

Makale Bilgisi: Gündoğdu, A. (2025). <i>Kosmos ve The Killing of a Sacred Deer</i> Filmlerinde “Abject” in Dönüşü. DEÜ Edebiyat Fakültesi Dergisi, Cilt:12, Sayı:2, ss. 576-591.	Article Info: Gündoğdu, A. (2025). The Return of “The Abject” in <i>Kosmos</i> and <i>The Killing of a Sacred Deer</i> . DEU Journal of Humanities, Volume:12, Issue:2, pp. 576-591.
Kategori: Araştırma Makalesi	Category: Research Article
DOI: 10.69878/deuefad.1617154	DOI: 10.69878/deuefad.1617154
Gönderildiği Tarih: 10.01.2025	Date Submitted: 10.01.2025
Kabul Edildiği Tarih: 14.07.2025	Date Accepted: 14.07.2025

THE RETURN OF “THE ABJECT” IN *KOSMOS* AND *THE KILLING OF A SACRED DEER*¹

Ayşegül Gündoğdu*

ABSTRACT

Julia Kristeva in *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, defines the “abject” as that which both threatens identity and paradoxically serves to preserve it. This paradoxical condition is not an object or subject that language can define. Ironically, it is at the very center of the formation of identity. What Kristeva calls the “not-I or not-other” threatens the integrity and boundary of identity due to its ambiguous and inexplicable nature. Since the abject does not belong to the defined and determined sphere of subjectivity, it disrupts the orders, rules and boundaries through which individuals and/or societies try to keep their borders intact against this destructive power. Therefore, identity and the boundaries that define identity result from processes in which the not-I and the not-other are tried to be expelled from these boundaries. Accordingly, this study aims to discuss the emergence of this “thing (abject)” that is not-self and not-other in two different narratives, in Reha Erdem's (2009) *Kosmos* and Yorgos Lanthimos' (2017) *The Killing of a Sacred Deer*, and to discuss how identities and cultures that are thought to be perfectly constructed are actually intertwined with the “thing” that is trying to be expelled, and how this threat is incorporated into their lives by people themselves.

Keywords: abject, *Kosmos*, *The Killing of a Sacred Deer*, outsider, culture, identity, Julia Kristeva

¹ This is a revised and expanded version of a paper titled, “Between Nature and Culture: The Return of the Abject Nature in *Kosmos* and *The Killing of a Sacred Deer*,” presented at 15th Annual International Conference on Humanities and Social Sciences, Barcelona, Spain.

* Öğr. Gör. Dr., Ünvani, Dokuz Eylül Üniversitesi, aysegul.gundogdu@deu.edu.tr, ORCID: 0000-0002-7677-2192

KOSMOS VE THE KILLING OF A SACRED DEER FİMLERİNDE “ABJECT”İN DÖNÜŞÜ²

ÖZ

Julia Kristeva *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* adlı kitabında “abject”i kimliği hem tehdit eden hem de paradoksal şekilde kimliği korumaya yarayan şey olarak tanımlar. Bu paradoksal durum dille tanımlanabilecek ya da açıklanabilecek bir nesne ya da bir özne değildir. İronik şekilde özneliğin yani kimliğin oluşumunun tam merkezinde yer alır. Kristeva'nın “ben-olmayan ya da öteki-olmayan” olarak adlandırdığı bu şey, muğlak ve açıklanamaz doğası nedeniyle kimliğin bütünlüğüne ve sınırlarına tehdit oluşturur. Abject, özneliğin tanımlanmış ve belirlenmiş alanına ait olmadığı için, bireylerin ve/veya toplumların bu yıkıcı güce karşı sınırlarını sağlam tutmaya çalıştıkları düzenleri, kuralları ve sınırları bozar. Dolayısıyla, kimlik ve kimliği tanımlayan sınırlar, ben-olmayan ve öteki-olmayanın bu sınırların dışarı atılmaya çalışıldığı süreçlerin sonucudur. Bu çalışma, Reha Erdem'in (2009) *Kosmos* ve Yorgos Lanthimos'un (2017) *The Killing of a Sacred Deer* (*Kutsal Geyiğin Ölümü*) filmlerinde, ben-olmayan ve öteki-olmayan bu “şeyin (abject)” iki farklı anlatıda ortaya çıkışını ve kusursuz olarak inşa edildiği sanılan kimliklerin ve kültürlerin aslında dışarı atılmaya çalışılan “şey”le iç içe geçerek bizzat insan tarafından bu tehditin hayatlara dahil edildiğini tartışmayı hedeflemektedir.

