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Notes on difficult family memory

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Abduction and narcotisation: Notes on difficult family memory

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journals.sagepub.com/home/mss**Mario Panico** 

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Abstract

This article seeks to provide an analysis of an excerpt from an interview (conducted by the cognitive psychologist Dr Aline Cordonnier) with a 60-year-old Belgian woman whose father was (probably) a collaborator with the Germans during the Second World War. The article aims to investigate a set of specific issues relating to the woman as an implicated subject (because of a family bond), and how themes related to this difficult history are mediated through the lens of the family, proposing, therefore, an abductive reasoning that speaks of her own implication and of what has been silenced in the family history. The analysis of specific segments of the interview will employ tools from Umberto Eco's interpretative semiotics, taking into account, in particular, the concepts of 'abduction' and 'narcotisation'.

Keywords

abduction, family memory, implicated subject, narcotisation, postmemory

Introduction

Family memories are reticular and contradictory, perhaps more so than any other type of collective and individual memory, if that is possible. Deeply subjective and connected to the positionality of the subject involved, family memories represent fertile terrain for investigating how personal and social beliefs are constructed and normed about specific past events (cf. Shore and Kauko, 2017).

Maurice Halbwachs (1925) considered the family as one of the main systems for modelling ideas of the past, characterising it as one of the main *cadres sociaux* that fundamentally influence the construction of what is named as 'what happened'. Over time, and with the consolidation of Memory Studies as an interdisciplinary field, the family (intended as a social group; as a semiotic environment where norms, codes and narratives are built; as a psycho-anthropological arena where the subject sketches her self-representation and biography) has been extensively examined from

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different methodological and epistemological perspectives (cf. Cordonnier et al., 2021; Erll, 2011; Rosenthal, 2002; Švaříčková Slabáková, 2022). The family has been considered a hive for memories, which are sometimes incomplete or at odds with each other, often conditioned by a substantial emotional investment that can alter what should be considered ‘memorable’ (Rigney, 2021), that is, worthy of being remembered. In this article, I reflect on some specific mechanisms of this individual-collective memory, having, as a general contextual backdrop, a collective trauma and the theme of collaborationism. The reference text that I use is a 3-minute excerpt from a 1-hour interview conducted by the cognitive psychologist Aline Cordonnier¹ with a 60-year-old Belgian woman whose father was a collaborator with the Nazis during the Second World War. Through the analysis of some parts of the extract, and drawing from Umberto Eco’s interpretative semiotic theory (Eco, 1978, 1979, 2014), I mainly want to emphasise how the ‘transgenerational impact’ (Frosh, 2019: ix) of such events affects the storytelling and the self-representation of the interviewee, contributing to a meaning deconstruction of the ancestral figure that is the ‘father’ and the ‘difficult’ memory he represents. I do not use the adjective ‘difficult’ by chance here. Borrowing from the field of Critical Heritage Studies² (see, in particular, Macdonald, 2008), I use it to refer to those family memories that stand out against a collective traumatic event, such as, in the case under consideration, a world conflict or a genocide. This feature is of no minor relevance to my reasoning and my analysis of the text mentioned above. The interconnection between the triadic arena in which the meaning of what is defined as the ‘past’ is constituted – that is, between the individual/(auto)biographical, the familial and the societal levels – allows me to reflect on the reception of that thorny past among subsequent generations. Although these later generations have not had the firsthand experience of a trauma, it is nevertheless made ‘present’ in the family, through implicit attitudes, silences, or explicit narratives; hence, they can nonetheless feel defined and affected by it on a subjective level (Hirschberger, 2018). As the literature on this topic has demonstrated (cf. Shore and Kauko, 2017), some such subjects feel the urgency to dig further into the family past, to investigate and pose questions about it, to understand the path of their genealogy: what came before and how this ‘before’ affects their relationships and the construction of their personality.

This phenomenon is widely known as ‘postmemory’. This is a concept by Marianne Hirsch (1992, and subsequent works 1997, 2008, 2012). At its base meaning, postmemory (and subsequent postmemorial work³) refers to the process of memorial (and textual) confrontation enacted by the sons, daughters, and grandchildren of those who survived the trauma of the Holocaust. Postmemory refers to the – mostly intellectual and artistic – effort made by people who have not experienced trauma firsthand but try to interrogate the memories of their predecessors who were directly affected by events of disastrous magnitude, often confronting non-disclosures, reluctance, and secrets. Over time, the concept has undergone numerous changes of context, coming to be applied to different post-trauma situations and to various types of memories: not only those of victims but also of perpetrators and collaborators (cf. Kapila, 2024; Koh, 2023; Maguire, 2017; Rosenthal, 1998; Schwab, 2010). In this essay, I mainly build on the critical position (see, among others, Frosh, 2019), which contends that in the context of perpetrators and collaborationists’ postmemories, it is convenient to talk about ‘implication’ (Knittel and Forchieri, 2020; Rothberg, 2019).

This concept stems from the theory of the implicated subject as proposed by Michael Rothberg (2019). Intending to overcome the binary and overly granitic distinction between victim and perpetrator and to offer a more layered and complex theory of violence and responsibility, building on the work of Primo Levi, Simona Forti and Hannah Arendt, Rothberg conceived the idea of the implicated subject not as an ontological identity that is presupposed for a given person, but rather as a subject position that can be filled depending on the specific situation being considered. In other words, it does not indicate an ontological quality aimed at creating a new memory ‘actor’ (it is not

a new way to name the bystander) who always plays the same role in the narrative, but a kind of positioning that can be modified and rewritten according to a given conflict and scenario. In this regard, it is important to stress the important distinction Rothberg makes between synchronic and diachronic implications. He writes,

I use the language of synchronic and diachronic implication [. . .] to signal an analytic distinction between forms of participation and responsibility that are keyed to present-day or to historical injustices, respectively. While this distinction clarifies the variety of ways in which implicated subjects find themselves entangled with power and violence in both past and present contexts, the two dimensions or axes are in reality inseparable. [. . .] Without a link to the present, historical injustices do not implicate us; they remain of strictly antiquarian interest. At the same time, what we consider the present is itself the outcome of historical processes that have created the world in which we live. [. . .] Histories that remain unresolved and thus trouble the distinction between a fully ‘absent’ past and a fully ‘present’ present – influences my approach to the relation of the synchronic and the diachronic: there is neither strict continuity between past and present nor a clean break between the two temporal dimensions. Rather, implication emerges from the ongoing, uneven, and destabilizing intrusion of irrevocable pasts into an unredeemed present. (Rothberg, 2019: 9)

