

DORCHESTER FILM SOCIETY
2024/25 SEASON



PERFECT DAYS
(Language: Japanese, English)

Director: Wim Wenders

UK Release: 2024

Running time: 124 minutes

Presented by Dorchester Film Society, 6 November 2024

“Japan has previously brought Wim Wenders inspiration, in 1980s documentaries *Tokyo-Ga* and *Notebook On Cities And Clothes*. Now, the German veteran returns to Tokyo to reinvent his fiction film-making (and, to some degree, retrieve his mojo) in *Perfect Days*, a likeable, elegantly crafted drift that might superficially seem as close as they come to being the proverbial ‘movie about nothing’. In fact, this is a philosophical contemplation that is very much about something – a meaning-of-life film, no less – with an introverted, immensely likeable central performance from Koji Yakusho. Wenders’ Cannes Competition entry is likely to be his most commercial fiction in some time, despite being unapologetically an art-house miniature. Yet it’s hard to escape a certain preciousness that is likely to turn off viewers with harder-edged tastes.

This is a film about a solitary man – Hirayama, a toilet cleaner in late middle age, played by Japanese cinema mainstay Yakusho, who won the Best Actor prize at Cannes. A low-height Ozu-style shot at the start shows Hirayama waking in his sparse flat before he shaves, trims his moustache, sprays his houseplants and dons the blue overalls of Tokyo Toilets, the company he works for. Much of the film shows Hirayama cheerfully and meticulously going about his work, sometimes accompanied by his erratic young assistant Takashi (an abrasively goofy comic performance by Tokio Emoto) and listening to pop cassettes as he drives his van. In between, we see the uneventful but contented flow of his days: relaxing in a bathhouse; eating in various bars, where he eavesdrops with amusement on customers’ banter; reading William Faulkner; and taking photos of the world around him with an old-fashioned film camera.

The taciturn Hirayama barely speaks throughout – Takashi rates him “9 out of 10 on the weirdness scale” – but he is no discontented recluse, simply someone who appears at ease in a world that he is alertly aware of. He does not need to socialise but seems happy enough when he comes into contact with people; like a small boy he rescues, and Mama (Sayuri Ishikawa), a middle-aged woman who runs a noodle bar he frequents. It’s only later in the film, when he is visited by teenage niece Niko (Arisa Nakano), that we get some glimmer of his background, with the suggestion that he has cut himself off from his roots.

In fact, another relative expresses shock that Hirayama is working as a

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toilet cleaner – which might hint at a life-choice trajectory akin to the Jack Nicholson character in *Five Easy Pieces*. But the job itself isn't at all represented as menial drudgery, and what another film might have depicted as a lonely, meaningless existence here comes across as very meaningful and quietly rich. (Among recent films, the closest affinity in subject and tone might be Jim Jarmusch's *Paterson*). As well as a sensitive, spiritually-attuned observer of the world, Hirayama is a perfectionist who takes pleasure in leaving his conveniences immaculately tended (admittedly, Wenders skews the picture by having him only tend to Tokyo's shiniest, most architecturally appealing loos, like the one with glass walls that turn magically opaque at the turn of a doorknob).

When Hirayama goes to sleep, we see his dreams; semi-abstract superimposition montages in black and white (the director's wife Donata Wenders is credited with 'dream installations'). An end title explaining the Japanese concept of komorebi (roughly, the dappled shadows of leaves) wraps up some key themes, although perhaps too explicitly after Hirayama's playful encounter with a melancholy divorced man (Tomokazu Miura, from Takeshi Kitano's *Outrage* films, among others).

The film is liberally punctuated with music, primarily 60s pop, but it's surprising that Wenders, always noted as a jukebox connoisseur, should have opted here for such a clichéd Golden Greats selection – Nina Simone, Van Morrison, *House of the Rising Sun* (also sung by Ishikawa in a Japanese version), even Lou Reed's *Perfect Day*, making the title connection a touch obvious. By contrast, welcome exceptions include Patti Smith's '*Redondo Beach*' and the Rolling Stones rarity (*Walkin' Through The Sleepy City*).

