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Apocalyptic Films: *Don't Look Up*, A Case Study

Elyse Kuperus

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Utilizing questions from Ted Turnau's book *Popologetics* (see [Apocalyptic Films: Questions to Ask](#)) and pairing them with the framework of cultural dimensions put forth in Dr. Justin Bailey's new book, *Interpreting Your World*, a robust Christian approach to apocalyptic cinema can be cultivated. In this review, I will analyze the film *Don't Look Up* (2021) as a case study.

Questions and Analysis

1. What's the Story?

Don't Look Up is an apocalyptic, slap-in-the-face satirical story in which we meet two astronomers, Dr. Randall Mindy (Leonardo DiCaprio) and Kate Dibiasky (Jennifer Lawrence), who discover a comet the size of Mount Everest hurtling toward earth. This unlikely pair attempt to warn the world of impending doom by reaching out to people from NASA and the Planetary Defense Coordination Office to the President. They shockingly are met with apathy from almost every level of authority, specifically until later in the movie, when the comet can be seen with the naked eye. This is where the movie gets its name, as President Orlean (Meryl Streep) urges everyone to ignore what they see in the sky – “Don't Look Up!” At the last minute, the president conspires with a billionaire to attempt to mine the comet. Society is in chaos at this point, which we see from afar, as well as up close, through Dr. Randall's affair with Brie Evantee (Cate Blanchett), a morning show anchor. Throughout this time in the movie, lines and phrases used by different characters eerily echo those heard in our own American society today, further solidifying its characterization as satire. The movie ends with the comet hitting earth and wiping out humankind, except for a select few ultra-rich and powerful (the president and her cronies).

2. Where am I? (the World of the Text)

From beginning to end, *Don't Look Up* feels bleak, with only small cracks of light or joy shining through, keeping in step with most apocalyptic movies. Why, then, did it break Netflix's viewing records with over 150 million hours viewed only two weeks after its release?¹ Much of the movie's aesthetics alone draw the viewer in. A star-studded cast, with names like Leonardo DiCaprio, Meryl Streep, Jennifer Lawrence, Cate Blanchett, and Timothee Chalamet sets it apart from other movies, and tantalizes viewers of all ages when scrolling through the thousands of

options on Netflix. Beyond its cast, the sets and script itself draw the viewer in, and I found myself tearing up right alongside Dr. Randall when he saw the comet in the sky with his naked eye the first time and said, “It’s horrific and it’s beautiful at the same time.” Ted Turnau, identifies in his book *Popologetics* just why movies and the theater experience are so capturing: “Cinema worlds tend to be embracive, as you sit in the dark womb of the theater and are drawn into the light of the screen. Rather than letting it sink into us, we are sucked into its embrace.”²

3a. What’s Good and True and Beautiful about It?

Don’t Look Up is fraught with ethical questions and dilemmas. The main characters are constantly faced with choices of whether to pursue their own ambitions and financial gain, or stand up for what they believe in. Even as the filmmakers utilize techniques of scathing satire, the film consistently critiques the selfishness of those in power. The heroes transcend beyond self-interest to work for the greater good. While Kate Dibiasky stays true to her knowledge and beliefs about the comet and its danger—therefore being ‘dismissed’ by those in power—Dr. Randall, who starts out as a bumbling professor, slowly transforms into a person with societal power at the expense of his character, no longer telling the truth and no longer committed to his wife or family. He is alone. Only when he apologizes to those he trampled on during his ascension is he redeemed. Much of the plot of the movie is looking to critique the power and influence that those who are ultra-rich wield within society. This theme relates to our cultural environment, often plagued by political power grabs. Additionally, this questioning of power offers viewers who may feel like minorities in the places they live an encouragement that they are not alone. Though the film’s critique of power and selfishness is in some ways flawed, it addresses certain points that are decidedly worth engaging.

The ending of the movie seems to scream at the viewer that if things in society continue down the path they are on, only the ridiculous, rich, white people will survive. While the scene is extreme, the idea behind it, that racism and classism still abound today, is overt and intentional. The film offers glimpses of hope; scorning self-interest and instead turning to help a neighbor see the truth is a redeeming theme of the film. Similarly, human connection is applauded while virtual connections—as exemplified by a ‘psychic’ hoax character—are ultimately isolating. Peter Isherwell, the CEO of Bash Cellular, has dreams to push his tech company to the next level by saving the world and mining the comet. He tells Dr. Randall, who disagrees with his ideas on how to approach the comet, that he will die alone. However, when the end of the world comes, Dr. Randall is the one surrounded by his loved ones, while Peter is thrust into a new, hostile planet surrounded by people as power-hungry as himself. This implies that the ultimate fate is not one when you survive despite all the odds, but rather when you purposefully invest in the relationships offered you throughout the time life affords. In the end, humanity’s ability to save itself proves impossible, but that fades to the background in the face of the realization offered at the end of the world by Dr. Randall: “We really had it all, didn’t we?”

