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FRAMING THE STEREOTYPE: CINEMATIC IMAGES OF OLDER PEOPLE IN BULGARIA AND JAPAN

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This paper compares how contemporary Bulgarian and Japanese films depict older adults, analysing “Donkey”, “Last Call”, “Plan 75”, and “A Long Walk”. Employing Stereotype Content and Embodiment theories alongside Cultivation Theory, it finds that Bulgarian cinema largely frames older people as isolated victims of economic and social decline, whereas Japanese cinema offers protagonists greater agency, emotional complexity, and resilience. Furthermore, Bulgarian cinema appears more static and primarily focused on hardship, whereas Japanese cinema is more problem-solving-oriented. These contrasting approaches illustrate cinema’s capacity to reinforce or challenge negative ageing stereotypes. The paper calls for more varied on-screen portrayals and suggests audience-reception research to explore impacts on societal attitudes toward ageing.

Keywords: ageing, older people in cinema, Japanese cinema, Bulgarian cinema, stereotype embodiment theory

СТЕРЕОТИПЪТ В КАДЪР: КИНЕМАТОГРАФСКИ ОБРАЗИ НА ВЪЗРАСТНИТЕ ХОРА В БЪЛГАРИЯ И ЯПОНИЯ

СТЕФАНИЯ ГАБРОВСКА-ШИРОВА

Статията сравнява как съвременното българско и японско кино изобразяват възрастните хора, като анализира филмите „Магаре“, „Като за последно“, „План 75“ и „Дълга разходка“. Използвайки теориите за въплъщението и съдържанието на стереотипите в комбинация с културационната теория, анализът установява, че в българското кино възрастните често се представят като изолирани жертви на икономически и социален упадък, докато в японското кино главните герои притежават по-голям потенциал, емоционална сложност и устойчивост. Освен това българското кино е по-статично и се фокусира основно върху трудностите, докато японското предлага по-ориентирани към решаването на проблема сюжети. Тези контрастиращи подходи илюстрират способността на киното да затвърждава или оспорва негативните стереотипи за остаряването. В статията се призова-

ва за по-разнообразни екранни представяния и се предлага проучване на въздействието им върху обществените нагласи към остаряването.

Ключови думи: остаряване, възрастни хора в киното, японско кино, българско кино, теория за въплъщението на стереотипите

1. INTRODUCTION

Contemporary societies worldwide are experiencing dramatic shifts in age structure, with both Japan and Bulgaria among those with rapidly growing proportions of older adults (Bulgarian National Statistical Institute, 2023; Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications, 2024). Such demographic changes have implications far beyond pensions and healthcare, extending into cultural arenas where film and other media both reflect and help shape collective understandings of ageing. Research on Stereotype Embodiment Theory has shown that age-related beliefs absorbed over a lifetime can later influence older individuals' health and well-being (Levy, 2009; Tamura et al., 2023).

In Japan, traditional Confucian ideals of filial devotion coexist with growing concerns about the social and economic "burden" of a rapidly ageing population. Content analyses of Japanese television commercials reveal that adults over 65 appear far less often than their share of the population would suggest, and when they do appear, they are frequently shown in passive or domestic roles rather than as active protagonists (Prieler et al., 2009). Bulgaria's post-socialist transition has similarly reshaped family structures and economic security for seniors, and recent Bulgarian films have begun to explore the financial vulnerability and moral complexity of older protagonists in greater depth (Grekova, 2023; Penchev, 2020).

2. DEMOGRAPHIC AND CULTURAL FACTORS

Bulgaria and Japan both face profound demographic shifts characterised by population decline and rapid ageing, yet the scale and pace of these changes differ markedly. Bulgaria's population fell to approximately 6.4 million at the end of 2023, a trajectory driven by persistently low birth rates and significant emigration (National Statistical Institute of the Republic of Bulgaria, 2024). In contrast, Japan's population (around 124 million in 2024) has been shrinking for over a decade, with nearly 900,000 more deaths than births in that year alone (Financial Times, 2025). While both countries struggle with population loss, Japan's absolute numbers and its status as the world's oldest society place it further along the demographic transition.

