Imaginaries of a Bulletproof Cabin: An Investigation between Law, Semiotics, and Memory

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Abstract

This article seeks to investigate the role that a symbol—connected to a legal event and a collective trauma—has in the construction of a past imaginary. It begins with a theoretical reflection on the role of the symbol as proposed by Juri Lotman and the function of repetition in the consolidation of collective memory. It subsequently focuses on the semiotic resonance of one specific object: the bulletproof cabin of the Nazi criminal Adolf Eichmann, used during his trial in Jerusalem, in 1961. I consider the 'afterlives' of this object, examining the different 'remakes' of Eichmann's cabin in several mediatic and artistic contexts, focusing on the modalities that have anchored it to the post-1961 imaginary of the perpetrator and the legal consequences of his actions. To do so, the article proposes a typology of uses of the cabin, identifying the different nuances of its representation and how they encapsulate the thorny issues surrounding that infamous legal event.

Keywords Symbol · Law and memory · Material culture · Imaginary · Perpetrator · Adolf Eichmann

> 'And there stood the bullet-proof glass box, like a big museum showcase – too big
> for a civet or a bird of paradise, too small for a skeletonic dinosaur – which was
> the focus and fulcrum of it all.' [39].

1 Arenas and a Bulletproof Cabin

The mutual relationship between law and memory has been studied from different epistemological perspectives. Scholars of legal studies, sociology, and anthropology (see, among others, [14, 41, 42, 47]) have investigated how the normative dimension of law has affected and influenced so-called 'historical truth' [38] and our social

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awareness of the past, notably in cases of collective traumatic events. In this sense, the law can be intended as a language, a semiotic device that is capable of producing a rigorous narrative version of the past, distributing actorial roles–who is culpable of something, who is not–and offering a narrative grid to follow for similar cases in the future. Shoshana Felman has written on the importance of law as a language in precisely this regard, thus foregrounding its ability to define the limits of all possible interpretations, to 'close the case and enclose it in the past' ([24], p. 107).

This article shares the same focus: the law's ability to modify and enclose past narrativity. The following discussion looks not at the language of the law itself, however, but how legal directives and narratives become repeated in culture. Put differently, I trace how the social perception of legal work is transmitted, diffused, and anchored in media and artistic texts. To do so, I emphasise chiefly the remediation ([10, 22]) of a material object which embodies a legal practice—it was once a part of the furniture of a trial—and which consequently became a symbol of the power of justice and of a traumatic event, namely the Holocaust. I refer to the bulletproof cabin used to protect the Nazi perpetrator Adolf Eichmann during his 1961 trial in Jerusalem[1].

Designed and constructed specifically for the occasion by the Israeli Government, Eichmann's glass cabin had the primary function of enabling the accused to stand present at his own trial, while being protected from any threats of physical violence. Beyond this function, however, the cabin also represents the Israeli government's intention and capacity to put one of the Holocaust bureaucrats in the dock. It does so by using a transparent material, glass, that produces a double scopic regime of visibility: it is the filter through which Eichmann is seen by his accusers and a global audience on TV, but at the same time it is the filter that mediates reality to the Nazi perpetrator, defining his vision of the witnesses, judges and the public, albeit constantly reminding him that he must face justice. The following reading of the cabin understands it not only as a material object with individual physical proprieties but also as a semiotic text that reveals how the 'legal arena' and the 'aesthetic arena', as defined by Jeffrey Alexander [1], can interact and powerfully condition the visual imaginary of the past.

In his theory on cultural trauma, Alexander [1] identifies a series of institutional 'arenas' that shape historical consciousness and the representation of the past by codifying what took place, offering a narrative pattern for the interpretation of similar events and defining the social and normative boundaries between punishment, reparation, and forgiveness. The arenas he theorises can be understood as different interpretative frameworks that help to postulate the different actorial roles implicated in the narrative of the trauma (for instance, victims and perpetrators) and to

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[1] The Eichmann trial can certainly be considered the most important legal event, in the context of the crimes committed by Nazis, after the Nuremberg trial (1945–1946). The trial of the former *SS-Obersturmbannführer*, captured in Argentina by the Israeli intelligence Mossad, was conducted in Jerusalem from April to December 1961. The trial was followed by prominent journalists and philosophers all over the world, also because it was broadcast on television. Among them was Hannah Arendt, who in 1963 published the most important and most cited text on the subject: *Eichmann in Jerusalem. A Report on the Banality of Evil*.

organise knowledge of the past. They structure four key variables: 'the nature of the pain', 'the nature of the victims', 'the relation of the trauma victim to the wider audience' and 'the attribution of responsibility' ([1], pp. 17–19). Alexander distinguishes and defines religious, scientific, mass media, state-bureaucratic, legal and aesthetic arenas; my focus here will, as mentioned, be limited to the juxtaposition and intersections of the last two.

The legal arena consists of all the texts and discourses that connect the sphere of jurisprudence to those of memory and trauma. As this connection indicates, the law can semiotically construct the perception of the past, providing a language for a traumatic event and structuring its narration through a normative system that can classify and organise the roles of the subjects involved and their valorisation (cf. [47]). In this respect, the legal arena could include, for example, those punitive or commemorative 'memory laws'[2] that enact a given state's agency regarding what is worth remembering or condemning, and how (cf. [11]). Another classical example would be the trials of perpetrators accused of crimes against humanity. From the Nuremberg trials (1945–1946) to more contemporary proceedings against those who committed genocides, many such instances have affected the representation of perpetration, the historical consciousness of the past, and the social-semiotic power of the law.

