

**DORCHESTER FILM SOCIETY**  
**2024/25 SEASON**



**THE ZONE OF INTEREST**  
(Language: German, Polish, Yiddish)

Director: Jonathan Glazier

UK Release: 2024

Running time: 105 minutes

Presented by Dorchester Film Society, 8 January 2025

“Fresh, original and deeply unsettling, *The Zone of Interest* is this year’s Oscar-competing entry from the UK. It is one of the year’s best films from anywhere. I saw it in September at the Toronto International Film Festival, and it has haunted me ever since. I’ll be curious to see how it fares in its commercial release during the 2023 holidays. [Release date: 2 February 2024 – DFS.] It is not a Christmas movie. In fact, there’s not a ho ho ho anywhere in sight.

But even if you’re only in the mood for merry bells and mistletoe, don’t even think of missing this one. Adapted by distinguished British writer-director Jonathan Glazier from the acclaimed 2014 novel by Martin Amis, the film chronicles the domestic life of Rudolf Höss (a solemn Christian Friedel), his wife Hedwig (a marvellous Sandra Hüller, also currently starring in the murder mystery *Anatomy of a Fall*), and their children, whose luxurious family home is nestled between train tracks and gas chambers on the edge of Auschwitz, the notorious German concentration camp in occupied Poland, where Rudolf serves as the commandant. Through the horrors of history, we forget the Nazis had homes too, even if they were built inside the bars of Hell.

*The Zone of Interest* opens with a group of people sunbathing and enjoying a picnic on a beautiful lake. Mama teaches her children the names of fragrant flowers in her spacious garden—phlox, dahlias, roses—while the servants and guests search for juicy berries. Papa returns to work after lunch in a perfectly ordinary job—routine, even boring.

In the afternoon, while a delicious dinner is prepared, the women try on clothes and cosmetics. Hedwig seems especially pleased with a new mink coat. It takes a moment to realize where their new acquisitions are coming from. Then the reality begins to dawn, gradually, quietly, and without incident. We are spared scenes of monstrous inhumanity, but this is still Auschwitz. The sounds of rifles we sometimes hear in the distance are all part of a normal day.

The women gossip about trivial matters. Instead of toys, the children play with a collection of gold teeth, ignoring the smoke rising from chimneys on the other

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side of the wall. Instead of the stock market, the men’s conversations centre on how long it takes to burn 700 Jews a day and dispose of the ashes. Rooms are filled to the ceiling with the confiscated belongings of innocent people following the massive extermination of all the Jews in Poland.

We are in the final days of the Holocaust, and when the peace and privilege of their everyday lives are threatened by orders from Berlin to move to a new home and transfer to a new, less fortunate position, Hoss begins to worry about his future, and Hedwig becomes fixated on self-preservation. It’s all very creepy and troubling. The film is so well-made, so deliberately cautious about showing actual atrocities, that the imagination works overtime, but the muted voices of prisoners in the background and the endless clouds of smoke rising over the vineyards, the grapevines and the gazebo make for a chilling contrast between what we see and what we know.

Shot on location, *The Zone of Interest* exposes both the banality and the evil of Nazism, illuminated by the taut, suspenseful performances of Sandra Hüller as the most unremarkable, often clueless wife and Christian Friedel as the most deceptively powerless control freak ever created by the Third Reich. The point of this overwhelming film—that depraved insanity sometimes goes undetected because of its unexpected mediocrity—has a chilling impact that seems, in the terrifying power politics of our world today, more egregiously relevant than ever.”

**Rex Reed, *Observer*, 14 December, 2023**

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“Inexplicably, *The Zone of Interest* is racking up laudatory reviews and awards. To anyone who knows anything about the Holocaust – or the numerous documentaries and dramas on the subject – that this empty exercise is getting such notice will be mystifying. Filmmaker Jonathan Glazer and the film’s supporters seem to think it is making some sort of profound statement.

The film follows Rudolf Höss (Christian Friedel), his wife Hedwig (Sandra Hüller) and their children as they eat dinner, have parties, garden, and otherwise enjoy life at their bucolic country home. It moves at a snail’s pace as Rudolf goes to work and Hedwig manages her household and servants. What is supposed to hold us in the film’s grip is that they live next door to the Auschwitz death camp which Rudolf helped build and now runs.

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We aren't given much information about what's going on behind the wall separating them from the attempted genocide taking place. There are occasional gunshots and cries. Rudolf has a meeting with some engineers about building a more efficient facility for the mass cremation of bodies. Then he enjoys a cigar or a river excursion, while Hedwig shows off a fur coat presumably taken from one of the prisoners.

The so-called drama comes when Rudolf is reassigned and Hedwig pouts that she doesn't want to move. Rudolf arranges for his family to maintain the residence while he goes off to oversee mass murder at another location. Rudolf is informed that he's got a big assignment coming up, with hundreds of thousands of Hungarian Jews due to arrive to be murdered. Then, we see Rudolf alone and throwing up. Is it because he finally developed a conscience or because he doesn't know if the job is too big for him?