As I mentioned, the interview extract I consider here allows me to deal with a particular kind of ‘diachronic implication’ nourished by a subject ‘heir’ of a difficult history. In this case, it is not a question of understanding how or if the heir is a kind of ‘secondary witness’ (cf. Arnold-de Simine, 2013; LaCapra, 2001), or whether she is in any way complicit in, guilty of or benefitting from the crimes committed by her father.⁴ As I will explain in the methodological part of this essay, the interview extract is not sufficient to answer these questions coherently. Rather, I am interested in understanding how the interviewee ‘performs’ (or resists performing) herself as an implicated subject while re-proposing the actions of others in the domain of her family lexicon and in the time/frame of the interview. Here, I am particularly interested in how, in the short excerpt taken into consideration, the woman interviewee suggests and ‘showcases’ – through her words, her interjections and her manner of replying – diachronic implication in relation to her father’s story. This, of course, is one of many possible interpretations that one researcher can reach via this brief text. As this is just a part of a longer and more complex interview – which, moreover, is part of a broader research project on post-World War II Belgian family memories – on this occasion, I do not aspire to offer a ‘definitive’ interpretation of its meaning. Instead, I seek to illustrate how, by considering certain rhetorical aspects of the language and specific traits of the dialogue between the two women, some indications of specific memory mechanisms can be unveiled.

In the following pages, I aim to demonstrate how the interview seems to provide a working through (Freud, 1914) moment in which the interviewee – helped by the interviewer/researcher – redistributes her knowledge. She reviews what can be considered truth or falsehood, thereby creating new cause and effect chains and new memorial and logical *consecutio*, verbalising (and somehow accommodating) thorny memories that affect her – despite herself – at a personal level, but also with national implications. Indeed, the extract also shows not only – on a small scale – her personal experience as the daughter of a collaborator, but also – on a large scale – the cultural dynamics that characterise Belgium and the memory of collaborationism (De Guissmé et al., 2017).

Themes

To understand how implication is interpretable as such and, possibly, performed in the interview, I will analyse some parts of it using the methodological tools of semiotics, with particular reference

to interpretive semiotics as theorised by Umberto Eco (in particular 1978, 1979, 2014).⁵ My goal is to consider how the text/interview itself (in particular, the interactions between interviewer and interviewee, and the use of certain words) become a springboard for the analysis of two specific core themes: abduction and family memory narcotisation. Moreover, I am interested in how this text can help to say something more about the relationship between forgetting and memory, about the forms of investigation that characterise the process of ‘recollection’ (Panico, 2024) – understood here as both a process of *remembering* (remembering *again*, differently and innovatively) and of redistribution of knowledge between the two subjects (the interviewer and the interviewee). Umberto Eco’s semiotic theory is particularly relevant in this kind of analysis because it helps me to comprehend how the rhetoric of the interview and the ‘voice’ of the people involved can make specific themes concerning responsibility and affiliation intelligible, and how forgetting plays a role in the production and reception of knowledge. I see the text itself metaphorically as a particular ‘space for memory’, which I define here as the frame that enables memory to be rewritten and examined from a different angle. With this new term, I refer here to (a space) ‘*for* memory’, rather than ‘*of* memory’ because it indicates the pragmatic function that the interview has in remembering dynamics. It serves to produce new kinds of memories, not merely to represent them. In this sense, it is evident how the interview is an interactional genre that not only allows the simple exchange of information, but also succeeds in calibrating and redefining, if not resemantising, the knowledge that is exchanged between the parties.

Given this premise, I address two specific aspects:

Abduction

Starting from a specific piece of the interview, when the daughter says three words – ‘wounded, the eye, shrapnel’ – I discuss below how abductive reasoning is fundamental to try to understand (also through imaginative and hypothetical assumptions) what is unsaid and narcotised. Abduction here, bearing in mind Charles Sanders Peirce’s logic of science theory (CP 5.172),⁶ is understood as the form of reasoning that can extend knowledge of certain facts, that is, allow the subject to develop new ideas, to guess, to predict (Eco, 1985). Because the interviewee does not know exactly what happened (she does not know what can be defined as true or false) and – though, of course, we know very little about her – she seems to struggle to find a coherent version of the possibility that her father was a collaborator, to resist this idea. In other words, she appears to be attempting to create an interpretation with the little information she has available that she claims to remember.

Family memory narcotisation

I am interested in how ‘truth’ or ‘falsehood’ is attributed to past events and the family in the interviewee’s enunciation. I consider how the categories of ‘truth’ and ‘falsehood’ are repeated and attributed to events that are not known in their entirety, hence there is no complete proof for these claims. I examine how this affects the woman’s description of herself as a mother, a daughter and a sister, as well as the characterisation of the father as a family member. Moreover, I consider how the ‘management of the truth’ – that is, how a subject distributes the information that is at her disposal in order to put forward a claim as trustworthy – and the ability to make claims is mediated by the interviewer, who, as in any interview, plays a role in the communication process. I discuss how what is known/unknown is presented as a family issue. Here, the discussion invokes the idea of narcotisation as proposed by Umberto Eco (2014) in his theory of ideology. Narcotisation is quite different from more classical forgetting, because it underlines the possible ‘reactivation’ of

meaning. Narcotisation, in this sense, accentuates the inclusion/exclusion of information shared in a specific community, such as the family. It emphasises, in particular, the potential future reactivation of 'paused' knowledge and the dynamics behind such narcotisation (cf. Lachmann, 2022).

Methodological clarifications

What are the benefits (and limitations) of a semiotic approach to such a short – but at the same time complex – text, such as the extract considered in this article? Answering this question is necessary to remove any suspicion regarding the universality of the interpretation I propose.

