Hidden Sacrifice:
Divisive Rhetoric and Memorial Architecture

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Abstract

I am troubled by the patterns of hate and violence that are having a resurgence today. Despite the centuries of atrocity that the world has endured, we seem to be falling back into old patterns of division, leading me to question whether our methods of remembrance are perhaps flawed. Do our memorials perhaps entrench the very divisions that generated the remembered violence? The narrative structures against which we orient ourselves in the world surely play a pivotal role in our understanding of reality, working to undermine or perpetuate our sense of solitarist identity. In such structures, a rhetoric of sacrifice serves to reinforce the divisions of the past, strengthening the conditions from which violence can grow. By applying René Girard's theory of the *scapegoat mechanism* to our study of memorial architecture, we can better understand how the practice of memorialization can entrench the polarizing rhetoric of sacrifice, serving to hide or, in the case of the Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum, reveal the fundamental arbitrariness of the sacrificial victim. An architecture that memorializes without the rhetoric of sacrifice is one that in fact expands our understanding of humanity, revealing the potential violence in each of us from the image of past atrocity.

Indeed, many of the conflicts and barbarities in the world are sustained through the illusion of a unique and choiceless identity.
—Amartya Sen, *Identity and Violence*

In 2008, South Africa experienced a wave of violence reminiscent of the later years of the Apartheid Era. African migrants were attacked and killed not because of their political affiliations or the colour of their skin, but because they were not South African.[1] This xenophobic violence is not an unusual event in history, globally or in the specific South African context. In fact, the fear of those deemed different and the subsequent violence against them has been a hallmark of human civilization; the last century has even been called the "age of genocide."[2] Today, we see this xenophobic rhetoric of otherness reappearing in politics and culture, heightening difference over commonality and setting the stage for sacrificial atrocity.

The polarizing worldview of *us* against *them* is a commonplace feature of media, particularly in the North American context. In his work on ethics and media, Roger Silverstone argues that this rhetoric of evil dehumanizes the perpetrators of violence, and so legitimizes any violent actions against them in the name of justice.[3] This rhetoric, used, for example, in the US military response to the 9/11 attacks, structures all subsequent acts of violence as comparatively virtuous – a beneficial bloodbath.[4] This sacrificial rhetoric displaces ethical accountability and obscures our vision of justice.[5] Media, and I use the term in its broadest sense, shapes our response to violence, our relationships with each other, and our actions in the world. Through the stories of violence that we encounter, atrocity can appear justified,

hidden in the rhetoric of sacrifice. Architecture, particularly memorial architecture, is a one such site of these stories.

The structure of these memorial stories will always have a tendency to reinforce this rhetoric of sacrificial atrocity, given that it is a condition of the event being memorialized. Take, for example, the Cambodian Genocide. The Khmer Rouge regime murdered a quarter of Cambodia's population in half a decade, seeking to 'purify' the Cambodian people.[6] The narratives used to justify this kind of mass violence rely on the creation of insurmountable difference.[7] Despite the fact that the victims and perpetrators of the genocide shared an identity of, for example, living in Phnom Penh, the ethnic distinction of Khmer and non-Khmer erased all other shared identities, allowing for the victims to be dehumanized to the point of death. Given that this dehumanization is a defining feature of violence, it can easily become the driving narrative of memorialization.[8] In contemporary memorialization, where the victims of violence play a governing role in the creation of memorial space, this narrative often appears inverted in the memorial, so that the perpetrators become monsters; the victims martyrs.

