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Slowing down in a hyper-accelerated world: reflecting on analog culture from a Japanese philosophical perspective in *Perfect Days*

Abstract:
In contemporary times, there is much talk about the accelerated pace at which we live and how this impacts the way we coexist in the world. In this article, our goal is to discuss the extent to which it is possible to reflect on modes of deceleration through Wim Wenders' film *Perfect Days*. To this end, in the first section, we discuss the importance of slowing down and Japanese philosophy, demonstrating how some concepts of the Japanese way of life converge with counterproductive practices. In the second section, we specifically analyze the extent to which the analog culture represented in *Perfect Days* can break with the logic of productivity and exaggerated growth through simple, infraordinary practices. Finally, we emphasize that pondering on simpler, more ritualized ways of life can also invite us to live a slower, more fulfilling life.

Keywords:
Decelerations, slowed-down mode of life, *Perfect Days*, Japanese philosophy, photography and analog cultures

Resumo:
Na contemporaneidade, muito se fala sobre o ritmo acelerado em que vivemos e no quanto isso impacta no modo como coexistimos no mundo. No presente artigo, nosso objetivo é discutir em que medida é possível refletir sobre modos de desaceleração a partir do filme *Dias Perfeitos*, de Wim Wenders. Para

tanto, na primeira seção, falamos sobre a importância de desacelerar e a filosofia japonesa, mostrando como há uma relação na forma como alguns conceitos do modo de vida nipônico convergem com práticas contraproducentes. Na segunda seção, analisamos especificamente em que medida a cultura analógica representada em *Dias Perfeitos* é capaz de romper com a lógica da produtividade e do crescimento exacerbado por meio de práticas simples e infraordinárias. Por fim, destacamos que ponderar sobre modos de vida mais simples e ritualizados pode nos convidar a também viver de forma desacelerada e mais plena.

Palavras-chave:
Desacelerações, modo de vida desacelerado, *Dias Perfeitos*, Filosofia japonesa, fotografia e culturas analógicas

Introduction

We often read about how ours is an era of accelerated life and hyperproductivity, but also of anxiety and fatigue. Based on this, in this text, we propose to discuss the relevance of reflecting on alternatives that consider the theme of deceleration, since we argue that it is possible to circumvent part of the capitalist logic and constant growth through practices that decelerate. We structure our reflection around a brief discussion that considers some socioeconomic and philosophical aspects of why we live in such an empty, accelerated, and unhappy way. To conjecture about a society that lives in fatigue and productive exhaustion, we draw some ideas from a film, emphasizing that it is not only through formal academic texts that we can discuss real problems and existential questions specific to our time.

To address this discussion, in the first section, we draw on concepts from Japanese philosophy that encompass different understandings of temporality, as well as the realization that we live in an era of a *burnout society*, as Byung-Chul Han (2015) states, in which much is produced and little is lived. We also consider that we live in a state of despair, stemming from unfulfilled dreams and capitalism's promise that accelerating productivity through machines, for example, would create more time for workers' existential fulfillment. Considering the proposal of degrowth, such as that of Kohei Saito (2022), and the idea that life is not useful, as Krenak (2020) teaches, we argue that we must reshape our lives based on concepts such as incompleteness, living in the present, and moments in which we linger and give meaning to our lives through rituals and communal practices.

In the second section, we explore the extent to which the film *Perfect Days* proposes a recent visual discussion about a character who lives a frugal life as a public restroom attendant in Tokyo. During his work breaks, Hirayama captures photographs of sunlight streaming through the leaves of a tree and eats a sandwich; when he's off, he rides his bicycle, takes a long

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bath in a public restroom, reads books purchased cheaply at second-hand bookstores, and listens to music he records on cassette tapes. Drawing on concepts from Japanese philosophy, we argue that the way of life led and proposed by the film's main character embodies an experience deeply rooted in what we call here *analog cultures* – derived from Sax's (2016) concept of analog – which, because they have a different temporality, foster decelerations and moments of leisurely, ritualized enjoyment.

