

Critique

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The Portrayal of Political Evil: Jonathan Glazer's *The Zone of Interest*



Very few historical occurrences have a single meaning attached to them, as if by consensus among historians, like the Holocaust. History is usually open to interpretation, but the subject of the Holocaust has only one meaning, which is that it was an unmitigated political evil. It was not only the number of people killed – officially put at six million – that matters most since Stalin and Mao are both held responsible for a comparable number of deaths in the last century. It was more the manner in which it was accomplished – to turn mass murder into an industrial project and use the principles associated with industrial efficiency to undertake the extermination of human beings. For this reason, its portrayal in cinema has represented a challenge. How does one portray it viscerally in a piece of fiction and not allow for multiple meanings and ambiguity, which most critics will agree are essential to artistic creation?

The Holocaust is a subject that preoccupies contemporary cinema chiefly because of the horror

associated with its visual recreation. The best-known film dealing with the subject was Spielberg's *Schindler's List* (1993), but regardless of the eulogies heaped upon it, the film was problematic because it tended to sensationalise. We already know so much about it, but reproducing the imagery in such graphic detail seemed exploitative and unnecessary. Stanley Kubrick also noted a curious misunderstanding of the subject by Spielberg: that the Holocaust was not about the heroism of one man who saved a thousand people but about the failure of human civilisation to have allowed so many to be methodically exterminated in the matter of a few years.

There are other ways of dealing with the subject, and Jean-Luc Godard suggested that a 'true' perspective on the Holocaust (because of the industrial methods employed) might be that of an accountant at Auschwitz trying conscientiously to keep watch over the everyday expenditure. Withholding the horror, Godard seems to suggest,

might be a better way to deal with something so widely portrayed since there is the danger of audiences becoming insensitive to the subject. Among the films that attempt understatement in this way are Andrej Munk's *The Passenger* (1963) and Andrei Konchalovsky's *Paradise* (2016); the latter film adopted the perspective of an aristocratic SS officer sent to audit a concentration camp because of the suspected corruption in it. This is deeply ironic since cleansing something of corruption is essentially a moral purpose, and here was an effort portrayed to cleanse something that was intrinsically evil! Jonathan Glazer's *The Zone of Interest* (2023), which has just won the Oscar this year for the best international film, tells, similarly, a story about the family life of Rudolf Hoess, who was commandant at Auschwitz, the most notorious of the extermination camps. It tries to make its point by showing the family life of the protagonist as ordinary when the most horrific things are happening just beyond the wall: roses on one side and mass murder on the other.

In Jonathan Glazer's film, the Hoess family (Rudolf, his wife Hedwig and their five children) tries to live their ideal life in a lavish bungalow with a beautiful garden that abuts the death camp. The strategy from the first frames is to deal visually with its lushness while having constant sounds from the camp intrude – gunshots, shouts, screams and crying children. A technical problem the camp has to deal with pertains to the cremations, how so many dead people can be cremated to keep pace with the output of the gas chambers. Smoke from the ovens is constantly seen in the bungalow, but the family members treat it as routine, and the children grow up in this atmosphere as if it were nothing. At night, we see a child in bed studying the extracted gold teeth from one of the dead inmates. Since we already know what the film is attempting from the advance publicity, we expect no drama in the story: it is unseen and happening entirely on the other side of the wall. The only 'excitement' allowed into the story of the Hoess family's existence is Rudolf transferred briefly elsewhere until he is brought back - since his replacement cannot manage the expected large contingent of Hungarian Jews.

The Zone of Interest may seem like audacious filmmaking, but there is something curiously insipid about it. The reason, one initially supposes, is the unacceptability of the notion that one can live in such

an atmosphere of evil and not be affected by it, especially the children who seem to lead otherwise 'innocent' lives. Would there not be moral contamination of some sort? This is evidently something uncertain since we cannot know how 'moral contamination' would proceed.

But I think the basic problem is much deeper - in the construction of the fiction itself. The film may be dealing with actual, documented people, but it is constructing fiction around their everyday life in the vicinity of a Nazi extermination camp. I propose that the subjects of fiction must necessarily follow a trajectory, being changed by what they undergo and the protagonists are not allowed to transform. I suggested earlier that the drama 'happened on the other side of the wall', and that is not strictly true since the cries and the gunshots do not constitute the kind of 'drama' that fiction demands, where we must be made to *care for/about those it is about*; their lives must be made interesting. Formal/visual devices cannot compensate for the lack.

The Zone of Interest cannot evidently 'care about' the protagonists because of what they are culpable of, but the peripheral sounds and smoke are not enough to make us care about their victims either. As if recognising this, the film includes a flash-forward showing us the Holocaust exhibits at Auschwitz today, mainly the quantities of worn footwear belonging to the dead inmates preserved behind transparent glass, but this strategy is also hardly effective. The film is not telling anything that we do not already know and have not been duly prepared for.

Since the non-admission of change and drama into the lives and attitudes of the protagonists is the drawback noted about *The Zone of Interest*, I will conclude this piece with speculation about why fiction demands it. Fiction is essentially an attempt to construct a universe understandable to humankind since 'God's world' cannot be known - as we might like it to be. Since literature/fiction is social in its purpose, it must have an ethical or moral component. The possibility that humankind can transform for the better – or suffer for not transforming – is an essential part of it. Even a pessimistic tale would imply what should be but is not. When Glazer's film shows us something as horrific about humanity as the Holocaust without caring much about/for those involved, it relies on the tears already shed over the

chapter to propel its fiction. And there is no moral vision to offer for all the care taken to recreate the past.

Readers may disagree with me on this point, saying that any piece of fiction must show a transformation happening, and the argument may be that something essentially composed of one element ('evil' here) cannot transform. Transformation assumes that there is a conflict between disparate elements, say between a man's greed and his conscience or between soldiers' fear of dying and their attachment to duty. The Hoess family has children, but none of its members are afflicted with doubt or moral conflict. Rudolf Hoess is shown retching in the film's last moments as though what he has been doing has filled him with deep revulsion. Perhaps implying doubt or horror among members of the family would be impossible since it did not lead

to any remission for the victims at the concentration camp, who died anyway.

But whatever the reasons, the notion that people, including children (considered innocent), can be involved in such horrors without the sights, noises and smells making the most negligible impact upon them is not something that the spectators of a film can stomach easily, and one yearns for some kind of reassurance. The film has some segments showing food items delivered secretly to the victims by sympathisers in the dead of night, but that has little effect on the film in its totality. Perhaps the difficulty that *The Zone of Interest* creates for us lies in our belief (based on the instruction we have received) that ordinary people are essentially good but unable to account for the Hoess family and their seemingly contented children amidst such unchecked evil.

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