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Chapter 8
‘THE BROKEN MAN’
THE HARMELLEN RAILWAY DISASTER MEMORIAL: AN EXAMPLE OF A ‘POSTPONED’ AND CONTESTED MEMORIAL

Laurie MC Faro

Photo 1: The Harmelen railway disaster memorial ‘The broken man’
(photo: LMC Faro, 2012)
INTRODUCTION

Harmelen, a cold Sunday morning, January 8, 2012. A crowd is gathered beside a railway track. These people are assembled because they are ‘involved’ with the memorial that has just been unveiled. The artist Taeke de Jong has called his memorial ‘The broken man’. The initiative for the memorial was taken by people of the local community in memory of the victims of the biggest Dutch railway disaster ever. This railway accident took place exactly fifty years ago in the immediate vicinity.

If we observe the monument we will discern a bronze human figure with neither legs nor arms: ‘The broken man’. The figure is placed on a console and symbolizes the victims of this railway collision which took the life of 93 persons and left many injured.

‘At last, after 50 years, we have a place to visit on my father’s birthday or to go to on the day of the accident’, says Hans Fictoor, the son of one of the train operators who died in the crash. ‘It is also a place of recognition of what has happened there, a marking of the place’, states Bob Kradolfer, one of the train passengers who left the train unharmed.

The initiative and organization of the memorial and of the unveiling ceremony was taken in particular by the mayor and the chairman of the Harmelen community platform. Main reason was to commemorate the 50th ‘anniversary’ of the train crash and to honor, not only the victims, but also local people, medical personnel and all others who were active in the rescue and salvation procedures.

Post states that in his ‘ritual zone’ entitled ‘Memory Culture’, a lot of dynamics may be observed (Post et al. 2011: 29). In particular since the nineties, a new ritual repertoire has been developed regarding tragic events and natural or man caused disasters. Nowadays, so called ‘crown years’, like the 10th anniversary, the 25th anniversary and so on, of tragic events are often the cause of, depending on the impact of the event on society, nationwide commemoration. But when this railway accident took place, social circumstances were very different. There was little space for public rituals. For reasons to explore in this contribution, until the fiftieth anniversary there had never been any commemorative ritual or any marking with a commemorative plaque of the site of the accident.

The question must be asked: why did it take fifty years to create this memorial and transform the character of this tragic place by means of public art and commemorative rituals?
‘Postponed’ Memorials

Nowadays, the site of a tragedy or disaster will shortly after the event be turned into a, maybe temporarily, memorial site. And after a year, at the first commemoration, most probable a ceremony will be held at the site of the incident and a monument will be erected in remembrance of the victims. One recent Dutch example is the (failed) attack by a car driver on the Royal Family in Apeldoorn on Queen’s day in 2009, killing seven people. At the first anniversary of this tragic incident a monument was unveiled in the presence of the royal family and relatives of the victims. In 2011 a shooting incident took place in a shopping mall in Alphen aan de Rijn. A boy shot several people, killing six persons, and killed himself afterwards. On April 9, 2012, exactly a year later, a memorial plaque with the names of the victims was unveiled. Outside the mall, within a little park, a memorial place with a memorial bench and a tree were erected.

But in 1962 these rituals would have been unthinkable and not fitting into social circumstances which were still very much: ‘take your loss, cope with it and get on with your life’, all within a private setting. ‘Life goes on’, as became obvious in Harmelen: 48 hours after the tragedy in which 93 passengers lost their lives, trains passed the site of the accident at full speed as if nothing had happened. The remnants of the tragedy were visible from the train when passing by. Apart from a day of mourning, no nationwide commemorative rituals took place.

Somehow, for fifty years, the site of the accident has been ‘neglected’, obliterated, by people involved like relatives of the victims, injured passengers, passengers who got out without an injury, rescuers or people from the neighborhood who witnessed the tragedy. However, this does not mean that this horrible day has been completely forgotten. A lot of people involved seem to have been hiding their emotions for fifty years, unable to find ways of communicating their experiences.

Now, with the memorial in place, the place has been turned into a place set apart in commemoration of the tragic events that took place on that misty Monday morning in 1962. A place that could provide an opportunity to come to terms with all those long time hidden emotions and experiences.

