



Adam McKay's 'Don't Look Up' is a satirical film that tells the story of two astronomers attempting to warn the people about a comet that will destroy the planet, only to be faced with denial and ridicule. While the movie's main goal is to address the threat of climate change, it sheds light on several different societal norms that are the undertones of many issues and situations. This article explores four ideology-based American societal norms that are represented through various cinematographic elements. From a dialectical approach, the concept of the thesis and the antithesis is applied to analyze the nature versus technology dilemma; followed by a philosophical dissection of the leak of nihilism onto science and morality. Then the age of pop culture with a smear of absurdism is scrutinized; tailed by a critique of plutocratic meritocracy. These undertones illuminate the problematic societal norms by providing backgrounds for their ideological bases and defining their deficits which lead to chaos that could have been prevented.

The societal norms discussed in the article are ideology-based collective behaviors viewed through analytical philosophical lenses in an attempt to crystallize the issues that led to humanity's destruction in the movie when it could have been prevented. The first lenses center around the dialectic between the notion of nature versus technology employing Hegel's thesis and antithesis concept that results in a solving synthesis to compromise societal contradictions. The following lenses put into frame how nihilistic tendencies have smeared social conventions and leaked into previously anchored scientific beliefs by using a critical article by Greyson V. Arsdale and a nihilism framework by Alan Pratt. At the tertiary level, the lenses focus on the absurdism in the focus on pop culture celebrities backed up by the influence of the media and pop culture, the former by Adorno and Horkheimer and the latter by Samantha Barbas; in addition to the philosophy of the absurd by Albert Camus and Claire Brummell's expert overlook

on dark humor as means of expressing absurdity. The final lenses enclose the contemporary capitalist American society in its plutocratic meritocracy reality with Littler Jo's critical narratives from her book 'Against Meritocracy'.

### **On the Future of Nihilism**

The philosophy of nihilism, which is often associated with the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche, is evolving and taking different shapes and themes every new century. Nietzsche's nihilism was more directed at the rejection of moral and religious beliefs. He argued that nihilism's "corrosive effect would eventually destroy all moral, religious, and metaphysical convictions and precipitate the greatest crisis in human history" (Pratt). Afterward, nihilism took various themes reaching the existential nihilism questioning the meaning and purpose of life and all humanity. This philosophy kept evolving according to the changing situations and experiences of mankind. In the present time, nihilism is found everywhere, and by everywhere we mean even in science and technology which previously seemed to be immune from this questioning and skepticism. Here we come to the point that, nihilism which is "the belief that nothing in the world has a real existence" (Oxford languages) is reaching even the fact-based domains, and this was greatly illustrated throughout the events of the movie.

There was a quote by Jack Handley at the very beginning of the movie saying "I want to die peacefully in my sleep like my grandfather, not screaming in terror like his passengers."(*Don't Look Up* 05:20–05:30). This quote generally summarizes the whole idea of the movie and specifically refers to the philosophy of nihilism. We notice through the events of the movie that the astronomers were the ones who were panicking in the beginning when they discovered the 'planet-killer' comet, whereas the people in power were careless and apathetic

towards the matter. However, by the end of the movie, the situation overturned to the point that the astronomers no longer cared about the future in contrast to the people in power who were striving to escape and survive. The case of the astronomers can lead us to the nihilistic point of view where people start to gradually lose their purpose in life and enter the loop of meaninglessness, especially since the reaction the protagonists have received after reporting to the people in charge was to their disappointment. Also, the fact that the CEO Peter Isherwell, who was one of the people in power and very wealthy in the movie, told Dr. Mindy, an astronomer, that his technology can even predict the way he is going to die. Isherwell told him: "you are gonna die alone" (*Don't Look Up* 01:26:56–01:27:06). This confirmed the nihilistic feelings of Dr. Mindy, and he decided to spend his last moments with the people he cherishes because nothing else mattered anymore.

