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2021

<https://doi.org/10.25969/mediarep/16251>

Veröffentlichungsversion / published version  
Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

### Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Batori, Anna: “Everything is Connected”. Narratives of Temporal and Spatial Transgression in Dark. In: *VIEW. Journal of European Television History and Culture*, Jg. 10 (2021), Nr. 19, S. 112–124. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.25969/mediarep/16251>.

### Erstmalig hier erschienen / Initial publication here:

<https://doi.org/http://doi.org/10.18146/view.246>

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# “EVERYTHING IS CONNECTED”

## NARRATIVES OF TEMPORAL AND SPATIAL TRANSGRESSION IN DARK

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**Abstract:** The paper discusses the storytelling formulas of the first season of the German series *Dark* (2017–2020) by focusing on the key temporal and spatial aspects of seriality in the show, such as the time frame of diegesis (story time), the temporal structure of the story (discourse and narration time) and the unique temporal installation of the series. As argued, the story and visual textuality of *Dark* not only transcends time and space – thus to provide us with a complex narrative set – but, by atemporal and spatial storytelling jumps, it creates a map of inconsistencies of double discontinuity fairly new to television and serial narration. By focusing on these spatial-temporal aspects of the series, the paper sketches a new approach to postmodern television formulas, while it also offers a possible interpretation to the national characteristics of the production based on the recurring theme of captivity in time.

**Keywords:** German history, complex television, postmodern television, time-travel, collective memory, *Dark*

### 1 Introduction

The debut of Baran bo Odar’s *Dark* (2017–2020) on 1 December 2017 was a widely expected event that not only kept German audience in great anticipation to see the first German Netflix series that may re-write national television history but attracted an international audience too who expected a “precision-engineered, universe-bending” mystery.<sup>1</sup> *Dark* received praise from film and television critics for its puzzled narration,<sup>2</sup> outstanding cast and excellent cinematography.<sup>3</sup> The German press saw the birth of a new era that entered German television into an internationally recognized frame,<sup>4</sup> while acclaiming the show’s visual composition<sup>5</sup> and convoluted chronology that opened a new chapter in German television storytelling.<sup>6</sup> The international reaction to *Dark* was even more glowing. Critics described the German science-fiction series as “the best new Netflix crime,”<sup>7</sup> a “must-see mind-bending fairy tale”<sup>8</sup> that questions “time’s sequential nature.”<sup>9</sup> The second and third (final) season have also been hailed as “wilfully confusing and deliciously creepy”<sup>10</sup> “brain-melting,”<sup>11</sup> “defiantly bizarre, twisty, and more addictive than ever,”<sup>12</sup> one that you do not *watch* but *solve*.<sup>13</sup>

Indeed, the theme of *Dark* is time itself that, while being wrapped around a science fiction formula, wrestles with themes of collective memory, nostalgia and history. These topics are built along a special, jigsaw-like atemporal chronology quite complicated to comprehend. The negative reviews of the show – although not many – highlight the frustrating experience that while intertwining its plots in different spatial-temporal dimensions,<sup>14</sup> *Dark* seemed to overcomplicate its narration.<sup>15</sup> The various temporal and spatial dimensions of the series not only transcend time and space via atemporal and spatial storytelling jumps, but it creates a map of inconsistencies of double discontinuity. *Dark* deals with time-travel through a multigenerational discourse, while keeping the multiple plot threads under a united, well-structured temporal concept whose understanding demands extra caution from the audience. Still, the ever-growing fandom of the show whose enigma-solving videos can be found in a great number on YouTube, Twitter and question-and-answer platforms such as Quora and Reddit, proves that people are fond of piecing together the puzzle and solving the time-travelling mystery by consuming the show at a slow pace or re-watching the whole first season. Netflix stated that *Dark* is one of their most-watched non-English series, which makes the German show one of their most successful European productions.<sup>16</sup> With the proliferation of locally produced video-on-demand series, scholars must pay attention to the changing landscape of television narratives and the question of national specificity in these productions. How is the global trend of complex television narration made nationally specific in the case of *Dark*? What makes a television series a national production?

