

The "Forensic Landscapes" of Srebrenica

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Abstract: This article appropriates the forensic archaeological notion of "forensic landscape" for critical theory as a means to explore the ways in which the topography stretching between Srebrenica and Tuzla has been seen and monumentalized in the aftermath of the genocide in 1995. Bringing together forensic scientific discourse and visual culture, this article provides a critical reading for the Marš Mira, an annual commemorative walk held prior to the burials in Potočari. By drawing on different taxonomies of landscape, the Marš Mira exemplifies how the forensic landscape functions memorially as a zone of indistinction.

Keywords: landscape, Srebrenica, forensic science, archaeology, Marš Mira, mass grave sites, Simon Norfolk, Ziyah Gafic

I. INTRODUCTION

In *On the Natural History of Destruction* (1999), W. G. Sebald describes the typical survivor of the bombing campaign of German cities as an eyewitness who lost his forensic bearings. Displaying a now familiar predicament, the traumatized subject cannot accurately describe the events he witnessed precisely because he experienced them too directly. When the survivor

does brave an account of what happened, his reminiscences generate clichéd narrative accounts of the bombings. Whether out of denial or amnesia, the recollection of Germany's destruction sits in an insurmountable blind spot constituted by traumatic forgetting, on one hand, and fictionalization, on the other; but, either way, the forensic, in the form of concrete facts, ends up censored.

In an effort to circumvent the deficiencies of German post-war memory, Sebald proposes the revival of an alternative and supplementary literary form: a "natural history of destruction", inspired by the title of an article that was never written and the intent of which was forgotten by the original author. This project leads Sebald to celebrate an autopsy report that he finds wedged in the midst of a fictional account, entitled "Findings on Pathological and Anatomical Investigations After the Raids on Hamburg in 1943-1945. With Thirty Illustrations and Eleven Plates". He writes: "This document, a genuine one written in the interests of science by a certain Dr. Siegfried Gräff, opens up a view into the abyss of a mind armed against all contingency. The informational value of such authentic documents, before which all fiction pales, also determines the character of Alexander Kluge's archaeologi-

cal excavations of the slag-heaps of our collective consciousness" (Sebald, 2004: 60). Sebald turns to pathological and archaeological details for their information, but one quickly gets the sense that his quest is also sensory in that his emphatic shift from eyewitness to objectal witnessing leads him not towards more scientific details but rather to landscape. In landscape the author envisages an informational resource as well as a "sensory experience" of destruction that German citizens disavowed and failed to describe. Herein lies the crux of the matter: in the medico-legal and archaeological imaginary, landscape becomes information *in potentia* as well as a view. This is despite the fact that, as Kitty Hauser notes: "for those who see the landscape and its elements in this way, appearances are merely the end products of more-or-less hidden stories, an agglomeration of past traces, actions, and occurrences (Hauser, 2007:3).

It is precisely this mutual drama of contrasts between appearances and latent information that forms the basis for a representational structure out of which entire political struggles are plotted, fought and mapped. Srebrenica is caught in this representational structure.

II. LANDSCAPE

A. FIRST IMAGES

The first pictures of landscape were aerial views. On August 10, 1995, United States Ambassador to the UN Security Council, revealed images taken by aerial reconnaissance platforms and satellite imaging before the U.N. Security Council that suggested mass killings in and around Nova Kasaba (Schmitt, 2013). These

first visuals depicted a mass of individuals gathered in a soccer field and another showing overturned earth. Although survivor testimony and intelligence guided the discovery of the images, Albright's exposé instantly transformed Nova Kasaba from being mere places to sites for the international community, that is to say places that matter because something happened there. Inasmuch as the images show that the two events happened within a narrow mile radius from one another, their juxtaposition suggests a straightforward inference: the men previously assembled in the first picture must have ended up in the second. But as Errol Morris quips: "Nothing is obvious that it is obvious" (Morris, 2011: 8). Nothing in the images themselves indicate that what they depict is directly related. Jean René-Ruez, Chief Investigator for the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia (henceforth ICTY), explained that despite the "good faith" of the US Ambassador, these sites were not, in fact, directly connected. "Although the exhumations were not done in Nova Kasaba until the end of 1998, we have known since August 1995 that it was not an execution site but rather an assembly site. (...) The bodies found in the mass graves shown in these pictures were connected with other executions that took place in the area" (Delpha, 2012: 34).