Very much in the film's favour are its lazy drift, its refusal of restrictive narrative shape and its restless exploration of Tokyo, with Franz Lustig's photography luminous by light and day. Some familiar Wenders references are here (notably a nod to Patricia Highsmith's fiction), while the Ozu influence is inevitably present – although the overall tone is closer to latterday reference points like Hirokazu Kore-eda, in his softer mode, and Naomi Kawase's delicately feelgood *Sweet Bean*. An extended shot of an ambiguously smiling Hirayama is a closing grace note but, for all its poetic charm, this is a slender work that comes across as something of a 'mindfulness movie', in a faintly self-satisfied vein."

Jonathan Romney, *ScreenDaily*, 25 May 2023

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“Wim Wenders’s *Perfect Days* suggests a kind of spring cleaning for the filmmaker. Gone are the elaborate concepts and freighted iconography of *The American Friend* and *Paris, Texas* and *Wings of Desire*, not to mention of the vastly less impactful fictional films that he’s released in the intervening years. Wenders aims for simplicity here, following a middle-aged man, Hirayama (Yakusho Kôji), as he goes about his day cleaning Tokyo’s toilets, taking pictures of trees, listening to classic rock and pop, reading classic literature, and savoring the humble sources of day-to-day affirmation that we tend to take for granted.

Hirayama’s humility is the gauntlet that Wenders has thrown down for himself. *Perfect Days* wants to be an invitingly human movie that homes in intensely on the little moments of a man’s life so as to unearth universal truths. There’s a bit of Vittorio de Sica’s micro-texture-minded sensibility swimming around in it, and the impression that Wenders imparts of Hirayama as a god-like figure who surveys the rest of us flawed humans from afar brings to mind the protagonist of *Wings of Desire*. But the film that haunts *Perfect Days* more than any other is Jim Jarmusch’s *Paterson*, which followed a bus driver with dreams of being a poet over a few days as he wrestled with the wonder and entrapments of a life that doesn’t quite fulfill him.

That sense of beauty underscored by a fine line of quiet agony kept *Paterson*’s obsessive celebration of quotidian experience from growing cute or condescending. The film was an astonishing leap forward for Jarmusch, who has often been happy to look down on those who might not have access to his hipster rolodex. By contrast, *Perfect Days* toes the line between poignant and maudlin, particularly for Wenders’s tendency to fetishize Hirayama as the poor man who knows his place. The film is like the cinematic equivalent of a wealthy artist telling a janitor that he’s lucky because he’s acquainted with real life. And the decision to make him silent for much of the runtime, an observer of pettier folk, doesn’t refute this impression.

A few scenes late in the film hint at trauma that Hirayama may be suppressing, but Wenders generally sees him as a man without warts. He does nothing that would disrupt the exaltation of his purity. Indeed, there’s even something self-congratulatory about an act as simple as how Hirayama drinks the same iced drink after work at his favorite restaurant. In other words, Wenders hasn’t quite escaped one of his straitjackets: characters that scan only as symbols.

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The film's details collectively grow absurd and pompous. At night, Hirayama, always the eager student of classical art, reads William Faulkner by lamplight before bed. Does he ever take solace in the lowbrow or the casual? A film concerned with life's little pleasures might benefit from a few namedrops that aren't so conscientiously planted so as to bolster Wenders's own bona fides as an aesthete. Faulkner's writing doesn't readily suggest fodder for chilling out after hours of cleaning up piss and shit—which we never see, as the scatological element of Hirayama's job is inconvenient to Wenders's naïve idealizing of blue-collar work.

Most infuriating of all is Wenders's refusal to confront the gulf that exists between Hirayama's interests and how he makes his money. There's nothing wrong with being happy with humble work, but Wenders doesn't earn his reverie. Humility often springs from facing and surviving darkness, whether it's bitterness, regret, or profound catastrophe.

