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IN CINEMATIC SPACE: “KOMOREBI”
IN WIM WENDERS’ PERFECT DAYS**

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YANSIMALARI: WİM WENDERS’İN
MÜKEMMEL GÜNLER FİLMİNDE “KOMOREBİ”

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Keywords:

Nature,
Light,
Cinematic Space,
Wim Wenders,
Komorebi.

Anahtar Kelimeler:

Doğa,
Işık,
Sinematik Mekan,
Wim Wenders,
Komorebi.

ABSTRACT

For centuries, the impact of nature on human life has been a subject of fascination and inquiry for artists and designers. Throughout history, different civilizations have developed many concepts to describe the universal emotions that nature evokes in humans. Komorebi, which has a special meaning in Japanese culture, refers to the sunlight filtering through the leaves of trees, creating a mesmerizing interplay of light and shadow. This term is used to capture the enchanting moment when light gracefully passes through the foliage. This study explores the cinematic representation of Komorebi in Wim Wenders' film Perfect Days (2023) by analyzing its visual manifestations in cinematic space. A qualitative research approach was utilized in the study. Content analysis and observation techniques were used as data collection methods. Within this scope, the spaces where the visual representations of the concept of Komorebi can be observed have been identified in the sequences of the film. The visual data obtained were evaluated through the semiotic analysis in terms of their interaction with light and nature within the framework of the concept and their strategic roles in the film's narrative. This multidisciplinary study suggests that discussing the integration of light and nature in spatial design through the spaces of a film can provide new perspectives on the potential of spatial experiences to enrich storytelling and visual aesthetics.

ÖZ

Doğanın insan yaşamı üzerindeki etkisi yüzyıllardır sanatçılar ve tasarımcılar için bir hayranlık ve araştırma konusu olmuştur. Tarih boyunca farklı medeniyetler, doğanın insanlar için ortak olan hislerini tanımlamak için birçok kavram geliştirmiştir. Japon kültüründe özel bir anlamı olan Komorebi, yaprakların arasından süzülen güneş ışığını tanımlar. Bu kavram, belirli bir anda ışığın ağaçların arasından büyüleyici bir şekilde süzülmesini ifade etmek için kullanılır. Bu çalışmada, auteur yönetmen Wim Wenders'in Mükemmel Günler (2023) filmi üzerinden Komorebi kavramının sinematik mekândaki görsel karşılıkları araştırılmıştır. Çalışmada nitel araştırma yaklaşımı kullanılmış, veri toplama yöntemi olarak içerik analizi ve gözlem tekniklerinden yararlanılmıştır. Bu kapsamda filmde Komorebi kavramının görsel karşılıklarının gözlemlenebildiği mekânlar sekanslarda tespit edilmiştir. Elde edilen görsel veriler, kavram çerçevesinde ışık ve doğa ile kurdukları ilişki ve film anlatısındaki stratejik rolleri açısından göstergebilim yöntemi üzerinden değerlendirilmiştir. Bu multidisipliner araştırmada, mekân tasarımında ışık ve doğa ile bir arada var olmanın mekânsal deneyimleri zenginleştirme gücünü bir filmin mekânları üzerinden tartışmanın yeni bakış açıları sağlayabileceği düşünülmektedir.

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Alıntılanmak için/Cite as: Müştak Sevindik S. (2025) Reflections Of Light And Nature In Cinematic Space: “Komorebi” In Wim Wenders’ Perfect Days, Çukurova Üniversitesi Sosyal Bilimler Enstitüsü Dergisi, 34 (1), 669-690.

INTRODUCTION

The human relationship with nature is becoming more disconnected. Urbanization, fast consumption culture and changes in lifestyles are distancing people from nature every day. However, humans are a part of nature, and it is known that being in a natural environment has a positive effect on human life, physically and spiritually (Bratman et al., 2012; Schultz, 2002; Tam, 2013; Mayer et al., 2008; Kondo et al., 2018). For centuries, artists, writers and architects have been fascinated by the impact of nature on human life (Bawden, 1910; Woodring, 1977; Crawford, 1983; Ulrich, 1993). Throughout history, different civilizations have come up with different concepts to describe the sensations of nature that are common to humans. *Waldeinsamkeit*², in German, describes “the peace of being alone in the woods”, while *Petrichor* is used in English to describe “the pleasant earthy smell after rain”³ (Merriam-Webster Dictionary, 2024). In each culture, these concepts have deep meanings in describing unique moments in everyday life when people experience nature. Similarly, the word *Komorebi* has a special meaning in Japanese culture, describing the sunlight filtering through the leaves of trees. The concept is used to describe the mesmerizing aesthetic beauty of light filtering through trees (Zhang, 2020). This word, dedicated to a unique moment of nature, shows the deep connection of Japanese culture with nature and how they can poetically express the various sensations created by nature.

In Japanese culture, nature and its elements have been at the center of life, art and design throughout history (Edagawa, 2008). Using natural elements as part of spatial design has a long history in Japanese architecture (Sadler, 1963; Takeshi, 2005; Young & Young, 2004; Daniels, 2011). In this context, the *Komorebi* concept is important in Japanese architecture as an aesthetic and functional element. Japanese building culture is based on the principle of being in harmony with nature. Temples and palaces are designed in large gardens, allowing natural light and shadows to penetrate the interior (Edagawa, 2008). Even

during the modernization of architecture, traditional elements and principles are combined with modern design concepts and the *Komorebi* concept continued to be applied in contemporary architectural interpretations. Renowned modern Japanese architects have created designs that emphasize how natural light, a cultural tradition, enriches spatial experiences. In these modern spaces, the dramatic effects of natural light and shadows are used to create a rich experience, peace and serenity.