The aesthetic arena, on the other hand, is characterised by the artistic narratives of the trauma that seek to forge emotional bonding and identification at a public level. Among the most recognizable examples is the transnational articulation [16] of Anne Frank and her image, now a symbol not only of the Holocaust but of the more general category of the victim ([1], p. 20).

Expanding on the connections between the legal and aesthetic arenas allows me to delineate certain mechanisms that regulate the symbolisation of law and memory and the construction of specific past iconographies. In this sense, Eichmann's bulletproof cabin enables a critical analysis that walks the line between the aesthetics of law and the semiotics of memory. Through this very tangible and distinct case study, it is possible to study the 'external dimension' of the aesthetics of law [64]—i.e., how legal work 'appear[s] more and less frequently in culture' ([65]: 93)—alongside those discourses on the past that emerge at a cultural level and impact collective memory. By scrutinising its long-term echoes in cultural production, I illustrate how the bulletproof cabin is more than a simple tool used to protect Eichmann from physical attacks from those in the courtroom; rather it was (and remains) an object

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[2] Two examples of kind of memory laws are the Spanish Ley 52/2007, also called 'Ley de Memoria Histórica de España' which recognised the victims of the Spanish Civil War and Francoism and ordered the erasure of all symbols related to the dictator Francisco Franco; and the 2018 Polish law that punishes those who create connections of 'responsibility or co-responsibility to the Polish nation or state for crimes committed by the German Third Reich' with up to three years in prison.

that triggers emotions and generates new meanings of broader concepts such as justice and perpetration.

In these pages, therefore, I do not address the performance and performativity [7] of the courtroom ritual per se. Instead, I look at the afterlives[3] of a material trace of that ritual: how, through repetition, this piece of practical furniture mutated into a sign that synthesises and expresses varying content relating to memories of the 1961 trial, the figure of the perpetrator and the authority of the law.

In Sects. 2 and 3 of this essay, I begin with semiotic definitions of the symbol and of its mnemonic function, as proposed by Juri Lotman, before turning to the modalities in which the imaginary of perpetration is constructed through repetition and remediation. In Sect. 4, I turn to the symbolic weight of Eichmann's cabin, studying a corpus made of various texts with different expression substances (this includes fictional films, documentaries, comics, and book covers). I conclude my account in the fifth section dedicating greater attention to two artworks in particular—Gustav Metzger's installation *Eichmann and an Angel* [37] and Moshe Ninio's photographic work *Glass* [40]—that offer two of the most creative and challenging representations of the cabin.

2 The Symbol and its Memory

Before proceeding with the analysis of the different textualisations of Eichmann's cabin, it is necessary to frame the symbolic status of this 'glass cage', as Hannah Arendt [3] called it—already invoking a semantic area beyond its original function, that of animal captivity. From the point of view of the semiotics of culture, and of course and considering our positionality in the present, after the trial, the trapezoidal bullet-proof cabin which housed Eichmann, built of wood and glass, can certainly be understood as a 'symbol' for at least two reasons. First, through its expression, the object condenses many meanings connected to memory, (the power of the) law and perpetration; second, even when remediated, it does not lose that fundamental connection to the juridical sphere that 'created' it.

In semiotics, theoretical reflections on the symbol are manifold and can undergo subtle shifts according to the philosophical tradition taken into consideration. Our main point of reference is Charles Sanders Peirce, who in his philosophical theory of the sign proposed a tripartite classification: icon, index, and symbol. The icon is characterised by the ability to propose similarity or analogy with its referent (for example, the map of the Amsterdam subway represents the Dutch city's underground transport system, to scale); the index presents a relationship of physical continuity with its referent (a woman's footprints left on wet sand); the symbol is a sign to

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[3] The concept of 'afterlives' is the English translation of Aby Warburg's notion of *Nachleben*, which has become a key concept in memory studies (see, for example, [45, 6, 46]). In this paper, however, I follow Marek Tamm's more nuanced definition: the term 'does not refer to an afterlife in the sense of another life beyond this one, but should be understood as a continued life, the past that becomes actual in the present, or the past that haunts the present. Therefore, instead of the traditional 'afterlife', a more appropriate translation might be 'survival' or even 'revival'' ([53]: 9).

which several meanings have been conventionally associated (the © symbol stands for the private property of an intellectual or artistic work) ([43] 1.369, c.1885).

While undoubtedly recognising the importance of Peirce's definition, my objective, following Franciscu Sedda's [48] suggestion in a recent study of the symbol, is to reflect not only on the semiotic metaphysics of the sign, but also on the understanding of *how* and *when* it 'acts like' a symbol. In this case, then, I focus only on the sign-cabin *qua* symbol, but also and more specifically on the functions it performs culturally as a metalanguage. This shift in focus towards a cultural dimension facilitates the possibility to theorise the semiotic relationship between memory and law from a diachronic perspective.

Therefore, I follow the theoretical reflections on the symbol and its mnemonic properties as proposed by the Russian semiologist Juri Lotman.

