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EMPATHY SUSPENDED: IMMANENT ALIENATION IN JONATHAN GLAZER'S *THE ZONE OF INTEREST*

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Abstract

This article analyzes Jonathan Glazer's *The Zone of Interest* (2023) as an original spectatorship experience that moves beyond the traditional dichotomy of empathy and alienation in film theory. It argues that, unlike Brecht's didactic alienation, Glazer's film produces what is referred to here as "immanent alienation," an effect which emerges from the narrative's own aesthetic texture. The article employs qualitative textual analysis within a two-stage theoretical framework. The first stage, a phenomenological deconstruction, examines how the film constructs the experience of alienation through two main aesthetic strategies: the "machinic gaze," which generates a surveillant visual regime; and "acousmatic hell," which renders the horror of the film's setting invisible yet continuously audible. The second stage, a hermeneutic discussion, interprets the ethical and philosophical implications of this experience through the frameworks of Jean-Luc Nancy, Susan Sontag, Jean-François Lyotard, and Hannah Arendt. The study demonstrates how the film, by pressing against the limits of representation, shifts the responsibility for moral judgment from the screen to the spectator's own conscience.

Keywords: Immanent alienation, alienation, Holocaust, empathy, identification

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EMPATİ ASKIDA: JONATHAN GLAZER'IN THE ZONE OF INTEREST'*İNDE İÇKİN YABANCILAŞMA*

Öz

Bu makale, Jonathan Glazer'ın *The Zone of Interest* (2023) filmini, sinema kuramındaki geleneksel empati-yabancılaştırma ikiliğinin ötesine yerleşen özgün bir seyir deneyimi olarak ele almaktadır. Çalışmada, Brecht'in didaktik yabancılaştırma etkisinin aksine, filmin anlatısal ve estetik dokusundan türeyen ve burada "içkin yabancılaşma" olarak kavramsallaştırılan bir etkinin üretildiği savunulmaktadır. Bu argümanı çözümlemek için nitel metin analizi yöntemi benimsenmiş ve iki aşamalı bir kuramsal çerçeve kurulmuştur. İlk aşamada yapılan fenomenolojik çözümleme, filmin bu deneyimi iki temel estetik strateji aracılığıyla kurduğunu göstermektedir: Gözetim estetiği yaratan "makine bakışı" ve kampın dehşetini görünmez kılıp işitsel düzeyde duyulur hâle getiren "akusmatik cehennem". İkinci aşamada yürütülen hermenötik tartışma ise Jean-Luc Nancy, Susan Sontag, Jean-François Lyotard ve Hannah Arendt gibi düşünürlerin kuramsal yaklaşımları ışığında bu deneyimin etik ve felsefi boyutlarını yorumlamaktadır. Analiz, temsilin sınırlarını zorlayan filmin ahlaki yargı sorumluluğunu perdeden izleyicinin vicdanına doğru kaydırdığını ortaya koymaktadır.

Anahtar Sözcükler: İçkin yabancılaşma, yabancılaşma, Holokost, empati, özdeşleşme

Introduction

The relationship between cinema and its spectator has long turned on a basic tension. One side pulls the viewer toward "immersion" or "identification," drawing them into the story and encouraging emotional alignment with the characters. The other side pushes back through strategies of "alienation," which disrupt the illusion and create a critical distance. How a film negotiates the space between these two impulses, through its own aesthetic and ethical choices, is far from obvious. Jonathan Glazer's *The Zone of Interest* (2023) brings this question sharply into focus and, in the process, tests the cinematic limits of representing the Holocaust. The film follows the outwardly mundane life of Rudolf Höss, commandant of the Auschwitz camp, and his family, who inhabit a pastoral home built directly against the camp wall. The work's unsettling force comes from the jarring contrast between this carefully maintained domestic world and the organised machinery of mass murder operating incessantly just beyond it.

Glazer's film deliberately turns away from the familiar narrative codes of Holocaust cinema: witnessing the victim, staging dramatic confrontation, or offering catharsis. Instead, it approaches the Holocaust from an unusual angle, embedding the viewer in the everyday life of the perpetrators. Films told from the Nazi perspective are not new, yet Glazer's method diverges sharply from earlier attempts. His most striking choice is his absolute refusal to show violence. Rather than appearing onscreen, violence is pushed into a constant, oppressive layer of sound that shapes the film's unsettling tone. Glazer has remarked that this strategy creates "two separate films": the one we watch, which follows the banal bourgeois routines of the Höss family, and the one we hear, which carries the camp's uninterrupted terror (O'Hagan, 2023). This split is strengthened by a vivarium aesthetic, achieved through hidden static cameras – the setup that Glazer himself describes as "Big Brother in a Nazi house" (O'Hagan, 2023). The cameras, fixed in place like a monitoring system, never move. Long takes quietly observe the family's routines, and the camera's machinic gaze echoes the moral indifference that defines the household.

Glazer's concern is not to explore the psychology of Höss and his family. The film's cold distance does not seek to understand the Nazis; instead, it exposes the unsettling fact that a family can carry on with ordinary, even banal, routines while atrocity unfolds a few metres away.

Claude Lanzmann, director of *Shoah* (1985), argued that asking "Why were the Jews killed?" and trying to make the answer "understandable" through psychological or historical reasoning is obscene (Lanzmann et al., 1991, p. 478). Glazer adopts a similar stance. He refuses to explain how the Höss family managed to live a "normal" life adjacent to such monstrosity. He does not probe their motivations or inner worlds. He simply presents the situation without commentary.