As the events unfold in the movie, the futility of changing people's mindsets becomes clearer. Not only did the astronomers face mockery from the public, but also they failed to convince the government to take serious actions, instead, they were told to stop being 'dramatic'. The public was more interested in a celebrity couple's break-up than in an extinction-level comet that will hit the earth in a few months, and so was the president who was only focusing on winning the midterms. This enough shows how science could not stand against the collective carelessness and ignorance of modern society. Also, the astronomers' situation demonstrates how far nihilism has reached and how it made even science powerless and forsaken in crucial situations. Even though the protagonists said that they were exactly 99.78% sure that the comet would hit because that's the result of the calculations, the president doubted the seriousness of the results saying "call it 70% and let's just move on" (*Don't Look Up* 20:25–20:30). The news of an apocalyptic event happening very soon did not affect the president and her son, perhaps

since it was not profitable for them. In other words, the whole idea illustrates how modern society lost the sense of seriousness and threat, and how it cast into doubt all of its pillars be it religion, morality, authenticity, and even science.

“We really did have everything, didn’t we?” (*Don’t Look Up* 02:05:55–02:06:07) was what Dr. Mindy said in his last moments in the movie. The astronomers realized that the world had a huge chance to save itself, but it did not seize it. In an article written by Greyson V. Arsdale about the movie, he said: “Don’t Look Up is most clearly a satire of the response to climate change, but audiences will also find deep and intentional parallels to the response to the COVID-19 pandemic” (Arsdale). It is as if the movie is saying that the world now has the chance to take action and save itself. Also, since the movie is pessimistic and nihilistic, it clearly shows how the real world would end if it follows the movie’s direction. Then he adds: “However, while people frustrated by the failure to adequately mobilize to mitigate these pressing emergencies may find some catharsis in watching, it will be a cold comfort, as the movie’s main message seems to be that “if the government won’t listen, and the media won’t listen, and the public won’t listen, then we might as well just pray.”(Arsdale). Saying that the movie provides comfort to the people is just like saying that the situation has already gone out of control and that people are fully aware that it would be futile to try to change anything, and this is the core of nihilism. The movie encouraged nihilistic thinking even more by not giving any solution to change its catastrophic ending.

The movie discussed various issues. It illustrated clearly how societies are going from bad to worse, and how philosophies are evolving and becoming more extreme in the negative sense. Nihilism, as one of these philosophies, was already a destructive one, and it exacerbated the situation by reaching science and technology. Societies have lost faith in morality, religion,

and all conventions that used to be cherished, and with modernization, the case worsened. The movie shows that at some point even science becomes powerless, and technology would eventually fail to protect humanity and become useless and worthless. In the end, people would forsake everything and would doubt all of their surroundings and even themselves. Here we come to wonder whether people in the apocalypse would resort to their beliefs and conventions and start praying, or they would just throw everything away and live in disbelief and carelessness until the end.

### **The Societal Norms through the Dialectical Approach**

The study of societal norms can be traced back from the early ages besides the emergence of philosophy; philosophers were the earliest to contemplate societies intending to understand the societal norms and their constant evolution "from the time of Plato onward, thinkers were approaching, and to a certain extent successfully formulating, the chief problems of sociology" (Barens, 174). For instance, the German philosopher Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel presented a dialectical approach to dealing with history and ideologies. The dialectical approach is strongly associated with sociology because the historical context necessarily embeds sociological aspects such as societal norms (Dybicand Pyles, 303).

The dialectical approach is dedicated to Hegel. However, many philosophers used this approach before and after Hegel. The dialectical approach is a philosophical method based upon two conflicting sides that represent the dialogue of argument and counter dialogue argument "Dialectics" is a term used to describe a method of philosophical argument that involves some sort of contradictory process between opposing sides" (Maybee and Julie E). Correspondingly to the meaning of the dialectical approach in philosophy, Friedrich Hegel allocated the approach

