Article:
Coates, J. orcid.org/0000-0003-4326-1481 (2024) Ageing, personhood and care in Chie Hayakawa's Plan 75 (2022). Screen, 65 (3). pp. 352-372. ISSN 0036-9543

https://doi.org/10.1093/screen/hjae024

Ageing, personhood and care in Chie Hayakawa's *Plan 75* (2022)

JENNIFER COATES

How would you like to die? This question haunts Chie Hayakawa's *Puran 75*/*Plan 75* (2022), a film that imagines a near-future or alternative present-day Japan in which a government initiative offers financial incentives to citizens aged 75 and over who are willing to be euthanised. This blunt approach to population control targets the demographic challenges of Japan's super-ageing population, yet the film's nuanced characterizations and dreamy visual themes open up the narrative into an invitation to consider the tensions between abstract, top-down, strategic planning on population numbers and the realities of life lived as part of a community. Over the course of the film, the question 'How would you like to die?' morphs into 'How should we live?' Developing into a wider meditation on what makes a life not only liveable but also valuable, *Plan 75* invites us to consider what it means to be a useful member of a community, and what we might owe the living, regardless of their perceived usefulness. In this way the film frames a thoughtful investigation of the politics of ageing within larger questions of personhood and value.

Plan 75 offers a fresh view on issues of ageing, care, and their representations in cinema by refusing the narrative of 'decline' common to depictions of elderly characters, who often suffer from dementia, Alzheimer's disease, or physical disabilities brought on by ageing.[1] Engaging audiences with vital characterizations of healthy elderly people, Hayakawa invites us to rethink what it means to be a person and to contribute to a society. Following Katsura Sako and Sarah Falcus's argument that 'narrative practices and the ways in which viewers relate to

1 Margaret Morganroth Gullette, *Aged by Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), p. 11.

https://doi.org/10.1093/screen/hjae024

them can be understood *as* forms of care', I suggest that Hayakawa's reworking of narrative tropes about ageing to challenge the association of age with decline and disability can be understood as a form of care in itself.[2]

Plan 75 engages consistently with questions of care, from the physical and economic demands of caring for an ageing population to a care-focused understanding of what constitutes citizenship itself. My essay draws from writing on feminist ethics of care to contextualize the often impossible questions posed by Hayakawa's sensitive film. Scholarship on the ethics of care is interwoven with analysis of key scenes to explore the multiple meanings and uses of the concept of care. These variations in understanding and application render 'care' difficult to comprehensively define. The film presents care as a matrix-like structure rather than an easily defined concept that can be unproblematically applied; reading *Plan 75* through the lens of an ethics of care thus allows for exploration of those varied understandings and applications. As the film shifts focus in its final scenes from narrative critiques of institutional modes of caring to a more open-ended visual mediation on how to live outside institutional schemes of 'care', the visual style becomes more abstract and affect-driven. Mirroring this development, I introduce a discussion of aesthetics of care to explore how Hayakawa's film pushes us to feel, as well as to think, in more creative ways about ageing, care and personhood. My analysis of the film text is structured around topics raised by viewers in critical writing and in audience engagement events such as Q&A screenings with director Chie Hayakawa, in order to incorporate the exhibition context into an understanding of the wider impacts of the film. As an ethics of care evolves from close listening to others, this structuring device is a theoretical and methodological response to the issues raised in the film. The concluding section considers the contribution of filmmaking as an aesthetic practice to our understandings of what care and caring can actually look like.

The 'Plan 75' of the film's title is the name of a government initiative to financially incentivize people aged 75 and over to participate in a voluntary mass euthanasia programme, in a near-future or alternative present-day Japan. In some ways it is no surprise that this glimpse of the future comes from Japan, an area commonly employed as a setting for science fiction and futuristic narratives and often associated with technological advancement. At the same time, Japan today is a living example of the demographic challenge that will face many countries in the near future, with 29% of its population aged 65 or over in 2022, the year of the film's release. Japan has traditionally enjoyed a reputation as a 'geriatric utopia' where the wisdom of elders is valued, yet scholars who challenge this idealized vision emphasize that the country today is no geriatric 'paradise lost'.[3]

In imagining a possible response to this demographic challenge, Hayakawa employs the speculative fiction genre conventions described by Judith Merril in her use of

2 Katsura Sako and Sarah Falcus, 'Introduction', in Sako and Falcus (eds), *Contemporary Narratives of Ageing, Illness, Care* (London: Routledge, 2022), p. 5.

3 Jason Danely, *Aging and Loss: Mourning and Maturing in Contemporary Japan* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2014), p. 17.

> the traditional 'scientific method' (observation, hypothesis, experimentation) to examine some postulated approximation of reality, by introducing a set of changes – imaginary or inventive – into the common background of 'known facts', creating an environment in which the responses and perceptions of the characters will reveal something about the inventions, the characters, or both.[4]

Hayakawa introduces the invention 'Plan 75' into a 'postulated approximation of reality' that looks much like the present-day Japan, following a range of characters through their differing engagements with Plan 75, and in the process revealing much about their attitudes and expectations towards individual and state-level obligations to provide care. This 'traditional "scientific method" (observation, hypothesis, experimentation)'[5] can be discerned in the visual and sound aesthetics of the film, which has been called 'quiet' by many reviewers.[6] This quietness stems from Hayakawa's commitment to capturing *process*, from the harrowing progression of a fatal attack on a care home that opens the film, to the protagonists' everyday processes of cleaning and doing laundry at work, or washing dishes and clipping toenails at home. The almost ethnographic pacing of scenes of the daily lives of the protagonists builds a strong sense of material reality around a narrative based on one inventive change to our 'common background of "known facts"'[7] – Plan 75.

Hayakawa has noted an 'intolerant atmosphere' in contemporary Japanese society, in which the lives of people who are not perceived as useful become increasingly devalued.[8] Introducing the idea of a government-sponsored euthanasia programme into an otherwise recognizable Japan allows the director to explore the effect that this atmosphere has on how care is conceptualized and communicated. The opening scene, showing a killing spree in an old people's care home, echoes the 2016 Sagamihara massacre in which residents of a home for adults with disabilities were killed and injured by an assailant who cited ableist rhetoric as motive. Responding to this fatal expression of intolerance, Hayakawa uses the speculative fiction genre to explore what Margaret Morganroth Gullette has called 'Euthanasia as a caregiving fantasy' in relation to which 'many people are made to feel, or at least are forced to accept that others feel, that their lives are worth ending'.[9]

Plan 75 brings together a wide range of characters who are connected through the impact of the government initiative on their lives. The circumstances of each character test the limits of the human ability to care for others in a moment of increasing precarity, as work, accommodation, and the ability to take care of oneself become ever more uncertain, while the safety net of social care is also eroded.[10] The challenges that the characters face – job insecurity, homelessness, isolation – are all present in our everyday reality. The Plan 75 initiative serves as a device through which to explore the effect of these challenges on our understanding of our connections and obligations to one another.

4 Judith Merril, 'What do you mean? Science? Fiction?', in Rob Latham (ed.), *Science Fiction Criticism: An Anthology of Essential Writings* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017), p. 27.

5 Ibid.

6 See, for example, Ian Haydn Smith, 'Plan 75: the future, today', *Curzon Home Cinema Journal*, 17 May 2023, <https://www.curzon.com/journal/plan-75-the-future-today> accessed 11 June 2024.

7 Merril, 'What do you mean?', p. 27.

8 Chie Hayakawa, qtd in Selina Sonderman, 'Plan 75: an interview with director Chie Hayakawa', *The Upcoming* (2022), <https://www.theupcoming.co.uk/2022/06/09/plan-75-an-interview-with-director-chie-hayakawa/> accessed 11 June 2024.

9 Margaret Morganroth Gullette, 'Euthanasia as a caregiving fantasy in the era of the new longevity', *Age, Culture, Humanities: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, no. 1 (2014), p. 217.

10 Hideaki Fujiki argues that 'The welfare state policy can be said to have reached its peak during the so-called first year of welfare in 1973 when the Tanaka Kakuei Cabinet enacted a law providing free medical care to the elderly', and this policy has since declined. For the elderly protagonists of *Plan 75*, access to free care comes at the cost of agreeing to be euthanised. Hideaki Fujiki, *Making Audiences: A Social History of Japanese Cinema and Media* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022), p. 524.

