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Confronting Moral Responsibility and Adiaphorization: Bauman's Postmodern Ethics through *The Zone of Interest* (2023)

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Abstract. This article explores Zygmunt Bauman's view on moral responsibility, in a fluid world, focusing on the postmodern perspective on morality which is not based on ethical codes. The aim is to demonstrate how modern morality, influenced by power structures, is shaped by adiaphoric regulations that distort the individual's relationship with the Other. This is achieved by first examining Bauman's concept of *adiaphorization*, and then briefly reading it alongside Agamben's *homo sacer* while analysing Jonathan Glazer's film, *The Zone of Interest*, as a concrete example of moral indifference to illustrate how adiaphorization operates within ethical frameworks. The study argues that mechanisms such as the Holocaust were facilitated not only through the 'suspension of law' but also through adiaphorization, 'suspension of morality' – not a Baumanian term but our coinage – via what is here termed the *destabilization of responsibility*: the structural dispersal and fragmentation of moral accountability.
Keywords: Zygmunt Bauman, moral responsibility, adiaphorization, *homo sacer*, *destabilization of responsibility.*

Moralinė atsakomybė ir adiaforizacija: Baumano postmodernioji etika filme *Interesų zona* (2023)

Santrauka. Straipsnis tyrinėja Zygmunto Baumano požiūrį į moralinę atsakomybę takiame pasaulyje, akcentuojant postmodernistinį žvilgsnį į moralumą, kuris neparemtas etiniais kodeksais. Straipsnio tikslas yra parodyti, kaip, paveiktas galios struktūrų, šiuolaikinis moralumas yra formuojamas adiaforinio reglamentavimo, iškraipančio individo santykį su Kitu. Tai pasiekiama visų pirma nagrinėjant Baumano *adiaforizacijos* koncepciją, o tuomet trumpai sugretinant ją su Agambeno homo sacer samprata, analizuojant Jonathano Glazerio filmą *Interesų zona* (angl. *The Zone of Interest*), kaip konkretų moralinio abejingumo pavyzdį. Taip atskleidžiama, kaip adiaforizacija veikia etinėse schemose. Šiame tyrime teigiama, kad tokie mechanizmai kaip Holokaustas lengviau funkcionavo ne tik todėl, kad „įstatymas buvo suspenduotas", bet taip pat ir dėl adiaforizacijos, „moralės suspendavimo". „Moralės suspendavimas" yra ne Baumano terminas, o šiame straipsnyje nukaldinta sąvoka, kuria norima įvardyti *atsakomybės destabilizaciją* – moralinės atsakomybės struktūrinį išsklaidymą ir fragmentaciją.
Pagrindiniai žodžiai: Zygmuntas Baumanas, moralinė atsakomybė, adiaforizacija, *homo sacer*, atsakomybės destabilizacija

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Introduction

This study aims to explore Bauman's views on moral responsibility in the context of the face-to-face encounters between the individual and the 'Other'. The influence of institutional power on contemporary morality disrupts the primordial ethical relation to the Other, precipitating a crisis of responsibility. In this study, the term 'destabilization of responsibility' is introduced to designate not the total disappearance of ethical obligation, but rather its progressive erosion, diffusion, and fragmentation within modern bureaucratic structures. While Bauman does not explicitly use the term, his analysis of modernity as a space where everything becomes unstable provides a conceptual basis for understanding responsibility as undergoing a process of dislocation. This term is chosen deliberately to highlight that responsibility is not annihilated outright, but relocated, outsourced, or rendered ambivalent through mechanisms such as *adiaphorization* or Agamben's *homo sacer* as later will be examined while analysing Jonathan Glazer's film, *The Zone of Interest*. However, this formulation also invites critical reflection: Can responsibility ever be fully stable? From a Baumanian perspective, moral responsibility is always fragile and relational, never institutionalized or guaranteed. Thus, destabilization of responsibility is not simply the loss of a previously fixed ethical order, but a name for the modern condition where responsibility becomes increasingly drift – structurally dispersed and ethically ambiguous. The factor that enables the use of the concept in a Baumanian context is that for Bauman, "liquid life is a precarious life, lived under conditions of constant uncertainty" (Bauman 2005, 2). In his view, unlike the regulatory model of solid modernity, liquid modernity represents a form of society that is essentially deregulating (Bauman and Donskis 2016, 33). Thus, "the status of all norms […] has, under the aegis of 'liquid' modernity, in a society of infinite and indefinite possibilities, been severely shaken and become fragile" (Bauman 2000, 79). In such a society, flexibility replaces conformity as the central virtue – emphasizing adaptability, detachment from long-term commitments, and the opportunistic pursuit of the moment (Bauman 2007, 4). This framing, then, is less about lamenting a lost stability than about diagnosing the conditions under which moral disengagement is normalized. For this, the notion of stable responsibility is inherently problematic, as modernity itself is marked by the dissolution of fixed ethical anchors and the proliferation of institutional mechanisms that diffuse or displace guilt. This formulation aligns with Bauman's insight that ethical judgment, once grounded in face-to-face relations, is now refracted through systems that enable individuals to retreat from direct responsibility. By using the term 'destabilization', the article aims to capture the moral volatility and ethical dispersal that define both the personal and collective dimensions of accountability in contemporary society. This ethical dispersal is not merely incidental but systematically generated – necessitating an analysis of the structural mechanisms that enable such moral disengagement, particularly through Bauman's notion of adiaphorization and Agamben's conceptualisation of homo sacer.

