



## Voluntary Simplicity and the Search for Meaning: Deconstructing the Film Perfect Days

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### ABSTRACT

Today, in the face of increasing consumption habits and changing lifestyles, it is important for individuals to try to live by reducing their share in their lives. Voluntary simplicity means that individuals move away from the complexity of modern life and adopt a more minimal, simple and meaningful understanding of life. This study aims to analyse the concept of voluntary simplicity in depth through Wim Wenders' film *Perfect Days* (2023) and open it to discussion in this context. In the research, the effects of voluntary simplicity on the individual and the reflections of this understanding in cinema are examined, and the individual's search for inner peace and his/her stance against social pressures are tried to be understood through cinema. Using deconstruction and document analysis methods, the narrative language, character development and thematic elements in the film are discussed in detail. The film *Perfect Days* deeply explores how individual simplicity is signified in a cinematic narrative. The analyses question the inner anxieties and loneliness of the character Hirayama (Koji Yakusho) behind his minimalist lifestyle and provide new readings on the complex psychological effects of the pursuit of voluntary simplicity. This study aims to make an original contribution to the limited academic studies in the field by revealing the reflection and effects of voluntary simplicity in cinema.

**Keywords:** Minimalism, Perfect Days, Deconstruction, Voluntary Simplicity, Win Wenders

## Gönüllü Sadelik ve Anlam Arayışı: Perfect Days Filminin Yapısökümü

### Öz

Günümüzde artan tüketim alışkanlıkları ve değişen yaşam biçimleri karşısında bireylerin hayatlarında paylarını azaltarak yaşamaya çalışmaları önemlidir. Gönüllü sadelik, bireylerin modern yaşamın karmaşasından uzaklaşarak daha minimal, sade ve anlam dolu bir yaşam anlayışını benimsemesini ifade eder. Bu çalışma, Wim Wenders'ın *Perfect Days* (2023) filmi üzerinden gönüllü sadelik kavramını derinlemesine analiz etmeyi ve bu bağlamda tartışmaya açmayı hedeflemektedir. Araştırmada, gönüllü sadeliğin birey üzerindeki etkileri ve bu anlayışın sinemadaki yansımaları incelenerek, sinema aracılığıyla bireyin içsel huzur arayışı ve toplumsal baskılara karşı duruşu anlaşılmasına çalışılmaktadır. Yapısöküm ve doküman analizi yöntemleri kullanılarak, filmdeki anlatı dili, karakter gelişimi ve tematik unsurlar detaylı bir biçimde ele alınmaktadır. *Perfect Days* filmi, bireysel sadeliğin sinemasal bir anlatıda nasıl anlamlandırıldığını derinlemesine işlemektedir. Elde edilen analizlerde Hirayama (Koji Yakusho) karakterinin minimalist yaşam tarzının arkasındaki içsel kaygıları ve yalnızlığını sorgulayarak, gönüllü sadelik arayışının karmaşık psikolojik etkilerine dair yeni okumalar gerçekleştirmektedir. Bu çalışma, gönüllü sadeliğin sinemadaki yansıması ve etkilerini ortaya koyarak, alandaki sınırlı akademik incelemelere özgün bir katkı sağlamayı hedeflemektedir.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Minimalizm, Perfect Days, Yapısöküm, Gönüllü Sadelik, Win Wenders

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## Introduction

The rapid increase in global warming, the depletion of limited natural resources, social inequalities deepened by growing populations, and excessive consumption encouraged by the growing population are increasing social problems and mental disorders on a global scale. (Rebouças & Soares, 2021, p. 303). While a part of the world tries to survive with limited resources, a small minority group consumes these resources unlimitedly. While this situation has a serious impact on social balances, some individuals and groups have been labelled as "green living," are turning towards alternative lifestyles expressed in terms such as "simple living" and "eco-friendly living" (Odabaşı, 2013, p. 199). Voluntary simplicity stands out as an approach that expresses individuals' preference for a simple, meaningful and sustainable life by taking a conscious stance against the culture of consumption and ostentation imposed by modern life (Özgül, 2011; Rich et al., 2019). In parallel with minimalism, voluntary simplicity is based on the pursuit of reducing the environmental footprint, limiting material consumption and achieving inner fulfilment (Hatipler & Köksalan, 2020).

Voluntary simplicity is defined not only as a lifestyle but also as a social movement (Grigsby, 2004). Although voluntary simplicity has gained importance with the increase in global problems, this concept has been advocated by many great religions and important figures throughout history. Leaders such as Buddha, Lao Tse, Moses, Jesus, Muhammad and the Hebrew prophets, as well as thinkers such as St Francis, John Woolman, Hindu rishis, Muslim Sufis and Gandhi, have advocated voluntary simplicity in different ways. (Gregg, 2009, p. 4). Today, the voluntary simplicity movement with its religious, philosophical, secular and artistic dimensions is being defended in a wide range of areas around the world. In addition to all these, voluntary simplicity continues to constitute important themes in the art of cinema.

In this context, although there are various films dealing with the theme of voluntary simplicity in cinema, academic studies on this subject are quite limited. This study aims to offer an original perspective to the cinema literature by focusing on Wenders' *Perfect Days*. The film creates simplicity both visually and narratively by focusing on a character who adopts a minimalist lifestyle, and the filming process carried out with a minimal production team. The minimalism and simplicity that Wenders tries to capture with the character of Hirayama, and the fact that he does it with technique, makes the work valuable. The use of document analysis and deconstruction methods to reveal the voluntary simplicity, minimalist life and its underlying meaning in the film gives the research a broader and deeper perspective. In this context, the study aims to make an original contribution to the limited academic studies on voluntary simplicity in cinema.

