothing happening and the body just lying there. Something needed to be done; a sign had to be made, a ‘sign of respect’ for him. And therefore she had returned to her house – she lived just around the corner – and had brought the plant and the candles because these were the only things in the house that seemed appropriate for the purpose. But that didn’t seem to matter because the only thing that mattered was that a sign of respect had been made.

To me, the account was bewildering and shocking. Within two minutes the woman had reasoned from ‘being liberal and hospitable’ through ‘going abroad and meeting foreigners’ to stating that ‘all Arabs should leave the Netherlands’ and then blaming the mayor in particular. How had all this come to her mind? At

that moment I was sure that this was the extreme standpoint of a single individual. In the subsequent days I would learn that this woman's view was widely shared (although many other opinions came to the fore as well). This viewpoint stated basically that Arabs/Moroccans/Muslims were, in a general way, responsible for the murder of Theo van Gogh, together with everyone in favour of a permissive immigration and integration policy, the epitome of this type being Job Cohen. The immediate impact of the conversation with that woman was that I now saw the attributes she had placed (which for a brief moment constituted the entire Theo van Gogh memorial) in a totally different light: they had transformed from a materialisation of sympathy or respect, into a sign for seclusion and exclusion.



The Theo van Gogh memorial in its earliest stage (November 2, 2004). Photo: Irene Stengs.

Whether other people felt an urge to do something while they seemed to be waiting so long, or whether the appearance of those first attributes triggered others to follow, I cannot tell. But while I was still taking notes of what I had just heard, I noticed that someone had, in the meantime, laid red roses on another spot some ten meters away. I also failed to notice the person who had laid a bunch of yellow roses on that same spot soon afterwards. Next, a man appeared with a bouquet of sunflowers, an attribute indexical to Van Gogh by association,⁷ and a brief note. Soon, bouquets of sunflowers would become the hallmark of the memorial. This association had also been made by others, by inspiration or independently. Next

to the sunflowers, a man placed a film container. He told me that he appreciated Theo van Gogh because of his movies. When he heard about the murder on the radio, he immediately left to bring the container as a tribute to ‘Van Gogh the moviemaker.’

The speedy appearance of mourning attributes made me realise that something similar might be happening on the other side of the fenced-off part of the street. Or would the general perception be that this side was the street’s main entrance and hence ‘the place to be’? I forced myself to leave and have a look over there. It was much quieter by the other barrier, with only a few ‘media people’ and two police officers keeping around thirty bystanders at bay. A few meters behind the barrier, a portrait of MP Ayaan Hirsi Ali had been laid on the bicycle lane, partly covered by a bouquet of sunflowers. The sunflowers had clearly not been freshly purchased but came from a vase; the portrait was torn from a magazine. The poignant juxtaposition with the blue tent down the street evoked a possible future in a split second: Ayaan Hirsi Ali as the next victim. Not long before (September 2004), Ayaan Hirsi Ali and Theo van Gogh had co-produced *Submission*, a controversial short movie highlighting the relationship between the abuse of Muslim women and the Koran. The murder cast a shadow over the fate of this strongly anti-Islam MP, a former Muslim herself. Texts had been written around her portrait as incantations to prevent a similar fate from befalling Hirsi Ali. Two of the texts were clearly visible from behind the barrier: the Sixth Commandment *Thou shalt not kill* and the sentence *Keep your bloody paws off our bloody little A.*⁸ Both messages allow for more than one interpretation. The biblical commandment could be read as, ‘Thou shalt not kill Ayaan Hirsi Ali’, but, in a broader sense, may be seen as a religious conviction of the Van Gogh killer and his – then still presumed – religious motivation. The second message requires a more extensive explanation for those who are not familiar with the details of Dutch politics. First of all, it is a rephrasing of the famous WWII Amsterdam expression ‘Bloody Huns, keep your bloody paws off our bloody Jews’, but the connection here was probably indirect. A few years earlier, the expression had been rephrased by Amsterdam mayor Job Cohen, in a tête-à-tête with the then Amsterdam alderman for Education, Youth and Integration, on the evening after the city council elections in 2002. Unaware that the conversation was being recorded by a television crew, the alderman had spoken of ‘fucking Moroccans’ and the mayor’s sound reply had been “but they are *our* ‘fucking Moroccans’”. At the time, the broadcast had led to considerable controversy. The rephrasing of this saying on the Hirsi Ali portrait thus carried an anti-discrimination message and seemed to show support for Job Cohen in the political debate on the integration issue, and opposed to the opinion voiced by the woman quoted above, for instance.



