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# Whatever Happened to History? Cultural Recycling and Notions of the Past since Postmodernism

**Abstract:** Fredric Jameson diagnosed postmodernism as “the disappearance of a sense of history” (1985, p. 125), implying its inability to retain its own past. This chapter raises the question of the continuity of this particular understanding of our time, which was paradigmatic of postmodern cultural recycling as it was practised in the last few decades of the twentieth century. In the age of radicalised technological reproducibility, the phenomenon of cultural recycling is more ubiquitous than ever, but has it changed in quality? Against the backdrop of the above, I will discuss the extent to which Jameson’s critique of postmodernism still captures the (post)digital present. In my thesis, cultural recycling in popular cultural forms is these days often conceived of as an ahistorical practice that hides its apparent “ideologyless” consumer ideology behind nostalgia and retro phenomena. Nonetheless, the potential of cultural recycling in digital spaces will also be identified. To this end, I will dedicate some reflections to the relation between the present and the historical past, as visualised in cyberspace. To support my perspective on the subject of cultural recycling and history, I will focus on the Instagram series @ *ichbinsophiescholl* as an example of contemporary cultural practices on the Internet that correspond to the theoretical concepts suggested above.

**Keywords:** postdigital recycling, postmodernism, history, Instagram, @ *ichbinsophiescholl*.

## 1. After Digitalisation: The Archive of the Past

*“Always historicize!” (Fredric Jameson: The Political Unconscious).*

“[T]here has never been a society in human history so obsessed with the cultural artifacts of *its own immediate past*.” (Reynolds 2011, p. xiii). Nostalgia and the urge to look back have frequently been mentioned when describing the period from the 1990s to the present. Music critic Simon Reynolds adds a concretisation to this widely accepted diagnosis: the chronic “retro-consciousness” he sets out in an extensively read essay, nowhere more dominant than in pop music, (Reynolds 2011, p. xviii) refers to a relatively recent past and, unlike Victorianism’s love

of antiquities, is not purist but often ironic, “It uses the past as an archive of materials from which to extract subcultural capital [...] through recycling and recombining: the bricolage of cultural bric-a-brac.” (Reynolds 2011, p. xxxi).

The materials that compound this archive of the immediate past are available more widely than ever before. Retro-consciousness as understood by Reynolds “seeks to be amused and charmed” (2011, p. xxxi) by the past, and to this end, “the very media it is dependent on and disseminated through – records and television – enable the Event [sic] to become permanent, subject to endless repetition. The moment becomes a monument.” (Reynolds 2011, xxxvi) Digitalisation has further accelerated and fuelled the cultural dominant of recycling, precisely by making popular culture products accessible with an intensity not seen until now. This has also changed patterns of consumption and distribution, further encouraging the escalation of retromania, “We’ve become victims of our ever-increasing capacity to store, organise, instantly access, and share vast amounts of cultural data.” (Reynolds 2011, xxi).

Nowadays, the past seems to be ready to be captured at any moment. With digitalisation, it seems to come nearer and nearer until it forms part of an enlarged present, while at the same time the conception of history is undergoing profound changes. In this process, the breach between “past” (as something immediate and near) and “history” (as something artificial and remote) is becoming greater. This hypothesis forms the starting point for my reflections on the relevance of cultural recycling; that is, the practice of reusing cultural material in the new millennium, and the practice’s relation to contemporary experiences of history as well as popular reconceptualisations of (or often, disillusionment with) history in the postdigital age. To shed light on this nexus, my chapter first assesses the validity of postmodern theory by analysing the continuity of current postmodernism and by examining its relation to the postdigital. To this end, I will rely strongly on Fredric Jameson’s materialistic theory of postmodernism. The German Instagram series @ichbinsophiescholl will serve as an example to substantiate my theoretical argument about the potential continuity of postmodern temporality.

## 2. Is the postdigital postmodern?

The American poet Ezra Pound’s imperative “Make It New” expressed the key message of modernist art:

This slogan compels the writer to create out of the material of art work that is distinctively innovative. [...] These ‘new’ modern works cannot be wholly autonomous, however, as

they must consider the aesthetics of the past in the context of the present moment [...]. (Bledsoe 2016, n. pag.).

The nexus between innovation, artistic autonomy and the consideration of tradition (“the past”) is at the heart of modernism. It is at stake, again, in postmodernism, although its components are then in a process of profound re-evaluation, doubtlessly at the expense of innovation or newness. However, “Make it new” might also be read as a strikingly postmodern slogan as it quotes the nature of recycling: There is no new material in postmodernism, but we make it look (or work) as if it were new.

In what follows, I will not go into the well-studied differences between modernism and postmodernism, but rather centre on a more recent development: from postmodernism to postdigitality. I will draw a line from Fredric Jameson’s critique of postmodernism to the analysis of the postdigital to argue that the postmodern and the postdigital share many basic characteristics that let us think of a continuous temporality, or in any case, of overlapping temporal, social and cultural regimes.