## Voluntary Simplicity

The concept of voluntary simplicity, first named in 1936 by Richard Gregg, a disciple of Gandhi (Odabaşı, 2013, p. 199; Akova, 2020) Gregg's philosophy was first introduced to the

literature in 1977 in an article published by Elgin and Mitchell. Gregg expressed it as an honest, simple and sincere philosophy of life by eliminating piles of goods that have no meaning in one's life (Gregg, 2009; Argan et al., 2012, p. 205). Elgin and Mitchell also define voluntary simplicity as "being outwardly simple and inwardly rich" (Elgin & Mitchell, 1977, p. 13). Etzioni (1998, p. 620) defines voluntary simplicity as "a conscious choice to limit spending on consumer goods and services and to develop non-material sources of satisfaction and meaning". With voluntary simplicity, it is aimed for the individual to live a simple and simple life in the outer world and a rich and deep life in the inner world. (Odabaşı, 2013, p. 199). Voluntary simplicity, however, includes both the inner and the outer state. It implies a single purpose, sincerity and honesty, as well as the avoidance of external clutter, of many things that have nothing to do with the basic purpose of life (Gregg, 2009, p. 5). However, these definitions exclude changes forced by external economic conditions or personal circumstances (e.g. a recession or job loss) (Aidar & Daniels, 2024, p. 47).

Leonard-Barton (1981) defines voluntary simplicity as the degree to which an individual chooses a lifestyle that aims to minimise consumption and dependence by maximising the effectiveness of daily activities (McDonald et al., 2006; Rich et al., 2017). Huneke (2005, p. 528) argues that contrary to the "consumption for happiness" culture of the modern age, voluntary simplicity, which is a movement based on the philosophy of "less is actually more", argues that one can be happy by minimising the use of resources and with a perspective away from materialism. Shama (1985, p. 57) states that voluntary simplicity is a lifestyle consisting of low consumption, ecological responsibility and self-sufficiency.

Voluntary simplicity stands against the destructive, unethical and environmentally damaging lifestyles that arise from excessive consumption pressure (Kraisornsutthasinee & Swierczek, 2018, p. 81). Unlike reasons such as financial inadequacy or poverty, the individual voluntarily consumes less and creates "an alternative to the consumer society by advocating richness in the inner world and simplicity in the outer world" (Elgin, 2013, p. 70). Individuals who are content with less for any reason (Craig-Lees & Hill, 2002, p. 188) It is formed by adopting a lifestyle that aims to live a simple and happy life by standing against consumption-oriented and materialistic life. This approach prioritises low and balanced consumption, the importance of human values, working and living conditions and environmental sensitivity.

Voluntary simplicity involves simple living conditions in which the spiritual world is important; it is based on being, not having. This existence expresses a state in which people are at peace with themselves and their environment. According to the results of the field research conducted by Elgin and Mitchell (1977), the prominent criteria in the lifestyle of the participants related to voluntary simplicity were determined. These criteria include material simplicity, humanistic scale, self-determination, ecological awareness, personal development and appropriate technology. (Shama, 1985; Özgül, 2011; Hatipler & Köksalan, 2020, pp. 677-678; Eraslan Paksu, 2023). These concepts are generally explained as follows:

- Material simplicity refers to the simplification or de-cluttering of one's individual and social life by making do with less and simplifying it from a materialist point of view; this is achieved through anti-consumerist actions.
- The humanistic scale advocates the beauty of the small scale, avoiding big cities, high-ceilinged buildings and crowded environments; this allows one to downsize and humanise one's living and working environment.
- Self-determination aims for the individual to determine his/her own path and to increase the control in his/her life.
- Ecological sensitivity involves being sensitive to, respecting and protecting the environment, resulting in the realisation that resources are limited, and that pollution reduction is essential.
- Individual development refers to the process of self-knowledge, discovering and developing one's own talents by moving away from the culture of consumption, and this helps the individual to improve his/her quality of life.
- Appropriate technology is based on the use of appropriate technologies to provide more functional, efficient and energy-efficient solutions, rather than the automatic application of high technology; therefore, products and services that adopt such technologies offer new marketing opportunities.

In addition to these definitions and categorisations, the literature also reveals that there are many debates about voluntary simplicity. Some studies emphasise that the adoption of a simple lifestyle should be valid only for the wealthy, and they consider people who lack freedom, live in forced poverty or are forced to adopt such behaviours by any institution or government (Elgin & Mitchell, 1977; Leonard-Barton, 1981; Gregg, 2009; Shama, A & Wisenblit, J., 1984; Etzioni, 1998; Etzioni, 2004; Gambrel & Cafaro, 2010; McDonald et al, 2006; Boujbel & d'Astous, 2012). A number of other studies suggest that the lifestyle of voluntary simplicity is not limited to wealthy individuals but may also be preferred by those whose basic needs are less met (Huneke, 2005; Kala et al., 2017). The main argument, however, is that everyone, rich or poor, should have a measured attitude towards nature. Voluntary simplicity is a consciously chosen lifestyle in line with ethical values; it is an approach that an individual chooses to pursue voluntarily (Kara & Irge, 2021, p. 1494). Scientific progress, industrialisation, trade and transport have enabled people to produce and distribute more and better-quality food, clothing, shelter, tools, equipment, comfort and luxury than in the past. (Gregg, 2009, p. 6). However, while the capitalist system transforms material progress into objects of desire that encourage people to consume, the movement for voluntary simplicity emerges as a reaction against this understanding of consumption and includes actions, discourses and phenomena aimed at living a moderate life.

## Methodology of the Study

In this section, the purpose, importance, method and sample selection of the study are given.

### Purpose and Importance of the Study

In Win Wenders' *Perfect Days*, the character Hirayama goes deeper into the philosophy of voluntary simplicity by adopting a minimal lifestyle. This study aims to analyse how individuals perceive voluntary simplicity and the reflections of this perception in cinema. Voluntary simplicity manifests itself as an alternative to the intense consumption culture of individuals today, and the reflections of this philosophy in cinema offer a different perspective to the audience. Hirayama's minimal life is shaped not only by external elements but also by an inner journey. In this context, while the richness that individuals feel in their inner world is combined with the peace and balance brought by a simple life, it becomes important to convey these experiences through cinema. Therefore, this study tries to understand how voluntary simplicity is perceived at the individual level and how this perception is shaped in the film *Perfect Days*.

