Plan 75, a cautionary tale about a society that provides no comfort to the elderly and then disposes of them

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Writer-director Chie Hayakawa's *Plan 75*—her first feature—is a subtle and unsettling film about an imagined Japanese government euthanasia plan for people over the age of 75. The 113-minute movie was Japan's entry in this year's Academy Awards Best International Feature Film category and has since been released in the United States and Britain.

Plan 75 begins with a somewhat murky portrayal of mass killing at a Japanese retirement home, followed by a brief news item reporting the tragedy and then a government announcement about a new voluntary euthanasia program. The movie then focuses on the life of Michi (Chieko Baishô), a 78-year-old working class woman, who, despite some initial scepticism decides to join the assisted death program.

Michi's decision is the outcome of an inescapable social process, the product of a society that offers no comfort to elderly. She loses her job, her friends, her home, and other socially meaningful activities. There appears no other alternative than to accept the glowing inducements in the Plan 75's glossy and comforting brochures.

The inducements can include cash payments for relatives and a final two-day stay in a luxury spa or, for those who have no money, a dignified funeral. The whole plan is sanitised with glib official assurances that the elderly participants can always back out if they change their mind but if they decide to go ahead it will be a "meaningful" contribution to society.

But the truth is revealed in a group meeting attended by the young Plan 75 customer service agent Yuko (Kawai Yuumi) where attendees are warned that they must warmly encourage the applicants not to back out of the arrangements once they have agreed to participate.

Despite having an "unauthorised" human connection with Michi, a conflicted Yuko obediently quotes from the prepared text in her last phone conversation with the lonely Michi, who obviously needs a friendly confidante, not a guidepost to euthanasia.

Apart from the opening scene in the retirement home, the tenor of Hayakawa's film is nuanced and matter of fact, which only serves to make it more effective and chilling.

Hayakawa recently told the *Guardian* that: "It's too real to be sci-fi. I specifically made this film to avoid a programme like this becoming a reality… A state-sanctioned solution like Plan 75 is far from impossible in a country that is becoming ever more intolerant to socially weak people: the elderly, the disabled and the people who have no money."

Referring to the misanthropic sentiments promoted by the government and media towards the elderly and the weak she said: "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…

"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."

The film's approach underlines the poignant details of Michi's life in a tiny apartment and the sterility and bureaucratic impersonality of the welfare offices where she unsuccessfully attempted to find help.

At one point, trying to support herself financially after being fired from her job as a hotel maid, she is seen directing traffic on a busy road at night. The camera hovers on her hi-vis coat, blinking with red lights, as she tries to grab a few moments' rest.

The scene then cuts to the Plan 75 euthanasia and cremation centre, where Maria (Stefanie Arianne Akashi), a young low-paid Filipino aged care worker, has been forced to take a job because she desperately needs to send more money back to her family in the Philippines.

In Michi's life, but also more briefly in that of lonely-retired worker Yukio (Takao Taka), whose young nephew

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Hiromu (Hayato Isomura) is another Plan 75 customer service agent, the film subtly portrays modern society's isolation and depersonalisation of the elderly, depicting them as a burden because they can no longer work.

Director Hayakawa deftly demonstrates that the so-called generation gap is not immutable and can be easily bridged. As Michi leaves her apartment for the last time, a little girl who is skipping stops and waves to her, and Michi waves back, filled with love of life.

In one unsettling scene Maria is set to work stripping the personal effects from the bodies of the elderly people who have been euthanised and are ready for cremation.

That she finds this job horrible, after she has left the more poorly paid one where she painstakingly cared for elderly people in a residential facility, is clear when she sees a male fellow worker stealing a pair of glasses from the pile of belongings taken from the corpses.

Trying to compromise Maria, he offers her a watch, but she refuses it. "Dead people, useless anymore, you're useful, no trash. Remember… the dead," he says to persuade her. Is he talking about the things or about the elderly? Maria gives in and pockets the watch.

Meanwhile, Hiromu drives his uncle to his appointment with death but later turns his car around and, with Maria's help, retrieves his uncle's body to try and give him a decent cremation. Hiromu, who has not questioned the workings of Plan 75 until now, has discovered that the bodies of those elderly without family will be treated as industrial waste.

Maria, Hiromu and Yuko—young employees of the "voluntary" euthanasia conveyor belt—are disturbed by different aspects of their work. But above all, it is 78-year-old Michi, who represents the life force in the story and the antidote to the misanthropic scheme with all its false façade.

The government-sponsored euthanasia program portrayed in Hayakawa's film has been welcomed by some right-wing commentators in Japan, which has the world's highest proportion of elderly people as a sector of its population in the world. This reaction, however, is not a Japanese phenomenon.

Given the global ruling elite's official acceptance of social murder of the elderly and immune-comprised in response to COVID 19, the application of a cold-blooded eugenic experiment such as Plan 75 is not farfetched nor is it science fiction.

Capitalist governments have for years decried the increase in life expectancy, bemoaning what they termed the "intergenerational budgetary problem" of social welfare spending on pensions and the access of the elderly to subsidised medical care in the later decades of their lives. From their standpoint, the pandemic, which they now insist is over, had a positive benefit, getting rid of "non-productive" sections of society, and thereby reducing outlay on pensions and subsidised medicine.

Governments all adopted the policy of "let it rip," not only removing lockdowns and quarantines, but basic preventative measures such as test-and-tracing, mask mandates and provision of air filters, leaving the most vulnerable to fend for themselves. These policies have been accompanied by the revival of eugenic and Social Darwinist conceptions previously championed by Hitler's Nazi regime.

It is no accident that the sinister Ezekiel Emanuel, former Obama administration official and Biden task force advisor, a leading advocate for reducing life expectancy and slashing medical expenditure on the elderly and chronically ill, has been given prominence. Emanuel was widely promoted in the mainstream media during the upsurge of Omicron.

Emanuel is part of an ever more right-wing intellectual climate promoted by the government and the media. In 2020, the then leading Tory government advisor Dominic Cummings reputedly proclaimed the pandemic required "herd immunity, protect the economy, and if that means some pensioners die, too bad."

Hayakawa's film opposes this reactionary trend. As she stated in an interview last month with *Cinema Daily*: "Our capitalist society, which values rationality and productivity, creates the distinction between 'worthy lives' and 'worthless lives,' and critical views on socially weak people get stronger by the day. My anger and anxiety toward such intolerance of society motivated me to make this film."

Plan 75 is a timely reminder that such plans have grim ideological foundations and may serve as a warning about the type of society that can spawn them. It is an artistic achievement that Hayakawa has made a film that is so realistic and yet so poignant.

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