

Public Valediction: Grief in Virtual Space

Dr. des. Karina Frick, PostDoc

The Project

Grief, understood as a reaction to a loss (cf. Schwarz-Friesel 2013), has long since reached the internet. Thereby, innovative postmodern and collective forms of grief arise, which try to avoid culturally coined norms. Their emergence implies a fundamental change in the grief culture of our society (cf. Jakoby/Reiser 2014: 76): Whereas grief was mainly privatized in the 20th century (cf. Jakoby/Haslinger/Gross 2013: 254), nowadays, there seems to be an increasing demand to share one's grief in the public space of the Web and, in doing so, create digital mementos (cf. Geser 1998).

The project aims at looking into different forms of emotional grief practices on the Web. Thereby, linguistic patterns, architectural designs (e.g. of virtual cemeteries, see Fig. 1) and spatial metaphors, as well as the concept of or the discourse about grief in general, are of interest.



Fig.5: Meta discourse in the mass media.

Hypotheses and First Insights

Hypotheses:

1. The mentioned emotional online practices have a great impact on the social handling of death and grief, but the conventions of these new forms of grief expressions need to be (metacommunicatively) negotiated first.
2. The (collective) expression of grief on the internet counteracts the tabooing of death and grief (as stated, for example, by Schwarz-Friesel 2013).

Preliminary observations:

1. Religious references (even ironic ones) are very common. They seem to help eluding the uncertainty in dealing with these novel digital forms of grief expression.
2. The limits of the unspeakable concerning death and grief are being expanded on the internet.



Fig.2: Tweets following Götz George's death.



Fig.1: Virtual grave for German actor Götz George.



Fig.4: Swiss website for online obituaries.

Research Questions

1. What kind of emotional grief practices can be found on the internet?
2. Which forms of communication are they accompanied by and what are the resulting linguistic forms of the concept *grief*?
3. How is the architecture of virtual cemeteries and memorials designed and which spatial metaphors occur?
4. Which conclusions can be drawn for a virtual space conception?
5. How do these digital grief forms influence the social grief discourse in general?

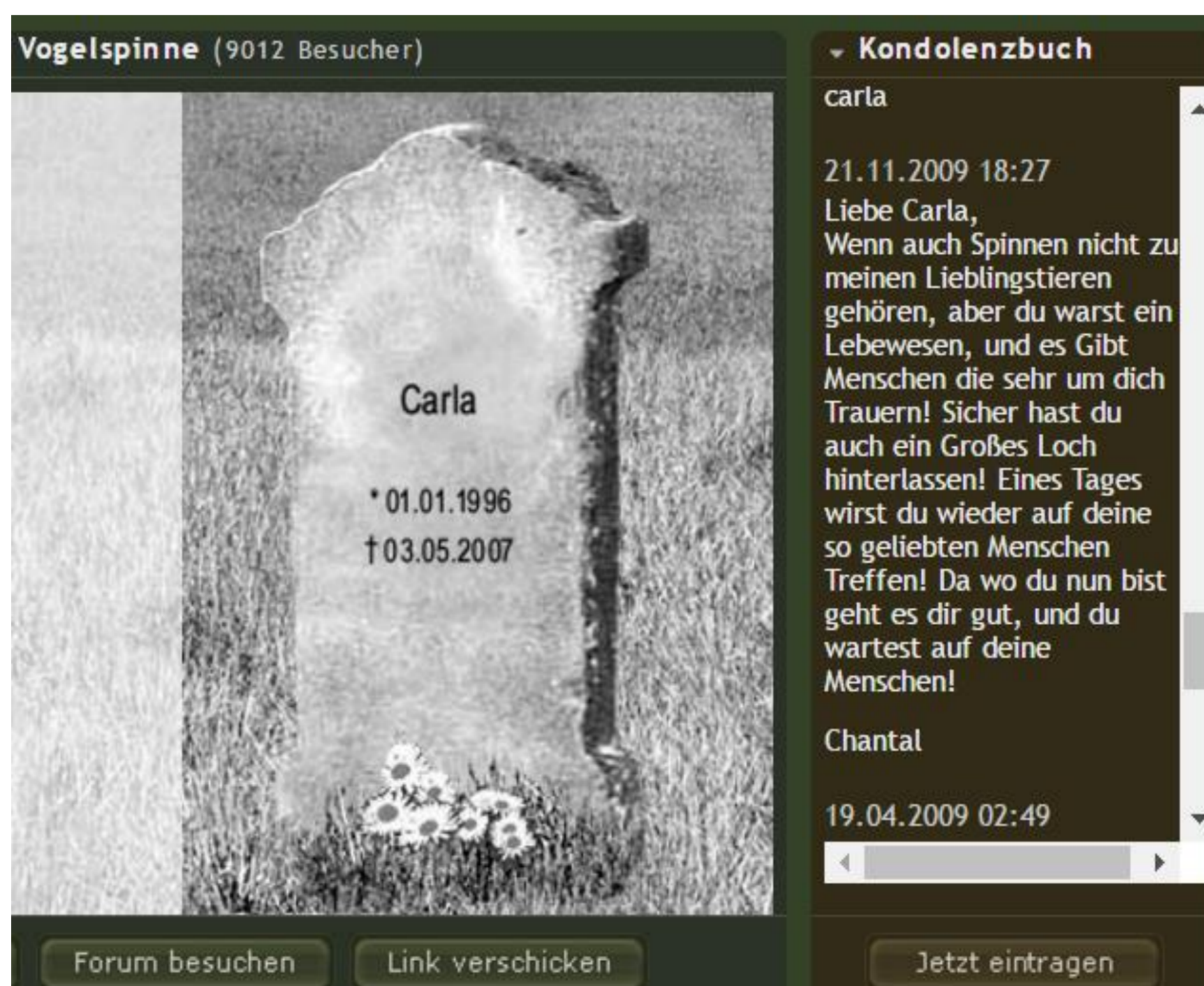


Fig.3: Grave and condolences for tarantula Carla.

Data and Objects of Study

Since the emergence of virtual cemeteries during the 90s of the last century grief offerings on the internet have diversified. Thus, platforms that were originally created for other purposes are used for the articulation of grief, for example, blogs or social media such as Facebook or Twitter (see Fig. 2). Especially in the context of the latter, innovative collective forms of grief communication can be found (cf. Brubaker/Hayes/Dourish 2013).

Main data sources:

- Virtual cemeteries for humans or animals (see Fig. 3)
- Twitter and other social media platforms
- Online (and offline) obituaries (see Fig. 4)
- Blogs and personal websites
- Mass media articles and user comments (see Fig. 5)

References

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Contact

Dr. des. Karina Frick
University of Zurich, URPP Language and Space
Freiestrasse 16, 8032 Zürich
karina.frick@uzh.ch