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## Commemorating Victims of 'Senseless Violence': Negotiating Ethnic Inclusion and Exclusion

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## Chapter 8

# Commemorating Victims of ‘Senseless Violence’: Negotiating Ethnic Inclusion and Exclusion<sup>1</sup>

Irene Stengs

Terrorist attacks, natural disasters, high profile killings or the deaths of public figures – these dramatic events appear to evoke similar public responses in many places in the world. Many will therefore recognise a scene of people placing candles, flowers, portraits and other mementos in a public place as a mourning ritual. The shared repertoire suggests shared intentions and meanings. Yet, behind the objects and practices involved lies a world of messages, morals and politics that is deeply embedded in the local society. Ethnological research into public mourning ritual is therefore by implication a study of the relationship between contemporary cultural and political processes in a particular society.

This contribution investigates the relationship between public commemorative ritual, narrative, and place. The empirical focus will be on public ritual in commemoration of victims killed through so-called *zinloos geweld* (‘senseless violence’). In the Netherlands, ‘senseless violence’ evolved during the 1990s into a highly specific concept and societal concern. As we will see, however, the concept does not describe a specific form of violence, but rather should be seen as a moral category condemning a range of violent behaviour (cf. Stengs 2003; Vasterman 2004).<sup>2</sup> A sudden concern with a fairly specific category of evil is not unique to contemporary Dutch society. In the United States, for example, a comparable concept accompanied by a comparable social concern is ‘random violence’ a category covering an even wider variety of ‘unpredictable threats’ (cf. Best 1999: 2).<sup>3</sup> Another example may be

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1 My gratitude goes to Jeroen Beets, Ron Eyerman and Lizzy van Leeuwen for their useful comments. I would like to thank Jeroen Beets and Richard Blake for editing the text.

2 The response to the so-called ‘MP3-murder’ in Brussels (April 2006) shows that the expression *zinloos geweld* has become the common term to label excessive social violence in the Flemish-speaking part of Belgium as well.

3 In the United States the expression ‘senseless violence’ is used in the specific context of protests against ‘senseless gun violence’; that is, protests against the enormous death toll of the nation’s wide-spread gun ownership (approximately 30,000 a year, see <http://www.silentmarch.org>). In Germany the rarely used expression *sinnlose Gewalt* refers to cases of violent death, terrorism or vandalism. In Indonesia the idea of ‘senseless violence’ is associated

found in the fear of satanist child abuse which haunted Great-Britain in the 1980s and early 1990s (cf. La Fontaine 1998).

For the Netherlands, the public outbursts of grief and anger surrounding 'senseless violence' have been approached from the perspectives in particular of trauma and coping (Post et al. 2003), moral panics (Beunders 2002), and media and media hypes (Vasterman 2004). Based on ethnographic research, this study offers an additional perspective by exploring the specific roles of narrative and ritual in the construction of 'senseless violence' as a societal issue. This perspective, however, requires the acknowledgement that the concrete narratives and rituals take place within the media-shaped landscape of modern society, without which they 'would not make the sense, or have the resonance that they do' (Couldry 2003: 13). In fact, the entire subject of this study owes its very existence and form to modern media, and is only accessible as an object of research through these media.

In this chapter, I demonstrate how, in the process of the framing of a sequence of victims as 'victims of senseless violence', the various narratives elaborate other, underlying, issues. As we will see, the rituals performed may be partly interpreted as a ritual confirmation of such framing. From another perspective, the apparent unity displayed during the rituals will prove to be questionable. In the ritual process social boundaries are set and negotiated (cf. Cohen 1985; Hughes-Freeland and Crain 1998). In other words, the rituals are vehicles for processes of inclusion and exclusion. In the polarised Dutch society of today, the main divisions tend to follow ethnic lines. In some of the cases presented in this study, 'senseless violence' and the related rituals have been used by those on one or both sides of the line either to exclude others or to claim their inclusion within Dutch society.

My point of departure will be a case that is of interest because of several interrelated issues. Firstly, there was serious controversy over whether or not the casualty could properly be labelled a 'victim of senseless violence', and over what, if any, ritual was appropriate. Secondly, unlike in earlier cases, the victim had a Dutch-Moroccan background, and the controversy therefore inescapably had an ethnic dimension. Finally, the fatal incident had not occurred 'just anywhere', but not far from the place where movie director Theo van Gogh had been brutally murdered by a Dutch-Moroccan Muslim fanatic two months earlier. Because of this coincidence, the relationship between these two cases allows for a better understanding of the significance of 'place' in the politics of ritual.

### **Blaming the Victim?**

On the early evening of Monday, 17 January 2005, a young man snatched a handbag from a woman who had stopped her car at a pedestrian crossing in Amsterdam. He then fled on a scooter with a companion. The woman responded by pursuing the scooter, driving in reverse. In doing so she hit the scooter, and the collision left the bag

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with ineffective violence, for example a robber who cuts off a woman's hand without taking her bracelet (see Van Leeuwen 2005: 208–209).

snatcher dead. His companion fled the scene. The Amsterdam newspaper *Het Parool* opened the next day with the headline 'Woman runs over and kills bag snatcher in [Amsterdam] East.' The newspaper described how in the course of that evening, while the police fenced off the scene for investigation, a 'vicious atmosphere' began to develop. 'Angry youths began to shout, and banged on the fence.' Although the police spoke of a 'tragic accident', friends and family members of the victim spoke of 'murder.' The decisive element in the controversy following the incident was the Moroccan background of the thief/victim, a nineteen-year-old named Ali el Bejjati. Among circles of (young) Dutch-Moroccans, El Bejjati's death gave rise to fierce resentment, strengthening their feelings of being victim to discrimination, rejection, and criminalisation; in brief, of being treated as second-class citizens. In their opinion, El Bejjati's death proved that 'Moroccans could now be murdered for something as minor as stealing a handbag.' This interpretation was in direct opposition to that of El Bejjati's death as mainly the unintended (but tragic) outcome of his own actions. Among many non-Moroccan Dutch, El Bejjati – soon known popularly as 'the bag snatcher' – evoked sentiments related to 'increasing street violence', 'Moroccan criminality', and 'the advancing danger of Islam and terrorism': perceived social wrongs all related to 'the general failure of Dutch immigration politics.'<sup>4</sup>