1. The importance of slowing down and Japanese philosophy

It's no secret that we live in a society marked by acceleration, the logic of hyperproductivity, and the promise of constant and virtually unlimited growth. In a world where there's so much talk about reducing impacts due to environmental disasters caused precisely by this drive for exacerbated productivity, perhaps considering *decelerated modes of life* is an interesting perspective for better understanding our times and devising alternatives in the Anthropocene (Kussler 2023, 2024a, 2024b; Kussler/Capra 2023). The socioeconomic proposal of semi-limitless productivity has brought numerous problems not only in terms of environmental degradation and imbalance, but also eroded the social fabric, labor market, and minimum working conditions, as we have never achieved the so-called *dream of capitalism*. This mirage, already described and refuted by Marx in his youthful writings, argued that technological advancement would supposedly bring more freedom and time for human beings to fulfill themselves in their non-work activities, since machinery would produce enough to grant us the right to leisure and self-realization (Marx 2007). However, what we have experienced is increased productivity, exploitation, precariousness, and alienation of labor on a larger scale, culminating, in recent decades, in an even more subtle style of transforming workers into *self-entrepreneurs*, with no time for rest or contemplation, as life is reduced to work that can be performed anywhere, even via apps (Kussler/Leeuven 2020).

Still on the accelerated reality and exacerbated exploitation of ourselves, our vital energy, and our lifetime, Byung-Chul Han (2015), in a pedagogical yet profound way, analyzes and explains how we have become a sick society, a *burnout society*. We are in a historical moment that could provide us with a better quality of life and working conditions, but instead, we have further increased productivity to the detriment of enjoying a fuller life. As the author states, the burnout of the so-called *performance society* is also a form of individuation, as our fatigue is solitary and distances us from other forms of interpersonal relationships. The fatigue of burnout – a work-related illness, that is, an occupational disease – is not a fatigue that incapacitates us from doing things, nor a fatigue of the body that allows the mind to calm and inspire other existential endeavors. Many human actions are possible beyond *productive labor*, including that it has long been known that leisure and playfulness are necessary to create and to live and inhabit the world more integrally, and not just as *animal laborans* (De Masi, 2002).

A society marked by the logic of *unhealthy positivism* – in the sense that, in the world of work, there is no longer time for rest, as domestic leisure can also become a time for *self-employment* – is also a disciplinary society, in Foucault's (1979) terms. A society of individuals

who do not unite for a cause and who are dominated, as bodies and desires, by work, is a docile, fragile, and politically inert society. A hyper-accelerated society does not allow time to enjoy, to be moved by art, to discuss political issues, to question the meaning of life, or to feel love. Amidst larger problems, such as the unfolding environmental crisis of the Anthropocene that plagues us, at different levels, our human species and other species, continuing to think within a productivist, extractivist, capitalist, and growth-oriented logic is, as Han (2021a) states, a path toward death, since such a perspective *runs over life*. Perhaps thinking from the logic of unproductivity, ineffectiveness, and/or degrowth, as Kohei Saito (2022) argues, is the way to mitigate such problems and reorient our way of inhabiting the world.

Thinking about deceleration is perhaps all we have left, since we are unlikely to experience a major sociopolitical and economic revolution capable of shifting the axis of the contemporary world's productive machinery. In a way, climate change is forcing us to rethink and change our daily habits, harshly and drastically, but without being able to halt the *conveyor belt of hypergrowth*. To consider the forms of deceleration, we would like to emphasize that it is not just a concept, but a *mode of inhabiting the world* that goes against the logic of exacerbated capitalism. Slowing down is proposing a simpler, more frugal life, without the prospect of stockpiling, accumulation, control, and almost limitless appropriation. Here, we echo the wisdom of Krenak (2020: 64, our translation), who argues that humanity is *devouring the planet*, unaware that *life is not useful*, for "We are the plague that came to devour the world". That is, more elements make up human existence beyond its productive, marketable, and exploitative capacity for its own and others' labor. The big question is to propose alternatives that allow us to tread more lightly on the planet, that is, different paths that allow us to live more harmoniously with the environment, with other species and in a way that is not exclusively exploitative.