This article argues that *The Zone of Interest*, by dismantling traditional bridges of empathy, creates an original anti-empathic spectatorship experience, termed in this study as "immanent alienation." To ground this concept, the article first outlines a type of alienation that, unlike Brecht's effect, emerges from the film's own aesthetic texture. It then examines how the film constructs this experience through two key formal strategies: its cinematography, which produces a machinic gaze (echoing Glazer's description of the setup as "Big Brother in a Nazi house"), and its sound design, described here as an acousmatic hell that renders the camp's violence invisible yet constantly audible, drawing on Michel Chion's framework. The final part of the analysis discusses the philosophical and ethical consequences of this immanent alienation experience through the theoretical frameworks of Jean-Luc Nancy's "forbidden representation," Susan Sontag's "ethics of spectatorship," Jean-François Lyotard's "differend," and Hannah Arendt's concept of the "banality of evil." The aim is to show how Glazer's film pushes representational limits in a way that shifts moral judgment from the screen to the spectator's own conscience.

Theoretical Groundwork: Traditions of Engagement and Alienation in Film Theory

The interaction between the spectator and the on-screen narrative has traditionally been framed in terms of two poles. On one side stands the tradition of engagement, rooted in Aristotelian principles of identification and catharsis, which aims not only at emotional release but at moral clarification and ethical refinement, as the spectator works through pity and fear in relation to the characters (Nussbaum, 1992, p. 287). Even in this ethically enriched understanding, Aristotelian catharsis assumes a sustained continuity between spectator and represented world. It is precisely this continuity that Brecht later sought to interrupt. At the opposite end lies Brecht's Epic Theatre, built on the alienation effect (Verfremdungseffekt), which distances the spectator from the hypnot-

ic pull of identification and recasts the spectator as a critical observer approaching the narrative analytically (Brecht, 1966, p. 192). While Aristotelian aesthetics encourages affective alignment and ethical reflection from within the narrative, Brecht's political project disrupts this relation and highlights the constructed nature of representation, prompting the spectator to recognise and interrogate the ideological mechanisms beneath cinematic illusion.

Building on Brecht's ethico-political intervention, 1970s film theory conceptualised this alienating aesthetic under the label of "counter-cinema." Peter Wollen (2016, p. 365) characterises the work of directors such as J. L. Godard in terms of "seven cardinal virtues," set against what he calls Hollywood's "seven deadly sins." The contrast hinges on narrative intransitivity versus transitivity, estrangement versus identification, and un-pleasure versus pleasure. As Wollen (2016, p. 366) notes, whereas classical cinema draws spectators into the story through coherent narrative flow and strong characterisation, counter-cinema makes use of techniques such as direct address, discontinuous narration, and inconsistent characters to distance viewers deliberately and reposition them as critical observers.

During the same period, psychoanalytic film theory, particularly as it developed around the journal Screen, examined the spectator–screen relationship through unconscious processes. Christian Metz (1982, p. 49) argues that the cinema screen functions as a mirror, echoing the Lacanian "mirror stage," temporarily giving coherence to the spectator's fragmented sense of self, and that spectators organise their desire by identifying with the camera's gaze. The concept of "suture" describes how the viewer is "stitched" into this imaginary world and interpellated as a passive subject within the ideological structure of the cinematic apparatus (Oudart, 1977, pp. 35–47; Heath, 1977, pp. 48–76). Jean-Louis Baudry (1975, p. 307) extends this view by comparing the cinema auditorium – the darkened room, the immobilised spectator, the projector – to Plato's cave, arguing that the apparatus creates an "illusion" that ideologically positions the spectator. Laura Mulvey (1975, p. 11) later added a feminist dimension, showing how the cinematic gaze operates as a "male gaze" that reproduces patriarchal ideology by fetishising the female image.

From the 1980s onward, the psychoanalytic "Grand Theory" – with its ambition to explain spectatorship through universal notions like desire and pleasure – met growing resistance. Critics began turn-

ing to the more concrete cognitive and emotional processes that shape how viewers engage with films. Noël Carroll (1988, pp. 193–194) argues that psychoanalysis's broad and unverifiable concepts, like "desire" and "pleasure" are inadequate for explaining the specific emotions that films create. In The Philosophy of Horror (1990, p. 96), he challenges the idea of wholesale identification, arguing instead for a basic emotional "asymmetry" between spectator and character: because the viewer often knows more than the character, their affective states do not align. Building on this critique, theorists such as Murray Smith (1995, pp. 102–106) break spectatorship into finer cognitive stages: recognition, alignment, and allegiance. Carl Plantinga (2009, pp. 98–100) similarly stresses a more distanced relation, maintaining that viewers typically "care for" characters (sympathy) rather than "share" their emotions (empathy). Torben Grodal (1999, p. 1) proposes that emotional and cognitive responses operate within a psychosomatic unity and that watching a film is an "embodied mental flow." Neuroscientific work has supported this view, showing how mirror neurons help shape spectators' bodily responses (Grodal & Kramer, 2010).

Alongside these debates on empathy, identification, and cognitive engagement, Gilles Deleuze offers a broader philosophical horizon by dividing cinematic history into two regimes: the movement-image and the time-image. This distinction marks a shift from action-driven narrative structures to modes of cinema in which perception, hesitation, and thought become central, providing a useful orientation for understanding how contemporary film reshapes the spectator's relation to the cinematic world.[1]

Defining Immanent Alienation: A Theory of Affective Estrangement

In contemporary cinema, the long-standing divide between identification and alienation has become increasingly porous. Hollywood films

[1] For Deleuze's detailed articulation of these image regimes, see *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image* (1986) and *Cinema 2: The Time-Image* (1989). In his account, the transition from the movement-image to the time-image marks not only a break in narrative logic but also a shift in spectatorship, as the viewer increasingly becomes a witness or voyeur to situations in which action no longer governs perception. This transformation offers a philosophical backdrop for considering how modern cinema reconfigures the viewer's position within the cinematic world.

routinely employ estranging techniques, while arthouse films often lean on mechanisms of identification. This convergence sets the stage for examining how works such as *The Zone of Interest* reconfigure Brechtian alienation and interrupt traditional pathways of empathy. Glazer's approach unsettles established binaries in film theory. Although he creates a perceptual distance between the spectator and what they witness, he does not do so in a Brechtian manner by breaking the cinematic illusion. Instead, he builds an exceedingly realistic and coherent narrative world. Here, alienation arises not from external intervention but from within the film's own unsettling and hyperreal texture. This paradox – producing an alienating effect with the tools of immersive cinema – reveals the limits of existing theoretical frameworks for explaining certain strands of contemporary filmmaking.