Portrait of former MP Ayaan Hirsi Ali with sunflowers on the Linnaeusstraat bicycle lane. In the background the blue tent covering Van Gogh's body. Photo: Irene Stengs.

Because not much was happening at this second barrier, I returned to the other side of the fenced-off area. The 'sunflower annex film container spot' was already developing into a more extensive memorial. The film container was almost covered now by bouquets of flowers and candles had been lit. Cigarettes had appeared as a new kind of attribute. Van Gogh had been an enthusiastic smoker,

and, in direct opposition to the general tenor of the times, was an ardent campaigner for the right to smoke. Meanwhile, an ‘ordinary person’ had dared to enter the ‘in the media’ area: he had confined himself to the task of arranging and rearranging the memorial, and (re)lighting the candles. To an outsider he may have looked like an ordinary citizen; as a fieldworker on memorial sites in Amsterdam, however, I recognised him from earlier sites where he had performed the same self-assigned tasks as a ‘ritual expert’. Someone, for instance, had placed a small cactus – the first of many to follow – a direct reference to Van Gogh (‘sharp and cutting’) and his former television programme ‘A Pleasant Conversation’ (*Een prettig gesprek*). Van Gogh always concluded his talk show by presenting a cactus to his guests, which they had to kiss (as a symbolic act to demonstrate that they were not afraid of the consequences of their actions). The ‘ordinary person/ritual expert’ moved the cactus to a more central place, that is, on top of the film container. It is my observation that such ‘ritual experts’ are part and parcel of virtually all public mourning sites and related events.

His task allowed the ‘ritual expert’ to stay behind the barrier, and within the boundaries of the police and media space. The possibility for other ordinary people to transgress the fenced-in area for a brief moment to bring their attributes to the evolving memorial further illustrates this potential of ritual. If the barrier had only been placed there to demarcate the zone of police investigation, nobody would have been allowed to cross. Yet, the presence of the media in this zone also lent it the character of a media space. The media, however, were present in anticipation of the common ritual responses to an exceptional death, by public violence or of a celebrity. This anticipation had already transformed the place into a ritual space, and the inherent liminal character of the anticipated ritual granted the transgressability of the boundaries. Once entered into this ‘ritual space of the media’ people cannot but perform: they present themselves and their opinions, implicit or overt, intentionally or not.

Freedom of Speech

Right from the beginning, written messages more or less explicitly expressed the concerns of those who had brought them to the place of the catastrophe. Even the first bunch of sunflowers already carried a note revealing a glimpse of what would soon appear to be a major field of contestation connected with the Van Gogh murder. The note read: *A freedom fighter has been murdered, farewell Theo, Hein.*⁹ Freedom, in this perspective, referred in particular to freedom of speech, one of Van Gogh’s primary hallmarks being his perpetual voicing of blunt opinions on sensitive matters.

The second note that was added to the memorial also addressed the topic of ‘freedom of speech’:

Dear Theo! 2-11'04
 Freedom of expression... What are we heading for?
 Will nobody dare to say anything anymore soon...
 When will this finally get through to them in The Hague?
 How many more to come? How many more to go?! Senseless!
 See you in heaven
 xxx Maaike ¹⁰

The topic of 'freedom of speech' echoed a public outcry similar to that surrounding the murder of rising populist politician Pim Fortuyn on May 6, 2002, generally considered to be the first political murder victim in the Netherlands since 1672.¹¹ The well-clad, edgy and charismatic politician – popular because he voiced otherwise taboo topics on 'immigrants' lack of adaptation', 'the backwardness of Islamic culture', and the 'danger of the Islamisation of our culture' – had made *Loquendi Libertatum Custodiamus* ('let us guard the freedom of speech') his motto. Fortuyn's famous saying was 'I am a man who says what he thinks and does what he says.' Hence, his murder was regarded as the silencing of free speech.¹²

In an article on the sacralisation of mediated images in Sweden and Finland, Sumiala-Seppänen and Stocchetti (2005) use the concept of 'diachronic association' to understand such echoes in relation to the Swedish response to the death of Anna Lindh (murdered in 2003). In their words: 'The main distinctive characteristic of diachronically established comparisons is that they create a sort of continuity between events happening in different spaces and at different times' (Sumiala-Seppänen and Stocchetti 2005, 242-243). The murder of Anna Lindh became associated diachronically with the death of Olof Palme, the Prime Minister of Sweden, who was murdered in 1986. Significant traits in this particular association are that both victims were politicians; politicians who, in accordance with the Swedish ideal of democracy, lived without bodyguards or any protection, among the people instead of being separated from the people, and hence, by implication were committed to the same ideals (*ibid.*, 243).

