Ephemeral Memorials against ‘Senseless Violence’: Materialisations of Public Outcry*

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ABSTRACT Since the mid-nineties, in The Netherlands quite a number of cases of violent death have given rise to intense, short-lived attention from media and public, ‘senseless violence’ being their common denominator. It is argued that the responses of media and public evolve along the lines of a ritualised pattern, one of the material expressions being an ephemeral memorial. Taking the memorial for Anja Joos, the most recent victim of ‘senseless-violence’, as its starting point, this essay explores the popular concept of ‘senseless violence’, the evolution of the narrative behind the subsequent hypes, and the societal anxieties and issues on the background.

Amsterdam, October 6, 2003: five teenage boys beat a woman so badly, that she dies from her injuries shortly after the assault. The youngsters – employees from a nearby supermarket – had chased the woman after a minor incident at the supermarket. There, one or more employees claimed to have seen the woman putting a can of beer and some dog food into her bag without paying. As it turned out later, however, the woman had paid for her purchases. The story could have ended there, if some other employees and some other teenagers standing near the entrance outside the supermarket had not meddled in. To comprehend the events that followed, the subsequent public indignation and the discussions in the media, I will provide the reader with the narrative about the woman and her attackers as it appeared step-by-step in the media. For, first of all, as we will see, this narrative is pivotal in the way the expression of public mourning took shape in the days following the incident. In particular the ephemeral public memorial that had arisen after the woman’s death visualised the relation between the narrative and expressions of mourning. Secondly, and maybe contrary to intuition, neither the arising of a narrative nor the public mourning were spontaneous, natural responses to an awful event. In opposition to the unpredictability of the sequence of events that finally lead to the death of the woman, the subsequent media coverage and the reactions of the public could be anticipated upon as soon as the incident had happened. As I will show, the narration of the event, its structure and the overall style of covering the news followed a specific ‘format’. In addition, also the mourning and anger that emanated among the public after the first radio and television broadcasts on the molest had been aired followed a particular, ritualised pattern (cf.
Next to the composition of the ephemeral memorial already mentioned, the mourning practices comprised a wake, a ‘Silent March’ (*stille tocht*), and a public funeral. Thereafter, the attention of media and public faded away as quickly as they had emerged.

This kind of short-lived, intense phenomena are often referred to as (media) hypes, a qualification usually encompassing denigratory connotations. In general, a hype is thought of in terms of exaggeration, superficiality, and momentariness. After a brief period of extraordinary attention of media and public, the incident hardly is remembered anymore. Habituation and debunking place the episode in perspective. The interest in comparable events decreases, while other issues catch the attention from media and public (Beunders 2002:176; Van Ginneken 1999:91-92). Nevertheless, as this paper intends to show, hypes are meaningful social phenomena which, apart from media studies, deserve anthropological interest as well.

In fact, the repetitive actions and practices that shape the narratives and the mourning ritual around certain concrete cases of violent death reflect a more long-term trend of articulating societal issues around such incidents. The responses to these individual incidents easily develop into separate hypes and highlight a deeper concern that is widely shared in The Netherlands: the concern about ‘senseless violence’ (*zinloos geweld*). This immediately leads us to two important questions: first, what do people – in Dutch society – mean when they use the expression ‘senseless violence’ and second, why do cases of lethal violence perceived as ‘senseless violence’ evoke responses in the form of hypes?

It is my intention to address these questions in the light of the reactions to the death of Anja Joos, the woman mentioned above, who is generally regarded as ‘again another victim of “senseless violence”’. My major focus will be the ephemeral memorial created by the public on the scene of mischief. This will enable me to discuss the intrinsic connection between the format of media coverage and the pattern of public outcry in more detail. We will see that the attributes left by the public on the place where Anja was beaten to death recounted the narrative of the incident as it was disseminated by the media. Via an analysis of the relation between narrative and memorial I will show how the story about this concrete incident elaborates on current moral and political concerns. Therefore, I will first address the format of media coverage.