To clarify the discussion, the analysis distinguishes between two levels of alienation. The first, which this study terms *transcendent alienation*, reflects the classic Brechtian model in which the director intervenes from outside the diegesis, consciously fracturing the cinematic illusion. Devices such as breaking the fourth wall, directing an actor's gaze straight at the audience, or exposing the apparatus of filmmaking all fall into this category (Uhde, 1974, p. 29). What drives this strategy is an epistemic distance between the viewer and the narrative: the spectator is constantly aware that what they are watching is a fiction. This awareness shifts their engagement into a more reflective and intellectual register. In effect, the film instructs the viewer, "This is a fiction; now consider the social reality it points toward."

The Zone of Interest adopts a different strategy, which this study terms *immanent alienation*. Here, alienation does not arise from an external disruption but from the film's own aesthetic fabric and the quietly unsettling atmosphere it sustains. In contrast to transcendent alienation, this mode operates on an ontological level. The spectator is not expelled from the film's realistic world; if anything, they are drawn deeper into it. Yet within this world, emotional alignment with the characters never takes place. Instead, the viewer encounters a pronounced moral and affective boundary that cannot be crossed. Glazer does not invite identification with Rudolf Höss or his family. The viewer observes them as an anthropologist might: close enough to perceive every detail, but never able to enter their world. This stance displaces passive emotional identification and provokes a more active intellectual and moral response.

The effect Glazer produces – immersing the spectator in an unsettling reality rather than breaking the cinematic illusion – echoes Catherine Wheatley's (2009) idea of *cinematic unpleasure* in her work on Michael Haneke. Wheatley states that this term signifies "not simply the frustration of the pleasure drive, but the mobilisation of a series of 'negative' emotions on the part of the spectator, such as discomfort, embarrassment, anger and guilt" (2009, p. 78). This "unpleasure" arises from the deliberate frustration of the spectator's expectation of pleasure and catharsis from conventional cinema. According to Wheatley, this condition forces the spectator out of passive consumption, compelling them to question the source of the film's discomfort and to "engage rationally with the on-screen image" (2009, p. 78). The experience produced by immanent alienation operates in a similar way. It does not seek to create intellectual distance but instead forces the spectator to establish an ethical relationship with the events depicted. The result is a profoundly unsettling encounter that elevates the viewer's relationship with the film to an existential and moral level. Wheatley's concept describes the *affective* outcome – discomfort, anger, guilt – generated in Haneke's cinema. *Immanent alienation*, by contrast, designates the aesthetic and ontological mechanism through which such feelings arise. Unpleasure is what the spectator experiences; immanent alienation is how the film produces that experience by confronting the viewer, already immersed in a realistic world, with the moral void that underlies it. Thus, one concept concerns the phenomenology of spectatorship, while the other identifies the representational strategy that makes that phenomenology possible.

Analytical Framework: A Dual Phenomenological and Hermeneutic Method

This study employs a qualitative textual analysis, a method commonly used in film studies, to deconstruct the aesthetic and narrative strategies that create an anti-empathic effect on the spectator in Jonathan Glazer's *The Zone of Interest*. This method requires examining a film not only through its content but also through the formal elements that construct its meaning. As Mikos (2014, p. 412) notes, every film analysis arises from a specific theoretical perspective and serves a particular cognitive purpose. This analysis aims to utilise the film's aesthetic structures (cinematography, sound design, etc.) as tools to uncover the "embodied experience" and "philosophical inquiries" that underlie them. To pursue this aim, the study adopts a Dual Phenomenological and Hermeneutic

Method as its analytical backbone. The approach examines the experience of "immanent alienation" generated by the film through two main stages:

I. Phenomenological Deconstruction:

This stage of the analysis examines the immediate, bodily, and sensory experience the film elicits from the spectator. Here, the film's cold, detached cinematography is considered under *The Machinic Gaze*, while its unsettling sound design is discussed under *The Acousmatic Hell*. The aim is to clarify how these formal elements work together to shape the experience of immanent alienation.

II. Hermeneutic Discussion:

The second stage explores the philosophical and ethical implications of the experience outlined earlier. Under the heading *The Responsibility of the Gaze*, the analysis interprets the film through the frameworks of Jean-Luc Nancy's *crisis of representation*, Susan Sontag's *ethics of spectatorship*, Jean-François Lyotard's *differend*, and Hannah Arendt's *banality of evil*. Through this, the study demonstrates how the film suspends conventional mechanisms of empathy and positions the spectator within a more demanding moral and interpretive stance.