Likewise, the main diachronic association of the death of Theo van Gogh is with the death of Pim Fortuyn. Both murders were political murders that happened against a background of increasing tension regarding the issues of immigration and integration. Although Fortuyn was a politician and Van Gogh was an artist, they shared similar controversial (that is, at the time, 'politically incorrect') opinions on Islam, Muslims, and their integration into Dutch society, opinions which they openly and frequently voiced in public. Despite the fact that both victims were killed by assassins from entirely different backgrounds,¹³ their deaths were interpreted along parallel lines: Fortuyn was murdered because he 'said what he thought' while Van Gogh was murdered because of his frank and uncompromising use of 'freedom of speech.'



The Theo van Gogh memorial site (November 3, 2004). Photo: Irene Stengs.

Sumiala-Seppänen and Stocchetti argue that a diachronic association has a scaring and a reassuring potential, ‘scaring because it shows the continued presence of this type of death for people who represent the wider national community and its values (...)’ and ‘reassuring because it institutionalises this type of death, it makes it familiar, it prescribes the appropriate behaviour and the nature of the collective response’ (ibid.). With regard to ‘scaring’, the diachronic associations

evoked by the Van Gogh murder are that of political murder aimed at silencing the free word and erasing civic society, and the ruthless evil of indiscriminate, uncontrolled violence against the moral order of that society. With respect to reassurance, the diachronic associations determined, or in the words of Sumiala-Seppänen and Stocchetti, prescribed the ritual to follow, and, in the case of the Van Gogh murder, the memorial was only one dimension. However, I would like to add to Sumiala-Seppänen and Stocchetti's more conceptual approach that diachronic (and all other) associations become visible only in and through actions inspired by the event. Or, in other words, the ritualised practices that follow such an event are part of and shape a new reality that is produced and altered in the actions. This reality is not clear-cut and one-dimensional, but ambiguous and a matter of contestation. Like any other memorial, the Theo van Gogh memorial was a materialised political confrontation and a site of negotiations about interpretations.

Relocation, crisis

Around 3:30 PM a hearse carried Theo van Gogh's body away from the Linnaeusstraat. Instantaneously, people from the Amsterdam sanitation department arrived to carefully collect, with the assistance of the 'ritual expert' introduced earlier, all of the attributes on a small lorry for transportation, to rearrange – or should I say 'translate' – them into a memorial on the spot where Van Gogh had died. Subsequently, the barriers were removed, an act which had a – for me – unforeseen effect on everybody gathered there, including myself. We all rushed to the memorial at a quickened pace, as if attracted by a magnetic force. I found the moment weird and also embarrassing: what were we heading for, after all?

Again, I want to return to Lisle's analysis of the need to see for oneself. Following Jenny Edkins in her discussion of Dachau concentration camp tourists, Lisle speaks of a 'need to face the horror' (Edkins quoted in Lisle 2004, 16). Gazing at catastrophes reveals a voyeuristic need, which entails both attraction and repulsion. In the Linnaeusstraat, we all knew that we would find a small memorial; consisting of the attributes we had just seen before, on the spot where Van Gogh had been killed. The attraction to the place implied a forbidden desire to see traces of the violence ('the real') conducted a few hours earlier, a desire fed by the knowledge that such traces, should these indeed be visible, would fill us with abhorrence. This desire for the object of horror is taboo, which accounts for the embarrassment experienced by myself, and no doubt by others as well. In Lisle's words: '[we] were driven by the possibility of witnessing something authentic, but shamed by the voyeurism required to gaze upon "the real"' (ibid., 17).

The place of the murder, as argued above, had been 'delineated out of the ordinary', which was also materially manifest from the site of the memorial being fenced-off. This did not imply that the boundaries of the site had become fully

determined. In the hours and days that followed, city officials adjusted the barriers to the expanding collection of flowers, drawings, notes and objects. The conversations and the initial attributes discussed above, already indicate the main themes of the social crisis:

- the danger of Islam
- weak politics and politicians, in particular on issues of immigration and assimilation
- the decay of Dutch society and Dutch values (tolerance and freedom of speech in particular)
- (senseless) violence as a social problem



Detail of the memorial site, showing various more or less political messages. The red text reads: 'What's to me today, tomorrow to us. Because it does not get beyond words again.' Photo: Irene Stengs.

