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Screen Memories in Literary and Graphic Dementia Narratives. Irene Dische's "The Doctor Needs a Home" and Stuart Campbell's *These Memories Won't Last*

1 Freud's concept of *Deckerinnerungen* and (un)covered memories in dementia

In 1899, Sigmund Freud introduced the concept of *Deckerinnerungen* to argue that recollections of early childhood memories which are vivid, seemingly benign and apparently of great importance to his patients may in fact cover, mask or replace other memories of more disturbing emotional significance (Freud 1969a).[1] James Strachey (Freud 1962, 301) translated the term as "screen memories" for *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*. Similar to bodily symptoms or linguistic Freudian slips, these screen memories can be understood as coping mechanisms, compromise formations or even wish fulfilments that draw on condensation, displacement, defensive disguise and repression (Laplanche and Pontalis 1972; Berna-Glanz and Dreyfus 1984; Quindeau 2017). They enrich our understanding of the dynamics of remembrance because, as Samuel Weber (2010, 627) puts it, they "serve not so much to reveal as to conceal" and hence "operate to preserve forgetting at the heart of remembering." Although Freud was soon to discard this concept in favour of the more neutral notion of "psychic reality,"[2] the term remains central to psychoanalytic reflections concerning the extent to which memories originate in the past or are retroactively projected onto it (Sprengnether 2012; Reed and Levine 2015).

The idea that one memory can mask an earlier, perhaps more disturbing one, is well captured in Freud's term *Deckerinnerung* which would, more literally,

1 Freud (1969b) discussed the concept again in 1904 in *Zur Psychologie des Alltagslebens* (4, "Über Kindheits- und Deckerinnerungen").

2 Freud's patients at that time were mostly young women who recalled being sexually abused by family members. The concept of psychic reality argues that for the psyche, imagined occurrences – for instance, sexual fantasies – can have the same repercussions as (memories of) real events. This birth of the psyche as an autonomous entity with its own logic helped Freud to avoid having to discuss child abuse as prevalent in bourgeois society.

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translate not as 'screen memory' but as 'cover' or 'covering-up memory.' The German word clearly has a spatial dimension to it and may prompt ideas of secret hide-aways, criminal activities and even detective stories. Drawing on antique metaphors of mnemotechnics, his own topological model of the psyche and the notion that psychoanalysis is a kind of archaeology of the unconscious, Freud in general conceptualised memories as if they were layered or even three-dimensional entities which could be brought to the fore by disclosing them in a horizontal move (unveiling, unravelling, laying open) or through vertical activities (uncovering, shedding, unearthing, excavating). Of course, exposing such memories would normally take place in psychotherapy, but the in-depth search for buried truths has always been a common plot element in cultural discourse and the arts. This is perhaps why the psychoanalytic concept of *Deckerinnerungen* / screen memories has proved stimulating in the arts and humanities and has been taken up in literary and film studies, gender, memory and trauma studies (Felman 1981; Jacobus 1987; Goldmann 1989; Jelača 2016). In these fields, the notion of screen memories sometimes has a more metaphorical sense that allows scholars to connect, for instance, psychic dynamics with cultural theory and media history. According to Weber, most memories are in fact memory images – they take a visual form; therefore, the translation of *Deckerinnerung* as 'screen memory' evokes the "double function of the image as screen: first to provide a *support* for representations and projections, and second, to *screen out* other images and elements that could disrupt the unity of self-consciousness and therefore fall prey to repression" (2013, 340, emphasis added). While Weber's reading neglects Freud's three-dimensional understanding of remembrance, it successfully joins psychoanalysis with media theory. On that condition, images may work as screens that blend different political events, for instance, when Holocaust photos are projected onto other historical situations to link slavery, civil war and ethnic cleansing to genocide. As Andreas Huyssen (2003, 14) puts it, in international memory politics, print and image media may function "as memory screens in radically opposing ways, either enabling strong memory discourse and bringing a traumatic past to light or blocking any such public reckoning by insisting on the absolute incommensurability of the Holocaust with any other historical case." Against this background, recalling certain memories can be understood as a means to forget or evade others in a variety of contexts: some scholars argue that Auschwitz commemoration can work as a *Deckerinnerung* if it supplants other past (and present) wrongs, such as continued German antisemitism after the Holocaust or America's involvement in slavery and Native American genocide (Diner 1987; Rothberg 2009). The multiple logics of unconscious compromise formation and wilful surrogate make screen memories a key concept at the crossroads of individual and cultural memories.

