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## Representing the Material Infra-Ordinary of the Perpetrator

Mario Panico

**Abstract:** This paper explores the role played by the material objects of perpetrators in the representation of their lives, crimes and memory legacies. To locate and situate these objects, I concentrate not on the propaganda monuments built during regimes but on the domestic arena, that is, on places connected to the private lives of perpetrators that now feature in memorial sites. In the cases examined here, these feature within artistic exhibitions at such sites. In the first part of the article, I propose that these cases also provide a particularly fruitful opportunity to question the 'infra-ordinary' of perpetrators. In this, I borrow Georges Perec's notion (1997) that the study of apparently trivial things unveils the most 'authentic' dimension of the real. In the context of perpetrator heritage, what emerges is a very thorny infra-ordinary, as it is overlaid topologically and phenomenologically with the space of violence. Having outlined this reasoning, in the second part of the article, I examine two examples of artistic practices which integrate the objects of perpetrators into the site's narratives. The first is a temporary exhibition entitled 'Bilder, Stimmen und Klischees' (Pictures, Voices and Clichés), which was hosted in a part of the SS Auxiliaries' quarters at the Mahn- und Gedenkstätte Ravensbrück in Germany. My second example is the permanent artistic installation at the ESMA Museo Sitio de Memoria, (Museum and Site of Memory), in Buenos Aires. The analysis of these two artistic practices sheds light on the strategies adopted to represent perpetrators through the material infra-ordinary, thereby challenging the stereotype of absolute evil.

**Keywords:** perpetrators' objects, material infra-ordinary, domestic space, trauma site, Mahn- und Gedenkstätte Ravensbrück, Espacio Memoria y Derechos Humanos ex-ESMA

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## Introduction

As I write, there is a film in theatres which is provoking much discussion in academic and cultural circles, *The Zone of Interest* (2023), directed by British director Jonathan Glazer.<sup>1</sup> The film has been critically acclaimed, gaining a wide global release and winning two Oscars in 2024 for Best Foreign Film and Best Sound. Loosely based on the novel by British writer Martin Amis,<sup>2</sup> Glazer's film recounts the domestic life of the family of Rudolf Höss, the former commandant of the Auschwitz concentration camp. The narrative takes place almost exclusively within the boundaries of the commandant's domestic space, and the audience never sees what happens inside the camp. (It is almost as if this is unneeded, the absence is so easily filled by the rich imaginaries of that setting from well-established Holocaust films and other cultures).

Höss and his family live just a few metres away from the Auschwitz I camp. In this villa, we observe their daily routines: taking care of the flowers in the garden, making decisions on how to tighten the cogs of efficiency in the concentration camp machine, or thinking about the next family holiday away from Oświęcim in the moments before bed. At the same time, the concentration camp pierces the scene insistently, disturbing the tranquillity of the family in different ways: from the smells of burnt bodies hovering in the air and the prisoner's screams of despair heard in the background to the glaring light of crematorium fires illuminating bedrooms by night.

*The Zone of Interest* is one of the most interesting Holocaust films released in recent years.<sup>3</sup> It offers an innovative reflection on the figure of a Nazi perpetrator, focusing on his everyday life and domesticity, without reducing this narrative to a Manichean representation of the Nazi as a monster or an absolute evil. This perspective is fundamentally tied to the setting chosen for the story: the house, with its flowerbeds, its inhabitants, its decorated interiors, its furniture and everyday objects. Indeed, the Höss house presents the spectator with the *ordinariness*

1 For a snapshot of the discussion the movie generated see, for example, Fatma Aydemir, 'The Zone of Interest is a portrait of guilt. No wonder it has divided opinion in Germany', *Guardian*, 27 March 2024.

2 Martin Amis, *The Zone of Interest* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2014).

3 For a recent, comprehensive overview of *Holocaust films* see Rich Brownstein, *Holocaust Cinema Complete: A History and Analysis of 400 Films, with a Teaching Guide* (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, 2021).

of evil.<sup>4</sup> Put differently, it represents that troubling familiarity of the simple, banal practices of human beings as connected to those who were partially or fully responsible for severe, collective crimes, due to political conviction, indoctrination, voluntary choice, faith, or the impossibility of doing anything else.

The position of the house in the vicinity of the camp, and its shadows of death and violence, invites the spectator to question the psychological dimension of the characters depicted. We wonder at their habits, and especially the anaesthetisation of their quotidian and cyclical life, causing them to perceive Auschwitz not as a heterotopic place but merely as the condition of their daily stability. In *The Zone of Interest*, objects play a central role in the Höss family's everyday life. They contrast or even seek to mask the bleak reality of the concentration camp, though often this backdrop remains latent or somehow haunts the objects. The villa's curtains, for instance, furnish a screen between the peaceful interior and the violent exterior, and the large wooden mirror in the bedroom allows Hedwig Höss to try on a fur coat that was seized from a Jewish prisoner. The dinner table allows the Höss's family to gather to eat and share stories about the day, while the shadow of the Auschwitz watchtower is framed by the window in the background. Likewise, the swimming pool and the yellow, white, and orange striped deck chairs in the garden provide a summer-holiday feel – were it not for the crematorium chimneys in the background. Even the doors that divide the rooms ultimately act as thresholds within a space that betrays all its 'tyranny' on the human body,<sup>5</sup> making the house into a labyrinthine space in which the protagonists seem more like trapped rats than inhabitants.<sup>6</sup>

Though much more could and should be written on *The Zone of Interest* in terms of the imagery of perpetration, suffice it here to begin with this brief outline of its mise-en-scène to introduce the position I wish to advance in this article: domestic objects and spaces are pow-

4 I use the concept of 'evil' here without any moral implication, echoing Hanna Arendt's infamous notion of the 'banality of evil'. On the theoretical concept of evilness and how the concept has been studied from a philosophical perspective see, for example, Paul Ricœur, 'Evil, a Challenge to Philosophy and Theology', *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 53.4 (1985), 635-48; Zachary J. Goldberg, *Evil Matters: A Philosophical Inquiry* (New York: Routledge, 2021).

5 Mary Douglas, 'The Idea of a Home: A Kind of Space', *Social Research*, 58.1 (1991), 287-307.

6 This effect is also given by the shooting style adopted by Glazer. In fact, as he has stated in many interviews, he placed hidden cameras in the various rooms of the house and filmed different scenes simultaneously, creating the visual effect of a reality show. Cf. Sean O'Hagan, 'Jonathan Glazer on his Holocaust Film *The Zone of Interest*: "This is not about the past, it's about now"', *Guardian*, 10 December 2023.

erful meaning-makers in the complex and delicate narratives of perpetrators' lives. To do so, in the following pages I think through the material 'infra-ordinary' of perpetrators, in particular the guards and commandants of concentration camps and torture sites in Nazi Germany and during the Argentinian Military Dictatorship. As my terminology implies, I adopt the language and the perspective proposed by Georges Perec.<sup>7</sup> 'Infra-ordinary' is the term Perec proposes in his anthropological reflection on those apparently trivial, quotidian objects, things which textbooks disregard, even though they can communicate personal experiences.

Why approach the representation of perpetrators and their materiality in these terms? My intent here is not to pursue a study of the social settings that allow ordinary people to commit crimes against humanity. The academic literature on this topic is extensive and it has already demonstrated how violent behaviour can emerge.<sup>8</sup> Rather, in my view, studying materiality provides an opportunity to challenge the way perpetrators are commonly 'othered' in memorial museums and popular culture representations, that is, presented reductively as sub-human or entirely alien, unknowable. These kinds of 'othering' representations forge a sort of 'memory habit'; they provide the predominant lens through which it is possible to *see* and *understand* conflict, through the dehumanisation of the perpetrator.<sup>9</sup> Doing so, they simplify the otherwise complex, stratified dynamics of conflict by reducing individuals to moral extremes.

