

***Don't Look Up* Climate Change Dooming Boomers, Nihilistic Teenagers and Underfunded Scientists Against/For the World**

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Abstract Representations of the global climate crisis have permeated popular culture for over half a decade. We passively watch the environmental crisis unfold in entertainment media as the ecological collapse continues to forge on, seemingly inexorably. Adam McKay's satirical apocalypse film *Don't Look Up* (2021) delineates generational differences in social/political activism and non-activism, participation in social media discussions about climate change, blaming others and taking responsibility for the climate emergency. This article shows that the film's allegorical climate apocalypse represents a satire of intergenerational (climate) crisis communication, misinformation, and denial in contemporary US-American news, popular media, and political discourse. The movie achieves this through intergenerational ideas and values and a satirical allegory that represents the climate crisis in various discursive fields.

Keywords Climate crisis in film. Climate crisis communication. Popular culture. Allegorical satire. Ecocriticism. *Don't Look Up*.

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1 Introduction

Representations of the climate crisis have permeated audio-visual popular media. For example, movies such as *Mother!* (2017, directed by Darren Aronofsky) explore climate change in subtle, metaphorical ways, while blockbusters such as *The Day After Tomorrow* (2004, directed by Roland Emmerich) transform climate change into spectacle and documentaries such as *An Inconvenient Truth* (2006, directed by Davis Guggenheim) provide scientific explanations of climate change. This fascination with representing environmental catastrophe in the media has been accompanied by a feeling of being overwhelmed and simultaneously being paralysed by the climate crisis. We are “spectators of ruin” (Morton 2010, 2) in an “Age of Spectatorial Complicity” (Estok 2014, 49). Adam McKay’s apocalyptical satirical comedy film *Don’t Look Up* (2021) represents this spectatorial complicity as the central factor in aggravating the environmental crisis.

The film centres on a comet threatening to end life on planet Earth. This comet substitutes the slow, intangible effects of global warming on flora and fauna for an instantaneous and immediate event. The film’s satire of contemporary US-American political and popular culture foregrounds how these factors contribute to our spectatorial complicity. Thus, *Don’t Look Up* is a story about the struggle of scientists, politicians, and ordinary people of all generations against the crisis-denying and -enabling structures in politics, media, and economy. Although the film never explicitly addresses climate change, its story is an allegory for it. The film’s protagonists, astronomer Dr Randall Mindy (Leonardo DiCaprio) and PhD candidate Kate Dibiasky (Jennifer Lawrence), struggle to raise awareness of “an extinction-level event” (*Don’t Look Up*, 0:07’55”) unleashed by a comet approaching the planet. In their quest, they confront self-absorbed politicians, tech billionaires with illusions of grandeur, and a sceptical public distracted by news and popular culture. As such, the film mediates contemporary society’s anxieties and apocalyptic imaginations regarding global crises – notably the climate crisis. The film substitutes climate change’s temporally and spatially distant impact (for the average US-American) for an immediate doomsday event. The spectacle surrounding this near-future event allows the movie to explore science communication and denialism in political, economic, news, and popular media discourse – a variety of discourses where experts and opinion leaders influence the emotions and consensus of the masses. Accordingly, the film not only represents how these discursive fields portray, frame, and comment on the climate crisis but also the systems and individuals that manipulate them, resulting in misinformation, denial, and conspiracy theories. *Don’t Look Up* juxtaposes its representation of crisis discourse in the mass media with intimate personal moments spanning across

generations. This oscillation between global and personal narratives, generations, discourse fields, and sentimentalities (satire and sincerity) contribute to the metamodern character of the film. Metamodernity is the successor of postmodernity and a burgeoning theoretical framework that aims to articulate a new cultural sensibility between, within, and beyond the modern and postmodern.