### Sample Selection

Purposive sampling method was preferred in the study. Purposive sampling involves the selection of participants or materials according to certain characteristics in qualitative research and plays an important role in explaining events and phenomena. (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2016). Patton (2002) defines this method as "identifying participants or samples that will provide the most appropriate information and experience to achieve the objectives of the research". In this context, the purposive sampling approach used in the study is of great importance in terms of analysing the themes of the film *Perfect Days* in depth and understanding the individual perception of voluntary simplicity. The selected *Perfect Days* sample allows for a comprehensive analysis of the themes in the film.

Many cinema films are often productions that emphasise an alternative lifestyle to consumer culture, the fast pace of modern life and materialism. These films focus on themes that promote minimalism, sustainability, natural living and simple living. Many films or documentaries associated with the concept of voluntary simplicity deal with these themes. For example, *The Straight Story* (1999, David Lynch), *The Beach* (2000, Danny Boyle), *Grizzly Man* (2005, Werner Herzog), *Into the Wild* (2007, Sean Penn), *Minimalism: A Documentary About the Important Things* (2016, Matt D'Avella), *Captain Fantastic* (2016, Matt Ross) and *Nomadland* (2020, Chloé Zhao) are notable examples in this context. The common main theme that stands out in these films is the criticism of the materialistic and consumption-oriented values brought about by modern life and the search for alternative lifestyles. The desire to live in touch with

nature and minimalist life in these films stand in a completely different place from the film *Perfect Days*. The character Hirayama in the film voluntarily lives a minimalist and simple life by staying in modern life and not escaping from the cycle of capitalist life. He leads a minimal life among people despite people. Hirayama is not against modern life. He finds inner peace and contradictions in himself. Since both the character Hirayama and the theme of the film provide a wide range for analysis, the film *Perfect Days* was preferred as a sample.

## Method

The film '*Perfect Days*' was analysed using deconstruction and document analysis methods. Document analysis is a method that systematically deals with themes, symbols, characters, dialogues and audiovisual elements of motion pictures. In addition, audiovisual materials such as sound recordings, posters and tickets can also be included in this analysis (Green & Thorogood, 2018; Kaçar, 2024). This method assumes a complementary role to research based on the principles of impartiality and objectivity (İslamoğlu & Alnıaçık, 2019, p. 228).

In this framework, the film *Perfect Days* was analysed in depth through elements such as main and sub-themes, symbols, images, use of colour and locations. In addition, the film was analysed in terms of how the very few dialogues used in a minimal sense reflect the theme, plot and character contradictions of the film.

Deconstruction of the film *Perfect Days* was carried out with document analysis. Deconstruction is a method developed by the 20th century French philosopher Jacques Derrida that enables in-depth analysis of texts. Derrida developed this method to question the binary oppositions underlying Western philosophy (Derrida, 2014). Deconstruction is not a destructive criticism in the classical sense, but a text-reading strategy that aims to reveal alternative references that are covered up. Deconstruction is an alternative reading method that accompanies the dissolution of the dynamics within the text itself, rather than eliminating a text through external intervention. In this respect, it should be considered not as a destructive or pessimistic, but as a positive and developmental attitude (Rutli, 2016, p. 64). In this study, in addition to the known meanings of the film, an alternative and positive reading that tries to make sense of what is not expressed and covered up has been tried to be carried out.

The deconstructive approach/method is used in film theory and criticism to analyse how films create meaning not only through story and characters, but also through cinematographic techniques, genres and narrative structures. As a result, cinematography can be considered as a form of writing (Brunette, 1986, p. 61). Brunette and Wills (2014) argue that cinema, although not a language in the traditional sense, is a field where meaning is constantly reconstructed in a manner similar to Derrida's concept of 'writing'.

Although the director presents a constructed meaning, from a deconstructive perspective, there is no limit to the meaning of a text; a text can have not only a single meaning, but multiple or multiple meanings. Deconstruction is a powerful method that emphasises the multiplicity and ambiguity of meaning in cinema and questions how narratives and structures are constructed. This approach offers new ways of thinking and perceiving by distancing the viewer from traditional patterns of interpretation.

In this study, a reading was made to understand the contradictions, anxieties and meanings of images underlying Hirayama's minimalist life. In the process of analysis, first a superficial interpretation was made within the framework of the film's theme of voluntary simplicity, which everyone can easily understand, and then a deeper examination was made by deconstruction. In this context, Hirayama's view of his life, his limited social interactions, the places he visits, the photographs he takes, the tree metaphor in the film, the woman he loves, the places shown and the routine elements such as the time he spends with his colleague are discussed. The contradictions and neurotic concerns that stand out in these routines are evaluated as a different layer of meaning. The study has tried to analyse the depths of cinematographic narratives based on the deconstruction of inner anxieties with the theme of voluntary simplicity for the viewers.

## Analysis of the Film '*Perfect Days*'

In this chapter, the plot of the film *Perfect Days* is analyzed and how structural and technical elements and dualities are reflected. At the same time, the effect of voluntary simplicity on the character and the neurotic concerns that the character tries to cover up while preferring a simple life are analyzed through deconstruction.

## The Subject of the Film '*Perfect Days*'

Directed by Wim Wenders, *Perfect Days* explores the meaning of life and the beauty of ordinary moments by focusing on the everyday life of a man named Hirayama living in Tokyo. Hirayama lives a simple and organised life as a lonely man. By delving deep into his daily routines, the film sheds light on his character's inner world and personal values.