The *Komorebi* concept has been the subject of studies from many branches of science and art (Minnaert, 2008: 8; Gabriele, 2020; Clements, 2021; Longo & Longo, 2020). Noteworthy research on the concept in the field of architecture is the master’s thesis prepared by Z. Zhang (2020) from the Department of Architecture at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT). Since scientific studies in the field of environmental psychology and public health have proven that connections with nature have positive effects on people’s happiness and concentration, this study argues that creating a living environment connected to nature and embedding the concept of “*Komorebi*”, the sensory experience of nature, into building systems will provide people with the perception of connectedness to nature in the built environment. The visual impact of *Komorebi* has been analyzed and a daylight filtering system has been developed. This system is envisioned to be a very useful proposal to establish a relationship with nature in built environments where natural connections are limited. M. Ishizaki’s master’s thesis (2012) from the Department of Architecture at the University of British Columbia also relates the concept to shopping/retail spaces. In this research, Ishizaki criticizes the homogenizing cities, chain stores, and hypermarket towers that are becoming similar to one another at an alarming rate day by day, and argues that instead of these, the neighborhood scale consisting of diverse small units, commercial units managed by local people would work best for city dwellers. For the retail incubation center project, she proposes in her thesis for

² The compound word “*waldeinsamkeit*”, which is a combination of the words *wald* (forest) and *einsamkeit* (loneliness), was first used as a religious motif, then gained widespread use in literature with the novel by Ludwig Tieck, one of the representatives of German Romanticism (Lindinger, 2020; Tieck, 2020).

³ The word “*petrichor*” was first introduced by Australian mineral chemists Isabel Joy and Richard Grenfell Thomas in their 1964 article “Nature of Argillaceous Odor”, which was published in *Nature*. *Petrichor* was proposed in the article for the unique odor, which was considered to be a fine essence derived from the varied nature of the substance. Subsequently, use of the word became widespread.

the preservation of the identity and livability of cities, she states that the filtered light created by the *Komorebi* effect will create warmth and discovery areas in space. She thinks that this unique space, which will host new interactions, will create a “forest of shops” that breaks the daily banality of the city and dissolves the dichotomies of indoor-outdoor and public-private. Although there are some studies on this subject in the field of architecture, the concept still has not been sufficiently researched in all its aspects in the literature.

Architecture, as an art object, is too multifaceted to be reduced to a single discipline and structure. In other words, the value of an architectural object goes beyond its structural features and is also reflected in the semantic connection it establishes with the art world. In this sense, it would be more accurate to define architecture as a hybrid art that interacts intensively with many branches of art rather than an autonomous discipline (Akay, 2023). It would not be wrong to state that architecture has established the most dominant relationship with the art of cinema after its relationship and representation with different branches of art such as sculpture, painting, literature and music. Anthony Vidler has stated “*Of all the arts, it is architecture that has had the most privileged and difficult relationship to film*” (Dear, 1994; Kaçmaz, 1996). Cinema is almost an experimental laboratory for the design or organization of spaces (Aslan, 2013; Hacıömeroğlu, 2023). The director creates an imaginary reality by the narrative of the movie. The created space appeals to the visual perception of the audience through the colors, images, light and shadow relations, and materials in the images presented. Cinema can make the space directly one of the main characters (protagonist) of the story or use it as a background that strengthens the narrative of the story (Güzer, 2023; Yalın, 2023). A common representation is created by adding the concept of dynamic time, which includes continuity, to the static representation forms of architecture (Akçay Kavakoğlu, 2023).

This study examines how the cinematic spaces in German director Wim Wenders' *Perfect Days* (2023) contribute to the storytelling through nature and light-shadow interactions (*Komorebi*) through a semiotic approach. *Komorebi*, which appears frequently in the film, is not only

a visual motif in the spaces where the main character lives his daily life but also becomes a symbolic element that deepens the character's life story and the meaning of the beauty of nature in life.

The research aims to examine the cinematographic reflections of the concept of *Komorebi* in private and public spaces in the dense urban fabric of Tokyo's Shibuya district, showing the strategic role of spatial design in storytelling and how this role is integrated with the inner world of the character, the main theme of the film and the experience of the viewer. Thus, in this interdisciplinary study where the arts of architecture and cinema intersect, the ways in which the use of light and nature together enrich spatial experiences will be revealed, and the multi-layered contributions of *Komorebi* scenes to the narrative will be discussed through the layers of denotative and connotative meaning.

The Origin of *Komorebi* in Japanese Culture

The Chinese called the archipelago in the direction of the rising sun “*Ribēn*”, meaning “*source of the sun*”, “*day/sun*” and “*root*” (Güvenç, 1992). In Japanese, this word is translated as “*Nippon*”, with the same meaning. As a country of islands symbolizing the sunrise in the easternmost part of Asia, Japan has a deep history and cultural background (Güvenç, 1992). Being an island country has necessarily subjected it to geographical isolation and made it dependent on the conditions of nature. This has made it unique in many respects. Limited island resources and natural conditions have popularized the idea of coexistence with nature (Edagawa, 2008).

Shinto, Japan's deep-rooted religion, is based on the sanctity of nature. This belief system, in which living together in harmony with nature, purity and respect for ancestors are among the basic principles, has influenced Japanese society socially and culturally since ancient times. According to this belief, nature and natural elements have spirits and are considered sacred (Bocking, 1995). The Shinto faith includes physical and spiritual purification rituals performed with natural elements. In addition, the seasonal cycles are celebrated with festivals and prayers are offered to the spirits in gratitude for this abundance of nature (Rots, 2013). Shinto temples, in which the holy

spirits are believed to reside, are built in harmony with nature near mountains, forests and rivers using natural materials such as wood and stone. All these principles in the Shinto belief system have led to respect for nature and environmental awareness in Japanese culture since ancient times.

Another belief system that forms the religious and philosophical infrastructure of Japanese culture is Buddhism (Güvenç, 1992). This belief, which is known to have been brought to Japan from China, is based on minimalism and simplicity. According to this belief, nature is a teacher, and its cycles and changes are a source of deep understanding (Suzuki, 1964). Nature contains a unique environment for direct experience and momentary realizations in the stilling of the mind. “*Mushin*”, meaning an empty mind, is important in Buddhism and “*interaction with nature*” can bring the mind to this state (Hashi, 2016). Practices such as sitting in a quiet forest, watching the flow of a river and so on encourage oneness with the sounds and sights of nature, providing mental clarity and peace. An important element of this belief system is Zen gardens (Weiss, 2013). These gardens are minimalist and symbolic representations of nature in Buddhism, designed for the practice of meditation and mindfulness. Zen temples, like Shinto temples, are designed in harmony with nature. The natural beauties in which the temples are located are thought to deepen the meditations as part of Zen practices (Weiss, 2013). Zen philosophy’s strong relationship with simplicity and nature has deeply influenced and shaped Japanese culture and art for centuries.