This article suggests that the allegorical satire of the climate crisis in Adam McKay's *Don't Look Up* (2021) enables social, cultural, and political commentary on (climate) crisis communication, misinformation, and denial in news, popular, and political discourse across generations. I will first analyse how Adam McKay's *Don't Look Up* (2021) represents the climate crisis through allegory and satirical humour. Furthermore, I will explore how the film bridges the spatial and temporal distance between the cause, impact, and solution of/to climate change through its allegorical representation. Additionally, I will discuss the communication of (the climate) crisis in the film's satirical representations of how US-American politicians, entrepreneurs, and news shape the understanding and emotional investment of the older generations while side-lining scientists and their findings. Furthermore, the movie highlights the younger generations' position between climate nihilism and the allure of social media, celebrity culture, and performative activism. Lastly, I will illustrate how the film incorporates the satirical sincerity of metamodernity in its oscillating representation of a global issue across generations, places, discursive fields, and modes.

2 Allegorical Climate Crisis: Dramedy Instead of a Slow Burn

To dramatise a real planetary threat, *Don't Look Up* employs a global extinction event unleashed by a comet approaching Earth. The film thus represents climate change in the mode of a satirical allegory and spectacle. An allegory is a stylistic device that "[in] the simplest terms, [...] says one thing and means another" (Fletcher 2021, 2). It thus allows for the representation of a complex, systematic subject matter as a more direct and concise one. In other words, as stated by Fredric Jameson, it is a "one-to-one narrative in which features of a primary narrative are selected (in the process rhetoric calls amplification) and correlated with features of a second one that then becomes the 'meaning' of the first" (2020, ch. 1). In the case of *Don't Look Up*, the narrative of climate change – as a slow and gradual destruction of our ecosystem through human action and inaction – is transposed to a cosmic existential danger approaching earth and humanity's inaction in preventing or mitigating it. The last part, humanity's inaction, is the common denominator in both narratives. Jameson

further states that the two dimensions of allegory are not separate; instead, allegory is based on “the interechoing of narratives with one another, in their differentiation and reidentification” (Jameson 2019, ch. 1). Thus, substituting “the violent effects of climate change [that] are so far removed from the causes thereof (both temporally and spatially)” (Hobbs-Morgan 2017, 78) for a global, immediate and indiscriminate extinction event erases the slowly unfolding environmental apocalypse from the popular imagination by drawing on an “apocalyptic genre [that] presents climate change via speculative images that foster an emotionally dramatised and scientifically simplified idea of climate change” (de Roo 2019, 63).

This allegorical representation of the climate crisis is not without its flaws. Firstly, the film’s attempted solution to the crisis – i.e., destroying the comet before it impacts Earth – is concrete, simple and allows for a return to the status quo.¹ By transforming the systemic problem of climate change into a singular and avoidable disaster, the film understates the severity of the problem. Colin Davis and Stephan Lewandowsky stress that this flawed allegory imagines “the impact of the comet [as] a discrete event in the near future that will affect everyone simultaneously”, even though “[c]limate change is more gradual, and its effects are unequally distributed across the planet” (2022, 323). Secondly, while the comet in the film is a natural phenomenon, climate change results from human activities. However, these differences allow the allegorical representation in the film to accentuate the political and economic structures that enable and facilitate inaction, denial, and disbelief in climate change (323). Ultimately, the analogy, albeit flawed, allows the film to focus its (climate) crisis representation on the cultural, political, scientific, and economic discourses.

Don't Look Up reframes the global issue to the dimensions of politics, capitalism, popular culture, and science communication by satirising the denial, scepticism, and existential angst present in its intergenerational discourse. While the representation of the global climate crisis in film and other media affects the general public’s opinion on the subject matter, its mode restricts its factuality. Kate Manzo has investigated the usefulness of representation of climate change in film and proposes that neither documentary nor science fiction films about the climate crisis

should [...] be held to higher standards than science itself, which is not expected to tell the whole truth and be perfect. Debates about

1 There are two projects to stop the comet in the film, but both fail: once because the President of the United States prioritises harvesting the comet for its resources over destroying it and once due to technological failure caused by a lack of thorough independent peer-review. Thus, the film critiques the potential of politics, economy, and technology to solve the climate crisis.