**Formats of responding**

When in The Netherlands a person falls victim to ‘senseless violence’ – or, more precisely, dies a violent death perceived as due to ‘senseless violence’ – a sequence of responses is set in motion, widespread media attention being one. First, the regular news will report the death of the victim in combination with some information on time, place and circumstances. In the earliest reports these subjects appear as mere facts. Soon, however, the responses from the public become the main focus of media attention, marking the shift from ‘incident’ to ‘event’. As, since the final decade of the twentieth century, laying
flowers on the place of mischief has become the principal expected response to lethal incidents of ‘senseless violence’, reporters can await the first people to arrive with flowers within a few hours after the incident. Of course, this will be mainly people who, in one way or another, knew the victim or who happened to be around at the time of the incident. Both categories are interesting subjects for media reporting and extended broadcastings or features, composed of a blend of news and interviews with ‘people involved’, will be aired: the narrative recounting the incident begins to take shape. And it will not take long before others, neither related to the victim nor to the incident, will arrive in growing numbers to express their sympathy with the victim and, at the same time, their horror about the offence. Many visitors mark the place with flowers, cuddle toys, candles and lanterns, to which, as the media provide more detailed information about the person of the victim, an increasing number of attributes are added. The ephemeral memorial for Anja Joos as it had taken shape at its high point, about one week after the incident, well illustrated how the attributes placed on the spot recounted a shared narrative. In the following section I first will reconstruct the narrative from the elements of this particular memorial, and then will explore why such narratives have the potential to start a hype.

The Anja Joos memorial

The Anja Joos memorial was located at the fringe of a small square, beside a streetlamp, next to the chairs of the outdoor café where Anja Joos (43) was found by the police shortly before she died. On October 14th, 8 days after the incident, the memorial consisted of a core of flowers, encircled by a composition of papers with messages and candles, and numerous attributes placed randomly in between the flowers and the papers (see figure 1). Amidst the flowers people had put several photographs of Anja. Next to their function as commemorative objects, these photographs testified to a central element in the narrative: Anja’s physical weakness. This condition was – at least partly – a consequence of Anja’s drug and alcohol addiction, implicating that Anja was socially vulnerable as well. In fact, the whole narrative revolved around these themes. First, as a single woman and with her physical condition she was no match at all for five strong teenagers of seventeen, eighteen and nineteen years old. The photographs reconfirm that Anja, with her fragile appearance, had no chance at all. Second, precisely because of her junkie appearance she had been suspected of shoplifting. The first reports told that Anja was beaten to death by supermarket employees because she had stolen a can of beer and (possibly) also some food for her dogs. Although there was an almost hundred percent public and media consensus on the fact that the theft of a can of beer never ever could provide a permit for manslaughter, the dog food added a totally different perspective to the incident: Anja might have been a drop-out, but she had been good to animals. In the days to follow both local and national newspapers published background articles (mainly based on interviews with neighbourhood people) on ‘Anja’. From these pieces the public learned that Anja (originally from Germany) was a rather well-known figure in her neighbourhood, living
there for over twenty years already. Although she did not really live on the street (she was not homeless), she was often seen in the streets in companion with her adopted stray dogs ‘Alfa’ and ‘Rambo’, having a beer for example with other neighbourhood ‘tramps’. Anja’s compassion with other living beings in trouble added a moral tinge of nobleness and self-sacrifice to the narrative: even in her difficult position she took the effort to take care of two stray dogs, so she was a good person. The potential dilemma on whether one should steel food or leave one’s dogs hungry dissolved quickly when within a few days the accusations of shoplifting had turned out to be false. Not only had the youngsters behaved extremely cowardly in beating to death a fragile woman, but led by prejudice they had even killed a totally innocent and moral person.