The discipline of semiotics deals with the analysis of texts – where a 'text' can be any object, from a novel, a painting or a museum to a practice (cf. Marrone, 2022). Furthermore, semiotics is interested in understanding the inner workings of that text, trying to understand what internal rules define it and constitute its meaning, regardless of what the author's intentions are (in the case of a novel or a painting, for example) or those of the subjects that it engages (as in the case of practices or rituals). This means that a semiotic approach to textuality can make intelligible the internal mechanisms that dominate it, and the underlying grammars that define its meaning. However, in my specific case, even when considering the extract as a text, it would be naive to think that the intentions of the interviewee are not fundamental to grasping the meaning of the words or the interaction. The interview – as a genre and not just in this specific case – therefore poses challenges to the semiotic gaze, which risks taking the form of speculation, or 'over-interpretation', as Eco would say (Eco, 1992). This is why, in this analysis, I first recognise certain specific features of the 'interview' that differentiate it from other types of text:

The interview always has a reference point in reality; it cannot, therefore, be disconnected from the context in which it is carried out, from the various choices made by the subjects that are active in the dialogue (interviewer and interviewee);

The meaning of the interview is closely linked to a series of conditions that may vary from time to time: the setting, the interviewer's goals, the question-answer/dialogue format, the emotional and psychological state of the interviewee (in general, but especially at the given moment when the interaction takes place);

The historical and cultural context is essential: as much as one would like to 'isolate' the interview, as one might isolate a painting from its exhibition space or the painter's intentions, this would inevitably lead to a partial interpretation. Which is not to say that it does not work perfectly as an argument, but that doing so risks saying little about the cultural and interactional dynamics at stake. In this case, given the limited amount of information, I decided to search for information on the one hand by taking into account the communicative family dynamics expressed in the extract, and, on the other, by considering the interview within the complex context of Belgian memories of the Second World War (also given the main project of which it is a part).

On this occasion, in view of the collective exercise conducted by several researchers in the field of memory studies that is reproduced in this issue – that is, to analyse an interview extract with various methodologies and without access to the complete interview nor additional information on the interviewee – I adopted the following methodological hybridisation to offer as coherent an interpretation as possible.

First of all, the extract is considered as a text. This means first looking at the internal elements of the text, those which show how the interviewee relates to her father's memory. Using the tools of Eco's interpretive semiotics, I trace the memory processes that were at stake: abduction and narcotisation. The question I pose, which is central to my interpretation, is: are there recurring elements within the text that can demonstrate how the interaction between interviewer and interviewee can be traced back to forms of assimilation of a traumatic family memory?

Connected to the first point is the question of context. While it is true that semiotics does not deal with context, as I mentioned, in the case of the memory text, I believe this is a methodological limitation of no minor relevance. How is it possible to study a memoir, a work of art, a documentary if the researcher does not take into account the sociocultural dynamics that enabled it or the spatio-temporal frame in which it was produced? Initially, this information was not available to the researchers involved in the methodological exercise. Subsequently, however, it was possible to formulate a more specific research question (as proposed in the previous point) thanks to the discussion that took place in Trento, during the seminar in which many of the researchers present in this issue collectively discussed the coordinates needed to analyse this extract. Following the collective discussion, the researcher Dr Aline Cordonnier shared the key objectives of her research project to the group; these proved to be important insights that helped to shape this context.

Hence, combining the general context offered to us with my own methodology, I focused my attention on the semiotic strategies of memory proposed in the discourse, taking particular interest in how the woman interviewed constituted herself (or not) as an implicated subject with respect to her father's (possibly collaborationist) experience.

Blessé l'œil shrapnels: abduction and the interviewee as a yielding family enquirer

In this section, I take into account a particular kind of abductive reasoning that the interviewee voices during the conversation.⁷ In the field of the philosophy of language, abduction is understood as a logical and inferential process through which a series of hypotheses are established that prove empirical constructs. In our case study, the empirical construct is the collaboration of the interviewee's father with the Germans. Abduction is thus the typical argumentation of the investigative process, in which hypotheses need to be asserted (even when using creative and imaginative drive) to try to verify them, to prove their veracity and thus supportive of the fact that a given person wants to demonstrate (Eco, 1985). By accounting for the investigative attitude of the postmemorial subject, abduction can be considered one of the main processes that unveils information in the context of difficult family memory (Panico, 2024). This is especially the case when the heir has a precise intention and the agency to stand up to a family secret, attempting to fill the gaps that transgenerational transmission has left empty though the resemantisation of family oral history and its archive. Through the abductive process, the subject tries to re-centralise that information left aside, made invisible or inaccessible due to imposed silences, reticence or shame.

Regarding the interview extract in particular, I note, I have no interest in understanding if this is true in this case, that is, whether the interviewee has a real and active desire to uncover the 'Pandora's box' of her family history. Within the limits of this essay and given the limited information available in the interview, this cannot be assumed or investigated. What I would like to stress, instead, is:

how the Belgian woman in the interview employs abductive reasoning, and what kind of memory functions as the ‘inciting incident’ (Mittell, 2017), the ‘casus-belli’ event that starts the inference;

how the interviewee proposes a double image of herself: as someone who actively asked things of her family members, but who, in the end, is somewhat yielding, someone who does not keep asking but who remains in her initial status of ‘not-knowing’.

how this ‘not-knowing’ drives not a more general reflection on the Belgian collective memory and her implication – even if she does not consider herself implicated, nor indeed mention how she has benefitted, personally or as a part of a national community, from this history.

Umberto Eco, drawing on the theory by Peirce, explains:

In the Abduction I am confronted with a curious and inexplicable result. [. . .]here is a bag on the table, and next to it, also on the table, is a number of white beans. I do not know how they got there, who put them there, or where they came from. I can consider this Result a curious case. Now I would have to find and apply a Law such that, if it were true, and if the Result were considered a Case of that Law, the Result would no longer be curious, but very reasonable. (Eco, 1985: 167, my translation)

The subject therefore needs to speculate to solve the case. In the interview, an initial conjecture is gradually introduced through what in narrative theory is called an ‘inciting incident’, that is, a moment in the narrative that changes the subject’s status and invites or pushes her to modify its condition. In our case study, it is a family memory that leads the interviewee to want to know more, to increase her ‘cognitive competence’⁸ regarding the past. It is particularly interesting to note that the inciting incident is transgenerational, in that it concerns the memory that the woman’s children have of her father (their grandfather).

