

Karolina Wierel<sup>1</sup>

## The End, Power and the Media: Catastrophic Imagination in Film Discourse. Analysis of the Phenomenon on the Example of Adam McKay's *Don't Look Up*

The article will indicate the catastrophic sources present in the film *Don't Look Up* by Adam McKay. Among the films released at the end of 2021, this title was most often chosen by viewers and widely discussed by critics and in social media. By analysing discourses relating to important social problems, such as the relationship between media and power, problems related to global warming and ecology, as well as anthropocentricity, the non-film narrative sources of *Don't Look Up* will be identified and a cultural-studies interpretation of this popular culture film text will be undertaken. The following concepts will be used for analysis and interpretation: eco-criticism, denialism, the apocalypse of reality, criticism of the West using the methods of source analysis, the perspective of the ecological turn and the critical attitude of the author of the article.

**Keywords:** catastrophe, end of the world, asteroid, media, science, power, Peter Sloterdijk, Adam McKay

Koniec, władza i media: wyobraźnia katastroficzna w dyskursie filmowym.  
Analiza zjawiska na przykładzie filmu *Nie patrz w górę* Adama McKaya\*

Wśród premier filmowych ostatnich miesięcy 2021 r. *Nie patrz w górę* Adama McKaya był tytułem najchętniej wybieranym przez widzów i szeroko dyskutowanym przez krytyków, zyskał również spore zainteresowanie użytkowników mediów społecznościowych. Celem artykułu jest próba wskazania przyczyn popularności tego filmu, który można potraktować jako odzwierciedlenie wyobraźni zbiorowej odbiorców kultury popularnej początków trzeciej dekady XXI w. Przeprowadzona tu analiza dyskursów odnoszących

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<sup>1</sup> University of Białystok, Institute of Cultural Studies, k.wierel@uwb.edu.pl.

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się do istotnych problemów społecznych, takich jak: związek mediów i władzy, globalne ocieplenie i ekologia, a także antropocentryczności, pozwala dotrzeć do pozafilmowych źródeł fabularnych *Nie patrz w górę* oraz przedstawić kulturoznawczą interpretację tego filmowego tekstu kultury popularnej. W rozważaniach wykorzystano takie pojęcia, jak: humanistyka ekologiczna, denializm, apokalipsa rzeczywistości, krytyka Zachodu oraz metody analizy źródłowej, perspektywy zwrotu ekologicznego.

**Słowa kluczowe:** katastrofa, koniec świata, asteroida, media, nauka, władza, Peter Sloterdijk, Adam McKay

## Introduction

Images of the end of the world are a constantly recurring theme in cultural texts produced in the first decades of the 21st century. These visions of the 'end' were shaped primarily through the mass media, which reported on successive threats leading to global catastrophes. The dates of the apocalypse were constantly being changed and postponed (Carlin 2021). The expectation of catastrophe was escalated by interpreting natural phenomena (tsunamis, hurricanes, floods, earthquakes), epidemics of unknown diseases (AIDS, AH1N1) or the COVID-19 virus pandemic, which was interpreted as announcements of the imminent end of the world.

From 2019 until today, people all over the world have been living in a state of permanent catastrophe caused by the COVID-19 virus, which has changed the way the whole world functions in many areas: economic, political, social, cultural or educational. This catastrophe of a cosmic (natural) nature fits in with the image of the catastrophe from the film *Don't Look Up* (2021), chosen for analysis in order to illustrate the relations linking the categories of power, end and media in a popular culture text, as I agree with the opinion of the Israeli historian Yuval Noah Harari, who believes that: "a good science-fiction film is worth much more than articles in periodicals such as *Science* and *Nature*" (Harari 2018: 301). Considered as a cultural text, Adam McKay's 2021 film deserves reflection because of its power to influence the collective imagination and its impact on audiences as well as film critics. This film image can also be seen as a dystopian vision of a not so alternative reality, directed to pop culture audiences.

