

Nasreddine EL Guezar Science as a Discourse
of Power in Apocalyptic
Times in the Film *Don't
Look Up*

Abstract: Apocalyptic narratives of environmental collapse have become increasingly visible in contemporary media and art. Films, as important cultural texts, help us understand how society imagines and responds to ecological crises. Primarily, this article examines the cinematic narrative of Adam McKay's *Don't Look Up* (2021). It discusses the film's portrayal of humanity's response to an impending environmental apocalypse predicted and warned of by science. The analysis attempts to examine whether the film depicts human indifference to science surrounding the apocalypse or reasserts science itself as a masked exercise of power that shapes what counts as knowledge through discourse. Seemingly, the film illustrates a contemporary society that is driven by short-term gains fostering a mass culture of scientific negligence, and sidelining crucial warnings of self-destruction. However, bearing on Michel Foucault's discourse theory and other ecocritical perspectives surrounding uncertainty and the apocalypse, this article advocates for expanding the discussion on the particular representation of science and scientists in film. Arguably, *Don't Look Up* appears to champion science as the watchdog and panacea in times of imminent events of destruction. This suggests a subtle exercise of power that discourages skepticism and promotes unquestioned trust in scientific discourses about environmental apocalypse. In this light, this article explores how political incompetence, propaganda distribution, and societal ignorance mask science as a discourse of power in the film.

Keywords: The environmental apocalypse, *Don't Look Up*, science, discourse, knowledge and power.

Speculative scenarios where the end of the world becomes inevitable have long been a prime concern of the human imagination. Traditionally, imagining the apocalypse has often been associated with divine retribution inspired from cross-religious stories like Noah's Ark. However, in contemporary discourse, the notion of the apocalypse has evolved to encompass a broader range of existential threats, including those stemming from environmental degradation. Contemporary environmental writing often employs alarmist rhetoric and apocalyptic scenarios to highlight the urgency of ecological crises (Harrison 2002). Notably, many literary and artistic works feature storylines centered on imminent ecological destruction. These stories, oral, written, or visual, often depict events caused by natural disasters. These have turned out to hold speculations and insights that are worth analysis in the context of the environmental changes that the planet has been undergoing due to human activity.

The apocalypse, as James Egan defines it simply, is “the myth of the end of the world” (1984, 214). Even though the idea of the world literally ending often appears to be unlikely or exaggerated, human societies have always included apocalyptic narratives as part of their cultural imagination. Bertrand Vidal notes, “[d]espite being unrealistic the end of the world has become an obligatory myth in our history” (2015, 172). Contemporary visions of the future often carry a shadow of doubt, reflecting a growing uncertainty about humanity's capacity to steer the course of its own environment. What was once a story of progress now leans toward caution, as confidence in human agency fades beneath the weight of global challenges. Mark Fisher and Fredric Jameson have famously observed that “it is easier to imagine the end of the world than it is to imagine the end of capitalism” (Jameson 2003, 76; Fisher 2009, 2). This sentiment is echoed in the claim that “it has almost become easier to imagine the end of the world than it is to imagine a world capable of guaranteeing a future for humanity” (Vidal 2015, 179). This is becoming increasingly evident in literature, film, and art, where apocalyptic themes continue to mirror widespread anxieties and a collective recognition of the human limitations in the face of escalating crises such as climate change.

Some academics suggest that even the threat of total destruction—like climate catastrophe, nuclear war, or environmental collapse—is not enough to change human behavior in a deep or lasting way. Adam Trexler points out, “[a]ttempts to regenerate human morality, even on pain of apocalypse, are doomed to fail” (2015, 49). In a more recent publication, Davidson gives similar remarks on apocalyptic narratives, especially in climate politics: “The prediction that the wild weather of the future will result in the breakdown of contemporary society unless something

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is done creates a state of fear. Apocalyptic politics, rather than presenting the future as something that can be negotiated and reformed, suggests that the world is set on a trajectory toward catastrophe” (2024, 481). While apocalyptic thinking is sometimes accused of promoting fatalism or panic, it can also inspire pragmatic and hopeful approaches to addressing global challenges. As Lawrence Buell highlights, the apocalypse remains a “powerful master metaphor that the contemporary environmental imagination has at its disposal” (1995, 285). Many other scholars agree that “in projecting unforeseen disasters and imagining how humans and non-humans respond to them, post-apocalyptic narratives can accentuate and amplify the socio-ecological enmeshment between these beings” (Dang 2023, 3). Apocalyptic narratives, therefore, can mobilize creative and critical energies, rather than merely paralyzing audiences with despair and fear.

Among the creative platforms that communicate environmental apocalypses in an effective manner are films. Many contemporary films explore themes of imminent global destruction, often portraying worlds on the brink of collapse. Movies that mirror events involving destruction on a daunting catastrophic scale have been plentiful in recent years. Notable examples include, *The Day After Tomorrow* (2004), *The Road* (2009), *Geostorm* (2017), *Greenland* (2020), among many others. These movies dramatize important environmental themes into entertaining visual modes of narratives that leave an impact on audiences. With their concentration on natural disasters that touch humankind and the globe, these movies not only offer us the opportunity to imagine our present and futuristic worlds undergoing instabilities, but they also encourage us to think how we may grapple with them. In other words, these narratives urge us to reflect on the individual and collective responses of authorities, decision-makers, and those with the power and influence to drive actions that could potentially reverse the course of events during a crisis. That said, these films allow us to initiate critical reflection on contemporary environmental issues and open up to discussing cinematic productions that portray society’s uncertainties in times of global destruction and ecological collapse.

