

In search of *Perfect Days*: Contemplation as documentary practice¹

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I have always been fond of guide books. As a child I read guide books to the point where it became a vice. I guess I was always looking for some perfect city.²

Thomas Merton

I've been fortunate to visit Rome. The first time, back in 1975, came by way of a gift. I'd been volunteering with a group of religious sisters in Lourdes who ran a hostel for pilgrims not able to afford *pensions*. As a 'thank you', they paid for the Rome return-trip, including the chance to stay with their religious brothers in Ciampino. The brethren were wonderful guides but were also happy to leave me to wander and find things on my own, map and notes in hand. The city-folk I got to meet left a huge, lasting impression. As did this amazing city, sacred as it is secular, holy yet irreverent and joyful. Several years later on a return trip, I recalled my first visit, walking inside the basilica of Cosmas and Damian unaware, then, of the passages from *The Seven Storey Mountain*.

During that more recent trip, I used Merton's observations to serve as a rough guide to the imperfect city that is Rome. He recounts wandering into the Basilica of Saints Cosmas and Damian 'by the Forum, where there was a mosaic above the altar. I glanced at it, I looked back, and I could not go away from it for a long time, it held me there, fascinated by its design and its mystery and its tremendous seriousness and its simplicity.'³ Set against the backdrop of his Rome visit, the extract (there are many more) alludes to Merton's part-impressionistic, part-travelogue style. Piecing together material written during or after his travels, I sensed a writer familiar with the nuances of documentary and guide-book formats.⁴

As a contemplative, his gaze is not dissimilar to the effect generated by the filmmaker's camera and lens: distance shots and panoramic scene-setting make way for close-ups and the rich, granular details of everyday

life: alley ways, wrong turns and people's expressions. Recalling his approach to documenting time spent in California, Alaska and the final journey to Asia, I was struck in my cross-referencing by how this contemplative-documentary style is present very early in his writings. He recalls how, having visited various iconic locations in Rome, he hadn't really 'seen' the city. 'I had seen the Forum and the Colosseum and the Vatican museum and St. Peter's. But I had not really seen Rome'.⁵

For Merton, visual tropes are deceptive more than they are transparent. We tend to think of the eye as camera-like. Our eyes are often directed by word-of-mouth or by a guidebook. Our heads move in the direction of something we see. In the case of Merton, so he directs our gaze in and around a scene. We turn our heads with him in the same way a film-maker imagines for us a city or landscape. Documentary - whether in the form of writing, photography or the moving image - can tell stories or simply evoke them. 'Telling' and 'evoking' work differently, but both function around the relationship between the form, its content and the subject who views or reads the text. Whilst we turn our heads with Merton (e.g. he describes a scene in Rome which is factually accurate), he is evocatively inviting us to question what we actually see and how we react. The fact that the icons are present in the basilica is not in doubt and our eyes look with Merton. But what else do we actually see?

Although Merton's own photographs tell us what he saw, they contemplatively visualise something in addition to the scene or image. Is he always looking for a perfect shot or location, like the city in the guidebooks he read as a young man? His photographs equally tell us a story about what Merton liked looking at, so that the angle he uses to position the viewer is at the same time a brief insight into the interior and contemplative dimensions of the camera operative, in this case Merton.

There's a similar, contemplative desire which underpins a very recent film by Wim Wenders. The parallels with Merton's approach are striking. Wenders's *Perfect Days* (2023) tells a story about a man living in Tokyo at the same time as it evokes a vision of contemplative living in a busy city. Unlike Merton, Wim Wenders is not armed with a second-hand Baedeker. But like Merton, this film production is able to imagine tremendous mystery amidst the simplicity of daily life. You might know Wenders's earlier work (e.g. *Wings of Desire* [1987]; *Buena Vista Social Club* [1999]). I promise I will get to his most recent film. But first off: If you've not seen it, then please go to a cinema where it's screening. If you're watching at home, and I hope you will, enjoy every moment. Only to watch it again. Some reviews suggest it's a waste of time. These reviews judge the film

solely on the hero's manual work. Cleaning toilets is boring. Nothing happens. A film with no action, a tedious, low-status central character, and very little, if any, plot. Other reviews have championed the film's meditative qualities, and its ability to find meaning and joy in ordinary life, in the mundane circumstances we all face. These reviews are readily available via newspaper archives and the internet.

I'm conscious, however, that I'm writing for Merton readers, and so Merton needs to be part of my story to you. I say this, mindful that you may not have seen the film. No spoiler alerts needed. The story is really simple. It's about a man who cleans Tokyo's toilets. When not at work, he lives alone in a really small apartment. He eats out now and again; reads; takes photographs of shadows made by leaves; waters his bonsai garden; and listens to good music. However, in these mundane circumstances, Hirayama (played by Kōji Yakusho)⁶ cultivates a deep, unpretentious love and reverence for all who people his environment, realised in the film by the quality of his attentive gaze and unselfconscious contemplative practice.