Nevertheless, if you can accept *Perfect Days* on its own rigged terms, it's Wenders's most involving film in some time. The notion of every life being wonderful is tempting as media opiates go, and several scenes do land. For instance, a moment in one of Hirayama's favorite haunts, where a woman sings *The House of the Rising Sun*, manages to suggest in a matter of seconds her wellspring of longing. But these moments can't escape the stifling sanctimoniousness of *Perfect Days*. No moment, no stray detail, disrupts the pervading class condescension that Wenders mistakes for empathy. For a slice-of-life film to work, there must be an illusion of randomness, and Wenders can't escape his old, deliberate ways. Most of the film's scenes feel planted, as if Wenders is introducing exhibits in a case.

At a certain juncture it becomes obvious that *Perfect Days* is an older man's fantasy of returning to an analog world. So was Paterson and Jarmusch's film before that one, *Only Lovers Left Alive*, though those are thornier works. Hirayama encounters younger people, whom Wenders draws broadly, and they continually express astonishment at his collection of American rock cassettes and shelves of literature. Quite a bit of the film is devoted to these sorts of mutual appreciations. Ultimately, Wenders's longing to wind society's clock back from a surveillance dystopia is more personal to him than Hirayama's meditations over trees and commodes.

It's possible to leave *Perfect Days* in disbelief at its sentimentality, yet still feel refreshed by its contemplative plunge into a world that's an implicit fantasy of life as it was before social media annihilated the tactility of seeing people in person, buying things in stores, and owning movies and music as actual objects,

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rather than as data on a computer. The film reveals itself, beneath its evasions, to be riven with despair after all. If only Wenders could've faced it head on."

Chuck Bowen, *The Slant*, September 8, 2023

"Fantasy comes in many forms, and one of them arises when a work of scrupulous realism strains plausibility to the point that it plays like mere wish fulfillment. The German director Wim Wenders's latest film, *Perfect Days* ... is such a work. Set in Tokyo, it's a story about a man who's a manual laborer and, in a sense, an artist, but it offers very little substance about either activity. Wenders follows an aesthetic principle of seemingly passive observation—of withholding, ambiguity, and implication. He relates his protagonist's experience by means of images and moods. But, rather than offering a stark and incisive vision, this aesthetic of tacitness delivers a sentimentalized prettiness. The results are merely vague, in a way that seems wilfully naïve about Japan, about labor, and about art.

The protagonist, Hirayama (Koji Yakusho), is a cleaner for the Tokyo Toilet, a real-life set of seventeen public bathrooms of architectural distinction that opened between 2020 and 2023 in the city's Shibuya neighborhood. A middle-aged man, he lives alone in a small duplex apartment and follows a rigid daily routine, which Wenders (who wrote the script with Takuma Takasaki) details: Hirayama awakens to the sound of a street sweeper, reshelves a book that he'd been reading before falling asleep, trims his mustache, shaves, waters his plants, dons a jumpsuit, and gets a can of coffee from a vending machine before driving off to work in his van, to the tune of music from one of his audio cassettes, largely of well-curated American rock and pop of the sixties and seventies.

Driving from site to site, Hirayama goes about his work with a precision that matches the orderliness of his home and his schedule. Using a small medical-style mirror, he peers beneath a toilet to see whether the underside needs to be cleaned; he cleans a bidet spray head and a rubber faucet hose, scrubs a urinal filter with a brush, even dusts the electronic components under a lid. At lunchtime, he sits in a park and eats a sandwich, and, while admiring the surroundings, pulls a small 35-mm. camera from his pocket and takes a picture of the foliage on high. He holds the camera away from his eye and merely tilts it in the direction of what he wants to photograph—a memorably self-effacing method. He files his photos obsessively, by month and year, in a meticulous array of identical boxes that occupies many shelves. After work, Hirayama

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sometimes bathes at a public bathhouse; he dines at a casual restaurant in an underground mall where he's greeted as a regular. Then he returns home, reads, falls asleep, and—with slumbers punctuated by dreams, always in black-and-white, dominated by foliage and light—he awakens to the sound of a street sweeper and starts his rounds again.