Adapted from a short film with the same title that opened the anthology feature *Jū nen*/*Ten Years Japan* (2018; executive produced by the director Hirokazu Kore-eda), the feature-length version of *Plan 75* follows a diverse group of characters connected through the new government initiative. At 78 years old, Michi (Chieko Baishō) has lost her job, her friends and eventually her home in a series of events that lead her to consider signing up for Plan 75. In a parallel storyline, Filipina care worker Maria (Stefanie Arianne) is recruited to work at a Plan 75 euthanasia facility, driven by the need to earn money for her young daughter's healthcare. Plan 75 call-centre operative Yoko (Yūmi Kawai) coaches Michi through the stages of registering for Plan 75 and preparing for death, while recruiter Hiromi (Hayato Isomura) discovers that his estranged uncle has signed up to die on his 75th birthday.

The film and its cast have won numerous awards since its premiere in the *Un Certain Regard* section of the Cannes Film Festival in May 2022, where it also won Special Mention in the *Caméra d'Or* competition. *Plan 75* was the Japanese entry for the Best International Feature Film competition at the 95th Academy Awards, and later won the Best Director and Best Actress categories at the 65th Blue Ribbon Awards. The film was nominated for all major Japanese film awards of 2022–23, winning the Yoshimitsu Morita Memorial Best New Director prize for Chie Hayakawa, Best Actress for Chieko Baishō, Best Supporting Actor for Hayato Isomura and Best Supporting Actress for Yūmi Kawai at the 44th Yokohama Film Festival.

This reception can perhaps to some degree be attributed to Sally Chivers's observation that depictions of ageing on 'the silvering screen' have tended to focus on 'the global north' and particularly America and Hollywood.[11] *Plan 75* approaches the experience of ageing through a set of cultural norms and expectations that differ from those commonly seen in anglophone cinema, allowing international audiences to engage with issues of ageing from new perspectives. Chivers argues that 'audience members need comforting reassurances that they are not yet old […] that they will not individually bear responsibility for the burdensome, increasingly elderly population',[12] while Gullette suggests that audiences are drawn to narratives about ageing because 'the media's relentless longevity discourses about the demographic catastrophe of aging has taught us to anticipate our future duty to care, and to dread it'.[13] Yet Hayakawa's insistence on the vitality of her elderly characters, and her sensitive depiction of younger characters actively seeking ways to meet their diverse care needs, offer global audiences a less fearful view.

In the context of Japan, with its well-documented demographic issues that stem from an ageing population and a difficult relationship to immigration, Hayakawa's speculative fiction film offers an opportunity for viewers to consider how the nature of our reality is changing – an increasing number of people around the world require specialist care, while many governments remain reluctant to invest in migration from 'younger' countries in order to bring people who could offer that care in

11 Sally Chivers, *The Silvering Screen: Old Age and Disability in Cinema* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2011), p. 34.

12 Chivers, *The Silvering Screen,* p. 6

13 Gullette, 'Euthanasia as caregiving fantasy', p. 214.

the areas where it is most needed.[14] A common image of today's Japan features robot aides that provide physical and mental care for those suffering the effects of ageing, from physical decline to dementia.[15] In Hayakawa's rendering however, Japan is not presented as a utopia of technologized care but as a prosaic, everyday space in which the pressures caused by the challenges of care and caring in a precarious society increase the unhappy atomization of individuals. Hayakawa's active elderly characters push us to question how we understand care for the aged; Michi and her friends do not require the physical care of the infirm, but a mode of care that recognizes their personhood and allows them to continue to live and work. While discussions of care ethics in relation to ageing often move swiftly to specific challenges like dementia or physical care requirements, Hayakawa issues a timely reminder that basic care needs such as housing, money and human connection are no less essential for the elderly than for anyone else.

As Yayo Okano argues, the ethics of care – or care ethics, as variations on the theory are also known – has become 'an issue of global concern' in the past two decades.[16] During the 1980s, Carol Gilligan, Nel Noddings, Joan C. Tronto and Sara Ruddick all proposed using conceptions of care and ethics inherent to practices of caring as alternative frameworks for theorizing, counter to moral theories such as utilitarianism, which tended to focus on justice.[17] Addressing 'domains of life in which women were the major ethical actors',[18] early work on care ethics focused on parenting, illness, ageing, disability and caring within human relationships. Scholars in this wave of care ethics argued that the ethical and moral issues in private life should not be excluded from ethics and moral theory more broadly, which tended to focus on the public domain: 'Thus, needs that arise from inevitable human dependencies became a central concern of care ethics'.[19]

In Japan, Chizuko Ueno has woven Gilligan's ethics of care throughout her critique of the economic undervaluing of caring, understood as an act of love, highlighting the class and gender issues at the heart of a society-wide devaluing of care and care work.[20] Several ethnographies of care homes, elderly care, and the lives of carers in Japan draw from Tronto's ethics of care, indicating the central role that care practices play in the structuring of Japan today, as well as the ethical issues therein.[21] Similarly, recent work on disability in Japan, both in relation to aged populations and to other experiences of disability, have productively applied an ethics of care framework.[22] Issues of precarity, particularly gendered precarity, in Japan today have also been critiqued from the perspective of care ethics to demonstrate the inequalities resulting from a lack of focus on care and caring in social and economic policy.[23]

There are of course some points of contention in the field, which we can understand in the context of the development of care ethics

14 See James Wright, 'Robots vs migrants? Reconfiguring the future of Japanese institutional eldercare', *Critical Asian Studies*, vol. 51, no. 3 (2019), pp. 331–54; Gabriele Vogt, *Population Aging and International Health-Caregiver Migration to Japan* (New York: Springer, 2018).

15 See Anne Stefanie Aronsson, 'Social robots in elder care: the turn toward emotional machines in contemporary Japan', *Japanese Review of Cultural Anthropology*, vol. 21, no. 1 (2020), pp. 421–55; Jennifer A. Parks, 'Lifting the burden of women's care work: should robots replace the "human touch"?', *Hypatia*, vol. 25, no. 1 (2010), pp. 100–120.

16 Yayo Okano, 'Why has the ethics of care become an issue of global concern?', *International Journal of Japanese Sociology*, vol. 25, no. 1 (2016), pp. 85–99.

17 Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development* (Boston: Harvard University Press, 1982); Nel Noddings, *Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethics and Moral Education* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1984); Joan C. Tronto, 'Beyond gender difference to a theory of care', *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, vol. 12, no. 4 (1987), pp. 644–63; Sara Ruddick, 'Maternal thinking', *Feminist Studies*, vol. 6, no. 2 (1980), pp. 342–67, and *Maternal Thinking: Toward a Politics of Peace* (New York: Beacon Press, 1989).

18 Jean Keller and Eva Feder Kittay, 'Feminist ethics of care', in Ann Garry, Serene J. Khader and Alison Stone (eds), *The Routledge Companion to Feminist Philosophy* (London: Routledge, 2017), p. 540.

19 Ibid.

20 Ueno Chizuko, *Kea no shakaigaku: tōjisha shuken no fukushi shakai e* (Sociology of Care: Towards a Welfare Society of Autonomy for those Affected) (Tokyo: Ohta Shuppan, 2011).

21 Jason Danely, 'Learning compassion: everyday ethics among Japanese carers', *Inochi no*

from feminist philosophy into areas as diverse as 'political science, economics, sociology, history, nursing and biomedical ethics, and theology'.[24] Jean Keller and Eva Kittay summarize the key debates in the field arising around the following areas: conflicting understandings of the self as relational or as independent and autonomous; emphases on emotion-based deliberation as opposed to reason; and attention to context and particularity as opposed to universal pre-established principles.[25] Care ethicists also continue to debate whether care and justice are contrasting or complementary moral frames, and to what extent understanding the instinct to care as gendered is helpful. These points of contention may explain why several scholars of ageing in Japan have chosen to address the twinned issues of care and ethics outside a named framework of an 'ethics of care' or 'care ethics', and generally without reference to the work of Gilligan, Noddings or Tronto.[26] In the context of a wealth of films dealing with ageing and death in Japan, film scholars have also begun to apply an ethics of care framework to textual close reading, and to understanding the exhibition contexts of cinema in Japan. This essay thus especially draws inspiration from Fujiki's application of Gilligan's ethics of care to historicize the construction of a particular 'citizen' identity in Japan, defined by 'mutual response-ability' and interconnectedness, which Fujiki notes often informed self-organized film screening events.[27]

Discussions of caring and ethics in Japanese language scholarship and ethnography often use the *katakana* script used to transcribe foreign words to render care as *kea*. An ethics of care, or *kea no rinri*, has been used to discuss topics such as restorative justice, citizenship, moral education, empowerment, and debates on autonomy in Japanese academic writing.[28] Studies of care work, nursing, and particularly elder care are often framed within an ethics of care informed by Gilligan's and Noddings's writings, which are also available in translation in Japanese.[29] In the context of Keller and Kittay's observations that care ethicists working in English in the 1980s were arguing against the dismissal of ethical issues perceived as pertaining to the private sphere, on the grounds that the private sphere was often understood as of lesser importance than the public sphere, it seems possible that the choice to use the *katakana* syllabary to translate 'care' as *kea* (rather than finding a synonym in Japanese) may have been a rhetorical tactic to smooth the integration of an ethics of care framework into Japanese-language scholarship with reference to established publications in English.

