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CITY OF MANY WORLDS: HABITATION AS STORYTELLING DEVICE IN CONTEMPORARY FILMS SET IN TOKYO

Jennifer Coates

Kosugiyu bathhouse is renamed 'You no yu' in *Ice Cream Fever* (dir. Chihara Tetsuya, 2023), in a play on the character Yū's name. In a scene from the film, owner Harue (Katagiri Hairi) pokes her head out to welcome Yū (Matsumoto Marika). Courtesy © Parco. Collage by the author.

A young woman arrives unannounced at the unresponsive door of a Tokyo apartment belonging to an older relative. She sits down outside and waits. Like the girl herself, the viewer is unsure of her welcome. We know the apartment's inhabitant to be solitary, taciturn, a person who struggles to communicate and make connections with others. How will she be received? And how will this development impact the protagonists as we follow them through a slice of their lives in Japan's largest city? These are the identical plot points of two recent films that share a setting but in many other respects could not be more different. To explore how depictions of the lived experience of a range of city spaces are used to drive plot and develop characterization, I use the architectural concept of "habitation" to think beyond buildings and characters' relationships to those structures, analyzing instead how inhabited spaces incite plot developments and bring characters together, in a trope that I call "habitation as storytelling device."

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Writing about cinema, both academic and popular, has often drawn attention to how mise-en-scène, location, and set design have been used to communicate characters' inner states. Working with the terms *dwelling*, *habitation*, and *inhabitation*, Guiliana Bruno has explored how the architecture of the cities that film characters move through can express their inner psychologies.[1] Building on this path-breaking work, I propose that applying architecture scholar Oliver Heckmann's concept of "habitation" to film analysis can expand this line of inquiry to reveal how architecture not only communicates characterization, but also can actively shape both character and plot. Habitation as a storytelling device not only uses buildings and interior design to tell viewers about characters' psychologies, but also weaves narratives directly from the built environment. Characters change their environments, and are also changed by them, as the relationship between inhabitant and habitation space takes center stage.

Two recent films invite us to look at how habitation spaces prompt characters to behave in new ways, building relations and networks with other people in and through those spaces. Wim Wenders's *Perfect Days* (2023), about the professional and personal life of a public-toilet cleaner, and Chihara Tetsuya's *Aisu kurīmu netsu* (*Ice Cream Fever*, 2023), about the role of an ice-cream shop in four women's lives, do not simply trace their characters through the architecture of contemporary Tokyo. Their stories would not exist without those architectural spaces. From designer toilets to bathhouses, and trendy apartments to more-traditional abodes, both films are built around habitation—the interaction of dwelling space, lived experience, and enacted behavior. Inhabiting the specific apartments featured in both films actively changes the characters as they grapple with sharing once-solitary spaces. Habitation behaviors such as choosing to use a public bathhouse instead of a private bathroom, or working as a toilet cleaner, prompt the characters to make decisions about how to live their lives. If representations of "dwelling" spaces on film represent characters' already-existing inner psychologies, then habitation, by contrast, precipitates new plotlines by creating an active relationship between inhabited space and inhabitant.

By insisting on the materiality of the architecture surrounding the characters, both films consistently emphasize the analog aspects of bodies in spaces in an increasingly digital culture, recalling Bruno's argument that "film/body/architecture" is "a haptic dynamics."[2] Wenders's and Chihara's characters are in constant physical contact with their environments, touching toilets, baths, and café counters while cleaning, jumping to hit a spot above a doorframe, or caressing a tree in a park. The more the characters touch their habitation spaces, the more we become aware of the lack of human touch in their lives: all the protagonists suffer from loneliness and frustrated desire, and yet all keep other characters at a distance until the shared spaces that they inhabit force them into contact.

By organizing characters' lives around habitual visits to bathhouses and jobs as toilet cleaners and ice-cream sellers, *Perfect Days* and *Ice Cream Fever* dwell on the most banal aspects of embodied experience, while surrounding the characters with ephemeral digital content in Instagram feeds and references to Spotify. *Ice Cream Fever* brings characters together through the consumption of ice cream, while *Perfect Days* introduces characters at the opposite end of this process as they visit the Tokyo Toilet Company's designer facilities. Yet the emphasis on bodily processes is a reminder to pay attention to the embodied experiences of the characters, and to observe how they change their habitation environments as, at the same time, those spaces also change them.

Perfect Days follows sixty-something Hirayama (Yakusho Kōji) through his daily routine as he wakes early in a sparsely furnished apartment in a working-class neighborhood of Kōtō Ward and drives to trendy Shibuya to clean designer toilets, before relaxing in the old *shitamachi* ("low town" or lower class) district of Asakusa. The arrival of Hirayama's niece Niko (Nakano Arisa) threatens to disrupt this established pattern. Yet Niko's strategy for achieving a better understanding of the rift between her mother and her uncle lies in assimilating into Hirayama's life and work; sleeping in his room, sharing his lunch, attempting to help clean the Shibuya toilets, and ending the day at his favorite bathhouse.

Ice Cream Fever introduces two pairs of female protagonists connected by a stylish modern apartment in the *yamanote* ("mountain side" or upper class) area of western Tokyo. In one storyline, Natsumi (Yoshioka Riho), a young graphic designer working in an ice-cream parlor, attempts to make a romantic connection with Saho (Serena Motola), a novelist suffering from writer's block. In a second storyline interwoven through the first, businesswoman Yū (Matsumoto Marika) arrives home to find Miwa (Minami Kotona), her long-estranged and now deceased sister's only child, waiting outside. As the film cuts repeatedly between the two plotlines, the viewer comes to realize that Saho and Yū are consecutive (not simultaneous) inhabitants of the same apartment, and that Saho's storyline takes place before Yū's begins. The detective work required to separate out the two timelines is echoed in the plot points of Yū

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and Miwa's storyline. While Niko attempts to understand Hirayama by mirroring his actions and lifestyle, Miwa takes a different approach, enlisting Yū in a search for her absent father. Miwa leads Yū through the stylish cafes and workspaces of Shibuya, searching for a man who is revealed to be as shallow as his constant pursuit of the latest food fads suggests. When Miwa is downhearted, Yū takes her to her favorite bathhouse, a place that she describes as "an oasis."

