VOLUME 26 NUMBER 3 SEPTEMBER 2024

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Journal of Genocide Research

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/cjgr20

# "Zone of Interest" as an Ethnography of Indifference

Ghassan Hage

**To cite this article:** Ghassan Hage (16 May 2024): "Zone of Interest" as an Ethnography of Indifference, Journal of Genocide Research, DOI: 10.1080/14623528.2024.2350147

**To link to this article:** https://doi.org/10.1080/14623528.2024.2350147



Published online: 16 May 2024.

JOURNAL OF GENOCIDE RESEARCH
https://doi.org/10.1080/14623528.2024.2350147

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

FORUM: "THE ZONE OF INTEREST"

OPEN ACCESS Check for updates

# "Zone of Interest" as an Ethnography of Indifference

Ghassan Hage

Department of Anthropology, University of Melbourne, Parkville, VIC, Australia

I saw "Zone of Interest" when it first appeared. Like many, I came out thinking that I have just seen one of the best movies I have been to in a long time. As I watched Rudolph Höss, the commandant of Auschwitz's concentration camp, his wife, Hedwig, and their children, live the life of their dreams in the house of their dreams, while only being separated from the exterminatory furnaces by a mere wall, it was hard not to keep thinking: this is all of us now in the shadow of the mass murders committed in Gaza, living in cultures that have banalized evil. But the thought did come to me that maybe it was just me projecting my Middle Eastern sensitivities and obsessions into the film. When I came out of the theatre and started talking to others it was clear that I was hardly the only one to think this. Later, the director's courageous Oscar acceptance speech, Naomi Klein's incisive reflections on the film's significance, and my colleague Marcelo Svirsky's comments about the politics of the "never again" in which the film intervenes, all reinforced the view of the film as offering what Foucault would call a history of the present, a view of the past that is also about our everyday lives in the now.[1]

This perspective allows us to capture a rich dimension of the story that would otherwise be missed if we merely read the scenario as an attempt to chronicle the past.[2] But it also encourages discussions of the overall moral and political relevance of the film at the expense of some of its micro elements. Most people I know who have seen the film have also been taken by the incredible attention to the minute details of the everyday life of the household depicted in it. I later understood that this was achieved by the positioning of the cameras such as to create a "reality TV" effect: "Big Brother in the Nazi house," as Naomi Klein quotes Glazer saying about his film. I felt throughout the film that the scenes were played out as if informed by an account of someone who has had deep knowledge of how daily life unfolded there. It is this ethnographic dimension of the film that I want to think with here. I hasten to say that this ethnographic dimension does not contradict the generalist politico-moralist dimension. On the contrary, it speaks to it, enriches it and continually reinforces it. Nonetheless, it is a dimension that is

**CONTACT** Ghassan Hage ghage@unimelb.edu.au University of Melbourne, Australia

[1] Naomi Klein, "The Zone of Interest is about the Danger of Ignoring Atrocities – Including Gaza," *The Guardian*, 14 March 2024; Marcelo Svirsky, "Perpetrators: Israel under the Zone of Interest," *Arena Online*, 19 March 2024, https://arena.org.au/perpetrators-israel-under-the-zone-of-interest/.

[2] For a good account of the actual Höss household and its historical context see Milan Solly, "The Real History Behind "The Zone of Interest" and Rudolf Höss," *Smithsonian Magazine*, 4 January 2024, https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/the-real-history-behind-the-zone-of-interest-and-rudolf-hoss-180983531/.

often being eclipsed by the focus on the general message and the discussions it is generating.

With this in mind, I decided to go and see the film again and consciously concentrate on its attention to behavioural details. As expected, I found this second viewing very rewarding, and I recommend it to all those who have appreciated what the film has to offer. If nothing else, this viewing highlighted the way the exterminatory devil was present in the details, as it were. I can now say with more confidence: I would be happy to recommend this film to anthropology students as an introduction to an ethnography of necropolitical indifference. Centreing on this indifference points not only to a history but also to an ethnography of our present. It shows how the film provides us with material that helps us ask enlightening questions: How are indifferent-to-the-death-of-the-other subjects constituted? What is indifference as a social phenomenon? How is indifference enacted in everyday life? What are the factors that make this enactment possible? Seen from this perspective, the film teaches us an importance truth: necropolitical indifference is not a result of racism but rather one of its key defining features.