Postmodernism has been closely related to the new form of multinational consumer capitalism that is becoming more sophisticated in a digitalised network society. Curiously, the ideological dimension that informs this variant of “late capitalism” is often not considered to be such: postmodernism was meant to imply not only the end of history, but also of ideologies. In this context, the relevance of Jameson’s contribution is said to be found in the fact that it did not limit itself to describe postmodernism as just a set of styles (as was the case with other theories of postmodernism), but to recognise its relation to a certain economic logic and its effects on the conceptualisation of historical experience. “Jameson was really the first major critic to insist on seeing postmodernism as a manifestation of certain political and historical circumstances” (Roberts 2000, p. 119). In this way, according to the Marxist thinker, postmodernism articulates economic forces on a cultural level. In his seminal essay “Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism”, first published in 1984 and then republished in an extended book form in 1991, Jameson stresses “the radical distinction between a view for which the postmodern is one (optional) style among many others available and one which seeks to grasp it as the cultural dominant of the logic of late capitalism” (1991, p. 45). This second approach conceptualises the theory of postmodernism as “a genuinely dialectical attempt to think our present of time in History” (1991, p. 45–46). In a famously concise definition, Jameson pinpoints the particularity of postmodernism as “the consumption of sheer commodification as a process” (1991, p. x).

Reconsidering the social effects of globalisation and the concentration of global capital, in his later work *Signatures of the Visible*, Jameson states our incapacity to think of the category of totality:

The truth of our social life as a whole – in Lukács’ terms, as a totality – is increasingly irreconcilable with the possibilities for aesthetic expression or articulation available to us [...]; and if we can grasp the truth about our world as a totality, then we may find it some purely conceptual expression but we will no longer be able to maintain an imaginative relationship to it. (2016, p. 74).

For Jameson, this observation is indeed problematic, as we can only perceive the present in fragments of a rather chaotic nature. The fragments do not form a complete puzzle any more, they are just pieces without context.

It is possibly precisely because of the fundamental fragmentariness of our present, obscuring the view of the whole, that Jameson sees postmodernism as characterised by a predominant preoccupation with itself. This finding is initially quite similar to Reynolds’ theses on “retromania”, which is ultimately more a preoccupation with oneself than with the past. Unlike Reynolds, however, Jameson does not judge this finding, “The point is that we are *within* the culture of postmodernism to the point where its facile repudiation is as impossible as any equally facile celebration of it is complacent and corrupt” (1991, p. 62). This is not about condemning or celebrating postmodernism. I shall affirm the same for the postdigital: it is not about evaluating this era positively or negatively, but about analysing it critically.

Jameson’s problematisation of history in postmodernity is central to a discussion under postdigital auspices: about history as experience as well as concept. The erosion of grand narratives (Lyotard) like “progress” or “freedom” is usually interpreted as the end of modernity. This end was accompanied by a change in the experience of time, described by Jameson as the “disappearance of a sense of history”. This development now consists of

the way in which our entire contemporary social system has little by little begun to lose its capacity to retain its own past, has begun to live in a perpetual present and in a perpetual change that obliterates traditions of the kind which all earlier social formations have had in one way or another to preserve. (1985, p. 125).

I would like to highlight two points here: firstly, the idea of a “perpetual present”, a broad present that grows at the expense of what Jameson calls the sense of history. History no longer offers any resistance to this present. Secondly, it is important to distinguish between history and the past. History unfolds its meaning in the present, not in the past. The disappearance of the sense of history, according to Jameson, now leads precisely to the perception of contemporary

events as recent past (not historical) and in this way neutralises them for the present – they are no longer experienced as connectable to it. “The present has been colonised by ‘pastness,’ displacing ‘real’ history” (1991, p. 20).

Against this background, and transferred to the cultural sphere, it also becomes clear why bricolage is one of the central cultural-artistic procedures of postmodernism. Postmodern artists “no longer ‘quote’ such ‘texts’ as a Joyce might have done, or a Mahler; they incorporate them, to the point where the line between high art and commercial forms seems increasingly difficult to draw” (Jameson 1985, p. 2).

In retrospect, the definition of the cultural logic of postmodernism may at the same time be called a prophetic foresight of the postdigital era. The incorporation of cultural material (digital and due) into the holdings of the Internet archive is commonplace today; the tearing down of the boundaries between “high” and “low” culture in the “culture industry”, already suspiciously observed by the Frankfurt School, has now prevailed on a broad front. However, since the turn of the millennium, this intermixing has certainly also been associated with hopes that digitalisation would democratise cultural and aesthetic judgements.