Some alternatives, as the title of this section indicates, can be found in Japanese philosophy. Although Japan is marked by efficiency in production, it is also a country marked by numerous contradictions, such as the requirement for an almost exclusively paper-based bureaucracy, the use of faxes, stamps for document signatures, etc. This has to do, for example, with the way Japanese culture, especially Buddhist influences, thinks about the transience, impermanence, and uniqueness of things, as indicated in the expression *ichigo ichie* (一期一会), which denotes the idea of a *unique encounter* or that *each moment is unique and unrepeatable*, so we should live in the present. Another concept that resonates with this is *wabi-sabi* (侘寂), which teaches us to accept the imperfection of things and human beings; beauty lies in what is incomplete, imperfect, and impermanent (Kempton 2018). Based on the idea of a *life of simplicity*, such concepts are implemented and developed through the tea ceremony, the *chadō* (茶道), which is an activity that involves preparing and presenting a simple and distorted bowl of tea, in a simple place, where what matters is letting yourself be enveloped by the smell, the colors, the flavor, the silence, and the sound of the objects. (Okakura 2006).

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It is in this example of simplicity, acceptance of impermanence, and focus on *life in the present* that Japanese culture and philosophy invite us to consider ways to slow down in a world of hyperproductivity. Perhaps one of the greatest acts of disobedience in contemporary times, from a political and social perspective, is to be unproductive, to reduce the desire for production and, with it, the longings and anxiety that mark our generation. When there is an invitation to accept imperfections, the marks of life and history, there is also an invitation to reflect on what truly matters, which can be small, infraordinary things, in the sense given by Perec (2000), in everyday life, as there can be much poetry, beauty, and other aesthetic factors in the simple things of everyday life (Saito, 2007). *Being present in the present* or *focused on the current moment* is a difficult task in a world marked by speed and the disappearance of rituals, which, as Han (2021c) states, are symbolic techniques that allow us to *feel at home in the world*, as they allow, through repetition, us to *inhabit* and *linger in the world*. According to Han (2021b: 13, our translation), "What is disturbing in the current experience of time is not acceleration as such, but the lack of completion, that is, the lack of cadence and rhythm of things", so considering analog activities can help in the process of fixation in this temporality.

It's only possible to ritualize life when we allow ourselves to step outside the flow of mere production and enter the realm of *poetic creation*, of enjoyment, of experiences beyond the realm of work, and this requires time spent idle and unproductive. In the next section, we'll discuss the extent to which practices with analog objects, such as an analog camera, a cassette tape, or second-hand books, can symbolize and help us rethink how we inhabit the world. We begin with the reflective analysis proposed in the film *Perfect Days*, which, among many other topics, invites us to consider the value of simple activities, how much can be accomplished with small daily rituals that allow us to stabilize our lives and give lasting value to the bonds we create with human and nonhuman beings.

2. *Perfect Days* and analog culture

One of the most interesting films released in recent years is perhaps *Perfect Days*, directed by Wim Wenders (2023). The story is relatively simple: a Tokyo public restroom attendant finds time during his breaks and after work to take photographs, listen to music, and visit public baths or bars while cycling. The film's pace is quite slow and repetitive – at times even agonizing for the spectator. Hirayama, played by Kōji Yakusho, has a fairly predictable and repetitive, ritualized routine, so that every day begins and ends practically the same way throughout the week. The character wakes to the sound of his neighbor's broom sweeping the street, gets up, straightens his *futon*, and heads to the next room to water his seedlings.

