

Finding Sunbeams in the Darkness: Michel Serres's Analogical Thinking and the Ethics of Listening in *The Zone of Interest*

Abstract

This article addresses the fundamental concept underpinning Jonathan Glazer's *The Zone of Interest*, which recognizes selective empathy and extraordinary empathy dissonance within our contemporary cultures as a continuum, not a moment. The article uses Michel Serres's philosophical process to provide an ontological and epistemological framework within which *The Zone of Interest* can be understood analogously as a warning about darkness enveloping the world. Glazer has emphasized the axiom of his film is focusing upon the present. *The Zone of Interest* asks questions about humanity's contemporary cultural sensibilities, which determine how societies engage with diversity, difference, and the multiplicities of perspective that are an inescapable part of the global geopolitical landscape. Serres's process is inherently analogical, recognizing patterns of knowing and being that recur isomorphically across space and time. This article brings together the immersive sensibility mediated through the screen – situating *The Zone of Interest* as a cinematic experience that elevates sound over vision – with Serres's assimilation of Lucretian atomism, which links materialism and ethics; the importance of noise as a source of knowledge within Serresian thought; and a topological approach to time and space, which shapes the analogical, qualitatively relational, processes characteristic of Serres's philosophy.

Keywords

Jonathan Glazer; Michel Serres; Sound; Analogy; Ethics; Holocaust

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'Look At This, This Is Real, It Could Be Now'¹

Inspired by Martin Amis's novel (2014), Jonathan Glazer's *The Zone of Interest* (2023) is a distillation of a concept than an adaptation. Glazer embeds the audience within Amis's premise of experiencing the Holocaust from the perpetrators' point of view. The film dispassionately positions disregard for others' lives as the normalized background for an upwardly mobile Nazi family settled within the Third Reich. Set in 1943, Glazer dispenses with the fictional identities in Amis's novel to recreate the real-life circumstances of Rudolf and Hedwig Höss (Christian Friedel and Sandra Hüller), living next door to Auschwitz with their five young children. The Hösses's expansive garden is a localized version of the entitlement to *lebensraum* (living space) within Nazi ideology. The boundaries of their "living space" share a wall with the concentration camp, which Rudolf Höss oversaw as Auschwitz's longest serving commandant. As Glazer observed when visiting the Auschwitz-Birkenau Memorial and State Museum, the Höss family home was within the "literal shadow of Auschwitz's smoking chimneys" (O'Hagan 2023). The gut-wrenching decimation of human life taking place in Auschwitz, directly managed by Höss, occurs unseen within *The Zone of Interest*. The cameras focus primarily upon activities in the house and garden, using hidden equipment to film "in as unimpeded a way as possible" (Glazer in Sexton 2024). However, the rooftops and smokestacks of the newly constructed Auschwitz buildings are frequently visible, looming above the boundary wall. Crucially, the disturbing sounds emanating from the camp, which combine the suggestive with the unequivocal, are constantly audible, day and night.

¹ Quotation from Johnnie Burn, Sound Designer for *The Zone of Interest* (O'Connor 2024).

Glazer has made it clear that *The Zone of Interest* is not about further documenting the Holocaust, with its well-known horrors and associated imagery, but about recognizing humanity's capacity to "live with holocausts and other atrocities, to make peace with them, draw benefit from them" (Klein 2024). This article engages with the film's fundamental concerns about "extraordinary empathy dissonance" and the ways in which "selective empathy" marks human culture as part of "a continuum [...] not a moment" (Coates 2024). The article situates *The Zone of Interest* as a provocation to think more deeply about the ethics of our contemporary cultures, especially the Global North, with the aim of using Michel Serres's philosophical process to provide an ontological and epistemological context for analogical thinking. Put another way, the article seeks to show how the analogistic thought within Glazer's provocation can be situated philosophically as part of an open-ended network of possible futures and outcomes, within which humans have free will to implement change. For Glazer, the "axiom of the whole project was 'make it present'" (Glazer in O'Falt and Desowitz 2024). *The Zone of Interest* invites consideration of what it means to belong to cultures that accept atrocities as commonplace, prompting consideration of humanity's cultural sensibilities, which determine how societies engage with diversities, differences, and the multiplicities of perspective that are an inescapable part of the global geopolitical landscape (as well as being integral to local communities and societies in general). The article suggests that Serres's philosophy, which is not widely applied to film, offers a framework through which to engage with cinematic art and other creative practices.

Serres's philosophy combines aspects of historical epistemology, information theory, and relational ontology using analogical and topological (qualitatively relational) thinking to identify patterns and connections between knowledges and ways of being across time and space. He is inherently pacifist and pro-human, advocating a humanist version of posthumanism that promotes ecologically focussed structures on a global/cosmological scale.

Throughout his work, Serres is fundamentally aware of the messy and pluralistic qualities of being, as well as the dynamic and negotiated qualities of knowledge (including communication in all its forms), while always insisting upon an empirical, material, basis for any ontological or epistemological insights. This has been characterized as a form of “sense empiricism” (Tucker 2011) and pan-ontological “aspectual pluralism” (Watkin 2020). With consideration of the immersive sensibility constructed and mediated through the screen, which situates *The Zone of Interest* as a cinematic experience that elevates sound over vision, this article is organized into three sections and a conclusion. The first section focuses upon the thematic and conceptual qualities of the film, which takes the audience inside the Höss family sensibility; their patterns of knowing and being. The second section discusses Serres’s assimilation of Lucretian and Epicurean atomism into his ontological and epistemological thinking, which links materialism and ethics, providing a philosophical framework for analogical thinking. The third section considers the importance of noise within Serres’s philosophy, and within *The Zone of Interest*, as a source of knowledge to be sensed and valued. The conclusion briefly discusses Serres’s topological approach to time and space, which shapes the analogical processes characteristic of his philosophy and draws together the core themes of the article.

Perpetrator Culture, Selective Empathy, and Contemporary Darkness

To look for the similarities between us and them, rather than the differences. That could be a dangerous and provocative perspective, but it always felt a robust one.

