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## Film Review

# THE ZONE OF INTEREST

(Jonathan Glazer, US/UK/PL 2023)

Auschwitz, like perhaps no other place, exists in Western collective memory as the ultimate evil. This assessment is justified by the testimonies of inmates of the concentration and extermination camp Auschwitz-Birkenau who survived that hell. But is it possible to represent this historical place through cultural artefacts, and if so, how? Survivors and academics have considered the ethics and limits of Holocaust representation for as long as such cultural representations have existed. Who should be represented: victims, perpetrators, those somewhere in between? Holocaust “classics” such as Steven Spielberg’s *SCHINDLER’S LIST* (US 1993) rely on clear-cut characterizations of victims, evil perpetrators, and heroes. With *THE ZONE OF INTEREST* (US/UK/PL 2023), Jonathan Glazer took up a much harder challenge. His film, which is loosely based on Martin Amis’s novel of the same name, centres its narrative on the daily life of camp commander Rudolf Höss and his family. It is certainly legitimate to question the purpose of this perpetrator representation and to consider whether it has a higher moral goal that transcends any voyeuristic pleasure a viewer might gain. We can usefully explore these questions in light of religious undercurrents within the film’s aesthetic and narrative choices.

*THE ZONE OF INTEREST* evokes Christian motifs alongside the image of Auschwitz as hell on earth, but it uses those themes for a subversive purpose. Consciously utilizing the unique possibilities of the medium of film, it contains two clearly demarcated planes for two separate realities: David Fear comments, “There is the movie you see here – and there is the movie you *hear*.”<sup>1</sup> We see innocent people playing in the garden of Eden, but we hear the agony of

1 Fear 2024.

the deepest circle of hell. While this contrasting duality is readily noted by the viewer, some contextual knowledge may be required to understand that the soundscape depicts the (historically accurate) auralty of Auschwitz, with industrial grinding, bellowed incomprehensible orders, shooting and screaming. Opting for a purely sonic representation of the camp atrocities was Glazer's response to the issue of ethical representation: "I don't think [the atrocities] should be represented... I don't think they can be represented", he has stated.<sup>2</sup>

Supposed innocence, by contrast, is rendered ad absurdum: the purity of Höss's white suit stands in contrast to his affectless bureaucratic planning of the most efficient way to commit genocide; the inherent purity of his children is tainted when their father realizes that human ashes, the product of his murderous activity, are floating in the river Sola and abruptly orders them out of the water.

In the context of the Auschwitz world, purity takes on another sinister meaning: "The paradise she [Höss's wife] is building stakes a claim on the land that will soon be 'purified', a shining model of Nazi futurity", notes Amy Herzog.<sup>3</sup> The gendered dimension of this "racially pure" National Socialist utopia is apparent: it is, after all, the commander's wife, Hedwig Höss, whose task it is to create a paradise on earth for the family. The actual work within the domestic sphere is done by female forced labourers, whom Hedwig Höss controls in a manner that parallels her husband's treatment of his underlings. The self-proclaimed "Queen of Auschwitz", who under no circumstances wants to abandon her home, figuratively takes on the role of the temptress Eve: in this case, the apple of sin is her inciting her husband to procure the belongings of the murdered. This practice was forbidden by National Socialist and SS legislation, leading to a grotesque contradiction: while genocide as organized by Höss was bureaucratically normalized, the "sin" of petty theft committed by Hedwig Höss was criminalized. Sandra Hüller's portrayal of Hedwig Höss, self-absorbed and blindly content, radiates the banality of evil that Hannah Arendt identified.<sup>4</sup> After the war, the general public tended to be fascinated with female National Socialist perpetrators, judging them more harshly than men, as in the example of Ilse Koch, termed the "Bitch of Buchenwald" in media discourse.<sup>5</sup> The film steers

2 Harvey 2023.

3 Herzog 2024, 15.

4 Arendt 1963.

5 Przyrembel 2023; Jardim 2023.

clear of gendered judgement by focussing in the second half on Rudolf Höss, who figuratively descends to hell as he makes his way down an endless staircase in the final scene.

Other female characters are depicted more favourably. Hedwig's mother's visit to the family home in Auschwitz veers from pride and happiness about her daughter's new bourgeois lifestyle to sincere horror when she realizes the origins of the flames illuminating the night sky and the putrid smell. She chooses to leave, aware that the paradisiac surface of the idyllic home only thinly veils the depths of hell being experienced by others. Most of the forced domestic labourers are women: Herzog has noted that "one of the most significant contributions of *THE ZONE OF INTEREST* is its highlighting of the gendered labor of the fascist regime".<sup>6</sup> Within this gendered dimension,<sup>7</sup> both female perpetrators and female victims are depicted from a detached, "big-brother" camera angle that thwarts the viewer's easy identification with the characters on-screen. The representation of a female resistance figure stands out, however, in both cinematic and narrative terms: the scenes with the righteous Polish girl who risks everything by breaking into the camp at night and leaving food for the prisoners are jarringly interspersed throughout the main narrative and shot in night vision, evoking a surreal parallel world in a Brechtian *Verfremdungseffekt*. Such selfless actions are an anomaly in the world depicted in this film. Glazer subverts Nazi moral codes: acts of compassion occur under cover of darkness, while atrocities unfold in broad daylight, reflecting an inversion of normative associations of light with good and darkness with evil.

The final minutes interrogate normality again, cutting between the contemporary Auschwitz museum and Höss's descent down the staircase. The cleaners polishing the cases containing the infamous mountains of shoes, hair, and suitcases are all female. The daily grind of their job is concerned with the products of evil, as was the case for the men under Höss who wielded god-like power over life and death while overwhelmed, thoroughly banal bureaucrats. This juxtaposition does not equate the two activities, but rather underscores the banality of routine: both involve repetitive tasks tied to the material remnants of atrocities, albeit in radically different ethical contexts. This scene closes the historical arc of gendered labor under the Nazi regime, contrasting it with today's preservation of memory, rather

6 Herzog 2024, 17.

7 Lewis 2017.

than implying direct continuity. At the same time this contemporary depiction somewhat de-sacralises the symbolically charged and over-represented space of Auschwitz within the collective imaginary.

Glazer summed up his intention with this movie thus: “I think that if we keep thinking of us as victims, and we look at the others as perpetrators, that is going to get us nowhere.”<sup>8</sup> If films like *SCHINDLER’S LIST* are a product of what philosopher Gillian Rose termed “Holocaust piety”, serving as a bulwark against exploring “what we are – human, all too human”,<sup>9</sup> then *ZONE OF INTEREST* is an impressive feat of “Holocaust impiety”. Matthew Boswell defined this concept as utilizing “aesthetic shock as a formal mechanism to induce a deeper ethical engagement with [the] subject matter”.<sup>10</sup> The ultimate goal of such a representation is to bring viewers to ask themselves, “What would I have done?”<sup>11</sup> This film draws attention to the gender dimension, showing how one woman’s paradise can be another woman’s hell. Informed by Hannah Arendt’s concept of the banality of evil, it explores the coexistence of ordinariness and evil, not least by inverting the traditional Western association of moral goodness and beauty.

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8 Ercolani 2024.

9 Rose 1996, 43.

10 Boswell 2012, 6.

11 Boswell 2012, 10–15.

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## Filmography

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- THE ZONE OF INTEREST (Jonathan Glazer, US/UK/PL 2023).