In the context of the reflections undertaken in this study in the third decade of the 21st century, it is worth to recall words of the German philosopher Odo Marquard, who, analysing the reality of the second half of the previous century, stated:

Whatever our times are supposed to be, they are in any case an epoch of alternating utopias and apocalypses, of enthusiasm for salvation on earth and the certainty of a catastrophe, of anticipation of the imminent arrival, on the one hand, of heaven on earth and, on the other, of hell on earth, and in any case – all too emphatically – of philosophies of progress and philosophies of decline. Why do they both belong to our world? (Marquard 1994: 79)

The cited philosopher points out the essential thought and emotional tendencies of ‘modernity’ in the Western perspective: the split between the desire for the fulfilment of the technical, social and political utopian projects based on the idea of progress confronted with the desire to be ‘natural’, ‘authentic’ and sensitive to the needs of change within the postmodern culture. This ‘rupture’, described by Marquard, is represented in the film by the interrelation of the authorities and the Silicon Valley visionary, Peter Isherwell with a real cosmic threat in the form of an asteroid that will destroy the earthen paradise. The entropic vision of reality can apply to both the plot of McKay’s film and the realities in which its audience operates. In this study, Marquard’s question may help to reflect on the role of the media in shaping public attitudes in an emergency situation and to express public opinion on the role of politicians and scientists in the context of an impending disaster.

In philosophical texts and academic publications, in artistic creation, literature and film, as well as in the media (press, radio, television, internet) of the 1990s, and the first two decades of the present century, a growing sense of insecurity have become noticeable. Since the beginning of our era, the date of the end of the world has been set 148 times, or on average every 13.5 years (Krasecka 2013). In the 19th and 20th centuries, the date of the apocalypse was announced with greater frequency and, thanks to the expansion of the means of mass communication, visions of doom reached a wider audience.

The apocalyptic tone of media information also recurs a century later. News with apocalyptic overtones around the year 2000 seemed to be one of the regular news items of the day, fuelling the interest in visions of the end of the world of both the public and the artists. Nowadays, news stories about the end of the world which are to attract the attention of the public are constantly appearing (Kermode 2010). McKay’s 2021 film seems to confirm the enduring popularity of the motif of ‘the end’, ‘apocalypse’ or ‘catastrophe’ in popular culture, because they have not lost their importance as figures of the collective imagination.

## Media and science

The last decade of the 20th century and the first decade of the 21st century are characterised by an exceptional wealth of visions of the 'end' of history, geography, art, man and the world. Frank Kermode, in his book *The Sense of an Ending*, notes that for people: "the end seems to have lost its naïve inevitability, its shadow still hovers over our narratives; we can speak of it as an immanent phenomenon" (Kermode 2010: 11). The omnipresence of the theme of 'the end' in various cultural texts as well as in news services translates into not treating threat in a realistic and responsible way. Today, the task of determining the date of the end of the world has been undertaken, among others, by mathematician Nafeez Ahmed, working with a team of scientists responsible for creating a computational model called HANDY, which stands for Human and Nature Dynamical.

The HANDY research project is funded by NASA (Ahmed 2014). The main task of the team of scientists drawn from various fields of knowledge is to identify possible causes of the disaster, calculate the most precise date of its occurrence and develop strategies to counteract the destructive factors, which are both human and natural. The research takes into account a number of factors, e.g. historical data on the collapse of past civilisations, as well as the population size of particular social and species groups, access to water, food.

Ahmed pointed out that predictions of the collapse of Western civilisation currently based mainly on capitalism and democracy, should not be disregarded, as figures show that stubborn adherence to the current political and economic direction will inevitably result in the collapse of the Western civilisation. As the mathematician points out, the overexploitation of natural resources, the unequal distribution of wealth and resources, as well as rapidly increasing social stratification on financial grounds could become the main causes of the collapse of the current cultural pattern. Consequently, the factors identified in the form of problems accumulating in many spheres of social life will ultimately lead to disaster. Mathematician leading the scientific group of the HANDY project believes that the fault for impending inexorable catastrophe is attributable to the elites concentrating power and financial resources in their hands.

The degeneration of the Western social elites (consisting of political, religious and artistic circles) is a prominent theme addressed by Adam McKay, director and writer of the 2021 film *Don't Look Up*, who began his career by starring as a comedian on the popular show *Saturday Night Live* (Bauer 2021) and gained a practical understanding of how the media works. Criticism of the way the media operates is not a new theme in the work of this director, who in his previous films such as *Anchorman: The Legend of Ron Burgundy* (2004), *The Big Short* (2015)

or the critically acclaimed and award-winning series *Succession* (2018–) exposes the mechanisms of media corporations and criticises the level of contemporary journalism. The relationships and dependencies of power and the media are the main discourse at the basis of the plot of *Don't Look Up!* (2021).

