Final places
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3 | Expressions of private mourning in public space: The evolving structure of spontaneous and permanent roadside memorials in the Netherlands

Abstract
In order to develop new understandings of the way the bereaved deal with traumatic death and the artifacts they use as a means of public expression of grief, a visual content analysis of photos of 216 roadside memorials constructed in the Netherlands between 2006 and 2009 was undertaken, together with 24 interviews with the people who constructed them. We found that friends have an urgent need to memorialise the deceased and are the establishers of most spontaneous memorials. They place meaningful objects at the place of death, not necessarily indicating to an external observer the identity of the deceased. In contrast, permanent memorials clearly state who has died and re-embody that person. Primarily established by parents, permanent memorials reveal parental desire to maintain bonds with the departed. By transforming the death site into a place of care, parents continue their identity as nurturers. While spontaneous memorials comprise items such as fresh flowers, candles, personal notes and loose photos, permanent memorials contain lasting objects such as artificial flowers, plants, solar-powered lights, inscriptions and permanently-affixed photographs. Greater consideration needs to be given to the separate functions played by spontaneous and permanent memorials and the differing needs of the various categories of mourners.

3.1 Introduction
Roadside memorials mark places of death, the spot where people have died in traffic accidents. They have also been discussed as being a feature in many other countries, including Canada (Belshaw & Purvey, 2009), the USA (Everett, 2000), Mexico (Henzel, 1995), Ireland (MacConville & McQuillan, 2010), Germany (Aka, 2007), Sweden (Petersson, 2009), Australia (Clark & Franzmann, 2006; Hartig & Dunn, 1998), New Zealand (Clark & Franzmann, 2006) and the Netherlands (Klaassens, Groote & Huigen, 2009; Stengs, 2007). The practice is not new as there is a long tradition of marking the places of tragic death (Clark & Franzmann, 2006). For example, there is documented evidence of a roadside memorial

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2 This chapter is based on Klaassens, M., Groote, P., & Vanclay, F. (forthcoming). Expressions of private mourning in public space: The evolving structure of spontaneous and permanent roadside memorials in the Netherlands, *Death Studies*. 

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having being built in the Netherlands in 1940 (Van de Ven, 2004). The modern version of roadside memorials has attracted the attention of scholars and journalists primarily because the practice has proliferated and gained popularity over the last 15 or so years (Clark, 2008; Clark & Franzmann, 2006; Hartig & Dunn, 1998; Owens, 2006; Reid & Reid, 2001).

The establishment of these private memorials in public spaces brings death into the public sphere. This runs counter to the trend in Western societies of being death-denying, where the public expression of grief is essentially taboo. Death has been ‘sequestered’, that is removed from the public sphere into the private world of the individual (Giddens, 1991; Mellor & Shilling, 1993). Boundaries between the public and private sphere have changed and the emotional repressiveness of many Western societies has gradually given way to greater expressiveness in public mourning, as is evident in response to the passing of famous people, disasters and roadside tributes (Howarth, 2007). This expressiveness is reflected in the collections of mementoes at roadside memorials. The functions of such memorials are to assist in the process of bereavement, which is especially important in the event of sudden and often inexplicable loss, and to make death and grief visible and public. They are cultural manifestations of grief, mourning and memorialization. Studying them provides new understandings of how the bereaved deal with traumatic deaths and how they use memorials as a means of expression in the public sphere. In this paper we study the composition of roadside memorials in the Netherlands and the meanings the bereaved attach to them. In particular, we focus on the differences between spontaneous and permanent memorials (Klaassens et al., 2009).

3.2 Spontaneous memorialisation

The phenomenon of roadside memorials is part of the process of spontaneous memorialization (Petersson, 2009) that is most evident in disasters such as terrorist attacks, murders, fatal accidents and the deaths of public figures. “Spontaneous memorials are the collection of mementoes which mourners bring to and leave at the site of the death, or some other site associated with the deceased” (Haney, Leimer & Lowery, 1997, p. 161). They are spontaneous in that their origins are without official endorsement, nor are they instigated by church or state (Santino, 2006), and they are not established at the normally prescribed places commemorating death such as a church, funeral home or cemetery (Haney et al.). The term, spontaneous memorials, is controversial as the memorials often lose their spontaneity, especially when the public becomes aware of the memorial site (Doss, 2008; Margry, 2007).

In modern societies, which are normally successful in controlling the circumstances surrounding death, there seems to be an increasing need for spontaneous memorialization to deal with those cases where death occurs suddenly, unexpectedly and/or violently without
warning or opportunity for closure (Collins & Rhine, 2003; Howarth, 2007). Spontaneous memorials indicate a desire to reconstruct new forms of ritualized mourning, indicating that the traditional mourning rituals of conventional religion seem to be inadequate (Clark & Franzmann, 2006; Haney et al., 1997). The increase in the popularity of spontaneous assemblages demonstrates that these impromptu structures and objects – which typically comprise only inexpensive materials – have the capacity to provide a mechanism to allow people to negotiate complex events, such as traumatic death. But it is not the ordinariness of the materials used or cost of the structure that is important, rather it is their symbolic and emotional power – they are rich with meaning (Doss, 2008).

Although these mass public mourning events appear to evoke similar responses in many places around the world, spontaneous shrines are not generic, because each disaster and each deceased individual is unique (Santino, 2001). In addition to the placement of candles and flowers, the personal items that are carefully placed (re)construct the identity of the people who died, but also those who came to mourn them (Grider, 2006). Therefore, these memorials are increasingly regarded as unique, valuable and irreplaceable collections. In several countries, thousands of items from spontaneous collective memorials have been archived, for example after the assassination of Dutch politician Pim Fortuyn in 2002 (Magry, 2003), the March 2004 train bombings in Madrid (Sánchez-Carretero, 2006) and the 9/11 terrorist attacks in the USA (Gardner & Henry, 2002).

