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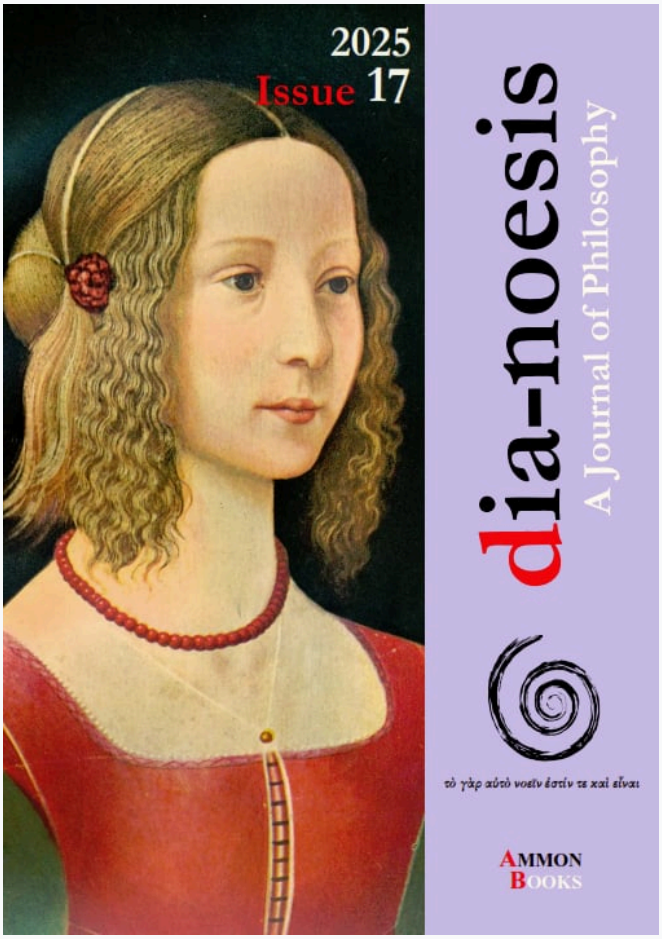
The image of woman in philosophy



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Knowing: *The Zone of Interest* from a Philosophical Point of View

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Abstract

Watching the film *The Zone of Interest* by Jonathan Glazer, one cannot overlook the philosophical ideas that permeate it, just as one cannot help but admire the way the director unfolds these ideas on screen: harsh, bordering on brutal, ironic, wonderfully repellent. Rudolf Höss, as commandant of Auschwitz, knows—but this awareness of reality does not touch him. Hedwig Höss chooses not to know, or to ignore, wrapped in the veil of a paradise that exists only as a morbid construction in her mind. The film is haunted by Platonic and Aristotelian notions of *eidenai*—awareness, distortion, perversion, selective perception. At the heart of the hell of Auschwitz lies Hedwig's garden, a living representation of her disturbed psyche. How does Robert Musil put it? Depending on the perspective from which one approaches the subject of humanity, many partial truths emerge.

Keywords: *Cinema, Plato, Aristotle, Zizek, Nietzsche, knowledge, subjectivism, ethical systems, fetishist disavowal, visualization, terrifying irony*

On People Naturally Desiring to Know (Plato, Aristotle)

The infinitive of the verb *οἶδα*, which means "I know," *εἰδέναι*, is first encountered in Plato.[1] We are at the point where Plato, having divided the soul into three parts—one with which we learn, one with which we feel anger, and the irrational part with which we desire (material) pleasures[2]—proposes the type of pleasures that correspond to each of these three parts.

He begins with the third part, attributing to it the greatest pleasure: financial gain, since this allows access to all the material pleasures one desires. For this reason, he characterizes it as *philokerdes* (money loving or profit-loving). As for the second part of the soul, Plato believes that it is entirely devoted to the pursuit of dominance, victories, and good reputation. He characterizes it as *philoneikos* or *philotimos* (victory loving or honor loving). Reaching the first part—the one through which we acquire new knowledge—Plato considers it to be always fully oriented toward the effort to know the truth, indifferent to money or fame. Based on this, he suggests the characterization *philomathes* or *philosophon* (knowledge loving or wisdom loving). It so happens that in each person's soul, one of the three parts predominates. From this, it follows that there are three kinds of people: those who love wisdom (*philosophers*), those who love victory (*ambitious* individuals), and those who love wealth (*profit-lovers*). And these, respectively, are what they each consider most important in life, disregarding the others. For example, for the ambitious person of the second category, knowledge means nothing unless it brings him honor and fame. On the other hand, the philosopher—the person of the first category—considers the knowledge of truth to be

[1] Plato, *The Republic*, 582 b, Now, think about it. Here are three men. Which of them has most experience of all the pleasures we have mentioned? Does the lover of profit learn about the nature of truth itself? Do you think he has more experience of the **pleasure of knowledge** than the lover of wisdom has of the pleasure of gain?' Edited by Ferrari G. R. F., *University of California, Berkeley,* translated by Griffith T., Cambridge University Press. First published 2000, 3rd printing 2018.

[2] This part of the Platonic soul seems to align with what Freud, in his own trisection of the psyche, 2.400 years later, would call *Id.*

incomparably more important than the goods that secure pleasures for the person of the third category.[3]

It is precisely this knowledge of truth, this yearning to know, this longing to understand the mysteries of nature and the world, both natural and human phenomena, this thirst for solutions—like another Oedipus[4]—that Plato calls *eidénai* (to know). And it is evident that he considers it far more significant than all other goods that life and the world can offer.