(Wilson in Gant 2024)

I wanted to show that these were crimes committed by Mr. and Mrs. Smith at No. 26.

(Glazer in Solly 2024)

Glazer's formal experimentation with cinematic grammar in *The Zone of Interest* seeks to actualize, within reason, the Hösses's nauseating existence. The audience is invited to slip inside the Hösses's bourgeois sensibility of "non-thinking, aspirational-careerist horrors" (Glazer in Fear 2023) who normalized evil. Visceral shocks emerge, often subtly and intuitively, through a steady flow of fugitive details that segue the viewer ever deeper into the mindset of an established Nazi family. The Hösses's are so comfortable with their ideological alignment with Nazism, and the lifestyle it affords them, they unthinkingly accept the Holocaust as background noise to their existence. The unsettling strategy of placing the audience inside the Höss household encourages a shared perceptual awareness of their disposition towards repressed, suppressed, and largely unspoken conformity with genocide. To articulate the underlying concept Glazer refers to philosopher Gillian Rose's provocation to imagine "a film that could make us feel 'unsafe', by showing how we're emotionally and politically closer to the perpetrator culture than we'd like to think" (O'Falt and Desowitz 2024). Much of the Hösses's daily lifestyle is comparatively mundane, progressing through a series of (seemingly) surface level interactions, leading some critics to opine a sense of slowness and limited dramatic content. The lack of sensationalism is deliberate. Taking a perspective on the Holocaust from within the Höss home invites reflection upon, and seeks to move beyond, Hannah Arendt's "banality of evil" by grounding the audience – through the patterns of family life – within "the norms of the emotional and political culture [being] represented" (Wilson in Gant 2024).

By inviting association with a sensibility that condones genocidal acts, the details within *The Zone of Interest* build (especially with repeat viewings) into a traumatic body of interwoven realizations – emerging from almost subliminal awareness – to resonate as gut reactions and psychological shocks. The documentary-like and partly improvised qualities of the film (using natural lighting and concealed cameras) belies a tightness and intricacy of

entangled meanings that are embodied and implicit (rather than explicated and explicit). *The Zone of Interest* is about immersion within the day-to-day trivialities of the Höss lifestyle, rather than being guided through a more conventional cinematic narrative with familiar imagery and semiotic codes. The film is structured so the integrated weight of impact builds through the rhythms and interactions rather than working towards a dramatic climax. In keeping with Serres's philosophy we are always 'in the midst of things,' situated within a network of relations where each material interaction carries an ethical implication. In terms of narrative, the film ostensibly tracks Höss's promotion and the complications this causes the family; at the same time, an almost overwhelming density of ethical insights are folded together with an understated intensity. The audience is taken inside a morally skewed way of being wherein the prospect of Höss living and working away from his (supposedly idyllic) family home causes more angst and consternation than his responsibility for expediting the Holocaust. When Höss explains he is being redesignated to Oranienburg, Hedwig describes their situation next door to Auschwitz – with an extended garden and household staff – as “living how we dreamed we would.”

As an insight into the Hösses's sensibilities, *The Zone of Interest* is a stark case of out of sight, out of mind. However, the sounds of genocide are a constant presence. The Hösses' wilful capability to filter out seemingly undeniable information (reducing it to background noise) is presented as an enduring ethical concern, inviting analogous comparisons with the morality of contemporary culture. *The Zone of Interest* asks provocative questions about the inferred parallels with compartmentalized (systemic) violence and oppression across the world. Under the prevalent neoliberal framework, power is concentrated primarily in the Global North where our social and legacy media outlets deliver, among other things, a near constant flow of selectively monetized information, infotainment, opinion, propaganda, and misinformation about ongoing violence, injustice, inhumane acts, and humanitarian crises.

From the situation in Gaza, which Glazer highlighted in his Oscar acceptance speech, through the impacts of climate change, the plight of refugees, and the socio-economic mechanisms that find ways to profit from ecological, political, and economic disasters, *The Zone of Interest* invites broad consideration of our patterns of being and sharper consideration of the points at which disinterest, and selective empathy, become active forms of complicity. In the Global North, social media has become the background noise against which many people's lives unfold so that images of war and suffering become interwoven with the trivialities of consumer culture. In *Malfeasance*, Serres discusses the cultural appropriation of media in the service of profit as an act of pollution, whereby a broader sense of ethical values becomes debased in favour of short-term economic (and other) gains. For Serres, our cultures are shaped by what we collectively choose to sense and value; in essence, our ethics are determined by what we pay attention to as significant "information" and what we disregard as background "noise". The shocking implication of *The Zone of Interest*, noted by Glazer as both "grotesque and striking", is how familiar the Hösses are in terms of their middle-class bourgeois aspirations (O'Hagan 2023).

The following examples present various threads of inhuman ambivalence woven into the Höss family's everyday patterns of being. Details that imply the ease with which the family has adapted to the notion of ambient genocide: the water turns pink (with diluted blood) when the soles of Höss's boots are washed into a drain after returning from Auschwitz; the eldest Höss son, Claus (Johann Karthaus), peruses the remains of human teeth in bed, by torchlight, while his younger brother, Hans (Luis Noah Witte), on the bunk-bed below, mimics the dull repetitive sounds of the concentration camp machinery; prisoners' ashes are quietly folded into the Hösses's soil beds to help grow flowers and vegetables, which the children eat; Hedwig unhesitatingly takes ownership of a fur coat and the lipstick in one of the pockets, delivered from the death camp's storage facilities that are laughingly

referred to over coffee as “Canada” (thought of as a country rich with resources); the house is organized with an obsessive need for cleanliness, at Hedwig’s behest, by housemaids under threat of execution; and plain white laundry is frequently hung out to dry, despite the near constant possibility of human remains in smoke and ash blowing through the Hösses’s garden. The household staff and gardeners are recruited from Auschwitz, existentially aware of their disposability. The sense of horror is always there, in the details, drifting by within surface perceptions that are present but simultaneously repressed, akin to the scrolling imagery on a smartphone screen that is immediate but also elsewhere.

