

DORCHESTER FILM SOCIETY
2023/24 SEASON



PLAN 75

(Language: Japanese)

Director: Chie Hayakawa, 2022. Running time: 113 minutes.

Presented by Dorchester Film Society, 17 January 2024

This strange, melancholy film from Japan effectively makes the (unfashionable) case against euthanasia: that old people won't want to be a bother or appear selfish and so will feel pressured into accepting state medicine. Director and co-writer Chie Hayakawa imagines a future in which Japan, burdened with an ageing population, proposes a supposedly voluntary but actually insidiously coercive arrangement called Plan 75, in which citizens of 75 years and above can sign up for an easeful death in return for 1,000 dollars which they can either spend on themselves or give away to their family. The system becomes a success, to the extent that a chilling Plan 65 is mooted, and the drama shows us how this creates a new burden for old people: the burden of explaining to themselves why they don't just do the rational thing and end it all.

We see older characters retired from jobs which they really need, people without access to welfare and housing, old people who are desperately lonely and who even crave the Plan 75 helpline as someone to talk to. But the movie creates dissident moments: a young employee of Plan 75 realises that one applicant is his elderly uncle, while a Plan 75 call centre operative meets an old lady in person and takes her for an evening's bowling, and realises that her colleagues are being trained in steering callers away from the last-minute change of heart which is the customer's theoretical right.

This is a poignant and weird film, and it could well be that in real life this scheme would almost solely attract, as it does here, people who are utterly alone without family, although I think there would surely be many with families, families perhaps keen to get their hands on the money. And wouldn't there be an issue with over-75s who had a fatal illness? Would they be entitled to the payout? Or would applicants have to prove basic health? Maybe Hayakawa ruled scenarios like these out in case the film became too vulgarly satirical. For all this, its evocation of misery is certainly well managed."

Peter Bradshaw, *The Guardian*, 10 May 2023.

“The low-tech sci-fi film *Plan 75* posits a near future where, after a spate of hate crimes against the elderly, Japan offers its citizens a drastic way to deal with its rapidly ageing population. The plan of the title is a bureaucratic support system for people aged 75 and over who volunteer to be euthanised painlessly. In return, the state gives them ¥100,000 (roughly \$740) to spend as they wish — be that on a luxurious last meal or, for the more practically minded, on funeral arrangements. Some may choose to be cremated and interred with friends or family, partly because it’s cheaper and partly because some believe it will be “less lonely”.

It’s a concept not unlike the one seen in cheesy 1973 future-shock classic *Soylent Green*, but without Charlton Heston shouting hysterically about what happens to all the dead bodies. Indeed, this is a quiet, respectful study of what a programme like this could mean for a range of different people, from lonely, forcibly retired, prospective user Michi (veteran actor Chieko Baisho giving a heartbreaker of a performance) to the bureaucrats who handle admissions and client services such as Hiromu (Hayato Isomura) and Yôko (Yumi Kawai).

The smooth pragmatism of *Plan 75* suddenly seems less easy to shill when, in Hiromu’s case, his own aged uncle walks into his centre one day. Yôko, meanwhile, grows close to Michi while listening to her life story via phone calls, part of the therapeutic pre-death process that the plan includes. Finally, there is Maria (Stefanie Arianne), a Filipina immigrant who works behind the scenes sorting through the possessions left behind and trying to raise money for her sick child back home.

Writer-director Chie Hayakawa’s multi-stranded drama started out as one segment in an anthology film, *Ten Years Japan*, which imagined what the country might look like a decade into the future. It’s not hard to see why she wanted to develop the material further given that the basic conceit is so fertile, and perhaps more plausible than most sci-fi imaginings. Her direction is stately and considered, allowing space to savour little details along the way such as how Michi holds her hand up to the light, or how Maria sings in church. Composer Rémi Boubal’s string-led score offers a soothing balm without ever becoming saccharine, helping the film to achieve a kind of hushed transcendence.”

Leslie Felperin, *The Financial Times*, 11 May 2023.

