

Re-enacting historical memories on social media through profile-based works: a perspectivist approach

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ABSTRACT

The possibility of passing for someone else did not emerge with social media. However, fictitious identities have become much easier because – as the saying goes – “on the Internet, nobody knows you’re a dog”. A new genre has emerged on social platforms, beyond trivial experiments with pseudonyms, or experimenting with “versions of oneself” on social platforms. In this paper, we will term this new genre “profile-based works”. We will consider these works as symbiotic agents, pointers and witnesses to contemporary society. After a general introduction to the genre and a critical discussion of methodologies to identify its specificities, we will focus on two re-enactments of historical events and figures on Facebook and Instagram. We will discuss the problematic nature of these works in terms of valorisation, preservation and archiving insofar as, on the one hand, they question the classical categories of the work, the author and the reader; and, on the other hand, they are fundamentally dependent on their publication platforms.

KEYWORDS

fictional profiles; social media; memory; archives; digital identities; social semiotics

RESUMO

A possibilidade de se fazer passar por outra pessoa não surgiu com as redes sociais. No entanto, as identidades fictícias tornaram-se muito mais fáceis porque – como diz o ditado – “na Internet, ninguém sabe que és um cão”. Para além das experiências triviais com pseudónimos, a experimentação de “versões de si próprio” nas plataformas sociais deu origem a um novo género, que neste artigo designaremos por “obras baseadas em perfis”. Consideraremos estas obras como agentes simbióticos, indicadores e testemunhas da sociedade contemporânea. Após uma introdução geral ao género e uma discussão crítica de metodologias para identificar as suas especificidades, centrar-nos-emos em duas reencenações de eventos e figuras históricas no Facebook e no Instagram.

Discutiremos a natureza problemática destas obras em termos de valorização, preservação e arquivo, na medida em que, por um lado, questionam as categorias clássicas da obra, do autor e do leitor; e, por outro, são fundamentalmente dependentes das suas plataformas de publicação.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE

perfis ficcionais; redes sociais; memória; arquivos; identidades digitais;
semiótica social

On social networks, the personification of History through biographical reconstruction is a recurring feature. This approach is used to resurrect individual or collective memories through the creation of fictionalized social media identities in order to draw attention to historical figures. This article aims to discuss such type of works, which in this paper we will refer to as “profile-based”. We will identify their main characteristics and experience ways to interpret them in their technosemiotic and sociocultural contexts.

According to Louise Merzeau (2015), one of the peculiarities of a narrative profile on social media is that it does not only appear on the newsfeed through its posts but is also shaped by it through the platform and its predefined design. Indeed, every profile-based work is necessarily co-authored by its creator and by the platform: the author creates within the confines of a pre-designed editorial canvas that cannot be altered. This pre-designed canvas reflects the perspective, interests, ideas and beliefs of the platform’s designers, which may diverge from those of the author – for example, when commercial interests intrude upon the work through advertisements.

Additionally, profiles share certain traits with novel characters based on identity constructs, but also differ from them in several respects. As Raphaël Baroni states (2017, p. 88), “When we are (as readers) immersed in a fictional story (on paper), we are both involved in the world we are being told about and excluded from it at the same time.” On a social network, characters and readers are not only involved in the same world, they can communicate with each other. Social networks provide an editorial canvas that changes the ways writers and readers engage with one another. As a result, profiles blur the boundaries of literary works and the traditional roles of writers and readers.

First, we will present some methodological proposals that will help us identify the specific nature of profile-based works on social networks. Second, we will analyse, from a perspectivist approach, two profiles that present themselves as embodiments of historical events within a multimodal form. The first case (“IchbinSophieScholl”) will be discussed from the receiver’s perspective, highlighting how readers, through their interactions with the narrative profile, challenge the author’s viewpoint ; the second (“Profile:

Sudeten German”) will be approached from the author’s perspective as one of the author of this article is also the creator of the work.

ANALYSING THE AMBIGUOUS NATURE OF PROFILE-BASED WORKS

In theory, the creation of an individual account on social media corresponds to a person – or, at least, a fragment of her or his identity. The predesigned canvas attempts to standardize how individuals represent and narrate themselves through declarative elements: name, description and possible images of representation. These first biographical informations, that we can consider as basic metadata, make it possible to figure out how the person or character defines themselves or is defined. However, even a virtual persona is inherently complex and cannot be reduced to an industrial format. Following the account’s creation, the profile’s publications shapes its public expression. These posts will qualify the profile’s output, providing insight into the literary, narrative or thematic forms that will be addressed.

