

# THE BANG IN *MEMORIA* as the degenerate and genuine index in the dynamics of trauma

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**Abstract:** This essay explores the dynamics of trauma – as presented in the film *Memoria*<sup>1</sup> through the lenses of Lacanian *tyche*, Freudian *Nachträglichkeit*, and the Peircean index with process ontology. The role of subjective interpretation in the retroactive construction and reshaping of trauma is examined. By analysing the differing interpretations of the bang as a degenerate index for elder Hernán and a genuine index for Jessica, the essay highlights the Firstness of a genuine index in enabling subjective interpretation and offers insight into the potential for integrating and overcoming the unrepresentable nature of trauma.

**Keywords:** *Memoria*; Lacanian *tyche*; Freudian *Nachträglichkeit*; Peircean categories; process ontology; degenerate index; genuine index.

## Pauk *Memorias* kui mandunud ja tõeline indeks trauma dünaamikas

**Abstrakt:** Käesolev essee uurib trauma dünaamikat filmis *Memoria* läbi Lacani *tyche*, Freudi *Nachträglichkeit*'i ja Peirce'i indeksi protsessioontoloogia. Täpsemalt uuritakse subjektiivse tõlgenduse rolli trauma retroaktiivses konstrueerimises ja ümberkujundamises. Analüüsid paugu erinevaid tõlgendusi mandunud indeksina vanema Hernáni jaoks ja tõelise indeksina Jessica jaoks, toob essee esile tõelise indeksi esmasuse subjektiivsete tõlgenduste võimaldajana ning käsitleb võimalusi trauma mitterepresenteeritava olemuse ületamiseks.

**Märksõnad:** *Memoria*; Lacani *tyche*; Freudi *Nachträglichkeit*; Peirce'i kategooriad; protsessi ontoloogia; mandunud indeks; tõeline indeks.

## 1. Introduction

*Memoria* is a contemplative film offering a dreamscape that creates a rift between sound and image; past and present; and memory and experience. It presents

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<sup>1</sup> Weerasethakul, Apichatpong 2021. *Memoria*. Anna Sanders Films.

fragments of the life of Jessica, an expatriate English woman living in Colombia, where she is on a search for the truth behind a repetitive, dull, yet sharp bang she has been hearing, which troubles her with insomnia. Jessica goes to a recording engineer, Hernán, to replicate the haunting sound. While Jessica and Hernán start to form a connection, he abruptly disappears. Later, Jessica meets a fisherman also named Hernán, but who is older. The elder Hernán asserts that he remembers everything in the town, even memories before his birth except for dreams, because he never dreams. Together, Jessica suddenly experiences a flood of memories of elder Hernán, all in sounds — of a massacre of a family, hiding from a burglary, and countless moments of life in turmoil, mixed in which there is the bang. In the sounds of memories, she feels all the subtle feelings, as if she were reliving them in the present. I argue that *Memoria* intuitively presents the dynamics of trauma. Before deeper analysis, I will first introduce Lacanian *tyche* and Freudian *Nachträglichkeit* for understanding the dynamics of trauma.

## 2. The Dynamics of Trauma

### 2.1. *Tyche*: A Failed Encounter and the Unrepresentable Suffering

A diagnostic classification for Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) was added to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders third edition (DSM-III) in 1980. The DSM-III classifies a diverse but restricted number of traumatic events (specified in Criterion A) as causally related to a particular clinical criteria, thereby adopting a restrictive approach to determine what constitutes a “traumatic” event (Bistoën et al. 2014: 669). By defining objective particularities of the event as the cause of PTSD, it implies that “the traumatogenic potential of an event can be deduced a priori by charting the objective particularities of the situation” (ibid, 669). Such an event-based diagnostic approach is widely challenged in subsequent trauma studies, which prioritise the subjective reception of the survivor instead of definitive particulars of the stressor event. According to Cathy Caruth (1996: 4), “trauma is not locatable in a single violent or original event in an individual’s past, but rather in the way that its very unassimilated nature — the way it was precisely not known in the first instance — returns to haunt the survivor later on.”