Indeed, the interviewee starts with a well-established and precise family memory: she recounts how her children remembered ‘vraiment bien’ when their grandfather, rubbing his eye, caused it to emit a very unusual sound. The children asked ‘mais enfin qu’est-ce que t’as à ton œil?’. The grandfather replied, ‘Ah mais ça c’est quand il y a un obus qui a éclaté et j’ai reçu des shrapnels’. The woman recounts how her children, at the sound of the word ‘shrapnel’ – the English word they did not know, burst out laughing, asking nothing more, too amused to elaborate and ask other questions. At that point, she presents herself to the interviewer as an agent-subject who wanted to know more, recounting how she urged her father to explain further how he got the wound. Her father’s reply (‘quand j’ai été blessé hein’) is seemingly revealing to her. It is at this moment in the interview that she seems to reach a key point in her research. She reaches this revelation repeating three words ‘Blessé l’œil shrapnels’. The syntagmatic chain of the three terms, interspersed with a micro-pause of about 0.2 seconds between each one, seems to render the reification of a past flash of genius, the insight, the moment of discovery aurally. The woman seems to have put together essential pieces that are fundamental to her abduction. This epiphany lasts only a few seconds because her investigative drive seems to fade as quickly as it started. She immediately continues by saying ‘enfin voilà mais est-ce que c’est faux est-ce que c’est vrai je ne pourrais pas vous dire’. Although not explicitly stated, the woman appears not to continue pressing her father with questions, letting her intuition remain a personal and individual cognitive experience and not a shared one.⁹

The same happens with a second inciting incident in the second half of the extract. She speaks of an event involving her brother. Reportedly, sometime before, the brother had corrected and translated a German document for his father so that his pension could continue to be paid. A

pension, that is, that comes from some work in Germany that was, we are led to presume, during the Second World War, hence opening up an enigmatic unsaid about the nature of that work. This detail, presented without any authentic contextual clarification, is followed by the account of how the woman had pressed her brother to ask him if he knew anything more or whether he had ever spoken to their father about that time of his life. The brother replied that he knew nothing ('ah non moi je ne sais rien'). Here, too, when the tale seems to reach a potential climax that would enlighten the mystery, thanks to the active agency of the woman, it slows down and stops, because the woman says 'donc voilà mais en même temps bon ce frère-là on ne le voit plus pour des raisons pfff idiotses'.

The woman's abductive argumentation presents an alternating but cyclical motion: she self-represents in the interview as one who actively seeks answers, though concretely, she does not persist and rather lets unknowns fall back into silence and latency. During the conversation, she assumes different thematic roles, going from being a doubting person, an active agent of the search, to a passive and yielding agent who does not insist when she would seemingly need to.

To confirm this, suffice it to consider the development of her actions in the search for the past, that is, through the following pattern:

She has a doubt;

Then she investigates by asking the father;

Then she does not insist by asking the father further questions;

Then she asks the brother;

Then she pressures and criticises the brother, implicitly hinting that he knew but did not tell, then claiming that she no longer speaks to him and thus has no way of knowing;

Then she still does not know.

'Voilà': coming and going into family narcotisation

The negotiation of family memories – therefore giving form to what can be recounted and transmitted and become common knowledge – goes through a filtering process that is affected by numerous factors (Barclay and Koefoed, 2021). Collectivity, the need to maintain internal balances and the overall preservation of the group are just some of the conditions that allow a fact or knowledge to become a memory. These forces, acting on the filtering process, thus impose a selection. In the transition from the 'memorisable' (an indeterminate mass, of which everything can potentially become a memory) to the 'memorable' (worthy of being remembered) and the 'memorised' (that which is actually remembered), some information is necessarily lost and excluded (cf. Violi, 2017). This happens for individual memory as much as for the collective and cultural memory of a group. Excluded, however, does not necessarily mean forgotten, lost forever and not 'semiotisable' (cf. Eco, 1985). Excluded information is often placed in a space that Eco defines as 'latency' (Eco, 2014), a kind of 'memory reserve' (Ricœur, 2007), in which any information that has been narcotised 'rests', ready to be reawakened – or thawed, Eco would say (Eco, 2014: 88) – by a subject who decides to pry into it. At the level of the cultural functioning of memory – so at the social rather than familial level – this mechanism can be enacted through ideological choices and power logics through which, at any given moment, institutions and policymakers and even cultural tastes can influence the agenda of what is central to the debate, meanwhile omitting other areas of culture. This semiotic reserve is to be imagined as a marginal space within a given culture and

community in which information is stored that should not be visible to everyone, for one reason or another.

Shifting from the more publicly common realm of cultural memory to the family level, and borrowing the metaphor of the home, a family space *par excellence*, the reserve is comparable to the space of the attic, where what is stored is not definitively lost, though nor does not have the same importance as what is kept in the living room, in sight of all: family, friends and strangers. A classic narrative trope is that of the daughter or granddaughter going up to the attic and discovering great family secrets hidden among mouldy boxes covered in cobwebs (see, for example, Hoffmann, 2004, quoted in Hirsch, 2008: 112). As I showed in the previous section, referring to the interview that we are analysing in this issue, this kind of search in the space of the memory reserve, does not emerge through a coherent process. The interviewee goes in and out of this reserve, at times following the narcotisation imposed at the family level regarding her father's past. Everything she states is perhaps true or perhaps false; both conditions are posited as equally possible ('mais est-ce que c'est faux est ce que c'est vrai je ne pourrais pas vous dire' or, 'et que tout ça n'est pas vrai j'en sais rien'). The epistemic truth that the woman reconstructs is fragile and represented by the use of a series of verbs such as 'to imagine' ('j'imagine'), foregrounding how abstract and hypothetical knowledge is juxtaposed to a factual knowledge, which, according to her account, in the interview, is impossible to testify as 'true'. As a further exemplification of this, it should be noted how the only affirmative information in the clip is provided just when it is the interviewer who asserts control over the conversation, acting as a sort of memory helper who produces meta-abduction (Eco, 1983) to understand the story. Here, what I define as 'memory helper' stands for an actor who is a fundamental part of the conversation and who, although not knowing the truth of the facts, uses the statements and historical data at her disposal (1) to help reconstruct the events that another person is trying to recall coherently, but also (2) to construct her own hypothesis about what is told. The memory helper – in the case of the interview, the researcher – subjects the information she is given to the real world of historical and contextual knowledge, so as to compare two possible regimes of truth (Foucault, 2001): that of the woman/interviewee who produces her creative and incoherent abduction because she is probably restrained by negative emotions and shame, and that of her knowledge of historical facts. The interviewer assumes this role, asking precise questions that recalibrate the argumentation and avoid coming and going in the space of family memory narcotisation. The researcher's questions piece together a jagged and confusing narrative, directly asking the questions, to prevent the interviewee from wandering around her thoughts and hence allowing the denial of a possibly embarrassing and difficult-to-accept fact.