The phase of crisis is a phase of 'people taking sides' (Turner 1982, 108). Many of the expressions of sympathy for Van Gogh and his opinions at the memorial site voiced people's opinions and sentiments about the above-mentioned issues. These took the form of personal messages directed either at Theo van Gogh, the bereaved, the killer or various politicians, or more generally formulated texts directed at society, Islam, the government, or humanity. Next to the various photographs of Theo van Gogh, one could also find drawings (children's as well as

adult's), cartoons,¹⁴ and small installations . In the days to follow, more and more people brought their messages carefully sealed or otherwise protected from the wet November weather, counteracting as it were, their ephemerality and demonstrating that they were meant to last and remain legible as long as possible.

Most of the messages were brief and plain, such as a sheet of white paper with the text: 'the Netherlands = country of mediators.'¹⁵ Or, on the bottom of a cardboard box: 'A true Muslim would never do such a thing.'¹⁶ Or, on a sheet of orange paper:¹⁷ 'If you don't agree with these beautiful Netherlands, move to another country. Be aware that this path will take you nowhere. This is no way of speaking, NOWHERE. N +J.'¹⁸ Or a framed text that simply said: Islam = Islaf, meaning in effect: 'Islam is cowardly.'¹⁹ Others had expressed similar opinions in full-page notes. Although I never witnessed anybody removing an attribute from the memorial, some censorship existed. One example was a card, probably placed on Thursday morning November 4, that had disappeared that same afternoon. The card depicted a man who, while penetrating a goat, turns his head to a volcano erupting in the background. The attached text read: 'Freedom of speech takes precedence over religion. Fundamentalist goat fuckers forget this.'²⁰



'Leftist wallies for Cohen', an expression of disdain for Amsterdam mayor Job Cohen's so-called 'soft, leftist policy'. Photo: Irene Stengs.

An illustration of what could be called a ‘mini-installation’ was comprised of a small transparent box filled with wads of cotton, that had been placed there on the evening of the first day. The Dutch word for wad (*watje*) is also slang for a wally, a softie. Texts on the box read: ‘wads for Cohen’, and ‘leftist wallies’,²¹ the latter referring to the Dutch labour party (Partij van de Arbeid), of which mayor Job Cohen is a prominent member. A dunce’s cap with the text: ‘Hey old fatty, your stretched-out leg will be missed’,²² visualised a common perception of Van Gogh as society’s court jester, ready to trip somebody up.

Citizens took sides and urged authorities and politicians to take appropriate measures, with the general anxiety being that the murder might release a chain reaction of violent actions between autochthonous and Muslim or allochton Dutch. The first redressive initiative had already been taken on the day of the murder. In his press conference of Tuesday afternoon (1 PM), the mayor made a general appeal for people to come to the Dam Square in Amsterdam that evening for a mass ‘noise wake’.²³ Precisely the use of cultural performances – which potentially encompasses any genre ‘from tribal rituals to TV specials’ – is characteristic of this third, redressive phase (Turner 1982, 108). In the next section I will present the noise wake as such a kind of ritualised cultural performance that is meant to redress the crisis and yet articulates its contents at the same time.

Redressing the crisis

The idea of a ‘noise wake’ had come up in the context of the ‘usual’ response to manslaughter or other cases of lethal violence in the public domain, the silent march. Mayor Job Cohen had supposedly first suggested organising a silent march. This suggestion would have been turned down by Van Gogh’s family and friends because Van Gogh detested silent marches: a noisy event seemed a more appropriate commemoration. The manifestation was set to start at 8 PM, preceded by the sounding of the bells of all of Amsterdam’s churches and the blowing of train whistles at Amsterdam Central Station, which is well within hearing distance from the place of the wake, Dam Square.

As I approached Dam Square, I became part of a fast-growing stream of people heading in the same direction. Suddenly, I became aware of the ringing bells of the nearby Zuidertoren, and then I began hearing other bells as well. An enormous crowd filled the entire Dam Square from the Royal Palace to the Krasnapolsky Hotel, from the Bijenkorf Department Store to Madame Tussaud’s Wax Museum.²⁴ In response to the call to bring anything that could produce noise as a token of protest, people had brought frying pans, pan lids, whistles, drums, trumpets, amplifiers, ghetto blasters, firecrackers, etc. The majority of the public was ‘white’, and included adults as well as children. One sign read: ‘Headscarves off, Cohen out’.²⁵ Somewhere in the middle of the crowd, someone waved a Pim Fortuyn flag. The main stage stood in front of the Royal Palace. Furthermore, the

live television broadcast of the event was shown on a large screen next to the podium.