This Harmelen memorial is an example of a ‘postponed’ memorial. It is of particular interest to reflect on the reasons why there still exists, even fifty years after the disaster, a widely supported interest to erect a monument and a memorial.

In this contribution, the question will be discussed ‘why’ there was no memorial erected at the time of the disaster and why there was still an interest to do so, fifty years after the tragedy took place. More in particular if we consider that after such a long time there may also be people who may have come to terms with their loss. They may get very emotional when faced with a memorial ceremony bringing up the horrible event fifty years ago. In this respect, the
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A memorial place may become a place of contestation. Or will the memorial place have a ‘healing’ function because at last a public marking of the disaster will offer a place of consolation regarding memories that had been hidden by many for so long?

Context of this contribution

Many authors (Huyssen 1995; Nora 2002; Erll 2010; Garde-Hansen 2011) speak of an extraordinary fascination in today’s society with memory. Many reasons are given and discussed for this widespread interest in memory. Garde-Hansen (2011: 13-14) mentions that nowadays there is an upsurge in the recovery of repressed memories, either of nations, communities or individuals whose histories have been ignored, hidden or destroyed. Another relevant aspect relates to an increasing interest in genealogical research and family narratives. And also, a characteristic of today’s society is an increasing emphasis upon trauma, grief emotion, reconciliation and apology. These developments coincide with the extension and development of mass media and digital media.

The widespread desire to commemorate and remember results in a focus on commemorative rituals. Post distinguishes a number of cultural fields or zones as playing sacred zones in which ritual dynamics take place (Post 2011). Post follows Evans in his definition of sacred as ‘set apart’ (Evans 2003). As Post states these zones have a certain coherence, which emerges from the interplay of cultural practices. Under the influence of abovementioned ‘memory boom’, the area of contemporary memory culture receives much public attention: ‘The field appears to be of crucial importance when it comes to ritual dynamics and the new design of ritual places’ (Post 2011: 8). Innovation and creativity take place but also debates and collisions, particularly in the repertoire of celebrations and especially commemorations (Post 2011: 29).

One of the remarkable developments in this memory zone is the phenomenon of so called ‘grassroots’ memorials (Margry & Sánchez-Carretero 2011). These memorials, for instance roadside memorials, are being raised shortly after the time of a tragedy or disaster. Margry and Sánchez-Carretero define ‘grassroots’ memorials as follows:

‘The phenomenon of placing memorabilia, as a form of social action, in public spaces, usually at sites where traumatic deaths or events have taken place’ (Margry & Sánchez-Carretero 2011: 2). More precisely: ‘Grassroots memorialization is understood as the process by which groups of people, imagined communities, or specific individuals bring grievances into action by creating an improvised and temporary memorial with the aim of changing or ameliorating a particular situation’ (Margry & Sánchez-Carretero 2011: 2-4). According to Margry and Sánchez-Carretero, grassroots memorials are characterized by:
Performativity: The memorialization has a transformative intent towards change, for instance consolation or coming to terms;
Subjectivity: Grassroots memorials are usually created on the individual, personal level;
Instantly: Grassroots memorials are erected shortly after the tragedy.

But at the same time and in contrast with these grassroots memorials another phenomenon in the zone of memory culture presents itself: ‘postponed’ memorials. The Harmelen memorial forms a striking example of this phenomenon. These ‘postponed’ memorials are raised by people who lived through traumatic experiences and personal losses in the past, and who, many years later, still feel the need to execute a commemorative ritual at a monument. They organize so called ‘memory communities’. Communities of people who share the idea that they want to raise a monument in the public area to commemorate the victims of a particular disaster. Together they put a lot of effort in the creation of these postponed public memorials.

The American geographer Kenneth Foote (Foote 2003) explores how and why, or not, Americans have memorialized sites of tragic and violent events. In
his book *Shadowed Ground*, he sorts tragedy sites according to what happened to the place after the tragedy. He calls this distinction ‘common outcomes for places associated with violence and tragedy’. He distinguishes between the following ‘outcomes’:

*Designation*: A site is marked – something important happened here – but not sanctified;

*Sanctification*: A sacred place, set apart from its surroundings and dedicated to the memory of an event, person or group;
‘The Broken Man’: The Harmelen Railway Disaster Memorial

Rectification: A site is ‘put right’, repaired and reused;
Obliteration: Active effacement of evidence of particularly shocking or shameful events.

