

Spontaneous Shrines, Memorialization, and the Public Ritualesque

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In this article I argue that public memorialization is generally located in a conceptual field that ranges between commemoration and social activism. That is, to greater and lesser extents depending on the types of memorializations and the circumstances of their creation, acts and objects of public memory both refer to known persons and events, and also propose attitudes—social positions—regarding those deaths and the circumstances that caused them. This continuum is evident in both performative public actions such as parades or demonstrations, where the emphasis on a specific social agenda is often overt, and is also evidenced in material cultural objects such as statues, which have the appearance of and are suggestive of permanence and immutability. My emphasis is on the phenomena I have named “spontaneous shrines,” but I want to situate these within a range of events and materials so that we may more clearly see the particular dynamics of each.

By “spontaneous shrines” I refer to those temporary memorials that people construct, at their own motivation, to mark the sites of untimely deaths. These memorial assemblages (Santino 1986) usually are made up of flowers, candles, personal memorabilia and notes, as well as religious icons. Any or all of the above may be present, and different circumstances

will call for different elements. Deaths due to automotive accidents are usually marked (when they are marked) by a cross, a wreath, or flowers; mass-scale paramilitary attacks are frequently met with written messages to the deceased and to the general public; in the US a gang-related murder is marked by a mural and a shrine containing elements meaningful primarily to gang members (see Sciorra and Cooper, 1994). Further, people often use these sites to hold vernacular memorial services and other rituals of commemoration, at the time of the deaths and on significant dates thereafter. Differences in the artifacts and images that comprise a shrine will vary internationally, such as the use of the black ribbon and image of white hands in Spain in response to ETA attacks; football scarves in Northern Ireland, or origami cranes left at the Hiroshima Memorial in Japan. (variations among types of shrines has been noted by Thomas 2006.) My field research has been conducted primarily in Western Europe and the United States, however.

The term “spontaneous shrine” has gained some acceptance (see e.g. Grider 2001) but it is also somewhat controversial. By “spontaneous” I do not mean to imply that the actions of memorializing an individual or individuals at a place that is significant in the context of their deaths are impulsive (though they may be) or frivolous (which they never are). Rather I use the term to refer to the self-motivation of the actors involved; their decision to create or contribute to such a site being generated by their own desires and by having witnessed friends and family doing the same. These shrines are not the result of an official directive of state or church; indeed, they are often frowned upon by representatives of those institutions.

I have termed these assemblages “shrines” because they are more than simply memorials. I have been told repeatedly by people involved that it is important to them to leave a memento at a death site because it is the last place the person was alive. Thus the sites, and the shrines, often signify life rather than death, at least in one sense. The notes that are left there are communications with the deceased; with those who are beyond this world. Moreover, as Steven Zeitlin has shown, the notes are often written from the point of view of the deceased (2006; for an in-depth examination of the writings of 9-11, see Frankel, 2001). The shrines are seen as a portal to the otherworld, a place where two-way communication can occur. For this reason alone they can be viewed as shrines. Moreover, they frequently serve as destinations for journeys that are routinely dubbed “pilgrimages” by the people who perform them (Dubisch 2005). And of course they celebrate the individuals who have died. They are more than memorials, that have a secular or vernacular (if religious or spiritual) quality to them; they are a kind of folk shrine.

The use of roadside crosses in North America to indicate a death has been known since colonial times (Griffith 1992). Generally thought to have been introduced to the New World by the Spanish, roadside crosses have been a regional folk tradition in the American Southwest and Mexico, including among Native Americans, for centuries. In more recent decades the custom has spread throughout the US. Moreover, there are many other European precedents for the custom;; analogues are seen in Greece and Ireland, among other countries.

Along with the marking of a road death, the practice of acknowledging other kinds of deaths has emerged as a new mourning

ritual in the late 20th century. Perhaps the earliest example occurred at a place where no one died at all: the Vietnam Memorial Wall in Washington, DC. To the surprise of just about everyone, this memorial, unconventional in design and controversial while being built, was found to be enormously moving in its gravestone-like simplicity, and its engraving of each and every victim of that war in chronological (rather than hierarchical) order. As it turned out, this memorial invited participation. To this day, people leave tokens of love and memory there.

This commemorative behavior was self-generated and was not anticipated by the designer of the memorial or by the U.S. Park Service which oversees it. It shows that these spontaneous actions need not necessarily take place at the site of the deaths commemorated; a reasonable facsimile will do. For instance, the scene of princess Diana's death in Paris is so commemorated, but millions of people also left flowers at royal sites associated with her in England.

