

## Thanatos

ISSN 2242-6280, vol.3 1/2014

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[https://thanatosjournal.files.wordpress.com/2012/12/huttunen\\_youtubememorials3.pdf](https://thanatosjournal.files.wordpress.com/2012/12/huttunen_youtubememorials3.pdf)

# **Srebrenica burial ceremonies on YouTube: Remembering the dead and the missing in a contested political situation**

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### **Abstract**

In this paper, I analyse a body of YouTube videos depicting the annual reburial cum memorial ceremony in Potočari, Bosnia-Herzegovina, which commemorates the victims of the July 1995 Srebrenica massacre. The 8,000 victims that went missing after the assault on Srebrenica are among the totality of victims of the 1992–1995 Bosnian War. Around 100,000 people lost their lives in the conflict, but in addition to this grave figure, there is also a peculiar group of victims – the 30,000 people who remained missing after the war had ended. The complicated process of locating and identifying the missing has taken years, creating a situation where remembering and commemorating the dead merges with remembering and commemorating the missing. Moreover, the difficult political legacy of the war has created a situation where remembering the dead and the missing is often understood within a heavily politicized atmosphere. The intensity of the Srebrenica tragedy, as well as the international media attention it receives, makes the Srebrenica victims more visible than the other victims in Bosnia, both nationally and internationally. The widespread presence of this remembrance online is part of this visibility. There are dozens of video clips on YouTube showing various stages of the annual ceremony in Potočari: sometimes they are long shots showing the unfolding of the ceremony in real time, while other clips are heavily edited collages of the event with added music. In this paper, these practices of online remembrance are interpreted through the concepts of liminality, witnessing and cultural memory. I argue that the internet has become an effective site to circulate and put forward witness accounts as testimonies. They enable the creation of specific communities of memory across spatial distance.

## Introduction

Unusual deaths (Robben 2004, 6) require unusual forms of remembrance, and deaths that are embedded in politically tense contexts often give rise to forms of commemoration that reach beyond the remembrance of the individuals who have passed away. In this research report, I look at one such case – the remembrance of the victims of the July 1995 Srebrenica massacre, which took place during the 1992–1995 Bosnian war.

I examine a body of YouTube<sup>1</sup> videos depicting the annual reburial cum memorial ceremony in Potočari, Bosnia-Herzegovina, which commemorates the victims of the Srebrenica massacre. I consider why these videos are on the internet, and offer some tentative keys to reading their social, political and cultural dimensions as forms of remembrance.

My particular interest in remembrance practices on YouTube has grown from my larger ethnographic research project on the question of missing persons in Bosnia-Herzegovina and beyond. In my larger project, I am interested in the political and cultural dimensions of when a large number of people going missing, the *liminality* (Turner 1977) of the missing persons, and the ritual appropriations of the missing in Bosnia (Huttunen forthcoming). I understand the forms of internet remembrance as acts embedded within a larger framework of political projects aimed at coming to terms with the violence of the 1990s in Bosnia, and furthermore as projects searching for accountability and justice. Moreover, I suggest that for individual family members, the YouTube material is part of actual rituals of remembering.

### **The context: The Bosnian war, the fall of Srebrenica, the dead and the missing**

The dissolution of Yugoslavia in the 1990s gave rise to violent conflicts in the area, most notably in Croatia, Bosnia-Herzegovina and Kosovo. The armed conflict, entailing violent assaults on civilian populations, took place in Bosnia between 1992 and 1995. When the war ended, there were approximately 100,000 dead, and around 30,000 missing. The 8,000 victims that went missing after the assault on Srebrenica are among the totality of victims whose destiny was unclear at the end of the war. As it has turned out, most of those missing were dead, many of them buried in mass graves in northern and eastern Bosnia (Wagner 2008; Stover & Peress 1998). Moreover, some two million people were forced to leave their homes because of the hostilities in Bosnia, and approximately one million of these left the country, creating a worldwide diaspora. I suggest that the context of the diaspora is significant in understanding the YouTube material at hand.

The complicated process of locating and identifying the missing has taken years, creating a situation where remembering and commemorating the dead merges with remembering and commemorating the missing (see Huttunen forthcoming; Wagner 2008). In addition, the difficult political legacy of the war often frames remembrance of the dead and the missing within heavily politicized discourses.

