All human interactions heavily rely on communication, or can be equated with communication. For a human society to function requires that all its members comprehend and accept the basic elements of the communicative strategies, especially mutual respect, then voluntarily embrace and practice them, and have a good command of society’s collective memory (history and culture), ethics, and morals. Moreover, this communication process relies on a number of strategic maneuvers that depend on intensive negotiations, collaboration, interactions, compromise, agreement, and exchange, or, as we might say, on dialogic communicative acts, as defined by Jürgen Habermas. Joseph Federico summarizes the insights offered by Habermas in the following way: “Communicative action is entwined with the social life of human beings. The attempt to withdraw from it leads to ‘an existential dead end.’” Moreover, “[d]iscursive rationality … is posited in every discourse oriented to consensus. Any individual who enters into communicative action … makes three validity claims: to truth, rightness, and truthfulness, depending on whether the speaker is referring to something in the objective world, the shared social world, or his own subjective world” (Federico 1992, 8). These operatives are possible only because of a shared code of signals, either predicated simply on human language, or on symbolic objects. In other words, without a common language, a common history, or a set of specific values and ideals

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1 I have discussed many of these aspects in my monograph Verzweiflung und Hoffnung; for a particular aspect of this research agenda, published in English, see my study “Why Do Their Words Fail?” For special aspects, see the contribution to Authority & Community in the Middle Ages, ed. Mowbray et al (1999); for a case study, see Stock.
there is no society, that is, memory constitutes community. This set of common values is in absolute need of symbolic objects representing the core values, a shared culture, and one language that binds them all together. In this paper I want to focus on objects of memory, above all.

Such iconic and symbolic objects provide insight into the past through visualized memory and indicate the future for the society that embraces that memory as its foundation in specific values and ideals. Once any of these links are broken, society at large is in danger of falling apart, as happened with the Roman Empire, the Ottoman Empire, and the Soviet Union, among others throughout history. In this sense I am using the term ‘memory’ both in the practical sense of the cerebral capacity to remember, and in a metaphorical sense to know oneself and to share this identity with the social group, either the family, a monastic order, or a people via a historical perspective. This explains why, for instance, the crucifix represents one of the most essential icons of Christian society, since it powerfully encapsulates past, present, and future (death, life, and resurrection) for all believers. The aura of the art object, as Walter Benjamin once observed, comes to life through the ritualistic performance of its authenticity, or value (Benjamin 2002, 105). This is the case as much with the crucifix as with innumerable other objects representing memory and social identity.

Manuscripts and books are only late phenomena in the history of human cultural development, but they certainly prove to be some of the most efficient carriers of human communication and memory. Moreover, they have served exceedingly well over the several last millennia to preserve human memory, hence culture at large. Not surprisingly, the Bible, the Torah, and the Koran emerged as central icons of their respective societies, providing revelation, memory, guidance, and principles of social conduct (Jager 2000, 9-17). Nevertheless, information can be stored in many

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2 Regarding the problematics of visual signs, linguistic codes, and other means of communication, already in the Middle Ages, see Müller 2005, 35-52.
3 Kwint et al. 1996. For modern myth formation based on a figure from the past, which proves to be an intriguing variant to the theme pursued here, see Mathis 2002.
4 There would be no need to support this claim, but see Glenisson 1988.