El Bejjati died a 'violent death': his life ended brutally and abruptly. The bereaved, however, condemned his death as murder, a crime, an immoral act. It is precisely this framework of morality that helps us to understand the political and public responses to El Bejjati's death. Over the last decade, Dutch society has evinced a far stronger non-acceptance of 'violent death', particularly when it is due to the immoral behaviour of others.<sup>5</sup> New ritualised practices articulate this shift in degree of acceptance: ephemeral memorials, public wakes, and 'silent marches' (*stille tochten*). The violent deaths most likely to evoke such responses are mainly murder and manslaughter, in particular when labelled as 'cases of senseless violence'. The 'senseless violence' label presumes that the victim was innocent, and often implies a tinge of moral heroism. Although the heroic dimension was definitely absent in El Bejjati's case, opinions diverged on his status as a victim: some parties immediately

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4 One more aspect should be mentioned to situate the case properly within the integration debate. The driver was of Surinamese background. This fact, however, played hardly any role in the escalation that ensued. How the case would have evolved if the driver had been a Dutch autochthon will remain a matter of speculation.

5 My interpretation is inspired by Philippe Ariès' idea of 'acceptable death'. According to Ariès, in modern, Western society death can only be 'acceptable', if at all, when every effort has been made to prevent it, generally in a medical context. Ariès contrasts the acceptable death to the unacceptable death, 'the embarrassingly, graceless dying' which may lead to extreme, emotional outbursts (1976: 88–89). Clearly, a death caused by murder or a traffic accident is not unacceptable merely because it is unexpected and, in particular when it concerns the death of young people, 'undeserved' – as has been suggested elsewhere to explain the recent proliferation of roadside memorials in the Netherlands (cf. Post 1995: 44) – but such death is the more shocking because of the moral aspects involved: recklessness, drunkenness, lack of respect for others, social indifference (Stengs 2004).

labelled his death as ‘an accident’, others as ‘murder’ or ‘senseless violence’. The controversy around the public rituals that followed El Bejjati’s death reflects this division. This chapter explores the political and moral aspects of such ritual responses in the context of the general Dutch concern over ‘senseless violence.’

### **Mourning Ritual or Protest?**

The day after El Bejjati’s death – Tuesday, 18 January 2005 – family, friends, and others who felt concerned brought flowers, candles and letters to the tree where he had died, turning the site into a small memorial. That evening, friends and bereaved gathered at the spot to pray for the deceased, under the guidance of an imam. The next morning, the flowers and letters had been removed by unknown persons, who had left a ‘racist’ drawing on the spot.<sup>6</sup> New flowers were brought and this time the city authorities fenced off the site. Ladybird stickers on the cellophane flower wrappings placed the memorial in the context of ‘senseless violence’. The ladybird is the well-known symbol of the National Foundation against Senseless Violence (*Stichting Tegen Zinloos Geweld*), established in 1997 (see further below). A sketch of a hand, an orange ‘respect’ ribbon around the wrist, with the text ‘stop violence’ expressed a more ‘neutral’ position. El Bejjati’s Moroccan background was manifested through messages in Arabic and items like a framed Koran calligraphy, or a drawing of a mosque, and, perhaps, through the absence of any portrait of the deceased.<sup>7</sup>

On Wednesday evening, the second day after the incident, a hundred people attended a second commemorative gathering organised by a local youth organisation. During the gathering a silent march was announced to take place on the Friday afternoon. Eventually, a march was held on Friday afternoon, but I speak deliberately of ‘a march’ because the parties involved disagreed on the exact nature and label of the ritual. The *NRC Handelsblad* of January 20<sup>th</sup>, a major national newspaper, quotes the alderman for welfare of the district-council Amsterdam Oost/Watergraafsmeer, apparently shocked upon hearing that a silent march was planned for the following Friday: ‘that should be stopped.’ The organisers had planned to depart from Amsterdam Central Station, and march through the city centre to the place where El Bejjati had died. On Thursday afternoon the Amsterdam mayor, Job Cohen, met with the district council, representatives of minority-group organisations and relatives of El Bejjati. At this meeting, Cohen said that he would not give permission for a silent march, but would permit a ‘march of mourning’, instead. It was agreed that this march would depart from the memorial to proceed to the local mosque (the Alkabir mosque), where the Friday afternoon service was already planned to be held in commemoration of El Bejjati. The Mayor made the following statement:

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6 The content of the drawing has not been made public.

7 Portraits of the deceased have been part of virtually every ephemeral memorial I have seen so far. Cuddly toys, another customary element of such memorials, were equally absent (except for one small elephant).



**Figure 8.1** The memorial for Ali el Bejjati

*The Arabic text reads: We belong to God and we will all return to him, January 2005.*

*Photo: Irene Stengs.*

I told El Bejjati's sister that everybody should acknowledge the facts. One of these facts is the criminal past of her brother. The main thing is that this would not have happened if he had not attempted to steal the woman's handbag. No representatives of the city administration or the city council will participate in this commemorative march. As was the district council, *I was against a demonstrative silent march. But I cannot oppose a march of mourning.* (...) I can imagine that one would want to mourn if he had been a friend or relative. I would only have forbidden that march [of mourning] for one reason, namely when public security would be endangered. Well, such is not the case. (*NRC Handelsblad*, 21 January 2005, italics added).

That Friday, announcements at the memorial site read:

In consultation with the district council it has been decided to begin *the silent march* of 21-1-5 where it all happened. We will then walk in silence to the ALKABIR mosque. We will start at 2 PM. So do not gather at Central Station. (*italics added*)

Apparently, the opinions were divided on whether the planned march would be a silent march or a march of mourning. The following description of the actual march – based on my field notes of the event – demonstrates that opinions on the nature of the march also differed among the participants.

