



**THE
ZONE OF
INTEREST**

Monday, May 6, 7:30 pm

Reviewed by Robbie Collin | The Telegraph | Rated PG-13 | 106 mins.

Devastating and vital, the “Under the Skin” director’s Oscar-nominated drama shows how evil can flourish in the most mundane circumstances.

Meet Rudolph and Hedwig Höss (Christian Friedel and Sandra Hüller): a young, attractive, well-to-do German couple who live with their five children in a neat, spacious house in the bucolic Polish countryside. Friends and family often come to visit: their large, well-tended garden is perfect for hosting parties, and there’s a picturesque river nearby ideal for swimming and picnics. Their main reason for living here, however, is convenience, since it’s right next door to Rudolph’s work. On the far side of the unusually tall garden wall lies the Auschwitz concentration camp, where, since the age of 38, he has served as commandant.

As the family eats dinner together, the rumble of industrialized murder can be heard faintly in the background, sometimes punctuated by a pistol crack. Later, as Rudolph contentedly smokes a cigar in the garden, the glow of its tip mimics the flames which claw at the night sky from the crematorium smoke stack behind.

For his first film since 2013’s *Under the Skin*, the British director Jonathan Glazer has returned with a loose adaptation of the 2014 Martin Amis novel *The Zone of Interest*, but very little of the source apart from the bones of its premise remains. Amis’s book was like PG Wodehouse via a nightmare – a sort of *Arbeit Macht Frei*, *Jeeves*, in which a handful of Auschwitz bosses witter on about their professional, social and carnal travails.

Glazer drops the fictional characters and presents instead the actual historical figures, even shooting on an exact reproduction of the Hösses’ grace-and-favour house. This building becomes the film’s base of operations: every room has been rigged with multiple static cameras which coolly survey the family’s daily routine – recognisable, everyday stuff spiked with moments of pure cruelty and outrage, as their activities and conversations have to in some way accommodate the monstrous happenings just outside.

Hedwig jokes about her friend having misunderstood her when she described a new fur coat as having come from “Canada”: the name of the storage facility used to house the Jewish inmates’ pillaged belongings. And when her mother visits, the two idly speculate

whether a Jewish neighbor the older woman used to clean for is “over the wall”. Such a pity, they go on, that they missed out on her lovely curtains in the auction of her belongings when she was rounded up.

The couple’s steadfast refusal to recognize who they actually are, what their lives are built on, and in Rudolph’s case what he has committed himself to achieving, is cumulatively head-spinning. “How could you?”, you keep asking yourself – a question with shades of both moral condemnation and spiritual incomprehension.

Glazer makes the bold and brilliant choice to depict none of Auschwitz’s savagery directly, his camera only moving decisively inside the camp itself for a quasi-documentary epilogue. But through painstaking framing and sound design, its horrors gnaw at the edge of every shot. At one point, we see a montage of flowers thriving in that beautiful garden, each one nurtured by the ashes of dead Jews. The sheer sick-making awfulness of this causes the film itself to temporarily fail: the screen fades to red and freezes before eventually collecting itself and moving on. It is one of the most devastating sequences I have seen in the cinema in years.

“To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric,” Theodor Adorno famously wrote. Glazer’s film gives us the prosaic instead, refashioning it into the darkest, most vital sort of art it might be possible for us as a species to produce.

Why put an audience through it again, though? Why the need to remember and restage? After all, *The Zone of Interest* only works if you already know about Auschwitz; if you can imagine what’s happening on the other side of that wall. The definitive answer comes in that epilogue, as Glazer shows us the glass cases full of suitcases and shoes being polished, the gas chambers swept out, the ovens dusted. These objects exist because we built them. We remember because we can’t afford not to.

In German and Polish with English Subtitles.

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Monday, May 13, 7:30 pm

Chris Knight | Original Cin | Rated PG | 123 mins.

Not trying to sound like your friendly neighbourhood algorithm here, but if you enjoyed Paterson, Jim Jarmusch's 2016 drama about... well, not much of anything to be honest, then you may similarly be moved by its spiritual cousin, Perfect Days by Wim Wenders.