According to Foote, these distinctions are not eternally set, changes may occur as time passes by.

In terms of Foote, a postponed memorial would mean a transformation of a tragedy site: either from obliteration into sanctification or maybe designation, or from rectification into sanctification or designation. In terms of Evans, sacred as ‘set apart’, Foote defines a sanctified place as a sacred place (Foote 2010: 95-77). In this contribution I will discuss which transformation took place at the site of the Harmelen railway collision.

This contribution is based on a research project with a wider scope and a focus on postponed memorials in different settings. These memorials all share the fact that they concern an issue of ‘recurrent memory’ meaning that for people involved, there is a lapse of considerable time (forty to seventy years) between the events and the commemoration. There seems to be no possibility of forgetting and there is a need to perform an act of remembrance.

In order to reach a broad perspective, the focus in this research project will be on four ‘types’ of Dutch monuments:

- A ‘traditional’ Second World War monument: The monument ‘Vrouwen van Ravensbrück’ at the Museumplein in Amsterdam (1975);
- Monuments for stillborn children (from 2000: The monument ‘Een glimlach kwam voorbij’) at the public cemetery in Sittard;
- A new type of Second World War monuments: ‘The Digital Monument to the Jewish Community in the Netherlands’ and the ‘Jewish Monument Community’ (2005 and 2010);
- The Harmelen railway disaster monument ‘The broken man’ (2012).

The Harmelen railway disaster and its ritual repertoire

Monday morning January 8, 1962

On an early, misty morning the express train coming from the direction of Utrecht collided, almost frontal, on a train coming from Rotterdam. Near the village of Harmelen both trains would cross tracks, a normal procedure. The express train would arrive first at that point and a couple of minutes later the other train would pass. But that particular Monday morning the express train
was late. The train traffic controller decided therefore that the train from Rotterdam would cross first and continue its journey in the direction of Amsterdam. He put the first train signal for the express train on orange and the second signal on red. But unfortunately, and maybe because of the fog, the operator failed to notice the orange signal and did not reduce speed in order to stop the train in front of the red signal. Both trains collided almost head-on, the express train with a speed of 120 kilometers per hour, the other train with a speed of approximately 60 kilometers per hour.

The consequences were terrible. Because of the speed, the trains were twined causing an awful damage. It was Monday morning and both trains were packed with people returning from their weekend leave. The disaster took immediately 91 lives. In the days after, two more victims died. 52 persons were wounded. Both train operators were among the fatalities.

The rescue of the victims was started immediately by people from the local community and afterwards by medical staff from hospitals in the vicinity. Everybody in the vicinity, who was able, was involved. One famous media image is a picture of a priest, dressed in his robe, talking to a passenger still trapped in the train. Most people were devastated by the horror they were witnessing: the awful cries from passengers still trapped in the train, the deadly and horribly mutilated bodies, and loose limbs everywhere around. Some passengers were salvaged from the train many hours after the collision took place.

These images made an impact as one of the passengers, Bob Kradolfer, who got out safe, states:

I still remember the cry of a woman, still trapped down in the wreckage: ‘Help me, I can’t get out’. But there was nothing I could do. You would need a crane to take the steel apart. I am certain that I could not have helped her and walked away but after all those years I still get emotional when I think that I, sort of abandoned her. I have never known what has become of her, but this image in my mind is even worse than all the dead bodies that I have seen.4

Ritual repertoire in 1962

The coffins with the victims were all jointly put together in a church in Utrecht. The royal family returned from their winter holiday. Queen Juliana, her husband and other officials paid a visit to the place of the disaster. She paid tribute to the deceased in the church and visited the wounded in hospital (Janson 2011). The Dutch railways company Nederlandse Spoorwegen (hereafter: Dutch Railways) called Friday January 12 a day of mourning. A short ceremony with wreath laying was held in front of the main building of Dutch
Railways, near the monument in honor of railway personnel who died during the Second World War (Fictoor 2008). From all government buildings, railway buildings and stations, flags were flying half-mast. This day was chosen because most of the victims were buried that day. In Harmelen, the day after, Saturday 13, was chosen as a day of mourning. In both protestant and catholic churches, ceremonies were held in remembrance of the victims (Janson 2011).