But how does this concept relate to dementia? In the context of critical gerontology, *Deckerinnerung* can help to develop a more nuanced understanding of the neurologic and psychic dynamics of remembering and forgetting over an individual's life span and, as a consequence, help guide social interaction and patient care. Common wisdom has it that in old age, short-term memories are prone to be lost much sooner than remote memories. This is especially true for people who live with dementia. The sociologist and psychoanalyst Ilka Quindeau argues that the same holds true for screen memories which seem to be more recent and hence more fragile than the long-term memories they are supposed to cover (Hinrichs 2016). Based on empirical research with German old-age pensioners, Quindeau and Einert (2013) explain that individual wartime stories often hide even more disturbing childhood memories of terror, flight and persecution, but, above all, long-suppressed experiences of emotional neglect within the nuclear family. Because of neural processes in the ageing brain, these previously covered memories ultimately "unfold their meaning anew," so that a "former traumatization may be reactivated" in the ageing mind of the present (Quindeau 2019).

This essay draws on the rich semantics of the German-language term *Deckerinnerungen* and the English term 'screen memories.' Putting approaches from psychoanalysis, literary studies, comics studies and dementia research into conversation, it offers a comparative analysis of two dementia narratives that originate from different cultures and use distinct media and genres: a fictional story by the American German author Irene Dische and an animated webcomic by the Australian comic-book artist, writer and interactive designer Stuart (Stu) Campbell. My reading argues that despite these obvious differences, both Dische's "The Doctor Needs a Home" and Campbell's *These Memories Won't Last* link individual experiences of dementia to larger historical developments by reflecting on the topographical and visual aspects of screen memories. By bringing to the fore personal recollections of Nazi persecution or Second World War battlefields, each of these two artworks negotiates the personal, political and ethical implications of hidden memories that are uncovered or recovered through dementia.

2 Uncovering screen memories in Irene Dische's short story "The Doctor Needs a Home"

Irene Dische's "The Doctor Needs a Home" was published first in a German translation in 1990 and, five years later, in the original English as part of the short-

story collection *Strange Traffic* (Dische 1995).[3] The short story demonstrates how Alzheimer's disease can bring new knowledge to the fore, or, rather, knowledge that has hitherto been prey to disavowal or repression. As the screen memories and life-lies of an elderly New York doctor start to break down, long-cherished identity concepts – such as his understanding of having been a victim of Nazi persecution first and foremost – start to erode. As a consequence, Stach, a Jewish refugee with a German Yiddish linguistic background, has to face the "tainted memory" (Vice 2019, 117) of a more complex past than previously imagined.

By way of a first-person monologue, the reader learns that the main protagonist was born in Drohobycz in the Eastern European region of Galicia and had lived in Lviv and Vienna before fleeing to New York to escape the Nazi death camps. He earned a medical degree there, became an esteemed scholar and winner of a Nobel Prize, married, had a child and was later divorced.[4] Suffering from "ulcheimers" or "ulcer of the *Heimat*" – as Stach understands the term "Alzheimer's disease" (Dische 1995, 128) – in the narrative present, the old doctor daydreams of his mother and his sister Zesha, the remembrance of whom he seems to be devoted to with near-incestuous fervour. As the monologue unfolds and illness progresses, Stach gradually reverts to his first language: his English is increasingly shot through with German phrases such as "Kuss, Kuss, Schwesterchen" (Kiss, kiss, little sister; 133), words which are not translated because of the first-person perspective and may leave an English reader at a certain loss – a loss which might be understood as an (inverted) echo of the protagonist's feeling of disorientation in the United States. At the end of the story, his daughter admits him to a dementia care facility, the eponymous "home" that he takes for the longed-for "villa on the Danube where I belong" (135).

