
Quietly Critical: Ten Years Japan

By Jennifer Coates

Ten Years Japan (*Jū nen*, 2018) expands on the *Ten Years* anthology film franchise, which began in Hong Kong and has since spread to Taiwan and Thailand. Executive producer Koreeda Hirokazu introduced the project as “carrying on the spirit of the original Hong Kong film by trying to envision Japan ten years from now” (*Variety*2017). Yet viewers familiar with Japan, and indeed Japanese film scholars, may have been forgiven for struggling a little to imagine what “carrying on the spirit” of the original might mean in the Japanese context. A significant number of Japanese scholars, filmmakers, and politicians have approached Japan as something of a separate entity within the region of East Asia, expressed in the common phrase “East Asia and Japan” (*higashi ajia to nihon*). Furthermore, the “spirit” of the Hong Kong original was one of defiant protest, resulting in aggressive censorship and a negative media campaign by the Chinese government (Fang 2017). The five short films in the Japanese anthology take a softer tone, focusing on imagery and themes familiar from earlier politically-oriented film narratives, such as the safeguarding of children and the necessity of hope (see Coates 2018). At the same time however, all take a critical stance towards the Japanese government’s role in planning for the nation’s future.

Plan75, directed by Hayakawa Chie, opens the anthology with a sensitive exploration of one of Japan’s best-known issues, the super-aging population. While most nations are aging, Japan’s population is aging faster than others, with almost one third aged over sixty-five (Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communication 2019), and an increasing burden on working-age citizens to support pensioners. Hayakawa’s film imagines a future where impoverished and disabled citizens aged over seventy-five are recruited to a state-sponsored voluntary euthanasia program paying cooperative volunteers to die. Protagonist Itami, played by Kawaguchi Satoru, wrestles with the discomfort of his job persuading seniors to sign up to the program, while his pregnant wife considers whether to sign up her mother, suffering from Alzheimer’s disease. The short film neatly juxtaposes the sterile bureaucratic population-level initiative with the messy lived experience of one family caught between the challenges of aging and death, and bringing new life into the world. Hayakawa’s beautiful framing and measured pace colours the cerebral nature of the problem presented to us with human feeling: as an old man lies dying alone in the state euthanasia centre, a pair of hands reach out from an unseen body and clasp his own, suggesting that the warmth of human connection remains important, even in the face of impossible ethical

choices.

As the title suggests, the mood lifts a little in the early scenes of the next short film, Kinoshita Yusuke's *Mischievous Alliance* (*Itazura dōmei*). The opening sequence shows young schoolchildren scurrying to class in an elementary school. Slowly however, we identify the colour grading and image quality of the footage as that of a security camera. Each child's face is located, identified and tagged by an artificial intelligence programme. A small sign in the bottom left corner of the screen identifies the camera as "PROMISE CAM" and the programme as PROMISE System v14.2.0.1. A zooming shot reveals that every child in every classroom wears an eye-level device connected internally, which transmits PROMISE's instructions and prompts to the child. Discipline is applied via a frequency emitted directly into the child's head.

All five short films build their worlds around problems and technologies already identifiable today. The disciplinary system of *Mischievous Alliance* recalls the debates around the use of devices that emit high-pitched noises disproportionately painful to younger people's hearing, such as the "Mosquito" device, to drive youths away from areas like parks and building sites (*Japan Today*2019). Visually, the opening scenes also recall Fukasaku Kinji's *Battle Royale* (*Battoru rowaiaru*, 2000) in which non-compliant teenagers are punished by a remote-controlled explosive device around their necks. The horror of the children's situation is therefore readily understood, yet Kinoshita's short film focuses instead on a moment of innocent rebellion set in natural surroundings. The mischievous alliance of the title is formed by a group of children determined to set free a horse due to be killed by school authorities. As the old horse bolts from his opened stall and runs through the nearby forest, the children give chase, finding themselves surrounded by peaceful nature as the ringing in their heads subsides. Of course, PROMISE System v14.2.0.1 is soon updated to PROMISE System v14.2.0.2 and the children are returned to a state of enforced compliance. Like Hayakawa however, Kinoshita appears to identify a fragile hope in empathy expressed through human communication, as well as the interspecies bond which inspired the mischievous alliance to free the school horse.

Human connection is also a key theme of *DATA*, Tsuno Megumi's quiet film placed third in the anthology. Here the boundaries of the human are pushed and expanded, as Maika (Sugisaki Hana) tries to get to know her dead mother by accessing the data cloud she has left behind. The careful intimacy of the father-daughter relationship is sensitively depicted by Tsuno's slightly shaky camera, getting close up to her subjects for an almost ethnographic impression. By contrast, a torrent of blunt information characterises Maika's attempt at intimacy with her digitised

mother. Once again, the material objects which make up the film's world are based on our contemporary identification systems. The mother's "Digital Data Inheritance Card" is found amongst her belongings in an envelope marked like that used to deliver pension and tax information in today's Japan. The design of the card recalls the controversial "My Number" combination identity card rolled out from 2015, and scheduled to become mandatory from 2021 (Osaki 2015). Critics of the scheme have focused on issues of privacy invasion and vulnerability to information leaks, concerns reflected in Maika's repeated efforts to hack into her mother's digitised file. When her search appears to suggest that her mother may have had an affair, Maika begins to reckon with questions that have become familiar since the "Right to Be Forgotten" was debated in Japan (Otake 2014). While Maika asserts that, "As her daughter, it's my right to know about her", her mother's friend suggests, "Maybe nobody has that right".

