

Communicating climate change in *Don't Look Up*

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Abstract

Don't Look Up makes no direct reference to climate change, yet functions as a climate communication film, satirising political and societal responses to the scientific evidence of climate change and to the lack of concerted global climate action. As a popular cultural story of climate inaction, *Don't Look Up* importantly critiques existing values of late-capitalism in the form of speculative techno-fixes, extractive capitalism and celebrity commodity culture. Yet as a mainstream Hollywood film, it privileges global north perspectives. More diverse stories that go beyond apocalyptic imageries are required to more clearly centre climate justice within popular cultural imaginaries.

Keywords

Environmental communication; Representations of science and technology; Visual communication

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Introduction

"The cumulative scientific evidence is unequivocal: climate change is a threat to human well-being and planetary health. Any further delay in concerted anticipatory global action on adaptation and mitigation will miss a brief and rapidly closing window of opportunity to secure a liveable and sustainable future for all" [IPCC, 2022, p. 35, my emphasis].

The closing statement of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), Working Group II, Sixth Assessment Report, uses the evidence of climate science to implore for urgent global action on climate change within a rapidly diminishing (but unspecified) timescale. In a (not so) parallel fictional realm, the Hollywood film, *Don't Look Up*, dramatises the scientific call to action to address "an extinction level event" (Dr. Randall Mindy) in the face of a distracted, sceptical and disengaged world, where political investment in the speculative technological fixes of late-capitalism overrides collective global action, to render the planet

uninhabitable. Whilst the real-world IPCC report advocates for “integrated and inclusive system-oriented solutions based on equity, and social and climate justice” [IPCC, 2022, p. 31] — a significant statement given its final wording approval by international governments — the fictional world of *Don't Look Up* could be argued to narrativise the failures of not placing equity and justice as central to global solutions to planetary ‘threats’. By using satire to reveal the inadequacies of present socio-economic and political systems to acknowledge scientific evidence of the comet and respond to its extinction level threat, the viewer is called upon to make the associative link between the fictional comet and that of the global climate crisis. *Don't Look Up* thus functions as a climate change communication film, satirising political and societal responses to the scientific evidence of climate change *and* to the lack of concerted global climate action to “secure a liveable and sustainable future for all” [IPCC, 2022, p. 35].

Don't Look Up makes no direct reference to climate change, but is supported by a real-world climate campaign whose climate actions have been advised by (social) scientists [“Don't Look Up / Count us In”, 2021]. In this commentary, I explore how the film functions as a useful reflection point for popular cultural and mainstream climate communications, through its allusion to the history of climate science communication; its use of (gendered) emotions, humour and satire as communicative devices; and its implied critique of celebrity commodity culture in climate activism. I will also highlight the limitations of this Hollywood film in rendering more diverse stories that go beyond apocalyptic spectacular environmentalisms [Goodman, Littler, Brockington & Boykoff, 2016] to more clearly centre climate justice within popular cultural imaginaries.¹

Climate science and the crisis of communication

Don't Look Up is a story about how scientific discovery and its communication is embedded within socio-economic-political systems that shape their production and reception; Haraway's [1988] situated knowledge. This situatedness is brought to the fore in the historical developments of climate science, which *Don't Look Up* dramatises in the ‘present’ to apocalyptic ends. The central quest of the trio of U.S. scientists at the centre — astronomers Dr. Randall Mindy and Kate Dibiasky, and Head of the Planetary Defense Coordination Office, Dr. Teddy Oglethorpe — is to validate the scientific data of the comet, against a barrage of sceptical and increasingly comical obstructions from governmental and media institutions. The trio's adherence to the language and processes of science to authenticate the comet's reality is communicated through continual reference to the peer review process and percentage of certainty associated with the comet's planetary impact. When eventually informed about the comet, U.S. President Janie Orlean satirically undermines the scientific process:

President Orlean — So how certain is this?

Mindy — There's 100% *certainty* of impact

President Orlean — Please, don't say 100%

White House Aide — Can we just call it a potentially significant event?

¹In this context I acknowledge my own positioning here as a cis white queer woman working within a global north/U.K. context. My use of the term ‘cis’ is in line with Stonewall's definition of LGBTQ+ terms. See <https://www.stonewall.org.uk/help-advice/faqs-and-glossary/list-lgbtq-terms>.