About 500 people have gathered at the memorial for the march, in the narrow street. The majority are young – teenagers – and of Moroccan-ethnic background. The apparent dress code is dark blue, grey or black ‘gangsta’ coats for the boys; most girls, also darkly clad, wear headscarves. This combination of age, ethnicity and style gives the occasion a flavour of its own; it gives me a sensation of meeting ‘the other within’. The few non-Moroccan Dutch participants seem, for the greater part, to work for the press. They are regarded with distrust and anger; the atmosphere is tense. I do not want to be taken for a reporter, so I am not taking pictures. This does not make much difference, however. As we are about to depart, I approach a young boy carrying a Moroccan flag with the intention of asking what the flag means to him and why he has brought it. He does not want to speak to me and quickly turns his back.

The explicit and self-aware presence of young Muslimas is striking. During the march they make themselves seen and heard. Many walk in rows, their arms tightly linked. About ten minutes into the march, the girls begin to chant slogans in Arabic, which I later learn to be the first verse of the Koran: ‘There is no greater God than Allah, and Mohammed is his prophet.’ Six chanting girls in a row carry a large Moroccan flag above their heads. After a while, one of the organisers – I presume a man connected with the mosque – calls on the girls to maintain the silence; ‘we have agreed that this would be a silent march’. Still, a couple of times some chanting can be heard. Half an hour after departure we arrive at the mosque, where some go home and others stay to follow the service.

The organisers thus perceived the event as a silent march, although it had not actually been silent. The newspaper headlines followed the Mayor in speaking of a ‘march of mourning’, although the term ‘silent march’ did appear in some articles. On the Friday evening television news, Prime Minister Jan Peter Balkenende expressed his approval of the Mayor’s decision not to allow a silent march. This involvement of those at the highest level of national politics is illustrative of the import of the eventual label given to the march. Why were the bereaved, or the organisers, so eager to hold a silent march? Why were the authorities equally eager to prevent this from happening? What does it mean when the Mayor explicitly says that no official representatives will participate in a possible march of mourning? To answer these questions we need to understand the implicit messages of a silent march, and the specific role of the ritual. Since, in Dutch society, the silent march acquired its meaning from its strong association with ‘death through senseless violence’, I will first explore the concept of ‘senseless violence’.



**Figure 8.2** A march of mourning or a silent march?

*Photo: Irene Stengs.*

### 'Senseless Violence' as a Social Issue

In 1996, the expression 'senseless violence' entered Dutch parlance as a term referring to a specific category of public violence. Although the phrase 'senseless violence' already existed – for instance to designate excessive violence in war situations or in television programmes – the term acquired a new connotation: street violence in which innocent people are killed or seriously injured. In this usage, 'senseless violence' was perceived as a new societal problem (Vasterman 2004: 63–64).<sup>8</sup> Vasterman analyses how media hype both reflect and contribute to the process of

8 See Blok (1991; 2001) for an approach to violence as a cultural construct, as 'meaningful action', instead of being dismissed *a priori* as 'senseless' (2001:111). As Blok illustrates, violence (by others or in other cultures) may appear 'senseless' to outsiders who are unaware of the political and cultural context. The tendency to qualify (certain forms of) violence as 'senseless' or 'irrational' should thus be regarded neither as a typical Dutch attitude towards violence, nor as an attitude that is specifically related to our era (cf. Girard 1972). See also Best's study on 'random violence' (1999), an analysis of a typical contemporary American attitude to violence.

constructing social problems. Once a certain 'condition' is defined as problematic, usually through the efforts of only a small number of people ('interest groups'), a social movement concerned with this particular problem may evolve to make it a political issue. In this process the media play a significant role 'as messengers and managers of the public arena' (2004: 260; cf. Best 1999: 28–47).

The Dutch public concern about 'senseless violence' drew its impetus through two cases of manslaughter: the death of Joes Kloppenburg (26) in August 1996 and the death of Meindert Tjoelker (30) in September 1997. Both men were kicked to death during an evening out when intervening to put a stop to violent behaviour by others. In the commemorative service held a few days after Joes Kloppenburg's death, his mother used the expression 'senseless violence'. The then mayor of Amsterdam and the media also spoke of an act of 'senseless violence' (Vasterman 2004: 101). In reaction to the death of Meindert Tjoelker in Leeuwarden, the district chief of police for the province of Friesland appealed in the local newspaper for one minute of silence 'to make clear that Frisian society will not unthinkingly accept this increasing senseless violence' (quoted in Vasterman 2004: 95, translation IS). Nine days after the death of Meindert Tjoelker, the National Foundation against Senseless Violence (*Landelijke Stichting Tegen Zinloos Geweld*) came into being. Five months later relatives and friends of Joes Kloppenburg set up the 'Stop! Now! Foundation' (*Kappen Nou!*).<sup>9</sup>

Since the killings of Joes Kloppenburg and Meindert Tjoelker quite a few cases of manslaughter have been labelled 'senseless violence', and some of these have dominated the media and public discussion for weeks.<sup>10</sup> Random victims of indiscriminate shots fired in anger, a bicycle repairman stabbed by a customer in a hurry, a boy shot by a driver whose car was hit by a snowball, two toddlers killed after finding a hand grenade in a playground – all appear on a list of victims together with Joes Kloppenburg and Meindert Tjoelker and other victims of nightlife-related violence.<sup>11</sup> The public attention surrounding such cases has resulted in a proliferation of organisations and initiatives involved in the discussion on 'senseless violence' from various perspectives and with various objectives.<sup>12</sup> These initiatives have played a significant role in both the institutionalisation of the fight against 'senseless violence' and in the framing of certain cases of manslaughter as 'senseless violence'.