An important element that is much more complicated to pin down is the profile’s interactions with other profiles. These social actions encompass a variety of forms : likes, comments, repost replies, or on a more intimate level, messages and/or participation in private thematic groups.

Furthermore, and this is crucial, the specific characteristics of the reader’s own profile plays a role in the reading and interpretation of this kind of work. Discoverability is a common issue in literary studies, especially in digital literature as no traditional editors promote these artifacts. Readers must search the web, explore the platforms intended for this purpose – Facebook, Instagram, Wattpad or Webtoon, – or follow leads, for example the links between other people’s blogs, creating communities and networks.

On social networks, we also sometimes discover accounts by following suggestions from the algorithm. These suggestions are based on what we already follow, friends we might have in common, hashtags that point to publications that mention them, and so on. The multiplicity of factors (selection factors, shadow ban issues and platform specific censorship) – and the fact that these algorithms are still black boxes to which we do not have access to and therefore largely unknown to us –, make us discover profile-based works necessarily inside our filter bubble (Appiotti, Saemmer, 2022).

In other words, the discoverability and readability of a work on a social network is profoundly linked to the notion of “profile”: not only because any post is “signed” by a profile, but because the reader’s profile determines access to the narrative in the platform’s canvas. On Facebook, for example, a profiled work certainly relies on its dedicated profile page and personal diary feed, where its posts are aligned in ante-chronological order. In

practice, however, this is not how readers discover these posts when they appear for the first time. They discover them on the newsfeed, where they are constantly mixed in with many others.

The reader discovers the posts in this highly personalized ecosystem – an aspect not taken into account in Ruth Page’s seminal study *Narratives online* (2018). Page certainly insists on the importance of considering the complex “context” of a narrative on a social network. However, when she uses data mining methods to study these narratives, the ecosystem of the *individual* reader on the platform and her or his profile disappear. In our research on profile-based works¹, we consider this ecosystem as an integral part of the work, even though access to it is not always feasible.

To pinpoint this important specificity, we propose to use in our analysis a hybrid methodology, borrowing from the “hermeneutics of devices” in the tradition of Eric Méchoulan (2010), Yves Jeanneret and Emmanuël Souchier (2005), as well as from an perspectivist approach called “field semiotics” that we have developed in other contexts (Saemmer, Tréhondart, Coquelin, 2022). On the one hand, the need for this methodological composite is justified by the fact that the profile as a work cannot be reduced to its posts but takes its place in the industrial and technical ecosystem of the social network; Ruth Page (2018) already underlined this point.

On the other hand, as pragmatist semioticians, we believe that not only any interpretation of a cultural artefact is necessarily situated in a cultural and social “context” (as stated by social semiotics, Halliday, 1994), but also that the analyst’s “interpretant” (Peirce, 1978), her or his personal viewpoint, inexorably distorts the view of the work.

In social networks these founding paradigms of pragmatism are “literally” materialized, because the reader can only access the profile-based work through her or his personal profile; the configuration of this profile, partly based on his declarations and partly automatically calculated by the device, conditions the configuration of the work when it is read on the newsfeed: for example, the more or less prominent position of posts on the reader’s personal newsfeed. If we seriously take into account the technosemiotic ecosystem of a profile-based work, its interpretation *has to be* perspectivist, filtered by a profiling of the device prior to the interpretation by the human reader.

Accordingly, in this article, we will examine the first work from a “reader” perspective, and shed light on the second work from an “author” perspective. As the personalised accessibility of the profile-based work has

1 This research is being carried out as part of the “Investigation into fictional profiles” project supported by the ArTeC University Research School (ANR 17-EURE-0008).

important consequences for its documentation, we also come back to this aspect at the end of the article.