A significant film dealing with the subject of environmental apocalypse in a manner that stimulates discussion is Adam McKay’s *Don’t Look Up*. The American movie was named one of the top ten films of 2021 by the National Board of Review and American Film Institute (2021 Archives). Starring Leonardo DiCaprio, Jennifer Lawrence, Cate Blanchett, and other notable actors, the movie combines satire and black comedy with a confronting soon-to-happen apocalypse—An approaching comet that will destroy planet Earth. “McKay gives you over two hours of laughs while

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convincing you that the world is coming to an end” (LaSalle 2021). In this movie, a doctoral candidate in astronomy, Kate Dibiasky, and her professor, Dr. Randall Mindy discover the approaching comet and as a result they strive to warn the government officials and media outlets about the comet that will hit the planet and put an end to human civilization.

The film has garnered diverse reactions and analyses in academia. Most seem to circulate on how it serves as a satirical commentary on society’s response to global crises, particularly climate change. Although the movie does not directly reference climate change, it effectively satirizes societal responses to scientific evidence and the lack of global action (Doyle 2022). Further, for Preece (2022), the movie highlights the challenges of compelling the indifferent to care about impending extinction and the failure of governments to address it. Gruber (2024) concurs that *Don’t Look Up* operates as a satirical allegory for climate change, criticizing societal responses to scientific evidence, highlighting intergenerational differences in climate activism, social media engagement, and responsibility attribution. Coşkun and Kaymak (2022) also note that the movie highlights issues such as political self-interest, indifference, and the manipulation of reality. Chambers (2022) argues that *Don’t Look Up* satirically critiques the marginalization and commodification of scientific expertise in media and politics, highlighting how gendered and institutional biases shape public perceptions of scientists and their credibility. Moreover, the film underscores the importance of clear scientific communication, the dangers of misinformation, and the role of motivated reasoning in addressing catastrophic global threats (Davis and Lewandowsky 2022). The film has prompted discussions about the challenges of science communication in the face of skepticism and ignorance (Mede 2022). It presents representations of science, scientists, and science communication as a satirical metaphor for the response to the climate emergency (H. Little 2022). Lay and Johnson (2023) contend that *Don’t Look Up* presents viewers with a “moral imperative: Do all that you can to prevent climate change,” and that, despite criticisms of its effectiveness as satire, this imperative remains undeniable. Overall, *Don’t Look Up* has provoked significant scholarly discussion about its connection to the environmental issue of climate change, mass indifference of the public, and skepticism of science in times of crisis.

With analyses focusing on its satirical take on contemporary society’s handling of existential threats, *Don’t Look Up* has received notable attention from scholars. Generally, the circulating literature seems to draw attention to the film’s critique of political inaction, media sensationalism, and public apathy toward imminent apocalypse based on scientific evidence. Amid an impending ecological crisis, politicians, media, and the

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public have been perceived as indifferent to the scientific alerts.¹ In spite of this rather obvious interpretation, one may consider other possible readings surrounding the movie's portrayal of science itself. It stands to reason that science and scientists have been represented as a guiding light, disregarded by most, but have ultimately been the keys to averting the environmental apocalypse and preserving stability. While there appears to be a consensus among academics that the film can be interpreted as a satirical criticism of public indifference against science and scientists, little attention has been given to the depiction of the scientific discourse itself in the movie. In this light, this article seeks to revisit the environmental apocalypse in *Don't Look Up*, with particular focus on the representation of science and scientists prior to the catastrophe.

Focusing on the representation of science and scientists in the movie may lead us to find some significant areas of ambivalence, raising critical questions about why particular knowledge disciplines are favored over others or placed at the forefront of addressing environmental crises. It may be true that, in today's society, we are often able to bypass scientific facts and ignore potential threats to our survival in favor of short-term gain. However, one may wonder if the movie itself can be seen as an attempt to bring back scientific authority in predicting and dealing with ecological crises. It is argued here that the movie seems to push forward the idea that science is always the warning against as well as the answer to societies' most threatening problems. Despite the foolish mistakes that politicians, media outlets, and the public make, as dramatized in the movie, the cinematic production may also showcase a concealed, centralized control over knowledge discourse, reinforcing how power shapes what is accepted as knowledge. Thus, the movie does not depict innocent human ignorance of imminent environmental threats; rather, it reclaims science as a system of power, a knowledge discourse where scientists are the reliable authorities to dispel credible information and corrective remedy to the 'ignorant' public. Following this thesis, how does the movie's depiction of science and scientists subtly mask a discourse that positions knowledge as power in times of looming apocalypse?

To allow for a dive into our hopes and fears about the future, the apocalypse, in this regard, has been a powerful creative element in visual and written narratives. Narratives with this kind of orientation commonly rely on end-of-the-world scenarios around pressing environmental, technological, and social worries. Despite criticism of its effectiveness and accuracy, apocalyptic fiction serves as a powerful tool for reimagining the world and addressing climate change concerns (Moo 2015). In this way, these narratives are not mere tales of destruction and doomsday imagina-

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¹ *Don't Look Up* can be read as a satirical response to the widespread denial of scientific facts, particularly around climate change. While the narrative exaggerates for effect, it captures the core problem of denialism: The refusal to act on urgent knowledge, even when the consequences are obvious.

tion; rather, they act as platforms that convey collective anxieties about environmental degradation, societal instability, and the fragility of human existence. For instance, Cormac McCarthy's novel *The Road* or the *Mad Max* film series do not only present to us bleak, sterile, wrecked worlds, they rather push us to consider what it means to survive when everything we once took for granted has fallen apart or is on the verge of annihilation. Moreover, they challenge our understanding of the limits of human knowledge, questioning the common assumptions that we can easily predict and prevent substantial events using basic human knowledge and established disciplines. In other words, these narratives often employ the apocalypse as a 'black box' to grapple with the limits of human knowledge (Duncan and Gold 2019). In today's changing world, with multiple dilemmas hovering over us and the planet, paying attention to apocalyptic narratives that imagine limits of human knowledge may continue to stand as a reasonable need.