In his theory of culture, Lotman specifies how symbols *survive* temporalities, acting as a semiotic clasp that 'synthesises times, defines spaces, brings actors into existence' ([48], p. 15, translation my own; cf. [35]). For Lotman, symbols are characterised by a figurative recognizability that condenses and captures a value system and a set of meanings, thereby providing a community with an additional 'tool' through which it can relate and perceive the world. This process of synthesis into a singularity makes it possible to give value to a complexity that otherwise could not be expressed (cf. [31]). Within this system of condensation, the symbol can pass more information than other signs, and with greater ease. As Lotman writes,

> A symbol, then, is a kind of condenser of all the principles of sign-ness and at the same time goes beyond sign-ness. It is a mediator between different spheres of semiosis, and also between semiotic and non-semiotic reality. In equal measure it is a mediator between the synchrony of the text and the culture's memory. Its role is that of a semiotic condenser ([35]: 111).

The exchange of information implied here is not only synchronic, from one part of the culture to another and in different areas of the semiosphere [34], but also diachronic, as a movement that traverses generations and cultural shifts. For this reason, Lotman suggests, the symbol should be seen as one of the most 'important mechanisms of cultural memory' ([35]:104). It represents a kind of 'reminder', something which can facilitate the recollection of the past, but also, more individually, assist the cognitive perception of various things. As Lotman writes:

> a symbol, being a finalized text, does not have to be included in a syntagmatic chain, and if it is included in one, it preserves its own semantic and structural independence. It can readily be picked out from its semiotic context and just as readily enter a new textual context. This leads us to another important feature: a symbol never belongs only to one synchronic section of a culture, it always cuts across that section vertically, coming from the past and passing on into the future. A *symbol's memory is always more ancient than the memory of its non-symbolic text-context* ([35], p. 103, my emphasis).

The symbol is therefore capable of condensing a series of meanings that connect to events in the past—those that led to its constitution. More importantly, though, the symbol is 'flexible': since it does not 'belong' to any single, synchronic section of a culture, it can gain subsequent and additional meanings. These meanings are attributed within a culture in particular contextual spaces, and they change with the shifting intentions of the symbol's use; however, the symbol always maintains some link to the context that generated it. As it travels in the semiosphere, then, it can partially modify its original status and adopt new contextual meanings that can be similar or different. For Lotman, the memory of the symbol can correspond to the meanings of its own uses, thus it becomes a sort of chronology of those various pragmatic functions that enabled the growth of its meanings.

3 An Imaginary of Perpetration

The cabin used by Eichmann functions, in the immediate wake of the trial in 1961, as a symbol in precisely these terms. To understand how it is necessary to consider in further detail the mechanism that allows an object such as this to be transformed and assume different connotations (in a type-token semiotic logic): repetition.

Widely studied in semiotics and philosophy (see, among others, [17, 18, 21, 44]), the process of repetition serialises the object, increasing its visual presence within the central zones of the semiosphere.[4] In our example, the glass cabin, this results in a familiarisation of both the trial as event and the perpetrator as a culpable actor in the post-Holocaust memory narrative. Repetition, and more precisely remediation—when the sign is repurposed across changing media environments—is the motor that enables an object to 'travel' through culture ([9, 23]). In this movement, it contaminates and is contaminated by every arena through which it passes, becoming recognizable thanks to recurrent semantic traits, even for those without specialised expertise. In this case, for example, the non-specialist equates to those who do not have in-depth knowledge of the Jerusalem trial and its various stages.

This mechanism fosters a democratisation of the sign, causing it to reach the most diverse subjectivities, even on a diachronic level; at the same time, it also fabricates a sort of 'common sense'. In the case of Eichmann's cabin, this generates a visual archive in which memory and law are intertwined. This visual archive corresponds to a portion of an encyclopaedia, as Eco [20] would say, which 'safeguards' all the visual texts that represent and/or mention the 1961 trial.

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[4] Repetition permits the symbol to become an *almost* 'invariable' metalanguage ([35], p. 104). Certainly, the symbol pre-empts the rules of a precise type of meaning, i.e., it becomes a matrix that can be compressed or expanded according to the context of its use [36]. Nevertheless, repetition does also produce variants, which in turn stand for the modifications of the culture that decides to adopt it. It is in light of these partial modifications that we can consider the symbol *almost* invariable.

Through this process, the repetition and remediation of certain symbols contribute to the consolidation of an imaginary: a kind of visual repertoire that becomes normalised and often summarises the narrative of the event itself (cf. [22]).

This imaginary is to be understood as a 'semantic system of images' ([57], p. 34) in which a given culture figuratively constructs the perception of its reality, according to power relations, fixed narrative patterns, and aesthetic canons.

The mechanism traced out here is evident in particular in the construction and narration of traumatic pasts, and more particularly still in the use of material objects from those pasts as repeated symbols. The objects belonging to those involved in a given event can come to evoke their lives; the same objects can adopt different values as they 'travel' through different media environments (one thinks, for instance, of the shift from use-value to commemoration and documentary exhibition of the shoes of those murdered in the Holocaust). Much research has been conducted on the construction of the imaginary of violence towards the victims of traumatic events, focusing quite specifically on the remediation of precisely these kinds of material belongings ([13, 49, 66]). Leaving to one side the shifts towards fetishisation or the anesthetisation of violence, the re-proposition of these objects has established a fully-fledged aesthetics of memory, where material culture has been configured as a sign of sufferance that can make a trauma 'tangible' ([4], p. 58) and synthetic, enacting a strong emotional impact.