Throughout history, the theme of nature has played a central role in cultural and artistic works in Japan under the influence of belief systems. The sacredness, aesthetics and transience of nature, which are common to Shinto and Buddhism beliefs, have formed the basic elements of Japanese art (Jackson Jarves, 2022). In traditional painting, calligraphy and woodblock printing, themes such as the beauty and spirit of nature, peaceful scenes of daily life and the change of seasons have played important roles. In

literature and poetry, the momentary beauty and simplicity of nature have been used as metaphors for human life and emotions (Anesaki, 2023). The fact that nature has such an important place in Japanese culture is undoubtedly reflected in architecture. Although traditional Japanese architecture has developed under many influences across different periods in terms of its historical roots, the basic principle has always been to respect the nature.

This principle can be seen as indicative of an ancient understanding rooted in antiquity. It recognizes the transient nature of life and encourages making sense of and appreciating this impermanence. The Buddhist philosophy of “*mono no aware*”, which means “*awareness of impermanence*”, is also indicative of this deep connection. This philosophy provides a framework for understanding the inextricable relationship of human beings with nature and life in Japanese culture. Creating awareness of one’s experiences in nature helps with in-depth understanding of emotions (Prusinski, 2012). This approach is not only a physical phenomenon, but also the result of understanding the rhythm of nature and effort to establish a deep human connection with nature (Calović, 2022). This understanding is concretized in the individual’s life through experiences. The *Komorebi* concept can be considered an example of this concretization.

Komorebi, which means “*sunlight filtering through the trees*” and refers to a momentary experience of nature, is a combination of the Japanese words “木” (ko - tree), “漏れ” (more - to seep, to filter) and “日” (bi - sun, daylight) (Figure 1.) (Zhang, 2020). *Komorebi* is one of the many terms used in Japanese culture to describe the instant unique beauty of nature and has been used semantically throughout history in daily life, poetry, literature and art. The concept represents the exquisite and ephemeral beauty in the unique nature of nature. In Japan, which means “source of the sun”, the concept emphasizes the importance of the impressive light–shadow experience created by daylight in nature filtering through tree leaves for people (Güvenç, 1992).



Figure 1. Daylight filtering through the trees – *Komorebi* (Personal Archive of Author, 2024)

Komorebi is in line with the Buddhist principles of living in harmony with nature and experiencing the moment, creating a meditative atmosphere that promotes peace and serenity. As in Shinto, it inspires respect for nature and a deep connection with it. This connection can give people a sense of meaning and fulfilment. Drawing on the rich history of Japanese culture, this concept is not only an aesthetic phenomenon, but also an element with deep cultural roots, philosophical background, and psychological and environmental implications.

***Komorebi* in Architecture**

Throughout history, nature and light have been among the most important elements of architecture in terms of functionality and aesthetics. In ancient buildings, they were used to illuminate and ventilate the interior while creating an aesthetic effect. During the Roman period, the use of natural light became more sophisticated. Thanks to the circular opening (*Oculus*) in the centre of the Pantheon's

great dome, the natural light that enters the interior creates a dramatic effect by falling on different points of the space during the day, creating light plays. Natural light had a symbolic meaning beyond aesthetics. Sunlight, as a divine symbol of the gods, had a spiritual significance, especially in sacred spaces. In temples, sunlight shining on a sacred statue or altar at certain times of the day was an important part of worship rituals. Directing light for various purposes and using it as an important component of space was something that ancient architects performed skilfully. In the Gothic architecture of the Middle Ages, natural light entered the interior through stained glass windows with religious motifs, creating dramatic plays of light and shadow that can be described as an art form (Figure 2.). This was used as an element to strengthen the effect of the mystical and spiritual atmosphere in the interior. As can be seen, the natural light–shadow effect applied in architectural spaces has a common effect on a cross-cultural basis, enriching the user's spatial experiences.



Figure 2. The circular opening in the center of the Pantheon's great dome (Oculus) (Istock, 2016),
The bright beam of light inside Milan Cathedral (Istock, 2013)

The *Komorebi* concept puts natural elements and the play of light and shadow at the centre of architectural spatial design. This can be considered not only as an aesthetic principle but also as a reflection of the philosophy of harmony with nature. In architectural design, it is possible to see various correspondences of this philosophy. These may appear as large windows, open plan arrangements and use of natural materials. For example, Zen gardens can be counted among the important *Komorebi* spaces of Japanese culture that emphasize the transience of nature and the effect of light on spatial experiences (Anesaki, 2023; Güvenç, 1992). Based on simplicity, minimalism and balance, these gardens are designed as tools for mental peace and meditative experience. In sensitively designed Zen gardens, the placement of trees and plants can create light and shadow plays at different times of the day and one

can experience *Komorebi*.

The *Komorebi* concept, which can be handled in many ways as a metaphor from an architectural perspective, has an important place among the basic architectural design principles used in Japanese traditional architecture until today. In tatami rooms, which are an important part of dwellings in traditional Japanese architecture, translucent *Shoji* doors and windows and opaque *Fusuma* panels made of natural materials allow daylight to filter softly into the interior (Takeshi, 2005; Yoshida, 1955). In traditional verandas known as *Engawa*, natural light also filters in, giving the spaces a dynamic aesthetic effect and spiritual atmosphere (Locher, 2010). These architectural components allow the *Komorebi* effect to be felt in the interior.