To understand the “unassimilated nature” of trauma from a systemic level, it is useful to turn to the psychoanalytic framework of Jacques Lacan. Lacan (1993: 8-9) divided the psyche into three orders, i.e., the imaginary, the symbolic and the real. The imaginary is the realm where the ego is formed upon illusory identification with the specular image in the mirror stage. The symbolic is a realm of language, culture and society that governs the ego, with the symbolic system composed of differentiated elements. And the real is the undifferentiated and thus unrepresentable realm; it is the exact “point at which the symbolic fails” (Belau 2001: 16), and “the

impossible kernel of the symbolic around which it circles, what the symbolic attempts to cover over as its very industry” (ibid, 16). There is always a dynamic tension between the symbolic and the real, as they both try to engulf the other. As a constitutive of such tension, the “incursion of the real into the symbolic order” (Evans 2006: 25) is described by Lacanian *tyche*, meaning a “purely arbitrary” (Belau 2001: 25) chance in the real, contrasted by Lacan with *automaton* as chance events in the symbolic. In *tyche*, the traumatic event<sup>2</sup> is born, as the consequence of the impossible “encounter with the real” (ibid, 25).

## 2.2. *Nachträglichkeit*: delayed onset and retroactive causality

However, trauma is not formed immediately after the occurrence of the traumatic event<sup>3</sup>, but until a belated *realisation* of it (Bistoën et al. 2014: 677). Such phenomenon of delayed-onset PTSD is supported by evidence, in which a delayed traumatic response can be observed “in the first weeks, months, or even years following the event” (ibid, 671). This is pointed out in *Nachträglichkeit* (afterwardsness, *après-coup*) by Sigmund Freud (Freud 1975a [1895]: 356). Bistoën (ibid, 672) cited Mather and Marsden (2004), explaining *Nachträglichkeit* as the process of trauma where “there are two etiological moments instead of one”. The logic of *Nachträglichkeit* is depicted in Figure 1 by Bistoën (2014: 674):

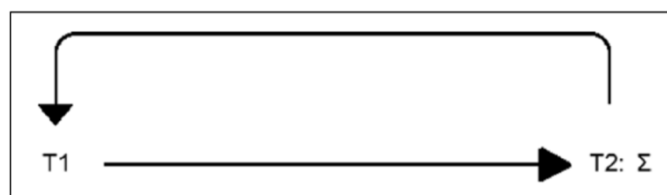


Figure 1. The logic of *Nachträglichkeit*. (Bistoën 2014: 674)

As summarised by Bistoën et al. (ibid, 674), there is a delay separating T1 (the experience of the initial stressor event) from T2 (the experience of “non-Criterion A events” or “life events” as the “agent provocateur”), suggesting that the initial event<sup>4</sup> is not traumatic but only become traumatic at the time of T2 provoked by a life event that is “reminiscent of” (ibid, 675) the initial stressor event in a retroactive way. As summarised by Judith Herman (2001: 47, 121), it is then followed by traumatic responses, such as alternations between amnesia or hypermnesia; emotional flooding and emotional constriction; and endless shame, guilt and self-blame, etc. Bistoën et al. cite Freud stating that “it was the *memory*<sup>5</sup> that *became* traumatic, whereas the

<sup>2</sup> As will be argued in 2.2., the “traumatic event” here is traumatic-yet-to-be, hence will be later referred to as a “stressor event”.

<sup>3</sup> ibid.

<sup>4</sup> To avoid ambiguity, I will refer to the initial event at T1 before its revival at T2 as a “stressor event”, instead of a “traumatic event”.

<sup>5</sup> Here, the memory should be understood as the “interpretation of memory”, when considered in its context of *Nachträglichkeit*.

*experience* originally was not” (Bistoën et al. 2014: 674). Nevertheless, when it comes to the reason why memory rather than experience evokes the traumatic response, Freud explains it by one’s change in puberty that makes possible an understanding of the repressed experience as a precocious sexual one (ibid, 675-676), which are often criticised as scientifically untestable and culturally insensitive.