As such, discussing apocalyptic-packed narratives and the ways they can be analyzed has become important. Coming to realize the limits of our knowledge and the impossibility of absolute certainty, these creative stories help in navigating the unknown. In his *Going Away to Think*, the environmental humanities professor, Scott Slovic, reminds us of the importance of turning attention to alarming doomsday messages:

In both private decision making and the formulation of public policy, we struggle today, in an age of relativism and social constructivism, to locate guideposts of "truth." Furthermore, although the news reports indicate that we live in an increasingly violent and volatile society, many of us no longer understand what it means to be in danger. Danger has, for the most part, become a muted, abstract phenomenon, likely to reveal itself only as a vague economic irritant or as a sudden, unexpected physical threat a flooding river, an avalanche, a sidewalk mugging. We are losing our ability to process warnings of all kinds, including environmental warnings, driven as we are into becoming ideologically intransigent interpreters of science and complacent recipients of doomsday messages (2016, 48–49).

Taking abstract and invisible dangers seriously is increasingly becoming a challenge, as Slovic notes here. To trust these kinds of threats would also mean trusting the people who warn of them. Nonetheless, this does not mean these vague or unseen dangers should require unquestioned and passive trust of the specialized authorities with titles and degrees in the fields of expertise. In the wake of this realization and others, we feel

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urged to explore perspectives, nevertheless their fictitious character, on how humankind may engage with the boundaries of the available knowledge amid possible doom. Similarly, various analytical methods enable the study of apocalyptic rhetoric across textual, visual, and aural media.

Philosophy and cultural studies offer rich theoretical frameworks for critically examining the limits of human knowledge, particularly in relation to the apocalyptic and environmental themes explored in the film, *Don't Look Up*. Michel Foucault's contributions surrounding concepts like knowledge, discourse, and power can be useful here. The French philosopher theorized that what we know and how we talk about things—our discourse—are shaped by power. According to him, power is not only about authorities or governments telling us what to do. It is everywhere, like an invisible web that influences what we consider true or false (Foucault 1972, 98). This power decides who gets to speak, whose knowledge counts, and thus what we think. In this view, knowledge is more than just discovering the truth; it is also about understanding who controls that truth and how it affects our lives. By studying how power and discourse work together, Foucault has allowed us to see that what we unquestioningly regard as 'common sense' might, in reality, carry complex and hidden forces shaping our world and hence the circulating texts we engage with. In this context, Foucault's ideas about discourse offer a framework that is both useful and still relevant for understanding and analyzing a range of texts.

In this light, Foucault's writings largely contribute to challenging modern distinctions and questioning the conventional categories we use to classify different types of discourse. In his *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, he asserts:

Can one accept, as such, the distinction between the major types of discourse, or that between such forms or genres as science, literature, philosophy, religion, history, fiction, etc., and which tend to create certain great historical individualities? We are not even sure of ourselves when we use these distinctions in our own world of discourse, let alone when we are analysing groups of statements which, when first formulated, were distributed, divided, and characterized in a quite different way[.] [...] In any case, these divisions—whether our own, or those contemporary with the discourse under examination—are always themselves reflexive categories, principles of classification, normative rules, institutionalized types: they, in turn, are facts of discourse that deserve to be analysed beside others; of course, they also have complex relations with each other, but they are not intrinsic, autochthonous, and universally recognizable characteristics (1972, 22).

Accordingly, the conventional distinctions between different types of discourse such as science can be questioned. These divisions are not natural or universal but are instead constructed classifications shaped by historical contexts, institutions, and the ways people choose to organize knowledge. Since these categories influence how we perceive and analyze discourse, they themselves should be critically examined rather than assumed as fixed truths.

For Foucault, discourse refers to more than mere ways of speaking or writing; it is a system of representation that is produced by and reproduces power relations. Discourse influences what can be spoken about, how one can speak, who is allowed to speak, and from which position they can speak. In his *The Birth of the Clinic*, Foucault notes that the institutionalization of the medical gaze transformed clinical medicine by granting doctors authoritative power to observe, diagnose, and intervene within a structured system. He states, “[t]he clinic was probably the first attempt to order a science on the exercise and decisions of the gaze[.] [...] The medical gaze was also organized in a new way. First, it was no longer the gaze of any observer, but that of a doctor supported and justified by an institution, that of a doctor endowed with the power of decision and intervention” (2003, 89). In this way, discourse can be shaped by power relations—who is allowed to speak (doctors), from what position (institutional authority), and how their speech (medical knowledge) is legitimized—through systems of observation and classification.

In this sense, discourse controls access to knowledge and shapes society by maintaining or challenging power structures. The discourse of the educational institution, for instance, decides who has access to knowledge and how it is distributed, influencing societal structures. “Every educational system is a political means of maintaining or of modifying the appropriation of discourse, with the knowledge and the powers it carries with it” (Foucault 1972, 227). By determining what is taught, who teaches it, and who learns it, education either reinforces existing power structures or challenges them, shaping who has authority over discourse and knowledge in society. In connection with this, Foucault affirms his conception of knowledge:

Knowledge is that of which one can speak in a discursive practice, and which is specified by that fact: the domain constituted by the different objects that will or will not acquire a scientific status (the knowledge of psychiatry in the nineteenth century is not the sum of what was thought to be true, but the whole set of practices, singularities, and deviations of which one could speak in psychiatric discourse); knowl-

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edge is also the space in which the subject may take up a position and speak of the objects with which he deals in his discourse (in this sense, the knowledge of clinical medicine is the whole group of functions of observation, interrogation, decipherment, recording, and decision that may be exercised by the subject of medical discourse) (1972, 182).