Undoing this divisive dehumanization is the challenge of memorial architecture. Judith Butler, a contemporary philosopher and feminist theorist, calls for an expansion of our definitions of whose deaths are grieveable, and whose lives are liveable.[9] This, if anything, is the mandate of memorial architecture. Without this expansion, our understanding of past atrocity is left within a propagating rhetoric that stills criticism and encourages thoughtless violence.[10]

Yet we often find memorial architecture caged in sacrificial rhetoric. While this may bring some solace to those wishing to find meaning in the arbitrary death of innocents, the implications of this framework are far from benign. Sacrifice is undeniably violent.[11] It relies on separation, on establishing difference-from-the-norm, placing the narratives of sacrifice within Silverstone's commentary on the dehumanizing rhetoric of evil.[12] In fact, we can see contemporary xenophobic rhetoric as a "sacrificial preparation" that paves the way for justified violence against an 'other.'[13] By understanding the dehumanization contained within the rhetoric of sacrifice, we can begin to understand how these narratives contribute to our contemporary ideologies of division. René Girard, an anthropological philosopher, argues that sacrifice is contingent on the creation of a scapegoat whose death propitiates mimetic conflict within a society.[14] Within this theory, we see that violence is not 'out there' in some mythical 'other,' but rather it exists as an intrinsic part of human nature, neither good nor evil. In acknowledging this, we can begin to reframe our violent pasts in a narrative that affirms life and expands our humanity.

Girard's theory makes two central points, both of which are important to memorial architecture. The first argument is that sacrifice is reliant on the creation of a scapegoat who is connected yet indelibly distinct from the conflicted group, and who is fundamentally innocent. He argues that it is the very innocence of the scapegoat that turns it into a sacrificial victim; if it was part of the conflict, then its death would result in vengeful violence.[15] In deflecting conflict within a community onto an innocent victim, the community can unite and so end the conflict. In this theoretical framework, it seems inevitable that the scapegoat will always be a marginalized community. These communities are at once connected to majority groups and socially differentiated from them; minority populations become the bearers of the majority of conflict.[16] In our contemporary world, where the traditionally religious institutions that control sacrifice are no longer the dominant political institutions, the sacrificial process casts a larger and larger net, multiplying innocent victims and singing the "praises of murder and madness as the only true forces of 'liberation.'"[17]

Any union that occurs after sacrifice is only possible with the collective belief in the guilt of the scapegoat.[18] And this is where our images of the scapegoated communities begin to act. Here, architects play a role in convincing the society of the otherness and guilt of a group, framing that community as a potential scapegoat. Without the image of absolute difference, these communities become part of the larger conflict – and potential resolution - and so cannot be arbitrarily sacrificed. But why does the collective believe so readily in the guilt of the scapegoat? This brings me to Girard's second point.

The creation of this sacrificial scapegoat is tied to our mimetic nature, not to any pre-existing identity of or propensity to evil. This argument places violence within our ability to imitate, which is also the way in which we learn, neither good nor bad. Violence is therefore a constant possibility, emerging from normative, familiar society, potentially perpetrated by any of us.[19]
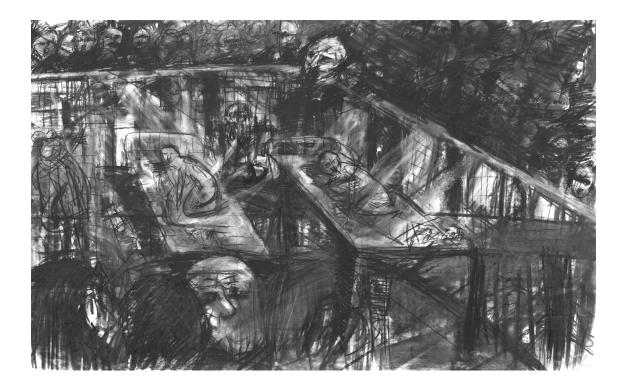
Figure 1. Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum, analytical drawing, animation still. Drawing by Author.

Girard's theories argue that modern violence is fundamentally based on an illusion that the violated community is guilty, and that their deaths are beneficial. This illusion is reinforced through the rhetoric of sacrifice, which I argue needs to be avoided. It is this rhetoric that occludes our ability to see within ourselves both the violator and the violated, to see within normalcy potential horror. And this ability is critical if we are to avoid playing out age-old patterns of sacrifice.

In memorial architecture, we often see this sacrificial narrative of good and evil used to present the past. This narrative produces a sacred separation of communities – violator and violated – and obscures the overwhelming connections between the two, perpetuating the differences that were generated to justify the violence being memorialized. In this way, memorial architecture can dehumanize and limit our definition of whose lives are worth grieving for.