data interpretation, logos and so on are therefore inevitable. However such films can, and should be held to photographic standards of truthfulness, openness and honesty. (2017, 94)

While the discussion on the representability of the climate crisis in the media, as well as its depiction in *Don't Look Up's* narrative and marketing, have been debated by critics and scholars alike, they agree that the film depicts the societal responses to climate change communication in various discursive fields of US-American culture (Atik, Ozgun, Dholakia 2022; Fahy 2022; Doyle 2022; Davis, Lewandowsky 2022). Nonetheless, fictional filmic representations of climate change differ from climate science communication in that the former prioritises emotional investment over factual accuracy (Weik von Mossner 2020, 330). Furthermore, scholars postulate that climate change films create awareness and prompt short-term emotional investment yet fail to trigger long-term actions and behaviour changes (Sakellari 2015; Lowe et al. 2006). Nonetheless, representing the climate crisis in film defines, challenges, and articulates a collective understanding of the global threat (Fiskio 2012, 13).

3 Scientists vs the News: Satirising What the Audience is Dying for

Don't Look Up satirises various discourses that are not limited to climate change. Instead, the target of satire is US-American culture and politics:

As a product of popular culture itself, the film critiques commodity culture through a focus upon the cultural products of late-capitalism (music, film, TV, social media) and celebrity culture – situating these as contributing to public and political disengagement from crisis. (Doyle 2022, 5)

The satirical mode of the film, in combination with the genre of apocalyptic fiction and the exaggerated narrative, performances, and cinematography, draw attention to climate crisis discourse in contemporary US-American culture. Thus, the film is a “climate change communication film, satirising political and societal responses to the scientific evidence of climate change” (Doyle 2022, 2) and the lack of individual and global action to save the planet. Therefore, the focus of the satirical attack is no longer on the crisis but on people’s behaviour and inaction (Doyle 2022, 5; Davis, Lewandowsky 2022, 323). Furthermore, it figures the global climate crisis as a “multi-generational problem” (Farber 2020, 293) by satirising the people epitomising the divide at each extreme – youth activism and Greta Thunberg

for Gen Z and climate deniers and Donald Trump for the Baby Boomers. This emphasis on binary extremes erases nuance yet situates climate change as a generational problem. The various discourse strands and their dominant characters also reinforce the generational differences and stereotypes surrounding climate activism and denialism. The older generations are represented as the political and economic elites, while the younger generations are represented as either climate nihilists or celebrity-obsessed slacktivists on social media.² The film's protagonists, however, as representations of the scientific community, are situated between these extremes and oscillating between them. This generational divide in the face of climate change reveals the film's metamodern sensibilities. Ultimately, the film critiques not predominantly crisis management and communication but the discourse and behaviour surrounding it.

The film's main mode of critique is satire. Satire is (1) a "literary art", (2) that "attacks its targets", (3) which are "discernible historical particulars", (4) its critiques are "to some extent humorous", and (5) it is an essentially "negative enterprise" (Marshall 2013, 7). Furthermore, Milthorpe defines it as "a mode that, by necessity, is responsive to the historical, biographical, or literary environments of its creation" and attacks "specific targets" who are "deserving of censure or praise" (2016, 3). Thus, satire critiques specific targets ranging from individuals to movements. Furthermore, this targeted critique is informed by the socio-cultural, literary, and historical context of its time of creation. Therefore, satire is a reactive mode employed in art influenced by the current *Zeitgeist* to humorously critique a target as it is "integrally dependent on the particular social and historical circumstances of its deployment" (Day 2011, 3). The film's satire primarily deploys the scientist characters' exaggerated difficulties in communicating their findings and creating awareness across political, news, and popular discourse fields, hoping to avoid catastrophe while critiquing the (lack of) actions taken by the USA in tackling the climate crisis.

