Sommario

PARTE MONOGRAFICA

EMOZIONI E VITA QUOTIDIANA
(a cura di Franco Crespi e Massimo Cerulo)

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Grieving online? An analysis of a digital emotion

1. Introduction

Of all the human emotions, grief is one of most complex and difficult to study and understand. It arises out of the most extraordinary, most inexorable, and most unacceptable human experiences: death [cfr. Thomas 1975]. It breaks the social order, including the anonymous and well-established practices of everyday life, and it affects at least all those people who were personally and intimately connected with the deceased. In other words, death is an unacceptable trauma, both rationally and emotionally [cfr. Morin 2000], a fact to which people react in many different ways that are dependent on culture and society [cfr. Walter 2012], but also on the nature, intensity and duration of the relationship that linked them to the dead. At the same time, it becomes necessary – for both the individual and the community – to elaborate on the loss in a symbolic manner, to give it meaning, especially through ritual practices of "passage" [cfr. Durkheim 2008; van Gennep 2011].

The absolute separation of the expression of emotions linked to mourning from the rest of life was achieved in late modernity, when the social control of grief, and especially of its expression and duration on the part of individuals, was sanctioned by science. Beginning in the twentieth century, the West has effectively rationalized grief through a fixed system of rules that define the acceptable social duration of grieving [cfr. Prior, Bloor 1992; Mellor, Shilling 1993; Holst-Warhaft 2000], rules that have been strengthened by a pathologizing perspec-

tive that assigns to grieving a definite and limited duration beyond which it is a pathological condition that should be treated medically [cfr. Kübler-Ross 1970].

Despite this trend, the manifestation of grief as an intimate and social emotion is currently showing some signs of transformation. The management of grieving time, and more generally of practices connected to death and dying, is strictly involved in the social organization of time, but there are some relatively extended enclaves in which grief is experienced individually and collectively.

Digital technologies, for instance the Web with its QR codes and services, including memorial and commemoration services, online grieving counseling and support and post-mortem messaging, are a good example of the non-pathologization of grieving. Instead, these technologies treat grieving as part of a continuing bond [cfr. Neimayer, Baldwin, Gillies 2006; Klass, Walter 2001] between the survivors and the dead [cfr. Lingel 2013], but also as a relationship that the survivors share with each other in a community that offers mutual support for the common experience of loss.

Forms of digital grieving that have become widely diffused through the Web in the last two decades answer to an exigency for meaning that expresses itself as an exigency for personalization [cfr. Gamba 2008; 2015] – individuals' desire to satisfy their personal demand for meaning according to their own biographies, following their own exigencies and beliefs, a trend that Luckmann [1967] identified as characteristic of modern sacrality.

This article is based on the results of research conducted between 2004 and 2014 on the digital shapes of grief and memory [cfr. Gamba 2016]. There are significant commemoration tools, usually referred to as digital or virtual cemeteries or web memorials, with different shapes and aesthetics, ranging from video games to databases, from hypertext to webpages, from social networks and their applications to QR codes.[1] This article analyzes the specific aspects of coping with loss through online rituals [cfr. Hutchings 2012] that can represent the uninterrupted and circular interaction between the immediate and emotional expression of grief and its formulation in a constant symbolic form that is nonetheless as complex as memory itself [cfr. Halbwachs 1997; Candau 2005; Jedlowski 2002]. The article examines some of the regulative mechanisms concerning the

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1. I have offered extended definitions and detailed descriptions of various types of digital commemorative tools in several works [Gamba 2010, 227-228; Gamba 2007b, 110-111].

expression of grieving on the Web, in particular visibility [cfr. Cardon 2008] and *extimacy*, a concept first formulated by Jacques Lacan and later elaborated by Serge Tisseron [cfr. 2001, 2011], digital-grief shapes like writing and images (cfr. Gamba 2015], and the influence of digital-grief expression on everyday life and on the contemporary transformation of the concept of grief.