The first days after Anja’s death the memorial remained rather modest, consisting mainly of flowers, candles, lanterns, a few bird statuettes and an occasional word of protest (see figure 2). Heavy showers and strong winds resulted in a sloppy, unorganised display. But,
Figure 2. The Anja Joos memorial before the real hype (October 8, 2003)
as the media provided more details on Anja’s life and existence, the background and motivation of the attackers, and the circumstances of her death the memorial evolved into an increasingly specific ‘Anja Joos memorial’. A clear statement was contributed by the Oranjekerk, the neighbourhood social welfare institute, by placing an eye-catching, blue, more than life-size, statue on the spot. The statue had been part of an ‘art of the homeless’ exhibition which the institute had organised as a part of its centenary celebrations. For those who knew where it came from, the statue was a positive reference to Anja’s status as a part of the world of junkies and other street people and the related network of relief organisations. Her death – as I will further illustrate below – had given these people a voice. Moreover, the original exhibition with the celebrations’ motto ‘Paradise Regained’ had been replaced with a banner ‘where is the Love?’ (see figure 3). In the meantime, also some attributes referring to ‘the reason’ behind Anja’s death appeared: dog statuettes; (empty) beer cans and bottles – one of the Desperados brand; several cans and boxes of dog food; pieces of dry dog food. The blue statue had been given a ‘shoulder bag’, made from an empty Pedigree can.

The further development of the memorial was greatly helped by a change of weather for the better, in particular because this enabled a good arrangement of written materials. These papers, every single piece separately put in folio sheets, included press cuttings about the incident, personal letters to Anja, remarks contemplating the deterioration of society, expressions of grief in the form of poems or one-liners, general calls for a society based on peace and justice, and (also less specific) appropriate books, phrases or quotations.

Some attributes and written expressions referred however to discussions and political themes currently important in Dutch society. They place the Anja Joos narrative in a wider context and reveal other dimensions of the narrative than I have discussed so far. First of all I want to quote the text of a ‘song’, left at the memorial, referring to the apparent negative role of ‘the establishment’. The song reads:

Prince Bernhard is a MURDERER
It’s odd (2 x)
It [sic] honestly but sadly true
An enormous MURDERER8

The name of the prince appeared also in a writing on the supermarket’s façade: ‘Bernhard, what to do now?’ (Bernhard, wat nu?)

The reader who is unfamiliar with the details of the Dutch news of the past few years will wonder how Prince Bernhard, the high-aged Prince-consort of former Queen Juliana (r. 1948–1980), could emerge as ‘the murderer of Anja Joos’. Prince Bernhard had entered the discussion about public violence in 2002, when he offered to pay an eventual fine for two supermarket employees who were being prosecuted for using excessive violence against a shoplifter already caught. The prince even called them ‘heroes’. In Parliament, the populist right-wing MP Eerdmans suggested a new law explicitly allowing shop keepers and personnel to use violence against shoplifters and -raiders. The statements of the Prince
Figure 3. ‘Where is the Love?’
and the MP are a culmination of the frustration about the highly ineffective prosecution of shoplifters, which shop owners perceived as a permissive policy. In this perspective Anja Joos – as an outcast and alcohol addict – might be seen as one of those many habitual petty criminals (draaideurcriminelen, literally ‘revolving-door-criminals’) that hamper the life of shop owners.

In the same period the lack of intervention in cases of ‘senseless violence’ was another topic of public dissatisfaction. The violent death of a young man (René Steegmans, 22) in the centre of Venlo in 2002 – he was beaten to death by two youngsters in broad daylight in front of over twenty witnesses – induced Minister of Interior Remkes to encourage ‘the public’ to intervene in such situations with a ‘hell of a kick’ (rotschop). A sharp increase of armed raids on supermarkets further fuelled the general concern with insecurity in the public domain. Against this background, many welcomed the statements of Prince Bernhard, MP Eerdmans and Minister Remkes as justified calls for taking action and taking justice. But, by blaming Prince Bernhard for the death of Anja Joos, the author of the above song points to the paradoxical character of such calls for ‘justified violence’.

To further illustrate my discussion of the political context of the messages at the monument I want to mention an attribute that carried a more wide-ranging political message: a Che Guevara banner, tied to the streetlamp. The message disseminated by this attribute can be interpreted as complementing the above message as follows: ‘the establishment calls for “justified violence” when it comes to protecting the interests of supermarket owners or, more in general, those of “capitalists”’. The Anja Joos memorial may thus be understood as both an embodiment of the Anja Joos narrative, and a material expression of various points of view already circulating in public debates and controversies as well.