The juxtaposition of these images, however, were effective in another way in that their coupling phrased the question of what happened to the individuals gathered in the football field. In the pairing of the photographs landscape became a visual trope for Srebrenica's missing. Under the aerial gaze, the upturned earth formed chalky patches, negative spaces, which smuggled the clandestine back to consciousness. Indeed, here we are left with an early record of a process

that endures to this day: of the estimated eight thousand men missing from Srebrenica *becoming* landscape and a parallel process whereby landscape becomes *forensic*.

ICTY and Physicians for Human Rights (henceforth PHR) investigators commenced exhumations of mass gravesites in 1996. Four mass gravesites (Cerska, Nova Kasaba, Orahović, Branjevo Military Farm) were fully exhumed. However, the number of bodies they found at the Orahović and the Branjevo Military Farm was short of what survivors had told them to expect. Here the findings confirmed what some were already suspecting: that graves had been emptied of their contents, and the bodies displaced and dispersed to other locations (Toronto Star, 1996; Sullivan 1996). The discovery of robbed grave sites explains why Ruez describes the Srebrenica case as a “crime without bodies” (Delpha, 2012; 31; Sullivan 1996). What was found at these sites did not correspond to the information provided by the aerial images and eyewitness accounts. Bodies were missing.

Between 1996 and 2000 twenty-one mass graves were exhumed by the ICTY; fourteen of which are considered “primary gravesites”, meaning the graves where the bodies of individuals were first buried subsequent to their execution. Eight of these “primary” gravesites were found “robbed” or “disturbed”. Retrospective searches of satellite and aerial reconnaissance images as well as evidence gathered from intercepted phone conversations indicate that that an orchestrated campaign of post-burial disturbance occurred between September and October 1995 (see ICTY, http://www.icty.org/x/file/Outreach/view_from_hague/jit_srebrenica_en.pdf; Manning 2000). In order to make sense of the findings and establish the sequence of actions

taken by the Army of Republika Srpska (henceforth VRS), ICTY investigators tracked the transfer of bodies from grave to grave by introducing the notion of “secondary” and “tertiary” mass grave sites, terms now familiar to citizens throughout Bosnia. Bodies initially buried in one location would be transferred to another location, sometimes excavated a third or a fourth time before the process of displacement came to an end. The result is not only a confusion of borders between grave sites, but a simultaneous physical and symbolic fracturing of the bodies ensnared in the displacement.

The secondary and tertiary character of the Srebrenica mass grave sites displace and assault the ontic condition of place as testimony to a given event; it intentionally thwarts topography’s forensic value. Its gamble is that future onlookers will presume that massacres did not happen, and that what was once a primary grave site is no site at all. As a topography of *différance*, where secondness simultaneously marks difference and defers symbolic closure, the secondary grave’s deconstructive force targets and contaminates the temporal and spatial parameters of the crime scene. If place secures the scientist’s testimonial authority, in theory destruction leaves the forensic investigator with little to say. The displacement of bodies and the emptying of graves embody the logic of *deconstruction* in the sense given it within critical theory, but give it a violent application, using it as the alibi for historical negation and revisionism.

B. ALIBI

The VRS forces who voided the primary grave sites were the first negationists—the first to artificially produce absence and ally it with the denial of atrocities.

The first negation was not inscribed in landscape as *representation*, but instead constituted a conscious project to void the territory of human remains and deny human presence. In its ascertain of human absence, the physical dispersal of the dead shares in the alibi of wilderness, the fullest expression of negation within the tradition of landscape inasmuch as it denies human presence as well as the specular witness as its constitutive condition. As Jonathan Bordo explains: "As the absolute limit of itself, the wilderness posits no traces, which is tantamount to positing a visual alibi that nothing took place there at all. Catastrophic and murderous incidents took place, once reframed in the wilderness, lose their context as having meaningfully occurred" (Bordo, 2002: 308). Wilderness is a vision of landscape that sets the forensic under erasure in that it posits a presence that, by definition, excludes human occupation. Its logic, as Bordo argues, ultimately posits that the onlooker's presence will itself be suspended in its formulation. Wilderness, therefore, is both a fantasy of virgin soil and a fantasy of the perfect crime—that which leaves no traces. Wilderness is a criminal alibi.

The material destruction of mass depositions throughout the Drina Valley, however, reacts to the imminent arrival of the forensic scientific investigator as a witness figure—is produced with the knowledge that she approaches. Conscious that enemy factions had located primary mass burials via satellite imaging, theirs thwarted conventional anthropological techniques for identifying and counting human remains (see Wagner 2008). These acts of destruction presume the appearance of an eventual witness, but hopes to rob the latter of testimony—meaning that while it waits for the witness to look upon pre-designated ar-

reas, its intent is to empty the designative and indicative function conventionally fulfilled by the investigator. As a figure whose primary function is to confirm the place, the number, the fact of death, the investigator is left, in theory, wont of a focal point, of a place with referential value. Here, not here: undecided.