Bauman's concept of adiaphorization, the process through which actions are detached from their moral contexts, and Agamben's theory of homo sacer within the context of

the state of exception, offer a significant framework for understanding the extremities of modern societies. Therefore, by examining Bauman's concept of adiaphorization together with Agamben's concept of homo sacer, the study aims to show how mechanisms such as the Holocaust are facilitated not only by the 'suspension of law' but also by the 'suspension of morality'. According to Bauman, the complex structures of modern societies have led to a process of adiaphorization that allows individuals to disregard their moral responsibilities. This process results in the desensitization to the Other and the blurring of the boundaries of ethical responsibility. While adiaphorization entails the routinisation of moral indifference within everyday modern life, homo sacer delineates the very object of such indifference. When considered together, they enable a conceptualisation of modernity's ethical collapse from the dual perspectives of the perpetrator and the victim. Bauman underlines that the most pressing yet evasive question in the age of liquid modernity is not "what ought to be done", but rather "who is going to do it" (Bauman 2000, 133). While this article primarily engages with Bauman's earlier works, it is important to situate this analysis within the broader trajectory of Bauman's thought. After 2000, Bauman distanced himself from the term 'postmodernity' and developed the concept of 'liquid modernity' to better capture the shifting, uncertain, and deregulated nature of contemporary societies. Though *Postmodern Ethics* remains foundational for understanding his view on moral responsibility, the fragility and ephemerality of ethical bonds described in this work align with the conditions Bauman later attributed to liquid modernity. Therefore, the destabilization of responsibility discussed in this article can be seen as both a continuation and an intensification of the processes Bauman began describing in the 1990s, and now recontextualized under the conditions of liquidity, where ethical commitments lack structural anchorage and are subject to rapid erosion. Bauman uses "the liquid modernity for the currently existing shape of the modern condition, described by other authors as 'postmodernity', 'late modernity', 'second' or 'hyper' modernity" (Bauman, 2011: 11). For him, "what makes modernity 'liquid', and thus justifies the choice of the name, is its self- propelling, self-intensifying, compulsive and obsessive 'modernization', as a result of which, like liquid, none of the consecutive forms of social life is able to maintain its shape for long" (11). Also, "'liquid modern' is a society in which the conditions under which its members act change faster than it takes the ways of acting to consolidate into habits and routines" (Bauman 2005, 1). In such a setting, "liquidity of life and that of society feed and reinvigorate each other" (1); therefore, "liquid life, just like liquid modern society, cannot keep its shape or stay on course for long" (1). In this context, adiaphorization emerges as a cultural symptom of liquid modernity, where power structures and market-driven desires dull moral awareness. Under these conditions, distinctions between good and evil become blurred, normative boundaries lose their force, and individuals grow desensitized to ethical judgment, resulting in a dangerous moral numbness that erodes the very capacity for responsibility.

In a world where the actor increasingly lacks clarity about what must be done despite holding the power to act, the destabilization of responsibility further complicates the ethical landscape. In this context, adiaphorization detaches action from moral evaluation,

homo sacer embodies the life that is excluded from political and legal concern, and the destabilization of responsibility undermines the very foundation of moral accountability. Taken together, these three concepts expose a critical triad of ethical disengagement: the routinization of indifference (adiaphorization), the abandonment of vulnerable lives (homo sacer), and the dispersion or dislocation of agency (destabilization of responsibility). This framework is necessary to understand the moral topography of contemporary power not merely as a failure of ethics, but as a systematic unmaking of ethical relations themselves. It provides a dual lens – diagnostic and genealogical – through which one can trace how modern forms of governance, under the guise of neutrality or necessity, engineer zones of non-responsibility and subjects of dispensability. By jointly reading Bauman and Agamben, we uncover the mechanisms by which liquid modernity obscures responsibility while simultaneously producing lives that can be acted upon with impunity. Therefore, the central claim of this article is that the erosion of moral responsibility in modern societies cannot be fully explained by legal or political failures alone; rather, it results from a deeper and systemic form of ethical disengagement produced by modern institutional structures. This process is conceptualized through a triadic framework that brings together Bauman's notion of adiaphorization, Agamben's homo sacer, and the original contribution of this study – the destabilization of responsibility – as a category that captures how moral agency is fragmented, outsourced, and rendered ambiguous in contemporary settings.

To ground Bauman's concept in a more concrete context, this study analyses Jonathan Glazer's film *The Zone of Interest*. The film vividly depicts the day-to-day realities of the Holocaust and the moral indifference that emerged during this period. In this context, the article aims to demonstrate how the mechanisms of adiaphorization operate, and how modern ethical understanding shapes human relations. Thus, the article argues that Bauman's views on moral responsibility remain significant in contemporary ethical debates and contribute to understanding how the ethical structures of contemporary societies have transformed.

