

## Mythic Banality:

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## Mythic Banality: Jonathan Glazer and Hannah Arendt

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The worst is that man has come to seem mindless.  
John Berger, "Francis Bacon and Walt Disney"

*The Zone of Interest* is a film that has been shot at least twice: once through the lens of its director, Jonathan Glazer, and then again through the lens of the 7 October Hamas attack and the subsequent war on Gaza. Few Holocaust films have spoken to our times so directly. When Glazer made that connection implicit in his Oscar's acceptance speech – "Not to say 'look what they did then' – rather, 'look what we do now'" – he too became part of the proxy cultural conflict that has raged from Berlin to New York. Throughout all of this, the ghost of Hannah Arendt has been a notable presence.

Before its general release, Glazer said that while working on the film he was "constantly thinking" of Arendt's description of how it was not radical evil but an outrageous mindlessness that powered the industrialized genocide of the Holocaust. Whether judged an achingly timely masterpiece or denounced as "Holokitsch," the film's critics have followed Glazer's lead and regularly evoked Arendt's "banality of evil," the phrase she used in her controversial reports on the 1961 trial of the Nazi Adolf Eichmann.<sup>1</sup> In fact, whether people love or loathe the film often seems to turn on whether they approve or disapprove Arendt's thesis. Or, indeed, of Arendt herself, for just as her debunking of the myth of demonic Nazis earned her public opprobrium, so too has Glazer's Oscar's speech turned him into a controversial figure in the very history he is asking us to understand. *The Zone of Interest* comes with a ready-made Arendtian imprimatur. I think this is also a problem.

What is undoubtedly true is that the film delivers a master class in the aesthetics of Nazi banality. The horror of the ordinary is communicated in the small things – a wheelbarrow laden with the clothes and belongings stolen from murdered Jews creaking up the garden path, the manic dog, the baby who never stops crying. The "Big Brother" cameras track through the ugly house and its garish garden against Johnnie Burn's acclaimed soundtrack; part animal, part industrial, an inhuman grunt belching out from deep within Auschwitz. From the opening shot of Rudolf Höss, played with sublime

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<sup>1</sup> Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (New York: Penguin Classics, 1963, 2006). This article has been republished with minor changes. These changes do not impact the academic content of the article.

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understatement by Christian Friedel, in his too-big swimming trunks, his flaccid untamed flesh belying every Nazi fantasy of Aryan masculinity, to Sandra Müller's brusque awkwardness, with her expertly executed marionette movements, the Commander of Auschwitz and his Mutzi, we are led to believe, are rather ordinary, if unappealing, aspiring bourgeois made good by mass murder. The Nazi "organization relies not on fanatics, nor on congenital murderers, nor on sadists; it relies entirely upon the normality of job-holders and family men," Arendt wrote in 1945 in an essay called "Organized Guilt and Universal Responsibility."<sup>2</sup> *Stinknormal* is the German word for an unexceptional normality, and *Zone of Interest* absolutely succeeds in making the normal stink.

It is a normality that tempts viewers into the film's thought experiment: How is it that ordinary non-descript people, at best, consent to and, at worst, execute crimes against humanity? Would I – could I – have done the same? And, perhaps most pressingly, where is my complicity now? That last question has gained urgent resonance in the context of Israel's assault on Gaza. "Everyone I know who has seen the film can think of little but Gaza," Naomi Klein wrote in *The Guardian* in March this year.<sup>3</sup> Hedwig Höss runs her fingers through the lingerie of dead women; an IDF soldier is filmed stealing a pair of silver bride shoes for his fiancé from an occupied Palestinian home – the comparison is Klein's. "There are so many echoes that, today, Glazer's masterpiece feels more like a documentary than a metaphor," she suggests.