When it comes to perpetrators, however, we require a different paradigm as the role they play in the narrative of the past trauma and the evaluations of the texts that represent them in culture are likewise different. While the remediation of objects connected to victims encapsulates issues like 'innocence and victimhood' ([59], p. 18), since their lives were brutally interrupted, the remediated material objects 'belonging' to a perpetrator instead evoke contrasting themes like violence, responsibility, culpability, and justice.

In Eichmann's case, these aspects are exacerbated by the fact that the object that metonymically represents him is not personal or quotidian, but an element of courtroom furniture. As such, it is rooted to a highly semiotised space in which certain rules and behaviours are prescribed. While the figure of the Nazi bureaucrat [3] can be visually detached from the space of the concentration camps where the 'final solution' was implemented, it cannot be detached from the space of the courtroom or the cabin. The reason for this attachment is essentially tied to the creation and remediation of the image of Eichmann in a fundamental association with this cabin: as I have anticipated, it is a symbol that materialises across the semiosphere in a variety of disconnected cultural representations.

4 A Piece of Courtroom Furniture in Culture: Some Examples

More than a decade before the trial in Jerusalem, the Irish artist Francis Bacon painted *Study for a Portrait* [8] in which he represents a man in a suit and tie, his mouth wide open, intent on releasing screams of rage and pain. In fact, the painting is one of many studies by Bacon with variations of this theme. The scenario depicted is distressing [55]: the man's body seems to be unravelling, he appears to

lose materiality, to become a ghost, and his mouth is a disquieting black hole. This text is particularly interesting here: as Lyndsey Stonebridge [52] points out in her research, the man looks like Eichmann and is seated inside a glass booth. Given the obvious resemblance to the Nazi, many art historians have sought to question the date of the work and the artist's denial that he portrayed Eichmann in Jerusalem [52]. If Bacon's declarations are to be believed, the painting constitutes a fascinating case where a work of art premeditates the representation of an event [27], making it iconic even before it has even taken place. The anticipatory power of art manifests itself not only at the plastic and figurative level [26] but also and especially at the level of content, in relation to the semiotic interpretation of the trial. Although it does not depict Eichmann, the painting anticipates the effects of meaning produced by the photographs of the 1961 trial: the dystopian emotional and proxemic relationship between perpetrator, witnesses and the public; the semiotic power of the glass booth, destined to be remedied in various discursive regimes for the very fact that it simulates (even at the level of form) the function of a cage in which 'evil' is trapped but remains visible. As Stonebridge ([52], pp. 110–111) writes: 'Bacon's [8] *Study for a Portrait* captures (the verb is particularly apt here) the torsion between caged beast and the nightmare of evil without agency that the encaged Eichmann embodied' (Fig. 1).

The relational character of semiotics also facilitates a systematisation of a group of texts that gravitate diachronically in the semiosphere, making it possible to render intelligible the various attributions of meaning given to a particular phenomenon. Eichmann's cabin is a potentially fascinating case in this regard, insofar as the discourses surrounding it nourish and modify not only its textualisations after 1961 but also those that preceded it, as in Bacon's painting. Eichmann's cabin not only

has a significant afterlife, but its poignancy also constructs a semiotic 'fore-life': the meanings of the previous texts liked to it *a posteriori* are altered because of its symbolic invasiveness.

Shifting, then, from pre- to post-, it is evident that trying to trace a history of the various textualisations of Eichmann as perpetrator (and his trial) produced in the years following 1961 would require greater space than I have available, and moreover transcend the aims of this discussion, which are limited to identifying the forms of this object's remediations.

Precisely because the trial of Eichmann was broadcast internationally on television (under the direction of affirmed American documentarist Leo Hurwitz), one of the privileged languages for the narration of this event quickly became, unsurprisingly, the audiovisual one, specifically cinema and documentary. Among the many films released,[5] two particularly useful examples with respect to the representation of the cabin are *The Man in the Glass Booth* from [61], an adaptation of a theatrical play with the same name, directed by Arthur Hiller, and the [50] artistic documentary *The Specialist* by Eyal Sivan and Rony Brauman. These are two very different products, in terms of objectives and style. The first is not specifically a film about Eichmann, but a fictional story inspired by the Jerusalem trial. The second is a two-hour documentary that re-elaborates the 350 hours of recordings made during Eichmann's trial. What they have in common is the way they 'make figurative' and visually enhance the booth not as a simple and 'innocent', inanimate piece of furniture, but as an object that is capable of conveying the power of the law and the force of justice against one of the most wanted criminals of the post-World War II period.

The first case, *The Man in the Glass Booth*, tells the story of a Jewish survivor of the Holocaust, Arthur Goldman. Living in the present in the United States of America, Goldman is kidnapped by the Israeli secret service and put on trial in Jerusalem, accused of being a Nazi war criminal in disguise. The film uses the complex double identity of the protagonist to question the nature of culpability in general. More relevant here is the depiction of the titular glass booth: when Goldman arrives at the trial, he, like Eichmann, is placed in a bulletproof cabin, where he remains for the entire second half of the film–at the trial's culmination, he even locks himself in it and falls into a catatonic state. The cinematography of the film uses the cabin continually as a frame within the frame, carving out Goldman in the foreground in order to emphasise his declarations, or boxing him in behind the witnesses, as an emblematic yet isolated backdrop to their words.