Roadside memorials have common features with these other spontaneous memorials, but they diverge in a variety of ways (Belshaw & Purvey, 2009). Roadside memorials mark the sites of death that were caused by traffic accidents. They are established in honour of the death of one or a small number of ordinary people, rather than to commemorate a celebrity, or the lives of many people after a major disaster. Therefore roadside memorialization takes place at a more personal level. Finally, individual roadside memorials do not normally receive national attention and are not normally disseminated through the mass media, so the process of memorialization happens on a smaller scale, although they can attract media attention at the local level.

Previous studies have shown that the standard format of a roadside memorial tends to comprise a cross, flowers and personal items (Belshaw & Purvey, 2009; Hartig & Dunn, 1998; Reid & Reid, 2001). Klaassens et al. (2009), however, showed that Dutch roadside memorials tended to differ from this convention in that crosses were not typical in the Netherlands. In addition, they identified two different types of roadside memorials: spontaneous and permanent ones, differing in their composition, construction and establishers. However, they found that not all memorials were easy to categorise with permanent and spontaneous memorials have some features in common. Nevertheless, they concluded that almost all
roadside memorials commence as a temporary, spontaneous memorial created shortly after the accident using objects that are at hand at the time of notification of the death, with some being replaced by permanent memorials over time.

It is implicit that mourners (i.e. the constructors of spontaneous memorials) have not applied for official permission to establish a memorial, which in formal terms might be considered illegal. Klaassens et al. (2009)’s category of spontaneous roadside memorials share features with other spontaneous memorials, such as temporal proximity to the time of fatality, and their unofficial and temporary nature. However, their size, media coverage and participatory audience differ. Spontaneous roadside memorials are usually constructed by the friends and classmates of the victim. Over time, the spontaneous nature of the memorial may disappear through decay or removal, but the memorial might be expanded or replaced by a more permanent form. This typically happens several months after the accident. The permanent type of roadside memorial is frequently built by the parents of the victim. Friends seem to have a more pressing and urgent need to memorialize the accident and their loss in the immediate aftermath of death, whereas parents seem to memorialize the deceased in a more enduring and considered way. Many of the permanent memorials have approval from relevant formal authorities and may be authorized to persist for a specified number of years (Klaassens et al.).

Although the literature on roadside memorials is substantial, the various publications mostly document and describe small numbers of roadside memorials in particular regions, usually applying a case study methodology (Doss, 2008). Overall, they describe the composition of roadside memorials in general rather than specific terms. This paper will contribute to this research gap by analyzing in detail the composition of more than 200 roadside memorials in the Netherlands. While the earlier research of the authors (Klaassens et al.) showed that the construction and composition of spontaneous and permanent roadside memorials differ, in this paper we analyze how they differ in greater detail and discuss what this reveals about the way mourners use the memorials to deal with traumatic death. Additional information is gained by considering the demographical characteristics of the deceased, specifically sex and age, on the composition of the memorial and the artifacts used to commemorate their death.

3.3 Methodology
Quantitative and qualitative methods were used together to identify the composition of roadside memorials in the Netherlands and the meanings mourners attached to them. The primary research methods used were a visual content analysis of photos of 216 roadside
memorials and 24 in-depth, semi-structured interviews with people who established or maintain roadside memorials.

Between 2006 to 2009, a database of known roadside memorials in the Netherlands was compiled and continuously updated. Entries for the database were gathered by mobilising as many external ‘eyes and ears’ as possible by using our personal and professional networks to inform us about roadside memorials and/or the people who established them. In addition we called on the support of the general public through the mass media. We utilised a range of opportunities to have stories and announcements about the research presented on regional and national radio, in a regional newspaper, and an article in a popular Dutch (young) women’s lifestyle magazine. These stories contained a request for the researchers to be informed about the existence of any roadside memorial and carried contact details of the researchers. In addition, annual formal requests to the Dutch Ministry of Transport, Public Works and Water Management have resulted in being informed about the locations and details of all fatal accidents in the Netherlands for each year. Information about the deaths were cross-referenced with newspaper reports of those accidents. This provided information about the age and sex of the victims, as well as other information about the accident. Using the information obtained from all our information sources, a database (Excel spreadsheet) was established. For each deceased person who is memorialised, all available information about the memorial, the deceased person and the accident were added. As at the end of 2009, the database contained 393 memorials. We are continuing to update the database.

In addition to the textual information about each memorialised roadside death, we also sought to gain pictorial information for each entry by internet searching, extracting images from newspapers and TV programs, and by the authors visiting memorials and taking their own photos of many of the sites. Images were able to be obtained for a total of 216 memorials.

A visual content analysis (Rose, 2007) of the photographs was undertaken to quantify the material dimensions of the memorials. This was based on counting the frequency of certain elements in the images, followed by an analysis and interpretation of those frequencies. With a high reliability (Ball & Smith, 1992; Neuendorf, 2002; Slater, 1998), this method offers a clear procedure to systematically analyse a large number of images. We are aware that assigning meanings to the memorials and mementos is subjective and interpretative (Hall, 1997; Rose, 2007). It is therefore important to justify one’s own reading and interpretation in detail and formulate the coding carefully (Lutz & Collins, 1993).