Disarmingly simple, it's the story of Hirayama (Koji Yakusho), a Tokyo toilet cleaner in the city's busy Shibuya district whose modest, almost monastic existence reminded me of a line by Victor Hugo: "He spent his life in always doing the same things at the same moment. A month of his year resembled an hour of his day."

Hirayama rises early, trims his moustache, spritzes his collection of tiny plants, buys a can of coffee from the vending machine outside his plain home, gets in his van, and begins his janitorial rounds.

Not sure if the lavatories he visits are so pristine because of Japanese cultural practices or just movie magic, but if there's anything that took this North American out of the tale, it was how already clean are the places Hirayama is cleaning.

Then again, the story behind the picture is that Wenders was invited to Japan to witness the so-called Tokyo Toilet Project, a collaboration between civic planners and famous designers to see what could be done to elevate the humble public commode. It was hoped that some photographs or even a short film might emerge from the visit.

Instead, Wenders created a feature that is Japan's Oscar nominated best international film this year. It also won the Prize of the Ecumenical Jury at the Cannes film festival, not to mention a best-actor award for Yakusho, who says little but does so much with his face, eyes, and mouth.

What makes Hirayama smile? Many things. Trees, certainly, which he sometimes photographs with an old-fashioned film camera during his lunch break in the park, using an odd technique of not looking through the viewfinder, but just lining up the camera and letting it see what it will. He's also enamoured with Skytree, a broadcast and

observation tower almost twice the height of the Tokyo Tower, and currently the tallest freestanding structure in the G20 nations. (Sorry CN Tower!)

But he also takes joy from such simple pleasures as a baseball game on TV at the restaurant where he often dines, or watching a homeless man's sinewy dance near one of the restrooms he cleans every day. (The man playing this minor character is none other than famed dancer-turned-actor Min Tanaka.)

If there is one thing that really annoys him — though it's a bit of welcome comic relief for viewers — it's his junior colleague Takashi (Tokio Emoto), a chatterbox layabout with a habit of defining every life experience on a scale of one to 10.

I haven't even gotten to Hirayama's two main interests, which are books and music. When we first meet him, he's working his way through something by Faulkner, and on two occasions he visits a bookstore to pick up something new, one time choosing the mid-century Japanese writer Aya Koda, another picking up Patricia Highsmith, whom the bookseller confesses taught her "the difference between fear and anxiety."

But the music is where Perfect Days really takes flight, with songs that include Lou Reed's "Perfect Day" (of course) as well as contemporaneous gems from Van Morrison, The Kinks, Patti Smith and more. Hirayama keeps a collection of vintage cassette tapes at home and in his van, and often lets those voices of 50-plus years ago provide the soundtrack to his drive.

The selection also includes "(Sittin' On) The Dock of the Bay" by Otis Redding, in this writer's estimation about as perfect a song as has ever been crafted by humankind. That's almost enough to make me give this film (as Takashi would say) a 10 out of 10.

But I'm going to dial back my praise ever so slightly. Call it a nine. Were I to be forced to rank them, Perfect Days might fall just a little behind Paterson. And I sometimes wished for a bit more information, backstory or history of the main character, whose family life is tantalizingly hinted at in the segment where his sister's young daughter briefly crashes at his place.

Then again, that desire on the part of the viewer to know more is also the hallmark of a great character and an expertly crafted film, someone who feels like you could shake their hand and strike up a conversation, something that feels real enough to step inside, look around and explore. Perfect Days is both those things, and much more besides.

In Japanese with English subtitles.

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Monday, June 10, 7:30 pm

Reviewed by Karen Gordon | Original Cin | Rated PG-13 | 135 Mins.

The Taste of Things is a beautiful, entrancing, sensual movie. One of the year's best, it's a quiet marvel that lingers long after the end credits roll.

It's 1885 in the French countryside. As the film opens a woman walks through a vegetable garden, collecting herbs and vegetables and then heads into the kitchen.