Phenomenological Deconstruction: The Architecture of Immanent Alienation

The Machinic Gaze

The camera's gaze is the basic mechanism that shapes how the spectator relates to the emotional world of the characters. Traditional cinema relies on a hypnotic bond between the viewer's eye and the image, encouraging identification and emotional alignment, whereas *The Zone of Interest* breaks sharply from this aesthetic. Here, spectatorship is defined not by the pleasure of looking or emotional proximity, but by a distant and unsettling mode of witnessing. The basis of this regime is the aesthetic Jonathan Glazer describes as "an observational film… almost like Big Brother in a Nazi house" (O'Hagan, 2023). To achieve this, Glazer and cinematographer Łukasz Żal shot the Höss home and garden with ten simultaneously operating cameras and without artificial lighting, presenting the scenes as if the viewer were watching a Big Brother-style feed from inside the Nazi domestic sphere (Canfield, 2023). As Glazer explains:

> We needed to retreat as a unit, not to be present in the filming, to watch the characters in their environment, which had to be completely credible to them in 360 degrees. The cameras needed to record everything simultaneously so that we were not ever moving a camera and repeating the same action. We would capture all of our angles at once in order to achieve that sense of present tense (Canfield, 2023).

Glazer's aesthetic turns the Höss family's life from fictional drama into a bare object of observation. This heightened sense of reality draws on the "fly-on-the-wall" technique, rooted in the direct cinema movement that reshaped documentary practice in the 1950s and 1960s. Enabled by new portable technologies, the movement's core promise was to make the apparatus disappear, giving the spectator an unobstructed view of reality and positioning them as a factual witness. Glazer's shift of this documentary rhetoric into fiction is a deliberate gesture that changes its function. The choice serves a dual, intertwined aesthetic and ethical aim that shapes "immanent alienation." Aesthetically, it pulls the spectator into a hyper-realistic world; ethically, it creates a moral void at its centre, preventing emotional attachment to the characters. In most fiction films, viewers retain an awareness of the work's constructed nature, but in *The Zone of Interest* this awareness becomes markedly blurred, imposing a raw sense of reality on the spectator.

This stark realism grows out of a set of deliberate formal choices. The camera keeps its distance and remains fixed, offering almost no close-ups. Medium and long shots dominate, and the length of the takes presents the family's routines in something close to real time, deliberately avoiding the usual techniques that invite emotional proximity. The result is twofold: the long takes draw attention away from the visual and toward the auditory, where the sounds of the camp create a disturbing counterpoint to the on-screen normality. At the same time, the CCTV-like aesthetic sets up an emotional barrier between spectator and character. The raw visual atmosphere is reinforced by the exclusive use of practical light, which, as cinematographer Łukasz Żal notes, gives the frame a cold, emotionally "flat" appearance (Sony Electronics Inc., 2024). Rather than opening a window onto the characters' inner world, this aesthetic produces a dull, affectless surface that mirrors their moral emptiness and intensifies the experience of immanent alienation.

This "flat" style also shapes the film's framing, which is almost always rigidly symmetrical and centrally composed – a choice that disqui-

etingly aligns with the authoritarian and anti-empathic logic of the Nazi system. The resulting gaze is, like the system it mirrors, a machinic one. Windows, doors, and fences constantly form frames within the frame, boxing in the family's life and visualising their moral self-segregation. At this point, Pascal Bonitzer's idea of the "blind field" (le champ aveugle) is essential (2011, p. 70). For Bonitzer, the force of the frame comes not only from what appears within it, but also from the offscreen space (hors-champ) that loads the visible image with threat or desire (2011ms, p. 72). Each time we look at the Höss family's garden, the "blind field" just outside the image – the Auschwitz camp – saturates the scene with its underlying meaning. Glazer draws on this blind field primarily through sound, compelling the spectator to confront the horror that lies beyond the frame.

The most striking use of this machinic gaze is the frequent horizontal division of the frame. The lower part contains the Höss family's pastoral "paradise," while the upper part reveals the industrial "hell" of Auschwitz. This composition inverts the sacred meaning of Renaissance paintings, where the divine realm (represented by hope and salvation) is placed above the earthly. In *The Zone of Interest*, the space above symbolises annihilation and absolute injustice. By placing the spectator within a familiar symmetrical order but subverting its content, Glazer ensures that the shadow of hell never lifts from the pastoral life below. This aesthetic structure invites the spectator neither to traditional identification nor to Brechtian alienation. Instead, the entire cinematographic aesthetic removes the spectator from a position of emotional integration. It transforms them into a shocked witness who cannot for a moment lose their moral awareness. This is precisely what immanent alienation is: an alienating effect that arises not from an external intervention but from within the film's own world, trapping the spectator inside the narrative while simultaneously detaching them from it morally.

In essence, Glazer's cinematography mirrors the characters' profound apathy toward the genocide. The camera's unemotional gaze reflects their moral indifference, and the formal emptiness the spectator encounters quietly echoes the void at the heart of the characters. Form, in this sense, makes the viewer feel the moral collapse embedded in the film's content. Yet this dominant visual regime is broken only a few times, most notably in the night scenes of the Polish girl who secretly leaves apples for the prisoners, filmed with a thermal camera. This choice briefly

suspends the film's hyper-realism and moves the viewer into a more spiritual, abstract visual space. In a world morally frozen and "dead," the girl's small acts of kindness appear literally as pockets of "heat" and "life." The alienation here works differently from the film's main mode: it becomes a transcendent intervention that disrupts the established rules of realism. This Brechtian gesture suggests that acts of conscience cannot be captured with the same cold, machinic gaze that records the banality of evil, and that such moments may require a different, more abstract cinematic language.

The Acousmatic Hell

A second pillar of the film's immanent alienation lies in the unsettling way sound interacts with the image. In *Audio-Vision: Sound on Screen* (2019), Michel Chion emphasises that sound does far more than accompany an image; it reshapes and even redefines how we perceive it. This is what he terms "added value" (2019, p. 202): the capacity of sound to load an image with meaning that appears to have been there all along. The exchange works both ways. As Chion writes, "Sound shows us the image differently from what the image shows alone, and the image likewise makes us hear sound differently than if the sound were ringing out in the dark" (2019, p. 19). In most films, added value reinforces immersion by pairing images with congruent sounds. *The Zone of Interest* turns this principle inside out. By layering pastoral domestic scenes with the distant screams, gunshots, commands, and furnace roar of Auschwitz, the film uses added value not to create harmony but to produce a sustained tension between what is seen and what is heard.