Hirayama wakes up early in the morning to the sound of a woman's broom on the street and gets out of bed. He first brushes his teeth, then trims his moustache, shaves and washes his face. He waters his flowers and looks at them with a smile. After putting on his work clothes and taking his necessary belongings with him, he leaves the house. He looks at the sky, drinks his instant drink, chooses a cassette tape, puts it in the cassette player and sets off for work with the same music every morning. Hirayama meticulously cleans the same toilets every day, eats his lunch under the same tree that he considers as his friend, goes to the public bath at the same time after he finishes his work. In the evening, he goes to the same places, then goes home, reads his book and goes to sleep.



Hirayama's weekends are also bound by his own rituals: he goes to the laundrette, spends time at the bookshop and eats at the restaurant where the woman he loves works. In the film, all these routines constitute the basic flow of Hirayama's life. However, while performing these daily actions, he always seems content and in harmony with nature. The fact that he wakes up at the same time every morning and starts the new day by taking a deep breath symbolises a rebirth. The way he looks up at the sky and smiles with laughing eyes is an expression of his deep gratitude for his existence.

These simple and quiet moments make Hirayama's existence more meaningful. These seemingly routine actions are actually the source of peace and serenity in his life. With this minimalist approach, Wenders offers viewers the opportunity to find deeper meaning in the simple moments of life. Hirayama's rituals, beyond being a part of his ordinary life, open a door for the viewer to understand the character's philosophy of life. His silence and simple way of life, while leading the viewer to deep thoughts, offers an opportunity to discover the richness of his life.

By choosing the opposite of a life that Hirayama's character could have, Wenders skilfully brings the simplicity of the time he spends and the places he inhabits to the cinema. This minimal lifestyle is in striking contrast to the modern structure of Tokyo. Despite the fast pace of the city, Hirayama's slow and thoughtful lifestyle endeavours to reveal the beauty of ordinary moments that individuals overlook. The film emphasises the theme of "the beauty of ordinariness and simple life"; the small moments and details of Hirayama's daily life gain an existential meaning. His longing for the past and the inner happiness he finds in the small details of life offer a deep meaning to the viewers.

### **The Construction of Narrative Structure in the Film 'Perfect Days'**

The narrative structure based on the routines that constitute the subject of the film emphasises the simplicity of the character's life rather than a classical storytelling. Classical narrative cinema is usually characterised by a three-stage structure with a conflict, climax and conclusion. However, *Perfect Days* deviates from this structure and directs the audience more towards the character's inner journey and the simple but meaningful moments of his life. While in classical narrative and mainstream cinema there are elements of suspense and unexpected events that increase the viewer's curiosity, *Perfect Days* leaves these elements aside and invites the viewer to witness the details of Hirayama's daily life more closely. This narrative style, rather than bringing the flow of events in the film to a certain dramatic climax, offers the opportunity to explore the banalities of life and the deeper meanings within them. In this context, *Perfect Days* goes beyond the boundaries of classical narrative by presenting a deep

narrative through the repetition and simplicity of daily life while questioning the expectations of the audience.

While the development and change of the character is expected in traditional narrative structures, here, instead of change, the existence of a cyclical structure comes to the fore. Conflict or resolution in the film does not emerge unexpectedly. For example, scenes depicting simple moments of daily life do not fulfil the audience's search for excitement; even an emotional moment such as love cannot fulfil this expectation. This situation shows an approach contrary to traditional narrative rules.

The film focuses on Hirayama's inner world and mood, concentrating more on the character's thoughts and feelings than on external events. As the viewer participates in this inner journey, they leave behind the traditional progression of the story and experience a more personal, deeper experience. This structure follows the conventional narrative forms (exposition, knot, resolution) of tragedies, dramas, stories, epics, fairy tales and mainstream cinema (Aristoteles, 2021) and the eternal journey of the protagonist is a part of the narrative structure (Campbell, 2017) outside of it. Unlike such narratives, *Perfect Days*, instead of presenting a clear conflict or resolution, presents the depths of the character's ordinary life to the audience and emphasises the cyclicity of life.

In addition, the minimalist approach of scene transitions, music and dialogues in the film distracts the audience from the feeling of an intense story and therefore does not create an expectation of a conflict or climax. In this way, *Perfect Days* both distances the viewer from classical narrative structures and offers the opportunity to witness the character's simple but meaningful life up close.

### **Visual and Auditory Simplicity in the Narrative Structure of the Film 'Perfect Days'**

The simplicity and minimalist approach in *Perfect Days* stands out with the use of cinematographic techniques. By going beyond the limits of traditional cinematographic techniques, the audience's perception of the film is not only through the characters, but also through technical formal elements. The film achieved the simplicity of the production process by working with a small number of crew members; this brings the audience closer to the essence of the story. Fixed shooting techniques are preferred instead of moving cameras, emphasising the naturalness of the space and characters. By avoiding unnecessary lighting and complex plans, a simple but effective narrative is adopted in every scene. Long single plan sequences and simple shots used at different angles offer the viewer a deep experience. This minimalist approach supports the simplicity of the film's theme stylistically and offers viewers the opportunity to explore the depths of ordinary life.

While the technical naturalism of the film reinforces the simplicity of the narrative, Wenders built the visual language of the film on a minimalist aesthetic. Fixed

camera angles and long shot sequences reflect the simplicity and peacefulness of Hirayama's life, while the colour palette is created in harmony with the character's mood. The pastel tones in Hirayama's living spaces create a sense of serenity and peace.

While these visual preferences of the film help the audience to perceive the world from Hirayama's perspective, the music used in the film also provides clues about the character's inner world. The music he listens to from the past years with old cassettes expresses his longing for the past and his mental state; this strengthens the film atmosphere and adds an emotional depth to the character. Thus, Perfect Days offers a powerful experience that directs the viewer to the beauty and depth of ordinary moments with both visual and auditory elements.