In our coding, we made a distinction between spontaneous and permanent roadside memorials. Although these two types of memorials have similarities, their main differences are in the length of time following death in which they are established and the durability of the materials used. When the memorial only consisted of loose and moveable objects, it was
coded as spontaneous. Where the main structure of the memorial consisted of an existing structure, for example a tree or traffic sign pole, we looked for the presence of features such as a plaque that would signify a permanent memorial. If not present, we coded the structure/memorial as being spontaneous. Other characteristics of memorials that would likely lead to a memorial being coded as spontaneous were signs that it was self-made and could be placed immediately after the accident by the bereaved themselves, for example a small stone or a rough handmade cross containing only handwritten text. These memorials can be removed easily. We coded a memorial as being permanent when the main structure was built using long lasting materials and/or were produced by professionals. For example, a cross would be coded as permanent when the woodwork was polished or varnished (i.e. nicely finished), or when an engraved plaque was permanently affixed. The apparent professionalism of these permanent memorials is noticeable and many have similarities with head stones. The permanent memorials are often difficult to put into place (because they can be large or heavy), or they might be carefully affixed to ensure their permanence.

Of the 216 memorials considered, we categorized 33 as being spontaneous and 183 as being permanent. It should be noted that some memorials had characteristics of both. The disparity in numbers is partly because on any occasion where a memorial contained features that implied that prior thought or planning had been applied, and/or external assistance and/or considerable effort was used in the construction, the memorial was classified as being permanent. It is acknowledged that in some of these cases, the permanent memorial might be superimposed on top of an existing spontaneous memorial.

In this paper we examine: (1) the basic structure of the memorial; and (2) the ancillary objects (floral items, personal items and other ephemera) on display. Following a preliminary examination of the photos and through a process of dynamic coding, the main structure of each monument was classified as being a cross, tile, rock, tree, pole, or ‘other structure’ (Figures 1a – 1f). These categories were refined during the coding procedure in order to ensure that the codes were exhaustive and mutually exclusive. We determined whether the material structures contained the following features: first name, last name, date of birth, date of death, age of the victim, and inscription or text containing words other than the details already given, for example phrases like “in memory of”, “departed our lives”, or poems or other personalised comments. These features provide insight into the amount of identifying information about the victim provided on the memorial, and about how public space is personalized. We categorized the ancillary items as being: flowers (fresh, artificial), plants (flowering or not), light sources (candles/lanterns, solar-powered lights), stuffed toys (i.e. soft cuddly toys), butterflies (e.g. whether the main structure or any additional objects were in the shape of or contained a
Figure 1A. Roadside crosses

Photo: Vincent Breen

Figure 1B. Memorial tile

Photo: Peter Groote

Figure 1C. Rock-shaped roadside memorial

Retrieved from http://www.dennisklaver.nl

Figure 1D. Memorial tree

Retrieved from http://boomke.punt.nl/?gr=763402

Figure 1E. Memorial pole

Photo: Mirjam Klaassens

Figure 1F. Memorial categorized as ‘other’

Photo: Vincent Breen
butterfly), hearts (e.g. whether the main structure or any additional objects were in the shape of or contained a heart), personal notes to the deceased, photographs (loose, affixed), religious insignia (whether as additional objects, or as representations/symbols within objects, or as the sign of the cross marking the date of death), and other objects. The categories provide detailed information about the composition of items found at the roadside memorials. Some of the categories were based on research on spontaneous memorialisation, where especially flowers, lights and cuddly toys feature at the death site. We coded for butterflies and hearts as well because our earlier research indicated that these objects were not infrequently used in the Netherlands (Klaassens et al., 2009). As before, as the coding process progressed, the codes were refined with additional categories and subcategories as needed. The coding was entered into the Excel spreadsheet which was later converted into a format to be used for the analysis using the statistical software package, SPSS Version 16.0.

The 216 investigated roadside memorials were established in honour of 266 deceased people – 183 memorials were established for one person alone, 22 monuments were for two people, and 11 monuments commemorated three or more people. For the investigated memorials, the age and sex of the victims could be established in the substantial majority of cases (94% and 97% respectively). The background information in the database allowed us to examine the influence of age and sex on the design of the memorials. In most cases, we used a Chi-square test to test the statistical significance of the relationship being considered.

Where memorials were established for multiple victims, there were certain difficulties for the analysis. For instance, when a butterfly was placed at a memorial which is in memory of both a teenage girl and a boy, we do not know for certain for which victim it was intended, or whether it was for both. This could influence our interpretation of the symbol and the victim it represents. Furthermore, the pictures of permanent memorials were easier to analyze, because spontaneous memorials often contain so many items (or a ‘sea of flowers’) that objects may be hidden from view. Furthermore, in four cases photographs lacked clarity meaning that not all desired information could be extracted.

In content analysis, there is a tendency to assume that the things that occur more frequently are more important than things that occur rarely. In cultural geography, however, we know that sometimes the unique or rare is more significant than the mundane and commonplace. In order not to lose any detail about the objects and characteristics that could not be categorized, we made observation notes for each unusual object. In this way we included a qualitative interpretation within the content analysis, in line with Rose (2007) who argued that content analysis and qualitative methods are not mutually exclusive.

We conducted 24 semi-structured in-depth interviews with the bereaved who maintained a roadside memorial; 22 of whom had also constructed it. The total number of
people involved in the 24 interviews was 42. Seventeen interviews were conducted with parents, three with widows, one interview with siblings and three interviews with people in different compositions namely with a mother and friend; parents and a sister, and one with a mother, sibling, friend and neighbour. Most interviews were with more than one person. When contacting the establishers, we left it up to them as to whom they would be interviewed with, because of the sensitive topic matter to be discussed. The interviews provided information about the meanings they attach to the memorial, as well to any additional artefacts that may be placed there, and what they actually symbolize, in deference to Reid and Reid (2001) who stated that the meaning of these objects can only be truly known to the person who placed it there. Nevertheless, the respondents often found it difficult to articulate why they chose certain objects for the memorial and the meaning those objects held for them or the victim. In the following passages, in most cases pseudonyms have been used to preserve the anonymity of those we interviewed and/or the victims. The only times where this is not the case is where we have used a photo of the memorial and it reveals the deceased person’s identity, or where the story necessarily requires use of their real name. Where the real names of living persons are used or are identifiable, their permission for use of the material has been given. The interviews and analysis were done in Dutch. The excerpts presented in this paper have been translated by the authors.