“Japan’s entry for the Best Foreign Film Oscar *Plan 75* is a science fiction film that’s surprisingly subversive. Director and co-writer Chie Hayakawa’s debut

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feature is a contemplation on aging and the dignity of human life, but it would have worked much better as a short. The film is extremely slow moving, and a successful project would not have left me waiting for the characters to die and being relieved when it was finally over.

With aging citizens placing a greater burden on society than ever, the country of Japan has come to a humane solution: all citizens over the age of 75 can opt to voluntarily end their lives. This dystopian government program, known as Plan 75, has had a large success rate. Seniors don't want to be a bother to their families and their country either physically or emotionally, causing many to choose euthanasia when they still have plenty of good years left.

It's a fascinating script (co-written by Jason Gray) that's gorgeously directed, but the writing could use a boost. The stories would benefit from a richer depth, especially the relationships between the elderly and young people that seem far too superficial. The social commentary is there, but it's not as powerful as it could be as a result of the stories that go nowhere. Many interesting elements and plot lines are introduced, like the false promise of sending volunteers to a luxury resort before they are killed, but then there's nothing more.

Hayakawa is certainly a skilled director, and her style is impeccable. She does an excellent job at getting the audience to fall in love with the sweet senior citizens and adorable elderly actors, showing them doing the most mundane (yet still charming) activities like shopping at the local market and meeting to sing at a home karaoke party. You know it's only a matter of time before the film is ready to off grandma.

With *Plan 75*, Hayakawa takes an exceptional premise and crafts movie that suffers from its measured, leisurely pacing. If it moved along more quickly and the script more detailed, this would be a showpiece in international cinema. As-is, I found it to be painfully slow and lacking in intimate storytelling.

Louisa Moore, *Screen Zealots*, 18 October 2022.

BACKGROUND TO *PLAN 75* AND WHY ITS DIRECTOR EXPLAINS HER FILM IS “FAR FROM IMPOSSIBLE”.

If this sounds like gothic horror or dystopian sci-fi, Hayakawa begs to differ. “This is human drama,” [the film’s director] says. “It’s too real to be sci-fi. I specifically made this film to avoid a programme like this becoming a reality.” [DFS placement and emphasis]

“Japan is ageing faster than any other country in the world, boasting one of the highest life expectancies. Women typically live to 87 and men to 81. Almost 40% of its population is over 60, a figure expected to continue expanding as the population shrinks. Couples in Japan now have an average of just 1.3 children – far below the 2.1 children societies need to remain stable.

Japan once placed its elderly at the top of the social hierarchy, even holding a national holiday to honour their contributions to society. But no longer: Fumio Kishida, the country’s prime minister, recently said the ageing population poses an “urgent risk to society”. Announcing a new government agency to address the issue, he said: “Japan is standing on the verge of whether we can continue to function as a society.”

In her new film, *Plan 75*, Chie Hayakawa posits a policy the agency could try: voluntary euthanasia for the over-75s. Instead of being a burden, a bother, a resource-draining nuisance, anyone aged 75 can simply place themselves in the calm, efficient hands of the state and painlessly slip away. Those with money and family can do so at the end of a two-day premium package, after spa treatments and special meals. Those without are given enough cash to pay for basic funeral costs before lying down on a camp bed in a dark, silent room divided by curtains where they quietly acquiesce to being gassed to death. “My family will be so proud of me,” chirrup one elderly woman in an advert for the scheme. “It’s something we should think about,” another says equably to her friends, as they enjoy a dish of fruit together after a karaoke session.

Shot in natural light, in the present day, in almost real time and in an almost documentary style, *Plan 75* slowly reels audiences in, focusing on the impact the scheme has on a small group of people across society as the horror builds. It opens with a radio reporting that a gunman has opened fire in an old people’s care home – the latest in an epidemic of violence targeted at the elderly. The reporter goes smoothly on to discuss the roll-out of the government’s euthanasia scheme. “The whole world is watching its success,” he says.

