



Meaning Through Perspective: A Mise-En-Scène Examination of the Film ‘Perfect Days’

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Abstract: This paper intends to provide a Mise-en-Scène analysis of the film *Perfect Days* and its cinematic language. The Japanese film "Perfect Days," directed by Wim Wenders was released in 2023. It was nominated for the 2024 Academy award. The film showcases fluctuations and contrasting solitude with loneliness, while also addressing themes of acceptance and acknowledgment. Specific scenes from the Japanese film are selected to analyze the five elements of mise-en-scène namely characters, stage, décor, light, and space, in order to comprehend their significance and the film's mood and meaning. The paper concludes that meaning has been constructed through these five aspects, despite the recurring scenes lacking the spoken, and how this has rendered the film particularly visually appealing.

Keywords: Mise-En-Scène, Examination, Perfect Days

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INTRODUCTION

Films as artistic expressions offer a range of themes and ideas. In common parlance film is often equated with entertainment but looking from a wider perspective, entertainment can mean different things than just dealing with the least common denominator. In the current scheme of things where communication, content and entertainment have become the most abused words owing to the oversimplification of their meanings and manifestations, Wim Wenders' *Perfect Days* (2023) introduces the audience to a different kind of storytelling that lets the audience encounter the simplicity and beauty of routine life. The banality emanating from the regularity of routine serves as the film's core theme and takes the audience into a ride of unusual but familiar emotions. A visual spectacle, the film intricately showcases the mundane routines of Hirayama, a toilet cleaner, against the dynamic backdrop of Tokyo's bustling streets. The film is a reminder of finding beauty in routine and day to day things.

This research paper engages in a mise-en-scene analysis of the visual elements of the film. Mise-en-scene literally means "what is placed in the scene". It includes everything visible within the frame, including the actors and setting, as well as the way these elements are composed (Wexman, 2007). As the film under study is a cinematographic treat, a mise-en-scene analysis was thought to be the best way to engage into the depth of the story.

The analysis of mise-en-scène can reveal how films convey mood, meaning, and character development (Purwati, 2021). The arrangement of visual elements in mise-en-scène can influence viewers' perceptions and enhance the film's overall expression (Triadi Syadian, 2021).

OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

To conduct a mise-en-scène analysis of the film *Perfect Days* in order to understand the thematic depth and meaning of the narrative.

METHODOLOGY

This study uses content analysis to examine the five mise-en-scène aspects in the Japanese film 'The Perfect Days.' Particular scenes are identified, and features such as stage setup, lighting, space, costumes, and Characters are meticulously examined. This would assist in explaining the degree to which these aspects amalgamate to convey mood, meaning, and value to the images.

ANALYSIS

Synopsis of the film

The film centers around Hirayama and his solitary life as a toilet cleaner. Seemingly content with his work, he mostly keeps to himself. The film showcases his interactions with different characters and how the audience appreciates, through Hirayama's character, the beauty of everyday life.

Characters in the film

Hirayama (Koji Yakusho) is the film's protagonist, and the narrative centers on his daily tasks and his interactions with others. The audience perceives the supporting characters as they exist in Hirayama's world. Consequently, while his character is examined in depth, the others are portrayed through his perspective and defined by his encounters with them.

Hirayama's Character

Hirayama is depicted as middle-aged, with somewhat weathered yet dignified features. The creases on his appearance and his rugged behavior impart a sense of understated sagacity to his persona. He refrains from attracting attention, and the camera frequently positions him to highlight his subtle, nearly unnoticeable presence.

The most distinguishing aspect of Hirayama's physical appearance is his job outfit. He wears a basic, utilitarian ensemble—typical attire for an individual engaged in a public service position, such as a janitor or toilet attendant. His uniform lacks individuality, is functional in design, and is unexceptional. It visually underscores his invisibility and anonymity within society. He is integrated into the system yet remains inconspicuous, seamlessly merging into the background, akin to his persona. The minimalism of his attire symbolizes his modest, minimalist disposition.

In adherence with his physical characteristics, his facial expressions and non-verbal communication have also been well-thought by the director. Hirayama seldom exhibits explicit emotion. His expression is frequently devoid of emotion, indicating that he has perfected the skill of concealing his own thoughts from others. His deficiency of expressive movements solidifies his position as an observer in life, rather than an active participant.

Adding to this are his physical movements which are yet again measured, intentional, and regulated. In both cleaning and commuting, his behavior embodies a man unhurried and calm. He frequently appears to drift through existence, physically anchored yet emotionally disengaged.