Srebrenica, a small town located in eastern Bosnia in the Podrinje region neighbouring Serbia, has become a symbol of the brutality of the Bosnian war. The town, declared a safe area by the UN, was an enclave to which thousands of civilians poured from the surrounding countryside. It was attacked by Serb forces on 11 July 1995; over the following

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<sup>1</sup> The YouTube is a video-sharing website, launched in 2005, on which users can upload, view and share videos free of charge. See <https://www.youtube.com/?gl=FI&hl=fi>.

two weeks, over 8,000 Bosnian Muslim or Bosniak<sup>2</sup> men and boys were brutally executed, while women and children were deported from the area. (Wagner 2008, 21–57) The assault on Srebrenica was the most violent single attack on civilians in Europe since WWII, and the leaders of the campaign, Ratko Mladić and Radovan Karadžić, are on trial for genocide at the International Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia in The Hague.

The search for the 8,000 missing persons from Srebrenica – and the identification of their remains – has been an enormous project requiring huge investments, both in material and human terms. The details of the identification work that has been ongoing for over a decade is beyond the scope of this report, but it is clear that as the missing started to be found in mass graves and later identified through new DNA methodologies, the families of the deceased could start burying their loved ones and begin the mourning process (Wagner 2008).

A large memorial centre with a cemetery for the victims of the assault on Srebrenica was built in Potočari, some five kilometres south of Srebrenica proper. Newly identified victims from the mass graves are buried at the cemetery during the annual commemoration ceremony on 11 July. Between 200 and 700 bodies have been buried in the ceremonies, which is attended not only by mourning family members, but also by other Bosniaks from the area and beyond who wish to participate in the commemoration. The ritual repeats a similar form every year, combining Muslim burial ceremonies, commemoration of the victims, speeches by local and international politicians, and music.

### **The liminality of the missing**

In anthropological approaches, death is understood as the final transition in the course of human life, regulated by those left behind through ritual practices (e.g. Hallam & Hockey 2001; Metcalf & Huntington 1991). As is well known, Arnold van Gennep (2004 [1909]) introduced the understanding that all rites of passage are organized in a temporal continuum, with a tripartite structure consisting of the separation stage, the transition or liminal stage, and the incorporation stage. In death rituals, the deceased is separated from the community of the living, then goes through the liminal stage and is re-incorporated, after a proper burial, as a dead person or dead ancestor back into the social structure. In this process of transition, the living family members also renegotiate their relationship with the deceased and also with one another.

Those who are missing for extended periods remain at the liminal stage: they are not properly buried, and the ritual cycle is not complete. Even when it is most likely that the missing person is dead, without a body, there is no certainty. This is a harrowing situation for those left behind because they are tied to the unfinished, liminal stage for an indeterminate time.

Victor Turner (1977) further developed the concept of the liminal, suggesting that liminality is both a threatening and enabling condition. Below, I will consider the ways in which the liminality of the missing may resonate with the forms of online remembrance.

### **YouTube material on Potočari**

One can find a surprisingly large amount of online material about the ceremonies at Potočari. On YouTube alone, there are hundreds of video clips showing various stages of the ceremony. Searching with the words ‘Srebrenica burial’

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<sup>2</sup> Bosnian Muslims are increasingly referred to as Bosniaks in post-war Bosnia and among the Bosnian diaspora. For closer discussion on ethnicity in Bosnia, see e.g. Jansen 2005; Huttunen 2005.

produces around 1,210 hits, 'Srebrenica commemoration' 490 hits, and 'Potočari burial' around 190 hits (accessed 29 April 2014). There is footage from the burials at Potočari dating from at least 2003, and repetitive footage shot on consecutive years shows the continuity of memorial practices as well as the growing number of people at the event.

The video material falls roughly into three categories. Firstly, there is raw, unedited footage showing the unfolding of the ritual and events around it in real time. Secondly, there are heavily edited clips, combining still photographs and moving images, with added texts and music. Thirdly, there are news reports from various TV channels, including the BBC and Bosnian television. There are significant differences in the ways in which each of these categories addresses death, mourning, commemoration, and the political frame around them in Potočari.