Equally evident is that the type of person oriented toward knowledge—the philosopher, in other words—is clearly a superior type of human being compared to all others, regardless of what they have achieved and, consequently, enjoyed in their lives. Thus, Plato, although his main focus here in the *Republic* is different, paves the way for what Aristotle will later call the *theoretical life* in the *Nicomachean Ethics* (-323 BCE), identifying it with ultimate happiness (*eudaimonia*). He describes the person who lives such a life as a *theoretical being*, and as such, clearly superior to all others.[5]

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[3] Plato, *The Republic*, 580d – 583c.

[4] Sophocles, *Oedipous Rex*, *ὦ πάτρας Θήβης ἔνοικοι, λεύσσετ', Οἰδίπους ὅδε, ὃς τὰ κλείν' αἰνίγματ' ἤδει καὶ κράτιστος ἦν ἀνήρ.* Inhabitants of our native Thebes, behold, this is Oedipus, who knew the riddles [*ainigma* pl.] of great renown [*kleos*], and was a most mighty man. translated by Jebb R. C., Revised by Sens A., Further Revised by Nagy G., 2020. Cf. Papaoikonomou Antonis D., "Leadership and power: the psychopathology of Shakespearean Richard III, *Dia-noesis: A Journal of Philosophy*, 15, 2024, pp. 81-92, https://doi.org/10.12681/dia.38173

[5] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics,* 1177a-b: And we think happiness has pleasure mingled with it, but the activity of philosophic wisdom is admittedly the pleasantest of virtuous activities; at all events the pursuit of it is thought to offer pleasures marvelous for their purity and their enduringness, and it is to be expected that those who know will pass their time more pleasantly than those who inquire. And the self-sufficiency that is spoken of must belong most to the contemplative activity. For while a philosopher, as well as a just man or one possessing any other virtue, needs the necessaries of life, when they are sufficiently equipped with things of that sort the just man needs people towards whom and with whom he shall act justly, and the temperate man, the brave man, and each of the others is in the same case, but the philosopher, even when by himself, can contemplate truth, and the better the wiser he is; he can do perhaps do so better if he has fellow-workers, but still he is the most self-sufficient. And this activity alone would seem to be loved for its own sake; for nothing arises from it apart from the contemplating, while from practical activities we gain more

However, for the purposes of this article, let us now examine the text commonly referred to as *Metaphysics*, specifically its beginning. And Aristotle Writes: All men by nature desire to know. An indication of this is the delight we take in our senses; for even apart from their usefulness they are loved for themselves; and above all others the sense of sight. For not only with a view to action, but even when we are not going to do anything, we prefer seeing (one might say) to everything else. The reason is that this, most of all the senses, makes us know and brings to light many differences between things.[6]

"All men by nature desire to know," then. Given that Aristotle structures his texts based on a goal he sets from the very beginning—in this case, the path to knowledge, a journey with a specific starting point and a defined end [ΤΕΛΟΣ] each time—it is crucial here to examine how this journey is realized, what its stages are, and what the interpretive keys to it are. After all, in Aristotle's theory, the ultimate stage—the goal—is always the attainment of knowledge, not of particular, individual phenomena or problems [καθ' ἕκαστον], but of universal truths [καθ' ὅλου]. That is, a comprehensive answer that contains the solution to as many questions or riddles as possible—reducing, in other words, as many phenomena as possible into fewer explanations. Therefore, it is important here to follow how this journey unfolds in his philosophy.

This opening phrase is key: it means that all humans have a natural inclination toward knowledge, a tendency to learn in order to resolve their uncertainties. This is the primary prerequisite. Without it, any discussion about knowledge as a goal would be meaningless. Humans experience wonder, formulate and pose questions to themselves—since there is no other audience—hypothesize, and then attempt to answer, sometimes through myths, religions, much later through sciences, and occasionally through a combination of all of the above. What is particularly significant here is that Aristotle, with the pronoun

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or less apart from action. And happiness is thought to depend on leisure; translated by Ross W. D., Batoche Books, Kitchener, 1999.

[6] Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, translated by Ross W. D., Book A, Oxford at the Clarendon Press, 1924.

"all" [Πάντες]—in contrast to Plato, who perceives philosophical and scientific discourse as the privilege or capability of a very specific group (namely, the first category of people he describes in *The Republic*)—considers this power of decoding and classifying experiential data to be common to all humans. Human nature, therefore, is deeply connected to knowledge. If we were to consider knowledge as an autonomous domain, independent of human existence and experience—a realm to which humans contribute rather than the other way around—then humans, or more precisely, human nature, is the bridge, the path leading to knowledge.

This path, as previously mentioned, is not, as in Plato's view, the concern of a select few, nor is it an ascent toward the heavens where the Good resides. Rather, it is an earthly process of daily engagement with the world, with external experience, through the senses.[7] This is precisely the meaning of the next phrase: An indication of this is the delight we take in our senses. The senses, after the natural inclination toward knowledge, are the second prerequisite for acquiring knowledge. Aristotle, with his well-known tendency to categorize things by importance, identifies vision as the most significant sense. That is, our natural desire for knowledge is proven by the appreciation we have for our senses, and the most important of them is sight. Sight provides us with knowledge, not through identification but through differentiation. In other words, by identifying differences between perceptions, we can highlight similarities. These similarities form the raw material for the creation of concepts. In the process of concept formation, we isolate the differing elements among comparable perceptions, focusing our analysis on similarities. For instance, among the available perceptions or memories of trees, we disregard individual differences—both between different tree species and among trees of the same species—and, by emphasizing

[7] This difference, after all, between the two philosophers (knowledge through the ascent to the sky, the realm of the Good, in Plato; knowledge through the observation of the data of experience, in Aristotle), is also the true subject of the famous painting by Raffaello Sanzio da Urbino, known as *The School of Athens*, which, however, he himself signs with the phrase *Causarum Cognitio* (Seek Knowledge of Causes).

their common features (roots, woody trunk, branches, leaves), we form the concept of "tree." Aristotle calls this method of concept formation *inductive reasoning*.[8] Only through concepts, according to Aristotle, can humans attain knowledge of universals—that is, the type of knowledge we characterize as scientific.

