

Asking Environmentalists Not to Fear the Reactor

By [MANOHLA DARGIS](#)

Early in “Pandora’s Promise,” Mark Lynas, a British environmental activist, walks around the ghostly environs of the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant in Japan, near the second-worst nuclear [disaster](#) in history. There, amid spookily forsaken homes and cars, he talks about the 2011 earthquake and tsunami, as well as the meltdowns, and says he understands why people are afraid of nuclear power. Wearing a white Tyvek suit and knotting his forehead, he occasionally pauses to take a radiation reading with a [meter](#) no bigger than a cellphone. “So, are you still pro-nuclear?” asks a man off camera, presumably the director [Robert Stone](#). Mr. Lynas squints at his interlocutor and asks, “Are *you* still pro-nuclear?”

It’s a redundant question, even in Fukushima. Less than 10 minutes into “Pandora’s Promise,” Mr. Stone, whose documentaries [include](#) “Guerrilla: The Taking of Patty Hearst,” has made it clear where he stands, from the experts whom he’s gathered to make the environmental case for [nuclear energy](#). Some of these specialists are brought in soon after the movie opens with scenes from an anti-nuclear power demonstration that features the anti-nuke activist [Helen Caldicott](#) braying into a microphone (“It’s wicked!”), her voice distorting as she turns up the volume, while other protesters, some dressed as skeletons, wield placards. By contrast, Mr. Stone’s first expert, Stewart Brand, the founder and publisher of the “Whole Earth Catalog,” is introduced looking silently over a pristine stretch of coast.

This comic divide — the strident old lady environmentalist with the apparent bad dye job (Ms. Caldicott) versus a Yoda of the modern environmental movement (Mr. Brand) — makes for quite a setup. Yet such deck-stacking in movies can also be a viewer turnoff, no matter how seemingly worthy the cause. And “Pandora’s Promise” is as

stacked as advocate movies get. Its other testifiers include the nuclear physicist [Charles Till](#), who helped develop a type of reactor called the Integral Fast Reactor, and Leonard J. Koch, who helped create [EBR-1](#), an early nuclear reactor in Idaho. Financial backing, meanwhile, has come from various sources, among them the deep-pocketed [Paul G. Allen](#), whose Vulcan Inc. has invested in what it [terms](#) “advanced nuclear technologies.”

In brief — or so the movie’s one-sided reasoning goes — everything that anti-nuclear energy activists and skeptics have thought about the issue is wrong. Decades of politically and ideologically driven fearmongering and misinformation have led to its demonization when it could be our salvation. Drawing on original interviews, archival materials, computer animations and even, d’oh, [“The Simpsons,”](#) Mr. Stone builds his case seamlessly but leaves no room for dissent, much less a drop of doubt. “To be anti-nuclear,” another of his experts, the journalist Richard Rhodes, says, “is basically to be in favor of burning fossil fuel.”

Certainly there’s an environmental case to be made for nuclear energy as an alternative to fossil fuels, which is exactly what some activists and [journalists](#) have been exploring for years. But you need to make an argument. A parade of like-minded nuclear-power advocates who assure us that everything will be all right just doesn’t cut it.