The woman is Eugenie, played with quiet elegance by Juliette Binoche. Sunshine floods the large kitchen of the house as she begins to prepare what is no doubt going to be a feast as the kitchen assistant Violetta (Galatea Bellugi) bustles around. But first, a simple breakfast.

The man of the house Dodin (Benoit Magimel) joins them, and Violetta introduces her young niece Pauline (Bonnie Chagneau-Ravoire) who she's taking care of for the day.

After breakfast, they get back the business of cooking. Everyone, including young Pauline, moves around the kitchen quietly, focusing on the tasks at hand: a loin of veal is put into hot oil on the stove. A plate of crayfish boiled. The freshly harvested lettuce is plunged into boiling water. Dodin breaks from some work to help prepare the quenelle dough.

In director Tràn's hands, these preparations are fascinating, hypnotic, and beautiful to watch. By the time Eugenie puts a turbot into a casserole dish filled with milk and lemon slices, there were tears in my eyes.

Who are these people? What is their relationship to each other? It's about 15 minutes in before we start to get a sense of that... as if it mattered at that point. I could have watched them make the rest of the dishes.

Dodin is a famed gastronome, who serves these beautiful, multi-course meals in his lovely dining room to a group of male friends, all professionals. The men are also gourmands who savour and appreciate every bite and who admire Dodin's knowledge and skills as well as the talent of Eugenie, who they clearly adore and respect. There's so much genuine respect and familiarity here.

They want her to join them, but she demurs. Her focus is on preparing each course to perfection. It's her vocation and her passion.

Eugenie walks lightly through the world but takes her work too seriously to step out of the kitchen when food is in the oven. She eats in the kitchen with Violetta and young Pauline, who they discover is a budding gourmet with a palate that astonishes both Dodin and Eugenie.

Tràn partly based the screenplay on the novel *Le Passion de Dodin-Bouffant* by Marcel Rouff, which was inspired by the life of French lawyer, author, and gastronome Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin. And those familiar with the history of modern French cuisine may note that the movie places itself in this world of food, with references to some of the great innovators of that time, Antonin Carême and Auguste Escoffier. But at its heart, *The Taste of Things* is a love story.

Eugenie has been Dodin's chef for 20 years. It's clear he loves her, and that has grown from a respect for her talent and dedication over years. He wants to marry her. She is more elusive, but not out of manipulation of his affections.

There isn't any artifice in this movie. Dodin isn't a brute. Eugenie is an intelligent woman, thoughtful about her life, and wanting to have time to herself. She and Dodin work together in the kitchen, have meals together, relax in the garden in the evening, and are lovers. They talk like equals. Their shared passion for food and for excellence in its preparation is a bond.

The Taste of Things is rare, with a depth and maturity we don't often see on screens anymore. It charts the connection of two mature adults who are at peace with themselves and each other. There's a calm restraint to their relationship, and that adds to the film's sensuality.

Location is another factor. Tràn shot not on a set but in a house in France, and that sense of being in a place that has been lived in and well used and cared for adds to the feeling of the movie. There's so much time spent in the kitchen that it becomes like another character in the film. Cinematographer Jonathan Ricquebourg has done a beautiful job of capturing the quiet beauty of the place, the sun streaming in as steam rises from a pot. It's a lovely moment.

At the centre is the luminous Binoche, one of the most wonderful actresses in modern cinema. Her gracious, grounded performance lights up the screen without dominating the movie. The other anchor is, of course, Magimel.

The preparation of the food, the quiet focus, and kindness with which these people relate to each other is a pleasure to watch.

Tràn won the best director award at Cannes for this movie, and you can see why. There is drama in the film, but Tràn doesn't give into any tropes or narrative tricks. He doesn't need to. By then we're all in.

In French with English subtitles.



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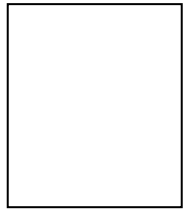
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"So rich and romantic, it will leave you woozy."

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