On People's Natural Disinterest in Knowing (Žižek)

Slavoj Žižek's theory of *eidénai* is deeply influenced by Lacan's Four Discourses theory. In her exceptional study on Lacan, Catherine Clément[9] speaks of the need to manage the Real.[8]

Clément draws a highly interesting parallel between the Real and the Freudian *Id*, considering them both excessive and uncontrollable. This correlation has significant implications. The Real is so terrifying that it is impossible to experience it without the necessary filtering function of the Symbolic. Otherwise, the attempt to comprehend it would lead to madness. In other words, the Symbolic serves to protect humans from a reality they are incapable of assimilating. Expanding our discussion beyond the scope of this article, we refer to the cases in which, according to Clément, an individual encounters the Real without the protective function of the Symbolic: madness and murder. Here, the Real has penetrated in such a terrifying way that it drives the subject to insanity or at least to a perception of things that borders on the consciousness of the impossible. For Lacan, as analyzed by Clément, the impossible is a part of the Real, even if it appears, by definition, to be outside it. It is true that the Real contains much of what we literally and

[8] Aristotle *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1139b For it, proceeds sometimes through induction and sometimes by syllogism. Now induction is the starting-point which knowledge even of the universal presupposes, while syllogism proceeds from universals. There are there for starting-points from which syllogism proceeds, which are not reached by syllogism; It is therefore by induction that they are acquired. translated by Ross W. D., Batoche Books, Kitchener, 1999.

[9] Clement Catherine., *The lives and legends of Jacques Lacan*, translated by Arthur Goldhammer, New York: Columbia University Press, 1983.

metaphorically consider and label as inconceivable. This is precisely why the Real, contrary to common intuition, cannot truly be described, written, or fully understood.[10]

Thus, through the inclusion of elements of the impossible and the unthinkable, Lacan arrives at a conception of the Real that cannot exist in our minds unless it has passed through the gates of madness, psychosis, or mania. Ultimately, what an individual experiences as the Real is what can be filtered through the function of the Symbolic and assimilated by their cognitive structures. However, even this process of symbolization has its limits—the vast majority of the Real will always remain beyond comprehension, as it is impossible for a being that is a mere fragment of the Real to fully grasp the very Real that encompasses it.[11]

The crucial point here is that, as mentioned earlier, Lacan's thought, exellently analyzed by Clément, deeply influences Slavoj Žižek and his own analyses of the problematic relationship between the Real and reality. Here, we will examine two of his works in which his theory of the Real (as what is) and (human) reality is thoroughly explored: *Violence: Six Sideways Reflections* and *Welcome to the Desert of the Real: Five Essays on September 11 and Related Dates*. Regarding human—and specifically subjective—reality, and how it can be revealed as a

[10] Nietzsche F., *The gay science,* Chapter 373 Would it not be rather probable that, conversely, precisely the most superficial and external aspect of existence-what is most apparent, its skin and sensualization-would be grasped first-and might even be the only thing that allowed itself to be grasped? Translated, with Commentary~ by Kaufmann W., Vintage Books, A Division of Random House, Inc. New York, 1974, p. 335.

Nietzsche F., *On the Genealogy of Morals*, Chapter 19 These "good men"-they are one and all moralized to the very depths and ruined and botched to all eternity as far as honesty is concerned: who among them could endure a single *truth* "about man"? Or, put more palpably: who among them could stand a *true* biography? Translated by Kaufmann W., and Hollingdalb R. J., Vintage Books a Division of Random House, Inc. New York, 1989, p. 138. Cf. Ojimba A. C., "Nietzsche's Intellectual Integrity and Metaphysical Comfort", *Conatus - Journal of Philosophy*, 9 (1), 2024, pp. 109–130. https://doi.org/10.12681/cjp.34391

[11] Clement C., *The lives and legends of Jacques Lacan,* Translated by Arthur Goldhammer, New York Columbia University Press 1983, pp. 168-169.

deliberately distorted version of the Real, adapted to individual needs, psychological and intellectual structures, and the almost infinite ways in which the Real can be experienced, Žižek references Mary Shelley's classic novel *Frankenstein* in *Violence: Six Sideways Reflections*.[12] To highlight the nightmarish relativity of the Real at an intersubjective level—and how even the slightest shift in perspective can transform an entire perception of what is assumed to be a single, objective Real—Žižek points to Shelley's groundbreaking literary decision in the middle of her book. As he notes, Shelley did something unprecedented in literature at the time (1818): she gave the monster a voice, allowing it to speak for itself and narrate the story from its own perspective. This choice aligns perfectly with a liberal, democratic, and anti-authoritarian stance, which holds that all viewpoints and interpretations should be heard. In the novel, Frankenstein's creature is no longer merely a "thing," a horrific object that no one dares to face, but a real subject with fully articulated thoughts and speech. As a result of this unprecedented subjectivization, the ultimate criminal now has the opportunity to present himself as the ultimate victim. What is ultimately revealed is that the monstrous murderer is, in reality, a deeply hurt and desperate individual, yearning for company and love.[13]

John Barth, in his remarkable -second- novel, *The End of the Road*, addresses the same theme—the extreme, almost monstrous subjectivism with which the singular Real is perceived, interpreted, and ultimately confronted—in a profoundly revelatory manner. However, for Barth, the Real is not dealt with through symbolization but through fiction, which, in many respects, serves the same purpose or is at least equivalent. His approach also carries strong existentialist undertones, introducing the American literary audience to this perspective. As Barth states: In life, there are no essentially major or minor characters. To that extent, all fiction and biography, and most historiography, are a lie. Everyone is necessarily the hero of his own life story. *Hamlet* could be told from Polonius's

[12] Zizek S., *Violence, six sideways Reflections*, Big Ideas/Small Books, Picador, New York, 2008.

