

JAN IJÄS TWO FORESTS

Jan Ijäs explores modern folklore, anecdotes, rumours, beliefs and various phenomena in his essay films. In the *Waste* series, the stories relate, one way or another, to things going wrong, becoming dysfunctional and, consequently, useless. Something that used to be valuable can degrade into waste that needs to be disposed of. *Two Forests* reflects on the end of human life and the final disposal: aging and death. This time, the setting is the aging and ailing Japan and its forest-related death myths.

As Pentti Saarikoski writes in his collection of poems, *Runot ja Hipponaksin runot* (1959): "Man is given life/so that he would carefully consider/the position in which he wants to lie dead." The two forests that Ijäs has chosen as exempla, or anecdotes, that crystallise the wider moral issue of death also represent two different 'positions' on, or approaches to, death. People normally die of an illnesses or accident. However, in extreme cases, individuals can decide for themselves when it is time to die – or the decision may be made for them by someone else.

The first forest is Aokigahara on the northwestern flank of Mount Fuji, the quiet and idyllic 'Sea of Trees', where Japanese people have gone to end their lives for thousands of years. Like so many other things, the perfect suicide spot, as recommended by Wataru Tsurumi in his cult book *Kanzen Jisatsu Manyuaru* ('The Complete Manual of Suicide', 1993), has now been ruined. It has turned into a morbid tourist attraction, and anyone planning to commit suicide there will find it difficult to find a peaceful corner.

The other forest is Obasute, a mountain where, according to legend, elderly people who had become a burden were taken and left to die. In modern Tokyo, elderly people can also be dumped using a specialist service – relatives no longer need to climb all the way up a mountain. But if senior citizens are swept off the streets, who will be left? Elderly people make up a significant part of society. They have time to gather in karaoke dens to enjoy themselves. Yet a lonely life dedicated to work is often followed by a lonely death.

In *Itsemurhan filosofia* ('The Philosophy of Suicide', 2012), Tapani Kilpeläinen points out that suicide can be seen as opposition to the sovereign power of biopolitics, in which individuals' lives are not their own but rather belong to society. Society ostensibly values long life, but it has no use for it when it is no longer productive. There is a grim counterpart to all the elements of an active life in the Japanese culture of death, as exemplified by the service design that has developed around abandonment. People get weird satisfaction from cleaning videos, and after-death cleaners can also go viral, as shown by *Two Forests*. Although Ijäs's assortment of stories includes a Twitter killer, death is at first more typically so mundane and inconspicuous that it is only discovered when neighbours notice the by-products of decomposition: smells, fluids and insects. Oblivion is a fate more tragic than death, the work concludes.

In the *Waste* series, Jan Ijäs deals with various phenomena that have become useless and unwanted, alongside cultural landfills. The cameras of cinematographers Ville Piippo and Jan Ijäs do not follow any single individual but observe the landscapes of quiet or explosive destruction across the world, from New York to Tokyo and from Ghana to Kittilä.

Two Forests also happens to link the laconic style that is characteristic of Ijäs to the trend for *Landscape Theory* in Japanese contemporary art. The theory emerged in the early 1970s in response to social impoverishment and student protest movements. Its cornerstone is *Ryakushō: renzoku shasatsuma* (A.K.A. Serial Killer, 1969/1975), a Marxist-flavoured film by Masao Adachi, which is also referenced in *Two Forests*. The film is a kind of conceptual-psychogeographical *true crime*. Adachi and his team retrace the steps and landscapes of 19-year-old Norio Nagayama, who had an impoverished childhood and murdered four people in the autumn of 1968. The film's subdued style shies away from the media sensationalism associated with murder and murderers. As we look at – even admire – the landscape, the film shows us that we are shaped by the landscape of our society. The landscape watches us the same way we watch the landscape. (Hiroko 2023; Go 2023.) Adachi's latest film, *Revolution +1* (2022), can be seen as a sequel to the film he made in his youth. It is a semifictional sociological study of Tetsuya Yamagami, who murdered Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe.

Nagisa Ōshima was perhaps a more widely known collaborator of Masao Adachi. He also influenced the 'landscape theory'. In 1970, he said the question "how does one live in the 1970s?" is a parallel of the question "how does one die in the 1970s?" (*After the Landscape Theory*, 2023). This duality can also be found in *Two Forests* and its landscapes, which explore living and dying in contemporary Japan.

Tokyo evokes images of a promise of the future and progress, but Ijäs points out that this vision of the future is actually a construct of the aesthetics of 40 years ago, stuck in a time capsule and mummified. It has become retrofuturism, dreams of the future, gone grey, from the past. Perhaps this is why the focus needs to shift from the metropolis to the forests with all their layers of growth and decay. An efficiency-oriented approach to forest management has created an ecological problem as forest ecosystems have been cleared of decayed trees, which should be left there (Mikkonen 2017). A person's death in an efficiency-driven society wreaks temporary havoc and creates disruption. Nature takes over culture, tissues break down and become mushy, various decomposers have a ball – even if it all takes place in a flat in the middle of a big city.

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