At the same time, however, there is some overlap between key concepts and concerns at the heart of discourses on ethics of care, and discussions of empathy, particularly the specific kind of empathy known in Japan as *omoiyari.* Takie Lebra glosses *omoiyari* as 'the ability and willingness to feel what others are feeling, to vicariously experience the pleasure and pain that they are undergoing, and to help them satisfy their

mirai (The Future of Life) (2016), pp.170–92.

22 Hirotaka Sugita, 'Re-envisioning personhood from the perspective of Japanese philosophy: Watsuji Tetsuro's Aidagara-based ethics', *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, vol. 54, no. 9 (2022), pp. 1367–76.

23 Yayo Okano, 'Precariousness, precarity, and gender-care politics in Japan', in Maurice Hammington and Michael Flower (eds), *Care Ethics in the Age of Precarity* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2021).

24 Keller and Kittay, 'Feminist ethics of care', p. 540.

25 Ibid., pp. 540–43.

26 See John W. Traphagan, *The Practice of Concern: Ritual, Well-being, and Aging in Rural Japan* (Durham, NC: Carolina Academic Press, 2004); Iza Kavedžija, *Making Meaningful Lives: Tales from an Aging Japan* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2019); Anne Allison, 'Automated graves: the precarity and prosthetics of caring for the dead in Japan', *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, vol. 24, no. 4 (2021), pp. 622–36.

27 Fujiki, *Making Audiences*, p. 415.

28 Yayo Okano, *Sensō ni Kosuru: Kea no rinri to heiwa no kōsō* (Against War: The Ethics of Care and a Vision for Peace) (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 2015); Yasunari Hayashi (ed.), *Kea suru kokoro o hagukumu dōtoku kyōiku* (Moral Education to Nurture Caring Minds) (Tokyo: Kitaōji Shobō, 2000); Kouju Kamada, 'Tagenteki shichizunshippu no kiso toshite no kea no rinri' (Ethics of care as a basis of multiple citizenship), *Global Education*, no. 19 (2017), pp. 2–17; Kimiyo Ogawa, *Kea no rinri to enpawāmento* (Ethics of Care and Empowerment) (Tokyo: Kodansha, 2021); Hiromi, '"Kea" wa "jiritsu" o koeruka?' (Does care surpass autonomy?), in Akira Geshi (ed.), *'Amae' to 'jiritsu' no kyōikugaku: Kea, dōtoku, kankeisei* (Pedagogy of Emotional Dependence and Autonomy: Care, Morals and Relationships) (Tokyo: Seori Shobō, 2015).

29 Yamane Sumika, '"Kea no rinri" to "kea rōdō": Girigan "mō hitotsu no koe" ga kataranakatta

wishes'.[30] This is quite close to Noddings's reworking of a well-known phrase from The Bible:

> 'Do unto others as they would have done unto them', which means you have to think about what the other is feeling. Not just how I would feel in that situation but how is this other person really feeling? That is a major difference.[31]

The directionality of *omoiyari* helpfully characterizes Noddings's key point that care must come from 'direct contact', paying close attention to the needs of others.[32]

Omoiyari also has a close connection to the origins of Gilligan's ethics of care, which focus on moral reasoning. Japanese school textbooks often discuss *omoiyari* in relation to the question 'what is the best thing to do?', and deciding the best course of action through *omoiyari* is deeply relational.[33] Keeping the relationships between people at the heart of an ethics of care is consistent with the conceptualizations of Gilligan, Noddings and Tronto, which all emphasize relationality and responsiveness.[34] Reading *Plan 75* through the lens of an ethics of care, understood not only as a 'global concern' but also as an ethics deeply embedded in Japanese discourses of moral reasoning and judgement, we can see how Hayakawa's film engages with these eternal challenges, contributing a nuanced and complex examination of care and ageing to a growing corpus of films focused on these topics.

In developing her script, Hayakawa conducted a number of interviews with elderly people in Japan, mainly women, in order to understand better the experiences and concerns of her characters. After screenings of the short film version of *Plan 75*, the director held discussions with a number of older people that further informed the characterizations of Michi and her friends in the feature-length version. Hayakawa also interviewed four Filipino care workers to create the character of Maria.[35] This approach reflects the emphasis within an ethics of care on paying close attention to the needs and feelings of others as a starting point for empathetic engagement.

While collecting their life stories, Hayakawa also questioned her elderly interviewees on how they would feel about an initiative like Plan 75. Some were surprisingly positive, expressing a desire to take control of their own health and outcome, as well as the wish not to 'burden' others: 'Especially for Japanese elderly and Japanese people, they tend to think that they don't want to be a burden to others. They don't want to be a burden to children or society.'[36] This observation echoes Jason Danely's ethnographic work, which emphasizes the tensions inherent in 'the fear of being a burden, wishing to yield, yet dreading abandonment' felt by many elderly people in Japan.[37] All the characters of *Plan 75* are caught between the instinct to care for themselves and be close to family and friends, and the demand to prioritize an imagined greater good for a

koto' ('Care ethics' and 'care work': what Gilligan's 'In Another Voice' didn't say), *Soshiorogosu* (Sociologos), no. 29 (2005), pp. 1–18; Izumi Seiko, 'Tāminarukea ni okeru kankoshi no rinri-teki kanshin: kaishakugakuteki genshō-gaku apurōchi o mochiita tankyū' (Ethical concerns of nurses in terminal care: exploration using a hermeneutic phenomenology approach), *Nihon kango-ka gakkaishi* (Journal of the Japanese Society of Nursing Science), vol. 27, no. 4 (2007), pp. 72–80.

30 Takie Lebra, *Japanese Patterns of Behaviour* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1976), p. 38.

31 Masao Yokota, Clarissa Douglass and Nel Noddings, 'How to develop true care: three interviews with Nel Noddings', *Encounters in Theory and History of Education*, vol. 20, no. 1 (2019), p. 108.

32 Noddings, qtd in ibid., p. 115.

33 Akiko Hayashi, Mayumi Karasawa and Joseph Tobin, 'The Japanese preschool's pedagogy of feeling: cultural strategies for supporting young children's emotional development', *Ethos*, vol. 37, no. 1 (2009), p. 41.

34 Joan C. Tronto, 'partiality based on relational responsibilities: another approach to global ethics', *Ethics and Social Welfare*, vol. 6, no. 3 (2012), p. 303.

35 Hayakawa, in private conversation with the author, prior to an audience Q&A at The Showroom Cinema, Sheffield, 4 June 2023.

36 Hayakawa, qtd in Shane Slater, 'Interview: Chie Hayakawa discusses the dystopian "Plan 75" and its Japanese worldview', *Awards Radar*, 2022, <https://awardsradar.com/2022/11/29/interview-chie-hayakawa-discusses-the-dystopian-plan-75-and-its-japanese-worldview/> accessed 11 June 2024.

37 Danely, *Aging and Loss*, p. 12.

larger population. Michi wishes to 'keep trying' (*chotto mo ganbarimasu*) to support herself but acknowledges the increasing impossibility of this in a world where older people are considered useless. Maria balks at the implications of Plan 75 but takes the higher salary of a job there in order to support her sick daughter in the Philippines. Hiromi appears relatively unthinking about recruiting older people to the initiative until his own uncle signs up. And when Michi decides to apply to the programme, Yoko becomes her assigned call-centre contact and is drawn into a personal relationship with the elderly woman that causes feelings of conflict about her role.