[13] Ibid., p. 46.

point of view and called *The Tragedy of Polonius, Lord Chamberlain of Denmark.* He didn't think he was a minor character in anything, I daresay. Or suppose you're an usher in a wedding. From the groom's viewpoint he's the major character; the others play supporting parts, even the bride. From your viewpoint, though, the wedding is a minor episode in the very interesting history of *your* life, and the bride and groom both are minor figures. What you've done is choose to *play the part* of a minor character: it can be pleasant for you to *pretend to be* less important than you know you are, as Odysseus does when he disguises as a swineherd. And every member of the congregation at the wedding sees himself as the major character, condescending to witness the spectacle. So, in this sense fiction isn't a lie at all, but a true representation of the distortion that everyone makes of life. Now, not only are we the heroes of our own life stories -- we're the ones who conceive the story, and give other people the essences of minor characters. But since no man's life story as a rule is ever one story with a coherent plot, we're always reconceiving just the sort of hero we are, and consequently just the sort of minor roles that other people are supposed to play. This is generally true. If any man displays almost the same character day in and day out, all day long, it's either because he has no imagination, like an actor who can play only one role, or because he has an imagination so comprehensive that he sees each particular situation of his life as an episode in some grand over-all plot, and can so distort the situations that the same type of hero can deal with them all. But this is most unusual. This kind of role-assigning is myth-making, and when it's done consciously or unconsciously for the purpose of aggrandizing or protecting your ego -- and it's probably done for this purpose all the time -- it becomes Mythotherapy. Here's the point: an immobility such as you experienced that time in Penn Station is possible only to a person who for some reason or other has ceased to participate in Mythotherapy. At that time on the bench, you were neither a major nor a minor character: you were no character at all. It's because this has happened once that it's necessary for me to explain to you something that comes quite naturally to everyone else. It's like teaching a paralytic how to

walk again. Now many crises in people's lives occur because the hero role that they've assumed for one situation or set of situations no longer applies to some new situation that comes up, or -- the same thing in effect -- because they haven't the imagination to distort the new situation to fit their old role. This happens to parents, for instance, when their children grow older, and to lovers when one of them begins to dislike the other. If the new situation is too overpowering to ignore, and they can't find a mask to meet it with, they may become schizophrenic -- a last-resort mask -- or simply shattered.[14]

From one perspective, the entire *noir* tradition in cinema and literature follows precisely this line of giving voice—much like Shelley did in *Frankenstein*—to the main character, allowing us to delve into their soul and mind. The significant caveat, of course, is that this protagonist usually operates mostly at the limits of illegality, never fully crossing the line—at least not without some major moral justification, such as protecting a vulnerable woman (*Drive* (2011), *Blade Runner* (1982)).

Anthony Burgess and Stanley Kubrick similarly follow this noir tradition in *A Clockwork Orange*, giving the protagonist-anti-hero Alex the stage to present events from his own perspective—calmly, coldly, without hesitation, dilemmas, or remorse. Just as Nabokov does the same with Humbert in *Lolita*—though Kubrick does not follow his adaptation. The audience is free to challenge Alex's words while watching the film. The way a criminal perceives himself and his actions is a fascinating theme in literature, theater, and cinema, masterfully explored by Patty Jenkins in *Monster* (2003). The same can, under certain conditions, apply to life. Countless are the interviews we have watched of people who have repeatedly committed crimes, and often with great interest. What sparks our curiosity is what these people say about themselves and their actions—what explanations, in other words, they offer. It is the moment when the genius, the fool, the naïve, the villain, the paranoid, the liar, the coward are revealed.

[14] Barth John., *The End of the road*, Avon Books, A division of The Hearst Corporation 959 Eighth Avenue New York. 1958.

Returning to Žižek, the Slovenian thinker points out that when Svetlana Stalin emigrated to the United States in the 1960s, she wrote memoirs portraying her father, Joseph Stalin, as a loving father and compassionate leader, shifting the blame for most of his crimes onto his corrupt associates, especially Lavrentiy Beria. With a touch of humor, Žižek notes that later, Beria's son, Sergo, wrote a biography of his father, depicting him similarly as a devoted family man who merely followed Stalin's orders while secretly trying to limit the destruction. Žižek cites Hannah Arendt to argue that figures like Stalin were not embodiments of absolute evil, as Erich Fromm suggested[15], since the gap between their self-perception and the horror of their actions was vast. The experience that we have of our lives from within, the story we tell ourselves about ourselves in order to account for what we are doing, is fundamentally a lie- the truth lies outside, in what we do.[16] The extend to which the distorting action of our eyes can reach is shown in the following quote by Žižek: Isn't it strange that the same soldier who slaughtered innocent civilians was ready to sacrifice his life for his unit? That the commander who ordered the shooting of hostages can that same evening write a letter to his family full of sincere love? This limitation of our ethical concern to a narrow circle seems to run counter to our spontaneous insight that we are all humans, with the same basic hopes, fears, and pains, and therefore the same justified claim to respect and dignity.[17] Žižek continues: refusing the same basic ethical rights to those outside our community as to those inside it is something that does not come naturally to a human being. It is a violation of our spontaneous ethical proclivity. It involves brutal repression and self-denial.[18] So, in relation to the question we posed—how is it possible for a person not to feel any guilt, even for the most heinous actions—the answer is directly linked to whether that person is aware of their actions.

[15] Fromm E., *The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness*, Holt, Rinehart and Winston, New York, Chicago, San Francisco, 1973.

[16] Zizek S., *Violence, six sideways Reflections*, Big Ideas/Small Books, Picador, New York, 2008.p. 47.

[17] Ibid., p. 48.

[18] Ibid., p. 48.

