

Nat Muller on *I'm So Sorry*

The ominous crackle of a Geiger counter accompanies the opening sequence of Zhao Liang's poetic documentary *I'm So Sorry*. A forest, abandoned playgrounds, bunkers sunk in fields – these desolate landscapes devoid of human presence set the stage for a video essay that ruminates on the ruins left behind by nuclear power – once thought of as the ultimate military deterrent and a source of clean energy. Liang captures the visible and invisible damage of radiation on a timescale that far exceeds the human.

Throughout the film, nature – beautifully portrayed – seems pitted against the destructive hubris and greed of mankind. Weeds push through the cracks of abandoned houses and schools; the gorgeous cherry blossoms around the nuclear power plant of Fukushima bloom with an almost grotesque splendour; a wild boar darts away from the camera; ivy wraps itself around cars; and lush pink roses grow in the garden of an old woman living in Chernobyl's Exclusion Zone. They form treacherous foils to the death and disaster associated with these sites. However, this is not an instance of nature asserting its dominance and healing the afterlives of modernity, but rather the final convulsions of a broken planet where everybody, human and nonhuman, loses. The bees have long disappeared from Fukushima.

*I'm So Sorry* shows how predominantly the elderly, who are isolated from society, lonely, and abandoned by the authorities, as well as the very young, disabled and maimed by the devastating effects of radioactive fallout, suffer most. In this narrative, political ideologies, historical events and – on a more individual level – the lives and livelihoods of families have been erased and now only gather dust. Liang sensitively documents the traces of past habitation and life, allowing ghosts and rubble to tell the story. A Noh performer (classical Japanese theatre) clad in a traditional costume and wearing a mask figures as a guide connecting these sites of nuclear disaster, and stands as a silent witness to a catastrophic past and cursed future. Nuclear isotopes remain radioactive for thousands of years, well beyond human lifespans.

Some of the film's most telling footage involves the vast workforce and enormous technological infrastructure needed to process, decontaminate, and store radioactive waste. Here, too, the manual and dangerous labour required to clean up the world's nuclear mess is human capital easily spent. Hidden from view and buried deep underground, another disaster awaits and turns *I'm So Sorry* into a prescient and powerful yet moot apology to humankind and to the planet.

*Nat Muller is a curator and writer who is currently completing a PhD at Birmingham City University*