We can understand how the tensions and obligations inherent to an ethics of care are expressed through the characters' relationships using Noddings's conceptualization, which allows for varying strengths of feeling according to how close or distant a person requiring care is from a person providing care. In Noddings's understanding, care expressed for an individual can also be an act of violence or damage to wider society. This conflict between caring for one person and caring for a wider demographic affected by a more abstract problem is explored in Maria's narrative arc. While early scenes show her interacting gently with older Japanese residents of a care home, she must swap this work for the higher-paid labour of removing clothing and valuables from corpses at a Plan 75 euthanasia facility, prioritizing financial care for her daughter over physical care for elderly people. Even this difficult choice is presented within a narrative of care, as Maria is offered the job by a friend at her local Filipino church who has listened closely and empathetically to her worries about her daughter. Yet Hayakawa does not present Maria's decision as simple or selfish. Her elderly Japanese workmate at the euthanasia facility encourages Maria to take valuable accessories and money from the corpses' belongings in a scene that demonstrates the messiness of care ethics. Reminding her that 'Dead people don't use. You use', his apparently unethical invitation to steal is also an act of care for Maria, based on his observation of her financial situation.[38] This close observation of others' and of one's own surroundings is the basis for an ethics of care that extends across and beyond the human characters of Plan 75, from care for others, through care of the self and care for the environment.

Plan 75 presents care as relational, with Maria's story as a kind of comparative case for the Japanese characters. Hayakawa explains that what she wanted was

> to express the notions of bonds (*kizuna*) that she has with her family […] Thanks to her presence, I could also reflect on another stark contrast – even though we praise our familial bonds, our *kizuna*, in fact, we seem to be losing it. In other words, we're becoming a very indifferent type of society.[39]

Maria's relationships with her daughter overseas and her Filipino church community in Japan underscore the loneliness of the Japanese

38 Workers at the euthanasia facility are addressed in English, suggesting that most are non-Japanese. This positions the facility as an extension of the outsourced elder care available in Japan today, where care homes are often staffed by non-Japanese workers, often on specialized visas from countries such as the Philippines.

39 Hayakawa, qtd in Lukasz Mankowski, 'Interview with Chie Hayakawa: that saddening reality of ours', *Asian Movie Pulse*, <https://asianmoviepulse.com/2022/06/interview-with-chie-hayakawa-that-saddening-reality-of-ours> accessed 11 June 2024.

characters, and emphasize that determining 'what is the right thing to do' hinges on the stakes involved, for those closest to as well as those distant from the protagonist.

Maria's decision-making takes place in the context of determining the 'right thing' to do for her daughter. By contrast, Michi is at first less vulnerable to the pressures of Plan 75 advertisements, as she has no children or close family. Hayakawa developed Michi's characterization from her earlier short film, in which an unnamed elderly woman suffering from dementia was cared for by a daughter pregnant with her second child. While this earlier version of the story was a starker iteration of the perceived need to prioritize the young over the old, the depiction of Michi in the feature-length version of *Plan 75* emphasizes her physical and mental vitality, problematizing the tendency of 'silvering screen films [to] rely on illness or disability narratives to convey the social burden of growing old'.[40] Hayakawa cast the established actress Chieko Baishō in order to ensure that Michi appeared to be 'someone that the audience would want to choose to live'.[41] Michi's strength and independence is communicated by the wealth of experience that Baishō brings to the character; Hayakawa felt that the veteran actress, best known for her tough-yet-glamorous sister character in the long-running 'Tora-san' film series – *Otoko wa tsurai yo* (Yōjii Yamada, 1968–95) – 'could show her strength and beauty as a human being'.[42] Michi's active nature seems to prove her usefulness to society as well as her attachment to life; we see her cleaning hotel rooms at work, and later enduring a hard cold night as a traffic attendant. Yet the character is also drawn as tender and caring, slicing apples to feed co-workers, managing a booking for friends at a local karaoke place, and paying for their groceries. In quieter moments she cares for the spaces she lives in and moves through by tending plants, washing plastic containers and carefully sorting the recycling.

Michi's practices of self-care are depicted in repeated close-ups of Baishō brushing her teeth and trimming her toenails, feeding a plant with the clippings. In these scenes, Hayakawa's elderly characters appear closer to those of Sachi Hamano's *Lily Festival*/*Yurisai* (2001), in which older women carefully prepare and dress their bodies for a stylish life of romance, than the female protagonists of the two versions of *The Ballad of Narayama*/*Narayama bushikō* (Keisuke Kinoshita, 1958; Shōhei Imamura, 1983), who remove their own teeth by beating them with rocks, in order to avoid the temptation to eat and thereby to stay alive. Yet the elderly protagonists of *The Ballad of Narayama* abuse their bodies in order to make themselves useful; they think of dying as the best thing they can do for their communities in order to preserve resources for the young. Michi's gentle practices of caring for herself are similarly framed as productive, as she nourishes her plants with off-cuts from her own body. Hayakawa recalled watching older people placing hair and nail clippings into the ground or into plant pots, which she interpreted as an expression of care for the environment, using the

40 Chivers, *The Silvering Screen*, p. 8; see also Mao Hui Deng, *Ageing, Dementia and Time in Film: Temporal Performances* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2023); Katsura Sako, 'Dementia in Japanese cinema: the family and rural nostalgia', in Sarah Falcus, Heiki Hartung and Raquel Medina (eds), *The Bloomsbury Handbook to Ageing in Contemporary Literature and Film* (London: Bloomsbury, 2023), pp. 313–24.

41 Hayakawa, in private conversation with the author.

42 Hayakawa, qtd in Stephen Saito, 'Chie Hayakawa on a Word from the Wise in "Plan 75"', *A Moveable Feast*, 5 December 2022, <https://moveablefest.com/chie-hayakawa-plan-75/> accessed 21 June 2024.

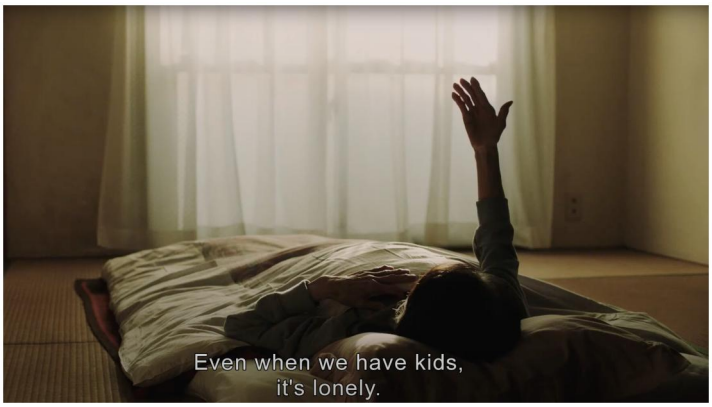

Fig. 1. Michi is repeatedly entranced by the beauty of the light. All images from *Plan 75* (Chie Hayakawa, 2022).

human body to feed the non-human. The act also suggests Michi's acceptance that one day she will die and her body become part of the earth. This contextualizes Michi's resistance to Plan 75 more as an active choice to live than derived from a fear of dying.[43]

Scenes showing Michi caring for her body contrast with the impersonal treatment of bodies at the Plan 75 facility, both before and after death. As the pressure to apply to Plan 75 grows and other options for survival disappear, Michi's embodied experiences are visually communicated to show her clinging to life. Her constant turning towards the sun echoes the behaviour of the plants that surround her, allegorizing her will to live by aligning her innate response to her environment with that of a plant that seeks out sunlight to survive. She repeatedly holds her hand up to the sun, watching the patterns of light and shade (figure 1). Michi is dazzled by the beauty of the light playing across her hands, just as the viewer is similarly entranced by these shots from Michi's perspective. These scenes bring the viewer emotionally closer to the protagonist by literally allowing us to see through her eyes, recalling Laura Marks's 'haptic visuality', which can present a characters' experience as an encounter also experienced by the viewer from the same position in the same moment.[44] It is notable that such scenes often address mortality; in Marks's discussion of a close-up shot of a hand in Ines Cardoso's video art piece *Diastole* (1994), she observes that the video ends with the words 'How can we ever understand death?'. Naomi Kawase's *Katatsumori* (1994) also uses close-up shots of hands to emphasize the fragility of its 80-year-old protagonist, the director's adoptive mother Uno Kawase, suggesting their use as a device to emphasize an embodied sense of being alive and, at the same time, the mortality of the body.

