

Managing *The Days*: Personal Responsibility and the Fukushima Nuclear Disaster

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Abstract: *The recently released eight-part Japanese docudrama THE DAYS (Netflix 2023) ostensibly concerns the March 2011 earthquake, tsunami, nuclear reactor explosions and subsequent meltdowns at Fukushima. We highlight the problematic rendering of this particular Fukushima screen history by analysing THE DAYS' narrative veracity and reliance on "heroic" disaster tropes, absent-presences, the glossing over of the radiological legacy, and the context of related nuclear accident teledramas and docudrama re-enactments.*

Keywords: *Fukushima, meltdown, radiation, management, responsibility*



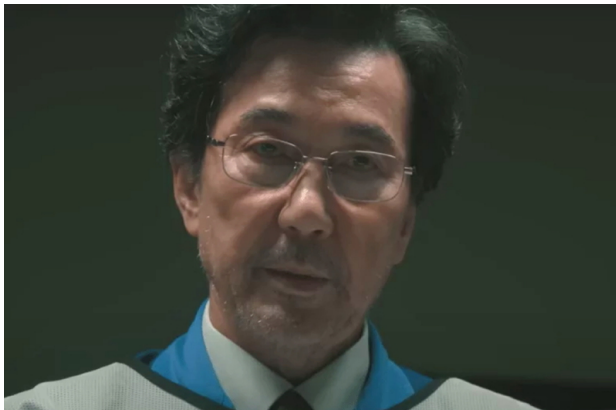
Computer generated digital effects recreate the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear

power plant prior to the 3/11 disaster (Netflix 2023).

The recent Warner Bros. Japan and Netflix series *The Days* (2023) was promoted as being the true story of the Fukushima catastrophe. Across its eight episodes and 7.5 hrs of screen time, the “truth” is highly selective and relative. In many ways, the production is a missed opportunity. The predominant perspective is of character-driven drama alongside linear disaster narrative and all the formulaic tropes associated with that genre. *The Days'* conventional, transnational dramatic impact could have been heightened by stylistically showcasing the crisis in the manner of earlier Japanese disaster film and television, including the revisionist *kaiju-ega/anime* style of the *Neon Genesis Evangelion* and *Shin Godzilla* creators in their millennialist depiction of technocrats and bureaucrats struggling to comprehend the impact of national disasters of unmanageable proportions, urgency and panic.

The Days was released within the recent wave of film and television dramas showcasing nuclear cataclysm such as the multi-award-winning US/UK HBO historical drama *Chernobyl* (Anon. 2019), the poorly rated Russian fictive drama *Chernobyl* (Anon. 2022) and the Netflix four-part series *Meltdown: Three Mile Island* (Anon. 2022), which featured documentary testimony and dramatized re-enactments of the events surrounding the 1979 nuclear disaster near Harrisburg, Pennsylvania.

Each of these programs approach their subject matter using similar modes to foreground the veracity of their historical interpretations. While HBO's *Chernobyl* was heralded as a landmark media event winning high critical international praise, the Russian *Chernobyl* series was met outside of Russia with derision, if not contempt, due to its conspiratorial plot involving a CIA operative and his Russian confederate planting explosives at the Chernobyl plant, triggering the meltdown. The authenticity of *Meltdown* largely stems from archival video interspersed with historical dramatizations and contemporary interviews, chiefly with formerly pro-nuclear technicians turned whistleblowers and formerly pro-nuclear community members turned anti-nuclear activists.



Masao Yoshida (played by Koji Yakusho), the enigmatic general manager of the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant (Netflix 2023).

However, *The Days* shows us an unrealistic, almost inhumane, idealized Japanese response to the multiple disasters. The cast is headlined by Koji Yakusho (Anon. 2023), well known from his early J-Horror films (especially with the writer-director Kiyoshi Kurosawa), who plays Masao Yoshida, the inscrutable and frequently

obstinate general manager of the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant. Yoshida's narrative dominance and privileged perspective remains enigmatic and problematic throughout the drama. Only in the closing minutes of the series is some insight granted into his personal history outside of the Fukushima plant and his inner life-world. Indeed, family life is mostly eschewed in *The Days* apart from a single, caricatured subplot concerning a missing worker and his family's frustration at being lied to, or answered evasively, by TEPCO representatives and other officials (ABC 2022).