However, architecture can also act to enable connections even between the most disparate of identities. Operating as a frame for the present, memorial architecture can affectively connect potential violence with past violence, opening up our understanding of our role in breaking from the sacrificial processes that persist across time. Through memorial architecture, we can begin to understand not only our potential place as a scapegoat, but also as a potential violator, intent on carrying out false justice. Simply put, it is through a kind of sensorial resonance between violence and normalcy that architecture can reveal the illusions of solitarist identity that drive sacrificial atrocity.

One example of this revelatory architecture is the Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum in Phnom Penh. This space is not a constructed memorial, but is the site of violence itself - the place where the guilt of the created scapegoats was made absolute.[20] The building, once a high school, is not an exceptional space. It is simple and ordinary, a courtyard typology with four three-storey block buildings around it. But within these buildings, incredible acts of violence were committed and, importantly, justified by those committing them. The buildings served as a torture facility during the Khmer Rouge genocide during the latter half of the 1970s. Our affective comprehension of our place as both victim and perpetrator within the architecture is best understood through ones narrative encounter with the torture rooms in Building A (Figure 2).

These rooms are uncannily familiar. We experience them in sequence, as a rhythmic narrative that oscillates between violence and
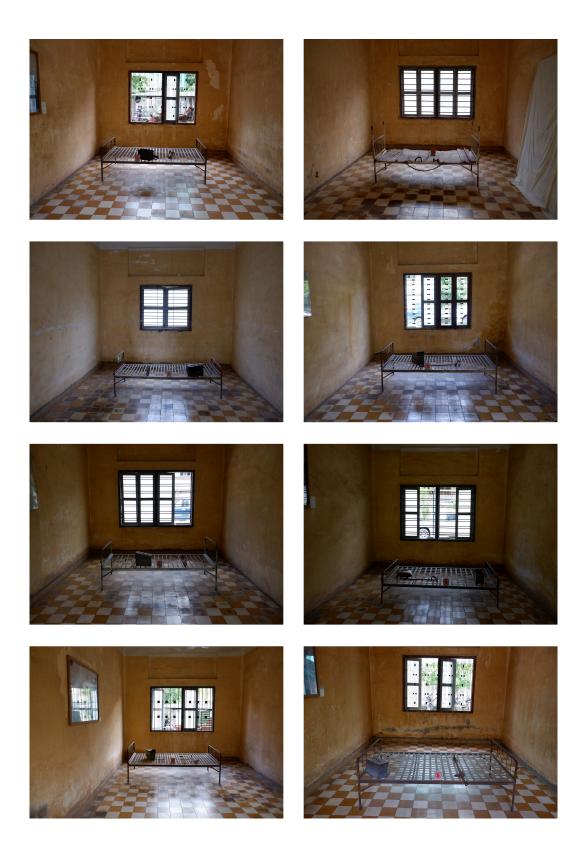
Figure 2. The torture rooms in Building A place us in a familiar space of violence. Images by Author.

Figure 3. The architecture is normative and familiar, affectively communicating potential horror within our normative institutions. Image by Author.

normalcy; between the torture beds and simple corridor. This oscillation affectively reframes our understanding of normalcy to include the violence of genocide; within the banal architecture of an exterior corridor and checkered tiles we see past violence projected into the present. The normative space becomes one of potential violence (Figure 3).

At the doorway to each room, we peer into darkness; a metal bed on top of cracked blackened tiles marks the encounter. The architecture evokes a benign institution, the beds evoke restful peace; here they are perverted by violence, inverted into an institution of horror and a torture device. There is no narrative of guilt or judgment here, only uncanny horror at the intimacy of such atrocity. We become aware of our potential position as both victim and violator through this oscillating sensorial narrative.

