THE ASSASSINATION OF THEO VAN GOGH

FROM SOCIAL DRAMA TO CULTURAL TRAUMA

Ron Eyerman

THE ASSASSINATION OF THEO VAN GOGH

POLITICS, HISTORY, AND CULTURE

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From Social Drama to Cultural Trauma

Ron Eyerman

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To Johanna

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CHAPTER 1 ASSASSINATION AS PUBLIC PERFORMANCE: THE MURDER OF THEO VAN GOGH

Every work of art is an uncommitted crime.—**Theodor Adorno**

Three positive things one can say about Amsterdam: you can buy anything you want; you are free; you are safe.—**René Descartes**

On November 2, 2004, the Dutch filmmaker Theo van Gogh was killed while cycling to work in the morning rush hour on a busy street in the heart of Amsterdam. The murderer, who also arrived on bicycle, first shot his victim, then slit his throat, and finally, with a separate knife, pinned a five-page note to his body. Written in Dutch verse, the note contained an indictment of Western society and was addressed not to van Gogh but to Ayaan Hirsi Ali, a Somali refugee and member of the Dutch parliament, and other well-known politicians. In addition to being an outspoken proponent of Muslim women's rights, Hirsi Ali had written the screenplay for a short film, *Submission Part One*, directed by van Gogh.

A work of fiction, the film had been recently shown on Dutch public television and depicted the bruised bodies of young women with text from the Koran written on their semi-naked bodies. The film aroused great public debate and the already controversial Hirsi Ali was forced into hiding and twenty-four hour police protection. Despite receiving the same threats, Van Gogh continued his very public life and became the victim of this well-publicized crime. The murder set off a series of reactions, including arson against Muslim schools and mosques.[1] The murderer was almost immediately identified as Mohammed Bouyeri, a citizen of the Netherlands, but with roots (and citizenship) in Morocco. Bouyeri was tried, convicted and sentenced to life imprisonment under the new anti-

terrorism law.[2] A second trial, which concerned the alleged involvement of co-conspirators, members of a so-called "Hofstad group" (Court or Capital City group), was carried out, resulting in the "group" being officially labeled a terrorist organization; some of its alleged members were later sentenced to prison. Strong doubts remain, however, about both the status of the group and any conspiracy in the murder of van Gogh. Named as one of its leaders, Mohammed B. spoke for over an hour during the second trial, using the occasion to discourse on his personal mission and the role of jihad or sacred struggle in Islam. This was in sharp contrast to his behavior at the first trial, when, except for saying a few words, he chose to remain silent.

The media coverage of the murder and its follow-up has been worldwide and extensive. Following approximately two and a half years after the murder of Pim Fortuyn (May 2002), a leading politician with outspoken ideas on immigration policies, many local commentators saw the murder of Theo van Gogh as part of a clash of civilizations and forecast a turning point of historical proportion in Dutch society. The international media also followed the story closely. In the United States for example, Ayaan Hirsi Ali was the subject of extensive coverage, including an article in the *New York Times Magazine* that featured a full-page color photo and the headline "Daughter of the Enlightenment." Interviewed on the CBS television news magazine *60 Minutes* soon after the murder (where the program host introduced her as a "star"), Hirsi Ali insisted she had no regrets and claimed to be making a sequel to the film, something she repeated in a follow-up broadcast on July 10, 2005. Hirsi Ali has since moved to the United States and become an international celebrity. Also interviewed on *60 Minutes* was Theodor Holman, identified as a columnist and radio commentator and "one of van Gogh's closest friends." Explaining why the Netherlands was shocked by van Gogh's death, even if he was a controversial figure, Holman said, "The country did love him. . . . He had his own television show, he had a radio show, he made movies. So he embodied what you can do in this country and what you can say" (*60 Minutes* transcript, p. 3).[3] In addition to van Gogh and Hirsi Ali, Mohammed Bouyeri, his life, and his possible motivations have also been the subject of great media scrutiny. President George W. Bush referred to Bouyeri in a speech given just after the latter's trial: "In a courtroom in the Netherlands, the killer of Theo van Gogh turned to the victim's grieving mother and said, 'I do not feel your pain—because I

believe you are an infidel.' "[4] Clearly the death of a Dutch filmmaker is of more than just local interest.