Sharing Shibuya: Two Very Different Representations of the Same Place

While these two 2023 films share a plot device and location, they differ in many ways. Wenders, an established auteur director, uses a shoulder-mounted camera to evoke his earlier exploration, in *Tokyo-Ga* (1985), of Yasujirō Ozu's depiction of Tokyo. The lasting influence of Ozu on Wenders's view of Tokyo is apparent in several references, from the use of Ozu's home neighborhood of Kōtō Ward for Hirayama's apartment setting to the juxtaposition of the *shitamachi* area of East Tokyo with the stylish upper-class *yamanote* area in the west, a favorite Ozu theme. The actor who portrays Wenders's almost-silent protagonist, Yakusho, is a star known for international hits such as *Shall We Dance?* (*Sharu wī dansu*, Suo Masayuki, 1996) and *Babel* (Alejandro González Iñárritu, 2006). The character is known only as Hirayama, a family name borrowed from *Tokyo Story* (*Tokyo monogatari*, Yasujirō Ozu 1953) and that reoccurs across Ozu's filmography.

Ice Cream Fever features Matsumoto Marika, famous in Japan for her advertisements for the Ministop convenience-store chain, alongside newer faces such as fashion model Serena Motola and singer Utaha, of the popular group Wednesday Campanella. This is director Chihara's first feature, and he drew from his professional experience as the art director of the Lemonlife Inc design and advertising studio to layer images of sculpture, typography, fashion, and couture accessories, as well as social media platforms such as

Director Chihara Tetsuya uses habitation space and mirroring to guide the viewer through the intertwined plotlines of *Ice Cream Fever*. Courtesy © Parco. Collage by the author.

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Instagram, into a textured representation of the stylish and creative Shibuya area.[3] Like *Perfect Days*, *Ice Cream Fever* uses a handheld camera, but Imajo Jun's cinematography calls attention to this choice, shooting through surrounding objects such as plants and fences, reframing often, changing focus, and panning quickly between characters in dialogue scenes. Wenders uses shot-reverse-shot sequences, often cutting after each sentence in a style reminiscent of Ozu, even if the handheld camerawork seems to exist on the opposite side of the cinematographic spectrum. Where Wenders communicates the experience of the busy Shibuya district by sending toilet users repeatedly crashing into Hirayama's space as he works, stumbling on- and off-screen while Hirayama remains still and quiet, Chihara imbues his camera movement with the fast pace that characterizes the neighborhood, evoking the overwhelming feeling of hyperstimulation common to pedestrians passing through the space.

This difference in film style reflects Wenders's and Chihara's respective positionalities. *Perfect Days* is a German-Japanese coproduction directed by an established auteur and featuring an international star, riffing on recognizable film styles and characterizations from Japan's cinematic past. *Ice Cream Fever* introduces a first-time director and performers cast from the worlds of fashion, music, and advertising, with characterizations hewing relatively close to the debut actors' established personas in their own fields. Yet the inception of these two projects had more in common than may be readily apparent. Wenders was approached by Yanai Kōji, the son of Fast Retailing company founder Yanai Tadashi, to create a series of short films around the Tokyo Toilet initiative. This project commissioned sixteen noted architects and designers to create seventeen public toilets around the Shibuya, Ebisu, and Hatagaya areas of Tokyo, originally scheduled to coincide with the 2020 Tokyo Olympics. The planned series of short films would have been high-art advertisements for the project. Deciding instead to create a fictional feature film around the real-life public toilets, Wenders recruited Takasaki Takuma from the marketing firm Dentsū to collaborate on the script. *Perfect Days* therefore has its roots in advertising. So does Chihara, who worked as a graphic designer and advertising art director before creating his first film. While the presence of professional models and singers in *Ice Cream Fever* nods to Chihara's world of design and marketing, the source material came from a short story by Akutagawa Prize–winning author Kawakami Mieko, a longtime friend and collaborator. *Ice Cream Fever*, the more apparently commercial of the two productions, has its roots in literature as much as advertising.

Both films were screened on the international film-festival circuit from 2023 to 2025. Yakusho was awarded the Best Actor prize at the Cannes Film Festival in 2023, at the Asian Film Awards and the Kinema Junpō Awards in 1924, and at the Yokohama Film Festival in 2025; he also won the Japan Academy Film Prize in 2024. *Ice Cream Fever* was included in the 2024 Japan Foundation Touring Film Programme and Japan Cuts 2024, and Chihara, Motola, and producer Kitaki Kazuyuki promoted the film by participating in public interviews and audience Q&A sessions in the United Kingdom and North America. Read alongside one another, these very different films with shared subjects illustrate how contemporary cinema, across international-domestic, auteur-novice, and artistic-commercial lines, treats the representation of Tokyo as a habitation space that both changes its inhabitants and is also changed by them. Both films use existing apartment blocks, interiors, and built environments to structure narratives about alienation, family, and human connection.

Attempts to connect across geographies and generations in a modern world also evoke Ozu's major postwar themes, but this emphasis on the lived experience of the city's architecture is pointed. As Bruno points out, "[A]rchitectural views of interiors … particularly mark Japanese film, especially the work of Yasujiro Ozu and Kenji Mizoguchi."[4] Focusing instead on Anglo-European cinema that "tours in and out" of domestic and public spaces, from the home to the street, Bruno's *Atlas of Emotion* explores "architectural views that have made Western private life publicly available."[5] In their architectural views of Tokyo, Chihara and Wenders emphasize a third space in between the home and the street by focusing on toilets and bathhouses, publicly available spaces used for very personal functions. By situating key moments of human connection in these spaces, both directors show how habitation spaces can change the behaviors, experiences, and even attitudes of their inhabitants.