Figure 3. *Shoji* window and panel (translucent panels) (Takeshi, 2005), *Engawa* (veranda) (Yoshida, 1955)

Although the *Komorebi* concept belongs to Japanese culture, it expresses a cross-cultural human experience, and it is possible to come across architectural spaces that give people the same experience in different geographies. The best known of these is undoubtedly Frank Lloyd Wright's Fallingwater House. As one of the successful examples of the maximum integration of nature and light into a building, it can be said that it offers its visitors the experience of *Komorebi*. The daylight filtering through the surrounding trees is widely incorporated into the interior through the open plan layout with the large windows, which creates a peaceful, serene atmosphere. Another example is Mies van der Rohe's Farnsworth House.

Thanks to its minimalist and modern glass walls, the house is almost integrated with the surrounding nature and landscape elements, and the natural light filtered through the trees can circulate freely in the interior space, allowing visitors to experience *Komorebi*. Another example with similar characteristics to Farnsworth House is Philip Johnson's iconic modernist design Glass House. In Western architecture, especially in the modern period, the principles of letting light into the interior space through large surfaces and open plan schemes pave the way for the creation of the *Komorebi* atmosphere mentioned in many examples (Figure 4).



Figure 4. Fallingwater House (Fisher, 2018), The Glass House (Johnson, 2006)

The *Komorebi* concept is quite old in terms of spatial experiences. Beyond Eastern architecture, it is possible to find clues and traces of spatial formations related to this experience in different periods all over the world. The deep relationship with nature and light at the core of the concept, and the light–shadow plays created date back to the antiquity of architecture. Although the metaphorical relationship of the concept with architecture is dated recently in written sources, its spiritual relationship dates to ancient times.

METHODOLOGY

This study was carried out by focusing on auteur director Wim Wenders' film *Perfect Days* (2023). A qualitative research approach was adopted, employing inductive content analysis and observation as data collection methods (Creswell, 2009; Angrosino & Mays de Perez, 2000). Initially, the research aimed at exploring cinematic spaces in general; however, it shifted toward Wim Wenders' filmography due to its conceptual alignment with *Komorebi*. Within the scope of this study, both short and feature-length films by Wenders were reviewed. Out of the 40 films examined, *Perfect Days* (2023) emerged as the most suitable work, as it is a contemporary production featuring a wide array of cinematic spaces closely related to the *Komorebi* concept in Japanese culture. To examine how *Komorebi* is constructed and represented within the cinematic narrative, this research applied a semiotic lens informed by the approaches of Roland Barthes (1972; 1986; 2008) and Umberto Eco (1976). In other words, the study not only considered the literal representations of nature, light and shadow but also explored their metaphorical and cultural dimensions. This semiotic inquiry aimed to reveal how *Komorebi* interacts with the film's narrative structure, the main character's psychology, and the viewer's reception. Following the identification of *Perfect Days* as the purposeful sample, two criteria were established for selecting cinematic spaces relevant to *Komorebi*:

1. Physical and spiritual relationship between the character and the interplay of natural light and shadows as a significant narrative element within the cinematic space.
2. Physical and spiritual relationship between nature and the character is a significant narrative element within the cinematic space.

Only those locations that met both criteria were selected for detailed analysis. In this context, Hirayama's house, Tokyo public toilets and the urban park (Yoyogi-Hachiman Shrine Forest) were identified as the main locations where the visual manifestations of *Komorebi* were most evident. The process of semiotic analysis was carried out in the following stages:

1. Denotative Analysis: Each scene was first described literally, including architectural features and observable interactions between the character and the environment.
2. Connotative Analysis: Based on the cultural contexts and the narrative framework of the film, the same visual elements were then interpreted symbolically. Consideration was given to what these elements might imply or indicate with the character's inner journey, the broader themes of the film and the emotional tone conveyed to the audience.
3. Contextualization: The information from the denotative and connotative readings was contextualized both within the overall story of the film and within broader architectural or cultural discourses. This step aimed to establish a connection between the *Komorebi* and the character.

This comprehensive interpretation in the semiotic analysis made it possible to identify the *Komorebi* as both a visual motif and a symbolic catalyst that influences the character's psychology and the viewer's cinematic experience. As a result, this study offers insights into how nature, light, and shadow can function as narrative devices in architectural and cinematic contexts, especially in dense urban environments such as the Shibuya district of Tokyo.

The Origins of Wim Wenders' Cinematic Narrative

Ernst Wilhelm (Wim) Wenders, born in Düsseldorf, Germany, during the Second World War, is one of the leading directors of modern cinema, known for his documentary and fiction movies (Arslan et al., 2004; Künzel, 1986). One of the important factors in his career

progression as a successful director was undoubtedly the one-year period he spent in Paris in 1966. During this time, he learned the history and details of cinema and had the opportunity to discover the famous Japanese director Yasujiro Ozu, who was his role model. Ozu had a profound influence on his later work. To make sense of Wenders' close connection with Japanese art and culture, it is useful to look at the artistic approach of Japanese director Ozu, for whom Wenders expressed his admiration (Dawson, 1982).

Geist (1983), in his research on the influence of Japanese director Ozu on Wenders' cinema, provides a conceptual overview of the elements where the cinematographic narratives of the two directors intersect. Ozu emphasizes the importance of the Zen influence in his cinema, especially the concept of "*Mu*" (Geist, 1983; Schrader, 2018). This concept can be expressed as "*emptiness*", which gives a higher meaning to existence, and silence, which elevates the meaning of sound. In Ozu's cinema, the emphasis on stillness stems from the "*Mu*" principle and Ozu is said to direct silence and emptiness (Richie, 1977; Schrader, 2018). Numerous static, undramatic scenes of landscapes, cities, buildings or interiors are used in groups. In Ozu's movies, the importance of ordinary moments is emphasized because all moments that constitute the continuity of human life are equally precious. These similarities in Ozu and Wenders' cinema confirm that Wenders may have been influenced by Ozu. The fact that their cinematographic expressions share a common Zen-based minimalist aesthetic philosophy supports this⁴.

