

Why do you want to see?

## ***The Zone of Interest* interrogates the desire to bear witness that animates the Holocaust movie as a genre.**

by [Mac Loftin](#) in the [June 2024](#) issue



A scene from Jonathan Glazer's *The Zone of Interest* (A24)

Eleven years ago, *The Hollywood Reporter* hosted a roundtable to hype the Oscars. Somehow things got on to the topic of Holocaust movies, and Austrian director Michael Haneke called movies like *Schindler's List* "unspeakable" because they make mass murder into entertainment: drama and resolution, suspense and catharsis, popcorn and candy. The only responsible way of representing the Holocaust on film, Haneke said, is for the film to refuse to entertain, for it to demand

something of the viewer: “What do you think about this? What is your position? What does this mean to you?”

Reducing the Holocaust to entertainment might be unspeakable, but the Holocaust movie is a garrulous genre. Wikipedia’s “List of Holocaust films” article shows roughly five new ones every year. A cynical reading of the genre’s popularity is that it offers the audience a sadistic thrill at the spectacle of limitless violence. But movies like *Schindler’s List* and *The Pianist* are popular for an understandable reason as well: they promise to make the incomprehensible comprehensible, to take the unhealing wound of millions of lives snuffed out and forever unlived and suture it up in the familiar arc of a blockbuster.

We can watch *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas* and tell ourselves that we have borne witness to a thing that in reality exceeds our understanding. Kalonymus Kalman Shapira, the rabbi of the Warsaw Ghetto, preached to his community before its destruction that the reason for God’s absence is that God’s sorrow over the Jews’ suffering is too great for the world to bear. To keep the world from breaking, God retreats into his private chambers and weeps in lonely agony. The Holocaust movie offers the fantasy that we can finish this mourning, a power not even God has.

*The Zone of Interest*, Jonathan Glazer’s new film about the commandant of Auschwitz and his family, refuses to be that kind of movie. Instead it interrogates the desire to bear witness that animates the Holocaust movie as a genre. It asks the viewer, over and over again, like the awful rhythmic grinding that makes up its soundtrack, “What do you want to see? Why do you want to see? What do you think seeing will bring you?”

The film opens with a black screen and the sound of groaning metal, screaming, and occasional gunshots. The sound goes on and on, and the screen remains black for what feels like several minutes. I could feel the audience squirming in the seats around me; someone looked up at the projector to see if this was supposed to be happening. The desire to see builds and builds, before the movie cuts to Höss and his family having a picnic by the river.

There’s very little actual drama in *The Zone of Interest*. It tells the relentlessly dull story of the Höss family: Rudolph, his wife Hedwig, and their children. The Hösses are pioneers on the new frontier, attempting to build an idyllic life in their dream home while negotiating the tensions brought on by Rudolph’s demanding job as

overseer of the camp. Their house abuts the camp wall, its barbed wire and concrete the backdrop to Hedwig's beautiful garden.

The real tension in the movie comes from Rudolph and Hedwig's nauseating, infuriating, maddening refusal to see the evil in which they wallow. Hedwig plants flowers in the garden and soothes her crying baby, amid the unending noise of murder. Rudolph files reports, takes meetings, reads bedtime stories to his children, and blows his nose in the sink, great gobs black with soot from the roughly three million people incinerated in his crematoria. The Hösses are completely immersed in evil, and they do not want to see. We are right there with them, in claustrophobically close shots, and we *do* want to see. But how different are those two desires?

There's only one scene that gives a glimpse inside the camp walls. It's only a few seconds long, which was long enough that I almost had to step outside the theater. But even here, Glazer doesn't let us see. The shot is an extreme closeup of Höss's face. The awful rusty groaning and desperate screaming that, up until now, had been the muted soundtrack to the Hösses' domestic drama is now almost deafening. Höss's face is partially obscured by the thick smoke from the crematoria. The camera lingers on him for a moment, his eyes roaming around with the bored determination of a man doing an unpleasant but necessary task, then we're back to the dream house.

The uncomfortable proximity between the desire to see and the refusal to see builds throughout the movie until its final scene. Rudolph calls Hedwig from Oranienburg late at night to tell her some good news: they're going to name the extermination of over half a million Hungarian Jews after him. *Operation Höss*, he beams. Then he turns off the office lights and walks down the stairs. He stops at the landing, bends over, and retches. Starts walking again, stops again, retches again. Something like a conscience seems to flicker in him as he stares into the pitch darkness of the hallway. Suddenly the scene cuts to footage of the present day at what has become the Auschwitz museum. At first it feels like Dantean *contrapasso*: Höss had wanted to be forever remembered for "Operation Höss," and his punishment is that he gets his wish.

But as the scene drags on, Höss's defeat by history starts to feel hollow. Don't these silent Polish women cleaning the Auschwitz museum look an awful lot like the silent Polish women forced to clean Höss's Auschwitz home? The camera lingers on the famous display case full of the shoes of the murdered. Can the absence of so many

people really be contained within a museum display? Might the glass case be fooling us into thinking that now we have seen and understood what happened here, hiding from us the fact that we never can? Might the very structure of a museum trick us into thinking we're looking at something contained safely in the past, obscuring the reality that the violence and the loss will reverberate forever? Surely we are right to do whatever we can to remember, but are there things all this remembering protects us from having to confront? The scene cuts back to Höss staring into the dark. He blinks and walks out of the building.

The most upsetting part of *The Zone of Interest* for me was after I left the theater and went home. I couldn't shake the feeling of an awful likeness with the Hösses. To live a relatively comfortable life in America, as I do, is to live in comfort as my government entangles itself in genocidal conflicts around the globe. This comfort is bought by the suffering and death of so many—my laptop made with cobalt mined by enslaved children in the Congo, my food harvested by trafficked child laborers in California, my taxes buying the bombs that have killed 30,000 people so far in Gaza and God only knows how many people elsewhere. What is this life if not a dream home next door to a death camp? And what does the constant satisfaction of our desire to see—bodycam footage of police executions, wall-to-wall coverage of wars, true crime podcasts and documentaries—allow us to avoid seeing?

Georges Bataille, writing during the Nazi occupation of France, recorded extensively his feelings of complicity and his suspicion that his desire to bear witness was really just a desire to feel innocent. "Before excessive cruelty," he wrote, "either that of men, or that of fate, it is natural to rebel, to cry out (our hearts fail us): 'That can no longer be!'" But all too often, "that which weeps and damns within me is my desire to sleep in peace, my fury at being disturbed."

Stoking our desire to see while refusing to satisfy it, *The Zone of Interest* does not let us sleep in peace, and it does not entertain. It demands of us that we stay awake, exhausted and furious and disturbed.