Before concluding this section, I would like to reflect on the use of 'voilà' in the creative abduction process proposed, as a 'word' that serves to navigate the family memory narcotisation. Of course, in the French-speaking context *voilà* is often used as an interlude, to indicate something self-evident and simple: *sic et simpliciter*. In English it can be translated as 'that's it', used when there is nothing to add, when what has been said is clear enough and needs no further clarification. In the interview, however, *voilà* seems to be used as a belittling, avoidant strategy of the content it precedes. Here are the sentences where the Belgian woman used the word 'voilà':

1. 'alors là aussi c'était une histoire en fait qu'il racontait que mes enfants se souviennent vraiment bien parce que euh enfin **voilà** de temps en temps mon père se grattait l'œil comme ça . . .'
2. 'alors ça faisait rire mes enfants parce que ce mot était un mot pas possible shrapnels dans les yeux et euh et et et **voilà** et donc euh je sais qu'à un certain moment moi j'ai dit: "mais enfin mais tu as eu ça où alors"'

3. 'et donc c'est après que je me suis dit: "blessé l'œil shrapnels" enfin **voilà** mais est-ce que c'est faux est ce que c'est vrai je ne pourrais pas vous dire'
4. 'et j'ai dit: "mais toi tu sais des choses" "ah non moi je ne sais rien" donc **voilà** mais en même temps bon ce frère-là on ne le voit plus pour des raisons pfff idiotes'
5. 'mais c'est apparemment quelqu'un qui saurait plus de choses sur la famille parce que **voilà** il sait qu'on aurait une demi-sœur quelque part et fin des choses comme ça'.

Sometimes *voilà* is used even in potentially upsetting content, as in the last point of the list, where the interviewee again presents the hypothesis that her brother has more information about her father's possible collaborationist past, having suggested that he knows – though, in saying this, she also therefore claims to know – that they might have a half-sister. *Voilà* is used five times by the interviewee, especially at points when, as readers and listeners, we might ask for more, to know better, precisely because we feel we are closer to a 'breakthrough' in the investigation. The woman, on the other hand, seems to use 'voilà' to indicate reticence, probably self-protection due to the context of the interaction. When she seems to arrive at evidence, she closes the possibility of working through with a seemingly innocent 'voilà', as if there was nothing to add, precisely at the closest moment to a possible epiphany or revelation of a narcotised truth. The Belgian woman's abductive reasoning recalls past events in an indistinct way, mixing secrets, reticence and self-denial, family likes and dislikes. Instead of clarifying, it seems to pave new routes of investigation. Reading and listening to the interview extract, narrative gaps and even personal contradictions in the woman's understanding of her family history become evident. The interview, unwittingly, becomes a tool to move back and forth not so much in the story of her father's collaborationism, but in the thorny and contradictory space of diachronic implication.

Implication on small and large scales

In my analysis of the short excerpt of the interview conducted by Dr Aline Cordonnier with the daughter of a collaborator with the Germans during the Second World War, I opted to focus on the abductive and meta-abductive reasoning undertaken by the two persons involved in the conversation. This account aimed to consider how implication is grasped by the collaborator's daughter, not just in relation to her family history but also in relation to the national context of which she is a part. This part of the interview is particularly interesting because it highlights how the interviewee's recounting of the past is continually negotiated by the information she conveys, her reticence, and her lack of knowledge about her father's possible involvement. 'J'en sais rien' says the woman during her interview. This absence of knowledge is certainly one of the main aspects of this extract; it is also a springboard to a reflection on the terms in which implication can be understood in relation to this kind of case, between 'small-scale encounters and large-scale structures' (Rothberg, 2019: 2). Indeed, Rothberg argues that through the study of complex forms of implication one can interpret the socio-political and cultural dynamics present in relation to a traumatic past. The interviewee speaks French, so it is assumed that she is from the area of Wallonia, the southern, franco-phone part of Belgium, rather than Flemish/from Flanders. This linguistic aspect is not to be underestimated because, in relation to the memory of the Second World War, it has been decisive in creating a kind of division between the narrative of the northern part of the country as collaborators with the Nazis and the southern part of the country as resisters. As many historical, sociological and linguistic studies have shown (cf. Balance, 2002; Beyen, 2002; Lagrou, 2003), in the post-War narrative in Wallonia, a popular and institutional narrative was consolidated in which the role of the resisters left accounts of collaborationism on the back burner.

This has sometimes led to a self-exculpatory narrative in which non-knowledge corresponds to a hesitation to investigate, therefore avoiding complex narratives and more nuanced distinctions between good and bad. This has led to a cultural narcotisation of collaborationism in favour of a more comforting narrative in which French Belgians resisted the Nazi enemy. In this sense, I believe that the woman's inability to speak to this history, to share what she knows – her *not remembering* – has connotations at a small-scale (the family space) and a large-scale (the national space) level. As mentioned, given the brevity of the excerpt, it is not possible to make explicit the extent to which she benefits from her father's collaboration (or as a Belgian citizen) in the present. Nevertheless, it does provide the measure of her ability to untangle a past system of injustice in which she suspects she is involved, even though she does not have the vocabulary, or perhaps the desire, to express her implication in it.