Wenders has been interested in photography since his childhood, and it is possible to see the effects of this interest in his cinematic narrative. He attaches great importance to photographic visuals in his movies. He takes many photographs of spaces that he thinks are suitable for the movie atmospheres he envisions and constructs the basic movie outline based on these photographs. In addition, he often uses characters taking photographs in his movies (Özek Erkuran, 2021). In 2014, Wenders made a documentary titled *Salt of the Earth* about the life of the famous Brazilian photographer Sebastio Salgado. The movie begins with the meanings of the words "*photo*" (light) and "*graphy*" (to draw/write), emphasizing that the

photographer draws/writes the world/life with "*light*" and "*shadow*" (Üretmen, 2021).

When we look at Wenders from a broad perspective, we see that he is a "*poly-art*" figure who is interested in many branches of art, such as imaginative cinema, documentary cinema and photography. In his movies, stories set in modern urban spaces are effectively told through characters and their lives from a photographic viewpoint where light and shadow are effective. Narrative motifs such as the movement and dynamism of life, the beauty of routines and simplicity are emphasized. All these elements form the basis of Wenders' cinematography and provide a framework for making sense of his narrative.

Released in 2023, the feature movie *Perfect Days*, Wenders' last work, also contains these narrative elements. The main character of the movie, Hirayama, played by Koji Yakusho, is a middle-aged man who makes his living cleaning public toilets in Tokyo's Shibuya district. He lives a simple and meaningful life, sticking to his daily routines. In the fast-paced and crowded urban life of Tokyo, he lives alone at his own pace. His life is ordinary, serene and peaceful. Hirayama notices the simple beauties in life, takes photographs with his analog camera and archives them monthly. The main theme of Hirayama's photographs is sunlight and nature motifs. In the movie, shot from Wenders' perspective, the effects of nature and light are clearly felt in the spaces where the story takes place, despite the dense urban texture. *Komorebi*, the filtering of light through tree leaves, as a narrative motif is frequently seen in the movie's indoor and outdoor spaces, which creates natural light-shadow plays that affect the main character Hirayama, who frequently encounters them in his daily life. In the movie, this routine cycle conveys Hirayama's small happy moments in his ordinary life and his questioning of life. Within this framework, the movie takes place in spaces in the Shibuya district of Tokyo. In these spaces, the *Komorebi* concept is not only a visual descriptive element, but also a profound symbol that conveys the character's life story. This study examines the relationship between architectural space, nature and natural light through cinematic narrative by analyzing these spaces within the *Komorebi* concept.

⁴ Wenders' interest in the aesthetics of Japanese art is thought to have developed during a year in Paris, where he worked with Johnny Friedlaender on print abstraction paintings that incorporated the principles of two-dimensional space and accidental design, elements of traditional Japanese and Zen art (Geist, 1983).



Figure 5. Hiramaya's house (Wenders, 2023)

FINDINGS

Hiramaya's House

Hiramaya is a middle-aged man living alone in a two-story house in the Shibuya district of Tokyo, a lower-middle income neighbourhood in a dense urban fabric. He makes his living cleaning Tokyo's public toilets. Hiramaya's house is a space worth examining, where most of the movie takes place, and where the character's life and outlook on life are imagined (Figure 5.). The entrance courtyard of the building is connected to the hard ground of the street. There is a parking lot and entrances to other residences in the courtyard. A wet room is at the entrance of the building

through the courtyard.

Throughout the movie, Hiramaya uses this space for different functions such as brushing his teeth and cooking. However, since he bathes in *Sento* (a traditional Japanese public bath) and this is not shown while all other details of his life are seen, it can be assumed there is no bathroom in this multi-purpose wet space in his house. The stairs from the entrance to the upper floor led to the only large room of the house, which is open plan. This room can be divided by a sliding door with frosted glass in the direction of the balcony on the upper floor (Figure 6.). In this part on the balcony side, Hiramaya keeps his plants on a low table and occasionally eats his meals sitting on the floor.

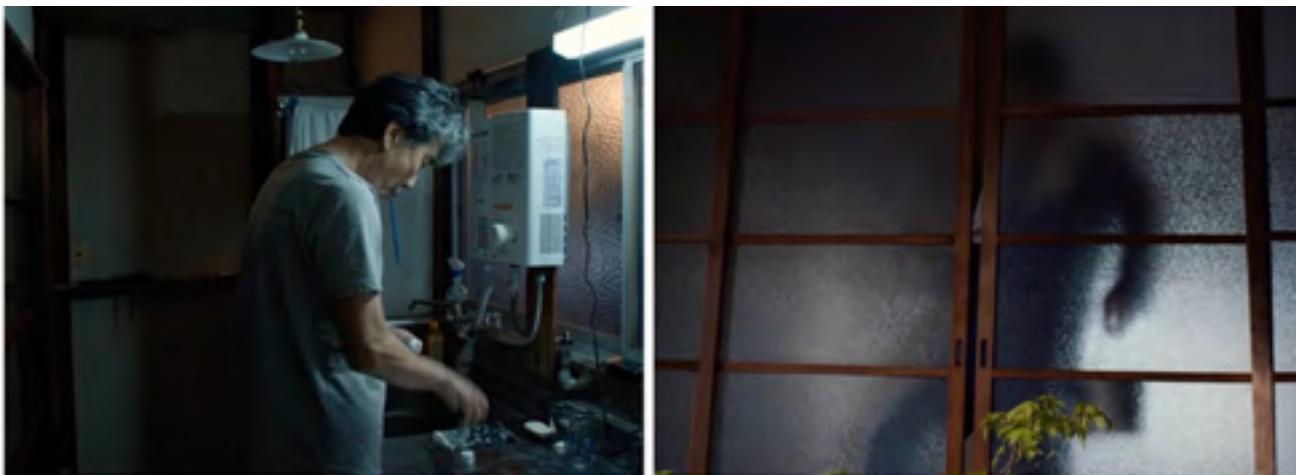


Figure 6. The only wet area of the house used for toilet and kitchen functions (Wenders, 2023), Frosted glass sliding doors in the interior of the house (Wenders, 2023)



Figure 7. Hirayama's bookcase with wooden construction in front of a large, frosted glass sliding window (Wenders, 2023), Hirayama lounges on the *Tatami* mats of his home, enjoying the light filtering through the leaves (*Komorebi*) into the space (Wenders, 2023)

On the upper floor, the house's large window opening and partition panel are designed with frosted glass and can slide, allowing light to filter into the house (Figure 7.). The one room of the house is enough to fulfil all Hirayama's needs. Hirayama sleeps, dresses, eats, reads and waters his plants in this room. The house has architectural elements that incorporate natural materials. On the floor are *Tatami*

mats made of natural materials, a part of the Japanese lifestyle. Wooden materials also stand out in the door and window details. Inside and outside the house, Hirayama has carefully cultivated plants. Sometimes when he wakes up, he watches the light, and tree leaves filtering through the large, frosted glass windows (Figure 8.).