3.4 Differences in structure between spontaneous and permanent roadside memorials

We analysed differences in the composition between spontaneous and permanent roadside memorials and what that reveals about their meaning. Our analysis showed that the majority of spontaneous roadside memorials contain an existing structure, such as a tree, lamp post, street sign, traffic pole or guard rail (crash barrier). Since these existing structures are usually located near the site of the accident (and may even have been responsible in part for the fatality), they are ready-present, accessible and potentially appropriate structures to decorate at the spur of the moment. Therefore existing structures are often a part of spontaneous memorials (60% versus 21% for permanent memorials). With time, when more permanent structures become established, existing structures, for example a tree, can still remain part of the memorial.

In contrast to spontaneous memorials, permanent memorials are diverse and often creative. Twenty three percent are characterized by a cross, 27 percent by a commemorative tile, 19 percent by a tree, 13 percent are in the form of a rock, 15 percent resemble a pole, and 24 percent are of another shape (see Table 1). This variety in the design of Dutch roadside memorials would appear to differ from roadside memorials in other countries. In the USA (Collins & Rhine, 2003; Everett, 2000; Reid & Reid, 2001), Germany (Aka, 2007), Australia
(Clark & Franzmann, 2006; Hartig & Dunn, 1998, Smith, 2003), New Zealand (Clark & Franzmann, 2006) and Mexico (Henzel, 1995), roadside memorials in the form of crosses or crucifixes have been noted as being normal.

Table 1. The Structure of roadside memorials by type of memorial

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Structure of roadside memorials</th>
<th>Type of roadside memorial</th>
<th>Spontaneous (n=33)</th>
<th>Permanent (n=183)</th>
<th>( \chi^2 ) b</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cross</td>
<td></td>
<td>3</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tile</td>
<td></td>
<td>0</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tree</td>
<td></td>
<td>39</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rock</td>
<td></td>
<td>6</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>ns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pole</td>
<td></td>
<td>21</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>ns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other shapes</td>
<td></td>
<td>30</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>ns</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* More than one structure per memorial is possible

b Significance level for 2x2 Chi-square tests: *p<0.1, ** p<0.05, *** p<0.01, ns=not significant, df=1

One possible explanation for the limited number of crosses in the Netherlands could be that, as Henzel (1995) and Jordan and Rowntree (1990) found in other countries, predominantly Protestant regions generally lack religious iconography. Furthermore, it should be noted that the Netherlands is one of the most secularized countries in the world (Bernst, Dekker & Hart, 2007). Our interviews reveal a variety of reasons why the bereaved did not use a cross. Willem, who is originally from Germany where crosses are the standard (Aka, 2007), explained that the roadside memorial he made, which took the form of a little wooden house containing pictures, is more personal than a cross. Mary and Marja, who each lost a child, believed that a cross is something for older people. Anja, who lost her 18-year-old son, thought that a cross was more appropriate at a cemetery. And Cobie, who lost her husband, stated that she just does not like crosses.

Beside the roadside memorials that contain a cross as their main structure, our analysis showed that 17 percent contained some form of a cross, almost all of which used it as a symbol to identify a date as being the date of death. As such, the cross can be interpreted as a euphemistic symbol rather than denoting religiosity. The absence of religiosity is also demonstrated by the limited number of angels featured. Angels featured at only six sites and in two cases where the inscribed text made reference to angels. By comparison, because of the cultural symbolism of deceased children being depicted as ‘one more angel in heaven’ (at least
in the anglophone world), many memorials in Australia and New Zealand carried the verbal or pictorial images of angels (Clark & Franzmann, 2006). An explanation for the limited use of angels at Dutch sites is provided by Peelen and Altena (2008) who argue that because of secularization, angels are replaced by butterflies at the cemetery and online remembrance sites in the Netherlands (discussed later).

The diversity in material forms suggests a desire for personalized places of remembrance to reflect the identity of the deceased. Wouter and Tina, the parents of a 17-year-old deceased boy, established a memorial in the shape of a die (i.e. the singular of dice) (see Figure 1f). Wouter explains: “It was clear from the start that this is what it should be, because our son played games a lot”. Wouter: “Dice symbolise fate”. Tina: “The dice fall where they may, so the dice were unlucky for us”. From the interviews, it appeared that many of the bereaved crafted (or at least conceived) the memorials themselves in order to personalize the site and to be able to do something in a hectic time filled with overwhelming emotions just after the accident. Sander who constructed a roadside cross for his deceased daughter explained: “It gave me much satisfaction. It is part of me”.

We found other indications suggesting the importance of personalizing the death site by the bereaved. For some respondents, having an individual memorial is important in order to personalize it. Pauline, who lost her 18-year-old daughter, has had difficulty in accepting that her daughter did not have her own monument, but could only have one shared with the driver in a single vehicle accident because the authorities permitted one memorial only. As a consequence she pleaded to have her daughter’s name plaque on top, so it would be clear that artefacts and decorations placed on top of the monument were intended to be for her daughter. The idea of a collective monument in memory of victims of traffic deaths was rejected by all people with whom we discussed this.

Figure 2. Roadside memorials in honour of two teenage girls that died in a car accident
Figure 2 shows the site where girls aged 16 and 18, from two different families, died. It conveys the families’ efforts to give the death site their personal sense of place, resulting in two very different memorials. One family placed a formal gravestone made of granite inscribed by much text and detailed information, whereas the other family placed a simple stone with little information. Curiously, both included photos of the deceased.

Another way to personalize a site in order to express the deceased’s identity is the incorporation of information about the deceased. The most common feature of the roadside memorial is the first name of the deceased (79% for permanent memorials, 24% of spontaneous memorials), whereas many did not contain the last name (see Table 2).