McKay's *Don't Look Up!* became the most popular film of late 2021 on the Netflix streaming platform not because of its special effects or sophisticated scenario, but because of the themes explored and the selection of actors involved in the project, who, in addition to their work on the sets, are active in many fields of social discourse, including the environmental, feminist and even economic one (Boni 2019; van Diggelen 2012; Lips 2018; Newbold 2020). McKay's cinematic work may owe its popularity to the fact that it fits perfectly with the social mood of the popular culture audience that functions in binary environments: media and non-media, audience seeking answers to a multitude of questions in the fields of politics, economy, sociology or cultural studies and, finally, lost viewers who cease to distinguish between fiction and reality.

This exaggerated, satirical film seems to be a pop-cultural reflection of the notion of the apocalypse of reality (Sloterdijk 2021: 115), which is a philosophical attempt to summarise in a synthetic way the 20th century and the semantic scope of which also extends into the first decades of the 21st century. The German philosopher's concept fits perfectly with the situation depicted in the plot of McKay's film: the inevitable apocalypse to be brought by a speeding comet and the reception of this news in different social circles: journalists, politics, family, friends.

The question that may constantly accompany the viewer is: who would I believe if I were in an analogous situation to the characters in the film: journalists, politicians or scientists? The contemporary recipient of cultural texts lives in several areas that can be called multiverses, and the boundaries of these spaces are blurred, which has been shown in an exaggerated but convincing way by the makers of the film *Don't Look Up!* (2021).

In his latest film, McKay revisits the critique of the media, one of the major issues in the social discourses of the early 21st century. In the analysed work, journalists treat the news of a deadly threat like an interlude between news of celebrity romances, explaining this by the need to convey distressing information in an "easily digestible" form, "because it's healthier that way" (*Don't Look Up!* 2021: 39:24–56). An exasperated young PhD student, Kate Dibiasky, played by Jennifer Lawrence, who has discovered the asteroid hurtling towards Earth, says: "The destruction of the entire planet is not a light, funny news. This is disturbing, even frightening information" (*Don't Look Up!* 2021: 42:12–25).

Her rational assessment of the situation meets disregard, and she is deemed "crazy" by the programme's viewers. Randall Mindy, played by Leonardo DiCaprio, the researcher accompanying Kate, asks the host if their message of mortal danger

has reached the audience. He receives the reply that it “it is done”. “You’ve been great, but the girl [Kate] [...] needs some media training. She fell flat” (*Don’t Look Up!* 2021: 41:26–36).

Another scene with striking meaning takes place after the scientists’ appearance on the TV show, when a group of journalists analyse the reception of the two astronomers in the world of social media. Kate becomes object of mocking memes, while the comments on doctor mainly focus on his sexual attractiveness. He has been named: “the sexiest scientist”, “bed-time prophet”, “A.I.L.F.” (*Don’t Look Up!* 2021: 42:57–43:10).

The subsequent sequence of events in the film deepens the feeling of dismay of the scientists, who are confronted with media analysis. The scientists’ message concerning the impending apocalyptic collision of the asteroid with Earth is not as important as the perception of the characters’ physical appearance. This cinematic motif is quite critical to the recipients of media messages, and thus also the viewers of the film *Don’t Look Up!* itself. One would like to say after the classic author of the theatrical grotesque, Nikolai Gogol: “What are you laughing at? You are laughing at yourselves!” (Gogol 1987: 125), which the director uses in a brilliant manner to build an interpretive path for his work, using irony, cynicism, and grotesque to tell the story of a 21st century American reality reflecting the worst features of journalism and politics.

At the end of the journalistic analysis of the impact of news about the end of the world, the scientist hear that their message was ranked in terms of ‘clickability’ below the weather forecast and traffic news, which is something Kate and Randall find truly striking. Faced with little interest in the report on the catastrophic threat, the editor-in-chief of the New York Herald begins to undermine the credibility of the scientists, discrediting the significance of their discovery. This change of position by the editor is supported by the opinion of the head of NASA, another person whose competences do not match the responsible position, who said that scientists’ information about the apocalyptic threat brought by the asteroid is a stimulated hysteria (*Don’t Look Up!* 2021: 43:51–56). At the end of the meeting the editor states: “We’re closing the topic for now. I wish you a successful end of the world” (*Don’t Look Up!* 2021: 42:57–43:10). This situation reflects the ignorance manifested by the media world against the threat and the journalists’ sense of power over the reality in which words and images are supposed to affect the solution to the impending disaster.