One bizarre incident depicts Yoshida clearly aggravated by both the oversight of the power company's senior management and political interference from the Prime Minister and Cabinet in Tokyo. During a protracted multi-party video conference Yoshida stands up and away from his video monitor, stretching and walking, no longer taking part in the teleconference before undoing his fly, dropping his trousers, bending and scratching his buttocks and pointing his behind at the video conference camera for all to see. This incongruous behaviour is not met with any visible response by the online participants or those in the emergency management center. It is hard to reconcile such behaviour being acceptable given the severity of the nature of the unfolding crisis. It creates a perplexing narrative rupture, halting the otherwise photo-realist docudramatic tension. Overall, the pacing of the series is equally baffling. Dramatic tension is often undercut by long pauses and nonaction, silences inexplicably injected throughout the episodes, or by repetition of expository dialogue, all of which serve to disrupt the narrative flow.

Another offbeat characterisation in the series is the presentation of Japanese Prime Minister Naoto Kan (played by Fumiyo Kohinata) as a somewhat histrionic, bullying and often belligerent leader during the national crisis. The opportunity to explain how Prime Minister

Kan became an international advocate for the closure of Japan’s nuclear power plants, traveling the world to promote the dangers of nuclear energy in the years following the explosions and meltdowns, could have provided a powerful counternarrative contrasting Yoshida’s terminal and belated ruminations. Also unmentioned is the irony of Kan not being from the long-dominant Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), inheriting the lax nuclear regulatory oversight mechanism that, despite ongoing scandals, the prior LDP governments had entrenched for decades and which failed so spectacularly during and after the Fukushima disaster (Kaufmann and Penciakova 2011).



Japanese Prime Minister Kan (played by Fumiyo Kohinata) depicted as a histrionic browbeater (Netflix 2023).

Most of *The Days*’ action takes place in two locations of the crippled plant: the Control Room for Units 1 & 2, and the Seismic Isolated Building (SIB)—which had been transformed into the operational hub for all efforts to control the cascading disasters. This begs the question, how much seismic isolating was done, or could have been done, at the reactor buildings themselves? In the SIB we observe an idealized Japanese bureaucracy operating with little distraction from the earthquake, tsunami

or nuclear meltdowns. Yoshida and other scripted characters heroically make difficult decisions at the center of the room, all the while surrounded by dozens of subservient staff who seemingly continue to work as if in a mid-sized Japanese business office. Everyone is busy, everyone seemingly has plenty of “normal” work to do, rarely distracted by the events immediately surrounding them or having occurred in the preceding scenes, such as violent aftershocks. We know that the towns surrounding the plant have been devastated by the earthquake and tsunami, we know that over 20,000 people are dead, we know the site is beset by increasing levels of radiation, yet none of these obedient and focused workers ever seems to be inhabiting a world where this is happening. They all are shown beavering away at the minutia of office tasks, as though they were passing several regular days at the office, while at the center, important men are grappling with destiny. None of these office workers cry, or stare into the distance contemplating the loss of their homes and family; no one is even a little distracted from their paperwork. In fact, none seemingly change their clothes, eat, or sleep either. They are the canvas of functionality and continuity that the drama is painted upon—reassuring us that all will be well. The human drama is contained in the few principal male characters.



Anonymous workers are shown methodically completing their paperwork as their superiors rush to save the nation

(Netflix 2023).