For Michi to take time to appreciate the world around her, despite the pressures of work and poverty, feels like a practice of self-care in the face of the harsh realities of late capitalism. In this respect the chores that she performs in anonymous hotel rooms as a cleaner seem different from the slow and careful cleaning, tidying and watering of plants that she

43 Hayakawa, in private conversation with the author.

44 Laura U. Marks, *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment and the Senses* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000), p. 192.

undertakes in her own small apartment. The apartment is set to be demolished, leaving Michi homeless in a narrative development that echoes Vittorio De Sica's *Umberto D.* (1952), in which the protagonist cares for himself and his dog through the performance of daily chores, despite impending homelessness. However, even simple actions of self-care such as the tidying of one's environment offer no refuge from the unending quest for profit that destabilizes the elderly protagonists' lives. Self-care is not presented as an unproblematic form of caring, since another iteration of the Plan 75 package offers a version of the self-care spa trip, including beauty treatments, delicious food, and the taking of a commemorative photograph before the applicant is euthanised. Even the supposedly simple care of the body can be co-opted into larger and more problematic conceptualizations of care and ethics. As Maricel Oró-Piqueras and Sarah Falcus have noted, 'Within a liberal capitalist system, successful ageing not only implies individual responsibility for taking care of oneself and one's needs, but also for making use of all the consumerist products, techniques and experiences available to keep the signs of ageing at bay'.[45] It is a bitter irony of Hayakawa's *Plan 75* that the deluxe spa package is a means of preventing ageing not by prolonging life, but by hastening death.

When Michi applies to join Plan 75, we encounter the care offered in the basic package; young call-centre operators such as Yoko are tasked with advising applicants on how to prepare for their death. The young workers are limited to 15-minute phone calls with applicants and forbidden from meeting in person, a rule Yoko breaks as her relationship with Michi deepens. After a meeting at a bowling alley, where Michi demonstrates physical health and a talent for the game, Yoko must make a final call to advise her on how to arrange her apartment before leaving for the euthanasia facility. Sticking to her call-centre script, Yoko's eyes fill with tears and her voice wavers as she imbues each sentence with hidden meaning, pleading with Michi to change her plan while using the language mandated by the initiative to thank her for her self-sacrifice (figure 2). This affecting scene places an ethics of care and an ethics of justice in stark tension: Yoko expresses care for Michi by implicitly urging her to prioritize herself and stay alive, while the call-centre script uses the language of justice in praising the Plan 75 applicant for prioritizing the imagined future of Japan by removing themselves from state care and thereby lessening the burden of providing care which falls on the government.[46]

Hayakawa's account of the process of shooting this scene emphasizes the importance of interpersonal connection.

> Those two places, the call-centre and Michi's place, are quite far from each other so we had to shoot one part first and then the other. We covered Michi's parts first, but Kawai Yūmi was there at the site,

45 Maricel Oró-Piqueras and Sarah Falcus, 'Approaches to old age: perspectives from the twenty-first century', *European Journal of English Studies*, vol. 22, no. 1 (2018), p. 6.

46 While I am not arguing that the Plan 75 initiative fits exactly within an ethics of justice framework, the discourse used to advocate for Plan 75 within the film heavily emphasizes the perceived benefit to younger people when older people remove themselves from society. An ethics of justice approach tends to focus on solutions that offer the most positive, or the least damaging, outcomes to the greatest number of people. As discussed below, the Japanese government (among many others) has in the past used similar arguments to remove groups perceived to pose specific threats to larger numbers of the population. In this sense, Hayakawa's invention of Plan 75 hews close to previous historical examples that resulted from the application of an interpretation of an ethics of justice-style mode of prioritizing larger groups within the population over smaller ones.

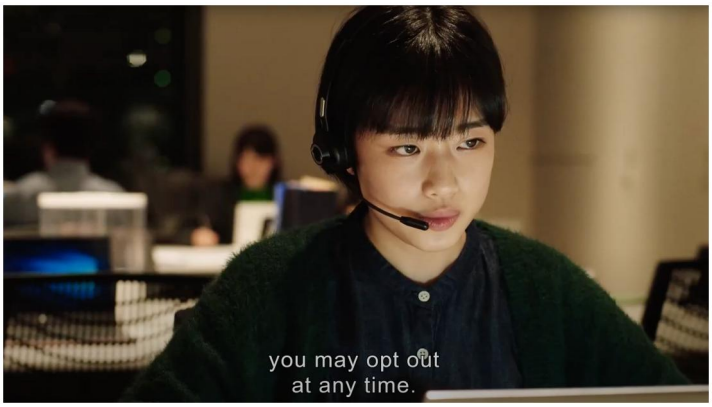

Fig. 2. Yoko struggles with the tensions of the call-centre script and the ethics of care.

> hidden in the other room, participating in the scene from a distance […] Our main goal was to maintain the natural flow of conversation and keep the emotional layer of voice adjusted to the real ambience of the scene.[47]

47 Hayakawa, qtd in Mankowski, 'Interview with Chie Hayakawa'.

Listening closely to one another in a shared ambience creates a sense of care passing between the two characters, as Yoko tries to save Michi and Michi tries to calm Yoko. Each understands the needs of the other by carefully listening not simply to the words but to their feeling and hidden meanings. Attention to the 'emotional layer of voice' might be something like an *omoiyari* version of care, in which each speaker imbues their words with a resonance attuned to the listener and their well-being, and listens closely for the same in the other's speech.

After this final call, Yoko moves to the lunch-room and overhears a staff trainer speaking with new call operatives. Explaining that many applicants change their minds and want to withdraw from the plan, she tells the new recruits that 'you must become good listeners' to ensure that this does not happen. Yoko stares directly and meaningfully into the camera in medium close-up, as though urging the viewer to understand that this kind of listening is an empty gesture. Listening while keeping the speaker at a distance is the performance of a caring action without caring intent, or any attempt to understand the speaker's feelings or to help them. If Yoko and Michi's listening is a kind of *omoiyari*, the trainer's advice describes an empty kind of care in which 'what is best to do' is already assumed by the listener.

If close listening is a basis for understanding another's feelings and needs, care as empathy can also be built through deep understanding of another's embodied experience. As the film shifts to Michi's embodied perspective, we experience a transition from one kind of empathetic engagement to another, as we are invited to *feel with* Michi rather than observe her from a distance. A series of long shots that place Michi's small figure against a huge background of green landscape as she travels to, and hikes back from, the mass euthanasia centre has the effect in a

cinema auditorium of making the viewer feel similarly immersed in soothing nature. Michi has narrowly escaped death, an experience that few viewers will be able to understand through shared experience. Instead of narrating Michi's feelings, Hayakawa establishes empathy despite the huge distance between the embodied knowledge of viewer and protagonist by bringing the viewer's visual and physical sensory experience so close to Michi's. In this image of an older woman becoming immersed in nature, we can see another echo of *The Ballad of Narayama*, which Hayakawa cites as inspiration.[48] These earlier films about *obasute* (leaving elderly people to die exposed to nature) also considered what kinds of care younger people owe to their elders, and what elders' responsibilities to society might be. However, the gentle freedom expressed by the natural setting of the final scene of *Plan 75* also prompts us to think about some larger and more difficult questions. Michi's association with nature creates the impression of a strong and vital character, which calls into question the idea of a normative span of a 'natural' life ending at age 75. How do we know, or decide, when life is over? This question appears to haunt audiences of the film, who have raised it several times in Q&A events with the director.

48 Hayakawa, in private conversation with the author.

Hayakawa's observations on critical and audience responses to the 2018 short film as compared to the 2022 feature-length version provide an illuminating context for the creative decisions that result in key differences between the two narratives, and demonstrate the role of conversations with viewers in the development of the latter.

> I want to have the audience as a partner in making this film. Like they are your co-writer or something, you're working together with the audience. I trust the audience with their ability to feel. I want to leave it open to the interpretation of the audience.[49]

49 Chie Hayakawa, qtd in Sonderman, 'Plan 75: an interview with director Chie Hayakawa'.

Her filmmaking methods share much with ethnographic practices, not only in the visual style of scenes which quietly observe protagonists in the process of everyday actions, but also in the use of audience feedback. As discussed above, screenings of the short film version of *Plan 75* have provided opportunities for Hayakawa to engage with audiences and gather further information on how elderly viewers responded to the idea of a government-issued euthanasia initiative. This is not unlike the screening-back process employed by ethnographic filmmakers to gauge the truthfulness of the images and narrative captured on film for those involved in or affected by the filmmaking process. In this sense, Hayakawa's 'audience as partner' model has antecedents in ethnographic filmmaking practices employed not only by anthropologists and social researchers but also by feature filmmakers such as Shōhei Imamura and Kazuo Hara.[50]

50 Jennifer Coates, 'Blurred boundaries: ethnofiction and its impact on postwar Japanese cinema', *Arts*, vol. 8, no. 1 (2019).