The principle of repetition and variation, as in the musical minimalism championed by Philip Glass and Steve Reich and brought to a radical extreme by Morton Feldman, has long had a cinematic exemplar—Chantal Akerman's *Jeanne Dielman*, from 1975, which renders the rigid routine as the taut barrier separating the protagonist from madness, collapse, or rage. Jeanne's self-imposed restraint is something like a *rigor vitae*, a severe diminution of life in order to preserve it. Wenders, born some five years before Akerman, belongs to the same generation of filmmakers; both of them made their first features in the early nineteen-seventies. From the start, their works yoked a tamped-down performance style to a conspicuously composed visual one, bringing painterly precision and contemplative reserve to a project of relentless, documentary-like observation. But where Akerman pursued ever bolder applications of this style, Wenders—with a pop-cultural bent—popularized it into a strain of modern melodrama, mixing a trendy chill of alienation with a bittersweet twist of nostalgia.

In *Perfect Days*, Wenders reaches back to the seventies for his fundamental inspiration. The title is borrowed from Lou Reed's song *Perfect Day*, from 1972, which Hirayama listens to at home. Wenders's artistic breakthrough film, *Alice in the Cities* (1974), is the story of a German journalist in the United States who defies his assignment in favor of taking Polaroid pictures during his reporting trip. (A book of Wenders's own Polaroids has been published.) Wenders has also long been obsessed with American rock and pop of that period—so much so that his 1972 film *The Goalie's Anxiety at the Penalty Kick* was long kept out of distribution because of the prohibitive cost of maintaining rights to his needle drops.

In Reed's song, the narrator is addressing someone about their perfect day together: "I'm glad I spent it with you." When Hirayama hears that line sung, he's alone, and the song keeps playing on the soundtrack while he's outdoors biking, again alone. Hirayama's solitude is presented not as a deprivation but as self-sufficiency, a contented isolation. The movie offers the vaguest hint that there's a woman of whom he's literally dreaming; but nothing in the dreams or elsewhere suggests who she might be. Hirayama interacts with a goofy, young fellow-cleaner named Takashi (Tokio Emoto) who, desperate for money to spend on his girlfriend, Aya (Aoi Yamada), wants to sell the elder man's

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treasured cassette tapes at a secondhand store. Aya, taken with the voice of Patti Smith, which she hears while riding along with the two men, pays Hirayama another visit in order to listen again. He also gets a surprise visit from his niece, Niko (Arisa Nakano), who spends a few days with him and joins him in his rounds. When they listen to a cassette of Van Morrison, she wonders whether the song is on Spotify; Hirayama has no idea what that is—and Wenders doesn't continue their conversation to indicate whether he wants to know, whether Niko tells him, or just how far out of basic awareness of current-day life he, in fact, is.

Hirayama isn't a complete technophobe; he has a cell phone (a flip phone), but that's as far as it goes. He's never seen using a computer, a TV, a VCR, a CD, or a DVD; he pays for everything with cash; his camera uses film (though it's seemingly auto focus and autoexposure). His incuriosity runs wide; he's never seen reading a newspaper or a magazine. He reads only books—William Faulkner, Patricia Highsmith, Aya Kōda—none by contemporaries. Though he's not a literal hermit, his social life appears to be non-existent, except when he can't help talking with a colleague, with a neighbor, or with a woman behind the counter of the restaurant in the mall. One man there suspects that he's having an intimate relationship with a woman, but Hirayama denies it and the movie offers no further hint. What talk he offers is terse, and he doesn't in any case initiate it.”

Richard Brody, *The New Yorker*, February 6, 2024

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