1. Bauman's Postmodern Ethics as a Critical Perspective

In *Modernity and the Holocaust*, Bauman (1989, 212–213) critiques the modern understanding of history, which views the rise of humanity as a departure from its animalistic nature and portrays rational organization as a victory over the harshness of a primitive existence. This modern view, which sees society and its institutions as forces that morally and civilly uplift humanity and which also conceptualizes society's repressive control as a barrier protecting fragile humanity from the flood of savage instincts, is ultimately deemed untenable by Bauman.

In the postmodern era, which Bauman describes as an age of ethics, the term 'post' does not imply the chronological displacement of modernity or its replacement once modernity is over or in decline. Rather, 'post' signifies a condition where modern views become impossible once postmodernity reveals that modernity's long and earnest efforts

were built on deceptive premises such as ethical codes that were created to be "universal and unshakably founded" (1993, 10), and these efforts would inevitably prove futile. Thus, postmodernity expresses a retreat from the dead ends created by modernity's "objectively founded" (10) radical aspirations and demands. Contrary to this *oxymoron* (10; Bauman's emphasis), postmodern ethics repositions the concept of the Other not as an abstract figure distant from us, but as a neighbour – as someone close both physically and mentally (84). It also stimulates critical examination of the ready-made conceptualization of the Other that has been shaped by the very same institutional mechanisms and carriers of modernity – mechanisms that simultaneously destabilize our sense of responsibility as we term it. Philip Zimbardo reminds us of the devastation wrought during the "mass murder century", witnessing the parade of 50 million people systematically killed by government decrees (2007, 12). How many of these victims were not neighbours of their murderers? Out of a displaced sense of responsibility emerges a 'hazardous form of institutionalized moral duty' of any type over anyone. 'Institutional modernity' manipulates and shifts the sense of individual-to-individual responsibility and directs it to the institution (government, religion or nation) itself, eroding personal agency in the process. "In this reshuffling, even the basic forms of social relationship go through a mutation. From amorous relationships to religion everything becomes *unstable*, liquid (Bauman and Vecchi 2004, 62; our emphasis). Noting the unstable stand of human being under oppressive regimes, Bauman still invites us to re-evaluate the long tradition of 'neighbourly rights', which essentially embodies the acceptance of the Other as part of the self. The failure to fulfil this neighbourly responsibility will even bring a deeper sense of shame, a new identical stigma shared by the perpetrator contrary the victim's (Jewish in this case) "shame by proxy"[1] (1991, 132) as coined by Bauman. It is unsurprising, then, to hear a Hutu murderer remark in an interview, "The worst thing about the massacre was killing my neighbour; we used to drink together, his cattle would graze on my land. He was like a relative" (qtd. in Zimbardo 2007, 12–13). The exhaustive cases resulting from abysmal or immoral indifference have also shown us that the damage to a locality is sometimes greater than expected. It is observed that 'collective responsibility' or 'collective guilt' "remains a strong component of people's intuitive theory of morality" (Branscombe and Doosje 2004, 49) as well. Like the representatives of the Jewish victims, there are many people in all parts of the world who have been turned into 'proxies' through the "guilt by association" (17) that links the self and the in-group perpetrators as these new mass feel "responsible for an unjustified violation of accepted moral standards" (17). Responsibility exists on shifting grounds, and it is constantly being renegotiated between the self, the collective, and the institutional structures that claim authority over moral judgment. This unstable terrain allows individuals to displace personal accountability onto larger entities such as governments or social systems, creating a moral vacuum where the direct ethical

[1] A similar discussion of 'proxy' is seen in Primo Levi's *The Drowned and The Saved* (1988). Primo Levi emphasizes that Holocaust survivors are not the true witnesses of the atrocities because those who endured the worst – the ones who did not survive – cannot testify about their experiences. He argues that the survivors speak '**by proxy'** for the victims (p. 84).

connection to the Other is weakened. In conclusion, Bauman's postmodern ethics seeks to clear the fog of the dislocation of responsibility and stabilize the sense of responsibility. This encourages us to attempt to facilitate the possibility of an inclusive sublimation in the discourse of the Other by redirecting the excluding force affecting morality.

