



KinoFest

THE GERMAN FILM FESTIVAL



FILM REVIEW: The Zone of Interest

By Princess Kinoc of Film Police Reviews

I have to say this. It's a bold move for KinoFest to include 'The Zone of Interest' in its lineup of films. With the ongoing conflict in both Ukraine and Russia, as well as the war against Palestine in Gaza usurped by Zionist beliefs, I would always look back to the past and compare that situation to how the Nazis had once tried to wipe the Jews out of hate and questionable beliefs. Even when other nations attempt to rewrite the histories of their former atrocities, here is a film festival that chooses to side with the truth. It is very telling that the times are changing and that it is possible to both acknowledge the past and be apologetic for it. The circumstances in which Jonathan Glazer made this film and released it in the same year that the Jews in Israel decided to attack a smaller country like Palestine, is a massive coincidence that I think needs to be studied. This is also probably why he spoke about how we can "resist the dehumanization that has led to mass atrocities", one like the one he tries to depict in the film.

Adapted from a book of the same name by Martin Amis, but unlike its predecessor, the film does not look and feel like it follows the same narrative that we might already have an idea of. Set during World War II, an ambitious couple settles in an idyllic home in Auschwitz. Rudolf Höss (Christian Friedel) and his wife Hedwig (Sandra Hüller) open the film (or rather after that harrowing black noise that seems to remind me of an alarm) with their five children cozying up by the lake. The camera, motionless, and disassociated shows a family spending their normal day, cheering each other on and enjoying the pleasures of a simple life. This picturesque scene reminds me of the way Lav Diaz poses his frames at the beginning of his films - what might seem ordinary, will soon become a backdrop of a harrowing, political commentary on society.

The film carries on and shows us the house from an unnerving angle, almost always showing the contrast between the house's off-white matte paint and the walls that separate it from the towering walls of the concentration camp nearby. It almost feels like a surreal cinematic experience each time the shots move to a conversation between the people inside the households, and instead of ominous background music, we hear gunshots, people screaming, and what appears to be a churning sound that I once heard of when I went to a family member's cremation, with her dead body being cremated in public (yes, there are such public cemeteries that do public viewing of the cremation before the body is pushed inside the crematory).

What adds to the experience is the thought that they all must live next to it. I wonder what the children were told of. I wonder how they can fathom swimming, dining, and even laughing while millions of Jews are being burned alive next door. To top it all off is what the wife says at one

point “I’m glad to be finally living in paradise”. The couple’s aspirations to move to Auschwitz, apparently, are not because they are inherently evil (I’m sorry, I know that they should be seen as evil but let me explain further), but simply because they abide by the tenets of the Artamanen-Gesellschaft (Artaman League), an agrarian and völkisch movement that aims to have city folk go back to the rural lands as a form of retreat from the decadence of the cities, also as a form of “racial purity”, an act of cleansing one’s body, lifestyle, and minds. So, yeah, perhaps they are inherently evil for believing in this, and for imposing this on their children. The people around them seemingly praise them for pursuing this as well.

There are scenes in Hedwig’s garden, new and incomplete, that are shown in a dolly shot but it feels completely off as the backdrop includes the grey and sturdy concentration camp. She says “soon this will cover everything” at a creeping ivy in her villa but it also feels as if she is talking about how her garden will attempt to hide the scent, the grey towering camp, and the noises that can be heard from next door. How they all remain oblivious to all that is one of the scariest, inhumane depictions of the Holocaust that I have ever seen in film. Johnnie Burn’s intensely harrowing and immersive sound design helps aid in that, to a fault there is no need for us to see the victims next door. The mere fact that the family chose to ignore them is just pure evil. We know at this point that Hedwig’s innocent garden cannot hide the atrocities next door.

I’ve always seen Glazer as a very technical director. With his beginnings in theater, each of his films offers a mise-en-scène like no other. Unlike Wes Anderson who seems to follow a cardinal direction when shooting his films, Glazer does it frame by frame, plotting his storyboard to let each set piece serve its purpose far greater than what it is intended to. Much like in theater where there is no camera A,B, and C, his sets are built to cover all areas of the screen, no matter at which angle we look - from the framing of the first scene of what initially looks like an idyllic countryside, to the contrasting lines of the roofs of the gates that show the manmade garden at the bottom and the smoky skies of churned bodies from the concentration camp next door.

I have to admit though that I was not a fan of Under the Skin when I first saw it, so perhaps after this I’ll give that a rewatch. Lukasz Zal’s cinematography in both the night terrors and the daylight grey provides an overwhelming sense of dread throughout the film. Whether by purpose, I think it helps that the other innocents in the film, those of the children, are never shown up close. It feels as if they are half-heartedly unaware of what is happening, unlike the lilacs and the roses that witness the terrors each day. The only close-up we see here is that of Hüller when she tries on the dead Jew’s lipstick as if confirming who the real murderers are in this story.

Friedel and Hüller both excel as the heads of the family. The dissonance they both display shows how they have completely lost their sense of humanity, without the need for extravagantly lambasting Glazer and Amis's screenplay, as what amateurish antagonists might do. The way Friedel decides to depict Höss as a mild-mannered efficient commandant adds to the chilling performance of Hüller's Hedy as she cherry-picks her ideals by wearing stolen minks from the Jews and wearing their lipsticks in the same way that Satan might have done too. The way that they bring up their children and instill that these are normal occurrences is something that I wish no children and no parent should ever live with and decide to live with these days. But Amis and Glazer's script is something we see each day; may it not be directly in our lives but mostly with individuals who will stop at nothing and are willing to forget their humanity for the sake of control and power over anyone else. In our country alone, we see this every day. The genocide in Gaza continues to face this each day. The impact of every decision we make matters, and it does not only affect our families but everyone else in this world.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

[Princess Kinoc](#) is a freelance writer, and the current Editor-in-Chief for [Film Police](#) Reviews. She is also a member of the Society of Filipino Film Reviewers (SFRR) and the Society of Filipino Archivists for Film (SoFIA). Outside FPR, she has also written reviews and essays for New Durian Cinema and Pelikula Journal, and she co-hosts the Filipino film podcast, Third World Cinema Club. She is a black coffee drinker, and she's not so sure if that matters.

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