2. Keys to grieving

Grief is often experienced multi-dimensionally, and those dimensions can often conflict with each other: individual and social; instinctive and controlled; public and private. At the same time, grief is also part of the process that transforms the deep pain of loss into the more comforting condition of memory. In this process, grief is the psychological or emotional aspect, while ritual – in this case the entire complex of ritual actions that follow the death of an individual – is the material and performative aspect. Both aspects serve a fundamental symbolic function: they give death meaning; they transform an unacceptable absence into memory. On this last point, Louis-Vincent Thomas has remarked that grief and its attendant rituals are not only a process that transforms an absence into memory [cfr. Thomas 1985], but also an interaction between individual memories and collective memory. And it is exactly in this passage from one kind of memory to another, which also involves a sharing of common emotions and memories, that the individual can cope with the pain of loss and achieve meaning. As Thomas has argued, this passage is a survival strategy intended to "organize grief, fight against the pain of the separation and the distress of death" [Thomas 1975, 524, translation mine].

Grief is a reaction whose emotional intensity and duration depend on the kind of personal relationship that links each individual to the dead. However, it is also determined by the place the dead occupied in the social hierarchy. Indeed, grief for common and anonymous persons is restricted, and these individuals therefore achieve a restricted memory, one that is limited to their relatives and friends. Grief for and memory of important persons, in contrast, extends from those who were intimates of the deceased to those who were unknown to them. This variability in the extent of grief expresses a differential capacity to exercise a *pouvoir de survie*

(power of survival) [cfr. Gamba 2015] – in other words, to be remembered – that is achieved by public and common rituals that include emotional expressions of grief. In the past, and to some extent even today, survival through memory was a specific condition that was granted to the élite, the immortals: for the Egyptians the Pharaoh, in Ancient Greece heroes, in the Middle Ages the king, in the contemporary era celebrities. In this manner, and in all times, memory results from social and political power [cfr. Vernant 1996; Kantorowicz 1957], and it is greater or lesser depending on the social importance of the dead. Therefore, the complex process of grief has always involved a difference between the personal and collective memory of the deceased, a difference that has reinforced social hierarchies through the types of memory and commemorative practices offered to the deceased depending on their social position. In this sense, the social power of survival, of permanence, is measured by the space-time extension of collective memory through the celebration of public rituals performed in dedicated places.

This public expression of grief has long been blended with the private and personal one, but above all mourning had always been given an important space and time in social and private life. This is a condition that modernity, and especially industrial social organization, has changed, because of one peculiar characteristic: speed. Public grieving should be concluded quickly, and its effects – visible and troubling – should be relegated to the private sphere so as to promote a rapid return to the everyday routine; rituals must be performed quickly so as not to occupy space and time, and therefore not interrupt work in industrial cities, longer than necessary.[2]

A direct consequence of this modern condition was the rationalization of grief, which involved the total separation of the different contexts for the expression of grieving and a drastic contraction of the duration of grieving. This situation was reinforced in the 1970s by a pathologizing perspective in psychology and psychiatry, which assigns to the grieving process a limited time, based on the five stages described by Elisabeth Kübler-Ross [1970], beyond which grieving is to be treated as a pathological condition, a disease in need of normalization – a view that has negatively influenced the public expression of grief, indeed, that has caused it to be censured as abnormal and inappropriate. The most interesting aspect of this double

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2. Thomas has argued that it is for these reasons that Saxon rituals, concentrated in the cemetery, have become the dominant and contracted form of death ritual [Thomas 1975, 47].

rationalization was a contraction of the public and social expression of grief, which has made death invisible, a phenomenon referred to by some authors as "the denial of death," its disappearance as a social object [cfr. Urbain 1989; Baudry 1999], but which has also limited the private, personal, and intimate expression of grief. But at the same time, and paradoxically, the same modern condition has created an exigency for the *personalization* of death and the rituals and grieving that accompany it [cfr. Seale 1998; Walter 1994; Bacqué 1997].