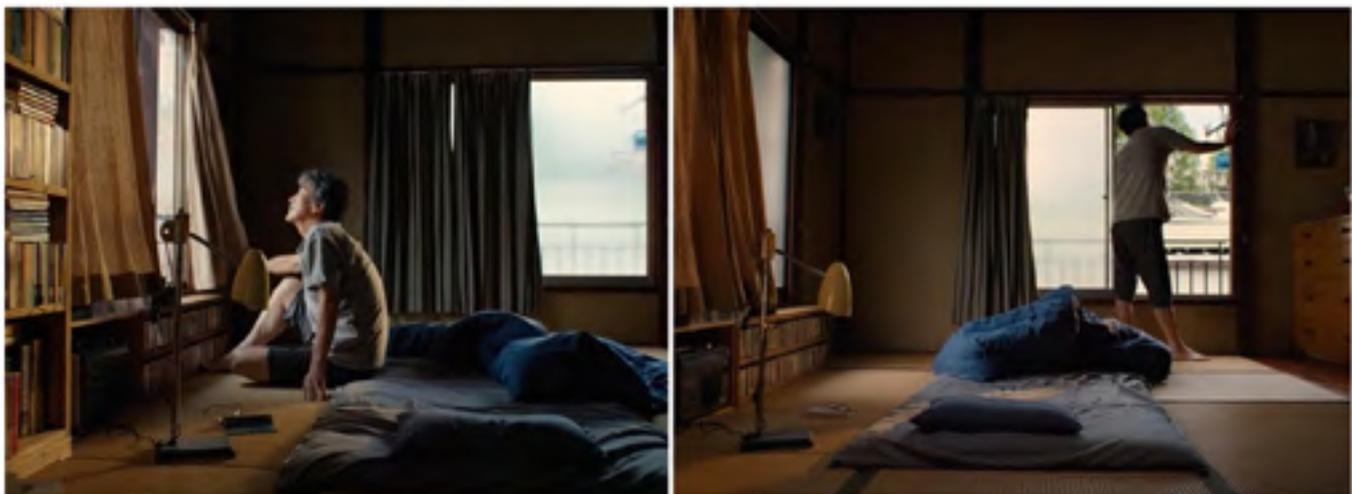


Figure 8. Hirayama sits on *Tatami* mats looking out at the sunlight through a frosted glass window (Wenders, 2023), Hirayama looks out of the frosted glass window into the sunlight and nature (Wenders, 2023)

This open-plan minimalist house, in which only basic needs are met with extremely limited furnishings, can be read as a reflection of the simplicity and serenity in Hirayama's character and mood. Far from ostentatious consumption and not concerned with money and status, Hirayama's main motivation is spiritual fulfilment. A simple yet organized space nourishes the character's inner peace, distracting him from the chaos and confusion of the modern city. This approach is in line with the phenomenon of “*the transience of moments*” in traditional Japanese culture and Zen philosophy. The light seeping in through the frosted glass in the windows of the house makes the passage of time visible in the room. The character sits on the tatami and silently observes the source of the light and the way it filters through the leaves (*Komorebi*). Beyond a simple visual experience, this action can be described as Hirayama opening the doors to a deep inner journey. From a psychological point of view, this ordinary yet peaceful flow shows that he has a state of mind capable of staying in the “*moment*” without anxiety. Through the daily rituals in the house (watering the plants, sitting on the floor and watching the sunlight), which are dominantly conveyed by Wenders in the film, Hirayama experiences moments of spiritual renewal. This order and repetitive daily rituals indicate the character's psychological stability. This routine may be a strategy to avoid feelings of uncertainty and anxiety by creating a sheltered framework for the character. Throughout the film, the character is portrayed as serene and at peace, far from a depressed and anxious expression with a consciously chosen solitude.

Waking up in the morning with the sunlight and gazing at it reveals his search for meaning in the small moments of his daily life. In these moments, Hirayama's gaze and posture are marked by admiration, curiosity and serenity. *Komorebi* becomes a narrative motif that emphasizes the character's embrace of impermanence, his inner peace and desire to unite with nature, rather than just the light entering the space through the leaves. Therefore, the actions that take place in the house are not just domestic activities but become a Zen-like ritual that celebrates the “*awareness of impermanence*” (*mono no aware*) and creates inner

serenity. His monthly archiving of nature and daylight (*Komorebi*) photographs taken with his analog camera in a wooden cabinet in his home shows his desire to “*preserve the transient beauty*” and “*capture the moment*”. The need to document these transient, small but meaningful moments of life reflects his sensitive, sensitive and meditative inner world.

The director focuses the viewer on the atmosphere of the scene by using long takes, fixed camera angles, silent sequences and frames that reveal light and shadow effects. In this way, the *Komorebi* is transformed from a simple background detail that offers a visual aesthetic into an element that reflects the character's mood and penetrates the viewer. The play of light and shadow in the fluid and calm rhythm of the film triggers empathy in the viewer as well as in the character, evoking feelings of peace, serenity and capturing the moment. It reinforces the idea of how precious and poetic small moments can be, which may go unnoticed in the stress and hustle and bustle of modern life, or which may be considered “*ordinary*” like a play of light and shadow reflected on the floor at home. It creates an experience that touches the soul by telling the viewer to “*slow down, stop and look*”. The idea of accepting and enjoying the transience of moments, as in Japanese culture, is reinforced by these scenes and conveys the idea of “*the beauty hidden in the daily routine*” as a powerful connotation in the viewer's mind. The viewer witnesses the light-shadow-nature triad with a different consciousness and feels that they can adapt it to their lives.