Anahtar Sözcükler: abject, *Kosmos*, *The Killing of a Sacred Deer*, yabancı, kültür, kimlik, Julia Kristeva

1. INTRODUCTION

Two highly acclaimed movies, *Kosmos* by Reha Erdem (2010) and *The Killing of a Sacred Deer* by Yorgos Lanthimos (2017), present striking stories of the never-ending struggle of humankind to control and design the world to create a perfect and meticulous order where they can feel comfort and assert their power. Yet, this ambitious attempt often results in a backlash that disrupts everything, culminating in a tragic outcome. This backlash serves as a cautionary reminder that designing and shaping the world and our lives is impossible. To explore this backlash, Julia Kristeva's concept of the abject in *The Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* will be referred to in analyzing the emergence of the abject as an unknown or unexplainable force in the characters' lives in these movies. Kristeva (1982) defines abject as which is “beyond the scope of the possible, the tolerable, the thinkable” (p.4). It is neither an object nor a subject that can be defined or explained by language; rather, it is “what does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between,

² Barselona, İspanya’da, 15. Yıllık Uluslararası İnsani ve Beşeri Bilimler Konferansı’nda sunulmuş, “Doğa ve Kültür Arasında: *Kosmos* ve *The Killing of a Sacred Deer*’da Abject Doğanın Dönüşü” çalışmanın gözden geçirilmiş ve genişletilmiş halidir

the ambiguous, the composite” (Kristeva, 1982, p. 4). Because the abject does not belong to the identified and defined space of subjectivity, it disrupts the orders, rules, and structures through which individuals and/or societies try to maintain their borders intact. Hence, paradoxically, the identities and boundaries that define and differentiate those identities result from these processes of exclusion through which those labeled as non-I(s) and non-we(s) are expelled.

In *Kosmos* and *The Killing of a Sacred Deer*, the abject appears as a stranger, an outsider who does not fit into the established order and ultimately disrupts the so-called secure borders of that structure. In *Kosmos*, this outsider is Battal, a mysterious man whose whereabouts are unknown, and the established structure is represented by a small town. One day, Battal arrives in that small town out of nowhere and disrupts nearly all the daily routines of the townspeople’s lives. Similarly, in *The Killing of a Sacred Deer*, a young man, Martin, emerges as the abject figure, challenging Dr. Steven Murphy’s neat and organized world and his medical eminence. Avenging his father’s death, Martin shatters Dr. Steven’s seemingly all-powerful and secure life. In this movie, the established order that is presumed to be invincible is Dr. Steven’s medical eminence and authority, which completely fails with Martin’s unsettling entrance into Dr. Steven’s life. Thus, both movies present the stories of the haunting existence of the unknown, “the abject,” in two different socio-cultural contexts, and show that it is almost impossible to keep the unknown, whether it be an outsider or an unexplainable happening, from transgressing so-called well-defined boundaries and secure zones of life. Humankind’s never-ending struggle against the unknown and the unexplainable turns out to be a futile effort because the abject is always there to haunt communities, identities, and borders.

2. An Outsider from the Wilderness: *Kosmos*

A Reha Erdem’s much-acclaimed *Kosmos*³ tells the story of Battal, a lonesome stranger who arrives in a town (Kars) where time seems frozen like the heavy snow, and whose name is not mentioned in the movie. In this unnamed town which may be considered a microcosm for similar communities, Battal is first perceived as a healer, then transformed into a saint/healer, and finally, he becomes a threatening freak who must be expelled from the town. His unknown whereabouts, peculiar characteristics, and behaviors accompanying his mysterious past make him all the more intriguing to the townspeople. Therefore, because of all these characteristics that identify Battal that his early saint-like image is turned into a pervert and a dangerous man. Coming out of nowhere, having no family or anybody, he is the weird stranger who does not belong to anywhere or have any connections and, thus,

³ The dialogues from *Kosmos* and all the other references to texts in Turkish in this paper are my translations.

he is the one who “comes from nothingness and vanishes into that nothingness in the end” (Altıntaş, 2009, p. 67). In an interview, Reha Erdem (2009) calls Battal a “stranger” who “looks at the town from outside” (p. 178). Battal’s distance is established in the movie with the opening scenes where a stranger looms on the horizon of the town’s border.

The movie opens with scenes of heavy snow and blizzard all over, and there is nothing other than a tiny black image gradually coming closer to the camera’s view in that vast whiteness. This black image is Battal running through the snow, crying and seeming helpless and desperate. Finally, he comes closer to a fog-covered town where the houses are visible now, and overlooking the town, he hears the screams of a young woman, Neptune, running across a river to save her almost-drowning brother. After immediately saving the boy, Battal continues to cry/scream as he did in the opening scenes, lying on the snow as if he were dead. Then, the scene is cut to a zoom-in of a cow’s eye and to the inside of a mosque where Battal is again lying on the ground. As in the opening scenes in wide-angle shots, Battal is again the only one in the view in the mosque’s wide-angle shot, and is like a tiny spot in that big place. Moreover, in all these scenes, the only sounds are the sounds of nature, such as the birds and the river, and the sounds of bombs and guns heard from afar as if the town is under siege. Gradually, rather melancholic melodies of high-pitched violins also accompany these sounds. As such, in establishing Battal and the town’s story, the cinematography of the movie plays a significant role: “[I]t is possible to say that... aesthetics of the scene and montage function in an organic unity and creates the structural, plastic [cinematic] universe together” (Acar, 2009, p. 30).