The final episode employs a lengthy coda, narrated by Yoshida, who “explains” the progressive modernist rationale for the Fukushima reactor site, now lamented as an act against nature. Yoshida declares the importance of nuclear power to postwar Japanese economic and social stability, and of the wounded but capable recovery. He asks, “Why, after losing control, did the reactors stabilize? In the end, we never found a conclusive answer.” The reactors did not “stabilize,” they experienced full meltdowns. This mirrors how, much as at the time, the drama of the events soon gave way to a manipulated narrative suggesting control, recovery, and resolution. TEPCO and the Japanese government denied the meltdowns for two months (Yamamoto 2016), waiting until the story was no longer front-page news before tacitly admitting the reality. They claimed the reactors were in “cold shutdown” (Kaiser 2011) even as the locations of the molten corium that used to be the reactor cores, somewhere beneath each reactor has had water pumped onto it to keep it from over-heating (and potentially achieving spontaneous fission (McCurry 2011) even to this day. This is where much of the water being dumped into the Pacific comes from.

We are told of the importance of support from Japan’s friends, such as the United States in Operation Tomodachi, and the voiceover singles out the support of the USS Ronald Reagan and other ships, ignoring the high levels of radiation to which the crew of these specific ships were exposed (Burke 2016). It shows workers cleaning up the site and nearby towns, a job known as “liquidators” in Chernobyl, and neglects to mention that these crews were often made up of impoverished laborers who were recruited, and then underpaid, by Yakuza affiliated subcontractors;

much as has always been true in the “normal” maintenance and cleaning of Japanese nuclear reactors (Nuclear Watch 2014).



Yoshida at the center of the SIB, surrounded by mostly nameless technical and administrative staff, effectively all men, young and old (Netflix 2023).

Over flashbacks of his clinical treatment for cancer, Yoshida perfunctorily narrates that it was likely the stress of his working conditions, or decades of heavy smoking, rather than exposure to radiation at the power plant that triggered his cancer, disavowing any potential radiological impact. He describes his terminal prognosis as motivation for him to give testimony revealing all the truths about the nature of the accident at Fukushima. Here we see the endpoint of the film’s narrative arc: personal responsibility trumps social liability. Japan could recover from the nuclear disaster of Fukushima through the work of countless non-individuated workers and the critical decision making of heroes, but the harm that comes to us is because of our own lifestyle choices. Much like residents who are abandoned to determine the levels of radiation on their own farms and in their families’ food (Iwaki Citizens’ Radiation Measurement Center 2023), there is a neoliberalization of risk (Holmer Nadesan 2013). You smoke, don’t

blame being onsite of a triple nuclear meltdown for your woes. Your neighbour can afford a Geiger Counter and you can't? Don't count on the government to mitigate your wellbeing. It's on you.



One of many shots of Yoshida smoking heavily (Netflix 2023).

The coda also shows how life after the accident and the subsequent ongoing clean-up is progressing, with Yoshida mourning how the destruction of centuries old cherry blossom trees had to be undertaken due to the high uptake of radiation in these ancient plants. Yet nowhere in the series is a fuller appreciation of the broader impact of the tsunami and earthquake on the Fukushima district and its inhabitants, which resulted in the death of many thousands of citizens and the untold devastation of fauna and flora. While the coda's overlaying montage briefly visualises some of the radiological clean-up, including large tanks storing radioactive water and plastic bags holding contaminated topsoil, such imagery is brief, transient, and largely left unexplained for viewers. This selective avoidance, or at best historical amnesia, undermines the enormous, ongoing legacy of the radiological impact that includes multiple reactor meltdowns and fuel storage depot contamination, and the long duration clean-up and decontamination that will take several more decades and many

trillions of yen.

The timing of the domestic and international release of the series coincided with TEPCO's decision—endorsed by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA 2023)—to allow millions of tons of contaminated water containing tritium and other radionuclides to be released into the Pacific Ocean for many decades to come. While the eight episodes of *The Days* is paced by the cascading disasters of the triple nuclear meltdown of the 3/11 Fukushima disaster, the story is one of management, recovery, and ultimately, personal responsibility. We come away reassured that while nuclear power can be problematic, we humans are problem solvers.



Promotional image for *The Days* (Netflix 2023).

Editor's correction (11/23/2023): An earlier version of this article incorrectly referred to Naoto Kan as the only non-LDP prime minister in 50 years. The text has been revised merely to indicate "Kan not being from the long-dominant Liberal Democratic Party".

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