

time in the world to immerse herself in it. She stands on the brink of the abyss, with hope. Volume III cannot come soon enough.

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The Zone of Interest

2024. Film. Dir: Jonathan Glazer.

Sometime last year I watched Jonathan Glazer's *The Zone of Interest*, unsure of what to expect. Little did I know then, as I do now while attempting to articulate my response, that it has lingered inside me like a disquieting echo. The film is not a typical war story, nor, I would argue, is it solely a cinematic exploration of the Holocaust. Instead, it delves into something far deeper and more unsettling: our innate human capability for denial, the construction of formidable psychological walls against the unbearable.

The film centres its gaze on the domestic lives of Rudolf Höss, the commandant of Auschwitz, his wife Hedwig and their children. These are not monstrous figures but rather disconcertingly ordinary individuals, immersed in the mundane rhythms of their daily existence. It is precisely this normalcy, their chilling ability to compartmentalise and wilfully disregard the inferno of human suffering unfolding just beyond their meticulously manicured garden wall, that forms the film's profoundly disturbing theme.

Glazer's lens lingers on the seemingly 'idyllic' tableau of the Höss family: children splashing in their pristine pool, all the petty squabbles and affections that mark any bourgeois household. Yet, this veneer of domesticity is brutally juxtaposed with its immediate proximity to the unimaginable horrors of Auschwitz. The film offers only glimpses of the camp, with figures moving like ghosts (out of focus) within its barbed-wire. It is the soundtrack that becomes a suffocating presence: muffled cries, the distant gunshots and the incessant, mechanical drone of the crematoria. These sounds bleed into the family's privileged reality (and into our experience as viewers), offering a dissonance that resonates deeply with Hannah Arendt's chilling concept of the banality of evil.

The Zone of Interest casts a harsh light on the terrifying implications of our human freedom, our capacity to choose what we attend to, and, crucially, what we choose to ignore. The Höss family's deliberate act of turning away, their narrowly defined sphere of interest, underscores the profound ethical weight of our existence and our interconnectedness. Their focus remains resolutely within the confines of their self-constructed world, while denying the shared humanity just beyond their garden gate. There are subtle yet piercing moments that crack this carefully constructed façade, such as the unsettling drift of ash that occasionally settles upon Hedwig's prized flowers and manicured lawn.

There is a fleeting moment of awareness when Hedwig's mother visits, voicing a brief, almost immediately dismissed, concern about whether her former Jewish housekeeper might be interned in Auschwitz. She cannot, however, sustain this flicker of recognition and makes a hasty departure, as the reality, or perhaps her daughter's wilful blindness, appears too unbearable to witness.

The Zone of Interest has a distinctive style. It is characterised by long, detached takes coupled with the unsettling soundscape, amplifying the viewers, and my, sense of unease. I felt positioned not as an invited empathiser but as a detached observer, akin perhaps to the neighbours who must have, on some level, been aware of the atrocities unfolding behind those walls. The family's blindness is not an accident; it is a deliberate choice, their meaning derived from the material, their social standing, their adherence to a twisted sense of bourgeois normalcy. This stands in stark contrast to individuals like Viktor Frankl, who, amidst the unimaginable hardships of Theresienstadt and Auschwitz, found meaning in the face of that suffering.

The film's determined gaze compels us to look at our shared responsibility for the societal frameworks we construct and maintain. It forces an uncomfortable introspection, demanding we confront our latent capacity for complicity, how we have a tendency to avert our eyes from the pain of others, a failing that echoes across both historical atrocities and the crises of today.

For me, as an existential psychotherapist, this introspection holds a particular significance. I am tasked with guiding individuals to confront the uncomfortable truths of their existence, and Glazer's film serves as a powerful, and deeply unsettling, reminder of the vital importance of that work, and the ever-present danger of choosing to look away. This resonates with my unease today over the proliferation of conflicts, the spread of autocratic power and the ascendance of extremist ideologies, both political and religious. Ultimately, *The Zone of Interest* acts as a stark warning on our dangerous ability to build barriers of indifference even as inhumanity unfolds in our world. It demands a rigorous examination of our own potential for passive acceptance and underlines the necessity to resist the narrowing of our moral compass.

The opposite of love is not hate, it's indifference. The opposite of art is not ugliness, it's indifference. The opposite of faith is not heresy, it's indifference. And the opposite of life is not death, it's indifference.

(Wiesel, 1999)

Ondine Smulders

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