I am not happy with the too-speedy connection between the administration of mass industrial death – the Kanada warehouses in Auschwitz were part of a system organized to yield every last scrap from the bodies of dead Jews – to the ideologically-fevered war crimes of some of today's IDF, but what is true is that over the months those echoes have got louder, and the historical analogies and continuities more conspicuous. Höss describes his wife as a "model settler farmer." "All these weeds here," Hedwig complains snatching and pulling in her borders. From over the wall, we can hear the terrified screams of small children. These are "garden variety Nazis" Gavin Jacobson wrote in a recent essay for *The New Statesman* (Höss disguised himself as a gardener at the end of the war). "It's hard to ignore the horticultural parallels between the [film's] language ... here and the strategy of 'mowing the lawn' or 'mowing the grass,' the informal term the IDF has historically used to describe its ops in Gaza."<sup>4</sup> This time it is Adorno who joins Arendt in the conversation from the last century: "The caring hand that even now tends the little garden as if it had not long since become a 'lot', but fearfully wards off the unknown intruder, is already that which denies the political refugee asylum."<sup>5</sup>

The echoes and parallels are – or rather have become over the past seven months – all around us. But I am not sure that they are comparisons which the film can support, either morally or politically. Naomi Klein is right to argue that back in its preview stages, a lifetime ago last summer, viewers could set themselves up for Glazer's thought-experiment and declare themselves guilt-free. Historical distance did much of that work. Yet even now I doubt that many watch the film and seriously imagine themselves planting dahlias as the

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<sup>2</sup> Hannah Arendt, "Organized Guilt and Universal Responsibility," *The Jewish Record* (January 1945): 19–23, *Essays in Understanding: 1930–1954*, ed. Jerome Kohn (New York: Schocken Books), 129.

<sup>3</sup> Naomi Klein, "The Zone of Interest is About the Danger of Ignoring Atrocities – Including in Gaza," *The Guardian*, 14 March 2024.

<sup>4</sup> Gavin Jacobson, "Garden Variety Nazis: The Zone of Interest Unearths the Horticultural Roots of the Shoah," *The New Statesman*, 30 March 2024.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

smoke poured from the chimneys of Auschwitz. If people indulge in the thought experiment the movie presents, by and large they do so with full knowledge of what the Holocaust was. The commander of Auschwitz and his cat-got-the-cream frau are clearly monstrous. This distance makes any passing familiarity with the perpetrators relatively easy to shake off – which might be why Glazer, like Arendt before him, got into so much trouble for suggesting otherwise and insisting upon a wider and more entangled historical corruption. Banality, like evil, is tolerated better when it is kept in its boxes. Framed, it loses its capacity to cause real historical or political trouble.

And this might also be why the film cannot support the weight of its own claims, or some of the claims and comparisons that have been made in its name since Gaza. Not because of any moral or political failure, but because it is a film. Bold aesthetics are what Glazer – and his other films bear this out – does and does extremely well. From the opening black-blank screen behind which we slowly hear birdsong and human voices, *The Zone of Interest* is a film that is highly conscious of its artistry. At moments, it could almost be a video installation. “Genocide becomes ambient to their lives” is how Glazer has described his characters. But how do you puncture such ambience in such a supremely, superbly, ambient film? Arendt faced a political and theoretical version of this problem when she published her reports on the Eichmann trial – how indict banality without appearing to condone it?

*The Zone of Interest* certainly wants to be a critique of the banality of evil, but in that endeavour it produces a mythic banality of its own. To rephrase Naomi Klein: the film cannot help being metaphor, despite its documentary ambitions. Myth paints its colours broadly. It has to, otherwise it cannot bear the weight of the universalism required of the genre. Glazer works with broad and well-defined morally-visual strokes. A blindfolded Höss is led out into the garden by his children. It’s his birthday, but we get the metaphor. There is something of the wicked queen as Hedwig wraps the stolen fur coat around her, spinning slightly on her heel, pouting her reddened lips in her mirror (“he calls me the Queen of Auschwitz,” she tells her mother). White sheets flap against grey walls. Rarely have so many bodies been so ostentatiously scrubbed and washed in one film. A vibrant flower head fills the screen with blood red colour. A boy plays with human teeth. Rudolf and Hedwig make little piggy noises at one another in bed. The scenes in which Aleksandra Bystron-Kolodziejczyk cycles around the camp leaving apples for the prisoners (based on real events) have a deliberate fairy tale quality. They are shot in night vision, so they resemble both the visual and the moral negative of the rest of the film. For a moment we are spared the grunting of the camp. Yet what we hear instead is Höss reading his sleepless daughter “Hansel and Gretel,” including, of course, the scene when the witch is defeated and pushed into the flaming oven. In terms of its metaphors, this is not a subtle film.