More overtly, we hear (without seeing) a steady and discordant stream of gunshots, shouts, screams, and other indiscernible but deeply unsettling sounds, which blend into and at times rise above the continual low drone of industrial-type machinery (workshops and crematorium furnaces) operating on the other side of the wall. The film invites implicit and explicit waves of understanding, the rhythm of which depends upon how attentively one perceives the background noise conveyed by Johnnie Burn’s pervasive yet submerged sound design and Mica Levi’s mercurial and judiciously featured score. The score, which frames and selectively disrupts the sound design, is punctuated by guttural sonic belches that seem to reverberate through the body: echoing, low, primordial-type noises that combine a sense of the corporeal with the subterranean. Sounds that seem to emanate from within the bowels of the earth while pulsing through the gut, via a deep bass tone, to accentuate the embodied sonic experience that defines the core of the film. The physicality of these waves of noise, experienced as both sound and vibration, feels aligned with the stomach: the body’s instinctual site for interoceptive sensory awareness of anxiety, disgust, unease, nausea, and discomfort. Building upon their collaborative and stylistic mode of storytelling—which draws significantly upon sonic evocations intuitively correlated with visual imagery, developed when making *Under the Skin* (Jonathan Glazer, 2013)—Glazer, Burn, and Levi

create two conjoined, juxtaposed, and simultaneously integrated realities in *The Zone of Interest*. Glazer describes this duality as the filmic story you see and the one you hear, whereby “the second is just as important as the first, arguably more so” (O’Hagan 2024).

The Zone of Interest expands the plane of cinematic understanding by depicting genocide through the relationship between the audio, which channels the degenerate horrors from the other side of the wall, and the visual, which documents the dull routines of a sociopathic Nazi family. Most of the children seem too young to fully comprehend their situation; however, their behaviours—which includes one of the daughters repeatedly sleepwalking at night—infer various degrees of nascent awareness and/or trauma. The eldest son, Claus, seen wearing his Hitler Youth uniform, displays both understanding and signs of sadistic pleasure, such as locking younger brother Hans in the greenhouse and then making a hissing sound to emulate the release of Zyklon B (introduced to Auschwitz under his father’s command). Multiple meanings are tacitly inferred by the film’s title, based upon the obtuse euphemism, *interessengebiet*, used by the Nazi administration to describe the expanse of land surrounding Auschwitz. As a title, “the zone of interest” plays ironically on the personified indifference of the Höss family (with reference to the understated Nazi terminology), while also indicating the profound ways the audience is led “into the warp and weft of unfamiliar zones” (Rapold 2023). However, as Glazer has made clear in numerous public statements, *The Zone of Interest* is not a history piece or study of the past: it is about the ongoing human capacity to accept repeating patterns of inhuman atrocity and suffering, framed by rationalized indifference, as a familiar aspect of the contemporary world. The next section provides a framework for this concept through Serres’s atomist influenced philosophy.

Atomism and an Affinity with Analogism

Relation precedes being; there you have my philosophy in a word (Serres 2001, p.321; in Watkin 2020, p.398, Trans.).

I don't know if you're saying it's an analogy or just the fact that it made you think of that, which is enough for me, but [...] that's the type of connection that we were talking about (Wilson in Gant 2024).

Serres understands our ways of being and knowing as dynamically positioned within a fluid, interwoven, network of relationships. Such relationships, which are endlessly mutable, emerge through patterns of interaction within the material world, inclusive of all things (animate and inanimate) across the entirety of the universe. Some of these patterns, including within human politics, tend to recur across time and space as isomorphic iterations (patterns repeating with variations), which can be shaped and influenced (towards new or distinct patterns) through changes in the material relationships between things. For example, if humanity had historically established less anthropocentric and more ecocentric structures, on a global scale, our cultures would have evolved differently, likely avoiding the existential threats of climate change. If humans significantly change our material interactions with nature now, shaped by ecocentrism, future generations should benefit from the reorganized cultures that develop. For Serres, there is no teleological or deterministic expectation of outcomes (beyond entropy); he is not an atomist in the reductive sense. Instead, we are always in the midst of things – within “a fluctuating web of relations” – whereby analogical thinking can build connections, shape understanding, and bridge differences by “discovering possible relations in this disparate order” (Serres in Watkin, 2020, p.107). Ideally, the relations that are discovered might influence future patterns towards dynamically stable equilibriums. In a political sense, this infers peaceful democratic systems that embrace cultural fluidity/change without drifting towards breakdown/chaos.

In relation to artworks, including *The Zone of Interest*, as well as the importance of culture and the study of cultures more generally, Serres's philosophy provides a way of thinking about creative practices (especially those on the frontiers of creativity) as embodied mediations that can open out, broaden—and otherwise expose, reveal, and invite—exploration and awareness of our patterns of knowing and being. Existing patterns might be revealed more clearly or palpably through artworks that present and/or embody those patterns from a new or distinct perspective; other patterns may be emergent as possibilities, including radical possibilities, which might inform us individually and/or transform our collective existence if they expand and take hold as cultural influences. Put another way, artworks can take the perceiver inside a new or distinct sensibility that might then reshape or otherwise reconfigure their understanding about ways of knowing and being. If such ideas become influential, they might reach ever wider audiences, communities, and cultures, potentially at a global level. Influencing sensibilities through cultural production, including film, involves engagement and reflection through embodied awareness of—and/or dialogue about—issues, topics, ideas, knowledges, and perspectives that might otherwise be overlooked, undervalued, unfamiliar, unknown and/or unconsidered.

By focusing upon selective ambivalence towards genocide as a pattern of human behaviour, *The Zone of Interest* invites analogical thinking (independently aligned with Serres's philosophy) to critically engage with a way of being that is not limited historically to the Nazis and the Holocaust. The film takes us inside an inhumane sensibility so that we might recognize and, to some extent, know the patterns of being that can distance humans from their own abhorrent actions and foster indifference towards the suffering of others. By recognizing these patterns, and getting closer to them, we potentially become better equipped to identify variations of those patterns when they start to recur (as isomorphic iterations) and to ideally change course (by intervening, disrupting, or reforming those patterns) before the

full horror of a genocidal sensibility takes hold within a culture. As the film's producer and long-time collaborator with Glazer, James Wilson has explained that *The Zone of Interest* does not visualize the extermination of European Jews because it is focused specifically upon "grappling with the culture that contributed to those atrocities" (Coates 2024). When interviewer Tyler Coates refers to former plantations in the American South as living museums connecting past and present, Wilson responds to this analogy as "the type of connection that we [Wilson and Glazer] were talking about" (Coates 2024) in terms of ongoing relevance across time.