"The Doctor Needs a Home" could have become a sentimental account of family care, belated love, penitence and reconciliation, but the story turns into a dark account of an individual's involuntary self-exposure in illness against the backdrop of historical catastrophe, unmasking a deadly decision he took in the past. By drawing on the pivotal qualities of fiction's ability to tell stories "from within living with dementia" (Vedder 2012; Krüger-Fürhoff 2015; Hartung 2016), Dische's story lets the reader see the world through the old doctor's eyes. On the one hand, the reader shares Stach's Alzheimer's-related confusion as they try to piece together the various storylines and the contradictory information about the women who surround him in his everyday life, and whom the old man alternately

3 All page numbers given subsequently refer to the English-language version of the text.

4 According to Orendi (2000) and Jaenicke (2009), the main protagonist has been endowed with details from Dische's own father's biography.

takes for his mother, sister, former lovers, divorced wife, neighbour and daughter. On the other hand, the reader is likely to be alienated when confronted with the doctor's neologisms and Freudian slips that blend past experiences of violence with present-day racism: the narrator mentions "tonight on television a good pogrom" (Dische 1995, 134) and muses that in his favourite coffeehouse, "The Negroes replace the Jews in this particular café. They are much quieter as guests, though" (127). While the reader might wonder both about the historical and ideological background of such observations and the reliability of the narrator, over the course of the story, they are presented with three differing versions of Stach's escape to the United States:

> That was before hoodlums overran the country and killed [my father]. My sister and my mother went east, back to Galicia, and I went west: a simple equation that equals separation. (121)

> I was impatient to leave Austria. I bought Zesha two train tickets back to Drohobyc [*sic*]. I said, Take Mama back, and wait for me to send for you from New York. [. . .] I haven't heard from them in a long time. I am beginning to lose hope that they are alive. (131–132)

> This woman – who is she, how does she know anything? – tells me, "Listen, your sister isn't around, get it through your head, you were a bastard to her, you sent her home to Drohobyc [*sic*], remember, when the Nazis came. You only looked out for yourself. [. . .] The Nazis shot her, and your mother, and threw them into a ditch." Hubbub with the hot blue light, what do you call it: gas. (133–134)

The doctor clearly is a victim of Nazi persecution, but at the same time he also seems to be at least partially responsible for his mother's and sister's deaths because he prioritised saving his own life over theirs. Revealingly, his first account – "My sister and my mother went east, back to Galicia, and I went west" – offers a harmless topographical juxtaposition, one that translates the vertical dimension contained in the concept of *Deckerinnerung* or screen memory into a horizontal difference: going east versus west covers extermination versus survival. The second memory is more explicit in pitching Drohobycz against New York: Drohobycz is not only the name of a town in Poland (today Ukraine) but also the name of a ghetto within the city, where the Nazis detained Jewish people before sending them on to concentration camps.

The third version of the story suggests that his former wife knows more about the past events than the narrator himself remembers – or pretends to remember. Since the truth is only gradually unveiled to the reader, and understood alongside Stach's worsening memory problems, this type of slow revelation seems to be linked to the progression of the protagonist's Alzheimer's disease. The family farewell story is presented as part of the doctor's remote memories and gets more detailed in the second narration, matching the decline of his short-term memories. In the third instance, he seems to repeat a third-party's version of the historical

events. However, there is a connection between his role in his mother's and sister's death and his behaviour in the present, which betrays a certain carelessness, auto-aggression and suicidal thoughts. Following on from the third and possibly most truthful version of what has happened is this paragraph:

> Hubbub with the hot blue light, what do you call it: gas. I have left the gas stove on again. They smelled it. They burst into my apartment and danced around me like baboons shouting. Ovens are danes, they are ages, you must light them. With these things. They wave little sticks at me and strike them, and then there is fire everywhere. They are writing a long list of all the things I do wrong. [. . .] To teach everyone a lesson, I turn the gas stove on again without lighting it. Suddenly a woman walks in the door. [. . .] "Let us pack you a bag," she says. "We are taking you to a home. It's all arranged. My cab is waiting downstairs."
>
> (Dische 1995, 134–135)

Turning the gas stove on without lighting it certainly is a way to communicate with the persons around him, but it may also be understood as the doctor's implicit acknowledgement that his female family members were shot or gassed – and could be taken as a belated attempt to admit his role in this, share their fate and be reunited with them.