Unlike these auteurs of Japan's 1960s and 1970s experimental cinema who incorporated ethnographically informed engagements with everyday

people into stylised and emotive scenes, however, Hayakawa's commitment to trusting the audience extends to refraining from didacticism. The director has clearly stated many times that the film is not a judgement on the rights or wrongs of euthanasia, despite several English-language reviews branding *Plan 75* an 'anti-euthanasia' film.[51] Leaving the film 'open to the interpretation of the audience' and trusting in their 'ability to feel' involves creating a well-realized and believable life for each character. Rather than exposing the characters' flaws and inconsistencies, a tendency among an earlier generation of directors using ethnographic or ethnofiction filming principles, Hayakawa's ethnographically informed writing and visual style encourages the audience to care for the characters by building a sense of intimacy through close observation of their actions and experiences.

Sandra Laugier argues that the intimate sphere of the ordinary or everyday is an ideal starting point from which to build an ethics of care, and that film can be a 'privileged medium' through which to develop this ethical stance.[52] 'Care is also specific attention to the invisible importance of things and moments […] Film cultivates in us a specific ability to see the importance of things and moments, and it emphasizes the covering over of importance in our ordinary life.'[53] Hayakawa's attention to mundane everyday processes such as cleaning and grooming cultivate this 'specific ability to see the importance of things and moments' in the audience, drawing our attention to the way in which these aspects of 'ordinary life' are often hidden from public view. Through close observation of characters' ordinary moments, Hayakawa nudges the audience towards a viewing stance based on an ethics of care by drawing us into the protagonists' everyday lives.

Michele Aaron similarly positions film as 'an inherently ethical medium: it depends upon an ethical encounter between the various individuals engaged in its experience. In revealing others' vulnerability, film requires us to feel in relation to them, to care about what happens.'[54] In slowly revealing the characters' vulnerabilities through observation of their movements, Hayakawa trusts the audience to feel with the characters and care about what happens to them. This care can then travel outside the world of the film or beyond the physical space of the cinema. In conversation, Hayakawa has recalled younger audience members expressing feelings of desire to speak with older audience members in several discussion sessions after screenings, noting that the former often wished to know what the latter thought of the film, and through this to make a connection with the older generation. In this way, the closeness formed between viewer and elderly protagonist can translate into an ethics of care extended towards other cinemagoers and older people in the viewer's own everyday life.

This closeness exists in tension with what Gullette has called 'the image of "the old Eskimo on the Ice Flow" [that] appeals to many people who don't object to – or perhaps don't even notice – the socially-coerced nature of that mythical form of killing'.[55] There is often an element of

51 See, for example, Peter Bradshaw, 'Plan 75 review – life is terminated at 75 in melancholy anti-euthanasia drama', *The Guardian*, 10 May 2023, <https://amp.theguardian.com/film/2023/may/10/plan-75-review-life-is-terminated-at-75-in-melancholy-anti-euthanasia-drama>; Saskia Baron, 'Plan 75 review – dystopian vision of euthanasia in Japan', *The Arts Desk*, 15 May 2023, <https://theartsdesk.com/film/plan-75-review-dystopian-vision-euthanasia-japan>; Tom Whyman, 'In "Plan 75", euthanasia is the answer to loneliness', *ArtReview*, 18 May 2023, <https://artreview.com/euthanasia-is-final-loneliness-is-not-plan-75-chie-hayakawa/> all accessed11 June 2024.

52 Sandra Laugier, 'The ethics of care as a politics of the ordinary', *New Literary History*, vol. 46, no. 2 (2015), p. 234.

53 Ibid., p. 235.

54 Michele Aaron, 'Ethics and digital film', *Film Criticism*, vol. 40, no. 1 (2016), p. 1.

55 Gullette, 'Euthanasia as a caregiving fantasy', p. 214.

horrified attraction in viewer responses to film images of elderly citizens choosing to remove themselves from society. Critics have certainly speculated on the feasibility of such an initiative: Peter Bradshaw of *The Guardian*, for example, devoted a third of his review to considering the specifics of the implementation of Plan 75.[56] In a post-screening Q&A, an audience member queried the director on how the plan could be improved to work in a fairer, less sinister way. Hayakawa cites such responses as her motivation for increasing the complications and sinister undertone of the initiative in her extended version of the film:

> On one side, *Plan 75* reveals an image of gentle, friendly, honest human beings and their kindness. On the other, there is violence […] I wanted to clash this depiction and the best possible way was to render it through this stark contrast – between warm-hearted people, their delicacy, calm faces, warm voices, their peaceful everyday life and this inhuman form of violence that becomes possible and is performed on them as an act of systemic power.[57]

In the same audience Q&A, Hayakawa expressed her sense that the 2018 short film had made Plan 75 seem too reassuring, even appealing. She thus resolved to enhance the sinister coercive element of the initiative and its marketing in the feature-length film, and to emphasize resistance to the initiative, including a scene in a government office waiting-room in which a man aggressively unplugs a television showing an advertisement for the Plan, and another in which a protestor throws a drink at a poster during a recruitment drive. These additions confront the viewer with the realities of 'euthanasia as caregiving fantasy' by showing characters who understand Plan 75 as a socially sanctioned form of killing.

Hayakawa had also intended to include a doctor character who, following an arc similar to that of the young recruiter Hayato, would realize at the mid-point of the film the horrifying implications of Plan 75. This would have added a character with close medical knowledge of the processes of death and dying, something that shifted when the doctor character was reworked into Hayato's young recruitment agent. In the finished feature-length version, Michi is the only character with personal experience of death, as she loses her closest friend in the first part of the film. The younger characters are further removed from the concept of dying, understanding death through such violent mediations as the live-streamed shooting of elderly care home residents that opens the film. Such different understandings of death obscure the stakes of Plan 75 for the younger protagonists, at least until they encounter its victims directly.

Surrounding Michi with much younger characters emphasizes not only the unknowability of death for younger generations, but also the fear of something like a death contagion that can create distance between those closer to death and those for whom it is an abstract concept. At the heart of critical and audiences' responses that demand a workable version of Plan 75 is this horror of death, and perhaps the idea that an

56 Bradshaw, 'Plan 75 review'.

57 Hayakawa, qtd in Mankowski, 'Interview with Chie Hayakawa'.

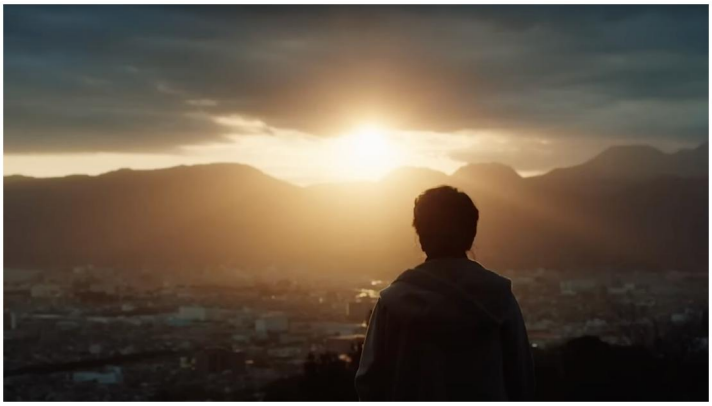

Fig. 3. Michi escapes into nature and faces the sunset.

orderly plan can drive death away from disorderly life into its own safely encased area, like the euthanasia centres that appear distant from the living spaces of the film. Attempts to imagine a workable Plan 75 can therefore be understood as refusals of death, or refusals to encompass death in the messiness of everyday life.