As films can represent science in an accessible and easy fashion, they can similarly represent the system of science communication. The representation of science and climate change communication in *Don't Look Up* showcases that "the news media system not only obstructs effective science communication but harms the public understanding of science" (Fahy 2022, 2). The film uses montages of news broadcasts, YouTube clips, and social media reactions to represent

² The term slacktivism - alternatively 'clicktivism' or 'armchair activism' - describes a form of online (token) activism devoid of "meaningful activation and mobilization" (Jacquarcq 2021, 45) characterised by a lack "of willingness to devote significant effort to enact meaningful change" (Kristofferson, White, Pelozo 2013, 1149).

the intra-diegetic discourse on the allegorical climate change, where science rarely takes centre stage. Furthermore, the news media prioritises subject matter that further engagement and drama over ones that are existential threats to the audience. This reprioritisation is represented in the film in the first interview Dr Randall Mindy and Kate Dibiasky give on the national television programme *The Daily Rip*. The hosts, Brie Evantee (Cate Blanchett) and Jack Bremmer (Tyler Perry), reframe and joke about the comet as they try to “keep the bad news light” and to help “the medicine go down” (*Don't Look Up*, 0:39'40''-45'')

DR. MINDY: It's somewhere between six and nine kilometers across. So...

EVANTEE: It's big.

DR. MINDY: It would damage the entire planet. Not just a house, you know?

BREMMER: The entire planet. Okay, well, as it's damaging, will it hit this one house in particular that's right on the coast of New Jersey? It's my ex-wife's house. Can we make that happen? (*Don't Look Up*, 00:39'01''-19'')

Ultimately, the discovery of the comet and its existential threat to humankind is overshadowed by celebrity news. Climate scientist Peter Kalmus commented in *The Guardian* and linked his personal experiences to that of the fictional characters in the film, stating that:

climate scientists have faced an even more insurmountable public communication task than the astronomers in *Don't Look Up*, since climate destruction unfolds over decades – lightning fast as far as the planet is concerned, but glacially slow as far as the news cycle is concerned – and isn't as immediate and visible as a comet in the sky. (*The Guardian*, 29 December 2021)

According to this statement, the representation of news and journalism in *Don't Look Up* mirrors the practices of late-capitalist news agencies that prioritise entertainment, growing viewer numbers, and sales over existential threats and unpleasant stories. Yet, this satirical depiction of news media focuses on “immoral and reprehensible journalists” (Fahy 2022, 6) while neglecting to highlight that journalism has contributed to the education of the public in environmental matters (5). While the film's representation of science communication and journalism is exaggerated and limited in its perspective, it nonetheless points toward the potential problems in communicating (climate) crisis to all generations in contemporary US culture.

According to Hannah Little, the film employs a trifold of humour theories to entertain the audience and simultaneously satirise and

critique through exaggeration, contradiction, and analogy (2022, 2-3). The three theories, initially proposed by Billig (2005), are (1) “incongruity”, (2) “relief”, and (3) “superiority” (quoted in Little 2022, 2). The humorous incongruity in *Don't Look Up* is most evident in the form of language different characters use to describe the same subject matter, mainly the comet approaching Earth:

[DR. MINDY] A comet between five to ten kilometers across, that we estimate came from the, uh... from the... from the Oort cloud. Which is the outermost part of the solar system. And, um... And using Gauss's method of orbital determination and the average astrometric uncertainty of 0.04 arcseconds, we then asked... (*Don't Look Up*, 0:18'36"-58")

Scientists like Dr Mindy employ “technical, scientific language to express a pretty simple and serious concept: that a comet will hit the Earth and everyone will die” (Little 2022, 2). This language barrier is an actual issue in science communication. Still, in this scene it becomes a vehicle for ridiculing Dr Mindy as being unable to talk to people outside the ‘ivory tower’ of academia. The following comedic relief breaks the tension created by such incongruities through exaggerated performances, subversive cinematography, and vulgar language. This complementary oscillation is a result of a paradox that is resolved through rapid and sudden bursts of emotions:

[KATE] Well, maybe the destruction of the entire planet isn't supposed to be fun. Maybe it's supposed to be terrifying. And unsettling. And you should stay up all night...every night crying, when we're all 100% for sure gonna fucking die! (*Don't Look Up*, 00:39'47"-40'09")