According to Bauman's definition (1993, 33–34), postmodernity refers to the liberation of the individual from any discourse or effort aimed at shaping them around the ideals of rationality and perfection. In this context, the postmodern era represents the end of modernity and the beginning of the moral era. For Bauman, the beginning of the moral era does not mean producing more good and less evil compared to the principle-driven and universalism-promoting ethical legislative modernity, nor does it entail simplifying moral choices or ensuring that moral dilemmas are less haunting. Drawing inspiration from a metaphor by Weber, Bauman describes postmodernity as the re-enchantment of the world after a long and diligent modern struggle to disenchant the world, which ultimately failed. The re-enchantment of the world involves restoring the value of emotions, which were often accused of leading humans astray in the conflict between reason and emotion, and legitimizing irrational sympathies and attachments that cannot be explained in terms of utility or purpose. In this context, if postmodernity is a retreat from the dead ends that modernity's radically pursued desires have led us to, then, postmodern ethics is also an ethical perspective that will re-accept the Other as a neighbour, close to hand and mind, from the world of *calculated interests* into which it has been driven, to the core of the moral self, and will reconstruct the Other as a very important character in the process where the moral self reaches the position it deserves (83; our emphasis). Lacking this ethical perspective leads to a state of consciousness referred to as adiaphorization. Bauman's concept provides an important framework for understanding the issue of moral indifference, which is one of the key problems faced by modern societies. As Leonidas Donskis points out, it is essential to emphasize that the world Bauman examines is not a cave inhabited by monsters, devils, or dragons, posing dangers to the good part of humanity. Instead, this world is a "hell that a totally normal and seemingly kind human being, fine neighbour and family man creates for the Other by refusing to grant him his individuality, mystery, dignity and a sensitive language" (in Bauman and Donskis 2013, 8).

2. Adiaphorization

Adiaphorization, Bauman's version of adiaphoric, "a term borrowed from language of the church, meant originally a neutral or indifferent belief in the matters of faith and its doctrine" (Bauman 2009, 290) means 'amoral' in the metaphorical use and connotes to be "subject to no moral judgment, having no moral significance" (290). Bauman broadly explains the liturgical concept in the interview with the Bauman scholar Julija Tuleikytė. According to this (in Tuleikytė 2014, 219–220), the concept of adiaphorization finds its origins in medieval Church councils, where the term 'adiaphoric' held significant meaning. These councils were tasked with evaluating new ideas that emerged between their sessions, determining whether they aligned with the Catholic doctrine. If an idea was

consistent with the faith, it was expected that true Catholics would believe and accept it. Conversely, if an idea contradicted the Church's teachings, those who embraced it were deemed heretics. However, some ideas fell into a neutral category – neither in agreement nor in conflict with the faith. In such cases, individuals were free to accept or reject these ideas as personal choices, without any formal endorsement or condemnation by the Church. This neutrality defines the concept of *adiaphoron*.

Adiaphora or *adiaphorization* is used by Bauman to describe a state in which a person temporarily withdraws from their field of sensitivity. Although Bauman is foregrounding the adiaphoric attitude towards choice and its moral sign, the term also has epistemic relations[2], which Bauman also accepts (in Tuleikytė 2014, 219) but mainly avoids to stress in his writing. For the individual, events become insignificant because they are not personally involved, or affected by them. One example of this is public executions, carried out before crowds. In such cases, the public witnessing of the execution or torture of an individual eliminates any possibility of forming a real, personal connection with the victim. The person being executed is often labelled as a 'public enemy' or 'criminal', and this dehumanization suppresses the viewers' ability to have understanding or empathy for what is happening. Bauman uses this concept to illustrate how society can become morally disengaged from the suffering of others, particularly when such events are distanced from personal experience or are normalized through a public spectacle. As Donskis displays, adiaphoric behaviour for Bauman is a major problem of our time and is caused by "instrumental rationality; mass society and mass culture, that is, being in a crowd each and every moment […] enveloped by an anonymous power thanks to which no one will recognize, identify or shame you" (in Bauman and Donskis 2013, 38–39). As a result, events that we do not personally relate to become insignificant, disconnected from our experience of the world, and irrelevant to our sense of identity, affecting others but not ourselves (39).

Adiaphorization, as emphasized in *Modernity and the Holocaust*, is the act of concealing other human targets within a task-specific heap of features and keeping them separate in a way that will not allow for 'the restoration of the face', and it can exempt each action from being subject to moral evaluation in the theoretical world of Bauman. In this context, social action is made measurable not by moral values such as good or bad but by goal-oriented methodological and technical values. This situation neutralizes the sense of moral responsibility toward the Other (1989, 125). With adiaphorization, while moral responsibility is shattered, the agent, as a moral subject, is rendered silenced and defenceless, when confronted with the dual power of duty and methodological rules. Moreover,

[2] As the epistemic relation is beyond the scope of this study, we suggest to look at Tuleikytė who claims that "Bauman, treating morality as pre-social, asymmetrical, and dialogical, takes a critical look at Durkheimian, Husserlian, or Cartesian treatments of cognition, and, in his texts, one can read the assumption that adiaphorization appears along with epistemic activity or (and) sociality as one of the necessary causes" (63). Also, see Tuleikytė, J., 2015. "'Humanizacija per metaforas' ir Baumano adiaforizacijos koncepcijos episteminės implikacijos", *Problemos*, 87: 60–72. On the other hand, for a critique of Julija Tuleikytė's thoughts on Bauman, see Markuckas, M., 2017. "Baumanas ir adiaforizacijos problema: drąsūs žingsniai mažai pažintoje žemėje", *Problemos*: 192–195.