It is difficult to pinpoint with certainty the initial emergence of the spontaneous shrine as a recognizable act in the US or internationally. Some people have suggested the death of John Lennon as the earliest example, but I seem to remember that the phenomenon was already in existence. Major tragedies such as the terrorist destruction of the aircraft over Lockerbie field in Scotland are other events that helped publicize and regularize the spontaneous shrine as a vehicle for the expression of mass grief. Along with the "flower revolution" associated with Lady Diana in Great Britain, the major international tragedies of September 11, 2001 in the US and March 11, 2003 in Spain have been extensively broadcast by all sorts of media. (see Kear and Steinberg 1999; Walter,1999) As Benedict

Anderson has noted for the communication of Independence Day traditions in the early US by the print medium, so does the electronic media of television and internet introduce the shrine activity to viewers throughout the world. (Anderson 1991).

An important aspect of spontaneous shrines is the fact that they appear in public space and command public attention. The notes, for instance, may be written to the deceased, but they are publicly displayed, and are often intended for a wide readership. At the least, it is understood by contributors to the shrine that it will be viewed by a broad spectatorship. The deaths that these shrines draw attention to were caused by circumstances that are a part of the public discourse. One reason why spontaneous shrines are a part of the public landscape, the culturescape, is because they quite literally index troublesome public issues, whether it be drunk driving, teen suicide, police brutality, or paramilitary violence against civilians: the deaths are a part of the field indicated when we name these problems.. Spontaneous shrines not only commemorate the deaths of individuals, they draw attention to the reasons for the deaths, to social ills that need to be addressed. The implicit logic seems to be, had these issues been properly addressed, these deaths need not have occurred. Or, alternately, if we the people do not become aware of these issues, more such deaths will occur.

I have suggested above that spontaneous shrines represent an unofficial response to an untimely death, and to certain salient social issues. In doing so I have constructed a dualistic framework between official and unofficial rituals and commemorations. While I think that this is a useful, indeed crucial parameter in these cases, we must be aware that there will be a range of ritual responses to such deaths. A number of commemorative

events for a single individual's death may be held by one's family members, colleagues (fellow students; co-workers); church, and possibly one's fellow citizens within a civic polity. Some of these are formal events; others less so. Deaths that touch on the culture of the ruling government, such as those of soldiers, police officers, or firefighters, will be met with ostentatious civil ritual. In these, the deaths are described as heroic sacrifices that further the foundational assumptions of that governing body—that is, they will be placed within official discourse. A gang-wall memorial exists within a very different (though directly related) discourse, and derives from and speaks to a very different community. In so doing, it speaks with a different aesthetic. The first implication I want to draw from this is simply that in each memorial event, the deceased individual's identity will be constructed according to the needs and nature of the group involved. A concomitant implication is that these identities, these constructions, may not always be congruent or compatible with each other. A family may want to erect a homemade cross along the roadside at a place where a loved one died, but officials may not allow this. Sometimes, officials replace the hand-constructed memorial with what they deem to be an acceptable alternative marker. Very often this latter compromise is deemed unacceptable by the people affected. We see here a clash over public space, and who has access to it, who defines it, and who controls it (Everett 2002).

Likewise, in Northern Ireland memorial murals are painted for members of paramilitary groups. The deceased are depicted in military dress and described as soldier-martyrs. At the same time, the notes and messages left at spontaneous shrines employ an entirely different discourse: deceased individuals are addressed according to their family relationship:

“Daddy,” “Grandpa,” “Peter.” The people who create the shrines refuse to use the language of (para)military rhetoric, but instead insist on naming the personal, familial relationship that the same paramilitary actions have destroyed (Santino 2000). Spontaneous shrines put a face and a name—and a relationship—on large social issues such as the Vietnam War, which remains controversial in the US; paramilitarism in Northern Ireland and elsewhere; drunk driving, or urban subcultures.

Spontaneous shrines frequently, by their very nature, challenge hegemonic claims to space and control of discourse as well. Clerics have been known to object to their existence, and the events that occur at them, as unsanctified ritual, since they exist outside the control of the official hierarchy of the church (Westgaard 2006). Commercial interests do not want them on or near their property in fear of losing business. And city officials are constantly debating their validity.

Ranges of Commemorative Activities: Derry

“Ours is a commemorative art. We seek to give honour to the ordinary people who paid the price for whatever progress has been made.” —Kevin Hasson, in *Art and Healing: The Bogside Artists*, by Will Kelly (no date; published by the Bogside Artists and Derry City Council).

