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Navigating our 'zone of interest' in evaluative practice¹

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The Oscar-winning film 'The Zone of Interest' directed by Jonathan Glazer appropriately pushes buttons. The film portrays the routine domestic household life of Rudolf Höss, commandant of Auschwitz concentration camp. Auschwitz provides an ever-present backdrop to familiar patterns of household relationships; a backdrop of industrialised genocide, with visuals comprising smoke and occasional light flashing from chimneys, as well as a powerful soundscape (itself attracting a second Oscar Award) including machinery, transport trains, and occasional shouts and people screaming.

The film triggers several points of resonance for myself as a systems thinking in practice (STiP) practitioner with a long-standing interest with what I term systems thinking in evaluative practice - STi(E)P. The 'zone of interest' can be likened to a 'system of interest' – a core idea of STiEP illustrating the dynamic interplay between evaluand, evaluator and evaluation (Box 1)

Box 1 Zones and Systems: system of interest from a systems thinking in evaluative practice (STiEP) perspective

From a STiP perspective a 'system' is a conceptual construct used for making sense of a 'situation'. To use a significant STiP adage, a system is a map of a situation or territory, not to be confused with the actual territory. In STiP, and by extension STiEP, the 'interest' is always coupled with the 'system'. The two are integral.

A core part of systems thinking literacy in STiEP is the notion of a 'system of interest'. Drawing on traditions of American pragmatism, the system of interest can be regarded as a bounded entity actively constructed through *boundary judgements* (...of a 'system' and its sub-systems), constituted by an interplay between *value judgements* ('perspectives' on the situation informing the system) and '*factual*' judgements ('evidence' of situational reality informing the system).

The 'zone of interest' can be directly related to this STiEP understanding of evaluative practice – a corresponding interplay between evaluand, evaluators and evaluations (Fig.1)

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generating meaningful ‘signals’ or patterns of abstracted data sets from the cacophonous ‘noise’ of reality” (Reynolds, 2011)

Drawing on Fig.1, three questions of the film can be expressed to prise out the importance of framing in evaluation:

1. What is the *zone* of interest in relation to evaluative practice?
2. Why should the zone be of *interest* to an evaluation?
3. How does the ‘zone of interest’ perform from perspective of evaluators?

Two contrasting reviews of the film - which I’ll call Zone 1 and Zone 2 – can be compared using these questions. The comparative inquiry provides a vehicle to present some awkward questions not just about reviews of the film but as allegories of evaluative practice more generically.

(Zone 1) 1st order system: the evaluand as a system (Lewis, 2024)

From the perspective of Malcolm Lewis (writing in the New Internationalist) the *zone* of interest is “the easy co-existence of... comfortable domesticity with... mass killing” (Lewis, 2024 p.76). The ‘system’ of interest to Lewis is a particular historic time and place. It is of *interest* because it illustrates how routine activities can be normalised amidst such horrors of what Glazer himself referred to as ‘ambient genocide’ (akin to what Hannah Arendt in 1963 called the ‘banality of evil’ in reference to Adolf Eichmann’s trial and testimony).

For Lewis – as an evaluator/ reviewer - the judgement on performance of ‘zone of interest’ (i.e. the question 3 - ‘how’ - that seeks to make meaningful in joining the ‘what’ and ‘why’ questions) fails the evaluative test. Acknowledging Glazer’s auteur status as an accomplished writer-director, with experience in the advertising industry, Lewis comments: “You can see the influence in the visual clarity, spelt-out sound effects, and, unfortunately, *display displacing meaning*” (my italics). Regarding the characters focused on in the film, Lewis continues: “there’s no insight into their histories and personalities, their callousness and indifference. There’s no character development, no narrative, no analysis, no politics. This is... over-long and over-hyped” (Lewis, 2024 p.76)

At one level, the evaluative framing (or reasoning) here is quite reason-able. There is a void in providing an explanation for the banality being portrayed as integral to the zone of interest. But was that the intention of, and meaning behind, the film from the viewpoint of the Director?

The framing of the review here (Zone 1) – i.e. the ‘system’ (...of interest to Malcolm Lewis) - is of the evaluand.

With evaluative practice we might consider the *evaluand* (e.g. an intervention like a project (e.g. film), programme or policy) *as if* it is a system. We might also refer to the wider *evaluation* process *as if* it is a system. To differentiate between the two, the evaluand might be called a 1st order system and the evaluation a 2nd order (learning) system (Reynolds, 2023). Box 2 attempts to clarify the difference in these perspectives in relation to STiEP with reference to different zones of focus.