In this mise-en-scene of the opening scenes, Reha Erdem juxtaposes (the forces of) nature and city/culture with their geographical details and their specific sounds. Thus, it may be said that Battal almost acts as a connection between nature and culture, represented in the movie by the town. In their analysis of Reha Erdem movies, Güntürkün and Altunay (2023) state that

the binary opposition between nature and culture, which usually appears as a dual structure in the movies of Reha Erdem, is presented in this film especially through the structure of language. Battal is presented as a character who does not have the language to express himself and, simultaneously, as the one who comes from outside the borders of culture (as a constructed reality), an alien to the culture. (p. 177)

These opening scenes, which are presented in a fragmented structure and where there is no conversation but only sounds in an unnamed time and spatial place, establish an ambiguous atmosphere that helps display the clash between a stranger coming from nature and the city with its defined borders and

residents. This border zone in its ambiguity between nature and the town is the abject, embodied by Battal, “in-between, the ambiguous, the composite” (Kristeva, 1982, p. 4).

What makes Battal’s in-betweenness even more visible is his language and voice, introduced in the opening scenes as screams and cries in high tones. From the moment he appears on the screen, he is crying and screaming in a piercing tone. He makes these same sounds when he runs through the snow, saves the boy from drowning, and runs on the opposing sides of the river parallel to Neptune, the boy’s sister. As soon as they see each other, Battal and Neptune start screaming at each other. Neptune is like a wild bird, and Battal immediately answers her call like a wild animal. It is as if they communicate through cries and screams, just like animals do when they come across their species and instinctively start communicating in their “language.” This different language is one example of the Kristevan abject, which “confronts us... with those fragile states where man strays on the territories of the *animal*. Thus, by way of abjection, primitive societies have marked out a precise area of their culture in order to remove it from the threatening world of animals. . . .” (Kristeva, 1982, pp. 12-13). Similarly, Battal and Neptune occupy the fragile state where they stray on the territory of the animal through their scream-language, which is completely different from human language. This connection between animals and Battal is highlighted even more when Battal calms down with a slow hand movement three stray puppies barking at a woman with grocery bags in her hands on the street. He says to her,

they are afraid of you. They do not have owners. What they go through is because of people; since there is evil instead of righteousness, there is evil instead of justice. In fact, what people go through is experienced by animals too. What they [animals and humans] go through is the same. Both die the same way. Both have the same breath. People do not have superiority over animals, madam, because it’s all in vain, because they all go to the same place, are all made of dust, and return to dust. (Erdem, 2009, 25:17)

Battal’s words are all-embracing; he does not separate or create any hierarchy among creatures living in this world, whether they be trees, dogs, animals, or humans. Rather than creating borders, he embraces the other, trying to understand and communicate with it. As such, he is a denizen of nature, where everything flows into each other through interconnectedness and interdependence. This completely contrasts with the townspeople, who are divided over the issue of their town’s borders. There is a dispute among them about who is more receptive to strangers and foreigners coming to their city and who does not want anybody other than the local residents. Those who support open borders argue that this can be a possibility for new work

opportunities, gain, and support. Those who oppose this idea claim that strangers or outsiders are just enemies who can harm and destroy them and their society. They even spread propaganda and prepare pamphlets about the dangers of “others.”

Moreover, the daily activities in the town also mark the significance of the borders for the townspeople. For instance, the huge military headquarters and the abundance of military trucks and cars passing through the city center call attention to the forces that control these borders. The function of the military even extends to keeping the social order by solving the family dispute between some brothers in the town. Furthermore, there is a real border in the town to identify the separation between town/inside and others-enemies/outside, where war and danger loom on the horizon with all the sounds of bombs and guns in the background. Ironically, although this enemy line is set to expel the enemy and mark out their territory, Battal disrupts this clear definition. When, for example, he is just walking around the ruins of the collapsed buildings in the town, a soldier stops him, shouting that he cannot enter the prohibited area, and asks for his identity card. Battal, however, does not have an identity card to present, making him an unidentifiable entity, an abject. Therefore, by simply jumping over a wall and passing to the so-called other side/outside of the town, he transgresses the security borders of the town and, in a way, challenges the whole security structure upon which it was founded. In addition, Battal’s non-identity, symbolized by not having an identity card, also highlights his challenge to the town’s so-called secure territorial space. It is as if the more they attempt to keep their community intact and exclude what they deem to be outsiders or intruders, the more the “abject” gets ground.