The second largest city in Northern Ireland is officially named both Londonderry and Derry, but is referred to only as Derry by the Catholic and nationalist citizens of both Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. While it is viewed today as a success story of power sharing (the city’s population is majority Catholic, and the city council is an integrated one), it has a troubled past. The name is derived from an Irish word,

“Doire,” anglicized to “Derry,” but it became “Londonderry” with the usurpation of the city by colonial “planters” (in this case the London Company) in the 17th century. This conflicted discourse surrounding the city’s name is matched in a number of public memorial events.

Memorialization is not new to Derry. Its Protestant and Unionist members parade twice a year in memory of the lifting of the Siege of Derry, when the forces of King William of Orange broke the forces of King James, 1688-1690. In December of each year, an effigy is burnt of Robert Lundy, the governor of Derry who had decided to come to terms with James’ army prior to the arrival of the forces of William. The Burning of the Lundy, and the biannual parades are spectacular events that dominate the city with large gatherings of people (many of them from outside the city), music, and bonfires, and they celebrate the events that they see as having been crucial to the continued existence of a Protestant state for Protestant people on the island of Ireland. The Roman Catholic residential area, known as the Bogside, lies down the hill, outside the walls of the old city. There the more recent events of the Battle of the Bogside and the infamous Bloody Sunday are commemorated in mural, monuments, and an annual demonstration.

On August 12, 1969, during a procession of the Apprentice Boys (a fraternal organization, similar to the Orange Order, named for the apprentice boys who prevented Lundy from meeting with the opposing forces) residents of the Bogside met the parade (viewed as invasive and triumphalist) with resistance. Rocks and bottles were hurled and the scene quickly became a full-scale riot. Homemade Molotov cocktails were met with the brunt of the Royal Ulster Constabulary’s might. So-called “no-go” areas were created by the residents; someone painted the gable-end of a

house with the legend “You are now entering Free Derry.” The RUC mobilized tanks to bulldoze barricades. The battle was waged for 36 hours and is referred to as “the Balttle of the Bogside.” A few years after that, in January 1971, a peaceful demonstration for Catholic civil rights was shattered by the gunfire of the British armed forces, killing fourteen people (and another who later died in the hospital). This has become widely known as “Bloody Sunday,” and these events are seared into the public imagination of the Irish of all backgrounds. Making matters worse, an initial investigation into the actions of the British forces by a member of the British parliament exonerated the soldiers entirely.

Today, these events are remembered in several spectacular ways. The area where the demonstration was held has been rebuilt, but it is surrounded by murals, painted in a photo-realistic style, (unlike those of Belfast and other parts of Northern Ireland) that depict famous scenes from that day. A child wearing a World War II gas mask and shielding himself with a bedspring. Father Daley waving his handkerchief as a flag of truce as he desperately tries to carry a wounded man to safety. The faces of the people killed. A large, grassy traffic island contains highly significant monuments to the dead, including the original gable with “You Are Now Entering Free Derry,” Next to it is an H-shaped block of granite that represents the infamous H-block cells of the Maze prison, where Republican prisoners were held. At the other end of the island, the names of the fifteen people who died as a result of the events of Bloody Sunday. On separate occasions when I have been there, I have seen objects such as a plastic statue of the Blessed Virgin placed there, and on other occasions, flowers. This monument is not a gravestone; no one is actually buried at this site. In a way similar to the Vietnam Memorial Wall in Washington,

DC, this public monument was seen as incomplete and provoked a response, a need for personalization, to honor the dead in an ongoing, open-ended way.

In addition to the murals and the monuments, more or less permanent, the deaths of Bloody Sunday are annually commemorated, as people take to the streets carrying banners painted with the faces of their loved ones who were killed. This kind of symbolic dramatic event which clearly is addressed toward a societal grievance I call “ritualesque.”