I am reminded of John Berger’s 1972 essay on the paintings of Francis Bacon. In his post-war paintings Bacon, says Berger, “accepts the worst has happened.”<sup>6</sup> The parallels with *The Zone of Interest* and Bacon are not random. Susan Sontag described Adolf Eichmann sitting in his glass booth in Jerusalem in 1961 as resembling “one of the great shrieking but unheard creatures from the paintings of Francis Bacon.”<sup>7</sup> Berger is critical

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<sup>6</sup> John Berger, “Francis Bacon and Walt Disney” (1972) in *Selected Essays of John Berger*, ed. Geoff Dyer (London: Bloomsbury, 2001), 458–64.

<sup>7</sup> Susan Sontag, “Reflections on the Deputy,” in *Against Interpretation and Other Essays* (London: Penguin, 2013), 125–6.

of Bacon's scream paintings because, he says, they concede to the mindlessness they portray. The paintings "demonstrate how alienation may provoke a longing for its own absolute form – which is mindlessness."<sup>8</sup>

Much of the pathos of *The Zone of Interest* also comes from the sense that the worst has happened and cannot be undone. Mindlessness is certainly not the absolute form of the film, but there is cartoonish quality to it which suggests, against the intentions of its makers, that this is what there now is: an endemic mindlessness that we are now condemned to perpetuate. This is what I mean when I say that *The Zone of Interest's* thought experiment is a temptation: because it invites us to consider our own banality, our mindlessness, it tempts us into accepting the historical terms of that banality. The role of twentieth-century history, bureaucracy, imperialism, racism, antisemitism, industrialism, in setting those terms becomes part of the banal ambience. That is the problem.

Arendt certainly did think Eichmann was catastrophically thoughtless – *Gedankenlosigkeit*. "The longer one listened to him," she wrote,

the more obvious it became that his inability to speak was closely connected to his inability to think, namely to think from the standpoint of somebody else. No communication was possible with him, not because he lied but because he was surrounded by the most reliable of all safeguards against the words and the presence of others, and hence against reality as such.<sup>9</sup>

Hardly anyone really speaks, let alone listens, in *The Zone of Interest*, and when they do it is in the obscene circumlocution of Nazi death-speech, as in the scene when the men from Topf & Söhne come to market their new gas ovens ("burn, cool, unload ... continuously") or when Höss delivers the instructions for the extermination of Hungary's Jews in 1944. The presentation of that scene reaches back directly to Arendt. When he returns to Auschwitz, Höss is informed he is working under the command of Eichmann (the real Höss had been receiving orders for the Final Solution from Eichmann since 1941).

Höss was hung in Poland in 1947. Arendt's description of Eichmann's execution in June 1962 could almost be the template for an alternative last glimpse of Höss in the film (as it is we last see Höss puking in a stairwell – another metaphor). Self-importantly and unrepentantly, weirdly unaware that he is delivering his own funeral oration, Eichmann re-commits to his atheistic Nazism and then, seemingly forgetting what he has just said, declares he will meet his comrades in the afterlife he has just renounced. It is in relation to this scene that Arendt uses her now famous expression: "It was as though in those last minutes he was summing up the lesson that this long course in human wickedness had taught us – the lesson of the fearsome, word-and-thought-defying banality of evil."<sup>10</sup>

But Arendt did not think that the banality of evil was timeless or somehow intrinsic to the human condition, as if we're always and forever destined to brush the crumbs off our tables as fellow human beings are incinerated. There was nothing normal about Adolf Eichmann – every time she uses the word "normal" in her reports it is in quotation marks. The context in which he lived and worked was profoundly abnormal – that was Arendt's point. The thoughtlessness, the banality, with which he and others executed their crimes had undone the categories in which good and evil could be understood.

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<sup>8</sup> Berger, "Francis Bacon," 464.

<sup>9</sup> Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, 49.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 250–1.

Racism, imperialism, colonialism, antisemitism, and finally, obscenely, Nazi totalitarianism and the Holocaust had wrecked the moral world, tearing up legal and political bannisters, shattering the ground upon which we stand. Arendt was describing a post-Holocaust world in which the capacity to make moral and political judgments had gone fatally awry. And she was asking the court in Jerusalem to do something about it.