## Science, power and media

The second discourse relevant to the culture of the third decade of the 21st century, present in the plot of McKay's film, concerns the place of science and scientists in the modern world. Who does the viewer of content in the world of mass media consider an authority? What is fake news and what is factual? Why is science to be believed rather than understood?

Frames with photos of the space, animals and plants interspersed with successive film stills distance the viewer from journalists, politicians and scientists who have yet to realise that the man-made world as a system is not superior to the Universe and Nature in the broadest sense. The crisis of human identity is highlighted in McKay's film by the inert communication between people. The multiplication of media worlds intensifies man's quest for omnipotence in the spheres of science, art and religion, which are treated as tools to maintain power, to win the next election.

The director and writer of the film *Don't Look Up!* particularly highlights the inertia of scientists in the face of the world of media and politics. What matters in these cultural spaces is not data, facts or information, but the realm of visual appeal and the way information is presented, as well as the 'clickability' in the sphere of social media. This multiversality of modern man translates into the fact that, ultimately, the humanity in McKay's film will not be saved because it has lost the ability to distinguish between lies and truth, greed and humanism. Man has developed ways of communicating that do not improve at all the quality of dialogue, but rather hinder it, providing only the opportunity to speak, without contributing to the development of the competence to listen and understand the interlocutor's message. At the end of the film Dr Mindy shouts to the cameras in despair: "Please forgive me, but not everything has to be pleasant and sounds nice! What has happened to us? Have we lost the ability to talk to each other? What has gone wrong with us? How to fix this? [...] Our greed will finally kill us" (*Don't Look Up!* 2021: 43:40–44:26).

Ahmed, member of the HANDY science project, states that the histories of other civilisations (Maya, Romans, Guptas, Egyptians) provide evidence that usually, the disasters – unless they are cosmic, meteorological and partly natural phenomena – mostly resulted from the elites failing to respond to symptoms that foretold misfortune, and even more often were caused by a disregard for indications of danger, leading to disaster. Sadly, scientists on the HANDY team have dashed the hopes held by some people in the saving power of modern technology or science. In their view, they will only allow the efficient use of natural resources, but technology requires the exploitation of energy sources, making it a factor degrading

the natural resources and the environment, while the enlightenment model of research removes the possibility of a holistic perspective on the world.

These conclusions are probably shared by the director of *Don't Look Up!*, who chose such a title for his film to illustrate man's omnipotence complex and highlight that Anthropocene will be the last phase of the *Homo sapiens* species presence on planet Earth. As proved by McKay, technology will not be used at all to save people and life on Earth, but will be used to save a select few richest and most influential members of the 'good rich' species (*Don't Look Up!* 2021: 1:43:16), who will be evacuated to another planet. Media representations of the 'end' of the world today are still dominated by a pessimistic and gloomy vision of a man who lost the real possibility of influencing the future of the world and his fate, and the conviction that this atmosphere makes emerge another endist discourse based on the assumption that the end of the world is inevitable.

This view is manifested in the film's plot. Even if some technology that could be used to stop the apocalypse exist, it will not be used because of the government and economic interests, while the well adapted media rhetoric is able to convince voters that the catastrophe is just collective hysteria and there is nothing to worry about, as reflected in President Orlean's slogan, which she shouts herself at her political rallies to her admirers: "Don't look up!"

In the film *Don't Look Up!* the viewer face a combination of multiple disasters. McKay paints a picture of a stupefied society manipulated by politicians, journalists and even academics who have succumbed to 'media training' and are complicit in creating this message, as Dr Mindy did for a time, seduced by the glamour of TV celebrity and showbusiness.

One of the problems of modern science and scientists, which *Don't Look Up!* expose is the too hermetic, incomprehensible and boring language that the scientists use to communicate with the world. Hence the question: can the scientific way of communicating content change, become more simplified, without losing its value? When Mindy, Doctor of Astronomy, explains to the president and other authorities what the danger discovered by his PhD student is all about, we see the exasperation on the faces of his interlocutors, their gestures express boredom and ignorance. We hear: "Speak more clearly!" (*Don't Look Up!* 2021: 18:53–19:03).