At the end of *The Zone of Interest* an audacious fold in time moves between Höss dry retching on a darkened stairwell, in 1944, and present-day Auschwitz-Birkenau State Memorial and Museum being cleaned and maintained for public engagement and collective memory. In that moment, the ongoing interactivity between past and present is made explicit. In addition to the importance of remembering the Holocaust, Glazer's use of folded (topological) time appears to indirectly reference the closing sequence of the groundbreaking documentary *The Act of Killing* (Joshua Oppenheimer, Christine Cynn, and Anonymous, 2012), when the state supported murderer, Anwar Congo, involuntarily starts dry retching in response to the deaths he inflicted decades earlier. The conclusion to *The Zone of Interest* uses an analogical reference to *The Act of Killing*, about the Indonesian Death Squads operating between 1965-66, to infer repeating patterns and how the past informs and shapes the present. Glazer's cut to show Auschwitz-Birkenau as a contemporary memorial, around eighty years in the future, is consistent with Serres's topological approach to time and space (to be discussed further) whereby the past becomes immediately relevant, and contingently interwoven, with the present. Importantly, as Wilson's interview makes clear, thinking analogously through *The Zone of Interest* does not propose a moral equivalence between distinct historical events, whether considering The Holocaust, Black genocide in the United

States, the Indonesian mass killings of the 1960s, or other atrocities. *The Zone of Interest* instead suggests the parallels between cultural sensibilities that internalize violence and oppression should be acknowledged more directly and moved into the foreground of our cultural awareness. However, the film follows Rose's commitment to engagement through feeling – immersion within a sensibility – over documentation of events.

As Wilson explains, *The Zone of Interest* avoids depicting Höss as a monster because dehumanization offers the comfort of distance: Höss becomes the monster over there, rather than evoking an uncomfortable closeness through familiarity from within (Coates 2024). *The Zone of Interest* invites the audience to step inside, and compare with today, the everyday aspects of a culture that supported, validated, and rewarded Höss. Consciously borrowing from the Reality TV aesthetic, as both a contemporary reference and a stylistic device, the film uses a fly-on-the-wall approach whereby the actors were unaware of camera placements and unimpeded in their interactions. *The Zone of Interest* relies upon “a balancing act and sometimes a tension” that combines detailed historical research – including faithful reconstruction of the Höss house (on location, a short distance from the original Höss house) – with a “kind of creative fiction” that operationalizes the cognitive dissonance of the family (Wilson in Coates, 2024). Making the Höss sensibility relatable, through a family man working his way up the corporate structure, invites parallels with analogical forms of empathy dissonance within contemporary culture. Naomi Klein (2024) pursues this point in response to Glazer's Oscar acceptance speech about Gaza and the walls that divide us, as well as broadening the impact to the commercialised culture that typically situates politics as a strand of media. In Serres's terms, “(n)othing hides the new better than news and media” (2013, 70), whereby both emergent and urgent issues relevant to our ethical positioning – to what our cultures might stand for – are lost within the flow. The standing ovation received by *The Zone of Interest* at Cannes, from a wealthy international audience (flown into France),

sits awkwardly alongside the Global North's general detachment from the way "flight emissions are entangled in the disappearance of food sources for impoverished people far away, or the extinction of species, or the potential disappearance of entire nations" (Klein 2024).

Serres's philosophy is inherently concerned with these observations because it provides an ontological and epistemological process through which analogical connections are understood as both material and ethical patterns of knowing and being. In *The Birth of Physics*, Serres offers his most comprehensive engagement with Lucretius's atomism through his reading of *De Rerum Natura (On the Nature of Things)* (1972), written by Lucretius (c.99-c.55 BC) in the first-century BC. The impact of Lucretian atomism upon Serres is present throughout his work, including as a recurrent influence upon ethics. Through Serres's topological way of thinking, which proposes (among other things) that chronologically distant knowledges become relative/relevant through folds and flows in time and space, he regards Lucretius as a contemporary in thought. For Serres, *On the Nature of Things* speaks in terms appropriate to thermodynamics and, by extension, selective aspects of quantum physics (see: Webb, 2006). Serres's topological way of thinking incorporates cosmological time and deep time, within which human interactions cover an incredibly short span of (chronological) time relative to the overall picture of material interactions. For Serres, time does not flow as a simple linear chronology (Newtonian clock time) because it also includes crossflows and backflows of negentropic (negative entropic) energies (moving towards order; the formation of structures, life, and so on) as well as the expansive dissipation of energy through entropy. Within this multifaceted model of time, which is materially connected to space, understanding Lucretius as a contemporary becomes less difficult to apprehend within a cosmological or geological timescale, whereby making topological (qualitatively relational)

connections between patterns of thought in the first century BC and the twentieth century AD requires such a small shift in spacetime as to be almost insignificant.