Table 2. The features of roadside memorials by type of memorial

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Features of roadside memorials</th>
<th>Type of roadside memorial</th>
<th>( \chi^2 )</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Spontaneous (n=33)</td>
<td>Permanent (n=179)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First name</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Last name</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Date of birth</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Date of death</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inscription</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Significance level for 2x2 Chi-square tests: *p<0.1, ** p<0.05, *** p<0.01, ns=not significant, df=1

The lack of the last name at many memorials makes the death site less formal and more personal places of remembrance especially meaningful for those who had known the deceased. “The materialized name appears to be sufficient to provoke deeply felt sensations of intimacy, sentiment and personal devotion” and therefore is often crucial in establishing relationships between the roadside memorial and the memorialized person (Hallam & Hockey, 2001, p. 172). Those feelings can be intensified by using the nickname of the deceased (as was done in four cases) or by the use of titles or military rank. For example, in an accident that took the lives of two ministers of religion, their titles (Reverend or in Dutch, ‘dominee’ abbreviated ‘ds’) were used. Two crosses erected in honour of two soldiers featured their military rank. At two monuments, the last name of the deceased was symbolically represented rather than written. For example, at the site where Dennis Klaver died, his mother placed a large rock with a little plaque of copper in the shape of a clover (klaver means ‘clover’) (see Figure 1c). His mother explained: “All the time his friends called him that way, never by his first name. ...
I never realized it then, but when it happened, it became a symbol. The clover has become very special and has much to do with Dennis”.

3.5 Differences in the use of ancillary items
Roadside memorials comprise material objects that manifest deeply-felt emotions. The content analysis showed that 75 percent of memorials consisted of something more than just the main structure, such as floral tributes and other material objects. Although spontaneous memorials rarely feature expensive items, any objects placed are highly meaningful to the mourners who place them there. For example, after periods of time Janet collects the accumulating material objects placed at her teenage daughter’s memorial and stores them in her daughter’s former bedroom. Hilde, another mother, donated piles of stuffed toys from her daughter’s memorial to charity. Not all memorials feature additional material objects, however, which can often be explained by the mourner’s reasons for establishing a memorial in the first place. For example, the memorial established by Henk and Greet in honour of their 12-year-old son was established primarily as a protest against the unsafe traffic situation rather than as a place of remembrance. It lacks personal objects, but informs in grave detail the circumstances surrounding the tragedy and refers to the website they established for more information.

Below, we examine the meanings and symbolic associations of the material objects placed at the roadside memorials. To structure the analysis and interpretation, we describe them according to their symbolic meaning and/or purpose. These categories, however, overlap and are not mutually exclusive. Statistical analyses were used to examine the relationships between the objects used and the sex and age of the deceased. The results are presented in Tables 3 and 4.

Symbols of love and beauty
Offering flowers to the dead is part of the culture of many societies and is a typical funeral offering (Doss, 2008), a way to remember the dead (Goody, 1993) and can be seen as a gesture of love, respect and sympathy (Hallam & Hockey, 2001; Walter, 1996). This funeral custom is highly visible at roadside memorials and according our analysis occurs irrespective of the age or sex of the victim. However, the probability that flowers will be found at spontaneous monuments is significantly higher compared to permanent ones (94% compared to 54%). This implies that the custom is especially important soon after death. The large majority of the flowers featured at roadside memorials were roses. Walter (1996) contends that the rose is a symbol of the ‘pain of love’ and wonders when the rose also emerged as the flower of remembrance.
Table 3. Objects at roadside memorials per type of memorial

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Objects at roadside memorials</th>
<th>Type of roadside memorial</th>
<th>Spontaneous (n=33)</th>
<th>Permanent (n=183)</th>
<th>( \chi^2 ) a</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Flowers</td>
<td></td>
<td>94</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fresh</td>
<td></td>
<td>85</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Artificial</td>
<td></td>
<td>18</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>ns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plants</td>
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*a* Significance level for 2x2 Chi-square tests: *p<0.1, ** p<0.05, *** p<0.01, ns=not significant, df=1

*b* means that expected cell frequencies were too low to allow calculation
Even though there are variations in the meanings of the rose that are context and culture specific, the rose is widely accepted as a common symbol for love in the Western world (Goody, 1993). The colour of the roses lain at the memorials was predominantly red. Colours have symbolic meanings, with red referring to love. Thus a red rose lain at a site of remembrance means: ‘I love you forever’ (Goody, 1993). Chrysanthemums decorated 16 memorials. Since its introduction to Europe, the chrysanthemum has acquired a symbolic status as the flower of death in European Catholic areas, although this meaning may not hold in protestant areas (Goody, 1993) such as parts of the Netherlands. Sunflowers decorated 17 sites. Sunflowers are commonly understood to be symbols of joy and happiness, and therefore potentially reflect the life of the deceased.

The interviews indicated that the bereaved regularly bring flowers to the memorial. However, we found little evidence that the bereaved consciously took flowers to the memorial because of their associated symbolic meaning. This is in line with Goody (1993) who explained that the public is often not aware of the ‘language of flowers’. Some of the bereaved explained that they would bring the deceased’s favourite flowers. Cobie, who placed a cross for her deceased husband, planted tulip bulbs at the site and often brings fresh cut tulips as these were his favourites. Jan-Willem and Janet planted bulbs in the shape of

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<th>Female (n=71)</th>
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<tr>
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<td>33</td>
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</table>

*a Significance level for 2x2 Chi-square tests: *p<0.1, ** p<0.05, *** p<0.01, ns=not significant, df=1
their daughter’s name and frequently take pink flowers with them, as that was their daughter’s favourite colour.