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With this understanding, knowledge is not only a collection of facts; it is, rather, what is recognized as legitimate within a particular system of discourse. Knowledge then is shaped by the practices, ideas, and observations accepted in that field. Additionally, the person speaking about knowledge (like a scientist, doctor, or psychiatrist) does so from a particular perspective, based on their role and expertise in the field. In other words, what we consider 'true' or 'scientific' depends on the rules of a given time and place.

Foucault documents that "there is no knowledge without a particular discursive practice; and any discursive practice may be defined by the knowledge that it forms" (1972, 183). In essence, Foucault argues that knowledge does not merely explain or describe reality; rather, it actively constructs it through discourse. Knowledge, in other words, becomes a space in which the subject can occupy a place to talk about the objects involved in the subject's discursive practices. As a result, through the making of "docile bodies," as Foucault describes in *Discipline and Punish*, the body can be seen as a "political field" that is marked and formed by power relations (1995, 25–26). Knowledge, thus, is a set of statements placed side by side, where concepts are defined, used, or changed. It is determined by the possibilities of use and adaptation offered by discourse. In this way, knowledge is always tied to a specific way of speaking or practicing, and any practice is defined by the knowledge it creates. Similarly, science can be read as an element of discourse formation. "Science (or what is offered as such) is localized in a field of knowledge and plays a role in it. A role that varies according to different discursive formations, and is modified with their mutations" (Foucault 1972, 184). Therefore, science is a dynamic element within discursive practices, continuously changing as knowledge systems evolve and reshape meaning.

Whether 'scientific' or not, every narrative is embedded in a broader context, where discursive practices and circulating narratives are interconnected. In this sense, narratives are not mere neutral stories; they are instead shaped by the social and cultural frameworks in which they are created, actively constructing identities, power structures, and social norms. Just as narratives build meaning through discourse, science operates in a similar way. "Turning the sources of explanation on their heads,

Latour argues both society and nature emerge from a common source, in scientific practice” (as cited in Trexler 2015, 57). Hence, French philosopher and anthropologist, Bruno Latour concurs that scientific practices create both our understanding of nature and the way society is structured, making them intertwined rather than separate. Relevantly, science, as a social practice, influences the stories we tell about the world, shaping our understanding of both the natural world and human behavior, often blurring the lines between fact and interpretation. This interplay between discourse and knowledge extends to the platforms we use to communicate ideas. Just as discourse shapes science, the tools we use to share stories—whether TV, social media, books, or podcasts—further influence how narratives are told, who gets to tell them, and how audiences interpret them. For instance, social media can amplify marginalized voices but can also distort information through algorithms and sensationalism, as well as alter public perception. In this way, the stories we tell, whether scientific or fictional, are never isolated; they are shaped by language, culture, and the tools we use to communicate them, actively influencing how we make sense of the world.

Bruno Latour also challenges the traditional subject-object distinction, arguing that the interaction between humans and non-humans cannot be understood in isolated terms. Using the gun as an example, he highlights how both the person and the weapon contribute to the act of shooting, with neither being fully responsible on its own. Latour explains that “weapons kill people,” as proponents of gun control argue, but “people kill people,” say the opponents, each simplifying the complex interaction (1999, 176–77). Rather than viewing the gun as a neutral object or the person as the sole agent, Latour emphasizes the concept of “technical mediation” or “translation,” where technologies like guns actively mediate and transform the intentions of the user into action. The gun’s “program of action,” or function, is translated into a new “program” when combined with the person’s intent, resulting in a hybrid entity that neither person nor object can be fully reduced to (1999, 176). This view can be further explored through the idea of “scripts,” where technologies are seen as inscribing specific actions or behaviors in the world, influencing human behavior in ways that seem both absent and present (Latour 1992). Thus, Latour rejects the subject-object divide and proposes that humans and non-humans act in unison, shaping each other’s existence and actions.

In addition to the object-subject distinction, Latour proposes another distinction around how science is made. According to Latour’s concept of “science in the making,” scientific knowledge is actively constructed, as opposed to the finalized, uncontested facts presented in textbooks,

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which he terms “ready-made science” (1987). By examining science in its formative stages, Latour believes we can gain a deeper understanding of how scientific facts and technologies come to be established. Latour notes that when we trace back from established facts (black boxes) to their recent past, we encounter “uncertainty, people at work, decisions, competition, controversies” (1987, 4). By focusing on science in the making, Latour aims to demystify the creation of scientific knowledge, revealing it as a product of human endeavors, negotiations, and socio-technical networks. His approach to understanding science carries significant implications, primarily by advocating a shift in focus from “ready-made science” to “science-in-the-making.” This shift implies that instead of viewing scientific knowledge as a collection of established facts, we should examine the processes through which this knowledge is constructed. This perspective challenges traditional views of scientific objectivity and highlights the intricate relationships between various entities in the production of scientific knowledge.

