Society on Screen: Post-Pandemic Film Trends of Satirical and Political Commentary

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Abstract

In the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, the film industry has witnessed significant transformation in production and distribution methods and shifts in audience reception. This developing dynamic underlines cinema's role in creating satirical commentary and initiating critical thinking by forming fictional environments for experimenting with possible narratives of governmental dysfunction, societal collapse, and impending environmental crisis.

Similar to past cinematic eras influenced by major historical events, contemporary American political cinema delves into scenarios of a somewhat conspiracy nature, narratives that foreground fears of manipulation, and environmental catastrophe, forging stories that spark critical thinking and encourage audiences to take a stance. Recent Netflix productions, such as *Don't Look Up* (McKay, 2021) and *Leave the World Behind* (Esmail, 2023) have provoked distinct receptions, foregrounding ethical dilemmas about the role and responsibility of satirical and political cinema, and evoking existential unease. Through critical examination, this thesis delves into the evolving dynamics of political cinema and satire in reframing contemporary anxieties and sociopolitical complexities in the post-pandemic society. Understanding the ethical and political implications of these cinematic works, together with different decoding processes of the audience influenced by the recent crisis, requires exploration of the varied online reception, critics, and commentaries. By employing an interdisciplinary approach, this thesis will examine theoretical perspectives rooted in media and cultural studies, media reception theory, and political economy; and deconstruct narrative themes, character portrayals, and visual elements within a broader sociopolitical context.

Key Words: Satire, Political Films, Post-pandemic Cinema, Media Reception, Societal Anxieties

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1. Introduction

Political satire plays a vital role in democratic societies by providing a platform for dissent, promoting accountability, and fostering public engagement with issues of general concern. Its effectiveness has become of great interest to the media scholars trying to define and understand the implications of such works, and the ethical considerations, especially in today's largely developed media ecosystem. Scholars like Jean-Luc Comolli and Jean Narboni in *Cahiers du Cinema*, have developed theories on the relationship between cinema and ideology, arguing primarily that cinema is inherently political and functions as an ideology promotor (1990). Other film and cultural studies by Mazierska (2018) contend that "political cinema" is indeed challenging to define, adding to the belief that all films inherit a political dimension due to their reflection of societal conditions and ideological perspectives (p.36). In the process of analyzing various modes of cinematic representation of political messages, there is a necessity to understand the intricate interplay between ideology, aesthetics, and socio-political contexts within the political medium. Research by Ryan and Kellner in their well-known paper, C*amera Politica* (1998) touches on the pervasive influence of ideology on cinematic narratives, writing that films exhibit a wide diversity of rhetorical and symbolic strategies that can be reframed to create new political inflections, arguing against a simplistic view of this cinematic ideology, while advocating for a nuanced and deeper analysis of the effects on audiences. Mazierska (2018) further situates her analysis within the distinction between "political films" and films made "politically" (p.35), a distinction defined by Godard's emphasis on the latter's self-reflexive nature and direct engagement with the audience. This approach draws parallels with other media scholars such as Adorno and Deleuze, underscoring cinema's potential to serve as a transformative tool for politicizing viewers (Mazierska 2014, p 36).

Extending these beliefs to different directorial styles and political stances of renewed filmmakers, some names have generated controversy and discussions amongst viewers within the sociopolitical context. From early works of Kubrick with his satirical black comedies that critiqued the Cold War paranoia, nuclear and military madness (*Dr. Strangelove* or *How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb,* 1964) and Chaplin condemning fascism, dictatorship, and anti-semitism in favor of democracy (*The Great Dictator,* 1940), up to more recent political satires examining class struggle, social hierarchy in the contemporary South

Korean society (*Parasite* (Bong Joon-ho, 2019), and Adam Mckay's newest response to the climate change anxieties and political dysfunction (*Don't Look Up*, 2021), different themes of general interest have been portrayed using curated comical narratives and characters inspired from reality.

While satire has been used and developed alongside the evolution of humanity and in growing with technological and media advances, today's cinematic trends and widely spread genres and themes are influenced by the COVID-19 pandemic that has reshaped life as we knew it. Although it is still uncertain how the pandemic has altered styles and aesthetics of the new media, screenwriter William Goldman (2021) poses intriguing questions about cinema history and possible clues on new film dimensions. Knowing that the pandemic represents the biggest global concern since the Second World War, it is fair to assume that in the same manner as the arrival of film noir in that era, this world shift can suggest upcoming trends in contemporary media and cinema. The element of the virus, pandemic, medical and environmental crisis, together with issues stemming from governmental policies, and different political stances all over the world, might suggest recurrent elements to be vehiculated in recent and new films.

This thesis examines how the COVID-19 pandemic has influenced the reception and perception of films within the film industry, with a particular focus on contemporary satirical and political films such as *Don't Look Up* (McKay, 2022) and *Leave the World Behind* (Esmail, 2023). Through an analysis of narrative techniques, character portrayals, and audience reception, this thesis will navigate the evolving role of political satire in influencing public discourse and highlight the implications of political affiliations.

While both have received positive and negative responses, their contradicting reception was influenced by more than subjective elements of style and directorial choices, but rather ideological nuances like ineffective production involvement of later films with the American President Barack Obama and former First Lady, Michelle Obama and satirical miss-match. Both Netflix films aim to depict widespread perceptions of American daily life and explore future scenarios of societal decay and interpersonal dynamics in a manner accessible to the audiences. Despite their shared thematic interest in depicting current societal inefficiencies, they have received a wave of criticism and online hate that can be simplified to a common conception: satire and political commentary no longer aim at sharing conclusions or suggesting

advice, but rather bluntly emphasize the imminent danger, lack of control and underline people's faults to influence. By doing so, the satirist manages to ever so slightly influence the public perception and collective individuality regarding one political ideology or the other, hinting at opposition between the Democrats and Republicans. This thesis will employ a thorough examination of a theoretical framework stemming from political cinema, post-pandemic studies and infodemics, satire, art and moral philosophy, and reception studies. The methodology will cover elements of narrative, cinematography, and aesthetics of the two main films, together with additional references in the film industry, online debates, and film reviews from critics, uncredited viewers, and the authors themselves to build a comprehensive analysis of both the delivery intentions and the reception success and criticism.

In the end, the paper aims to analyze the emerging political film style that subtly hints at the COVID-19 pandemic through various metaphors of climate change, political-ideological divide, and governmental inefficiency. It explores how viewers receive and subjectively make meaning of such political films in today's post-pandemic sociopolitical context.

2. Theoretical Framework

- **Satire, Art, and Moral Philosophy**

Political satire emerged before the appearance of print media. Its rich and diverse history dates back to ancient times, being traced to ancient Greece, particularly to Aristophanes in the 5th century, BCE (Halliwell 1991). The Greek playwright was best known for his comic dramatism and satirical treatment of political, social, and cultural themes, using critique to build images of contemporary politicians, intellectuals like Socrates, institutions, and other relevant events of the time, such as wars and the image of women in society. Stemming from techniques of color gradings, character-built, and imaginative plots used by Aristophanes as well, the evolving genre provokes audiences with sharp wit, exaggerated metaphors, and comical situations to emphasize social conventions. In modern terms, satire and political satire are vehiculating irony and exaggeration to ridicule and criticize events, or ideologies that would stimulate social or political change.