These instances of humour alleviate the tension created by characters reframing, denying, or trivialising the approaching comet and the main characters, who function as the audience's emotional focalisers, becoming frustrated, angry, and desperate (Little 2022, 2). Lastly, superiority encompasses humour that leverages inferiority towards other characters. It works in a similar fashion to the previous concepts but portrays “politicians, media personalities and the population at large as characters acting in foolish ways” (Little 2022, 2). As a result, the audience “are encouraged to laugh at their stupidity” (Little 2022, 2). The humour in *Don't Look Up* capitalises on exaggerating the language and knowledge barrier between scientists and everyday people, as well as the ignorance and willing inaction against impending doom.

Along the way, *Don't Look Up* reinforces a specific ideology through its satirical attack and critique of ideologies, individuals, and

movements. Andrew Stott highlights satire's effectiveness in criticising politics and instigating change in politics and ethics as follows:

In the best instances, it takes its subject matter from the heart of political life or cultural anxiety, re-framing issues at an ironic distance that enables us to revisit fundamental questions that have been obscured by rhetoric, personal interests or *Realpolitik*. (Stott 2014, ch. 7)

However, this form, he continues, is limited in its effectiveness as it "reinforces and validates a discourse of power that relies on the systematic humiliation of targeted groups to secure its own sense of identity" (Stott 2014, ch. 7). Thus, the identity politics of the film contradict its intent of creating awareness and convincing climate crisis deniers to listen to climate scientists.

Don't Look Up subverts conventions of the satirical mode by not representing an average person's view on the political issue but instead that of scientists and celebrities. As a result, the film, as highlighted by Little (2022, 3-4), satirises not the ones in power through an outsider's perspective but rather reinforces the division between in-group and out-group of climate change supporters and believers, as it opts for an entitled viewpoint. The film's climate crisis-affirming ideology is paired with a bourgeois focus in both the narrative and the film's marketing, which over-emphasises individual agency and its impact.³ While scholars agree that individual action is necessary to mitigate the climate crisis and generate collective change (Fraginière 2016; O'Brien 2015; Kent 2009; Brownstein, Kelly, Madva 2022), systemic issues inherent in neoliberal capitalism mitigate responsibility and action to individuals. Although the exaggerated representation of climate change discourse mirrors real-world experiences, the film's mode subverts the conventions of satire and thus adopts an alienating stance through its (self-)involved celebrities. Nonetheless, *Don't Look Up* aligns with the traditions of satire "that tend toward either an aesthetic enjoyment of satirical critique or the use of satire to reinforce moral or ideological instruction" (Stinson 2019). Ultimately, the film alienates a proportion of its audience - arguably the most important - by delineating strict in- and out-groups that are climate change-affirming (heroes) or -denying (villains).

3 The website *Don't Look Up Climate Platform* - a collaboration between the film and Count Us In which is "a global movement of people and organizations taking high impact steps to address climate change" (Count-Us-In.org, FAQ section) - for example overemphasises the impact individuals can have in fighting the climate crisis by small everyday actions, e.g., eating more vegetables, using sustainable transport, waste less food, etc.

4 Boomers Dooming the World: Make Denial Great Again

The most powerful enemy faced by the film's protagonists, besides the doomsday comet, are political and economic elites personified by individuals belonging to the Baby Boomer generation. Politicians in the film are portrayed as corrupt, self-serving, and backed by tech billionaires. A populist president prioritises economic growth and popularity over scientific facts. At the same time, a tech entrepreneur is so removed from compassion and ethics that he created an algorithm to predict people's deaths.