Thus, although Battal is initially accepted by the town because he has saved the boy, he is ironically doubly a “stranger” in the town with his all-embracing attitude and unique way of communication. After he saves the boy, the boy’s father comes to the local coffee shop and thanks him for what he did. He calls Battal “someone who is sent by God,” because “he has given his boy his life back by saving him” (Erdem, 2009, 07:06). He is almost exalting Battal to the position of a higher, even a “divine” being capable of giving life. Battal’s response to him is almost in the same tune as his words about animals. He says that “everything happens to everybody in the same way. What happens to the good and evil is the same. . . . What is the doom in everything in life is that what happens to everybody is the same, and even the hearts of humans are full of evil” (Erdem, 2009, 07:23). Although other men listen to him carefully, they have difficulty making sense of what he says, for his manner of speaking is fragmented and confusing as he talks about humanity, God, love, animals, the dead, and the living. Still, since he is a “savior” in their eyes, they want to express their gratitude and appreciation and welcome him among themselves. Finally, an older man welcomes him to their town, saying

that he is like “a dervish” who makes it possible for a young boy to return to life in the almost frozen river.

Battal’s status as a savior and helper solidifies when he saves the life of another person in the town who is almost choked to death and helps heal a woman from her constant headaches. Furthermore, he becomes the center of attention with his confusing and unexplainable actions and behaviors. For instance, he starts stealing medicine for another woman and tries to help heal her pain with strange gestures as if he were in a trance. Even once, he lights a stove which is old and not used for a long time by breathing through it, and the boy’s father witnesses this moment. All these instances and the rumors about his unexplainable “abilities” cause people to believe him to be a sacred person. They even start to queue in front of the old building where he stays to meet him and ask for his help for their sick and disabled relatives and friends. Thus, the townspeople categorize him as a strange and incomprehensible but helpful addition to their community. In this way, he is not a threat to them, and as long as he fits in and acts according to the townspeople’s perception, he is acceptable. In a way, the townspeople adapt him to the secure borders of the town to be identified and defined, which saves him from being an outsider.

However, Battal’s unexplainable and confusing manners, language, and his “doubly stranger” position in the town, gradually, turn out to be a real threat to the townspeople. Their perception of Battal as a dervish, saint, and healer is transformed into a menace that needs to be expelled from their community. In this sense, Battal’s relation to animals may be considered the most significant characteristic causing people’s perception to change completely. Battal’s animal-like sounds and screams, his climbing to the tree tops like squirrels and cats, his communication with stray puppies and Reha Erdem’s zoom-ins of animals, such as cows, ducks, and especially the scenes of the slaughterhouse where the cows are about to be slaughtered with their groaning sounds in the background follow Battal’s scenes, implying a connection with him and the animals. In her analysis of the human and the human body in Reha Erdem’s movies, Tuncer (2009) writes that, Battal “exists in an in-between state by dissolving the borders between the human bodies and the animal bodies, and with this existence, he goes out of the oppressive and stereotyping codes” (p. 101). In doing so, Battal may be said to invite us “to a new level of consciousness by being in a place between human and animal through his body, and by making us question all the social norms” (Tuncer, 2009, p. 100). Besides, his connection with animals/non-human bodies also implies the distinction between him and the townspeople in their treatment and inclusion of animals in their lives. When Neptune asks her father, who works as a butcher in the slaughterhouse, whether the animals feel that they will be killed, he says mechanically, “Of course, it is impossible not to” (Erdem, 2009, 01.24:42). Still, this recognition does not produce any

compassion or empathy towards animals in him. On the treatment of animals, Erdem (2009) states that

I do not mean to say this as if I want to teach a lesson like “we do this, we do not do that.” But we are in such a hypocritical state. This is a grave hypocrisy. These are what I see when I go to the slaughterhouse. . . . We do not want to see this. . . . There is no such thing as “oh animals do not understand.” What I saw there were Eyes. Such pain and horror! . . . There cannot be anything more horrifying than that. They tremble. We do not know this. . . . This is the hypocrisy of all of us. (p. 181)

In the movie, in one of the slaughterhouse scenes, there are cows in a row, just waiting for their turn at the door of the slaughterhouse, and in another scene, there is a close-up of a cow falling to the ground in the slaughterhouse before being divided into pieces as meat. Whereas the emphasis in the slaughterhouse scenes points to the utility/gain function of animals for the people, Battal is presented in a more specific connection with animals, as if he shares a common way of existence with them and, also, to highlight people’s hypocrisy towards them.

A fascinating scene becomes the epitome of this unique existence. One day, Neptune waits for him in an old, empty building, which was once an official/institutional building where Battal hides the medicine he has stolen. She starts screaming like animals when they call for their pairs, and Battal responds similarly. Without ever saying a word, they communicate and experience almost ecstatic moments through screams. All the papers in the drawers in the room suddenly start to fly in the air, and the camera presents these moments at an angle that makes everything seem upside down, as if defying gravity. Furthermore, Battal and Neptune polish their toenails and vein lines in red, and suddenly, they start flying like birds in the room. They use their feet, like claws or talons, to land on the ground again. This emphasis on the color red in two different settings functions in two opposite contexts, one is in the slaughterhouse, where the blood of the animals symbolizes their fear and death. In the other context, the red nails of Battal and Neptune signify and cherish a new and different form of joy, communication, and even existence, which gives them a sense of unity and peace with every living creature and nature, free of limits, borders, and categories. Reha Erdem (2009) comments on this scene, saying, “according to me, there is both love and sex. Without even touching and getting undressed, [t]here is a great desire there” (p. 179). Similarly, in elaborating on the meaning of this scene, Acar (2009) also underlines the unique connection made between animals and Battal and Neptune, stating that

the communication created between Kosmos and Neptune is the wild, pre-language, archaic, and out-of-culture communication. It is a language which makes letters fly in the air and the written language invalid, in this wild and strange language, communication is made with bones, birds' screaming. (p. 44)