In her “Situated Knowledges,” Donna Haraway critiques the notion of objective, neutral knowledge that claims to be universally valid. Instead, she proposes that all knowledge is situated, meaning it arises from specific social, cultural, and historical contexts. She rejects the notion of an objective, neutral “god’s eye view,” describing it as a “god trick”: the false claim to see everything from nowhere (1988, 582). Instead, she advocates partial perspectives, asserting that they offer a more accountable form of knowledge. Haraway writes, “[o]nly partial perspective promises objective vision” (1988, 583). This idea emphasizes that recognizing one’s positionality is crucial for producing more reliable knowledge. Haraway encourages using critical theories not to dismiss reality as subjective or fragmented, but to develop richer, more responsible forms of knowledge that acknowledge complexity and positionality. She adds, “We need the power of modern critical theories ... not in order to deny meanings and bodies, but in order to build meanings and bodies that have a chance for life” (1988, 580). Haraway asserts, then, that modern critical theories—particularly those that analyze language, power, and social structures—are essential tools for creating knowledge that is meaningful, responsible, and sustainable.

When applied to film, concentrating on the particular usage of “discourse” may help us uncover underlying meanings and reveal how power and knowledge are constructed within the narrative. Foucault has been a leading theorist concerning the “‘disciplinary’ character of modern institutions, practices and discourses. In particular, the ‘regimes of truth’ (what counts as truth) of modernity involve relations of power/knowl-

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edge” (Barker and Jane 2016, 102). This angle enables us to delve into the content of narratives as part of a larger cultural conversation that involves the discursive formation of certain disciplines and subjects. “Knowledge is formed within the practices of power and is constitutive of the development, refinement and proliferation of new techniques of power. Hence the analytic term ‘power/knowledge’” (Barker and Jane 2016, 104). Put differently, it is not in spreading scientific information where power lies but in the notion of science itself as a body of knowledge production; as such, a discourse that produces scientists who then can produce the scientific information as objective information that provides the ‘right’ ways of dealing with emergent problems. This theoretical outlook allows us to reinterpret *Don’t Look Up* through a frequently overlooked lens. In the film, the system of knowledge, as a form of discourse, generates power in society for those who hold power, while also shaping knowledge about those who lack it. This Foucauldian reading allows us to analyze *Don’t Look Up*’s representation of science and scientists more thoroughly when scientific discourse takes on the role of knowledge as power in times of apocalypse.

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Human Indifference to Science and the Apocalypse in *Don’t Look Up*

In many films, science and scientists are frequently portrayed as embodiments of reason and progress. These portrayals highlight how science can serve as a positive influence, helping to solve problems and bring about changes that benefit communities and humanity as a whole. In doing so, these films also illustrate how non-scientific factors—such as the role of politicians, media, and even the public—can contribute to manipulating emotions and spreading misinformation. In this regard, *Don’t Look Up* brings to view this compelling contrast between the rationality of science and the human indifference to the apocalypse. Through their attitudes, words, and actions, many of the characters in the film, as most literature suggests, demonstrate a collective indifference to the impending apocalypse even when it is supported by solid scientific evidence. As we attempt to analyze how science is used as a discourse of knowledge and power, we begin by examining human indifference to science as depicted through governmental management, technological enterprises, media sensationalism, and the public’s reception of apocalyptic news.

The character of President Janie Orlean is an antagonist who distrusts experts regarding the approaching comet. For example, she prioritizes attending a birthday party over listening to an extinction-level warning by

a group of scientists. She causes them to wait for several hours outside her office at the White House with no apparent sense of urgency. This lack of concern is further displayed when a Pentagon representative waiting with the scientists abruptly leaves after receiving a message on his cell phone, notably showing a lack of worry about the impending disaster news. The President and the rest of governmental officials continue to downplay the severity of the situation, distracted by a scandal involving a Supreme Court nominee. Later when Dr. Randall meets with the president and warns “there’s 100% certainty of impact,” a member of the group suggests they label it as a “potentially significant event” (McKay and Sirota 2021, 20:09), the President agrees, “call it 70% [...] You cannot go around saying to people that there’s 100% chance that they’re gonna die.” Following this, Dr. Oglethorpe, NASA’s head of planetary defense, stresses the gravity of the situation and urges immediate action, yet the President remains more concerned with the timing and the upcoming midterm elections, stating that “at this very moment, I say we sit tight and assess.” This response reveals a troubling governmental indifference to serious threats, even when backed by scientific evidence.

The President, initially dismissive of the scientific warnings, shifts her stance when she realizes that her political future is under pressure, especially after being implicated in an immoral activity. Sensing the potential to turn the crisis news to her advantage ahead of the midterms, she decides to act on the comet threat. To do that, she frames herself as a heroic figure poised to save the planet by starting a mission to destroy the comet. To captivate the public further, she enlists a charismatic man to sacrifice himself at the launching ship. This is performed in this manner to appeal to the emotions of the public, transforming the impending disaster into what Douglas Kellner calls and is now commonly known as a media spectacle (2009). This quickly becomes a trending topic on social media, with lots of people starting selling and buying products to prepare for the apocalypse, others sharing videos of their anxieties, and some creating memes, or writing clickbait blogs about the event. However, when the highly publicized and costly launch mission to destroy the comet fails, it raises doubts about the competence and reliability of those in charge. This response underlines a notable cynicism of leaders who, in the face of ecological apocalypse and alarming scientific warnings, prefer to exploit the crisis to further their political interests. This highlights that a significant part of the problem lies not with the scientists delivering the warnings, but with the governmental mismanagement of global crises.