An analysis of the murder of Theo van Gogh has several perspectives and frameworks to draw upon. The selection of one analytic frame or another is neither innocent nor obvious. In fact, the framework through which one chooses to respond to the question "what really happened here?" goes some way to providing its own answer. One can fruitfully look at this occurrence as a "hate crime," which as defined by Kelly and Maghan (1998:222), would mean viewing it as a criminal act that also possesses "dynamic racial, political, ideological and cultural dimensions that magnify their impact on victims and on the communities in which they occur." From this perspective one could study aspects of this "dynamic," such as the role of "media performance" (Cottle 2004), which would highlight processes of media construction. However, calling the murder of van Gogh a "hate crime" (was the murder of a native Dutchman "racist"?) is already to categorize and thus to prescribe interpretation. Another alternative is to analyze the murder and the associated reportage as a "moral panic," which would call attention to another aspect of the media's role in dramatizing the occurrence and in prescribing its effects. The German translation of the Dutch historian Geert Mak's (2005c) account of the murder carries the subtitle "history of a moral panic" (though the author himself claims no responsibility for that choice).[5] Framing the murder as a moral panic means highlighting a form of public hysteria induced through media orchestration. In his rich account, Mak focuses on the lack of what he considers a proper response from Dutch leaders and opinion makers and what this might mean for Dutch society. His own position comes out clearly: we have been through this before. If Protestants, Catholics, and Jews have been incorporated into Dutch society, why can't Muslims be as well? From another point of view, one could call the murder an "assassination," which would imply a political motivation. This might also be fruitful, but it would push the investigation primarily to the assassin, to the person and the structural conditions that might drive or motivate him or her (see Wilkenson's [1976] analysis of assassinations according to a theory of status inconsistency). Finally, one might apply the notion of "artistic transgression" as Julius (2002) does; this turns the question into a moral and legal dispute suggesting historical and cultural comparisons, where the notions of blasphemy and artistic license come under scrutiny.

In my own approach to the murder of Theo van Gogh I will make use of aspects from these various perspectives. Over the following chapters I will apply three types of analysis, geared to three levels of approach. I begin with a performative approach that focuses on the prediscursive performance of action (Alexander et al. 2006). Issues of concern here are who was killed and why, how it was carried out, and what it meant to actors and audience. Second, use is made of discourse theory in analyzing how these actions were transformed into an event as they were represented and reconstructed through mass media reports and other accounts. Here the concern is also who was killed and why, but with a focus on media representation and framing. Third, the theories of social drama and cultural trauma are applied as means to understanding the social processes triggered by the murder and as means toward assessing its long-term effects. Issues here concern the meaning and changing nature of social inclusion, the boundaries of "Dutchness," of Dutch "multiculturalism" and the very nature of Dutch collective identity.

THE EPISODE

The stage for the murder of Theo van Gogh had already been set by preceding events. Let me mention some of the most significant: the arrival of waves of immigrants from former Dutch colonies from the 1950s onward, the emergence of Amsterdam as a magnet for a "counterculture" in the 1960s, and the importation of "guest workers," largely from Turkey and Morocco, in the 1970s. In October 2003, the Central Bureau of Statistics (CBS) would report that there were "nearly as many Muslims as Calvinists in the Netherlands" (web magazine *www.cbs.nl*) and that the number of Muslims in the country was increasing dramatically, to nearly 6 percent of the total population.[6] According to a member of the Dutch parliament at the time (someone of Moroccan heritage), "Muslims are expected to outnumber non-Muslims in Europe by 2050," and in some European cities, "Muslim school children will be in the majority within the next decade" (Cherribi 2003:195). There were also media-circulated reports that Mohammed had become the most popular name for newborn boys. More directly connected to our purpose was the publication in a leading newspaper of an essay titled "Het multiculturele drama" (The multicultural drama) by the sociologist and political commentator Paul Scheffer. This article, which appeared in January 2000, castigated the lack

of public discussion of immigration policy and, more significantly, the apparent lack of any such policy at all. This set in motion widespread debate about the alleged "failure of Dutch immigration," especially as it concerned the assimilation of Muslims. Aspects of this discussion were transformed into a political platform by Pim Fortuyn, a sociology professor turned social critic and populist politician, whose enormous success effectively ended with his assassination just prior to what was expected to be a triumphal national election in 2002. In between came the September 11 terrorist attacks on targets in the United States, which helped catapult Fortuyn to prominence. When the murder of Fortuyn first occurred it was widely assumed that the assassin was an Islamic militant, a fear shared by Hirsi Ali (2007) that turned out to be false. The killer was announced as Volkert van der Graaf, an animal rights activist, who, at his trial, would claim to have acted on behalf of Muslim immigrants. It was in this tense context that Theo van Gogh used his public presence to make vulgar remarks about Muslims and Jews, that Hirsi Ali drove her campaign for the rights of Muslim women as a member of parliament and media figure, and that their film *Submission* was broadcast.

