Digital commemorating and memorials: performing the urban and online sphere

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Introduction

In one definition, the term “public” denotes something that is “done for, made for, acting for, or being in the service of the community as a whole” [WordReference Random House Learner's Dictionary of American English, 2021]. This seems to imply that what is public is a result of construction and does not exist by default. Portions of the city, services, and goods are made public, and thus made available by someone for society. Yet the public domain is a terrain of contradictions. It is an often-unguarded context but, conversely, dominated by state and corporate interests, including through forms of censorship. Meanwhile, it is an arena for dissent, multiplicity, creativity, and thus freedom.

A public phenomenon implies not only one that is available but also one that becomes available, i.e., the shift from one status to another. Furthermore, becoming public signifies becoming visible and accessible. It implies that this sphere is activated by viewers, passersby that inhabit it not only through their gaze but also by undertaking several intentional and unintentional acts, such as expressing emotions, articulating polysemic memories, or tracing mutual relationships that function as tools for mediating messages and meanings. Within this framework, I argue that the spectator as a performer and her actions are central to the definition and constitution of the public domain. Furthermore, the reciprocity of visible, subtle, or implied human relations contributes to making the public domain per se, as well as to generating forms of individual and collective care, which are necessary not only to create the commonality typical of the public sphere but also to preserve it.

Within the framework of my inquiry into how this public sphere is articulated and takes shape in the urban and online space, I will ask who the agents and actors are that make the public sphere, and how they perform it. One of the various ways of activating and experiencing the public sphere is commemorating. Commemorating is thus a way of enacting memory, not only by erecting permanent and transitory forms of monument but also by citizens and artists conducting performative actions. In particular, I will inquire into commemoration as an ephemeral, transitory act that works as a tool for appropriating, transforming and ultimately creating the urban and online domain. Secondly, I will focus on commemorating in relation to the digital sphere, or modes of digital commemorating.

The huge predominance of technological devices and the internet is contributing to marking the rhythm of engagement with and experience of the public domain.

Performance studies scholar Diana Taylor [2003] has observed the function that we – as subjects – have as performers, as actors in the public sphere, and thus the way we take part in its construction. Transformations occur not only through actions that leave permanent traces but also through volatile, transient gestures made in the public domain, such as crossing neighborhoods, taking photographs in the street, building temporary memorials, playing music, and dancing. These actions, which trigger transformations, also inhabit the online domain, where what I call the expanded spectator operates. Using the term expanded, I am paying tribute to the phrase “expanded cinema,” which was coined in 1966 by American filmmaker Stan VanDerBeek, and then

canonized by art critic Gene Youngblood [1970]. Originally referring to a type of film that is shown beyond cinema theaters, especially in the open air, warehouses, and art galleries [Tate Modern website], the concept of expanded cinema actually denotes a tight, all-encompassing nexus of human beings, "machines of his own invention" [VanDerBeek in McKenzie 2014: 1173], images and emotions.

By asserting the need for new image-making devices that are able to create "non-verbal inter-change" [VanDerBeek in McKenzie 2014: 1173] in his manifesto, VanDerBeek [1966] envisions that "motions pictures… or expanded cinema" work "as a tool for world communication" [MacKenzie 2014: 1173]. In the project *Movie-Drome*, which consists of thousands of images projected on a dome-screen, from which the audience takes what it can, writing its own narrative, VanDerBeek conceptualizes movie-dromes as image-libraries [VanDerBeek 1966].

Using the term spectator for digital users, I stress the users' participation by the act of seeing [White 2006] and their remixing of contents, turning them into authors [Fossati 2012]. I argue that archiving implies circulating, preserving and resignifying items. Therefore, observers involved in the processes mentioned above function as a bridge between the online and offline spheres. In particular, storing and resignifying are essential aspects of forming cultural memory. If the concept of expanded cinema was based on the idea of challenging the links between technology, audiences, images and spaces, I argue that the main characteristic of the expanded spectator is that they inhabit online and offline spaces using the broad possibilities offered by technological devices and the internet. Therefore, by the term expanded spectator I aim to stress this observer mode of experiencing and connecting urban and online domains, performing these spheres by echoing actions, and messages, and using communication tools, and technological devices, as well as creating memory.

The racial attack in 2020 in Hanau: from the murder of nine citizens to the blossoming of activist and art initiatives online and offline

On February 19, 2020, nine people were killed in Hanau, a town located 25 kilometers from Frankfurt (Germany), in a racially motivated attack by a right-wing extremist. The murders occurred in two locations: the Arena Bar in Kesselstadt, a district of Hanau, and central Hanau.

The victims were eight men and one woman. Their names are: Hamza Kenan Kurtović, Said Nesar Hashemi, Vili Viorel Păun, Ferhat Unvar, Sedat Gürbüz, Fatih Saraçoğlu, Kaloyan Velkov, Mercedes Kierpacz, and Gökhan Gültekin.