Analog refers to the set of practices, objects, and material and sensory experiences that provide emotional, social, and cultural value, in contrast to the immateriality and speed of the digital world. In *Perfect Days*, this appears in the collections of cassette tapes, the film photographs that Hirayama captures, and the books he acquires in secondhand bookstores. For Sax (2016), the analog does not only mean the opposite of digital, but represents everything physical, material, and human – both objects and experiences that involve our

senses and emotions. The author also argues that, even in the digital age, people continue to seek the analog because it provides authenticity, connection, and presence. In this context, we therefore name the use of physical objects represented in *Perfect Days* as *analog culture*. Analog culture offers something that digital culture does not completely replace: tactile experience, dilated time, human imperfection, and social connection. In this sense, analog culture also unfolds as an ethical-political stance of resistance to the accelerated way of life and hyperproductivity.

As he waters his Japanese maple tree, the film's photography fills the room with violet hues (Fig. 1), contrasting with the warm, yellowish light that illuminates the space and the yellow color of the adjoining room where the character sleeps. The plants also have their own timing, as they are harvested near a temple, amidst Hirayama's work schedule between one public restroom and another, and each one is at a different stage of growth. Once done, the character trims his beard, washes his face, and leaves the house without eating. Before leaving for work, Hirayama puts on his uniform (blue overalls), grabs his gear, which is lined up near the door, always in the same order, and heads to his car. The canned coffee is purchased from a vending machine in front of his house.

Figure 1 - Hirayama watering Japanese maple seedlings

Source: Wenders (2023)

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Driving through the city on his way to work, the character listens to music on cassette tapes he puts in the car radio. Even amidst the chaos of Tokyo, Hirayama finds calm in his soundtracks: the songs perfectly fit the mood, the moment, and the development of the film, including classics by Lou Reed, The Rolling Stones, Van Morrison, Patti Smith, The Velvet Underground, Nina Simone, and others. Hirayama's work routine is highly ritualized and repetitive, and he doesn't mind cleaning toilets down to the smallest detail, waiting patiently outside while someone interrupts his cleaning to use the restroom. Cleaning toilets for the *Tokyo Toilet* project shows that there's beauty in cleanliness, and bathrooms don't have to be synonymous with dirt or bad smells. In fact, the initiative brings together architectural projects by 16 creators to revamp the Shibuya area of Tokyo, focusing not only on design but also on the idea of offering a unique experience to public restroom users, giving the public a new perspective on what hospitality means in this context as well (The Nippon Foundation, 2024). Here, we can reflect on what Yuriko Saito (2022) says that everyday aesthetics enable people not only to see beauty in simple things, but also in the *care of objects and through objects*, as a beautiful restroom can inspire people to litter less or not to be disgusted by public restrooms, for example.

During his breaks from work, Hirayama sits on a bench to eat his sandwich and watch the sun's rays filter through the leaves – the art of *komorebi* (木漏れ日). There is a tree that is special to him, and he always returns to the spot to observe it at different times, in different weather, and photograph it (Fig. 2). According to Kossoy (2001: 44, our translation), "Every photograph represents in its content an interruption of time and, therefore, of life. The selected fragment of reality, from the moment it was recorded, will remain forever interrupted and isolated in the two-dimensionality of the sensitive surface". In this sense, although he takes the *same* photograph in the same place and of the same object every day, an image never repeats itself. Thus, Hirayama builds an immense material archive with the films he develops and the photographs he enlarges (prints) – and only develops the film when the 36 exposures are finished; that is, *a posteriori*.

Since the protagonist collects and stores the analog photos in organized boxes, we consider this to form a type of archive. The images he captures record daily life and help to solidify a memory. For Seligmann-Silva (2022), the archive is a place of memory, a field of struggle between remembering and forgetting; it is also an ethical and political act of reconstructing meaning. From this perspective, Huyssen (2014) also states that the archive emerges as a response to the anguish of forgetting, an attempt to retain the past amidst the acceleration and cultural amnesia of contemporaneity. Hirayama's photos give value to an archival space that allows him to revisit moments and resignify temporalities. In this sense, Hirayama's images carry traces of past experiences that reveal themselves, opportunely, in uncertain futures. In the Japanese language, the term *ma* [間] also refers to a type of temporality, intervals and a type of *spatial in-between* that differs from *mu* [無], *nothingness*, as it is a time of pause, a temporality in which things happen (as in the case of lunch breaks with photographic records of the tree), similar to what we understand from the Greek concept of *kairós* [καιρός], the

opportune time, which distances itself from *chrónos* [Χρόνος], chronological, sequential time, as it symbolizes the time in which one can experience something unique, *something special that happens*.