To navigate this connection, there is a need for a better understanding of the intricacies of satire, art, and moral philosophy. Diehl (2013) initiates a discourse by scrutinizing the essence of satire, arguing that it often gravitates around the implicit argument by creating an analogy that necessitates the audience's subjective understanding (p.312). This claim underscores the pivotal role of analogy in satirical discourse, where discerning based on your own set of values and knowledge becomes paramount. He suggests, "satire is philosophical in practice as well as in subject and structure" (p.312). However, it is crucial to make a proper distinction between two forms of social commentary, particularly paradigmatic satires, and works of moral philosophy, as Diehl considers that "satire sacrifices the quality of moral arguments to meet the requirements of displaying wit or entertaining the audience" (p.312).

Consequently, the tension between moral discourse and entertainment value within satire challenges conventional paradigms and media practice, enriching discussions on artistic value. Jillian Harrington, in her article about *Political Satire in Film* (2017), argues that despite the comedic allure of satire films, a successful political satire has the potential to influence people's beliefs and views, mirroring societal and government issues, along with public anxieties. This ongoing debate explores ethical and ideological factors, suggesting a change in the perception of film authors (such as screenwriters, directors, producers, etc.) from entertainers to moral agents. Scheneck (1987) offers an insightful examination of the theory/practice dilemma in political theory, drawing from Michel Foucault's work, particularly focusing on the issue of responsibility. In essence, Scheneck suggests that political theorists cannot simply observe and describe political phenomena as empirical and descriptive evidence, they must instead "inform political practice with responsible direction" (Schenck, 1987, p.15). These theories can be extended in the context of satirical films that tend to promote one political ideology over another.

Injecting the personal agendas of filmmakers into their work or subtly advocating for particular viewpoints can risk undermining the trust of their audience. Therefore, filmmakers must exercise caution and ethical consideration when crafting satirical commentary to not be perceived as manipulative, thus diminishing the impact of the social critique. Scholars such as Ruben Quintero have strived to create a documented overview of the satirical purpose. He argues that the aim should reach beyond the mere laughter and "corrosive spite", but any writer deserving of the satirist name "must be more than a partisan advocate or a clownish entertainer, for a true satirist must be a true believer, a practicing humanitarian, responsible even in his or her subjective indulgence or personal indignation" (2007, p.3). Starting from Quintero's

assertion that a satirist can function as "a cautionary prophet or an idealistic visionary" (2007, p.2) through connections with history and extrapolation into the future, it is understood that audiences are compelled to reflect on societal issues and advocate for a change.

However, Quintero acknowledges that satire is not obligated to promote solutions to the problems exposed, but rather encourage action by provoking critical thought. Upon linking these theories to the selected case studies, *Leave the World Behind* and *Don't Look Up*, one striking difference appears from behind the lenses of the message, in the knowledge that the first is directly associated with and produced by a former American president, Barack Obama, and his wife, Michelle Obama. Given that a film is a collective effort of all involved parties, this poses questions about the transparency of the filmmaker's intentions and the potential for a coercive message. One may argue that the initial purpose of the film expanded beyond the wish to create satire, rather aimed at a serious political substrate, but this affiliation did not go unnoticed and became a relevant topic for online debates. Conversely, while *Don't Look Up* was considered to be bluntly hinting at Republican ideologies and inefficiencies, the lack of direct political affiliation allowed for a more open interpretation of the film.

- **Political Media**

In the discussion of the connection between political figures and media representations that emerged together with the recent collaboration between the Obamas and Netflix, theories have touched on different manners of analysis. On one hand, the top-down model suggests that influential politicians and elites are the ones who significantly influence the mass media agenda (Kleinnijenhuis & Rietberg, 1995), arguing that every press release, interview, or speech done by political elites is made to frame an in influential discourse planned to best promote a certain campaign. Conversely, the "bottom-up" model, also known as the "mediacratic model" promotes a study of how mass media influences politics. Unlike the prior model, the mediacratic theory considers that the media agenda is the one to conduct attitudes on public discourse and set the political agendas, arguing that the media is not a passive recipient of political messaging, but rather an active tool for influence (Walgrave & van Aelst, 2008). In Jeffrey P. In Jones' book *The Changing Face of Politics on Television* (2009), it becomes evident that the landscape of political content has shifted significantly in the last two decades, thus, arriving at a blurring of what was thought to be a conventional boundary separating "serious" politics and television and media programming.

Politics and popular culture have traditionally been separated on television networks, with public affairs programming confined to news divisions and entertainment remaining distinct (Jones 2009, p.5). To preserve their broadcast license duties for public service and protect their advertising revenue from entertainment programming, networks were able to segregate their operations for regulatory and business reasons. As a result, television politics frequently took a reductionist stance, emphasizing the serious delivery of information about political elites, which alienated audiences. However, this is not the case anymore since the emergence of cable television and the growth of online consumption of media and broadcasting channels. This break from the conventional wisdom that there must be a channeling distinction between politics and popular culture of entertainment, created new partnerships and modes of political propaganda and political speech.

- **Post-pandemic shifts**

Moreover, today's society is building back and developing knowledge and a newfound reality after the global COVID-19 pandemic that has brought significant changes in all sectors of work and life. Finnegan Pierson wrote for *Raindance* (2021) that the film industry is what aided people in surpassing the dark times of the pandemic. Although he agrees that the implications and the result of the rapid growth of streaming are yet hard to determine, Pierson underlines the crucial importance of film to our society.

According to *Forbes*, by June 2020, "48% of US online adults had subscribed to at least one streaming service" (Anjali Lai, 2021). The research conducted at that stage showed a massive reshaping of consumer content consumption and expectations. Even after the pandemic fatigue set in, about 41% of American adults were still enjoying TV more than they did before, while 42% used it as a form of stress relief. Starting ten years before 2020, offline TV and video consumption has seen a continuous drop which was sped up by the outburst of the pandemic. Even after COVID-19 restrictions lessened, this decrease in online consumption has not recovered. Thus, the new-found reality of "binging and streaming content" has forever altered our media consumption from a somewhat controlled intake to an everyday standard practice that was initially obliged by our constraints to remain in our homes, but has now become engraved in our routines, making streaming content in the intimate setting of our homes the most enjoyable and accessible.

Based on the findings from *All the Ways COVID Changed the Film Industry Forever*, an article published by Madison Kemeny, the rapid development of streaming services (eg. Netflix and the launch of Disney+) market a transformative era for the film industry. Similar to any rapid shift in practice, people have split between proponents of streaming and opponents. The first group argues that such broad access helps democratize access to films and provide a wider range of stories and voices to fit the world's cultural diversity, while the others provide theories of loss of the cinematic experience, reduced quality, and homogenization of content. The debate centers around what is gained and what may potentially be lost as the industry moves more towards streaming, trying to understand and anticipate any lost value in consumption and appreciation.