The changed concept of history and the impossibility of grasping the social as a whole (as embodied, for example, by communism, but also by the social market economy) led Jameson to diagnose postmodernism with a depthlessness (1991, p. 6) that can be understood both literally (flat screens) and metaphorically. In the latter sense, it corresponds to a culture of the image, which has since then spread and intensified rapidly through the Internet. Depthlessness, however, means superficiality in a formal sense, not as a judgement of content, as is often expressed in relation to popular cultural formats.<sup>1</sup> Jameson takes up Jean Baudrillard’s concept of simulacrum and states that in the postmodern world, it is hard to distinguish the real from the simulated. There is no doubt that this blurring of the boundaries between “real” and “simulated” has increased with the digital turn, but it is precisely from the perspective of the postdigital that the concept of simulacrum can be questioned. What was once understood as simulacrum, we could say, is now quite real. Let us think of it as augmented reality. So “simulacrum” cannot be understood here as an illusion; rather, digitality does indeed have an effect on the real (and *vice versa*).

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1 Jameson compares Van Gogh’s painting of the worn-out *Shoes* with Andy Warhol’s *Diamond Dust Shoes*, to illustrate this new depthlessness. According to the critic, in Warhol’s artwork, there is neither depth nor context (1991, pp. 8–9).

For Jameson, pastiche as the aesthetic procedure of postmodernism *par excellence* also corresponds to its depthlessness. Unlike parody, which he contrasts with pastiche, the latter lacks the satirical impulse. In this sense, Jameson describes pastiche as “a neutral practice [...], without any of parody’s ulterior motives” (1991, p. 17), which mixes styles of the past without hesitation. In this regard, it can also be linked to the weakening of history: that is, distance as an aesthetic effect (for instance, the viewer in front of an “old” work of art) was abandoned (Jameson 1992, p. 48). The result of this abandonment of distance and the dominant procedure of pastiche described in Jameson’s theory is succinctly summarised by Felluga (2011, n. pag.), “We can no longer understand the past except as a repository of genres, styles, and codes ready for commodification.” This assessment could also proceed from the Frankfurt School and might well overlook the contemporary role of “stylistic communities” as analysed by Baßler and Drügh. According to these critics, these communities are continually expanding the scope of aesthetic judgements. I concur with Jameson’s view on postmodernism, however, that this occurs at the expense of history and in particular of historical agency. Everything is subjected to the regime of the aesthetic: food preferences, hobbies, the use of gendered language. Baßler and Drügh’s point, however, is that these (aesthetic) judgements are themselves historical in nature (Baßler / Drügh 2021, pp. 129, 131).

So, what can we conclude about the relation between postmodernism (according to Jameson) and the postdigital present in terms of their notion of history and historicity?<sup>2</sup> It is quite obvious that Jameson’s findings are still astonishingly topical today. Against this backdrop, I hold that the postmodern dilation of the present<sup>3</sup> has been radicalised in a postdigital present dominated by the aesthetic regime and that this is not necessarily a contradiction of the much-cited diagnoses of “retromania” or “nostalgia obsession”. The quintessence of these is precisely that there is no discernible effort to capture the past epistemologically, but rather that this past is shaped according to the needs of the present, any distance between past and present being erased. Authenticity has clearly lost value in this culture; a development that the media philosopher

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2 To my knowledge, the issue of their linkage has rarely been explicitly addressed in discussions of the postdigital. Cox is an exception, as he asks whether (and in what ways) Jameson’s theory on postmodernism is also of use for the postdigital (2016, p. 72).

3 In their *Contemporary Aesthetics*, (Baßler and Drügh (2021) make use of the term “broad present”.

*avant la lettre* Walter Benjamin already noted and by no means condemned in the 1930s with regard to the cinema. However, from this situation we cannot deduce that contemporary cultural production only perpetuates a form of cultural amnesia (Cox 2016, p. 71). Instead, I would now like to examine briefly in what ways the postdigital present imagines history and what role cultural recycling might play in it.

### 3. Cultural recycling as (a)historical practice?

The postdigital present is said to be installed in a culture of presentism, as impressively described by Douglas Rushkoff, “If the end of the 20th century can be characterised by futurism, the 21st can be defined by presentism” (Rushkoff 2013, p. 3). As for critics like Jameson, there is no contemporary imagination of a future in positive terms because of our postmodern inability to think of society as a whole and not as fragments. “Presentism” means that the nearer past is incorporated into the present in the mode of an extension. This is a profoundly ahistorical operation, and also the reason why, according to Reynolds, retro-phenomena always refer to a near past. It is also where today’s nostalgia differs from the retrospective view celebrated by historicism. Within the latter frame, cultural recycling is most often thought of as an ahistorical concept, even an anti-historical one. Indeed, this is what Reynolds’ essay about retromania suggests when analysing the 2000s as “a simultaneity of pop time that abolishes history while nibbling away at the present’s own sense of itself as an era with a distinct identity and feel.” (2011, p. XI). But it is also the cyclic process associated with recycling that seems not to go along with historical thinking but rather evokes Nietzsche’s “eternal return of the same”. Especially in popular cultural forms (Hollywood remakes, pop remixes), the (re-)circulation of well-known cultural figures, plots and other material can be described as an ahistorical practice that hides its apparent “ideologyless” consumer ideology behind nostalgia and retro phenomena. Thus, digitality, the constant looking back, and the impression of a timeless present enter into a strange and, moreover, so far rarely thematised combination. This was pointed out by the Cultural Studies scholar Andreas Huyssen in an interview,