Chion's concept of added value can be understood through a logic that resembles Sergei Eisenstein's theory of dialectical montage. For Eisenstein (1977, p. 49), meaning emerges not from the simple addition of two images (A and B) but from their collision, which produces a new synthesis (C). A similar structure appears in Chion's account of how sound (B) and image (A) converge to generate meaning. Yet, while Eisenstein's images collide like a chemical reaction that creates tension, the meeting of sound and image for Chion is closer to an alchemical fusion – a merging in which the two elements combine to reshape the spectator's perception.

In *The Zone of Interest*, we watch a carefully tended domestic world while, from beyond the garden wall, the fear and suffering of the camp

seep into the film's sonic space. The film builds meaning not simply through what is shown but, more crucially, through what remains unseen. As cinematographer Łukasz Żal has remarked (Sony, 2024), what sits outside the frame can sometimes matter more than anything within it. The camp's sonic presence – screams, gunshots, shouted orders, the steady roar of the furnace – draws on Michel Chion's idea of acousmatic sound, defined as "sound heard without its cause or source being visible" (2019, p. 72). We never see the horror; we only hear it. And because the source of these sounds is withheld, our imagination is repeatedly pulled toward the unseen space they imply. This choice anchors the film's sound design and shapes the unsettling effect the film achieves.

These acousmatic sounds can be further clarified through two concepts drawn from Chion's theory: "offscreen sound" (2019, p. 73) and "extension" (2019, p. 84). The sounds of the camp are not akin to non-diegetic music; they originate just beyond the frame yet still belong to the diegetic world. This is what Chion terms "offscreen sound" (2019, p. 73). The effect produced by these sounds is what he calls "extension," defined as "the degree of openness and breadth of the physical space suggested by sounds beyond the borders of the visual field" (2019, p. 85). Put differently, the sounds make us sense a vast, unseen and terrifying geography stretching beyond the garden we see.

These "offscreen sounds" create a spatial extension beyond the garden wall, building an immense and ominous geography that presses against the pastoral images. When the tranquillity of the garden merges with the brutality carried by the soundscape, the family's daily life takes on a monstrous, almost obscene quality. This constant sonic presence lays bare the moral void within the image, the absence of empathy, and the characters' mechanisms of denial. In this way, sound expands the setting beyond a simple house and garden, turning it into a sterile, indifferent space that exists beside hell. Through this strategy, sound stops functioning as mere accompaniment. It becomes a structural element that gives shape to the film's unseen yet dominant reality. One could even say that in *The Zone of Interest*, sound is the film's true character: the inescapable presence of the victims who never appear on screen.

The rawness of the film's images is echoed in its diegetic sound. Instead of the clean, carefully controlled audio typical of conventional cinema, the noises inside the Höss house are recorded as they occur, complete with the space's own acoustics. According to sound designer

Johnnie Burn, this choice grows out of the same observational logic that shaped the film's multi-camera system:

> All those things were happening, and 10 different cameras were picking up, but there were also 20 different microphones, and they were positioned very carefully to collect all of that. So the process of sound was one part, following the action around the house to be in the room, but also very much to say, well, this other thing is still going on. It is that constancy that immerses you in their house and also takes away from multiple camera angles. The sound gives a constant flow through that. That is just what makes it feel so credible and so overwhelmingly alarming that it is so mundane and normal, and you do hear someone banging a drum next door, and you do hear the baby crying, and yet, all of those layers of detail of sound are juxtaposed against this horrific thing (Chilingerian, 2024).

As Burn notes, this raw and continuous layer of sound gives the family's everyday routines a blunt sense of realism, while the untreated acoustics subtly unsettle the cinematic illusion the spectator is accustomed to. This tension becomes another facet of immanent alienation: it interrupts identification and holds the viewer in a steady position of witnessing. Rather than disrupting the illusion from the outside, as in Brecht, Glazer produces a conflict embedded within the film's own world. The family's mundane domestic scenes and the sounds from the camp never cohere; they remain out of joint in a way that generates a constant, irreconcilable strain. What the viewer hears continually contradicts what they see, preventing any full absorption into the image.

The film's soundscape also draws the spectator toward what could be considered a moral trap. Constant exposure to the background sounds of horror throughout the film carries the risk of cognitive habituation and desensitisation for the viewer. The possibility that the initially shocking sounds of gunshots and screams may become less noticeable over time makes the spectator feel the fragility of their own moral stance[2]. To get used to the horror, to choose not to hear, or to filter it out involuntarily ceases to be an evil specific to the Nazis on screen; it emerges within the

[2] For a different reading of how the film's sound shapes spectator attention and perception, see Talijan (2025). Talijan challenges the frequently repeated "two separate films" –one we see and one we hear– arguing instead that sound and image form a single, continuous atmospheric field rather than two representational layers.

spectator's own experience as an unsettling potential belonging to the darker side of human nature. Thus, the film leaves the spectator to confront the terrifying possibility of drawing a parallel between their own indifference and that of the Höss family.

Hermeneutic Discussion: The Responsibility of the Gaze

Traditionally, following Plato, representation has been understood as a copy of something. Consider a table: once we sculpt it, we now have both the table and its sculpture – a diminished version, a substitute that stands in its place when the original is absent. Yet the sculpture remains an imitation of the real table. Jean-Luc Nancy challenges this framework by arguing that the prefix "re-" is not repetitive but intensive. Representation, for him, is not a copy or a stand-in for an original; it is an "accentuated presentation" shaped for a particular gaze (Nancy, 2005, pp. 35–36). Rather than replacing a presence, true representation presents the absence that lies at the heart of presence itself (2005, p. 32). It becomes the "presentation of what does not amount to a presence, given and completed" (2005, p. 33), opening a space for meaning that prevents the world from hardening into an inert, undifferentiated mass. For Nancy, the task is not to abandon representation but to transform its nature.