with three main elements thesis, antithesis, and synthesis (Dybicz and Pyles, 303). The thesis is the original, and the first idea of any concept such as history or sociology, whereas the antithesis is the idea that the thesis invariably evokes. The antithesis is usually in a polar tension with the thesis, and tension between the thesis and its antithesis creates a blockade in the progression of ideas thus a synthesis, the combination of the thesis and antithesis in a compromise, should be created to resolve that blockade. When the blockade is resolved the synthesis becomes the new thesis that will inevitably provoke an antithesis, thereupon the tension would raise another blockade which requires synthesis to be resolved. This pattern of dialectical approach is constant and continuous in life “In the Hegelian system, this paradoxical condition is regarded as one phase of that antithesis which is presented in all spheres of existence, between the subjective and the objective, but which it is the result of the natural and intellectual processes that constitute the life of the universe, to annul by merging into one absolute existence” (Hegel, 9).

Referring to our case study „Don“t Look Up“, the movie that discusses how the instability of the societal norms can be projected through the film industry, one can notice the fluctuation between two main contending sides. This last can be studied through the implementation of the Hegelian dialectical approach since the movie has that idea of dialectical pattern, where the thesis is nature mainly “the approaching comet” and the antithesis is technology. In the context of the movie the thesis which is nature; is defended by the “look up” league, the astronomer, and the Ph.D. student who discovered the comet, whereas the antithesis which is technology is supported by the „Don“t Look Up“ league, the US President and Isherwall. Regardless, of the tension between nature and technology; they do not have equal representation. The antithesis has a more valuable position supported by the power holders' league, which preferred to immolate planet earth for material resources “So you can imagine, wow, just how happy we were at BASH

when our astrogeologists that this comet hurtling towards earth contains at least thirty-two trillion dollars of these critical materials” (*Don't Look Up* 1:13:08-1:13:28). Moreover, the „Look Up“ league fails to subsist itself, because the societal norms of the era have overlooked the concept of nature. This imbalanced conflict between the thesis and antithesis does not permit a synthesis to resolve the tension; therefore, the progression stops and the blockade explodes. The creeping control of technology caused a shuttering where both sides collapse at the end of the movie.

### **Absurdism and the Age of Pop Culture**

The word “Pop” in the term Pop Culture has two references. It is an abbreviation of the world popular, and also refers to the era of Pop Music which indicates the emerging culture of the mid-19<sup>th</sup> c – a very similar concept to the Jazz Age. However, it does not root back in the Arts; it resulted from the idea of mass consumption. Pop Culture has emerged as a reaction to the old, official, and abstract cultures of the prior times. It is more of a product that is aimed to gain popularity- hence where the name comes from- and ultimately secure a financial profit (“Pop Culture”). One of the best profit-making products is the media manifested in TV, films, and videos. According to the German philosophers and sociologists Adorno and Horkheimer, the media renders a great deal of its audience into a passive mass ready to accept whatever it supplies them with. Unable to act, react or produce anything novel, these ordinary people (i.e. the audience) are left only with the ability to comment.

In her book „Movie Crazy“ Samantha Barbas denounces the fact that celebrities are given more importance than serious news items making people’s lives shallower; eventually blurring the line separating our understanding of what is real and what is a fantasy- as if the audience

never leaves the theatre. It is obvious in the film how first the President and the government give more importance to the elections and their image, showing no concern for the shocking news, and above all the General charges them for free snacks and water proving that everyone's main priority is the financial benefit. Another solid point is the irony in the film itself: to address the importance of the ecological crisis the producer made use of the popular actors and actresses as a factor to attract the public's eye, proving again that all the audience care about is the celebrities.

on such important matters; we are too taken by the pop culture, goofy memes, and what is trending to ponder and wonder about serious matters, or try to provide a solution to critical, real-life issues.