Television producer Lennart Booij, a pupil and friend of Theo van Gogh, opened the event by inviting everyone to make a deafening noise. The noise, symbolically led by a bass drum on stage, lasted eight minutes. Then Mayor Cohen and the Minister of Immigration and Integration (Rita Verdonk) gave brief speeches. As Verdonk and Cohen represented opposite ends of the political spectrum on the issue of immigration and Islam— the mayor a moderate and the minister a hard-liner – their appearances and speeches provoked both applause and noise from the various constituencies in the crowd. The mayor in his speech emphasised the unanimous disgust and rejection of the murder by Amsterdam’s citizens; the Minister declared in return that ‘the limit had been reached’. The speeches were followed by two minutes of ‘deafening silence’.



The noise wake at Dam Square in Amsterdam. The screen showed alternating views of the speakers and the crowd (November 2, 2004). Photo: Irene Stengs.

Towards the end of the noise wake, the diachronic association between Pim Fortuyn and Theo Van Gogh was powerfully expressed. All of a sudden ‘Pim Fortuyn’ appeared in the huge round window on the top floor of Madame Tussaud’s. Fortuyn’s wax statue could be seen watching the crowd far below, which provoked extra outbursts of yelling and other noise.²⁶ The event lasted for about 25 min-

utes; the drummer announced the end with another brief bit of drumming, joined again by noise from the crowd in the square. Then many people began to leave, while others chose to stay behind to make more noise, or to play music and dance, which altogether produced a kind of festive atmosphere.

Besides the actual happening, the noise wake was also broadcast live as a political event of an extraordinary order, or, in other words, a 'media event'. Media events, according to Couldry's reworking of Dayan and Katz's *Media Events* (1992), are 'large scale event-based media-focused narratives where the claims associated with the myth of the mediated centre are particularly intense' (Couldry 2003, 67). I have selected two aspects of the national broadcast that illustrate how Couldry's analysis helps us to understand how media construct social power during such events. As authorised interpreters of social reality, the joint national public broadcasting organisations were able to focus on or exclude aspects of the happening (initially announced by a television presenter as a 'noise march'). First of all, I would like to emphasise that many of the participating politicians received individual attention with them being shown in close-up, which was often accompanied by details of who they were and their specific political affiliations (some were even briefly interviewed). In this way, the national broadcast created and sustained the idea that the centre of society was temporarily located at Dam Square, and that the selected people-in-the-media represented that centre. Second, the broadcast also played a redressive role, stressing the societally positive side of the public's responses. During the entire event the camera alternated between shots of the speakers and close-ups of the public holding their various signs, banners and noise-makers. For instance, some signs that read: 'No assassinations in the name of my Islam' and 'Muslims against violence' were clearly shown at least twice.²⁷ In contrast, however, signs like 'Headscarves off, Cohen out', the Pim Fortuyn flag and other messages of a similar political nature were not featured and mostly just skimmed over in the passing of the camera. This, however, did not prevent some anti-Muslim violence from occurring. In the aftermath of the assassination, several Muslim schools and mosques in provincial towns became the targets of (attempted) arson.

Closure

In the above sections I have delineated the period between the murder and the funeral as a period of liminality, a period in which the polity sought to heal the fissure, through a series of redressive measures and performances. The performances, both organised and unorganised, allowed Dutch society to present itself to itself, which made this liminal phase also essentially reflexive (cf. Turner 1982, 75). The opinions, criticism and advice articulated in the rituals provided society, as it were, with feedback on its current state. For the sake of clarity, 'closure' means the closure of a crisis phase as such. It did not mean an end to the hostile

atmosphere that surrounded the issues of immigration and Islam, which was to remain hardened for the years to come.

In addition to the noise wake and the memorial (a material articulation of both crisis and redress), the redressive performances after Van Gogh's murder also included two other major rituals that are discussed below. In both instances, the organising parties attempted to redress the crisis by addressing the topics of contestation that concerned them specifically. Their efforts may also be interpreted as attempts to render the crisis as meaningful by converting certain values into the system (see Turner 1982, 75-76).

– On Wednesday November 3, various neighbourhood organisations organised a march from the local Al-Kabir mosque to the memorial site. The march was primarily meant to be a protest against violence in general. Furthermore, the aim of the march was to demonstrate the organisations' collective commitment to a civic society that consists of people from a broad variety of ethnicities and religions. In the meeting in the mosque that preceded the march, Amsterdam's alderman of social affairs and education Ahmed Aboutaleb, himself a Dutch-Moroccan, specifically addressed the Moroccan community, albeit subtly, by stating that

'there is no place for people who do not share the fundamental values of an open society, such as Dutch society. The freedom of religion, the freedom of speech and the non-discrimination principle are the most important of these values. Everyone who does not share these core values should be wise and leave'.²⁸

This citation was repeated over and over by the media and became 'the moment' of the march. Aboutaleb was invited onto numerous television shows and interviewed time and again in the week that followed.