The film's president, Janie Orlean (Meryl Streep), is a caricature of Donald Trump. Like her real-life inspiration, she starts as a reality television star, provides her family with positions in her presidential staff, and is an outspoken sceptic of science. President Trump voiced his science scepticism on numerous occasions, such as during the COVID-19 pandemic, but perhaps most infamously when he publicly contradicted California Natural Resource Secretary Wade Crowfoot when he remarked, "I don't think science knows, actually", in response to the impact of climate change on the 2020 wildfires in California. The Trump administration "built consistently on an anti-science discourse of which denial of anthropogenic climate change formed a key part" (Zehndorfer 2022, 121). His fictional counterpart in *Don't Look Up* takes a similar stance and weaponises science to further their own agendas and that of investors. Donald Trump and Janie Orlean prioritise the economy over the environment by heeding the word of entrepreneurs over that of scientists. Besides the behaviour and personality, the fictional president's campaign "Don't Look Up" and its rallies mirror Donald Trump's rallies throughout his candidacy and eventual presidency, including slogans on baseball caps, chants, and the overabundance of US-American iconography.

The actions taken by President Orlean to manage the approaching comet remind viewers of President Trump's crisis management during the COVID-19 pandemic and the climate crisis. In the first meeting, she is confronted with the nearing comet and its "99.78% certainty of impact on earth" (*Don't Look Up*, 0:20'16"); then she lowers the certainty to 70% and dismisses its significance as the midterms are coming up and "at this very moment, I say we sit tight and assess" (*Don't Look Up*, 0:21'45"-51"). Thus, the president postpones addressing an existential threat to the earth in favour of public perception and political schemes. Indeed, she even goes as far as calling the comet "a hoax" (*Don't Look Up*, 0:46'36", 0:55'52"), mirroring Trump's sentiment regarding both the global climate crisis (see Stelter 2020, 25) and the COVID-19 pandemic (6-9). Through its connection to real-world politics, Orlean's behaviour satirises believers in conspiracy theories, such as the anti-vax movement during the COVID-19 pandemic and climate change deniers. Nevertheless, this

strategic shaping of the narrative on climate change affects the general public's opinion on it. The Trump administration's contradiction of accepted science encouraged the public consensus to follow suit (see McGuire 2017). However, Orlean's character was influenced by a variety of US-American politicians representing both major parties. As such, the critique of politics does not centre on one specific party but rather the political system and political discourse, which strategically favours short-term plans that ensure power and maintain publicity over long-term crisis management and problem-solving.

Entrepreneurs trying to exploit (rather than avert) the crisis to make a quick profit embody neoliberal capitalism. Tech-billionaire Peter Isherwell (Mark Rylance) represents the self-proclaimed saviours of humanity and political donors in late capitalism. *Don't Look Up* communicates its critique of capitalism in connection to the climate crisis by "humorously [exposing] the interconnected failings of late-capitalist systems in both dealing with, and exacerbating, an extinction level threat" (Doyle 2022, 4). This critique also addresses the notion of a "good [...] Anthropocene", first suggested by Erle Ellis (2011, 42-3), according to which human endeavours and technological advancement can change the fate of the planet for the better.⁴ However, instead of saving the planet, the people in power - politicians and CEOs alike - are preoccupied with financial gain and short-term success. Isherwell, the CEO of BASH - the fictional stand-in for tech corporations such as Apple, Microsoft, and Tesla - exploits the disaster for financial gain by harvesting the comet instead of destroying it. This economic exploitation of crisis "parallels the way in which powerful companies have sought to delay climate action so as to continue exploiting fossil fuels for profit" (Davis, Lewandowsky 2022, 323). Furthermore, the late-capitalist consumerism promoted by the fictional company distracts the public from the impending apocalypse through its marketing. Their slogans "For peace of mind" (*Don't Look Up*, 01:18'56") and "Life, without the stress of living" (*Don't Look Up*, 0:25'15") convey the idea of an escapist retreat from all problems of life, including the approaching comet. In this way, the film portrays a society focused on maintaining the status quo through escapist materialism. Technological advancement becomes intimately tied to furthering the goals of companies and CEOs, not the environment or humankind. Ultimately, humanity's technological progress cannot save the earth as the emphasis on financial profit and individualistic neoliberalism take precedence over environmental concerns.

⁴ For example, Simon Dalby critiques this idea in his article "Framing the Anthropocene: The Good, the Bad and the Ugly" (2015). He postulates that the Anthropocene is "neither good nor bad but [...] rather ugly" (16) due to the required changes in politics and economics and the resistance they are being met with.