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9 The words '*Kappen Nou!*' are thought to have been Joes' last words. See <http://www.kappennou.nl/intro.htm>

10 For a detailed analysis of the interaction between media and public opinion, see Vasterman 2004.

11 See <http://www.schooltv.nl/eigenwijzer/projecten/index.jsp?project=479557>

12 See [www.zinloosgeweld.nl](http://www.zinloosgeweld.nl).

### The Canon of Heroes: A Serial Narrative

The death of Meindert Tjoelker sent an unprecedented wave of indignation through Dutch society. In comparison, the death of Joes Kloppenburg evoked scarcely any public response. Although both victims were conceptualised as victims of 'senseless violence', something had apparently changed. Why did the death of Tjoelker give the concept of 'senseless violence' its eventual emotional charge, while the death of Kloppenburg had little effect? In various studies attempts have been made to explain this sudden societal concern with 'senseless violence.' Beunders explains the emotional response to Tjoelker's death by pointing to the 'virus of collective mourning' that was in the air at the time he died. His death happened two weeks after Princess Diana's, and the emotions were still fresh in the people's minds, as were the public ritual responses (2002: 172–173). The Belgian White Marches (related to the 'Dutroux murders') of October 1996 are also mentioned as a possible example (*ibid*; Boutellier 2002: 83; Vasterman 2004: 120–121). These foreign cases of collective outcry and mourning may very well have influenced the scale, content, and form of the protests and sentiments evoked by the death of Meindert Tjoelker. Vasterman argues that the Tjoelker case was not a media hype on its own, but rather the starting point of a hype surrounding 'senseless violence' that lasted several years.<sup>13</sup> According to Vasterman the hype ended in 2000, Daniel van Cotthem<sup>14</sup> being the last victim of public violence to evoke a large public response under the banner of 'senseless violence.' Since then the topic has gradually disappeared from the news.

On this point I am inclined to disagree with Vasterman. His media perspective on 'quantity of media attention' – irrespective of its significance – reduces the concern with 'senseless violence' to a singular and temporary phenomenon, in compliance with the general perception that present-day society is governed by the media and by emotions: we rush from hype to hype. In my view, a media hype may play an important role in the social construction of a problem, but the fading of the hype does not imply a fading of the construct itself. A focus on the role of narrative and ritual can clarify the unabated vigour of the concept, and can show how in the ritual process political and moral issues are crafted, negotiated, affirmed and denied. From this perspective, a ritual is an act and a statement at the same time (*cf.* Bell 1997: 162–164). As I will demonstrate, 'senseless violence' has remained a powerful notion, colouring public perception of violent deaths and the ritual responses to them.

With the death of Meindert Tjoelker a strong narrative took shape, describing a brave moral hero who had died as a result of his intervention in the vandalism of others. The fact that Tjoelker was to be married on the Monday after that weekend added significantly to the dramatic content of the narrative, emphasising the sacrifice made.<sup>15</sup> Except for the impending wedding, the narrative of Joes Kloppenburg's death

13 For a similar line of argumentation, see also Stengs 2003: 37.

14 For no apparent reason, Daniel van Cotthem (17) received a heavy blow to his head in a railway station. He died two days later, on 9 January 2000.

15 The fact that Tjoelker was buried on his intended wedding day contributed significantly to his image as a victim (*i.e.* of senseless violence). Although I deliberately use the word

parallels Tjoelker's in many respects. The hour and circumstances of Kloppenburg's death as well as features of his personality (male, young, brave) narrate the same pattern of 'the ordinary-man hero who intervened and paid with his life for good citizenship and moral courage.' The Tjoelker narrative was strong enough to absorb that of Kloppenburg retrospectively, and to provide a perceptual framework for the interpretation of a variety of later cases of fatal street violence. To understand the continuities and discontinuities in the interpretations it might be helpful to distinguish the main elements of this framework: firstly, the aspect of a strong moral condemnation, mainly contained in the epithet 'senseless'; secondly, a mythical dimension that allows the narrative to become an allegorical explanation of 'what is wrong with our society'; finally, the main actors – the victim and the perpetrators.

In 2004, the Dutch rappers Lange Frans and Baas B. scored a major hit with the single *Zinloos* ('Senseless'). The rap consists of five verses in which the singers condemn the death of five young men who fell victim to acts of 'senseless violence': Daniel van Cotthem, Joes Kloppenburg, Meindert Tjoelker, René Steegmans and Kerwin Duinmeijer. Their song recounts in brief the narratives of the death of the victims, as they were covered at the time in the media. The verses alternate with a chorus:

*How many more to come  
How many more to go  
Who were these heroes  
We are doing this here in your names*<sup>16</sup>

Such a ballad poses the question of who is included in the canon of heroes and who is not. The singers, not wanting to exclude anybody, attempt to deal with the problem in their final verse:

*The list is long, God Almighty  
with Kerwin Duinmeijer since August '83  
and the trend right now is even colder, bleaker  
and the fear and the hate more familiar*

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'image', it is not my intention to deny the severity and sadness of Meindert Tjoelker's death. I use the expression only to demonstrate the convincing power of narratives. The judicial inquiry that followed the confrontation between Meindert Tjoelker and his attackers showed that Meindert Tjoelker's victimhood was much less one-dimensional than it had originally appeared in the narrative. After an evening of heavy drinking, Tjoelker had challenged the culprits until they attacked.

<sup>16</sup> Translation IS; for the full text in Dutch see the singers' website <http://www.dmen.nl/page.php?PID=40>.

Apparently, since Kerwin Duinmeijer died in 1983, many have fallen victim to senseless violence, and society is even worse today than twenty years ago.<sup>17</sup> Hence the singers' rhetorical question: 'how many more to come, how many more to go?' However, by explicitly rendering the story of a few specific victims, the emphasis is put on them and not on those whose name is not mentioned and whose story is not told. Are some victims more heroic than others, or do other factors come in too? Below I will investigate why some victims are more captivating than others through the case of René Steegmans (22), beaten to death in the city centre of Venlo in 2002. Lange Frans and Baas B. highlight the heroic dimension of his death:

*Renée [sic] Steegmans did his daily shopping  
He could not know that they would kick him to death  
Told off two turds on a motorcycle  
And that would make him a victim himself*

The narrative follows the classic line of 'an intervening hero fallen victim to senseless violence'. Steegmans had commented on the aggressive driving behaviour of two young men (eighteen and sixteen years old) on a scooter, who had just almost hit an elderly woman. Two other strands in the narrative of Steegmans' death, however, are not so easily grasped in a single verse. Firstly, Steegmans was beaten to death in broad daylight in front of ten or more witnesses 'who had not intervened'. In the emotional debate about this 'fact' the bystanders were publicly declared guilty, co-accountable for Steegmans' death. Secondly, unlike in earlier cases, the main offender was of Moroccan background. The latter strand was painfully highlighted by an interview with the boy's parents, that was broadcast on national television on the day of the silent march in commemoration of René Steegmans and as a protest against 'senseless violence'.<sup>18</sup> In the interview – conducted in their own language – the parents 'defended' their son by emphasising that he had always been a good, calm person, who never sought confrontation, although he was strong enough to 'handle' two men. The strongest resentment, however, was caused by their explanation of Steegmans' death in terms of destiny and the will of Allah: in this respect, their son's role had only been instrumental. The entire picture of the parents, unemployed, unable to speak Dutch after having lived in the country for decades, and their 'unworldly'<sup>19</sup> perception of the cause of Steegmans' death, all added to the general feeling that the Dutch integration policy was bankrupt and that a stricter policy should be initiated.