The shift in the 20th century from a progress- and future-oriented sensibility up until 1968, to a memorial orientation towards the past since then is indeed remarkable and deep. Today, however, we may have to ask whether both futures past and present pasts have been replaced by present presents run by invisible and unknowable algorithms, the eternal now of an ever churning media and consumer culture, which neither knows the past nor imagines a future.

In other words, we have to ask how digital technologies and social media affect the very capacity of human beings to live in an extended timeframe, rather than merely in an eternal here and now. (Huysen 2018).

In this way, our representation of history is not only deprived of depth, but also of sharpness. This phenomenon goes hand in hand with the dominance of the category of space over that of time, as Jameson described it for postmodernism, “our daily life, our psychic experience, our cultural languages, are today dominated by categories of space rather than by categories of time, as in the preceding period of high modernism” (1991, p. 16).

It is doubtful whether the weakening of historicity is actually rooted in the medium at all – nowadays, the medium of the digital space. On the other hand, I argue that the immediacy of the digital and also the archival nature of the Internet as a gigantic repository without obvious criteria of order run counter to an elaborated sense of history, while at the same time these characteristics do indeed promote cultural recycling. This form of recycling is to be thought of as a practice in the social framework of a consumer society. To a certain extent, cultural recycling blurs the frontiers between production and consumption. In this way, however, cultural recycling also obscures the nexus that connects it with late capitalist ideology.

I have spoken of the weakening sense of historicity in cultural recycling and only briefly mentioned examples such as (retro-)remakes, and more generally a proliferation of retrophilic phenomena that fall under this practice. These phenomena are, however, by no means specific to postdigitality; they have already been critically analysed in postmodern theory. The point is that their presence is far greater in contemporary art and culture.

Cultural recycling is a vague term, one that has so far been a rather undertheorised concept (see the contribution by Llamas Ubieto in this volume). By this term, I simply understand the re-use of already existing cultural material (tropes, figures, plots, works of art, etc.). Now, however, we add the term “postdigital” to it as a description of our time, and thus point out that today, reality can no longer be understood as if it were independent of the digital or as if it were in opposition to it, since the digital permeates it (Llamas Ubieto 2020, p. 2). If, as Llamas Ubieto states, there has been a mass digitalisation of the real and an unprecedented remediation of reality, we must assume that the manners of mediation between subject and world have also changed. The Internet can today be seen as the principal mediator between the single subject and the world. It is also the place where many diverse practices of cultural recycling are located. So, coming back to the notion of “*postdigital* recycling”, from a Cultural Studies approach we can for now operate with the following definition,

We understand by postdigital recycling a processing action on a used material, waste or product that implies its detachment from an initial context and its return to a new life cycle. This operation aims at circulation as well as at re-evaluation. (Llamas Ubieto 2022; my translation).

Detachment, circulation and re-evaluation are terms of crucial importance here. It is commonplace to find that aesthetic categories that have prevailed since the Enlightenment (originality, aura, genius, etc.) are rapidly losing importance. In addition, however, the boom of recycling in the cultural sphere, in line with the loss of classically modern value categories, also leads to a certain sociocultural exhaustion, perceivable in the widespread impression of contemporary culture's lack of novelty and originality. Frequently, newness is only attributed to technical advances, devices, software, virtual media, etc.

The omnipresence of recycled materials can also be interpreted as a symptom of the crisis of posthistoire: the loss of grand narratives intensifies with the digital availability of everything (Baßler / Drügh 2021, p. 126). Extending Jameson's critique of postmodernism to postdigitality, the dissolution of grand narratives leaves fragments that are recycled and reused without taking the context into account. In other words, contemporary practices often dismiss the horizon of expectations (in the words of Reinhard Koselleck) that originated the work. While related cultural practices such as imitation or reproduction still preserve the original, this is not necessarily the case with recycling. Marilyn Randall pointed this out,