As such, Battal and Neptune “do not conform to the characteristics of modern culture; they do not shy away from each other, and they do not mind being strangers. They reflect nature” (Kule&Gülaçtı, 2023, p. 199).

The townspeople become baffled as Battal remains out of all their cultural and social norms, traditions, and habits. They see that he refuses to work, steals medicine from the pharmacy, and spends most of his days at the local coffee shop, where he eats all the sugar. Even once, when he is sitting with the other men at the same coffee shop, they see a cigarette burn on his hand, curing itself with no scar. When they offer him tea, he says, “I don't want tea, I want love” (Erdem, 2009, 36:56), which is translated by the men around him mockingly as “so, he wants a woman” (Erdem, 2009, 36:58), whereas what he means is more of a universal, spiritual love or connection. Yet, since this is the only way people can make sense of and categorize him, they continue to tease him about it until one of them shouts at him, “who are you?!” (Erdem, 2009, 37:48). Battal obviously does not fit into any of their earlier categorizations, yet they cannot find another meaning that will explain who or what he is. Therefore, in a way, this is the exact moment where Battal's character is highlighted as the “abject,” the unidentified and unexplainable, and as what “draws [one] towards the place where meaning collapses” (Kristeva, 1982, p. 2). The abject lurks behind the gaps and breaks in his seemingly confusing words and language, resisting the townspeople's efforts to identify and categorize him to protect themselves from falling into his abyss of meaninglessness:

[Battal] speaks with the wild screams of the birds, not with our language Battal goes out of language together with culture. He talks continuously but nobody understands his words. . . . Within the borders of language, Battal is desperate; he cannot fit into the borders of language, [and] when he does fit in, he is left dysfunctional. That is why his name is Battal; he is both ‘larger than the ordinary’ and ‘useless and dysfunctional’ simultaneously. (Altıntaş, 2009, p. 67)

Accordingly, Battal's larger-than-life image starts to break down gradually, foregrounding his useless and dysfunctional side. One significant turning point of this change takes place when another boy in the town is sick and he cannot help him. The boy has been ill, probably for a long time, due to an undiagnosed disease, and he needs serious medical treatment immediately.

Unfortunately, although it is already too late to save him, the child's father says, "it is you who made my son ill" (Erdem, 2009, 01:43:11), marking the final point of that change. Now, he is a thief stealing sugar from the coffee shop and medicine from the pharmacy, he is the "murderer" of the child, and even the gendarmes are after him to interrogate him. He cannot fit into the town's structure, nor can he help them anymore. He is completely turned into the threatening stranger, "the abject," which must be expelled from society so that the town can return to its pre-Battal life with its secure borders intact. This transgression transcends his earlier physical border crossing, for "that very [ultimate] border he crossed has a heavy and tragic price, both for Battal and society, symbolizing the life of a child and the future and survival of society. If a society wants to live and stay together, it will not cross the border, it will not cross the borders of culture" (Altıntaş, 2009, p.68).

The closing scenes of *Kosmos* are almost identical to the opening scenes, where a tiny black spot gradually comes closer to the camera's view in the deep whiteness of the snow-covered nature. This time, Battal is rushing in panic towards the snow-covered nature, screaming and crying. He is leaving the town and gradually vanishing in the blizzard and snow, his image turning into a tiny black spot on the scene.

3. An Ambiguous Guest: *The Killing of a Sacred Deer*

As *Kosmos* presents Battal as the in-between, challenging the established order and structure against the backdrop of a small town, *The Killing of a Sacred Deer* by Yorgos Lanthimos presents Martin as the threatening presence destabilizing the totally sterilized and seemingly flawless mechanical world of medical science. The movie presents the life and family of Dr. Steven Murphy, a top-notch heart surgeon with a picture-perfect upper-class life. Lanthimos first establishes this so-called perfect order and then illustrates the destruction of it with an ambiguous, unidentified figure, Martin. To introduce this world, like Erdem, Lanthimos uses different angles⁴ ranging from wide angles to extreme close-ups and Dutch angles to create and highlight the ambiguous and almost ominous atmosphere looming in the Murphy Family.