As Kjell Anderson writes in a chapter devoted to the imaginaries of perpetrators in different cultural arenas:

7 Georges Perec, *Species of Spaces and Other Pieces*, trans. by John Sturrok (London: Penguin, 1997).

8 In recent years, much research has been done on the motivations and dynamics that led 'ordinary men and women' to commit crimes against humanity. See Alexander Laban Hinton, *Man or Monster? The Trial of a Khmer Rouge Torturer* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016); Eva van Roekel, 'Getting Close to Perpetrators in Argentina' in *Researching Perpetrators of Genocide*, ed. by Kjell Anderson and Erin Jessee (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2020), pp. 115-36; Erin McGlothlin, *The Mind of the Holocaust Perpetrator in Fiction and Nonfiction* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2021); Timothy Williams, *The Complexity of Evil: Perpetration and Genocide* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2020); Antonius C.G.M. Robben and Alexander Laban Hinton, *Perpetrators: Encountering Humanity's Dark Side* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2023); Alette Smeulers, *Perpetrators of Mass Atrocities: Terribly and Terrifyingly Normal?* (New York: Routledge, 2024).

9 Nick Haslam, 'Dehumanization: An Integrative Review', *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, 10.3 (2006), 252-64.

Perpetrators often serve as a totem of outrage – an antagonist for the protagonist to struggle against; the struggle itself is the thing – the heroic realization of courage, justice, or survival. Through fighting against the perpetrator, a story is told, while the character of the protagonist is also manifested. When rendered as a symbol, the perpetrator is unidimensional, and without compassion, doubt, or remorse. [...] Consequently, artistic and cultural representations of the perpetrator often mystify evil rather than bring us any closer to understanding or empathy, promoting a sense that evil is meant to be feared, not understood.<sup>10</sup>

While such representations have served to preserve the memory of atrocities and educate future generations, they evidently risk ingraining a one-dimensional view of the perpetrator. In contemporary conflicts, this framing often leads to a simplistic understanding of the ‘evil other’ which flattens the reality of human behaviour. The dangers of this become acutely evident when such narratives are weaponised in political domains and especially contemporary conflicts, when they are narrated through superficial oppositions between good versus evil – as though these were natural, ontological categories.

To begin addressing this issue, it is necessary to rethink how we conceptualise and represent the perpetrator, also within the institutions dedicated to historical memory. For this reason, this article proposes a shift in focus: instead of viewing perpetrators as symbols of extraordinary malevolence, I emphasise the mundane of their everyday lives. This shift is enacted by examining the everyday objects of perpetrators, revealing how the capacity for extreme violence can coexist with ordinary life. Reconnecting perpetrators of mass violence to the realm of ordinary human experience in this way can trouble the ‘memory filter’ mentioned above. Put differently, the reflection of the quotidian lives of perpetrators in domestic spaces and artefacts reveal the unsettling *normality* of evil, more than its *banality*.<sup>11</sup>

In the following, I apply this reasoning to the representation of objects in the houses once inhabited by perpetrators, now situated in memorial sites where violence was committed. I suggest that such objects inspire reflection on their everyday aesthetics, albeit in this case

10 Kjell Anderson, ‘The Perpetrator Imaginary: Representing Perpetrators of Genocide’, in *Researching Perpetrators of Genocide*, ed. by Kjell Anderson and Erin Jessee (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2020), pp. 23–48 (p. 25).

11 Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (New York: Viking Press, 1963).

an *uncanny* one based on the syntagmatic relationship between quotidian human praxis and the perpetrator's active violence. By focusing on this normality here, I hope to illustrate how more nuanced representations have the potential to be powerful agents, to help us *understand* perpetration in all its complexity, rather than fearing it (to paraphrase Anderson). Of course, this must take place firmly within a memory politics that powerfully denounces and vilifies past atrocities.

Let it be clear that the aim of this study is not to downplay the guilt of the perpetrators to whom I refer, nor to make far-fetched arguments that diminish or 'argue away' their responsibility. My interest is in the narrative positioning of perpetration. In this sense, I also do not focus on a micro-historical perspective, dedicated to the habits of specific perpetrators. I reflect on how the *narratives* about perpetrators and perpetration can be ramified through objects and their role within the memorial narratives of heritage sites.

After an initial discussion of the specificity of these kinds of houses,<sup>12</sup> in this article, I focus on two case studies of artistic interventions in ex-houses at trauma sites,<sup>13</sup> both of which engage fruitfully with the mundane domesticity and materiality of perpetrators. The first is part of the temporary exhibition, 'Bilder, Stimmen und Klischees' (Pictures, Voices and Clichés), hosted within one of the SS Auxiliaries' houses at the former Nazi concentration camp Ravensbrück, close to Berlin. The exhibition ran – with some difficulty due to the COVID-19 pandemic – from 13 September 2020 to 30 September 2021. In it, five artists worked with archival and historical documents to produce a series of site-specific installations and artworks on the different cultural and private aspects of the domestic lives of SS auxiliaries.<sup>14</sup> Below I examine the

12 Mario Panico, 'Violence and Domesticity: Nazi Perpetrators' Houses between Preservation and Resemantisation', in *Transizioni di memoria: Narrazioni della violenza nel XX e nel XXI secolo*, ed. by Matteo Cassani Simonetti and Roberta Mira (Rome: Viella Publishing, 2024), pp. 263-80.

13 I use the concept of trauma site, considering the definition by Patrizia Violi: 'By "trauma site" I mean a memorial that elaborates an existing trace and arises in the very place where horrors and carnage on a huge scale have taken place; concentration, prison and torture camps subsequently transformed into museum places and opened to the public'. Cf. Patrizia Violi, *Landscape of Memory: Trauma, Space, History* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2017), p. 14.

14 One of the most intriguing aspects of the Ravensbrück case, and this exhibition in particular, is the way in which it weaves the question of gender into a wider discourse on perpetration. While it would be worth tying this discourse to the objects I analyse below – especially when compared to the second case study, where gender is equally relevant but made invisible as the perpetrator was a man – that would fall outside the scope of this article. On the relationship between gender and violence at Ravensbrück, see Susanne Luhmann, 'Managing Perpetrator Affect: The Female Guard Exhibition at Ravensbrück,' in *Perpetrating Selves:*

work of one of these artists, Dominique Hurth, who, together with a textile designer, re-created the historical curtains inside the house where the female guards lived.

The second case study is found at the former domestic space of Rubén Jacinto Chamorro, ex-director of the military school and clandestine detention/torture centre, the Escuela Superior de Mecánica de la Armada (ESMA, The Higher School of Mechanics of the Navy) in Buenos Aires. The site is now a memory museum and UNESCO heritage site. In particular I consider an artistic intervention by Nicolás Dardano and Cecilia Atán which is part of the permanent exhibition of the site. This was carried out under the curatorship of the former director of the memory site, Alejandra Naftal. It consists of a television, placed in a room of Chamorro's flat, that loops short clips of Argentinean TV broadcasts from the 1970s.

These two case studies – which represent different traumatic histories and are based on different politics of memory – enable me to compare the representation of the perpetrator's material infra-ordinary within two different historical and geographical contexts. The analysis of these artistic interventions unveils two different aesthetic approaches to the materiality and domesticity of criminals, offering new insight into the use of arts in trauma sites to mediate the figure of the perpetrator and the act of perpetration. Before discussing these examples, however, it is worth further conceptualising the 'use' of objects within this process.<sup>15</sup>

## The Material Infra-Ordinary

In order to grasp the potential relevance of everyday objects within the narrative representation of perpetrators, it is helpful to adopt the concept of the infra-ordinary by the French philosopher and writer Georges Perec. In *Species of Spaces and Other Pieces*, he questions whether it is possible to study the things that are absent from the daily news, and if so, how. To do so, he suggests, requires the difficult task of seeking that which is *not* extraordinary, but which nonetheless characteris-

*Doing Violence, Performing Identity*, ed. by Clare Bielby and Jeffrey Stevenson Murer (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), pp. 247-69.