Figure 2 – Photographic record of *komorebi*

Source: Wenders (2023)

In one scene, one day, when his niece accompanies him to work, as he admires the tree, she pulls her smartphone from her pocket to photograph the leaves illuminated by the sun's rays, while Hirayama pulls his analog camera from the pocket of his overalls. Immediately after seeing his uncle's old camera, Niko pulls out a camera similar to his uncle's, a gift from him (Fig. 3). Next, Niko asks if the tree is his friend, to which Hirayama replies yes, and she goes to touch the trunk of the friendly tree. It is interesting to note how Hirayama naturally acknowledges that he has a friendship with a plant, as he visits it regularly, spends time with it, photographs its canopy – in other words, inhabits and lingers in that territory, seeing beauty and meaning in that substandard and personal moment, which, for us, might otherwise go unnoticed. There is a strong indication here of a way of recording unique and unrepeatable moments, characteristic of Japanese philosophy and culture, as outlined in the previous section.

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Figure 3 – Hirayama and Niko appreciate the trees

Source: Wenders (2023)

Hirayama lives in the present. At one point, it's revealed that he had a life of luxury and left it for family reasons, especially regarding his father. While he lives a frugal life different from his previous one, he's also somewhat stuck in the past, with a kind of nostalgia that manifests itself in his collection of cassette tapes, which, despite being valuable objects, are not sold – as Takashi, the character, wanted to do at one point to get money to go out with a girl. Takashi doesn't understand the use value, the symbolic and emotional value of the tapes, just as he doesn't understand why Hirayama puts so much effort into cleaning the bathrooms, since, as he says, *they'll be dirty again*. In another scene, when Hirayama talks to his niece while they ride their bikes, he states that *next time is next time, now is now* (今度は今度, 今は今 = *kondo wa kondo, ima wa ima*). In this sense, he wants to show his niece that it's important to live in the present, linger in places, ritualize actions, and repeat things you enjoy and that create or give meaning to life. This is what we talked about when we mentioned earlier about living in the present, being fully present, without thinking about productivity or the speed of the digitalized and ubiquitous world.

The time it takes to develop Hirayama's photographs is different from the time it takes to take instant digital photos on a smartphone, just as it is to wash clothes at the laundromat, which allows him to read his books by William Faulkner, Patricia Highsmith, or Aya Koda. Time also slows down when he bathes in the public bathhouse, the traditional *sentō*. Bathing with others involves an exchange of glances, a moment alone, a different time and, in some way, communal and shared. When he passes the bar he usually goes to, he is called by name and offered the

same appetizer and beer as always, as he already has a permanent spot and is recognized by the owner. His weekend pilgrimages are essentially the same, as Hirayama has created a schedule of things that bring pleasure and give meaning to his life; his visits and journeys help stabilize his life and decelerate the constant and tiring pace of work during the week.

When Hirayama returns home, the colors change. Out goes the blue uniform, and in comes clothes in softer tones, in shades of gray, beige, caramel, white, and brown. The time he has to rest on the weekends also represents a time to slow down, listen to his cassettes on the bedroom radio, read one of his books bought at the second-hand bookstore, and simply enjoy the sunlight and light streaming through the bedroom window while lying on the tatami mat. On the weekends, there's no time to wake up, because no lady is sweeping the streets either. The weekends are for enjoying snacks at the bar, having a drink, leisurely cycling, taking a long bath in the public bathhouse, as well as listening to the owner of another bar sing and comforting her ex-husband by the river, while Hirayama and the other character play with their shadows.

