



FILM: **THE ZONE OF INTEREST**

FDG RATING: 3.9 ☺☺☺☺○

Film Discussion Group (FDG) Scale is 1-5 (5 is best)

Jonathan Glazer: *director*  
Sandra Huller: *actress, Hedwig Hoss*  
Christian Friedel: *actor, Rudolf Hoss*

DATE: May 19, 2024

DISCUSSION SUMMARY: **THE ZONE OF INTEREST**

Many of us avoided or procrastinated watching this 2024 Oscar winning film (best foreign language film) dreading another Holocaust movie. But curious about all the buzz, we reluctantly gave in and were then hooked on the powerful story which was interspersed with eerie dark, black and white night time thermal imagery that looked like a moving film negative.

It's a unique perspective focusing solely on Auschwitz commandant, Rudolf Hoss and his family life with a secondary focus on his SS responsibilities. He has strived to create a dream life for his wife Hedwig and their five children. They live in a large, richly furnished villa with a spacious yard and lovely garden that Hedwig proudly cares for. A short wall separates their world from the furnaces spewing smoke and blowing ashes but what is happening there remains hidden. As a high ranking Nazi responsible for testing and implementing methods to accelerate Hitler's order to systematically exterminate the Jewish population of Nazi-occupied Europe, Hoss was praised for doing his job exceedingly well.

In the opening scene we see the family enjoying an idyllic picnic by the lake, the children swimming, and then walking back home together through the woods. In a later scene, Hoss takes the children kayaking in the lake, but quickly gathers them to head for home after noticing ashes littering the water. It appears he is a loving father who cradles his daughter and puts her back to bed when he finds her crouched the hallway; she walks in her sleep. Whenever this happens, the film abruptly switches to the eerie black and white infrared thermal scenes. It's like looking at a filtered film negative and it's difficult to decipher what we are seeing but appears to be a young girl placing apples along the dirt trenches that the prisoners dig. Hoss also reads a bedtime story to his children before they go to sleep. It's interesting that the stories tend to be ominous such as the bird swooping down with a warning to Beware. Or the passage in Hansel and Gretel, when they stuff the wicked witch into the oven to burn. The stories are grim commentary on what is actually happening around them.

We never see the horrific actions taking place behind the wall, but we are relentlessly haunted by what we know is happening. It is all hidden from view which almost makes us complicit since we continue to ignore it. But intermittent muted background sounds of gunfire, screams, barked orders, and machinery. are a constant reminder.

One of the most disturbing early scenes is when Hedwig is admiring herself in the mirror as she tries on the fur coat which was among the clothes and other belongings brought to her in a large sack. We know the items were taken from prisoners as they were stripped when entering the camp. She paints her lips with the red lipstick she found in the coat pocket and studies the unfamiliar fashionable face staring back at her in the mirror. She takes the rest of the goods and clothing that were in a sack and spreads them on the kitchen table telling her servants/workers to each pick one piece.

Their idyllic life is interrupted when Hoss is promoted due to his superior efficiency and is transferred to Oranienburg where he will be given greater responsibility reporting direct to Eichmann. Hedwig refuses to leave and makes a condition of his transfer that the family is allowed to stay, unwilling to give up her perceived perfect life. From this point on. Hoss is in a downward spiral physically and emotionally which is artistically amplified through filming techniques.

The end abruptly shifts to the present. We see cleaning women dusting, mopping, vacuuming, and shining the windows of the exhibit of clothing and possessions taken from the Jews. as they entered the death camp. What the Nazis tried to eradicate, and keep concealed, is now very visible as a memorial. But it's interesting that this scene shows an almost sanitizing approach to the horrors the display represents.

A published critic wrote that Jonathan Glazer's unforgettable Auschwitz drama is a brutal masterpiece. We appreciated that the Holocaust horrors were implied rather than dramatized. But one discussion participant said that knowing what was hidden on the other side of the wall, was like living next door to a suspected serial killer. Several participants noted that they had dreaded watching Zone of Interest but are glad they did. It's a subject we've watched too many times, but this perceptive provided insight into the minds of the SS. It was shocking to see that they approached the prospect of eliminating all Jews, as an engineering challenge and even attempted to patent the design of a multi chambered furnace which greatly increased efficiency.

Zone of Interest is a powerful story and is worth watching especially to appreciate the director's artistry. Sandra Huller is superb as the commandant's wife. Christian Friedel is also excellent as Rudolf Hoss. The cinematography, the creative use of sounds, and very mesmerizing film techniques, made the movie disturbing but intriguing to watch.

A couple low scores tore apart a resounding zone of high marks leaving a resilient 3.9 on our scale of 1 to 5. (5 is the best.)



See you at the movies!  
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