In Vasterman's interpretation, the public upheaval around Steegmans' death was no longer part of the 'senseless violence' hype as the case was drawn into the entirely

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17 Kerwin Duinmeijer (15), who died in 1983 as a victim of brutal racism, is often labelled retrospectively as a 'victim of senseless violence'.

18 The interview was broadcast on 25 October 2002, as part of the programme *Netwerk*.

19 The expression was used by the Venlo alderman of welfare in a reaction to the interview, which was also broadcast on television (*Nova*, October 29, 2002).

different context of the failing integration of immigrants into Dutch society (2004: 131). For the general public, however, René Steegmans has remained primarily a victim of 'senseless violence' as illustrated by his inclusion in the rap 'Senseless'.<sup>20</sup> Vasterman is correct in observing that the Steegmans case served to articulate 'the failure of integration', or, more precisely, certain perceptions of this failure. Contrary to Vasterman, however, I argue that the narrative of Steegmans' death could only develop into an allegory of the ethnic tensions of the moment because of the unabated vigour of the label 'senseless violence' attached to it. To explain the power of this label I will first turn to the aspect of ritual, as it is through ritual that a victim of violence is made a 'victim of senseless violence'.

### **Ritual and Social Boundaries**

Two key rituals accompany each case of 'senseless violence': first, the placing of flowers, letters, and objects at the place of the victim's death, which create an ephemeral memorial; and second, the silent march. In my view, the memorial can be interpreted as a material expression of the story of the victim's death reformulated into a narrative of 'another case of senseless violence', while the silent march is the formal, public confirmation of this narrative, or of the victim's new status of being a victim of 'senseless violence'.

I will illustrate this interpretation with an analysis of the ritual following the death of Anja Joos (43) in Amsterdam, on 6 October 2003, the first to be acknowledged as a victim of 'senseless violence' after René Steegmans. The case further shows how 'senseless violence' became connected with the immigration issue. We will see how this political context frames the meaning and impact of the ritual involved, and at the same time how the ritual as a social practice draws boundaries and articulates underlying issues of inclusion and exclusion.

The process of framing Joos' death as a case of 'senseless violence' is emblematic for the simultaneous making and mediation of such 'reality' through the interplay of media presence, media reporting and the presence and participation of ordinary people 'on the spot'. The earliest news broadcasts reported Joos' death with some factual information on the time, place and circumstances of her death. Soon, responses from the public became the main focus of media attention. Reporters could *await* the first people to arrive with flowers within a few hours after the incident. Now, the media were no longer mediating immediate reality, the unspoken assumption of 'live' broadcasting, but a reality already framed and ritualised (cf. Couldry 2003). In the days to follow, extended broadcasts or features were aired or published, composed of a blend of news and 'on the spot' interviews with people who had known Joos, the supermarket, or the employees. An increasingly shared narrative took shape, and the more it was recounted, the more the 'incident' became an 'event'. For a period of two weeks people continued to bring flowers and attributes to express their sympathy

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<sup>20</sup> For example, see <http://www.wortelep.in.nl/evenementen/galaworteletruij.htm>.

as well as their horror at the offence. The attributes placed at the memorial can be seen as a material highlighting of the key elements of the Anja Joos narrative, which I will reconstruct below. This reconstruction will also reveal how narratives about incidents like Joos' death elaborate contemporary moral and political concerns.

### **Intermezzo: The Anja Joos Memorial**

The Anja Joos memorial was located at the fringe of a small square, beside a lamppost, next to the chairs of the outdoor café where Anja Joos (43) was found by the police shortly before she died. On 14 October, eight days after the incident, the memorial consisted of a core of flowers, encircled by a composition of candles, written messages, and numerous attributes placed randomly amongst the flowers and the papers, including several photographs of Joos. Besides their function as commemorative objects, these photographs were evidence of a central element in the narrative: Joos' physical weakness. Her condition was (partly) a consequence of her drug and alcohol addiction, implying that Joos was socially vulnerable as well. In fact, the narrative revolved largely around these themes. First, as a single woman in poor physical condition Joos was no match at all for six strong teenagers of seventeen, eighteen and nineteen years old. The photographs reconfirm that Joos, with her fragile appearance, had had no chance at all. Second, precisely because of her 'junkie' appearance she had been (falsely!) suspected of shoplifting. The first reports told that Joos was beaten to death by supermarket employees because she had stolen a can of beer and (possibly) also some food for her adopted stray dogs.<sup>21</sup> Although there was a wide public and media consensus on the fact that the theft of a can of beer could never justify manslaughter, the dog food added a completely different perspective to the incident: Anja Joos might have been a drop-out, but she had been good to animals. Joos' compassion for other living beings in trouble added a moral tinge of nobleness and self-sacrifice to the narrative. Her background also explains the prominent and continuous presence of street people at the memorial site. The vagabonds (all men) took care of the arrangement of the attributes, watered the flowers, kept candles and lanterns alight, and informed interested passers-by and journalists about the affair, and about their specific relationships with Joos. They also brought about a certain disorder. One behaved noisily, another made peculiar movements, or chalked images on the pavement; at times they argued about each other's actions. Thus, the scene of the crime was not only marked by a memorial but also by the explicit presence of marginal people, who in general rarely function as a group.

