

Review of Perfect Days by Richard Brody
The New Yorker, February 5, 2024

“Perfect Days” and the Perils of Minimalism

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” (which opens Wednesday), 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 willfully 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 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 bitter-sweet 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 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 autofocus 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 nonexistent, 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.

To the extent that there's drama, it's forcedly epiphanic—as, for instance, in a chance encounter with an ailing man (Tomokazu Miura) that offers an opportunity for a moment of wry and whimsical compassion. The playful scene elides the practicalities of the men's connection, in a way that holds true for interactions throughout the film. Hirayama's bond with Niko involves drolly abstract aphorisms but no questions about specifics, whether past, present, or future. He is largely estranged from his sister (Yumi Asō) and totally estranged from his father, for specific reasons left conspicuously vague. He appears to have no friends, near or far, beyond his commercial relations; whether he was ever in a romantic relationship is never suggested. The incuriosity is Wenders's own.

The strange vision of the hyper-devoted, passionate toilet cleaner (whose diligence isn't at all matched by the work of his happy-go-lucky slacker colleague Takashi) suggests, above all, a nostalgia, Wenders's own, for an age when people hired to do a job could be expected to do it with thoroughness, care, and attention to detail—to surpass expectations and set standards of excellence. In short, it plays like nostalgia, like a lament by someone used to hiring support staff that good help has become hard to find. The satisfaction that Hirayama gets from his work is unclear, and what he did for a living before the designer bathrooms opened is unspecified.

Hirayama must surely have a head full of experiences, memories, perceptions, aversions, intentions—of ideas—but Wenders is content to catalogue the character's quirks. (Compare Akerman's Jeanne, who was clear and vocal about how her life was inflected by the course of history.) Is Hirayama devoted, whether on aesthetic principles or civic ones, to the architecturally and technologically distinguished public bathrooms that he services? Or did he work the same way when he was assembling light switches, or teaching middle-school students, or practicing law, or cleaning private and architecturally undistinguished bathrooms, or doing whatever he was doing prior to the opening of these facilities? Does he get bored?

A nineteenth-century British humorist wrote, "I like work: it fascinates me. I can sit and look at it for hours." Wenders is fascinated by Hirayama's work in the same way. He celebrates this numbingly routine exertion with a visually chirpy enthusiasm that thrums above all with satisfaction at not having to do it. The images in which Wenders frames Hirayama at work are elegant, but the editing of them is brisk, cutting the routine down to a handful of exemplary moments that celebrate the laborer's attentive care while eliding its longueurs. "Perfect Days" comes off as Wenders's

exaltation of humble and uncomplaining submission—someone else’s, not his own.

The satisfaction that Wenders appears to get from detailing Hirayama’s fervently devoted labors is inseparable from his enthusiastic depiction of Japan as a rigidly ordered society, albeit one whose traditions and formalities are at risk of being worn away by individualism, technocentrism, ambition, and the rapid pace of contemporary life. It’s a vision of the country seen through the eyes of its great mid-century directors—above all, of Yasujirō Ozu, to whose work Wenders has long paid homage. (The name Hirayama is a nod to characters in Ozu’s 1953 film “Tokyo Story.”) But “Perfect Days” lacks Ozu’s trenchant engagement with the Japan of his time—Ozu’s characters talk copiously, and his films reveal what the talk conceals, about the characters’ lives and about Japanese society at large. Wenders, rather than attempting to consider the country as it is now, is content to work with a received mythology regarding Ozu’s refined aesthetic of restraint. In other words, he stereotypes, celebrating uncritically an order from which he’s an outsider, while enjoying the privileges of the tourist, the celebrity, and the advocate.

I’ve often felt that one of the prime directorial prejudices of recent times is the fear of language—in particular, the aversion to the voice-over, in which characters’ interior monologues convey their states of mind along with their actions. In “Perfect Days,” the absence of one leaves Hirayama a cipher. What’s more, because the drama is slender and allusive, it hands the work of imagination to the viewer, as if the movie were a set of talking points, or a puzzle requiring the viewer to fill in the blanks that Wenders doesn’t care—or dare—to fill in.

Many movies could use a voice-over. With “Perfect Days,” one can even imagine how different voice-overs, meshing with the same scenes and micro-

dramas, would have yielded drastically different results: one in which Hirayama is left-wing, another in which he's on the right; one in which his memories involve trauma, another in which his memories involve guilt; one in which he's in mourning for a lost love, one in which he's in rage. The same images, of Hirayama in closeup in his rearview mirror, of him gazing out the window at the sky, of him admiring foliage, would take on drastically different tones and moods. Instead, they take on an easy universality that risks offending no one, disturbing no one, offering nothing of substance to challenge a viewer. Rather than foregrounding the movie's images, the near-silences of "Perfect Days" almost obliterate them.