Hans Fictoor clearly remembers the funeral of his father:

> At that time we lived in Rotterdam. We were catholic. A service was held in remembrance of the victims and more in particular of my father, on Tuesday in our local parish church. The church was crowded with people. His funeral took place on Friday. Everywhere in the street and in the next street, neighbors hang white sheets from the windows to honor my father. I knew this custom, when my grandmother died, our neighbors also hung a white sheet from the window. But now: almost two streets all white sheets, very impressive. The coffin was carried into the church by railway personnel, dressed in their uniforms. They formed two rows through which the coffin passed into the church. He was given great honors by his colleagues.5

But the week following the disaster and the funerals, people went back to business and on with their lives. Or even earlier: ‘I was a policeman at that time. My shift started in the afternoon of the accident and I went to work, just as normal. People were happy that I got out but that was it. You just got on with your life’ Fictoor states: ‘I went back to work and my colleagues had been instructed not to talk to me about the accident and the death of my father. The same had been done at my sisters’ schools. And I wanted so much to share my emotions but most people kept a distance’.

Janson (2011: 32) concludes that the following morning after the accident, trains were driving slow speed along the site of the disaster. Within 48 hours the train schedule was back to normal.

**Ritual repertoire of other disasters at that time**

In terms of Foote, the site of the accident had been ‘rectified’, after the accident the railway was soon back in use. Another issue is whether any particular marking of the site in remembrance of the collision may be found. In this respect, other railway collisions may be considered.

Before Harmelen, two other railway accidents with a respectable amount of fatalities took place. In 1918, in the vicinity of Weesp, a railway embankment collapsed causing a train to fall down the ramp, 41 people died and 42
were injured. In 1942 near Sliedrecht one train bumped another from the back side. A wrong signal was the cause of the accident. 18 people died and 62 were injured. Until Harmelen, these were the two accidents with the highest death toll in the history of Dutch Railways (Veenendaal 2008). Neither of these accidents, or any other, has been marked with a commemorative sign.

With regard to the main theme of this contribution, it is also interesting to consider commemorative repertoire of other Dutch disasters that took place in the same period.

In the period after the Second World War until Harmelen, the Netherlands was hit by several disasters or serious incidents. These disasters may be divided between so called ‘man made’ disasters (for instance traffic accidents like plane or train crashes and ‘natural’ disasters (for instance flooding) (Slachtofferhulp Nederland 2010).

A ‘man made’ disaster with a huge local impact was a plane crash in Apeldoorn in 1946. On October 7 of that year an airplane crashed on the gymnasium of a Christian high school in the town of Apeldoorn killing 23 pupils, 5 pupils were injured. The coffins with the bodies were ceremonial placed together in the school. A ceremony was held in a local church and the boys were all buried together on the local Christian cemetery. A week after the tragedy, classes were resumed. In the first years after the crash, memorial ceremonies were planned yearly at the anniversary of the crash. Later on, only the 25th and the 40th anniversary were remembered in commemorative ceremonies. In 1948, a memorial was erected on the cemetery with the two names of boys who were buried at other cemeteries. In 1949, a memorial plaque with the names of victims engraved was unveiled in the school. And finally, in 1986, a memorial book was published with testimonies of survivors and family of victims.

If we consider the ritual repertoire at the time of the tragedy, the focus was on remembrance of the victims. The high school had a Christian signature and for that reason Christian rituals accompanied all ceremonies. The local community was deeply involved, in particular because the pilot of the airplane was a boy from the same town, Apeldoorn. He had flown, without permission, to his hometown to, as was assumed at that time, greet his mother. Over Apeldoorn he had been flying in circles for some time before crashing on the gymnasium. Many locals witnessed the accident, making the impact on the community even bigger.