Music is another important element in this story. In addition to organising the chaos of life and emotions, it serves as a bridge in relationships with others. Hirayama's friendship with his colleague's girlfriend and nephew was

influenced by the music he listened to. At the same time, music develops the ability to cope with loneliness and becomes a source of relaxation and peace in Hirayama's inner journey. His listening to music serves as a means of brightening his mood and deep contemplation.

### Binary Contrasts in 'Perfect Days'

Deconstruction is an effective method to question binary oppositions in films (good-villain, man-woman, hero-enemy e.g.) and to analyse the meanings underlying these oppositions. The contrasts in the film Perfect Days are presented through the lifestyle of the character Hirayama. Hirayama establishes his own virtuous lifestyle by avoiding the requirements of the modern world. This preference weakens his relationship with the modern world and creates a kind of duality. This dichotomy is especially evident in the time Hirayama spends with his young friend and nephew, with whom he cleans the toilets.



*Image 1: Hirayama cleaning the toilet*



*Image 2: Takashi fiddling with the phone*

Hirayama arrives at work on time and his seriousness when cleaning the toilets is striking (Image 1). This is contrasted with his colleague Takashi (Tokio Emoto) (Image 2). Takashi not only arrives late for work, but also performs his duties in a sloppy and non-serious manner. In Image 2, it is clearly observed that Hirayama is doing his work with great care, while Takashi is busy with his phone and neglecting his work.

In different frames of the film, the generation gap between Takashi and Hirayama is emphasised by the changes in their views on life. While Takashi endeavours to talk non-stop, Hirayama prefers to work with his silence and does his job with great pleasure/duty, minus his share of speech. At the beginning of the film, it is even unclear whether Hirayama can actually speak. This reflects the depth of his character and his perspective on his life. Hirayama's seriousness and disciplined approach contrasts with Takashi's superficial and careless demeanour, making the difference between the two characters even more apparent.

The differences in Hirayama's and Takashi's view of the world are evident not only in their professional life but also in their private lives. This situation is aimed at the representation of young generations in modern life. Wenders concretises the perspectives of two different generations in the same image (image 3). Takashi needs Hirayama's help to hang out with his girlfriend because his motorbike breaks down. Hirayama does not turn them down and witnesses the two young lovers on the road as they get into his car (visual 3). During the time Hirayama spends in his car, the differences between his interactions with the two young lovers become apparent. The expressions of the

two young lovers mixing Hirayama's cassettes show how different their view of the world is. Takashi's girlfriend Aya (Aoi Yamada) expresses that they like the music they put in the cassette player even though they are listening to it for the first time. Hirayama, on the other hand, looks strangely at the songs she searches for on her phone. Before getting out of the car, Aya secretly throws the cassette in her bag; this is important in that it reveals people with different levels of expectations of the world.

At the place where old cassettes are sold (image 4), Takashi sees that Hirayama's cassettes are worth a lot of money and insists Hirayama to sell them. Hirayama does not want to sell his cassettes. Takashi insists that love is difficult without money, whereupon Hirayama gives him all the money in his pocket and expresses that he does not want to sell his tapes. This scene clearly reveals the dualities and differences between Takashi and Hirayama. While for Takashi and Aya everything is temporary and worthless, for Hirayama the old cassettes are of value and the feeling of love is not temporary, it is unique and permanent. This situation, beyond voluntary simplicity, also reveals how the expectations of different generations from life change in the film. Here, the changing value judgements and expectations of individuals with modern life are emphasised. The comparison of Takashi, who has daily transient values, with Hirayama, who has a minimal number of tools, is important in terms of showing the contradictions and contradictions in changing life. This difference in meaning and value is concretised in the following scenes not only with the colleague but also with the family members.



*Image 3: Image of Takashi, Aya and Hirayama*



*Image 4: Image of the shop where the tapes were sold*



*Image 5: Niko looking at the tape*



*Image 6: Hirayama and Niko on a bicycle*

The difference in value and worthlessness between modern life and tradition is also supported by the discourses of Hirayama's niece Niko (Arisa Nakano), who is involved in his life. The dialogue between Hirayama and his niece Niko as they drive to work in the early hours of the morning clearly reveals the differences in their worlds of meaning. In Image 5, Niko shows the cassette of Liam Morrison and asks *"Is it on Spotify?"*. However, Hirayama replies *"I don't know what that is, I don't know, where is this place?"* because he does not know what digital music platforms are. When Niko laughs and replies *"It's not a shop"*, this situation reveals the gap between Hirayama's lifestyle in the digital age of the young generation and his own minimal life. This dialogue emphasizes that there is a significant difference and contradiction between the two generations not only in terms of lifestyle but also in terms of their view of the world and value judgments.

Hirayama's difference with young people is embodied in the dialogues between them while Niko is riding his bicycle (image 6). Niko says, *"You have nothing in common with my mother; she says that you and I live in different worlds"*. *"That may be true,"* Hirayama replies, *"The world is made up of different worlds; some are connected, some are not. My world... your mother's is quite different,"* emphasising the differences between individuals. This statement reveals how Hirayama is at a distance not only with young people but also with his own peers. While Niko

tries to explain his world, Hirayama's lack of answers further deepens the gap in the world of meaning between the two characters. This situation increases the richness of the themes in the film by emphasising the conflict between different generations' perspectives on life and value judgements and reveals Hirayama's desire to continue his life in minimal life without expectations from digital life. Another similarity of the duality and difference Hirayama experiences with other people is evident in the Skytree, which is reflected as a symbol of modern life with trees in nature.

The Tokyo Skytree (image 7), a high-rise structure rising in the centre of Tokyo, is prominently highlighted throughout the film, representing the contradiction between modern life and Hirayama's minimalist lifestyle. This structure, which is seen in many scenes where Hirayama is present, reflects the architectural structure of modern life through toilets, parks and streets, and emphasises the cultural dimensions of modern life. When analysed from a deconstructive point of view, it is understood that the meanings of trees (image 8) in Hirayama's life change with the uniqueness of each moment.