Hirayama and his interactions with other characters

Hirayama discovers a young boy, Yosuke, whimpering inside a toilet after losing his mother in the park. Gently consoling him, he takes his hand and leads him out. Soon after, Yosuke's mother appears, eyeing Hirayama with suspicion as she hurriedly wipes her son's hands with a wet wipe. Unlike her, Hirayama remains expressionless, free of judgment or hesitation. Though he offers a small smile when Yosuke waves goodbye, his quiet, observant demeanor conveys a sense of detachment—an absence of expectation from society or those around him. His focus seems to rest solely on his own world.

In his interactions with Takashi, his co-worker, Hirayama never seems overwhelmed. Takashi, on the other hand is a stark opposite of Hirayama's character. He is talkative, intruding, child-like and judgmental. He frequently gives Hirayama unsolicited advice, which is never taken seriously. Takashi's character blends seamlessly with Tokyo's bustling city life, while Hirayama represents a solitary countryside common man aiming at invisibility.

In yet another interaction with the restaurant owner, a woman, Hirayama's mannerisms remain constant. This woman who briefly engages with Hirayama in the café is attired in a more casual and lively manner than he is. Her attire contrasts sharply with his monotonous uniform, reflecting her emotional transparency and capacity to interact with her surroundings. While Hirayama's dress suggests a form of practical detachment, her apparel conveys an appreciation for life's minor delights.

Her interaction with Hirayama is characterized by a transparency that he does not possess. Her vivacious, vibrant gestures and expressive expression sharply contrast with Hirayama's subdued demeanor. This interaction is succinct yet underscores the physical and emotional distance between them, seen in their seating arrangement and divergent life perspectives.

Hirayama's most extended on-screen interaction is with his niece, Niko, who seeks refuge with him after running away from home. The audience sees Hirayama indulged in verbal communication during this brief period in the film. Niko is young and brings a fresh perspective for Hirayama. Her mention of a song application 'Spotify' is out of Hirayama's depth which Niko finds really amusing.

Niko and Hirayama form a striking contrast, making them a delight to watch. Despite their differences, their on-screen camaraderie is captivating. Their dynamic is a continuous exchange—Niko brings fresh ideas, while Hirayama offers the wisdom of experience. Hirayama's cycle becomes a symbol of life coming full circle when he revisits his childhood via Niko's presence. Niko's exit from Hirayama's life happens when her mother (Hirayama's Sister) comes to pick her up. The communication between the brother and sister is brief but concludes in Hirayama's emotional outburst and he cries inconsolably. This is the first instance when Hirayama is shown to divulge his internal upheaval.

Throughout the film, Hirayama interacts, verbally and non-verbally, with some other people like Takashi's

girlfriend, Ava, the homeless man who he often sees while cleaning the toilet, the woman having lunch on the other side of the bench, the bookstore owner, etc. In all his interactions Hirayama's demeanour seems still, constant and unchanging. He maintains a consistent sense of space, both physically and emotionally, in all his encounters.

Hirayama's meditative solitude seems to have a larger objective of offering resort to others maintaining a stoic stance. To put this differently, he assists the little boy without expecting anything in return, lends money to Takashi despite knowing it won't be repaid, and welcomes Niko into his home, sharing his life lessons with no desire for anything in return.

Finally, in his last encounter with the restaurant owner's ex-husband, who is battling cancer, Hirayama appears entirely unlike himself. In order to cheer him up Hirayama plays the game of 'shadow tag'. Hirayama rides back to his home in his cycle, however, he doesn't seem measured and calculated rather free-spirited and happy. The mood is enhanced by a long shot of him riding the bicycle over a bridge, suggesting him getting a recourse from his solitude.

Stage Setup and Space

Minimalism serves as the defining theme of *Perfect Days*, evident in the film's carefully crafted mise-en-scène. Hirayama's residence is compact, unassuming, and minimally furnished. It exemplifies minimalist design—simple, functional, and lacking personal embellishments. The apartment's simplicity evokes emotional separation and solitude, while simultaneously reflecting control, order, and a yearning for tranquility amidst external chaos.

Minimalist Furnishings: The apartment is equipped solely with essentials a bed, a compact table, a chair, and some other utilitarian objects. There are no superfluous adornments, personal items, or indications of comfort. The absence of personal warmth in the decor shows Hirayama's inclination to eschew emotional connections. The place is functional however devoid of any profound reflection of his personality or emotional being.

The apartment features neutral and muted colors—grays, whites, and browns—conveying tranquility yet also a sense of emotional vacuity. The subdued color palette fosters a sense of separation and establishes an environment with minimal distractions.

The flat embodies Hirayama's isolation. It serves as both a tangible environment in which he resides and a metaphorical realm that represents his emotional landscape. His compact, utilitarian flat functions as a sanctuary—a secluded, shielded refuge from the cacophonous and oppressive external environment. Nonetheless, it appears desolate and emotionally arid, suggesting he has deliberately maintained this state to evade emotional connections or disturbances to his internal regimen.