By focusing on these questions and the first season of the series, this article offers an interpretation of the national characteristics of *Dark* whose narration, as argued below, makes rich use of references to German history. The paper investigates the fragmented time-frame and spatial set of *Dark*'s first season within the confines of its multi-layered storytelling discourse and, through the textual and narrative analysis of some selected scenes, highlights the key role of memory, history and nostalgia that, while driving the story forward, create a complex national production.

## 2 Global Narratives, Global Histories (?)

Recent scholarship has argued that with the proliferation of media distribution platforms, such as Netflix, Hulu, BBC's iPlayer or Amazon Video, a new era of network has been developed that saw the birth of complex television.<sup>17</sup> Influenced by vast technological, industrial and regulatory changes after the millennium and supported by the transformation of production, exhibition and distribution practices, new narrative forms and new aesthetic trends were born that have drastically re-written traditional storytelling formulas.<sup>18</sup> Series like *Heroes* (2006–2010); *Narcos* (2015–2017); *Mad Men* (2007–2015); *The End of the F\*\*\*ing World* (2017–2019); *Fleabag* (2016–2019); *You* (2018–) or *I Am Not Okay With This* (2020) – just to mention a few – set up a new paradigm in television storytelling characterized by interweaving, cumulating and often fractured long-term story arcs, kinetic visuals, innovative forms of transmedia and new orienting paratexts.<sup>19</sup>

It seems that televisuality, a term coined by John Caldwell<sup>20</sup> to signal a shift in the stylistic presentation of television, has been slowly overwritten by quality television narratives which operate with higher quality of storytelling and *mise-en-scène*. As argued by Caldwell, the excessive visuality of the television programmes in the 1980s and 1990s America not only brought about auteur packaging and avantgarde spectacle in order to differentiate these shows from other tv productions – as is the case with *Northern Exposure* (1990–1995) – but by doing so, they slowly pushed content behind style.<sup>21</sup> In *Television's Second Golden Age: From Hill Street Blues to ER*, Robert Thompson offers a different interpretation of the Caldwellian televisual age by establishing twelve characteristics of quality television.<sup>22</sup> These include genre-mixing, provoking topics, a pursuit of upscale viewers, the creators' creative autonomy as well as overlapping plot lines and narrative complexity. In his view, series like *Twin Peaks* (1990–1991) or *St. Elsewhere* (1982–1988) have re-articulated classical television by producing quality dramas with realistic depth, transgression of genres and interconnecting storylines that all prompt critical spectatorship. Similar to Thompson, in *Storytelling and Television*, Kristin Thompson argues that programmes like *The Simpsons* (1989–) or *Six Feet Under* (2001–2005) opened a new chapter in television history for they put greater emphasis on psychological depth, non-linear storytelling formulas and authorial comment which all create art television.<sup>23</sup> It seems that the post-2010 proliferation

of streaming services only intensified the spread of quality television programmes and deepened the narrative complexity of series. The new era of television narrative has been referred to as the third phase of the medium, an ephemeral phenomenon that offers "new narrative and distributive temporalities."<sup>24</sup> In this sense, television functions as a complex time machine<sup>25</sup> that, on the one hand, produces a wider narrative experience by offering unlimited streaming to viewers who have absolute access to shows and paratexts.<sup>26</sup> This new form of spectatorship that involves binge- and marathon watching,<sup>27</sup> higher spectatorial awareness<sup>28</sup> and an evolving form of fandom<sup>29</sup> is, on the other hand, complemented by a new narrative practice that creates temporal implausibilities by structuring the story along atemporal forms. The new, disjointing narrative experience not only refers to the erratic viewing practices of online platforms – the viewer can re-watch, stop or forward the discourse time of the series<sup>30</sup> – but encompasses complex net of narrative temporalities that these shows develop. The temporal structure of complex television series often incorporates jumping chronologies,<sup>31</sup> temporal distortions<sup>32</sup> and multiple storylines<sup>33</sup> that cause visual and cognitive disorientation in the viewer. The temporal and spatial complexity in *The Leftovers* (2014-2017); *Stranger Things* (2016-); *Maniac* (2018), or *Westworld* (2016-) – again, just to mention a few – not only encompasses flash-backs, flash-sideways from parallel worlds, interweaving plotlines and mental images, but suggests a much greater notion of time itself. As Kelly argues, the new series "are not just about temporal complexity but are temporally complex themselves,"<sup>34</sup> which prompts viewers to re-structure the spatial-temporal jigsaw outlined in a complex series. This new narrative agency not only requires a sophisticated co-productive participation from the viewer but leads to a set of broader questions that prompt us to re-define current cultural practices and the very role of complex television in the twenty-first century local and regional landscape.