In terms of age structure, Bulgarians aged 65+ comprised roughly 23.8% of the population at the close of 2023 (National Statistical Institute of the Republic of Bulgaria, 2024). By comparison, the Japanese aged 65+ reached nearly 29.6% in 2023, the highest proportion globally (World Bank, 2025). Bulgaria's ratio of

seniors to working-age adults stood at about 38% in 2023, while Japan's rose to approximately 70%, reflecting a much narrower base of support for retirees (World Bank, 2025).

Both Bulgaria and Japan uphold family-based eldercare, but their traditions diverge. In Bulgaria, Eastern Orthodox values frame senior support as a private obligation, with families shouldering nearly all dementia caregiving amid deep mistrust of formal services—an arrangement that persists despite EU efforts to expand public eldercare and leaves many seniors exposed when relatives migrate or caregivers burn out (Goncharova & Karamelska, 2023). Japan blends Confucian and Buddhist filial ideals with a comprehensive public long-term care insurance system established in 2000. Although multigenerational co-residence remains valued and institutionalisation stigmatised, rising female workforce participation and geographic mobility have driven greater reliance on formal care, even as family caregiving retains strong moral significance (History & Policy, 2021; Hagihara et al., 2021).

Despite these differences, both societies idealise family-centred eldercare even as economic pressures undermine it. In each context, film and media reflect and reinforce this ambivalence, portraying older adults alternately as revered custodians of wisdom or as burdens when removed from the home, thereby perpetuating mixed stereotypes about ageing (Levy, 2009; Tamura, Suzuki, & Yamamoto, 2023). Understanding these demographic pressures and cultural logics is crucial for evaluating how national cinemas depict—and can influence—societal attitudes toward older adults.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Erikson argued that a person continues to grow and change throughout their entire life. The final stage (older adulthood) in his theory is "Ego Integrity vs. Despair". In this stage (65+ years), individuals reflect on their lives. Those who feel satisfied develop a sense of integrity, whereas those who feel regret may fall into despair (Erikson, 1982; Thrower, 2021). In Erikson's framework, despair is not merely sadness—it often involves "looking back on life with feelings of regret, shame, or disappointment" (Thrower, 2021). Characteristics of despair include bitterness, a sense of failure or wasted life, and even depression and hopelessness. Erikson also emphasised the potential for "integrity", accepting one's life as a unique story with value, which can buffer against shame and withdrawal. A sense of integrity fosters acceptance and resilience, whereas despairing individuals may ruminate over mistakes and unmet goals (Thrower, 2021). Both of these motifs are frequently found in films that explore this stage of life.

4. INTERNALISATION OF AGE STEREOTYPES

Stereotypes related to ageing typically centre on assumptions of frailty, cognitive decline, dependency, and reduced social and economic value (Nelson, 2016). Older people often find themselves subject to various forms of stereotypical thinking that shape not only societal attitudes toward them but also their own self-perception. According to the Stereotype Content Model (SCM), proposed by Fiske and colleagues (2002), stereotypes are structured along two primary dimensions: warmth and competence. Older individuals are often perceived as warm yet incompetent, generating a patronising form of prejudice characterised by pity or condescending kindness (Cuddy et al., 2005). Such stereotypes implicitly communicate diminished agency and capability, profoundly influencing societal and interpersonal interactions with older people.

The internalisation of stereotypes refers to the process by which individuals begin to accept and incorporate societal stereotypes into their self-concept. Levy's Stereotype Embodiment Theory (SET) states that individuals assimilate age-related stereotypes from their cultural environment throughout their lifespan. Once internalised, these stereotypes become self-relevant and can operate unconsciously, influencing behaviour and health through psychological, behavioural, and physiological pathways. For instance, negative age stereotypes can lead to diminished self-efficacy, increased cardiovascular stress, and reduced engagement in health-promoting behaviours, thereby exacerbating health decline in older adults. Research consistently demonstrates the influence of internalised age stereotypes on older adults' cognitive performance, emotional resilience, and physical health. Levy et al. (2002) found that older individuals with more positive self-perceptions of ageing lived 7.5 years longer than those with negative perceptions, even after controlling for age, gender, socioeconomic status, loneliness, and functional health. Furthermore, negative self-perceptions of ageing and negative stereotypes regarding cognitive decline can lead to reduced confidence and increased anxiety about cognitive performance, inadvertently exacerbating cognitive difficulties (Chasteen et al., 2015).