The cinematography, by cinematographer Franz Lustig, uses the strategy of repetition, present in other narrative elements – such as lighting and colors –, but also employs different shots and angles to avoid boring the viewer. Hirayama's room, for example, with few objects and yellow lighting, is where most of the character's intimacy takes place: he sleeps, reads, thinks, and organizes boxes containing film negatives and printed photographs. From time to time, he sits on the tatami mat, looks at the prints, separates his favorites, discards those he considers bad or with technical errors, and stores the good photographs in boxes.

Figure 4 – The colors of comfort
Source: Wenders (2023)

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Finally, we believe that the colors of comfort serve as an invitation to the viewer to slow down, embrace simplicity, and live in the present. In a world filled with existential speed and digital immediacy, perhaps returning to crafts and analog devices is an alternative to avoid suffering too much from the frantic pace that prevents us from creating poetically and inhabiting the world with the necessary leisure. We need to slow down to have creative leisure; we need creative leisure to be able to take care of ourselves [and others]!

Final thoughts

Based on the reflections we've articulated throughout the text, we can consider *Perfect Days* to be a film structured around an aesthetic of silence and repetition – elements of traditional Japanese culture. The film's narrative follows the seemingly banal daily life of Hirayama, a worker responsible for cleaning public restrooms in Tokyo, whose routine repeats itself with almost ritualistic precision. The narrative's choice to reiterate actions, schedules, routes, and gestures leads the viewer to an experience that, at times, borders on exhaustion – not only physical or sensory, but also existential. This structure of repetition can be read as a subtle critique of the logic of late capitalism, where routine is marked by exhaustion, incessant productivity, and the alienation of subjectivities. At this point, the film constitutes a metacinematic critique: it presents itself as the antithesis of the hegemonic narrative model, especially that represented by Hollywood cinema – an icon of the global cultural and entertainment industry. By rejecting the linear plot, conventional conflicts and expected climaxes, *Perfect Days* offers the viewer another form of enjoyment: contemplative, sensitive, and open to the experience of a slower time (or extended/dilated time).

The ordinary – or, more precisely, the infraordinary, in Perec's sense – is the central axis of the dramatic construction here. By following Hirayama in his everyday gestures, the film reveals that happiness may lie not in rupture or exceptionality, but in calm repetition and the acceptance of simplicity. This lifestyle choice seems to echo fundamental concepts we discuss in this text regarding Japanese aesthetics and philosophy, such as wabi-sabi, which values imperfection, transience, and modesty, or *ichigo ichie*, which emphasizes that each encounter is unique, each moment singular and unrepeatable, inviting us to live intensely each moment of life and focus on the present.

The apparent absence of a plot is, in fact, filled with a profound poetic and philosophical meaning. Even though we don't know exactly what Hirayama feels or thinks, we are led to feel with him. His silence is not opaque, but rather reverberates with contradictory emotions: within him lies both solitude and peace, both melancholy and serenity. His relationship with the world is realized through small practices – tending to plants, photographing trees and shadows, listening to music on cassette tapes – that resist the accelerated flow of modern life. In these practices, the film evokes the importance of inhabiting the present mindfully. The future will never be completely digital, but rather a balance between analog and digital culture, where the former will continue to play an essential role in ways of being and existing.

Finally, we consider the analog photographs that Hirayama collects in organized boxes function as small archives of time. They are artifacts that capture the moment, record the ordinary, and transform it into memory. This silent, physical collection – displaced from digital networks – evidently highlights the value of a personal and intimate archive, in which time lived, time saved, and time relived intertwine. Photography, in this context, assumes a symbolic and sensitive function: it is, at once, memory, trace, and resistance. At the end of the film, there are no answers, no traditional ending. We don't know where Hirayama is going, what he intends, or what motivates him. But the final image – his face in a moving car, oscillating between tears and a smile – synthesizes all the affective ambiguity that permeates the work: the tension between the weight of solitude and the lightness of simple life. This final indefiniteness is not a void, but rather an opening, a surrender to the aesthetic and sensory experience that the film proposes. Thus, *Perfect Days* invites us not only to observe the life of an ordinary man, but to rethink the very way we relate to time, work, memory, and the small – almost imperceptible – pleasures of everyday life.

NOTES

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