Habitation space thereby creates plot points in both films. It is also used to structure the world of the film itself, offering crucial information about timelines and characters' senses of time. Chihara's complex multitimeline plot is structured around an apartment occupied in turn by Saho and then Yū, which is used to orient the viewer in time. The stark black, white, and pink palette of the apartment's first inhabitant, Gen Z Saho, contrasts with the warm colors and midcentury-modern interior-design choices of Millennial Yū, who takes over the apartment after Saho disappears. This use of the apartment as a structuring device in Chihara's nonlinear plot is echoed in Wenders's

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more classical narrative structure. Hirayama's apartment, and his actions within it, locate the viewer temporally in the cleaner's unchanging daily routine, from the sound of the neighbor sweeping the street early in the morning to tasks such as caring for plants that he completes before his working day and the tidying that he performs on days off work. By focusing on how the protagonists inhabit their spaces—at home, at work, and in leisure activities in between—these two very different films communicate a similar point about habitation in contemporary Tokyo by showing how characters are shaped by the spaces in which they live and work.

Inhabiting Tokyo: Personal Space, Social Space, and Spaces In Between

Life in Tokyo has been depicted on film since the beginnings of cinema as a popular medium. The metropolis and the cinema both offered turn-of-the-twentieth-century inhabitants the excitement of modernity, entertainment, and technological advancement. When the Lumière Cinématographe was brought to Japan by businessman Inabata Katsutarō in January 1897, camera operator François-Constant Girel was dispatched to capture scenes of everyday life around Japan, including *Une rue à Tokyo* (*A Street in Tokyo*, 1897).[6] Ever since, the experience of inhabiting Tokyo has been communicated on film through two dominant modes. First, there is the panicked excitement of the pedestrian or passenger overwhelmed by the bustling city; then, the paradoxical loneliness of the isolated apartment dweller in one of the most populated cities on earth. The family drama is a notable exception, as directors from Ozu to Kurosawa Kiyoshi and Koreeda Hirokazu have explored the contradictions of living in a large city with significant wealth and class disparity for family units composed of members with different expectations, goals, and even values. For the solitary protagonist, however, Tokyo as setting and plot device has most often been used to signal overwhelm, anxiety, isolation, confusion, and horror. This trope often takes on an Orientalizing element in depictions of Tokyo experienced by non-Japanese inhabitants, such as the protagonists of Sofia Coppola's *Lost in Translation* (2003). The work of non-Japanese filmmakers operating in cinematic traditions closer to Japan's, such as Hou Hsiao-hsien's *Café Lumière* (2003), tends to offer more-nuanced portrayals of characters negotiating the stressful and calmer spaces of the city in turn, while shaped by the specific neighborhoods that they inhabit.[7] Such films echo the use of setting as characterization and plot device found in classics such as Akira Kurosawa's *Ikiru* (1952), in which a dying bureaucrat finds the meaning of his existence in the fight to save a neighborhood. Wenders's and Chihara's protagonists are not without anxiety and confusion, but their modes of inhabiting the city are similarly nuanced. Moving between their solitary apartments and commercial spaces, such as bars and cafes, where socializing more commonly takes place in urban Japan, Hirayama and Yū take pleasure in the variety of spaces offered by the capital. These protagonists are attuned to spatial zoning and its affordances, epitomized in their shared passion for that liminal space in between social and personal, public and private: the bathhouse.

To explore how depictions of a range of city spaces are used to drive plot and develop characterization in *Perfect Days* and *Ice Cream Fever*, I borrow the architectural concept of "habitation" to think beyond building structures, analyzing instead how the experiences and actions of characters demonstrate how spaces shape their inhabitants, and how characters in turn shape their environments. "Habitation" encompasses not only housing and its attendant objects, but also the networked social existence that is living itself. Architecture scholar Oliver Heckmann argues that a focus on habitation, as opposed to housing, buildings, or architecture, can "not only transcend the often monofunctional focus on housing and with it the different socio-spatial demarcations of the apartment, the house, the neighborhood, and the city, but it also encompasses the socio-economic practices and networks emerging across these domains."[8] Habitation is therefore both an activity and a networked condition of existence with others as much as a space or a place to call home.

Wenders has previously expressed interest in ideas of habitation, focusing on the "habitability" of place in works such as *Wings of Desire* (1987). Bruno traces themes of habitation in Wenders's work beyond the built environment to argue for clothing, as depicted in *Notebooks on Cities and Clothes* (1989), Wenders's film about designer Yohji Yamamoto, as "a fashion of habitation."[9] Linking habitation to habitus, Bruno argues that "[h]abitus connotes both costume and custom."[10] For Bruno, fashion, film, and architecture are "fantasies of habit, habitat, and habitation" that "map the narrativization of liminal space."[11] Analyzing how the liminal spaces of the bathhouse and toilet, neither properly private nor properly public, are narrativized in *Perfect Days* and *Ice Cream Fever*, we can see Heckmann's expansive conceptualization of habitation at work, as these spaces are where "socio-economic practices and networks" emerge, changing characters' personal circumstances and fulfilling their desires.

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Heckmann's observation also offers a timely prompt to consider how the representation of habitation on film functions beyond the specifics of location, architecture, and use of space. Perhaps exacerbated by the increasing ease of identifying film locations online, contemporary discourse on housing, architecture, and homes on film tends to focus on the existence (or otherwise) of the spaces in question. From Bong Joon Ho's *Parasite* (2019), in which the appearance of a luxury home was composed across four separate sets, to Todd Field's *Tár* (2022), which features the luxury apartment built by Christian and Karen Boros on top of a former Nazi air-raid shelter, striking architecture on film is sparking design conversations. Cinema's engagement with architecture *as* architecture perhaps reached a peak in *The Brutalist* (Brady Corbet, 2024), which takes its name from an architectural movement and composes the characterizations of an architect and his client from fragments of several architectural biographies. As a force that "makes real estate *real*" by contributing to socioeconomic disparities and lending concrete form to prevailing orders and hierarchies, architecture offers a powerful visual depiction of inequality.[12] In the examples above, the aesthetics of architectural spaces are used to communicate information about the characters and their lives, their financial status and their worldviews. A habitation-focused film analysis would encompass not only aesthetics but also how a space is used, and would consider spaces beyond the home–street, private–public binary, to explore how the habitations that a protagonist moves through can add nuance to characterization and drive plot as the spaces change the characters as much as the characters change their space.