The actual murder has been well documented and my recounting builds on Benschop (2005) and Chorous and Olgun (2005) (see also Buruma 2006b). Both assassin and victim were cycling when Mohammed B. began shooting. The latter fired several times, severely wounding his victim. The final shots were fired as van Gogh was being chased (twice) around a parked car, while shouting, "We can still talk about this, don't do it," something that Hirsi Ali (2007) calls typically Dutch. After van Gogh was dead, the assailant cut his throat with a small machete (attempting, perhaps, to decapitate his victim). This was something the assailant had apparently rehearsed on sheep in the hallway to his apartment. The killer then stuck a filet knife into his victim's body so deeply that it touched the spine. Attached through the knife (which perhaps was meant as a dagger) was a note that contained threatening references not to van Gogh but to Ayaan Hirsi Ali. In his pocket Mohammed B. had another, more personal, note written to friends and colleagues, in which he declared his martyrdom. After kicking his victim to ensure he was dead, the assailant reloaded his weapon (a 15-shot semi-automatic pistol manufactured in Croatia) and walked calmly across the crowded street toward a nearby park. There were fifty-three eyewitnesses, including one who supplied the media photos that were taken through his cell phone camera. One of the onlookers is re-

ported to have said to Mohammed B. "You can't do that," to which the latter replied, "Oh yes, I can, he asked for it, and now you know what to expect." When the police arrived, the assailant fired off twelve more shots in their direction, wounding a motorcycle policeman. Wounded in the leg by a police bullet, Mohammed B. was finally arrested. In the ambulance, an accompanying police officer told him that he was lucky not to have been killed, to which Mohammed B. replied, "That was precisely my intention." At his trial he would repeat these sentiments, telling the wounded policeman to his face that he had intended to shoot to kill and to be killed himself.

Hirsi Ali and not Theo van Gogh may well have been the prime target for assassination, something we will directly address. The note pinned to van Gogh's body (available on http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Image:Afscheidsbrief.jpg), was addressed to "Mrs. Hirshi Ali" (the name was misspelled throughout), calling her an "infidel fundamentalist" who "terrorizes Islam" and "marches with the soldiers of evil." It labeled Hirsi Ali an "unbelieving fundamentalist" and a heretic in the service of lying "Jewish masters," "products of the Talmud" who "dominate Dutch politics" (according to the translation by Ian Buruma [2005]). The note also contained the phrase "I know for sure that you, O America, are going to meet with disaster. I know for sure that you, O Holland, are going to meet with disaster" and is signed Saifu Deen al-Muwahhied. According to official accounts this letter was most likely written by someone other than Mohammed B., though this is a name he allegedly used on the Internet. The style of address appears to reflect its author's desire to link urban street rhetoric with poetic prophecy from an imagined past and could very well have been written by Mohammed B.

On Mohammed B.'s person, the police recovered the following suicide note:

> BAPTIZED IN BLOOD
> So these are my last words . . .
> Riddled with bullets . . .
> Baptized in blood . . .
> As I had hoped.
>
> I am leaving a message . . .
> For you . . . the fighter . . .
> The Tawheed tree is waiting . . .

Yearning for your blood . . .
Enter the bargain . . .
And Allah opens the way . . .
He gives you a garden . . .
Instead of the Earthy rubble.

To the enemy I say . . .
You will surely die . . .
Wherever in the world you go . . .
Death is waiting for you . . .
Chased by the knights of DEATH . . .
Who paint the streets with Red.

For the hypocrites I have one final word . . .
Wish for DEATH or hold your tongue . . . and sit.

Dear Brothers and Sisters, my end is nigh . . .
But this does not end the story.

The killing appears staged as ritual assassination, though I would rather see it as a social performance.[7] The killer prepared himself for assassination and martyrdom, yet the fact that he felt it necessary to carry textual messages reveals that he felt the acts did not speak for themselves. Although he was born and raised in Amsterdam, Mohammed B. chose to die as a martyr to Islam and, to judge by the written texts and the mode of killing, to link himself and his act to a tradition where murder was a sacred duty and where even a kitchen knife could pass for a dagger, the only permissible weapon of ritual assassination (Buruma and Margalit 2004:69). The shots may have been necessary on city streets, but the real killing was done in a prescribed way.