### 3 Postmodern Television, National Narratives

As the above-mentioned examples illustrate, complex temporality is not a genre-specific phenomenon or concept, but it refers to a great variety of television series that all work with a sophisticated, often mosaic-like timeline and space. It could be argued that this new form of art television, as Thompson<sup>35</sup> has it, opened the gates to postmodern television.<sup>36</sup> Indeed, while the postmodern turn in film has been the centre of great scholarly interest, less has been devoted to the postmodern turn in television.

Although television does not seem to follow the realist-modernist-postmodernist cultural trajectories of art history or cinema – thus having skipped late modernism<sup>37</sup> – contemporary practices of complex television suggest the birth of a new, postmodern age in televisual practices. Besides self-reflexivity, intertextuality, visual and narrative disorientation, fragmentation, the contamination of genres, irony, pastiche and hypertextual travels that have been identified as main trademarks of postmodern visuality,<sup>38</sup> contemporary series are preoccupied with the question and interrelation of time and space.

These new narrative temporalities, as Kelly has it, can be "located within a much wider early twenty-first-century spatio-temporal zeitgeist"<sup>39</sup> that, as Jameson<sup>40</sup> pointed out, suggests a new crisis of historicity and memory. According to Jameson, the effect of consumer capitalism to erase history gives birth to a deep obsession with the nostalgic revisitation of the past that is represented by stereotypical repetitions in nostalgia films. Thus, to compensate the lack of history, postmodernism dwells into narratives that, on the one hand, mobilize "a vision of the future in order to determine its return to a now historical present" and, in an allegorical way, activate "a vision of the past, or of a certain moment of the past."<sup>41</sup> What Jameson outlines this way, is not only the crisis of history, but the very failure of the "then" – that of future narratives – that could give a new identity to the "now," the becoming of history.

*Dark* exemplifies the loss of historical sense on two levels. The show features time-travelling into three different historical epochs, while interweaving memory-images and mosaic-like assemblages of past, present and future. The series centres around a mystery – a series of disappearance in the small German town of Winden – that the police are unable to solve. The investigation not only sheds light to dark, generational secrets that reveal the interconnected

histories of four families living in a remote village but introduces a supernatural twist that explains the mysterious vanishing of young boys from Winden. That is, thanks to the accident in the Winder Nuclear Power Plant in 1986, a wormhole has opened up in the local cave that connects the years of 1953, 1985 and 2019 via time-travel, thus generating a thirty-three-year cycle of space-time transgression. The disappearance of Mikkel (Daan Lennard Liebrez) – the local policeman's son – triggers a series of events that eventually lead to the main protagonist – the teenager Jonas (Louis Hofmann) – to discover the truth behind his father's suicide and the young boy's sudden vanishing by crossing space-time dimensions. While Jonas travels back to 1986 to find Mikkel, Ulrich (Oliver Masucci), the father of the boy finds a way back to 1953 where he hopes to stop the person who he thinks started the series of crimes in town. These main lines are backed up by intertwining sub-stories that not only outline a map of generational connections but offer an analytical explanation to the very phenomenon of spacetime, wormholes, time-travel and gravity.

It has been stated that time-travel is an important phenomenon in postmodern science fiction,<sup>42</sup> but in the case of *Dark*, it gets a national dimension by jumping between 1953, 1986 and 2019. In Germany, the Holocaust and the East-West division all constructed a problematic national self-understanding that, as Robertson and Kim argue, is shaped by memory rather than history.<sup>43</sup> What was born this way is a self-critical memory-culture<sup>44</sup> that, by focusing on the traumatic events of the past, discloses a negative self-image.<sup>45</sup> The ethical question of *Dark* – whether we can change the flow of events and so prevent certain tragedies – points out this very fragmented point of national self-understanding. By offering a cyclical understanding of time where events and epochs constantly repeat themselves, *Dark* constructs an ever-recurring cycle of historical events.