As if promising to finish with nature's capacity to enact a kind of final closure on bodily presence in the threat of pure wilderness, the forensic gaze responds by obliquely projecting the body as an immanent but not necessarily localizable aspect of landscape. Forensic scientific methods often draw on a topographical operation—this is especially the case for forensic archaeology. When a place becomes a crime scene, topography becomes the medium for and extension of the body. Indeed, it is precisely this doubling of the body in the trace, the way in which the body is traced and retraced through it, that the body is a flickering and suspended presence even where it cannot yet be found or firmly located.

C. LANDSCAPE AS MEDIUM

When a site is designated a crime scene its immediate effect is to endow everything within its parameters as potentially significant. This symbolic transfiguration should not be mistaken to mean that everything takes on meaning; rather everything in a designated crime scene takes on the status of information for a time. As Henry Bond remarks in *Lacan at the Scene* (2009), a corpse turns everything—at least for a time—into a body of evidence, what judicial discourse calls the *corpus delicti*. A corpse changes the significance of everything around it: the pen, the shoe, the bed sheets, the cutlery are given equal importance. The mundane be-

comes worthwhile, and as Bond explains the crime scene implicitly challenges the “classical regime of representation” (Bond, 2009: 13) where certain objects and subjects take precedence in our hierarchy of taste. When crime becomes the lens nothing is to be overlooked; everything is equal until it is determined non-relevant to an investigation.



Fig. 1. Photograph from Ziyah Gafić, *Quest for Identity* (2010)

Yet even where an object lacks an evidentiary function, the change of status of object endures as a relic to crime. A case in point is the photographic work of Ziyah Gafić in his project titled *Quest for Identity* (2010). In this collection, Gafić photographed objects recovered from mass graves linked to the Srebrenica genocide. Taken at a square angle, mundane objects of

reminiscent of everyday life and travel are captured against the cold metal backdrop of the examining table. Gafić builds a catalogue that imitates in part a similar the catalogue of artefacts kept by the International Commission for Missing Persons (henceforth ICMP). In this version objects are classified not according to site, but rather according to the category of objects itself. Toothbrushes, watches, keys, forks and spoons, combs, family photographs, prayer beads, Koranic verses and scrolls, eyeglasses: their reclassification become suggestive of shared experiences, shared lineages and shared history. Although the title of the project ostensibly formulates an identitarian (as distinct from identification) motive and purpose, the status of the objects themselves as sources of meaning derive first from their association with Srebrenica as a crime scene. It is their historical relationship with and connection to criminality that renders these artefacts evidence *and* relic at the same time. Crime and history operate as partner signifiers in their new disposition in an artistic milieu.

D. FORENSIC LANDSCAPE

Forensic landscape is a technical term recently proposed by archaeologists to describe the sites that await inspection. Forensic archaeologist Ian Hanson defines the forensic landscape as “execution sites or body processing sites and evidence of the movement of the deceased to the grave or their deposition into the grave” (paraphrased by Margaret Cox et al., xxxx: 15). In other words, the forensic landscape constitutes a physical parameter within which a sequence of events is discernible in noted topographical disturbances in and around a burial site. The surface surrounding a

clandestine grave, for instance, might reveal the presence of heavy machinery or human traffic suggesting a wide range of scenarios of possible interest to an investigator. The term landscape like that of “crime scene”, however, rhetorically generalizes the function of the forensic trace to an entire surface area, such that while a parameter might contain distinct pieces of evidential value that will be photographed and collected, these are in and of themselves mere components of a conceptual and topographical field where the forensic trace is already operating as a potentiality and a value.

The notion of landscape in the scientific investigation of mass death likewise shifts the emphasis away from bodies to their surrounding environment. As Cheetham and Hanson explain, when potential mass gravesites are cordoned off and gridded in the manner conventionally used for crime scenes, or when methods such as pedestaling are applied, the result is an “artificial boundary on the landscape” that risks destroying or ignoring noteworthy evidence. “Such two-dimensional boundaries can override the ability of both investigators and archaeologists to ‘see’ landscape. The crime scene becomes defined by the cordon, the grid becomes the limit of site, the ‘pit’ excavated to access a burial becomes the grave itself” (Cheetham and Hanson, 2008: 9).