The first profile, which we will analyse in the following sections, was read by Nolwenn Tréhondart not when it was initially published in 2021 but later, after all the posts had been compiled on the Instagram account #IchbinSophieScholl. Once a profiled work is completed as a fictional archive, this becomes the sole means for readers to discover it: the initial ecosystem, where the works posts intermingle with other posts dedicated to news, wars, elections, birthday wishes, lolcats or commercial offers, is definitively lost.

The second work, “Profil: Sudeten German,” is analysed by its author, Alexandra Saemmer, a perspective that allows her to access both the personal feed of the account that brings together all the posts and the newsfeed of the “Saemmer Alexandra” profile that publishes the work. However, this perspective does not allow to reconstruct the experience of the different readers, who discover the posts on their personal ecosystem on the Facebook platform.

These two case studies highlight the challenge in discussing online narratives. What does it mean to analyze them when they are spun out in real time versus accessing the “complete” narrative retrospectively?

FOCUS ON #IchbinSophieScholl

I, Nolwenn Tréhondart, came across the #IchbinSophieScholl Instagram account while teaching a digital literature course at the University of Lorraine to future German language teachers. It was a young teacher who knew about this profile, and had followed it when it was published daily. She chose it as the subject of study for her end-of-semester paper, enabling me to discover this work in its archived version (and not post after post on my newsfeed). My previous training as an editor makes me particularly interested in the designers’ practices, in their connivances and strategies of resistance with digital devices and platforms. My methodology combines an analysis of the technosemiotic affordances of the Instagram platform with an analysis of the situated reception of a work whose content seems, at first glance, to be at odds with this industrial context.

While Sophie Scholl is a famous figure of German resistance during the Nazi period, and therefore well known to German teachers, she was unknown to me. I had no opportunity to hear about her during my own schooling. Therefore, this was for me a discovery of both a profile-based work and a historical figure.

The #IchbinSophieScholl profile is inspired by a deceased individual – the German resistant Sophie Scholl –, using archival material and biographical information to reconstruct certain aspects of her personality. Another similar example that has gained popularity on Instagram is “Eva Stories”, a project developed by an Israeli entrepreneur. Both profiles follow a common premise, imagining how history might have unfolded differently if social media platforms had existed during World War II. They try to offer a subjective and intimist view, as they are embodied through the perspectives of two teenage girls profiles. Eva Stories’ tagline, “What if a young girl had Instagram during the Holocaust?”, aptly captures the essence of this concept.

Historical profiles are often created by public or private organizations in order to “educate” the younger generation. Eva Stories is inspired by the true story of Eva Heyman, a young Hungarian Jew who tragically lost her life in a concentration camp at the age of 13. In an interview, the producer Mati Kochavi explains that he wanted to create a new approach to witnessing and remembering the Holocaust, given the dwindling number of direct survivors. He states: “In the digital age, when attention spans are low but thrill spans are high, and given the dwindling number of survivors, it is imperative to find new models of witnessing and remembering. The idea is to use social media to create a new genre of remembrance, and in this way we hope to bring viewers closer to Eva’s life and the depths of her soul” (Eglash, 2019).

This remark takes place in a context where cultural institutions are looking for new ways to raise awareness among young people about sensitive historical events. José Van Dijck (2007) refers to a new paradigm that emphasises the active role of users in shaping and preserving historical narratives. Users are seen as memory agents, encouraged to participate in the co-creation of a “mediated” memory within the organised structure provided by social network. Stefania Manca, Marcello Passarelli, Martin Rehm (2022) explain: “We are witnessing the transition from the ‘era of the witness’ to the ‘era of the user,’ where users are encouraged to choose from a large number of testimonies and navigate the wide range of resources available.” Besides, the new memory ecology generated by social media participation provides a form of “multidirectional memory” of the Holocaust, which opens up new communication modes. This concept aligns with the idea that diverse perspectives and collective contributions induce a more comprehensive understanding of the past.

However, many questions arise in relation to the emergence of digital mediation strategies inscribed in a capitalism of surveillance (Zuboff, 2019). Memory functions are indeed at the heart of the attention design strategies of digital platforms, whose industrialised memory production and personal

memory management systems, subject to the workings of the affective web (Alloing, Pierre, 2017), exploit users' nostalgic emotions.