The Principals

A twenty-six-year-old Dutchman of Moroccan descent, Mohammed Bouyeri (referred to by the Dutch as Mohammed B., as I have been doing), until recently had been a model of integration, a success story for the Dutch multicultural society. Buruma (2005) calls his background "typical for a second-generation Moroccan immigrant": a father disabled by years of menial labor, speaking only halting Dutch, and a mother who arrived in the Netherlands through an arranged marriage and a change in Dutch immigration policy. Mohammed B. was active in community affairs and

had six years of higher education, leaving college just prior to finishing his degree. While events in his personal life may have "triggered" his move toward political extremism, the picture is more complex, as will be shown in the chapters that follow.[8] In the space of a few months in 2004, Bouyeri changed his manner of dress, his rhetoric, and his place of worship, moving from the conservative, local mosque of his father to one led by a more radical Syrian cleric. He began writing fantasy articles and "open letters," on the Internet, using different names, "Abu Zubair" (the powerful) and "Saifu Deen al-Muwahhied ("Saifu Deen" literally means "the Sword of Faith"), the name on the letter pinned to van Gogh's body. His letters contained a list of groups and people to "hit," including Hirsi Ali and other prominent Dutch politicians.

Three intended victims were identified in Mohammed B.'s letters on the Internet: Ayaan Hirsi Ali; Ahmed Aboutaleb, an Amsterdam politician born in Morocco, with an opposite view on Muslim assimilation; and Geert Wilders, a Dutch politician following in the footsteps of Pim Fortuyn. The most internationally prominent was Ayaan Hirsi Ali, who was born in Somalia but had been a Dutch citizen since 1997. She was elected to parliament on a list for the Volkspartij voor Vrijheid en Democratie (People's Party for Liberty and Democracy, VVD). In both public and private life, she has lobbied forcefully against female circumcision and spoken out on issues concerning immigrants to Europe.

Theo van Gogh, a Dutch filmmaker and enfant terrible, was forty-six years old at the time of his death and the great-grandson of another Theo van Gogh, brother of the painter Vincent van Gogh. A law school dropout, van Gogh worked as a stage manager and as a film and television actor. He wrote regularly for the Dutch Metro, a free newspaper, and was the author of several books; his last book, written in 2003 and called *Allah weet het beter* (Allah knows best), was mockingly critical of Islam. Van Gogh was a member of the Dutch republican society (Republikeins Genootschap), against the monarchy, and a friend and supporter of Pim Fortuyn. He was well known for his derogatory statements about Muslims and Jews, including some directed against Job Cohen, the mayor of Amsterdam, whom he called a "collaborator," evoking images of the Second World War. In addition to *Submission*, van Gogh had just completed a film about the murder of Pim Fortuyn. One of his television films, a remake of *Romeo and Juliet*, in which one of the lead characters is a Moroccan immigrant, continues to be used in Dutch classrooms to stim-

ulate positive views of integration. Clearly an ambiguous figure, van Gogh often characterized himself as an "intellectual terrorist."

The Film

Submission is an eleven-minute fictional account of four young Muslim women, including one who is forced into an arranged marriage with a man who physically abuses her, who is raped by her uncle, and who is later punished for falling in love with another man. In the film, the women wear transparent gowns that reveal bruises as well as nakedness. Scriptures from the Koran appear painted on naked backs and the voice-over (in English) strongly suggests that the Koran justifies violence against women. With regard to its aesthetic framework, the film makes reference to previous motion pictures such as Peter Greenaway's *The Pillow Book* (1996), and one can also find links to the work of the Iranian photographer Shirin Neshat (one look at Hirsi Ali's web homepage confirms this), where body and text are conjoined in communicating a message. It was first broadcast over Dutch public television (VPRO) on August 29, 2004 (following the murder of van Gogh, it was broadcast on Danish television on November 11, 2004, and in Italy on May 12, 2005).