As audience and scholarly attention to the use of remarkable buildings as film locations has intensified—for example, in films such as *Columbus* (Kogonada, 2017), which borrows the notable architecture of Columbus, Indiana, to express emotions that the characters struggle to speak about—spatially informed activity is more often discussed in relation to the practicalities of filmmaking. While the grand spaces of famous civic buildings can often accommodate filmmaking apparatus, accounts of making cinema in real-life spaces tend to emphasize the necessity of careful blocking and the use of smaller (or handheld) cameras that can move around tight interior spaces.[13] These factors also inform Wenders's and Chihara's practices. The two directors can be understood as *spatial realists*—a term that John David Rhodes coined to describe "filmmakers who insist on the reality of space and location."[14] *Perfect Days* and *Ice Cream Fever* feature real buildings, parks, and streets; in fact, Chihara encountered such difficulties in location scouting that he bought the apartment below his own in order to film the interior scenes there.[15] This methodology, and the overall "small is beautiful" orientation of these filmmakers' use of real locations and portable filmmaking equipment, perhaps call to mind certain aspects of Wong Kar Wai's contemporary Hong Kong as much as any classical model from Japanese cinema.

Wenders has discussed the role that real buildings have played in the development of previous film projects such as *If Buildings Could Talk* (2010), a short 3D film created for Sejima Kazuyo and Nishizawa Ryue's SANAA exhibition at the 12th International Architecture Exhibition in Venice. "I get all my inspirations from landscapes, cities, deserts, and buildings," he told journalists.[16] In *Perfect Days*, Hirayama's habitation environments are readily identifiable; he catches the eye of a fellow worker eating lunch on the grounds of Hachiman Jingū shrine and cycles daily to Denkiyu, a family-run traditional bathhouse operating since 1922. After bathing, he visits a *yakisoba* noodle shop established in 1965 in an underground shopping area near Asakusa (which itself dates from 1955). Chihara's Shibuya is similarly grounded in reality. Saho wanders the trendy back streets while Yū visits Kosugiyu bathhouse, established in 1933 in the Suginami Ward area of Koenji.[17] The buildings, streets, and bathhouses used by the protagonists inform the films' style in the use of handheld cameras and 4:3 aspect ratios, which can capture the floors and ceilings of tight spaces. At the same time, the recognizably real nature of key spaces draws the audience into the world of the film as we map the characters' routes through the city. Rumiko Handa calls *Perfect Days* "fiction set in nonfiction," observing that, by drawing attention to "the importance of everyday buildings that figure into people's lives," the film offers "viewers a way to see themselves in particular spaces."[18] This could be extrapolated into a working definition of Wenders's overall worldview across many decades of filmmaking, and also echoes the "haptic wandering" that, Bruno argues, is experienced by the film viewer who "imagines [themselves] residing in a space, in someone else's place, and tangibly maps oneself within it."[19] Seeking to push beyond identifying existing architecture in fiction film and reading built environments as extensions of characters' personalities and concerns, I propose applying the concept of "habitation" to open a broader category of investigation that includes analysis of actions in space as much as architecture and interior design.

Understanding habitation as an activity and a practice as much as a designation of dwelling space also allows for analysis of the role of class to emerge into the foreground

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In *Perfect Days* (dir. Wim Wenders, 2023), Hirayama (Yakusho Kōji) makes connections with others while cleaning public toilets. Courtesy © Neon. Top right/top left photos and collage by the author.

of recent films about urban life. While the capacity to purchase or commission luxury accommodation signifies the upper-class status of characters in films such as *Parasite* and *Tár*, a realistic depiction of class as a part of everyday life in Tokyo is harder to create, in part because there was relatively little economic disparity between social classes until the 1970s. Contemporary Japan is home to large numbers of residents suffering low socioeconomic status and poverty and widening inequality, and the metropolitan Tokyo area has experienced a thirty-year increase in urban polarization, marked by the emergence of underclasses and health disparities.[20] Yet the arrangement of everyday life in the city obscures important class factors, especially for nonresidents, and therefore makes them more difficult to represent. The character in *Perfect Days* who represents this vast and complicated population is an unhoused elderly man who appears in parks around Hirayama's cleaning route, treated by passersby as an inconvenience, a threat, or a ghost as he mentally unravels in public. The film thus gestures here to realities that it is not well-equipped to explore in more detail.

Heckmann argues that attention to habitation as practice can expose the "systemic expulsions" of city dwellers from "social security, safe employment, affordable housing, and healthy environments" that are caused by the unregulated global finance sectors that fuel those same cities' growth.[21] At the same time, however, he insists on the "integrative potentials" of shared habitats such as cities, even as "societal diversification and segregation" make definitions of community "increasingly diverse, dynamic, and contested."[22] Hirayama's shared habitat includes foreign tourists, lost children, and a young boy with Down syndrome, but the unhoused man seems to exist in a bubble, speaking only to himself and failing to register traffic and humans alike. "Collective habitats," Heckmann argues, require "new attitudes and practices of sharing, regarding caregiving, working, serving, and other practices."[23] For this reason, Heckmann suggests that we should conceive

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of habitats as "open-ended, integrated physical and operational systems."[24]

The city is one part of the "integrated physical system" that forms a habitat, but the fact that the city is shared does not necessarily mean that it fosters community. As Heckmann argues, "[I]nclusion and exclusion can be understood as two inherent antipodes of urbanity."[25] Louis Wirth saw the city as both a "melting pot" and a force of segregation, while Saskia Sassen, categorizing urban neighborhoods as "spaces of the modest," found within these zones the potential for empowerment, allowing those without significant resources to create their own culture.[26] At the same time, cities can atrophy and impede connection. Attempting to explain not only his physical distance from her mother, living apart from the family home, but also their ideological segregation, Hirayama explains to Niko, "The world is made up of many worlds. Some are connected and some are not." The ideological separateness of the protagonists of *Perfect Days* and *Ice Cream Fever* is depicted not only in the "many worlds" of neighborhoods and buildings they inhabit, but by their treatment of these spaces and the desires, choices, strategies, agency, and habitus they enact therein. While earlier alienated inhabitants of Tokyo suffered in silence, expressing a desire for connection by saving a children's park (*Ikiru*) or departing Tokyo for the kinder environs of Onomichi (*Tokyo Story*), Hirayama and Yū craft new habitations that satisfy their needs by layering their many worlds, combining the private, public, and liminal spaces available to them to create a personalized habitat. As much as the city shapes the characters, the characters also force the city into a shape within which they can live—if not exactly happily, then at least with satisfaction.