Serres's ontology draws significantly upon Lucretian atomism and the notion that (prior to the universe forming in its current dynamical state) the initial, universal, state of being consisted of atoms falling in the void. In this conception, atoms fall in regularized patterns (without interaction) such that the initial state of the universe was so uniform as to appear static: a form of lateral flow. According to Lucretius the clinamen then occurs, which is an unpredictable swerving of atoms – through an inclination or bias in one direction or another – setting in motion an ongoing chain of interactions between atoms. The expansive universe, including our solar system and the material world as we know it, is formed from this ongoing dynamical process, which will eventually return to a regularized pattern of atoms falling in the void due to entropy (the second law of thermodynamics). Until that point occurs, an ongoing series of fluid interactions between atoms formulates Earth, the emergence of life, and shapes the constantly changeable relations between all animate and inanimate things. For Serres (1983), these patterns of interactions are also patterns of noise. Each material interaction potentially leaves a trace as a form of noise, or energy transfer, which is a potential source of knowledge. One example is the background radiation of the universe, which can be listened to with the right kind of specialist instruments, thereby folding us back (topologically, through time and space) to the start of the universe. For Serres, noise (in its broadest sense) refers to the multiplicity of all possible knowledges: it encompasses the expanse of all ongoing material interactions within the open system of the universe. This notion of noise as a source of knowledge, which is selectively sensed and valued to gather information, provides context for understanding the role of sound within *The Zone of Interest* (in the next section).

For Serres, following Lucretius, ethics are interwoven with materiality from when the clinamen first occurs because all things in the universe are formulated by, and emergent from, material interactions. How those material interactions occur, and the patterns of iterative and variable interactions that recur, influence the formation of localized patterns of temporary order and stability. These include geological structures, variations and adaptations of life, self-supporting ecosystems, and, over time, the emergence of *homo sapiens*, language, culture, societies, laws, morals, and other ways of knowing and being formed within an ongoing process (until entropy eventually returns everything to a state of laminar flow). As a simplified statement, how evolution on Earth has unfolded, and how it continues, is dependent upon interactions and their environments. However, any given pattern can potentially be influenced, and the possible outcome changed, if the interaction moves towards the noise and chaos from which patterns of knowing and being emerge:

All things arise from a stability in the flow of atoms that produces local [negentropic] order, and our existence is no different, though it is played out on a particularly rich variety of levels. So, as part of nature, we conform to the material logic of atomism that threads its way through all physical and discursive domains (Webb, 2006, p.132)

Chance occurrences, for example, might bring together microbes that formulate a new virus, which then prospers, radically changing how other lifeforms interact within the world, shaping how they might live or die. In terms of human influence upon patterns of knowing and being, direct examples include cultivating antibiotics to control harmful bacteria; creating vaccines to prevent viruses spreading; and genetic and cellular engineering relating to modified crops and other organic properties and outcomes. We have also introduced forms of artificial intelligence into our digital communication systems, such that human behaviours are now monitored and influenced by algorithms operating beyond our immediate control (typically to enhance digital engagement and consumption). And, as mentioned previously,

our cultures and societies have evolved by sensing and valuing the material world (the natural world that we are part of) from an anthropocentric perspective. The dominant human cultures on Earth have chosen not to value fauna and flora, and the ecosystems they create and support, as equivalent in importance to the needs and wants of our societies (in the Global North). Humanity has historically chosen not to sense the material world too closely or carefully—which is to say, we have limited the extent to which we listen to, study, understand, and consistently learn from nature—as an outcome of our ethical choices. Instead, our dominant cultures have focused on selectively sensing and valuing the material world well enough to influence patterns of being and knowing that function through generalized degradation of nature (in the service of selected human wants and needs); expansive human influence upon the material world; and societies built upon competition for resources. For Serres, consideration of these ethical choices is present in Lucretius, whose poetry advocates choosing patterns of knowing and being aligned with Venus (love) rather than Mars (war); collaboration with nature, including other humans; and peaceful existence, exercising democratic restraint in pursuit of pleasure (See: Webb, 2006, p.127).

Serres often speaks about the codes that inform our knowledges and suggests that, especially through the scientific method, these codes have increasingly displaced conventional language as the means through which we communicate knowledge and understand our interactions with the material world (2006, p.336-347). Such developments in understanding material codes, including breakthroughs like creating the atom bomb, may be detrimental and/or supportive to our existence. New insights that expand the boundaries of knowledge cannot be understood as markers of progress, which presumes some form of determinism; instead, they infer the discovery of new and distinct patterns—that can be potentially beneficial and/or potentially dangerous—for current and future interactions and possibilities. Splitting the atom may lead to harnessing power that makes interstellar travel

feasible; it may also lead to mutually assured destruction of most living things on Earth. In keeping with Lucretius's commitment to Epicureanism, Serres warns against human overreliance upon anthropocentrism (and the need to step back from exercising the power we have over the natural world) as well as humanity's tendency to overreach without understanding, and/or significantly considering, the consequences of our actions within the bigger picture (Webb, 2006, p.134; Serres, 1991, p.119). All these considerations emerge from material interactions and the ways in which patterns of knowing and being are influenced by engaging with the noise (or energies) of the world to selectively identify, draw upon, and then apply information. However, this is always part of a fluid process whereby the noise of the world (including unknown and/or overlooked knowledge) adds interference and unanticipated outcomes.

For Serres, a substantial ethical failure comes from humanity's preoccupation with human-to-human politics, which develops from anthropocentrism and has been further compounded by aspects of enlightenment and modernist thinking. Nature has consistently been overlooked and treated primarily as a material resource rather than a collaborative equal. Overreliance upon abstract human thought, prioritized above embodied knowledges and experiences, has created patterns of knowing and being preoccupied with human politics and organized around the accumulation of economic wealth (as opposed to developing systems that value other outcomes more highly, such as ecological wellbeing). As Serres states in *Times of Crisis* (2013), human intelligence has too frequently been used as a weapon to conquer nature and to enable nations, corporations, and/or individuals to compete for resources and wealth. Our cultures have overinvested in hard ways of being (valuing material innovations as a priority), leading to societies that focus predominantly upon competition over—and claims to ownership of—finite resources; expanding economic and material gains; and seeking high-ranking relative status within socio-political hierarchies of anthropocentric

power. Such patterns of being fuel notions of difference, rivalry, and even enmity; reduce or otherwise limit compassion and empathy (especially between rivals and strained group identities); and—if a culture moves into an extreme sensibility—can lead towards excessive anger, hatred, violence, war, and acts of genocidal destruction. Following Serres’s ontological and epistemological process, the patterns that ultimately lead to genocide build from our ways of knowing and being and the levels of selective empathy/empathy dissonance that a culture is ethically willing to propagate. It is these qualities and recurrent patterns that Glazer (and Wilson) are focused upon, and draw attention to, through *The Zone of Interest*. As Glazer states in relation to the analogical qualities of the film and its contemporary relevance:

I think what's inside this film is what we do to each other as human beings [...] We see others as lesser than ourselves, different from ourselves. Somehow, step by step, that leads to atrocity [...] It's about the inherent violence in us – and how we need to evolve out of that state. (Bushby, 2024)

Screaming Flowers as Patterns of Knowing and Being

Noise is not a phenomenon [...] but being itself. (Serres, 1983, p.50)

We are drawing upon the mental imagery and the knowledge that collectively is owned by the world to draw pictures in people’s heads with sound. (Burn in Mitchell, 2024)

Following any one of the threads that form a multiplicity of interwoven patterns in *The Zone of Interest* leads into a matrix of connected rhythms. For example, the opening scene of a riverside family picnic presents an image of blue skies and sunshine, inferring an Edenic pastoral lifestyle. In swimwear the Nazi identity is unclear, but the following morning Höss is in uniform receiving a wooden canoe as a birthday gift. The finish is wet, implying it was made locally (by skilled prisoners). Höss later takes two of his children for a canoe ride (as

part of their supposedly bucolic upbringing) when the river suddenly becomes cloudy with human remains and Höss picks a jawbone out of the flow. Rushing to his children, Höss shouts for them to get out of the water. Once home, they are vigorously washed and Höss blows wet ash from his nose into the sink (a routine seemingly familiar to him). A housemaid then pensively scrubs the bath, likely under threat to remove all traces of the incident (or be reduced to ashes herself). Höss later dictates a carefully composed message for the SS in Auschwitz, using code to warn against picking the lilac bushes to the extent that they “bleed”. The message is both obscure and explicit: casual disposal of human remains that despoil (or bleed into) the natural surroundings (revealing evidence of the Holocaust) will result in punishment. From Höss’s home office, Glazer cuts to Hedwig slowly touring her visiting mother around the “paradise garden” she designed, with its swimming pool, flowers, vegetables, and beehives. Changing pace and tone, a series of fixed shots on different flowers from various angles is accompanied by the intense buzzing of bees (recalling a sickeningly trite comment about Höss working like a ‘busy bee’). While focused upon a red flower, the intense buzzing sound (of bees harvesting pollen, seen within the sequence of shots) morphs into desolate human screams (the harvesting of lives) and the screen turns solid blood red (an allusion to making the lilacs bleed) before the sound cuts abruptly to silence. The low, persistent, background rumble of the concentration camp machinery then returns, followed by a variation of the sonic belches that selectively punctuate the film, before swiftly cutting to children reading praise from the Höss family guestbook about National Socialist hospitality.

Thinking analogously, through Serresian atomism and its ethical implications, the screaming flowers are symbolically and materially connected to victims of the Holocaust. The flowers provide a visual referent for the Nazi code (used by Höss) and they are materially (atomically) composed from remains of Auschwitz prisoners (whose ashes fertilize the garden). In relation to noise as a source of knowledge, the screaming flowers create a

point of convergence for the film's thematic interest in visual appearances—surface images associated with nature and pastoral scenes—and the deeper reality of hellish darkness and misery, conveyed primarily through the sound design. As a core principle of the film, Glazer decided the audience should “only ever *hear* the atrocities” (Mitchell, 2024) so that over the wall sounds can suggest conceptual reference points within the perceiver's mind. The audience is invited to listen closely and to place value upon the rhythms and content they hear, while only seeing interactions within the Höss family home. The more one listens, the more information is available to understand the full horror of what is occurring. To filter out the background noise—akin to the Höss sensibility—is to disengage from, or otherwise disregard or downplay, the rhythms and patterns of meaning integral to the situation. Noise, sound, and the knowledge contained in the patterns of being it conveys becomes elevated above the visual content, while also being reliant upon juxtaposition with the imagery, to enforce Glazer's point about selective empathy and empathy dissonance. In effect, the audience is invited to consider their own position in relation to the events that unfold, which is shaped by the extent to which they engage with background noise as a source of information. Beyond *The Zone of Interest*, Glazer infers that our patterns of cultural engagement require more sensitivity and attentiveness for humanity to evolve out of socio-political structures that rationalize, and thereby enable or support, systemic violence and oppression.

The screaming flowers and blood red screen, as well as the guttural sonic punctums that follow, are not impactful because they offer an analytical or intellectual experience; they are impactful because they convey a complex embodied and sensorial experience (through patterns of knowledge). *The Zone of Interest* is primarily about sensibilities and sensoriality—a synthesized poetics of meaning—rather than a rationalized, self-consciously cognitive, form of knowing. This approach aligns with Serres's philosophy whereby sensorial

and empirical engagement, mediated through the body (and bodily extension through technology), provides the initial basis for human ontology and epistemology. As discussed above, Serresian “noise” provides an analogy for all possible knowledges within the open-ended nature of the universe. Human knowledge (including how we engage with one another) is therefore directly connected to how the noise of the world is sensed and valued—selectively filtered through bodily and technological processes—to identify which noises are to be listened to and recognized as important “information” and which noises are disregarded or overlooked, to remain as background noise (Serres, 2013, p.27-48; Webb in Dolphijn, 2018, p.11-30). In philosophical terms, the canon of Western thought has historically privileged certain traditions of rationalized human thought (as information) over other possibilities, which includes other traditions of knowing and being (as background noise) (Wolfe, 2007, p.xi-xxvii). Understood within this context, embracing the possibilities within Serresian noise is to consider multiple ways of knowing and being that are typically overlooked or undervalued within Western thought, such as indigenous and embodied knowledges; the perspectives and insights of so-called minority groups; alternate rationalities, which might include Eastern philosophies and other belief structures beyond Western thought, as well as (but not limited to) the contributions of non-human and more-than-human lifeforms to the ecologies and functionality of Earth.