In this interview, when 'goaded' by the researcher's questions, the woman relies on a fuzzy process of regulative justification¹⁰ (cf. Bellucci, 2018) of the past events concerning her parent's complicity. As she is talking, these events as well as the standards used *not* to speak of them seem to become her own, due to the avoidant strategies she adopts. In other words, the interviewee in this extract appears to replicate the rhetoric of silence and narcotisation that has seemingly characterised her family history. She presents herself in a way that serves to regulate an interpretation that is at least as shocking as it is possible, to 'find' the least traumatising solution to the enigma about her father. In response to the researcher's questions, her statements are constantly reshaped and curtailed through linguistic stratagems (e.g. the use of 'voilà') or due to the impossibility of designating a fact as true or false. In this way, the interviewee is both an active enquirer and a reluctant family member who passes on knowledge of the facts to others. At the same time, she seems to showcase in an exemplary way a cultural strategy in which forgetting (Connerton, 2008) in relation to collaborationism also acts in a larger, national context. Her alternating abduction indicates a process of attuning one's identity as a daughter to a memory of violence that, perhaps understandably, one would never want to inherit. This excerpt is important, then, not so much because it demonstrates how the interview grants the possibility of a factual truth – that is, whether the woman's parent collaborated with the Germans – but because this is achieved through a space that meanwhile performs the daughter's difficulty to admit her connection with that trauma. In other words, connecting to my argument in the first section of this article, it is in these terms that the interview stands as a space for memory, as a participatory moment in which information is not only conveyed from one subject to another but it is constructed and reworked in the making of the interview itself. From this perspective, studying family memories with the tools of the interview provides us with a plural form of investigation that can follow a subject as s/he repositions him- or herself to shed light on the facts of the past, therefore also revealing the dynamics of the construction of the self through what is admitted or denied as a 'memorised' fact.

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Notes

1. I would like to thank Aline Cordonnier for allowing us to use the excerpt from her interview for the purposes of this essay. Cordonnier presented the interview during a seminar held at the University of Trento (organised by Thomas van de Putte) in 2022. On that occasion, various Memory Studies researchers were given the possibility to interrogate different texts (interviews, videos, photographs). The aim was to bring into dialogue different methodologies and theoretical perspectives in analysing texts and forms of discursivisation of the past. I contributed to the seminar by proposing a focus on the semiotic analysis of visual texts and spaces of memory. For more information about the seminar, see the introduction to this issue.
2. Although in Critical Heritage Studies this adjective is usually used in relation to material culture (particularly monuments of dictatorships that still occupy a space in our cities today), in this article I invoke the post-conflict dimension that the term proposes. The concept of difficult heritage is primarily concerned with the challenges – that are difficult, indeed – that contemporary societies, institutions and policy makers face in the project of resemantising and redeveloping an uncomfortable memory that is materialised in monuments. Thus, on this occasion, ‘difficult’ is more related to the process of elaborating and systematising an inconvenient heritage that cannot, however, be ignored.
3. Marianne Hirsch defines postmemorial work as follows: ‘Postmemorial work, I want to suggest [. . .] strives to *reactivate* and *reembody* more distant social/national and archival/cultural memorial structures by reinvesting them with resonant individual and familial forms of mediation and aesthetic expression’ (Hirsch, 2008: 111).
4. The issue of benefits is, of course, a valid point that, for Rothberg, can potentially determine implication. For example, taking into account his personal experience, Rothberg questioned the extent to which he is an implicated subject of American slavery and racial capital, even as the descendant of Ashkenazi Jews who immigrated to the United States after the criminalisation of slavery. As an American citizen who pays taxes in a system that continues to benefit economically from slavery, he concludes, he is implicated (cf. Rothberg, 2019: 17). On this occasion, however, my focus is not anchored to these kinds of advantages, that is, I do not aim to unveil clues about the benefits of the interviewee thanks to her national and family history. After all, as Rothberg says, implication is a complex category, and it does not necessarily pivot around benefit. Indeed, as he writes, ‘I do not believe that, say, contemporary Germans are best understood as “beneficiaries” of the Shoah, even as they remain implicated subjects responsible for the deeds carried out in the name of their nation’ (Rothberg, 2019).
5. On the relationship between the semiotic theory by Eco and Memory Studies, see Salerno (2021) and Mazzucchelli (2023).
6. Work by Charles S. Peirce is quoted using the standard abbreviation ‘CP’, which refers to *The Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce* (see Peirce CS (1931–1958), in ‘References’). Numerical references indicate volume and paragraph number.
7. In this extract, different levels of abduction can be traced: the interviewee’s abduction, with respect to the family memory; the interviewer’s abduction, in trying to connect the information she receives in the dialogue; the interpreter/researcher’s abduction, based on what is transcribed in the interview; and a level of meta-abduction involving the interpreter/researcher trying to understand what the interviewee and interviewer are abducting. While acknowledging all these levels and demonstrating the complexity of layered thinking that characterises these types of texts, on this occasion, I am mainly concerned with the first type (the interviewee’s abduction).
8. In this essay, the term ‘competence’ is to be understood in relation to the semiotic and structuralist perspective of Algirdas J. Greimas. In particular, competence refers to a specific stage of the *Schéma Narratif Canonique* (SNC) in which the subject succeeds in obtaining all the information and know-how necessary to carry out his or her mission. In this sense, it could equally be labelled ‘cognitive competence’, since it concerns the amount of information that the subject needs to know in order to interpret the past.
9. A clarification is necessary at this point of the analysis, echoing the methodological section outlined above: the excerpt taken into consideration for this analysis does not propose all the exhaustive codes

that we would need to reach a certain conclusion. This specification is necessary because it leaves us the legitimate space for other interpretations: for example, that the word 'voilà' is only used as a transitional word together with others such as 'enfin' and 'donc', which are used less in the extract.

10. The interviewee does not determine the object of her knowledge but just the rule according to which her knowledge can be considered plausible.