This shallowness, meaninglessness, and void in the actuality of humans' culture are clearly outlined in Albert Camus' essay "*The Myth of Sisyphus*" where he introduces his philosophy of "*The Absurd*". Sisyphus is a Greek mythology figure who was damned by one of the gods to keep pushing a boulder up a mountain only to have it roll back down, and as it did, he is condemned to repeat that same task forevermore. He, in the end, concluded that Life is meaningless. This does not entail that suicide is an answer. On the contrary, he encouraged Men to pursue their dreams and imagine themselves as happy in doing so. However, to him, Life: is a manmade illusion and so is any reason to live whereas only Death is real. Relating this approach to the film it appears that Camus is right. By the end of the film when the comet is about to collide with Earth, we see that people continue to enroll in their mundane tasks; each is different in nature, and all is nothing but a distraction from the only real thing which is Death.

Absurdism is given a linguistic dimension via the use of sarcasm and dark humor. Claire Brummell, an expert in human behavior, claims that Dark Humor is often used as a coping

mechanism when one or more of our needs are being compromised in some way. She explains: "It could be a period of *intense grief* or *overwhelming stress*; we might have been through a *trauma* - the list goes on. So the things that we use to try to cope are behaviors that we believe, consciously or subconsciously, will *either stop those needs from being impacted, or will meet them in some way*". These needs might be: 1/ The eagerness to feel or experience some positive feelings other than the constant, overwhelming, and negative ones. 2/ Feeling Powerless or out of control: "The use of dark humor offers a chance to choose how we respond to what is going on. It can make us feel a little more in control than we otherwise would have." 3/ Love, or as she clarifies is to be the need to connect with ourselves and others. It is due to our rollercoaster reality that we get deprived of such emotions (Bashforth).

Dotting the i's and crossing the t's, despite that meaningfulness of life, or rather the lack of it, is a very subjective concept; as we live in our modern times we are as individuals from all over the globe obliged to coexist amidst the philosophy of the dominant Western Civilization. According to the history of the latter- being the one which controls what we think or believe to be meaningful- it was first believed in the absoluteness of Religion, followed by the ultimacy of Science, and now with the rise of Materialism and the Pop- Culture "Economy" and "financial profit" has become the engine that runs our lives. Nowadays people will refuse to believe in Science if the reality of it is going to threaten their financial stability. Materialism made humans unreasonable; worrying about money they will not be able to spend. Pop Culture made them passive; always waiting for that fictional hero to save them. To cope with this mass consumption mess, the humor plague, i.e. Sarcasm, was the public's refuge where they can express their opinions by saying the opposite of what they meant to compete for the media's attention and fulfill some of their very natural and psychological needs.

## **Ambivalent Meritocracy**

The American society has gradually shifted to a meritocratic capitalist society over the years under the guise of democracy and egalitarianism. It became a society where wealth, income, and social status are assigned through a competition organized by the elites. Meritocracy legitimizes contemporary capitalist culture through which plutocracy thrives (Littler, 17). Veiled by satire, this movie depicted this contemporary reality in the characters of President Janie Orlean, Jason Orlean, and Peter Isherwall. This essay will analyze these three characters through Littler's (2018) personifications of the contemporary rich that censures their plutocratic dynamics and attitudes and which the characters are an allegory of.

As the gap between the elite and the regular people grew in length through the decades, the former found ways to appeal to the latter by performing ordinariness and subtly flaunting their wealth and power. This is shown through several instances in which President Orlean comforts Dr. Mindy whilst he was having a panic attack just to keep him under control amid discrediting him and undermining the gravity of the situation (*Don't Look Up* 24:33-24:57). Another instance is during Isherwall's press conference, he promotes the new BASH Liif device that has special emotional assistance features that would provide uplifting company which he claims he was in search of, despite an earlier warning to the audience to avoid sudden movements and negative expressions (*Don't Look Up* 25:53-28:03). Showcasing the idea that even though he claims to be relatable, he is still in a different class above the regular people. Jason is the president's son and thus he is assigned a high government position and unearned privilege.