The arena

One additional dimension of the Anja Joos memorial should be mentioned: the prominent and continuous presence of street people around it. This of course was directly related to Anja’s own background and lifestyle, but how to interpret that relationship? The vagabonds (all men) took care of the arrangement of the attributes, sprinkled the flowers, lightened the candles and lanterns, and informed interested by-passers and journalists about what had happened, and their specific relation with Anja (see figure 4). They also brought about a certain disorder. One behaved noisily, another made peculiar movements or was drawing in chalk on the pavement and sometimes they argued about each other’s ‘doings’. Thus, the place of mischief was not just marked by a memorial but also by the presence of a specific group of people. In my opinion, this situation should be interpreted as reflecting a struggle about the appropriation of Anja’s identity. Whom did Anja belong to?

Ephemeral memorials are comparable to memorial displays on graves in that they sustain the social presence of the deceased (see Hallam & Hockey 2001:208-209). A difference however is that ephemeral memorials for victims of ‘senseless violence’ superimpose
the new identity of being a victim of ‘senseless violence’ over the personal identity of
the victim as presented by the more specific attributes (i.e. dog statuettes, dog food and
beer). Anja’s added identity, as it were, rehabilitated her posthumously to become part of
‘ordinary society’, or, in others words, Anja was appropriated by the public. The street
people, on the contrary, expressed by their presence and activities that for them Anja
had been and still was ‘one of them’ and that, by implication, they themselves should be
acknowledged as part of ordinary society as well.

However, the extraordinary dimension of the street people’s presence and concern
immediately and paradoxically demonstrated that they were actually very much excluded
from ordinary society. The dirty, odd or aggressive appearance of some of them gave a
certain awkwardness to the atmosphere. This tension added to the atmosphere of protest
that already emanated from the memorial. The memorial marked the square as an arena
where wider societal debates and moral issues were articulated. The central role of the memorial in these processes of articulation became most apparent when it had been removed. Upon the removal of the memorial to Anja’s grave on the day of her funeral, the emotionally charged atmosphere, together with the street people and interested public, had totally disappeared.

Media-scandals

Earlier, I stated that the media’s switch of focus from news to public response marked a shift from ‘incident’ to ‘event’. Media studies distinguish several types of ‘events’. They represent (partly overlapping) genres or scripts, structuring the form of media coverage. In its original definition ‘media-events’ are pre-planned live broadcastings of events, which suspend the usual broadcasting scheme and are watched by millions (Couldry 2003:60). The funeral of the murdered Dutch politician Pim Fortuyn was an excellent example of a classic ‘media-event’ based on a ‘ceremonial’ script. The international audience will be more familiar with the funeral of Princess Diana. But also broadcastings following unplanned events may be structured along the lines of specific scripts. The script for reporting cases of ‘senseless violence’ largely parallels that of the genre ‘media-scandal’. According to Lull and Hinerman, the essence of the media-scandal is a large-scale media attention along with an intensive public debate that follows upon an intentional violation of social norms by certain individuals. Consequently, the narratives recounting the roles of the main characters in media-scandals tend to be told in terms of good and evil (see Reesink 2000:126). The narratives about Anja Joos and her offenders follow this ‘good-evil’ distinction. The victim was an innocent and even good person; the youngsters had committed a hideous act of cowardice.

Reesink emphasises that (in opposition to the hero of a media-event), the main character of the media-scandal is an ‘anti-hero’, turning ‘the norms and values of the world in which we live upside-down, or at least, bringing its dark side into the open’ (ibid.:127, translation IS). In the commotion evoked by lethal cases of ‘senseless violence’, however, media and public mainly focus on the positive character: the victim. Even in the case of Anja Joos, whose offenders had been ‘of Moroccan descent’ – an element with a great potential for an escalation of anti-Moroccan feelings and protests – Anja remained the major focus of attention. The memorials – although they are short-lived – are the material manifestations of this focus. But also the wakes, silent marches and funerals are organised in honour of the victims. One might even argue that within the short period that such hypes evolve, the anti-heroes gradually disappear from the scene, disappearing as it were, behind their awful deeds. Instead of individual agents they become more general representatives of uncontrolled and uncontrollable brutality or, to put it differently, of the merely negative as opposed to any idea of moral or social order. The epithet ‘senseless’ adequately covers this negativity (see also Blok 2001:103). Part of its strength lies in its compelling power. Once a homicide has been labelled as ‘senseless violence’ nobody
can sidestep the moral message: it is impossible to stand up for the ‘senseless’. The power of the expression ‘senseless violence’ did not come as an inherent feature of the epithet, of course, but is rather a result of the repetition of the narrative in subsequent hypes. The shared memory of these narratives has given the expression its substance.