Some clips of the unedited footage are just a couple of minutes long<sup>3</sup>, while others last for up to two hours and attempt to cover the whole burial and commemorative event.<sup>4</sup> This footage shows the unfolding of the ritual, including elements such as the music performance that opens the ceremony annually; the rows of green-shrouded coffins awaiting burial; family members and other close ones kneeling next to the coffins, often praying, sometimes crying and wailing; empty graves awaiting the coffins; coffins being carried to graves while the names of the deceased are read aloud; the lowering of coffins into graves, the shovelling of soil into the graves; the imam leading a Muslim prayer ritual; and ambassadors and foreign and local politicians giving speeches in the nearby hall. This footage brings home the disquietingly large number of bodies being buried and the repetitive form of the ritual. The music, images of sorrow, and ritual repetitiveness, together with the recital of the names of the dead, invite the viewer to imagine herself as a participant in the ritual, and also invite her to remember, commemorate, and mourn. However, there are also elements that break the ritual-like spell of the footage. In juxtaposition to the formal ceremonial aspects, some footage also shows groups of relaxed people sitting in the shade, talking to each other, and young boys waving to the camera. This footage has a documentary feel to it – and an aura of authenticity – as some of the recordings are technically of a rather poor quality. Such images point to the other dimension of this commemorative practice: this is an event repeated annually, and for some participants it is not about burying their own loved ones, but rather a social event, an opportunity to meet others and possibly to make a political statement through their participation.

The edited clips also vary in their duration, as well as in the subtext or connotative tone that they produce. Many of them include a combination of still photographs of the ritual in Potočari, moving images from the same events, and sorrowful, evocative background music. Rather often, these pictures are interlaced with images of the assault on Srebrenica, the mass graves, and/or refugees fleeing from Srebrenica in 1995. Sometimes a written commentary is added, most often telling about the assault to Srebrenica, the death of 8,000 men and boys, the project of ethnic cleansing, and the established tradition of the memorial ceremony in Potočari. Mostly, the textual commentary is limited to only a couple of simple assertive sentences. As such, these clips produce a much clearer political and moral frame to the ritual than the raw footage; they move further away from commemoration towards political commentary.<sup>5</sup> Sometimes, however, these edited clips are so skillfully made that they produce a strong sense of online ritual

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<sup>3</sup> See e.g. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bGCwmCMcdTA&NR=1&feature=endscreen>, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HJ2FA-s41FQ>, [accessed 29 April 2014]

<sup>4</sup> For longer shots, see e.g. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IsyKiQswNPk>, [accessed 29 April 2014]

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sAInMXApYVo>, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OPE0gMBDPuM>, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sLNow-Z02Eg>, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f4vfVNNof4s>, [accessed 29 April 2014]

commemoration: they have a strongly aesthetic approach to mourning and remembering, turning the horror of the genocide and the mass graves into a peaceful, beautiful farewell.<sup>6</sup>

The moral commentaries, such as references to the Holocaust through borrowing the musical theme from the movie *Schindler's List*, are implicit rather than clearly explicated in this genre. Some other edited clips, however, are far more disturbing, and much more explicit in foregrounding a political message connected to the burial and commemoration practices. For example, in one such clip, a voice of a child screaming in horror is mixed with music while photographs of the 1995 onslaught are shown.<sup>7</sup> Such a framing shatters expectations of a peaceful mourning and disturbs the viewer, forcing her to confront the horrific events behind the pictures of burial and remembrance.

The TV reports produce a clear, outspoken political frame to the events. They detail the number of bodies being buried and always refer to the events of 1995. The news reports also often foreground the voices of family members<sup>8</sup>, as many of them feature short interviews with family members.

The genre of the news report brings an aura of objectivity to these clips; however, the putative objectivity of the news reports differs from that of the raw footage. While in the latter case, the sense of objectivity arises from their unedited nature, in the former case it grows from our trust (or lack thereof) in certain news corporations, such as CNN and BBC, and their reports. These reports fix the commemoration within a frame of political relations reaching beyond the local Bosnian context. This genre is furthest removed from being a ritual performed online and closest to political commentary on the events that produced the need for these massive commemorations.

### **Witnessing, announcing or mourning: How to read the material**

Watching this material evokes many questions: how does one understand this material? Why is there so much material on YouTube? Why do individuals upload this material onto YouTube? How is it understood by onlookers? What sorts of effects do the various types of visual material have on the individuals and the collectives that see them? How do they affect those with connections to Srebrenica and those persons being buried; those with connections to Bosnia but not personally to the events in Srebrenica; and finally those without such connections, encountering the material intentionally or unintentionally?

Many of these questions are not answerable within this report, or with the available data. However, even beginning to ask these questions suggests that this is a multi-faceted phenomenon, relating to issues of violence, death, remembrance, and mourning, but also to issues of voice, politics, and community-building. Below, I give some tentative suggestions for reading this material and for developing an analytic perspective on this material.

