



KinoFest

THE GERMAN FILM FESTIVAL



FILM REVIEW: The Zone of Interest

By Princess Kinoc of Film Police Reviews

Often, the most sinister are those who present themselves as normal. In Jonathan Glazer's 'The Zone of Interest', we are initially poised to get comfortable with the goals and ambitions of a young couple, which soon reveals are husband and wife who have built a home beside one of history's most profoundly wicked concentration camps.

Loosely adapted from the 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 we might already know. 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 positions 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 the people living in the idyllic home are relaxed about living 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 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 that utilizes the contrasting lines between good and evil, shown in a dolly shot that feels completely dreadful as the backdrop includes the grey and sturdy concentration camp, in contrast to how inauthentic her garden feels like. She says "soon this will cover everything", pointing 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 capable of adjusting to their current living situation and 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 immersive sound design helps aid to that overwhelming sense of dread to a fault that there is no need for us to see the victims next door. The fact that the family chose to ignore them is just pure evil. There is a scene in which perhaps one of the prisoners attempt to escape the camp and one of the younger children can see it on his view of the window. He catches himself and says "I shouldn't have done that." Which means that they are aware that there are prisoners next door but, in perhaps the most vile evocations, they're told of it as mere "adult" things and conversations they should never see nor ask about.

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 allow each set piece to serve its purpose far greater than what is intended. 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.

Lukasz Zal's cinematography during the night terrors and the daylight grey adds to the music's looming tension and fear 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 - the choice to do so is as if the film affirms 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 so. The way 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 every 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. And for what? For control and power over anyone else?

The film won Best International Film at the 96th Academy Awards, and what better way to accept the award, is Glazer's speech that says what one might think while watching this film, "All our choices were made to reflect and confront us in the present – not to say, "Look what they did then," rather, "Look what we do now." Our film shows where dehumanization leads, at its worst. It shaped all of our past and present."



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.