– On Tuesday November 9, the Dutch-Moroccan Cooperative Organizations of Amsterdam²⁹ organised a bicycle tour, 'Cycling for Togetherness',³⁰ from the west side of Amsterdam to the east. The route was symbolic: Mohammed B., the assassin, was from Amsterdam-West, while Theo van Gogh was from Amsterdam-East. The tour ended in Oosterpark, the public park bordering the Linnaeusstraat, where the bicyclists gathered under the motto 'Murdered for speaking out. We Don't Accept Extremism'.³¹

Tuesday, November 9th had been chosen for the bicycle tour because the cremation ceremony was to take place that evening. Although we should acknowledge that social crises can never be entirely 'solved', this ceremony, with its mixture of ritual and some almost entertaining contributions, came closest to a closure of the liminal period. The ceremony was well covered by the media, making it another highpoint of the interconnectedness between ritual, space and media.

Van Gogh was cremated at the Nieuwe Oosterbegraafplaats, a cemetery on the eastern edge of Amsterdam, not far from where Van Gogh had lived and not far from where he was killed. By exception, the cemetery was closed to the general public for the cremation ceremony. Besides distinguishing people with a personal relationship to the deceased from the general public, the spatial arrangements also provided a hierarchical division within the latter category. Admission to the cemetery's auditorium, where the actual farewell ceremony was held, was restricted to family and intimates of the deceased. The latter included, because of the nature of Van Gogh's activities, many people from the media (producers and celebrities). A large tent had been set up next to the auditorium for public figures, politicians and government representatives, journalists and other people who had not been part of Van Gogh's inner circle, but who had been invited because his death was a public occasion. In the tent, the service could be followed on a television screen. Another space had been delineated on the street in front of the cemetery entrance. Here, people who had not been personally invited gathered to follow the ceremony on a large screen. They included people from his neighbourhood and from Amsterdam, lesser journalists, activists, researchers, and everybody else who felt the urge to be there, which ended up being about 500 in total.

The ceremony was broadcast live on national television so that the general public could follow the event in the private spaces of their homes. Again, as I will show, the selection of images and the general format of the presentation made this media event more than just some neutral documentation of 'things taking place.' The broadcast provided closure in a way that serves as a good example of how media work to affirm and construct social bonding (cf. Couldry 2003, 66).

To understand the broadcast's potential, I would first like to mention the selection of Maartje van Weegen to provide the voice-over commentary. This television commentator is well known for her coverage of royal funerals, marriages and other official and royal events. Her voice made the ceremony perceptible as a national event. At the same time, her voice also gave credence and an air of national importance to the media themselves, albeit implicitly. The choice of Maartje van Weegen clearly illustrates Couldry's observation that, in the context of media events, 'media work hardest to ground the representational authority on which they rely for their everyday practice' (Couldry 2003, 69).

Another significant detail of the broadcast was the decision to skip the actual opening of the ceremony (a solo by a well-known Dutch violinist) and instead provide the audience with a day-to-day chronology of 'the most important news items' from November 2 until November 9. Each day was presented in the form of an obituary, a broad white frame with the respective dates in black. The design was inspired by the title of Van Gogh's film about the assassination of Pim Fortuyn, 0605, which in its turn had rephrased 9-11. A collage of images provided summaries of each day within the white frame. In this way, the media gave the Van Gogh murder and its aftermath a narrative structure, with a beginning (0211)

and an end (ογΙΙ).³² And by doing so, they led the way towards the forging of a closure of the crisis.

During the speeches, close-ups of the speakers alternated with close-ups of celebrities (including politicians) and, less frequently, with images of the audience out on the street, again re-establishing the authority of the television medium. The images of the ordinary people on the street made them 'representatives of the people' for the time being, rather than the select company of politicians in the restricted area. Each speech, including the opening speech by Van Gogh's mother, was rewarded with applause in the auditorium, in the tent and out on the street. This applause expressed support and unity, and therefore added to the closure potential of the event, but also intensified the event's performance character.³³ Important in this respect were the remarks about recent anti-Muslim attacks made in several of the speeches. According to the speakers, Theo would have strongly condemned these as the opposite of free speech.