3. A new demand: The need for personalization

Directly deriving from modern individualism, personalization[3] is an expression of the quest for meaning characteristic of the liquid and uncertain nature of contemporary Western societies [cfr. Bauman 2000]. These societies have redefined their value hierarchy in accordance with the *modern sacred cosmos*, in Luckmann's [1967] well-known expression, a system of personal values through which individuals pursue their quest for meaning in various different ways, according to their own biographies, exigencies, and belongings. This bottom-up system of significance [cfr. Bellah 1967] assigns a meaning to things through a personalized path involving every aspect of experience, including death. Traditional and institutionalized rituals, felt by participants and mourners to be emotionally empty, have been transformed through individuals' desire to satisfy their need for the personal expression of loss and to determine the duration of their coping process themselves [cfr. Gamba 2015].

Digital technologies have become tools to satisfy the need to express emotions related to the pain of losing a loved one. The Web in particular accords an extended space and time for the personalized expression of grief, confirming the result of a significant body of recent research in the psychiatric and psychological fields [cfr. Wortam, Silver 2001; Neimayer, Baldwin, Gillies 2006; Silver, Nickman, Worden

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3. The term *personalization* is currently used to explain every type of individualistic action or choice, especially in the field of consumption [cfr. Appadurai 1986; Bahl, Milne 2010], as a type of mass personalization that touches the economy, technology, media, politics, and culture [Castagno 2014; Castells 1997; Boltanski, Chiapello 1999; Bennet 2012], but it acquires a deeper symbolic value in the study of rituals and their transformation.

1992; Klass, Walter 2001], which now conceives of grieving as a non-pathological and extended relationship, a normal and even continuing bond with the deceased based on the emotional exigencies of the survivors and that can be prolonged for a long time following death. However, this change in attitude is not widely reflected in the broader public discourse. Still considered to be detrimental to productivity, grief remains subject to persistent social censorship. In this vexed terrain, online communities developed through produsage[4] provide a non-pathological space in which participants can freely express emotions on the overwhelming experience of loss for any length of time, find information, and support each other.

From this point of view, the Web is a privileged and wide observatory for the kinds of personalization demanded and practiced by individuals unsatisfied with traditional rituals and limitations on their expression of their personal emotions. The webpages hosted by web memorials or special sections of social-media sites – for instance Facebook or Twitter – created from the personal histories of the dead, simultaneously present a space for the mourner's own self-expression. Each user comes to the website with their own personal values and concerns, seeking a time, a space, and a personally satisfactory mode through which to celebrate the memory of their loved one. These websites provide free access to different forms of commemoration and allow mourners to establish connections with each other, thereby reflecting the highest ideals of sharing communities.

In this process of communication and exchange, the mourner/user can engage in active self-expression and allow others to do so as well. On the one hand, the mourner wants to communicate their own feelings of loss and find support from others touched by an analogous experience; on the other hand, they also want to offer other users, be they friends or strangers, a place to share their grief and find support. This shared support is one aspect of the personalization of ritual: proximity, a mediating and privileged space in which exchange among community mem-

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4. Produsage is a neologism [cfr. Bruns 2008] on a digitally collaborative behavior model in which participants develop and share a body of knowledge (such as the content of a website). It denotes user-led content creation and underlines the porosity between the role of producers and users. Produsage is also characterized by collaboration between individuals with various levels of expertise, and is thus an explicitly democratic process in which the participants, simultaneously inhabiting the roles of professionals and amateurs, contribute to knowledge stores and facilitate the free distribution of content through sharing.

bers produces not a spatial but an emotional relationship, defined by a dynamic of passive and active modalities through which members become and feel part of a close community [cfr. Ricœur 2000].

4. Digital emotion

To understand digital grieving – its increasing diffusion since its appearance in 1995[5] – is also to understand the digital dimension of emotions, in this case the emotions and feelings linked to loss. First, through its tools, the digital environment is a privileged space in which the individuals involved create and manage the content completely autonomously, and the personalized content – namely, data – is not exclusively constituted by a material dimension; but this data also generates a symbolic dimension through which the users manifest their preferences, political attitudes, beliefs, values, and feelings. This digital condition produces a direct effect on identity: it becomes an extended identity, because the digital embodies and develops some aspects that contribute to the creation of a new extended identity [cfr. Belk 2013] composed through an interaction and exchange between physical and digital experiences [cfr. Turkle 1995; Lardellier, Bryon-Portet 2010; Papacharissi 2007]. It is a complex kind of identity that expresses its presence and effectiveness through the collection of its digital clues [cfr. Merzeau 2009] through several mechanisms: *memory, the dynamic of visibility,* and *the desire for extimacy.*