5 Nihilism and Slacktivism: Gen Z Commodifying the Crisis

While older generations are sceptical towards climate change and/or worry less about a future transformed by it, younger generations tend to worry more about global climate change (Farber 2020). Members of Generation Z tend to convey their worries through either activism (see Greta Thunberg) or humorous resignation (personified by Yule, played by Timothée Chalamet, in *Don't Look Up*). The film's memetic representation of Gen Z/Millennial engagement with climate change and how they are perceived in broader discourses thus focuses on individual activism, internet memes, and celebrities.

Whereas Randall Mindy and Kate Dibiasky's attempt to appeal to the masses through mainstream news fails, their television appearance creates waves on online social media. The film depicts this dimension of discourse through montages of social media posts, reactions, videos, and internet memes.

The two scientists are reframed in a humorous and satirical fashion in internet memes. Dr Mindy, who manages to adapt to the constraints of news media coverage and thus the older generation, is transformed into a popular and famous scientist. Kate Dibiasky, however, is subjected to ridicule, a sentiment shared by Generation Z, who resort to humour and climate nihilism (see Kuppa 2018; Farber 2020). This reframing of the scientists happens in the movie's story and its visual presentation of internet memes. The intradiegetic internet community conceptualises Dr Mindy as both a respected, calm, and intelligent astronomer and a desirable man. By contrast, Kate's erratic outburst on the live TV programme is ridiculed. Her comparison to Charles Manson frames her as a crazy cult leader while also tapping into the stereotype of a woman who cannot keep her emotions in check. Yet, Dibiasky's appearance resonates with sceptical youth – personified by Yule and his friends – who idolise her and her unapologetic communication. While Kate is ridiculed for her emotional and direct way of addressing the existential threat on traditional news, she becomes simultaneously celebrated 'and' mocked by her age cohort on social media, indicating that responses to existential threats cannot be easily categorised by age only. As the comet's impact nears, she deploys her popularity to create awareness and prompt action. This course of action mirrors both Gen Z's humorous engagement with climate change and its most famous activist, Greta Thunberg. Yet, while social media and traditional media are separated in their form, functions, and users, they both fail to invoke practical activism.

The film's satirical representation of popular culture and media exaggerates familiar structures and processes. *Don't Look Up* satirises popular culture's and online activism's limitations in contributing to

social and political change by highlighting online movements, concerts, and celebrity fandom as distracting audiences from what 'really counts' and, accordingly, contributors to inaction. The "For Real Last Concert to Save the World" epitomises these limitations and its slacktivist contributions through entertainment content. While the concert attendees and the people participating in rallies and protests in the film's final act include all generations, the commodified and entertaining activism unifies them as consumers and fails to avert the disaster. The concert's main song, *Just Look Up*, illustrates this armchair activism with lyrics such as "Look up, [...] get your head out of your ass. Listen to the goddamn qualified scientists. We really fucked it up, fucked it up this time" (*Don't Look Up*, 1:44'14"-33"). The song and the concert may be considered a "last gasp attempt at making collective meaning out of impending disaster" (Doyle 2022, 5). Still, the commodification of the crisis and its attendant transformation into entertainment calls out the slacktivist stance for pointing at crises without affecting change. Ultimately, the younger generations' activism is not enough to avert the catastrophe as media spectacle, humorous, and sincere engagement fail to bring forth political and collective change.

6 Metamodernity Encapsulated: With, Between, and Beyond Generations

The film encapsulates metamodern ideas in its reconciliation of polarities and thus signals the coming of a generation (Vermeulen, Van Den Akker 2010, 5) that oscillates between the past and the present. *Don't Look Up* employs a variety of strategies in both its narrative, character design, and cinematography to express a plurality of emotions, ideas, and structures in US-American discourse on climate change. Through its metamodern aspects, the film positions itself as an intergenerational product - simultaneously with the old and the new, between the old and the new, and beyond the old and the new (see Vermeulen, Van Den Akker 2010). Such a plurality of positions connected to the climate crisis modifies the anxiety and fear of younger generations as well as the popular and political discourse that re-frames and denies the crisis.