A Perfect Day for Ice Cream: Consumption as Habitation Practice

"The inhabitation of space is achieved by tactile appropriation," Bruno argues, noting that "architecture and film are sites of consumption."[27] Chihara's and Wenders's protagonists are in constant physical contact with their environments, touching walls and scrubbing toilets, and at the same time engaged in constant consumption of the ice cream, noodles, bar snacks, books, and cassette tapes that furnish those environments. Hirayama's sparse, tatami-floored apartment, constructed of flimsy veneer and stained concrete, is the stylistic and material opposite of the stylish unit occupied consecutively by different characters in Chihara's film. Yet the visual treatment of the two apartments suggests a shared approach to developing characterization through depictions of inhabited spaces and acts of consumption. Hirayama prizes his collection of rare cassette tapes, which would sell for inflated prices in the hip music store where a young coworker of his brings him, and he purchases used books by authors esteemed by the knowledgeable bookstore owner. Yet Hirayama declines the substantial sum offered by a worker at the store, even as Wenders's camera repeatedly pans lovingly up and down the low shelves holding tapes and books that line the walls of Hirayama's apartment, communicating the high personal value of these items. By contrast with Hirayama's minimalist decor, the apartment that links the characters of *Ice Cream Fever* looks more lively. The style-conscious choices of the consecutive occupants transition from Saho's monochrome fittings and Georgia O'Keeffe print to Yū's bright retro refrigerator and midcentury-modern leather sofa. Yet the taciturn characters of both films are drawn through their relationships to objects that signify not only awareness of trends or minimalist good taste, but also what we might recognize, after Pierre Bourdieu, as the practice of distinction.[28] These carefully chosen objects collected in real apartments indicate that the characters are not solitary by accident. They choose to be alone because few others meet their high aesthetic standards, and, by extension, their strict ways of living. The consumer objects around the characters not only signal their preferences but also indicate how their distinctive consumption practices create and inform their worlds.

Both filmmakers draw attention to the role of consumption in their otherwise minimalist characters' lives by placing a short cameo appearance of themselves in scenes of valuation and transaction. Wenders himself stands silently by a rack of records in the music shop where Hirayama's cassette tapes are valued, and Chihara appears briefly as a customer in Natsumi's ice-cream parlor. The ability to spot the filmmaker relies on viewer recognition, and so these cameos are invitations to exercise a similar aesthetically informed mode of distinction to that practiced by the protagonists, and to insert oneself into the world of the film by acknowledging its real-life referents. This strategy is less Hitchcockian than New Wave.

By inserting themselves into their works, the filmmakers not only invite the viewer to participate actively in reading their films, but also suggest parallels between the characters and their creators. Natsumi is a graphic designer who decorates her ice-cream counter in quiet moments, and could therefore be understood as a version of Chihara himself, a professional designer with a keen interest in graphic design in particular. Hirayama's photography hobby similarly suggests the character as a version of Wenders,

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endlessly producing images of the Tokyo neighborhoods through which he moves, and invokes other characters from Wenders's works, such as the writer-photographer Philip in *Alice in the Cities* (1974). By bringing the figures of the filmmakers into the text at moments of consumption, the practice is framed as part of a cycle that includes the creative process, rather than as mere entertainment or narcissistic self-reflexivity.

Both films counteract the narrative problems created by largely silent, taciturn, or mysterious protagonists by telling the viewer about the characters' experiences, attitudes, and problems with reference to the material objects surrounding them. This exemplifies but also amps up a familiar strategy of characterization through mise-en-scène, extending this psychological use of space into an intriguing register of visual communication. The apartments communicate their inhabitants' knowledge of art, music, and design as well as their solitary lifestyles, but they also demonstrate the "tactile appropriation" that the characters deploy in order to bend space to their requirements, layering their habitations into their own "world of many worlds" that meets their needs. Material objects like cassette tapes allow Hirayama to connect with younger characters such as his workmate's music-loving girlfriend and his visiting niece. Physical spaces instead literalize emotional barriers between characters, communicated by multiple shots of Hirayama experiencing physical discomfort and lack of sleep during Niko's stay after giving up his tatami-mat room and futon to his niece and attempting to sleep in the cramped kitchen. Liminal spaces offer a way out, as the bathhouse becomes a mutual habitation space for characters who struggle to reside or abide with others.

The habitation spaces of these films are more than straightforward reflections of the characters' psychologies and feelings. In both films, habitation space actively drives the plot; the story could not be told without the space that structures it. Characters' efforts to manipulate their spaces—intruding, expelling, resisting, leaving, or cohabiting—become the plot points of both stories. Both apartments bring characters together, as Niko and Miwa find their respective uncle and aunt by seeking out their home addresses and showing up on their doorsteps. Hirayama welcomes Niko warily, and their distance is both communicated and re-created by the use of the apartment's rooms. Family members would normally use a tatami room as a communal sleeping area, spreading out individual futons in the shared space. That Hirayama consigns himself to the uncomfortable kitchen suggests the unfamiliarity of these two estranged family members and, at the same time, prolongs that estrangement by continuing to force a distance between them.

