

DARKNESS VISIBLE

THE CINEMA OF
JONATHAN GLAZER

AUTHOR JOHN BLEASDALE
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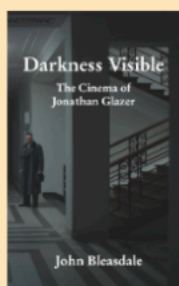
REVIEWED BY MICHAEL BROOKE

Stanley Kubrick once admitted envying commercials directors, specifically their ability to create memorable worlds, characters and stories within the space of a minute or so. We'll never know what he'd have made of Jonathan Glazer, a filmmaker who has regularly demonstrated that gift while also producing a feature filmography that is itself distinctly Kubrickian, not just tonally (chilly, quizical, obsessive) but also in the growing gaps between his film releases. Also, each Glazer feature has a distinctly different genre and milieu – a safecracker reluctantly taking on one last job (*Sexy Beast*, 2000), a ghost story about well-heeled Manhattanites (*Birth*, 2004), sci-fi horror in Scotland (*Under the Skin*, 2013) or the domestic life of a key Holocaust architect (*The Zone of Interest*, 2023).

But when watched in quick succession, connections become obvious. This begins with the title of John Bleasdale's book, which argues that all of Glazer's films are to some extent about darkness, whether visible or metaphorical, their characters buried, sucked into an infinite void or trapped in some kind of tunnel, a recurring image characterised as a threshold "between life and death, between comfort and annihilation".

Notionally Glazer's most audience-friendly film, *Sexy Beast* is as off-kilter as the work of Nicolas Roeg. Even without James Fox's presence, it would be hard to miss the film's nods to *Performance* (1970), and *The Man Who Fell to Earth* (1976) is echoed in the way Glazer turns sun-bleached Spain into a weirdly alien landscape, with a dash of surrealism in the dialogue – "You got very nice eyes, Deedee. Never noticed them before. They real?" This is uttered by Ben Kingsley's Don Logan, the most spectacular example of anti-typecasting in cinema since Jon Voight's vicious prison escapee in *Runaway Train* (1985). Bleasdale has much to say about Logan ("a lonely, bitter man, appalled by contentment"), not least the fact that he's essentially a child at heart, lashing out, throwing tantrums, pissing on the floor.

A child is also at the heart of *Birth*, although Cameron Bright's Sean is unnervingly calm, insisting to Anna (Nicole Kidman) that he's the reincarnation of her dead husband with such conviction that she comes to believe him, despite being aware of the dangers of magical thinking – something we can sense happening during the extraordinary mid-point close-up of her at the opera, a perfect illustration of Hungarian film critic Béla Balázs's concept of



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ABOVE
Ray Winstone in
Sexy Beast (2000)

the 'silent soliloquy'. While defending *Birth* as Glazer's most misunderstood film, Bleasdale also argues that it is his most heartfelt Kubrick tribute, with clear echoes of *Eyes Wide Shut* (1999), in its setting and Kidman's casting; *Barry Lyndon* (1975), in its candlelit photography; *Lolita* (1962), in its unsettling paedophilia undercurrent; and above all *The Shining* (1980).

After *Birth*, nearly a decade elapsed before *Under the Skin* was released, its prolonged gestation seeing it undergo extensive rethinking, the elements of Michel Faber's source novel being systematically jettisoned until virtually no backstory was left beyond the premise and its Scottish setting – at which point, Bleasdale argues, the film became genuinely alien. Indeed, he describes Scarlett Johansson's protagonist as 'the Alien' throughout and notes that, despite the creature's superficial femaleness, 'it' was Glazer's preferred pronoun in interviews. And the Alien's victims are, essentially, food, while everything else – even something ostensibly heart-tugging like a crying baby – is irrelevant.

That dispassionate analysis reinforces links between *Under the Skin* and *The Zone of Interest*. Just as the Alien tunes out everything except its ultimate goal, so Rudolf Höss and his family blank what's happening at the Auschwitz camp next door. The first Glazer feature to be set in the past, it's staged very much in the present: clothes are brand new, the Höss residence is freshly renovated, the *mise en scène* consciously echoes television's *Big Brother*, that quintessentially 21st-century entertainment. It's an incredibly risky strategy, but Bleasdale convincingly argues that Glazer comes closer to finding a cinematic method of depicting Hannah Arendt's phrase "the banality of

evil" than more emotionally heightened Holocaust dramas.

Each feature gets its own chapter, but Bleasdale also tackles the short films, music videos and commercials, the best of which are also distinctively *films de Jonathan Glazer*. They frequently anticipate elements in the features, and Bleasdale characterises the commercial work as "laboratories, places to experiment with form and technique without the weight of a traditional narrative".

As publicity-shy as Kubrick or Terrence Malick, the subject of Bleasdale's *The Magic Hours* (2024), Glazer was not interviewed for *Darkness Visible* (not for want of trying on Bleasdale's part) and makes only fleeting appearances via excerpted archive interviews. His highest-profile public appearance was his thoughtful, nuanced acceptance speech (reproduced in full) in 2024 for *The Zone of Interest*'s Academy Award for Best International Feature Film, with which he caused outrage in some quarters by pointing out that Israelis and Gazans alike have been the victims of deliberate dehumanisation.

Although Bleasdale is more interested in direct critical analysis, there are occasional production anecdotes ("Why don't we just dump the horses?" suggested a colleague during the tricky digital post-production of *The Surfer*, Glazer's memorable Guinness ad, the horses emerging from the surf later becoming one of advertising's most indelible images) as well as wider philosophical reflections. Some are autobiographical, but not indulgently so – in fact, much of the book has the feel of Geoff Dyer's *Zona* (2012), which similarly attempted to pin down cinematic artistry (in his case, Andrei Tarkovsky's *Stalker*) while being constantly and sometimes cheerfully aware of the impossibility of verbalising the ineffable.