The internalisation of negative stereotypes significantly impacts mental health among older adults. Internalised ageism—characterised by acceptance of negative societal beliefs about ageing—has been closely associated with increased depression, anxiety, and diminished self-esteem in older populations (Ayalon & Tesch-Römer, 2018). These stereotypes heighten mental health risks, discouraging older adults from engaging in social activities, pursuing new experiences, or even seeking necessary healthcare services, thereby reinforcing isolation and depression. A study by Han and Richardson (2015) highlights that older individuals who internalise negative stereotypes about ageing experience heightened loneliness and reduced life satisfaction. This psychological phenomenon is particularly pronounced in contexts where societal narratives emphasise the "burdens" of an ageing population, as

observed both in Bulgaria and Japan, where media portrayals often depict ageing as synonymous with economic strain and health decline.

5. REPRESENTATION OF OLDER PEOPLE IN CINEMA AND MEDIA

Cinema, literature, and media serve as influential cultural mechanisms for transmitting and reinforcing societal stereotypes about ageing. Representations in these media profoundly affect societal perceptions and, consequently, the internalisation processes experienced by older individuals.

Cinema has historically portrayed older characters in limited and stereotypical roles. They often appear either as overly dependent figures or as sources of wisdom, both of which reinforce marginalisation and otherness. Chivers (2011) argues that older characters in cinema predominantly embody negative traits—such as stubbornness, cognitive decline, or eccentricity—thus limiting the range of identities older adults feel comfortable embracing. Similarly, cinematic narratives rarely depict older adults engaging in dynamic or socially productive roles, perpetuating the stereotype of this life stage as passive or irrelevant. Persistent images of solitary, dependent grandparents cultivate the assumption that isolation and helplessness are universal experiences of old age. Conversely, films that depict seniors exercising autonomy or embarking on new challenges can broaden public understanding and counteract ingrained prejudices (Arai, Jimenez, & Lang, 2022).

Building on Stuart Hall's work, films are understood not as passive mirrors of social attitudes but as active constructors of meaning, shaping norms through the characters they choose to highlight and the narratives they privilege (Hall, 1997). Throughout film history, two principal elder archetypes have prevailed: the "sage mentor", whose wisdom propels younger heroes, and the "burden", whose frailty prompts pity (Ng & Indran, 2022). These complementary stereotypes—warm in intent yet dismissive of capacity—epitomise what Levy terms "ambivalent ageism", in which older people are simultaneously respected and deemed ineffectual (Levy, 2009).

Genre conventions further influence how seniors are represented. Social-realist dramas, a common mode in Bulgarian cinema, tend to accentuate structural failures and personal suffering, whereas speculative or comedic-dramatic forms, more prevalent in Japanese cinema, more readily integrate redemptive or solution-oriented plotlines (Bordwell & Thompson, 2013). As a result, Bulgarian screen culture largely emphasises the vulnerability of older people, while Japanese narratives frequently depict senior characters adapting creatively to life's later challenges.

Given cinema's power to shape both societal views and personal self-concepts, interventions to diversify representation of the older population are crucial. Research in the Western Pacific region indicated that balanced media messaging—

including active, empowered senior figures—can significantly reduce age-related bias and bolster older adults' sense of self-efficacy (Arai, Jimenez, & Lang, 2022). Educational programmes incorporating film clips that defy stereotypes, coupled with reflective discussion, have delivered measurable decreases in implicit age bias among youth populations (Tamura, Suzuki, & Yamamoto, 2023).