Yū is more explicitly hostile on finding Miwa on her doorstep, offering to help her niece find a hotel. When she finally accepts the presence of her guest, she lays ground rules requiring Miwa to stop calling her "Auntie" and polices her behavior around the apartment, demanding that she clean and stay out of her way. It is clear that Yū prefers to live alone; when she chides Miwa for leaving a mess in the kitchen, Miwa points out that the packaging on the counter is from "the food that you ate last night, alone." Miwa appears to be sleeping on the sofa while Yū emerges from the bedroom the next morning, and neither invites the other to their solitary meals. In both films, a suddenly shared apartment space both communicates and entrenches family rifts. The apartment functions as more than a plot device, demonstrating how habitation spaces drive a narrative by bringing characters into contact, and at the same time communicate nuanced information about the ambivalent, anxious, and alienated feelings of those characters through depictions of how the spaces are used, shared, and divided.

Anxious Habitation: Homes and Buildings as Visual Signifiers of Alienation

The arrival of their nieces on these alienated protagonists' doorsteps forces Hirayama and Yū to confront their personal histories. Hirayama lives alone and works as a toilet cleaner in a simple lifestyle designed to reject his wealthy family's values and influence. When Niko arrives fleeing her family home, it is implied that both Hirayama and Niko have suffered some kind of violence or abuse from uncaring parents. This appears to have left Hirayama unwilling or unable to make connections easily; despite his attraction to the owner of his local bar, he is unable to declare his feelings for her. Yū has similarly left home after a devastating fight with her sister after learning of her relationship with Yū's partner, now Miwa's father. She spends her days working and looking for companionship at the local bathhouse. When Miwa arrives to search for her father in Tokyo, Yū experiences flashbacks that hint at her regret over the end of her relationship with her sister. Yū's story is intercut with a second plotline in which lonely Natsumi, working at an ice-cream parlor, becomes infatuated with novelist Saho. Though the two women often talk when Saho visits the ice-cream parlor, Natsumi's efforts to forge a relationship end in disappointment when Saho abruptly disappears.

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Hirayama's and Yū's senses of longing are evoked in flashback scenes that take the characters away from urban Tokyo into nature and rural living. Both films employ black-and-white photography to communicate the "different worlds" that their protagonists inhabit. Hirayama's daily life is filmed in realistic color, but his dreams, which repeat the events of the day interspliced with images of Niko's face and the blurry shadows of trees in sunlight, are black-and-white. Wenders has suggested that the visual motif of *komorebi*, or sunlight seen through trees, refers to an earlier moment, before the film narrative begins, in which appreciation for nature saved Hirayama's life by prompting him to leave a self-destructive lifestyle peopled with abusive family members for his current simple solitude.[29] Hirayama's dream sequences are spaces where his present solitary world and memories of his previous life with his family overlap.

Ice Cream Fever similarly depicts Yū's estranged family home near Mount Fuji in black-and-white, in flashbacks to her relationship with her sister before her death, and to Miwa's actions before their shared Shibuya plotline begins. The "different worlds" that are established through this color coding are, like Hirayama's dream sequences, not only geographically separate but also temporally out of sequence. The film opens with a black-and-white image of a *machiya*-style wooden townhouse as Miwa pulls open the sliding door. A cut to a color shot of a male character unpacking in the white stucco apartment once occupied by Saho and then by Yū constitutes a time leap into the future. Architectural motifs illustrate the timeline of the changing occupants of the apartment, such as a small flower decal visible above the man's head as he leans over the balcony. Visiting Saho, Natsumi touched her ice-cream-covered fingers to the upper ledge of the balcony doorway, leaving four pink dots. When Yū takes over the apartment, Miwa adapts the dots into a flower design by adding a green stem. In the first shot of the apartment in the opening sequence of the film, the small flower appears above the male tenant's head, signifying that the apartment has once again changed hands, and that this male character is Yū's replacement. Somewhat like a mirror image of Wenders's imagining a narrative point before the beginning of *Perfect Days*, the introduction of the new male tenant signals a temporal extension beyond the end of *Ice Cream Fever*. The final scene introduces the male tenant to Natsumi's ice-cream parlor, where he speaks the first words of Kawakami's short story, indicating that the film ends at the starting point of its source material. Habitation spaces are used to mark change, from the complicated time shifts between Saho's and Yū's respective storylines to the everyday small physical changes experienced by Natsumi, who starts each shift by testing how high she can jump and marking the results on the wall above the employees' door.

Each character is introduced with reference to their habitation spaces. For example, the first scene featuring Saho shows her muttering as she walks through the neighborhood, noting habitation markers such as "Dim windows. Orange house." If Saho's invocations of the spaces around her serve to commit her new habitation to memory, a sudden loss of memory can cause the surrounding habitation spaces to disappear. Struck by a desire to be near Saho after their first encounter in the ice-cream parlor, Natsumi runs to catch up to her. Her voice-over intones without expression, "It was like something I have no memory of" (*sore wa, kiyoku ni nai gurai na koto*). A pink opaque overlay appears in the frame, obscuring the buildings around Natsumi as she dashes out of the shop, then revealing the space again one square at a time. An emotionally induced memory blank results in the disappearance of the surrounding environment from the frame that the character occupies, suggesting that habitation is more than simply space, but extends into the character's psyche, physically changing as their interior reality changes.

Habitation space also literalizes anxious and painful affects through the protagonists' treatment of the space around themselves. Hirayama and his neighbor stare in alarm at the excavated footprint of a torn-down building when the neighbor points out that no one can remember what had stood there. Natsumi's coworker Takako (Utaha) reflects on having moved home often as a child, leading to lasting feelings of loneliness, while Miwa's sense of abandonment is communicated in a monologue about the number of atomic weapons in the world. Miwa's worries about the future eradication of Japan by an atomic bomb, when an inhabitable world no longer exists, echo the concerns of the protagonist of *I Live in Fear* (*Ikimono no kiroku*, Akira Kurosawa, 1955), who cannot enjoy his wealthy Tokyo lifestyle due to his fear of nuclear extinction. The erosion of social and emotional ties symbolized by the erasure of home in Takako's past and Miwa's imagined future indicate the high stakes of habitation.