Although the definition given forensic landscape denotes an archaeological way of looking at territory—as a stratigraphy on geological layers that reveal a timescale, it nevertheless constitutes an open concept that exceeds that of site. Indeed, the shift towards landscape in archaeology more generally marks a similar emphatic shift from site-specific inquiries (Turner, 2013: 131). Indicating a zone without pre-determined hermetic boundaries, landscape refers to a processual

continuum of search, location and recovery, which the notion of site does not adequately convey. Where the notion of site isolates particular spatial units for thorough excavation, the notion of forensic landscape expresses wider regional parameters that carry prospective evidential value. Another way to explain the contribution of the term is to understand that to ‘see’ landscape in the sense proposed by Hanson is to subordinate (but not substitute) space for trace—meaning that where a criminal investigative procedure would typically produce a spatial grid, effectively freezing a territory in a uniform and standardized pattern, the notion of landscape instead emphasizes the territorial “lines of flight” of the criminal trace as defining the ‘real’ boundaries of the forensic from the non-forensic territory (Deleuze and Guattari). “On a disaster recovery scene such as a plane crash, the outer cordon set to control scene access and define evidential distribution can become obsolete overnight when at daylight it is seen strong winds have blown documents, clothing and personal effects three hundred meters past the cordon” (Cheetham and Hanson 2008: 10). Significantly, landscape relativizes space, or minimally displaces it as a determinative marker of the forensic. Where the grid of the crime scene investigator typically “locks” or “freezes” a given space for investigation, as if freezing time, landscape introduces at least the possibility that ‘site’ can alternate and/or change.

If landscape is “both a frame, and what a frame contains” (Mitchell, 2002: 5) in this instance the frame is diachronically dynamic. This is why, perhaps, the term “forensic landscape” lends itself, I believe, to critical theoretical interpretation and extension. Where the concept and value of the trace precedes and exceeds its official entrance into evidence, the forensic referent persists

even in oblique forms of expression. Theoretically, one may ask whether the forensic trace is ever fully exhausted in the concept of forensic landscape.



Fig. II. A photograph from Simon Norfolk, *Bleed* (2005)

Photographer Simon Norfolk's work entitled *Bleed* (2005) provides an interesting point from which to engage and explore the potential of "forensic landscape" in conversation with landscapes aesthetic and pictorial traditions. *Bleed* is an impressive collection of landscape photographs taken at mass grave sites associated with the Srebrenica genocide. Norfolk returns to sites already exhumed by forensic scientific investigators. For the investigator the former landscape is not an aesthetic practice or a mode of representation even though it is clearly conceptual practice mediated visually. Rather it bespeaks the visible con-

tours of an area determined to have forensic value. Topography in advance of representation warrants the investigators appeal to landscape. Norfolk, however, appropriates the scientist's alibi and going to same sites, returns landscape to its pictorial tradition, aestheticizing place and trace in lieu of their judicial preferences. A few photographs show a solitary glove left at an excavation site, another the refrigerated morgue where bodies were temporarily stored at ICMP headquarters. For the most part, however, the landscapes are bereft of material references to forensic technique or scientific presence. These oscillate between the pastoral and the highly abstract; without the captions explaining their connection to the genocide, the viewer would likely miss their historical significance.

It would seem that recovering the pictorial and aesthetic sense of landscape from the forensic would constitute an unjust manoeuvre. Something in the hierarchical alternation of the term, and the seeming divestment of the forensic for the sublime, raises suspicion (especially in the critical tradition of Theodor Adorno). When absence suggests itself as an alibi for aesthetic proclamation in the very place where forensic is supposed to have made a claim, it proves distasteful. They investigated *this* place. Norfolk came for a sublime image. And yet, I would argue, Norfolk's strategem is subtler than this. The informational opacity of his collection is not simply a divestment of knowledge for the sake of aesthetics; the negation of informational presence is not the photographer's, at least not in the first instance. Rather Norfolk calls us back to the other polarity in the representational structure demonstrated earlier by Sebald. In the archaeological imaginary, landscape is at once informational but it is also a view.

In so doing, Norfolk forces us back upon landscape as representation only to emphasize the question and problematic of absence rather than the dramaturgy of bodily presence. In so doing, Norfolk reminds us that the quest to find the missing men of Srebrenica is not just a presencing of bodies but also confrontation with what it means to find someone missing.

To summarize: in Norfolk's oeuvre *Bleed*, we encounter another manifestation of "forensic landscape". To posit landscape as a representation of a forensic question is to suggest that it can carry the question of *Where? Who?* Until all the dead are recovered, landscape becomes the bearer of an open question. Or, if you will, formulates the zone of indistinction that inheres within the very terms of landscape as such.