Tokyo Public Toilets

Hirayama, who makes his living cleaning Tokyo public toilets, sets out to clean different toilets in his daily routine. Throughout the movie, Hirayama cleans nine different public toilets. These toilets have one important thing in common: they were designed as part of the Tokyo Toilet Project in the Shibuya district of Tokyo by 16 internationally renowned architects, interior designers, industrial and graphic designers, most of whom are Japanese (The Tokyo Toilet, n.d.) (Figure 9.).



Figure 9. Ebisu East Park Toilet designed by Japanese architect and academic Fumihiko Maki, Hirayama notices the *Komorebi* effect in the Ebisu East Park Toilet (Wenders, 2023)



Figure 10. Nabeshima Shoto Park Toilet designed by renowned Japanese architect Kengo Kuma, Yoyogi-Hachiman Toilet designed by renowned Japanese architect Toyo Ito, Yoyogi Fukamachi Mini Park Toilet designed by renowned Japanese architect Shigeru Ban (Wenders, 2023)



Figure 11. The interior of Nishihara Itchome Park Toilet, designed by renowned architect Takesosuke Sakakura, allows the *Komorebi* effect created by nature to be felt in the interior thanks to the permeable structure of the facade, (Wenders, 2023)

Initiated by the Nippon Foundation and supported by the Shibuya Municipality, the project aims to improve the comfort, safety and aesthetics of public toilets that are not used because they are dark, dirty and smelly. The goal is to create inclusive, accessible and innovative public spaces for disadvantaged members of society and to make toilets functional and seen as

works of art in the city. The project was announced in 2019 and the first toilet, designed by Pritzker Architecture Prize winner Shigeru Ban, opened for use on August 5, 2020. The 17 public toilets' construction as part of the project was completed in 2021; only 9 of them can be seen in the movie (The Tokyo Toilet, n.d.) (Figures 10.-11.).

In the movie, Hirayama meticulously cleans each of these toilets, and when someone comes to use the toilet, he steps outside, looks up at the sky and watches the light and shadow play of tree leaves reflected on the toilet walls. This cycle, which repeats in many restroom scenes, is thought to be one of the important narrative motifs of the movie (Figures 12.-13.). The light and shadow effect of the surrounding trees on the various components of the structure can be observed in eight of the public toilets in the movie. The only exception is the Ebisu Station West

Exit Restroom, where there is no landscape area around the restroom in a dense urban fabric. However, here too, the light–shadow effect is provided by a permeable façade composed of white aluminium strips spaced horizontally at 2 cm intervals. The only common element in the public toilets in the movie, which have different architectural design decisions and mass formations, is that they treat the light–shadow effect as a component of the design and that it plays a crucial role in the movie narrative (Figure 14.).



Figure 12. Ebisu Park Toilet designed by renowned interior designer Masamichi Katayama, *Komorebi* effect on the concrete walls (Wenders, 2023)



Figure 13. Jingu-Dori Park Toilet designed by renowned Japanese architect Tadao Ando, the *Komorebi* effect can be seen on the permeable surfaces of Jingu-Dori Park Toilet, which creates light and shadow plays together with body silhouettes (Wenders, 2023)



Figure 14. Nanago Dori Park Toilet designed by Disruption Lab Team under the creative direction of renowned designer Kazuo Sato, Ebisu Station West Exit Toilet designed by renowned graphic designer Kashiwa Sato (Wenders, 2023)

One of the most important parts of Hirayama's daily life is the act of cleaning, which he performs with great care and precision. In Japanese culture, cleanliness is seen as an important physical and spiritual value. In the Shinto belief system, “purification” rituals with water express a spiritual renewal and are believed to give the individual a spiritual serenity. Therefore, the fact that the “cleaning” ritual is at the centre of the character's daily life carries a symbolic value. The character's dedication to his work makes the viewer feel that he has experienced both an external (space) and an internal (spiritual purification) transformation and derives inner satisfaction and serenity from it. Emphasizing nature and light in public toilets, among the most neglected spaces in the city where functionality is generally prioritized, reinforces the message that the city and nature can coexist for humans. The play of light and shadow in these spaces, which go beyond mere function, is one of the striking recurring motifs in the narrative. The fact that he goes outside after each cleaning ritual and watches the light-shadow plays, even if for a short time, emphasizes the psychological dimension of the spatial experience. This repetitive action-cleaning, stopping and looking, observation-awareness indicates that even in seemingly ordinary spaces that are part of the daily routine, moments of meditative serenity can be experienced.

In the cycle of actions repeated in public restrooms, ordinary spaces are transformed into an artistic atmosphere in the director's cinematographic expression. Wenders conveys the character's cleaning routine in a particularly slow rhythm with long and fixed angles, minimal dialog and silent moments. In this way, the viewer can observe the movement of light and shadow in the space and the character's reactions to this interaction in depth. In these moments, the viewer's attention is focused on the sounds coming from outside and the movement of light in the

space; the poetic and ethereal effect of light in the space is emphasized. In these scenes, the soft tones of the colour palette and the slow rhythm of the editing support the character's inner journey and the meditative atmosphere of the *Komorebi* scenes. All these narrative elements transform the *Komorebi* experience from a mere visual element into a narrative tool that is intertwined within the character's psychology and the theme of the film.