A Lacanian reinterpretation explains the retroactive causality of *Nachträglichkeit* more convincingly in his semiotic-structuralist approach. As analysed in 2.1, the initial stressor event at T1 results from an encounter with the real and is thus unassimilable by a subject constructed upon the symbolic. Hence, after T1, a single signifier covers up the hole torn by the encounter with the real (Verhaeghe 2019). This single signifier stands in for and consequently “condenses” the unassimilable stressor event by “bordering the nonsensical event” (Bistoën et al. 2014: 677) so that the subject may deal with it in an “asubjective” (ibid, 677) way, because a single signifier makes no sense. Generally, meaning is only constructed in a net of differentiated signifiers and defined by the difference between them. If, however, the wound becomes an enigma, it won’t hurt at all, and we shouldn’t even call it a wound until it is deciphered. It is deciphered at T2, triggered by a life event that is reminiscent of the initial stressor event, with new experience and hence understanding of T1 gained during T1 to T2. At this moment, T1 is finally able to be “fully experienced [...] simultaneously” (ibid, 677) at T2 and thus become a wound.

### 2.3. Dynamics of trauma in *Memoria*

In this vein, the bang, stripped of meaning in *Memoria*, can be a single signifier that constitutes the enigma. Nevertheless, it’s a special one since it is only a single signifier in a certain sense. Normally, the single signifier would not confound the survivor since it ought to be “mute” (Bistoën et al. 2014: 676) and does not make sense. However, its plausible meaninglessness, in turn, intrigues Jessica and the viewers to unravel the truth behind it. I argue that it is the film’s artistic treatment of splitting the trauma borne by one person into two characters — the experiencer of the initial stressor event (elder Hernán) and the survivor with the symptoms (Jessica) — that allows the single signifier for elder Hernán to develop its meaning for Jessica with its connection to other surrounding signifiers. To put it another way, the retroactive causality between T1 and T2 is *broken* by a split of the traumatic temporality, with each part represented by two characters, respectively. While elder Hernán is the experiencer at T1, Jessica is the one who comes to explore the truth approaching T2. The entire film that unfolds itself through the perspective of Jessica can be a live stream of the decryption of the enigma, in which the bang that is initially a single signifier is getting away from its function as a meaningless cover-up and getting closer and closer to the critical point at T2 to revive the long-repressed T1, the exact moment of *realisation* of the survivor, which is artistically treated as the two characters. For elder Hernán, the bang and all other data in his memory are all isolated and meaningless

single signifiers, allowing him to avoid confronting the trauma (see 3.2.). However, for Jessica, who is not the experiencer of the unassimilable initial stressor event, the bang is not deprived of the possibility of generating new meanings, hence the repetitive bang is not necessarily traumatic for her (see 3.3.).

Moreover, I argue that the bang, in turn, connects Jessica and Hernán in the same way that the existence of the answer evokes a desire towards the solution to the enigma, and the solution to the enigma brings the answer (wound) into being. Given that the bang serves both as memory data (as a single signifier) for elder Hernán, and the enigma to explore for Jessica, a re-closure of the artistically split traumatic temporality is implied, showing the dynamics of trauma.

Furthermore, the concept of *Nachträglichkeit* as the retroactive causality in trauma does not suggest that trauma is simply a time bomb waiting to explode but rather a complex process constantly being shaped and reshaped by new experiences and memories. In other words, *Nachträglichkeit* implies that “traumatic encounters are mediated by subjective dimensions above and beyond the objective particularities of both the event and the person” and “that the subjective impact of an event is not given once and for all but is malleable by subsequent experiences” (ibid, 668). Accordingly, the bang, as previously discussed in 2.2., is not a single signifier for Jessica, as it is open to subjective interpretations. In other words, the meaning of the bang is not fixed and can be interpreted differently by different people (see 3.3.). Through its artistic treatment of splitting and depicting one person’s trauma through two characters, *Memoria* turns the *memory* of the stressor experience of Hernán into the *experience* of Jessica. This allows for a different perspective and interpretation of the same event. In line with the concept of *Nachträglichkeit*, *Memoria* implies a way to overcome trauma, i.e., through the subjective interpretation — the way to overcome trauma is just the same as the way it was constructed.

