

Don't Look Up: Science vs. a deadly catastrophe confronting humanity

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Directed by Adam McKay

When Donald Trump was reminded about the dangers of climate change in the midst of a surge of the COVID-19 pandemic in the fall of 2020, he replied, “I don’t think science knows, actually.” Trump’s open disdain for scientific truth on both climate change and the pandemic was symptomatic of capitalism’s intellectual and moral rot.

Trump was not alone, of course. The Democrats, and the present Biden administration, with its political lackeys in the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), have also been complicit in their own attacks on science, including covering up truths about the pandemic that might threaten the rising stock market.

Such life-and-death matters are taken up with varying degrees of success in *Don't Look Up*, a dark comedy in which scientists attempt to alert the world about a comet set to hit Earth in six months’ time. Written and directed by Adam McKay (*Succession*, *Vice*, *The Big Short*, *Anchorman*), from a story by David Sirota (editor-at-large at *Jacobin*, former advisor to Bernie Sanders’ presidential campaign), the film skewers the anti-scientific stupidity and criminality of the American political establishment, as well as the corrupt nexus of corporations, the government and the media.

When McKay began working on the film, prior to the global COVID-19 pandemic, he was focused on the issue of climate change. But many of its themes will resonate with audiences who have experienced millions killed by a virus that has attacked and devastated society, an entirely preventable disaster.

Don't Look Up, currently the most popular film on Netflix, is not entirely successful or satisfying. It is guilty of a certain heavy-handedness, and its tone veers toward the bleak and misanthropic at times. A disdain for the broader population weakens it. Nonetheless, many moments stand out for their entirely legitimate urgency and anger.

The film opens with the discovery by Kate Dibiasky (Jennifer Lawrence), a Michigan State University graduate student and PhD candidate in astronomy, of a large comet

late one night while making telescopic observations. She alerts her advisor, Dr. Randall Mindy (Leonardo DiCaprio), who makes the startling calculation that the large body will hit Earth in a little more than half a year and cause a planet-wide extinction event.

Dr. Mindy alerts NASA’s Planetary Defense Coordination Office head Dr. Teddy Oglethorpe (Rob Morgan), who has them sent to the White House to meet President Janie Orlean (Meryl Streep). Orlean suggests a composite of various former presidents, with their hypocrisies and stupidities.

When Dr. Mindy and Dibiasky explain the dire situation to President Orlean and her son and Chief of Staff, Jason Orlean (Jonah Hill), they are met with unseriousness and bemusement.

Dr. Mindy then elaborates with greater urgency the implications of the impending event, only to be mockingly interrupted by Jason once again. Oglethorpe interjects, “Madam President, this comet is what we call a *planet-killer*.”

The White House refuses to confront this deadly reality, in scenes reminiscent of the two most recent administrations. The Orlean White House, moreover, is in the middle of a sex scandal as the president heads into the midterm elections and, according to news reports, is in “full crisis mode.”

Dr. Mindy and Dibiasky leak the information to the *New York Herald*, whose editors abandon the news story when it doesn’t prove to be generating internet traffic. The story is drowned out by various pieces of celebrity gossip. The pair of scientists eventually end up on a circus-like talk show, *The Daily Rip*, with hosts Brie Evantee (Cate Blanchett) and Jack Bremmer (Tyler Perry), whose aim is to “keep the bad news light.” The co-hosts demonstrate the trademark smugness and idiocy that dominates American television.

Meanwhile, tech billionaire CEO Peter Isherwell (Mark Rylance) of the BASH corporation gets wind of the comet and learns that it contains trillions in rare-earth materials. Isherwell convinces the White House that instead of deploying a scientific strategy to destroy the comet, BASH should send its rockets to mine the comet for its minerals

first.

Dr. Mindy is elevated to become the face of this operation (and he is briefly seduced by the position and the media attention), with Kate sidelined, but Isherwell's increasingly reckless plan leads to disaster. When Kate eventually informs the public that the White House doesn't care if the comet strikes the planet, it sparks riots. Kate meets a semi-religious, half-witted anarchist type named Yule (Timothée Chalamet), who enters her life as the comet hurls toward Earth.

There are powerful and hilarious moments in *Don't Look Up* that stand out. When President Orlean is told about the planet-killing crisis, she initially responds, "Let's bottom line this. What is this going to cost me?"

Orlean even has a "Mission Accomplished" moment, aboard a warship where she announces a bombastic plan full of hot air to address the comet threat, and stages a photo-op as George W. Bush did at the outset of the Iraq War.

Dr. Mindy later appears on *The Daily Rip* and has a "mad as hell" moment. He challenges conspiracy theorists dismissing the reality of the comet. Mindy has a breakdown on the show in response to the inanity of its banter. "Look, let's establish once again that there is a huge comet headed to the earth. The reason we know there's a comet is because we saw it with our own eyes with a telescope. We should have deflected the comet when we had the f---ing chance, but we didn't do it. And now they're actually firing scientists like me for speaking out, for opposing them. *The president of the United States is f---ing lying! This whole administration has lost its f---ing mind!* I think we're all going to die!" He's then gagged and escorted off with a black bag over his head in a CIA-like maneuver.

The talented Chalamet as Yule is perhaps the weakest character. To a certain extent, he and the rest of the younger characters are treated with contempt, and this is a serious flaw. They're represented as fickle, and the population as a whole is portrayed as too obsessed and distracted by social media and celebrity culture to take reality seriously.

All this points to the biggest weaknesses in the outlook of McKay (whose contributions to *Succession* and other films are strong, especially *Vice*) and Sirota in particular. Sirota's generally contemptuous view of the population is common to the liberal and pseudo-left layers at the *Nation* and *Jacobin*.

These are the elements that support Bernie Sanders and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and the Democratic Socialists of America (McKay is a member of the DSA), which is nothing but a faction of the Democratic Party itself. The attacks on the Clinton wing are evident, but ultimately these "lefts" operate within the Democratic Party's political orbit.

The screenwriting is also careless at times and many of the

slapstick gags are too crude and drag on, as does the film as a whole. While there are hints of Stanley Kubrick's *Dr. Strangelove* (1964) and Sidney Lumet's *Network* (1976), the writing is hardly as disciplined and focused.

Don't Look Up is at its strongest when it reveals how everything in America is reduced to a question of profit vs. science. The incestuous relationship between corporate tycoons and the government and the media is unevenly lampooned. Right-wing media crackpots and fascistic types are also mocked.

The film is effectively shot and the music by Nicholas Britell (who did the soundtrack for *Succession*) is striking. DiCaprio, Lawrence, Streep and Blanchett take their roles as seriously as they can, despite the limitations of the script. Hill is amusing in his satirical portrayal of the Trump Jr.-like sycophant.

To their credit, Lawrence and DiCaprio see parallels between the present pandemic crisis and the dangers raised in the film. According to *Yahoo News*, Lawrence told reporters, "It's just so sad and frustrating to watch people who have dedicated their lives to learning the truth, be turned away because people don't like what the truth has to say."

DiCaprio also said, "I was just thankful to play a character who is solely based on so many of the people that I've met from the scientific community, and in particular climate scientists, who've been trying to communicate the urgency of this issue and feeling like they're subjected to the last page on the newspaper."

"And then, of course, COVID hit and there was a whole new scientific argument going on there, and it's just such an important film to be a part of at this particular time."

Despite many of its limitations, *Don't Look Up* has struck a chord with the population as the pandemic reaches a new and deadly phase, with millions dead and the political establishment following the dictates of profit over science and human lives.



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