Within this framework, Nancy describes Nazism as a project of "super-representation" (2005, p. 38). It was a regime that aimed to create a world "without fissure, without abyss, without withdrawn invisibility" (2005, p. 38) – a realm of total and seamless presence. The Aryan body was imagined as the purest expression of this ideal: an idea made indistinguishable from presence itself, leaving no gap or remainder for interpretation. In this sense, the Aryan ideal functioned as a modern idol[3], a "fabricated god" that claimed a complete and self-contained presence (2005, p. 39). In this worldview, the Jew appeared as the Kulturzerstörer (destroyer of civilisation), the figure said to contaminate this supposed authenticity and thereby threaten representation itself (2005, p. 40).

The extermination camps were the ultimate site where this project of super-representation staged what Nancy calls the "spectacle of the

[3] According to Jean-Luc Nancy (2005, p. 30): "The idol is a fabricated god, not the representation of one, and the contemptible and false character of its divinity derives from the fact that it is fabricated. It is an image to be valued for itself and not for what it represents, an image that is itself a divine presence and must, for that reason, be made of the most precious and durable materials (wood that is rot-resistant, gold, silver, and the like)".

annihilation of what, in its eyes, is non-representation." Their purpose was not merely to kill, but to enact the "devastation of representation, or even of the possibility of representing." This took place through the systematic erasure of the "face," the locus of singularity and meaning. As one survivor observed, the "anonymous, the faceless ones, survived" (2005, pp. 34, 40). The "Muselmann[4]" of the camps is described as a "faceless presence," someone who has "seen the Gorgon" and whose gaze has been emptied (2005, p. 45). This violence also involved "stealing" death itself, turning it from a personal, meaningful event into an anonymous industrial procedure. What remained was a horrifying confrontation: the SS, embodying a gaze of pure, self-justifying power, facing the living dead, who testify to the destruction of testimony itself (2005, p. 43).

According to Nancy (2005, p. 29), "forbidden representation" is not a moral prohibition but a condition that representation enters when it comes face-to-face with its subject. It marks a moment in which representation is startled, suspended and interrupted (Nancy, 2005, pp. 33–34). Confronted with an "otherness" that exceeds presence, representation falls silent (Nancy, 2005, p. 38). Nothing external forbids representation; rather, representation *forbids itself*. Nancy likens this to the *interdictio* of a Roman judge who halts a proceeding, placing being in abeyance so that meaning (*absense*) can appear (2005, pp. 47–48). Representation collapses into this state because its subject – the camp – is "what kills every possibility of the image" (Nancy, 2005, pp. 46–47). In this sense, the camp "forbids representation" (Nancy, 2005, p. 47). Any attempt to depict this impossibility directly risks "recreating the gesture of the murderer" (Nancy, 2005, p. 47).

[4] The term "*Muselmann*" was used in the camps to describe prisoners who had been physically and psychologically broken by exhaustion, starvation, and despair. Survivor Viktor Emil Frankl, recalling the term in *Man's Search for Meaning* (2015), describes a Muselmann as "a miserable, collapsed, sick inmate, nothing but skin and bones, no longer capable of working... such a person we call a 'Muslim.' Sooner or later –usually very soon– every 'Muslim' ends up in the gas chamber" (p. 34). Primo Levi, in *If This Is a Man* (1959), evokes the Muselmänner as the "drowned," an endlessly renewed mass of "non-men" whose inner spark had gone out, too empty even to suffer. Their existence, he writes, was so diminished that "one hesitates to call them living," and their deaths were "almost no longer death" (p. 103). In this sense, the Muselmann stands in a liminal state –neither fully alive nor fully dead. This is why Nancy speaks of the Muselmann as a "faceless presence": a being whose face no longer signifies a subject, whose gaze has been emptied of meaning, and who, having lost even the capacity for recognition, can no longer function as a witness.

The film pointedly refuses to show the violence inside the camp – the gas chambers, the corpses, the familiar shock images of Holocaust cinema. In withholding these scenes, it recognises both the impossibility and the ethical difficulty of depicting an event that "kills every possibility of the image." Glazer's choice reads as a cinematic response to Susan Sontag's critique of "harrowing photographs" in *Regarding the Pain of Others*. Sontag (2004, p. 90) argues that the real problem with such images is the false comfort they offer: the belief that seeing suffering is the same as understanding it. Photographs do not clarify causes or consequences; instead, they "haunt" us (p. 90). What often remains, she warns, is simply the image itself, since "people remember only the photographs" (p. 89). A photograph can thus freeze and flatten meaning, turning into an icon that substitutes for the complex political and historical reality it gestures toward (pp. 22–23, 86). By refusing to give the spectator such an icon of horror, Glazer deliberately avoids the risk Sontag identifies – the slide into cliché and the hollowing out of meaning (p. 23).

Glazer's cinema, to use Nancy's formulation, "forbids itself" (Nancy, 2005, pp. 47–48) and refuses to "recreate the gesture of the murderer" (p. 46). It follows the logic Nancy describes, in which an artwork acknowledges its own "artistic failure" and its "powerlessness to represent" (p. 33). The film organises its narrative around the two sides of the wall dividing the Höss family's idyllic garden from the camp. On the domestic side, we observe the family's uneventful, everyday life. This calm surface becomes, in miniature, what Nancy calls the Nazi project of "super-representation": a seamless presence that admits "no fissure and no abyss" (p. 38).

