

SLOVO

Journal for East European, Central Asian,
and Russian Affairs

Review: *The Zone of Interest* (2023)

Directed by: Jonathan Glazer

Written by: Jonathan Glazer

Production companies: JW Films, Extreme Emotions, Film4, Access Entertainment, Polish Film Institute

Running time: 105 minutes

Countries: United Kingdom, Poland, United States

Languages: German, Polish, Yiddish

Jack Howell

UCL School of Slavonic and East European Studies

Jonathan Glazer's 2023 feature film, *The Zone of Interest*, provides a new perspective to the category of Holocaust cinema. The question of how to depict one of humanity's greatest atrocities, in which millions of innocent lives were destroyed, is one not easy to answer, especially in an artistic medium such as cinema. Past consensus has often favoured an approach which focuses directly on the horrors, destruction and pain experienced by those subjected to the event, depictions of graphic violence and cruelty being employed as a tool to showcase the brutal realities to the viewer. Landmark films such as *Schindler's List* (1993), *The Grey Zone* (2001) and *Son of Saul* (2015) have all employed this approach in tackling the subject of the Holocaust, featuring unquestionably evil Nazi functionaries who, on screen, are routinely depicted as the sociopathic perpetrators of murder, torture, and humiliation against camp prisoners, all before a backdrop of forced labour and deplorable conditions. This approach certainly has its merits. The visualisation of the Holocaust's visceral horrors serves not only to recreate the victims' lived experiences, but also ensures a remembrance of such unimaginable actions is preserved in popular memory.

Glazer's film, however, takes a different approach. It instead focuses on the seemingly mundane day-to-day life of Auschwitz Commandant Rudolf Höss and his family within their idyllic home, the garden wall of which backs directly onto Auschwitz Camp I. The film establishes its unconventional tone immediately, opening with the Höss family happily celebrating Rudolf's birthday under sunny skies. This, of course, contrasts starkly with the Nazi uniforms, barbed wire-topped walls and looming camp structures also lurking within the scene; the film makes no secret of their presence over its 105-minute runtime.

This establishes the core dynamic of the film: the unsettling and ordinary indifference of the Hösses, their focus primarily held by personal motivations such as career, family, and leisure, contrasted with the ever-encompassing markers of death which permeate the backgrounds of their lives throughout. Sound plays an important part in this process. From over the garden wall, distant gunshots, screams and the churning of the crematoria litter the film's soundscape. Similarly, on screen, we are shown plumes of locomotive steam as trains approach the camp's platform, prisoners' stolen belongings being disseminated within the Höss residence, and crematorium ash settling on the garden's neatly kept flowers. The camp interior, its conditions, and its inhabitants are never directly shown save for several prisoners employed directly into the domestic service of Mrs Höss's household. Violence is strikingly not once depicted on screen. This dynamic, in combination with musician Mica Levi's haunting synthesiser-heavy soundtrack, the unsettling order and symmetry of Łukasz Żal's cinematography, and the often-oppressive lighting of the Höss home, creates an atmosphere of sickness and unease as the film progresses.

Only occasionally does the overwhelming darkness of the film give way to small reprieves of hope. A Polish girl risks her life sneaking food to one of the camp's unguarded labour sites under the cover of darkness, in the process discovering a piece of music composed by a camp prisoner and later playing it at home on the piano. Whilst seemingly insignificant within the film, Glazer's inclusion reminds us for a moment of our own humanity, of qualities such as selflessness and expression, and that even within the darkest of environments, qualities such as these can shine through.

The film's two lead performances deserve particular acclaim. Commandant Rudolf Höss, played by Christian Friedel, behaves on screen as if he were a simple factory manager attempting to meet production quotas, increase efficiency and appease his bosses, apparently eerily unaffected by the weight of the industrial-scale mass murder he is directing. His wife Hedwig, played by Sandra Hüller, is presented as a strong-willed and efficient homemaker, highly complicit and willing to support her husband's crimes if it maintains her family's privileged lifestyle in which she revels.

At times, the film's story morbidly appears more akin to a marriage drama than to a Holocaust film. The central conflict arises detached from the realities of the mass murder taking place, instead centring on Hedwig's unwillingness to give up her family's life and home at Auschwitz following her husband's reassignment away from the camp. Evil is presented on screen as both ordinary and mundane, driven by workplace and family pressures, opportunism, and desensitisation. The latter is demonstrated resonantly through the visit of Hedwig's mother, who, whilst evidently supportive of Nazi racial policy, abruptly cuts short her stay at the Höss home, unable to handle its physical proximity to the camp's function.

Glazer stated that his aim was to demystify the evil of the Holocaust's perpetrators,¹ and with his film's unique approach, he largely succeeds. Audibly and visually haunting, whilst exploring the Nazi psyche arguably to an extent that no Holocaust film has before, *The Zone of Interest* serves as a landmark film, reminding us that evil can be ordinary, closer to our own lives than we might like to imagine.

Bibliography

Jonathan Glazer: Shooting his film at Auschwitz, the humanness of evil, and why he always knew he'd create a film about the Holocaust', *Q with Tom Power* (CBC, 18 December 2023), <https://www.cbc.ca/listen/live-radio/1-50-q/clip/16030629-jonathan-glazer-shooting-film-auschwitz-humanness-evil-always> [accessed 9 April 2026]

¹ Jonathan Glazer: Shooting his film at Auschwitz, the humanness of evil, and why he always knew he'd create a film about the Holocaust', *Q with Tom Power* (CBC, 18 December 2023), <https://www.cbc.ca/listen/live-radio/1-50-q/clip/16030629-jonathan-glazer-shooting-film-auschwitz-humanness-evil-always> [accessed 9 April 2026].