The communication of past violence through the Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum relies not on explicit historical narratives but rather on evoked sensorial rhythms-of-connection. Our encounters with the torture rooms results in an altered image of a classroom. Within these encounters, we find incredible horror operating within and through familiar space, affectively revealing the role that our normative rhythms and realities play in mass violence. Through our disjunctively familiar resonance with the event, the Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum re-humanizes the dehumanized monsters and objects that characterize the conflict. It is this dehumanization that is part of our normative realities, all too often hidden by rhetoric and ideology. Here, the architectural narrative avoids using the incendiary rhetoric of sacrifice to discuss the violence, resulting in an understanding of it that accounts for the humanity of both parties, and intimately connects us to the event.

In experiencing the Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum, we understand not only the fundamentally innocent nature of the scapegoat, but also the all-too human potential for each of us to believe in their guilt rather than our own potential-for-violence. Architecture that uses a narrative of sacrifice, or of evil, only succeeds in hiding the innocence of the scapegoat, deepening the differences that are used to incite more violence. And today, in a world where it seems that compassion and open discourse is struggling to stay afloat, we cannot build spaces that divide. Our memorials, and indeed all our architecture, has an ethical mandate to foster

connectivity and spontaneity, creativity and heterogeneity because without it, we are left stagnating in violence, mistaking it for peace-establishing sacrifice.

Endnotes

1. Necklacing, popularized during the final years of the anti-apartheid struggle and the Emergency Decree that was imposed on the country, is when someone has a car tire placed around their neck, filled with gasoline, and lit. They burn to death. Ernesto Nhamuave, a Mozambican migrant, was set on fire in 2008 by a mob on the outskirts of Johannesburg. Hundreds more were forced from their homes back to their native countries or into refugee camps set up in major South African cities.

2. Roger Smith, "Human Destructiveness and Politics: The Twentieth Century as an Age of Genocide," *Genocide and the Modern Age: Etiology and Case Studies of Mass Death* 2 (1987).

3. Roger Silverstone, "The Rhetoric of Evil," in *Media and Morality: On the Rise of the Mediapolis* (Malden, USA: Polity Press, 2007), 71.

4. Noam Chomsky and Edward Herman, *Counter Revolutionary Violence: Bloodbaths in Fact and Propaganda* (Andover, Massachusetts: Warner Modular Publications, Inc., 1973), 6.

5. Silverstone, "The Rhetoric of Evil," in *Media and Morality,* 56-80.

6. Henri Locard, "State Violence in Democratic Kampuchea (1975–1979) and Retribution (1979–2004)," *European Review of History: Revue Européenne D'Histoire* 12, no. 1 (2005): 121-143, doi:10.1080/13507480500047811. https://doi.org/10.1080/13507480500047811.

7. Amartya Sen, *Identity and Violence: The Illusion of Destiny* (New York, USA: W.W.Norton & Company, Inc., 2006), 2.

8. Mary McCarthy and Simone Weil, "The Iliad, Or the Poem of Force," Chicago Review 18, no. 2 (1965): 5-30. doi:10.2307/25294008. http://www.jstor.org.proxy.lib.uwaterloo.ca/stable/25294008.

9. Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (New York: Verso, 2006), 146.

10. Amartya Sen, *The Idea of Justice* (New York: Penguin Books, 2010), 337. It is important to note that, as Sen argues, criticism in open, free space is a fundament of democracy and the assessment of ethical action in society. Memorial architecture is part of the larger questions of justice that Sen raises, linking closely to his comments on freedom of expression and access to information.

11. René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred* [La violence et le sacré] (Baltimore, USA: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1972), 23.

12. Ibid., 39.

13. Ibid., 272.

14. René Girard, *Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World* [Des choses cachées depuis la fondation du monde], trans. Stephen Bann and Michael Metteer (USA: Stanford University Press, 1978), 45.

15. Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, 26.

16. Ibid., 271-273.

17. Girard, *Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World*, 287.

18. Ibid., 45.

19. Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (USA: Penguin Books, 2006), 26.

20. Here, 18000 people were tortured, murdered, or condemned to death during the Khmer Rouge regime. Identified as non-Khmer or sympathetic to them, the victims of the genocide 'confessed' their guilt, forcibly legitimizing their own sacrifice to cultural purity.