As with flowers, hearts also embody love and were present in 39 percent of the spontaneous and 14 percent of the permanent memorials. Through their placement, the death site is transformed into a place of love and beauty, and horror is taken out of the sites. Marja wants the death site to reflect her daughter’s personality and therefore she said: “It has to be vivacious there as well”. Candles are literally and metaphorically ‘lights in the dark’. They transform a dark place into a place of light. Some 61 percent of spontaneous memorials displayed candles, whereas only 39 percent of permanent ones did.

Only a small number of roadside memorials refer to the circumstances surrounding the tragedy. In general, these references are taboo as the focus of memorials tends to emphasize the deceased as they were when they were alive (Doss, 2008). This does not necessarily mean that signs of the accident are covered up, as these are the last physical reminders of the deceased when they were last alive. For example, in a few cases, a guard rail was decorated. Of the many trees that constituted roadside memorials, 46 percent had damaged bark clearly communicating that they were associated with the death. At only four sites were fragments of the car or references to the vehicle found, for example the handlebars of a moped, and in another case a wheel rim. In contrast to our evidence, objects involved in accidents were included at roadside memorials in Australia (Hartig & Dunn, 1998), the USA (Everett, 2000; Griffith, 1992; Reid & Reid, 2001), the United Kingdom (Morrison, 2005) and the former Yugoslavia (Rajković, 1988).

In Newcastle, Australia, Hartig and Dunn (1998) noted that the memorials “function as conservative memorials of youth machismo; of heroic aggression, disregard for safety and egocentrism” (p. 5). Many of their roadside memorials featured fragments of the crashed vehicle and objects involved with the collision, “serving as masculine artefacts of death” (p. 10). In contrast, few Dutch memorials contained objects that refer to the impact of the accident. Our interviewees revealed that fragments associated with the wreckage have special meaning to them. Cobie, who lost her husband, took parts of the wreckage home to place within a home memorial that included a picture of him and the urn containing his cremated remains. Therefore, the fragments may be regarded as a point of material contact with the once-living person and facilitate a desired physical connection.

The fragility of existence
According to Hallam and Hockey (2001), the fragility of flowers may explain their resilience as expressions of memory. They suggest that the rapid discoloration and quick putrefaction of flowers reflects the transience of human life. The beauty and fragile, transitory nature
symbolized by flowers can also be applied to butterflies. Butterflies were found at 16 percent of the permanent and 3 percent of the spontaneous memorials. The monuments provide information about the way we can interpret butterflies. The site where a 20-year-old woman died carried the following text: “Your life was colourful and light as a butterfly, but just as delicate as well. You were with us for a short time, to disappear from our side on dancing wings, towards Heaven”. Another memorial, in honour of a 24-year-old woman, mentioned: “Just like a butterfly you fluttered through life, cheerful, happy, experiencing everything to the fullest. Now you have flown away from us, although your beautiful colours will remain”.

We found that female victims have a significantly higher probability of being remembered by butterflies (35% vs 9% for males). The presence of butterflies occurred for all age groups for both males and females, although there was a marked concentration in the use of butterflies in the case of younger females. One respondent, Marja, who lost her 10-year-old daughter, explains that she associates butterflies with cuteness and therefore with girls and children. Janet: “I think that most parents who lose a child would visualize it as a butterfly”. Our analysis confirms this to some extent – for females in age groups up to the age of 25, some 41 percent of memorials had butterflies, whereas for males much lower percentages were recorded (with the highest recording of 16% in the under 15 age category). The symbolism of butterflies is known across the Netherlands as a reference to the transition from life to death. The butterfly that flies out of the chrysalis symbolizes the soul that rises from the mortal remains. The transformation from caterpillar to butterfly strikingly resembles the Christian belief in the transition from life to death and resurrection (Peelen & Altena, 2008). An explanation for the use of butterflies at permanent memorials is that parents who are the main establishers of them regard their deceased loved one as having departed (i.e. being not-present) as opposed to being deceased (i.e. ceasing to exist) (Collins & Rhine, 2003). This notion is communicated symbolically by butterflies.

Dragonflies and ladybirds were found at several sites and could be associated with the fragility of existence as well. Although the ladybird has a specific meaning in the Dutch context as the symbol for the national movement against senseless violence (Stengs, 2007), it is widely traditionally understood to represent good luck and/or being blessed.

**Communicating lost innocence**

Stuffed toys were placed at 23 percent of our investigated sites, but were significantly more often present at spontaneous memorials (36% vs 19%). Teddy bears are reported to be quite common at collective spontaneous shrines in the USA (Grider, 2006). An improvised shrine erected in the first weeks following the 9/11 terrorist attacks contained so many teddy bears that Zeitlin (2006) was prompted to wonder: “What kind of a shrine is this that it pays
homage to the teddy bear?” (p. 106). According to Grider, the choice of the teddy bear at spontaneous shrines is a topic of debate among scholars. Several studies have argued that stuffed toys are typically found at sites where children have died (Collins & Rhine, 2003; Senie, 2006; Westgaard, 2006). Our analysis showed that the likelihood of stuffed toys being present was much higher in the younger age groups (up to age 22) for both females and males, but that there was a difference between males and females. For girls up to 18, stuffed toys were present in 54 percent of cases. For girls aged 19 to 22, 27 percent had stuffed toys. For boys up to the age of 18, 26 percent had stuffed toys, while 31 percent of boys aged 19 to 22 had stuffed toys. At older age groups, while stuffed animals were sometimes present for males and females, the frequencies were very low.