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Author biography





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Extract of the Interview

| Line | Time stamp | Speaker | Utterance |
|------|------------|---------|---|
| 1 | 00:00 | Int | Donc votre papa était prisonnier (.) pendant la guerre (1.7) So your dad was a prisoner (.) during the war? (1.7) |
| 2 | 00:05 | Par | J'imagine (.) j'imagine (1.1) fin de guerre (.) et euh (.) = I imagine (.) I imagine (1.1) at the end of the war (.) and uh (.) = |
| 3 | 00:09 | Int | = Plutôt oui mais prisonnier alors (.) des Allemands (0.4) ou alors c'était = Rather yes but a prisoner then (.) of the Germans (0.4) or was it |
| 4 | 00:12 | | plutôt prisonnier après la guerre (.) en lien avec ces histoires [de collaboration] rather imprisoned after the war (.) in relation to these stories [of collaboration] |
| 5 | 00:16 | | par l'État belge by the Belgian State |
| 6 | 00:16 | Par | [Mais oui parce que] (.) oui parce que l'hôpital était en Allemagne (.) et donc il [But yes because] (.) yes because the hospital was in Germany (.) and so he |
| 7 | 00:18 | | est resté longtemps en Allemagne après la guerre (2.1) donc prisonnier (.) stayed in Germany for a long time after the war (2.1) so prisoner (.) |
| 8 | 00:24 | | prisonnier (0.5) plutôt des (.) des Belges (0.6) enfin des Alliés (.) il partait = prisoner (0.5) rather of the (.) the Belgians (0.6) well of the Allies (.) he left = |
| 9 | 00:28 | Int | = Oui donc plutôt (0.4) fin de guerre après-guerre [que pendant la guerre] (.) = Yes so rather (0.4) at the end of the war after the war [than during the war] (.) |
| 10 | 00:30 | Par | [Oui (.) oui (.) oui (.) oui (.)] [Yes (.) yes (.) yes (.) yes (.)] |
| 11 | 00:31 | Int | J'imagine qu'il était trop jeune que pour avoir euh (.) [fait partie de l'armée] I imagine that he was too young to have uh (.) [been part of the army] |
| 12 | 00:34 | Par | [Mais euh (.) alors l'histoire] (.) [But uh (.) so the story] (.) |
| 13 | 00:36 | | alors là aussi c'était une histoire en fait qu'il ra(h)contait (.) É que mes enfants se so there too it was a story in fact he would te(h)ll (.) £that my kids |

| Line | Time stamp | Speaker | Utterance |
|------|------------|---------|--|
| 14 | 00:40 | | souvi(h)ennent vraiment bien£ parce que eu:h (2.7) enfin voilà de temps en temps rem(h)ember very well£ because u:h (2.7) so anyway from time to time |
| 15 | 00:46 | | mon père se grattait l'œil comme ça (.) et ça faisait un bruit euh (0.9) >que ça ne my father scratched his eye like this (.) and it made a sound uh (0.9) >it wouldn't |
| 16 | 00:50 | | fait pas chez la majorité des gens< (.) mais bon un bruit assez (.) l'autre l'entend make in most people< (.) so really a sound very (.) the other hears it |
| 17 | 00:54 | | distinctement .h (.) et donc bien sûr mes enfants >comme tous les enfants posent clearly .h (.) and so of course my children >like all children ask |
| 18 | 00:57 | | des questions (.) et donc ils avaient dit< : « mais enfin qu'est-ce que t'as à ton œil » questions (.) and so they had said<: "but what on earth is wrong with your eye" |
| 19 | 01:00 | | .h (.) et alors mon père le(h)ur avait répondu : (.) « Ah mais ça c'est quand il y a .h (.) and so my dad had answered th(h)em: (.) "Ah but that it is when there was |
| 20 | 01:03 | | un obus qui a éclaté et j'ai reçu des shrapnels » (.) alors ça faisait rire mes enfants a shell that exploded and I was hit by shrapnel" (.) so that made my children laugh |
| 21 | 01:07 | | parce que ce mot était un mot pas possible £"shrapnels"£  .h (.) dans les because that word was an impossible word £'shrapnel'£  .h (.) in |
| 22 | 01:10 | | yeux (0.2) et euh (0.9) et et et et voilà (.) et donc euh (.) je sais qu'à un the eyes (0.2) and uh (0.9) and and and and that's it (.) and so uh (.) I know that at |
| 23 | 01:15 | | certain moment moi j'ai dit : « mais enfin mais tu as eu ça où alors » (0.5) et il a certain moment I said: "well jeez but where did you get that then" (0.5) and he |
| 24 | 01:19 | | m'a dit : « Et ben  (.) quand j'ai été blessé hein  » .h (.) et donc c'est said to me: "ah well  (.) when I was wounded uh  .h (.) and so it was |
| 25 | 01:21 | | après que je me suis dit : « blessé (.) l'œil (.) shrapnels (.) » .h enfin voilà afterwards that I said to myself: "wounded (.) the eye (.) shrapnel (.)" .h so that's |
| 26 | 01:24 | | mais est-ce que c'est faux est ce que c'est vrai (.) je ne pourrais pas vous dire (0.4) it but is it false is it true (.) I couldn't tell you (0.4) |

