The Zone of Interest (2023)

“I could have my husband spread your ashes across the fields of Babice.”

Major Credits

Writer and Director: Jonathan Glazer, adapted from a novel by Martin Amis
Cinematography: Lukasz Zal
Music: Mica Levi
Sound Editor: Maximilian Behrens
Sound Design: Johnnie Burn
Principal Cast: Christian Friedel (Rudolph Hoess), Sandra Huller (Hedwig Hoss)

Production Background

Glazer loosely based the film on Martin Amis’ 2014 novel, which is very different in both its narrative structure, which employs three distinct points of view, and a dramatic story, which involves a romantic plot and scenes within the camp. In some respects, the film resembles Glazer’s previous work, Under the Skin (2013), with its eerie sound design and deconstruction of genre (science fiction there; holocaust narratives here). The house was built on a site about two hundred meters from where the original Hoess home stood. Glazer employed ten hidden cameras throughout the building to film the characters performing simultaneous tasks. He directed much of the movie from a remote facility so that the actors were not aware if they were in a particular scene.

Rudolph Hoess served as the commandant of Auschwitz from 1940-43, returning in May 1944 on orders from Himmler. After avoiding capture and taking up farming under an alias, he was captured and sentenced to death at the Nuremberg trials. He published his autobiography shortly before being hung at Auschwitz in 1946. “Sunbeams,” which is played on the piano by a young girl along with subtitled lyrics, is a poem by a real-life Auschwitz survivor, Joseph Wulf.

Cinematic Aspects

1. Sound Design: Following the opening title, the screen turns dark for more than two minutes as Mica Levi’s abstract “overture” slowly accompanies the darkness. Johnnie Burn’s unique sound design permeates the narrative, subtly in the background noise emanating from the camp and most conspicuously in the hallucinatory sequences, where the strange music seems “like sepulchral belches from the Earth’s depths” (Richard Brody).

2. Camera Placement and Movement: With one exception (an early low angle close-up of Hoss that echoes Wertmuller’s heroic presentation of Hitler in Triumph of the Will), Glazer keeps the camera both at a distance and static. The opening long shot is perfectly composed, an image of German Romantic landscapes through the lens of Nazi lebensraum, the theory of “open spaces” that Rudolph Hoess had embraced from his youth when he joined the Artaman League, a back-to-the-land movement. Throughout the film, the camera literally keeps us away from the commandant and his family.

3. Thermal Imaging: The hallucinatory sequences shot with the night cameras (now associated with war and surveillance footage) contrast dramatically with the rest of the film, the uncertainty of what we are seeing at odds with the “objective” depiction of the family.
Questions for Discussion

1. The opening “overture,” largely ignored by the critics, is perhaps unprecedented. Can you think of any comparable opening to a film? What do you experience as you watch a darkened screen for more than two minutes and listen to a strange score that emerges almost imperceptibly?

2. In his press notes, Glazer described the “authorless” quality he was striving for in *The Zone of Interest*. What do you think he meant by this term, and did he achieve it?

3. He also described making two different movies here, the one perceived through sight and the other through sound. Can you discern the distinction Glazer intended? Do these two forms of perception complement or compete with each other?

4. How do the three non-diegetic sequences—the two night scenes shot with thermal imaging and the flower montage that bleeds to red—relate to the rest of the film? Why does Glazer interrupt the relentless portrayal of the Hoss family in these sequences?

5. What is the effect of the flash forward epilogue, and how does the scene in the museum at Auschwitz relate to the previous sequence?

6. How does *The Zone of Interest* fit within what is now certainly a canon of holocaust films?: *Night and Fog, Au Revoir Les Enfants, Shoah, Shindler’s List, Life is Beautiful, The Pianist, The Book Thief*. Consider your response from the four critical perspectives from which to view art (Lionel Abel): the world (truth), the artist (vision, originality), the audience (education, entertainment, pleasure), the work (form).

7. Among the few critics of the film, all seemed to agree that it subordinated meaning to artfulness. For example, Mick LaSalle began his review by calling it “a misguided work of conceptual art.” Manohla Dargis rebuked the film in the New York Times for not having a “point” other than “demonstrating the director’s “quality.” If you disagree with her damning summation of *The Zone of Interest* as “a hollow self-aggrandizing art-film exercise,” define and justify the film’s “project.”

“
“My family had it good at Auschwitz, every wish that my wife or my children had was fulfilled.”

—Rudolph Hoess, *Commandant of Auschwitz: The Autobiography of Rudolph Hoess*