One can only assume the people praising this soporific film have never seen the subject addressed on screen before or, perhaps, thinks it begins and ends with *Schindler's List*. So, the notion of this horrible family leading the good life while unimaginable evil is taking place strikes them as revelatory when it is, in fact, utterly boring. Little of consequence happens to the people we meet, so the heavy lifting of providing context to the proceedings is left to the viewer.

The contrast between those who perpetrated these crimes and their (here unseen) victims has been the subject of many other and more powerful films. *The Wannsee Conference* (1984) depicts the business meeting where the plans for the Final Solution were drawn up. *Europa Europa* (1990) dramatizes the true story of a Jewish boy who hid his identity as a member of Hitler Youth. *The Nasty Girl* (1990) shows a modern German community reacting when a student starts asking uncomfortable questions about the war. The allegorical *The Boy in The Striped Pyjamas* (2008) contrasts a German family with a Jewish child on the other side of the barbed wire. All of these films work because they engage in the viewer in the lives being depicted.

By contrast, *The Zone of Interest* is like watching home movies of strangers and being asked to react to what's taking place off-screen. It adds nothing to our understanding of the subject, taking nearly two hours to demonstrate what historian Hannah Arendt was able to sum up in just four words: 'the banality of evil.'"

**Daniel M. Kimmel, *North Shore Movies.Net*, January 12, 2024**

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“*The Zone of Interest* – which has been nominated for five Oscars, including Best Picture – issues a warning from just outside the walls of Auschwitz, spreading its soul-sickness across each frame. It studies the domestic life of Rudolf Höss (Christian Friedel), the real-life commandant at the concentration camp in Nazi-occupied Poland where an estimated 1.1 million people – 960,000 of them Jewish – were murdered. He lived at that time, with his family, in a corner of Auschwitz I, where a gas chamber and a crematorium were built.

Laundry is hung out to dry in the sun. A boy shares his first kiss around the back of the house. Hoss walks down to the nearby river to fish. At first glance, these images may seem innocent – idyllic, even. But we must bear witness to their details and testify to their significance: the rail-thin bodies in muddied uniforms, silently delivering the week’s groceries; the barbed wire that trims every exterior wall; the smoke issued from a train that skims across the top of the screen. Hoss’s wife, Hedwig (*Anatomy of a Fall*’s Sandra Huller), leads her visiting mother around the property’s vegetable patch. A faint, anguished scream interrupts the flow of conversation. Hedwig pauses for a moment and then continues.

Taking loose inspiration from a 2014 novel by the late Martin Amis, director Jonathan Glazer demonstrates Hannah Arendt’s “banality of evil” theory at work. First conceived during the 1960 trial of Adolf Eichmann, an SS officer and one of the primary architects of the Holocaust, the term views the enactment of such unspeakable crimes through a lens of “sheer thoughtlessness” – that men like Eichmann and Hoss hid their evil beneath ordinary turns of phrase, mindless action, and quotidian bureaucracy.

And it is unavoidable, now, that Arendt’s words reflect back to us. “This is not a film about the past,” the director has said. “It’s trying to be about now, and about us and our similarity to the perpetrators, not our similarity to the victims.” When Hoss is ordered to relocate to Berlin, his wife becomes inconsolable. She refuses to leave the house she’s transformed into her own fortress of delusion. We see uniformed officers, these machines of death, standing at the gates. But Hoss will ensure his boots are washed of blood before he steps across the threshold.

In the kitchen, the wives howl, gossiping about the clothes they stole off Jewish victims. But they will not utter a word about the fires they see burn at night. Huller’s intelligently pitched performance allows Hedwig’s mock nonchalance

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to crumble for a moment when she tells the Jewish woman who works in her home that she could “have my husband spread your ashes” across the countryside.

It’s a tidy home, rendered uncanny and hostile by Łukasz Żal’s cinematography. In Glazer’s last film, 2013’s *Under the Skin*, the director relied on hidden cameras to track an extraterrestrial Scarlett Johansson’s journey across Glasgow. He does the same here, with 10 fixed cameras dotted around the house, controlled via remote. An extended title sequence provides a kind of sensory deprivation. A darkened screen gives way to the hellish sirens of Mica Levi’s score, before we awaken, powerless to disrupt Hoss’s hermetic reality. At the very end, Glazer chooses to flash forward, his intentions made concrete – the evils of today will leave their own scars on history.”

**Clarisse Loughrey, *Independent*, 1 February 2024**

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“Much like Jonathan Glazer’s previous film — and music video in feature’s clothing — *Under the Skin*, his *The Zone of Interest* may have worked better as a short.

Adapted from Martin Amis’ novel by the same name, the writer/director’s stark, cleanly composed shots of Auschwitz commandant Rudolf Höss (Christian Friedel, *The White Ribbon*), his wife Hedwig (Sandra Hüller, *Anatomy of a Fall*), and their children enjoying domestic bliss while the din of carnage from the notorious death camp rages literally over the wall in their backyard presents a chilling situation, but one that gradually loses its power.