President Orlean — Yeah
Dibiasky — But it isn't 'potentially' going to happen. *It is going to happen.*
Mindy — Exactly 99.78% to be exact
Jason — Oh, great. *So it's not 100%*
Mindy — 'Well, *scientists never like to say 100%*
President Orlean — *Call it 70%* and let's just... let's just move on
[my emphasis]

President Orlean's response dramatises real-world ideological contestations over climate science by governments and the fossil fuel industry, aimed at discrediting the scientific process and amplifying uncertainties. This process has historical precedent: for example, the politicisation of scientific uncertainties in the Climategate controversy; the decades long lobbying activities of oil companies in discrediting science [Westervelt, 2022]; and the greenwashing of oil's own climate practices [Doyle, 2011b; Supran & Oreskes, 2021]. The institutional politicisation of climate science is highlighted in the film when the Head of NASA, an Orlean superdonor, says the science is up for debate.

Ideological contestation has also impacted the establishment of international scientific consensus on climate change through the 'conservative' proclamations on global climate science by the IPCC [Weart, 2003]. Thus, whilst *Don't Look Up* dramatises the temporal disjunctures between scientific evidence of threat and the inactions of a disengaged world, global climate science has itself been slow to call for climate action and hesitant to acknowledge threat levels [Doyle, 2011a]. WGII's Sixth Assessment Report [IPCC, 2022] stands out within this history precisely because of its unequivocal statement on the threat climate poses to human and planetary health. In contrast, civil society has been communicating and demanding action on climate change since the early 1990s.

Gendering emotional engagements with (climate) science

"Why aren't people terrified?!" (Dr. Randall Mindy)

Given the central role of scientific evidence in the film's narrative arc, *Don't Look Up* does not fundamentally question the epistemologies of scientific knowledge production, as critiqued by decades of feminist scholarship [Haraway, 1988]. The film positions the three scientists as 'truth-sayers' amidst a world distracted by celebrity politics and speculative technologies. Yet it does foreground scientists' emotional engagement with climate change through the increasingly impassioned statements from Mindy and Dibiasky. Both take on the role of advocates/activists; a position that climate scientists have hesitated to undertake for fear of discrediting their professional objectivity, but one that women are more willing to adopt [Boykoff & Oonk, 2020].

Mindy and Dibiasky express a range of emotions related to their knowledge of the comet — disbelief, hope, anger and fear — which also mirrors young people's complex emotional engagements with climate change [Ojala, 2012]. Yet Mindy and Dibiasky's emotional communication is treated differently by the media, illustrating the gendered notions of objectivity and subjectivity which shape

perceptions of female and male scientists. Both appear on the 'The Daily Rip' to be interviewed by hosts, Brie Evantee and Jack Bremmer, about the discovery of the comet. The interviewers' attempts to downplay its seriousness in order "to keep the bad news light" (Evantee), leads to an impassioned speech by Dibiasky: "Maybe it's supposed to be terrifying when we're all 100% fucking sure that we're gonna die!". Dibiasky is subsequently delegitimised through gendered discourse which questions her mental health, deems her a "yelling lady" and transforms her into a social media meme (see Amy C. Chambers commentary [2022] for further exploration of the gendering of scientists and expertise).

Gendered norms affect Mindy and Dibiasky's public credibility and the mitigatory comet actions they promote. Following his own emotional outburst on TV, Mindy is subsequently recuperated through processes of celebrityisation [Driessens, 2013]: hailed as a 'sexy' scientist offering rational and calm advice to the viewers; becoming chief science advisor to the White House to monitor the drone activities of tech billionaire Peter Isherwell; and embarking on a sexual affair with Evantee. In contrast, Dibiasky is discredited and side-lined from rational public commentary through (climate) memes. As the main 'truth sayer' questioning speculative techno-fixes of late-capitalism, she cuts through media distractions and governmental misinformation to publicly speak out in the street about the comet's threat; leading to riots and social unrest.

To some extent, Dibiasky presents the authentic heart of the film, sticking to the 'truth' of scientific knowledge, showing an emotional engagement, and refusing to stay quiet — a climate hero figure. However, the way in which Mindy's character is further recuperated at the end when he asks and receives forgiveness from his wife, returning to the marital home for a final family meal before the comet strikes, shifts the narrative focus to Mindy as the hero. Renouncing the temporary lure of Evantee, his desperate plea, "I just wanna go home" is a call for the 'authentic' love of family and a sense of belonging beyond the shallowness of an image centric world. The more radical figure of Dibiasky (in the context of the film's narrative) is ultimately overshadowed by the figure of Mindy, leaving a normatively gendered and patriarchal rendering of the world about to be destroyed by the comet.

Satirising late-capitalism and "stuff"

"I also wanna give a prayer for stuff. There's dope stuff, like material stuff, like sick apartments and watches and cars, um, and clothes and shit that could all go away and I don't wanna see that stuff go away" (Jason Orlean, Chief of Staff)

Don't Look Up arguably centres science as the 'truth' amidst a world that is incapable of dealing with planetary threats due to the prioritisation of profit. Satire is used as a communication device to humorously expose the interconnected failings of late-capitalist systems in both dealing with, and exacerbating, an extinction level threat. *Don't Look Up* thus ultimately urges viewers to remove their faith in the values and practices of existing political and economic systems to address planetary level threats. The central narrative arc of Dibiasky and Mindy takes the viewer on this journey as they experience the increasing lack of governmental and media action, albeit via different journey arcs.