The Instagram account “@ichbinsophiescholl” (I am Sophie Scholl) was created and launched in 2021 by two German public radio stations during a period of COVID-related containment. It depicts the last ten months of Sophie Scholl, a White Rose movement member who fought against National Socialism. The narrative takes the form of a diary, documenting the young student's daily life in real time until the day of her arrest and execution by the Nazis. Through her actions and beliefs, Sophie Scholl became an icon of resistance and a symbol of the fight against Nazism.

By focusing on her daily life and inner thoughts, the work combines fictional content using Instagram production tools, such as hashtags, geolocation, and emojis, with authentic historical documents related to Nazi propaganda. It utilises an intermedial approach (Müller, 2000; Méchoulán, 2010) by reimagining the narrative structure of the diary in the form of Instagram stories. The boundaries between fiction and historical reality are blurred, allowing users to share the posts. The account gained significant popularity, reaching nearly one million followers by June 2021.

Like many other profile-based works, this one integrates images and videos. In these contents, Sophie Scholl is portrayed by an actress. The conversations with users is taken in charge by a team of community managers with expertise in various fields. They use different approaches, including historical, journalistic, psychological and artistic perspectives. By answering questions and engaging in dialogue, they embody the broadening of the notion of authorship we mentioned in the introduction, and try to maintain the audience's attention.

User 1 : Dear Sophie, love is sometimes exhausting and inexplicable, but unfortunately we don't choose who we fall in love with. So be happy and grateful that you've found your Fritz and that he gave you such a smile during your ski vacation. Don't give up and stay strong!

Ichbinsophiescholl @_user1_ Dear Isabel, thank you for your words! It's all just ups and downs sometimes with love. Even today, I think everything is so wonderful. And the next day, I still have doubts. But most of the time, I simply miss my Fritz².

As we can notice, some users immerse themselves in the reading by pretending to live during World War II. They have conversations with the profile, discussing various aspects of Sophie Scholl's biography, including her love life, or warning her of the dangers she might face. Sophie Scholl

2 Translated from the German by the author of this article.

becomes like a friend to whom something terrible will happen. Others take a more detached and amused attitude, but they may also sometimes criticise the narrative techniques used by the authors. They question certain aspects that may overlook or downplay uncomfortable historical truths, such as Sophie Scholl's past involvement in the Hitler Youth.

User 2 What do you say about your problematic past as a committed BDM member?

User 3. It's a pity you start the story when she's already in Munich. Mega interesting is actually her evolution from a strong supporter of National Socialism to the resistance. Her Nazi past shouldn't be ignored, it's part of the heroic epic and only makes her character even more important³.

What I find also interesting in the comments is how the context of the work's presentation, specifically on Instagram and during times of COVID containment, affects the interpretative discussions: "As stories are redistributed – shared, in its interactional sense –, they are recontextualized" (Page 2018, 14). We note that not only the social context of the period, but also personal views on the virus and its collective handling influence the interpretation of posts in a way that probably was surprising for the authors of the work. Ruth Page states: "shared stories are never straightforward but are open to disruption in ways that exploit the mediated contexts in which they are told" (Page, 2018, 101).

Some users wonder if Sophie Scholl, like them, experiences feelings of loneliness in isolation. Others ponder whether Sophie would have used Instagram in 1942 to share her thoughts and distribute leaflets, given the dangers involved:

User 4 Why use Instagram in such a fascist context and film the printing of flyers? Everyone can see what you're doing. It's naive to film all this. Do you want to get arrested? You don't film yourself doing things that are illegal or punishable, do you?

User 5 You don't take into account that such a publication would have meant death at the time.

User 5 If Sophie Scholl had had Instagram, none of her messages would have been made public! She would have been censored all the way. We should learn from history! When fundamental rights and freedoms are restricted, opinions repressed. If people are excluded, we must sound the alarm!

User 6 FACT: The Nazi regime is reportedly asking Instagram for location and contact list. Farewell to the White Rose. SOPHIE Scholl wouldn't have a signal or probably even a cell phone in this age of glass citizens.