15 Here, I refer to the idea of 'use' not only from a pragmatic perspective (i.e., how objects have been used by their owners) but also how the use itself can become a device that contributes to the stratification of objects' meanings and the construction of new relationships and dynamics between subjects, places and institutions. Cf. Sara Ahmed, *What's the Use? On the Uses of Use* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019).

es our existence and defines us as human subjects. If the extraordinary is what is worth being remembered – i.e., it is memorable as it is outside of the norm – and the ordinary is what is often unnoticed, which we know characterises our existence and we are aware of it, then the infra-ordinary can include something even less visible, seemingly, because it is submerged by the social and personal importance built into the first two concepts. Perec writes,

How should we take account of, question, describe what happens every day and recurs every day: the banal, the quotidian, the obvious, the common, the ordinary, the infraordinary, the background noise, the habitual? To question the habitual. But that's just it, we're habituated to it. We don't question it, it doesn't question us, it doesn't seem to pose a problem, we live it without thinking, as if it carried within it neither questions nor answers, as if it weren't the bearer of any information. This is no longer even conditioning, it's anaesthesia. We sleep through our lives in a dreamless sleep. But where is our life? Where is our body? Where is our space?

How are we to speak of these 'common things', how to track them down rather, flush them out, wrest them from the dross in which they remain mired, how to give them a meaning, a tongue, to let them, finally, speak of what is, of what we are.

What's needed perhaps is finally to found our own anthropology, one that will speak about us, will look in ourselves for what for so long we've been pillaging from others. Not the exotic anymore, but the endotic. [...] What we need to question is bricks, concrete, glass, our table manners, our utensils, our tools, the way we spend our time, our rhythms. To question that which seems to have ceased forever to astonish us. We live, true, we breathe, true; we walk, we open doors, we go down staircases, we sit at a table in order to eat, we lie down on a bed in order to sleep. How? Where? When? Why? [...]

Question your tea spoons.<sup>16</sup>

Georges Perec's reflection on the infra-ordinary in the context of perpetrator studies urges us to focus on the seemingly banal, everyday aspects of life that often go unnoticed precisely because they are so familiar. This analytical lens becomes crucial when examining the imagery and the representation of genocide perpetrators, since, as I suggested in

<sup>16</sup> Perec, p. 210.

the previous section, it allows us to move beyond the stereotypical portrayal of these individuals as embodiments of ‘ultimate evil’. By shifting our attention to the infra-ordinary within this context, to ‘question the teaspoon’ means not only to survey ordinary people performing routine, everyday actions within a specific bureaucratic and ideological framework. More specifically, it also means tying historical horrors to that routine – thereby eschewing the extraordinary, abstract, and monstrous notion of perpetrators. Examining the mundane realities of perpetrators can thus provide a deeper understanding of how such atrocities were normalised and carried out, offering a more nuanced view of human behaviour and complicity.

However, investigating the micro dimensions of perpetrators’ everyday lives can also entail certain risk: romanticising their personalities, diminishing the impact of their violent actions, distracting the visitor’s gaze from the legal dimension and thus from their criminal responsibility. Managing to contain these risks, however, can enable a more nuanced definition of the relationship between humanness and violence.<sup>17</sup>

It is here that the importance of representation becomes clear, in my view, not just in terms of how the past is ‘preserved’ but how imaginaries of violence are constructed and complexified. Scholarship has widely recognised how artistic representation can challenge the social construction of evil,<sup>18</sup> offering a stratified understanding of the semiotic complexity of the pairing ‘ordinary’/‘violent’.<sup>19</sup> When material culture is integrated into artwork this representational process is further complicated, since objects potentially stress more the *action* of the subject, thanks to the instrumental nature of things. In this sense, the most interesting materials here are not the weapons or military uniforms exhibited at the trauma sites, but the objects which prompt us to ask how much infra-ordinariness and humanness we share with their owners, obliging us to look where otherwise we would be inclined to avert our gaze.

17 On the ordinary life of perpetrators see Christopher Browning, *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1993); Philip Zimbardo, *The Lucifer Effect: Understanding How Good People Turn Evil* (New York: Random House, 2007); Richard Rechtman, *Living in Death: Genocide and Its Functionaries*, trans. by Lindsay Turner (New York: Fordham University Press, 2021).

18 Jeffrey Alexander, ‘A Cultural Sociology of Evil’, in *The Meanings of Social Life: A Cultural Sociology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), pp. 109-20.

19 Diana I. Popescu, ‘Representing Infamous Others: Perpetrator Imagery in Visual Art’, in *The Routledge International Handbook of Perpetrator Studies*, ed. by Susanne C. Knittel and Zachary J. Goldberg (New York: Routledge, 2020), pp. 321-31.

Moreover, even when these objects are used for an aesthetic purpose that changes their original meaning, they can still underline the praxeological dimension of the perpetrator to a greater extent.<sup>20</sup> This is even more interesting when such objects evoke domesticity, hosted in sites that were inhabited by perpetrators. This is the case in the examples used in the following sections.

### Perpetrators' Houses at Trauma Sites

While memory and heritage studies scholars have debated at length what has been called 'difficult' heritage,<sup>21</sup> as well as the representation of perpetrators in memory museums,<sup>22</sup> little attention has been paid to private spaces, such as the houses of perpetrators.<sup>23</sup> Yet, across the world, material traces of perpetrators' domestic lives are very much present, from birthplaces and homes to houses at or near sites of violence, such as barracks or quarters near concentration and transit camps. Across these types, of course, some are preserved, and some have been re-functionalised (within memorials or entirely disconnected from them), while others have been simply razed.

Importantly, homes at sites of violence are situated on the threshold that separates private/public perpetrators and explicit/implicit violence: they are places of everyday life which, however, cannot be disconnected from systematic and/or institutionalised crimes against humanity. To think of depicting the perpetrator's infra-ordinary life

20 Jonathan Luke Austin, 'Posthumanism and Perpetrators', in *The Routledge International Handbook of Perpetrator Studies*, ed. by Susanne C. Knittel and Zachary J. Goldberg (New York: Routledge, 2020), pp. 169-80.

21 Sharon Macdonald, *Difficult Heritage: Negotiating the Nazi Past in Nuremberg and Beyond* (New York: Routledge, 2009).

22 On this, see among others, Caroline Pearce 'Visualising 'Everyday' Evil: The Representation of Nazi Perpetrators in German Memorial Sites', *Holocaust Studies*, 17.2-3 (2011), 233-60; Susanne Knittel, *The Historical Uncanny: Disability, Ethnicity, and the Politics of Holocaust Memory* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014); Birga Meyer, 'Identifying with Mass Murderers? Representing Male Perpetrators in Museum Exhibitions of the Holocaust', in *Perpetrating Selves: Doing Violence, Performing Identity*, ed. by Clare Bielby and Jeffrey Stevenson Murer (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), pp. 223-45.

23 An important exception worth mentioning is the European project 'Houses of Darkness' (2020-23), led by Ingvild Hagen Kjærholt, which studied and designed new artistic practices on what remained of the houses of Nazi perpetrators in the spaces of the former transit camp Westerbork (the Netherlands), the former concentration camp Falstad (Norway), and the former concentration camp Bergen-Belsen (Germany).

in a home far away from a crime scene would be a potentially more contentious choice. It would create the risk of enabling nostalgic drifts, misinterpretations or unjustified romanticisations of the perpetrator's persona.

Many of the trauma sites which have since become memorials to the suffering and loss witnessed *in loco* have begun to incorporate these kinds of spaces into their narratives, highlighting how their previous tenants contributed to the functioning of the violent site, with varying nuances of responsibility. In Europe, for example, there are many cases of this kind: a handful of examples could include the house of the Nazi Commandant in Westerbork, a former transit camp near Groningen, which was placed under a large glass case for preservation reasons in 2015; the house of the Nazi Commandant in Falstad, a former concentration camp near Trondheim, which today functions as a cultural centre and a venue for art exhibitions and a public debate arena on human rights; and the Nazi commandant's house at Natzweiler-Struthof, a former concentration camp near Strasbourg, which is now part of the site visit itinerary.