Aside from the implications brought onto the film and broadcasting industry, the pandemic saw mixed views on American society concerning political attitudes and governmental responses to the handling of the crisis. The research conducted by the Pew Research Center on *A Year of U.S. Public Opinion on the Coronavirus Pandemic* (2021) outlined that the first year of the virus outbreak saw a split between the Democrats and Republicans who disagreed over the extent of the measures taken. While the Democrats agreed that the virus posed significant health threats and supported the strict imposed measures of protection, the Republicans were more inclined to consider COVID a threat, asking for the reopening of places, softening of restrictions, and focusing on calibrating the economy as quickly as possible.

> "In late March, views of how Trump was handling the outbreak were already starkly split along party lines. Around eight-in-ten Republicans (83%) said the president was doing an excellent or good job, including 47% who said he was doing an excellent job. A nearly identical share of Democrats (81%) rated his response as only fair or poor, including 56% who said it was poor." (Deanke, Parker and Gramlick, 2021)

The same study conducted an analysis of the progressive shift in perception and trust that all American citizens held towards government and media institutions regarding the accuracy of the news spread. Mid-March 2020, the findings suggest that almost half of the Americans (48%) considered that they encountered at least some information that seemed prefabricated, with the trust falling considerably as time went by. Due to the drastic gap in viewpoints and trust on the matter of government having the best interest of people at heart, news of conspiracy theories and alternative realities started to gain momentum, voicing

concerns that “powerful people had intentionally planned the outbreak” (Deanke, Parker and Gramlick, 2021). Although still less than the majority, the numbers increased to striking percentages of 34% Republicans and 18% Democrats claiming that the rumors are probably or definitely true. Given the changing trends and divergent opinions, political films or media that incorporate relevant political messages or satirical approaches can be linked to news outlets, employing novel techniques to attract or sway audiences in ways that differ from traditional news and information channels. Filmmakers are now tasked with leveraging new broadcasting tastes and greater at-home consumption of both information and entertainment to transform their cinematic goods into works with many meanings.

- **Film Reception**

Besides the technical implications of the COVID-19 pandemic in the film industry, there are significant impacts on the reception of films, and how audiences are now drawn to stories that may reflect their anxieties and concerns. Kaes (2009) suggests that fiction becomes a tool and a platform for individuals to feel strong emotions through vicarious experience, which has become especially relevant during and after the pandemic. After having direct contact with a situation of gender and public concern, viewers gravitated towards movies that specifically tackle the issues they were or are dealing with, rather than choosing to escape reality through entertainment. This pattern was analyzed by Isadora Paiva and labeled an “emotional vaccination”, referring to the engagement with fears in a secure, fictional manner that prepares the audience for the actual situation (2021, p.42).

The film medium can be analyzed from multiple angles of research. When looking at it from a marketing and reception point of view, research has posed two concepts that can aid the understanding of the industry: “marketability” and “playability” (Hart, Kerrigan, and vom Lehn 2016). As referenced, marketability covers elements that build the attractiveness of a film to the intended audience, such as various commercial elements that would appeal to the viewer: cast, genre, release strategy, and additional techniques that serve as somewhat clues of the content. These marketable components can play a significant role in shaping the consumers’ interest in a film, directing their expectations from the earliest stages, before viewing (Kerrigan, 2010). This notion can tie into Stuart Hall’s encoding and decoding model, particularly when understanding the encoding part of a message. Hall considers that “messages have a complex structure of dominance because at each stage they are imprinted by institutional power-relations” (1977, p. 507). Following his theory connected to the concept of marketability, we

understand that the production of media messages (encoding) is a process in which creators embed a certain message with a specific meaning and value that is often influenced by cultural, economic and institutional structures that are involved at the production level. In this way, understanding the implications attached to a film or media product is directly linked to the broader dominant ideology.

To exemplify in the case of the chosen media objects, both follow a set of strategies to attract an audience. Firstly, casting notable stars like Leonardo DiCaprio, Jennifer Lawrence, and Meryl Streep, and short appearances of pop stars like Ariana Grande in *Don't Look Up* and Julia Roberts, Ethan Hawke and Mahershala Ali in *Leave the World Behind* functions as a significant audience attention hook. Secondly, both movies follow timely themes released in the context of the post-pandemic, covering themes that resonate with contemporary global issues like environmental collapse, governmental injustice, and political polarization. The release in 2021 of the movie *Don't Look Up*, immediately after the revival after a long period of restrictions and health panic, represented a great Netflix strategy of associating the movie with the world's socio-economic situation, capitalizing on the global reach and increasing the streaming fostered by the COVID-19 pandemic. By leveraging these concepts of marketability and message encoding, both films managed to not only engage a wide audience but provoke reflection and involvement in meaningful ways, across multiple channels.

Conversely, the process of decoding, as explained by Stuart Hall is influenced by the process in which the audience reads the media message, an action that he argues is not always a mirror effect, instead, it comes after aligning, negotiating, or opposing to the intended encoding. The three suggested engagement positions: the dominant-hegemonic, negotiated, and oppositional depend on personal experience, interest, and preferences, creating individual connotations, which can justify the sometimes oppositional reactions to the same media object. In connection with the addressed notion of "playability" that is constructed by inherent qualities of the film (script quality, acting, elements of production value), the viewer after immersing into the film, assesses its playability by comparing their preconceived expectations created with the experience of the viewing. Here, the notion of satisfaction or dissatisfaction with the experience, as explained by Oliver (2010) is the fulfillment response to the product, the degree to which it aligns with the consumers' judgment of the film's playability, influenced by the pleasure experienced in the viewing.

Further elaboration on the notion of pleasure in consumption experiences, as described by Holbrook and Hirschman (1982) suggests that there are pre-selection subjective factors that may influence the reception of the film, such as critical reviews, awards, positive word-of-mouth that serve as indicators of the level of playability of the film, showcasing audience approval. Learning about the encoded message can determine the audience to choose a media source that they think will satisfy specific needs or desires, as underlined by Katz, Blumler, and Gurevitch in their user and gratification theory (1973). This approach can justify why audiences may opt for a movie that is politically charged in the particular ideology that they are interested in. In this analogy, knowing that the Democrat former president of the US, Barack Obama, was the producer of the movie *Leave the World Behind* can constitute a reason for both interest and disinterest, which can prove counterproductive as a marketing strategy, depending on the likeability of the political figure, not the production's itself.

Another relevant theoretical field to this research is the nuanced understanding of humor that sheds light on the intricate ways in which satire and comedy function in cultural stories. This enhances the examination of modern political films and their impact on public online conversations. The *Relief Theory* was first hinted at in the 18th century and further elaborated by thinkers like Freud and Herbert Spencer. Initially, laughter was seen as the result of a clever individual's innate freedom of expression in the face of societal restrictions, according to Morrell (1988), but Freud later proposed that laughter is instead a release of built-up psychic energy that was initially intended for emotional or cognitive tasks but ended up being unnecessary (Freud, 1905). This promoted idea that laughter can help alleviate stress, is in line with the challenges of dealing with modern crises, perceiving now humor not just for entertainment, but also as a way to build up psychological strength, offering some sort of relief from the constraint stream of information and emotions that define today's society.