The statement by the director of the Office of Interplanetary Defence, a little-known government entity, is more suggestive: "Madam President, this is an object classified in the 'planet killer' category" (*Don't Look Up!* 2021: 19:52–56). This message is secret and fits into the discourse of unreliable fake news. The category of post-truth is nothing new to the president or her advisers, however the academics were not yet aware of it. The entanglement of the media and politics in the omnipotence complex makes the outlook for the future of the human species look less than optimistic. The catastrophe of interpersonal misunderstanding makes the words



of the author of *21 Lessons for the 21st Century* sound like an illustration of the plot of the McKay's film:

People rarely realise their own ignorance because they lock themselves inside something like a reverberation camera with only like-minded friends and self-affirming news feeds. In such an environment, their beliefs are rarely challenged [...]. Academics hope that misconceptions can be eradicated through better education. [...] Such hopes are based on a misunderstanding of how people really think. Most of our views are formed through collective, group thinking rather than through the rationality of individuals towards the group (Harari 2018: 283).

Yuval Noah Harari, in his book *21 Lessons for the 21st Century*, states that for millennia, much of what passes for 'news' and 'facts' in human social networks was actually fiction and therefore 'some fake news remains forever' (Harari 2018: 314).

This may be the reason why people lose the ability to distinguish between truth and lies, as the boundaries between these categories are fluid. This collective fiction produced by various forms of communication means that, in McKay's film, the rationality represented by political opponents and academics in the view of supporters of the president and her political staff becomes a lie promulgated by political enemies of the ruling and working class.

### Capitalism and the comet

In the film *Don't Look Up!* government plans to change the trajectory of an asteroid are abandoned due to the interference of an influential businessman, called a visionary, and, of course, a "platinum donor of the (presidential) campaign". Owner of BASH, he represents many figures from the world of business, but is closest to Elon Musk and his ambition to conquer space with SpaceX. The cinematic figure of Sir Peter Isherwell is a grey eminence in politics and the economy, reflecting the discourse on the relationship between corporations and governments.

We learn from the story of 'the end of the world' filmed by McKay that even the apocalypse can be a commodity. Due to the owner of BASH, it was decided to take advantage of the unique minerals that can be extracted from the asteroid. Influenced the altruistic businessman, the President of the United States, played by Meryl Streep, who is an amalgamation of the worst qualities of American presidents, finds further arguments to convince the government and then the nation that it is right to change decision related to the deadly comet. This change in government policy has polarised society into two groups: those looking down and those looking up.

The antagonistic camps began to wage a media war, organising events under the banner of 'last': concerts, news programmes, social media posts, in which

scientists also played an active part, attempting to get the word out about the deadly threat to people. This film thread resembles the desperate efforts of some scientists creating non-scientific forms of media to reach the audience's consciousness, for example with science-fiction books such as *The Collapse of Western Civilization: A View from the Future* (Oreskes, Conway 2018). Authors of this work, having lost faith in the effectiveness of governments or politicians, direct an alarming message to the audience of popular culture texts, believing that they can be the energy that would save the world from destruction. Climate change caused by the global warming, the ozone hole, migration for water and living space are not fiction, but real problems of people who are not politicians or journalists.

The authors of the essay, who, at the same time, are scientists, describe the future of the Earth around 2090 in the 'twilight age': a time of denial, negation and ignorance. This story is narrated by historians who describe the 21st century as the era of the second 'Dark Ages'. This Neo-medieval reality is to take place in the years 2073–2093 and is divided into the time of the Great Collapse and the dramatic era of Mass Migration. Drawing a dystopian vision of the future, the two researchers outline the reasons for the decline of the Western civilisation, one of which, in their opinion, would be the lack of a real impact of science on the economy:

Although, in the late 20th and early 21st centuries, billions of dollars were spent on climate research, the resulting knowledge had little impact on fundamental economic and technological policies based on maintaining the use of fossil fuels (Oreskes, Conway 2018: 78–79).