The movie opens with an extreme close-up of a beating heart during a surgical operation, and the surgeon's moves are shot in close detail. Then, the camera turns to the empty hospital corridors with white walls and floors, metallic colors, and metallic hospital equipment all around in a flawless order and design. This shot is also a reference to Stanley Kubrick's signature shot, one-point perspective, where a horizontal line seems to lead to a final point as if to disappear there. As Steven and his colleague walk down the corridors after the operation, talking about their watches, the camera follows them in

⁴ For more on technical details of camera and directing, see also Mercado, 2010.

this one-point perspective. Although these scenes seem to provide a larger perspective, zooming in on a beating heart in all its vitality, signifying the life power, and white and gray colors of the hospital corridors, along with all the metallic equipment make the whole place look colorless and lifeless, even creepy, creating a sharp contrast with the bloody and palpitating living heart on the operation table.

This metallic, meticulously designed, and orderly structure is the ultimate space symbolizing Steven's power and authority. It is even evident in Steven's daily life, including his most intimate relationship with his wife Anna. For instance, their kitchen is designed entirely in metallic materials, in white and gray, resembling the hospital corridors or the operating rooms. At the dinner table with his family or in his relationship with his wife, he talks as if with his surgeon friend, in very short, clear-cut sentences, lacking genuine feeling. He maintains the same distant manner in listening to his daughter's school choir preparations and telling his son to water the plants. Even when they make love, Anna is in the position of what they call "general anesthetic" (Lanthimos, 2017, 09:23), she is just lying on the bed without moving, and her eyes are closed as if she were a patient in Steven's operating room. In all these details, their beautiful and rich house, furniture, and life seem rather "artificial and without a foundation" (Bilis, 2018, p. 64). This seemingly flawless order is to be disrupted by a young man, Martin, whose father died on Steven's operating table. In their first meeting at a café, Steven orders food and drink for Martin and gives him a watch as a gift. Then, Martin starts to visit him in the hospital without notice, and he calls him whenever he wants. In these scenes, the flawless and meticulous perspective of the hospital corridors shifts. For example, in the café, the Dutch angle creates a disoriented and disturbing perspective, almost foreshadowing an ominous set of events ahead. Both in the café and in the hospital parking lot, where Martin calls Steven to invite him to dinner, the camera follows Steven from behind at a Dutch angle. Similarly, when Martin comes to the hospital, the camera again follows Steven from behind as if he were being stalked, and the angle is rather narrower to highlight his desperate position with Martin.

Steven becomes increasingly aware that Martin has come to avenge his father's death. Since Steven operated on Martin's father when he was drunk, causing the operation to go wrong, Martin is now demanding sacrifice in a striking parallel to the story of Artemis and Agamemnon⁵. When the Greek fleet is on its way to Troy, one of Agamemnon's soldiers kills Artemis's sacred deer. Although he kills the deer accidentally, Artemis demands a sacrifice. Thus, Agamemnon has to offer his daughter Iphigenia as a sacrifice so that Artemis lets the Greek fleet reach Troy. Martin forces himself into Steven's life in a very similar manner. One day, he tells Steven what he wants

⁵ For more on the mythological stories, see also Hamilton, 2011.

and that he demands a sacrifice. Unless Steven agrees to do and act as he wishes, his children and his wife will get sick one by one; first, their legs will be paralyzed, second, they will refuse to eat to the point of starvation, then their eyes will bleed, and finally, they will die. Thus, the in-between, the stranger, and the non-other who threatens the scientific medical world and its representatives is Martin, the abject, in *The Killing of a Sacred Deer*.

Moreover, like Battal, Martin also has unique and specific modes of behavior. For instance, he insists on what he says, never asks for permission, and eats like he devours something, especially when he eats spaghetti. Contrary to Battal, who was first considered a sacred person, a healer, Martin is immediately identified as the threat, the one who transgresses all borders and secure spaces, namely Steven's home and family, and his profession. Behind Steven's sterilized, all-powerful, and impeccable life, the movie highlights the threat of death and destruction through Martin. In Kristeva's (1982) definition, "death infecting life... is the utmost abjection. It is something rejected from which one does not part, from which one does not protect oneself as from an object. . . . [I]t beckons to us and ends up engulfing us" (p. 4). Accordingly, Lanthimos illustrates how death/abject/Martin gradually infects and destroys Steven's too-civilized, too-cultured, and too-scientifically structured safe world. Martin embodies the unexplainable who exists outside the norms of culture and science. Paradoxically, even though Steven knows the mechanisms of the human body, even to its tiniest details, and demonstrates this power in succeeding in the most intricate heart surgeries, he fails in controlling a threat infecting his life step by step. His first failure is Martin's father's death, which undermines his professional competence and talent, and next, he fails to stop "death" from encroaching upon his family. From that moment on, it is as if an unseen force takes over all that Steven thinks he has.

