

FILM REVIEWS

Jonathan Glazer, director. *Zone of Interest*. Film4, 2023.

Zone of Interest, adapted from a novel with the same title, follows the routine life of Rudolf Hoss, commandant of the Auschwitz concentration camp, with his wife and children. Auschwitz is notable for being the largest and one of the deadliest camps created by the Nazis. It is a family drama, where evil has permeated this nuclear family. The film is often chilling and terrifying without any actual violence perpetrated on screen.

The evil here is in the mundane. Hoss is a family man who does his job well. And his job is to systematically enslave and kill people. The construction of a new crematorium, one that is more efficient for the mass burning of human bodies, is presented as a managerial sales pitch. The discussion takes place with calm voices in a living room, presented by a pair of architects. His wife tends to her garden that is surrounded by walls with barbed wire on top and the camp just beyond. The children have a pool party, as the train in the background brings in more prisoners. This place is evil, and the characters are not only accustomed to it, but find it idyllic. Every meal, every joke made is tainted by the inescapable camp in the background. This evil has seeped into the children as well, who marvel at gold teeth and play make-believe the atrocities their father is committing. As normal as they profess to be, there is nothing normal about pretending to put your brother in the gas chambers. For these children their form of play is to reenact the atrocities committed just beyond their home.

The movie revels in long shots, expertly framing the characters and highlighting the wrongness of their world. Hoss's mother-in-law comes to visit and is given a tour of the garden, and the camera follows them from a distance, with the upper third of the frame dedicated to the camp looming in the background. In these scenes we hear the characters speak casually about the cruelty they are helping to enact and in Hoss's case, actually perpetrate. One of the most striking visuals is of the commander smoking a cigar in the twilight with the crematorium smokestack burning in the background.

The sound design in this movie is phenomenal. From

the opening title sequence the film is dedicated to this. The title fades to black and the audience is left in the dark to listen, perhaps for a little too long, at the thrum of this world. This extended sequence is to train the audience to listen to the noise of horror that permeates the background of every scene, the sounds the characters have grown so accustomed to. The noises of the camp are ever present, gunshots, screams, machinery, and yet only one character seems bothered by these terrible sounds.

The film, at an hour and 45 minutes, can feel long at times. This is often intentional, we follow Hoss as he turns off all the lights in his house, acting as a harbinger of darkness. While claiming to be an adaptation of the novel, the film drops the original plot entirely. It also transitions from the fictionalized characters of the book to their real-life inspirations in the film. The book centers around a character named Doll, who was inspired by the historical figure of Hoss, while the film simply presents a fictionalized Hoss and the interactions he might have had. While the movie is arguably more historically accurate for these changes, it may be disappointing to fans of the novel.

This film was made for a general audience. The film expects its audience to know about the Holocaust and concentration camps. Everyone should watch this film. There are a multitude of films focused on the Holocaust, and the deeds Nazis committed were so heinous that Nazis iconography is often used as shorthand for evil in media. This film, however, is unique, the evil here is terrifying not simply because of the violence, but because the people have grown so desensitized to it. It shows a frightening picture of what life is like when evil is normal, and acts as a salient reminder of what can happen when people acclimate to the sounds of terror around them. There is no home sweet home next to a concentration camp.

Trenten Hart