‘Senseless violence’

The Dutch concern with ‘senseless violence’ gained momentum through two shocking homicides which happened within a short period of time: the death of Joes Kloppenburg (26) in August 1996 and the death of Meindert Tjoelker (30) in September 1997. Both men were beaten to death on a night out. They were harassed when they interfered with the violent behaviour of others. Joes Kloppenburg had come to the help of a man who was seriously beaten up by drunks. Meindert Tjoelker apparently had voiced his dislike of the blatant vandalism of four men throwing bicycles in a canal. The death of Meindert Tjoelker sent an unprecedented wave of indignation through Dutch society.18 The death of Joes Kloppenburg, however, hardly had evoked any public response. Beunders explains this difference by pointing to the ‘virus of collective mourning’ that was in the air at the time Meindert Tjoelker died. His death happened two weeks after Princess Diana’s, and the examples of public ritual responses to strong emotions were still fresh in the people’s minds (2002:172-173). Although I agree with Beunders that ‘Princess Diana’ and some other foreign examples of collective protest and mourning influenced the scale, content, and form of the protests and sentiments evoked by the death of Meindert Tjoelker, one additional element should be added to the analysis: the role of narrative. The narrative of the death of Meindert Tjoelker – the specific rendering of the way, time and circumstances of his death as well as the details about his personality (male, young, brave) – was in many aspects a recounting of the narrative about the death of Joes Kloppenburg. The remembrance of the death of Meindert Tjoelker as a case of ‘senseless violence’ gained in power of expression because the dramatic death of Joes Kloppenburg already had provided the frame on which the narrative about ‘senseless violence’ could take shape.19 In other words, ‘Joes Kloppenburg’ provided the basic pattern for the narrative of ‘the ordinary-man hero who intervened and paid with life for being moral’ and ‘Meindert Tjoelker’ gave full emotional charge to the idea of ‘falling victim to senseless violence’.20

Although the expression ‘senseless violence’ is not specifically related to the cases of Meindert Tjoelker en Joes Kloppenburg (see Blok 1991), it is safe to say that the idea of ‘senseless violence’ as a powerful icon of what is wrong with Dutch society today has taken firm root since then. Nine days after the death of Meindert Tjoelker, the Foundation against Senseless Violence (Landelijke Stichting Tegen Zinloos Geweld) was set up. Five months later relatives and friends of Joes Kloppenburg began the foundation ‘Cut It Now!’ (Kappen Nou!).21 Since the killing of Joes Kloppenburg and Meindert Tjoelker several homicides have been labelled ‘senseless violence’, some of which have dominated the media and public discussion for weeks. The variation in victims and the
circumstances of their deaths shows that the epithet ‘senseless’ evolved into a suitable term for expressing the strongest moral condemnation. Random victims of shooting hot-heads, a bicycle repairman shot by a hasty customer, a boy shot by a driver whose car was hit by a snowball, two toddlers killed after finding a hand grenade in a playground, appear on a list of victims together with Joes Kloppenburg and Meindert Tjoelker and other victims of nightlife-related violence. The repetitively reviving public attention around such cases has resulted in a proliferation of organisations and initiatives which link up with the discussion on ‘senseless violence’ from various perspectives and with various objectives. They play a significant role in both the institutionalisation of the fight against ‘senseless violence’ and in the framing of certain homicides as cases of ‘senseless violence’. The potential of this categorization is convincingly demonstrated by the retrospective labelling of the death of Kerwin Duinmeijer as a ‘case of senseless violence’. Kerwin Duinmeijer (15) had died in 1983 as a victim of brutal racism. His death is remembered as the first racist murder in The Netherlands since 1945.