The voices of critics are essential to the interpretation and evaluation of a performative event. Providing answers to "What it all means" is the role of the critic, and in this case they ranged from local commentators and newspaper and magazine writers to representatives of the international media, bloggers, the police, and government analysts. For Albert Benschop (2005), the meaning is both deeply rooted and ominous: "The murder of Theo van Gogh wasn't a tragic incident or anomaly, but an almost logical result of a fight getting out of hand between autochthonous 'kaaskoppen' (cheese heads) who felt increasingly overrun by a horde of maladjusted and asocial, violent and criminal foreigners and the allochthonous foreigners who emigrated or fled to Holland. This conflict, which had been smouldering for years, was explosively brought to the surface by the murder of van Gogh."[9] Other voices were present, but a consensus would soon emerge around the alleged success or failure of immigration policy.

Then we have to consider the multilayered audience. There is the local, Amsterdam-based artistic and intellectual subculture with its own traditions and norms of propriety; the wider national public, with access filtered through Dutch language media with its regional, political, and

confessional differences; the local and international Muslim community; the radical Islamic movement; and, finally, the international audience, filtered through various mass media, including the Internet. The function and use of the Internet will be of prime importance in this study, not only as a means of communication, but also as a means of organization and interpretation in its own right. The Internet has facilitated new organizational forms, such as the "all-channel network" and led some theorists and strategists to speak of "netwar," as a form of conflict that might increasingly replace more traditional forms of warfare. According to Arquilla and Ronfeldt (1999:194) netwar "refers to an emerging mode of conflict (and crime) at societal levels, involving measures short of traditional war, in which the protagonists use network forms of organization and related doctrines, strategies, and technologies attuned to the information age. These protagonists are likely to consist of disparate small groups who communicate, coordinate, and conduct their campaigns in an inter-netted manner, without a precise command center."

LAYERS OF MEANING

What an action means cannot simply be deduced from the intentions of the actor or the context within which it occurs. The meaning of an action depends as much on who is viewing as on who is doing. In the interpretation of meaning, one must take into account the mediated process of framing and narrating of actions and events, including those that guide actors and audiences, as these are part of the conditions structuring actions. This includes not only mass-mediated accounts, but also historically rooted traditions. One way of interpreting the making of the film *Submission* is as an expression of artistic license and freedom of speech. The murder of van Gogh has been framed in some mass-mediated accounts as a matter of free speech, and the filmmaker as a martyr for that societal value. In describing himself as a "radical libertarian" and a "provocateur," van Gogh claimed the right of art and the artist to expose and test societal norms and values by exposing taboos. This position can also be situated in the traditions of the Amsterdam art world and various intellectual traditions of the country. This largely urban culture created a distinctive social space that permitted, even encouraged, outrageous behavior. In her own accounts, the scriptwriter Hirsi Ali (2007 for the latest)

claims that the film was intended as an intervention into the debate on violence against women, particularly Muslim women. In media accounts, she has been portrayed as the "Daughter of the Enlightenment," as was mentioned above, and also as a potential martyr for the cause of free speech. How the intentions of the filmmaker and the scriptwriter were actually realized in the film, who their intended audience was, and how they could expect to reach this audience are matters thoroughly discussed by de Leeuw and van Wichelen (2005) and will be further analyzed in subsequent chapters.[10]

Much like Salman Rushdie's *Satanic Verses* (1988) and more recently the so-called Mohammed Cartoons published in a Danish newspaper (2006), both subjects discussed in a later chapter, *Submission* was apparently interpreted by many Muslims as blasphemous, as an attack on religious beliefs. For them and for others, non-Muslims included, this might explain, if not legitimate, the murder of its creators. During the afternoon of the day of the murder of van Gogh, several organizations associated with the municipal government of Amsterdam organized meetings with Muslim organizations around the city to help quiet the disturbing and uncertain atmosphere. They also organized a televised press conference with Muslim political representatives and some sympathetic associates of Theo van Gogh that same evening. According to the Dutch historian Geert Mak (2005b:22), of those "Muslim" immigrants to the Netherlands who might constitute an audience, less than 20 percent report that they attend a mosque regularly. By his calculation the size of the potential audience for a "radical" Islamic message is about .04 percent (the number for Europe as a whole has been put at 400,000, per Tausch et al. 2006). A study carried out in Amsterdam by Slootman and Tillie (2006) revealed that 2 percent of the city's Muslim population had a "potential" for radicalization.[11] However, it is not so much numbers but perceptions that count here, especially the perceptions guided and amplified by mass-media projections and representations. As has been seen in the more recent controversy following the Mohammed Cartoon affair, many interpretations, and uses, can be made of controversies of this sort.