When Goldman arrives in the courtroom for the first time, the film's dialogue underlines the layered role that the booth plays in defining the power relationship in the space of the trial. When the pseudo-Eichmann first lays eyes on it, he makes it into a dismissive joke, questioning the purpose of the 'humidor' in the room. The judge responds, '[it] is a glass booth replacing the dock, bullet-proof for your protection. It contains a loudspeaker, microphone, earphones. I control a switch should

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[5] In the last twenty years, the following films that thematise the trial were produced internationally: *Eichmann* by Robert Young [63]; *Hannah Arendt* by Margarethe von Trotta [58]; *The Eichmann Show* by Paul Andrew Williams [61]; and *Operation Finale* by Chris Weitz [60].

Fig. 2 The cabin in a still from *The Man in the Glass Booth*

your testimony or response become irrelevant'. This dialogue is particularly interesting as it indicates two values afforded to the object: as well as the material quality mentioned above—bulletproof protection for the man inside—it also represents a means for the trial to control his testimony, his speech, 'should it become irrelevant'. Hence the film provides an extra layer of meaning to the cabin-symbol, indicating the need to limit the vital space of the perpetrator.

In this movie, then, the cabin goes beyond its mere materiality because it owes its symbolism only in part to its formal characteristics. This is not to suggest that the materiality of the booth is no doubt significant: for one brief example, the glass serves to define a regime of vision whereby the perpetrator is simultaneously in captivity and protected, but also exposed in a 'window', as though in a museum.[6] Nevertheless, what is more relevant is the fact that the cabin is a space of control (inside a bigger space of control which is the courtroom[7]) for the perpetrator's body, categorising the proxemics between perpetrator-judge, perpetrator-victims, and perpetrator-audience.

Finally, the film also presents the cabin as an actant that *helps* the evolution of the story also in relation to the protagonists' emotions and objectives. In particular, through interaction with the cabin—touching it, controlling the audio, Goldman locking himself inside—all the characters fully realise their characterisation within the narrative (Fig. 2).

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[6] As noted in the incipit to this essay, Jan Morris, who reported on the Eichmann trial for *The Guardian*, described the 'real' cabin in a way that echoes this image, as 'the bullet-proof glass box, like a big museum showcase—too big for a civet or a bird of paradise, too small for a skeletonic dinosaur' https://www.theguardian.com/world/2006/apr/10/secondworldwar.features11. Accessed 15 January 2023.

[7] As Leif Dahlberg [15] has pointed out, the objects of a courtroom serve to discipline and control, à la Foucault, the relationship that bodies have with the space they inhabit in those moments.

Fig. 3 Two stills from the opening sequence in *The Specialist*

The second example, *The Specialist*, further stratifies the role that courtroom furniture plays in the construction of the imaginary of this trial. In this case, as mentioned, the film is a documentary and therefore shows the actual scenes at Beit Ha'am. Following the opening credits, the film uses a series of establishing shots to set out the spaces of the theatre. It lingers on the glass cabin. This is depicted over a very specific musical soundtrack that uses a combination of shrill and deep, loud sounds and an irregular rhythm to create a tense, creepy sensation—evidently echoing the soundtrack of a horror film. This is further emphasised through the montage, which sometimes matches the rhythm of these sounds. At one point a particularly loud, high-pitched note of a string instrument plays as the camera cuts from the empty seats of the auditorium to a close-up of the empty cabin (Fig. 3).

In the footage that follows, of course, the cabin will no longer be empty. The scene therefore serves to set the tone for that subsequent action in a very specific way: the filmic enunciation—the music and the montage—attribute to the courtroom furniture a sense of discomfort and anxiety. In this scene, they are presented without people and without Eichmann, like furnishings and motionless witnesses waiting for the 'horror', and capable of predisposing a dysphoric, agitating even if static 'atmosphere' (see [25, 54]), anticipating an emotional evaluation of the event they are about to host.

As these first brief examples indicate, the textualisations of Eichmann's glass booth translate it into something other than a 'simple' courtroom object by highlighting certain particular aspects, according to the aims of the narrative. These cultural tendencies, together with the historical and iconographic extraordinariness of the Jerusalem trial, transform the booth into a stratified semiotic object, (partially) narcotising the function [19] of protection to create other meanings of the symbol. These can be summarised in the following tentative typology: (i) the cabin as document/monument; (ii) a metonymical condensation of perpetration and evilness in a broad sense; (iii) an eidetic recurrence or 'visual motif' capable of representing Eichmann in many textual products; (iv) an artistic object that thematises the theoretical issue of perpetration and 'evil's' point of view, activating emotions and

Fig. 4 A comic strip featuring Lex Luthor on trial in a glass booth, recalling Adolf Eichmann, and people watching it at home ('The Death of Superman', November 1961)

reflections linked to more general forms of judgement, responsibility or non-admission of guilt. In what remains of this section, I will briefly introduce instances of the first three of these types, before a more detailed analysis of the fourth one in the final section of the essay.