As with stuffed toys, other material objects also refer to childhood, such as colourful toys (three sites), decorative pinwheels (i.e. plastic or paper windmills) (five cases) and balloons (two cases). For our age groups up to the age of 30, photographs tended to placed at around 32 percent of memorials (and only at 11 percent of memorials of people older than 30). Photographs provide emotive power as they evoke “tension between the promise of life and the reality of death” (Hallam & Hockey, 2001, p. 91). The photos, especially those of young adults, communicate a truncated life, an unfortunate death, and even a “bad death” (Seale & Van der Geest, 2004). Marja placed a big picture of her deceased young daughter at the memorial to remind the person responsible for the accident of the young life they took. She explained: “Because one doesn’t receive any sign of regret from the person who was responsible, one tries to keep the death conspicuous. This way, you hope that she will think back to what she has done and what [pain and suffering] she has caused us”. The placement of colourful toys, stuffed toys, pinwheels and balloons is a careful display of objects related to childhood recreating the memorial site as the domestic nursery (Hallam & Hockey, 2001) and manifesting parental care and nurturing.

(Re)Constructing identities
Many roadside memorials comprise artefacts that refer to the identity of the deceased person or the group to which he/she belonged and things that the deceased liked (Thomas, 2006). At the sites we examined, we found objects that refer to the favourite sport in the Netherlands, soccer, for example soccer balls (four cases), soccer t-shirts (one case), soccer scarves (four cases), soccer caps (one case), flags with club logos or the national team (four cases). Beside objects related to soccer, a dartboard, a dart and a bicycle water-bottle (bidon) were found. These objects (re)constitute the life of the deceased individual and their social identities (Hallam & Hockey, 2001). In this way, the deceased’s personal identity, for example as a soccer player or a soccer fan, is (re)confirmed, as well as their collective identity as being.
part of a team or a group. By bringing memorabilia to the site, people express their own self-identification as being part of the same club/team/group as well as their grief toward the loss of a fellow team member or fan (Grider, 2006).

At six sites we found references to beer in the form of bottles or cans (four sites), a picture with beer drinking teenagers (one site) and beer caps (one site). Some respondents talked about having a drink or a smoke at the roadside memorial, almost sharing it with the deceased. Simon, whose son was killed at three o’clock on Saturday night, spoke about his son’s friends who had told him that on at least one occasion after the disco they had gone to the memorial “and smoked a cigarette, drank a beer, and I don’t know what, but to remember him”. One mother, Josey, referred to a shared meal: “We had a barbeque over there [at the memorial]. Yes, that was something he still wanted”. Studies in the USA, Australia and New Zealand (Clark & Franzmann, 2006; Reid & Reid, 2001) found that people often placed cigarettes at some of the memorials. In some cases, cans of beer were observed as well. It could be argued that the objects reflect a shared drink or smoke, rituals that recreate a common event that occurred when the deceased was alive. These rituals convey a sense of comradeship and solidifies friendships between the living and the dead (Reid & Reid, 2001). They also allow for unfinished conversations to be had and for the living to gain closure and progress through the various stages of bereavement.

Since the material objects placed at the memorial convey the deceased’s life story and social identity, there can be contestation over the range of objects on display. Jenny, for example, had difficulties with a picture of her son, in which he was wearing a Lonsdale sweater, being placed there by a friend of his, because in the Netherlands this brand is associated with the extreme right. Janet talked about some items at the memorial of her deceased daughter that, according to her, were not suitable. She said: “I love figurines and angels, but some are too much. Some are more appropriate in a trailer camp than at a memorial. I allow these objects to stay for one or two months and then I remove them. After some time, I think we [parents] have a right to remove them [objects we don’t approve of].”

**Continuing bonds with the deceased**

As mentioned before, a recurrent aspect at memorials is the preponderance of candles, lanterns and lamps of various forms. Significantly more candles were found at spontaneous memorials compared to the permanent ones (61% versus 39%). Many Catholics believe that candles are a way to speed the arrival of souls in heaven, especially when the Last Rites have not been received (Zeitlin, 2006), as would be the case with unexpected death in a road accident. Several interviewees kept a candle burning constantly at the memorials. Several of them indicated that candles carry the message: ‘We are thinking of you’. Hallam and Hockey
(2001) argued that lighting candles has become a social practice of commemoration, as the flame represents memory.

Our content analysis demonstrated that inscriptions or other dedication text were included in 44 percent of the permanent memorials and 12 percent of spontaneous memorials. The texts inscribe space and leave a reminder of the person that lasts beyond the mortality of their body. This is reflected literally in the words (in Dutch) in one of the inscriptions: “The path you take is not important, rather it is the traces that you leave behind”. Inscriptions are important in (re)shaping memory and preserving identity after death (Hallam & Hockey, 2001). For instance, the text “May the force be with you” at the memorial of a 16-year-old boy was a fitting tribute to an avid Star Wars fan. Written gestures in the form of poems, notes, cards and letters can supplement and re-inscribe space further (Hallam & Hockey, 2001). They are a means that give voice to the grief-stricken, as well as manifesting the relationships between the living and the deceased (Doss, 2008; Santino, 2006). Significantly more written gestures were found at spontaneous memorials than at permanent ones (54% compared to 15%). Our analyses showed that the notes were almost always directed to the deceased.

The wish to establish continuing bonds with the departed is demonstrated through the decorations that pertain to significant events that happen after the accident, for example family holidays, birthdays and even anniversaries of the death itself, so that the dead are incorporated into the ongoing festivals of the living (Goody, 1993; Thomas, 2006). We found a variety of Christmas decorations (seven sites) and various objects referring to the seasons (primarily autumn) (six sites). Cards and letters relating to the anniversary of death and which declared that the loved one would never be forgotten were found at three sites. These decorations and notes confirm the passing of time; and more specifically time and celebrations that are no longer spent together. The material objects reflect the bond between the living and dead, and the nature of their relationship (Santino, 2006). It is a materialized way to communicate to the outside world that they will commemorate and remember their loved one into the future. This is in line with the ‘continuing bonds’ theory of Klass, Silverman and Nickman (1996), which is about integrating the memory of the deceased into the ongoing lives of those bereaved, instead of breaking ties between the bereaved and the dead and letting go.