an important consequence is the erasure of the Face. This process involves placing the targets of action in a position where they cannot confront the agent, with capacities that would make them a source of moral demand. Thus, they are removed from the category of beings who can present themselves to the agent as a Face. Bauman points out that certain methods are at play here: the removal of the declared enemy from the sphere of moral protection, the classification of selected groups among the means of action that can only be evaluated based on technical and instrumental values, and the exclusion of the stranger from routine encounters with humans, where their face could be seen and might spark a glimmer of moral demand. Alongside these processes, the constraining effect of moral responsibility toward the Other is '*suspended*' and neutralized (126–127; our emphasis). Similarly, Levinas evaluates that the encounter with the Other is as an immediate feeling of responsibility toward them. In this encounter, seeing the Face conveys meaning and a direct communication with the Self. It is an invitation to take on the fate of the Other as an obligation[3]. However, adiaphorization precisely prevents one from seeing the Face, thus hindering the assumption of responsibility.

Adiaphorization, as a product of modernity, arises in a society where individuals are isolated from one another through the bureaucratic models and specialization that encompass all areas of life[4]. This process makes it difficult for people to fully grasp the outcomes of their actions. Consequently, individuals become indifferent to the moral dimension of their actions, avoiding personal responsibility for their outputs. In this context, adiaphoric action refers to actions that are exempt by social consent from moral evaluations, and are, thus, free from the threat of guilt or moral condemnation. Here, moral conscience is rendered ineffective, and actions are no longer restricted by ethical considerations in decision-making. In adiaphorization, responsibility is shifted from individuals to institutions or systems by authorities and their apparatus. This process destabilizes the sense of responsibility toward the Other, replacing it with a genetically modified one toward institutions, systems, or ideologies such as governments, religions, races, or nationalities. The meaning in 'facing' the Other or the obligation to positively confront the Other is reflected outside with full force. As in the Holocaust or the Rwanda case, that concretizes the shift of the sense of responsibility from the Other to a specific race, the transfer of responsibility obscures them and prevents individuals from feeling accountable for the consequences of their own actions by creating 'exceptional conditions' for legitimizing

[3] Emmanuel Levinas. *Philosophie, Justice et Amour, Entre Nous. Essais sur le Penser-à-l'autre*. Paris: Grasset, 1991: 121–139.

[4] Bauman clearly states that "adiaphorizing" effects are "rendering actions ethically neutral and exempting them [individuals] from ethical evaluation and censure", which he calls "the stratagem practiced by solid-modern bureaucracy" (2009: 53). Bauman distinguishes between the current practice of adiaphorization and of the near past, that is to say, between modernity and postmodernity. For him, the "consumer market took over from the solid-modern bureaucracy the task of adiaphorization" (54). Julija Tuleikytė's article on Bauman's adiaphorization discusses the links between Bauman's conception of the Holocaust and the consumer society. For Tuleikytė, "the relation between the two is in a way parallel to the relation between solid modernity and liquid modernity, the features of which the Holocaust and the consumer society respectively" (2016: 57). Tuleikytė, J. "Zygmunt Bauman: Adiaphorization in the Holocaust and in the Society of Consumers". *Jednak Książki*, 2016, n.6.

inhumane practices. They considered themselves accountable to government bodies more than to individuals. Bauman addresses the concept of adiaphorization particularly in the context of the Holocaust. The systematic killing of millions during the Holocaust, in which many of the perpetrators participated without experiencing guilt, is one of the most striking examples of adiaphorization. Indeed, these perpetrators believed they were simply fulfilling their given or newly assigned duties without making any moral judgments about their actions. According to Bauman (1991, 46), the tragic reality revealed by the Holocaust brings a profound message: it questions the wisdom of allowing experts or scientists to claim the right to distinguish between good and evil, the capacity of science as a moral authority, and ultimately the ability of these experts to make moral judgments about their actions and their consequences.

The importance of the concept of adiaphorization from the perspective of the Other stems from the moral exclusion of the Other. Here, the Other is subjected to oppression and injustice not through a logic of specific demonization, such as terrifying devils, sorcerers, monsters, or witches as indicated, but directly through moral exclusion. Indeed, through the process of adiaphorization, the Other is abstracted from moral concerns and left outside the realm of social conscience. In this regard, Bauman's concept of adiaphorization is used to understand how moral sensitivity can be eroded in modern societies and how certain individuals or groups can be exempted from moral responsibility. This concept helps us question how moral judgments, evaluations, and attitudes can be neutralized, and examine the social consequences of this abstraction process or indifference. To exemplify an adiaphoric existence, Jonathan Glazer's *The Zone of Interest* has been selected as a short case study. This film provides a keen illustration of how adiaphorization manifests in everyday life, particularly within the context of extreme historical events.