i. The Document/Monument

Over the years, Eichmann's cabin has been exhibited as a testimonial object in different museums. The most famous cases are those of the New York Museum of Jewish Heritage, which in 2017 displayed the object in a permanent exhibition entitled *Operation Finale: The Capture & Trial of Adolf Eichmann*, and the Ghetto Fighters' House Museum in Western Galilee, which presents the cabin in a permanent exhibition called *Facing the Glass Booth*. Although the two exhibitions differ – one focuses more on the trial and the other on the perpetrator – I believe they can be read together as they both endow the object with documentary and indexical dimensions in the same manner. The cabin is presented on the one hand as historical evidence of an event that changed the fate of the post-war period and the memory of the extermination of the Jews, and, on the other, as a legal artefact that is worthy of preservation. As such, the cabin moreover assumes an indexical dimension thanks to its location in the museum, highlighting a relationship of semantic continuity with the trial and with the perpetrator it housed. These new qualities attributed to the object help it to obtain a 'testimonial aura' that permits the cabin to become an 'exhibitable' object. Indeed, the relocation into a museum [56] grants the object an exhibition value that is certainly not connected to any artistic feature but tied to the fact that it was used in a certain moment of the past and once 'belonged' to Eichmann. Moreover, following the dichotomy proposed by Le Goff [32] its presence in the museum also makes the cabin a 'monument' to the justice carried out in the name of the victims of the Holocaust and the survivors of the death camps. In this context, the booth is positioned between *memento* and *monito*, between remembering of the crimes

Fig. 5 Paratext-covers of books about the 1961 Eichmann trial

committed by Eichmann and the Nazis in general and the memorial warning to not repeat those crimes, filtered through the force of justice.

ii. The Metonymical Condensation of Perpetration and Evilness

An example of the second type of meaning attributed to the glass booth can be found in a popular culture text, and specifically the 1961 storyline of the *Superman* comic entitled 'The Death of Superman'. In this volume, the villain Lex Luthor kills Superman and is subsequently put on trial by Superman's people, the Kryptonians. The story quite evidently draws inspiration from the Eichmann trial as can be seen in several narrative elements. For example, Luthor's trial is broadcast on television and followed by a great number of people at home, just like the Jerusalem trial, and, moreover, Luthor appears in a glass cabin during the proceedings (Fig. 4).

This example allows me to consider a different semiotic nuance given to the object that could be defined as a metonymical condensation of the perpetrator. In other words, the cabin became the ideal space to 'contain' the evilest person of all when he stands before the law. The cabin object, through figurative reduction, becomes a specific token of the general type that is 'a space of perpetration'. The cabin also represents the severity of the misconduct, insofar as it signals the presence of someone who is guilty of the most heinous crime of all.

This citation[8] in the *Superman* comics demonstrates how the semiosis of the cabin object (and of the 1961 trial) immediately transcended its own boundaries

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[8] Though the comic book has a completely autonomous semiotic life, i.e., it is possible to enjoy it without being aware of what was happening in Jerusalem at the time of its writing, this remediation of the booth simultaneously structures a separate, intertextual dialogue which functions only if the reader has an encyclopaedic knowledge of the original text/event [21]. In other words, the subject must recognise Eichmann and the whole legal ecosystem of the Jerusalem trial as a kind of memorial heritage in order to perceive the connection between the actual event and its textual quotation.

Fig. 6 *Eichmann and the Angel* installation by Gustav Metzger [37] © Gustav Metzger

to imprint itself in the popular imagination, becoming an effective narrative trope that represents a wickedness that does not repent for its crimes.

iii. Eidetic Recurrences

The last example that shows how the cabin is used and re-used in different domains devoted to the transmission of this historical event concerns the 'shape' of the object itself, i.e., how its form becomes a visual motif. I refer to the use of eidetic recurrences [26], lines that stand for the border of the cabin, which are visually adopted to evoke the booth as container and frame in texts about the trial. This is unmistakably clear on the covers of many books that analyse the Eichmann trial from a historical or interpretative point of view. For example, let us consider the 2006 English edition of the famous 'Eichmann in Jerusalem' by Hannah Arendt, 'The State of Israel vs. Adolf Eichmann' by Hanna Yablonka ([62]), or 'The Eichmann Trial' by Deborah E. Lipstadt ([33]—all in Fig. 5).

In these paratexts, the perpetrator is repeatedly *framed* between straight lines that directly or indirectly recall the edges of the cabin. In this way, the images of Eichmann are dissected into shapes, creating framed openings that capture the perpetrator, reproducing both the perspective of those present in the Beit Ha'am theatre and a sense of closure and containment around the accused. Therefore, the lines abstract the cabin transforming into a motif that seems necessary to construct a relationship of interdependence between Eichmann and the booth (and the viewer). These covers nourish the idea that there is no perpetrator without his container. The booth imprints itself on the imagination as a physiognomic characteristic of the perpetrator but also as the predominant frame/gaze from which a person can access his image.