The two scientists, Dr. Randal and the doctoral student, Kate, struggle to convey the urgent news to a public more captivated by entertainment

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than by alarming facts. To reach a wider audience, the two appear on the popular Daily Rip Show, only to find their critical message overshadowed by sensational stories, such as the breakup and reconciliation of a celebrity couple. Before going on air, Dr. Randal and Kate are instructed to lighten their message, as the producers believe people respond better to entertainment than to serious information, even when the stakes are incredibly high. When the host casually asks if the comet would destroy a single house, Dr. Randal responds, “It’s somewhere between six and nine kilometers across [...] It would damage the entire planet. Not just a house. The entire planet.” Despite this straightforward dire warning, the host remains unfazed, joking about whether the comet might hit his ex-wife’s house in particular, demonstrating his failure to grasp the gravity of the situation. Even when Kate strives to stress the seriousness of the impending disaster, the hosts continue to downplay the news, with one admitting, “we just keep the bad news light [...] it helps the medicine go down.” As a result, Kate’s pleas to convey the urgency and terror are dismissed, leaving the scientists looking like mad alarmists rather than credible experts. This illustrates how media platforms participate in trivializing serious issues, feeding public indifference.

In addition to the media, advanced technology not only shapes how people in *Don’t Look Up* feel but also influences important decisions. The film shows how technological progress can sometimes disguise information and sway the emotional reaction of the people in unexpected ways. Renowned tech experts in the film contribute to manipulating the public through a technology that controls how people experience and respond to their environment. As the CEO of Bash LiiF Tech, Peter Isherwell introduces the Bash 14.3 Phone. This device is designed to integrate with human emotions and respond to ‘unwanted’ human feelings like fear, loneliness, and sadness by presenting cheerful and satisfying content on the new phone. This breakthrough in technology suppresses and distorts natural human emotions, making it more challenging for individuals to confront and process alarming news. By framing fear and sadness as negative and undesirable, Isherwell promotes a society where people escape from uncomfortable and depressive thoughts through distractions, rather than facing or accepting them.

Technological advances, divorced from ethics, can pressure government decisions and manipulate public perception to shape a particular version of the truth. In the film, Isherwell and the US president orchestrate a fake accident to postpone dealing with the comet that is set to destroy Earth. Their underlying objective is to mine the comet for its estimated \$32 trillion in valuable resources. Isherwell’s alternative plan involves using

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advanced, yet non-peer-reviewed technologies, to break the comet into smaller pieces and redirect them into the Pacific Ocean. This plan, touted with a grand vision of technological salvation, is encapsulated in Isherwell's words. At 01:13:16, he claims, "when these treasures from heaven are claimed, poverty as we know it, social injustice, loss of biodiversity, all these multitudes of problems are just gonna become relics of the past and humanity is gonna stride [...] into the glory of a golden age." These declarations mirror Isherwell's humanitarian guise to promote ideas that support his technological expansion and the interests of the politicians who support him. In this sense, technological advancements can be used to manipulate and influence governmental actions and shape public perception, all while concealing dangers and maintaining control over the narrative.

Overall, the movie seems to emphasize the importance of trusting scientific expertise as a preference over other sources of information, such as the government, media, or tech enterprises regarding the impending comet. In the film, the president addresses the public, who hear news about the comet becoming visible in the sky, stating, "and do you know why they want you to look up? Do you know why? ,Cause they want you to be afraid." She then starts a "don't look up" movement as a form of skepticism and resistance, opposing those who want to promote their "apocalyptic" agenda. Against the context of the emerging two parties the following questions are raised: Which movement is right? Which one should people follow? Should the public trust the message that everything is under control and disregard the warnings of 'fearmongers,' or should they believe that the end is near given it is based on scientific methods and calculations? Immediately after the two campaigns are presented and two questions remain unanswered, the answer seems to be revealed in the film through a song that expresses, "listen to the goddamn qualified scientists." Here, the movie appears to affirm science as the ultimate recourse when suspicion takes place. It portrays science as a reliable source of knowledge that people should stop ignoring, "come to their senses," and turn to for clarity.

Science as a Discourse of Knowledge and Power in *Don't Look Up*

Don't Look Up not only conveys a manipulation of the public opinion and how their indifference is fueled through the government, media, and technology but may also reaffirm science as a means of shaping discourse,

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determining and generating knowable objects in a coherent manner, while dismissing alternative ways of reasoning as irrational or invalid. Hence, the way science and scientific expertise are situated in the film invite critical interrogation. The narrative subtly urges viewers to abandon their disbelief in science, implying that the apocalypse might have been avoided had scientific advice been heeded. In this way, the depiction of public indifference is used as a form of scapegoating that enables blaming a particular subject or issue—disbelieving a global threat. This justifies a broader course for the viewers—maintaining science as a unitary form of reliable knowledge. Therefore, it is argued here that in the way the movie portrays foolish human indifference to imminent environmental threats, it, in reality, indirectly reclaims science as a discourse of knowledge where scientists are the go-to authorities to dispel credible information and corrective remedy to the ‘ignorance’ of the public. Accordingly, I attempt here to look closely into the knowledge-as-power that science depiction takes in the film.

Following the failure of the launch mission, Dr. Randal is called to attend an emergency meeting at the White House. Before he enters the meeting, Dr. Oglethorpe reminds him, “Science tells the truth, Randal.” This statement conveys a strong belief in the ability of science to reveal objective facts about the real world. This reaffirms the idea that science is the accurate knowledge discipline that without it, other disciplines could be mere suppositions. This idea is further reinforced by depicting science as the remover of uncertainty and the public’s final refuge for factual and reliable information. For example, when the public is confused about whether the comet is good or bad news, the one to clear confusion is the scientist. During a TV broadcast, host Brie Evantee, who is personally involved with Randall Mindy, addresses him with playful irony: “Randall, we’re hearing that there is no comet, or that there is a comet but it’s a good thing or maybe it’s a bad thing. We are so confused. So, could you please help us out here, you know, oh, wise scientist?” Although the phrase “oh, wise scientist” is delivered humorously and is shaped by the characters’ personal relationship and the lighthearted tone of the show, it nonetheless reinforces—albeit indirectly—the pattern of casting scientists as trusted arbiters of truth. Such statements suggest the societal expectation that scientists are figures of authority and rationality, especially in moments of uncertainty.