In the metaphor of *recycling*, however, the recycled material is consumed and transformed, leaving nothing if not more detritus/garbage in its wake and producing a new product which, however similar or different to the old, must by definition replace it. [...] And yet, this cyclical nature of recycling and its propensity to eliminate its origins makes the metaphor, for Moser, for example, particularly pertinent to the present cultural and historical moment: "Inside such a system one could theoretically recycle indefinitely. Temporal differences (past-present, present-future) as well as historical dynamics (the present overtakes the past by realising it; the future is the utopic projection of present projects) would also be practically abolished. This is what throws modern history into crisis". (Randall 2007).<sup>4</sup>

The act of recycling, then, *replaces* its source and invites us to a never-ending action, which levels the different temporal dimensions. Moser's argument on recycling as challenging the modern understanding of history is particularly

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4 The paragraph cited contains a quotation from Walter Moser's study *Recyclages: Economies d'appropriation culturelle* (1996, p. 39), as translated by Randall.

interesting here. Actually, one could amend Jameson to the effect that it is not the sense of history *per se* that is weakened by recycling, but specifically the teleologically-orientated one that we generally identify with the still powerful modernity. In this sense, today's recycling trends are linked to the disintegration of grand narratives inaugurated by postmodernism. In *The Political Unconscious*, Jameson argues that narratives play a crucial role in mediating between the individual and society, or what he calls social totality, "according to a process of what he calls transcoding – the translating into an accepted code (which consists of certain narrative patterns and expectations) of social and historical reality to make it accessibly mediated for the individual" (Roberts 2000, p. 78). Although the use of narratives is timeless, it is not emptied of history. Hypothetically, we can state that despite the frequent populist attempts to recycle grand narratives (for instance nation, *Volksgemeinschaft*), micro-narratives dominate in (post) digital space, corresponding to the existing fragmentation on a social level. There are also formal reasons for this, as Internet (sub)genres like blogs and twitterature encourage short forms.

Long before the Internet became widely established, it was George Steiner who thought about "Real Presences" in a book of the same title (1985). There, he regretted a phenomenon that we can today connect to the recycling boom: the "disappearance of the primary under a mountain of secondary literature" (quoted from Kuhlbrodt 2019, p. 38).<sup>5</sup> This originally literary evaluation, thought of today, refers to the possibilities of the medium (to link and re-link, to twitter and re-twitter), and hence, to the nature of cultural recycling. I myself direct the gaze in this contribution to re-use, not primarily to *what* is being re-used. In this way, recycling comes into view as a process of change in the material used. The relation between result and source, however, becomes blurred and secondary.

The big question, which my contribution can only make explicit but not answer, is how to make sense of the past against this backdrop. How to think historically in a present which has unlearned to think of the past in terms of alterity: distances are thus being erased and the past is "incorporated" into the present. In order to approach this question, not only through the many criticisms of the recycling concept that have already been voiced, we need to take a look at the potential of the term. Sonja Windmüller has pointed out that

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5 Kuhlbrodt's thesis is that "it is precisely through the Internet that the supposedly secondary takes on a new rank. [...] The secondary has emancipated itself and has become primary itself, so to speak." (2019, p. 39; my translation).

“recycling” can be thought of utopically as a promise of salvation that survives destruction (2014, p. 108). However, recycling is not necessarily required for this promise to be fulfilled; memory as a possible umbrella term is also often ascribed this power of salvation. As Randall makes clear, recycling erases rather than commemorates the traces of what it was originally based on (2007, n. pag.). However, we do conceive of self-reflexive references that manifest themselves in practices of recycling and thus refer to the past in an innovative way, beyond retromania. In this context, and with regard to the artist and activist Steev Hise, we can think of the “power of recontextualisation” (Cannon 2002, n. pag.).

Such recontextualisation is not only semantic, but also technically facilitated by social media and the platformisation of the Internet. Victoria Walden Grace (2021) has researched this effect. Although her research deals with Holocaust memory and not with the generic recycling of cultural material, the logic she describes is certainly significant for our context because it points at the opportunities of digital recontextualisation:

One of the ways digital media are having an increasingly powerful affect on Holocaust memory is through the use of **networked logics**, drawing together fragments of testimony, material evidence and other sources into **mapping projects** either of specific sites [...] or bringing a variety of sites together through **hyperlinks** [...]. These experiences open up space for users to follow particular threads, compare different narratives, and to be led by their particular interests. **Connectivity** of different material elements is key here, but there is rarely any sense of a closed-text or resolution offered. (2021, n. pag.).

The potentials of digital Holocaust archives listed above are also those of (post) digital recycling. The logic of the network and the focus on connectivity also show the emancipatory promise of digital media: the use and processing of abundant materials, the connection of which turns the subject from a mere consumer into a self-determined subject.

Before I now turn to one specific case of cultural recycling and its processing of history in the postdigital space, it should be stated that in my opinion, the concept of recycling primarily makes sense at a macro level, in reference to a phenomenon or trend that says a lot about cultural understanding and society, but is less practicable at the level of micro-analysis, where the concept of recycling has little ahead of advantage intertextuality and intermediality. The term would be too unspecific to have value for analysis at a micro level. A question of interest is whether and how recycling (as an umbrella term for different strategies and actions in the cultural sphere) could be accomplished as a *historical* practice despite its close ties to postmodern perspectives.