In the current post-pandemic political cinema, such theories aid the interpretation of films like *Don't Look Up and Leave the World Behind* launched during a time of political and existential worry. Using dark humor as a critical instrument that prompts viewers to acknowledge their tensions amplified by the pandemic and potentially temporarily ease them. These movies involve viewers in a psychological balancing act by showcasing exaggerated situations that imitate real-world problems. They offer relief through humor while also prompting reflection and debate on serious societal issues. This balanced duality highlights the role of political films with satirical nuances to influence how the audience perceives and feels about certain issues, shaping public discussions during a time of imbalance.

3. Methodology

In this section, the methodology employed in this thesis aims to elucidate the approaches taken to analyze the films *Don't Look Up* and *Leave the World Behind*, within the context of contemporary political satire and socio-political commentary. The methodology begins with a descriptive analysis of both narratives, focusing on elements of character development, political undertones, and stylistic choices evident in both films. This initial exploration aims to create a foundational framework for the subsequent comparative analysis of the film's delivery and reception within online magazines and forums, specifically *Reddit* threads and reviews on platforms like *Rotten Tomatoes* or *Letterbox.* These platforms were built and developed to serve as significant repositories of public opinion, offering a rather diverse array of perspectives of both professional critics and passionate cinema enthusiasts. Unlike traditional film criticism, which may be limited to accredited newspapers, these free digital spaces offer a more democratized space for discourse, encompassing a broad spectrum of voices. This inclusivity is particularly relevant when exploring the reception of films with nuanced political implications and satirical approaches, as it creates a space for the consideration of diverse interpretations that would fulfill the intended goal of the film - that of generating reactions and sparking conversations.

This thesis will employ a textual analysis of these discussions, focusing specifically on the debates surrounding the political message and stylistic choices: character build-up, comedy elements, and storytelling techniques. By linking interviews with the filmmakers together with audience reviews and discussions, this research will provide a conclusive link between the message intended and received, and how the delivery and reception could be connected to the post-pandemic reality. By comparing and contrasting viewpoints, this methodology seeks to elicit insights into the intricate interplay between cinematic representation, public discourse, and sociopolitical reality through a reflexive engagement with both the films' narrative aspects and their reception by online communities.

Don't Look Up: A Comedic Catastrophe Exposing Societal Complacency and Political Apathy

Don't Look Up presents Adam McKay's cinematic satirical critique of our contemporary society's complacency and denial in dealing with existential threats. The directorial style chosen blends dark humor and stark realism to tackle some of the most relevant themes and motifs, drawing constant parallels to the COVID-19 pandemic and the crisis that followed due to split opinions, governmental inefficiencies, and mediated culture of entertainment.

The film's narrative unfolds with the shocking discovery of doctoral candidate Kate Dibiasky (Jennifer Lawrence) and her professor, Dr. Randall Mindy (Leonardo DiCaprio) of a comet that is found to be heading toward the Earth with an alarming 99.7% probability of collision that will eradicate life. This discovery sends the two scientists on a narrative exploration of indifference and bureaucratic inertia, finding endless disappointments and stereotypical representations of real-life political powers. Naturally, Dibiasky and Professor Mindy attempt to sound the alarm and find themselves on a quest to reach the White House and reveal the shocking discovery, hoping that President Orlean (Meryl Streep) would come up with the best solution. During this encounter, the film sharply portrays the clash between scientific urgency and political expediency, in a comic but somewhat revolting depiction of reality. Once arrived, the team of researchers witnessed several warning signs of the utter inefficiency and lack of diplomacy and professionalism coming from all members and staff of the White House, up until standing face to face with President Orlean and her son, the head of executive staff, Jason Orlean (Jonah Hill), who plays a brilliant comic gender-bended parody of former American President, Donald Trump. Their conversation becomes the embodiment of ignorance, class disparity, and power dynamics. This is exemplified by the situational absurdity of two astronomers, a student, and her professor, being the ones to inform the highest political institution, the White House, of a world-shattering event, only to witness the complete disinterest of the president who keeps focusing on campaign strategies and how to associate the discovery with relevant names, of significant cultural and educational background.

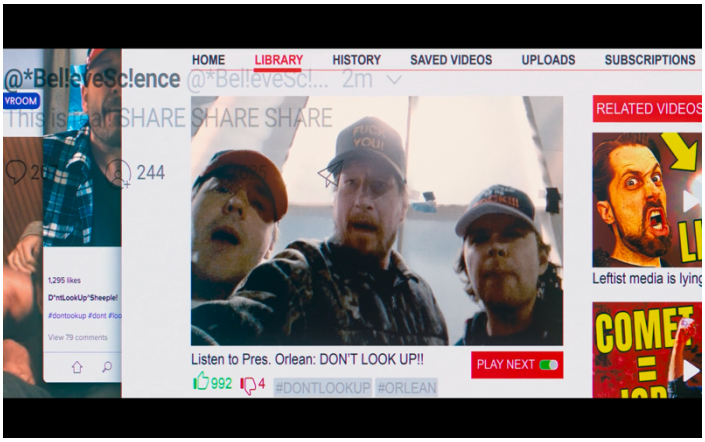


(Fig. 1- First meeting at the White House)

The film follows the endless attempts of Kate and Professor Mindy, to share their life-threatening message, and find people who would understand, despite the staggering disregard and indifference shown by political figures, media news outlets, and online users. They are taught how to tone down their emotions and succumb to media policies only to reach a wider audience, all of the details highlighting the intricacies of the media world. Their appearance on a morning show ends up trivializing the threat, instead of raising the proper awareness. Later, when a tech billionaire and CEO of a large corporation, Peter Isherwell (Mark Rylance), suggests a reckless and dangerous alternative plan to mine the comet for rare minerals instead of aiming to save the world by destroying it, it becomes obvious that the mission is diverted to corporate manipulation, resembling the fears of our contemporary society being led and controlled by a few businessmen. The collaboration between Ishwewell and President Orlean who sees this opportunity to boost her political campaign and raise the national economy, suggests the ultimate interests of current leaders.

Following this decision, the American nation and the rest of the world become polarized over how to respond to this threat; believe the scientists or, the government attempts to diminish the risks not to alarm the people. This split generates online debates and fights between the camp sharing the hashtag #DontLookUp (Fig. 2) encouraging people to ignore the disaster and the opposition that rallies under #JustLookUp. (Fig.3) As expected, the attempts to fragment the comet using drones failed due to large miscalculations that suggests the superficial work

conducted by Isherwell, resulting in mass panic as people began to recognize the chaos and inevitable impact. The shallowness and disconnection of the leaders, President Orlean and the CEO who shelter themselves on a spaceship that only fits a small number of people based on connections, financial and social status comes to a drastic halt at the end of the film, proving right all satirical commentaries. The comet hits, and the film portrays the few survivors (mostly elderly people and political figures, Peter Isherwell and President Orlean) in a radically altered world, serving as a moral of ignorance.





