

In the Grey Zone

89 minutes, 2012

A2-B-C

71 minutes, 2013

Produced and Directed by Ian Thomas Ash

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Reviewed by David Huebner

In the Grey Zone

In these two highly revealing documentaries on the Japan triple disaster (earthquake, tsunami, and Fukushima nuclear accident) of March 2011, film director Ian Thomas Ash gives us a picture of the Japanese people struggling with the immensity of the event. An American who has lived in Japan for eleven years, Ash's command of the Japanese language, his patient ability to wait for answers from those he interviews, and his gentle mix of the visual harshness of the disaster contrasted with the personal yearnings and concerns of Japanese citizens make these two films essential viewing for scientific information on the disaster. Along with British cameraman Colin O'Neill, both men end up in the town of Minamisōma filming and living among the people in the twenty to- thirty kilometer zone, more aptly known as the "Grey Zone." The Grey Zone transitions from evacuated areas of less than twelve miles from the nuclear accident to the nineteen miles-plus areas where the government deemed it safe for people. Carefully weaving in interviews and conversations with parents, government officials, local business owners, and children, Ash is able to capture the sense of doubt, frustration, and struggle that was experienced among the populace. The question consistently raised to officials is: Is it safe to stay in this "Grey Zone?" The answers are mixed and may surprise the viewer. Given free access to the town and affected zone, Ash softly probes to get to the truth of the effects of the disaster upon the lives of people. Minamisōma's history of a 1,000 years of samurai tradition is manifested in the lives of residents who remain stoic, brave, and willing to sacrifice for the sake of others—surely a samurai tradition. The calm manner in which most citizens engage with Ash is in contrast to similar film footage of Americans shedding tears and sharing deep emotions in disasters in the United States. The

Japanese advantage over many other countries is their national resilience, their extremely modern culture, and an incredible array of technological gadgetry and resources to help them climb out of the disaster and to recover. One bar owner declared that returning to the questionable Grey Zone is in the spirit of Japanese people who are "resetting" themselves and finding the courage to press on. Yet the faces do not lie; many struggle with being "caught between work and personal opinion" and wonder if they are doing the right thing by returning where radiation may still be a problem. Many are troubled about reopening schools. Ironically, one doctor proclaimed that even if some are affected by radiation and it shows up in thirty years, medical science by then will have come up with a cure for such a condition! The optimism of some was believable, but this doctor's foolish view was hardly credible. Doubt as to the proper course of action is so prevalent throughout the film that it makes us understand the statement of one parent: "If things go wrong in a few years, they won't be fixed with an apology."

A2-B-C

Director Ian Thomas Ash's follow-up documentary is more riveting than *In the Grey Zone* and targets the challenges and problems with the questionable advice of the Japanese national government on the safety of reoccupying areas. Filmed seventeen months after *In the Grey Zone*, the realities of the disaster zones are stark and candid. Radiation exposure has become a major concern among families, including children, and with most local officials. However, evidence mounts throughout the film that the national government is sugarcoating the situation in insisting that radiation levels are safe in most areas. Throughout this more aggressive documentary, the power of Japan's modern technology is demonstrated with the ready availability of radiation monitors, which show dangerous levels of radiation in many places that government officials, and even doctors, have declared safe. While radiation levels may be manageable after decontamination in schools and homes, "hot spots" exist just outside these areas where levels are extremely high. This not only limits mobility and threatens the health and safety of residents and schoolchildren, but rains and winds can carry contaminants from the hot spots into decontaminated zones. *A2-B-C* moves from a group of parents discussing the rise in abortions by prospective parents frightened by the threat of deformities to schoolchild-

ren showing playground equipment they are asked to avoid because of radiation. Some schools were not decontaminated until after the children returned for classes! Continued monitoring of the use of cafeteria food, the consumption of rice from contaminated fields, and the drinking of bottled water are all revealing clues that Japan is tampering with the future health of its citizens. The mistrust of government expressed by parents in *A2-B-C* is contrasted by the defensiveness of some officials. When Ash is confronted by a school assistant principal for filming on school grounds (having been brought to the playground by a concerned parent), he is bold, direct, and challenging. The conversation takes an angry turn, as the principal is more concerned with the failure to get permission for filming than he is with answering Ash's pointed question, "What do you reckon is the bigger problem (failure to get permission or the high levels of radiation in hot spots adjacent to the school)?" Ash's anger is apparent and his passion for getting to the truth is never in question. An interview with a bright seventeen-year-old girl, who has been diagnosed as "A2" (which designates thyroids with cysts), reveals the source of the film's title. The A2, B, and C codes are used to indicate test results of thyroid screening, with A2 meaning mild thyroid cysts and B and C larger thyroid cysts, one of the first places where radiation poisoning shows up. Whereas in American culture, anger and outrage are expressed very quickly, in Japan people seem hesitant to show their anger. Is this the result of confusion or culture? Ash does not explore this sociological question and only teases us with it, being more intent on showing the safety concerns throughout the contaminated areas of Japan. In these bold cinematic journeys, Ian Thomas Ash gives us—with superb people skills and sharp filmmaking—two great documentaries as "book-ends" for very personal, yet clearly scientific examinations of the nuclear aspects of Japan's March 11 triple disaster. ■

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