Thus, we not only have to acknowledge the ritual power of the media in such societal events, but also their active involvement in them, and the deliberate choices they make. For family and friends, the cremation ceremony meant the closure of a hectic and chaotic period. They could now begin with a period of more private mourning. For society in general, the broadcast of the ceremony also meant the closure of a hectic and chaotic period. Now, society could return to normal, albeit with increased tensions. In fact, a few more violent incidents against Muslims occurred after the broadcast, but the threat of violence that had lingered in the atmosphere, gradually faded away.

Memorial space

In conclusion, I return to the relationship between ritual, media and space, first by analysing the different spaces in which people participated in the cremation ceremony, or at least followed it, and then wrapping it up with the spatial and 'spacial' character of the memorial. The cemetery's auditorium is without any doubt a ritual space. Here the bereaved gathered to create the ceremony through their joint presence and actions. As in all ritual, mere presence is already a form of participation. The people in the tent were therefore also part of the ceremony. As a demarcated space in the precincts of the cemetery, the tent was also a ritual space. The screen and the cameras played special roles in this arrangement. From the perspective of the people in the tent, the screen mediated their presence into the 'actual' ceremony. The same arguments can be made for the demarcated area out on the street and the people who stood there watching the screen. Their presence meant that they had accepted the explicit invitation extended to the general public to attend the ceremony at that location. From a broader perspective, which includes the televising of the ceremony on national television, the people in the auditorium, in the tent and on the street occupied the same ritualised space. The

same line of reasoning can be extended to include the 1.9 million people who watched the cremation ceremony in their living rooms. In effect, the ritual space of the cemetery auditorium reached into their rooms, incorporating these into the same ritualised space for a period of time. The conclusion we may draw from this is that television, as a live mass medium, demonstrates that ritualised space is a social construct rather than a localised spatiality.³⁴



'Will be removed on November 10, 2004, 7:30 AM, upon the Van Gogh family's request'.
Photo: Irene Stengs.

On Wednesday, November 10 at 7.30 AM on the morning after Theo van Gogh's cremation, the sanitation department eventually removed the memorial from the Linnaeusstraat 'at the request of the Van Gogh family'.³⁵ Notice boards announcing this had been placed at the memorial site on November 8. Hardly anybody, had deemed the memorial's removal significant or interesting. There was no audience except for an occasional passer-by, maybe a single journalist, and myself. This absence of any audience confirms the above conclusion that the crisis had been closed on Tuesday, November 9, with the cremation ceremony. The Theo van Gogh memorial site ceased to be, in Couldry's terms, a media-related space after the cremation ceremony. Consequently, the clear-up of the site – one might even wonder if it can still be called a memorial site at this stage – was not part of the ritualised events, but an ordinary part of public service. The silent ending of the Theo van Gogh memorial site empirically illustrates the core proposition of this essay: that in cases of public deaths, memorial sites and their mediations are totally intertwined. Far more than localised spatialities, these memorial sites are social spaces that stretch out and act as far as the media reach. More generally speaking, the study of present-day politics of mourning involves the study of memorial spaces rather than of concrete memorial sites like the Theo van Gogh memorial.

Notes

1. My gratitude goes to Jeroen Beets for his useful comments and his assistance with the editing. I also want to thank Jennifer Long for her careful reading of the draft.
2. I would like to add that also the creative, individual contributions and elaborations that fit the situation as well as the deceased form a specific practice within the general ritual repertoire.
3. I should add here that Van Gogh's death left me in quite an emotional state myself. Although Dutch politics and society had become increasingly polarised since 9/11 and the assassination of the Dutch politician Pim Fortuyn in 2002, it was incomprehensible that 'we' had suddenly now reached a stage where artists and intellectuals had to fear for their lives. So, I went to the Linnaeusstraat as an anthropologist, but at the same time as a Dutch person, an Amsterdammer, an Amsterdam intellectual and a person from the neighbourhood.
4. My research at the memorial site consisted mainly of following and recording the evolution of the memorial as precisely as possible. I thus regularly photographed the entire memorial and as many details as possible. Primary observations included how people were present at the site: the manner in which they presented their attributes to the memorial; how they moved around and behaved; how people engaged in conversations or remained silent; and the topics of conversation. Moreover, I paid attention to the presence of the media; what media, when, where and what they did (filming, interviewing, recording conversations).