This contrasts sharply with how he is presented in all his grandeur in the opening scenes of the movie. For instance, when he speaks at a big conference on surgery about the latest developments in cardiac surgery, he is in a god-like position in front of that vast crowd of fellow surgeons. Yet, this is to change soon. In analyzing *The Killing of Sacred Deer* through a reading of Foucault's biopolitics, Onur Kartal (2018) writes that

the medical universe, which is supposed to be full of life, is shaken by death all of a sudden. Steven, who is the hero having the authority to control illness and life, and to defer death, is transformed into a despotic figure by losing all his control because of his desperate situation. When death is outside the home, there is no problem; the patient is gone, and life goes on. However, when it [death] enters into the home... Steven's entire power is destroyed. (p. 115)

Although Steven's eminence during his speech to his fellow doctors is emphasized with a wide-angle lens, there is still a foreshadowing sign from Lanthimos; as Steven gives his speech, most of Lanthimos's shots are in Dutch angles to present him from behind with an oblique viewpoint, creating an unsettling perspective. Additionally, Lanthimos frequently uses wide-angle shots in many scenes within Steven's house, highlighting the spaciousness and Steven's dominance in that vast space. However, all of this ultimately proves to be an illusion for Steven with Martin's unexpected and unwelcome entrance into his dominion.

Like Battal, Martin transgresses all secure borders and defies everything in Steven's life. Firstly, he comes to Steven's house as a guest and calls the neighborhood "so quiet, clean and beautiful" in contrast to his place, which he refers to as "not so nice neighborhood, not so nice house" to emphasize Steven has it all while he has nothing (Lanthimos, 2017, 24:53). He claims a part of this nice life by smoking in the children's room, talking about armpit hair, and walking with Kim, Steven's daughter. Next, he comes to the hospital twice, without any notice, the first time pretending that he wants to show his watch's new strap to Steven, and the second time claiming that he may have a heart condition and needs a check-up. Finally, he invites Steven to his house to meet his mother, believing that his mother and Steven will fall for each other. The significance of the Dutch angles in the scenes when Steven goes to meet Martin in the hospital and when he talks to him on the phone in the parking lot becomes even more pronounced as these scenes create all the ambiguity and lack of control looming ahead of Steven's life and family. Furthermore, when Steven's son Bob is suddenly taken to the hospital one morning when he cannot move as Martin predicted, some of the hospital scenes are also in Dutch angles, underlining the failure and destruction of both Steven and what he represents: science and power. Firstly, Bob, then Kim, and finally, his wife Anna start losing their ability to move. As Martin's foreshadowing becomes real one by one, Steven and all his colleagues are left desperate and helpless. They cannot name the illness, they cannot diagnose what causes their symptoms, and they cannot find any medical treatment. It is as if Steven's family is paralyzed without any scientific/rational reason or explanation, and the medical/positive sciences, which claim to have the ultimate truth, start falling apart.

Thus, it is not only Steven but his whole kingdom that is failing devastatingly because of something that is "neither subject nor object," something that "defies definitions and borders." There are two significant scenes portraying his devastation, firstly, it is when his wife asks him about the death of Martin's father and questions Steven's responsibility in that operation. He is just sitting in the corner in front of the hospital, like a despairing ordinary man, smoking and just answering in his usual clear-cut, short sentences, but this time he does not have any of the authoritative or

confident tone to explain what had happened. In the second scene, Steven is at his home, and after the shower, he just sits naked on the couch in the corner of the room, in the darkness, like he is also paralyzed. In both scenes, he has none of the dominating and controlling attitude he had at the beginning of the movie. Also, in these scenes, he is presented in narrow corners and darkness to emphasize that he is stuck in a dead end with no way to go. This is the revenge of Martin, death/the abject encroaching upon life. Finally, in the most horrifying way, he tries to make a decision; he blindfolds both his eyes and the eyes of his children and wife, tying their hands too. He turns around himself several times and shoots in the middle of their living room. The victim is little Bob, whose eyes have already started to bleed before, and everything ends just as Martin foreshadowed to Steven.

4. CONCLUSION

Kosmos and *The Killing of a Sacred Deer* present two stories of humankind's relentless desire to control and shape life, along with the devastating results this effort may cause. Even though people strive to design a perfect order with norms, borders, and top-notch cultural and scientific achievements, the unknown and the unexplainable still lie at the core of such seemingly flawless structures. Ironically, all these efforts create the illusion of perfection, which may lead to a false sense of security, control, and power. It is as if "the unknown" already lurks behind seemingly well-established societies and cultures, only to return to challenge, and even punish like Artemis, this ambition to control and dominate. This may represent one of the most significant challenges and sources of desperation for the modern world and humanity. Kanbur (2009) indicates this irony of humans' search for order: "the universe has its order, and in this order death is among us as much as life; yet, in their search for the ultimate order (including language), humans create their social chaos. Search for order can turn into what consumes each other" (p. 117).