Lack of Personal Touches: The apartment contains minimal personal items—absent are family photographs, mementos, and significant things that narrate his history or relationships. The apartment serves merely as a venue for rest and essential activities, lacking any additional significance. The lack of personalizing underscores the notion that Hirayama is either disinterested in or unable to establish profound emotional ties.

Compact, Confined Area: The apartment is diminutive and somewhat constricted, eliciting a feeling of confinement. Hirayama's motions in the space are frequently measured and intentional, underscoring the concept of emotional constraint. The apartment's constricted environment reflects Hirayama's emotional state—he is ensnared in his existence, navigating daily routines while seldom interacting with the external world or his internal self.

The Bed and the Sleeping Space: Hirayama's bed, centrally located in the room, serves as a symbolic area for repose and detachment. He appears to lack emotional investment in his sleeping environment; it serves only as a location for bodily repose and preparation for the subsequent day. His engagement with the bed is limited, and the depictions of him awakening or retiring are frequently lacking in emotion, implying a life characterized by low passion or transformation.

Instances of Meditative Solitude: At times, Hirayama is observed in contemplative solitude, such as when he is seated at his table, perusing a book or gazing out the window. These instances underscore his solitary disposition and the introspective existence he inhabits, characterized predominantly by silence and interior contemplation. The compact flat facilitates moments of seclusion while underscoring his disconnection from the external world. The flat serves as a "stage" for his inner existence, yet it is also a setting where no meaningful events appear to transpire.

Framing & Placement within the Room: In multiple moments, the camera depicts Hirayama positioned centrally, enclosed by the surrounding blank walls. These images highlight his alone and the emotional void of the environment. He is positioned centrally within the frame; however, the surrounding nothingness accentuates his solitary and emotional detachment from others.

The illumination in Hirayama's apartment is gentle and organic, frequently diffused through a window. The dim lighting accentuates the serenity of the flat, while also highlights the monotony and stagnation in Hirayama's existence. Occasionally, shadows linger in the room's corners, evoking a sense of sorrow and highlighting the emotional voids in his existence. The natural light may indicate fleeting instances of clarity or contemplation, although it is neither overwhelming nor sufficiently warm to be pleasant.

Public restrooms: These areas are hygienic yet personal, symbolizing Hirayama's position in the world. Although he is integrated into the public service system, his contributions within these domains remain predominantly unnoticed by the users. The monotonous quality of his cleaning rituals, along with the meticulous, even ceremonial focus he applies to his work, implies a feeling of purpose while simultaneously highlighting the character's isolation from others.

Light as a symbol:

The film makes use of light and consequently makes use of shadows to weave profundity in the narrative. Light as an important motif used by the director enhances the complexity and layers in Hirayama's character. *Komorebi* is a Japanese term that describes the dappled sunlight filtered through tree foliage. In the film, *Komorebi* is symbolically utilized by the director to enhance meaning. This can particularly be seen in instances where Hirayama captures photographs of these ephemeral patterns. The light penetrating the foliage produces a dynamic interplay of shadows that is perpetually in motion. It transitions, alters, and

diminishes, akin to the emotional episodes encountered by Hirayama. His existence is characterized by monotony and isolation, however these ephemeral instances of illumination—the "komorebi"—provide him with a glimpse of something exquisite and brief. The shadows cast by sunlight appear to represent instances of emotional insight, wherein Hirayama perceives profound sentiments or ephemeral beauty, only for them to dissipate as swiftly as they emerge. He observes without engaging. The photographs serve as an endeavor to capture or maintain that which is intangible, much to Hirayama's effort to retain emotional events without fully experiencing them.

The *komorebi* has been also achieved throughout the film via chiaroscuro. The language of shadows has been intricately interlaced in the film to symbolize the transient essence of existence. The "juxtaposition of light and shadow" (Chowdhury, 2024) symbolize the transient essence of existence as experienced by Hirayama and his relationships. To elaborate, Hirayama perpetually traverses his existence without complete engagement, analogous to the transient shadows on the forest floor.

Hirayama's dreams

At the end of everyday Hirayama sees monotonic dreams which appear as surrealistic paintings, "a spontaneous uncensored recording of chaotic images" (Brittanica, 2025), which seem difficult to decipher yet reveal the inner tribulations he seldom expresses. His dreams reflect his emotional existence which appears to be suspended in time, detached from profound involvement. Through this the director also "explores the themes of memory, solitude and passage of time" (Chowdhury, 2024). The dreams are monotone symbolizing a sense of aloofness and Hirayama's inner emotional void that he conceals with great poise.

The film's first dream sequence features rustling leaves, an adult holding a child's hand, and a fluid, melting motion. The seamless movement of these images creates ambiguity, making it unclear whether the perspective is from a traveler on a bicycle, in a car, or on a train.