The perpetrator later killed his mother, before killing himself. His father, who is known to share his far-right racist worldview, was the only survivor in the house, and he claimed not to have witnessed the murder. The police did not storm the house until five hours after the attack. According to the official case files, the last murder occurred while special forces officers were stationed directly outside the perpetrator's house – but they claim they did not hear any gunshots.

To this day, many aspects of the attack remain unclear, and several questions unanswered. To shed light on these, the families of the victims launched a series of independent actions. For one, they asked the Forensic Architecture collective and its Berlin-based partner Forensis to carry out an independent inquiry. This resulted in a video report, available on the website of Forensic Architecture, that reconstructs the dynamics of the attack, and outlines some currently crucial questions of the investigation: Did the father lie to the police in his statements? How did the police proceed? When did police surround the perpetrator's house? How could the police have failed to hear the shots?

In addition, in June 2022, the exhibition *Three Doors – Forensic Architecture/Forensis, Initiative 19. Februar Hanau, Initiative in Gedenken an Oury Jalloh*, curated by Franziska Nori, opened at the Frankfurter Kunstverein, Frankfurt, and later at Haus der Kulturen der Welt, in Berlin. Alongside the

Forensic Architecture/Forensis' investigation into the Hanau murders, it presented a new plausibility study on the case of Oury Jalloh, who burned to death in a police cell in Dessau in 2005.

In the immediate aftermath of the crime, the families of the victims of the attack founded the *Initiative 19. Februar Hanau* with the aim of not only ensuring "that the names of the victims are not forgotten" [*19. Februar Hanau* website] but also "supporting those affected and making the demand for clearance and political consequences heard" [Facebook page]. The Facebook page was launched on March 3, 2020, and the initiative also has an Instagram and a Twitter account, a YouTube channel, and a website. Later, on May 5, 2020, it opened a physical meeting place in Hanau where families and activists can meet to discuss the event and its aftermath, as well as offer mutual support.

Focusing on this initiative and especially the way it operates in the online sphere, I will question how the digital shapes and affects the act of commemorating. I will ask what outputs of the online commemoration exist in the offline domain? And I will investigate the initiative's social networks as sites of memory and commemorating. In this regard, I will explore the role played by the expanded spectator in digital memory, and outline modes of forging memory online, as well as in the urban environment. I argue that social networks function as digital archives of affect and memory. Therefore, whereas the digital sphere is part of the public domain, these digital archives play a part in forging relationships and human dynamics among users, including in memory. Furthermore, thanks to their hyper-accessibility, social networks as digital archives accelerate and facilitate the diffusion of memory.

The case study: *Initiative 19. Februar Hanau* and how it operates in urban and digital environments

The case of the *Initiative 19. Februar Hanau* is worthy of attention. As in other campaigns of a similar nature, the initiative uses social networks as a public arena. It belongs to the type of social media group or webpage created with the purpose of commemorating victims of abuse and initiating quests for justice. These pages take advantage of the echo and global visibility provided by social networks to publicize their cause. However, each page has its own specificities. For instance, one of the groups created in memory of 26-year-old Afro-American Breonna Taylor, which is named *Justice for Breonna Taylor*, reports that: "[the] group is created to bring awareness to the injustices that have been deceptively swept under the rug… Hidden from the public eye… Post discussions regarding to new information on her behalf..." (Facebook page).

Through its online and offline activity, *Initiative 19. Februar Hanau* exists as a community that brings people together. It consists not only of activists and the families of victims but also of users who visit the social media platforms, post their comments, participate in rallies, and hold celebrations across the country. In view of these aspects, I argue that the *Initiative 19. Februar Hanau* embodies the concept of the expanded spectator. In fact, focusing on the initiative allows me to track and trace trajectories among the dynamics activated by the collective both offline and in the digital domain.

The *Initiative 19. Februar Hanau*'s social media accounts and website largely mirror each other. They all gather together a variety of different content: photos of the victims of the attack, photos and videos of the demonstrations, public gatherings, and so on; links to newspaper articles about the legal case; updates on police investigations and their findings; and users' personal comments.

Looking closely at the digital platforms, I recognize three main aims.

The first is to prevent forgetting. The tools used, as emerge from the posts, are affect and empathy. For instance, month by month, similar messages recall the time that has passed since the date of the loss, e.g.:

32 Monate. Im Gedenken an Ferhat Unvar, Hamza Kurtović, Said Nesar Hashemi, Vili Viorel Păun, Mercedes Kierpacz, Kaloyan Velkov, Fatih Saraçoğlu, Sedat Gürbüz, Gökhan Gültekin.[1]

Other posts remember the victims' birthdays and also have a very emotional impact on other users. Messages of love accompany photos that report the names of the murdered and recall the age they would be if still alive. Within this framework, it's worth stressing the empathic relation between the victims' families and users, expressed through comments on these posts, shares, and emojis. The messages report sadness, shock, suffering, and often declare that the person will never be forgotten.