In this manner, the film seems to paint science as a moral compass set against the messiness of politics and the greed of business. Science is not produced in a vacuum, but rather deeply entangled with cultural, economic, and political forces as many scholars like Latour (1987) and Har-

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away (1988) argue. In *Don't Look Up*, the scientist is depicted as someone who struggles for a higher cause, similar to a secular martyr, promoting the belief that science is free from human flaws or external influences, which is often referred to as the “myth of scientific purity.” In other words, this suggests that science is not influenced by personal or social factors, when in reality it often is. Scientific research may serve particular interests, whether through funding, policy, or the stories we tell about progress. Daniel Sarewitz’s *Frontiers of Illusion* supports the view that science is not an autonomous force that naturally brings societal benefit; rather, it is deeply influenced by political, social, and economic contexts. As Sarewitz notes, “The societal value of science and technology is created at the interface between the laboratory and society; it is inherent in neither alone” (1996, 9). This argument undermines the notion of science as a ‘pure’ or inherently beneficial enterprise. From this viewpoint, one can observe that the film’s portrayal of science might be less about how science works, and more about our desire to believe in something stable and true. Rather than challenge the myth of science as above politics, the film seems to reinforce it, offering comfort over complexity.

These perspectives are further noted in how the film portrays the scientist as someone who stands apart from the confusion and ignorance of society, offering a sense of wisdom and clarity that most people lack. While the rest are preoccupied by distractions, the scientist is portrayed as a guiding light, and good samaritan. Using their knowledge discourse, they are characterized as surpassing the folly of the masses. For example, when trending news on social media circulates about two media personalities singer Riley Bina and DJ Chello breaking up, both Dr. Randal and Kate express that they either do not recognize those individuals or simply do not care about their news. In a perhaps somewhat scathing manner, this scene offers up the idea that scientists are most of the time detached from social media sensationalism. This suggests to the viewers that scientists are less likely to be distracted by ‘trivial’ matters. Instead, they are more likely to be committed to the broader well-being of society and humanity. This subtly informs the public that scientists are, as a consequence, the most suitable to navigate grave events and uncertain future scenarios.

When the comet presents a business opportunity for the BASH company, the latter relies on a scientific discourse to further their business interests and exploit the fears and emotions of the public. Dr. Randall is also used by the company to serve this purpose. Although he comes across as an awkward scientist who needs communication training and faces difficulty moving through media hype, he has, nonetheless, stepped

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up to support Bash's plan to manage public fear by joining their media campaign. In this way, he is used as a public symbol and stereotype of the trusty scientist that deals with dilemmas and assures the public that they are safe. As a consequence, Dr. Randall becomes a scientist who no longer tells the truth, but instead presents a version of it that aligns with the company's interests. When BASH Cellular, in conjunction with the US government, creates a new hotline, free of charge, to answer all of the worried public's questions, Dr. Randal in the ad declares, "and who knows? Maybe, just maybe, one of our scientists [showing a mother feeling relieved after the call with one of the scientists] can be that friend we all need to lean on during uncertain times." This highlights how scientists have been employed to calm callers and reduce their anxieties about the apocalypse. Thus, science turns into a discourse that feeds a kind of societal anesthesia towards impending global catastrophe.

Using science under the pretense of logic and serving the common good of humanity, large business companies can also modify the scientific discourse itself to better align with their business preferences. As BASH's alternative plan progresses, Dr. Randal begins to suspect unethical practices and discreetly confronts the CEO of the company about them. He confronts Peter Isherwell with the fact that many of his colleagues have either been removed or have resigned from the project. Insisting on ensuring the scientific soundness of the project, he also seeks reassurance that they are open to the peer-review process and not approaching the mission with a business-oriented mindset. However, Isherwell, seemingly offended, questions whether Dr. Randal sees them merely as a businessman, emphasizing that the project represents the evolution of the human species, not just business. Isherwell then reveals, at 01:25:40 having extensive data on Dr. Randal—including his health details and personal motivations—accurate information about how he will die. As this conversation illustrates, science is used to advance BASH's business interests, compromising core scientific practices like the peer-review process. This suggests the company's tendency toward profitability, intellectual intolerance, and authoritarianism. Isherwell's dismissal of genuine scientific concerns, using personal data and predictive algorithms, mirrors how large tech companies can exploit the facade of scientific progress to maintain control and suppress dissent.

Another point highlighted in the film is the inclination of science and scientists toward rationality and logic over storytelling. When Kate, Dr. Randal, and Dr. Oglethorpe decide to leak information about the approaching comet to the media, Dr. Randal gets anxious since this is not something he usually does. He is a lab scientist who lacks expression skills and media

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training. Nevertheless, Dr. Oglethorpe senses his discomfort and reminds him, “you’re just telling a story. Keep it simple. No math.” Dr. Randal then responds, “but it’s all math.” The latter’s focus on mathematical detail hinders his ability to shape a narrative and communicate effectively with a broader audience. However, this characterization suggests to viewers that science merits greater consideration, especially when it lacks popular appeal or an entertaining style. As the narrative seeks to reassert, scientific disciplines tend to prioritize rigor, unlike stories, which appeal more to emotions than reason. This supports the film’s underlying idea that science is grounded in mathematics, not storytelling, and that stories can distract people from listening to logical, sound scientific reasoning. Opposing the use of stories to improve public communication subtly reinforces the idea of science as the discourse of power in times of crises.