Without doubt, one of the most significant hidden references to German history in the first season comes with the key character of Noah (Mark Waschke) – the ruler of time and an evil force in *Dark*. The mysterious priest with the Emerald Tablet tattoo on his back secretly operates a time-machine and orders Helge (Peter Schneider) to kidnap children to conduct experiments on them. Writings on Nazi physicians who tortured children to do clinical research on their bodies and brains in the first half of the 1940s has been widely discussed in scholarship.<sup>46</sup> More than half of the special units where scientists of the Third Reich experimented on humans were allocated to children who underwent bone, muscle and nerve transplantation as well as immunization, sterilization, genetical and electroshock experiments.<sup>47</sup> According to estimates, around 5,000 children were murdered within the euthanasia killing programme in the children's wards.<sup>48</sup> This implicit parallel with German Nazism in *Dark* is conveyed via the dungeon where children are held captive to test the time machine. As Noah argues, "After looking into hell (...), it becomes part of you." Transcending time, as he states, would re-order events to "remove the evil and pain from the world." The hope of being capable of changing past events is also emphasized via the setting of the room.



Figure 1. The dungeon in *Dark*.

In contrast to the dark colouring and rainy environment of other scenes, the dungeon is over-lit by fluorescent lightning and light blue colours that all makes the room part of another universe. Interestingly, by murdering children – who are bound and gagged in an electronic chair – Noah's actions call forth the Nazi past and so, they erase any hope of altering the past. As the experiments fail, children are murdered, and their bodies are left with burst eardrums and burnt eyes in the forest.<sup>49</sup>

The series offers no way out of the burden of the past and suggests that, because time is not linear and, following the idea of the Nietzschean eternal return, everything lives in a connected circle of events, the events of the past cannot be altered. In this way, the characters drift in a floating state (*Schwebzustand*), an in-between state of their (unknown and often fearful) identities.

## 4 Narrating Time

As Jameson argues, "[...] science fiction equally corresponds to the waning or the blockage of [...] historicity, and, particularly in our own time [...] to its crisis and paralysis, its enfeeblement and repression. Only by means of a violent formal and narrative dislocation could a narrative apparatus come into being capable of restoring life and feeling to this only intermittently functioning organ that is our capacity to organize and live time historically."<sup>50</sup> "The postmodern collapse of historical distinctions,"<sup>51</sup> as Booker has it, have already been in the organic time-travel concept of the series' first season that takes us back to 1953, 1986 and 2019. What Jameson proposes, however, is not only the distortion of understanding and creating history but the renewal of narrative forms that, in the case of *Dark*, form a labyrinthine time-memory mosaic.

This formal experiment includes several flash-backs, flash-forwards, ellipses and memory-images that all serve the circular establishing of the narrative. The story of the first season ends and starts in 2052 – a date that we can only presume from the thirty-three-year-circle – and portrays a huge concrete wall filled with the photographs of the protagonists who are connected by a single thread. Just like Theseus in Greek mythology, the viewer is encouraged to unravel the connection between the characters in the story to find the way out of the labyrinth-like universe. Helping this exercise, *Dark* guide the spectator through several montage-sequences and inserts that locate the spectator within a more exact timeframe.



Video 1. Personal (inter-)connections in *Dark*.

In the first episode for instance, the camera slowly pans through the 2019 photos of Tronte Nielsen, Regina Tiedemann, Helge Doppler, Jana Nielsen, Charlotte Doppler, Ines Kahnwald, while juxtaposing the images of Ulrich Nielsen, Katharina Nielsen and Hannah Kahnwald from 1986 and 2019. The photo-montage of the main protagonists gets featured in the third, fifth, eighth and the ninth episodes, which underscores the series' overarching frame and orientates the spectators (Figure 2).



Figure 2. Everything is connected. The mysterious wall of photos in *Dark*.