The opening shots, not least the deployment of blurred and delayed half-light, and the absence of dialogue, facilitate a Zen-like mood, though it wouldn't be right to say this dominates the production. *Perfect Days'* introductory sequence invites us to share in the early morning light of Tokyo. Wenders shoots in what's referred to as '4:3 ratio'. This adds to the sense that audiences, with our hero, are able to see close-ups and distance with ease. It's also a way for Wenders to pay homage to a device that was common practice in classical Japanese film, not least work by Yasujiro Ozu.

The city skyline, distant and immense, is cut by street close-ups, personalised by a woman going about her work, brushing the leaves. The film effortlessly cuts from the panoramic skyline and the street into a room. It's here where our hero-protagonist is observed waking up. This observational mode of Wenders's (the camera is at futon-level) is effortless and gradual, establishing the meditative aspects of the whole film. It's not dissimilar to those compelling, meditative moments when Merton looks out from the hermitage, just as the day is about to begin; or when he describes his taxi ride through New York in 1964.

But this is not a film about meditation. Rather, it's a meditation on modern life, not dissimilar to the impact Merton's imagery generates in his 'Fourth and Walnut' sequence.⁷ Hirayama works, he reads, he takes photographs, he has friends and family, and he rests. Almost fifteen minutes into the film, and still no speech or dialogue. What is the director

really opening up for his audience? Subtitled in English, Wenders, who was originally asked to make a straight documentary about Olympic 'designer' toilets, instead recounts the story of a cleaner working in the fashionable district of Shibuya.

From start to finish, and aided by a superb soundtrack (everything from Nina Simone and the Kinks to Lou Reed's 'Perfect Days'), we live in the present moment with our hero. Yet, because his humble presence is so powerful, and because his relations with others are so tempered by compassion, I kept asking myself about this man's history. How did he become a toilet cleaner? What was going on in his life before we get to know him? Was he once a rich man, part of Japan's business elite? Is there a partner or lover, a son or daughter, a parent or brother? Such questions, I appreciate, give some indication of my film-viewing psychology.

We eventually learn that he has chosen to live estranged from his father. His sister, with whom he also remains distant but whom we do meet, has a daughter. Escaping homelife constraints, she temporarily lodges with her uncle and disrupts his urban-monastic rhythm. But these disruptions come with a positive spin, allowing us to get to know him as a loving and beloved uncle. Never really departing from his verité-documentary influences, Wenders's film frequently reminds us of Tokyo's light, its trees, its shade and its stretches of water. During his work breaks, we see an amateur photographer at play. Perhaps more so, we see a man looking out at a world that is perceived as non-hostile, such that its extimacy and apparent distance is always intimately perceived because of his presence. In the din of a busy, noisy city, strangers glimpse the presence of a man who embodies hospitality.

Wenders uses the light and shade to punctuate the film's timespan. Komorebi (木漏れ日 [pronounced kō-mō-leh-bē]) is the Japanese term which denotes how light filters in and out of the trees. There isn't really an English translation, but I was reminded of Merton's 'point-of-nothingness' reflections.⁸ In the film, our cleaner is uplifted by the sunlight leaking through branches and foliage, and his B&W photos (yes, it a pre-digital camera, too!), capture the beauty and wonder of sunrays dappling through overhead leaves. The light-shade casts dancing shadows on the Tokyo streets below, provoking in us a sense of something infinite in the midst of Tokyo's manifest displays of wealth, technology and impermanence. A ray of sunlight pierces through leaves, and Hirayama looks at the leaves' shadows moving in the wind, to and fro, as if, in Merton's words, 'untouched by sin and by illusion, a point of pure truth, a point or spark which belongs entirely to God, which is never

at our disposal, from which God disposes of our lives.’⁹

Hirayama, we initially sense, imagines that this ray of light is seen by no-one else, and this light travels from the sun only to reach him. The stream of passersby and the surrounding cityscape don’t detract from the film’s opening: we’re always in a moment of silence. Does Hirayama imagine this ray of light, this silence, is only for him? I think the answer is ‘no’. Wenders, cutting to people, park scenes and noise suggests this special moment of uniqueness is available to all, freely given. Like Merton, our Japanese hero is in the center of the city district, overwhelmed by the realization, not of separateness and self-isolation but of a connection which is communion.

I was sure my friends in the TMSGBI, and at the Buddhist centre near where I live, would want to see the film. In fact, I wasted no time emailing a colleague saying she had to see the film. ‘Why?’, she inquired. Well, it’s such a special story. I paused, struggling to precis what I’d just watched. It’s about a man who cleans toilets in Tokyo. He lives alone. He’s a solitary whose impact on all around him is benevolent. And I realized I wasn’t saying much. I shifted to mentioning the soundtrack, certain the well-known lyrics and music from popular and counter-cultural genres would ground my reasoning.