First, a point about the kind of racism manifested in Nazi antisemitism that helps us understand a crucial dimension of the film – and I can't help but add: something those Zionists who are freely distributing "antisemitism," mindlessly, all over the place at the moment should pay attention to. That is, if they really cared about antisemitism, and not just about justifying their disastrous murderous politics.

I must ask the reader to bear with me here before we get back to the film, as this needs to be explained a bit more carefully than the film review genre usually allows for.

While all racisms share some things in common, they can also differ in fundamental ways. Most importantly for us here, not all the phenomena referred to as "racism" involve a perception of the racialized other as "exterminable." For someone like me who started thinking about "White racism" in the context of Australian multiculturalism, it took me some time to fully understand the degree to which colonial racism towards Indigenous Australians was of an entirely different kind to racism towards Italian or Vietnamese or Lebanese immigrants.[3] The latter was not just less virulent than the racism towards Indigenous people, it was a different kind of racism altogether. I would say anti-Indigenous racism was viler. And part of its vileness was precisely its articulation to intimations of "exterminability": for racists, the indigenous others were as exterminable as cockroaches and as disgusting to be in the proximity of. While it shows up in odd individual cases, this kind of seriously vile racism was not directed in any significant structural way towards European and Mediterranean immigrants. It showed its face at the height of racism against "Asians" in the nineteenth century, and in more recent times towards Muslims.

This difference between forms of racism was not only important in Australia. As further reading and research helped me understand, despite some important similarities, there was a fundamental difference between the racism that manifests itself in slavery and colonialism, and the racism towards immigrants that comes from an unease in the face of cultural difference or in competition over jobs. To be sure, sometimes the two overlap. But it is the difference that is important to highlight here because Nazi antisemitism was more

[3] Ghassan Hage, *The Racial Politics of Australian Multiculturalism: White Nation, Against Paranoid Nationalism and Other Writings* (Sydney: Sweatshop Literacy Movement, 2023).

in the vile tradition of slavery and colonialism rather than anti-immigrant racism. This is where I found the film to be exceptionally insightful. It gives us a clear sense of how, for all its (rightful) association with extermination, Nazi antisemitism was always like slavery and colonialism, a mix of extermination, disgust, exploitation, and appropriation. Throughout the film, the furnaces of Auschwitz, the sound of guns being fired and the sounds of victims shouting as they face their death are shown to be continuously accompanied by practices of exploitation of Jewish forced labour (including sexual exploitation), and by the appropriation and cross-class distribution of Jewish property. Given the colonial genealogy of this cocktail of practices, it is not surprising that the racism that animated it also had strong resemblances to the racism that animated slavery and colonialism.

It is common knowledge in anthropology that "belonging to the human race" and believing in a categorical biological and moral difference between humans and non-humans is a distinctly modern phenomenon. There are pre-modern tribal cultures where the humans of the tribe feel a sense of together-ness with the animals and plants that surround them far more than with the "humans" of another tribe. In the modern era where it becomes taken for granted that "humanity" and "the human race" are one, such a lack of belief in the one-ness of humankind comes across as fundamentally discordant and incompatible. Many racisms solve this incompatibility by creating gradations of human-ness. Nazi antisemitism, however, replicates certain elements of the tribal culture refers to above. While those in themselves are not racist, they become so in a modernity positing the unity of "humanity" (see Note). Anti-semitism posits a human (Aryan) one-ness with nature, often referred to today as eco-fascism, in opposition to a oneness with other humans (the Jews). This is powerfully and systematically portrayed in the film. The attachment that Höss and his family exhibit towards the natural environment stands out in its opposition to the lack of care for the Jews surrounding them, those that are being exterminated "next door," as it were, and those working as forced labourers in their homely space. The most intense "love scene" in the movie is Höss saying goodbye to his horse. And there is a macabre moment where Höss is admonishing the killers and executioners of the Jews in the death camp for mistreating the camp's flowers.