Worries about Japan (and the wider world) ceasing to exist drive Miwa's desire to locate and establish closeness with family members, from her aunt Yū to her missing father. By contrast, Saho experiences Japan as a constricting habitation, a metaphor communicated by the tank in her apartment that houses Mexican salamanders, or axolotls. "They live in whatever they're given" (*ataerareta mono de ikite iru*), Saho observes, and the visiting Natsumi responds,

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"It's so pitiful." Saho counters, "This fish tank is like a small Japan. Don't you think we're pitiful?" (*kawaisō ja nai?*). In *Perfect Days*, Niko invokes a different animal metaphor to protest her forced move from Hirayama's apartment to her mother's house. Suggesting that she'll "end up like Victor in 'The Terrapin,'" she seems to imply that her family home is the site of the same kind of cruelty that drives the protagonist of Patricia Highsmith's short story to kill his mother. Both allegories suggest that there is nothing natural about the basic conditions of a given habitation, whether that habitation is a family or a country. Instead, the characters of both films layer spaces that satisfy different needs in different moments to create a flexible habitation that can encompass various affordances and moods.

Hirayama and Yū, respectively, clearly take pleasure in spending time alone among their treasured items, as represented in each film. Lou Reed's "Perfect Day," from which Wenders's film takes its title, plays over a serene image of Hirayama basking in late-afternoon sunshine on his day off, stretched out on the tatami floor of his humble apartment and enjoying his carefully curated music collection. The detritus of Yū's midnight snack, a stylishly packaged single-serve ice cream, similarly indicates her enjoyment of her own space after Miwa has gone to sleep. While the 4:3 aspect ratios of both films offer practical solutions to filming in small domestic spaces, the framing also communicates a sense of wholeness, visualizing the satisfaction of the protagonists with their snug habitations designed to fit their needs. Chihara explains that the aspect ratio, informed by the location space, also reflects the affect of the narrative: "We were shooting in Shibuya, which is a very small space, and the story is quite a small love story, with emphasis on the sense of the everyday (*nichijō*), so the frame also naturally became smaller and smaller."[30] Smallness is core to both films, from the slight yet meaningful tale of a toilet cleaner who seeks a quiet life to the small acts of service (making ice cream, operating a bathhouse) that the women of *Ice Cream Fever* offer. While each individual space—the apartment, the toilet, the bar—is small, the filmmakers and the characters alike construct rich lives by layering each small world on top of the other, creating worlds within worlds.

Inhabiting Many Worlds: Liminal Spaces Between the Personal and the Social

In *Perfect Days* and *Ice Cream Fever*, apartments are for solitary relaxation and occasionally, begrudgingly, hosting nieces. Bars, cafes, and entertainment spaces are for meeting coworkers, spending time with fellow drinkers, and playing ping pong with nieces who won't go home. But it is the attention paid to liminal spaces in between this public–private, personal–social divide that most clearly indicates how the protagonists' habitation practices inform their characterization, and how space itself drives the plots of both films. Toilets and bathhouses, spaces for public use but designed for personal functions, feature in both films to a degree that suggests they are key to understanding the protagonists' characters and motives.

Unlike the *onsen* spring baths familiar to tourists and visitors to Japan, the *sentō* bathhouses featured in both films are often old and even run-down, many dating from earlier decades when baths were not standard in private apartment homes. Hirayama's old and humble apartment may not have a bathtub, but Yū's stylish Shibuya apartment certainly does, as shown when Miwa cleans it. Nonetheless, Yū chooses to visit the Kosugiyu *sentō*, renamed You no Yu in a pun on the Japanese word for "water" (*yu*), for relaxation and conversations with the owner—a habit that other characters note is surprising given her penchant for solitude. While her coworker responds with excitement to Yū's invitation to the *sentō*, Miwa expresses misgivings, suggesting that, while soaking in a large bath is nice, doing so together with others can be awkward. The passion for local bathhouses demonstrated by the relatively antisocial Yū and Hirayama indicates that these liminal spaces in which personal matters are conducted among other people offer a kind of halfway between the cohabitation of the family home and the solitary apartment.

Kosugiyu bathhouse in *Ice Cream Fever* is introduced with a shot of its traditional tiled roof, indicating its status as an unchanging "oasis." When quirky owner Harue (Katagiri Hairi) decides to close the bathhouse, Yū, somewhat surprisingly, volunteers to take it over as a means of providing a supporting affect or "fuel" for other women. Harue provides a long list of female supporters who might help, demonstrating a hidden world of solidarity that has evolved around Kosugiyu. At the end of the film, Natsumi casually mentions that a decoration has been gifted from "*sentō* owner Yū-chan," indicating that Yū's wish to become "fuel" for the younger generation of working women by operating the bathhouse has become a reality.

Denkiyu bathhouse in *Perfect Days* is a quieter location where elderly men silently watch sumo on television after bathing together. When Hirayama brings Niko to the *sentō*, the curious stares of the patrons in the TV room suggest that they know enough about Hirayama's life to wonder who the young woman might be. Ōkubo Katsuhito, the owner of Denkiyu, has a background in architecture and urban development, at one point describing his role in maintaining

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the century-old space as part of his desire "to help make the city livable for all, especially young people who have just arrived in Tokyo for employment, and elderly people who are seeking a sense of belonging."[31] Like Yū, Ōkubo describes the bathhouse as a space in which people can feel supported and refreshed, and the actual *sentō* owner in fact appears in *Perfect Days* to collect a ticket from Hirayama, underlining the real-world existence of the space.

The many scenes in which Hirayama visits the bathhouse contrast with the dirty, demanding, and sometimes demeaning nature of his work as a cleaner for the Tokyo Toilet Company, his job created by the real-life initiative mentioned above and funded by the parent company of fashion retailer Uniqlo.[32] While the stylish toilet locations in Shibuya, Ebisu, and Hatagaya contrast with Hirayama's humble neighborhood, the designer toilets act as conduits for interaction with others (whereas Hirayama's neighbors tend to keep to themselves). Hirayama's Kōtō existence is silent and solitary, while Shibuya is contrastingly teeming with sounds and people, all of whom need to interact with Hirayama in order to complete that most basic of functions, going to the toilet. From the drunk toilet users who kick over his Cleaning in Progress sign to the rude mother who wipes her son's hands after Hirayama has touched them, many interactions are less than pleasant.