If this awareness is selective, as in the case of Svetlana Stalin, then we should not be surprised that in *The Zone of Interest*, the wife of the commander of the Auschwitz Concentration Camp, Hedwig Höss (Sandra Hüller), completely indifferent to what is happening at her husband's "work" just a few dozen meters away, experiences her life in their rather luxurious home as a paradise she doesn't want to leave under any circumstances.

Žižek does not directly challenge the philosophical tradition of Plato and Aristotle[19] regarding *eidénai* (knowing), but he emphasizes that ... the real event, the very dimension of the Real, was not in the immediate reality of the violent events....[20] This means that the Real and reality are—often—two entirely different things. Distancing is essentially the mental process that intervenes between these two spheres. It is a process that, to some extent, characterizes all of us—and, of course, even more so, serial criminals who feel completely at ease with their actions, as well as the thoughtless—such as the case of the commander's wife in *The Zone of Interest*—who, whether demonstratively or not, are capable of ignoring the monstrous aspect of a certain part of Reality.

Žižek refers to the example of the Soviet Union, which inspired many Westerners and fueled their hopes for the construction of a new world: The Soviet experience :"building socialism in one country" certainly did cumulate misery and atrocity," but it nevertheless used enthusiasm in the heart of the spectators (who are not themselves caught up in it).[21] This means that, in order for admirers of the Soviet project to be inspired by its vision, they had to overlook significant parameters that would render the entire endeavor of dubious effectiveness and ultimately questionable morality. The ethical

[19] Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 982b12-22, For it is owing to their wonder that men both now begin and at first began to philosophize; they wondered originally at the obvious difficulties, then advanced little and stated difficulties about the greater matters [...] And a man who is puzzled and wonders thinks himself ignorant [...]; therefore, since they philosophized order to escape from ignorance, evidently, they were pursuing science in order to know, and not for any utilitarian end.

[20] Zizek S., *Violence, six sideways Reflections*, p. 52.

[21] Ibid., p. 53.

system proposed by the Soviet Union required devotion and, in part, the disregard of certain collateral phenomena that could be considered crimes.

This is what Lawrence Durrell articulates in *The Alexandria Quartet*: History sanctions everything, pardons everything - even what we do not pardon ourselves.[22] Or what Arthur Koestler points out in his much-discussed book, *Darkness at Noon*: Had not history always been an inhumane, unscrupulous builder, mixing its mortar of lies, blood and mud? [...] He has discovered a conscience, and a conscience renders one as unfit for the revolution as a double chin. [...] My point is this, one may not regard the world as a sort of metaphysical brothel for emotions. That is the first commandment for us. Sympathy, conscience, disgust, despair, repentance, and atonement are for us repellent debauchery. [...] The greatest temptation for the like of us is: to renounce violence, to repent, to make peace with oneself. Most great revolutionaries fell before this temptation... [...] The temptations of God were always more dangerous for mankind than those of Satan. As long as chaos dominates the world, God is an anachronism; and every compromise with one's own conscience is perfidy. [...] ... sell oneself to one's own conscience is to abandon mankind. History is a priori amoral; it has no conscience. To want to conduct history according to the maxims of the Sunday school means to leave everything as it is. [...] In the opposite camp they are not so scrupulous. [...] Such peculiar birds as you are found only in the trees of revolution. [...] Truth is what is useful to humanity, falsehood what is harmful.[23]

Žižek argues that all ethical systems fundamentally require such an act of overlooking, or distancing, or, as psychoanalysts would say: *repression*. What would we have to say, he wonders—quite rightly—about the animals that are slaughtered for us to eat? Who among us could continue eating meat if they first visited a pig farm, where these unfortunate creatures spend their lives half-blind, unable even to walk, fattened up

[22] Darrell L., *The Alexandria Quartet, Klea*, edit Faber and Faber, 2005, p. 848.

[23] Koestler A., *Darkness at noon*, translated by Daphne Hardy, Bantam Books, New York – Toronto – London – Sydney Auckland, 1968.

merely to be slaughtered? Even if some would continue, it is certain that they would only do so by first managing to forget what they had seen, in an act of suspending their own perception. This forgetting entails a gesture of what is called fetishist disavowal: "I know, but I don't want to know that I know, so I don't know." I know it, but I refuse to fully assume the consequences of this knowledge, so that I can continue acting as if I don't know it. [24] At one point, Kubrick told journalist Robert Ginna (regarding the ambiguity in *2001: A Space Odyssey*): Nobody likes to be told anything. Take Dostoyevsky. It's awfully difficult to say what he felt about any of his characters. I would say ambiguity is the end product of avoiding superficial, pat truths.[25] Obviously, there is a logical inconsistency in such a stance, especially from a moral perspective. How can I overlook some of the consequences of my actions? Is such a thing even possible? Žižek tells us that questioning this contradiction—this ethical system that generates ethical problems in itself—is not the proper philosophical stance. On the contrary, what appears to be an inconsistency, a failure to realize the full consequences of our ethical position, is actually the very condition that allows us to adopt such an ethical stance in the first place. What if such an exclusion of some form of otherness from the scope of our ethical concerns is consubstantial with the very founding gesture of ethical universality, so that the more universal our explicit ethics is, the more brutal the underlying exclusion is? [26]

Žižek analyzes this critical relationship between reality and the Real in a particularly interesting way in his work *Welcome to the Desert of the Real! Five Essays on September 11 and Related Dates*.[27] Citing what Badiou calls a "passion for the Real," Žižek identifies the great difference between the 20th century and the one before it: the 20th century's desire to actualize the New Order by setting aside or demystifying the

[24] Zizek S., *Violence, six sideways Reflections*, p. 53.

[25] *The Artist Speaks for Himself*, by Robert Emmett Ginna, first published by Entertainment Weekly, 1999.