Spaces such as these are privileged sites to reflect on the infra-ordinary and on materiality. While the space of the concentration camp or detention centre can be considered a crime scene,<sup>24</sup> this is not necessarily, 'forensically' true of private houses nearby, as much as they are nonetheless implicated. The houses therefore trouble this categorisation, adding different layers to the criminal mechanism adopted there. They question the strategies of violence and foreground the power relationship between victims and perpetrators. Moreover, they assume a double semiotic status: on the one hand, they are indexes of the perpetrator's experience of 'normal' domesticity, and on the other, they are symbols of the constant involvement of perpetrators in the crimes committed.

As Paul Connerton notes, the house, in general – that is, any house and not specifically that of the perpetrators – stands for both a physical and symbolic microcosm of personal and collective experiences. It is a tangible object that reflects the lifestyles and habits of communities and specific individuals. In *How Modernity Forgets*, Connerton illustrates these ideas, highlighting the house as a 'medium of representation' and a 'mnemonic system', illustrating how it provides

24 *Geographies of Perpetration: Re-Signifying Cultural Narratives of Mass Violence*, ed. by Brigitte E. Jirku and Vicente Sánchez-Biosca (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2021).

its inhabitants with a model for the structure of the universe because it can represent relationships irrespective of scale and the nature of the material parts out of which it is built; houses have been compared to 'spatial texts', cultural representations in the form of metaphors for various kinds of social units and categories, such that actors can constitute meanings and different power relations through their everyday spatial practices.<sup>25</sup>

In the case illustrated here, however, the house's spatial practices cannot only be considered as 'internal', they cannot be confined entirely to the domestic space. The perpetrators' daily actions in the house assume an uncanny sense precisely because they entertain a syntagmatic and proxemic relationship with the crime scene and, of course, the victim. The house cannot 'make sense' without the camp or detention centre. As in linguistic theory, which illustrates how the relationship between words in a sentence determines their specific meaning in each context of enunciation, so, in the same way, the material object 'house' is configured as a space of perturbing infra-ordinariness due to the topological relationship it has with a site of violence. This is because violence has a relational structure. The victim is a victim when there is a perpetrator who exerts violence on him/her/them. That is why these houses have such pertinence in a study of violence, because they foreground the dynamics between ordinary domesticity and extraordinary harm.

'How is it possible that they lived here?' This is the question a visitor might ask when entering the home space of the perpetrator responsible for terrible crimes that occurred just a few metres away. This question, which is difficult to answer comprehensively, conceals the true challenge of these places. While the home is typically understood as a 'space of values' which are almost always positive, as Gaston Bachelard suggests,<sup>26</sup> these homes specifically were inhabited by those who – culturally speaking – have subsequently come to be designated as subjects without values. This can create a productive contradiction for visitors, one that has the potential to reinstate those values in specific narrative terms. As I will illustrate in the remainder of this article, via my case studies, this process can depend on the specific artistic and curatorial strategies employed to communicate the infra-ordinary of the perpetrator.

25 Paul Connerton, *How Modernity Forgets* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p. 19.

26 Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, trans. by Maria Jolas (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994).

## Methodological Notes

The methodology employed to investigate the following case studies combines museum display and visual analysis to explore how curatorial strategies, spatial settings and artistic interventions influence and stratify the meaning of the sites I study and the histories they aim to convey.<sup>27</sup> I assume that memory spaces can be understood as syncretic texts. They are composed of different elements that use heterogeneous languages (visual, audiovisual and written texts, material objects, sounds); together these contribute to defining the 'intention' of the site in a polyphonic way. Through this approach, I contend, it is possible to grasp not only the curators' intentions, but also and more importantly, in this case, what kind of message the site is communicating 'alone'.

Adopting this methodology, when visiting the sites I focused on how the physical space of the houses has been used to frame the artistic interventions, how it impacts the meaning of the installations in a syntagmatic way, stressing meaningful relationships among different elements in the same space. This involved examining how the spatial configuration, historical context, and materiality of the locations interact with the artworks on display, shaping the viewer's engagement with both the artworks and the site itself. I visited the Mahn- und Gedenkstätte Ravensbrück in September 2021. This was when I also visited the temporary exhibition. There, I engaged in discussions with a member of the Educational Services team to gain insight into how tours interact with the physical and historical context of the site. Talking with the staff also allowed me to mitigate the risks of any possible over-interpretation on my behalf. I visited Chamorro's house at the ex-ESMA in Buenos Aires several times during two separate field trips in March 2023 and March 2024. In Argentina, likewise, I supplemented my analysis through conversations with educators and guides, and through extended discussions with the former curator, Alejandra Nafatal. Moreover, on one occasion I visited the apartment in the company of Andrea Krichmar, a childhood friend of Chamorro's daughter, who had been in the house when she was just a child (Krichmar also features in the video installation of the Junta trial that is screened on site).

27 Christopher Whitehead, *Analysing Museum Display: Theory and Method* (London: Routledge, 2024).

### **Curtains, Cushions and a Bathtub: The Ravensbrück SS Auxiliaries' House**

The first example I consider is located in one of the SS-Auxiliaries' houses at the Mahn- und Gedenkstätte Ravensbrück in Germany, approximately 90 km north of Berlin. A former Nazi concentration camp, Ravensbrück is infamous for having had the largest population of female deportees (120,000 women from thirty different nations) and perpetrators (3340 women) during the period from 1939 to 1945.<sup>28</sup> After its liberation, the camp was used by the Soviet Army as barracks. Only in September 1959, after much lobbying by former prisoner survivors, the first Ravensbrück National Memorial was inaugurated. After the fall of the Berlin Wall and the unification of Germany, the site became part of the Brandenburg Memorials Foundation. Today, the Memorial has converted part of the site into a multifaceted space for the study of the Nazi regime and the violence committed against the Jewish people, other minorities, and political prisoners. The memorial presents a polyphonic structure composed of a memory museum, a research centre, exhibition venues, an archive, a library, and a repository for historical objects. The most important activity of the Mahn- und Gedenkstätte Ravensbrück is the research and preservation of the memories of the women who were deported, as well as the study of the lives and actions of the perpetrators. The latter work has a particular focus on the *Aufseherinnen*, the women guards or SS auxiliaries – women who, although not formally members of the SS, were instructed to oversee female prisoners and support the Nazi commanders of the camp.

The Ravensbrück Memorial was a pioneer for its decision to include the representation of the perpetrators and not just of the victims in its narrative. In 2005, the first exhibition on female guards was inaugurated, providing insight into aspects of their daily lives and the crimes committed in the camp, firmly from the victims' point of view.<sup>29</sup> The exhibition was set up in one of the eight former residences of the guards.<sup>30</sup>

28 Cf. 'Ravensbrück', in *Holocaust Encyclopaedia* <<https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/ravensbrueck>> [accessed 4 May 2024].

29 For a comprehensive overview of the exhibitions on the SS auxiliaries at Ravensbrück see Luhmann; cf. Doreen Pastor, 'Displaying Ravensbrück Concentration Camp Memorial: From the "Antifascist Fight" to "History and Memory of the Women's Concentration Camp"', in *Museums, Modernity and Conflict*, ed. Kate Hill (London: Routledge, 2020), pp. 171–90.

30 Ravensbrück is a very valuable case study that helps to comprehend the housing infrastructure of the perpetrators. In addition to the eight houses used by the women guards, the site also



Figure 1. The SS Auxiliaries' former houses where permanent and temporary exhibitions are held. Photograph by the author.