3 Translated from the German by the author of this article.

Some of these comments are even more controversial, comparing Nazi censorship to the restrictions on freedom during COVID. Indeed, while Sophie Scholl became a figure of the anti-Nazi struggle, she also became an icon in Germany for anti-masks and certain right-wing extremist movements. They identified with her as a figure of persecuted resistance. During the COVID confinements, several conspiracy movements criticised the German government's directives regarding the obligation to wear masks or stay at home requirements. They compared these to the restrictions on freedoms suffered by Jews under the Nazi regime "Jana of Kassel", a figure of the the Querdenker conspiracy anti-vax movement in Germany, claims feeling "like Sophie Scholl". Considering the comments as integral parts of a profile-base work, we observe how the present colours the fiction, and how personal concerns are deeply intertwined with the official posts.

User 7 : you know history repeats itself? People without masks are discredited and healthy people are excluded because they don't want to get tested/vaccinated! History repeats itself! And you're still part of it... Sophie's texts are even in tune with our times. Wake up at last

User 8 : very seriously, reread what you've written and think for a moment if the situation is anything like Sophie Scholl's. A word of advice, Sophie Scholl would have been murdered by now, so you can keep broadcasting your comments as funny as you are. There's freedom of the press and freedom of expression. Otherwise, you wouldn't have been able to post your comment here, otherwise dissidents and others wouldn't be able to demonstrate.

ichbinsophiescholl : @user 8 #teamsoffer Comparing the current situation with Hitler's dictatorship is inappropriate. Such statements are not only contrary to the facts, they are also disrespectful to the victims of the time.

Many users also seem concerned about the lack of historical context and the potential spread of misinformation on social media. According to journalist Nora Hespers (2022), the producers of the profile focused on playfulness, leaving historical contextualisation to the young historians and educators who use the platform and feel compelled to fill in historical gaps:

User 9 : Actually, it's a good idea BUT where's the historical context? I'd love to have some sources!

User 10 : Sorry guys, we want to teach kids in school to distinguish real information from fake, I wonder what real SOURCES are being used as a basis here? This gives us the illusion of knowing exactly what Sophie Scholl thought, losing ourselves in a fictional Sophie Scholl, I see this critically.

Historians such as Max Czollek on his twitter account (2021⁴) worry that some discussions and producers' choices may even glorify a victimised past and perpetuate romanticised ideas regarding German choices during the war, for example, by stylizing Sophie Scholl as the German Anne Frank. This could lead to a distorted or revisionist view of history, making users believe most Germans were resistance fighters.

To conclude, this reading of the profile-based work was done from my own point of view. Firstly, I read the account as an archive, since I could not any more discover the work post after post, on my Instagram feed. I read it as a closed, completed entity, a year after the now inactive account appeared. Hence, I did not receive on my own Instagram profile the polemics mentioned above but discovered them a year later, in a calmer post-confinement context, allowing a more distanced point of view. Although I am not German, my familiarity with the history of the Holocaust helped me to understand these interpretive conflicts and the historical person of Sophie Scholl.

FOCUS ON "PROFILE: SUDETEN GERMAN"

As we have just explained, a recurring feature of many historical or memorial profiles on social networks is the biographical reconstruction of small lives embedded in the whirlwind of historical events. In my daily life as a reader, the profiled works I follow on Facebook and Twitter create islands, moments of breathing and reflection. As an author, I, Alexandra Saemmer am interested in embodying characters on a social network as I am in observing what the social network teaches me about myself, my present and my past.

Since September 2022, I have engaged my personal profile on Facebook to reconstruct the lives of my grandparents who belonged to the Sudetenland people, a German-speaking minority who had lived in the border regions of Czechoslovakia since the Middle Ages, but were expelled at the end of the Second World War for collaborating with the National Socialist regime. Coming from a modest background of farmers and civil servants, they lived a seemingly "uneventful" life before their expulsion.

Born in the 1970s, I grew up with two versions of the fate of the Sudeten Germans. The nostalgic version passed on by my mother emphasised the tragedy of expulsion; complicity with Nazi ideology was the blind spot in this story. The second version, which emphasised this complicity, was taught to me at school; it glossed over the suffering caused by expropriation and forced displacement.