The question Eichmann's trial posed for Arendt was eloquently put in survivor József Debreczeni's soaring account of his time in Auschwitz, *Cold Crematorium: Reporting from the Land of Auschwitz*, published in Paul Olchvary's excellent English translation this January, and so coinciding with the general release of *The Zone of Interest: "Why does it occur to so few of them that they are committing a crime?"*<sup>11</sup> Eichmann represented a new kind of criminal who had committed a new kind of crime – against humanity itself. For Arendt, the genocide of Europe's Jews was not only the latest and most horrific anti-semitic massacre; it was an attack against human plurality – the fact of our existence together – committed on the body of the Jewish people and executed through the political economy of a terrifying new industrialized technology. The worst had happened. The world had acceded to the existence of superfluous people – and their extermination. Modern genocide, in short, and she would never stop insisting upon this, was everyone's problem, not least because the world had not yet reckoned with the history that occasioned it and which, in her view, continued to create and recreate the conditions for mass atrocity across the late twentieth century. And still, there was Eichmann, vainly pleading that he "was not guilty in the sense of the indictment."

Eichmann's judges ruled against his predictable defence that he was following orders using a 1957 Israeli ruling earlier made by one them, Benjamin Halevi, in the case of an infamous atrocity committed against Palestinians by the IDF at Kafr-Qasim. Some orders are "manifestly unlawful" and "wave like a black flag above the order given, as a warning saying: 'forbidden,'" the ruling says: such "unlawfulness that pierces the eye and agitates the heart, if the eye be not blind nor the heart closed or corrupt."<sup>12</sup> Arendt, who supported both the judgment and Eichmann's death penalty, was not persuaded that this law could check crimes against humanity. Eichmann refused to follow orders just once when, toward the end of the war, Heinrich Himmler, knowing the Nazis were losing, ordered the death trains to be slowed down. Eichmann's black heart told him that the only law that mattered was the one that said the Jews should die, so the trains kept on running. The "normal" rules did not apply.

Arendt was troubled by the fragility of the ruling, partly because she knew its history. In 1956, on the eve of the Suez offensive, a curfew had been imposed on Palestinian villages on the border with the order to shoot everybody found outside their homes after 5.00pm. Labourers from Kafr-Qasim were working in their fields so did not hear of the order which wasn't announced in the village until 4.30pm. The soldiers asked their commanding officer, Colonel Issachar Shadmi, what they should do? His answer was: "May Allah have mercy on them!" This was taken as an order to kill: forty-eight of the returning villagers, including children and women, were murdered.

<sup>11</sup> Jozsef Debreczeni, *Cold Crematorium. Reporting from the Land of Auschwitz*, trans. Paul Olchvary (London: Jonathan Cape, 2024), 82.

<sup>12</sup> "Military Prosecutor vs. Major Malinki and others – Verdict," quoted Danny Orbach, "Black Flag at the Crossroads: The Kafr Qasim Political Trial (1957–58)," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 45, no. 3 (2013): 497. Arendt discusses the case in *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, 145–6, and in the Postscript, 270–91.

The “black flag” ruling was made in the trial of the soldiers responsible, who were duly charged and convicted. On appeal a year later, and following public opinion, these sentences were drastically reduced – it turned out a superior order could be mitigating after all. If that could happen in this case, Arendt worried, what was to stop other crimes against humanity slipping through the net? In the event, the officer who gave the order was acquitted and given a token fine of ten (Israeli) cents. As Arendt already knew in the late 1950s, the suspicion was that Shadmi was protected because he himself had been following orders from higher-up. In 2022, after a long campaign by historians and activists, the archives were finally partly opened.