(Fig. 2 & Fig. 3- Social Media pop-ups)

While Mckay's use of the comet as a metaphor for climate change and environmental collapse is engaging and creative, some viewers may argue that the hyperbole of political and media incompetence undermines the seriousness of the issue. On one hand, the decision to represent the crisis and hint at the COVID-19 pandemic through the metaphor of a comet with an almost 100% chance of impact causing global destruction, effectively illustrates how even in the face of undeniable danger, some groups remain ignorant and easily manipulated by political propaganda, underscoring the alarming reality of ignorance and misinformation. On the other hand, the exaggeration of the comet metaphor could have diluted the allegory and its impact on the audience, as it diminished the real concern about the uncertainty of the pandemic or issues of global warming. However, accepting the chosen parabolic satirical representation of the fictional universe created takes the analysis further to each party, group, or stereotype critiqued. The media's role and function are ridiculed through its portrayal as an entity and business that advertises the environment and profits over information and realistic content. Research by Ali Ghasemi poses relevant discussions on the *Distrust of Science* in *'Don't Look*

Up' (2023), suggesting that one main aspect is the postmodernism culture that is responsible for "the prevalent anti-science tendency" (p.3479). He later constructs a pertinent overview of the movie, suggesting that McKay managed to conduct a narrative "that not only serves as a cautionary tale about the perils of willful ignorance but also sheds light on the mental and emotional struggles faced by scientists in an increasingly post-truth society" (p.3479).

Adam Mckay's deliberate and dynamic stylistic choices reflect his nuanced grasp of comedic rhythm and tonal blending. His films aim to capture and depict the subtle psychological aspects of how we perceive things, especially within the realm of humor. In today's comedy scene, editors and composers are acknowledged for their role in determining and molding the tone and world of the film, working within established conventions and rules to convey the message. McKay skillfully manages to keep coherence in the film by utilizing experienced actors who bring depth and relevance, creating an environment where creative collaboration thrives, resulting in unexpected discoveries and fresh perspectives. Furthermore, in an interview published by A. Frame, a newsletter covering Oscar-relevant stories, the director emphasized the importance of adapting visual styles to suit the unique demands of each project, making sure that the aesthetic created aligns seamlessly with its thematic concerns. Thus, combining cinematic elements of a long film, serious compositions, and fictional framings with non-diegetic media pop-ups and snap-shots of YouTube videos, social media posts, and news channels, creates a modern, relevant model of how media and cinematography shifted the viewer's attention to short content, viral trends and simplistic audio-visual materials.

In this way, the satire operates on multiple levels: one focuses on character-building techniques, drawing parallels between President Orlean, her son, and former US President Donald Trump, as well as associating inventor Peter Isherwell with figures like Elon Musk. The other level critiques the film industry and viewer preferences by blending traditional cinematographic elements with influences from the social media world. According to an interview with *The Hollywood Reporter* (2021), actor Rylance confirmed that in his search to discover the character of Peter Isherwell, he looked at CEOs like Steve Jobs, Mark Zuckerberg, and Jeff Bezos, but based most of his part on SpaceX and Tesla CEO:

> "They're thinking they're doing good — so there's that scene where he gets upset when Leonardo's character thinks he's just a businessman. These people have very high-minded ideas about what they're doing. They don't think they're bad people; quite the contrary.

You get that impression from Elon Musk. They think they're going to save humanity. I think they're dangerous," Rylance said. (Fig.4)



(Fig. 4- Peter Isherwell)

In the same tone, we can analyze the caricature of Donald Trump in the double act of Meryl Streep as a narcissistic and manipulating leader and Jonah Hill as her redundant extension. (Fig.5) An article by Emily Clute for *ScreenRant* online blog (2022) describes the president's dismissal of scientific evidence regarding the Dibiasky Comet to echo Trump's handling of the COVID-19 pandemic, where scientific consensus was often disregarded in favor of political agendas. The film's portrayal of Orlean's large rallies, similar to Trump's rallies and featuring merchandise baseball caps hinting at blind American support masses, underlines the hazardous potential for charismatic leadership to manipulate public opinion away from difficult truths. (Fig. 6) By satirizing Orlean's obvious ignorance of the comet's existence despite overwhelming evidence, the film illustrates the catastrophic repercussions of political leaders who prioritize their agendas over the well-being of society. While some aspects of Orlean's character may be inspired by past presidential figures, her portrayal ultimately serves as a clear critique of Trump's style of denialism and the broader ramifications for democratic countries dealing with grave dangers.




(Fig.5 & Fig. 6- President Orlean and American supporter riles)

Moreover, the creative choice of contrasting two news- the comet approaching and the insignificant but viral breakup of a popular mediatized couple, female pop star Riley Bina (Ariana Grande), and rapper DJ Chello (Kid Cudi), highlights once more the shallow interests of the media industry, news channels and overall pop-culture trends of today's society. The suggestion that the population is ignorant of the news from trained scientists but attentive to any entertaining message from media influencers builds a real and concerning depiction of our reality, signaling a warning.

Chiara Fort's dissertation aligns with the outline analysis of the satirical components of the movie, as she established multiple forms of satire, focusing on " 'inward-directed cli-fi satire' and 'outward-directed cli-fi satire' to categorize climate fiction narratives that differentially affect their audience" (Fort, 2022, p.26). Based on her study, the film *Don't Look Up* engages the audience on the topic of environmental issues by employing the second type of satire, the outward-directed one to provoke a critical and uncomfortable reflection on the topic of social indifference and obliviousness toward climate change. Following this theory, the type of satire chosen by Adam McKay does not need to produce positive emotions, thus risking negative emotional responses from the audience. (Fort, 2022) This theory can exemplify the reasoning behind the controversial reception and polarised views of the movie, arguing that the reason why some viewers were unpleased could refer to the directorial aperture for "corrective irony towards its viewers" which can feel somewhat judging and irritating.

- **Reception of *Don't Look Up***

Upon analyzing the intended narrative and cinematographic style, the reception of the film showed a week after its release in 2021, that *Don't Look Up* became the most-streamed English-language film, with an impressive 111.03 million viewing hours, ranking it the second-highest debut weekend viewership for any movie on the platform and the second most-watched film of that week in the United States, according to Tv Times. More than that, the film received 4 Academy nominations in 2022 for Best Motion Picture of the Year, Best Achievement in Film Editing for Hank Corwin, Best Achievement in Music Written for Motion Pictures with the original score of Nicholas Britell, and Best Original Screenplay to Adam Mckay and writer David Sirota. The actors, Jennifer Lawrence, Leonardo DiCaprio, and the director were nominated as well for the Golden Globes Awards in 2022, signaling together with multiple other awards and recognitions that the film was well received in the film critics industry. Online rating platforms have judged it differently, with IMDB rating 7.2/10, Rotten Tomatoes 78% audience score and 55%, 305 votes not rotten, and 3/5 stars given on Letterboxd. Thus, despite both its image and sound techniques and qualities being highly appreciated by film critics, the film elicited split views in the online reception, indicating strong engagement among viewers. While it accurately portrays the emotional toll of grappling with existential threats, the movie perpetuates stereotypes and exaggerations that may undermine public trust. To argue this matter further, this thesis will touch upon articles from renowned newspapers like *The Atlantic* and *The Guardian*, together with Reddit and Rotten Tomatoes discussions and reviews to illustrate how such divergences inform broader discussions about media, satire, and engagement in contemporary cinema.