Parents seem to memorialise the deceased in a more enduring way than friends through the establishment of permanent roadside memorials whereas friends seem to have a more pressing and urgent need to memorialise the event of the accident and their loss by creating spontaneous memorials (Klaassens et al., 2009). However, the meanings associated with a memorial change over time and it will be visited less frequently. Our interviews
confirmed that while the memorial plays an important part in the bereavement process, this role changes over time. We infer that memorials established to remember a loved one will be difficult to remove as that may signify that the relationship is being broken off. However, memorials, especially when they become less frequently visited, are victim to the ravages of weather, vandalism and removal. Our content analysis indicated different solutions to continue this materialized bond in an enduring way. Permanent memorials often feature more-enduring artificial flowers, flowering plants, solar-powered lights and fixed photographs, instead of short-lasting fresh cut flowers, candles, notes and loose photographs. From our interviews with the bereaved, of those that kept a candle burning in the months after the accident, all decided to use a solar-powered light after a period of time. Marja said: “We have lit candles for a long time, so it kept us busy. When we placed the lamp that works on solar energy, then all this work was no longer needed”. While the transition to labour and cost saving methods indicates a degree of processing through the stages of bereavement, the fact that a lamp is still maintained demonstrates an ongoing bond with the deceased. The meaning of the lamp is the same as the meaning of the candle, the deceased person is not forgotten.

3.6 Conclusion
We analyzed the composition and associated meanings of more than 200 roadside memorials in the Netherlands by using a visual content analysis and 24 in-depth interviews with those bereaved who were maintaining them. We found that by placing flowers and other artefacts that symbolize love and beauty, the bereaved take the horror out of these traumatic sites of death. Of particular note was that only a very small number of roadside memorials refer to the specific circumstances surrounding the tragedy. In contrast to the findings of Hartig and Dunn (1998) in Newcastle, Australia, in general the Dutch roadside memorials do not celebrate youth machismo or heroic aggression, but instead symbolize the fragility of existence and lost innocence. This is especially communicated powerfully through the artefacts featured in memorials for the young and for female victims, including stuffed toys, butterflies, ladybirds, angels and personal memorabilia.

We have made a distinction between spontaneous roadside memorials and permanent memorials. These differ substantially in their composition, construction and in terms of who established them. We analyzed the differences between them and what that reveals about the way mourners use the memorials. Most spontaneous memorials are part of an existing structure such as a tree, pole or crash barrier, which emphasize the spur-of-the-moment construction. Friends and classmates, who are the main establishers of this type of memorial, seem to have a more pressing and urgent need to memorialise the accident event and the loss
of a member of their social group than do parents. Parents, however, tend to have a need to have a more enduring, longer-term need to commemorate their loss. In relation to the objects brought to spontaneous roadside memorials, we found many similarities to the objects placed at various other collective spontaneous memorials, such as flowers, candles, stuffed toys and notes to the deceased. It could be argued that this manner of memorialization is part of contemporary youth culture which relies upon certain objects and symbols, which are conveyed through the mass media (and more particularly social media), to deal with sudden and untimely death, and goes beyond the traditional rules and cultural practices of acknowledging death. While the rituals of bringing artefacts to the death site do commemorate the deceased, they extend the focus beyond the deceased and the private mourning of bereaved to the social and cultural implications of their death. In commemorating the lives of those lost, roadside memorials also serve to bind together those who remain, and serve a social function of reminding us of the toll associated with road accidents.

Whereas spontaneous memorials clearly convey to an outsider that it is a place where someone has been killed in an accident, permanent memorials clearly identify who has been killed. The deceased’s biography is communicated through an inscribed name, the date of birth and death, a short text and affixed photographs that reconstruct and fix in time the personality of the deceased from the perspective of the mourners. The great variety of forms of permanent roadside memorials suggests the desire to personalize public places to remember a particular victim. Parents seem to memorialise their lost child in a more enduring way through the establishment of permanent roadside memorials to continue the bonds with their loved one, who is often regarded as departed (i.e. not-present) rather than being deceased (i.e. ceasing to exist) (Collins & Rhine, 2003).

By transforming the site of death, parents are able to re-establish and maintain their identity as nurturers and caregivers even after death by transforming the ‘bad place’ into a place of care and nurture. Parents often have an intense sense of guilt because they were unable to prevent the death of their children (Jorgensen-Earp & Lanzilotti, 1998). For example, Pauline, who lost her daughter, explained: “Because we could not be there [at the crash site shortly after the accident] and because it is so far from home. The accident happened at 12.30am, and Sander [Pauline’s husband] was only able to get there at five o’clock”. As another example, when Josey stands at the place of the accident where her son died, she often wonders: “Would he have called out for me? Like ‘Mom, help!’”. Hilde said, that when she visits the memorial she established for her daughter and leaves to go home: “Sometimes I feel a little bit like I abandon her [when I leave]. That is very peculiar, because
she is not here [the crash site] anymore, but sometimes I have the feeling that I’m going home and she’s not”.

The marking of the death site by a memorial illustrates the wish to continue the bonds with the departed after their death. Over time, however, the meanings associated with the memorial change. Spontaneous memorials eventually become more permanent, disintegrate and/or will be removed. Our respondents stated that the roadside memorial plays an important role in their bereavement, but that this role changes over time. This is reflected in the composition of the memorials as well. We found that fresh flowers, candles, notes and loose photographs, which feature in spontaneous roadside memorials, become replaced by longer-lasting objects such as artificial flowers, flowering plants, solar-powered lights and affixed photographs. Arguably, the symbolic meanings of these objects do not change, even though the material form of the main structure of the memorial and associated ephemera becomes more durable, which is a strategy employed by the bereaved to continue their bonds with the dead in a more enduring and endearing way.

References


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