

Peterborough Arts Cinema

Films that make you think

Thursday 26th September
7:30pm

Zone of Interest
12A 1h 45 mins

Director: Jonathan Glazer

Stars: Christian Friedel, Sandra Hüller, Johann Karthaus

German-occupied Poland, summer of 1943. More than anything, Hedwig, an indefatigable mother of five, wants to keep her well-organised life as is. After all, she has worked her fingers to the bone to create a fragrant slice of paradise to raise her children, and nothing will change that. If only her husband, the distinguished SS officer and Auschwitz commander [Rudolf Hoess](#), weren't always burdened by his duties. But perfection is a fleeting illusion



What did Hannah Arendt really mean by the banality of evil? (Aeon)

Arendt found Eichmann an ordinary, rather bland, bureaucrat, who in her words, was 'neither perverted nor sadistic', but 'terrifyingly normal'. He acted without any motive other than to diligently advance his career in the Nazi bureaucracy. Eichmann was not an amoral monster, she concluded in her study of the case. Instead, he performed evil deeds without evil intentions, a fact connected to his 'thoughtlessness', a disengagement from the reality of his evil acts. Eichmann 'never realised what he was doing' due to an 'inability... to think from the standpoint of somebody else'. Lacking this particular cognitive ability, he 'commit[ted] crimes under circumstances that made it well-nigh impossible for him to know or to feel that he [was] doing wrong'. (*Adolph Eichmann was the Nazi operative responsible for organising the transportation of millions of Jews and others to various concentration camps in support of the Nazi's Final Solution.*)

Arendt dubbed these collective characteristics of Eichmann 'the banality of evil': he was not inherently evil, but merely shallow and clueless, a 'joiner', in the words of one contemporary interpreter of Arendt's thesis: he was a man who drifted into the Nazi Party, in search of purpose and direction, not out of deep ideological belief. In Arendt's telling, Eichmann reminds us of the protagonist in Albert Camus's novel *The Stranger* (1942), who randomly and casually kills a man, but then afterwards feels no remorse. There was no particular intention or obvious evil motive: the deed just 'happened'.

Even 10 years after his trial in Israel, she wrote in 1971:

I was struck by the manifest shallowness in the doer [ie Eichmann] which made it impossible to trace the uncontestable evil of his deeds to any deeper level of roots or motives. The deeds were monstrous, but the doer – at least the very effective one now on trial – was quite ordinary, commonplace, and neither demonic nor monstrous.

The banality-of-evil thesis was a flashpoint for controversy. To Arendt's critics, it seemed absolutely inexplicable that Eichmann could have played a key role in the Nazi genocide yet have no evil intentions. Gershom Scholem, a fellow philosopher (and theologian), wrote to Arendt in 1963 that her banality-of-evil thesis was merely a slogan that 'does not impress me, certainly, as the product of profound analysis'. Mary McCarthy, a novelist and good friend of Arendt, [voiced](#) sheer incomprehension: '[I]t seems to me that what you are saying is that Eichmann lacks an inherent human quality: the capacity for thought, consciousness – conscience. But then isn't he a monster simply?'

Arendt never did reconcile her impressions of Eichmann's bureaucratic banality with her earlier searing awareness of the evil, inhuman acts of the Third Reich. She saw the ordinary-looking functionary, but not the ideologically evil warrior. How Eichmann's humdrum life could co-exist with that 'other' monstrous evil puzzled her. Nevertheless, Arendt never downplayed Eichmann's guilt, repeatedly described him as a war criminal, and concurred with his death sentence as handed down by the Israeli court. Though Eichmann's motives were, for her, obscure and thought-defying, his genocidal acts were not. In the final analysis, Arendt *did* see the true horror of Eichmann's evil.