The doctor seems to forget what his brain had covered up with more acceptable memories for most of his adult life: dementia, paradoxically, reveals rather than conceals bitter insights, and his Alzheimer's is, as Elke Liebs (2003, 174) puts it, a "metaphor for the moment of truth." Stach turns out to be both victim and perpetrator, a broken old man who accepts his specific guilt as a Holocaust survivor not with words but through the way he tries to kill himself. Drawing on psychoanalytic concepts of screen memory, disavowal and repression, Dische's short story demonstrates that knowledge can come out of forgetting, and dementia might turn into an unexpected (albeit equally unpredictable) accomplice in the process of coming to terms with or unveiling the past.

3 Navigating memories in Stuart Campbell's webcomic *These Memories Won't Last*

Stuart Campbell's 2015 work *These Memories Won't Last* offers several aesthetic strategies – some of them specific to the medium of animated webcomics – to negotiate the personal continuity of somebody living with dementia, while at the same time conveying his disorientation and inner life to the comics reader. Created during an artist residency in Vienna, the comic was nominated in the Digital Comics category for an Eisner Award (arguably the most important comics industry awards in the United States) in 2016 and screened as an "interactive web

animation" at the International Documentary Film Festival Amsterdam (IDFA 2016). I will argue that *These Memories Won't Last* uses concepts of the screen and screen memories to represent the dynamics of forgetting and remembering in relation to wartime atrocities.

These Memories Won't Last tells the story of Campbell's 93-year-old grandfather Ladislav (Jim) Szoke, who was born in Hungary in 1922, raised by a Slovakian foster family, wounded by a landmine in the Second World War and treated by the British Red Cross. After the war, he immigrated to Australia where he married and raised a family. When his physical and mental health deteriorated after his wife had passed away, a referral to hospital "triggered a psychosis which thrust his mind back into the war," as the grandson narrates it. Jim is diagnosed with dementia, but the comic does not explain or explore how psychosis and dementia might relate to each other. Instead, it narrates how the grandfather whose mind seems to be "swimming in the past" sometimes fails to recognise his family, accuses his daughter and grandson of stealing his personal belongings (including his dentures), suspects the nurses for "poisoning the patients' food," but also enjoys relating memories from his childhood and youth.

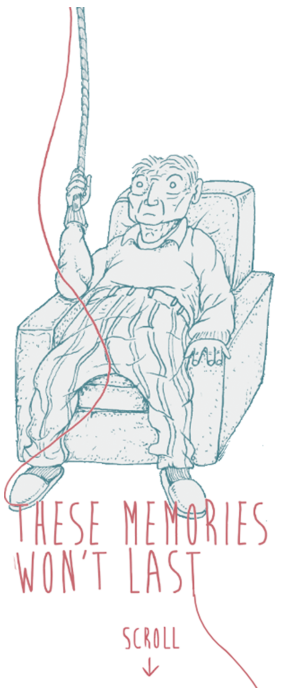


Figure 1: Entering Ladislav "Jim" Szoke's story by scrolling down.