Although in the public opinion ‘senseless’ unequivocally stands for ‘immoral’, behind it is a diffuse mixture of political views of how ‘senseless violence’ came to be and how society is to deal with it. Minister Remkes’ call to intervene with ‘a hell of a kick’ has already been mentioned as one example. Others have advocated less violence in TV’s early hours, earlier closing hours of pubs and disco’s, stricter parental education, school programs, security cameras in public spaces, anti-alcohol campaigns and stricter alcohol regulations etcetera. In addition there is variety of opinions as to where the responsibility of the authorities ends and that of individual citizens begins. Ephemeral memorials and other public expressions of mourning and protest derive their capacity to unite these potentially conflicting political statements and interests, or at least to conceal its diversity, from the uncontested moral opposition to ‘senseless violence’. One might state that the idea of ‘senseless violence’ provides the uniting capacity of the shared symbolical order that generally is thought to make ritual work.

The current Dutch concern about ‘senseless violence’ should be understood as a temporary and local expression of people’s ongoing unease about evil, although most Dutch would never express it like that. Over time people deem different things the greatest threat to their social order, and likewise the forms in which such ideas are articulated change. For Dutch society, ‘senseless violence’ has become such a theme for articulating anxieties since the late 1990s. The new concern by and large superseded the then prevalent worries and anger around the theme of ‘incest and child abuse’, which had led to several contemporary witch-hunts against parents, teachers and supervisors, and even the ‘discovery’ of extensive networks of satanic child abusers. (cf. La Fortaine (1998) for a study of similar cases in Great Britain). In the 1980s the typical hard drug addict ‘even stealing from his own parents’ had been the epitome of evil (cf. Beets and Stengs 1992). The concern about ‘senseless violence’ is articulated in the form of subsequent individual hypes around ‘cases of senseless violence’, each hype evolving in line with a specific, ritualised pattern. In ‘senseless-violence hypes’, inextricably bound up with modern, mass-mediated society, narrative and human praxis converge.
in a contemporary form, as I have attempted to demonstrate with my analysis of the Anja Joos memorial.

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Notes

* I am indebted to Jeroen Beets for his useful comments and for editing the text.
1. In my opinion, using the adjective ‘spontaneous’ (often used in Folkore Studies, in particular in combination with ‘shrine’, see for instance Grider 2001) to address such memorials is confusing. The adjective conceals that these memorials, irrespective their unofficial and temporarily nature, are composed in accordance with what people deem to be the appropriate and customary response towards violent deaths. The memorials thus are not the outcome of ‘instantaneous’ impulses.
2. Silent Marches and other forms of ‘silent protests’ are world-wide phenomena. The objectives of the protestors, however, are context-related. To mention a few examples: in The Netherlands Silent Marches are part of the protest repertoire against ‘senseless violence’. In the United States one should think in particular of protests against ‘senseless gun violence’, that are, protests against the huge death toll of the nation’s wide-spread gun ownership (approximately 30,000 a year, see http://www.silentmarch.org). Also the expression ‘senseless violence’ is in the United States unequivocally related to gun deaths. Germany has no Silent Marches, and the expression *sinnlose Gewalt* – not a frequently used expression – might either refer to cases of violent death, terrorism or vandalism. The Belgian variant of Silent Marches are the so-called White Marches, a phenomenon that evolved in 1996 in response to the slow, indifferent and unprofessional approach of the Belgian juridical authorities to the disappearance and killing of several young girls. Over 300,000 people – dressed in white and with them balloons – participated in the first White Marches in October, 1996 (see Walgrave 2000:53).
3. The word ‘hype’ is used in particular to indicate the ‘inflated’, ‘empty’ character of certain advertisement- and media-campaigns. See also Van Ginneken 1999:92.
4. See also Beunders’ overview of the development of the public concern with ‘senseless violence’ and the role of the media (‘moral panics’) (Beunders 2002:172-184). He addresses the topic from a different point view, however.
7. Both texts were written in English.
8. In Dutch: ‘Prins Bernhard is een MOORDERNAAR, ’t is gek (2x), ‘t [sic] heus maar helaas waar, een hele grote MOORDENAAR.’
10. Over 5 million cases of shoplifting happen each year in The Netherlands. Altogether, shopkeepers report each year over 290,000 cases of burglary, shoplifting and vandalism to the police. A 100,000 to 200,000 shoplifters are caught (see www.cbl.nl and www.platformdetailhandel.nl).
11. In 2000, the number of armed raids on supermarkets raised to 225, a more than 30 percent increase in comparison with 1999 (see www.cbl.nl)
12. Except for the statue, which was taken back to the Oranjekerk.
13. For more on Pim Fortuyn, see the article of Peter Jan Margry elsewhere in this issue.
15. Although the main suspect is a Tunisian.