Isherwall is the rendition of the normcore plutocrat- an individual who garners an extensive degree of power and actively maintains said power by performing ordinariness, i.e

saying they are 'just like us'. This motif becomes apparent when they are under scrutiny for their increase in accumulating wealth (Littler, 135-136). Isherwall is already a wealthy individual thanks to BASH and is even a premium donor to Orlean's party, yet he jumps at the opportunity to mine the comet for its \$140 trillion worth of assets that he claims are to solve all of humanity's issues. A claim that is deflated by his refusal of peer review as it could potentially poke at his credibility, and Jason's rebuttal to a worried Mindy that they would be rich and safe. In another instance, Isherwall is angered at Mindy for attempting to uncover his true financial motives and uses his power to diminish Mindy's confidence. These actions pierce through the ordinary façade Isherwall portrays and crystallizes his true motives.

President Janie Orlean is the rendition of the kind parent- a paternalistic custodian of society that will reassuringly look after us. A façade that reveals their primary goal is to look after themselves and their entourage (Littler, 144). Orlean's goals throughout the movies center around securing her connections with those who would guarantee her financial security and the success of her campaign. She is an active perpetrator of plutocratic meritocracy as she did not hesitate to entrust in Isherwall's plan that would inflate her wealth and power, even going to entice her supporters to deny reality for her benefit at their expense. A hidden symbol that speaks for Orlean's true colors is the black Hermès Birkin bag she carries everywhere and is even left with Jason in the ending scene. This \$12,000 bag is considered to be a status symbol of exclusivity and affluent wealth that requires expensive dedication and a years-long wait to acquire. Purchasing this bag is a years-long ordeal that requires the buyer to form a close relationship with an Hermès sales associate by purchasing \$100,000 worth of items over the course of three or more years. Subsequently, said associate will allow you a wishlist that you can specify certain features of the Birkin bag that you would prefer. It is reported the wait after this

wishlist can last for years, and when the bag is ready you will be privately informed. The bag you receive may or may not fit your preferences but if you refute the sales associate, you may not receive another bag (“The Bizarre World Of Birkin Bags... \*a Rant\*” 12:25–26:31). This tiny detail highlights Orlean’s directed attention towards status and garnering wealth through discreet networking under the guise of caring for the public’s benefit.

The last category is portrayed by President Orlean's son and Chief of Staff, Jason as the luxury flaunter. A materially superabundant individual who presents themselves publically in different ways depending on the class they are addressing (Littler, 148). Even though he is a one-dimensional character, he is a personification of the luxury flaunting heir of wealth who is unable to show courtesy. In the meetings with Mindy and Kate, Jason is discourteous and disdainful towards their claims and credentials. Jason's approaches to his mother's supporters seem tone-deaf and condescending as he proclaims himself and his mother's entourage as "the cool rich" and labels the working class as the lowest class to the dismay of the listeners. President Orlean paved the path for her son so much that he cannot make any decisions on her behalf despite his Chief of Staff position.

The ambivalence of the elite in contemporary plutocratic society is accurately portrayed through the Orleans and Isherwall. Their consistent efforts to acquire wealth and power at the expense of the common people will lead to the latter’s destruction while the former would have planned ahead for an escape route as shown in Isherwall’s spaceship escape. Littler’s personifications analysis provided an articulate critique of these plutocrats' conspicuous egoistic dynamics and hidden motives.

At the end of our analysis, and with hindsight, this article attempts to reveal the impact of the instability of societal norms in the twenty-first century illustrated in the movie; by scrutinizing different ideological-based societal norms. The movie discusses how man reacts to an inevitable menace to planet earth, and all creatures, in the era of trembled realities. The main societal norms represented in this article within the context of the movie are nihilism, the rejection of moral beliefs or preserved norms, portrayed in the denial of the reality of the comet. Moreover, the dialectical approach is adopted to line the imbalanced conflict between technology and nature, and how the quarrel effectuated the apocalypse. In addition to pop culture scratching the absurdism in the movie, where people neglect the hazard of the comet by the inclination to music and its economic aspects. Furthermore, the critique of plutocratic meritocracy betides to state the subterfuge of the elites Isherwall, president Janie and Jason Orlean, to justify their inconvenient actions. The movie does not depict only the philosophical-based societal norms; it covers various aspects and realms that can be conducted in further research.

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