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... The scheme is still a fiction and, as yet, there hasn't been any real-life, age-related violence in Japan. But Hayakawa has been watching Japanese society for almost a decade and has been increasingly concerned and angry about its direction. "A state-sanctioned solution like Plan 75," she says, "is far from impossible in a country that is growing ever more intolerant to socially weak people: the elderly, the disabled and the people who have no money."

Over the past decade, she adds, the Japanese concept of self-responsibility has become an obsession. "It means that we have to take care of ourselves instead of relying on the government or being a burden to society – and it has created a kind of hatred towards the elderly and the weak." The pressure, she says, comes from the government and the media. "They create shame among those who need welfare, meaning those who need it don't apply for it – which makes their lives even more desperate. But it also infects the younger generations, building up a huge resentment towards all older people."

Michi Kakutani, the 78-year-old woman played by Chieko Baisho who is at the heart of the film, is so desperate to avoid claiming welfare that she accepts a nightmarish job directing traffic around motorway roadworks in the dead of night. Having signed up to Plan 75, she is given her weekly 15-minute phone call – a service ostensibly provided so she can discuss concerns about her agreement to terminate her life, although we later hear the call-handlers being instructed to use these conversations to dissuade their elderly callers from opting out.

In one heartbreaking scene, however, the call-handler goes off script and Kakutani begins talking about a deeply traumatic experience during her youth. Just as she reaches the climax, however, the 15-minute limit is reached and the call is ended. Alone in her dark, silent and empty flat, with her phone still clasped in her hand, Kakutani repeatedly bows: she is genuinely grateful to the disembodied voice for giving her even that sliver of time.

What's especially interesting about the film is Hayakawa's refusal to come down on one side: the film shows the ripples from the centre right out to the edges of a society that condones this sort of scheme. "My feeling is not pro or anti-euthanasia or assisted suicide," says Hayakawa. "But I raise a question about the society that can be so inhuman to offer death instead of a way to help vulnerable people feel less isolated or afraid. To give them a reason to live instead of a way to die."

Hayakawa says that when the film came out in Japan, lots of online commentators felt the scheme was exactly what their society needed. More disturbingly, when she was researching the character of Kakutani, she interviewed 15 elderly women: most said they would also welcome Plan 75. “They wanted it for the security it would give them,” says Hayakawa. “Not because they want to get rid of themselves right now, but because they feel a lot of concern about being old and don’t want to be a bother to anybody, including their kids or family. They said that when they got dementia or they felt very sick, they wanted this option.”

Added to the fear of being a burden, Hayakawa says, is the fear of kodokushi, or lonely death: the increasingly common phenomenon of people dying alone and not being discovered for a long time. “It’s a sad and scary thing,” she says. “If you die alone and are not discovered for several months, your body’s decayed – and then who will clean up that body and that apartment?”

Hayakawa says that some people might think that if a person wants to choose when to die, there’s no problem. “But it’s not that simple,” she adds. “I want people to have more imagination because, once we have this kind of system, there’s a certain group of people who feel they have no option but to take it.” Added to that is the inevitable creeping expansion of the programme: Plan 75 is deemed such a success as the film progresses – generating large sums of money for those involved – that its scope is quietly expanded.

Hayakawa has carefully constructed a world in which Plan 75 seems like a reasonable solution when viewed from a purely rational standpoint. But the guilt of all those who allow it to take place – abrogating their responsibilities – eats away at the young people who are cogs in the Plan 75 machine. We see them becoming like the living dead: ghosts whose deadening eyes almost visibly throb with the effort of trying not to see the bodies piling up before them.

These young people don’t hate their elders. They are inhuman but not inhumane: they are compassionate and kind towards the older people they usher towards an early death. It is, in a very real sense, what the historian and philosopher Hannah Arendt called “the banality of evil”.

“Yes,” says Hayakawa, “that quote greatly inspired me. The bureaucracy takes over. They’re just doing their jobs but have stopped thinking about what sort of a system they are working for. That is reality in Japan. That is why I made this film.””

Amelia Hill, *The Guardian*, 8 May 2023.