4 URL : <https://twitter.com/rubenmcloop/status/1391675619797311488?lang=fr>

Based on an investigation I carried out between 2021 and 2024, I have tried to retrace the journey of my Sudeten family, to probe the injustices they suffered, but also their responsibility in the dramas that played out in these border regions of Mitteleuropa. At the start, I had no photographs, no administrative documents. In reality, however, a few traces had been preserved, hidden away at the bottom of drawers. The silence that hangs over the history of my Sudeten family is not only the result of oblivion that afflicts the memory of all small people, but the result of the guilt and shame of defeated soldiers, deposed colonisers, women raped on the fringes of the battlefields, expropriated migrants.

To reconstruct their lives, I drew on archives, family interviews, and personal accounts and life stories collected on the Facebook pages of the Sudeten community. I discovered that the post-memory of these people was being written there, hidden from public view, in the niches of social networks. I infiltrated these groups, as a “Sudeten profile”, to ethnograph the way in which this community looks at their history.

I titled my project “Profile: Sudeten German.” Its aim was twofold: firstly, to reconstruct the expulsion and expropriation experienced by my Sudeten ancestors, and secondly, to explore the contemporary meaning of Sudeten identity within the realm of social media.

Memorial narratives carried by profiles on social networks share many traits with a genre French theorist Dominique Viart (2019) refers to as “field literatures.” Field literatures are characterised by deeply linking literary writing with investigative techniques borrowed from social sciences. They often have a strong self-reflective dimension: the investigator questions her or his position and worries about its relevance. Field literatures fall under the category of “non-fiction”: the author shifts the focus from the fictionalised presentation of results to the narrative of the investigation itself. To fill the gaps in their personal or family memory, the author relies on ethnographic approaches on the one hand and on documents and archives belonging to collective memory on the other hand. The genre is vibrant in France, as exemplified by numerous recent publications (one of the best-known representatives of this literary genre is Ivan Jablonka, whose *L'Histoire des grands-parents que je n'ai pas eus* (2012) (The Story of the Grandparents I Didn't Have) – was a major inspiration for my own project.

From the author's perspective, I would argue that platforms such as Instagram or Facebook provide a particularly suitable writing tool for organising and editorialising a literary field investigation. To examine the tool's mediating influence, I propose to rely on concepts of “sameness” and “ipseity” theorized by French philosopher Paul Ricœur. In his seminal book *Soi-même comme un autre* (1990), Paul Ricœur distinguishes between two identity components. “Sameness” refers to the permanent substratum of the

subject. On Facebook, the editorial block of the “bio” section might embody this sense of permanence. The dynamic manifestations of the profile are distributed across two news feeds. The first feed, accessible through the “photo icon”, showcases the personal posts of the profile. It arranges the episodic occurrences of life along a stable ante-chronological axis. It can then be referred to as the “Blog-feed”, as it functions like a micro-blog. This part of a profile work remains accessible even when a profile becomes inactive, as we showed in the analysis devoted to #IchbinSophieScholl.

As soon as users log on to their profile, a second feed is displayed. It comprises all the posts edited by “friends” and pages to which the profile is subscribed; these posts are prioritised according to an algorithmic logic that takes into account past likes and other expressions of interest. Added to this are advertisements, which Facebook inserts according to numerous factors: expected centers of interest, affiliated communities confirmed by profile subscriptions, computer geolocation, declared age, linguistic space, but also simple stops on publications made by the user in the past, put into perspective with the tastes and preferences of other users and communities. We would compare the assembly of the various pieces on this newsfeed to the action of a kaleidoscope, because it is at once dynamic, individualised and filtering: at the very top of the Kaleidoscope-feed appears what the profile is used to appreciating and what it is expected to like.

The ambiguous nature of this second feed can be apprehended through the concept of “ipseity”: According to Paul Ricoeur (1990), ipseity refers to the various identifications through which alterity intrudes into the formation of the self. While the Blog-feed of a profile-based work is accessible to all readers, the Kaleidoscope-feed remains exclusive to the author’s perspective, as mentioned in our methodological introduction. Ipseity encompasses the values and norms that the subject adopts through their interactions with affiliated communities, and it is *precisely* this interaction that Facebook facilitates when it connects a profile to its respective communities.

In the case of “Profile: Sudeten German”, the Kaleidoscope-feed was a highly valuable source of information. Thanks to my subscriptions to Sudeten profiles and pages and the many interactions I had with them, Facebook quickly transformed my Kaleidoscope-feed in a sort of personalised *Sudeten media* from which I could draw material for my project. I would point out once again, however, that this source of intertextuality is inaccessible to other readers.