Although Michi signs up to Plan 75 at the mid-point of the film, pressured by joblessness, homelessness, and the death of her close friend, she nevertheless refuses to die. Quietly removing her medical mask and IV drip at the euthanasia centre, she escapes in the wake of Maria and Hayato, as the two smuggle Hayato's uncle's body from the facility to a formal cremation ceremony. While the film ends with an image of Michi stretching her arms out to meet the sun, critics and audiences have questioned how Michi will survive; Hayakawa has recalled an audience member telling her that she imagined Michi going back to her condemned apartment to kill herself. The director refuses to speculate on Michi's future after the end of the film, emphasizing that the important character development is that Michi chooses to live: 'In one scene, we see Michi […] gazing directly at the sunlight. I'd like to think of her that in that moment she's embracing all the feelings that come with the joy of living.'[58] The final shot of Michi surrounded by trees and green space, staring into the sunlight, seems to suggest that she is at peace in the world, despite her recent brush with death (figure 3). Yet audiences struggle to imagine post-Plan 75 Michi's existence.

In this aspect, *Plan 75* picks up a core theme of Nagisa Ōshima's *Koshikei*/*Death by Hanging* (1968). While the hanging is the problem that drives the narrative, the unresolvable question at the heart of this experimental film is the nature of death. The narrative revolves around discussion of whether 'R', a character who is revived after a hanging, is the same 'R' that was hanged. Is the Michi who leaves the euthanasia facility the same Michi who submitted to Plan 75? While critics and audiences have understood Michi's character arc in relation to the older characters of *The Ballad of Narayama* or *Tokyo Story*/*Tokyo monogatari* (Yasujirō Ozu, 1953), who worry about burdening the younger

58 Hayakawa, qtd in Mankowski, 'Interview with Chie Hayakawa'.

generation and accept the perceived need to remove themselves from society for the benefit of others, in fact Michi's half-death part-way through the narrative can be better understood in relation to Ōshima's conflicted and conflicting character, the *zainichi* Korean known as R. Discriminated against and pushed to the margins of society, both R and Michi are in many ways socially dead before they become, briefly, functionally dead. Their problematic return to life literally demonstrates that the world has refused to make space for them. While Ōshima's film explicitly addresses the changed status of the post-hanging R, Hayakawa quietly releases post-Plan 75 Michi back into the world that rejected her. Perhaps this is why audiences find it so difficult to imagine life for Michi after her escape from death.

Writing of the representation of death in recent Japanese films that depict processes of embalming, Kirsten Cather argues that 'What ensures peace for both the living and the dead is restoring these bodies to some prior whole, an image of them held by the living'.[59] While Michi certainly looks like her prior self, she no longer technically exists within the managed neoliberal systems of contemporary Japan. The living audience struggles to imagine how Michi can survive in such a state, still alive but bureaucratically dead. Where the first half of the film brought the viewer closer to Michi through intimate observance of her everyday life and close attention to her body, the final scenes of escape from death render the once familiar Michi suddenly strange or uncanny, her fate now unimaginable. No longer even precarious, she has literally fallen off the edge of the bureaucratically organized world. Her extreme vulnerability has prompted critics such as Sarah Merican to praise the film as a 'searing interrogation of how capitalism has made it too expensive to grow old with dignity'.[60]

One factor in this lack of dignity for the elderly is the removal of available private space, both for the homeless characters who frequent the recruitment drives that offer free meals, and for the newly homeless Michi. Removing privacy can be a mode of dehumanization or abstraction of the individual into a larger mass. Hideaki Fujiki notes that 'the intimate sphere' is linked to conceptualisations of individuals as '"humans" and "people"', while 'scholars have tended to associate the term "citizens" with the public sphere and citizenship', yet reminds us that '"citizens", too, are subjects of the intimate sphere and care'.[61] Michi is no longer a citizen, as she has given up her legal and social identity. Her home has been repossessed and her belongings removed, leaving her with no intimate sphere to return to. Yet it is clear that Michi will need care involving housing, food, money and social interaction. In this sense she embodies Fujiki's argument that that citizens, people and humans are interchangeable, in the sense that all need care to survive.

Michi's journey from citizen to living dead in many ways echoes the process of a steady removal of social care from the public sphere, in Japan as in many other areas of the world. While we may think of citizens as under the protection of their governments, acting

59 Kirsten Cather, 'The dying art of Japanese cinema', in David Desser (ed.), *A Companion to Japanese Cinema* (Hoboken: Wiley Blackwell, 2022), p. 455.

60 Sarah Merican, 'Plan 75: sombre euthanasia movie captures the escalating anxieties around ageing', *Sight and Sound*, 9 May 2023, <https://www.bfi.org.uk/sight-and-sound/reviews/plan-75-sombre-euthanasia-movie-captures-escalating-anxieties-around-ageing> accessed 11 June 2024.

61 Fujiki, *Making Audiences*, p. 413.

autonomously within societies managed by bureaucratic processes of ordering human life, Fujiki, for example, argues that

> from a historical perspective citizens are not so much autonomous or intellectual subjects but often vulnerable ones. Since the 1990s, growing neoliberalism and post-Fordism have further rendered Japan a risk society in which various types of risk caused by systems are nonetheless borne by individuals forced to take personal responsibility for them.[62]

62 Fujiki, *Making Audiences*, p. 413.

Risk society creates precarity, which underscores the necessity of care, and at the same time advances a world in which existing outside schemes of care is unimaginable. Arguing that cinema is well positioned to help us in sensing precarity, and the need for care that that state engenders, Kiu-Wai Chu suggests that 'by highlighting the vulnerable and the precarious in our cinematic representations […] a cinema defined by care, empathy and compassion can be promoted'.[63]

63 Kiu-Wai Chu, 'Screening vulnerability in the Anthropocene: *Island of The Hungry Ghosts* and the eco-ethics of refugee cinema', *Screen*, vol. 62, no. 4 (2021), p. 579.

Sako and Falcus similarly argue for 'cultural narratives of ageing, illness and care' that can 'complicate the dominant discourses' of 'ageism found in policies and practices of care'.[64] While the authors identify the recent Covid-19 pandemic as an example of explicit ageism in the practice of triage on the basis of age, the narrative of *Plan 75* also appears to draw from, or at least echo, historical examples of discriminatory policies and practices. For example, the constant stream of background advertising for Plan 75 echoes the language used in pre- and post-war Japan to convince sufferers of Hansen's disease (previously known as leprosy) to permanently quarantine on a remote island away from the rest of the population. Throughout the film, posters and television announcements repeatedly encourage the general population to support the plan as a means of 'protecting the future'.[65] These advertisements frame Plan 75 as an expression of care for the next generation, encouraging elderly people to remove themselves from society and family life as a means of showing care for the futures of younger friends and family. In this respect, the discourse around Plan 75 is not unlike the publicly promoted discussion of Hansen's disease, in which sufferers were encouraged to bear the pain of separation from loved ones by focusing on the safeguarding of the wider population that this was thought to ensure. Kathryn Tanaka observes that such discourses bring an ethics of care into tension with an ethics of justice.[66] While moral reasoning based on an ethics of justice prioritizes the protection of the general population from infection (in the case of Hansen's disease) or the negative economic and labour outcomes of an ageing population (in the case of *Plan 75*), an ethics of care acknowledges the fear and suffering of the afflicted (whether by disease or ageing, and associated discrimination). Tanaka's argument strikes at the heart of the problem presented by *Plan 75*. In exposing the tensions between a top-down approach to managing populations for the benefit of the greatest number of people, which we might call an ethics of justice,

64 Sako and Falcus, 'Introduction', pp. 1–3.

65 A particularly sinister poster that appears twice, reads: 'You don't have to be documented to apply'.

66 Kathryn M. Tanaka, 'For the purity of the nation: Ogawa Masako and the gendered ethics of *Spring on the Small Island* (*Kojima no haru*)', *US–Japan Women's Journal*, no. 50 (2016), p. 102.

and attention to the vulnerabilities and sufferings of individuals, understood here as an ethics of care, Tanaka's argument clearly offers inspiration for how we understand *Plan 75*, and audience fascination with its viability and implementation.

Between the top-down ethics of justice allegorized by Plan 75 and the *omoiyari* or relational ethics of care practised by the film's main characters, Hayakawa invokes another pathway for thinking through the concept of care in the final section of *Plan 75*. As discussed above, the visual style becomes increasingly abstract as we travel towards, and then through, Michi's submission to Plan 75. The heightened aesthetic of this final section of the film suggests approaching these scenes not only from the perspective of an ethics of care, which is clearly invoked in the earlier part of the film, but with attention to the aesthetics of care. What could or should ethical care on film look and feel like?