However, although the site of the accident was, in terms of Foote, ‘sanctified’ by a memorial, the accident itself was never discussed. A week after the accident, classes were resumed as if nothing had happened. The accident was never spoken about. This appeared to be very difficult for the boys who survived but lost all their classmates (Van Kerkvoorde 1946: 67). The ritual repertoire after this disaster has been influenced by the fact that there was a strong local embedding of the plane crash and its consequences. The victims were all from
the same community, making it possible to form a memory community which took charge of the commemorative rituals.

In 1954 in Valkenburg, a town in the south of the Netherlands, a bus crashed in the middle of town. The cause of the accident was a failure of the breaks when going down a hill, the Cauberg. 18 passengers and 1 local inhabitant were killed. The passengers were from two villages in Belgium. Local people were active in the rescue and salvation of the victims. Sometime after the crash, the site of the accident was marked with a memorial plaque with the names of the victims engraved. 8

If we consider other ‘man made’ disasters at that time, for instance a plane crash which took place in 1946, a month after the Apeldoorn crash, killing 26, we see a different ritual repertoire: individual burials, no commemoration after one or later years and no other public attention. Except with regard to a well known Dutch writer, Herman de Man, who was among the victims and whose funeral received nationwide attention. 9 This may be caused by the fact that there was no local connection to the accident, the passengers originating from different places and different countries.

A ‘natural’ disaster with the biggest impact was the flood disaster in 1953, called De Ramp, (‘The Disaster’). This flooding took place on February 1, 1953 and hit a big part of the provinces Zeeland and Zuid-Holland. The impact of the disaster, 1836 people were killed and many thousands lost everything, was enormous and nationwide felt. In the years after the disaster, commemoration of the victims was organized on a local scale through ceremonies in church and later on by monuments or memorial plaques. Every village that was struck would have its own memorial (Zuiderent: 2003). Already in the same year of the flooding, in 1953, a memorial book De ramp was published; the benefits would go to the victims. But at the same time, the disaster was considered ‘an act of God’ and impossible to speak about (Leydesdorff 1993; Rosenthal & Saeijs 2003; Zuiderent 2003). This may be the reason that a documentary which was made regarding the 50th commemoration was named De vergeten ramp (‘The forgotten disaster’) (Rosenthal & Saeijs: 7).

In summary, in terms of Foote, sanctification of a place of disaster takes place if local people connect to the tragedy and have an incentive to create a sacred, ‘set apart’, place. This is less likely to happen if the victims are from other regions or places.

How does Harmelen fit in after this summary of ritual repertoire after disasters in the Netherlands in the same period?

None of the victims in the Harmelen disaster originated from Harmelen or its vicinity. In comparison with the plane crash in Apeldoorn, where all the victims were students at the same school, or the bus accident in Valkenburg where the accident took place in the middle of town, there was no immediate or
specific reason to commemorate the site or a specific person. However, regarding the impact of the crash and salvation procedures on local people, some kind of memorial could have been expected. It is stated that in the aftermath of the disaster, voices were heard to mark the site with a memorial. Because the precise place is far away in the fields, the idea was soon abandoned; it would be impossible and even dangerous for people to visit this place.

Neither Hans Fictoor nor Bob Kradolfer have been back to the site of the accident. ‘Why would I go there, I have no reason to go to this place in the fields’, says Hans Fictoor.10 ‘I have never been back but regularly I passed the place by train. The first time I was sweating allover’, says Bob Kradolfer.11

**The Harmelen railway disaster memorial: postponed and contested**

After the accident a big inquiry was started to find out what exactly had happened and caused the collision. At regular times reports about the findings were published in the media. Besides the tragedy and the fate of the victims, safety issues on the railways were always associated with this disaster.

As a consequence of the accident, Dutch Railways started to take measures to improve the security system of all railway tracks. In 1996 the railway tracks near the site of the accident were separated by a so called ‘fly-over’ in that way ‘obliterating’ the original site of the tragedy.

Almost forty years had passed when in 2001 a group of family members of victims asked Dutch Railways if a memorial could be raised at the site of the accident. There had also been a request which had been declined by the local municipality to which Harmelen belonged at that time, Woerden. This request was declined because they felt no relation, no connection to the disaster.