Furthermore, the memorial included attributes referring to the 'reason' behind Joos' death: dog statuettes; (empty) beer cans and bottles; cans and boxes of dog food; pieces of dry dog food. A neighbourhood social-welfare institute contributed an eye-catching, blue, larger-than-life statue that had formerly been part of an 'art

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21 *Spits*, October 8, 2003.

of the homeless' exhibition. Somebody had provided the statue with a 'shoulder bag', made from an empty Pedigree can. Messages like: 'Senseless violence is so senseless', or 'Violence never makes sense' put Joos' death firmly in the context of 'a victim of senseless violence'. The announcements left at the site to encourage people to participate in the silent march gave a straightforward message: 'Anja Joos, † 6 October 03, silent march against senseless violence.

The ephemeral memorial for Anja Joos can be understood as sustaining her social presence by the display of the narrative of who she had been. In this respect such memorials are comparable to displays on graves (see Hallam and Hockey 2001: 208–209). The prevalence of the element of her violent death, however, superimposes a new identity over her personal identity: that of 'victim of senseless violence'. In this respect, ephemeral memorials differ significantly from grave memorials.

This difference, though, is not merely theoretical. As public performances, ephemeral memorials have an immediate effect in the world. Without the Joos memorial, for instance, the extraordinary presence and performance of the street people would have been impossible. The memorial made the square an arena where wider societal debates and moral issues were articulated. The Joos memorial was the material outcome of the woman's appropriation by the general public, which rehabilitated her posthumously as a good member of 'ordinary society'. This appropriation, however, was contested by the street people. Their presence and involvement expressed that, for them, Joos had been and still was 'one of them'. By implication, if she were to be acknowledged as part of ordinary society, they should be as well. This struggle for appropriation of the 'Joos narrative' reveals one aspect of underlying processes of inclusion and exclusion.

If the Anja Joos memorial was primarily a materialisation of those strands of the narrative that revolved around Joos' personal and (new) social identity, what can be said about the strand or strands that refer to the offenders and their position in society? Just as 'Anja Joos' and the circumstances of her death acquired clearer outlines over the course of time, so did the role and profile of the offenders. They were perceived to have behaved in an extremely cowardly fashion: as a group they had beaten a sole, fragile woman to death. Out of prejudice, they had killed an innocent and moral person. And, last but not least, they were 'Moroccans'.<sup>22</sup> An additional dimension in this final strand is that Joos had reputedly shouted 'Fucking Moroccans (*kutmarokkanen*: a politically charged term of abuse at the time), why are you always after me?' at her persecutors.<sup>23</sup>

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22 In fact, the main suspect was a Tunisian. Four of the five other suspects were of Moroccan background.

23 It is striking how the single word *kutmarokkanen* was able to draw the entire narrative into the sphere of increasing political tensions about the immigration issue. On the evening after the city council elections (6 March 2002), the then Amsterdam alderman for Education, Youth and Integration (Rob Oudkerk) used the expression in a tête-à-tête with the Mayor of Amsterdam (Job Cohen), without being aware that the conversation was being recorded by a television crew. The broadcast led to a serious row about the general stigmatisation of Dutch-Moroccans as non-integrated, violent and criminal. The Mayor's reply had been 'but

For an understanding of the position of the offenders in the ritual with relation to 'senseless violence' we must turn to the other key ritual, the silent march. My interpretation of the silent march is twofold. First, any silent march is the ritual confirmation of the victim's status as a victim of 'senseless violence': with a silent march the narrative of the victim's violent death is publicly, almost formally, acknowledged. Second, a silent march is a ritual in which 'the community' is constituted (or reconstituted) as a moral entity within the context of good and evil, as defined by 'senseless violence'. As a public event, a silent march is a performance in which the participants present themselves to the outside world as 'belonging to a community in which there is no place for evil', and is, by implication, a ritual exclusion of proven evil ones from this community (cf. Bell 1997: 163). On the face of it, the excluded ones are the offenders. Although this is correct, it is possible to pursue this topic of inclusion and exclusion a little further by asking: who is and who is not (allowed to be) part of this moral community? What exactly is the place of the ritual within these processes? In his analysis of the meaning and constitution of communities, Anthony Cohen's most significant argument is that the boundary between 'us' and 'them' is always relational:

People have (a) something common with each other, which (b) distinguishes them in a significant way from members of other putative groups. 'Community' seems thus to imply simultaneously both similarity and difference. The word thus expresses a relational idea: the opposition of community to others or to other social entities (Cohen 1985: 12).

Hence, Cohen focuses on 'the element which embodies this sense of discrimination, namely the boundary' (ibid.). In my interpretation, the silent march can be seen as a symbolic and enacted demarcation between 'us' (the pure) and 'them' (the danger) (cf. Bell 1997: 162–163). This distinction is not absolute, however; it is negotiated and constituted prior to and during the performance itself. The main symbol of the 'community' in a silent march is the participation of the community's highest formal representative, generally the local mayor, wearing the chain of office to confirm his *ex-officio* participation. In contrast, the aspect of exclusion from the community remains largely implicit in most silent marches. In the Anja Joos case, however, the negotiations about community boundaries came to the surface: the ethnic dimension meant that for some participants the boundary was between 'us' and 'the Moroccans', while others made an effort to limit the exclusion to the persons of the offenders, or even tried to include them too within the community.

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they are *our* "fucking Moroccans"', a reference to the famous WWII Amsterdam expression 'Bloody Huns, keep your bloody paws off our bloody Jews'. The incident inspired the Dutch-Moroccan HipHop/R&B artist Raymzter to write the rap 'Kutmarokkanen?!' which became a hit overnight.