It is not only individual photographs that are portrayed in split-frames, but *Dark's* first season also helps the comprehension of the story via family pictures. Family photographs in television function, as Holdsworth put it, "as a conduit, allowing an intersection with wider historical narratives and acting as an anchor, connecting the viewer to the subject of the investigations."<sup>52</sup> The portraits of the four families living in Winden not only endow the narrative with a rhythmic structure but when they are torn to pieces – as Hannah does for instance – they signify a lost, wounded community in danger. Moreover, thanks to these photographs, time gets dismembered into smaller memory-frames that, while assembling past and present, call attention to a broader sense of memory consciousness in German society. In this way, *Dark* becomes a form of memory itself that pinpoints the problematic notion of a united discourse on German history, one divided by the East-West opposition and the burden of the Nazi past and the GDR, which all leave "a double burden of traumatic recollections"<sup>53</sup> on German consciousness. This results "in a never ending cycle of negative self-questioning and doubt that renders the construction of a positive, affirmative identity impossible"<sup>54</sup> that *Dark* illustrates with the protagonists' meeting with their elder/younger selves and the identity crisis they experience during these encounters.

## 5 Solving Time: Complex Television

As if explaining the inescapability of the Nietzschean eternal recurrence and so the repeatedness of (German) history, *Dark* uses complex focalization techniques. Besides the visual guidance in the form of photographic sequences, *Dark* features intradiegetic narration that explains the eternal circularity of time. In the first episodes, the person of the narrator remains concealed, and it is only the eighth part of the series that reveals the source of the voice that belongs to H.G. Tannhaus, the clock-maker. While he already appears in a television broadcast in episode two, and his narration frames the first and fourth episodes, it is only the eighth episode that clarifies his personality. In this way, his narration is first introduced on an extradiegetic narrative level that becomes intradiegetic with the progress of the events and the introduction of Tannhaus's character. In contrast to traditional televisual formulas where diegetic and non-diegetic retelling and narration contribute to the viewer's better understanding of the story, *Dark* operates

an unusual treatment of serial poetics by omitting any story information that would help narrative comprehension. It does, however, work with a cliff-hanger structure that reserves viewers' attention. At the end of each episode, the series summarizes the narrative turns in a prolonged montage-sequence which, thanks to the slow-paced, lyrical soundtrack and the flow of slow-motion images, maintains an absolute aesthetic continuity and guides spectators towards the next episode.



Video 2. Lyrical flow in *Dark*.

The only useful cues that add to the narrative comprehension of *Dark*'s first season are the intertitles that signify the exact time of narrative space. The first concrete date – 21 June 2019 – is announced in the pilot when the grown-up Mikkel (Sebastian Rudolph) commits suicide. A couple of seconds later, another insert appears on screen – 4 November 2019 – that starts the main storyline of *Dark*. After three months of psychiatric treatment, it is the day when Jonas re-enters school and, through his perspective, we get introduced into the life of Winden. Despite Jonas's hallucinations that might be confusing – he sees his dead father and dreams of black tint coming out of his ears – the first episode follows a straightforward narration. It is only the end of the second episode when the first comprehensive time-line – 1986 – appears and the series starts to challenge narrative convention. Again, thanks to the inserts that orientate us to 6 November 1986 in the second episode, the viewer gets a clear glimpse of the space-time set that hosts the child Mikkel. However, the younger selves of the already known characters from the first episode are confusing to recognise, and when Mikkel rings the bell of his future-father's door or visits the hospital where his future-mother works, the understanding of events requires exceptional attention.

With spending an average of two minutes at a time in each of the three epochs (1953, 1986, 2019) from the seventh episode on, the re-structuring of the story reaches its peak of confusion. From episode seven to episode ten, the series offers a simultaneous parallel representation of time in different historical epochs, while also complicating the plots by introducing new characters and their uncanny relations to each other. While the images of different historical times are connected by well configured long-shots and match-cuts that borrow an excellent flow to the visual sphere, the narrative level of the story remains puzzling. It requires a great analytical potential from the viewer to remember the characters from 1953, 1986 and 2019, while understanding and recalling the circular sense of the storytelling form. What is born in this way, is an extremely complicated map of memories and understanding practices that emphasize the interconnectedness of events and the inescapable sense of circular time.

