

Starring Koji Yakusho, Tokio Emoto, Sayuri Ishikawa. Directed by Wim Wenders. Written by Takuma Takasaka and Wim Wenders. Premiered May 25th, 2023, at the Cannes Film Festival.

A Moment of Silence for Wim Wenders' *Perfect Days*

Review by Mollie Robertson

Wim Wenders, perhaps one of the most seasoned professionals in the film industry today, comes with a new tale of a more modest approach, but one that nevertheless tugs at your heartstrings and questions your placement in the world. *Perfect Days*, though slowly paced, is a deep meditation on both the appreciation and vulnerability of life that finds the beauty within its small and authentic moments.

There is no character more enjoyable and likeable than Hirayama, a man who lives on an endless stream of “perfect days”, ones lived in contemplation, simplicity, tranquility, and silence, apart from listening to his vast array of classic rock music. His job as a toilet cleaner is done to the utmost fruition, his hobbies consist of reading literature by Faulkner and Highsmith and taking photos of the tall trees above him. His routine is monotonous and spent alone, but he seemingly is content with it. However, his idea of the “perfect day” is not always met when he comes across obstacles in his path, specifically the ghosts and regrets of his past.

Perfect Days explores both escaping your past life through the mundane, yet romanticizing of your current. The past is always a cloud that looms over one's everyday actions, but it is the appreciation for these life lessons that Wenders successfully communicates. Wenders' choice of music is poignantly intentional, each song's lyricism paralleling perfectly with the complex emotions Hirayama feels but is unable to fully communicate. “Sometimes I feel so happy, sometimes I feel so sad” sings the Velvet Underground through Hirayama's van as he drives to work, gazing up at the Tokyo skyline against the morning sun, a hint of sadness behind his eyes. Hirayama's lack of dialogue and quiet persona evades all sorts of outward emotion; he operates as an enigma to the people around him. He instead distracts himself with the simple pleasures of life, an act that isn't always sustainable.

Though he may not directly confront these feelings while awake, they manifest themselves into his dreams. Wenders' black and white, avant-garde approach to the inner workings of Hirayama's mind are elusive and abstractly beautiful. As each dream occurs, viewers are forced to grasp at hints to the happenings of his past. Though difficult to comprehend, it is the only glimpse that one has to his subconscious, what he really is thinking about during his string of monotonous days: his family. It takes the entirety of the film for Hirayama to, not necessarily come out of his shell per se, but to fully feel his emotions in a climactic explosion ironically overlayed with the Nina Simone lyrics, “It's a new day, it's a new life, and I'm feeling good.” One cannot escape the pain of their past, it can only be healed through recognition and being comfortable in its vulnerability. It is one of the many nuances of life that we must come to understand.

Though titled *Perfect Days*, no day will be necessarily “perfect”, as the perfect day doesn't truly exist. It is only acceptance of this inevitability that is necessary to embrace life as it comes. Wenders shows the closure that can come from it, as melancholic as it may be, but how worthy it truly is.

Starring Pauline Acquart, Adele Haenel. Directed by Celine Sciamma; Written by Celine Sciamma. Premiered at the Cannes Film Festival May 17th, 2007.

Water Lilies: The Beginning of a New Queer Feminine Voice

Review by Mollie Robertson

The acclaimed French director Celine Sciamma, known primarily for her critically acclaimed film *Portrait of a Lady on Fire*, is perhaps one of the most realized and intentional auteurs of the 21st century. Having attended the prestigious French film school *La Femis*, Sciamma wrote her thesis screenplay entitled *Water Lilies* in inspiration of her experience growing up as a queer woman. Her mentor eventually persuaded her to direct the film, and in 2007, her feature debut premiered at the Cannes Film Festival. Though from a humble start, *Water Lilies* successfully prepares its spectators for the next decade and a half of Sciamma's emotionally resonant, and intimate and thematically influential pieces of work.

Water Lilies follows a young girl named Marie who is set on joining her town's synchronized swimming team, not for a particular interest in the activity, but for the sole purpose of getting close to Floriane, the mature, experienced, "bad girl" of the team. Together, they form a bond that transgresses the lines of a normal female friendship, and towards a place much queerer, frustrated, and confused.

Water Lilies is a film that seems rather simple on its surface but has a deeper connotation that deals with the blossoming of queerness from a young age. Marie is a protagonist who appears to know what she wants; her attraction to Floriane is evident and apparent in her behavior and tentative advances. Floriane on the other hand is pointedly flirtatious, but instead leads Marie on, seemingly hesitant to truly pursue Marie as a romantic partner; she represents the queer figure who is afraid to confront their sexuality out of ignorance and confusion. *Water Lilies* shows that queer expression and love is a difficult emotion to confront and realize, especially from a young age, and deals with intertwining complexities that range from male acceptance to trauma surrounding intimacy. The pain of a first love and heartbreak is difficult to cope with and understand, and is a conflict Sciamma captures realistically and emotionally, perhaps due to her drawing upon her own first hand experiences. Though some elements of the plot are left untied or unexplained, Sciamma's accurate depiction of queer adolescence is what set her apart from other filmmakers at the time that were too hesitant on portraying this type of experience. Her radicalism is what made *Water Lilies* the start to a future of beautiful and accurate tellings of queerness.

The style and thematic elements of *Water Lilies* directly foreshadows the coming female-gaze films of Sciamma's career. Like her debut, Sciamma's later films, especially *Tomboy* and *Petite Maman* deal with rather simplistic coming of age stories that unfold into a plethora of inner meanings and explorations of youth and pressures of societal expectations. In *Tomboy* it explores gender expression from the perspective of young girl, and *Petite Maman* explores the generational and personal differences between a grandmother, a mother, and her daughter. Each of Sciamma's films explicitly feature a strong female lead that forms a strong relationship with another female counterpart, and her rather minimalist style in all her films works to her advantage as she's able to depict attraction and emotion in a realist manner. Her actors are subdued in performance and tone, acting merely through their stares, silences, and shifts in body language, unafraid to elicit eroticism. Even *Portrait of a Lady on Fire*, perhaps her most stylized

film, still upholds the same thematic patterns that appear in all her filmography. Sciamma's approach is cinephilic in nature; she pays homage to her film predecessors, specifically Jacques Demy and David Lynch, and is thoughtfully attentive to the visual language of her films, specifically regarding texture and prolonged takes that are self-aware of its simplicity, yet its beauty and importance. With all of her films being connected through similar approaches and tones, Sciamma strongly upholds herself as a consistent auteur with a clear and unique message that she tries to communicate to her audiences.

Sciamma's work as a feminine queer artist has proved influential towards the depiction of female love on screen. Her portrayals of these characters are never rooted in judgement or distaste, but rather complexity and celebration. With her films being acclaimed by critics and audiences alike, including her debut *Water Lilies*, Sciamma is proof that queer stories can be applauded and respected worldwide and not merely through niche communities. *Water Lilies*, though maybe not as fully realized as her later works, is a strong start to Celine Sciamma's strong career and path as a successful auteur.