5. Mechanisms

The dynamic of visibility is a fundamental aspect of the expression of digital emotions. It is quite complementary to the dynamic that occurs in the physical word [cfr. Voirol 2005; Brighenti 2007], but is not reducible to it: its online specificity permits it to graduate itself by areas of interest, depending on whether

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5. The first web memorial, World Wide Cemetery, was created in 1995 by the Canadian engineer Michael Kibbee [cfr. Chang, Sofka, 2006; Gamba 2007].

the user is visible to the closest contacts – friends – and invisible or almost invisible to others – acquaintances or even unknown individuals [cfr. Cardon 2008]. The architecture of platforms and webpages supports the exhibition of multiple identities through a vast combination of conditions that couple visibility/invisibility; in other words, the Web allows the subjects, on the one hand, to enter, remain in and exit their identities according to the visibility/invisibility dynamic in continuity with everyday life, and, on the other, to manifest themselves in a variety of shapes.

This multiplication of individual expressivity emphasizes an essential characteristic of extended identities: because of their plurality, they should not be assimilated into an arbitrary and undifferentiated plurality of facets of a given personality; on the contrary, the contemporary habit of multiple personal expressions is evidence that multiple identities are incorporated by individuals with different intensities and socialization levels in their everyday life and its digital extension, even if the latter presents a highly variated degree of role consistency [Cardon 2008, 32]. This general identity mechanism also impacts grieving practices and emotions: the possibility of expressing multiple extended identities makes it possible for the subject to find both a personal and collective space for coping with loss, without the constraints and limitations that normally confront the personal grieving process.

Closely connected to the dynamic of visibility, *the desire for extimacy* (*extimité*) adds another important fragment to the comprehension of digital emotions. The term, originally formulated by Lacan, is currently used to indicate a dialectical process in which the intimacy protected in the private sphere is exhibited in the public and visible sphere without losing its private and intimate characteristics: not to be confused with exhibitionism, extimacy – especially its digital manifestation – reinforces identity [cfr. Tisseron 2001, 2011]. Extimacy is not an exclusively digital behavior, but, as Tisseron argues, the digital gives it an extended expression environment. The practice of extimacy has certainly been promoted by the media, but it is above all through the Internet, especially social networks, that it has become a widespread practice of the narration of self that could be textual or visual, or a combination thereof. Lacking in any moral or immoral inclination, extimacy could produce empathy as well as pathology [cfr. Tisseron

2010]. It is simply a desire that the Web encourages, and which is connected to the expression of multiple identities. Users post some private and intimate life fragments that they normally hide or carefully store, including visual or textual confessions of marginal, illegal, or simply embarrassing behavior, because the anonymity protects them, and thereby promotes other forms of expression and the extension of their identity.

This practice of extimacy concerns all spheres of experience and is not limited to leisure or sexual contexts; indeed, it is particularly suited to expressing the emotions of pain, loss, and grief. Normally compressed or interrupted in everyday life, these intimate feelings find a space to manifest themselves in several kinds of websites, for instance web memorials, virtual cemeteries such as personal pages, and social networks such as Facebook, Twitter, and MySpace, but also digital platforms like YouTube. In all of these cases, the users, in this case also mourners, express their deepest emotions first for themselves, but also expose and share these personal emotions with "other users" who could be well known or totally unknown [cfr. Kasket 2009].

The combined use of visibility and extimacy in the digital expression of emotion leads us to analyze another fundamental mechanism, maybe the most complex one, involved in digital grieving: *memory*. Memory is at the same time a (human and technological) process and content; it result from biological, psychological, social, medial, and digital interaction, and it involves an individual as well as a collective dimension. Generally, memory is the final stage of the grieving process, namely the result, transforming the absence, the loss and its pain into a whole. Although digital memories are content – in the form of texts, images, and videos concerning the deceased – that is managed and shared online by the mourners who participate directly in the grieving, they are not the only conclusive moment of the process of grieving. Memory is a key to expressing the emotions, but also a key to transforming them – in their personal as well as collective manifestations – into a manageable condition in which again memories, emotions and grieving interact in a continuing process that it is not linear and finite, but decentralized and continuous.