In order to illustrate the interplay between the Blog-feed (sameness) and the Kaleidoscope-feed (ipseity), let us take a closer look on two passages of *Profile: Sudeten German*.

Recently, a post edited by a member of the Facebook page “Sudetendeutsche” appeared on the Kaleidoscope-feed of the profile

“Saemmer Alexandra.” It announced that “the emperor has arrived in the village.” Puzzled by this statement, I commented on the post, seeking clarification about which emperor was being referred to. A member of the page kindly responded, explaining that the photo depicted a descendant of the Habsburg family visiting the former Sudetenland. These territories were indeed once part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire before being annexed by the Nazi regime. The post inspired me to delve into archival research; I discovered that my great-grandfather from Sudetenland had served in the imperial guard of Emperor Franz Joseph. Devoted to this identity, he certainly lamented Germany’s annexation of Sudetenland territories because he considered himself Austrian, not German.



Fig. 1. Screenshot of the work « Profile: Sudeten German” by Alexandra Saemmer. Accessible on <https://www.facebook.com/saemmer.alexandra>

When I sought to share my discoveries on the Blog-feed of my profile, I encountered a challenge: I did not possess any authentic photographs of my great-grandfather. However, I was determined to illustrate his presence in my narrative. I then turned to the collective iconographic memory stored in the database of the Dall-E tool (<<https://openai.com/dall-e-2>>), an AI-powered image generator. Using the available informations, I generated a portrait that, while not authentic, was a *probable* representation of my great-grandfather as a member of the imperial guard.

I dealt with the many gaps in memory in my grandparents’ accounts of their lives using a technique common in field literature: testing the

plausibility the story by comparing it with archival materials. It is not so much the accuracy of the portraits that counts, but their plausibility, their probability.

Before moving on to the conclusion of this part of our article, I propose to look at one last example. During the expulsion of the Sudeten Germans, rapes were committed against women by Russian soldiers involved in the operation. In my family, a compelling narrative emerged. My aunt consistently claimed that my mother was the result of such a rape, which took place in the absence of my grandfather, who had joined the Nazi army and was serving on the Eastern Front. Obviously, there are no photos documenting the rape. Continuing my investigation, I stumbled upon a family photograph that shows my grandparents a few weeks before the expulsion (Fig. 1). Eager to share this piece of our history, I published it on a Sudetenland page on Facebook. To my surprise, a reader generously used a tool from the MyHeritage platform (<https://www.myheritage.fr/incolor>) to colouring the photograph, thus providing a valuable clue for dating the image (for example, colouring reveals the species of plants represented and, above all, the flowering season). It turned out that it was probable my mother was conceived during her husband's final frontline leave before his death in the spring of 1944. This revelation challenged the assumption that the conception of my mother was a result of the aforementioned rape.

On my Blog-feed, I document all these progressions in the investigation, allowing others to follow along and engage with the unfolding narrative. As in the forementioned example *IchBinSophieScholl*, readers' comments are indeed an important third building block in this work. Some of them reflect the readers' identification with the story; in addition to the comments visible on the Blog-feed, I have received several testimonials on Messenger in which readers tell me sometimes very intimate accounts of their own family past, marked by war and expulsion. I have also received more alarmist comments from members of my family, who were concerned that their family history should be exposed in this way on a publicly accessible social network.

These cases exemplify the intricate connections between the Blog-feed and the Kaleidoscope-feed, where personal histories intertwine with collective memories, creating a multifaceted exploration of identity and historical context. I would therefore like to conclude by underlining this crucial aspect of this work: its inseparable connection to the Facebook platform.

Profile: Sudeten German is an investigative story that could not have been written without its field and its research tool, the social network Facebook. By subscribing to the Sudeten pages, I discovered a hidden continent with thousands of members expressing themselves in polished, well-argued posts, far removed from the stereotypical representations of network writing.

What's more, by subscribing, my own profile has become Sudeten German. Its Kaleidoscope-feed is now mainly made up of posts from the community. While current events – the war in Ukraine, the bombings in Gaza – still punctuate this feed, it is through Sudeten publications that I access it. I consider the *personal* Kaleidoscope-feed, from which I draw to document the work, and my activities on Sudetenland pages, to be part of the work. But, once again, this feed remains not accessible to readers, as I can not access to my readers feed.