These Memories Won't Last uses the specific media qualities of animated webcomics (Reichert 2011; Wilde 2015) to translate the experience of dementia onto a formal level. The comic opens with words that explicitly address the reader: "When you look back on your life, what memories would you choose to share?" followed by the information "loading memories" – a reference to memory loss but also a nod to the language of computer games. Instead of presenting clear-cut panels on a single computer screen or on several successive screens, Campbell uses the "infinite canvas" (McCloud 2000, 222) of the website, here a white background; the reader has to scroll down to discover the floating single-panel or multiple-panel images that are delivered in constant movement (Figure 1, n.p.). The excerpted images included in this essay are merely an immobilised and hence a pale imitation of the original online reading experience that I will discuss in more detail below. In addition to the different panels that show Jim, his memories and present events, *These Memories Won't Last* displays two abstract features that are visible throughout: a vertical rope that – as a visual metaphor – may trigger ideas of safety as well as suicide, and a wavy red string which could be the embodiment of the story's narrative thread or, indeed, a tongue-in-cheek reference to the "unbroken reading line" (McCloud 2000, 218) as one of sequential art's – here, webcomics' – aesthetic features. *These Memories Won't Last* has a responsive soundtrack by Lhasa Mencur which combines words, sounds and music, and it offers a note from the author that explains some of the biographical background and aesthetic choices.

To convey both the past and the present-day situation, *These Memories Won't Last* alternates between the grandfather's accounts and his grandson's comments; because both are presented in textboxes in the same red font, they are given equal authority on the reader's screen. On the visual level, the comic combines the present and past while at the same time keeping both layers of time clearly separate: Jim looks like an old man throughout the comic, but when he talks about memories from his past, he is transferred to settings from earlier times, such as the snowy wood the young boy once had to pass through running errands for his grandmother or an officer's room during the war. Overall, Jim is portrayed as a strong character who deeply impresses his grandson. Indeed, as relatives, the men share facial features and in one panel face each other, mirroring each other. Despite his diagnosis of dementia, the old man's eventual death is presented as self-determined: at the end of the storyline, Jim lets go of the rope (of life) when he fears that Australian foreign politics might lead to military aggression and suffering. Hence, the comic stresses his agency and dignity up until the very end of his life.

I argue that the concept of screen memories may be helpful to better understand Campbell's comic and the protagonist's dementia: With the help of flash