Human rights clash with governmental bureaucracy again in *The Air We Can't See*, in which director Fujimura Akiyo creates an entire world underground, where Japanese citizens live in the aftermath of an explosion that has contaminated the entire nation with radiation. The opening radio broadcast evokes the triple disaster of March 2011, when a nuclear reactor meltdown caused mass evacuation in the Tohoku region of Northern Japan. Prime Minister Abe Shinzō's response, unsatisfactory in the eyes of many citizens, evacuees, and anti-nuclear protestors, is here evoked in the draconian mandate forcing all citizens to live in sparse underground chambers. The young protagonist imagines a world of fantastical nature, provided by magical CGI, but her everyday environment is bleak. When a friend infatuated with the world above ground disappears, the protagonist imagines going above ground to search for her.

Like Tsuno, Fujiwara uses a handheld camera to create a sense of intimacy with her characters. One of three of the five films to rely mainly on child actors, Fujiwara's contribution demonstrates an ability to achieve naturalistic and convincing performances from children, a marker of executive producer Koreeda's own films and strongly in evidence throughout the anthology as a whole. While the other films in the anthology develop complex narratives that could be extended to feature length however, Fujiwara's film privileges the visual, gesturing towards the inner life of her protagonist through CGI animated sequences that recall a music video or art installation. Its placement as the fourth of five short films creates a pleasing sense of respite from the more challenging concepts and plots of the other contributions, yet in many ways this self-contained piece gives a closed-off impression that the other films resist.

While the first four short films maintain a critical dialogue with policies set by an unseen governmental force, the final film takes aim squarely at the government and ideologies of Prime Minister Abe from the very beginning. Ishikawa Kei's *Our Beautiful Country* (*Utsukushii kuni*) borrows its title directly from the book of the same name authored by Abe, which hinges the Prime Minister's vision for the country's future on the differentiation between politicians who will "fight" for what they believe, and politicians who will not (Abe 2006). The question of whether to fight has been taken out of the hands of the characters of Ishikawa's film, as the military draft has been re-introduced after years of pacifism, or non-military aggression, protected by Article 9 of the 1947 Constitution of Japan.

The use of propaganda, another key thematic of the anthology as a whole, is addressed explicitly by Ishikawa's contribution. While all five films deal with the gap between idealized technologically-enabled bureaucratic initiatives, and the material violence of their implementation, Ishikawa's film takes propaganda as its direct subject matter. Watanabe (Taiga) is a young advertising executive sent to tell an elderly designer that her work on a poster for the draft has been rejected. As the two bond over virtual reality war games, Watanabe learns about the designer's father's experiences in Japan's last war, and the distance between virtual reality and the lived experience of war becomes clearer to him. Though the protagonists overcome the distance between old and young, communicating and understanding one another freely by the end of the film, Ishikawa's contribution closes the anthology on a less hopeful note. The designer speaks in the past tense of a Japan that "might have been beautiful". "If young people have to die for a beautiful country, that country isn't beautiful at all", she reasons, but "Even so, it's too late now". While she insists on "passing the baton" to Watanabe at the end of the film, a close-up on her face shows it devoid of hope as he walks off into the night. Sure enough, in the next scene Watanabe supervises the pasting up of the replacement pro-draft poster. As he asks after the youngest member of the work team, now missing, we realise that the draft has already claimed this character. In a slowly zooming close-up on Watanabe's face, overlaid by the sound of an aeroplane, we see the reality of the draft and the danger to his own generation dawn on him, too late.

None of the five young filmmakers' visions for Japan ten years from now are explicitly hopeful. The lightest tone of the anthology is perhaps found in Fujimura's *The Air We Can't See*, where youthful innocence protects the protagonist from a full realisation of the horror of nuclear disaster. Tsuno's *DATA* similarly suggests that the best outcome of an imagined future includes a degree of disengagement. While Maika suffers from the overload of information contained in her mother's digital afterlife, the

final scene in which Maika and her boyfriend spend time screen-free in a park suggests the need for time spent with others and in nature, which we also find in Kinoshita's *Mischievous Alliance*.

Considering the *Ten Years* project itself however, it is debatable whether it could have been achieved, particularly at such speed and with limited resources, without our current degree of technologised interconnection. For example, the influence of streamed cinema content on the five Japanese contributions has been noted. Critics have observed their similarity to Charlie Brooker's *Black Mirror* (Schilling 2018), available to stream around the world on Netflix, which also screened *Ten Years Hong Kong*. The popularity of the original anthology film has been tracked through its downloads from iTunes, as the film briefly became the most-downloaded item in Hong Kong (Fang 2017), and the franchising of the project may have benefited from these early results. Furthermore, each short film clearly advocates the building of connections across boundaries as a means to survive the unknowable future: between young and old, human and non-human, and between the artificial environment and the natural. Given the key role that technology plays in building connections, the answer to our future problems cannot be so simple as: log off. Perhaps it is this dilemma which gives the five short films of *Ten Years Japan* their complexity.

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