### Intermezzo: The Anja Joos Silent March

The silent march was organised by three (neighbourhood) drug addiction social welfare organisations and by the National Foundation against Senseless Violence mentioned above. The chair of the local district council, the pastor of the Amsterdam Drug Addicts Pastoral Care Foundation, the director of the Drug Users Interest Group MDHG and the Mayor of Amsterdam were to give speeches after the march. About a thousand people participated: among them a high number of people who had known Joos from the drugs scene or from the street (many with a dog and a bottle of beer), along with a significant number of Moroccan people, including representatives from several Moroccan organisations. During the march, a group of ‘Dutch’ young men began to shout ‘murderers’ and ‘fucking Moroccans’ (*kutmarokkanen*), but kept silent upon request. Racist remarks towards ‘Moroccans’, however, could be heard along the march.<sup>24</sup> Differences in opinion concerning the boundaries between ‘us’ and ‘them’ came most strongly to the fore after the actual march, during the speeches. Some speeches evoked angry reactions, the drugs pastor’s in particular. He said:

It is an illness of our time to perceive whole groups as a problem. People are labelled ‘drug users’ or ‘Moroccans’. By doing so, we place groups in opposition to each other. (...) Anja was one of us. But so also were those men who have been arrested, every single one of them is one of us. They are all people with names, worth mentioning, with their own stories.<sup>25</sup>

Some members of the audience responded to his words by shouting such statements as: ‘I don’t think so’, ‘fuck off’, or ‘asshole’.<sup>26</sup> A similar appeal by the director of the Drugs Users Interest Group elicited a similar response. But when he expressed his respect for the participating Dutch-Moroccans and Moroccan organisations, he received a wave of applause that ‘drowned out the booing’.<sup>27</sup> The Mayor singularised the suspects as individuals without further comment, to include the Moroccans as a group in the Amsterdam community:

It is a sad affair that brings us together after our silent march (...): the death of Anja Joos as a consequence of her violent maltreatment by a group of young men. Yes, the suspects are Moroccan Amsterdam people. I am therefore pleased by the declaration from eight Moroccan organisations that I have just read. They are also present tonight, and express their horror at the attack that was fatal to Anja Joos.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> *Het Parool*, October 16, 2003.

<sup>25</sup> Quoted from *Het Parool*, October 16, 2003.

<sup>26</sup> Quoted from Frits Abrahams, *Eén van ons* (‘One of us’), *NRC Handelsblad*, October 16, 2003.

<sup>27</sup> Quoted from *Het Parool*, October 16, 2003.

<sup>28</sup> Quoted from [http://www.amsterdam.nl/gemeente/documenten/toespraken/cohen/inhoud/toespraak\\_anja\\_joos](http://www.amsterdam.nl/gemeente/documenten/toespraken/cohen/inhoud/toespraak_anja_joos).

The idea of including the perpetrators into the moral community clearly went too far for many. The position of 'the Moroccans' as a group, however, was a subject of negotiation, with a large majority of the participants in favour of their inclusion. Illustrative of the need for this inclusion was their communal declaration and participation in the ritual. For the Moroccan organisations (and individuals), the significance of their fitting in with 'Dutch' ritual reached much further than this particular silent march. In the context of the accelerating societal debate on the 'failure of integration' a 'Moroccan absence' would rather have implied a confirmation of their exclusion from Dutch society.

### Places Full of Meaning

On the day of Joos' funeral – the day the memorial was dismantled – the site was marked with a tile bearing the 'anti-senseless-violence' symbol, the ladybird. The tile disappeared that very night. The theft inspired an artist to design a commemorative tile in honour of Anja Joos; this tile was eventually installed during a modest commemoration ceremony one year later, on the anniversary of Joos' death. The narrative that, to speak with De Certeau, 'haunted' the place of mischief now had a material token (cf. 1984: 106). The practice of marking the place as a site with a narrative, however, was not sufficient to transform a neutral place on a city square into a specific space, with its own particular relation to the social world around it. The marking articulated only that this transformation had happened: for 'those who know', the narrative remains attached to the place regardless whether or not a mark is present.

At this point it is important to remember that the Anja Joos narrative is more than a narrative about one concrete person's sad fate. The concrete elements of the incident were absorbed into the moral and political field of meaning surrounding 'senseless violence', to evolve into a new allegory of 'what is wrong with Dutch society'. It is this broader, exemplary dimension that gives such narratives a tinge of myth and transforms the places to which they are attached into what Augé calls 'high places', places with a history (1995: 82). The bond between narrative and place allows for a better understanding of the commotion around the ritual response to the violent death of 'the bag snatcher', with which this investigation started.

El Bejjati died not far from the place where the provocative film maker and publicist Theo van Gogh had been murdered on 2 November 2004. The assassination took place in the context of Van Gogh's habit of commenting bluntly on just about anything, including Islam, and of his production of *Submission*, a movie pamphlet about the relationship between the abuse of Muslim women and the Koran. *Submission* had been broadcast on national television two months earlier, and had evoked considerable anger among the Muslim community. The movie sparked a heated (media) debate, and it inspired a rap group to write a song that called for the death of the script's author, MP Ayaan Hirsi Ali. Van Gogh had also received death threats.

The murder shocked the nation. Van Gogh was slain in a brutal manner, ‘ritually slaughtered’, as it was called. In addition, the murderer had pinned a letter on Van Gogh’s chest, with a knife. The letter contained death threats against Ayaan Hirsi Ali and another MP, who was known for his outspoken negative opinions on Islam, integration and immigration. Opinions on the position of the Moroccan population in Dutch society polarised further, with a tendency to a shift, also in the light of international Muslim terrorism, towards being a religious rather than an ethnic issue. At the high point of the crisis, mosques or Islamic schools were set on fire in several provincial towns.

On the spot where Van Gogh had died a large ephemeral memorial took shape. To provide a description and analysis of the Van Gogh memorial and other rituals related to his death in a way that would do justice to the case would require another article. I will limit myself here to the main aspect that is necessary for my argument: the manner in which Van Gogh’s death had imbued the area around the place of his death with meaning. We must therefore focus on the public interpretations of Van Gogh’s death, and on the ritualised practices in which these interpretations were made explicit and conveyed. The memorial itself was a ceremonial and material testimony to the seriousness with which the event was taken. The attributes visualised people’s emotions and perceptions, in a wide range of topics that cannot be dealt with here in detail. A vast category of images, objects and written messages referred to Van Gogh and his work, and closely related, to the recurring topic of ‘freedom of speech’.<sup>29</sup> Another prevalent category obviously consisted of items and messages that in some way referred to the Muslim and/or Moroccan identity of the murderer, and to related issues including ‘integration into Dutch society’, a topic to which we will return below.