6. AIMS AND THEORIES

By comparing contemporary Bulgarian and Japanese cinematic portrayals of older adults, this paper examines how each national cinema negotiates tensions between respect, marginalisation, and agency in its representations of ageing on screen. The films analysed here are: (1) "Donkey" (Bulgaria, 2021); (2) "Last Call" (Bulgaria, 2020); (3) "Plan 75" (Japan, 2022); and (4) "A Long Walk" (Japan, 2006).

Both Bulgarian and Japanese cinemas rarely position older adults as protagonists or narrators, though this scarcity is far more pronounced in Bulgaria. The comparatively richer presence of senior-led narratives in Japanese cinema demonstrates the medium's potential to cultivate more hopeful, opportunity-oriented visions of later life rather than limiting depictions to decline. In contrast, Bulgarian narratives overwhelmingly dwell on the hardships of ageing, portraying seniors as sorrowful, isolated, and economically marginalised, with "Last Call" standing out as a notable exception. Japanese filmmakers, however, grant their older characters greater emotional breadth: alongside loneliness and grief, they portray eccentricity, humour, and personal growth. Consequently, Bulgarian cinema often appears static—emphasising seniors' helplessness—whereas Japanese cinema tends toward solution-driven arcs in which characters confront the challenges of ageing with adaptability and resilience. This article explores this phenomenon and the possible influence it may have on internalised ageism and negative stereotypes.

7. ANALYSIS

7.1. Bulgarian movies

"Donkey"

"Donkey" tells the story of Stamat, an older man living in a small village whose only companion is his donkey, Marta. The film opens with his words, "Marta, Marta, we managed to survive this winter too," followed by an image of his wife's obituary. The obituary has an everlasting presence in all the Bulgarian films discussed. On the surface, it serves to honour the person who has passed, functioning as a ritual of collective remembrance. However, the same image also works as an ominous harbinger—it foreshadows the future awaiting the community's remain-

ing seniors by its constant and repeated presence on bulletin boards, electric poles, and streetlights. From the very beginning of the film, the viewer is confronted with the themes of survival or death.

Stamat is depicted as a solitary figure—talking to his donkey, setting an extra plate at his empty table, and filling his days with busywork to distract himself from his dire finances. It becomes clear that he depends entirely on his pension, yet none arrives for a week. To stay warm, he is driven to cut down a prized tree in his yard for firewood. He even shelters the donkey inside his home during the cold. When his pension finally comes in on Monday, he also receives a fine for the illegal tree-cutting and must sell Marta to a neighbour to cover the penalty. Two weeks later, having scraped together his next pension, he rushes to reclaim Marta only to learn she has been sold again. Crushed, he returns home, and in the final shot Marta arrives at his doorstep only to reveal Stamat's obituary beside his wife's: he died forty days earlier.

The film lays bare the absurd paradoxes many older Bulgarians face: a delayed pension becomes a matter of life and death, survival efforts are criminalised, and the only source of emotional comfort is traded away. From its opening moments, the narrative frames ageing as a struggle for survival and reinforces bleak stereotypes of late life. This brutal portrayal of growing old in the Bulgarian countryside may be necessary to show the struggles of many; however, the lack of resolution or hope turns it into an obituary itself rather than a warning or a sign of resistance against this way of living.

"Last Call"

The second Bulgarian movie discussed is "Last Call". It takes a different approach compared to the first movie—it is a dark comedy whose main character, Nikola, is a 70-year-old retired writer. The film opens on a bridge, where Nikola readies himself to jump. Across from him, a young woman is preparing to do the same. He saves her (and himself) and takes her to his home. The young woman, Aleksandra (23), tells him her story—she is pregnant by her ex-boyfriend, who left her to marry her best friend. Her mother left when she was 12, and her father was "crazy", always beating up the boys she fancied. Nikola has not spoken with his two daughters in 15 years and shows Aleks a folder with the obituaries of all his friends and his two wives, sharing his loneliness and lack of meaning in his life. Even though the movie takes a humorous approach and does not portray the older main character in a stereotypical light, it still depicts ageing as a time of loneliness and loss of loved ones and friends.