The cyclical sense of time is not only emphasized via time-travels into different eras but is constantly referenced on the diegetic and extra-textual level of the series. The show builds on the work of emblematic German theorists



and their ideas – such as the Einstein-Rosen bridge or the Reidemeister-moves – while explaining the organic sense of time. *Dark* is laden with symbolic meanings and hypertextual connections that all guide the viewer to understand time as a cage that keeps protagonist – and the German nation – captive. For instance, *A Journey Through Time* – a fictional book written by the scientist H.G. Tannhaus (Christian Steyer), who builds a time-machine in the series and whose name and work closely references H.G. Wells's *Time Machine* and Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* (1982) – becomes the cornerstone of *Dark* for it outlines the very correlation of past, present and future.<sup>55</sup> While guiding the elder Jonas (Andreas Pietschmann), Tannhaus creates a thirty-three-year periodic circle of historical circularity – the so-called lunar-solar cycle – where "everything repeats itself." Moreover, he calls attention to the symbol of the triquetra, the trinity knot, that alludes to the interconnectedness of events where a third dimension is accessible when one crosses the Einstein-Rosen bridge. The knot as a symbol constantly re-appears as narrative enigma in the visual text as well as the discursive level of the series, in this way to signal the interconnectedness of history in a central point. Playing Ariadne is a school piece, Martha (Lisa Vicari) presents a monologue on the eternity of time, stating that "[...] all things remain as before. The spinning wheel turns, round and round in a circle. One fate tied to the next. A thread, red like blood, that cleaves together all our deeds. One cannot unravel the knots. But they can be severed. [...] Yet something remains behind that cannot be severed. An invisible bond, [...] nothing ceases to be, [...] all remains." Besides the metaphor of Ariadne's thread and its reference to the understanding of the mosaic-like narrative, the knot represents a further dimension of the burden of time that cannot be erased. Like in knot theory, the ends of the string form links that cannot be untangled into a simple loop. Similarly, the history of a nation and the narrative of *Dark* can only be constructed and understood via time-fragments that eventually outline the organic interconnectedness of personal and collective narratives. In this way, while time functions as a liquid realm, history remains fixed – something that the protagonists must face when looking for their own identity.

## 6 Narrating (Anti-)Heimat

Supported by the sense of existential homelessness, the cyclical understanding of time has been the guiding principle of the narratives of the New German Cinema<sup>56</sup> and the contemporary art film of Berlin School.<sup>57</sup> The directors of Berlin School – Thomas Arslan (*In the Shadows/Im Schatten*, 2010), Angela Schanelec (*Passing Summer/Mein langsames Leben*, 2001) and Christian Petzold (*The State I am In/Die Innere Sicherheit*, 2001; *Wolfsburg*, 2003), Christoph Hochhäusler (*The City Below/Unter dir die Stadt*, 2010) Benjamin Heisenberg (*The Sleeper/Schläfer*, 2005), Ulrich Köhler (*Bungalow*, 2002), Valeska Grisebach (*Longing/Sehnsucht*, 2006) – all follow an anti-*Heimat* thematic by featuring constant travel, national division, alienation and rootlessness.<sup>58</sup> The never-ending flaneuring of characters in these films is often constructed along the concept of cyclicity that dislodges straightforward narrative time.<sup>59</sup>

The loss of *Heimat* and so the sense of a stable, secured community and rural idyll that was also a significant characteristic of the *Autorenkino* – together with anger and fear – seem to have a guiding force in German visual narratives.<sup>60</sup> The characters often wander in abandoned rural settings and forests that, because they are unable to find a fix and secure place, suggest an eternal identity-crisis.<sup>61</sup> In this sense, *Dark* follows the aesthetic path of German national cinema and the Berlin School by setting up a space of complete homelessness where characters – always represented in huge winter jackets – constantly shift between the local school, the police station and the forest (Figure 3). The never-ending wandering, the industrial landscape of the nuclear power plant and the changed perception of the archetypal German landscape whose emblematic symbol, the forest signifies threat rather than peace, are all part of the anti-*Heimat* conception of the series and the contemporary national art cinema of Germany.<sup>62</sup> Ghostliness,<sup>63</sup> constant travel,<sup>64</sup> in "anywhere-places"<sup>65</sup> and the inbetween-identity of the protagonists who are unable to find home<sup>66</sup> are all narrative cornerstones of the Berlin School that *Dark* inherits.