5. The desk offices of several major Dutch newspapers (*De Volkskrant*, *Het Parool*, *NRC Handelsblad*) and several commercial broadcasting companies are located within five minutes distance from the Linnaeusstraat.
6. On the Dutch notion of 'senseless violence' (*zinloos geweld*), see Blok 1991, 2001; Stengs 2003, 2007; Vasterman 2004. On the public commemorations of Pim Fortuyn, see Colombijn 2007; Margry 2007.
7. Via the famous 'Sunflowers' painting by Vincent van Gogh (Theo van Gogh's great-uncle).
8. In Dutch: 'Ge zult niet doden' and 'Blijf met je rotpoten van onze rot A'tje.'
9. In Dutch: 'Een vrijheidsstrijder is vermoord, vaarwel Theo, Hein.'
10. In Dutch: 'Lieve Theo! 2-11-04. Vrijheid van meningsuiting...Waar gaan we heen? Durft straks niemand meer wat te zeggen.... Wanneer dringt dit écht door in Den Haag? Hoeveel moeten er nog komen? Hoeveel moeten er nog gaan?! Zinloos! See you in heaven. xxx Maaiké
11. In 1672, the De Wit brothers (politically influential figures) were lynched as scapegoats during a complex political and economic crisis. The murder of Fortuyn is rather associated with the primordial political murder in the Netherlands, that of William I, Prince of Orange in 1584. William I was killed by order of Philip II, King of Spain for his role in the Netherlands' declaration of independence from Spain.
12. During my fieldwork at the Pim Fortuyn memorial sites, this type of freedom seemed to be absent, however. I have never felt so strongly censored as in the tense atmosphere there. Any 'wrong' remark seemed particularly dangerous.
13. Pim Fortuyn was murdered by Volkert van der G., who is generally referred to as a 'leftist animal rights activist'.
14. Cartoons by at least two well-known Dutch cartoonists (Joep Bertram, Gregorius Nekschot) were left at the memorial site (although we have to consider the possibility that these cartoons only resembled their styles).
15. In Dutch: 'Nederland = land van bruggenbouwers' (literally 'bridge builders').
16. In Dutch: 'Een echte Moslim doet zoiets niet.'
17. Orange is the Dutch national color (see note 8 on the Prince of Orange).
18. In Dutch: 'Als je het niet eens bent met dit mooie Nederland, ga dan naar een ander land. Weet dat je op deze weg nergens komt. Dit is niet de manier van spreken. NERGENS. N+J.'
19. The Dutch word *laf* means coward.
20. In Dutch: 'Het vrije woord gaat boven religie. Dat vergeten fundamentalistische geitenneukers.' The card and the text refer to Van Gogh's infamous description of fundamentalist Muslim men as 'goat fuckers'.
21. In Dutch: 'Watjes voor Cohen' and 'Linkse watjes'.
22. In Dutch: 'Hé, ouwe vetzak, Je gestrekte been zal gemist worden.'
23. Dam Square is not just the main square in Amsterdam, but also the symbolic heart of the nation, featuring a Royal Palace for important ceremonies of state, the New Church (the scene of coronation ceremonies), and the national World War II monument.
24. Eventually, approximately 25,000 people participated in the noise wake.
25. In Dutch: 'Hoofdhoekjes af, Cohen weg'.
26. In the course of the gathering, a memorial had evolved around the national World War II monument. The memorial resembled the Linnaeusstraat memorial in many of

its details: cacti, cigarettes, anti-senseless-violence messages, film containers, sunflowers, bottles of beer and wine. Even the self-nominated 'ritual expert' I had met earlier that afternoon was present to rearrange everything to his personal liking. With a burning torch in his hand, he seemed to be the guardian of this spot. Towards the end of the wake, a new category of attributes appeared in the memorial when many people left their signs, banners, whistles, pans and wooden spoons behind.

27. In Dutch: 'Geen moorden in naam van mijn Islam' and 'Moslims tegen geweld'.
28. The speech is still available at http://www.oost-watergraafsmeer.nl/nieuws_en/nieuws/algemeen/2004-2006/dossier_theo_van.
29. In Dutch: 'de Samenwerkende Nederlands-Marokkaanse Organisaties Amsterdam'.
30. In Dutch: 'Fietsen voor Verbondenheid'.
31. In Dutch: 'Vermoord om het Woord. Extremisme pikken wij niet'.
32. The Dutch and European method of noting dates as day/month/year is the opposite of the American order (g/11).
33. It is not a Dutch custom to respond to funeral speeches with applause. Public funerals are occasionally different, however. The waiting public, for instance, applauded when the hearse carrying the body of Pim Fortuyn passed by (as did the public who had come to witness Princess Diana's funeral procession).
34. This argument is largely a revised version of an earlier article (see Stengs 2010).
35. The memorial at Van Gogh's house was indeed removed. After consultation with the bereaved, the objects constituting the memorial are now kept in the Amsterdam City Archives. 600 of the notes and pictures have been restored and preserved and are also on permanent display on the Archives' website.

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