3b. What's False and Ugly and Perverse About It (and How Do I Subvert That)?

The use and misuse of power is ugly in *Don't Look Up*. President Orlean and her cronies form a sort of autocracy in the wake of the comet's discovery, which allows for blunt disregard for humanity when they turn the first mission to destroy the comet around and conveniently have their own escape ship when the second mission fails. The film clearly postulates there are two sides: science and big money. Many parallels to the arguments between the left and the right, as well as how the pandemic was accepted or denied, can be seen. The implicit vision of being a good human in the film is to be on the side of science, and, in these moments, plays on the overused and inaccurate dichotomy of the incompatibility of science and faith.

This analysis would be incomplete lest the people behind the film and their ambitions be addressed. Movies are not created in a vacuum, and there are people who directly benefit from the success of this film. Netflix is a business, so churning out high-grossing films is important, and addressing the emotions and opinions that are running rampant within society today is an easy way to garner high viewer numbers. The ambition of Adam McKay, the director, and Netflix itself, to create a popular, high-grossing film, while not inherently wrong, can easily be twisted through things such as casting choices. The "star-studded cast" consists of all white main characters, with the only largely featured person of color, Rob Morgan, cast as a supporting character (Dr. Oglethorpe). It is difficult not to see this casting choice as another way people of color are pushed to the margins within the Hollywood world. Michael Horton, in his book *Ordinary*, states that "Selfish ambition is the self-love that seeks to ascend beyond the skies in a solo flight, away from God and the community of fellow creatures."³ When the number of views becomes the ultimate goal, the original message that was meant to be conveyed can easily become clouded. This should offer a lesson to us all, that unlike Dr. Randall, we must stay true to ourselves, those around us, and ultimately to the God we answer to, whenever we approach a pursuit in life.

4. How Does the Gospel Apply Here?

The question of what this apocalyptic cinema does with God is a perfect diagnostic for the application of the Gospel. Yule, the evangelical character in the movie, when he first shares his faith to Kate, says "but don't spread it around." Many of the characters use Christianity as a front, such as President Orlean in her speeches saying, "May Jesus Christ bless every single one of you—especially members of my own party" and Jonah Hill's character, her son, praying for "stuff." God is shoved in the corner until he seems "of use" for the characters. This echoes the idea put forth in *Interpreting Your World*, in which Justin Bailey says, "There is a way of being religious that responds to revelation by fleeing God's presence, by using 'God,' as it were, to avoid God."⁴ This movie, and the frivolous way in which God's name is thrown around, should serve as a warning of how not to push God out of religion. Matthew 23:23 talks more about this, saying "Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You give a tenth of your spices – mint, dill and cumin, but you have neglected the more important matters of the

law – justice, mercy and faithfulness.” May we never neglect justice, mercy, and faithfulness in our pursuit of appearing religious.

One of the more redeeming religious aspects of *Don't Look Up* occurs a minute before the comet hits and destroys earth. Dr. Randall and his family gather around a table with Kate Dibiasky, Yule, and Dr. Ogelthorpe for a final meal in the face of the end of the world. This scene is incredibly emotional, as these broken people fellowship together, sharing what they are thankful for, and closing in prayer. The picture offered here, while flawed, offers encouragement that when everything is going wrong, seeking the Lord can lead to peace, even when the walls are (literally) crumbling all around. This idea that in the end, while science can offer reasoning and understanding, only faith can offer comfort, is not lost on the characters, and should not be lost on the viewer either. Yule's prayer seems an apropos note to end on: "Dearest Father and Almighty Creator, we ask for Your grace tonight, despite our pride. Your forgiveness, despite our doubt. Most of all, Lord, we ask for Your love to soothe us through these dark times. May we face whatever is to come in your divine will with courage and open hearts of acceptance. Amen."⁵

When we engage the questions and approaches offered by Turnau and Bailey, we more fully appreciate and understand apocalyptic cinema. Only when time, and ultimately love, is offered to a cultural artifact such as this, can we be a conscious consumer and offer insight as a thoughtful critic.

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1. <https://variety.com/2022/film/news/dont-look-up-netflix-weekly-viewing-records-1235147910/>
 2. Ted Turnau, *Popogetics*, p. 223
 3. Michael Horton, *Ordinary: Sustainable Faith in a Radical, Restless World*, p. 101
 4. Justin Bailey, *Interpreting Your World*, p. 103
 5. <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt11286314/characters/nm3154303>