

The Zone of Interest is about the danger of ignoring atrocities - including in Gaza

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If Jonathan Glazer's brave Oscar acceptance speech made you uncomfortable, that was the point

'Glazer wanted his film to provoke these kinds of uneasy thoughts.' Photograph: Caroline Brehman/EPA

It's an Oscar tradition: a serious political speech pierces the bubble of glamour and self-congratulation. Warring responses ensue. Some proclaim the speech an example of artists at their culture-shifting best; others an egotistical usurpation of an otherwise celebratory night. Then everyone moves on.

Yet I suspect that the impact of Jonathan Glazer's time-stopping [speech](#) at last Sunday's Academy Awards will be significantly more lasting, with its meaning and import analyzed for many years to come.

Glazer was accepting the award for best international film for *The Zone of Interest*, which is inspired by the real life of Rudolf Höss, commandant of the Auschwitz concentration camp. The film follows Höss's idyllic domestic life with his wife and children, which unfolds in a stately home and garden immediately adjacent to the concentration camp. Glazer has [described](#) his characters not as monsters but as "non-thinking, bourgeois, aspirational-careerist horrors", people who manage to turn profound evil into white noise.

Before Sunday's ceremony, *Zone* had already been heralded by several deities of the film world. Alfonso Cuarón, the Oscar-winning director of *Roma*, [called](#) it "probably the most important film of this century". Steven Spielberg [declared](#) it "the best Holocaust movie I've witnessed since my own" – a reference to *Schindler's List*, which swept the Oscars 30 years ago.

But while *Schindler's List*'s triumph represented a moment of profound validation and unity for the mainstream Jewish community, *Zone* arrives at a very different juncture. Debates are raging about how the Nazi atrocities should be remembered: should the Holocaust be seen exclusively as a Jewish catastrophe, or something more universal, with greater recognition for all the groups targeted for extermination? Was the Holocaust a unique rupture in European history, or a homecoming of earlier colonial genocides, along with a return of the techniques, logics and bogus race theories they developed and deployed? Does "never again" mean never again to anyone, or never again to the Jews, a pledge for which Israel is imagined as a kind of untouchable guarantee?

These wars over universalism, proprietary trauma, exceptionalism and [comparison](#) are at the heart of South Africa's landmark genocide case against Israel at the international court of justice, and they are also ripping through Jewish communities, congregations and families around the world. In one

action-packed minute, and in our moment of stifling self-censorship, Glazer fearlessly took clear positions on each of these controversies.

“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,’” Glazer said, quickly dispatching with the notion that comparing present-day horrors to Nazi crimes is inherently minimizing or relativizing, and leaving no doubt that his explicit intention was to draw out continuities between the monstrous past and our monstrous present.

And he went further: “We stand here as men who refute their Jewishness and the Holocaust being hijacked by an occupation which has led to conflict for so many innocent people, whether the victims of 7 October in Israel or the ongoing attack on Gaza.” For Glazer, Israel does not get a pass, nor is it ethical to use intergenerational Jewish trauma from the Holocaust as justification or cover for atrocities committed by the Israeli state today.

Others have made these points before, of course, and many have paid dearly, particularly if they are Palestinian, Arab, or Muslim. Glazer, interestingly, dropped his rhetorical bombs protected by the identity-equivalent of a suit of armor, standing before the glittering crowd as a successful white Jewish man – flanked by two other successful white Jewish men – who had, together, just made a film about the Holocaust. And that phalanx of privilege still didn’t save him from the flood of [smears](#) and [distortions](#) that misrepresented his words to wrongly claim that he had repudiated his Jewishness, which only served to underline Glazer’s point about those who turn victimhood into a weapon.

Equally significant was what we might think of as the speech’s meta-context: what preceded it and immediately followed. Those who only watched clips online missed this part of the experience, and that’s too bad. Because as soon as Glazer wrapped up his speech – dedicating the award to Aleksandra Bystroń-Kołodziejczyk, a Polish woman who secretly fed Auschwitz prisoners and fought the Nazis as a member of the Polish underground army – out came actors Ryan Gosling and Emily Blunt. Without so much as a commercial break to allow us to emotionally recover, we were instantly jettisoned into a “Barbenheimer” bit, with Gosling telling Blunt that her film about the invention of a weapon of mass destruction had ridden Barbie’s pink coat tails to box-office success, and Blunt accusing Gosling of painting on his abs.

At first, I feared that this impossible juxtaposition would undercut Glazer’s intervention: how could the mournful and wrenching realities he had just invoked coexist with that kind of California high-school prom energy? Then it hit me: like the fuming defenders of Israel’s “right to defend itself”, the sparkly artifice that encased the speech was also helping to make his point.

“Genocide becomes ambient to their lives”: that is how Glazer has [described](#) the atmosphere he attempted to capture in his film, in which his characters attend to their daily dramas – sleepless kids, a hard-to-please mother, casual infidelities – in the shadow of smokestacks belching out human remains. It’s not that these people don’t know that an industrial-scale killing machine whirs just beyond their garden wall. They have simply learned to lead contented lives with ambient genocide.

It is this that feels most contemporary, most of this terrible moment, about Glazer’s staggering film. More than five months into the daily slaughter in Gaza, and with Israel brazenly [ignoring](#) the [orders](#) of the international court of justice, and western governments gently scolding Israel while shipping it more arms, genocide is becoming ambient once more – at least for those of us fortunate enough to live on the safe sides of the many walls that carve up our world. We face the risk of it grinding on, becoming the soundtrack of modern life. Not even the main event.