The digital extension of memory has marked the transformation and duration of grief. The production and uses of memory on websites and social-media net-

works allow users to maintain a personal relationship with the deceased and their network, and this in a much more satisfying way than is normally possible in everyday life. In fact, grieving is a process that transforms an absence into memory, as we have stressed, as well as an interaction between personal and collective memories that relieve the pain of loss and achieve the symbolic work of being able to assign a meaning to death.

In this way, the relationship between the user and the deceased develops through a multiplicity of expressions – for example, the expression of loss through the sending of messages – and digital memories shared with other mourners are used as symbolic objects of grieving [cfr. Miller, Parrot 2009; Kirk, Sellen 2010]. The effectiveness of digital memory devices and the possibility of using them in different ways broaden the expressiveness of commemoration and grieving to match the exigencies of survivors. The specificity of digital ritual memories is revealed in the individual and personalized dimension of bereavement – intense, continuous, and extended – of users coping with loss [Bacqué, Hanus 2014] without necessarily conforming to established conventions. This process also allows users to engage collective memory in grieving, benefiting from its function of support and sharing.

6. The narrative shapes of grieving emotions: Texts and images

6.1. Textual shapes

The shapes of grieving on the Web are textual or visual narrative. However, they are rarely exclusively textual or visual; instead, they often demonstrate a blend of textual and visual elements in variable combinations, ranging from the written texts in virtual-cemetery hypertexts, where the visual content is extremely simple, to the YouTube video memorial, where the written content (when it is present at all) is restricted to the comments section. One of the most relevant keys to understanding the role of narrative in digital mourning is the connection that narrative fosters between the personalized expression of grief, the author's expression of identity, and the act of sharing emotions and memories with a grief

community. This connection narrative plays an important role in coping with grief [cfr. Bosticco, Thompson 2005] by continuing the bonds between mourners and the dead and between mourners themselves. The Web is well suited to narrative mourning because social platforms produce collaborative storytelling in which narrative is often co-constructed by multiple narrators who also share the same emotions [cfr. Georgakopoulou 2007; Ochs, Capps 2001; Page, Harper, Frobenius 2013].

The public expression of grief emotions – in other words, their communication – is an important element of the personalization of grief. Using digital tools, mourners are able to achieve a personalized expression of their emotions. The texts that emerge in these venues constitute symbolic, multivalent narratives that include a small number of elements: the biography of the deceased and the experiences and emotions of the mourners. The variability in the proportion of the elements depends on the personal choices of the users as they commemorate the dead with recorded fragments that recreate each identity. In fact, an analysis of memorial and grieving websites has shown that the grief narrative is primarily a potential space of expression for its author, a person with a hierarchy of individual values and preferences who is troubled by loss and seeks out a time, a place, and a personal mode through which to grieve and celebrate the memory of the deceased with relatives, friends, or strangers [cfr. de Vries, Rutherford 2004]. Specific themes recur in the expression of personal grief, including the expression of sadness or loss, a reflection on the cause of death, religious references, a belief that contact with the deceased endures, and the hope to reunite with the departed in the afterlife; guilt, gratitude, peace, and anger are also treated in the grieving narrative.

6.2. Visual shapes

The blend of narrative shapes of grieving in variable textual and visual combinations surely depends on the personal preferences of the users, who choose the shape that best matches their emotions and their digital-expression ability. But it has also been influenced significantly by the development and use of Web

technology, particularly in digital grieving. The first phase[6] of digital mourning was specially marked by the specific Web tools available at the time, which favored textual messages, and by the specific forms those messages took: letters, obituaries, tributes. The second phase, which arose with Web 2.0 technology, is characterized by a narrative realized through an increase in the communal and dialogical construction of memorial texts in social platforms. In this phase, two aspects deserve special consideration. First, the different narrative shapes are mixed in different ways, depending on the structures of different social platforms. Facebook; for example, gathers shorter forms of tribute in the comments; however, longer narratives can be made available through hyperlinks, as can videos and photos. Second, the use of visual supports in the grief narrative confers immediacy and power to the emotions communicated. From this point of view, YouTube is an archive [cfr. Iversen 2009; Gehl 2009] of videos that "let the images speak" in order to represent different experiences of death, and the facility with which images and videos can be shared is the principal factor in the growing use of visual elements in digital mourning.