The annual Bloody Sunday demonstration usually consists of family members carrying large images of their loved ones who were killed (seeDunn 2000). The event simultaneously mourns and commemorates the fifteen people who were killed on that day, and it also is a public protest against the unfair treatment of Roman Catholics under British rule generally, and what is viewed as a cover-up by the British authorities specifically. Because of this duality of mourning and outrage, of “mourning in protest, as Herriet Senie calls it (2006), These commemorations are a prime example of a ritualesque public event. This term complements the well-known term coined by Mikhail Bakhtin, the “carnavalesque ([1968] 1984).” In my studies of spontaneous shrines and other public memorializations of death (Palgrave 2006) I noted that such phenomena simultaneously commemorate people who have died, usually in an untimely manner, and call attention to the circumstances of their deaths (e.g. drunk driving, police brutality, paramilitary violence, etc.) In doing so, spontaneous shrines ask the spectator to take a position on those circumstances; to condemn them or to change them. As such, these phenomena are inherently political. They are also performative, in the sense J. L. Austin had in mind for certain vocal utterances that change

social situations by being spoken (“I solemnly swear...” ; “I now declare you husband and wife;” and so on). Spontaneous shrines and many public memorializations of death, such as the reading aloud at the steps of the US Capitol the names of soldiers who have died in Iraq, or the making and displaying of the AIDS quilt, are, along with memorializing, are also attempting to change some aspects of society. It is this transformative intent that is “ritualesque.” These events, while primarily symbolic, are also instrumental—they intend to produce change, or action, directly. The ritualesque, then, refers to instrumental (rather than purely expressive) but still symbolic public actions that are done to make a difference, to cause a change in social attitudes and behaviors, to make something happen.

Many large-scale festive events have this quality. Gay Pride Day, for instance, and Earth Day, are both concerned with social attitudes and in some way are intended and designed to modify attitudes and behaviors. El Dia de la Raza in the US also shares this quality. Likewise, many political demonstrations—whether concerned with war, nuclear energy, gun control—while they may appear—and be—quite festive in their gatherings of large numbers of people, are still done with a particular purpose and goal. Together, the concepts of “ritualesque” and “carnavalesque” represent two poles of public events. They are not opposites—the Pride Day antics, for instance, are very often fully carnivalesque, but in this case the carnivalesque is used in ritualesque ways: it is the very display of carnivalesque, festive inversion, of public display of skin, that is done to challenge onlookers to rethink their attitudes and assumptions.

The deaths of individuals are frequently publicly commemorated as a form of protest. In the examples from Derry, we can see a range of

commemoration from large parades in center city twice-annually celebrating a 300 year-old victory that is viewed as a charter for the contemporary status quo of the union of Northern Ireland with Great Britain, to ritualesque, performative demonstrations in which images of deceased individuals are publicly displayed in protest to that status quo and to the discrimination, violence, and sectarianism the demonstrators associate with it; to personal ritual acts of remembrance. Objects and murals stand as reminders of the flare-up of conflict and the use of deadly force; together they create a space valorized by communal resistance. These monuments are built where the battles and deaths occurred, and serve as indexes to them. They represent the area where people widely felt to be innocent of any wrongdoing were killed. As a result, the gravestone-like monument that has the names of the dead engraved upon it is a site of participatory, ongoing ritual activities, the laying on of flowers, the leaving of sacred icons. This is done singularly and spontaneously as individuals are so moved. The parades of the Apprentice Boys are held on the walls of Derry, visible high above the Bogside; from whence, it is said, British snipers premeditatedly shot and killed civilians. All the things—space, place, ritual, and memorialization are collapsed here, as each relies on and builds on each other in the continual multivocal construction of meaning, and society.

There is always a continuum from commemoration to performativity (seeking to cause change, following Austin) at all levels. Often official statues appear only to commemorate but their performative work is to create the sense of normativity, and is thus invisible. The statues of generals and older war memorials become invisible James E. Young has suggested that the construction of an official memorial marks the first

stage of forgetting (1993). This is why the Vietnam Veterans Memorial was so revolutionary—it disrupted this discourse of normativity regarding military power and allowed for, called for, participation, completion, by members of the public, members of the community it served (see Dubisch 2002). Official memorials signify that things are as they should be; there has been loss and suffering, a rupture in the metanarrative, but the official memorial seeks to contain that rupture and define it according to its own terms. Social structure is naturalized. But each monument, each ritual act and rituaesque event speaks to and for its own group (on monuments naturalizing society, see Handelman 1990). The various types of Derry memorials reflect the importance of agency, and the placing of objects on the memorial markers demonstrate a personal and communal incorporation of material culture into communal sacred space. While the placing of a flower or a plastic statue of the Blessed Virginn Mary may well reflect a community ethos and belief system, it also is a singular act by an individual, who mourns the dead and despises and condemns the conditions that caused that death. Multiple forms of memorialization are at play here, often simultaneously: demonstration, gable-end mural, statues and sculptures on hallowed ground, spontaneous shrines. All of these are interrelated and draw power and meaning from each other.

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