The sensorial and empirical aspects of Serres’s philosophy include a plea for humanity to be more sensitive—literally to *sense more*—and be more immediately situated and engaged with the world around us so that we might recognize, reconnect, and remember that we are part of the ecosystems that make up the material world (Serres, 2016). Increased sensoriality, for Serres, offers the potential for more empathic and compassionate ethics, between and beyond humans, through greater embodied engagement with ways of being and knowing. This includes moving away from anthropocentric competition for material

resources and towards a more Epicurean model of collaboration, restraint, the pursuit of pleasure, and the avoidance/minimization of fear and pain. Through the Höss sensibility, *The Zone of Interest* presents a near complete inversion of these Epicurean principles. The Höss “paradise garden” and supposedly bucolic lifestyle envisioned by Nazi ideology is based upon a hellish darkness of malice, vindictiveness, fear of others, and wilful destruction. The one point of light comes from the night-time infrared sequences, which invert the imagery (akin to photographic film negatives) to show Aleksandra Bystron-Kolodziejczyk (Julia Polaczek)—a Polish girl who was a member of the resistance—as a bright white figure leaving apples overnight for prisoners on work detail to find the following day. Her appearance in two sequences is initially accompanied by Höss reading *Hänsel und Gretel* to his daughters; in the first sequence, this gives way to the guttural sonic belches from Levi’s score. These primordial sounds convey bodily sensations of nausea, evoking the repressed moral conscience of the film which surfaces when the light of Aleksandra’s actions pierce the darkness. It is a discomfiting sound that prefigures Höss repeatedly retching while descending the stairs into blackness. Höss’s embodied knowledge of the atrocities he has committed (like the bodily self-revulsion of Congo in *The Act of Killing*) cannot be contained no matter how extensively the guilty party tries to rationalize, and thereby deny, the moral weight of their actions.

The guttural analogy to a convulsive stomach, evoked by the crossmodality of the sound, becomes an essential (discordant) rhythm within *The Zone of Interest*. Aleksandra’s actions show the prisoners that someone on the other side of the wall cares about their wellbeing, suggesting small cracks in the stronghold of Auschwitz’s “zone of interest.” Where the light of Aleksandra presents a ray of hope, the sonic punctums convey irrepressible guilt, thereby juxtaposing and combining these patterns of light and sound as ethical responses to inhumane actions. The sounds associated directly with Aleksandra’s

patterns of being are conveyed when she returns home (and the imagery reverts from infrared) so we can glimpse her family life. Aleksandra unfolds a piece of music titled *Sunbeams* (composed by Joseph Wulf, a prisoner in Auschwitz, and left for her to find neatly coiled inside a tin), which she plays solemnly, beautifully, and hauntingly on the piano. It is melancholic, while also sharing a deep-seated desire for light and life as well as reaching out for the kind of humane connection (the glimmer of hope, the feeling of sunbeams breaking through) that Aleksandra's actions offer within the darkness. It is a sensory dialogue between Wulf, as a prisoner, and Aleksandra, a fellow resistor, who cannot see one another but who know of the other through the patterns they create beyond the boundaries imposed upon them. Wulf's *Sunbeams* provides a musical counterpoint to the over the wall sounds of atrocity; a humane rhythm that communicates a plea for sensitivity and freedom, asking that the suffering being endured is *heard* (in the Serresian sense). As Glazer has discussed, both Wulf and Bystron-Kolodziejczyk were real people, researched as part of the filmmaking process.

As sound designer and sound mixer, respectively, Burn and Tarn Willers were committed to the level of authenticity requested by Glazer. Burn composed around 600 pages of notes, describing the process as less about filmmaking and “more about becoming an expert on the sound of Auschwitz” (Mitchell 2024). Burn discusses “film one” as the Höss family drama, shot in Poland on location with its own sound mix of household interactions. The replica house was made to be as authentic as possible so the sounds of footsteps on stone floors, the impact upon acoustics of thick walls, and the general atmosphere (the patterns of noise) were aligned with the reality they reconstruct. Sound perspective was captured for each of the ten cameras embedded within the house, with forty more directional microphones operating similarly throughout the house and garden. As Willers notes, there was no Additional Dialogue Recording (ADR) and no desire from Glazer for pristine sound, because

content such as the dialogue “wasn’t necessarily central at times” (Mitchell 2024). A commitment to feeling like you were in those spaces (where you may not hear everything clearly) was the priority. Burn refers to “film two” as the absolutely horrifying sounds of Auschwitz: an entirely separate soundscape, on a distinct track, filled with “blaring sirens, frequent gunshots, the bellow of chimneys churning out smoke, and the screams of prisoners being abused and executed.” Burn explains that the over the wall sounds were carefully designed to ensure they “never impacted the characters in the rest of the movie.” There are no correlations with the Höss family’s emotions or storyline: “gunshots don’t underline statements from the family; they just happen and are ignored, like they’re from a different reality, even though they’re happening only a few hundred yards away” (Burn in Goslin, 2024).

This notion of different realities highlights the intentional distinction Glazer anticipates between an audience’s perception (experiencing the visuals and different soundtracks as one unified reality) and the cognitive dissonance of the Höss family (preoccupied only with the comforts on their side of the wall). A striking example, of many, occurs when Höss goes horse-riding with Claus (his eldest child) dressed in his Hitler Youth uniform. The Auschwitz track is clearly audible, including gunshots and agitated sounds in the distance, which the audience experiences (along with the characters) as disturbing noises carrying across the relatively open natural landscape. The horses trample apples underfoot, unperturbed by the noises, wasting fruit that Aleksandra otherwise puts to good use (as the counterpoint of youthful hope and humanity). Höss suddenly and calmly asks Claus: “Did you hear that?” It seems, for a moment, that Höss might directly acknowledge the horrors he is responsible for, thereby bringing the two realities of the film together, but he is so detached and selectively empathic he instead comments on a bird call as part of a teachable moment: “It’s a bittern. A heron. A Eurasian grey heron.” The audience similarly experiences a

teachable moment through Höss's sensibility; not about Nazi ideology regarding nature, but about how Höss is indoctrinating his eldest son into ethically disregarding the Holocaust. A distinct ethical choice is being made about what to hear and value; a choice about what constitutes information and what is background noise. This principle (which aligns with Serres's interwoven notions of noise, material interactions, and ethics) leads directly into the fundamental questions and concerns that Glazer is posing, analogously, throughout *The Zone of Interest*. It shows how seemingly small details within patterns of knowing and being can relate to, and inform, the way local incidents are connected to (and reflective of) larger scale structures and systems, potentially on a global level.