While the concept of *Nachträglichkeit* offers insight into the function of subjective interpretation in constructing and reshaping one’s reception of trauma, it does not provide a detailed explanation of how these processes occur. To fully understand this, it would be necessary to examine the framework of Peircean semiotics and explain how the bang functions differently as a degenerate index for Hernán and a genuine index for Jessica.

### 3. The bang

#### 3.1. Degenerate index and genuine index

To illustrate the potential for subjective interpretation in constructing and reshaping the trauma, it is necessary to analyse the differing interpretations of the bang as a

Peircean index made by elder Hernán and Jessica (and younger Hernán). Before delving into the analysis, defining the terms being used would be beneficial.

An index, as defined by Charles S. Peirce (1998: 248), is “a sign which refers to the Object that it denotes by virtue of being really affected by that Object”. It “refers to objects which are in an existential relationship” (West 2012: 301). What is regarded as central in the definition of the index is Secondness in the Peircean category that refers to “a mode of being of one thing which consists in how a second object is” (Peirce 1998: 24). Therefore, an index is primarily characterised by its pure indexicality which necessitates a physical co-existence with its referent (West 2012: 301). However, it is argued by West (ibid, 301) that the definition of index “extends even to Objects which do not co-occur in space and time with their referent”. To put it another way, it is argued that a Peircean index can also refer to “absent objects” such as “mental images” or “hypothetical or possible objects” (ibid, 302). As a result, the index is divided into two types: the degenerate index, which is with pure indexicality, and the genuine index, which refers to non-present objects (ibid, 302).

The difference between the degenerate and genuine indices is further analysed from the perspective of Peircean categories. A degenerate index “consists in the most central [...] of what characterises indexicality, namely, Secondness” (ibid, 302), and “intrinsically represents characteristics of the object”, hence is more likely to refer to the “immediate object, which is the Object as the Sign itself represents it” (ibid, 308, 314). Therefore, its use is “stripped of the typical perceptions, interpretations, and conventions which later attach thereto” (ibid, 303). As maintained by West, the degenerate indices “lack interpretants” (ibid, 308); if any, then it would be close to the “act to force the attention to the thing” (ibid, 304).

In contrast, the genuine use of the index relies on “mental, more dynamic objects” (ibid, 308), which is “the object outside the sign [...] the reality which by some means contrives to determine the sign” (Turino 1999: 226) through a “spatio-temporal” (West 2012: 307) distance. It shows “the perceptual in Secondness” (ibid, 302) that is driven by Firstness and has the potential to constitute “more conventional interpretants” (ibid, 302) of Thirdness.

### 3.2. The bang as a degenerate index

When the elder Hernán meets Jessica<sup>6</sup>, the first thing he says is, “I know where you live.....at Eduardo’s house”, and that “His father used to run a cinema, his brother is a detective [...]”. When explaining why he never leaves the town and never watches any movies or TV, he says, “I remember everything, so I try to limit what I see”, and that “there are plenty of stories already”. He then picks up a stone nearby and begins to tell a story from the stone’s point of view, describing a robbery and violence between a man and his two friends. He goes on to give examples that are engraved into his memory data and become the “vibrations” in his body, such as rocks, trees,

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<sup>6</sup> *Memoria* at 01:19:35.

concrete, food, weather, and movements. He concludes that experiences are harmful. When Jessica asks him if he remembers the details of his dreams as well, he pauses for a moment and says he never dreams.

I argue that all the memory data stored in elder Hernán's mind function as degenerate indices, and that he experiences the world primarily through pure Secondness. This means that everything to him is mere referential indexical relations. Overwhelmed by a world full of degenerate indices, he is constantly drawn to every detail in his experience, yet these pure indexes that direct to immediate objects exclude any subjective perception or interpretation — he remembers everything but dreams nothing.

Moreover, not only does everything in his experience demand attention, but, once experienced, they also seem to remain as memory data that are unforgettable, leading him to limit his experiences and perceive them as harmful. This can be explained by analysing his status in the split traumatic temporality at T1, as discussed previously, where single signifiers help to cover up the unassimilated nature of the missed encounter with the real. In this regard, it can be maintained that these memory data in the form of single signifiers are not time-sensitive and that for Hernán, "past memories" are neither truly "past" nor truly "memory" but rather, frozen in time. That's why I refer to them as memory data rather than past memories.