This essentialist and radical banishment of the figure of the Jew from the sphere of sympathy and care is in Lacanian terms both the symptom and the condition of possibility of the culture of indifference that appears to protect the family's homely jouissance from the continuous processes of dehumanization and extermination to which the Jews are subjected. It colours and shapes the practices of necropolitical indifference that make up most of the movie.

To call these "practices" of indifference is to highlight their nature as a form of labour; something that involves a conscious or unconscious working-on-the-self to achieve. This is important because not all types of indifference require of us to work on ourselves. In the dictionary indifference is defined as "having no particular interest or sympathy, being unconcerned." One does not need to work on oneself to have no particular interest or sympathy towards, or be unconcerned with, something. To be sure, to be indifferent to x is not the same as to be oblivious to the existence of x. The indifferent subject is always aware of what it is they are being indifferent to. But being indifferent is not the same when we are being indifferent to something we have casually encountered and that has no particular significance to us, and being unconcerned with something that

is an integral part of our affective space. It is in the latter case that indifference requires a form of work on the self. This is crucial to understand the racist necropolitical specificity of indifference. Racism is a relation with people that brings them into our space of being. Even extreme racist dehumanization brings some people into the space of our being as dehumanized. We do not casually encounter the people we racialize. They are a structural part of our lives. Hating and despising x is a relation that brings x into our affective sphere even if it is to hate it and despise it. How to be indifferent to something or someone we despise is not an easy matter. On the face of it, one cannot say at the same time: I hate and despise chocolate and I am indifferent to chocolate. Yet this is precisely what racist indifference aims to achieve. It is what makes the labour of antisemitic indifference to the extermination of the Jews far more demanding than meets the eye.

Throughout the movie, Höss's family is exposed to manifestations of the macabre processes of extermination happening right next to them: the gunshots, the screams, the smoke, the light from the furnaces, the wall itself. All these are metonymies of the exterminatory process that is unfolding. That is, they are a small part of the process that they signify in its totality. It can be said that while metaphors use one order of reality to represent another order of reality, metonymies consist of an order of reality presenting itself through one of its fragments. As such, saying that the above-listed manifestations are not metaphors of the concentration camp but metonymies of it is to say something that is on one had somewhat evident, but on the other, something whose importance is overlooked: the manifestations listed above are not representations of the exterminatory process but the exterminatory process itself presenting itself through these manifestations. They are continual intrusions of the un-homely space of the camp and what happens in it into the homely reality of the family's lifeworld.

I am dwelling on this point because it is significant to our understanding of the type of indifference we are dealing with here: one is not indifferent towards a metaphor of extermination the same way one is indifferent towards a metonymy of it – in the way, today, we find it harder to be indifferent to a raw video of the death and destruction of Gaza posted on social media than to a sanitized written account published by a mainstream newspaper in the West. There is a particularly important scene in the movie where Rudolph Höss and his children are enjoying fishing and swimming in the river up to the point where he realizes that the ashes and remains of the incinerated bodies are thrown in the river and coming towards them. Höss rushes to remove his children from the river and they all subject themselves or are subjected to a long bath where all traces of the ashes of the dead are thoroughly scrubbed off their bodies. The indifferent subject knows that they are face to face with an unbearable reality whose presence and impact in their lives needs to be minimized. One can guess that, after that first encounter, Höss will make sure to regulate when the ashes of the dead are thrown into the river so as to avoid swimming there during such times. This is the labour of indifference.