The request to Dutch Railways was also declined. The first reason was a safety issue: a memorial near the railway tracks could jeopardize safety. Dutch Railways also worried about the precedent this memorial could create. The second reason was of a different order: Dutch Railways did not want their train operators to be confronted with memorials alongside the tracks.12

As described above, in 2002 the public ritual repertoire after tragic incidents had gone through a dramatic change resulting in particular into grassroots memorials. Dutch Railways regularly receive requests from relatives to raise these memorials to remember people who lost their life on the railways. Very often this regards people who committed suicide. Because of abovementioned reasons, Dutch Railways have always been very restrictive to allow these memorials. Instead they took the initiative was taken to raise a nationwide monument in remembrance of all people who had lost their life up and around the railways.
including staff, victims of railway accidents and people who had committed suicide. Together with a group of next of kin to victims of the Harmelen disaster, plans were elaborated and as a result the Nationwide Monument for Railway accidents was unveiled in 2004. The monument is located close to the head office of Dutch Railways and near kilometer marker zero of the national railway network (Tonnaer 2010). Approaching Utrecht from the east, the monument is visible from the train.

Opinions about this nationwide monument were mixed, some were happy with this ‘general’ monument, others, like Hans Fictoor, have mixed feelings and would rather have their ‘own’ monument in the vicinity of Harmelen and dedicated exclusively to the victims of Harmelen.

And with the 50th anniversary of the disaster coming up in 2012, (again) voices were heard to create a memorial in the vicinity of Harmelen. This decision was influenced by a question from a regional television channel about the way this 50th anniversary would be ‘celebrated’. In 2008, Fictoor had finished what he calls his own ‘monument’ in remembrance of his father. He published his family history focusing on the Harmelen disaster (Fictoor 2008) and in 2009 he started his own website. This site turned into a nationwide ‘forum’ for all people who had, in one way or the other, been related to the Harmelen disaster. When the mayor of Woerden (in the meantime Harmelen had become part of the city of Woerden) following the emerging attention on the disaster, was asked in 2010 to organize the 50th commemoration he had concerns whether this would open up ‘old wounds’. But he received an overwhelming amount with positive emails and plans were developed to organize a day of commemoration and a memorial site which would be unveiled on January 8, 2012, exactly fifty years after the disaster. Financial support came from several parties and also, after internal discussion because of their policy regarding the nationwide monument, from Dutch Railways.

A local artist, Taeke de Jong, was asked to design a monument. Together with representatives from the local community, it was decided that the monument would include two memorial plaques with the names of the casualties and in between a corpse on a console. The establishment of the memorial was a local achievement, in contrast with the nationwide monument, nobody involved in the accident was asked to participate in the design of memorial and memorial ceremony. The intention with the memorial was to create a space for all people involved in the tragedy to visit in remembrance of what happened in 1962. For that reason it was essential that the names would be on the memorial and that the place of the memorial would overlook the actual site of the accident.

Not only a memorial but also a memorial book became part of the 50th commemoration. In November 2011 a memorial book was presented with recently found pictures of the tragedy and the salvation procedure. A regional televi-
sion channel together with a nationwide channel for elderly people produced a documentary which was broadcasted on January 8, 2012. They also opened a chat box on the internet where people could put reactions. As a result, people from all over the country who had been involved one way or the other started to communicate with each other about their experiences.

The local community organized the memorial ceremony on January 8, 2012. A lot of effort was put into the difficult task of finding, after such a long period of time, descendants of victims, people who had been injured, or train passengers who had been unharmed. About 600 people attended the ceremony. 61 of the 93 deadly victims were represented at the ceremony. The goal of the ceremony was in the first place, in a brief official ceremony and speeches, to unveil the memorial. But also, and maybe more important, to accommodate a sharing of experiences and emotions between relatives of victims, survivors, passengers, caregivers and eyewitnesses. A short documentary, with live images from the site of the collision and the salvage was shown. Many people saw themselves, maybe for the first time, after all those years.

The memorial was officially named De kapotte mens (‘The broken man). Unfortunately some of the names on the plaques were misspelled, or dates of birth turned out to be wrong. This was mainly caused by the fact that at the time in 1962, these mistakes were made in official documents in which the fatalities were listed. Again, a lot of effort was put in by local people to check all the names and more mistakes were found. Several weeks after the ceremony it was decided to put new plaques with the proper names in front of the old plaques.