As the symbol of the building, the Sky Tree stands out as a symbol that connects the earth to the sky and represents the cosmic order (Eliade, 2020). Skytree, which is shown in many scenes of the film, is located in the most central



part of Tokyo. It is emphasised in many scenes that there is a connection between Hirayama's life and this structure. Hirayama's house is located close to the city centre and the toilets he cleans are located around the Skytree. The trees constantly shown in the film and this structure in the centre of Tokyo reveal that the mythical life of the past period has been carried to the present. Although the director does not reflect this situation as a contradiction, it can be said that there is a contrast between these two elements due to Hirayama's connection with real trees. In the film, the Skytree structure and the trees that Hirayama is constantly filming also express the reincarnation of the cosmic myths of the past in modern structures. The Cosmic Tree, on the one hand, is not accessible, on the other hand, it stands out as a symbol that can be found in every homeland. The cosmic tree, every city, every temple, every temple can be located at the centre of the universe (Eliade, 2020). The director draws attention to the ordinary existence of the 'Sky Tree' representation in a minimal life.

A meaningful connection can be established between this cosmic symbol and the trees that Hirayama watches and photographs every lunchtime. While these trees symbolise Hirayama's past and his ties with nature, they also reflect his commitment to traditional values. The Skytree structure appears as a symbol associated with modern values. This structure is deliberately included in the composition in most of Hirayama's outdoor shots. Skytree is not only a symbol of modern life but also a reference to the cosmic story of Tokyo. While the trees that Hirayama watches at every lunch expresses his connection with the past and his loyalty to traditional values, Skytree is included in this story as a symbol of modernism. This interaction between the past and the modern draws attention as an element that enriches the overall thematic texture of the film. It can also be said that a universal myth is perpetuated with the image of 'Skytree'.

Skytree seems to be a reflection of the Sky Tree by combining this symbolism with a modern structure. With its height and the visuality it adds to its surroundings, it symbolises the connection with the sky and the dynamism of modern life, while also representing the balance between nature and technology. In the film *Perfect Days*, this structure stands out as the main symbol of the main themes and dualities. Hirayama's simple lifestyle allows the individual to question his existence in the crowded and fast-paced life of Tokyo. In the film, symbols such as Tokyo Skytree offer a spiritual connection to the relationship with the past and characters lost in the chaos of modern life.

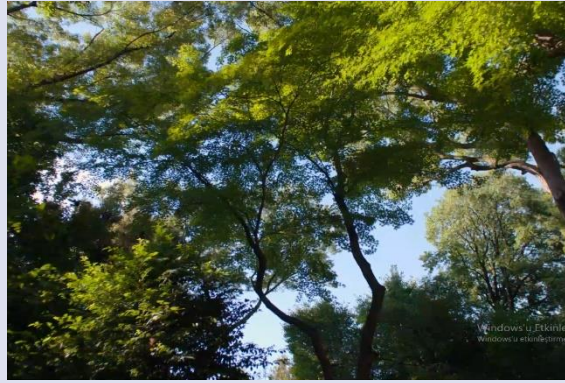
Although it is unclear what exactly Hirayama sees in his dreams, his life routines in the film can be seen as a reflection of his subconscious. The tree, which occupies an important place in Hirayama's life, shows that it has a special meaning in the depths of his life. When it emerges in the unconscious, this tree represents one's search for meaning in existence.

According to Eliade (2017, p. 18), the tree symbol is a symbol whose meaning can be decoded in dreams and imaginative experiences. In mythologies and religions, this symbol is associated with ideas such as renewal, rebirth, immortality, and the 'source of life'. Furthermore, the 'Sky Tree' symbolises the ascension of the soul and the quest for knowledge. Hirayama reflects these concepts as a character who embarks on a journey for the soul to reach the sky and continues his quest for wisdom in the process. The tree branches photographed by Hirayama symbolise his ties with nature and the past, as well as his quest for wisdom.

In the film, the Sky Tree can be read as both a mythological symbol and a symbol of modern life. While it represents the relationship between nature and man in Japanese culture, its parallels with Mircea Eliade's meanings of trees stand out. Through this symbolism, Hirayama reveals humanity's ties to the past and its search for the future, which construct meaning in human life.



*Image 7: Image of the Skytree shown in the film*



*Image 8: Image of the tree taken by Hirayama*

### Reflection of Voluntary Simplicity in Character

With the deconstruction approach, it can be said that there cannot be a fixed meaning in the film *Perfect Days* and that the film is open to different interpretations. This invites the audience to rethink and question the meanings in the film. In addition to the theme of voluntary simplicity, the film emphasises the multiplicity and ambiguity of meaning in the film by providing clues about Hirayama's past. This ambiguity offers the audience the opportunity to reconstruct the film in its own context. For example, it is important to distinguish voluntary simplicity from "frugality". As Chowdhury (2018) notes, frugality is about avoiding waste and is supported by many religious beliefs. Weber's (2011) *Protestant Ethics and the Spirit of Capitalism* also emphasises frugality for the purpose of accumulating wealth. In contrast, Hirayama's simplicity emerges as a personal and faith-independent preference; unlike figures such as Jesus, Buddha, Thoreau and Gandhi, it is at the very centre of modern life. In urban life where capitalist living conditions are felt, Hirayama lives a simple life away from consumer culture. This has a different meaning from those who prefer the usual ascetic life. As Gregg (2009) states, voluntary simplicity is based on the principles of "unity of purpose, sincerity and honesty" and is a stand against the unnecessary complexities of modern life.