One of the first and most relevant dichotomies appeared in online discussions about the Adam McKay movie, from professional critiques to audience feedback on social media and online forums revolved around concerns regarding its delivery and satirical approach. In a conversation among writers from *The Atlantic* newspaper, David Sims (2022) expresses a complex reaction to the film, noting how it initially left him in a "bummer mood", despite its comedic pedigree. Spencer Kornhaber echoes this sentiment, underlining the film's unconventional structure, which transitions from panic to nihilistic acceptance. The discussion delves into the subsequent critical debate around the picture, with Gilbert noticing a contradiction between those who evaluate it solely as a film and those who see it as a societal commentary (The Atlantic, 2022).

Agreeing with this belief, film viewers who follow and evaluate the movie as solely a cinematic media object of fictive reality use criteria that focus on narrative structure, character development, entertainment value, appreciating how well the film functions within its cinematic elements, aside from a necessary thematic undertone analysis. On the other side, the viewers who perceive and watch *Don't Look Up* as a societal commentary might prioritize how well and effectively the film addresses the themes in mind- climate change, governmental inaction, and societal ignorance, being then implicitly subjective, influenced by how the movie resonates emotionally or inspires reaction. Further on, Kornhaber appreciates the film's attempt to address serious concerns such as climate warming, but disputes the assumption that it can "save the world". Contrasting the viewpoints, Sims believes that director Adam Mckay's turn to polemical filmmaking offers difficulties in reconciling advocacy and enjoyment. The conversation also touches on the challenge of satirizing modern circumstances, evaluating parallels with previous struggles in depicting events such as the Iraq War in film. Ultimately, while acknowledging the film's ambition and controversial subjects, the writers question its tonal balance and effectiveness in expressing its message amidst a backdrop of real-world crises.

Peter Bradshaw's review for *The Guardian* (2021) offers a critical examination, expressing at first disappointment with the movie's execution, referring to it as "labored" and "self-conscious", similar to a longer Saturday Night Live sketch lacking the brilliance or seriousness required to deliver a meaningful political message effectively. Despite the criticism, Bradshaw praises the film's skillful management of specific scenes, especially its satirical approach to U.S. government policies on deflecting the asteroid. He emphasizes the smart political analysis found in Jonah Hill's depiction of a character resembling Trumpian politics, noting the movie's critical examination of current political ridiculousness. Despite his critique, the author suggests strongly that as long as a film manages to contribute to raising awareness about climate change, media, and technological trends of development, any critical objects become obsolete.

This perspective aligns with the thesis argument that modern political movies, particularly when combined with a satirical approach, are crucial in molding public conversation and potentially impacting policy and public opinion. In a realm where the news and media outlets have merged and political commentary and propaganda have occupied multiple forms of online reach, Bradshaw's article illustrates how individual beliefs and the perceived societal effects of a film can implicitly shape its critical reception. This affirms that

movies serve to both entertain and provoke thought, contributing to a wider comprehension and discussion of important worldwide issues.

Moving into the online reviewing communities, the popular review-aggregation website, Rotten Tomatoes, collects and compiles reviews from both professional critics and general audiences for movies, TV shows, and streaming content. The platform functions by assigning a “fresh” or “rotten” rating to each review, based on whether the viewer gave the work a positive or negative review. Upon initial examination of the ratings for the film *Don't Look Up*, it becomes apparent that the opinions of both critics and regular viewers are divided. The average audience rating stands at 72%, equivalent to a score of 3.7 stars out of 5. On the other hand, the score provided by critics is notably lower, with an average rating of 55% and a score of 6.3 out of 10. This immediate discrepancy is further illustrated by the breakdown of votes, with 136 critics rating the film as ‘rotten” and 169 critics rating it as"fresh ". These numbers testify to the polarized reception of the film, serving as a crucial starting point for subsequent textual analysis of audience reactions.

When searching for the name of the movie on Reddit, the popular social media platform known for its diverse range of forums or “subreddits”, where every user can engage in discussions on various topics, including film and entertainment, the same oscillating reception appears. Within these subreddits, users can post threads, comment on posts, and upvote or downvote content based on their preferences, making it a free, direct means of expression achievable in the comfort of their own space, regardless of social or political factors. As a platform that fosters open discussion and community interaction, Reddit provides a valuable source of qualitative data for analyzing the public reception of films. When ordering the posts by the criteria of “most relevant”, we overlook incentive titles such as “What do you think of the new movie DON’T LOOK UP?”, or “Finally saw Don’t look up and I don’t understand what people didn’t like about it”, “Don’t look up, it’s not a movie, it’s a documentary. Millennials are going to live it.”

To exemplify, this section will focus on comments from the most-voted discussion on Reddit, initiated by user r/Millennials, “Don’t look up. It’s not a movie, it’s a documentary. Millennials are going to live it.” In this thread, user Moonbunnychan captures a sentiment shared by many in the comments, stating that the themes of the movie are deeply entangled with current global issues, saying: “I know it was written to be about global warming but everything in it was applicable to our collective response to Covid as well, so I feel like I HAVE

already lived it" (Reddit user Moonbunnychan, 2021). This comment underlines the relevance of the movie by suggesting that it mirrors societal reactions to a global threat, thus it manages to share a message and create a comprehensive societal critique in an entertaining manner that will reach a far wider audience than a sole news outlet, enhancing its impact and relatability.

Conversely, another user speaks for the segment of the audience that was overwhelmed by the film's parallels to the pandemic reality, commenting: "After experiencing the pandemic, I could NOT watch it. I found it too much like real life" (Reddit user Green_Arrival, 2021). Judging by this argument, it is highlighted that the film managed to reflect intense realism and the satirical representation of governmental incompetence functioned as a magnifier glass of real-world anxieties, which can testify to the success of the director in creating this sense of uncomfortable truth and tension. Another proof that the film taps into deep-seated societal fears about the future, stands in the comment: "For me, I was compelled to watch it. It gave me the same existential crisis feeling that Idiocracy did" (Reddit user KingJollyRoger, 2021). The mystique of absurdity and blunt dark comedy entrapped viewers within the realm of the movie and determined engaged dialogue that transcends mere entertainment touching on fundamental concerns about climate change governmental accountability and public awareness. Aside from its ability to artistically design an alternative, exaggerated perspective on contemporary reality, the movie attracted both sympathy and hate, depending on personal political and social views, leading some people to revolt against the apathetic, ignorant society depicted in the film: "This is why religion was invented. It's not enough just to tell the masses what's good for them. You have to trick them into listening." (Reddit user Wes_bestern, 2021).