Nikola proposes to marry Aleks so that he can leave her his house and recognise the child as his. Here we observe a contrasting portrayal of the older person compared to the previous movie—Nikola is not helpless; he is lonely and sad but also resourceful, willing to help, and seen as the older, more experienced person who can share his wisdom and is strong enough to help others. His sense of humour highlights the vitality and desire to live. But it also shows how difficult it can be to

find meaning in life at this stage of life when one is separated from one's family. This points to a common problem faced by many older people in Bulgaria—living alone, with family abroad or in larger cities.

"Last Call" also presents a variety of older personae—some shown in a stereotypical light and others not. In a care home, the viewer meets four older men who gamble on what the young nurse's underwear will be each day, and three older women who watch Turkish telenovelas. The men play a major role in the movie. One is an old general from the army, Nikola's last (living) friend. Nikola asks him and "the boys" to find Aleksandra's ex and "bring him to his senses". The viewer follows their satirical journey, seeing how closely a person clings to who they used to be when younger. The general, who worked in the secret services, throws away his phone after speaking with Nikola, as if it were a burner from an action film. The older men accidently kidnap the wrong young man, taking the viewer through a series of comic situations that highlight their personalities. In one scene, the professor (one of the four friends) shares how after his only son married, his daughter-in-law sent him to the care home, claiming their apartment was too small. He is bitter and disappointed, and when they call him, he tells them he is "dead, gone" because they have taken everything from him. The others also complain that their children only call when they need something. Amidst the humorous moments, the film still reveals the darker side of ageing and what the future may hold.

Nikola's own daughters are no better—they visit him only when they hear he is marrying a young woman who will inherit everything. He tells Aleks that if they had not come, he would have known they truly hated him but at least turned out to be decent people. Now he knows they only care about money. He tries to show his children how materialistic they are but is unsuccessful. They accuse him of being a horrible father when they were young and leave. Nikola's attitude towards Aleks appears to be his attempt at redemption for the father he once was.

The movie manages to show older people as energetic and ready to live, yet without a sense of purpose and with a predominant feeling of loneliness. Its non-stereotypical approach presents the major challenges of ageing but also offers a different perspective on how this period of one's life can be lived.

7.2. Japanese movies

"Plan 75"

"Plan 75" brings the viewer to a near-future Japan in which a Plan 75 is passed by the government. The plan is a way for Japan to fight its demographic issues and the economic burden on the younger generation. It is a legalised euthanasia program for people aged 75+. Upon enrolling, participants receive a one-time $1000 payment and have a 15-minute check-up calls throughout the week with a worker at the company. The calls are presented as a benefit that gives older people the op-

portunity to talk to somebody but, in reality, are just a way for the government to ensure participants do not quit the plan. The program seems to work so well that the government considers starting Plan 65.

The main character is a woman named Michi Kakutani who has no family but still works and has some friends. She signs up for the plan with her friends even though she does not look or act like she wants to die anytime soon. One of her friends, who is older, collapses at work, and because of that all older people are let go. While her other friends are unhappy about losing their jobs because of this accident, Michi bears no hard feelings toward her friend but is worried instead. The viewer is presented with this almost legalised ageism the older people face. They are not wanted at work; they are not given a lease unless they pay the rent for two years in advance, which is impossible for many. After losing her job, Michi faces all of that and is forced to take the $1000 from the program even though she is not ready to die just yet. There is no clear timeline, but the impression is that soon after one takes the money, they must undergo the euthanasia.