Kosmos illustrates this challenge through the in-between Battal, who comes from the unknown and vanishes into the unknown, to remind that even the so-called strongest borders set against "enemy" may be the "Achilles heel" of the societies that constantly design new borders to protect themselves. Such boundaries that people cling to may be easily shattered, destroying the belief and trust in those protective structures and the capabilities of humankind. Likewise, *The Killing of a Sacred Deer* showcases the disastrous consequences of the "petty mistakes" of grand ambitions like Steven's. His irresponsibility in operating on Martin's father, causing him to die when he was drunk as a surgeon, and taking it for granted that he can easily get away with all of this, results in dire outcomes. Martin's haunting presence, which abruptly transgresses into Steven's life, underlines his responsibility as a surgeon and, perhaps, his hidden conscience. When he loses his control once,

he loses all control of his life and authority, and ultimately submits to the most horrifying demand (from Martin), as well as the “solution,” only to discover that neither his surgical talents nor his professional powers are infinite. In his hubris and devastation, Steven seems to echo Bellerophon, the owner of the legendary winged-horse Pegasus. When Bellerophon wants Pegasus to fly to Olympus, believing that he has every right to do whatever he likes with his marvelous horse, Pegasus refuses because Olympus is solely the domain of gods and goddesses. Although Pegasus serves as a reminder of Bellerophon’s mortality and limited powers as a human, Bellerophon is lost in his hubris and, thus, pays dearly for it. He is doomed and exiled from everyone and everywhere because of his ambition to play god. Steven shares a similar fate in his medical eminence and authority; just when he believes he has everything to lead and control his life as he wishes, he is fatally wounded and doomed. His family is shattered, he becomes a murderer of his son, he loses all his former hubris and confidence, and his world is completely turned upside down. These two movies emphasize the futility of humankind’s persistent struggle to overcome and dominate what cannot be known or explained. “The unknown” is like humanity’s Achilles heel, where they are most vulnerable, and “the abject” is always there to haunt societies, identities, borders, and spaces. Thus, it may be said that a more harmonious and peaceful understanding of life can be more nourishing and less devastating for the soul and mind than the endless desire to control and dominate the world around us.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest regarding this research.

ETHICS COMMITTEE APPROVAL / PARTICIPANT CONSENT

Ethics committee approval is not required for this study. There are no participants in this study.

FINANCIAL SUPPORT

The author did not receive any kind of financial support for this research.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

This research and all its stages were conducted by one author.

REFERENCES

- Acar, B. (2009). Her şey niye yok?! In F. Yücel (Ed.), *Reha erdem sineması: Aşk ve isyan* (pp. 19-46). Çitlembik.
- Altıntaş, G. (2009). Kuru rüyalar alemi. In F. Yücel (Ed.), *Reha erdem sineması: Aşk ve isyan* (pp. 49-69). Çitlembik.
- Bilis, A. E. (2018). Yorgos lantimos filmlerinde distopyan temsiller. *Akdeniz Üniversitesi İletişim Fakültesi Dergisi*, 29, 54-72. <https://doi.org/10.31123/akil.395605>
- Erdem, R. (2009). Reha erdem'le *a ay*'dan *kosmos*'a: Kosmos'un kars'ı dönülecek değil gidilecek yerler. In F. Yücel (Ed.), *Reha erdem sineması: Aşk ve isyan* (pp. 174-183). Çitlembik.
- Erdem, R. (Director). (2009). *Kosmos* [Film]. Atlantik Film; İmaj.
- Güntürkün, E., & Altunay, D. A. (2023). Gerçeküstü kodlar üzerinden reha erdem sinemasına bakmak. *Selçuk Üniversitesi Sosyal Bilimler Enstitüsü Dergisi*, 50, 170-183. <https://doi.org/10.52642/susbed.1223510>
- Hamilton, E. (2011). *Mythology: Timeless tales of gods and heroes*. Grand Central Publishing.
- Kanbur, A. (2009). Yarayla büyüyen insan ruhu. In F. Yücel (Ed.), *Reha erdem sineması: Aşk ve isyan* (pp. 115-128). Çitlembik.
- Kartal, O. (2018). Biyopolitik distopya: Yorgos lantimos sinemasından 'insan' manzaraları. *Cogito*, 90, 101-119.
- Kristeva, J. (1982). *Powers of horror: An essay on abjection*. (L. S. Roudiez, Trans.). Columbia UP. (Original work published in 1980).
- Kule, S., & Gülaçtı, İ. E. (2023). Reha erdem filmlerinde postmodern yansımalar: Kosmos, şarkı söyleyen kadınlar ve koca dünya. *Nevşehir Hacı Bektaş Veli Üniversitesi SBE Dergisi*, 13(1), 185-204. <https://doi.org/10.30783/nevsosbilen.1162583>
- Lanthimos, Y. (Director). (2017). *The Killing of a sacred deer* [Film]. Film 4; New Sparta Films.
- Mercado, G. (2010). *The filmmaker's eye: Learning and (breaking) the rules of cinematic composition*. Routledge.
- Tuncer, A. Ö. (2009). Zamansallık ve kaçış. In F. Yücel (Ed.), *Reha erdem sineması: Aşk ve isyan* (pp. 87-104). Çitlembik.