16. The ‘Moroccan’ element was not entirely absent, of course. It placed the whole incident also in the framework of the intensive and ongoing debate on the Netherlands as ‘multi-cultural society’, the (failure of) integration policies, and a general concern about anti-social behaviour of young, second-generation Moroccans.

17. Blok points to the general tendency – both in social sciences and among the general public – to consider all forms of non-state authorised violence as ‘anomalous, irrational, senseless and disruptive – as the reverse of social order, as the antithesis of “civilization” (…)’ (2001:103). This notion is also inherent in the current Dutch interpretation of ‘senseless’ as an epithet of immorality as argued here. Blok’s exercise on the idea of ‘senseless violence’ (not specifically on ‘cases of senseless violence’ in The Netherlands) is written from a different perspective than the one provided in this essay. Blok’s aim is to make an argument for an approach of violence as a cultural construct, as ‘meaningful action’, instead of dismissing violence a priori as ‘senseless’ (ibid.:111). As Blok illustrates, violence (of others, or in other cultures) appear to outsiders as ‘senseless’ when no details on the political and cultural context are provided.

18. For a more extensive description and interpretation of the hype around the death of Meindert Tjoelker, see Beunders 2002:172-176.

19. Only one month before Meindert Tjoelker died, on the place Joes Kloppenburg had died a plaque-cum-monument (the latter in the shape of the word HELP in blue neon light) had been unveiled on the first anniversary of his death: Joes Kloppenburg had certainly not disappeared in oblivion.

20. The fact that Meindert Tjoelker was going to marry the Monday after the weekend significantly contributed to his image as a victim (i.e. of senseless violence). Although I deliberately use the word ‘image’, it is not my intention to deny the severity and sadness of Meindert Tjoelker’s death. I only use the expression to demonstrate the convincing power of narratives. The judicial inquiry after the confrontation between Meindert Tjoelker and his attackers showed that Meindert Tjoelker’s victimship was a much less one-dimensional victim than it appeared at first from the narrative.

21. ‘Kappen Nou!’ are thought to have been Joes’ final words. See http://www.kappennou.nl/intro.htm.


23. For instance the Stichting Meld Geweld; Stichting Gorcum [sic] tegen Geweld; Centrum Geweldeoze Communicatie; Landelijk Platform tegen Geweld op Straat; De Landelijke Organisatie Veiligheid en Respect; Nederland tegen Zinloos Geweld; Stichting Nuttig Geweld. The Foundation against ‘senseless violence’ organised the action ‘DJ’s play against senseless violence’ (DJ’s draaien tegen zinloos geweld) (December 2003); Nederland tegen Zinloos Geweld intends to organise a ‘festival against senseless violence’. The Useful Violence Foundation (Stichting Nuttig Geweld) – a modest internet initiative – has been set up with the objective to support organisations and individuals who, by interfering in cases of ‘senseless violence’, make themselves guilty of using – in the foundation’s words – ‘useful violence’. The prosecution of the above mentioned supermarket employees was one immediate cause for setting up the foundation. Moreover and naturally following from this line of argument, the initiators attest against passivity – here they mention the killing of René Steegmans as their other motive to start the foundation – and call for the promotion of a ‘I assist culture’ (IK HELP cultuur) in the Netherlands. As a symbol for their organisation they have chosen the St. Bernhard dog.

24. See http://www.kerwin.nl. A reference to Nazi racism appears, for example, in one of the flyers dispensed during the Kerwin Commemoration of 2003: ‘…once is six million times too many. . .’ (italics and English in original).
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