[26] Zizek S., *Violence, six sideways Reflections*, p. 54.

[27] Zizek S., *Welcome to the Desert of the Real! Five Essays on September 11 and Related Dates*, First published by Verso 2002.

utopian ideals of the past. The ultimate and defining moment of the twentieth century was the direct experience of the Real as opposed to everyday social reality - the Real in its extreme violence as the price to be paid for peeling off the deceptive layers of reality.[28]

This is the raw realism of the 20th century, or at least the attempt at raw realism. Žižek continues: In the trenches of World War I, Ernst Jiinger was already celebrating face-to-face combat as the authentic intersubjective encounter: authenticity resides in the act of violent transgression, from the Lacanian Real - the Thing Antigone confronts when she violates the order of the City - to the Bataillean excess.[29] However, in today's Western world, reality, as Žižek defines it, lacks its hard core; it is a rather virtual, theatrical reality. On today's market, he says, we find a whole series of products deprived of their malignant properties: coffee without caffeine, cream without fat, beer without alcohol. [...[And the list goes on: what about virtual sex as sex without sex, the Colin Powell doctrine of warfare with no casualties (on our side, of course) as warfare without warfare, the contemporary redefinition of politics as the art of expert administration, that is, as politics without politics, up to today's tolerant liberal multiculturalism as an experience of the Other deprived of its Otherness (the idealized Other who dances fascinating dances and has an ecologically sound holistic approach to reality, while practices like wife beating remain out of sight.? [30] Virtual Reality simply generalizes this process of offering a product deprived of its essence: it provides reality itself, stripped of its essence, of the hard, resistant core of the Real—just as decaffeinated coffee has the smell and taste of real coffee without actually being real coffee, so too is Virtual Reality experienced as reality without actually being real.[31]

What interests us most here is the fact that this blending or convergence of virtual reality with Real reality ultimately abolishes Real reality itself. Žižek brings up the example of

[28] Ibid., p.p. 5-6.
[29] Ibid., p. 6.
[30] Ibid., p.p. 11-12.
[31] Ibid., p. 11.

television coverage of the events of September 11th as a characteristic case of the abolition of Real reality through its visualization—or, more precisely, through experiencing Real reality as virtual. For the overwhelming majority of people, the collapse of the Twin Towers was an event on their television screens: people, in endlessly repeated footage, running frantically toward the camera with a massive cloud of smoke behind them from the crumbling skyscrapers. ... was not the framing of the shot itself reminiscent of spectacular shots in catastrophe movies, a special effect which outdid all others, since -as Jeremy Bentham knew - reality is the best appearance of itself? [32]

But in what, precisely, does the visualization of the reality of the events of September 11th consist, beyond the obvious impact of their being recorded by television cameras? Žižek argues that this is a prime example of witnessing a reality from which its hard core was missing. The erasure of horror continued, as the Slovenian philosopher observes, even after the collapse of the Twin Towers. While the number of victims-3,000- is repeated all the time, it is surprising how little of the actual carnage we see - no dismembered bodies, no blood, no desperate faces of dying people . . . in clear contrast to reporting on Third World catastrophes, where the whole point is to produce a scoop of some gruesome detail: Somalis dying of hunger, raped Bosnian women~ men with their throats cut. These shots are always accompanied by an advance warning that 'some of the images you will see are extremely graphic and may upset children'- a warning which we never heard in the reports on the WTC collapse.[33]

Similarly, just as Žižek remarks on how little of the actual massacre we see at the Twin Towers—essentially no blood—it is equally striking in the film *The Zone of Interest* that the horror of the concentration camp is never directly depicted. There is not a single shot from inside the camp, except for one contre-plongée (low-angle) shot of the camp commander, Rudolf Höss, with only the sky in the background. Is this not yet further proof, Žižek wonders, of how, even in this tragic

[32] Ibid., p. 11.
[33] Ibid., p. 13.

moment, the distance which separates Us from Them, from their reality, is maintained: the real horror happens *there*, not *here*!"[34]

With all this, we arrive at *The Zone of Interest* (2023), a film by Jonathan Glazer starring Christian Friedel (Rudolf Höss) and Sandra Hüller (Hedwig Höss), based on the novel of the same name by Martin Louis Amis (2014). Both the book and the film are based on real events that took place during World War II at the infamous Auschwitz. In the film, the very title (*Interessengebiet*) serves a dual role: on the one hand, it is the euphemistic phrase the Nazis used to refer to the site of the suffering of thousands of Jewish prisoners of Nazi Germany, as well as the surrounding area; on the other, it hints at a selective perception of the Real—focusing only on certain aspects of it in order to construct a reality that resembles a psychotic distortion, refraction, or hallucination.

But let's start from the beginning. It is 1943 in Nazi Germany, specifically in the home of Auschwitz's commandant, Rudolf Höss, where he lives with his wife and their four children. Let's take a moment to examine the masterful way in which Jonathan Glazer reveals the true setting of the film. Initially, we see an idyllic shot—like something out of a Renaissance painting—of a family bathing in a calm river, with the only disturbance being the constant hum suggesting the operation of a nearby factory. Then comes a nighttime shot of the house, framed tightly enough to provide limited visual information beyond the house's features. Only in the next (morning) shot, when the camera is positioned across the courtyard, do we finally see that at the end of the yard there is a wall topped with barbed wire—indicating the presence of a camp right next door.

Even more astonishing is the way the director leads us to this realization. With masterful precision, he shifts the focus inside the house, then to the garden, first to the wife and the household staff, and later to the wife's mother, who arrives to visit and is joyfully welcomed by the family. Through this gradual buildup, Glazer delays the revelation of the horror just

[34] Ibid., p. 13.

a little longer. After all, the calm faces of everyone involved give no indication of something sinister.

