

THE ZONE OF INTEREST

François Truffaut once said, “I find that violence is very ambiguous in movies. For example, some films claim to be anti-war, but I don’t think I’ve ever seen an anti-war film. Every film about war ends up being pro-war.” His point has been widely interpreted to mean that cinema, by nature of its visual power and narrative drive, inevitably glorifies conflict—even when it tries not to. To depict war is, inevitably, to turn it into a kind of aesthetic spectacle. However, Jonathan Glazer’s *The Zone of Interest* presents a radical choice that overturns this dilemma: not depicting the war at all.

The film focuses on Rudolf Höss, the commandant of Auschwitz, and his wife Hedwig, as they raise their children in an idyllic home adjacent to the death camp. The “zone of interest” refers not only to the physical area surrounding Auschwitz but also to the moral perimeter we choose to maintain—what we allow ourselves to see, feel, and acknowledge.

Glazer’s camera is cold and distant. Long, static, unmoving shots dominate the film, often placing characters far from the lens. The camera does not chase drama—it observes. Watching it in a theater feels almost voyeuristic, as though we are spying on moments that should not be seen, moments that reflect us more than we’d like to admit. The distance, paradoxically, removes the comfortable emotional distance we often have when watching historical atrocities on screen. It implicates us.

To call the Höss family “monsters” would be easy, but also dishonest. That would imply that their evil is inhuman, separate from us. Instead, *The Zone of Interest* reveals that their behavior—prioritizing comfort, protecting family, ignoring suffering—is disturbingly familiar. Rudolf wants to provide. Hedwig wants to build a dream home. Their desires are unremarkable. It’s what those desires coexist with—and ignore—that makes them horrifying.

Comfort itself becomes a kind of sin in Glazer’s moral universe. The Höss home is serene, beautiful, and lovingly maintained. Their children play, garden, swim. But just over the wall, trains arrive, smoke rises, and screams echo. The juxtaposition is not just spatial—it’s ethical. The film forces us to ask: What horrors do we tune out to preserve our own comforts?

That wall in the film is literal, but it is also metaphorical. It could be the glowing screen of my phone, where I scroll past images of dead children in Gaza or Ukraine. It could be the physical barrier between nations—the walls that dehumanize at the U.S.–Mexico border or between Israel and Gaza. It could even be the invisible wall I raise when I consume animal products, knowing (but choosing not to think about) the suffering at their source.

In this sense, *The Zone of Interest* is not a period film. It’s a mirror. It shows us a world where genocide is routine, woven into the background of everyday life—because, in many ways, that is our world. The Höss family isn’t unique; they’re simply efficient participants in a system. Like many of us, they want safety, comfort, and a future for their children. Like many of us, they tell themselves that their job is just a job—and that if they don’t do it, someone else will.

The final moments of *The Zone of Interest* encapsulate the devastating truth at the heart of Rudolph and Hedwig Höss's relationship to the evil surrounding them. The question lingers: What happens when the characters begin—if only for a second—to reckon with the reality they've helped sustain?

After a chilling scene in which Rudolph contemplates the logistics of gassing an entire room of people, he pauses. He stares down a long, black hallway. It feels like a rupture in his internal narrative, a moment where the future—the memory of this horror, its judgment, its legacy—briefly touches the present. His reaction isn't heroic or transformative. He can't even bring himself to vomit. His body resists even that minor act of rejection.

Then he puts his hat back on and continues descending down the dark stairwell. To confront that question would upend everything: His job, his family, his purpose, his identity. The moral dissonance would be too great. His life is built not in spite of the genocide next door, but because of it. The very soil of his garden, the clothes on his children, the shine of Hedwig's dream home. To acknowledge that is to let it all collapse.

In this world Glazer constructs—where genocide has become so normalized that a gunshot is ambient, no more jarring than a bird chirping—the true horror isn't just that evil exists. It's that evil can be ordinary, even beautiful. It can nurture a family. It can help children grow up with laughter in their lungs. It can give someone like Hedwig a dream worth defending.

So the only way to live in such a world—if you benefit from it—is to look away. You build a wall. You tend your garden. You protect your children. You keep walking.

By refusing to show violence, the film magnifies it. By focusing on silence, it amplifies guilt. *The Zone of Interest* is a masterwork of aesthetic minimalism and moral maximalism, a deeply unsettling meditation on complicity, proximity, and the quiet machinery of evil. It doesn't allow us the release of horror or the satisfaction of judgment. Instead, it asks: What would you do? Would you look over it?-or keep tending your garden?

Glazer doesn't answer the question. But he does show us the cost of refusing to ask it.