In the second dream sequence, however, it becomes clearer that Hirayama's dreams are a mix of his 'daily nothings' which seemingly are his most prized and cherished moments of the day. This time he again sees a fluid motion, which as audience one understands, is his own perspective while riding a cycle or driving his van to work. This is coupled with Ava's image whom he had seen that day and blurred lights. In his dreams Hirayama recollects the memories of the day going back and forth in time, reminiscing the past and merging it with the present.

The third and fourth dream sequences have similar images of leaves, shadows, etc. In the fifth dream sequence varied images are superimposed by a Tic-Tac-Toe game slip, which Hirayama has started in real life with a stranger. This shows his yearning for a connection.

Through approximately ten dream sequences, it becomes evident that Hirayama, though a man of few words, deeply observes the world around him, preserving images of his surroundings and the people he encounters.

Reverence for Sunlight

Hirayama's bond with the morning sun and its shining rays is unique. His reverence for it is reflected in his daily ritual of acknowledging the sun as he leaves home for work. These scenes woven in the narrative reveal Hirayama's yearning for new connections, optimism for life and willingness for new beginnings. Though, he is a reserved, quiet individual who maintains a neutral stance for everything around him, his reverence for the sun and the smile he throws back when greeting it is reflective of his openness for new beginnings and change. Sun and its rays become a metaphor for vibrance in the narrative. It is important to mention here that the game of Tic-Tac-Toe that he starts with a stranger is also symbolic of his innate need to connect with someone. However, it is important to note that in both cases – greeting the sun and commencing the game with a stranger- Hirayama remains enthusiastic as there is no fear of bonding, the sun is up there in the sky and the stranger is nowhere.

However, it is worth noting that in both instances—greeting the sun and beginning a game with a stranger—Hirayama remains enthusiastic, as there is no fear of forming a bond; the sun remains distant in the sky, and the stranger is physically absent!

CONCLUSION

The film exemplifies what Berger said long back that “an image could outlast what it represented” (Berger, 1972). After conducting a mise-en-scene analysis of the movie one cannot agree less with Berger's statement, as the visuals in the film endure beyond the existence of the subject (Hirayama) depicted.

The film *Perfect Days* is a profound examination of the human condition as seen through the perspective of Hirayama, an isolated and meditative toilet cleaner. The director's careful focus on minimalism, light, and space constructs an emotional environment where ordinary encounters and trivial chores acquire deep meaning. The film, through Hirayama's character, reveals the intricacies of loneliness, recollection, and the fragile equilibrium between involvement and detachment in modern existence.

The narrative structure, focusing on Hirayama's daily routines and interactions, provides the audience with a distinctive viewpoint on the beauty of life's details. His interactions—with the little kid Yosuke, his niece Niko, and various transient characters—underscore his subtle wisdom and emotional composure. These interactions demonstrate a profound capacity for observation and empathy, if frequently unarticulated, that reflects the common desire for connection in an indifferent environment.

The film's visual aesthetic, grounded in minimalism set design, accentuates Hirayama's mental and physical solitude. His austere living space, lacking personal embellishments or warmth, reflects his emotional disconnection from the surrounding world. Nevertheless, it also transforms into a sanctuary—a haven that enables him to sustain control and order among life's chaos. The utilization of light, especially through the motif of *komorebi*, enhances the narrative by signifying transient moments of clarity, beauty, and emotional understanding—an embodiment of Hirayama's subtle awareness for the ephemeral essence of existence.

Hirayama's dreams, characterized by bizarre and fragmented images, provide insight into his mind, exposing the conflicts and impulses he typically suppresses. The dream sequences serve as analogies for his unexpressed internal landscape, contrasting with his composed external persona. The persistent motifs of shadows, light, and fluid motion in his dreams signify his internal conflict in harmonizing his isolation with his fundamental desire for connection and significance.

Ultimately, *Perfect Days* serves as a contemplation of the human experience—examining the fragile equilibrium between solitude and connection, observation and involvement, detachment and longing. Hirayama's way of life embodies the Japanese concept of *Yutori* (What is the meaning behind the Japanese concept of *Yutori*?, 2025), which emphasizes intentionally slowing down and fully experiencing the present moment. In his unassuming life, he embodies the role of a silent observer, a guy who, despite his reticent nature, is subtly aware of the beauty, intricacy, and impermanence of his surroundings. He takes his own pace to unravel the beauty of daily life.

The film urges viewers to contemplate their life, encouraging them to acknowledge the importance of transient moments that influence our existence and the deep ties that can emerge from seemingly trivial interactions. Through its nuanced yet impactful narrative and visual storytelling, *Perfect Days* reinforces the significance of simplicity, tranquillity, and the delicate interplay of light and shadow in comprehending the human spirit.

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