The contrasting framing of a review below (Zone 2) – the ‘system’ (of interest to Naomi Klein) – represents more a 2nd order framing.

Box 2 First-order and Second-order Perspectives: viewing systems (or zones) from a systems thinking in evaluative practice (STiEP) perspective

Figure 2 illustrates two contrasting ways of using ‘system’ as a device for exploring ‘situations’ in an evaluation.

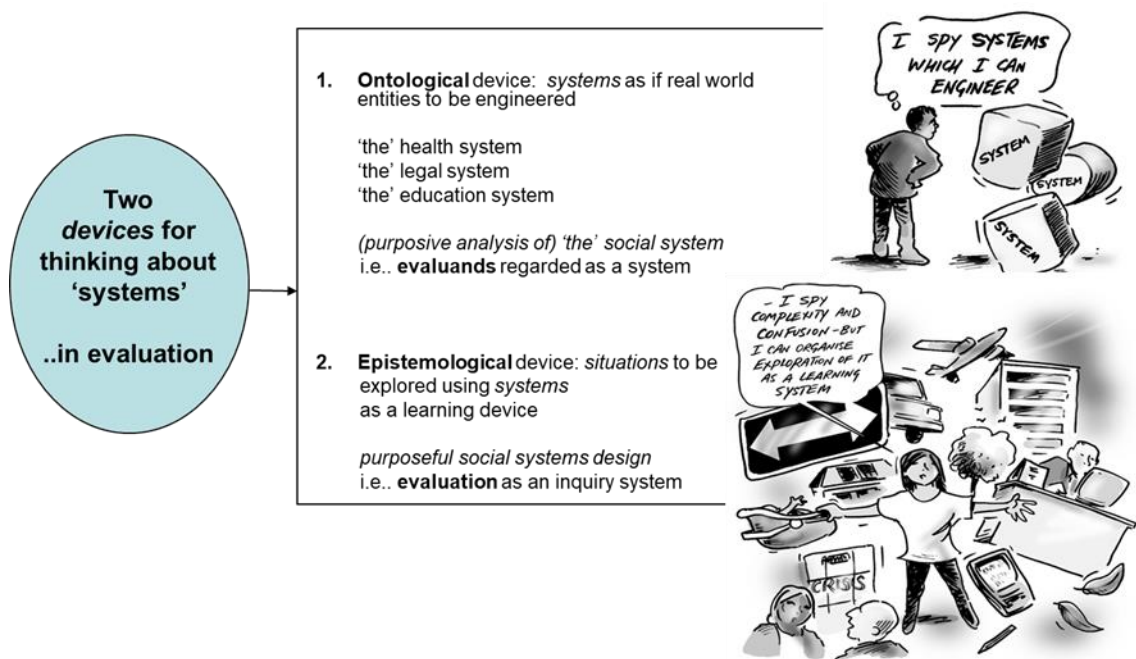


Fig.2 Ontological and epistemological uses of systems in evaluation

Source: Reynolds (2023) with graphics of each device sourced from Ison (2017)

Using ‘systems’ as ontological devices – directly representing situations of interest – is an example of first-order systems thinking. It is the most common expression of systems, and underpins much of what is commonly understood as constituting systems thinking, particularly in association with complexity science and social science analyses. There is great value in rendering aspects of situations as systems in this manner, contributing to insightful analysis of inter-related dynamics. However, what is often at risk is confusing the map for the territory – losing sight that such systems are themselves boundary judgements. As the graphic in Fig.2 illustrates, the risk lends itself to then treating reality as mechanistic ‘engineered’ systems, ripe for further systematic ‘engineering’!

First-order and second-order are logical constructs derived from the science of cybernetics. The transformation from 1st to 2nd order involves: "... the transition of oneself from an *observer of a reality* which is considered to be outside oneself, to a

participant in the same reality, and then towards being a *co-creator of that reality* [which requires fundamental cognitive and emotional reorientation" (Buddrus, 1996, quoted in Bell and Morse, 1999 p. 85. My italics)".

Second-order systems thinking takes a more systemic perspective by acknowledging our own role in making boundary judgements, whilst not dismissing the role of making such judgements in order to consider aspects of situations *as if* they are systems.

Figure 3 illustrates the contrasting boundary judgements between 1st and 2nd order thinking in STiEP.