The two sides of the wall mark, in Lyotard's terms, two distinct "genres of discourse" that cannot be measured against one another (Lyotard, 1988, pp. xii–xiii). In this sense, the wall produces what Lyotard calls a *differend*[5] – a situation in which no shared "rule of judgment" exists between the discourses involved (1988, p. xi). In a differend, the suffering of one side cannot be expressed in the idiom of the other, and

[5] In The Differend, Jean-François Lyotard defines a "differend" as a situation in which the injustice suffered by one party cannot be articulated within the available regimes of language. When a wrong cannot be expressed linguistically, that wrong remains unnamed. Lyotard stresses that when an injustice "cannot be expressed within the existing regime of discourse," this does not simply mean being silenced, but signals a "deficiency of expression," a muteness imposed by the limits of discourse (Lyotard, 1988, pp. xi–xii).

therefore has no place within the other's universe of meaning (1988, pp. xi–xii). Höss's wall, then, is not merely physical; it also functions as a semantic barrier.

The family's life, like what Nancy calls an "idol," appears as a "thick and tautological presence" meant to be revered (2005, p. 38). It embodies the aesthetic of Nazism, an extension of a regime of idolatry that strives for an absolute representation – visually complete, seamless, and univocal, leaving no space for gaps[6]. By observing this Nazi pursuit of "absolute representation," the film reveals its aesthetic and ethical irony. The horror on the far side of the wall is never shown; the genocide remains offscreen. That offscreen space exists only as an acoustic absence carried through the film. The screams, gunshots, and furnace roar function as an "*absense*[7]" that continually leaks into the polished presence of the image. Sound exposes the "hollowness at the heart of presence" and reminds us that representation is never complete (Nancy, 2005, p. 38). This absence corresponds to what Lyotard calls the "feeling" that marks a *differend*: the sensation that emerges when something cannot be put into words (1988, p. 13). The sounds signal a wrong that cannot be judged within the language of the family's visual world. Sound becomes the expression of this inexpressible injustice.

Despite the family's entirely ordinary life, Glazer tears a rift through the "flawless and complete" Nazi discourse and aesthetic: the smoke drifting from the chimneys in the upper frame, the screams rising from beyond the wall, and the furnace's low roar leaking into the soundscape. The film leaves the spectator suspended between two registers – on one side, the presence of a banal domestic life; on the other, the ab-

[6] According to Nancy, Nazism seeks to annihilate what it deems "non-representation"; paradigmatically, the Jew – and likewise the Gypsy – figured as what "infects the body and face of humanity," and thus had to be eliminated (Nancy, 2005, pp. 39 - 40). Because appearance/presence substitutes for truth, the regime suppresses anything that could fissure the image, aiming at a world "without fissure or abyss" (Nancy, 2005, pp. 37 - 38, 39 - 40). In this sense, extermination fixes meaning – "no meaning is projected beyond the extermination" (Nancy, 2005, p. 41).

[7] The concept of *absense* – Nancy's shorthand for absence + sens (sense/meaning) – refers to the "sense" that lies at the core of presence (Nancy, 2005, p. 31). Representation is therefore not a copy that replaces a lost original; it presents the absence or *absense* within presence itself, opening that presence to meaning (Nancy, 2005, pp. 35–36). For Nancy, what matters in representation is precisely this relation to absence and to *absense* (Nancy, 2005, p. 37).

sence of a horror that is heard but never seen. This places the spectator in the position Nancy describes as "surprised, taken aback, struck dumb" (2005, p. 37). For Nancy, the truth of Auschwitz must remain "open and incomplete so that it can be truth" (2005, p. 48). After Auschwitz, representing genocide becomes ontologically and ethically fraught. No image can bear the weight of that truth, and rendering the catastrophe visible risks aestheticising it, diluting its meaning, or turning suffering into something perversely consumable. Yet this does not amount to abandoning representation altogether. Within Nancy's redefinition of representation – which holds space for void and absence rather than constructing an idol – the task shifts. Glazer's film follows precisely this path. By withholding answers, declining to offer closure, and refusing to lift the calm surface of daily life from the horror beyond, the film stays faithful to this principle. It does not narrate the event so much as expose the "wound" the event opens within representation itself. In representing Auschwitz by not showing the unshowable, the film turns the missing image – the unrepresentable, *the absense* – into an aesthetic form of its own.

The stark contrast between the Höss family's ordinary routines and the implicit images of genocide that haunt the background of their daily life can be articulated through Arendt's notion of the "banality of evil." What links Höss to Eichmann is precisely this: for both men, genocide appears as a kind of administrative assignment. Arendt argues that a catastrophe as enormous as the Holocaust can arise not from a demonic will, but from the "sheer thoughtlessness" of ordinary individuals who refuse to reflect on the consequences of their actions (Arendt, 2006, pp. 287–288). Eichmann's evil, she writes, did not stem from any deep ideological conviction or philosophical hatred; on the contrary, its terrifying nature lay in its superficiality. Beneath the radical violence of his actions was a profoundly ordinary, unthinking attitude – a bureaucratic obedience that replaced moral judgment. He reduced the death of millions to problems of logistics and efficiency, just as Höss does in the scene where he evaluates crematorium designs alongside engineers. Within such a bureaucratic chain, meaning collapses, and the crime is rendered invisible behind procedural routines. As noted earlier, this echoes the split that Lyotard calls the *differend*: the suffering of the prisoners has no place within Nazi discourse, in which they exist merely as objects to be processed as quickly as possible.

