

# Ada Wells Memorial Prize 2024

By Erica Spencer

*“The ability to see ourselves in the lives of others is arguably what defines the value of film to society. Debate this proposition in relation to two feature films\*. The films you choose to discuss may be popular contemporary films, such as Christopher Nolan's *Oppenheimer* or Greta Gerwig's *Barbie*, European films such as François Truffaut's *400 Blows* or Agnès Varda's *Cléo from 5 to 7*, anime classics such as Hayao Miyazaki's *Spirited Away*, or New Zealand films such as *Waru* directed by eight Māori women or Taika Waititi's *Boy*. You may have your own favorite films that speak to the topic, and we welcome your original ideas!”*

*We are all the other to each other, a relation that sometimes descends into relegation and demonisation* (Whitehead, 2018, prologue).

The following films hold relevant parallels to current political and societal landscapes. Far too many people the world over are left helpless, indifferent, or complacent, as day after day we witness a barrage of livestreamed violence and war across social media platforms. It is only recently that I have begun feeling a compulsion to critically interrogate my own behaviours, judgments, and habits. Admittedly, each notion seems tied to material consumption and a deliberate use of collective distraction.

As I write this, political violence is rife, fears of an impending Third World War are widespread, while fascism is said to be making a comeback. It feels increasingly impossible to argue our innocence, as we are all objectively complicit in the confluence of violence, be it directly or from apathy and/or ignorance. At present, many of us can acknowledge that the systems created to uphold global order are not fit for purpose. Slowly, we have begun the enormous task of admitting the ways our daily comforts are, in some way, a result of colonisation. The inhuman treatment and genocide of indigenous peoples provided us the lands we inhabit, women and children are paid a pittance to languish in factories where our clothes are made, and thousands perish in mines to secure precious metals required to power various technologies the world depends on.

Much of our human experience is perpetuated upon, “the social process of othering” (Whitehead, 2018, p.1). Whitehead further explains that the ‘other’ is constituted as a disposable enemy rather than our neighbour (2018, p.1). This point is further illuminated throughout Johnathan Glazer’s, *The Zone of Interest* (2023). Glazer introduces us to the Höss family, set in 1943, husband Rudolf has recently been transferred to Poland for a new job, we watch as he and wife Hedwig clash over domestic responsibilities. Hedwig is a typical housewife, similar to those portrayed in old American sitcoms, a stay-at-home mother, entertaining friends and family as her children frolic among an idyllic walled garden. The desire to own a nice home, pick fresh vegetables in the garden under warm afternoon sunshine is admittedly quite relatable for viewers. At any time, one might be forgiven their momentary amnesia of a bleak reality; this is German-occupied Poland and Rudolf is a commandant for the Nazi party, tasked with the escalation and expansion of Auschwitz. The concentration camp operates its unyielding mass murder from sunup to sundown, just over the Höss’s garden wall. A central and provocative question Glazer seems to be asking is: How

like them are we? Furthermore, do our desires to retain comfort and security outweigh dismantling ongoing power and wealth consolidation, should we not all be challenging the multitude of oppressive structures, and is there a remedy for complacency? If it is true that the same ideologies laid bare in *The Zone of Interest* have started to resurface, across political discourse and foreign policy, should we not collectively do more to stop it... this time?

As the audience continues to survey the Höss family, we watch as Rudolph goes about a mostly ideal life; providing for his family, co-hosting parties alongside his wife (many are held in the garden situated on top of distant gunshots and screams). The family is frequently engaging in idle gossip over drinks, and before too long Rudolph's mother-in-law pays a visit. Raving about how well he's done for his family, delighted in her approval of the sprawling new home. At night, however, the guest room is awash in bright orange shadows, a reminder of the unrelenting incinerators next door.

Where Glazer relies on sound design to explore and enhance the moral failings of the Höss family, commentary on another moral injustice is seen in the silent film, *Within Our Gates* (1920). Director Oscar Micheaux extends an additional story of apathy, indifference, and the failing of our society. Micheaux offers several competing (and conflicting) aspects of contemporary African American life. The film sets its initial scene with the title card: "...we find our characters in the North [of the United States], where the prejudices and hatred of the South do not exist—though this does not prevent the occasional lynching of a Negro." Sylvia Landry, our main character, is an educated African American woman working at a Southern school for Negroes called Piney Woods. The school contributes to an effective ongoing narrative around education being the only hope for African Americans to advance in a vastly unjust and segregated society. Under immense financial pressure, Piney Woods has refused to send away new students, and the viewer is abruptly thrust into a tense confrontation, left to examine what place they might hold within this cruelly constructed world.