Yet the toilets also provide opportunities for happier communication and collaboration, such as an exchange with a Black British woman who asks Hirayama in English how the toilet designed by Ban Shigeru near Yoyogi Park works. When Hirayama silently demonstrates, she laughs delightedly, and he smiles on hearing her reaction through the toilet wall. A similarly playful exchange documents the slow progress of a game of tic-tac-toe that Hirayama plays with an unseen user of a toilet designed by Ito Toyo, which ends with a handwritten note thanking Hirayama in English. Though the occupation of toilet cleaner seems unworldly, and Hirayama's solitary amusements and hobbies suggest avoidance of human connection, in fact the Tokyo Toilet Company's toilets open up into a global world beyond Japan through which he can communicate with tourists and people from other walks of life.

While the occupants of the Tokyo apartments featured in these two films reluctantly and temporarily share their spaces with their nieces, and submit ambivalently to socializing in the public habitation spaces of bars and cafés, the liminal spaces of toilets and bathhouses are the real locations of human connection in both narratives. Hirayama contacts his estranged sister from his local bathhouse, but keeps her standing outside his apartment when she visits. His budding relationship with his niece does not develop, but he continues to communicate with users of Tokyo Toilet Company toilets through hidden notes and gestured instructions. Yū, for her part, establishes a meaningful connection to others in her neighborhood by deciding after all to run the local bathhouse, an occupation that outlasts her superficial work relationships and her patchy relationship with her niece. In these and other ways, habitation as storytelling device in both films extends their protagonists' uses of and relationships with public, private, and liminal spaces, showing viewers not only what the characters (materially) have, but also what they (affectively) seek.

Notes

1. See Guiliana Bruno, *Atlas of Emotion: Journeys in Art, Architecture, and Film* (Verso, 2002).
2. Bruno, 65.
3. Chihara Tetsuya, conversation with the author, Q&A at the Phoenix Cinema, Leicester, UK, February 5, 2024.
4. Bruno, *Atlas of Emotion*, 36.
5. Bruno, 36.
6. See https://catalogue-lumiere.com/une-rue-a-tokyo/.
7. Jennifer Coates, "Circular Thinking: The Yamanote Line on Film," *Japan Forum* 30, no. 2 (2018): 227.
8. Oliver Heckmann, introduction to *Future Urban Habitation: Transdisciplinary Perspectives, Conceptions, and Designs*, ed. Oliver Heckmann (Wiley & Sons, 2022), 2.
9. Bruno, *Atlas of Emotion*, 35.
10. Bruno, 211.
11. Bruno, 66.
12. See Reinhold Martin, Susanne Schindler, and Jacob Moore, eds., *The Art of Inequality: Architecture, Housing, and Real Estate* (Temple Hoyne Buell Center for the Study of American Architecture, 2015).
13. See, for example, director Yui Kiyohara discussing *Watashitachi no ie* (*Our House*, 2017): "I had to come up with the blocking very precisely because we were filming inside the house. It was an actual house, it wasn't a set. Because it's an actual house, the angles and the space we had, there are a lot of limitations that we needed to work with. And that's why there are a lot of repetitions that occur, because there were very limited angles we could use, and that's how we came up with ideas on how to use the frames effectively, in terms of the visuals." Natalie Ng, "Interview: Director Yui Kiyohara on *Our House* and *Remembering Every Night*," *Filmed in Ether*, August 27, 2023, www.filmedinether.com/features/interview-director-yui-kiyohara-on-our-house-and-remembering-every-night/.

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14. John David Rhodes, "Temporary Accommodation: Joanna Hogg's Cinema of Dispossession," *Film Quarterly* 73, no. 3 (2020): 14.
15. Chihara Tetsuya, conversation with the author. Exterior shots show Seijō Village, a five-story apartment block in Shinjuku Ward built in 1978.
16. Anna Battista, "Interview: Wim Wenders About His Latest Project," *Zoot* (2010), www.zootmagazine.com/2010/10/21/wim-wenders-and-sanna.
17. The bathhouse also has a second location in Harajuku near Shibuya, but the exterior featured in the film is of the original Koenji location.
18. Rumiko Handa, "Perfect Days," *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 83, no. 4 (2024): 565.
19. Bruno, *Atlas of Emotion*, 36.
20. Tatsuto Asakawa, Kenji Hashimoto, and Yuki Hirahara, *Inequality and Urban Space: Social Atlas of Tokyo Metropolitan Area 1990–2010* (Routledge, 2025).
21. Heckmann, introduction to *Future Urban Habitation*, 2.
22. Heckmann, 2–3.
23. Heckmann, 7.
24. Heckmann, 8.
25. Heckmann, 14.
26. Louis Wirth, "Urbanism as a Way of Life," *American Journal of Sociology* 44, no. 1 (1938): 1–24; Saskia Sassen, "The City: A Collective Good?," *Brown Journal of World Affairs* 23, no. 2 (2017): 119–26.
27. Bruno, *Atlas of Emotion*, 66.
28. Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (Harvard University Press, 1984).
29. Ed Rampell, "Perfect Days: An Interview with Wim Wenders," *Progressive Magazine*, February 1, 2024, https://progressive.org/latest/perfect-days-interview-with-wim-wenders-rampell-20240201.
30. Chihara Tetsuya, conversation with the author.
31. Handa, "Perfect Days," 566.
32. While *Perfect Days* does not explicitly reference Uniqlo, the marketing did make use of the Tokyo Toilet Company slogan. See Hao Wen, "Tokyo Sanitization: Wim Wenders' *Perfect Days* and the Discourse of Public Cleanliness in Japan," *Mediapolis: A Journal of Cities and Culture* 9, no. 1 (2024), www.mediapolisjournal.com/2024/04/tokyo-sanitization. *Ice Cream Fever* similarly featured in campaigns for Japanese brands such as the underwear manufacturer Une Nana Cool, using the film's characters in television and poster advertisements. Chihara and author Kawakami had been collaborating with Une Nana Cool for seven years before beginning work on the film. At the time of writing, advertising for the brand features Aoi Yamada, one of the actors in *Perfect Days*.

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