In a number of commentaries on the film, what I am calling a labour of indifference is referred to as "disassociation." There is no doubt that physical and emotional disassociation are part of the labour of indifference but it does not cover all the forms that the latter takes. Indifference can be a form of de-sensitization. This is what is referred to popularly as "developing a thick skin." The Lebanese say about a man who is indifferent and unaffected by his surrounding *hayda m-tamsah* (this man has become-crocodile). This is in reference to the thickness of the crocodile;s skin. The "thickness of the skin" of the

colonizer to the plight of the colonized is acquired historically as part of a colonial habitus. One can think of this as a political dermatology.

Indifference can also be a form of de-intensifiying the presence of something in our surrounding. Unlike with de-sensitization where we learn to see but not feel, here we learn not to see or hear or smell, etc. As Bourdieu's concept of *illusio* invites us to keep in mind: our relation to reality creates a differential of intensities within that reality that depends on one's interest and desires. Here the technologies of indifference work on the fashioning of one's surrounding reality more so than on fashioning one's self and one's sensitivity and "skin" as happens in de-sensitization. As noted above in relation to disassociation, one can learn to un-see the metonymic fragment or learn to un-see the connection between the fragment and the whole. In the film, it is not clear whether the Höss family had learnt to un-see the flames of the furnace or had learnt not to associate the flame with the exterminatory process of which it is a part.

At its simplest, indifference can be acquired through strategic avoidance. The subject knows where they will be exposed to the reality they want to shield themselves from and refrain from moving in spaces where they are most likely to encounter it. A more important strategy of avoidance is that of total blockage. In the film, the wall itself is of course the most important technology of blockage, stopping the unbearable reality of what is happening in the camp from flowing onto the space of the home.

I am only separating these types of indifference for analytical clarity since, in real life, and as well depicted in the movie, they come jumbled and fused with one another. This can be seen in the case of the presence of Jewish forced labour in the space of the home. As I have already noted, an important aspect of the film for me is how it makes clear the way extermination and the exploitation (including sexual exploitation) of forced labour go hand in hand. This entanglement is shown to be a feature of the household's everyday life as much as it was a governmental pre-occupation. At one point we see a Nazi commander order Höss to exterminate an obscene number of people, then turn to another commander and tell him something like "don't worry he won't kill everyone. You'll get your labourers." In the way it shows the labourers as if zombified and occupying a space between the dead and the living, the film alerted me to something I had not thought of before: in the midst of a genocidal process, those who are spared death to perform labour are nonetheless living metonymies of the exterminatory process itself. The family learns to both unsee this forced labour and unsee its connection to the process of extermination in which it is embedded.

The movie leaves us in no doubt that all these successful techniques of indifference come at a price. They take their toll on the psyche and the body. The indifferent subject is not constitutionally indifferent to its indifference. Every member of the family without exception exhibits pathological symptoms that the movie director wants us to see as the cost of their existence in this culture of necropolitical indifference. Rudolph Höss who on the face of it is the quintessential Nazi subject. His "classical" Nazi antisemitism is shown in the business-like way he discusses the efficiency of the technologies of death he is introducing into his concentration camp, and in the paradoxical scene where he is sexually exploiting a camp inmate, instrumentalizing her for his pleasure but at the same time exhibiting his disgust for coming to contact with a Jewish person. Witness the scene where he is endlessly washing and scrubbing himself after his "bureaucratized" sexual assault. This takes us back to the other scrubbing scene referred to above

where the ashes of the dead are being scrubbed after the accidental river encounter. Yet for all his de-sensitization to the suffering and the death of the Jews, Höss is shown to be suffering from what appears to be something of the order of severe stomach cramps. His wife Hedwig, on the other hand, is portrayed as the prototype of the petit bourgeois Nazi. Her antisemitism is structured around her envy and resentment towards the middle-class Jews for whom, in pre-Nazi time, her mother worked as a cleaner. Determined to enjoy her upward social mobility, she appears as the most resolved of all the family members to not let any unbearable reality ruin the homely space she has managed to climb to. She wants her mother, the ex-maid, to enjoy and be part of her social climbing and success, but is left deprived of her company as the mother, finds living in the vicinity of the camp unbearable. Towards the end of the film Hedwig appears unable to experience any joy or excitement: drowning in the meaninglessness of her life and the amoral abyss she has dug herself into. The children are also shown to exhibit all kind of pathologies from sleeplessness to behavioural disorder. There is little doubt, then, that one of the key themes of the movie is that indifference comes at a psychological cost. For if one can take a bath and scrub off the traces of extermination that stick to one's body, how does one scrub off the traces of the extermination that have stuck to one's psyche?