Unless requests come up from people directly involved, the municipality has no plans to organize yearly ceremonies around the memorial. The idea was to create a public designation of the place of the tragedy and offer a space for individual commemoration.

‘Maybe I will go there on my father’s birthday, or the day of the accident. The day of the accident has always been an awkward day in the family, all members having difficulty to express their emotions’, says Hans Fictoor.14

Although a minority showed disappointment about the mistakes, people are satisfied with the memorial: ‘I am glad it is finally there. It is beautiful. Impressive. And the corpus? Probably that is the way it was...', says Hans Fictoor. ‘A place of recognition of what happened there fifty years ago’, is the opinion of Bob Kradolfer, ‘a place to visit with my grandchildren and to tell them what happened to grandpa and how lucky he was to get out’.15
CONCLUSION:
EMERGING DISASTER RITUALS AND POSTPONED MEMORIALS

Nowadays, the widespread desire to commemorate and remember results is an emerging repertoire of disaster rituals (Post et al. 2003). In 2012 a guide with a protocol and checklist was published for municipalities in case a disaster or tragic incident would take place in their community. One of the recommendations is to erect a monument in the vicinity of the site of a tragedy (Holsappel-Brons 2012). The function of these monuments will be to mark the tragedy in history but also to give space to memorial rituals and to express emotions (Holsappel-Brons 2012).

The erection of the postponed Harmelen memorial may be explained by reasons given for the emerging widespread interest in memory culture and disaster ritual. These reasons are: an upsurge in the recovery of repressed memories, an increasing interest in family narratives and an emphasis on trauma, grief, emotion, reconciliation and apology (Garde-Hansen 2011: 13-14). Back in the sixties, Dutch society was characterized as ‘bourgeois and composed’. Rituals were focused on the deceased not on others like survivors, rescuers or witnesses leaving little room for emotions in public.

Nowadays, so called Slachtofferhulp (a nationwide organization offering help to victims) is available for those parties. At the time of the Harmelen disaster, they were not recognized as victims and therefore had no possibility to discuss their experiences and share their emotions. The Harmelen memorial appears to function as a medium to the recovery of repressed memories of communities or individuals whose histories have been long time ignored or hidden, in particular for those people mentioned.

There is also an emerging interest of family members to find out what happened at the time. Because parents have long time been unable to speak, children want to know what happened and families want to come to terms with their hidden emotions. As a result, people start with memory activities like writing stories or poems or, in the case of Hans Fictoor, a book in remembrance of the tragedy. In some cases, commemorative ceremonies are organized, like for instance in Apeldoorn to commemorate the plane crash or memorials are erected like in Harmelen.

Nowadays with the extension and development of mass media and digital media, we may almost ‘live witness’ tragedies and disasters. In 2009, the attack on the Royal Family on Queensday was witnessed live by millions of people. Practically the whole country became part of the tragedy and wanted to share emotions through commemoration rituals. This resulted in a ‘wave’ of grassroots memorials at the site of crash.
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In a much more ‘emotionalized’ society, in contrast with the ‘composed’ society in 1962, the 50th commemoration of the Harmelen railway disaster resulted in a surge of media attention: news items, documentaries, news paper articles, eye witness reports and even a fictional novel were published. The commemoration culminated in the unveiling of ‘The broken man’ thus offering the biggest Dutch railway disaster its own place in history.

Notes

1. The terms ‘monument’ and ‘memorial’ are often used interchangeably. In this contribution I will follow the definitions of Young (Young 1993) and will refer to a three dimensional piece of art as a ‘monument’. A ‘memorial’ may be for instance a day, a book, or a space. A ‘monument’ is thus a subset of the spectrum of memorials.
2. Hans Fictoor, son of one of the train operators, personal communication February 2012.
5. Hans Fictoor, son of train operator, personal communication February 2012.
7. Hans Fictoor, son of train operator, personal communication February 2012.
12. Ton Honing, project manager corporate communications, Dutch Railways, personal communication, February 2012.
13. www.hansfictoor.nl
14. Hans Fictoor, son of one of the train operators, personal communication February 2012.

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‘The Broken Man’: The Harmelen Railway Disaster Memorial