Hirayama's preference for simplicity is based on a philosophy that rejects the promises of happiness offered by capitalism. Adopting the philosophy of "less is actually more", Hirayama prefers a happiness far from materialism (Huneke, 2005, p. 528). According to Ergen (2016), voluntary simplicity is a way of life that an individual chooses with his/her free will. Hirayama's choice to live a simple life in a small house in the centre of Tokyo by rejecting material wealth in this direction can be associated with a choice of his own free will. There are no living conditions that would condemn Hirayama to this life. The viewer can relate this to the dialogues between him and his sister. His sister asks Hirayama "Do you really clean toilets?" and cannot hide her surprise at his positive answer. This scene shows that Hirayama's chosen lifestyle is a search for inner fulfilment rather than material elements. According to Elgin and Mitchell (1977), "a life that is outwardly simple and inwardly rich" strengthens environmental consciousness and helps individuals find a fulfilling existence. Hirayama, while he

could lead a luxurious life, continues to live his minimal life with smiling eyes, preferring a more satisfying and meaningful existence.

Hirayama's simple life also expresses his desire for inner peace and integration with the environment. The care he takes in watering his flowers every morning reveals his connection with nature and his environmental awareness. This symbolises that he lives a life in touch with nature even in the middle of Tokyo. He lives a minimalist life in a small house with daily routines and established habits. Hirayama's house is like his sanctuary. His preference for second-hand goods shows that he leads a conscious life against consumption. Ergen (2016) states that environmentally conscious individuals generally adopt the use of second-hand goods; the fact that Hirayama's living space contains old cassettes, books and simple items proves how much he has internalised this philosophy of life.

Although there is no explicit criticism of consumption and materialism in the film, Hirayama's lifestyle is an indirect criticism of these values. His distant relationship with his family, his limited communication with his environment and his self-sufficient life in his own small world draws a profile of an individual who differs from social norms. Alexander and Ussher (2012) argue that voluntary simplicity offers an alternative lifestyle to high consumption habits. Hirayama offers an alternative life in the centre of Tokyo by being content with a little, in search of meaning away from the chaos of the modern world.

### The Search for Non-Contradictory Existence and Deconstruction of Anxiety

Hirayama's life is the story of a man in search of a simple and contradiction-free existence away from the chaos and confusion of the modern world. Hirayama, who chooses to live only in the moment without thinking about the past and the future, lives a lonely life completely isolated from technology and social norms. He has no social ties such as women, children or family; he does not communicate with anyone outside of work. There are no modern communication tools such as television, computer or smartphone in his home. This minimalist lifestyle allows him to completely disconnect from the outside world and focus solely on nature.



*Image 9: Hirayama looking at the content of the book in the bookshop*

Hirayama goes to the bookstore to buy the same book that he gifted to his nephew and buys the book (Image 9). The dialogues between the bookseller and Hirayama about the book can be read as a reference to Hirayama's anxiety. The bookseller says "*Patricia Highsmith knows everything about anxiety. She made me realise that fear and anxiety are different things*" is important in terms of revealing Hirayama's general anxieties.

Hirayama, who lives as a seemingly virtuous and happy individual, carries a deep anxiety and fear, hints of which are given in certain scenes of the film. The book on anxiety and fear shown in one scene of the film (image 9) reflects his neurotic state of mind. After giving this book as a gift to her nephew, she goes back to the bookstore to buy one for herself. The book cover and the bookseller's statements suggest that anxiety lies behind Hirayama's voluntary simplicity. In the film, the minimal contradictions and uncertainties left in the character's life provide the opportunity to analyse from a different perspective. Some small details based on anxiety allow us to interpret Hirayama's life as a neurotic escape.

While fear is an identifiable reaction to a specific object or situation, anxiety is ambiguous and is defined as a state of fear without an object. Since the source of anxiety is not clear, this feeling is more disturbing (Salecl, 2013, p. 26). According to Freud, anxiety is associated with the anticipation of a danger and involves being prepared for this danger. However, it is not always clear what the danger is. Freud defines simple anxiety as panic felt in response to a specific danger, whereas he defines neurotic anxiety as a feeling of unexplained and often latent fear, not related to a specific situation. (Gall, 2012). Hirayama's choice of a minimalist life, rejecting escape from nature or a rich life, is actually seen as a manifestation of neurotic anxiety.

Hirayama's anxiety and contradictory mood can be seen in the small details of his life. For example, the tears in his eyes while saying goodbye to his sister reflects his deep inner anxiety. Although he stays away from the modern world, his relationship with his sister causes his repressed emotions to surface. In another scene, when his car runs out of petrol, he seems to have lost his routine and displays a restless state. This moment reveals his anxiety over the disruption of the order in his daily life. In addition, when he sees the woman he loves hugging her ex-husband, he starts drinking by the seaside, showing that his repressed emotions come to the surface in unexpected situations. These moments point to a neurotic

anxiety lurking deep beneath Hirayama's seemingly calm surface.

While fear emerges as an instantaneous reaction to a specific object, anxiety manifests itself with a vaguer perception of threat. The fact that Hirayama carries only enough money to save the day to meet his daily needs and avoids using credit cards and the financial processes offered by the capitalist world shows that he avoids the material world. Hirayama's minimalist life, combined with his Zen Buddhism and interest in nature, allows us to see him living like a modern 'monk'. Hirayama organises his house like a monastery and lives his life in solitude. Although some scenes and dreams give clues as to the reasons for Hirayama's anxieties that lead him to a solitary and minimalist life, it is difficult to read the reasons for this in their entirety. Hirayama's attempt to be alone in large crowds and his minimalist life can be considered as a reflection of consciousness and unconscious. According to Freud's view, the unconscious is an area dominated by the irrational. However, according to Jung's thought, the unconscious refers to an area that harbours the deepest source of wisdom (Fromm, 1978, p. 42). The contradictions in Hirayama's life, his loneliness and the dreams he sees provide a framework closer to Jung's understanding of the unconscious. For this reason, Hirayama's character stands out as a figure who tries to lead a wise life among the crowds.