III. IN SEARCH OF A MONUMENT

"I went out to walk around your city (the Hague), that is what I wanted to tell you. I couldn't really see much, but what I really liked, what caught my eye, was a monument that we visited and that was a monument to women, that is, women awaiting sailors who never come back. And the monument touched me profoundly. I should like to find this statue and take it to Bosnia with me. Perhaps it would be likened to mothers and wives of Srebrenica who have been waiting and hoping all these years, expect that we followed different roads. We could turn to our empty forests" (Witness Mirsada Malagić qtd. in ICTY, 2005: 52-53).

If the forensic landscapes of Srebrenica, in this critical theoretical interpretation, marks a zone of indistinction, the witnessing mothers and wives who mourn the men and look expectantly to the liminal topogra-

phy that has become of the Drina Valley have been given a different kind of monument in the Marš Mira. Translated from the Bosnian, Mars Mira means Peace March. A "pedestrian campaign" marking the anniversary of the Srebrenica genocide, the March invites thousands of individuals across Bosnia and beyond to walk the path travelled by the estimated 15 thousand men and boys who fled towards Tuzla after Srebrenica fell to the VRS in 1995. The organizers of the Marš Mira state that their goal is to promote long lasting peace by calling for justice for the victims in the arrest and prosecution of those who are responsible for committing the genocide (Mars Mira Website, 2013: para. 1). Participants walk their escape route in reverse order, starting out from Nežuk and arriving three days later in Potocari where the mass procession of coffins take place on the Potocari Memorial grounds.

Much could be written about the narrative construction of the Marš Mira, but I want to call attention to a particular curatorial choice made by the organizers that have a part in shaping the participants relationship to the landscape between Nežuk and Potocari. The trajectory taken by fugitives draws a line through the stretch of territory where the mass graves connected to the genocide were located. As such, this geography is a concentration of former primary, secondary and tertiary mass grave sites as well as the potential site of more discoveries.

Participants will note that a few unofficial monuments have been erected at former deposition sites, presumably by local agents, but for the most part, temporary markers erected only for the duration of the Peace March indicate the location of former mass grave sites. These temporary markers mediate land-

scape in non-negligible ways. Black placards with arrows pointing in the direction of nearby mass grave sites punctuate the trajectory, allowing participants to note the rise in number and density as of deposition sites as they approach Srebrenica. They also subtly call attention to the kinds of sites selected for mass burial: private land, riverbeds, cemeteries, densely forested areas. The placards themselves read, for example: “Masovne grobnica/ Lokajica: Zvornik-Snagovo/Klasifikacija: sekundarna grobnica/ Exhumacija: 24.10. -14.11.2005/Primarno: Grbaci (juli 1995) Broj slučajevac: 230 slučajaja”. Interestingly, these placards also sport the black and white photography of Tarik Samarah, best known for his collection of photographs entitled *Srebrenica* (2005). The photographs selected for the Mars in all cases refer to scenes of exhumation: a gloved hand holding the hand of a corpse, two investigators standing before a skull half-submerged in the earth, a plastic bag of evidence, and a singular skull heavily caked with earth.



The markers along the escape route call on the participant to become witnesses to the campaign of destruction/erasure committed by the VRS and the corollary efforts of the forensic scientific investigators to recover the human remains scattered clandestinely throughout the Drina Valley. Their conceit is to mediate the experience of landscape as an open and contested terrain, and, through ritual, memorialize the precarious but nevertheless enduring experience of looking to landscape for missing men. As Mirsada Malagić expressed in her testimonial before the ICTY, the mothers and wives “turn to our (their) empty forests”. The Marš Mira commemorates and gives monumental form to this questioning gaze. Forging a trajectory where bodies may likely still lie in nearby ravines or fields, the Mars Mira monumentalizes and commemorates a question that for many still awaits an answer.



Fig. IV. Temporary Markers. Mars Mira 2012.

The road, of course, leads to Potocari where the Marš Mira implicitly situates narrative closure. But until that day where all the disappeared are found and brought to rest, the ritual walk calls on the secondary witness to embody the question of the forensic landscape not as belonging to the past but as a very real condition of the present.

IV. CONCLUSION

Crimes of scale have a way on invoking landscape as they involve several agents, events and coordinated and complex relations between them. The postburial disturbances of primary mass grave sites in and around Srebrenica inspired and necessitated unprecedented forensic scientific efforts in order to locate and ultimately, identify the disappeared. This article emphasized the role different conceptions of landscape played in shaping, mediating and commemorating the Srebrenica genocide. Self-consciously appropriating the archaeological notion of “forensic landscape”, it suggests that the forensic reading of landscape not only helps explain forensic scientific procedure, but gives a name to the ambivalent and still enduring experience of looking to landscape for the question of the disappeared.

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