It's Not a History Lesson, It's a Warning

The usual theory supposes time to be always and everywhere laminar [...] No, time flows in a turbulent and chaotic manner; it percolates. All of our difficulties with the theory of history come from the fact that we think of time in this inadequate and naïve way. (Serres and Latour, 1995, p.59)

I was determined to make it not about then, but about now [...] It's not a history lesson. It's a warning. (Glazer in Fear, 2023)

Glazer's analogical approach is akin to Serres's conception of time as percolating in an uneven flow. It is way of thinking about time and space that is more topological than geometrical, which is to say qualitatively relational and variable as opposed to neatly quantifiable and linear. Considering time primarily as a qualitative experience, rather than a rigid constant for measurement or distance, is comparable to aspects of quantum physics (including similarities that Serres identifies between Lucretius and modern fluid dynamics; see Serres and Latour, 1995, p.57). It recognizes that any given moment, while shaped by certain causalities, occurs because of a network of multiple influences brought together as

one possibility: the result of numerous contingencies, reliant upon interactions that may stretch back into deep time (such as the formulation of raw materials or evolutionary behaviours), combined with actions across time leading to the present moment. To take a loaded gun, point it at someone, and then execute them (with impunity) is not the result of a straightforward linear progression of historic events. In keeping with Serres's philosophy, it is the product of multiple knowledges and interwoven patterns of being converging into a moment where any number of prior interactions could potentially lead to a different outcome. A particularly bleak example of inferred possibilities occurs when Hans (the youngest son) is playing with dice on his bedroom floor and is distracted by shouts addressing the commandant, his father, causing him to move to the window. We do not see what Hans sees, peeking behind the net curtains, but we hear Höss shouting for a prisoner to be drowned in the river after fighting over an apple. Alongside the sinking feeling this is a twisted outcome of Aleksandra's good deeds, where her attempts to bring light have been subsumed by prevailing darkness, we see Hans swiftly replace the net curtain and pensively return to his dice. After witnessing his father overseeing a man's death, which we hear, Hans whispers: "Don't do that again." The inference is that Höss has previously reprimanded him with these words. It is left open as to whether Hans is potentially empathizing with the victim or imagining himself growing into his father's role.

In terms of the bigger picture of topological relations across time and space, Serres's atomist philosophy assumes a structural familiarity between energy flows across the entirety of the universe. On a cosmic scale, the underlying patterns of what happens on Earth (or anywhere else) could recur isomorphically on the other side of the universe because the same essential laws of physics prevail everywhere. When and how things occur is contingent, shaped by the patterns of being (including ethics) that inform and influence the material interactions between things. As an underlying philosophical principle, Serres's atomism

provides the basis for his analogical and topological process. In relation to human knowledge, Serres advocates learning from the “limpid wisdom” of the natural world “that can be read directly from the codes inscribed in things around us” (Serres, 2000, p.182; Webb, 2006, p.133). It is a wisdom of Epicurean restraint that seeks localized relative stability, at any given point in history, while retaining “conduciveness to the emergence of new forms;” a kind of dynamic equilibrium that remains open to change without encouraging extremes of ambition “unsuited to the physical world” (Serres, 2000, 107-134; Webb, 2000, 132-135). By contrast, the reality depicted in *The Zone of Interest* is extreme, built upon sociopathic ambition and glossed over with surface level notions of appreciation for nature and pastoral wellbeing. The feeling of an off-kilter descent into *The Zone of Interest* occurs at the beginning of the film when the blurred title fades to a black screen accompanied by Levi’s mesmerizing, asymmetrical, score. The music conveys a sense of moving downwards, unevenly, like a sonic decompression chamber, taking us into a different atmosphere that is disconcerting in an oblique way. The black screen is an invitation to prioritize listening as integral to the full story, which is prolonged before eventually opening onto the picnic scene and birdsong.

As Levi explains, throughout the film “the music is taking you to a place below or beyond what you are seeing, almost a nowhere place beyond logical comprehension” (O’Hagan, 2023). The score intuitively conveys a feeling of the more-than-rational; it is integrated with the feel of the film, and a sense of moving through or across time, rather than being directly linked to the historical reality being depicted. Glazer’s topological fold in time to the present day emphasizes the provocation to consider the immediate relevance of the film. We move into the present through a single point of light, recalling the brightness of Aleksandra in the darkness and the associated sunbeam analogy. The point of light is initially surrounded by blackness and then revealed as a peephole in a gas chamber door, seen from

the inside, when it is opened to let in daylight at the contemporary Memorial and Museum. The haunting spaces of Auschwitz-Birkenau are seen and heard being swept and cleaned for purposes of remembrance and to honour the dead. The reversal in the role of cleaning to conceal the truth (scrubbing blood from the soles of boots; eradicating human remains from the bath; not picking the lilacs until they bleed) to becoming an act of honouring and remembering the past is a poignant moment. Even the noise of the vacuum cleaners and other sounds created by maintaining the spaces and wiping down surfaces, undertaken by workers in uniform, inverts the patterns of being from within the same spaces when overseen by Höss. As we return to Höss dry retching on the stairwell and spitting onto the floor (for others to clean up) he continues down into the pitch blackness—deeper into the hell he is committed to—as the final shot of the film. It is Glazer’s stark reminder about the depths to which humanity appears repeatedly willing to descend. Before the film moves into the final sequence of Levi’s score—which is jagged and oscillating, alive with a haunting collage of distorted human shrieks and whoops gradually dropping in pitch—Höss’s disappearance into darkness reiterates Glazer’s warning that “we should be left feeling deeply unsafe about this kind of primordial horror that is underneath everything” (Fear, 2023).

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