Early in the morning, the children blindfold their father to surprise him with a birthday gift -a canoe. Immediately afterwards, the maid calls the children to get ready for school, and the father leaves for work, just like millions of others at that hour. Two ragged men, seemingly prisoners, bring carts of supplies for the house. One maid receives the supplies, while another hangs clothes on the line. This is the everyday routine of a large middle-class family.

Sixteen minutes have already passed before we finally see three men entering the house, accompanied by Höss—one of them in uniform—giving us our first opportunity to grasp what is actually happening. The women in the kitchen chat casually about "women's matters," while in Höss's office, the men discuss "men's matters" related to the camp. One of the visitors explains to Lieutenant Colonel Höss how a new furnace works—likely to be installed at the camp. But rather than referring to the transportation and cremation of prisoners' corpses, he speaks of "cargo" and "pieces," as if dealing with objects.

However, Höss does not appear fully focused on "work." Something else seems to be occupying his mind. It takes nearly half an hour of film before we learn who Höss truly is, what he has done so far, and the situation he is facing. Moreover, it is his wife's reaction to this situation that will ultimately reveal the meaning of the film's title in the mind of its creator.

The next morning, through a letter from regional governor Fritz Bracht to Martin Bormann, the head of the Nazi Party Chancellery, we learn that Höss is not merely the commandant of this hellish place but also its true architect and mastermind. As stated in the letter, Höss has already "worked hard" for four years, accomplishing "great work" with "unprecedented results." The governor requests that Bormann appeal directly to Hitler to cancel Höss's reassignment to a clearly inferior position as deputy director of a similar camp in Berlin. This is something Höss's family is evidently unaware of. And this is precisely what has been troubling him from the beginning.

Between this revelation and the moment Höss informs his wife, Hedwig, about his impending transfer, the arrival of her mother takes place. The elderly woman is warmly received, and her presence serves to develop the film's theme on two levels: first, it allows the director to intensify Hedwig's "happiness," making the moment of her husband's announcement even more difficult; second, it provides an opportunity to showcase the only truly sane response to the surrounding horror.

Hedwig Höss, filled with joy and pride, shows her mother around the garden in a slow, sideways tracking shot reminiscent of Kubrick and Tarkovsky. Yes, she lives in a beautiful, comfortable house with servants at her disposal, a large and well-maintained garden with stunning flowers and organic vegetables, a greenhouse, and a swimming pool. A little farther away, there is not, of course, the camp of horror but the river where they can bathe. Yes, it is paradise, and she is utterly happy. What does Rudi call her? The *queen of Auschwitz*! And, of course, she cannot even imagine having to leave all this behind.

The elderly woman is indeed impressed by the garden, but as she walks through it, she occasionally glances at the camp's wall. When the tour reaches its midpoint, she speaks again. She seems somewhat aware, or at least suspicious: *Is that the camp's wall?* she asks, seemingly rhetorically. *Yes, it is*, comes the confirmation. And immediately: *We planted more vines at the back so that, as they grow, they will cover it.* It is well known that the Nazis had long-term, as well as grand, plans. They had come to stay.

Hedwig then turns her back to the wall, attempting to end the conversation there. But the elderly woman has not yet said her final words. "*Perhaps Esther Silberman is in there*", she suggests. '*Who is that?* Hedwig asks, perplexed. We soon learn: she was the woman who used to clean their family home and read books to them—hinting that Hedwig's family was likely illiterate. The elderly woman does not seem particularly surprised or even deeply disturbed by this thought. Her next words reflect the views of the average – politically ignorant – German voter of the Nazi party: "*God only knows what they*

were up to. Bolshevik things, Jewish things'. "Yes, yes," Hedwig agrees. And then another travelling shot for the continuation of the garden. A gunshot is heard in the background, momentarily distracting the elderly woman, though not Esther. She is too busy tending to the dog. The next shot is yet another masterpiece: the camera frames, in successive close-ups, the flowers, while from behind the house come not the buzzing of insects, as one would expect in such shots, but the threatening voices (of officers) and the screams of pain and despair (of prisoners) from an incident unfolding inside the camp. The final framing slowly dissolves into a deep red model, strongly reminiscent of *A Clockwork Orange* by Kubrick—red from real, not fictional, blood.

However, the matter does not truly end there. The elderly woman will have the chance to realize, by the following afternoon, what is roughly happening on the other side of the wall. She has fallen asleep on one of the loungers in the garden when smoke—likely from burning flesh—and gunshots force her to wake up abruptly. And that night, almost secretly peeking from the curtain of her room towards the camp across, she has already made her decision: she quietly gathers her things and leaves in the dead of night, without informing anyone, turning her back on the madness of the Höss family.

In what seems to be the next day, or at least a holiday—since the yard is full of children, presumably from friendly couples—Höss announces the news to his wife. They must leave, as he was informed a week ago that he is being transferred to Uraniemburg (a concentration camp near Berlin), where he will assume the position of Deputy Director. Hedwig is initially stunned, then furious, demanding an explanation. Höss—the terror of Auschwitz—stoically endures his wife's outburst, understanding her distress and disappointment. But there are no explanations, nor any way to avoid the transfer.

In the next scene, this time with the river as a backdrop, Glazer handles the subject with masterful finesse. Höss stands at the edge of the small pier, gazing at the horizon beyond the river. He is disappointed, and it shows, but he must come to terms with the decision. Hedwig softens, and the couple has the opportunity to discuss the situation calmly and "civilly"

against the romantic backdrop of the river, making decisions about their future.

Hedwig tells her all-powerful and utterly unscrupulous husband that she will not follow him. *"I will stay here to raise the children. They will have to drag me away from here!"* she declares firmly. Höss -one of the most infamous Nazi criminals-though disappointed that his wife is not joining him, once again accepts her decision with stoicism. *"This is our home, Rudolf. We live just as we always dreamed!" "In the East,"* says Hitler, *"is our Lebensraum (living space)."* And, pointing toward the house: *"That is our Lebensraum!"* Realizing that her husband has already consented, she relaxes even further. *"I will miss you,"* she says and bursts into tears. Höss briefly takes her hand to comfort her and then leaves.