From a modern lens, the representation of a nearly all Black cast acts to lull viewers into a false sense of equality. However, spectators are regularly brought back to reality, watching Sylvia contend with an 'eternal struggle' for her race, believing it is, "the duty of each member of our race to help destroy ignorance and superstition". The extent of how race laws impacted African Americans is further exposed with the close up of a newspaper quoting an elected Senator, "From the soles of their flat feet to the crown of their head, Negroes are, undoubtably, inferior beings." It is through these long held deceptive constructions of racial hierarchy that the US affirms its legal definition of 'whiteness'. Such policies will go on to be widely adopted -and supported- in an unrelenting campaign to ostracise Black people, complicating visions of the social world. The tactical use of suspicion and conspiracies to exclude and eradicate the 'other' underpins both films, and it should not be forgotten how North American race policies targeting African Americans during the Jim Crow era, would go on to directly inform anti-Jewish legislation of the Nazi regime. These laws presented Hitler with a template for the final solution to his 'Jewish problem', and across both films, we uncover the shameful thread tying together two of the greatest miscarriages of justice in human history. As W.E.B. Du Bois once wrote, "...how could America condemn in Germany that which she commits, just as brutally, within her own borders?" (1920, p.926).

It could be argued, in the context of a modern society, the Höss's are simply a family trying to live their lives without having to think about the unpleasant realities surrounding them.

Meanwhile, each nation feels justified in their pursuit of “security”, regardless if their aim comes at the cost of demonising those within their own communities. Comparatively, these two films explore the height of segregation in the US during the 1920s and the holocaust of the 1940s, yet it wouldn't be hard to mistake much of the rhetoric and blasé justification for discrimination and even eradication of the ‘other’, for more recent political discourse. The ongoing classification of who belongs to which race, and is thereby worthy of protection, are remnants from the designation that relegated the Negro to ‘less than’, an endorsement guaranteeing a significant portion of the US would remain incapable of arguing for their political representation, “The labor is kept cheap and helpless because the white world despises ‘darkies’” (Du Bois, 1029, p.936).

*Within Our Gates* reveals a contrast between races, as it suddenly shifts to a nearly all white cast, juxtaposed with Sylvia as the main Black character. The audience is thrust into another dizzying succession of characters, and the film reveals how each life is salaciously intertwined. While driving through town, Mrs. Warwick nearly runs over a small white child, whom Sylvia rescues at great risk to herself. Cut to the hospital, where Mrs. Warwick inquires as to what is troubling the young woman. It is here Sylvia confesses, she is gravely concerned for the school's future. The scene begins to reveal the vastly contrasting experiences between two women: one African American and the other a white philanthropist. Mrs. Warwick, unsure how she can best help, decides to consult her friend, Mrs. Stratton. Fortunately for Sylvia, Mrs. Stratton offers up the following advice: “My dear, you needn't trouble yourself over this illusion of educating the Negro. Leave it to those of us who know them—and who know just what they need.” Following their conversations, Mrs. Warwick becomes convinced of the blatant hatred on display from her friend, as Mrs. Sutton further remarks, “Let me tell you—it is an error to try and educate them.” In defiance, Mrs. Warwick settles on a \$50,000 donation, a considerable increase beyond the \$5,000 needed to keep the school open.

Optimism is short lived however, and Sylvia begins to narrate the events of her past. We're introduced to a kindly and hospitable family, the Landry's. Having adopted Sylvia as a young child, the Landry's supported her pursuit of education, despite never being afforded the opportunity themselves. The ever-helpless spectator observes as a mob descends on the Landry home, tipped off by an obedient Efram. This unsuspecting Negro has made a fatal miscalculation of his usefulness. Under a false assumption, he believed himself to be an invaluable friend to the whites, given his service of dispensing gossip. Though in a surprising turn of events (perhaps more so for Efram than the audience), we watch as the mob grows impatient from their pursuit of the falsely accused Landry and begin setting their sights on Efram. Soon after, it's clear he's found himself at the wrong end of a rope. This consequential attempt at assimilation has not protected the loose lipped Efram. Recounting the events, a close up of a newspaper explains, “Efram, Gridlestone's faithful servant and himself the recent victim of accidental death at unknown hands...”