Conversely, I cannot, as the author, perceive how exactly the posts of “Profile: Sudeten German” appear on the Kaleidoscope-feeds of my readers: for example, the links that are created between these posts and the news concerning the war in Ukraine and the conflict between Israel and Palestine, as I write these lines. Still, I have noticed from some of the messages left by my readers that this contextualisation is taking place on Facebook and influencing the reception of the work.

CONCLUSION

One of the most important insights we gained from this research is indeed the impossibility of separating oneself from oneself when conducting research on social networks. That is why the preceding passages are also deeply inspired by auto-ethnographic methods, such as we advocate in “field semiotics.” We try also to highlight how social media opens new avenues for the reactivation and appropriation of sensitive and painful pasts by reshaping our view of our past, and therefore our identity. The two cases have in common to approach the World War II history from different perspectives, questioning the reasons for resistance or adherence to the Nazi regime.

In the case of *#ichbinsophiescholl*, the analysis clearly shows the specific problems raised by a collective creation where the historian's role in constructing the fictional narrative is never put into perspective or questioned. This choice of treatment introduces confusion among readers, who rightly question the ethical dimension of a project appropriating the identity of deceased personalities (Severo, 2022), under the pretext of fulfilling an educational mission. Thus, there is a risk of propagating an event-driven, trivialized, and romanticized vision of history (Stelmach, 2022), modeled on the aesthetic codes of social networks.

The ambiguities of these works, as we have pointed out several times, are also linked to the techno-semiotic specificities of social media. This, for example, makes it possible to invert the traditional roles between authors and readers, who are brought together to rewrite history. From this

blurring can arise forms of interpretative confusion, or conversely, greater reflexivity and interpretative tolerance, when an author-reader partnership is established that aims to account for different perspectives. Finally, the two chosen examples show that the memories of World War II are far from dead, given the interest they continue to generate among readers eager to collectively revisit these periods of history.

The question remains how these digital works, which contribute to the creation and survival of a plural collective memory, can themselves be preserved. Part of the difficulty in documenting and archiving digital literary works lies in the extremely fast evolution of these narrative forms – rapid in comparison with the speed of research, in any case. Social networks illustrate these dynamics: whether by migration from one platform to another or by the inclusion of new features developing new grammars, expressions on networks often change, including for the individuals conducting the research. Digital literature – like literature in general, but perhaps more visibly – is a fluid, evolving subject (Vitali-Rosati, 2020). Each publication is intended to receive recognition from other network members and to launch other publications in more or less direct response. Furthermore, the modalities of conversation vary greatly from one network to another. Documenting these changes is complex: it is impossible to generalise everyone's screen time, uses of a platform and personal reading contexts of a profile-based work on the personal Kaleidoscope-feed.

A goal of our future research projects will be to document profile-based works on electronic literature archives in order to valorise them as a new genre of popular writing. We could rely on methodologies that already exist and have been developed for a wide variety of digital literary works, such as the one developed by the Répertoire des écritures numériques⁵, a research project directed by Marcello Vitali-Rosati and coordinated by Emmanuelle Lescouet. One of the main aims of this repertoire is to understand the technical diversity of literary digital works and their implications for reading, the circulation of knowledge and digital literacy in the broadest sense. The team documents the basic metadata of each work: its title, its author(s), its publication period, its language, as well as the reading gestures that are mobilized to make it work.

As soon as we log on to a platform to manage our accounts, make a purchase or find our way around, we are profiled. The social network refines and expands this portrait by sending us recommendations. The aim, of course, is to make us captive. At the same time, the canvas of the social networks provide efficient tools for creating narrative identity, as a profile

5 <https://repertoire.ecrituresnumeriques.ca/s/repertoire/page/accueil>

not only reflects our personal expectations and desires, they are weighted with data from communities that resemble us.

Even when it commemorates past historical events, as in the examples discussed, a profile-based work is a translatory agent, a pointer and witness to contemporary society. By tracking it, we do not just attempt to understand what it narrates in its posts, but also to reconstruct which dimensions of the reader's and writer's identity it reflects.

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