McKay's film raises question about the meaning of technological progress, which even in a situation of mortal danger is used to multiply the capital of already wealthy people rather than to solve problems; this shifts the viewer's attention to another issue raised in the film: climate change and the lack of real action in the policies of the richest countries that could be implemented to prevent an imminent catastrophe.

### Denialists rule!

The issue of climate change is another discourse present in McKay's film; the issue of attitude towards this phenomenon, called denialism, is represented in the film by the 'looking down' camp led by the US president and her officials. The term 'denialism' refers to scepticism about the scientific evidence for climate warming and environmental catastrophe. Denialists are not convinced by the researchers and do not acknowledge the scientific evidence of the destructive effects

of human activity the related environmental degradation. Representatives of denialism attribute the negative effects of the exploitation of planet Earth to age-old natural processes. Norwegian researcher of this phenomenon, Per Espen Stoknes (2015), confirms what Dr Mindy shouted into the camera in the film: the existence of denialists is the result of a communication failure between scientists and the rest of the world.

Analysing the problem of ecological stalemate, Ewa Bińczyk claims that the reluctance to take pro-environmental action is caused primarily by psychological issues; she uses for that purpose terms such as ‘denial’ or ‘ecological nihilism’ (Bińczyk 2018: 51). Ignoring scientific data on global warming relies on a narrative conducted in terms of abstract phenomena whose probability of occurrence is highly unrealistic (Rifkin 2019). In the film, this attitude is present in the US president’s speech to Kate Dibiasky and Dr Randall Mindy.

The president was told by astronomers invited to the White House that the force of the impact would be equivalent to the explosion of a billion atomic bombs at Hiroshima. The head of USA then asks the scientists: “Is this information certain?”. Hearing from the researchers that there is no one hundred per cent certainty in science, the president disregards Dr Mindy’s response and authoritatively states that the probability level for the scientists to be right reflects seventy per cent. “We will engage our scientists to deal with this case. No offence, but you’re just some couple” (*Don’t Look Up!* 2021: 23:15–45).

In the dialogue that follows, the president and her advisers begin a political calculation, trying to determine to what extent information about the apocalypse is a threat to the president’s re-election. “How many ‘end of the world’ meetings have we already held? Economic crisis, nuclear threats, killer smog, killer AI, drought, famine, pestilence, alien invasion, overpopulation. ozone nonsense” (*Don’t Look Up!* 2021: 23:15–45). The term ‘ozone nonsense’ was inadvertently uttered by the chief of President Jean Orleans’ political cabinet, Jason, who is also her son. This is a clear allusion to President Donald Trump and the government he appointed who denied the findings of the 21st United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (COP 21) held in Paris in 2015 (Pavone 2018). In the film, the president is unhappy with her son’s statements, which betrayed her denialist views on climate change and exposed an attitude of weariness with the relevant issues of the modern world. Instead of solving these problems, she covers them up, appease or ignore them, which reflects the real attitudes of the leaders of the major world powers, who are also the biggest polluters of the Earth (Meadows et al. 1972).

The president from the film *Don’t Look Up!* perfectly illustrates the attitude described in Stephen Gardiner’s article *A Perfect Moral Storm. The Ethical Tragedy of Climate Change* (2011), in which the author states that the problem of climate destabilisation is denied due to the necessity of changes to be implemented by

the highly developed civilisations – mostly responsible for this climate change – which would put them at a disadvantage and would force them to change in the field of economic wealth distribution and to eradicate poverty in the countries that are polluted in the process of the production of consumer goods. Arguments denying the issue of climate change, as well as other problems provoked by large corporations or companies owned by influential people, are cited. As Bińczyk writes, there is a certain policy of ‘defending products’ or ‘manufacturing doubt and ignorance’, which is implemented with the support of experts, scientific institutes, consultancies, professional PR companies whose job is to invent arguments against the harmfulness of products or solutions (Bińczyk 2018: 198).

The intersecting political, scientific and social discourses on climate change are reflected in the plot of McKay’s film by the division of citizens and audiences into two camps in conflict with each other. The director of *Don’t Look Up!* exposes the mechanisms of this dispute, showing that, at a certain stage, facts and the common good do not count at all and people – hidden behind the screen of dignity, prosperity and community and overwhelmed with greed and pride – are unable to understand what is being communicated to them. This communication blockade can be spotted at every level of society, from the crowd of voters on the street to the offices of the leaders of the world powers. Audiences immersed in worlds created by technology do not perceive real threats because they are too boring, serious, scary. Audiences shaped in this way share the opinions of those who speak with the voice of their fears: do not be afraid, as climate change is invented by the opposition and constructed into the environmental narrative by critics of Anthropocene (Bińczyk 2018: 194).