Figure 3. Wandering in the anti-*Heimat*

The sense of homelessness – that is further supported by stuckness in time – is exacerbated by the ever-present feeling of fear. Baran bo Odar and Jantje Friese, the creators of the show, stressed the German anti-*Heimat* essence of *Dark* by stating that they built the series upon the sense of “German Angst”<sup>67</sup> that, among others, utilizes the German paranoia of nuclear power,<sup>68</sup> which even led to the country’s decision to phase out its nuclear power plants.<sup>69</sup> Indeed, it is the malfunction of the plant that leads to the birth of the wormhole in 1986 and which eventually opens the gate to the cold-war era. The year not only alludes to the nuclear disaster of Chernobyl, but the Bavarian State Ministry’s approval on 12 June to demolish the Niederaichbach nuclear power plant (KKN) – Europe’ first administrative act of this kind.<sup>70</sup>

1953, another significant year, guides us back into one of the most fearsome periods of German history. It signals the East German uprising that ended with the incarceration of more than ten thousand people and cost the lives of about forty citizens who rebelled against the authoritarian state.<sup>71</sup> 1953 thus marks East Germans’ loss of illusion in socialism and the consolidation of the authoritarian framework of the GDR and as such, it signals the state’s ultimate power over citizens. 1986, on the other hand, reflects upon an invisible and uncontrollable power source that the protagonists are subjected to. In 2052, these histories collide. The post-apocalyptic, grey German landscape at the end of the first season and then in the second one, indicates a nuclear accident in Winden and so the failure of the present-day nuclear phase-out policy. Also, by depicting the protagonists’ negative transformation over the years and the way they became ruthless leaders of their groups – as is the case with the mute Elisabeth Doppler (Sandra Borgmann), or Adam (Dietrich Hollinderbäumer) in the second season – *Dark* signals the inescapable repetition of history (1953, 1986); the biggest fears of a nation return in a never endless circle.

## 7 Conclusion

While I agree with the statement that new televisual narratives have been highly influenced by the twenty-first century technological inventions, production practices and postmodernism, it would be rather simplistic to reduce complex televisual formulas to the level of industrial developments and new aesthetic forms. As the paper outlined, the time-travel narrative and its complex, multi-layered form in *Dark* indicate a national memory-crisis that forms contemporary German consciousness. Time-travel in *Dark* is by no means a nostalgic – or Westaligic – gesture that idealizes the past. Although the show has an absolute West-German perspective – there are not hints on the DGR in the series – the Germany it depicts is a deeply fragmented, dark and rigid territory. The monochrome colours, the overriding

night-scenes, the eerie music and ever-present wintery landscape and weather all emphasize the fearful quality of the series. Whether we enter 1953, 1986, 2019 or 2052 – or 1888 and 2020 in the following seasons – the dominating tone of the visual text is grey. The suffocating atmosphere exacerbating, the driving force of characters in all epochs is violence: Ulrich attempts to murder the child Helge in 1953, while he himself gets brutally beaten up by the local police force. In 2019, he gets serious injuries from the security men of the nuclear power plant, while Jonas is beaten up by his best friend. It is not only physical abuse that the characters have to go through, but they are also tortured psychologically. In 1953, the child Helge suffers from his mother's distant attitude and lack of love, and the same characterises the young Regina's (Lydia Makrides) relationship to her mother Claudia, who completely neglects her. The complex network of adultery and absolute alienation between family members only strengthen the sense of a dark, violent and unpleasant past, present and even future. The characters are doomed to repeat the acts of their predecessors, which gets even more emphasized in the later and final season.

Travelling back in time in the first – as well as second and third – season of *Dark* not only represents a current historiographic crisis in Germany but, by recalling homelessness and captivity in time that have been guiding narrative elements in German art cinema, it gives the series a German anti-*Heimat* character. Thus, while national and global television practices reached the threshold of postmodernity, this paper intended to draw attention to various nation-specific elements that complex television narratives work with. As outlined in this article, history and memory remain essential understanding practices that help us to outline the connections between national narratives and global, postmodern visual practices. That is, while *Dark* is beyond doubt a postmodern, transcultural television that, similar to the Berlin School, "sell[s] the nation to their international audience as a commodity,"<sup>72</sup> it stands as a deeply German production that mirrors a nation's stuckness in history.

## Notes

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## Biography

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