Metamodernity reconciliates polarities and, as such, foregrounds ambivalence in contemporary society, as irony and sincerity no longer cancel each other out. In the metamodern world, the strict binary systems and opposites in the social and cultural domains are not rejected but reconfigured as ambiguities and layers of meaning (Storm 2021). The film's fusion of genres and modes and the depiction of involved characters whose strategies and ideologies constantly seem to alternate between extremes encapsulate this aspect

of metamodernity. *Don't Look Up* oscillates between various themes such as sincerity and irony, hope and nihilism, personal and political, to underline that both the individual and the collective, the ironic and the sincere, must work together to address this pressing issue.

The film thus consists of two main narrative layers. Its macronarrative focuses on the existential threat of the comet and how scientists, politicians, and the media are struggling to respond to and possibly avert it. On the other hand, a multitude of micronarrative zeroes in on the private lives of individual characters and montages of global citizens, flora, and fauna. Politicians, journalists, and tech billionaires try to convince people that the comet is not a significant threat to the survival of humankind. However, this strategic rhetorical reframing fails to persuade people when they can see the comet with their own eyes without relying on scientists, news anchors, or politicians as mediators. This part of the narrative allegory highlights the problem with climate change, as its effects cannot be perceived immediately or globally. However, once the crisis becomes tangible, science communication becomes ineffective. At this point, the scientists resign to their fate and prioritise family and friends over the future of the planet; they no longer look up. This second interpretation of the film's title – to 'not' look up and focus on one's immediate surroundings – introduces these micronarratives, which the film's final minutes spotlight. Ultimately, the constant oscillation between the macronarrative and the micronarratives accentuates the global threat of the comet and the inconsequential individual in averting the climate catastrophe.

In its final moments, the film shifts focus by depicting the total annihilation of life on Earth in a montage. This sequence combines the fictional story and its speculative imagination of a doomsday event with documentary footage of nature, animals, and people. The destruction of the planet is shown from orbit in various wide shots as well as from Earth in close detail, putting the viewer in the position of a character experiencing the annihilation of life. The montage incorporates stock footage of various animals to represent the fauna affected. These animals include polar bears, an icon of the climate crisis, and bees, another species extremely affected by climate change and a potential indicator of it (Cunningham et al. 2022). Humans are both shown in open and closed spaces, in nature and civilisation. Additionally, humankind is shown in both public and private spheres. The humans seen in public spaces are strangers to the audience. At the same time, the main characters and their friends and family are placed in a domestic setting, increasing the emotional investment in the well-being and fate of the humans through recognition. However, the sequencing of these different images entangles them to the point that they become practically indistinguishable before ending in a cut to black.

This final montage positions seemingly inconsequential and intimate moments as the important aspects of daily life. Thus, while the satire critiques various elements of US-American society, the film's final moments accentuate the beauty of nature, the importance of the mundane, the beauty in horror, and the importance of family; or in the words of Dr Mindy, "We really did have everything, didn't we?" (*Don't Look Up*, 2:05'58"). Furthermore, the ending sequence displays the grand and the intimate, nature and humankind, extra-diegetic and intra-diegetic, professional footage and amateur footage, destruction and life, hope and despair, drama, and comedy. This montage accentuates the metamodern character of the film – and thus the intergenerational aspect of it – and expands the representation of the climate crisis from the fictional to the real through referentiality, homage, and heightened verisimilitude. Therefore, the film points to a new generation of climate discourse: a satirical sincerity that permutes all generations. At the same time, the film's ideological positioning alienates those segments of the audience it tries to convince of the severity of the issue at hand, while its exaggeration of individual responsibility glosses over systemic problems that individual actions cannot solve. Ultimately, Adam McKay's allegorical climate change satire addresses the difficulties in communicating climate crisis science, enforcing political action, and collective action across generations in contemporary US-American politics, news, and popular culture.

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