Scholar Zizi Papacharissi has said, "A political opinion posted on a blog or a video parody posted on YouTube presents an attempt to populate the public agenda, as a potential, privately articulated challenge, to a public agenda determined by others" [Papacharissi 2008: 231]. The comments mentioned above are not political statements in a literal sense. However, they claim a clear political position when they condemn the racist attack and share their involvement with another person's suffering or, simply, when they publicize users' feelings and emotions on social networks.

A relevant detail is that, from a quantitative point of view, the number of comments seems to have progressively diminished in recent times, while the number of shares remains considerable. Papacharissi states that "diminished participation in the public sphere, online or offline, reflects a move to newer modes of civic engagement" [Papacharissi 2008: 241]. This assertion is very interesting. Although I'm not able to verify whether it applies to my case study, it introduces a crucial question pointing to further avenues of research beyond the scope of this paper. In what other domains do users feel their contribution is fruitful? Or, do they just lose interest?

Another aspect concerns language: All posts uploaded by *Initiative 19. Februar Hanau* are in German, and so are most of the users' comments. Therefore, whereas the initiative's social media accounts and the messages they spread are potentially reachable by a huge number of users, language actually narrows their content's circulation.

The group's second aim with its digital presence is to issue a translocal call for action to citizens and activists across the country. This point is connected, to a certain extent, to the point on language raised above. In fact, *Initiative 19. Februar Hanau* is mainly active in Germany; getting its messages across national borders doesn't seem a real priority for the activists. Rather, the initiative appears to be predominantly concerned with joining the dots locally between the facts and evidence that show endemic racism and systemic discrimination to be the real causes of the nine Hanau citizens' death.

The third purpose is to document and keep track of protest actions, such as rallies and gatherings that take place in Hanau and beyond, and to make these events accessible.

The fourth aim is to keep track of the investigation's progress, to seek acknowledgment of the endemic causes of the attack, and to shed light on the failures of the democratic system.

Hashtags across the urban space boost digital memory

As mentioned above, remembering and pursuing justice are the initiative's main priorities. In this respect, I argue that the initiative uses more than social networks and digital tools to achieve an impact across the urban and digital spheres. More importantly, it embodies the AI aesthetic and applies it in the urban domain.

Taking a DIY [Do-It-Yourself] attitude, the dissemination of posters is one of these tools. In fact, through the website, users can download and home-print PDF templates of posters, which are used at demonstrations or disseminated across the city. The posters display portraits of the victims, hashtags such as #saytheirnames, #erinnernheißtverändern, #erinnerung, #gerechtigkeit,

#aufklärung, #konsequenzen, #hanuistüberall, slogans such as, “Wir trauern und erinnern” (We are grieving and remembering), and list all the open questions raised by the investigation that haven’t yet found an answer. In this regard, I trace a link with the anti-Brexit and pro-vote campaigns launched in 2016 and 2017 by photographer Wolfgang Tillmans.[2] Although I cannot state that *Initiative 19. Februar* Hanau was inspired by Tillmans’ campaign, the influence of these art projects on the initiative seems very plausible.

Fig. 1: Portraits der Opfer des Anschlags vom 19.02.20 zum Download und Druck (DIN A3), Initiative 19. Februar Hanau’s website.

Fig. 2: Poster zum Jahrestag des Anschlags am 19.02.21 zum Download und Druck (DIN A3), Initiative 19. Februar Hanau's website.

Another tool used in digital ecology is the set of hashtags mentioned above, which also plays a crucial function in digital memory and the process of commemoration. Like the posters, the hashtags also circulate online and appear physically across the urban space, not only in print on billboards but also on T-shirts that the initiative's activists wear at rallies.

Above all, the label #saytheirnames is particularly relevant. Indeed, a neon sign with this textual string stands outside the initiative's meeting place, in Hanau.

Fig. 3: Facebook page, Initiative 19. Februar Hanau.

The origin of the #SayHerName hashtag lies in 2014. It was conceived by the African American Policy Forum and the Center for Intersectionality and Social Policy Studies, to highlight the names and narratives of Black women and girls who were the victims of police killings. The use of this hashtag has become extremely popular in recent years, and has turned rapidly into a universal slogan, a symbol of the quest for justice. In fact, it has been used globally whenever murder victims belonged to discriminated-against ethnic groups or marginalized social classes.

