

Critique

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A Meditative, Contemplative, Spiritual Experience



Perfect Days, Japan, Germany, 2023, by Wim Wenders

Winner of the Ecumenical Jury Prize and Best Actor for Kōji Yakusho at the Cannes Film Festival, and nominated for the Academy Award for Best International Feature Film, legendary German filmmaker Wim Wenders' *'Perfect Day'* (2023), a Japanese film, is a true treat for lovers of pure cinema!

Although the film's storyline may not be theatrical, the story of its creation is genuinely fascinating. It all began with the 'Tokyo Toilet Project', a unique initiative that brought together leading designers and architects worldwide to create 17 innovative public restrooms in Tokyo for the Olympics.

Wim Wenders was initially approached to direct a series of short documentaries about

these functional art pieces. However, upon visiting the locations, the renowned German director was inspired to transform the concept into a fictional feature. With the full support of the production team, this masterpiece was born!

How many people, when asked to make a documentary on something as mundane as toilets, would envision an artistic feature film? It's incredible, isn't it?

This film beautifully illustrates how to celebrate life by appreciating small, everyday moments, aligning closely with Zen philosophy. It is rich with subtexts such as minimalism, simplicity, mindfulness, acceptance, patience, and tolerance,

encouraging viewers to embrace living in the present. Focusing on the ordinary aspects of existence, *'Perfect Days'* invites audiences to find joy and fulfilment in life's simplicity.

The film's narrative centres on Hirayama (Kōji Yakusho), a toilet cleaner, providing a glimpse into the life of a solitary, middle-aged man. Hirayama is a reserved individual who finds solace in nature, enjoys reading, gets carried away by music, and has a passion for photography. He approaches his work with reverence, believing that cleaning toilets is a form of worship. Leading a minimalist lifestyle, he eschews modern distractions like smartphones and television, embracing a simple, routine existence.

Hirayama's character possesses a strong personality, yet at the same time, he appears enigmatic, leaving many questions about him unanswered. His backstory remains a mystery, and it's difficult to discern what's going on in his mind, mainly because the film lacks internal monologues or expressions of his emotions. The writers and directors intentionally chose to keep the protagonist's history hidden, emphasising that the narrative does not dwell on any past dramas he may have faced. Instead, it focuses on the present and underscores the character's universal humanity. This creative decision invites viewers to engage with Hirayama's current experiences rather than reflect on his past.

The supporting characters surrounding Hirayama are portrayed with genuine humanity. As the story progresses, the audience realises that Hirayama likely possesses a complex backstory, while each supporting character also seems to have an intriguing history. This layered approach adds

richness to the narrative, encouraging viewers to consider the unseen stories that shape these individuals' lives and relationships. No character is depicted as entirely black or white; instead, everyone inhabits shades of grey, emphasising the complexity and multifaceted nature of human existence.

For example, Hirayama's niece runs away to visit him without informing her mother and treats him very kindly. Looking through her uncle's books, she mentions her fondness for the short story *'The Terrapin'* from *'The Selected Stories of Patricia Highsmith'*. That's all that is mentioned here, but if we delve deeper and find out what the story is about, we will be shocked because the protagonist is a little boy who kills his mother. This contrast highlights the film's intricate character dynamics.

After watching the film, it's clear that the casting of Kōji Yakusho in the lead role is entirely justified. His portrayal of Hirayama brings nuance and subtlety to the character. The supporting cast is equally well-chosen, each actor doing justice to their respective roles, adding richness and complexity to the narrative.

The directorial treatment is worth watching. In the film, the protagonist is given very little dialogue, emphasising the principle of "show, don't tell."

The film adopts a documentary style, with the camera consistently mounted on the director of photography's shoulder, using handheld techniques throughout the shoot. Remarkably, the entire film production was completed in just sixteen days, relying solely on this approach, without additional equipment like jibs, trolleys, or cranes.

Wim Wenders subtly captures the beauty of routine through his lens, transforming everyday activities into engaging visuals that support the film's themes. While the protagonist, Hirayama, leads a seemingly monotonous life—driving to work, cleaning toilets, and enjoying simple meals—the film presents these scenes from different camera angles each time. This approach emphasises that every action is distinct and unique.

The film has an aspect ratio of 1.33:1, or 4:3, a squarer ratio that is less common in modern cinema. Director Wim Wenders selected this format as a tribute to his mentor, Yasujiro Ozu. Wenders also chose 4:3 for its practicality in filming narrow spaces, such as the toilets where much of the film is set, allowing the floors to remain visible, which would be obscured in a wider aspect ratio.

Mirrors are used as a metaphor, possibly for self-reflection and introspection. Another metaphor Wim Wenders employs to support his message is the Japanese concept of *komorebi*, which describes the beautiful interplay of light and shadows created by leaves moving in the wind. The concept behind *komorebi* is that it can only exist for a moment. The philosophy behind *komorebi* emphasises the transient nature of beauty and life, reminding us to appreciate the fleeting moments that bring joy and meaning to our existence.

The dream sequences in the film are presented entirely in black and white; you notice a collage of daytime scenes, with superimposed visuals of the interplay between light and shadow created by rustling tree leaves — *komorebi*.

The film was initially titled *komorebi*, which I believe would have been the most fitting.

Lighting plays a crucial role in enhancing the film's meditative storytelling. Wenders emphasises using natural light to create a 'slice of life' experience. The early morning scenes in the movie are bathed in shades of purple and green, evoking the distinct lighting style associated with the late Robby Müller, who was the cinematographer for Wenders' earlier films.

The movie's sound design is minimalist, avoiding the use of non-diegetic sound—specifically background music and sound effects. Instead, the film relies solely on diegetic sound, grounding viewers in its naturalistic atmosphere. The only music comes from within the story, such as songs played on a tape recorder or performed by a violinist in a restaurant. These carefully chosen songs perfectly suit the scenes, setting the mood and subtly reflecting the protagonist's emotional state, adding a layer of expression to his otherwise quiet and introspective life.

The cool colour palette is carefully designed to reflect its holistic themes. Soft blues, greens, and greys contribute to a serene and introspective atmosphere, while the occasional brighter colours enhance the concept of a vibrant life.

While not overtly prominent, the film's artistic elements are seamlessly integrated into the overall narrative, indicating that they have been executed effectively. Departments such as art, makeup, hair, costume, and visual effects meet these criteria, enhancing the film's immersive experience without drawing attention away from the story itself.

The film's pace is deliberately slow, reflecting a deeper connection to the 'Slow Movement' concept. This cultural initiative promotes a more mindful and deliberate approach to daily life, encouraging individuals to reduce the frenetic pace of modern living and appreciate the beauty in simplicity.

Wim Wenders envisioned that people's attitudes towards life would shift after the COVID-19 pandemic, but he felt this change did not materialise. Through the protagonist's

behaviour in this film, he illustrates what could have happened had such a transformation occurred. The protagonist's actions reflect the missed opportunities for mindfulness and happiness in a post-pandemic world.

If you grapple with questions like, "What am I living for? How can I enjoy life? What constitutes true happiness? How can one lead a fulfilling life?" you should watch this movie!

Reference -

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