While the comet in the film serves as a metaphor for climate change, it may overlook the uncertainty of the issue. Despite the scientific community’s consistent warnings about climate change—increasingly evident in what people can see and feel—many remain passive, while others continue to dismiss it as a hoax. This division highlights the complex nature of how climate change is understood and discussed. Concomitant with this, one could also point out that the film’s metaphor oversimplifies or misrepresents the uncertainty of climate change. The future impacts of climate change are still debated among scientists, indicating that the issue is not black-and-white. For example, the widespread use of outdated and extreme climate scenarios, particularly RCP8.5, has been critically examined by Roger Pielke Jr. and Justin Ritchie (2021), who suggest that this scenario no longer represents the most likely future but remains prevalent in media and policy discussions. RCP8.5 continues to be treated as the baseline scenario, which has contributed in distorting climate research, policy-making, and public perception by exaggerating potential impacts and endorsing alarmist narratives (Pielke and Ritchie, 2021). This highlights the need to critically assess how climate risk is framed, acknowledging science’s diverse perspectives and the persistence of compelling but sometimes inaccurate narratives.

It is also important to note that the film’s depiction of scientific authority appears to endorse a form of governance resembling epistocracy. This alludes to what Roger Pielke calls the “linear model” of policymaking, where scientists provide facts and politicians are expected to simply follow them, ignoring the important role of values and political judgment (2007). By presenting the threat as absolutely certain and catastrophic, the film appears to shut down other meaningful discussions about different values or priorities, suggesting that anyone who questions science must

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be ‘foolish’ or ‘ignorant.’ Pielke notes, “[p]eople can debate policy options through science without ever making their value commitments explicit. They can hide them behind science” (4, 2007). This downplays the genuine uncertainties in climate science and could harm the open, constructive conversations we need. Science cannot serve as a straightforward moral guide without recognizing the political and ethical complexities involved (Dotson, 2020). That is, our treatment of issues should not be done in a way that leads the public to passively agree on what to do only because there are looming threats. In situations like this, ‘experts’ do not always have clear answers, and their advice may change over time. For these reasons, while scientific knowledge is essential, it should inform policymaking as one important factor among many; not as the sole authority.

The final ‘family dinner’ scene in *Don’t Look Up*, and especially the presence of Yule, further reveals how the film continues to frame science as a discourse that claims innocence and moral authority. At the table, the scientists are calm and composed, as if their responsibility ended with delivering the warning. Science is shown as having done its job perfectly, so to speak. It predicted the catastrophe, but the public along with the political and corporate elites failed to act. Yule’s quiet prayer, coming from a character who struggled with faith, signals that when science no longer offers hope, all that remains is a desperate return to religion. Nonetheless, faith here is indirectly portrayed as ineffective, an only remaining act of comfort rather than a real alternative to rational knowledge. This scene does not question the authority of science but reinforces it, suggesting that humanity’s downfall lies only in its refusal to listen to scientists. By showing science as detached, correct, and morally untainted, the film invites viewers to see scientific knowledge as something to be accepted without critical engagement. Yule’s prayer, instead of opening space for other ways of understanding or resisting, marks the final collapse of alternatives: When science speaks and people fail to respond, nothing is left but passive acceptance and spiritual surrender. In this way, the film seems to turn science into a discourse of unquestioned authority, urging future audiences to trust and conform rather than to think critically about how science itself operates within power structures.

To conclude, making use of the concept of ‘discourse’ has helped us explore some underlying meanings of the science surrounding the environmental apocalypse in *Don’t Look Up*. Viewing the role of science as a discourse has allowed us to question the seemingly innocent representation of science and scientists in the film. One may assert that the latter generally depicts a society engrossed by apathy toward scientific warnings and vulnerable to the decisions of state and tech authorities driven

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by political and profitable interests. This perspective allows the film to be understood as interrogating the political mismanagement, media sensationalism, and public apathy toward the apocalypse. However, a discourse-oriented reading suggests that the film's portrayal champions science as the primary rhetoric for knowledge. More specifically, the narrative tends to center scientific expertise while construing the public as lacking agency, particularly in critical contexts. Thus, the film *Don't Look Up* portrays science as the central authority, masking its role in enforcing power and dominance over the public.

It is hoped that this article will not be interpreted as promoting skepticism or passivity toward science during global crises. By contrast, baseless suspicion of science and scientists would be much, like in the film, a hindrance rather than a facilitator if the aim is to mitigate environmental predicaments. The same goes for any neglect of knowledge that scientists spread about global issues like climate change, as it only contributes to aggravating the situation. What this article intends, however, is to invite us to look critically into science as much as any other discourse of knowledge and power. Science and scientists are not immune to faults, not because they fail to be accurate all the time, but because they may also be employed and manipulated by those who take sensitive positions to dictate the fate of our nations, whether they are scientists or not. Perhaps the core issue is not which form of knowledge or group of experts is entrusted with anticipating crises and saving humanity during doomsday events. Many environmental threats are already taking place and how we approach them depends a great deal on how we gather knowledge from more than a single discourse. Unitary discourses of knowledge are particularly prone to reinforcing the power-knowledge relationship identified in Foucault's analysis. They shape how information is represented and positioned within power structures through dominant knowledge systems, while excluding alternative forms of knowledge. To address this, one approach is to exercise more caution with science, while another is to broaden the conversation to include a range of disciplines in confronting the challenges ahead.

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