Hashtags are a "metadata tag" [Wikipedia 2022] "that groups similarly tagged messages or allows an electronic search to return all messages that contain the same hashtag. It uses a word, abbreviation, acronym, or unspaced phrase prefixed with the hash character (#) to form a label. In other words, the hash symbol tells the computer that a particular word or words should be read as more important than other words in a given message for purposes of sorting digital content into similar clusters" [Losh 2020: 14]. Therefore, the hashtag has a hypertextual function, inasmuch as it has a taxonomic and thus archiving role. Furthermore, "A hashtag can tell people what to do" [Losh 2020: 67]. In this regard, I argue that the medium – the hash character and the word – is the message, and the message displayed in the urban space is intrinsically designed to recall aesthetically how digital memory functions and can affect commemoration. In fact, crossing urban and digital environments, textual strings participate in the *connective turn*, and thus boost memory. The connective turn is defined by scholar Andrew Hoskins as "the massively increased abundance, pervasiveness and accessibility of digital technologies, devices and media, shaping an ongoing re-calibration of time, space (and place) and memory by people as they connect with, inhabit and constitute increasingly both dense and diffused social networks" [Hoskins 2011: 273]. Therefore, connectivity has the capacity to stretch memory through a flux of present and past, making it "not a product of individual or collective remembrances" [Hoskins 2011: 273], but rather "generated through the flux of contacts between people and digital technologies and media" [Hoskins 2011: 273]. This key observation recalls the role of the expanded spectator and her function in the context of creating and preserving digital memory. Indeed, moving through the urban environment by using the language and means of the digital, *Initiative 19. Februar Hanau* attempts to blur the borders of communication between the offline and the online, creating a dialogue that echoes across the city of Hanau, its social media platforms, and the deeper symbolic and material struggle that the hashtag #saytheirnames recalls.

Meanwhile, all the users who post online comments of solidarity and affect, attend rallies, download posters from the website and affix them through the city take part in a set of online performances of commemoration that intertwine with other actions offline. In doing so, they contribute to blurring the borders of digital and analog time and space, and thus boost the creation and circulation of memory that, thanks to online platforms, has the potential to expand exponentially and prosthetically[3].

Conclusion

To return to my initial questions: How does the digital shape and affect the act of commemorating? And what outputs of online commemorating exist in the offline domain?

Following my observation of the *Initiative 19. Februar Hanau* Facebook page, Instagram account and YouTube channel as sites of memory, I would like to put forward some final considerations about the circulation of digital memory and commemorating. These social media accounts can certainly be seen to increase the message's circulation, that is, the remembrance of the nine victims of the racial attack, but they do it in a specific way.

Whereas, in theory, social networks promote the viral visibility and dissemination of content beyond national borders, the social media accounts of *Initiative 19. Februar Hanau* show mainly a local focus. Indeed, the activists speak to and interact with an exclusively German audience. I argue that their intention is for the remembrance of their loved ones to remain firm within the cultural memory of German society, of which the nine victims were a part. In this way, they seem to implicitly convey a clear message: The victims were not foreigners, "others" of the society in which they were living. Rather, they were integral parts of the German community. For this reason, the whole country has to think about the murders and the responsibility that the whole system bears.

The online commemorating merges with rallies, demonstrations, and even art exhibitions in the urban space. Photos, videos, and texts provide documentation of these public gatherings and events and are uploaded onto the digital platforms, and accompanied by hashtags, users' comments, and so on. Expanded spectators – embodied by the *Initiative 19. Februar Hanau* activists – inhabit and take action in the streets and social networks. They use visual and textual tools and strategies from both domains to increase the message's circulation, support the fight for remembrance, visibility and justice, contribute to online archiving, and make it possible for the public to experience the events, mediated via the screen. Ultimately, this activity is a material manifestation of the inner dynamics of the digital ecologies within which users, and especially expanded users, interact. One clear example of this is the use that the expanded spectator makes of #saytheirnames. The hashtag is a metadata tag online, a neon sign in the urban space, and a transnational invocation to remember and thus obtain justice.

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[1] Thirty-two months. In remembrance of Ferhat Unvar, Hamza Kurtović, Said Nesar Hashemi, Vili Viorel Păun, Mercedes Kierpacz, Kaloyan Velkov, Fatih Saraçoğlu, Sedat Gürbüz, Gökhan Gültekin (translation).

[2] The German artist created a series of photos combined with text for an anti-Brexit campaign (2016) and prior to the German elections (2017). These posters were exhibited in art spaces, circulated virally through social networks, and disseminated throughout the city of Berlin. They were also available as PDFs for home printing on the photographer’s website.

[3] This term recalls the notion of prosthetic memory coined by theorist Alison Landsberg [2004], who argues that the technologies of mass culture make it possible for anyone to share collective memories and to appropriate as personal experience historical events that they did not experience directly.