Urban Park (Yoyogi-Hachiman Shrine Forest)

In the movie, Hirayama stops by the city park (Yoyogi-Hachiman Shrine Forest) to have lunch after completing his morning work. It is a wooded, tree-covered area located in the dense urban fabric of Tokyo, known as one of the sacred sites of the Shinto faith. The *Torii* gate at the entrance of the park symbolizes the passage of visitors from the everyday world into the “*sacred zone*”. The dense tree cover in the park allows daylight coming from different angles during the day to reach the ground from the sky with different plays of light (*Komorebi*). Hirayama stops in front of the *Torii* gate as he enters the forest, pays his respects to the spiritual world and continues walking inside (Figure 15). While taking a short lunch break in the park, he observes the surrounding silence, looks up at the sky and the trees, and carefully watches the movement of the sunlight filtering through the trees. Every day he takes photographs of the sunlight filtered through the leaves (Figure 16). In these scenes, the character's spiritual connection with the world is felt to be more intense and sincere. Because this is a critical experience in which he seeks spiritual meanings beyond his daily routine and wants to stay in the “*moment*”. Although these actions take place during a short break in his daily cleaning routine, they play an important role in the film's narrative.



Figure 15. Hirayama's entrance to Yoyogi-Hachiman Shrine Forest through the *Torii* gate, experience of light and nature in a spiritual atmosphere (Wenders, 2023)



Figure 16. Hirayama's *Komorebi* experience in the urban park (Wenders, 2023)

Torii gates are more than a physical gate; they are a symbol of transition and spiritual transformation, separating the sacred from the profane (Young & Young, 2004). In this urban park, which is an important part of the city, a meditative/spiritual atmosphere is created for the users with the poetic play of light and shadow from the *Torii* gate. The character's process leading to the *Komorebi* experience through the *Torii* gate symbolizes his stepping into a threshold of spiritual transformation and awareness. In the Shinto faith, these gates mark the boundary between the “*profane*” and the “*sacred*”, while in the movie, the character leaves his daily routine and seeks serenity in a spiritual atmosphere. The *Komorebi* experience is not an aesthetic element here, but a metaphor that reinforces

moments of spiritual enlightenment/inner breathing. Photographing these plays of light and shadow reflects Hirayama's desire to capture the beauty of ephemeral moments. The concepts of respect/admiration for the sacredness of nature in the Shinto faith and staying in the “*moment*” in Zen philosophy have come together.

Hirayama's lunch break is a moment of detachment from the outside world and solitude with his own thoughts. In these scenes, the character is in a state of awareness and contemplation, focusing on the simple pleasures of everyday life, such as the sounds of nature and the play of light and shadow. The silence provided by the atmosphere of the forest reinforces the serenity of Hirayama's state of mind. The existence of this sacred forest, which is isolated

from the noise of the city, shows that the bond between nature and man has not been broken. It proves to the viewer that there are poetic moments that can be captured in everyday life.

For these scenes, which are laden with spiritual meanings, the director used wide frame long takes that move in a slow rhythm with little dialog, a technique that is prevalent throughout the film. This technique allows the audience to be simultaneously involved in the character's experience. Thus, he invites the viewer to focus on nature in a simple atmosphere. In these scenes, the sounds of nature such as birdsong and rustling leaves accompany the story. The director presents "*Komorebi*" to the audience as an almost tangible experience on the screen, which is itself an illusion of light. In these scenes, the viewer deeply feels the character's mental serenity in the meditative atmosphere and becomes involved in this journey.

CONCLUSION

Light and nature bring the ever-changing dynamics of life into the space, allowing users to experience the flow of time in a more tangible way. Changing light and shadow movements in the space depending on the position of the sun create a rhythm in harmony with natural cycles, strengthening and deepening the perception of space. This dynamic effect transforms the space from a static entity to one that increases user interaction and creates a sense of belonging. The concept of *Komorebi*, which describes the sunlight filtering through the leaves, essentially refers to the relationship of space with light and nature. As a tool that enriches the physical and spiritual atmosphere of the architectural space, *Komorebi* places the presence and movement of natural light at the centre of the spatial experience, rather than simply being a physical element. In this context, Wim Wenders' cinematographic narrative offers clues as to how the concept of *Komorebi* can be used in cinematic spaces. The space goes beyond a simple background and functions as a character that shapes the story.

This study analyses selected architectural spaces in Wenders' *Perfect Days* (2023) from the perspective of *Komorebi*, a concept specific to traditional Japanese culture. The elements embodying the concept of *Komorebi*

were identified in spaces such as the house, public toilets, and the urban park where the character's daily life occurs. Located in Tokyo's dense and complex urban fabric, these spaces draw attention by creating a calm and meditative atmosphere. The slow pace, which Wenders consciously adopts, transforms the viewer from a mere observer to an experienter of the space. In these scenes, nature and light are the main factors that create the atmosphere, reflecting the character's inner world. From a semiotic perspective, layers of plain meaning and connotative meaning were evaluated together through context. Thus, the daylight and shadow transitions in the movie become an important part of the narrative and offer a sensory experience to the audience.

The ordinary routines and everyday life experiences that we encounter throughout the movie are conveyed in depth through the locations. These cinematic spaces, in which *Komorebi* is used, reinforce the metaphors of life and experience in the film. The movement of light and shadow reflects the passage of time, the transience of life and the inner transformation of the character. Semiotic analysis reveals that space is not only a physical backdrop, but also an important tool that forms and shapes the character story. Accordingly, the concept of *Komorebi* offers a profound and meaningful experience as both an architectural and cinematic narrative element. Using the *Komorebi* effect, Wenders emphasizes the transience of life and time, the subtleties of human experience, and the capacity of space to generate emotional meaning.

The transformation of architectural space into a cinematic space (i.e. *Komorebi*) by the naturalistic light and shadow movements is seen as an important element that enriches the atmosphere of space and individual experiences, both physically and spiritually. *Komorebi* offers a layered experience for the user or viewer in cinematic space (a representation of reality) as it does in real-life physical space. The fact that the concept is new to the architectural literature and there are few studies in the field suggests that *Komorebi* can inspire many original research topics in the future.

It is thought that this study will pioneer and guide future research on the subject by contributing to a more

widespread recognition of the concept of *Komorebi*. As a metaphor, *Komorebi* can be examined in different cinematic examples or the context of environmental psychology. On the other hand, it can also be considered as a design approach and analysed in different architectural examples within the framework of biophilic design principles connected to nature. The research to be conducted within this context is assessed to offer original contributions to the literature and serve as a guiding reference for future studies.

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