### 3.3. The bang as a genuine index

As the one approaching T2 in deciphering the enigma of trauma, Jessica is not prohibited from a subjective interpretation of the meaning of the bang. Confounded by its meaning, she turns to younger Hernán, a recording engineer, for help. Together, he experiments with different parameters to create a sound that matches her description<sup>7</sup>: like "a big ball of concrete that falls into a metal well surrounded by seawater" with "more metallic" and "more earthy" characteristics, like "a rumble from the core of the earth". In the process, Jessica is getting closer to hearing something that resonates with the bang in her head. One day, younger Hernán shows her a piece of music created using the bang sound they had made together. The music moves Jessica, and they discuss Hernán's plans to perform the piece in a concert in Tokyo.

In my opinion, the bang functions as a genuine index for Jessica. Its spatio-temporal distance from the original object allows for possible separation from the context and situation of its original use, making it represent a dynamic object for Jessica. This enables Jessica and younger Hernán to develop subjective interpretations of it, which facilitates the creation of a sequence of signs in the process towards infinite semiosis. As pointed out by Pape (2015: 419), "process is the ontological backbone of any dynamical account of objects", which is further clarified by Peirce (1992a: 161):

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<sup>7</sup> *Memoria* at 00:21:31.

What is reality? Perhaps there isn't any such thing at all. As I have repeatedly insisted, it is but a retrodution, a working hypothesis which we try, our one desperate forlorn hope of knowing anything. Again it may be, and it would seem very bold to hope for anything, that the hypothesis of reality though it answers pretty well, does not perfectly correspond to what is. But if there is any reality, then, so far as there is any reality, what that reality consists in is this: that there is in the being of things something which corresponds to the process of reasoning, that the world lives, and **moves**, and **HAS ITS BEING**, in [a] logic of events. We all think of nature as syllogizing.<sup>8</sup>

In a genuine index, the ability to engage such processes of dynamic inquiry of reality is made possible by the presence of Firstness, which is also accepted as one of the distinctions between a genuine index and a degenerate index. Peirce (1992b: 171) defined how Firstness is intrinsic in the genuine index:

The Genuine Index represents the duality between the representamen and its object. As a whole it stands for the object; but a part or element of it represents [it] as being the Representamen, by being an *icon* or analogue of the object in some way; and by virtue of that duality, it conveys information about the object. A Degenerate Index is a representamen which represents a single object because it is factually connected with it, but which conveys no information whatever.

Hence, a “mnemic trace” (Bistoien et al. 2014: 676) for a traumatic event can be transformed into a musical element in a song that facilitates a concert performance's promise. This development into Thirdness is enabled by the presence of Firstness (iconicity) in a genuine index, which saves information that is “independent of interpretation” (West 2012: 304). As a genuine index, the bang contains information such as timbre, pitch, tone, energy, force, motion, etc., all of which are indexical to the dynamic object in mental images. These elements are waiting for a sequence of interpretations, rather than a fixed and limited answer. In the sequence of interpretations, endless retroactive causal cycles between T2s and T1s shape and reshape one's understanding of “trauma” as a dynamic object. In this regard, replicating the bang in the sound studio does not necessarily replicate the traumatic event it represents.

## 4. Conclusion

In conclusion, it can be argued that trauma is constructed and reshaped in a tension between the symbolic and the real. Through the concept of *Nachträglichkeit* and Peircean semiotics, it becomes clear that the trauma is not fixed and is subject to interpretation. The differing interpretations of the bang as a degenerate index (pure Secondness) for elder Hernán and a genuine index (as Secondness with Firstness and potential to Thirdness) for Jessica illustrate this. Through the endless retroactive

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<sup>8</sup> All italics, bold, and square brackets are from the original text.



causal cycles, new experiences and understandings gained when approaching T2s can constantly reshape one's perception of the traumatic event at T1s, providing a way to integrate the unrepresentable and potentially overcome it.

## Acknowledgement

I would like to extend my sincere gratitude to Karl Joosep Pihel for sharing his insights on integrating Peircean semiotics and the semiotics of music, which influenced my essay. I am grateful for his generosity and support.

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