Joseph Kupfer has identified film narratives as particularly effective in emphasizing the tensions between individual and society that we find at the heart of the problem an ethics of care seeks to address, suggesting the social value of using film to imagine and work through such complicated issues as care, caring and obligation.[67] That imagining takes place not only in film narratives but also in aesthetic elements, including visual style and performance. As *Plan 75* leaves narrative and scripted dialogue behind to immerse the viewer in sensory depictions of nature and loving close-up shots of Michi's face, hands and body, we are invited to move from a plot shaped by an ethics of care to a visual experience framed by an aesthetics of care.

Joan Iverson Nassauer conceptualized an 'aesthetics of care' around the same time as Gilligan, Noddings, Ruddick and Tronto first wrote about an ethics of care.[68] Nassauer's term describes a tendency among farmers, gardeners, landscape architects, and those who appreciate nature to associate tidy landscapes with landscapes that are well cared for, and in turn to think of people who maintain tidy landscapes as caring people. Yet the very creation of a tidy landscape involves violence, as Nassauer points out, from aggressively removing weeds by pulling them up or treating them with deadly chemicals, to removing native plants and installing 'tidier looking' non-native plants. Tidiness, Nassauer argues, is closely related to domination. We can see an allegory in *Plan 75*, in which a controlling governmental initiative seeks to tidy away a population demographic to create an ordered version of a society in which age demographics are neatly balanced. Human feelings are also subjected to this tidying impulse, as the Plan 75 infrastructure channels human interaction into a limited set of scripts that work against real *omoiyari*-based care while maintaining an illusion of care through polite service offered in clean and attractive spaces.

Nassauer argues that this kind of dominating neatness is in fact a disregard for that which we profess to care for, that 'neatness can say

67 Joseph H. Kupfer, *Feminist Ethics in Film: Reconfiguring Care Through Cinema* (London: Intellect, 2012).

68 Joan Iverson Nassauer, 'The aesthetics of horticulture: neatness as a form of care', *American Society for Horticultural Science*, vol. 25, no. 6 (1988), pp. 973–77. A number of scholars have recently engaged with this concept, some using Nassauer's work and some extrapolating from the ethics of care scholarship discussed above to consider the aesthetics of craft, performance, theatre and film, featuring divergent approaches and concerns. Performance studies scholars such as James Thompson and Amanda Stuart-Fisher describe a 'care aesthetics' in which a production can 'perform a mode of care for its actors' by building respect for their experiences into the narrative. See Stuart-Fisher, 'Introduction: Caring performance, performing care', in Thompson and Stuart-Fisher (eds), *Performing Care: New Perspectives on Socially Engaged Performance* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2020), pp. 2–3. Similarly, Thompson's 'aesthetics of care seeks to focus upon how the sensory and affective are realised in human relations fostered in art projects': Thompson, 'Towards an aesthetics of care', in Thompson and Stuart-Fisher (eds), *Performing Care*, p. 43. This enables us to understand how 'the social itself has an aesthetic': Thompson, *Care Aesthetics: For Artful Care and Careful Art* (London: Taylor and Francis, 2022), p. 1. While we can perhaps see this kind of aesthetic of care at work in the creation of the scene in which Michi and Yoko share a final phone call, I am specifically concerned in this section with work on aesthetics of care that emphasizes visual aesthetics and particularly natural themes.

care without meaning care'.[69] In *Plan 75*, the all-consuming quest for neat answers to Japan's population problem enact fatal domination of older people under the guise of care. Furthermore, the desire to dominate or neaten our fear of death, which as argued above can be perceived in the enduring attraction felt by viewers and characters alike towards the idea of a managed death, also suggests our refusal to truly regard death in a serious way. Caring for death – that is, establishing a relation to death that allows us to understand what the dying need from the living – does not entail tidying the realities of death away in a sanitized process such as Plan 75.

Hayakawa cites the introduction of the phrase 'super-aged' to apply to people over 75 in Japan as the motivation for the particular design of Plan 75. Enraged by the idea that people can be categorized so carelessly despite their abilities and achievements, she sought to call attention to this meaningless distinction by including the number 75 in the title of the plan. Commitment to such arbitrary boundaries and the insistence on abiding by pre-judged cut-off points that do not reflect actual human conditions are perceptible in characters' desires to control the circumstances of the end of their lives, and in viewers' struggle to imagine Michi's life after she falls out of the system of social care. If neatly planted flowerbeds communicate care for landscape to observers despite the aggression that neatness requires, considering *Plan 75* through the lens of an aesthetics of care shows how characters and viewers alike often gravitate towards systems of organization that enforce categorizations and boundaries, mistaking neatness for genuine care.

Michi's immersion in the wild natural landscape at the end of the film has been interpreted by many viewers as an image of an uncared-for-ness. Yet as Nassauer points out, wild areas that appear untamed often provide care for indigenous plants, insects and wildlife that cannot thrive in aggressively 'cared-for' neat landscapes. Such spaces show an intention to better understand what the living things in that landscape need, and to provide that despite knowing that 'care will not necessarily look neat when intention is involved'.[70] Michi standing alone in the wild landscape may not look cared for. She now exists outside the neat programme of care offered by the state according to strict categories. Yet she has made a decision, practised an intention, that can be understood as an expression of care for herself. By escaping into nature, Michi has found a space where she may be able to thrive outside the dominating force of the government's interpretation of 'care'.

As viewers, we are also provoked to rethink our conception of care as the film moves from the narrative trajectory that has propelled Michi towards Plan 75 to its expansive closing scenes that privilege the visual. Yuriko Saito argues that, 'having an aesthetic experience and engaging in a care relationship' have 'remarkable structural similarities' – 'both require attention to the particularly of the other, open-minded responsiveness, and imaginative engagement'.[71] By immersing viewers

69 Nassauer, 'The aesthetics of horticulture', p. 976.

70 Ibid.

71 Saito, *Aesthetics of Care*, p. 5.

in the lush aesthetics of a natural landscape at sunset, Hayakawa moves our care relationship to Michi on from a narrative-based concern for her survival to an attentive and imaginative response to her 'embracing all the feelings that come with the joy of living'.[72] Thus the viewer is brought into a care relationship with Michi motivated by shared feeling rather than by distanced worry or patronising concern. Hayakawa's visual design establishes the conditions for a 'collaborative aesthetic of care' in which the director, actress and viewer imagine a future in which Michi can live with joy rather than simply surviving.[73]

If we think of *Plan 75* as an example of a narrative practice that challenges established understandings of who requires or deserves care, and what that care should look like, Hayakawa's mediation on the many forms that care may take can in itself be understood as a practice of care.[74] In weaving writing on feminist ethics of care through analysis of key scenes, I have sought to demonstrate how Hayakawa explores care as a matrix-like structure. The complex cast of characters connected by the productive invention of a speculative fiction device builds a comprehensive picture that demonstrates that care is a network which we are all already part of, from the human to the non-human, and whether we acknowledge it as such or not.

Following the shift in focus in the final scenes from narrative-based critiques of institutional modes of caring to an affectively provoking visual aesthetic that suggests a more open-ended mediation on how to live, I have turned to discussions of aesthetics of care to explore how Hayakawa's film invites us to feel, as well as to think, in more creative ways about ageing and care. *Plan 75* pushes us to think beyond arbitrary boundaries and neat categories when it comes to understanding how care can look, and who requires or deserves care, by refusing to show ageing bodies in decline and instead situating the elderly body as part of nature in a sumptuous landscape. By insisting on the fundamental personhood of her aged protagonist, Hayakawa reminds us that care is not only present in large-scale social schemes designed to address specific illnesses or disabilities, but that care in the form of basic necessities for living is the right of all persons, regardless of age, ability or status.

I am grateful to Professor Hideaki Fujiki for his kind invitation to participate in a symposium on 'The Ethics of Care and the Humanities' at Nagoya University in January 2023, as well as his own work on the topic, both of which greatly inspired this essay. I would like to thank director Chie Hayakawa for her time and careful consideration of my many questions in our conversations about her film.

Screen, 2024, 65, 352–372
https://doi.org/10.1093/screen/hjae024
Original article

72 Hayakawa, qtd in Mankowski, 'Interview with Chie Hayakawa'.

73 See Amy Holdsworth, 'Care as practice and provocation: a response to Andrew Kötting', in Amy Holdsworth, Karen Lury and Hannah Tweed (eds), *Discourses of Care: Media Practices and Cultures* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2020), pp. 245–52.

74 Sako and Falcus, 'Introduction', p. 5.