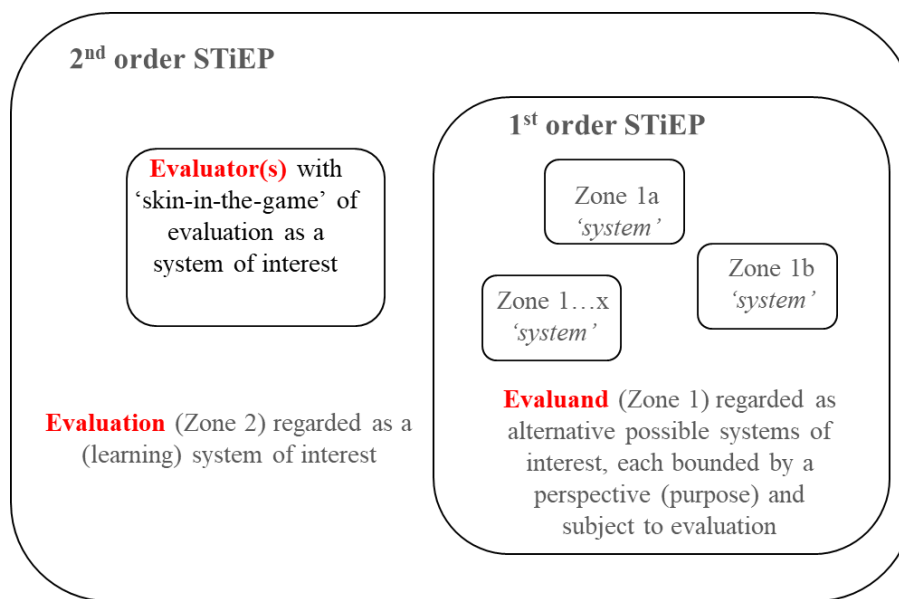


Fig.3 Second-order systems thinking in evaluative practice (STiEP)

Systems map illustrating 2nd order epistemological use of system as a device with embedded 1st order representations of an evaluand; different 'system' renditions of an evaluand (regarded more widely as an unbounded 'situation of interest'). Each Zone 1 system would have a different bounded perspective regarding 'purpose' to be factored in, along with evaluator viewpoints, within the wider (learning) system of interest of evaluation. (Note: an extension of this systems map to an influence diagram would show arrows between 'Evaluator(s)' and 'Evaluand')

From a STiEP perspective, evaluation ought to be more a 2nd order form of evaluative practice – a learning enterprise; one that acknowledges from the outset that any evaluand as a subject of evaluation may comprise of many perspectives ('zones' or 1st order systems of interest) – rather than a singular perspective offered by the terms of reference for a commissioned evaluation. A 2nd order endeavour also acknowledges the role of the evaluator themselves as co-creators of the evaluand and evaluation.

(Zone 2) 2nd order system of interest (Naomi Klein)

The evaluative viewpoint of the Zone by Lewis summarised above (*as if* the Zone was ‘a system’) is one of many different possible viewpoints associated with 1st order ‘systems’ (as signalled in Fig.3 – Zone 1a, Zone 1b etc). For example, an alternative fascist Nazi viewpoint might see the ‘zone’ *as if* ‘a system to demonstrate resilience of Aryan spirit and superiority despite external distractions’; or an extreme Zionist perspective may see the ‘zone’ *as if* ‘a system to legitimise the need for building walls to protect Jewish identity’. Boundary judgements about ‘zones’ are determined by the interplay between judgements of value and facts.

Naomi Klein (writing in *The Guardian*) relays the viewpoint on what constitutes ‘the zone’ from the perspective of the film’s director which contrasts with that of Lewis: “Glazer has repeatedly stressed that his film’s subject is not the Holocaust, with its well-known horrors and historical particularities, but something more enduring and pervasive: the human capacity to live with holocausts and other atrocities, to make peace with them, draw benefit from them” (Klein, 2024). At one level, the Glazer ‘zone’ perspective might be included as one amongst other zones in the 1st order evaluand. There is here though a wider 2nd order systemic sensibility; one that not only takes account of dynamics that go beyond the specific space and time of the Holocaust, but takes account also of our own judgements of ‘fact’ and ‘value’ as evaluators. It further invites consequent responsibilities in our co-constructing the ongoing realities associated with the subject matter of the evaluand (Zone of Interest).

To unfold this 2nd order evaluation, I return to the two further questions relating this ‘zone’ to evaluative practice: *why* should this zone be of *interest*, and *how* does this ‘zone of interest’ perform? The rationale of interest is suggested by Klein reporting on the Oscar ceremony and reflecting on Glazer’s powerful speech: “All our choices were made to reflect and confront us in the present – not to say, ‘Look what they did then’; rather, ‘Look what we do now,’ Glazer said, quickly dispatching with the notion that comparing present-day horrors to Nazi crimes is inherently minimizing or relativizing, and leaving no doubt that his explicit intention was to draw out continuities between the monstrous past and our monstrous present” (*ibid*).