In the end, the bold directorial choices achieved the imagined goal of provoking critical thought and online debates. Drawing the delivery and reception of the movie to the philosophy of Kant and Schopenhauer in his Incongruity Theory (Morreall, 2023), it is inferred that humor arises from unexpected or incongruous juxtapositions, implying that individuals have different thresholds for what they find unexpected, thus amusing, testifying to polarised views on the satirical success. To the belief that serious political aspects must be addressed on a less comical note, Freud's Relief Theory which considers humor as a primary release of psychological tension, would counter-debate that the gravity of the message does not need to correspond to the intended comedic tone. Still, in a mediatized society with endless trends and comedic aesthetics, this justifies why for some the misaligning tonality can cause an anxious reception. Nevertheless, the bold statements, and exaggerated situations, together with the impressive cast and directorial style of combining cinematography techniques with social media elements of

contemporary accuracy, built a convincing story that generated critical thinking and real-life debate on the post-pandemic living situation.

Leave the World Behind: A Dystopian Mirror of American Anxieties

The movie *Leave the World Behind* (Esmail, 2023) was directed from the plot of a book that explores themes of class difference, parenthood, environmental collapse, race, and technological dependency against the dystopian backdrop of a confusing disaster of an apocalyptic scale. The film is a provocative and effective thriller that explores the sinister undercurrents of American society. The story explores topics such as racial segregation and the decline of traditional American values like patriotism, and community engagement, underlining the nihilistic beliefs of the cynical upper class. The creator of dystopian Mr. Robot offers an unsettling mix of warning and wish fulfillment about America's downfall, almost acting as a key to liberal conspiracy theories.

While true that the involvement of former president Barack Obama and his wife, Michelle Obama, as executive producers adds a layer of intricacy, some argue that it influenced the film's reception. As it will be further explored, political affiliations could influence the perception of the film's message, with some perceiving it as a partisan critique rather than an objective commentary on societal issues. This poses significant questions about the impact of political figures on the artistic integrity and reception of such cinematic works.

The narrative centers around a middle-class family, Amanda (Julia Roberts), Clay (Ethan Hawke), and their teenage children, Rose (Farrah Mackenzie) and Archie (Charlie Evans), who decided to drive away from their home for a relaxing summer getaway in a remote Airbnb. Early on in the cinematic world, the viewer is immersed in a somewhat eerie atmosphere, built on the haunting soundtrack, unsettling zoom-ins, tracking shots and uneasy framing composition, and cold-toned coloring that almost projects an uncanny presence, signaling that the family's departure is the beginning of a thriller-like experience. Arrived at the Airbnb, the family seemed to be enjoying the time at the pool, spending a day at the beach, until a series of strange coincidences started to unfold, finding little to no explanations for the poor wifi connections, oil tanker crashing into the beach, and low technological responses.

On their second night, tranquility is disrupted by the arrival of G.H. Scott (Mahershala Ali) and Ruth Scott (Myha'la), father and daughter, owners of the house the family rented, claiming that they need a safe shelter from the power blackout. (Fig.7) Amanda is skeptical,

avoids allowing the two inside, and seems to not be convinced by the story G.H. is presenting. Her character's suspicion towards G.H. and Ruth is now influenced by racial stereotypes and watched through the sociopolitical lens, shifting the viewer's focus from discovering the source of the uncanny music to establishing good or bad characters, human typologies in a crisis. The first hints of a racial inequality theme are visible in Amanda's assumptions that the two were more likely to be the handyman and housekeeper, rather than owners of such a luxurious house. Despite the clear animosities, both families are forced to share the house due to an apparent national emergency that has them formulating theories and assumptions with limited information about what is unfolding. Soon enough, the camera follows G.H. who seems to have gathered more details from a client, trying to contain his worries so as not to scare the rest, and Amanda, left with an uneasy feeling, is trying to piece together the uncanny events that have followed their getaway.



(Fig. 7- G.H. and his daughter meet Amanda's family. First touches on racial differences.)

At this stage, the unclear TV pop-ups and Amanda's phone notifications glitches suggest a cyberattack across the country. While the woman is seeking answers, Clay appears unbothered, only interested in calming his wife down, rather than conceiving a plausible explanation. When Rose walks into the garden, she is surprised to meet dozens of deer and animals walking from the woods, animals whom Clay has previously considered a "good omen" but which now confirm the natural imbalance, a crisis bigger than the power outing, linking together the two popular anxieties- environmental decay and technological collapse.

The narrative delineates the development of the characters, interpersonal dynamics, and psychological responses amidst imminent danger: the children exhibit obliviousness, endeavoring to decipher a technology-devoid vacation; Archie shows detachment, while Rose displays an attraction towards the forest, trying to discover its enigmatic allure and strange previous closeness of the wildlife; Amada engages in superficial discourse, striving to shield her children while maintaining vigilance. Concurrently, Clay's drive into the city finds emptiness and a newfound sense of peril; he encounters a distressed woman crying words in Spanish, asking for help, yet he finds himself succumbing to fear and confusion, driving away from the falling cloud of red pieces of paper covering the entire land, rapidly attuning to the unfolding crisis. Ruth masks her unease and preoccupation with her mother's whereabouts under the tough front of a strong young woman, while G.H. emerges as the sole capable individual, predicting the calamity and taking measures to protect everyone.

The tension arises with his discovery of bodies buried in the sand and learning that all planes, including his wife's, crashed onto the shore possibly due to a cyberattack and complete technological failure. Following this macabre finding, the entire newly formed universe goes through a series of events: power outage, air accidents, a loud noise, and red flyers with a hidden message implying "death to America." (Fig.8) Amanda and her family ignore G.H.'s cautions and try to leave, but their plan is foiled by numerous self-driving Tesla vehicles colliding with each other, compelling them to go back to the shelter. This story skillfully combines topics of racial disparity, environmental degradation, and technological breakdown, engulfing the audience in the movie's tense and unsettling ambiance while stimulating thoughtful consideration of societal and political matters.



(Fig. 8- Flyers with Death to America message)

The film uses a mix of realistic characters and exaggerated caricatures to critique American society, reflecting modern worries and anxieties. Amanda is the character who represents the stereotype of a popular culture "super Karen" that succumbs to racial biases and cultural prejudices. Her husband, Clay, embodies the emasculated and ineffective white male, underlining the current criticism of traditional masculinity and reliance on technology, blissful to his surroundings and reverting to emotional outbursts instead of the dominating strong model of the rational male. Similar to the critique on the adults, the movie lense watches their children, the younger generation as "zombified zoomers" as YouTuber and filmmaker @DadSavesAmerica argues in his video essay *Leave the World Behind: Debunking the Real Conspiracy Theory*, symbolizing the sense of isolation and lack of connection worsened by the dependency on media and technology.