“We keep our eyes wide closed for what is coming”...

Artistic or scientific creativity in the subsequent years and decades of the 21st century was focused on a critique of previous human achievements with particular focus on the condition of the Western culture and its anthropocentricity. This tendency is particularly highlighted by activities in the field of ecological humanities (Domańska 2013) emerging from the wider field of ecology as a way of describing the world and as the effect of criticising the Western world. The ecological discourse influences and shapes other discourses from the areas of economy, politics, art and mass media.

Ecology in contemporary culture is promoted by the new humanities as an invigorating value of human creativity and a sign of the end of the era of Anthropocene. It is an umbrella term for human initiatives taken to protect what has survived the plundering activities of humans in nature (Bińczyk 2018: 66).

There is no hope for the human species in McKay's film. The wealthy and influential passengers on the spaceship designed by the visionary from BASH represent the ideas of transhumanists working for the evolution of the human species using cutting-edge technology and scientific innovations; these eulogists of progress in many dimensions of human life turn out to be cowards driven by narcissism, who may forget – like President Orleans – taking their children with them, focused on their own sake and comfort. “The good rich” do not take responsibility for their actions, fleeing disaster to another planet. Upon landing, it turns out that, on the new planet, humans are not at all at the top of the ecological hierarchy, which is quickly evidenced by the example of the president devoured by an animal of unknown species. Director and writer of *Don't Look Up!* (2021) emphasises the anthropocentricity of the Earth as a planet and the narrow framework of human perception.

After the closing credits, McKay leaves no illusions: the other group who survived the apocalypse are people like the US president's advisor. The surviving son of a fugitive head of state, Jason, after crawling out from under the rubble of the world, uploads a social media report with a plaintive comment about the disaster and an appeal to “like his post” (*Don't Look Up!* 2021: 2:17'44–49). The director's cynicism makes the persistent viewer even more depressed and seems to justify the question of the meaning of continued human existence. The authors of the film ask all those who hoped that also someone sitting around the table in Dr Mindy's house could be saved: would you want to live in a post-apocalypse world if people like the survived Jason were building it?

Describing the world of visual culture and of man living in the 21st century, shaped by anthropocentrism, Bruno Latour states that despite millennia of epistemological experience in the world of images shaped by society, education, political views or mass media, the modern man, paradoxically, sees no more and knows no more than his predecessor functioning in the pre-literate traditional cultures (Latour 2015: 153). This ‘looking without seeing’ becomes the cause of catastrophe not only in McKay's film, because looking towards the sky, towards the stars and the Universe, expresses an attitude of reflection, but it is also possible to look without seeing.

### Towards the end...

The combination of religious traditions and secularised visions of the end of the world in numerous popular culture texts results in a secularised depiction of the apocalypse constructed to find constancy in the norms that order the world, as well as to criticise the anthropocentricity of the West, which is explicitly depicted

in the film *Don't Look Up!* Unlike religious apocalypse, the secular apocalypse frames catastrophes not only at the level of cosmic phenomenon, but at many other levels of reality including human relations, science, values and nature.

The successive crises announced and described in scientific texts turn out to be ignored, covered up, depreciated, as scientists are neither able to change the opinions of those in power and journalists, nor to realistically influence public sentiments and opinion. Scientific work and its results are not a value that would shape opinions, nor is it a factor that would have a real impact on reality. Bruno Latour emphatically describes the catastrophic anthropocentricity with the metaphor of looking: “We keep our eyes wide closed for what is coming” (Latour 2015: 153).

Premièred in 2021, McKay's film exposes the contemporary social problems of the West, presenting a cynical picture of American and Western society, all the more evocative because it is constructed ‘from the inside’: as a critique of American culture by the Americans themselves. McKay seems to assume that the shock level of his film's audience should be great enough to tear them away from their private virtual islands of happiness on smartphones and computers. Even if the success of the film *Don't Look Up!* is temporary and fleeting, it does not change the fact that the history of culture knows few messages that would have the myth-making potential of depicting the world just before its end.

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