The insidious system of othering rears its ugly head once more by the newspaper's blatant disregard for justice, a reminder that it is only the wealthy white landowners who are extended protection and power. In discussing the tensions from this era, Du Bois remarked on the barriers facing the Negro's attempt to secure self-assertion and education, “They cannot do it and if they could, they shall not, for they are the enemies of the white race and the whites shall rule forever and forever and everywhere” (1920, p.936). Another bleak warning paralleled with our modern times, cautioning us to renounce the horrors occurring outside -or within- our walls, before we are doomed to perpetuate them into oblivion.

Micheaux utilises the film's final 15 minutes to push viewers into a confronting reality of what it means to be Black during a specified time and place. All at once, the audience encounters the mob, as they struggle to lynch Mr. and Mrs. Landry. Successful in their vile task, were left to watch as white men, women, and children cheer over the incinerated remains of the Landry's. The gruesome event is crosscut with Sylvia fending off an attacker. Micheaux, by way of crosscutting, presents the lynching of Sylvia's adopted family alongside her attempted rape. The attacker, who is only halted in his attempt upon seeing a scar on her chest, is revealed as Sylvia's father, having suddenly recognized her. These scenes demand thoughtful engagement from the audience. We must establish, among conflicting and contradictory evidence, how power and oppression in the 1920s Southern US, move through and manipulate race relations. The revelation of Sylvia's mixed race European ancestry shows just how interconnected these segregated worlds can be and have always been. Conversely, *The Zone of Interest* also requires heightened attention, in order to detect a nearly imperceptible reality shrouded in the background. Both films address a range of spectators who occupy various social positions, encouraging the audience to acknowledge and address one another.

*We could be recounting a very different human story, one of ethical triumphs, mass cooperation networks, national and international mutual coexistence, and living as one humanity under conditions of equality within the circuits of a moral economy.*  
(Whitehead, 2018, p.47)

*The Zone of Interest* sparked a crucial debate on what can occur when we turn away and refuse to speak up on widescale dehumanisation and real time eradication of non-dominant cultures. Each of us must confront the lies we tell ourselves about the rigorousness and exceptionalism of our countries, and simultaneously bear witness to the ongoing terrors inflicted upon the earth and its inhabitants. For the future of our species, it is imperative that we admit how the justification is waning for our current lifestyles, given the unsustainable economic systems designed to provide for some, while leaving behind many others.

As the oldest known surviving film by a Black director, *Within Our Gates* is a vital indication of how history can easily be erased and forgotten between subsequent generations, especially if we fail to actively hold on to it. Perhaps we'll persist through hope, but what is hope without sustained and collective action. In his use of repeated cutaways, Glazer showed what appeared to be a young woman, often under cover of night, leaving apples for prisoners in the outside perimeter of the camp. This small though significant act of resistance, against an otherwise ironclad system of oppression, offers a way forward, an insistence to push back. So too does Mrs. Warwick, who we see rail against the established order with her generous donation.

Just as Micheaux's film brought attention to the plight of African Americans, often dismissed by Northern whites who refused to believe regular lynchings occurred, Glazer extends an important critique on another frequently depicted event in modern history. Portraying the holocaust from the perpetrator's perspective, and drawing parallels to its audience, Glazer reveals uncomfortable similarities that many of us are too willing to overlook. The hyper-fixation on mundane activities of everyday family life, in juxtaposition with the ever-present smoke and gunfire just beyond the garden wall, is not only a glaring judgement on the Nazi regime's political agenda, but of anyone who enjoys material comforts as a genocide unfolds.

Micheaux's film does not offer its viewers the anticipated conclusion of collapsing time and space into a neatly constructed final narrative. Similarly, *The Zone of Interest* jolts viewers out of a linear timeline, revealing in one of its final scenes, a maintenance worker inside the Auschwitz-Birkenau Museum. The moral of these stories appear to be, if we don't find a way to better work together and not only understand, but embrace our unique differences, such stories of fragmentation and refusal to see ourselves in the 'other' will continue, to our detriment. Challenging a rise in concentrated power and wealth will be required in the near future, or as Whitehead explains, "The daunting task before us is to construct the conditions of existence for our collective well-being and security as a species" (2018, p.97). Perhaps then, it's time we heed the multitude of warnings, so often skilfully portrayed by artists past and present. If we insist on ignoring the atrocities being committed among our society, the alternative leaves us doomed to repeat them, over and over, or as Du Bois said, "forever and forever and everywhere".

### References

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