Michi gets attached to the young woman from the company who calls her for the check-ups and asks to meet her. Even though it is forbidden, the young woman meets her, and Michi gives her some of her $1000 as a "thank you" for listening to her. They go bowling, and the older woman is seen enjoying herself for the first time in the movie. On the night before the euthanasia, they talk again, and the young woman tells Michi that she can still withdraw from the program. She does so in a very official manner because the company probably records the calls and she could lose her job. After her shift, she tries to call Michi through her personal phone to ask her to reconsider undergoing the procedure, but the older woman has already disconnected her phone. At the facility for the procedure, the machine they use on Michi does not work and she does not die. She breathes the gas they give her, yet nothing happens for a long time, even when another man next to her dies. She decides not to go through with it and leaves. At the end of the movie, she can be seen looking at the sunset from the road and singing a favourite song of hers. Michi does not want to die and never gives up fully—she is forced by society to sign up and go through with Plan 75. Japan in the film is not a place for older people; there is no place for them in society, and they get stigmatised and ostracised because of their age. Plan 75 is presented as the choice to die with dignity exactly in the way one wants but, in reality, there is no choice; there is pressure and manipulation. The interesting perspective here is that most of the older people are not presented as naïve or easily cheated, but as living in a society that makes plan 75 look like the better option compared to living.

The movie's atmosphere and colour further deepen these perceptions. The spectator can see that even though Michiko always wears colourful clothes, the film's colours are saturated but muted. Her colourful clothes can be interpreted as her attitude toward life and her desire to still live it. This is a striking contrast compared to the representation of older people in movies, mostly in grey, black, and brown

colour scheme. The whole movie conveys a feeling of fogginess and corporate tone through a cold grey-blue colour palette, giving the viewer a sense of what it feels like to live in a society like this.

Though the government advertises Plan 75 as a way to reduce the economic burden on the younger generations, it employs many of them and puts them in questionable and psychologically burdening situations. Many of the employees doing the 15-minute checks are urged to persuade older people who want to quit Plan 75 to stay and undergo the procedure. Another important character who showcases this is Hiromu—a devoted young man working in the recruitment department of the organisation. In one of the sign-up meetings, he meets his uncle, whom he has not seen in years. His uncle has the appointment on his 75th birthday, the first day he could legally sign up for the program. Hiromu starts spending time with his uncle, and through their journey, he realises that Plan 75 might not be as good or ethical as he previously thought. By the end of the movie, the young man is faced with the reality of Plan 75—it is a cold and ageist, promoting the idea that after a certain age people "expire" and there is no longer a place for them in society, it is easier to get rid of them than try to solve the situation. Hiromu's uncle appears to be at peace with his decision to die, in contrast to Michi who wants to live and does not want to accept this fate. Through their polar decisions, the spectator sees the crushing weight of living stigmatised but is also given hope that there is a place for resistance and one day perhaps even change. The movie is a warning, representing a call for change in real-life Japan. Even with its heartbreaking story, it is not meant to be about sadness and dying but about living, growing, and doing better not only for the older people but for all people who will one day grow old.

"A Long Walk"

The second Japanese movie is "A Long Walk". It tells the story of an older man called Yasuda. He is a retired girls' school director. Because of his alienation from his daughter, he goes to live alone and leaves her his house. His new apartment is in a building where he meets Sachico—a 5-year-old girl who looks homeless but turns out to live in the same building. Sachico is abused mentally and physically by her mother and her boyfriend; she is neglected and forced to take care of herself. After witnessing that for some time, Yasuda decides to help the little girl, another redemption arc as in "Last Call". He starts running, exercising, lifting stones by the river to get stronger and save Sachico. This gives the viewer the opportunity to see the older man fighting the limitations of his age to help somebody else. Yasuda successfully breaks the stereotype that one is unable to grow or change at old age. What is more, he is portrayed as somebody who can become a better person and change drastically for the better. The movie also highlights this through the connection between the characters and their clothes—when Yasuda decides he is taking on a new path, he starts to train, cuts his hair into a neat hairstyle, and changes his previously loose clothes to more fitting ones. Before this transformation, he looked

like he was neglecting himself. This is how Yasuda appeared to feel as well—after his feelings change, his style and manner do too. The same goes for Sachico—she begins with a dress that looks like a rag but by the end of the movie she looks taken care of thanks to Yasuda's help. Furthermore, there is minimal conversation throughout the movie, especially between Yasuda and Sachico—they manage to understand each other without words. Their faces and most scenes speak for them and their feelings.

