

FILM REVIEW

Don't Look Up, or How not to deal with a disaster

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***Don't Look Up*, Producers: Adam McKay, Kevin Messick, Director: Adam McKay, English, 138 minutes, 2021.**

The latest film from the stable of director Adam McKay is parodical and farcical, but also authentic and despondent, not unlike his previous venture with *The Big Short* (2015). But unlike the former, *Don't Look Up* — the story of a people facing an advancing comet, a planet killer — is complete fiction. The film, however, has the disturbing and prescient quality of the *Black Mirror* (2011–2019) series, hitting home with the realisation that science fiction is closer than we think to reality; in other words, reality can indeed be stranger than fiction.

The threat of an approaching comet in *Don't Look Up*, originally envisaged as an urgent and accelerated metaphor for the climate crisis, took on many other meanings and representations as the film was being made and was released into a pandemic-ridden world. As we saw the story of *Contagion* (2011) turn into reality, we grappled with the fear of the virus and learning Covid-appropriate behaviour, while dealing with the consequences of disastrous lockdown policies, rampant misinformation, and the emergence of the Covid-denier. Disastrous policies, misinformation, and deniers — all of these apply to the Covid-19 pandemic, as much as they do to the climate crisis, and the comet threat in *Don't Look Up*. Returning after Covid-19 stalled the production of the movie, McKay realised he had to make the script “20 percent crazier, because reality had played out crazier than the script” [1].

The film begins with scientists — PhD candidate Kate Dibiasky (Jennifer Lawrence) and Dr Randall Mindy (Leonardo DiCaprio) — discovering the comet, and that it is on a collision course with earth. On informing the authorities, they are

whisked away to Washington, DC. Along with NASA's Dr Teddy Oglethorpe (Rob Morgan) — the only ally Mindy and Dibiasky have on the inside — they meet with President Janie Orlean (Meryl Streep). The scientists' concerns around the urgency of taking action and communicating the bad news to the larger public is shot down, as the caricature of a president tells them to “sit tight and assess”, while dismissing their concerns saying, “Do you know how many ‘the world is ending’ meetings we’ve had over the years?”

When the scientists attempt to go rogue with the information, the president is forced to address the public and provide a solution. However, Dibiasky and Mindy's television appearances only result in their warnings being made light of, and the urgency with which Dibiasky tries to tell the world that the end is near becomes fodder for viral memes on social media. When the plan to blow up the comet fails, and Dibiasky tries to reveal the truth behind it, her efforts are thwarted by means of threats and non-disclosure agreements. She continues to believe she must speak the truth and create a sense of urgency among the general public to demand answers and action from the powers that be. But we see Mindy, perceived as the “non-alarmist” one, as he gets taken in by the establishment's propaganda, still trying to speak the truth but losing his way perhaps due to his newfound fame or his surrender to the fact that “this is now beyond our control”. Eventually he realises the futility of relying on the powers that be to take action. When the comet comes close enough to be visible in the sky, he joins Dibiasky in urging people to “just look up” at the comet. This is met with the peddling of more misinformation from the establishment, with President Orlean's mindless rebuttal: “Don't look up”.

The film, on the one hand, coincidentally, mirrors our pandemic reality all too well, and on the other, deliberately mirrors an increasingly alarming climate crisis. It deals with many themes at once. Ineffective science communication and the political trappings it gets mired in are depicted in the failure of the scientists — in a terrible need to be media-trained [2] — to communicate with the media and masses [3], and in Mindy jumping on to the establishment bandwagon. How facts are turned into misinformation by the politico-media complex and fuelled further on social media is depicted in the dismissiveness the scientists are met with, and in the way we are shown public opinion changing on social media. Capitalism and profit-mongering take precedence and dictate the course of action when the planet-saving mission to redirect the comet is aborted in

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favour of a comet-mining operation that will not only make Big Business some big bucks but purportedly can “end world hunger”; or, as Oglethorpe calls it, “the pretty little bow they’re putting around this line of bullshit”. And finally, the chasm between the powerful rich and the vulnerable poor is depicted in the powers that be abandoning midway the one solution that could have given the entire planet a fighting chance, while ensuring they have a backup spaceship, with cryogenic pods no less, to make their getaway, in complete indifference to the lives of the masses.

As the pandemic has unfolded around us, we have realised the importance of effective science communication. We have learnt how misinformation, especially critical when dealing with matters of health and medicine, can spread easily and the harm it can cause. We have seen the boon and bane that both traditional media and social media can be. We have seen how hoarding and profiteering claimed lives during the pandemic. We have seen how, though the pandemic affected all classes, our boats couldn’t have been more different — with the privileged in their own bubble, bouncing back to normal, while the disenfranchised continue to struggle.

Don’t Look Up is not a disaster movie, it is a pre-disaster movie,

a warning. Disaster movies begin with the token scientist’s warning, and end with the hero saving their family, the day, or the world. *Don’t Look Up* is all about the scientist’s warning with no heroes, and no one saving the day. McKay has skilfully used the format of satire and comedy to entertain the threat of climate change while he entertains the audience. Though it ends apocalyptically, the ending feels more real than any other disaster movie’s happy ending. It ends with Mindy and Dibiasky eating their last supper surrounded by loved ones. In equal measure, there is an acknowledgement and acceptance of the end and frustration and regret at the inertia, as Mindy, soberingly, points to what we will end up losing to the climate crisis: “We really did have everything, didn’t we?”

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