Users express emotions linked to death differently, depending on their own emotional proximity to the deceased and on the type of loss involved. Visual-grieving supports – which I have called *ritual idiographies* (*idiographies rituelles*)[7] – such as those that we can find on YouTube, enable the full visual display of the mourner's grief on an intimate and personal level, following the need of extimacy, which can be satisfied by sharing one's experience and by receiving collective consolation from one's community [cfr. Wahlberg 2010]. The power of images to arouse shared emotions is mobilized through a combination of private and

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6. I have defined the transformation and the increased prevalence of digital rituals as having occurred in two waves. The first wave, 1995 to 2000, was characterized by three types of web memorials: virtual-cemetery video games, hypertext, and personal pages; the second wave, beginning in 2000 and involving social-network sites such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube, is characterized by the emotional use of digital tools by sharing communities [cfr. Gamba 2015].

7. Ritual idiographies are the "many ritual forms that differ in respect to their medium, be it video, audiovisual media, or slideshow; that express emotions and commemoration; that clarify information or solicit empathy; and that cause shock due to their content" [Gamba 2015, p. 86, transl. mine].

public means. The video memorial is a narrative of the mourner's personal experience that allows him to mark a continuing bond with the deceased; this bond is shared with a grieving community that recognizes itself as extending beyond the boundaries of personal experience to a wider audience that extends into other social networks.

The visual narratives do not always contain a high degree of symbolic coherence, and sometimes they are difficult to interpret [cfr. Huttunen 2014], not only because it may be difficult to identify their content, but also because of the contrasting emotions that this content can produce. However, for mourners they are a simple, immediate, and powerful way of communicating grief; and they conjure emotions directly, without mediation. These images' power demonstrates two fundamental aspects of grieving through digital emotions, in this case visually: the images are intended to express in an extremely personal way the mourner's grief and their intimate bond with the deceased, and they are meant to be shared as a means of digital support [cfr. Gamba 2015].

7. Conclusion

The collective and private expression of emotions linked to the death of a loved one has long been regulated in order to restore the order that was violently interrupted by the death. The quest for personalization – ordinary people's quest for meaning for their own lives – has also affected the grieving process, and since 1995 it has produced new digital rituals hosted on the Web that allow individuals to express their grief without constrictions. This ability is influenced by digital visibility and extimacy behaviors and supported by the digital tools that make it possible for users themselves to manage the memory. As a direct consequence of these transformations, we can observe a wide diffusion on the Web of textual and visual narratives expressing personal and intimate emotions shared with a wide community of people who have also experienced the death of the individual in question.

If we now know the mechanisms and the shapes of digital grieving, and we also acknowledge that they place a fundamental symbolic value on personaliza-

tion, what about the meaning of digital grieving as digital emotion? The main critique of digital grieving, and of digital experience more generally, is that, due to the structure of digital technology, it is superficial. According to this critique, the digital imposes a playful use of its tools on all its content, including the emotions linked to death and grief, which negates any symbolic value to these practices. But the symbolic intensity of digital emotions cannot be reduced to the technological structure through which they are conveyed. First, the superficiality concerns the way in which digital tools are used, and not the depth and authenticity of the feelings those tools are used to convey. (Of course, this does not exclude the possibility that emotions are conveyed superficially, but if they are so conveyed, that is for contingent, not structural, reasons). Second, superficiality is not an exclusive characteristic of digital experiences, because we can observe it in several contexts in contemporary life. More, it is an integral part of contemporary life [cfr. Bauman 1992] that has deep roots in modernity, as Georg Simmel and Walter Benjamin have sharply analyzed, for instance through the concepts of *blasé*, *flâneur*, and distraction. Third, digital grieving is bound with participation and a freer expression of emotion than traditional forms of grieving, both of which mitigate against superficiality.

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