Yasuda successfully helps Sachico to feel loved and secure by taking her on a journey to find "pink clouds, fluffy as cotton candy and a white bird". Their travel is portrayed almost in a magical way, as a child's tale that heals something in both of them. Yasuda, just as Nikola from "Last Call", is depicted as a man carrying sadness and regrets but also as resourceful, empathetic, and strong both mentally and physically. Both Yasuda and Nikola need a purpose to rekindle their desire to live a different life and quickly embrace the chance life offers them. This opens space for a new narrative—one that pictures older people as carriers of life, ready to take on a journey of self-discovery and help for others.

8. DISCUSSION

The four films discussed here represent only a small part of the available Bulgarian and Japanese contemporary cinema on ageing, yet they reveal a common narrative: growing old is depicted as a source of fear and loss—losing social connections, family, one's place in society, one's dreams, memories, self. The problem with this is that there is rarely a different depiction of this life period. Attempts to reconstruct preconceived notions of ageing frequently collide with universal societal conditioning, which steers individuals toward internalising negative views of growing older and, in turn, of their own evolving identities. Here it is important to take a quick look at Western cinema, which presents ageing in a different and utterly unrelatable way for many. There is often a positive, idealised representation of older people—so much so that it can look unreal, especially when contrasted with the grey and stagnant picture of reality shown in Bulgarian movies. Bulgarian movies about the older part of the population do not inspire and sometimes can even feel sadistic—as if the viewer must suffer the pain of the characters but not with the aim to be changed, but to have any hope for a better ageing crushed.

The analysis of the four movies confirms the thesis posed in the beginning with few exceptions. They can be considered positive examples only after some interpretation from the viewer. The tendency seems to be that Bulgarian movies are more stagnant and present the harsh reality of ageing in the country. The colours used are bland greys, browns, blues to enhance these impressions. There is rarely any optimistic detail to them. In this case, an exception is "Last Call", offering a fleeting glimpse of intergenerational solidarity and personal resourcefulness. On the other hand, the Japanese movies present the problematic reality not as a fait accompli but as some-

thing that can be changed. Even "Plan 75", with its dark idea, is a warning—a call for urgent change in perspective. Yasuda ("A Long Walk") has not given up on life, he just has nothing to live for and realises this might be because of the way he lived before. He is ready to change and repent, which depicts him as a stronger person than many of the other characters in the movie. Stamat ("Donkey") is defined by his loneliness, the empty house and stable after Marta is gone.

A Western example set in a Japanese context is the movie "Perfect days" (2023). It exemplifies how solitude can be depicted not as a state of despair but as a deliberate source of fulfilment. Furthermore, the film foregrounds elder labour as a form of civic care rather than mere menial work (Tanaka, 2023). By tracing Hirayama's daily rounds across architecturally distinct public restrooms, Tanaka reveals how Wenders uses built environments to reflect societal attitudes toward ageing and service. Wim Wenders's Western cinematic sensibility, rooted in existential contemplation and visual austerity, intersects harmoniously with Japanese cultural norms of service and communal responsibility, producing a portrayal that simultaneously honours individual ritual and collective care. Rather than depicting the cleaner's tasks as burdensome or devalued, the film presents each cleaning action as an act of social stewardship, imbuing the often-overlooked labour of older adults with symbolic weight. The movie dismantles the stereotype of older people as inherently lonely or dependent. Instead, it portrays late life as a chapter of intentionality and inner richness, challenging the view that ageing must equate with decline or social isolation.

Grounded in the Stereotype Content and Embodiment models, these findings underscore cinema's dual power to reinforce or to contest cultural scripts about ageing. While Bulgarian cinema's unrelenting focus on elder hardship may heighten awareness of social failings, its near-total absence of hopeful alternatives risks cementing negative self-perceptions among older viewers. Japanese cinema's more varied depictions suggest a pathway for films to serve as catalysts for empathy, resilience, and intergenerational understanding.

Future research should expand this inquiry across broader filmographies and include audience reception studies to assess the real-world impact of these portrayals on ageist attitudes. More narratives that depict ageing as an active, meaningful stage of life—where one is characterised not only by loss but also by growth, connection, and the enduring capacity for change—should be promoted.

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