Rarely does one encounter such a scene in cinema—one of pure, terrifying irony. The more *human* the couple's conflict appears, the more *civilized* their resolution, the more repulsive their agreement becomes. What kind of person is this—Hedwig—who fights tooth and nail not to leave a place that reeks of blood and burnt flesh, a hellhole that has already surpassed the limits of all brutality?

Since the rest of the film revolves around the issue of Höss's reinstatement, further development of the subject is beyond the scope of this article. However, there is one point worth noting. When the high-ranking officer, likely a general, announces to Höss the final decision that he will remain as commandant at Auschwitz, we finally learn the reason behind his initial removal. In a conversation between the general and the younger officer, immediately after their meeting with Höss, the general reassures him: *"Calm down, he won't send them all up the chimney. You'll have the workers you need."*

This implies that Höss was removed because, even by Nazi standards, he was so ruthless, so bloodthirsty, that his presence there became impractical and ultimately unprofitable for the country's wartime economy.

Epilogue

In this article, we have attempted to outline what we consider to be the central theme of *The Zone of Interest*: the selective perception of Reality and the mechanisms that make it possible. The film's uniqueness, compared to the hundreds of others with a similar subject—the atrocities of the Nazis—lies precisely in this fragmented perception of Reality and the process of shaping a reality for private use.

Moreover, the way the film's creator approaches the subject -the cinematic narrative- mirrors the way its protagonists think. It remains discreet in its depiction, except in the case of Höss's vomiting near the end of the film. However, this is likely due to the anxiety of returning to his position and home, rather than a Freudian-model[35] hysterical repression of an overwhelming reality.

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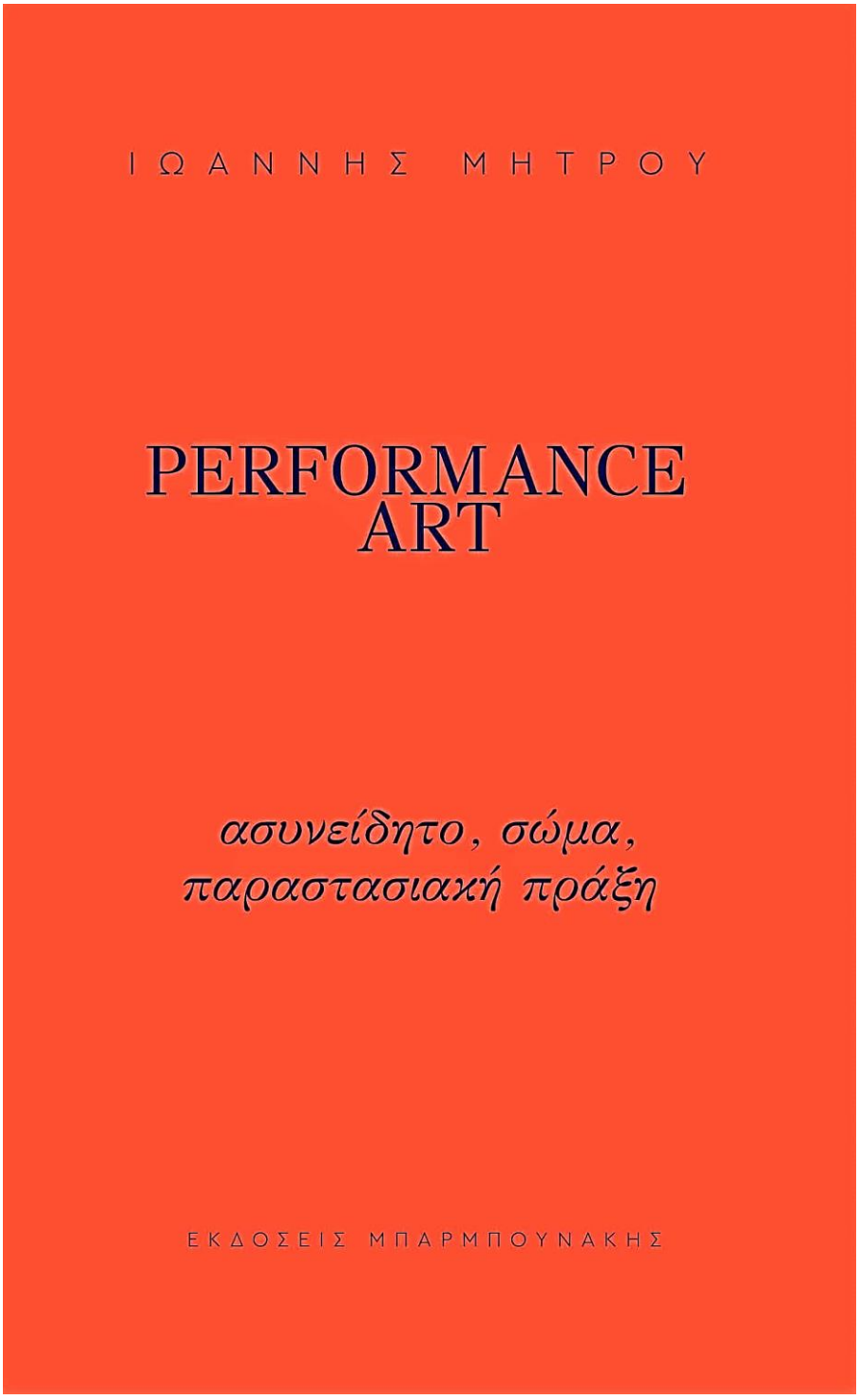
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