The performance in Klein’s review relates in-part to a 1st order system: “Glazer has described his characters not as monsters but as “non-thinking, bourgeois, aspirational-careerist horrors”, people who manage to turn profound evil into white noise” (*ibid*). But Klein focuses more on the 2nd order performance relating to the Oscar-ceremony testimony of Glazer – a performance in which Glazer embraced his own identity as a member of the Jewish community with other Jewish colleagues at the Oscar Awards in the presiding unsettling horrors of the Gaza war beginning October 2023: “ [Glazer] went further: “We stand here as men who refute their *Jewishness and the Holocaust* being hijacked by an occupation which has led to conflict for so many innocent people, whether the victims of 7 October in Israel or the ongoing attack on Gaza.” For Glazer, Israel does not get a pass, nor is it ethical to use intergenerational Jewish trauma from the Holocaust as justification or cover for atrocities committed by the Israeli state today” (My italics). As writer-director, Glazer clearly has stakeholding in the evaluand, but as a reviewer Klein also offers stakeholding

through the wider lens of the Oscar ceremony. The discomfort portrayed in the film was enacted through a parallel zone of interest in contrasting Glazers unsettling speech from the normalised comfort zone of Oscar celebratory practices: echoing Glazer, Klein observes “Look what we do now....[These people] Absolutely could be us” (*ibid*).

Navigating towards better (2nd order) evaluative practice

The two reviews presented here provide an allegory of 1st and 2nd order evaluative practice. My question is do most evaluative practitioners remain content in the comfort zone 1 of first-order evaluative practice – providing objective evaluations of an evaluand as circumscribed by commissioners?

In my experience most claims of using ‘systems thinking’ for evaluation rests on 1st order practice – interpreting evaluands as ‘systems’ of intervention to be evaluated with predefined boundary judgements needing to be measured for success according to outputs (of ‘the system’) measured in terms of efficacy and efficiency. More recently, particularly in the tradition of developmental evaluation (Patton, 2020), evaluations have drawn on insights from systems thinking and complexity science to define the boundaries of an evaluand more in terms of ‘complex systems’. But the evaluations tend to remain at 1st order level.

Is there a missing opportunity of using systems thinking to not just frame the zone of an evaluand, but to better frame the zone of the evaluation process itself? Such a 2nd order framing might enhance and deepen evaluative practice in developing logistical, ethical, and political value. Below are three principles of STiEP – Relational, Perspective, and Adaptive ...thinking in evaluative practice (TiEP) - to guide such a shift (adapted from Reynolds, 2023)

1. Relational thinking in evaluative practice: Systems thinking is a duality between the systematic and systemic. Being *both* systematic *and* systemic in evaluative practice is a core part of the wider logistical need to address inevitable non-linear dynamics involved with any evaluation. Systematically addressing terms-of-reference for any commissioned evaluation - using measures of efficacy and efficiency of immediate ‘outputs’ from the evaluand - might be enhanced through engaging *also* more systemically with what might be otherwise regarded as ‘an ambient white noise’ of longer term outcomes and wider impacts.
2. Perspective thinking in evaluative practice: Systems are fundamentally conceptual constructs which can be used to both (i) represent realities of any evaluand (‘as if’ constructs) as part of 1st order reflective practice, and (ii) actively shape realities during an evaluation through purposeful 2nd order reflexive praxis. Such evaluative practice as praxis invokes ethical responsibilities (e.g. what is ‘good/harmful’ ‘right/wrong’) on the part of evaluators as situated practitioners integral to the evaluand.
3. Adaptive thinking in evaluative practice: Systems that we construct in an evaluation – whether at 1st or 2nd order level – are always provisional; transitional and impermanent. 2nd order STiEP invites development of learning; that is, systems that

are agile and responsive to changes in the 'white noise' of lifeworlds in which systems inhabit. Evaluations as purposeful learning systems of interest may be regarded as political tools; socio-technical constructs that have power-over situations as well as power-to transform situations, or conversely power-to maintain business-as-usual relations of power. STiEP is political.

Principles are not tablets of stone but rather simple guidance founded on the deeper principle of systemic triangulation with boundary critique underpinning STiEP presented in Fig.1. Navigating our zones of interest in evaluative practice requires not just addressing discomforting logistical questions on dealing with dynamics of complex uncertain situations, but also, and more closer to home (as a zone of interest), ethical and political questions.

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