Technological fixes to address planetary threats are satirised through the actions taken to destroy the comet. President Orlean's comical faith in the plans of tech billionaire and CEO of BASH, Peter Isherwell, to break up the comet with unproven drones symbolises patriarchal techno-managerial [MacGregor, 2014] investment in large scale speculative technologies for climate mitigation activities. Not only do the actions of Orlean and Isherwell satirise this investment, they also reveal their economic underpinnings. Monetary gain from disaster — what Klein [2008] terms “disaster capitalism” — is the driving force behind the decision to break up the comet into profitable pieces for billionaires and the production of more tech commodities — a form of extractive capitalism — rather than obliterate its threat in total.

The material “stuff” of commodity culture is satirised as a distraction from and cause of impending doom; rendered meaningless when faced with an uninhabitable planet. Climate communication campaigns have attempted to switch a care for commodities — whose production, dissemination and use contribute carbon emissions — to a care “for the love of our families, our homes, our livelihoods and our planet” threatened by climate change [Climate Coalition, 2022]. Media cultures which support the circulation of meanings attached to and experienced through commodities are likewise mocked in *Don't Look Up*. Even social media activism is presented as contested and conflicted, with the #JustLookUp (a play perhaps on Nike's 'Just do it' slogan) and #Don'tLookUp social media campaigns seemingly reduced to branded practices with limited effect.

Popular culture and climate communication

With a cast of Hollywood actors, *Don't Look Up*, is a form of mainstream popular cultural engagement with climate change; an important space for contesting hegemonic relations [Pezzullo, 2016]. Here, the spectacular conventions of apocalyptic (climate) films are used to satirically draw attention to the real-world climate crisis. 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. Celebrity is critiqued a number of times in the film, through the celebritisation of Mindy as a ‘sexy’ scientist co-opted by the government, and via the ambivalent role of film actors in the fictional “Just Look Up” movement. Much of the satire also comes from real world celebrities playing exaggerated characters from their own industry — Ariana Grande as music star Riley Bina and Kid Cudi as DJ Chello, whose onscreen romance provides comedic contrasts between the scales of enfolding planetary disaster and the distractions of everyday engagements with celebrity culture.

Using real-world Hollywood celebrities to satirise celebrity culture as a contributor to climate/comet inaction reveals, however, some of the limitations of this multi-layered satire in the context of climate communication and action. This is illustrated through the power pop ballad, “Just Look Up”, sung by Riley Bina and DJ Chello in the film, and co-written in real life by Grande and Kid Cudi. Sung by Riley as a conventional romance ballad about their failed relationship, Chello joins in with, “Time is oh so precious, we don't really have much left now, Take my hand, baby, never leave you, Riley”. Riley responds with, “Look up, what he's really trying to say, Is get your head out of your ass, Listen to the goddamn

qualified scientists, We really fucked it up, fucked it up this time". Presented as part of "The For Real Last Concert to Save the World", both the song and concert satirise the limitations of celebrity popular culture in contributing to societal and political change through this last gasp attempt at making collective meaning out of impending disaster. It also reveals the social and economic systems within which the real-world and fictional celebrities are embedded, without any indication of an alternative way out or way forward.

What and whose climate stories?

As a popular cultural story of climate inaction, *Don't Look Up*, importantly critiques existing values of late-capitalism by satirising speculative techno-fixes, extractive capitalism and celebrity commodity culture as interconnected social, economic and political systems preventing action. Situating scientists at the story's emotional and 'authentic' centre also foregrounds the consequences of scientific misinformation and political ideologies in addressing climate change, although falls short of questioning (gendered) scientific knowledge production. Using satire as a communicative device enables the film to engage its audiences in a dualistic way, as both lookers on and complicit in the story. Yet, as the film critiques existing structures and systems it does not imagine an alternative set of realities, nor explain the comet's cause. In focusing upon the fictional stories of scientists, politicians and media celebrities, the film fails to centre any marginalised voices, continuing to privilege global north perspectives, even as these are satirised. Climate communication needs to keep in place both climate mitigation and adaptation, making the historical and structural inequalities of capitalism and colonialism the interconnected stories of both [Sultana, 2022]. Pezzullo states that, "Imagination is a performative survival technique" [2016, p. 804]. If climate justice is to become central to climate action, then popular communication on climate change needs to present such stories as central to the reimagination of a socially just world that responds equitably to the climate crisis, providing a "liveable and sustainable future for all" [IPCC, 2022, p. 35, my emphasis].

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