5 Questioning the Perpetrator's Perspective

The 'external' point of view on the booth—the heterotopic position of the spectator who is always in another site, necessarily not inside the controlled space of the cabin—has been aesthetically challenged through a handful of artworks. Two artists in particular have considered the possibility of reversing the point of view and looking at the cabin from within, in a metaphorical movement that draws attention to the perpetrator's gaze and to the condition of 'being judged'. As I illustrate in this section, these artists use the booth as a space of guilt that can be occupied by anyone. To do so, they overcome the granitic opposition between good and bad that often characterises trauma narratives, considering the perpetrators not as 'inhuman', literally, different to us because they belong to an exclusive and different space, but as people who in certain circumstances can assume problematic attitudes without having the courage to admit it.

The first instance is Gustav Metzger's *Eichmann and the Angel* ([37], Fig. 6), an installation which poses exactly this kind of question. Commissioned first by the Cubitt Gallery in London, then subsequently exhibited in other countries, the installation depicts a white cabin made of wood and glass that is evidently reminiscent of its equivalent at the Jerusalem trial. The cabin is situated in a room with white walls on either side, and it faces another wall made entirely of newspapers stacked one on top of the other. To the right of the cabin sits another stack of newspapers in front of a conveyor belt. The right-hand wall also features a reproduction of Paul Klee's painting *Angelus Novus* (1920); the painting also lends its name to part of the installation's title. The wall on the left of the cabin bears the names of three cities: New York, Jerusalem and Portbou.

The composition and content of the installation is evidently deeply metaphorical, carefully intersecting the lives of the three individuals it cites: Arendt (who died in New York), Eichmann (who died in Jerusalem) and Walter Benjamin (who died in Portbou). Metzger's work makes a powerful comment not only on the 'creation' of history, but also on the observation of that creation. First, the wall of newspapers evidently evokes the construction of history, as built and reported in the pages of that publication—specifically, *The Guardian*, making a play on words with its title: the 'guardian', the person who watches over something (Scharrer, online). Moreover, users of the exhibit can place sheets of newspaper on the conveyor belt, where they progress forward only to end up in a heap at the end (this is visible in Fig. 6), thus there is a dynamic sense of history being continued. Not by chance, Klee's painting is positioned above this pile of newspapers, clearly evoking Benjamin's reading of the figure in his essay 'Theses on the Philosophy of History' (published in *Illuminations*, a version of which was edited by Arendt). In Benjamin's infamous interpretation of the angel—what he sees to be the angel of history—he writes,

> A Klee painting named *Angelus Novus* shows an angel looking as though he is about to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating. His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain

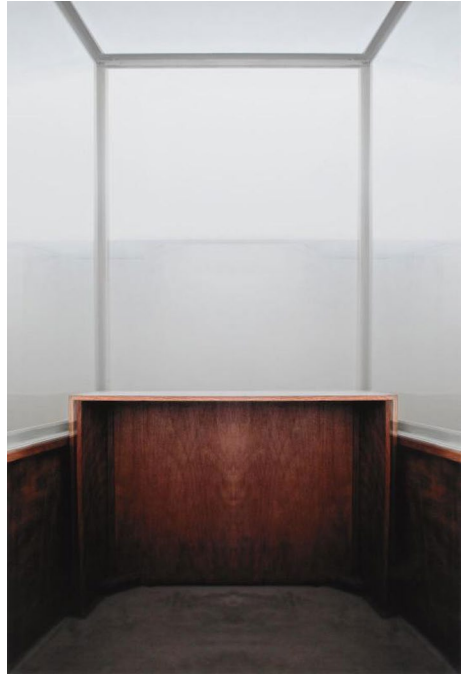**Fig. 7** *Glass* by Moshe Ninio ([40]) © Moshe Ninio

of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet ([12]: 257).

 In this exhibition, the 'wreckage' that is hurled at the feet of the angel is literalised by the newspapers that fall from the conveyor belt, at the angel's feet.

This process is made all the more interesting by the presence of the cabin, which clearly presentifies the figure of Eichmann: as we have seen in some other cases above, the cabin is a symbol that quite straightforwardly stands for him and for the trial. More relevantly, however, the cabin faces the wall 'of history' and the end of the conveyor belt, thus it has a privileged, but also forced, perspective on this creation of history. This reproduces the forced perspective imposed on Eichmann during the trial: he was obliged to face his judges and the witnesses, but also the testimonies of the crimes of which he was accused, in the documents reproducing the intricacies of the extermination camps. Clearly the artwork is making a complex provocation by comparing—spatially, as in its title—Eichmann and the *Angelus Novus*, therefore seeming to present the Nazi as another 'guardian' that must observe (and be afforded responsibility for) the wreckage resulting from his own actions.

What is relevant to my account of the bullet-proof cabin in this discussion is that the visitor can enter the version in Metzger's artwork, therefore *also adopting* Eichmann's positionality. Of course, this is not to suggest that the visitor can 'feel' the same as Eichmann or directly share the same experience. Indeed, though the trial and the Holocaust are implicit, more concretely the viewer is compelled to adopt a general point of view—one that cannot be detached from a sense of legal judgment and a responsibility that the defendant denies—for what is being looked at, i.e., the chain of events represented in the newspapers on the wall in front of them. The cabin therefore is characterised not only as a metonym of Eichmann *qua* perpetrator, but as a space that metaphorically represents the dimension of judgment in a more general sense, as well as a kind of denial of one's own responsibility for events. Evidently this gains new significance when considering how the wall of newspaper

Fig. 8 Third photograph in the artwork *Glass* by Moshe Ninio ([40]) © Moshe Ninio Photo credit: Georges Meguerditchain – Centre Pompidou

headlines could represent, for example, contemporary problems such as climate change in which all of us are implicated.