The documents show that the soldiers thought they were part of a plan to forcibly drive out Palestinians from the center of the country to the neighboring West Bank, which was then under Jordanian control. The plan, dubbed the “Chafarperet” (“the mole” in Hebrew), was a continuation of the Nakba, the forced exodus of 700,000 Palestinians when the state of Israel was created.<sup>13</sup>

The law that it was imagined could do justice to Eichmann’s outrageous criminality, in other words, had already proved toothless in the face of a policy of terror and ethnic cleansing. The “black flag” is now part of International Humanitarian Law customary law, and it’s a good thing that it is. But what this cross-over history reveals is that in many contexts it remained, and remains, quite possible for it not to occur to people that they are committing a crime, even when others are doing their legal and moral best to tell them that this is exactly what they are doing. It’s not (or not only) mindlessness which is the issue here, but a deeply ingrained political cynicism which, in terms of Israel and Palestine, has partly brought us to where we are now. Writing to her friend and mentor, the philosopher Karl Jaspers, about the original Kafr -Qasim trial, Arendt noted that people were “afraid” that the decision to try the officer who gave the order had been taken: “People are afraid about this, because nobody know where the order originated; that is, people are afraid because they probably do know.”<sup>14</sup>

It is in this context that she would have recognized the high-pitched moral anguish that characterizes our political culture today as being as much a symptom, as an expression, of a moral and political confusion that runs right through from the twentieth century to the present: the accusations of absolute collective guilt, the claiming of righteous innocence, the good people taking responsibility for crimes that are not their own (“Could I, too, be Hedwig Höss?”) and the bad ones breathtakingly sanguine about the carnage they are wreaking. The law still struggles to catch up. The black flags ripple loudly in the wind, but as the Hamas attacks and the assault on Gaza show so starkly, many interpret the flags as calls for even more violence, not warnings that crimes against humanity are being committed. The very worst that could happen, Arendt said towards the end of her life, was that violence be finally normalized as the way to do politics. The worst is happening.

In this context too is no surprise that *The Zone of Interest* has become a lightning-rod for discussions about moral responsibility and nor, indeed, that the film cannot possibly

<sup>13</sup> Clothilde Mraffko, “The Ghosts of the Kafr Qasim Massacre Return to Haunt,” *Le Monde*, 5 August 2022.

<sup>14</sup> Hannah Arendt to Karl Jaspers, 16 November 1958, in *Correspondence of Hannah Arendt and Karl Jaspers, 1926–1962*, ed. Lotte Kohler and Hans Saner, trans. Robert and Rita Kimber (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1985), 358.



bear the weight of that discussion. It is in the events happening outside the film that the true documentary of our time is being told. In this respect, complicity is only half the story. Worse would be to resign ourselves to confused, impotent mindlessness.

It takes courage to understand when we are committing crimes, and to call out others when they do, which is why when you watch Jonathan Glazer deliver his Oscar's speech you can see his hands tremor a little. Courage and defiance – disobedience – interested Arendt just as much, indeed if not more than, Eichmann's banality. To the question: "*Why does it occur to so few of them that they are committing a crime?*" she would very often reply with some version of: "but it did to some!" Some did know, or admitted they knew, and acted on that knowledge: that's where we need to look.

For myself, the mythic banality of *The Zone of Interest* is redeemed by the scene in which we see the actor playing the young Aleksandra Bystron-Kolodziejczyk at the piano playing a song she has found on a score in the camp during one her apple-smuggling missions. The song was written by a prisoner named Joseph Wulf. The sound of a Yiddish voice cuts over the noises of the camp: "Our hearts are not yet cold. Hearts like the blazing sun." Documentary – history – intrudes; the metaphors are paused. Bystron-Kolodziejczyk died shortly after she met Glazer in 2016, when she told him the story of her defiance. In the final words of his Oscar's speech, he dedicated the award to her. "Best of all," wrote Hannah Arendt, "will be those who know only one thing for certain: that whatever else happens, as long as we live we shall have to live together with ourselves."

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## Notes on Contributor

**Lyndsey Stonebridge** is a professor of humanities and human rights at the University of Birmingham (UK) and a Fellow of the British Academy. Her books include: *Placeless People: Writing, Rights, and Refugees*, winner of the Modernist Studies Association Book Prize and a Choice Outstanding Academic Title; *The Judicial Imagination: Writing After Nuremberg*, which won the British Academy Rose Mary Crawshay Prize for English Literature; and the essay collection *Writing and Righting: Literature in the Age of Human Rights. We are Free to Change the World: Hannah Arendt's Lessons in Love and Disobedience* was published in January 2024.