While the plot takes it sweet time to kick in, the chilling dichotomy of this proximity and the ignorance displayed particularly by proud homemaker Hedwig is amplified by punishing sound design of the unseen atrocities being committed next door. These elements can only carry *The Zone of Interest* so far, however, and with minimal causality at play, the slice-of-life scenes quickly grow dull and, like *Under the Skin*, Glazer achieves another “ok, we get it” scenario that stretches out far beyond its breaking point.

When this monotony is interrupted by cool, mysterious B&W nighttime scenes shot with infrared thermal imaging cameras, there’s a sense that more engaging times await. Yet Glazer and composer Mica Levi manage to render these asides

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annoying as hell with godawful deep bass-heavy music and sound effects that make it a toss-up as to which approach is more infuriating. It's a lousy way to tell a Holocaust narrative, and when what should be a gut-punch emotional coda arrives, viewers have been bludgeoned too repeatedly by Glazer's obvious messaging for the images to have their intended effect. Instead, the director's lack of vision and self-editing zaps *The Zone of Interest* of its potential and shows yet again that just because a film tackles an important subject, it's not automatically good or worthy of attention."

**Edwin Arnaudin, Asheville Movies, January 26, 2024**

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"A single, satanic joke burns through the celluloid in Jonathan Glazer's technically brilliant, uneasy Holocaust movie, freely adapted by the director from the novel by Martin Amis, a film which for all its artistry is perhaps not entirely in control of its (intentional) bad taste. How did the placidly respectable home life of the German people coexist with imagining and executing the horrors of the genocide? How did such evil flower within what George Steiner famously called the German world of "silent night, holy night, gemütlichkeit"?

The film imagines the pure bucolic bliss experienced by Auschwitz camp commandant Rudolf Höss (Christian Friedel) who with his family lives in a handsomely appointed family home with servants just outside the barbed-wire-topped wall. His wife, Hedwig (Sandra Hüller) is thrilled with the Edenic "paradise garden" she has been allowed to supervise at the rear, complete with greenhouse: she revels smugly in her unofficial title "Queen of Auschwitz" – and with just that line alone, *The Zone of Interest* has probably delivered enough nausea for a thousand films.

The Hösses love to go fishing and bathing in the beautiful lakes and streams of the Polish countryside thereabouts, although at one stage Höss discovers what appears to be bone fragments and dark particulate matter in the river that has washed downstream from the camp and curtly orders his children out of the water and back to their lovely home for a wash.

But really they live in complete denial in an enclosed world. Family life continues in all its unimaginable dysfunction, scene follows scene in unbearable affectless detachment, with the children being attended to, the servants instructed, the Nazi wives gossiped with (they chat about a nice dress salvaged from some "little Jewess") Hedwig's mother is welcomed into the house, and all

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the time screams, shouts and gunshots are continuously audible from over the wall. They are used to it. Meanwhile, the SS officers discuss the most technically efficient means of mass extermination; we never enter the camp itself, though Höss indulges himself with a female prisoner in his office.

Perhaps the most stunning shot created by Glazer and his cinematographer Łukasz Żal is the pin-sharp, deep focus view from the Hösses' charming front garden down the path to the camp wall, behind which the chimney is visible against a vivid, hallucinatory blue sky: Höss likes to tour the horrendous compound on horseback. It really has the scalp-prickling quality of a bad dream or a fairytale.

But the horror of what is happening begins to surface in aberrant behaviour: a child sleepwalks and Hedwig's mother is more disturbed by this menage than she will admit; troubled by the memory of once having worked for a Jewish woman that Hedwig briskly agrees may indeed be in the camp a few hundred metres from where they are talking in the beautiful garden. Their grotesque family life comes to an end when Höss is ordered back to Berlin as a deputy inspector of the camps, but Hedwig demands to be allowed to stay behind with the children in the commandant's quarters because this is the best place to raise the children.

The film, with its superb score by Mica Levi and sound design by Johnnie Burn, has undoubted power but might well revive the debate about conjuring slick movie effects from the horrors of history: I found myself thinking of Jacques Rivette's objection to the barbed-wire tracking shot in Gillo Pontecorvo's *Kapò* (1960). Glazer's movie is however, at least arguably, in the tradition of representing the horror indirectly, like Claude Lanzmann and Michael Haneke.

And the film does try to accommodate Jewish testimony, though the final coda sequence in the modern-day Auschwitz Museum may absolve the film of flippancy, but does oddly represent a kind of loss of nerve – as if the movie finally can't bear to stay within the prison of historical irony and has to flashforward out of there to restate its humane credentials. Yet there can be no doubt of Glazer's focus on an evil which creates its own banality, the banality which allowed the mass murderers to go about their business."

**Peter Bradshaw, *The Guardian*, 19 May 2023**