Over time, the permanent exhibition underwent numerous updates and revisions. In the summer of 2020, the section 'Im Gefolge der SS' ('In the SS Auxiliary') was updated and reopened, occupying two floors of the SS auxiliaries' quarters. Through testimonies of victims and perpetrators, archive materials, photographs and other historical documents, the exhibition gives an account of the experiences of the women who served as camp guards, focusing on recruitment methods, the daily routines of the guards and their representation in post-war popular culture. In the same rooms, a temporary exhibition entitled 'Bilder, Stimmen und Klischees' ('Images, Voices and Clichés') opened on 13 September 2020 and ran until 30 September 2021. In it, five artists – Marianna Christofides, Arnold Dreyblatt, Moritz Fehr, Dominique Hurth, and Susanne Kriemann – used archival and historical materials to create a series of sonic, photographic, audiovisual, and material artworks that examined various cultural and social aspects of perpetration and women's lives and lifestyles. In this article, I will deal exclusively with Dominique Hurth's contribution.<sup>31</sup> I focus specifically

encompassed residences designated for SS officials and the camp commandant's villa. Presently accessible to visitors, the villa hosts an exhibition dedicated to the SS leaders.

31 To know more about the other artworks, see the dedicated page on the Mahn- und Gedenkstätte Ravensbrück website: <<https://www.ravensbrueck-sbg.de/en/exhibitions/permanent-exhibitions/in-the-ss-auxiliary-the-female-guards-of-the-ravensbrueck-womens-concentration-camp/>> [accessed 3 May 2024].



Figure 2. The curtains made by Dominique Hurth in one room of the SS Auxiliaries' former house. Photograph by the author.

on Hurth's work because it represents an excellent example of how art can thematise the intertwining of the infra-ordinary, materiality, and violence in a perpetrator's former domestic space.

Hurth addresses these issues in two different ways within the exhibition. Firstly, by sewing and hanging reproductions of the curtains that once adorned the windows of the house (Figure 2) and installing wooden benches in the corridors with different coloured velvet cushions on them. The cushions are embroidered with statements made by former guard Irma Grese during the Bergen-Belsen trial in 1945 (Figure 3). The visual inspiration for these artworks, created in collaboration with a textile designer, were the domestic objects present in some archival photographs of the guards' flats, taken when the camp was active. Secondly, by hanging a collage of pink images and texts taken from German women's magazines from the 1930s and 1940s on the bathroom walls, above the white tiled bathtub. The collage is composed of materials of different kinds: articles from that era about body care, but also images made after the War. This includes a still from the film *The Reader* (dir. Stephen Daldry, 2008) showing the protagonist,



Figure 3. The cushions with statements by Irma Grese sewn onto them.  
Photograph by the author.

a former Nazi guard (played by Kate Winslet) taking a bath, as well as the notorious photograph taken in April 1945 by David E. Scherman of his colleague Elizabeth Lee Miller in the bathtub at Hitler's Munich apartment (Figure 4).

Through these artistic interventions, Hurth uses the space of the house to connect personal care, fashion trends, and collective tastes to women perpetrators. The exhibition hence frames the Ravensbrück guards in a complex way, connected not just to the camp and to its violence but also to contemporary German society and women's fashion. Through the bathtub collage in particular, the visitor can easily think of these women – who committed terrible crimes – also in terms of a very ordinary interest in beauty. Hurth guides us into this interpretive effort, prompting us to question the personal/social lives of these women and counteracting their more common, stereotypical representation as sub-human, sexually deviant monsters.<sup>32</sup>

32 Cf. Laura Sjoberg and Caron E. Gentry, *Mothers, Monsters, Whores: Women's Violence in Global Politics* (London: Zed Books, 2007); Alette Smeulers 'Female Perpetrators: Ordinary and Extra-Ordinary Women', *International Criminal Law Review*, 15.2 (2015), 207-53.



Figure 4. A section of the collage made by Dominique Hurth on the wall next to the bathtub in the SS Auxiliaries' house. Photograph by the author.

However, Hurth's works do not silence the violent parts of these women's lives. These three crafted objects (curtains, cushions, collage) use the infra-ordinary to articulate a narrative profile of the perpetrator as a complex and multifaceted person. This is realised at aesthetic and metaphorical levels. The colourful, velvet cushions, for example, are elegantly embroidered. However, their pretty appearance is contrasted by the content of the quotations sewn on them. One cushion bears the words 'Drittens gestehe ich' ('third, I confess'), words pronounced by Irma Grese before a British military tribunal in Lüneburg, in 1945. While, superficially, the domestic object seems to invoke home-

ly comfort, in fact, it also declares the responsibility of the woman who confessed to torturing, killing, and raping prisoners in the concentration camps in which she served. The semiotic effect is a 'haunting' of the object; it has a pleasant outward appearance, almost deceiving the visitor into not realising that they are part of the exhibition, but it is ultimately imbued with the violent memory of the crimes committed by those who lived in the rooms they now furnish.

Of course, the perpetrators' double characterisation in this space (as ordinary women who practised extra-ordinary violence) also has a topological attribute, expressed by the curtains that separate and filter the inside from the outside. The coloured curtains hang in almost every room, metaphorically embodying this contrast between interior comfort and exterior violence. Acting as barriers, they prevent a clear view of the outside world and ultimately shelter the apparent limpidness of domestic life from death and crime.

As a museum display strategy, it is striking how the pleasant design and the vivid colours of the curtains starkly contrast the themes of the permanent exhibition, which instead emphasise death, torture, and trauma. In one room, this aspect is visually conveyed in the clash between a reproduced testimony and the yellow curtains covering the adjacent window (Figure 5). The phrase, printed in German and English, in black ink on a white wall, is the quotation of an *Aufseherin*, Margot Pietzner, who in 1991 declared – 'Ich habe niemanden als *Aufseherin* misshandelt außer die *Ohrfeige*, von der sie nichts wussten' ('As guard I never maltreated anyone, except for the slap in the face they knew nothing about'). The sentence gives voice to the perpetrator's version, to her perspective, downplaying the actions committed in the space outside the house. The curtain seems to act in the same way within a scopic dimension: in the past, they kept the external violence out, concealing the camp and preventing the guards from seeing that reality when indoors. The house, in this way, comes across as a 'safe space' for the perpetrators: it shields them from facing, literally, the terrible acts taking place just a few hundred metres away.

Besides serving as a metonymy of the perpetrators' gaze, the curtains in the home of the *Aufseherinnen* also symbolise the intertwining of memories of the perpetrators and victims within the Ravensbrück camp context. This occurs, for instance, in two video testimonies: the first featured on the memorial's website (this was included in the initial

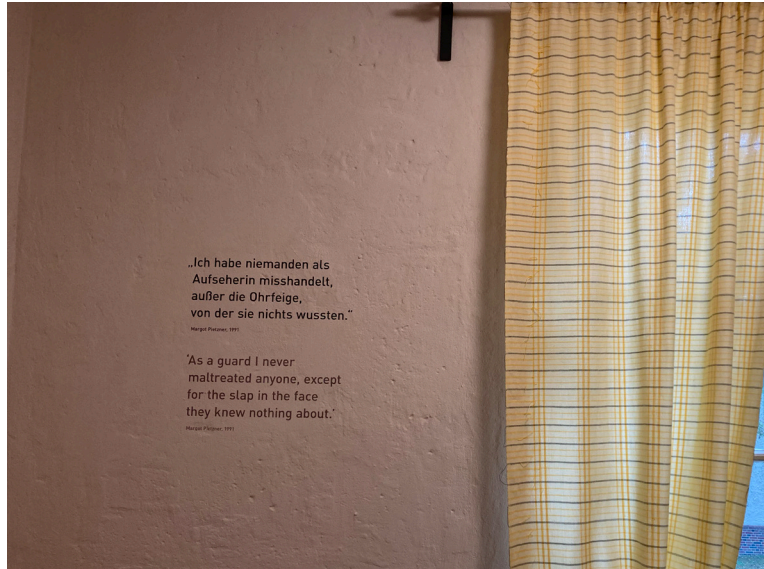


Figure 5. A sentence by an SS guard printed on the wall alongside the curtains created by Dominique Hurth. Photograph by the author.

exhibition, in 2005),<sup>33</sup> and the second was presented in the concluding section of the contemporary permanent exhibition.