Glazer has repeatedly stressed that his film’s subject is not the Holocaust, with its well-known

horrors and historical particularities, but something more enduring and pervasive: the human capacity to live with holocausts and other atrocities, to make peace with them, draw benefit from them.

When the film premiered last May, before Hamas's 7 October attack and before Israel's unending assault on Gaza, this was a thought experiment that could be contemplated with a degree of intellectual distance. The audience members at the Cannes film festival who gave *The Zone of Interest* a rapturous six-minute [standing ovation](#) likely felt safe toying with Glazer's challenge. Perhaps some looked out at the azure Mediterranean and considered how they had themselves gotten comfortable with, even uninterested in, news of boats packed with desperate people being left to drown just down the coast. Or maybe they thought about the private jets they had taken to France, and the way flight emissions are entangled in the disappearance of food sources for impoverished people far away, or the extinction of species, or the potential disappearance of entire nations.

Glazer wanted his film to provoke these kinds of uneasy thoughts. He has [said](#) that he saw "the darkening world around us, and I had a feeling I had to do something about our similarities to the perpetrators rather than the victims." He wanted to remind us that annihilation is never as far away as we might think.

But by the time *Zone* made it into theatres in December, Glazer's subtle challenge for audiences to contemplate their inner Hösses cut a lot closer to the bone. Most artists try desperately to tap into the zeitgeist, but *Zone*, whose theatrical release has been muted given the initial response, may well have suffered from something rare in the history of cinema: a surplus of relevance, an oversupply of up-to-the-minuteness.

One of the film's most memorable scenes comes when a package filled with clothing and lingerie stolen from the camp's prisoners arrives at the Höss home. The commandant's wife, Hedwig (played almost too convincingly by Sandra Hüller), decrees that everyone, including the servants, can choose one item. She keeps a fur coat for herself, even trying on the lipstick she finds in a pocket.

Everyone I know who has seen the film can think of little but Gaza

It is the intimacy of the entanglements with the dead that are so chilling. And I have no idea how anyone can watch that scene and not think of the Israeli soldiers who have filmed themselves rifling through the [lingerie](#) of Palestinians whose homes they are occupying in Gaza, or boasting of [stealing](#) shoes and jewelry for their fiances and girlfriends, or taking group selfies with Gaza's rubble as the backdrop. (One such photo went [viral](#) after the writer Benjamin Kunkel added the caption "The Zone of Pinterest".)

There are so many such echoes that, today, Glazer's masterpiece feels more like a documentary than a metaphor. It's almost as if, by filming *Zone* in the style of a reality show, with hidden cameras throughout the house and garden (Glazer has [referred](#) to it as "Big Brother in the Nazi House"), the movie anticipated the first live-streamed genocide, the version filmed by its perpetrators.

Zone offers an extreme portrait of a family whose placid and pretty life flows directly from the machinery devouring human life next door. This is most emphatically not a portrait of people in denial: they know what is happening on the other side of the wall, and even the kids play with scavenged human teeth. The concentration camp and the family home are not separate entities; they are conjoined. The wall of the family's garden – creating an enclosed space for the children to play, and shade for the pool – is the same wall that, on the other side, encloses the camp.

Everyone I know who has seen the film can think of little but Gaza. To say this is not to claim a one-to-one equation or comparison with Auschwitz. No two genocides are identical: Gaza is not a factory deliberately designed for mass murder, nor are we close to the scale of the Nazi death toll. But the whole reason the postwar edifice of international humanitarian law was erected was so that we would have the tools to collectively identify patterns before history repeats at scale. And some of the patterns – the wall, the ghetto, the mass killing, the [repeatedly stated eliminationist intent](#), the mass starvation, the pillaging, the joyful dehumanization, and the deliberate humiliation – are repeating.

So, too, are the ways that genocide becomes ambient, the way those of us a little further away from the walls can block the images, and tune out the cries, and just ... carry on. That's why the Academy made Glazer's point for him when it hard-cut to Barbenheimer – itself a trivialization of mass slaughter – without missing a beat. Atrocity is once again becoming ambient. (One might see the entire Oscar spectacle as a kind of live-action extension of The Zone of Interest, a sort of Denialism on Ice.)

What do we do to interrupt the momentum of trivialization and normalization? That is the question so many of us are struggling with right now. My students ask me. I ask my friends and comrades. So many are offering their responses with relentless protests, civil disobedience, ["uncommitted" votes](#), event interruptions, aid convoys to Gaza, fundraising for refugees, works of radical art. But it's not enough.

And as genocide fades further into the background of our culture, some people grow too desperate for any of these efforts. Watching the Oscars on Sunday, where Glazer was alone among the parade of wealthy and powerful speakers across the podium to so much as mention Gaza, I remembered that exactly two weeks had passed since [Aaron Bushnell](#), a 25-year-old member of the US air force, [self-immolated](#) outside the Israeli embassy in Washington.

I don't want anyone else to deploy that horrifying protest tactic; there has already been far too much death. But we should spend some time sitting with the statement that Bushnell left, words I have come to view as a haunting, contemporary coda to Glazer's film:

"Many of us like to ask ourselves, 'What would I do if I was alive during slavery? Or the Jim Crow south? Or apartheid? What would I do if my country was committing genocide?' The answer is, you're doing it. Right now."

Naomi Klein

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P.S.

- The Guardian. Thu 14 Mar 2024 11.00:

<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2024/mar/14/the-zone-of-interest-auschwitz-gaza-genocide>

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- As the crisis escalates...

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