Hirayama's life with psychoanalytical elements also evokes Zen Buddhism. His character and lifestyle reflect the basic principles of Zen. 'Zen' is the art of seeing one's own inner being, the depth of one's inner structure; it is the path that leads to freedom from dependence Suzuki (1997, p. 64). Hirayama's loneliness is not a state of indifference or indifference; it is related to the state of self-renunciation, which is called 'purification of the self' in Buddhism Suzuki (1997). According to Suzuki, the unconscious occurs quietly and noiselessly around our individual consciousness. Hirayama's serene, solitary and noiseless lifestyle expresses this state and the reflection of Zen Buddhism.

Suzuki (1997, p. 229) states, 'The feeling of solitude aroused by the sensitivity of infinity is a feeling that fully reflects the Zen spirit'. The spiritual simplicity, spontaneity, going out of the mould, subtlety and experiencing the ordinariness of daily affairs with a deep meaning in Zen is a reflection of the integrity inherent in the life of Hirayama's character. Hirayama is a Zen figure who maintains his spiritual serenity in the contradictory and chaotic atmosphere of the

crowds. However, he also harbours some contradictions related to his unconscious.

Based on Hirayama's minimalist life, is it possible to lead a life without contradictions within the necessities of capitalist life? This raises the question. When Hirayama's friend calls him on the phone and tells him that he has quit his job and will not come to his shift, Hirayama's anxiety increases, and he must work late at night. Due to Hirayama's long hours of work, he is unable to fulfil any of his daily routines. The life without contradiction that Wenders tries to construct with Hirayama's character is actually not possible, the anxiety of individuals may increase with the effect of conditions that may develop outside of us, and it may be difficult for them to maintain the life they have planned, based on the necessities of work-life conditions.

In order not to face his anxieties and fears, Hirayama takes refuge in routines, lives a limited social life and does not connect with his past. However, his instant reactions to events such as saying goodbye to his sister, running out of petrol in his car and seeing the woman he loves in the arms of her ex-husband reveal that his anxieties and fears are hidden deep inside. Hirayama, while trying to escape from the chaos of the modern world, actually carries the anxieties of this chaos within him. Unlike fear, anxiety creates a state of constant vigilance for him and this situation shows that there is a deep conflict behind his minimal life. Hirayama continues to face the complexity of the modern world while searching for an existence without contradiction.

## Evaluation and Conclusion

Wenders' *Perfect Days* depicts the character Hirayama's journey through the fast-paced and consumption-oriented structure of Tokyo around the themes of voluntary simplicity and minimalism. Through Hirayama's simple lifestyle and rituals, the film offers the viewer an alternative way of life to the materialistic world and the opportunity to discover the deeper meaning of ordinary moments.

Hirayama's daily rituals support the philosophy of voluntary simplicity while creating deep meanings with simple actions, and this theme is visually and aurally reinforced by the utilization of fixed camera angles, pastel colour palette and minimal music that reflect the character's inner peace. While questioning the consumption-oriented structure of modern society, the film presents a contrast with Hirayama's serene and minimalist life; in this way, it encourages the audience both to question materialism and to think about the alternative values offered by the philosophy of voluntary simplicity.

The following evaluations can be made regarding the prominent findings related to voluntary simplicity in the analyses:

- *Simplicity and minimalist approach:* Simplicity and minimalism are achieved through cinematographic techniques, bringing the viewer closer to the essence of the story. Hirayama's mood is reflected through camera shooting techniques and natural lighting, while the use of pastel colour palette and minimal music reinforces his inner peace. These elements offer the opportunity to explore the depths of ordinary life through the character's rituals. The simplicity of Hirayama's narrative is supported by the technical form and style.

- *Intrinsic wealth and conscious choice:* Hirayama distances himself from consumer culture and focuses on the pursuit of inner wealth instead of material wealth. His consciously preferred minimalism with voluntary simplicity distances him from the material world and provides a spiritual fulfilment. With this lifestyle, her social ties and the impositions of the modern world are questioned.
- *Minimalism, environmental consciousness and commitment to nature:* A relationship is established between Hirayama's connection with nature, voluntary simplicity and ecological consciousness. His effort to stay away from the modern world and his desire to live in touch with nature minimise his life and create an environmental awareness.
- *Zen Buddhism and the search for inner peace:* In the film, Hirayama's lifestyle bears traces of Zen Buddhism, thus strengthening his search for spiritual serenity. Although he tries to live a life away from the chaos of the modern world, this serenity is intertwined with a constant state of alertness in his daily routines; this situation shows that his inner anxieties still exist.
- *Living in the moment and escaping from the material world:* The film emphasises Hirayama's preference for living only in the moment, his conscious avoidance of social ties and his distant approach to the material world. He structures his daily life only around the necessary needs and avoids worries about the past or the future. In this way, Hirayama also distances himself from his relationship with his family and lives only the beauty of the moment.
- *The search for existence without contradiction and anxiety:* Although Hirayama wants to live a life away from the chaos of the modern world, the small details of his daily life and his sudden reactions show that he is deeply anxious. His search for a non-contradictory existence cannot prevent him from clashing with his repressed emotions and encountering situations that trigger his neurotic anxieties. While his minimalist lifestyle offers him peace on the surface, his constant state of alertness in his inner world reveals that anxiety is a permanent reality.

When analysed with a deconstructive approach, Hirayama's minimalist lifestyle, shaped by his desire to get away from the values and technology imposed by society, offers a simplicity on the surface; however, it creates a loneliness with the anxieties and conflicts hidden in the depths. This becomes even more evident in scenes such as Hirayama's farewell with his sister, revealing the tension between the effort to escape from the modern world and repressed emotions.

In conclusion, apart from neurotic anxiety, *Perfect Days* invites the viewer to question the consumer society and the search for individual peace by centring on the theme of voluntary simplicity. Through Hirayama's story, the film reveals how minimalism opens the door to inner richness and the search for meaning; thus, the audience is given the opportunity to consider the potential effects of simplification and conscious choices in their own lives.

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