At least at first, for the police authorities the event was a murder carried out by one person. This has now been extended to include several co-conspirators. For some (Dutch and American) authorities and commentators, it was much more than a murder or even an assassination, it

was a terrorist plot, with possible links to Al Qaeda and Takfir Wal Hijra, the latter an Egyptian-based group responsible among other things for the assassination of Anwar Sadat in 1981.

For at least a number of Dutch citizens the murder is an example of tolerant immigration gone too far. (A poll taken after the event suggested that 40 percent of Dutch citizens hope that Muslim immigrants "no longer feel at home in the Netherlands" and that more than 80 percent want tougher restrictions against immigrants.) In 2005, a Pew Survey reported that 51 percent of native Dutch "admitted to unfavourable views of Muslims" (Haan 2007:2).

For those concerned with law and tolerance, the event was a questionable artistic transgression, testing the line between freedom of expression and discriminatory, even criminal, remarks about another's religious beliefs.[12]

ASSASSINATION AS PERFORMANCE

Interestingly enough for the present case, the term *assassination* itself derives from the Arabic and the words *assassiyun* (fundamentalist) and *hashishiyyin* (consumers of hashish) (Laucella 1998:xi). It was first applied to a Muslim sect active in Syria and Persia between 1090 and 1272. The sects' chief objective was the murder of those it considered its doctrinal enemies, the elimination of which it took to be "a sacred religious duty" (Wilkinson 1976:3). A workable, formal definition of assassination could be "assassination refers to those killings or murders, usually directed against individuals in public life, motivated by political rather than by personal relationships. . . . Assassination is the deliberate, extralegal killing of an individual for political purposes" (Murray Havens cited in Wilkinson 1976:3). Wilkinson's book carries the subtitle "the sociology of political murder," and the essays collected in it reveal both the atmosphere in which it was compiled (the common feeling that the United States was a "violent and sick" society) and the desire to find a plausible sociological, rather than psychological, explanation for the rash of violence and killing that occurred in the 1960s and early 1970s. The underlying theoretical framework is provided by variations of collective behavior, with emphasis on "structural strain" and "status inconsistency" as developed most systematically by Neil Smelser (1962). Smelser's six "determinants" for explaining the emergence of relatively spontaneous collective behavior, such as riotous crowds, strikes and social move-

ments, provide the authors with tools to identify and understand the often less than collective act of political assassination.[13] This model is useful for our purposes, especially in accounting for the behavior of Mohammed Bouyeri; another concept useful in this endeavor is that of martyr. Bouyeri's letter makes clear that he planned to die along with his victim in the assassination. That he did not must surely have been a disappointment and to have created a problem in terms of how to behave in the aftermath, especially during the trial. In fact, he chose a well-scripted path, one used by politically motivated actors and common criminals alike: mainly silence, with a minimum of well-chosen words.[14]

In addition to the social-structural moorings, which Wilkenson and her coauthors identify, there is a history and a conventional repertoire in religious and political assassination. The fanatic breaks through the throng to point a pistol at the admired or despised leader in full public view or the hidden gunman, working alone or in conspiracy with others, to fire the shot that he or she hopes will change the course of history. There are performative aspects to be identified and studied in the very act of assassination. Further, many political assassinations are followed by attempts at a return to normalcy, accompanied by rituals of closure, elaborate state funerals, and periods of mourning, which are also rituals of reconciliation, where opposing sides may publicly present themselves as co-participant. The still unresolved murder of Swedish prime minister Olaf Palme in 1986 and the continuing controversy surrounding that of John F. Kennedy in 1963 are examples of such a process, where political opponents unite in mourning a fallen leader to signify the unity and resolve of a nation in crisis. This is highly significant public performance.

The assassination of Theo van Gogh was a performative event in several senses, most important perhaps in that it seemed to create a new reality. The political and cultural climate in the Netherlands changed with and through this event, even if one can identify other significant occurrences that preceded it and that added to its effect, like the assassination of Pim Fortuyn in May 2002, the first political assassination in the Netherlands in more than three centuries. The assassination of van Gogh was a highly symbolic and stylized performance, a carefully staged occurrence, while the murder of Fortuyn appears to be more the relatively spontaneous act of an enraged individual.[15] One murder occurred in a dimly lit parking lot, the other in full public view on a busy street. The multitude of possible intentions and coded meanings that were embedded in these