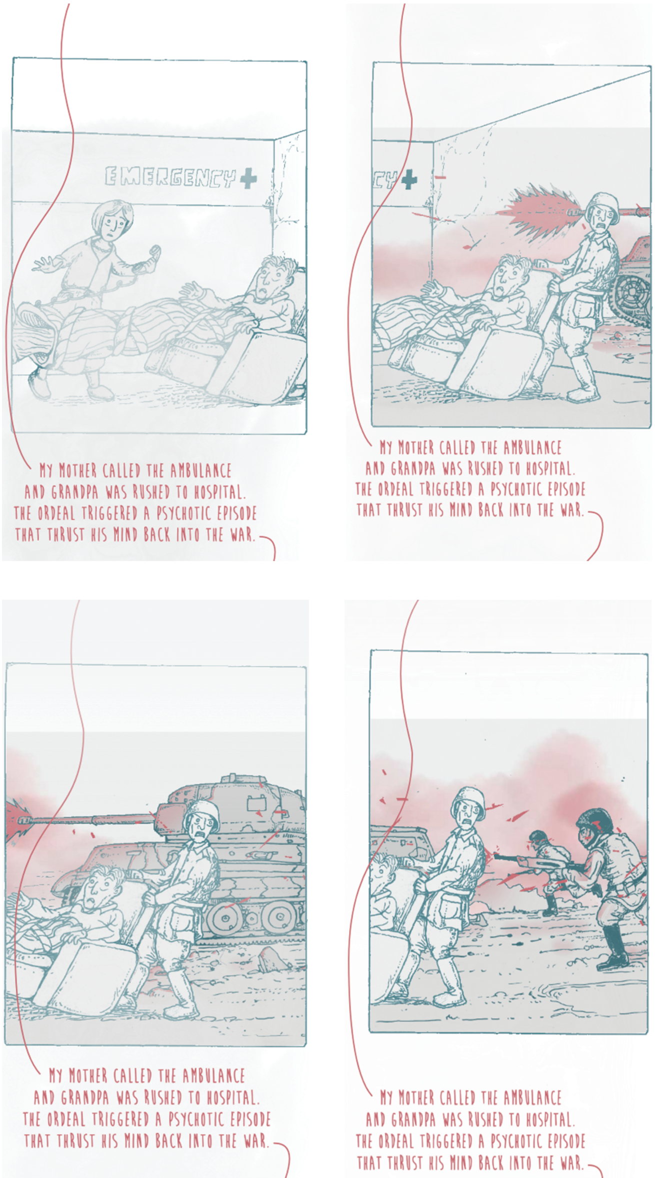
animation, the different visual elements slowly appear, continuously move down from the top of the computer screen and then either disappear at the bottom or simply fade away; at the same time, the red string that transports the comic's captions creeps up the screen so that text and image meet at some point. Some details in certain panels seem to be superimposed over others, referring to different temporal layers of the narrated life. But even if the reader points and clicks on the images – a standard technique with animated webcomics – they cannot get hold of them. In addition, the visual elements are not only ephemeral and in constant floating motion, but they are often barely visible through a kind of whitish fog, creating the rather frustrating sense that – notwithstanding the steady succession of images – one reads too slowly, has blurred vision and, as a result, cannot adequately fill the gaps between past and present story lines. Of course, this artistic strategy draws on Western cultural metaphors that equate clarity and visibility with insight and rationality, while darkness and obscurity are used to symbolise restricted cognitive faculties. As several scholars argue, these metaphors and visualisations have influenced the iconography of dementia in recent novels, films and patient information leaflets (Zeilig 2013; Schweda and Frebel 2015; Zimmermann 2017). In addition, once the reader scrolls down to see the next picture of *These Memories Won't Last*, they realise that – unlike in printed comics and most webcomics – they cannot turn or scroll back to refresh their memory: "The image and text will have faded away, unrecoverable" (Kunka 2018, 142). This means that although the reader has a certain control over the comic's pacing by scrolling at their individual speed, "panel delivery" (Goodbrey 2013, 190) is turned into a 'one-way experience.' This formal trait of *These Memories Won't Last* stresses the irreversible flow of time, deliberately (and contrary to expectations associated with digital comics) precludes the reader's agency (Wilde 2020) and prevents them from having an overview of the whole story. When the comic reader feels in desperate need of orientation, they gain emotional access and some insight into the experience of the old man with dementia.

In addition to these intentional erasures, an unintended technical one emerged (at least temporarily, as a more recent update remedied this): As stated in the webpage's note from the author, while working on his webcomic Campbell realised that "the latest HTML 5 code" he and programmer Vitaliy Shirokiy used might not work with newer internet browsers, restricting the temporal accessibility of the story and hence Jim's memories. This limited availability not only draws attention to the software support on which the webcomic relies, but it can also be associated with the biological deterioration of memory in people with dementia. This was exactly Campbell's intention, as he explains in his note about the format: "I had the idea that as the reader navigated through the story it would deteriorate, just like grandpa's memories." At the end of his introductory remarks,

the artist pleads, "If you get the chance to read this, please do your best to remember." Hence, the technical problems one experiences when trying to read Campbell's webcomic may be understood as a comment on the evanescence of data, or knowledge, in the information age, as well as a metaphor for the frailty of both the human brain and cultural memory.