My reasoning aside, the soundtrack to his work each day (Patti Smith, Otis Redding, Sachiko Kanenobu) is worth a listen. And despite the lowly, humble nature of his work, the music elevates and intensifies his lived sense that friendship and connection are vital to city-living. Music in film undoubtedly embraces us in a wholly different way to dialogue. Like dialogue, it can function as communicative act; but it is also a kind of silence, functioning as a shared communion without the need for spoken exchanges. There’s no sloppiness or sentiment, however, in Wenders’s deployment of these and other devices in the film. In winning the 2023 Cannes Ecumenical prize, it is surely the documentary format, borrowing as Wenders does from a great line of Japanese film makers, that secured the accolade.

That’s the content in a nutshell. The film’s form, however, is not without the marks of a director whose gaze sees in the mundane aspects of daily living the profound truths of life itself. Wenders’s skills mix many aspects of traditional documentary format (verité, poetic, observational, and performative modes) with a thematic concentration on city living. From start to finish, I think the film is, like part of its title, mostly perfect. It wasn’t just the film, however, which guided my reflections that evening when I ventured back to the streets of my home city. It was the specific

context of my going to and being in the cinema, itself a shared, collective moment.

This is a film whose absence of overt violence and fear, and of warfare and hatred stand in sharp contrast to the streets being screened on TV and which I’d temporarily abandoned in order to go see the film. There is no escaping the world where we must live. But there is every reason to question its values and its false promises. Figures such as Merton and Wenders remind me that it is possible to live in peace with others in big cities, without bombs and without mass killings. In order to animate that kind of peaceful action, so we need to be contemplatives. And we need to choose that option, seeing it as the most fundamental option for life itself. There are no perfect days in our world. But might we not imagine that possibility for part of the day?

In many of his instructions and talks with those in monastic formation, Merton shares with his listeners the experience of ‘art’. I’m using the term broadly in the way that Merton does. His approach is fairly consistent. He suggests the first thing that happens when we approach poetry or paintings takes place via the subject’s own perception of the referent or thing being represented. Reading his journals, it’s clear this is an approach Merton adopts when he re-presents the natural environment, vividly imagined in his depictions of the life just beyond the hermitage door. Whilst the object or scene is never in doubt, it is Merton’s re-presentation of the reality which makes an impression on me. An object or scene is filtered in and around the perceiver’s imaginary, a process which is deeply subjective though not without commonly shared sensibilities, never isolated. On one level Merton writes almost in the trajectory of verité or documentary style. We see and feel and imagine with the poet. Form and content are seamless. Or are they?

Most of us imagine a landscape or cityscape with certain features, and so on. Yet Merton’s descriptions of street scenes, or of saplings coming to life, or of the light awakening with dawn enrich how we ourselves see and experience the object. Such mental reconfiguration is not a misrepresentation of the world. Rather, it is our way of dealing with the ‘real’ world of objects. Alternatively phrased, Merton is choosing to imaginatively reconfigure how we might see the world because he knows our world – we –are in a mess. And with Merton and Wenders, we refuse and resist the fear that comes from anxiety.

Recall, for instance, how Merton’s secondary reflection on Lum’s in Lexington in 1968 serves to enrich our own documentary-experience of the place and time: ‘When I was in Lum’s, I was dutifully thinking, “Here is

the world." Red gloves, beer, freight trains. The man and child. The girls at the next table, defensive, vague, aloof.¹⁰ Or on July 10, 1964, Merton is 'riding down in the taxi to the Guggenheim Museum around one o'clock, through the park, under tunnels of light and foliage. The people walking on Fifth Avenue were beautiful, and there were those towers! The street was broad and clean. A stately and grown-up city! A true city, life-size. A city with substance and scale, large and right. Well lighted by sun and sky, anything but soulless, and it is feminine. It is she, this city. I am faithful to her! I have not ceased to love her.'¹¹

We perceive through our senses, and following Merton or Wenders, we then deal with the impression by giving it expression in words, in drawings, in photographs or moving images. The representations of Merton's New York, or Wenders's Tokyo, are at the same time contemplative acts whereby these spaces are reimagined in and for a wider audience. A day that might seem like any other day is, for us now as his readers, an almost perfect day, one brought to life in the verité which are Merton's and Wenders's texts.