In this sense, while the film, as Naomi Klein and Marcelo Svirsky point out, does indeed make us think about the question of active and passive complicity, of the "where are you and what are you doing while the genocide is unfolding," it also makes us think about another equally pertinent question. One that is at least pertinent to those of us who live in those countries where indifference to what is happening in Gaza has been hypocritically made into a higher morality (apparently, to struggle against necropolitical indifference, to care enough to want to stop the ongoing slaughter, is to support Hamas). This question goes something like this: what kind of pathologies are we, the inhabitants of these lands, silently developing as we are forced to live through the unbearable nightmare that is Gaza in a space where indifference to it is encouraged and routinised? What somatic disorders will our bodies and psyche begin to exhibit as we consciously or unconsciously work on taming the unbearable into something bearable?

## Note

I have added this sentence, and changed "one-ness" above to "togetherness" in response to the following critical comment made by Eduardo Viveiros de Castro:

"I read your post with the interest and admiration I always give to everything you write. That's why I can't help but disagree with the parallel you draw between Nazi racism and the ethnocentrism of extra-modern peoples. In particular, I disagree with the following passage:

> Nazi antisemitism, however, replicates the tribal culture refers to above. It posits a human (Aryan) one-ness with nature, often referred to as eco-fascism, in opposition to a oneness with other humans (the Jews).

One fundamental difference is that the extramodern (or tribal) peoples I know, at least the Amazonian ones, may indeed consider neighbouring peoples as not completely "human." But they have no problem adopting (by marriage, kidnapping or any other means) an

individual from these other peoples and considering him or her an integral member of their society. This is something that, I suppose, would be unthinkable in the relationship between Nazis and Jews. Moreover, alliances and mergers between peoples who were previously enemies are very common phenomena (and the reverse is equally true). Because "tribal" ethnocentrism or "racism" has nothing biological about it, it doesn't assume that individuals from other peoples are naturally – that is, immutably, essentially – inferior or non-human. These peoples' concept of "human" has very little to do with our modern concept (shared, incidentally, by Nazis and non-Nazis alike). Likewise, the "oneness with nature" that the so-called animist cosmologies show is very different from Nazi eco-fascism. It's not about oneness, in fact, but equality or pan-sociality, in the sense that non-human beings are considered people (different people, I should add) – which doesn't *necessarily* make them friendly (kinspersons, for example), quite the opposite."

To which I replied:

"I agree with both the point you make about kinship, etc … and concerning the differences between the Nazi and the pre-modern tribal relation to nature (one-ness is clearly the wrong term for the latter I need to replace it with together-ness)." At least in part, what your critique highlights is more the point where analogies become a problem. I think I need to re-write what I have written so as to ensure it is not interpreted as a claim that the Nazis and the pre or as you call them extra modern people share a similar "racism" or that, as you put it, I am drawing parallels between them. I think racism is only possible with the rise of the modern belief in "humanity." I simply wanted to use the comparison to convey the radical exclusionary nature of Nazi racism. Still, what makes Nazi antisemitism racist is not that radical exclusion but that exists in conjunction with that dominant modern belief in "humanity."

## Acknowledgements

This essay was first published on Ghassan Hage's blog, *Hage Ba'a* on 30 March 2024, http://hageba2a.blogspot.com/.

## Disclosure Statement

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

## Notes on Contributor

***Ghassan Hage*** is professor of anthropology and social theory at the University of Melbourne.