The first video depicts Edith Sparmann, a survivor of the concentration camp, as she revisits the SS female guards' house after many years. With evident anguish in her voice, she recounts the harrowing events of her detention and the emotions that linger within the space. As she moves through the empty rooms, Sparmann talks about the furnishings that once occupied the space during the war. At one poignant moment, she gestures toward the windows, remarking, 'There were curtains. I don't know what kind, but they hung around the windows'. In contrast, the second video is a 2004 interview with Margarete T., a former guard at the camp. Looking directly at the interviewer, she recounts her experiences with a mixture of guilt and complacency. In-

33 Cf. 'Die KZ-Überlebende Edith Sparmann beim Besuche eines ehemaligen Aufseherinnenhauses' ('Concentration Camp Survivor Edith Sparmann during a Visit to a Former Female Guard House') on the Mahn- und Gedenkstätte Ravensbrück website: <<https://www.ravensbrueck-sbg.de/en/exhibitions/permanent-exhibitions/in-the-ss-auxiliary-the-female-guards-of-the-ravensbrueck-womens-concentration-camp/places-of-residence-places-of-crime-the-house-of-the-female-guards/>> [accessed 4 May 2024].

terestingly, the conversation also begins with a discussion about the house's furnishings, underscoring the significance of this domestic space in shaping both the victims' and perpetrators' memories. The video commences with Margarete T. saying, 'When you came in, there was a window with pretty windowpane curtains'.

These contrasting perspectives underscore a mutual focus on the material elements of the house, illustrating how infra-ordinary objects can encapsulate conflicting versions of the past depending on the interpretations of specific individuals or groups. As mundane things within a traumatic setting, the curtains, the cushions, and the bathtub acquire a significance that goes beyond their mere utility. For the victim, they symbolise a deprivation of normality, while for the SS guard, they represent the need for private comfort and regular domesticity.

### **Television on a Loop: Rubén Chamorro's House at the Ex-ESMA**

The second space formerly occupied by perpetrators that I consider here is located in Argentina, in the city of Buenos Aires. It is part of the Museo Sitio de Memoria ESMA, ex Centro Clandestino de Detención, Tortura y Exterminio (former Clandestine Detention, Torture and Extermination Center).<sup>34</sup> The memory museum is situated inside a bigger complex of buildings (seventeen hectares in total) that, during the last dictatorship (1976-83), belonged to the Escuela Naval Militar (Argentine Navy Military School) and functioned as an office space and educational facility. The place that hosts the museum today was used as officers' quarters (*casinos de los oficiales*) and as a clandestine detention and torture centre for people considered enemies of the country. Around 5000 people were imprisoned here, kept in captivity, handcuffed and blindfolded, tortured, raped over the seven years of the dictatorship. In most cases these people were *trasladados* (Spanish for 'relocated'), however, in

<sup>34</sup> This marks an interesting difference to the Ravensbrück camp: Chamorro's house is an integral part of the museum, not physically separated from the space of violence. This seemingly minor detail greatly affects the perception of the domesticity-violence dichotomy at the level of the museum experience. Usually, during guided tours of the ex-ESMA, one passes by the Chamorro house after having visited the spaces in which atrocious violence was committed against prisoners. Given the diversity of the spaces, the friction between domesticity and perpetration is even more evident – first sinister, then quotidian, as the sign at the doorway reads (I return to this shortly below). In Ravensbrück, on the other hand, the building that was inhabited by the SS-Auxiliaries is located outside the camp entrance. It is very close, but more easily detached, including, as we have seen, by the house's curtains.

truth, they were loaded onto military planes and thrown, drugged but semi-conscious, into the Atlantic Ocean.<sup>35</sup>

After the dictatorship, the site remained the property of the military until 2004, when President Nestor Kirchner initiated the conversion of turning the place into a memory site. On the 24 March 2004, on the 28th anniversary of the military coup d'état, Kirchner and the mayor of Buenos Aires at that time signed a document to initiate this process. Over time, many of the buildings on the site have been converted and given different uses: headquarters of human rights associations such as Asociación Madres de Plaza de Mayo (Association of the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo), and H. I. J. O. S. (Hijos por la Identidad y la Justicia, contra el Olvido y el Silencio (Daughters and Sons for Identity and Justice against Forgetting and Silence); cultural centres and exhibition spaces such as the Haroldo Conti centre; archives for the study of the history of the military dictatorship; centres for the preservation of documents and testimonies of survivors of the detention centres, specifically the Archivo Nacional de la Memoria (National Archive of Memory). The Museo Sitio de Memoria ESMA itself opened some years later. On 19 May 2015, following much debate among politicians and memory activists,<sup>36</sup> various human rights associations, the presidency of the Argentine nation and museum experts, it was inaugurated in the former officers' quarters.<sup>37</sup> Since 2023, the ESMA has been listed as a UNESCO heritage site for its importance and work in transmitting Argentina's traumatic memories.

To date, the site is officially still juridical evidence of the crimes against humanity committed in Argentina and used as proof in the ongoing prosecutions of those involved in the dictatorship, so its spaces have not been altered to make room for permanent and temporary exhibitions. The strategy that was adopted, under the curatorship of the museum's former director, Alejandra Naftal, was to place transparent panels near the walls in the various rooms of the site (without touching them) on which the history of the place, the workings of the dictatorship and the disappearance of people are narrated. In many of the rooms, the legal accounts of survivors who testified at the trial of the military junta, conducted in 1985, and the trials for crimes against

35 Horacio Verbitsky, *The Flight: Confessions of an Argentine Dirty Warrior*, trans. by Esther Allen (New York: The New Press, 1996).

36 See Claudia Feld, 'The Ex ESMA as a Site of Memory in Argentina', in *The Palgrave Encyclopedia of Cultural Heritage and Conflict*, ed. by Ihab Salou and Britt Baillie (London: Palgrave, 2024), pp. 1-5 [Forthcoming].

37 Violi, pp. 255-56.

humanity, which began in 2004, are projected on the walls. This is especially the case on the third floor – nicknamed ‘Capucha’ (‘Hood’) – where abducted people were kept in captivity. During the dictatorship, besides the detention and torture centre and the officers’ quarters, the building also housed the apartment of Admiral Rubén Jacinto Chamorro, director of the ESMA and commander of the navy task force Grupo de Tareas 3.3 (GT 3.3) from 1975 to 1979. Located on the site’s ground floor, today this flat is included in the museum tour and integrated into its narrative.<sup>38</sup>

Before entering the apartment, a large glass panel defines this section of the museum as ‘Lo cotidiano y lo siniestro – La casa del Almirante’ (‘The quotidian and the sinister – The Admiral’s House’). The section title hence stresses an important semantic friction within the site, that is the coexistence of the everyday with an implication of violence. The panel also informs the visitor about some of the main characteristics of the apartment, for example, that it had a separate entrance, but was internally connected to the offices of the Chief of the Clandestine Centre.<sup>39</sup> It is also specified that there are no survivors’ accounts of what this house was like. Instead, immediately below this description, the visitor reads, written in italics (in Spanish), a description of the Admiral himself by a survivor, Martín Gras, from the 2010 *Juicio ESMA*:

Entendamos que en el mundo de la Armada, un almirante está muy cerca de dios. En la ESMA, el jefe de la ESMA estaba mucho más cerca de dios todavía. En general, ninguno de nosotros habló jamás con Chamorro. Chamorro era una figura misteriosa que aparecía, recorría, miraba, siempre en uniforme.