#### 4. “Imagine it is 1942 on Instagram”: A postdigital series and its mediation of history

Let us return to Jameson’s observation of a “weakening of historicity, both in our relationship to public history and in the new forms of our private temporality” (1991, p. 6). This trend would go hand in hand with a fascination for the (extended, long) present and a disinterest/lack of interest? in the *historical* past. It can also be perceived in our standards for authenticity and originality as well as their (dwindling?) appreciation and has profound consequences for art and aesthetics. As Moritz Baßler and Heinz Drügh write, in the digital age, no one expects “an unadulterated reproduction of reality” from media that are actually considered guarantors of reality, such as photography (2021, p. 271). This development cannot remain without consequences for the understanding of history implicit in cultural products.

In this context of a renegotiated relation between fact and fiction, history and entertainment, I briefly introduce the Instagram series *@ichbinsophiescholl* (<https://www.instagram.com/ichbinsophiescholl/>), which comprised a weekly episode from 30 April 2021 to 22 February 2022: it ended on the anniversary of the execution of Sophie Scholl, who was killed by the Nazis on 22 February 1942 at the age of only 21 for her resistance actions. Produced by the public broadcasters Südwestrundfunk (SWR) and Bayerischer Rundfunk (BR), the series was not conceived as a commercial product, but has a didactic-historical mission that adds an innovative chapter to the history of the public commemoration of Nazi victims and the reconsideration of this period. What is being “recycled” here is a historical personality as well as historical material around which numerous narratives and a cult of personality have developed surrounding the anti-Nazi resistance group *Die Weiße Rose* (*The White Rose*) of the Scholl siblings.

If by “postdigital condition” we understand an unprecedented daily presence of the digital and computerisation, for its ubiquity (integrated in the environment and in the subjects) as well as for new continuities that blur the clear separations between “analogue” and “digital” (cf. Llamas Ubieta 2020), we can capture the sense in which *@ichbinsophiescholl* is a postdigital product *par excellence*. An analogue figure is “platformised” here: we observe a media product developed on the basis of original historical material that adapts to social media practices (including, for instance, numerous selfies of the protagonist). The format enables and promotes interaction between user and content, while at the same time exposing itself as formally “chic”. What Jameson observed for postmodern culture applies here: the “history of aesthetic styles” “displaces ‘real’ history” (1991, p. 20). The philosopher interpreted this situation as a “symptom of the

waning of [...] our lived possibility of experiencing history in some active way” (1991, p. 21). He saw this symptom paradigmatically represented in a genre, the “nostalgia film”.<sup>6</sup> Today, the longing to experience history “in some active way” may be found in particular on social media platforms on the Internet.

An emotional approach is deliberately chosen, suggesting insights into Sophie Scholl’s inner life: we see her crying, laughing, dancing and cooking; we see her despairing over the horrors of war and experiencing love, all from the character’s perspective, looking directly into the camera. The posts are short; each weekly episode is around five minutes long and there is a great emphasis on Instagram-typical visual stories (even iconic food images are included), underpinned with short statements by Scholl in vintage lettering: “This regime is putting all our lives in danger! Enough is enough! I cannot continue to be idle”<sup>7</sup> (Week 17, 16.8.1942, posted 31 August 2021).

The motto (and premise) of the series, with which it was advertised on social media, is accordingly congruent. It also implies a specific approach to the past: “Imagine it’s 1942 on Instagram...”. (posted on 30.04.2021, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CSwq6GqME2x/>). New here is not the genre of some kind of “docu-fiction” that fictionalises real figures and events. What is new is that in a historical series, the present of social media, and no longer the past, is taken as the primary reference and measure. It is no longer about “how it really was”, but rather conditionally about “how it might have been” if Instagram had already existed in 1942. Sophie Scholl, played by Luna Wedler, thus becomes a figure of the present, regardless of the historical costumes and the setting, based on the “then”. This is also the intention of the series. “On the occasion of her 100th birthday on 9 May, the Instagram project by SWR and BR brought the resistance fighter out of the history books and into the here and now” (*Instagram project on Sophie Scholl*, my translation).<sup>8</sup> This “visualisation” was also suggested by the comments on the total of 401 posts on the Instagram channel. Many preferred

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6 For Jameson, this includes films like *Blade Runner*, which combine a sophisticated aesthetic with a wistful (non-historical) look at the past.

7 All the episodes, combining written and visual material, are available in the ARD Media Library, retrieved 12.05.2022, from <https://www.ardmediathek.de/video/ich-bin-sophie-scholl/woche-17-ploetzlich-ist-der-tod-so-nah/swr/Y3JpZDovL3N3ci5kZS9hZXgvdzE1MjI1NjQ>.