Anna Haverinen, who has conducted research on virtual death and mourning rituals, has suggested that simply announcing (i.e., telling about) the death of the loved one is one motivation behind virtual forms of remembering (Haverinen 2011, 60). In the case of the Srebrenica-Potočari rituals, rather than announcing a death, the material

<sup>6</sup> e.g. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Nr8-QUtQkJE>, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e14fSONEs4o>, [accessed 29 April 2014]

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L3C3Aypjqb8>, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DR2f0tS0MbQ>, [accessed 29 April 2014]

<sup>8</sup> e.g. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vhoh6fq\\_upE](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vhoh6fq_upE), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u0hJZqn4a4o>, [accessed 29 April 2014]

circulating online announces that these persons, who have been missing for up to 18 years, have now been identified and buried, thus finally closing the period of excruciating uncertainty and threatening liminality (see Huttunen forthcoming). By the same token, the material tells about the context of the deaths, or at least implies it. This is especially the case with the edited clips; the added photographs from 1995 and the written commentary make this clear, whereas in the raw footage this dimension is less clearly pronounced. The raw footage works as a form of ritual remembrance to be shared with those who already know what the event is about, while the purpose of the edited material is to inform and invite new audiences to learn about and understand the horrifying events and their continuing significance.

The memorials studied by Haverinen are individual memorials, while the YouTube material on Potočari rarely singles out one person, but rather seeks to commemorate the Srebrenica victims collectively. Even those clips that single out a named person represent that individual as one among many similar victims. Commemorating a single person is thus always embedded within the commemoration of this larger group, some of whom are still missing.

Lucas Hilderbrand (2007) suggests that YouTube is an important site for creating and reproducing *cultural memory*. The volume of uploaded material about the Srebrenica-Potočari memorials suggests that this is exactly what is taking place: a cultural memory of both the tragic events of Srebrenica and the annually repeated memorial ceremony is being created and circulated in the virtual space, with new items introduced each year. For a geographically dispersed group such as the people who left Bosnia as refugees during the Bosnian war, the internet is an ideal place for creating and reproducing a community of memory (cf. Malkki 1997) across spatial distance. While creating a site for cultural memory for the families of Srebrenica victims and other Bosnians who identify with the violence, this material also invites others to listen, share and understand the fundamental significance of the events. This points to another dimension of the contemporary circulation and presentation of audio-visual material, that of *witnessing*.

Several scholars have suggested that witnessing is one of the central communicative modes of modern media, and that electronic media has broadened the scope of witnessing (e.g. Ellis 2000). A witness is present at a particular significant event or place, and tells others what she sees. The internet has become an effective site to circulate and put forward witness accounts as testimonies.

The existence of the video material on the Potočari rituals becomes meaningful through the concept of witnessing. The material testifies to the burials taking place – these are funerals for those that have awaited a proper burial for years – but maybe, even more importantly, they witness the exceptionality of these funerals as well as the tragedy of Srebrenica. The edited clips and the news material in particular put the rituals into a political frame and point to the political and moral culpability of those responsible for the violence in 1995.

I therefore suggest that the witnessing function of this material works in two registers. For individual family members who upload footage of their relative's burial, the material is part of the process of closing the ritual cycle, of making public the fact that his or her family member is properly buried after an unbearably long liminal phase. In this sense, they are part of the actual ritual, inviting onlookers to partake in the ritual. On another level, all of this material works to give repetitive witness accounts to the unforgettable tragedy of Srebrenica.

Haverinen suggests that all internet memorials may be understood as *cenotaphs*, i.e. memorial monuments without actual physical remains (Haverinen 2011, 57). The Srebrenica-Potočari memorial acts as a cenotaph for those missing who are not (yet) located or identified. The YouTube memorializations of the ceremonies in Potočari spin this

dimension further: they are practices of virtual commemoration for those still missing, in other words, they are virtual cenotaphs of the actual cenotaph in Potočari.

### **Discussion**

Katherine Verdery (1999) suggests that burials always create an audience of mourners that recognizes the dead and their significance. Circulating burials online as YouTube video clips may be understood as an effective way of creating an audience for the funerals. In the case of the annually repeated memorials in Potočari, there are at least two kinds of audiences created. Firstly, the internet is an excellent way of uniting the geographically dispersed Bosnian diaspora to mourn and commemorate their dead. Secondly, the political and moral framing of the edited material clearly seeks to create new audiences beyond the diaspora Bosnians and to convince outsiders of the political importance of the event.

Above, I suggest that for individual family members, the video material may work as a form of remembrance, and as a form of publicly completing the ritual circle by interring previously missing loved ones after their long liminal state. The raw footage and the aestheticized edited clips in particular work as virtual rituals of mourning and remembrance, while the news clips and the explicitly political, edited clips with outspoken references to the genocidal violence of 1995 work rather as political witness accounts, combining memorialization with demands for accountability.

### ***Biographical note:***

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