38 Marina Franco and Claudia Feld, *ESMA: Represión y poder en el centro clandestino de detención más emblemática de la última dictadura argentina* (Buenos Aires: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2022); Alejandra Naftal, ‘Constant Consensus Building: Art and Conflict in the ESMA Museum and Site of Memory’, *Heritage, Memory and Conflict Journal*, 2.1 (2022), 7–18.

39 This information is complemented by other panels inside the apartment. One example reads, in Spanish and in English. ‘A pesar del paso del tiempo, aún es posible observar que la casa tenía tres formas de acceso diferente. La entrada principal hacia la avenida del Libertador, con un hall distribuidor que daba paso a un despacho; a una habitación con baño en suite y a la sala comedor o salón principal. Los otros dos accesos de la casa confluían sobre la zona conocida como ‘Los Jorges’, el largo pasillo donde funcionaban las oficinas de los jefes de los grupos de tareas’. [‘Despite the passing of time, it is still possible to observe that the house had three different accesses. The main entrance towards Libertador Avenue had an opening hallway that led to an office, to a room with bathroom and to the dining room or main living room. The other two accesses of the house merged on the area known as “Los Jorges”, the long corridor where the offices of the heads of the task forces functioned’].

We have to understand that in the Navy world, an admiral is very close to god. At ESMA, the boss of the ESMA was even closer to god. In general, none of us ever talked to Chamorro. Chamorro was a mysterious figure who was always in uniform and used to appear, go through and look around the place. (My translation).

This brief testimony sketches a profile of Chamorro as a shadowy figure and a formal man. This initial information frames what the visitor is about to see; she is about to enter the domestic space of that ‘mysterious figure’, that is, she will cross a spatial threshold bringing her into the familiar and intimate place of that ‘boss’ who was ‘always in uniform’.

The 195m<sup>2</sup> flat differs architecturally from the rest of the museum, with open spaces, a beautiful wooden floor and large windows that emphasise the luxurious conditions in which the director lived. The visitor can walk through the (now empty) spaces that were once the Chamorro family’s home. After passing through the kitchen, the visitor finds herself in a large room (Figure 6) in which a television screen projects the testimony of a young woman, Andrea Marcela Krichmar, given before the Trial of the Juntas in 1985. This testimony differs from the others in the museum as it is not given by a survivor.



Figure 6. The main living room in Chamorro’s house in the ex-ESMA, featuring the video testimony. Photograph by the author.

Krichmar was indeed not a prisoner at the ESMA. In the 1985 trial, she recounted an episode that would go on to be crucial in proving that ESMA was a clandestine detention centre. As the glass panel framing and supporting the monitor on which the testimony is broadcast reads, between 1976 and 1977 – a child at the time – Krichmar was invited by Chamorro's daughter, Berenice, to spend time together in her father's house. On that occasion, through one of the windows in the apartment she saw a hooded woman, chained at her hands and feet, being dragged out of a green Ford Falcon car.<sup>40</sup> At the time, as she told me during an interview, she did not realise the gravity of the event – just a child, she was unaware of what was happening in her country, though the event was understandably shocking, both at the time and subsequently. By the end of the dictatorship, having reached adulthood, Krichmar decided to take courage and testify to the event in court, despite weighty doubts and many fears for what this could entail.

Broadcast on the television, Krichmar's testimony echoes through and animates the empty space of the living room, following a strategy that is present in all the other spaces of the museum.<sup>41</sup> In addition to being powerful from a legal standpoint, the testimony broadcast in this way is also impactful from a museological point of view: the listener stands in the large living room, well aware that this was the home of the ESMA director, hearing the voice of a witness who had been there. In this case, the narration of the space is presented through the words of those who are not responsible of the crimes – unlike the case of Ravensbrück, where there are also video testimonies of former-SS auxiliaries. In fact, at the ex-ESMA, the apartment is one of three spaces here where the lives of perpetrators are specifically recounted. The other two are the navy officers' quarters (which are not open to the public) and the *Salón Dorado*, the 'Gold Room', which once used for official ceremonies, but now concludes the tour with a video installation on the justice served to the perpetrators. Across these spaces, however,

40 For a reference to this account see "Vi algo: lo justo era contarlo": historia de la mujer que a los 11 años vio a una encapuchada' ("I saw something: it was only fair to tell it": the story of the woman who saw a hooded woman at the age of 11') on the ex-ESMA website: <<http://www.museositoesma.gob.ar/vi-algo-lo-justo-era-contarlo-historia-de-la-mujer-que-a-los-11-anos-vio-a-una-encapuchada/>> [accessed 3 May 2024]. The green Ford Falcon, the same model as that seen by Krichmar, is today considered one of the symbols of the dictatorship violence in Argentina. This type of car was used to kidnap people and take them to the clandestine detention and torture centres.

41 At the ex-ESMA Museum, the curatorial strategy across different rooms is to give voice to the survivors, using written texts and audiovisual materials that share their testimonies. There is no space devoted to the 'voice' of the perpetrators.

the terrible events that happened here are narrated firmly through a legal frame and the testimonies of survivors (or a visitor, Krichmar), but not the perpetrators.

However, there is one section of this house that moves away from informative accounts of the legal arena towards a more artistic and metaphorical narrative. Once past the large living room, the visitor finds herself in front of the main entrance, facing Avenida del Libertador – one of the largest and busiest boulevards in Buenos Aires. From here, a corridor with several rooms (some inaccessible) stretches ahead. One of these doors is held ajar. Here, too, it is not possible to go inside the room; entry is prevented by a cordon. Glimpsing at the space through the semi-open door, one sees a large window, with the panes closed and the shutters down. Some background noises can be heard, and the visitor can see flickering images in the reflection of the windowpanes. She sees and hears programmes being broadcast on a television set inside the room (some in colour, others in black and white), behind the door and hence invisible to the visitor. The television constantly broadcasts a cycle of typical programming from the 1970s: commercials, speeches by the dictator Jorge Rafael Videla during the 1978 World Cup (Figure 7) and by the dictatorship's former Minister of Economy José Alfredo Martínez de Hoz, as well as scenes of Argentines celebrating their World Cup victory in the streets.

As I mentioned in the methodological section, understanding the impact of this installation requires a multi-scalar reading which combines the formal-visual aspects, and the more content-related and metaphorical issues it proposes in terms of violence and the infra-ordinary. First, concerning the positioning of the visitor, one notices how she is forced into the condition of only being able to 'peek' into a darkened room, forging the notion of an inaccessible but perceptible everyday life (made material by the television inside, the visitor is aware of this, though it cannot be seen). She nevertheless manages to see the content thanks to its re-mediation, conveyed by the television but reflected on the body of the house through the glass window. Hence, the building becomes an optical device, a screen that redesigns its relationship with space and with what is represented.

The images themselves imply the idea of Argentina as a commercially relevant country (through advertising and the Minister of the Economy), as politically stable (through politicians making serious speeches), as well as happy and united (the World Cup victory celebrations). Television, perhaps the quintessential object of the domestic, infra-



Figure 7. The TV broadcast of Videla's speech at the World Cup in Argentina (1978), mirrored in the window of a room in the Admiral's apartment at the ex-ESMA. Photograph by the author.

ordinary dimension, airs images in a looped, almost sclerotic rhythm, without any apparent coherence. The montage of these images makes evident, on a metaphorical level, the jumble of 'rose-tinted' information that penetrated the living rooms of Argentines through the control of the audiovisual medium.<sup>42</sup>

<sup>42</sup> The dictatorship's control of the media is an issue that returns to another memorial site in Buenos Aires, the Parque de la Memoria. In one section of this park, there is an installation composed of several street signs that narrate how institutions were implicated in the dictatorship. Among them, there is a sign representing a stylised image of a television set on which 'Espacio Cedido al Terrorismo De Estado' ('Space given over to State Terrorism') is written.

