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## Nine Days

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## Nine Days

### Abstract

This is a film review of *Nine Days* (2020) directed by Edson Oda.

### Author Notes

John Lyden became Editor of the Journal of Religion & Film in 2011. He was Professor of Religion at Dana College from 1991-2010 and is now the Director of the Liberal Arts Core at Grand View University. He is the author of *Film as Religion: Myths, Morals, and Rituals* (NYU Press), and the editor of the Routledge Companion to Religion and Film and co-editor (with Eric Michael Mazur) of the Routledge Companion to Religion and Popular Culture. He was the 2008 recipient of the Spiritus Award for Outstanding Contributions to the study of Religion and Film.



**Nine Days (2020), dir. Edson Oda**

In Edson Oda’s debut feature film, Will (Winston Duke) interviews potential candidates for life in the world, at a house on a remote beach in an unnamed dimension. These are not souls that have lived before that are being assessed for return placement (as in reincarnation) but souls that have never lived at all—and, if not chosen, they will cease to exist after the nine-day evaluation process. Will can only choose one out of the seven to be born. The stakes are therefore very high for them. Will is assisted by Kyo (Benedict Wong), who has never lived either, but somehow he has acquired the job of signing off on Will’s choice. Will himself has lived on Earth, which is why is able to be an evaluator.

One might think that Will would choose the best people possible, to fill the world with those who will be the most kind and compassionate to others. But he knows from experience that the world is a harsh place, and one needs toughness to survive it. His view is due not only to his own experience of the world as a “shithole,” but also because he is haunted by the memory of a

woman whom he chose to live who then ended her own life, who was “too good,” too sensitive to the world and its pain to live in it. Will saw himself in her, and he is reluctant to send anyone else who cannot survive life: he feels their pain as his own, which is why he has largely closed himself off to emotion. Kyo, who seems much more compassionate than Will, acts as his conscience throughout the process, always challenging him to open himself up to sympathy.

The film alternates between all the interviewees as we see their fates unfold. Key in this process is Emma (Zazie Beets), who understands Will better than anyone. She is the one who may be able to get him to open up, as she is kind but also extremely perceptive: she diagnoses him as someone who is in pain and who thinks he is irreparable, and she tells him as much. Will and the candidates for life watch the lives of those in the world that have been recorded on videocassettes, shown on old-style television screens: this deliberate use of outdated technology by the director smartly reinforces the alienness of the procedure, more than high tech VR would. Will asks them to write down what they like in what they see on these tapes, and what they don't: but Emma insists on liking absolutely everything she sees about life, and when asked to give a negative, she points to Will's own life.

It is never explained why Will has this job, or why only one soul of these can be born while the others must cease to exist. He and Kyo don't really know why things are this way: they are not gods, but simply carrying out a role. At one point, Kyo muses whether they are in fact in a test themselves, being judged by some higher beings, who are themselves judged by others, on and on in an infinite regress. While it sounds funny when he says this, it raises the point about who has set the rules and why it is this way. While the souls beg him for existence, they cannot control the process—and in this, they are like us, born into the world without a script and not knowing what will happen to us or how much of life we will enjoy. Those who live even nine days, however, can

live fully in that short time, just as those who live longer (like Will) can fail to do so. While Will has to decide who will be born, he also has to decide if he can live himself, allowing himself to experience the joys of life even while pain is all around.

This is an incredibly beautiful film about valuing life as a gift not to be taken for granted. The acting is extraordinarily powerful, especially Winston Duke's *tour de force* performance as a man holding pain and joy in tremendous tension. Oda said that he was inspired to write the script by the suicide of an uncle, who was viewed after the fact as too sensitive and kind for the world. The world *is* a harsh place, and maybe some are not strong enough for it, but there is a balance we can all seek between strength and sensitivity, courage and compassion. The characters in his film seek and often find this balance, regardless of how long they are given to live. I was deeply moved by this film, as was everyone at the screening, as it represents the human condition with enormous depth and love. I hope this film will be seen by as many people as possible, as it celebrates life with a profundity rarely expressed as eloquently: it was my favorite film at the festival.