

Don't Look Sideways

As a comet approaches, the masses make light of their impending demise

William Boyer (Bill Boyer)

2022

a review of

Don't Look Up, Dir: Adam McKay, 2021

Planet of the Humans Dir: Jeff Gibbs 2019

"You guys. The truth is way more depressing. They are not even smart enough to be as evil as you're giving them credit for."

—Kate Dibiasky (fictional astronomer in *Don't Look Up*)

So, what to make of an unusual film about a streaking, earth-bound comet colliding with present-day distractions? Does it shake up the entertainment cycle only to disappear like a fairly close asteroid missing our orbital self-importance?

The uncomfortably salient, darkly comedic satire, *Don't Look Up*, rapidly unveils its timely set-up with the help of a hefty Hollywood A-list cast. The unheeded doomsday plot maneuvers around the dire warnings of chief astronomer Dr. Randall Minty (Leonardo DiCaprio) clashing with President Or-lean (Meryl Streep), the dismissive Trumpian/Clintonesque Commander-in-Chief. She snickers and swaggers before eventually agreeing to an attempted mining of this hurtling Mt. Everest for precious metals, ignoring the real threat of a wipe-out of the planet.

In other words, the billionaire class trumps annihilation. Technology, the prez assures us, will save the world, or at least some of its VIPs. As the movie frame almost always includes someone looking down into a flickering screen, the sidetracked masses make light of their impending demise.

Smartly directed by Adam McKay, previously best known for *The Big Short* (2015), a bulls-eye mockery of the Great Recession and credit default swaps. Here, he rather brazenly shows how the apocalyptic drama can be subverted into nervous laughter, like fun-house mirrors of our troubling modernity. Significantly, he cleverly avoids specifically identifying either political party, while creating fake networks and consumer electronics. His critique hints at demanding radical systemic change, not eliminating a few bad red or blue apples.

Two key supporting characters, Brie Evantee (Kate Blanchet), as an uproariously superficial Fox-News-Good-Morning-America-like clone, and Peter Isherwell (Mark Rylance), a passive-aggressive billionaire tech guru, steal almost every scene they're in with their humorously chilling reproductions of all too familiar talking heads.

"Everything's fine," becomes Isherwell's (and the nation's) mumbling mantra. Perhaps the film's best deadpan hilarity, features Isherwell's headset microphone Tim Cook/Elon Musk-like presentation to an enthusiastic shareholders meeting. His new product rollout, the "BASH Liif" phone, features a sensory app responding to any negative thoughts with an individually designed cheery video feed.

Soon, the BASH corporation will be called upon to save the world. A satellite video feed for a spellbound global audience will even capture the anticipated techno-cure.

The humor predictably dissipates as the comet hurls closer. A surprisingly moving last supper deepens the film's emotional impact. Oddly, the only real family depicted in the movie accepts their unavoidable termination, settling

down tenderly to their last rites between jump cuts of street rioters, drunk newscasters, polar bears, humpback whales, honey bees and other forms of soon-to-be-extinguished life.

The film's ambitious targets: climate change denial, corporate capitalism, vacuous leadership, contemporary consumption, superstition over science, lunatic conspiracy theories and the failures of both mass media and social media, consider the grim possibility of the planet's not-so-distant extinction in terms of technology run amok. The message works for the most part, even if the medium cannot reconcile its own internal contradictions (for instance, production of typical full-length features can easily create over a hundred thousand tons of plastic, plywood and related consumer waste).

At the very least, this cinematic mimicry helps expand an urgent discussion, while spoofing key distortions of the day. It invokes comparisons to how Stanley Kubrick's 1964 masterpiece, *Dr. Strangelove* satirized a potential nuclear holocaust or Terry Gilliam's *Brazil* (1985) comically exposed the brutality of the modern surveillance state.

Hollywood satire can essentially trace its more political origins to Charlie Chaplin's *The Great Dictator* (1940), yet even Chaplin later regretted being way too soft on Hitler's fascism. In film, the typically much less costly documentary form usually remains best suited for ringing much-needed alarms.

No documentary better captures a *Fifth Estate* perspective on the desperate ecological conditions of our times and the humanoid source of this catastrophe than *Planet of the Humans* (2019). Directed by Jeff Gibbs, a northern Michigan environmentalist, and produced by filmmaker Michael Moore, yet with Moore thankfully letting the soft-spoken Gibbs control the muckraking footage and narration.

The sober documentary is free and uninterrupted on several platforms (as of February, YouTube recorded over 12.4 million views), thanks partly to Moore who recently admitted to reassessing his liberal activism for some of the more radical measures advocated in this important film.

Gibbs makes compelling arguments against modern capitalism (and its apologists) by focusing on the imperative of reducing mass consumption, the anti-thesis to the capitalist requirement of ever-expanding production and consumption,

The visuals of environmental destruction contradict interviews with industry spokespeople, as the director carefully deconstructs the false comfort of biomass, wind and solar industries for their continued reliance on fossil-fuel grids and thoroughly destructive resource depletions (sample revelation: solar energy panel utilizes mined, high-purity quartz and coal, NOT sand).

Celebrity environmentalists such as Al Gore, Bill McKibben, and Hugh Evans tout false carbon footprint reductions and other forms of empty virtue signaling. Their phony New Age, neoliberal environmentalism includes cringy public confessions of their many corporate sponsors in the oil, lumber, paper, and related polluter industries.

The backlash to the film has been intense, if not vengeful (YouTube briefly shut down access to the video and McKibben seems furious at even being questioned about his corporate alliances), yet the critique holds well three years later. Gibbs challenges viewers, even would-be allies, to reassess the conditions of their existence. He suggests massive economic reductions as the only truly redeeming practice of the popular "Reduce, reuse, recycle" Earth Day slogan that sees the last process in the triad as a last resort. Not the first.

Maybe one day the *Fifth Estate* will venture into film making. After all, we helped publicize the long, sometimes colorful fight to shut down the world's largest trash incinerator from the earliest days of the struggle in the late 1980s, as well as many other confrontations against various industries, technologies, and the widely accepted veneration of so-called growth.

Frighteningly, the two films reviewed here may be more prescient than imagined, and by the next decade, an actual apocalypse will upstage all our projects and best intentions.

In the meantime, don't look sideways.

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