As this implies, these are images which hark back to a past that was actively constructed as joyous by the propaganda machine of that time, albeit with the space to perceive the complex truth behind this kind of message. In relation to the 1978 World Cup images, for example, the images evoke happy collective memories and national pride, but in the specific location of the ex-ESMA – just a few kilometres away from the Estadio Monumental Antonio Vespucio Liberti, the stadium where the final took place in 1978 – they take on another meaning. Indeed, the image of Videla exulting over a goal by Mario Kempes clashes profoundly with the stories of the many survivors who reportedly realised they were detained near the stadium, since they could hear the joyful shouts of fans while in captivity.

The door, which is fixed ajar, narrows the viewpoint on the room (and on the infra-ordinary object within) while metaphorically widening our anthropological understanding, to paraphrase Didi-Huberman,<sup>43</sup> of perpetration. By denying entry into the dimly lit room, the doorway actually proposes an ‘opening’ to the infra-ordinary and normalisation of violence, suggesting the friction between normal activity (watching television) and the space of violence (the clandestine and torture centre on the upper floors). Acoustically too, the visitor’s experience is multifaceted. While looking at the reflected images, the sound of Andrea Krichmar’s testimony can still be heard from the living room, overlapping with the noise of this other television. Therefore, the voice of the witness recounting her experience as a child in Chamorro’s house merges with (for example) Videla’s voice reading the World Cup opening speech, which was projected across the globe. This acoustic contrast makes the contradictions that structure the perpetrator’s house explicit: daily propaganda, infra-ordinary leisure and quotidian violence. Through the use of archival images from popular television and the testimony by Krichmar – thus via two types of documentary sources, accounting for different histories of the same period – the exhibit condenses the perpetrator’s form of everyday life. Here killing becomes as ordinary as watching television, enjoying programmes that speak of a reality in which prisoners are not visible, where they do not exist, where violence is ‘not’ performed. These images of ‘absent violence’,<sup>44</sup> transmitted by the cathode tube, reach the visitor through

43 Cf. Georges Didi-Huberman, *Images in Spite of All: Four Photographs from Auschwitz*, trans. by Shane B. Lillis (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2012).

44 Paul Lowe, ‘Picturing the Perpetrator’, in *Picturing Atrocity: Photography in Crisis*, ed. by Geoffrey Batchen and others (London: Reaktion Books, 2012), pp. 189–200 (p. 189).

a play of mirrors, detaching the direct communication of the content and making visible the space of an otherwise inaccessible, dark room. In this way, while we cannot enter the infra-ordinary of the perpetrator in the former ESMA, we are invited to think through and grasp the violence and the ideological machine that enabled and fuelled it, thereby also shedding light on the mechanisms of everyday normalisations of violence.

## Conclusion

Entering the home of a person, in the proximity of places where he or she also committed violence against other human beings, means coming to terms with the familiarisation of the abject.<sup>45</sup> In other words, it involves a confrontation with the more human dimension of what is generally repudiated. The artistic work and the representation of everyday objects of perpetrators in museums and art installations – unlike ‘extraordinary’ objects of violence, such as weapons – complicate the interpretative and affective context, placing the visitor in a deliberately uncomfortable position. By relating to objects that we recognise as familiar and/or harmless, we are invited to direct our (positive or negative) emotions and empathic interests not only towards the victim but also, tentatively, to the perpetrator, who is ‘evoked’ in the normality of that ‘harmless’ object.

In perpetrator spaces at trauma sites, creating a museum narrative around a television, a bathtub, cushions, or curtains prompts the visitor to reflect on the sources of genocidal violence and the role that normalised environments have in the dynamics of perpetration. Normalised, in this case, stands for bureaucratised violence: a form of professional labour or a chore which the worker can, at some point in the day, separate from her/his/their domestic family life or leisure time. For this reason, I believe that one appropriate avenue to study this dynamic revolves around the artistic strategies that trouble the narration of perpetrators and perpetration at sites of memory and in museums. We need, in other words, to look at the extra-ordinary *through* the infra-ordinary. As Rechtman writes,

<sup>45</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. by Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982). On the idea of ‘abjection’ in relation to perpetrator research, see also Robben and Hinton, pp. 141-49.

to return to the ordinary means to reintroduce the quotidian into our analysis of major events as they appear to those who live them in the moment or in the immediate aftermath – at a time when the things that we condemn today are accepted, if not valorized. In other words, it is to sound the form of life in which men grow used to executing dozens if not hundreds of individuals each day – just as others go to the factory, the office, or the university.<sup>46</sup>

The quotidian that Rechtman talks about – of which infra-ordinariness is a part – can be traced not only in the testimonies that some perpetrators have granted to journalists and researchers. As this article has sought to illustrate, it is also important to interrogate cultural imaginaries, such as artistic curation, which can also contribute specific forms of understanding. By working with allegory – and in the cases considered here, also with the indexical and testimonial dimensions of the sites where they are proposed – artistic representations can offer new insight into these histories to an increasingly broad audience. Representation can affect the memory agency of infra-ordinary objects: it can trouble, change or amplify specific histories and therefore enable material culture to capture and transmit the different shades of collective violence to the visitors of these sites. Rooted in these practices, infra-ordinary objects can inspire renewed thinking and new knowledge of trauma sites.

This process is apparent in the two examples considered here. In Ravensbrück, the work by Hurth is built on notions of care for the home and its aesthetic dimension, which is contrasted with the unspeakable violence enacted in the camp. In the Argentinian case, part of the exhibition explicitly addresses the mediated, propagandistic construction of an idea of normality without trauma – a vision in which the bodies of detainees and death are not there, in which they ‘do not’ exist.

In both cases, moreover, the artworks invite reflection on the dual temporality of infra-ordinary material, in the past and in the present. With respect to the past, the material objects allow the visitor to reflect on the normalisation of violence at the time it was committed. These kinds of exhibits allow the visitor to get as close as possible to a set of objects that recall not only their original use functions, but also the everyday handling of violence by the folks who used them. They propose a perspective on how violence ‘made room’ for itself among

<sup>46</sup> Rechtman, p. 12.

everyday leisure or self-care such as bathing, decorating the house, or watching television. In this sense, as I suggested above, ordinariness is not synonymous with mediocrity – as understood by Hannah Arendt, in reference to Eichmann – but with normality, something regular and routine that neutralises or at least resizes the extraordinary nature of the actions committed.

Regarding the present, infra-ordinariness enables the agency of the artwork, potentially conditioning the visitor from a cognitive and affective point of view. The subject is offered a possible ‘empathic unsettlement’:<sup>47</sup> this is not a question of putting oneself in someone else’s shoes and therefore forcing an identification (something that is not required in the trauma site generally), but of cuing the visitor to the possibility of unsettling her views and understanding perpetrators partially, assuming a more dialogical stance toward their experiences. Further knowledge of these kinds of histories can be achieved through greater awareness of the various facets of those involved. Both examples considered in this article suggest this possibility through the motif of visibility or concealment. The act of seeing – i.e., seeing beyond the curtains, seeing the dark room with the television, etc. – is a gnoseological performance. The visitor is invited to know more and make intelligible, in a metaphorical rather than historical/factual sense, what the perpetrator knew and wanted to hide, from her/him/themselves and from the world outside her/his/their home. The entire narrative is layered by the proposition of various scopic regimes that provoke, in an aesthetic sense, thinking about the domesticity of the perpetrator. These two installations suggest what the perpetrators have made visible to themselves; what we, as visitors, can now see and understand in relation to their ‘human’ dimension; what we can make intelligible, only metaphorically, in relation to the violence that was their daily labour.

It is far easier to imagine the monster in caves, in the depths of the sea, and not in an elegant house inhabited by people exchanging affection for one another. This is why these domestic spaces at trauma sites are vital testing grounds that can actively trouble the all-too-comfortable idea of the perpetrator as an othered, sub-human subject.

47 Dominick LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), pp. 41-42.

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