Perhaps less obvious was the category of tokens that drew the murder into the context of ‘senseless violence’. Even though the murderer had committed his crime out of a political and religious conviction, ‘senseless violence’ was a prevailing topic. There were brief notes bearing such texts like ‘Senseless’ or, ‘Senseless! Who is next’ or ‘It is all senseless violence’. Another kind of reference to ‘senseless violence’ read, ‘Our society is stronger than the murderers of Meindert Tjoelker’. In addition, many ladybird stickers peeked out from the enormous heap of flowers. The National Foundation against Senseless Violence had hung posters on the lampposts at the memorial site. Several people had added the Foundation’s full-page obituary for Van Gogh to the memorial.<sup>30</sup>

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29 This topic actually relates to another field of meaning attached to the Van Gogh murder: the right of freedom of speech was the central topic in the outcry surrounding the murder of the rising populist politician Pim Fortuyn in 2002; see the contribution *Performative Memorials* of Peter Jan Margry in this volume.

30 The obituary, which was also an appeal to maintain societal unity, appeared on 4 November 2005 in *Metro*, one of the two free public transit newspapers in the Netherlands. The obituary consisted primarily of a large ladybird.

Other 'senseless violence' messages took a different direction by linking 'senseless violence' to 'ethnic violence', i.e. by presenting 'senseless violence' as a type of violence perpetrated in particular by Moroccans, as one specific 'canon of victims' illustrates:<sup>31</sup>

André Hartman<sup>32</sup>

Eddy Wind<sup>33</sup>

René Steegmans

Anja Joos

Theo van Gogh

Every one murdered by a Moroccan

Who will be next?

Dutch people, do something!!!

The message was an explicit testimony of the perception that had earlier found expression around the deaths of René Steegmans and Anja Joos, namely that the division between 'good' and 'evil' parallels the ethnic distinction between 'we' (i.e. autochthonous Dutch and victims) and 'them' (i.e. Moroccans and perpetrators).<sup>34</sup>

The interpretations of Van Gogh's death demonstrate the strong political and moral condemnative potential of 'senseless violence', a potential that the epithet 'senseless' has accumulated through the responses to the deaths of a long series of varied casualties. 'Senseless' has become a term to express one's strongest possible moral condemnation. Rather than to simply place some particular incident or type of behaviour outside our moral or social order, 'senseless' is used to expel actual persons or groups from this order.<sup>35</sup> In the serial narrative of 'senseless violence', the Van Gogh episode redefines those for whom there is no place in Dutch society, an exclusion that varies according to the various points of view.

Just as the purport of a 'senseless violence' narrative is broader than that of the specific incident, so does the place of mischief extend beyond the precise spot where the incident happened. The opening article of the daily newspaper *De Telegraaf* on Tuesday, 18 January, about the death of El Bejjati, provides a good illustration.

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31 Outside the direct context of the memorial, Theo van Gogh gained another place in the canon of victims of 'senseless violence': Lange Frans and Baas B. immediately added a verse about Van Gogh to their rap 'Senseless'.

32 André Hartman was shot during a raid on his cigarette shop in 1993.

33 Eddy Wind, a bicycle repairman, was stabbed to death by an angry customer in 1998.

34 Van Gogh's death was also placed within the context of 'senseless violence' by a 'noise wake', which was held in the evening on the day of his death. Approximately 25,000 people participated. The idea of a 'noise wake' had arisen in the context of the 'usual' silent march; Van Gogh had reputedly detested silent marches.

35 For example, I came across the expressions 'senseless loss', 'senseless shoplifting', and 'senseless verbal violence', all of which combinations illustrate the condemnatory power of the epithet.

Under the article's headline the editors had placed the almost iconographic image of the police investigation in the hours immediately following Van Gogh's death, with the body still there, hidden from view by a blue tent. Without words, the newspaper had drawn El Bejjati's death directly into the field of meaning of the narrative still attached to the place. As the narrative of El Bejjati's death evolved, the inclination to situate the incident within the specific meaning of 'that place' proved irresistible, for neighbourhood people, other (national) media, and also for the bereaved. More or less implicit verbal or visual references to the 'whereabouts' of the incident highlighted the meaning that was already attached to the location.<sup>36</sup>

## **Conclusion**

In the disagreements surrounding the ritual practices in commemoration of El Bejjati's death, the deeper issue of the Van Gogh narrative – the position of immigrant groups within Dutch society – was again brought to the fore. This was virtually inevitable given the existing political charge of the location. Young Dutch-Moroccans seized upon the incident as an opportunity to renegotiate their implicit exclusion, using ritual as a tool. The messages included in the memorial and its immediate, unauthorised removal can be understood in this context. The same holds for the conflict about the name and nature of the march. By preventing a formally acknowledged silent march, which would have included his own presence, the Mayor attempted to keep the narrative of El Bejjati's death outside of the 'senseless violence' myth that hovered above the place, and the associative narratives of victimhood and innocence. Which party was most successful in the controversy remains unclear. The march as it eventually took place was ambiguous enough to leave room for multiple interpretations, an ambiguity that is intrinsic to ritual. From the point of view of the authorities, the march, 'reduced' to a march of mourning, was a private happening devoid of any political dimension. For the participants, it remained a silent march and a protest against their exclusion. As a statement, the march allowed the participants to present the Dutch-Moroccan community as a self-aware group in Dutch society; as an act, the adoption of the ritual was proof of successful integration.

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36 Van Gogh was killed in the Linnaeusstraat. Other examples of verbal indications of place referring to 'Van Gogh' were – with or without mentioning the actual street where El Bejjati had died – 'near the Linnaeusstraat' or 'around the corner from the Linnaeusstraat', 'less than fifty meters from the place where Van Gogh was killed.' For example, television reports on the El Bejjati case included shots of the Linnaeusstraat, or interviews conducted on the spot where Van Gogh had died, without explicitly mentioning either the Linnaeusstraat or Van Gogh.

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