I would suggest 'contemplating' is a better description of what's going on than 'imagining'. The latter tends to connote daydreaming or fantasising as distraction. Merton, rather, is alluding to a function of the mind's profoundly contemplative capacity to think laterally, creatively and figuratively. It's also why we can imagine perfect peace even though we might not achieve it. In this contemplative moment, we experience the external world, and its potentially infinite movement, but as one act or as one thing: contemplation. Word and world, reality and meaning are inseparable. Contemplation fosters a way of engaging with the world that gradually dislodges the experience of separateness and self-isolation. This is not a theoretical activity, and nor is it intellectual. Rather, following Merton and Wenders, it is a function of being human.

To inhabit Merton's writings, or to temporarily lodge with Hirayama, is to begin to imagine a spiritual and, at the same time, a deeply cultural life. In societies that are increasingly deaf to their founding ideals, or where so-called common values have proved false to the point of implosion, then it's important to search for and represent an alternative world. We need Merton because he holds out hope for an alternative world view, not a perfect one, but one that might be better than what we have right now.

So, too, Wenders. He gives us Hirayama, not as an illusion but as an image of a life we can choose to embrace. Mama (played by Sayuri

Ishikawa) and who owns the restaurant that Hirayama visits on days off, takes time from behind the counter to sing her signature song. It's her way of saying 'hi'. It's only later we come to understand that shared moments such as these constitute Wenders's understanding that the truth of the person is in being gift to the other. This truth is repeated when, in playing shadow tag with Mama's ex-husband, the latter senses how, in privately facing a crisis point for his life, Hirayama has made him fear-less. 'Patricia Highsmith knows everything about anxiety,' says the assistant at the bookstore Hirayama frequents each week. 'I didn't know fear and anxiety were two different things.'

These important scenes in Wenders's film remind us only too painfully that life is not perfect. His contemplative art, like Merton's, is not some escapist strategy. And nor is it a journey into a privatised interior landscape. The world Merton and Wenders depict is only too recognisable, even as the years pass. Those who, today, live in their own private worlds tend not to embrace piety and tenderness but instead allow their private dreams, literally, to explode on a silenced and fearful landscape, a one that is peopled by all those named in the Beatitudes. For Merton, as for Wenders, the medium is not the message. Rather, for both men, the mediation is the message, and the message is communion. In such moments of communion, we embrace our imperfections humbly, standing with each other, always holding out for a more-perfect day.

Notes

1. This discussion makes detailed references to *Perfect Days* (2023), Japanese; film drama; 123 min; Director: Wim Wenders); at International Movie Data Base (October 2024): <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt27503384/>
2. Thomas Merton, *Run to the Mountain: The Story of a Vocation, Volume One 1939-1941, The Journals of Thomas Merton*, ed. Patrick Hart (New York: Harper San Francisco, 1996), p. 113, my emphasis.
3. Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (New York: Harcourt Brace (1948), 1978), p108
4. Alongside more typical instances of such writing (e.g. the Cuba entries in *The Seven Storey Mountain*), see also the more fluid docu-diary style of *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton* (eds Naomi Burton, Br Patrick Hart & James Laughlin, with Amiya Chakravarty, New York: New Directions, 1975).
5. *The Seven Storey Mountain*, p. 107.
6. Hirayama: tr. Japanese: written 平山 'peaceful mountain'
7. Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (New York: Image Books, 1968), pp. 156-58. Like all skilled documentarists, Merton chronicles more than one version of this experience The 'epiphany' takes place on

18.03.1958. It is documented in his journal on the following day (19.03). By the time *Conjectures* is published (1966), Merton had revised the initial entry.

8. The concept is referenced several times in *Conjectures*.
9. *Conjectures*, p158.
10. Thomas Merton, *The Other Side of the Mountain: The End of the Journey, Volume Seven 1967–1968, The Journals of Thomas Merton*, ed. Patrick Hart (New York: Harper San Francisco, 1999), p78.
11. Thomas Merton, *Dancing in the Water of Life: Seeking Peace in the Hermitage, The Journals of Thomas Merton, Volume 5: 1963-65* (Harper San Francisco, 1998), p125.

Anthony Purvis is Treasurer and Membership Secretary of the Thomas Merton Society of Great Britain and Ireland.

Forthcoming Events

Thomas Merton: Poet, Monk, Prophet

A study day with Dr Paul Pearson

Saturday 27 September 2025

at The Community of the Resurrection, Mirfield, West Yorkshire

Paul has published and spoken widely on Merton, is Director of the Thomas Merton Center at Bellarmine University in Louisville, Kentucky and Chief of Research for the Merton Legacy Trust.

Celebration 2026

The Society's 14th General Meeting and Conference

Friday 10th — Sunday 12th April 2026

at Sarum College, Salisbury

Details for both these events are being finalised. Further details, as they become available, including costs and how to book, will be circulated in our newsletter and be included on our website: <https://www.thomasmertonsociety.org.uk>.

Images (© Danilo Basile) from Yoyogi Hachimangu Shrine Park where Hirayama (*Perfect Days*) takes lunch and contemplates *komorebi*



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