8 See the producers: “Sophie Scholl, on Instagram, in real time”, retrieved 12.05.2022, from <https://www.swr.de/unternehmen/ich-bin-sophie-scholl-stimmen-der-macher-100.html>.

the grammatical present tense and tried to warn Scholl of all kinds of dangers;<sup>9</sup> dangers that the historical figure had actually taken on many decades ago and whose outcome we know.

What specific role do social media<sup>10</sup> play in the series? The episodes were not only “liked”, but also received lively commentary, with the character executed in 1942 replying.<sup>11</sup> Reading the comment section on Instagram, there seems to be an unwritten pact that what actually happened (Scholl’s arrest and execution) is still only virtual and hence changeable. At some points, the Instagram stories together with the user content even suggest a counterfactual scenario. Repeatedly, the users warn “Sophie” not to risk her life, to be careful and to retreat. In other words, all empathising reactions that result from identifying with “Sophie”, but which counteract the historical figure. What does the young woman stand for, what is she remembered for, if not for having put her life on the line while she and her companions demanded the end of the war and denounced Nazi crimes in their flyer campaigns?

The reactions to the series documented in the comments are most appropriately interpreted when taking into account the intended target audience. The producers’ declared aim was to reach a younger audience and thus also to continue the German culture of remembrance in a contemporary way.<sup>12</sup> Significantly, “contemporary” (“new”, say the producers) is here apparently synonymous with platformisation, i.e. the shift of public remembrance to the socially-shaped Internet. More aptly, it is about a postdigital space of memory that blends the *Lebenswelt* with the Internet, as it corresponds to the experience of the initial 750,000 followers<sup>13</sup> of the Scholl series. The understanding of history cultivated here, made explicit in the accompanying material to the series, cannot truly be separated from the memorial regime that stresses the affective dimension and experience of history. It might have benefited the project to differentiate more clearly between historical and memorial discourse. In this

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9 See (aleatorically extracted) the comments on the following reel, retrieved 12.05.2022, from [https://www.instagram.com/reel/CYQ\\_hKXFoPF/](https://www.instagram.com/reel/CYQ_hKXFoPF/).

10 For our purposes, the definition of Seargent / Tagg serves, according to which social media can be conceived of as “any digital environment which involves interaction between participants” (2014, p. 14).

11 See the extremely interesting contribution by Stephens (2021) on “Playing Pretend on Social Media”.

12 The producers, “We can bring Sophie Scholl to life on Instagram for a new generation - in a way you’ve never seen before”, retrieved 12.05.2022, from <https://www.swr.de/unternehmen/ich-bin-sophie-scholl-stimmen-der-macher-100.html>.

13 After the end of the series, it still registers 717,000 followers (as of 16.5.2022).

sense, Richard Crownshaw wrote the following on recent Holocaust literature, but in my view applicable to the context presented here as well,

What is needed is a dialectic between memory and history that, in delimiting the horizons of memory, does not lose sight of the cultural realities of over-identification, nor of the possibilities of the affective transmission of Holocaust memories. (Crownshaw 2010, p. viii).<sup>14</sup>

There is no doubt that the project is historically soundly researched; historians were involved as advisors. Besides, the makers seek to reflect on the specific form-content relation. Concerning their choice of the social platform, they state, “Instagram is no longer just a place full of cute dog pictures and food shots, but rather a world stage for activism and thus a ‘place’ where we would certainly have met Sophie Scholl.” (*Stimmen der Macher\*innen*).<sup>15</sup>

The series, however, conceptually evokes the “culture of the simulacrum” (Jameson 1991, p. 18) attributed to postmodernism,<sup>16</sup> which challenges the concept of the real. This is also one of the reasons for the criticism that the project has sparked, in addition to the applause for the innovative format.

@*ichbinsophiescholl* suggests authenticity, among other things through the exact dating of the episodes to the period 1941–1942, but incorporates deliberate references to the present. It is also characterised by omissions<sup>17</sup> and some incorrections (such as the wearing of gas masks in the German air raid shelters [Luftschutzkeller] during the bombings), which are not, however, exhibited as fiction. In one post (18 May 2021), the slogan “Make love not war” is used,<sup>18</sup> borrowed from the protest of the student movement against the Vietnam War and without any connection to the Nazi era. Media scholar Eva Hasel sees a danger in these “creative freedoms” because in the final instance, they could even lead to the denial of the Holocaust. In an interview, she commented on this:

I don't like the idea of creating an illusion of reality. Or the feeling of “bringing something back to life”. [...] If you start like that, then people who don't mean well can say, Oh, so if that's not true, what else is not true? And I don't think it's a good idea to fill in these

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14 See also Crownshaw (2010, p. vii-viii): “the pursuit of historical anchorage further displaces historical understanding, substituting memory or ‘hypermemory’ for it”.