For Arendt (2006), evil is not the product of radical maliciousness

but of the ordinary and the banal – those moments where critical thought stops and moral judgment freezes. Glazer renders this ethical paralysis visible in a scene centred on Hedwig Höss, whose quotidian gestures reveal how atrocity can dissolve seamlessly into domestic life. While chatting with friends, Hedwig laughs about someone misunderstanding her remark that certain belongings "came from Canada," mistaking it for geography rather than its camp-specific meaning[8]. Glazer frames the silent presence of the enslaved domestic workers, making the ethical blindness of the moment painfully clear. As Hedwig tries on a fur coat, hands it to an enslaved servant to be cleaned, and later tests a lipstick taken from prisoners, the blank ease of her expression shows how aesthetic self-enjoyment can coexist effortlessly with the machinery of extermination.

At the film's close, an unexpected rupture occurs. After withholding any direct visualisation of the camp, Glazer finally reveals it through a sudden jump forward in time that follows Rudolf Höss's abrupt retching as he walks down the stairs. The gesture – echoing Anwar Congo's retching at the end of *The Act of Killing* – is not a moment of lucidity or moral reckoning. It is a fleeting physical release, a crack in a body that continues to uphold its ideological defences. Glazer then extends this fissure into the film's structure itself: just after Höss slips into a dark corridor, a hard cut opens a second break, this time temporal, transporting the viewer into the present. The gates of Auschwitz swing open as a museum worker moves through a quiet daily routine.

The museum's quiet, orderly atmosphere signals that the traces of an unrepresentable violence still linger; yet it also opens a further question. When we stand before such a site from our own historical and ethical moment, how certain can we be that we are entirely removed from the habits of thought and social conditions that once made such violence possible? It is comforting to imagine ourselves safely distant, to assume that these structures now belong wholly to the past. Yet Arendt reminds us that such moral confidence is never as solid as we assume. Collective

[8] At Auschwitz, the term "Canada" referred to the warehouses where the personal belongings of deported and murdered prisoners were sorted, classified and redistributed. Prisoners used this name because these storage facilities contained an abundance of food, clothing and valuables. For those living under extreme deprivation, the warehouses symbolised an almost unreal space of material plenty, associated with the popular image of Canada as a prosperous land (Langbein, 2004, p. 17). Hedwig's casual use of the word in everyday conversation foregrounds the profound ethical and cognitive distance between the perpetrators' domestic sphere and the reality of extermination.

violence, polarising social pressures, ideological traps, systems of obedience, bureaucratic routines, and the forms of harm that grow out of ordinary notions of normality have not disappeared from the present[9]. Recognising this does not resolve the scene; rather, it lets Glazer's final gesture unsettle any assumed moral distance. The questions remain open, and immanent alienation persists beyond the ending, folding back onto the viewer's own historical position.

These philosophical frameworks are not simply tools for interpreting the film; they form the very structure of the unsettling experience it generates. The representational crisis described by Nancy and Sontag, the incommunicable wrong of Lyotard's *differend*, and the chilling apathy of Arendt's banal evil are not ideas the spectator works through intellectually. They are felt viscerally, as a direct phenomenological encounter. Here, the film's hermeneutic dimension meets its aesthetic force: the philosophical void becomes an affective one. The spectator experiences this theoretical crisis not as an abstract problem but as an immediate, embodied, and deeply disquieting sensation that this study terms *immanent alienation*.

Immanent alienation may well stir the spectator's ethical attention. But another worry follows close behind: no affective response, however disturbing, is immune to wear. Today's spectatorship unfolds in a media landscape where images and sounds circulate without rest, ready to be paused, replayed, cut apart, or absorbed into everyday routines. In such a setting, even the most harrowing traces of suffering can begin to dull – not because the film softens them, but because repetition slowly alters the threshold of what we notice. The troubling possibility is that the very shocks that prompt moral awareness may, over time, lose their edge and let horror settle into a kind of perceptual normalcy. This tension does not cancel the film's ethical power, but it does leave us with a lingering question about the fragility of moral attention: what keeps an awakened sensitivity from drifting back into indifference? In an age shaped by new viewing habits, nothing ensures that a film will be met in the way its ethical design requires.

[9] For a popular discussion of how fascist structures can permeate everyday behaviour and social relations, see Nevzat Kaya's conversation with İlker Canikligil on Flu TV: Kaya, N. (2023). "Faşizm Her Yerde: *The Zone of Interest*. " Flu TV. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h6K2cTIX0EI

Conclusion: The Spectator's Burden

This study has traced how Jonathan Glazer's The Zone of Interest inverts traditional cinematic tools while confronting the spectator with the horror of the Holocaust. The film relies on neither the empathic engagement of the Aristotelian tradition nor the didactic distance of the Brechtian tradition. Instead, beyond these two poles, it creates a paradoxical experience, termed in this article "immanent alienation," that draws the spectator into the film's hyper-realistic world while simultaneously detaching them from the characters morally and affectively.

The film's machinic gaze turns the spectator into a cold observer of the Höss family's banal life. At the same time, the sound design, described here as the "acousmatic hell," defamiliarises this banality by continually making the unseen horror behind the wall audible. This irreconcilable conflict between the tranquillity of the image and the brutality of the sound produces an aesthetic that resonates with Jean-Luc Nancy's critique of "super-representation" and Susan Sontag's ethics of "regarding the pain of others." Rather than offering a consumable icon of horror, the film shifts the impossibility of representation – and its ethical weight – onto the spectator.

The Zone of Interest is not simply a film about the Holocaust; it is a philosophical inquiry into the ethics of looking and witnessing. The immanent alienation Glazer creates shifts the burden of moral judgment from the screen to the spectator's own conscience. When the film ends, it is not the characters on screen but we, the ones who have witnessed that indifference, who must confront our own moral position and the darker potential of human nature. The final judgment is rendered not within the cinema hall but within the mind of the spectator – and this is the film's most unsettling and enduring achievement.

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