3. Suspended Morality: The Zone of Exception

The Zone of Interest (2023) is a British drama film inspired by the 2014 novel of the same title by the English author Martin Amis. While the novel tells the story of a Nazi officer and his family living right next to the Auschwitz Concentration Camp, it offers a narrative that unfolds in the shadow of the Holocaust, even though it does not place it at the centre. The main character, Rudolf Höss, served as the commandant of Auschwitz and was responsible for the deaths of thousands. In Nazi Germany, Höss was tasked with implementing the Nazi regime's genocidal policies, transforming Auschwitz into what became known as the 'death factory' and a central site of the Holocaust. His role was crucial in the operation of the camp, organizing mass killings, overseeing the construction of gas chambers, and orchestrating the use of lethal gases. However, for the purposes of our discussion, we intend to assert adiaphorization in modern politics through artistic depiction of a real case and exemplify how adiaphorization operates through the lives of Höss and his family.

The Zone of Interest explores how ordinary practices go hand in hand with great evil acts by using a minimalist and realistic approach. It presents a panorama of adiaphoriza-

tion, or moral indifference, by depicting the story of family members living in a villa right next to a death camp, continuing their daily routines as usual, while we hear the voices of the unseen victims from behind the walls. In this representation, despite the smoke rising beyond the wall, we are confronted with a crowd throwing pool parties, depicting Auschwitz paradoxically as a paradise for Hedwig and her guests, yet truly a hell for the camp's victims. The reflection and dissemination of violence and evil within the family is starkly portrayed in the scene where the eldest child locks his sibling in the greenhouse and pretends to release gas. What we want to emphasize based on all of this is that adiaphorization is not merely a 'state of exception' but its 'consequence'. The state of exception, inspired by Carl Schmitt's legal and political theories, is an attempt to explain how the modern state functions. For Agamben, the state of exception involves the temporary suspension of law, "suspension of the juridical order" (2005, 4) by an authority during extraordinary circumstances or crises. According to this view, a state, for example, which normally operates within the framework of law, in the face of a crisis or danger, tends to suspend the law and declare a state of emergency. In this situation, the state remains both inside and outside the law, thus stepping beyond the point at which the sovereign power suspends legal norms (23). Agamben's *Homo sacer* is a figure from Roman law who may be killed and yet not sacrificed, which means that he/she cannot be sacrificed to the gods while being able to get killed without legal consequence, representing a life excluded from both legal protection and religious significance, thus exposing the power dynamics of sovereignty (Agamben 1998, 12). Agamben, unlike Carl Schmitt, examines the state of exception through the concepts of biopolitics and homo sacer. According to him, in such states of exception, the modern state not only suspends the law but also retains the authority to directly control the lives of individuals. It is precisely at this point that homo sacer, as the person excluded from the law and deprived of the right to life, emerges within the sovereign's surveillance and control but exists outside the protection of the law. *Homo sacer* is a citizen over whose life the sovereign holds absolute control, i.e., a person who is not granted the right to life, and whose killing is not considered a crime (52). This state of total control reduces the individual to 'bare life' (11), stripping them of political and legal rights, leaving them as a purely biological entity. In this sense, Agamben (71–72) associates *homo sacer* with individuals in the modern age who, like Jews in Nazi concentration camps, are not protected by law, but who remain under the control of the state nevertheless. Thus, *homo sacer* is directly linked to the determination of the state of exception by political power. *Adiaphorization* does not refer only to the political and legal exclusion of individuals reduced to bare life, but also to their removal from a moral context and the absolution of the rest of the population from moral obligations toward them. The abandonment of the individual to the mercy of others is made possible not only by suspension of responsibility but also by the destabilization of responsibility, by attributing a new responsibility, or, more explicitly, 'erasing' the legal and moral responsibility. This results in the loss of morality. The legal norm is designated by the state of exception, which, in transcending its own remit, also overrides the ethical sphere that does not fall within its jurisdiction or simply acts *ultra vires*. This juridical

suspension not only regulates the authority-individual relationship but also destabilizes the individual responsibility in the act of killing. In another sense, it provides an explanation for the moral indifference towards *homo sac*er of the rest of society, which continues its daily routines. Therefore, as a process, *adiaphorization* involves being part of violence and evil, whether directly or indirectly, without feeling any moral responsibility towards the *homo sacer* or scapegoat.

The film focuses on the Höss family's efforts to maintain a normal life right next to the concentration camp, despite their awareness of the inhuman treatment happening next door. In this context, the film addresses the theme of adiaphorization, telling the story of individuals who become desensitized to the inhuman brutality they live alongside. As previously emphasized, Bauman notes that adiaphorization is closely related to the moral exclusion of the Other. When groups identified as the Other are marginalized from the sphere of moral consideration, the injustices and oppression directed toward them tend to be normalized and more readily accepted by society. In this way, certain segments of society, through the process of adiaphorization, are stripped of moral concerns and are left outside the boundaries of social conscience. From this perspective, the film questions how ordinary people can become part of such great evil, and how they can normalize it. The characters continue with their lives without undergoing any moral reckoning despite the massacres happening nearby. Moreover, they have turned the camp into a source of income and wealth. The scene where Höss's wife, Hedwig, tries on a luxurious fur coat stolen from a murdered woman, and, in another scene, where the couple's eldest son, Klaus, examines dentures taken from the mouths of Jews killed in the gas chambers, touches on the implicit complicity of ordinary individuals in the evil committed and on the 'banality of evil', a concept by Hannah Arendt that the film can explicitly be related to. Arendt witnessed the crimes and genocides committed under Hitler's antisemitic policies during World War II, which aimed to cleanse the German race of non-German ethnic elements, particularly Jews, as part of the Final Solution. This witnessing led to an inquiry aimed at understanding the nature of these evils and their origins as Arendt did in *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*, a controversial report about the trial of Nazi officer Adolf Eichmann in Jerusalem in 1961. The banality of evil is an attempt to explain how regimes like Nazism encourage ordinary individuals to commit morally horrific acts, and how moral judgments, values, and evaluations are bypassed. Arendt, while analyzing Eichmann's personality, actions, and speeches, argues that the crimes and evil did not stem from ideological fanaticism or monstrous feelings, but rather from a lack of thought and a tendency to follow orders as part of bureaucratic processes:

> Eichmann was not Iago and not Macbeth, and nothing would have been farther from his mind than to determine with Richard III "to prove a villain". Except for an extraordinary diligence in looking out for his personal advancement, he had no motives at all. And this diligence in itself was in no way criminal; he certainly would never have murdered his superior in order to inherit his post. He merely, to put the matter colloquially, never realized what he was doing (2006, 287).

The absence of critical thinking and unquestioning compliance with a bureaucratic mechanism obstructs moral scrutiny. Individuals who lose their individuality and moral sensitivity within such systems act as mere cogs in the machine. Hannah Arendt, as exemplified in the case of Eichmann, points out that the destruction caused by thoughtlessness or mindlessness can be far more catastrophic than the harm inflicted by the most destructive instincts inherent in human nature (287). Eichmann's example proves that individuals can commit horrific acts without awareness, simply by continuing their daily routines, disconnected from the consequences of their actions. Moreover, Arendt's theory of the 'banality of evil' does not justify individuals like Eichmann attempting to evade responsibility by blaming the bureaucratic mechanism or transferring the responsibility to it. Arendt argues that these individuals should still be held accountable and punished due to their lack of moral sensitivity and critical thinking. As conveyed in *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive*, Agamben believes that Hannah Arendt was misunderstood and was, in mundane reality, an ordinary person. "It is infinitely harder to grasp the mind of an *ordinary* person than to understand the mind of a Spinoza or Dante" (1999, 13; our emphasis). The testimonies came not only from the victims but also from the executioners, all of whom were ordinary inhabitants of the camp. Quoting Zelman Lewental, one of the prisoners of the camp, who introduced himself as 'obscure', Agamben stresses the dichotomy of being in such a site. He problematizes the contradiction in Holocaust testimony, where survivors' accounts are essential yet inherently incomplete. While the experiences are too real to forget, they are also too overwhelming to be fully expressed or imagined. This disconnection between the fact and the truth reflects the broader gap between historical insight and the lived reality and means that testimony can never completely capture the full scope of the events (1999, 12). He concludes that the "aporia of Auschwitz is indeed the very aporia of historical knowledge: a non-coincidence between facts and truth, between verification and comprehension" (12). Considering the perspective of the executioners, Bauman's concept of adiaphorization becomes an essential tool in comprehending this aporia. The moral values, actions, and expectations related to the individual's sphere of obligation are reconfigured by the lawmaker's new regulation, which, by stripping the Other of sanctity, renders them killable and makes them vulnerable to malpractice through the ordinary man's indifference. This is not only an assimilation of law but also an embodiment of an ethical code. The Nuremberg trials, as 'moral courts', were also interrogating the limits of man's indifference in the states of exception. Primo Levi was better at defining their state of perplexity, by narrating, "They are the rule, we are the exception" (1989, 84). In short, the adiaphorization process, in which evil becomes normalized, provides an explanation of how even the most ordinary individual can become ruthless. The concept of adiaphorization, therefore, not only addresses the political and legal operations of modern 'sovereignty' but also fundamentally focuses on the development and consequences of moral indifference within society and daily life. While the state of exception, as determined by the sovereign, refers to a political and legal mechanism indicative of authoritarian and totalitarian tendencies in modern states, *homo sacer*, who is declared outside the law by the sovereign, is not only deprived of political