15 *Stimmen der Macher\*innen des Instagram-Projekts*, retrieved 12.05.2022, from <https://www.swr.de/unternehmen/ich-bin-sophie-scholl-stimmen-der-macher-100.html>.

16 Jameson adopted the concept from Jean Baudrillard and made it a central aspect of his theory of postmodernism.

17 Most strikingly the crimes committed against the Jews.

18 In the original: “Liebe machen statt Krieg”, @*ichbinsophiescholl*, 18.5.2021.

historical gaps that we definitely have with fantasy or with your own creation. (Quoted in Hespers 2022, n. pag., my translation).<sup>19</sup>

The technical potential of the digital medium, the emotionalisation of content on social media, the possibilities of interaction with users are thus double-edged. On the one hand, they empower the individual user, in that the platform removes him or her from a purely passive approach; on the other hand, “history” is in a sense separated from “factual reality” and can now be experienced in a radically subjective and user-centric way,

the postmodern subject can cut and paste its own reality together. In the face of a globalised media, the electronic archive, new media technologies and their collective information overload, the ability to surf, sample and mix one’s way through these appears to define our agentic potential. (Spencer 2008, p. 195).

The question that I draw from my presentation of the Scholl series is whether we can possibly think of cultural recycling as a critical construct. As we have seen, today this practice is intimately linked to the (post)digital sphere. Nonetheless, the (post)digital is ideological and not exclusively a question of technology. This is why, if we want to unravel the commodity nature that often characterises cultural recycling, we also need to uncover the ideological implications of the (post)digital itself. It is not so much the content as the *aesthetics* of the Instagram series that makes this abundantly clear through the visualisation of Sophie as a character, open to fiction and hence proximity. Approaches to a history (not historiography) “from below” that have been transferred to the Internet could possibly point to alternatives here. I am thinking, for example, of the project “Open Memory Box” (<https://open-memory-box.de>), launched in 2013 and conceived by Alberto Herskovits and Laurence McFalls. The project makes private film recordings from the German Democratic Republic accessible: scenes from everyday life, holidays, family celebrations; without sound and commentary, which are left to the user.<sup>20</sup> This website does not enable users to have the communal experience that *@ichbinsophiescholl* offers, as they do not get in touch with each other. It can, however, get along without emotionalisation and abridgement. Unedited material on the Internet today may just hit us over the head like a *Stolperstein*<sup>21</sup>

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19 See also, for severe public criticism, comedian Jan Böhmermann, who dedicated an episode of the popular *ZDF Magazine Royale* to the series (18.02.2022).

20 For additional information on this project, see Fürstenau (2013).

21 Literally meaning “stumbling stone”, the word refers to a widely known initiative in public space that commemorates victims of Nazism. Their names are engraved in brass cubes that are installed on the pavement, normally in front of the houses from where they were once deported.

and in this way lead to the shocking approach of dealing with history in the way that the materialist philosopher Walter Benjamin had in mind when fleeing from the Nazis.

## 5. Conclusion

In his desperate condensed reflections *Über den Begriff der Geschichte*, written in 1940 and published posthumously in 1942, Walter Benjamin wanted to uncover the forces of history that have been put to sleep in the “once upon a time” of linear historical narrative.<sup>22</sup> This certainly utopian claim can only be fulfilled with difficulty by postdigital formats that deal with historical material. Due to the possibilities of digital participation, but also thanks to the accessibility of their sources, these formats undoubtedly have potential for activating the historical “narrative”. However, the affectation of social media channels and the questionable separation of “history” (“cold” and distant) and “reality” (near and immediate) in the age of radicalised technological reproducibility are obstacles to this.

Using the example of *@ichbinsophiescholl*, but also Jameson’s theory of postmodernity, my contribution has particularly highlighted the critical aspects that go hand in hand with the postmodern and now postdigital representation of history, without, however, ignoring the opportunities. So far, it is Holocaust research that has dealt intensively with the advantages and disadvantages of digital media in confronting us with genocide. What is needed, however, is a theoretical examination of concepts of history that are often only implicit in postdigital environments, as well as an informed criticism concerning the abolition of the distance between past and present that is often perceived here. Doubtlessly, this erasure stands in the way of a deeper understanding.

Technological developments initiated by the digital revolution have radicalised and further sophisticated the exposed characteristics of postmodernism, including its ahistorical understanding of time and its devaluation of newness. By referring to Jameson’s seminal writings and comparing them with digital media discourse, I have shown that postmodernism and not postdigitality meant to signify the real break for our “sense of history”.

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22 On Benjamin’s conception of history, diametrically opposed to the postmodern variant, see Opitz / Wizisla (2000, p. 419).

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