The second artwork that thematises the question of perspective is *Glass* by Moshe Ninio ([40], Fig. 7). It consists of four photographs taken from inside of Eichmann's original cabin. Each of the images captures the perspective from inside the cabin, with glass walls in front, above and to both sides, and with a wooden board on the lower half of each side. They function in a loose sequence: the first image shows the internal perspective, the second is identical to the first only reversed on the vertical axis, as if mirrored. The third image superimposes the first two, merging therefore the original image and its mirror refection in one. The fourth and final image is a black and white copy of the third.

As in the previous case, this artwork is immediately striking for the fact that it evokes the figure of Eichmann without directly visualising the perpetrator or the trial. Here, too, the bodily absence of the perpetrator is 'filled' by the spectator, who, when in the action of looking at the photograph in an art gallery or museum, occupies an ambiguous position within the representation. What differs from the previous example is the relation of gazes that are created between the space of the experience and the space inside the photograph. In the first two images this relation connects the subject-in-the-booth and the background, in the third one the same subject and the booth itself.

Glass is not a naïve operation aimed at visually mimicking what Eichmann saw (also because the background of the photograph is white and grey and has no figurative elements). The sophisticated aim of the artwork is ideally to give the spectator

a privileged position within the booth, imagining him/herself surmounted by the object and framing what lies beyond the caged subject. This operation reverses what was considered in the previous section: the frame is no longer on Eichmann, here it is directed toward the world outside the cabin, an evanescent and phantasmal background.

The depth of the gaze is more narrowed in the third photograph, the central one (Fig. 8). The superimposition of the two previous images—and specifically the central, wooden part of the cabin—shapes the face of a figure that is reminiscent of Beelzebub, looking in the direction of the spectator. In this photograph the visual interest of the viewer changes completely, as they are finally able to perceive a non-abstract figure with their own eyes. Their attention shifts to the evil face and the viewer recognises that they are no longer alone in the booth: they face this evil presence that takes shape in the wood grain. Here the scopic regime is once again altered: what happens beyond the cabin is no longer fundamental, the exchange of gazes takes place *inside* the cabin, which becomes even more claustrophobic: the spectator is forced to dialogue with a 'ghostly' entity ([51], p. 98) without knowing whether it is their own reflection on the polished wood or the entity that animates and inhabits the haunted space of the cabin.

Finally, it is interesting to note that the last photograph 'freezes' this deadly and disturbing dialogue in black and white, attributing the function of an archive document to the photograph, proof of the evil presence. Moreover, the chromatic choice to use black and white echoes the images of the trial that circulated around the world.

6 Conclusion

These examples illustrate how, after 1961, Eichmann's cabin became what Appadurai [2] calls a 'thing-in-motion' with an active, symbolic life. It travelled (and continues to travel today) within visual culture; in this process, it stratifies its meanings but also becomes a memory meta-language, providing a dynamic recollection of the legal event. Indeed, the textualisations of the cabin have their own nuances both formally (the horror soundtrack to *The Specialist*, the superimpositions of *Glass*) and at the level of their content (some pose Eichmann as 'evil incarnate'; others seem to challenge the very concept of perpetration). Together, though, the examples give voice to a collective cultural representation of Eichmann that accounts for this variety and continually stabilises or restabilises his image in our cultural memory, posing and challenging a set of assumptions about law, justice, perpetration and, more broadly, the memory of the Holocaust.

The spreadability of the cabin also allows me to offer some less contextual conclusions about the interrelationship of the symbol and memory, at least within the limits of the specific context studied here (the transmission of memories of trauma, between the legal and aesthetic arenas). First, the cabin invokes a set of interesting questions about the functions of material objects in the creation of memories, as mentioned above, both for its non-quotidian status and, more importantly, for its connection to a perpetrator, not a victim. The meanings of the cabin in the examples

treated here would appear to indicate that the tensions surrounding the cultural weight of perpetrators are indeed subject to shifts in meaning.

Second, the cabin-object functions as a symbol in the terms identified by Lotman. It is an anchor to a specific legal context and a concrete cultural representation, but it can also trigger and be subjected to reciprocal contaminations. Different repetitions and remediations open up the space, posing questions about the limits of what is being remembered and under what terms (representative in this regard are the challenging questions proposed by the artworks studied in Sect. 5).

Third, and relatedly, the example indicates the possible overlaps between the symbol, from a semiotic perspective, and the figure of memory. Reworking a theory of Maurice Halbwachs ([28, 29]), Jan Assmann ([5], p. 23) defines the 'figure of memory' as elements which stand for recognizable, 'fixed points' ([5], p. 37) that activate precise kinds of knowledge of the past and allow a community to recognise and stabilise its own 'history' in them. Here there is a clear connection to be made with symbols, as defined in this essay. Indeed, figures of memory are characterised on the one hand by being extremely permeated within a group and, on the other, by their ability to refer precisely to a time and a space, providing 'orientation' for the signification of the past. Together, these categories seem to guarantee the permanence of memory, and yet this is not universally fixed but instead can provoke new, often difficult narratives and shed light on unseen points of view.

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