rights, but also subjected to the moral indifference of the rest of the population. Thus, we suggest here that the concepts of *homo sacer* and *adiaphorization* should be interpreted together to better understand the function of the camps. Although Bauman's *adiaphorization* illuminates the mechanisms of moral disengagement within bureaucratic, institutional and face-to-face frameworks, it fails to adequately address the juridical and ontological position of those who suffer exclusion. In contrast, Agamben's *homo sacer* offers a critical analysis of legal abandonment while paying insufficient attention to the psychological and ethical processes that make such exclusion morally bearable for society. The synthesis of these concepts proves not merely advantageous but essential for a better understanding of camp experience. *Adiaphorization* without *homo sacer* risks reducing moral exclusion to abstract bureaucratic processes, divorced from the concrete legal structures that enable systematic abandonment. *Homo sacer* without *adiaphorization* appears as merely a juridical category, disconnected from the quotidian ethical numbing that allows others to coexist with such conditions. According to this view, *homo sacer* or the Other, who is cast outside the law by the sovereign, brought under biopolitical control, and reduced to bare life, becomes exposed to all forms of violence. In both cases, the neighbours or citizens are stripped of all responsibility and become apathetic to the victims' suffering. It is precisely this regulated condition of destabilized responsibility that necessitates the synthesis of Bauman's and Agamben's frameworks, as the ethical disengagement enabled by liquid modernity finds its most extreme expression in the juridical abandonment that produces figures like *homo sacer*. As Levinas argues, ethical responsibility arises from the immediate, unmediated encounter with the Face of the Other – a moment in which the subject is summoned by the presence of another person who demands ethical consideration. Bauman echoes this notion by stressing the relational and fragile nature of moral responsibility, especially when such encounters are obstructed by modern institutions. In *The Zone of Interest*, the spatial proximity between the Höss family and the victims of Auschwitz illustrates a powerful inversion of this concept: although the perpetrators live within hearing range of the Other's suffering, their moral perception is suspended. The physical closeness fails to generate ethical proximity because the institutional frame has already severed the face-to-face relation. As the screams from behind the wall are reduced to background noise, the Face is symbolically erased, and, with it, the possibility of ethical responsiveness disappears.

Conclusion

This study has examined Zygmunt Bauman's concept of *adiaphorization* alongside Giorgio Agamben's theory of *homo sacer*, offering an understanding of how modern societies can become morally disengaged under extreme conditions. Central to this analysis is the idea that modern structures, shaped by power dynamics and bureaucratic processes, have the capacity to strip actions of their moral significance and lead to destabilization of individual responsibility. Bauman's notion of *adiaphorization* explains how individuals, during times of social upheaval, become detached from ethical concerns and disregard

the humanity of others. This detachment, in turn, facilitates actions that would otherwise be morally intolerable. The integration of Agamben's homo sacer concept deepens this understanding by stressing how certain individuals or groups can be excluded from the protections of the law and, consequently, from moral consideration. In Agamben's framework, the homo sacer represents a life that can be taken without consequence, a state of being that reflects the suspension of legal recognition. When analysed together, Bauman's and Agamben's theories illustrate how mechanisms such as the Holocaust were facilitated not only by the legal state of exception but also by a broader societal moral indifference to the suffering of the Other. The homo sacer becomes emblematic of those rendered invisible inside the law, while adiaphorization describes the process through which such invisibility is normalized within the social order.

Jonathan Glazer's film *The Zone of Interest* serves as a visual representation of these concepts by portraying the everyday lives of individuals living adjacent to a concentration camp. The film's narrative captures the normalcy and detachment exhibited by those who, while living in proximity to extreme violence, remain indifferent to the suffering occurring around them. This portrayal resonates with Bauman's critique of modern morality, showing how *adiaphorization* allows people to distance themselves from the ethical implications of their surroundings. Glazer's film thus provides a concrete example of how the suspension of morality operates in practice and offers viewers a stark reminder of the dangers inherent in moral indifference. The assemblage of Bauman's and Agamben's ideas with the cinematic exploration in *The Zone of Interest* puts forward a central argument: that the breakdown of moral responsibility in modernity is not merely a matter of legal or political failure but is rooted in deeper processes of ethical disengagement. The film's portrayal of characters who have normalized their environment's atrocities illustrates how the mechanisms of adiaphorization contribute to the dehumanization of others and make ethical considerations secondary to bureaucratic and institutional priorities. Adiaphorization and homo sacer function sufficiently together to reveal the fragility of moral responsibility in modern societies, which can lead to extremes such as the Holocaust.

In sum, the convergence of adiaphorization, homo sacer, and the destabilization of responsibility reveals a structural logic of ethical disengagement embedded not only in modern governance but in the broader configuration of contemporary society. This triad exposes how moral boundaries are suspended, responsibility is fragmented, and certain lives are rendered invisible or disposable through routinised social practices and institutional norms. In light of these considerations, this article offers an original theoretical contribution by proposing destabilization of responsibility as a distinct analytical category. By triangulating Bauman's adiaphorization and Agamben's homo sacer with this new concept, the article seeks to go beyond existing readings of moral disengagement. It argues that the fragmentation of moral responsibility in liquid modernity should be understood not only as an effect of legal or institutional structures, but as a systematic ethical mutation that redefines the very conditions under which responsibility can be meaningfully assumed. When considered through the lens of cinema, this analysis gains further depth. Jonathan Glazer's *The Zone of Interest* powerfully visualizes this moral disintegration, not through

explicit violence, but by rendering the banality of evil as part of the everyday rhythm of domestic and bureaucratic life. The film's chilling aesthetic minimalism and formal restraint amplify the normalization of indifference, offering a visual counterpart to the theoretical dynamics outlined by Bauman and Agamben. Thus, the combined reading of these thinkers, enriched by Glazer's cinematic articulation, provides a critical framework for understanding the ethical crises that define our present.

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