| Line | Time stamp | Speaker | Utterance |
|------|------------|---------|---|
| 27 | 01:26 | | je ne pourrais pas vous dire (1.8) après coup eu:h (1.1) donc mon frère ((prénom)) I couldn't tell you (1.8) afterwards u:h (1.1) so my brother ((first name)) |
| 28 | 01:32 | | que je ne vois plus  (.) 'fin que toute la famille ne voit plus depuis trois whom I don't see anymore (.)  well that the whole family hasn't seen for three |
| 29 | 01:35 | | ans euh (1.3) au moment de la mort de mon père eu:h (0.8) on se voyait encore years uh (1.3) at the time of my father's death u:h (0.8) we were still seeing each |
| 30 | 01:40 | | donc à ce moment-là (0.4) et euh il s'est occupé d'une partie des des papiers (.) et other at that time (0.4) and uh he took care of part of the the paperwork (.) and |
| 31 | 01:44 | | moi d'une autre enfin bref .h et donc je lui ai dit (.) j'dis : (.) « mais t'es au courant I did some too so anyway .h and so I said to him (.) I say: (.) "but do you know |
| 32 | 01:48 | | de cette histoire de pension de papa en Allemagne » (.) et euh (0.5) euh il dit : « je this story about dad's pension from Germany" (.) and uh (0.5) uh he says: "I |
| 33 | 01:52 | | je je je j'envoie un papier comme quoi » (0.5) il m'a dit (.) euh mais je dis : « t'es I I I I send a letter saying that" (0.5) he said to me (.) uh but I say: "you you |
| 34 | 01:56 | | t'es au courant  toi de cette histoire » (.) il me dit : « ah oui oui oui parce que euh know  about this story" (.) he says to me: "ah yes yes yes because uh |
| 35 | 00:59 | | (.) papa m'avait demandé de corriger une lettre euh (.) qu'il avait écrit en allemand (.) dad had asked me to correct a letter uh (.) that he had written in German |
| 36 | 02:04 | | .h (.) euh pour que la pension puisse continuer (.) et euh (.) et donc je l'ai aidé » .h (.) uh so that the pension could continue (.) and uh (.) and so I helped him" |
| 37 | 02:08 | | j'dis : (.) « mais (1.1) tu lui as posé des questions  » (0.4) il m'dit : (.) « ben I say: (.) "but (1.1) did you ask him any questions  " (0.4) he says to me: (.) "well |
| 38 | 02:11 | | non (.) non je n'ai pas posé j'ai traduit  » (1.4) et j'ai dit : « mais toi tu sais des no (.) no I didn't ask I translated  " (1.4) and I said: "but you you know some |
| 39 | 02:15 | | choses  » (.) « ah non moi je ne sais rien  » (1.8) donc voilà  (1.8) mais en things  " (.) "ah no I don't know anything  " (1.8) so that's it  (1.8) but at the |
| 40 | 02:20 | | même temps (.) bon ce frère-là on ne le voit plus (.) pour des raisons same time (.) so this brother we don't see him anymore (.) for reasons that are |

| Line | Time stamp | Speaker | Utterance |
|------|------------|---------|--|
| 41 | 02:24 | | <p>pfff (1.6) idiots (0.3) donc c'est pas les vraies raisons .h (.) c'est des raisons pfff (1.6) stupid (0.3) so they are not the real reasons .h (.) they are superficial</p> |
| 42 | 02:28 | | <p>superficielles euh (0.4) mais c'est apparemment quelqu'un °qui saurait plus de reasons uh (0.4) but he is apparently someone °who would know more</p> |
| 43 | 02:31 | | <p>choses sur la famille parce que (0.5) voilà (1.6) il sait qu'on aurait (0.4) things about the family because (0.5) that's it (1.6) he knows we might have (0.4)</p> |
| 44 | 02:36 | | <p>une demi- sœur quelque pa::rt et (0.6) 'fin des choses comme ça .h (0.6)° donc a half-sister some::where and (0.6) so things like that .h (0.6)° so</p> |
| 45 | 02:39 | | <p>eu::h (.) est-ce que c'est parce qu'il veut s'écarter de ça (.) est-ce que lui aussi est u::h (.) is it because he wants to distance himself from that (.) is he also</p> |
| 46 | 02:43 | | <p>dans une espèce de provocation .h (.) et que tout ça n'est pas vrai (.) j'en sais rien in a kind of provocation .h (.) and that all of this isn't true (.) I don't know</p> |
| 47 | 02:47 | | <p>non plus (.) °j'en sais rien° (2.3) either (.) °I don't know° (2.3)</p> |
| 48 | 02:51 | Int | <p><i>Et donc si on met un peu toutes les pièces ensemble</i>  (1.0) si je compte bien votre <i>And so if we put all the pieces together</i>  (1.0) if I calculate correctly your</p> |
| 49 | 02:55 | | <p><i>papa avait environ 15 ans [au début de la guerre]</i>  (.) <i>dad was around 15 years old [at the beginning of the war]</i>  (.)</p> |
| 50 | 02:56 | Par | <p>[uhm uhm ouais] [uhm uhm yeah]</p> |
| 51 | 02:58 | Int | <p><i>et donc sûrement trop jeune pour faire la la la (0.4) and so probably too young to fight in the the the (0.4)</i></p> |
| 52 | 02:59 | Par | <p>Oui [la vraie guerre oui] Yes [the real war yes]</p> |
| 53 | 02:59 | Int | <p><i>[la campagne des 18 jours avec la Belgique] (0.3) [the 18-day campaign with Belgium] (0.3)</i></p> |
| 54 | 03:03 | Int | <p><i>Donc (.) il aurait (.) potentiellement peut-être été du côté de l'armée allemande Thus (.) he might (.) potentially have maybe sided with the German army</i></p> |
| 55 | 03:06 | Par | <p>Oui (0.6) Yes (0.6)</p> |
| 56 | 03:07 | Int | <p><i>Mais vous ne savez pas s'il serait parti au Front de l'Est (.) ou s'il serait</i></p> |

| Line | Time stamp | Speaker | Utterance |
|------|------------|---------|---|
| 57 | 03:10 | | <i>But you don't know if he might have left for the Eastern Front (.) or if he might resté autre part (0.7) et donc il y aurait eu (.) un moment have stayed somewhere else (0.7) and so there would have been (.) a moment</i> |
| 58 | 03:13 | | <i>où quand même (0.6) un contact (.) enfin il serait dans les combats where really (0.6) a contact (.) well I mean he would have been in combat</i> |
| 59 | 03:16 | Par | <i>[Oui oui oui oui tout à fait] (0.4)</i> |
| 60 | 03:17 | Int | [Yes yes yes yes exactly] (0.4) <i>[et a reçu des schrapnels et puis] (0.4)</i> <i>[and received some schrapnel and then] (0.4)</i> |
| 61 | 03:18 | | <i>Oui (0.4) et alors plutôt en fin de guerre alors (.) à ce moment-là = Yes (0.4) and so rather at the end of the war then (.) at that time =</i> |
| 62 | 03:20 | Par | <i>= Oui (.) il y aurait eu à un certain moment une prise de position de sa part de ce côté-là</i> = Yes (.) there would have been at a certain moment a stance on his part in this regard |
| 63 | 03:23 | Int | <i>Oui oui (.)</i> <i>Yes yes (.)</i> |
| 64 | 03:24 | Par | <i>Oui (.) uhm (0.5) uhm uhm (3.0)</i> Yes (.) uhm (0.5) uhm uhm (3.0) |