Because of his dementia, Jim revisits (and, in the comic, quite literally returns to) the past of cherished childhood recollections, but he inadvertently also finds himself in the grip of wartime experiences. These disturbing memories that were brought to the fore by psychosis and marked the outbreak – or facilitated the diagnosis – of dementia begin, as Andrew Kunka (2018, 144) describes it, "to scroll horizontally within a single panel border that appears on screen, instead of the vertical scrolling that has dominated so far." In this sequence of panels (Figures 2–5, n.p.), the reader can discern different visual and temporal layers that start to intermingle: the black-and-white drawings of Jim's recent medical condition in the foreground are juxtaposed to a grey-and-red war scene in the background, signalling that, as the two scenes overlie, a threatening past intrudes into the old man's present.[5] At the same time, the soft soundtrack is invaded by distant battle sounds of sirens, gunfire and explosions. Jim continues to be represented by the same elderly man in a hospital bed, first on his way to medical care, then pushed by a young soldier who is chased by enemy troops (wearing black boots instead of his white ones); Jim's landmine injury fuses with his present heart problems. Owing to recent distressing events – his wife's death and his poor health – the boundaries between past and present collapse, leading to an accumulation of traumatic experiences that the old man struggles to process. Displaying multiple protagonists and events that span more than 70 years, these panels superimpose the experience of distress in present-day Australia onto harrowing memories from European battlefields. The medium of comics might be an especially apt one to portray a psychic reality that does not or cannot reliably distinguish between fantasy and reality, past and present, or, to translate it into visual registers, foreground and background, or different layers of the screen. Campbell's hospital and war images (Figures 2–5) powerfully convey the fact that people with dementia – like all humans – do not simply 'lose' memories but that their brains distort, conflate and rework them. In his state of confusion, Jim seems to remember or re-enact things he had not mentioned to his family before; his changed mental state brings them to the fore.

5 Ehrhardt (2016) presents these sequences as a loop on the website 'Kill Screen' which is dedicated to the intersection of play and interactivity. Such a loop stresses that Jim cannot escape his distorted memories but it cannot convey the reader's experience of having to cope with blurred and dissolving panels.



Figures 2-5: Visual blending of disturbing experiences from the past and the present.

While comics in print often employ a specific frame-gutter architecture to collapse temporal distinctions (Chute 2016, 4, 21), Campbell's webcomic uses both the sequence of several panels slowly emerging on the screen and the staggered arrangement of multiple images within one single panel to make visual Jim's distress and temporal confusion. These flashbacks presume Jim to have a continuous sense of self but also assume him to be mentally fragile. In *These Memories Won't Last*, dementia seems to be a threat not because it evokes too few but rather too many memories, and violent and traumatic ones at that. The illness is not presented as defined by a sense of loss but rather by an abundance of haunting memories. And as the reader scrolls down the seemingly infinite canvas, the animation in which Jim's story is presented, the pace of which cannot be influenced by the reader, makes them empathise and feel at least some of the protagonist's despair. In addition to the means of printed comics to tell and show life stories dis/continued by dementia, for instance by working with the spaces in between panels, Campbell's webcomic plays with the aspects of time and movement to elucidate the frailty of human memory, the urgency of listening to loved ones and the ethical obligation to share stories of lost and regained memories.

4 Conclusion

Both the short story and the autobiographically based webcomic place their protagonists with dementia centre stage, granting them visibility (Campbell) and a personal worldview (Dische) in a way that honours their individuality and personhood. At the same time, what the old men remember does not go unchallenged by their respective audiences. From each narrative, the reader (who likely belongs to a younger generation) learns something that exceeds the (older) protagonist's grasp. Although Campbell's opening question to the reader, "When you look back on your life, what memories would you choose to share?" suggests a certain agency (in terms of choice) and acknowledges that individual memories are part of larger cultural frames (in terms of a shared understanding of which memories should be communicated and agreed upon), the animated webcomic in fact illustrates a rather limited power of control: very much like the short story, the comic involves the reader in the disturbing effects of remembering through forgetting. Drawing on multiple versions of (media) screen and (psychoanalytic) screen memories, "The Doctor Needs a Home" and *These Memories Won't Last* reflect how an individual's loss and return of memory can get intertwined with collective memories of mortal danger during the Nazi occupation and the Second World War. Both

artworks seek to negotiate the personal, political and ethical implications of long-buried memories that are uncovered or recovered by dementia in the context of cultural representations of it: they make the case that the protagonists' illness paves an uncomfortable way to harrowing truths that had been forgotten, repressed or substituted by screen memories for quite some time but ultimately, for better or worse, are not lost or settled or overcome, but unfold on the minds' and the narrations' surfaces.

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