On the other side, G.H. Scott is a resilient and brave black financer, resembling a contemporary hero which was inferred as a direct link to the film producer, Barack Obama. By making him the only capable character in the film, it serves as a subtle homage to Black culture, reflecting the political and social mission that the former president, a symbol of the "American dream", aspired to represent through his public presence. G.H.'s daughter is the radicalized skeptical youngster who is aware of racial injustice and questions societal norms, while herself being prejudiced. The contrast between G.H. and his daughter highlights the development of wisdom and maturity versus youthful passion, hinting at current trends fueled by anger and misjudgment that often defeat the initial purpose. Ruth's activism demonstrates cynicism, showing a simpler grasp of social dynamics and an ineffective approach to black and white cultures, promoting divisive speech instead of advancement and empathy.

In the end, one of the most relevant questions that leave the audience puzzled surrounds the creative decision to end the film with Rose finding a safe shelter, and hiding herself in to watch the last episode of Friends, instead of trying to save her family from the impending crisis. When asked about it, in an article by Jogn Dillio for *Tudum* by Netflix (2023), Esmail referred to the end as "pure escapism", an attempt to finalize Rose's story with a glimpse of hope:

> "I think as much as this film is a cautionary tale and it's meant to be a warning, it's not meant to give us an answer as to what to do next- but it is meant to say, ' As dark as it could get, as bleak as it can get, we can always strive to find some hope'" Esmail says.

Although a bold ending statement, the movie feels unfinished, rather self-explanatory that the end shall come despite any further attempts at repairing the political and social crisis. It becomes evident that the misconduct and shortcomings related to the COVID-19 pandemic have influenced both the aesthetic and narrative trends in contemporary cinema.

- **Reception of *Leave the World Behind***

Leave the World Behind has achieved notable success on Netflix, accumulating 136.3 million views in just 52 days on the platform, according to *TheWrap*. This achievement placed the film 8th in Netflix's ranking of top English-language movies, keeping it in the first spot on the streaming platform for almost a week. Although it seemed that Esmail's movie was received well amongst film critics, earning a 73% score on Rotten Tomatoes, it appears that the opinions are split when it comes to uncredited subscribers who only rated it at 35% with 2500 votes. Looking at IMDB reviews, the movie stands today at a 6.5/10, noting valuable nominations for People's Choice Awards, USA 2024 for Drama Movie of the Year, the Female Movie Star of the Year, and winning the CinEuphoria Award for Best Screenplay. A similarly balanced score was obtained on Letterboxd with 3,1/5 stars, making it a decent enough turnout for a Netflix production, with surprising viewership numbers that attracted the attention. Critics have mostly praised the movie's depth of themes, direction, and acting performances, recognizing its sophisticated examination of current social issues. The highlighted issues referred to the unnecessary runtime that began to lose interest, plot points that were undeveloped due to the ambition of covering too many different angles, and a lack of emotional connection, which can be the primary justification for the lower ratings from the audience. Most argue that the social commentary was heavy-handed and that the anticipation for a classic thriller may have caused disappointment among the general audience, miss-matching the expectations of the received object, resulting in a decrease in rating.

Using Reddit for an overview analysis of the public reception of the movie, the threads and discussions can be split on different thematic angles. Firstly, many users commented on the cinematographic techniques, some considering it over-the-top and inefficient, and some praising the originality and perspectives. User JoseyWales85 (2023) found the camera angles disorientating, commenting that "that one up the staircase almost made me sick", pointing at tilting techniques. (Fig.9) Similarly, user J4nkyst4nky (2023) added that while they appreciate creative camera work, "this felt super self-indulgent", adding that there needs to be a clear

purpose for this style of camera movements, suggesting “use a few Dutch angles instead of those flippy, spinny shots that exist seemingly just because they can”. The complex comment received multiple agreeing responses, proving that a wide number of viewers were taken out of the cinematic flow because of abrupt and misaligning shots that missed the target. Conversely, there are still viewers who enjoyed the vertical perspective shots and saw them as a reference to the vertical format of media consumed on phones, enhancing the film’s ability to immerse in different realms. (Grapefruithoe, 2023).



(Fig. 9- controversial camera angle- Staircase scene)

Another discussion comes from debating political views and implicit meanings of symbolical elements of the film. User Peachykeen723 mentioned historical allusions like the vessel name “white Lion” (Fig. 10) and the radio station “1619” (Fig.11) linking back to the initial arrival of African slaves in America. According to this user, this specific detail could imply that survivors of the war in the painting could end up being enslaved by the new conquerors, showing how history tends to repeat itself. To this analogy, user Tvinyl added that the movie is more of a metaphorical story than a straightforward one, aiming to explore issues of societal disparities, paranoia, and prejudice. They recognized the film’s attempt to raise awareness among viewers about their involvement in these societal problems, indicating that the film places viewers in the racialized distrust depicted in the movie. Notably, the film’s inclusion of conspiracy theories increased the complexity of viewer responses, especially when connecting the film’s message to the executive producer, former US President, Barack Obama.

An example is user Norgler's comment that completely rejected the message intended in the film, arguing that its direct connection to Obama is only just fueling conspiracy theories, calling it "orgasmic level conspiracy garbage" (Norgler, 2023). As a response, BeepBeepGoJeep user comments that the implicit idea of the film is to discredit a single, all-powerful group dominating worldwide events, underlining the intricate and diverse power dynamics in actuality. (BeepBeepGoJeep, 2023). The thread continues with some doubtful reactions that consider Obama's affiliation to be exactly the type of cover used by someone accused of being a part of such a "secret group", thus fueling the conspiracy theories created (Thanos_Stomps, 2023). These online debates demonstrate the impact of the Obama legacy and political public image, which resulted in a somewhat disregard of the film's political message as a veiled message, molding and reshaping the conversations surrounding the movie's implications, and reception goals.





(Fig. 10 & Fig.11 - conspiracy hidden details- the White Lion Oil tanker and the 1619 radio station)

Thus, after analyzing both media cases through the same lenses of narrative structure, directorial style, cinematic elements, and online reception and critics' reviews, it is evident that there is a rise in online engagement with political cinema. While acknowledging the public fear that the people have little to no influence at all on the current political sphere and possible future crises, online debates spiral around the newly found voice and personal agency of at-home film passionates that strive to elucidate hidden messages that may or may not have been intentionally encoded. Following this scenario, the film medium has become a fundamental reference point, an "emotional vaccination" (Paiva, 2021, p.42) against the uncontrollable reality, which underlines the responsibility of the filmmakers to accurately shape the fictional

universe keeping in mind the contemporary reception tendencies of appropriating the message according to recent tensions.

Integrating these concepts into the case studies chosen, reveals a change in thematic focus and reception, highlighting both lost and gained meaning. Adam Mckay's work, originally focused on global warming warnings, has instead gathered a post-pandemic narrative of perceived inefficiency and personal agendas of Trump's administration in dealing with the COVID emergency. On the other side, Sam Esmail's latest work, which tackles American anxieties and societal actions in times of crisis, has been reinterpreted as a conspiracy film, largely due to its association with Barack Obama as the executive producer.

4. Conclusion

In final, this thesis has examined how post-pandemic films, particularly *Don't Look Up* by Adam Mckay and *Leave the World Behind* by Sam Esmail navigate the contemporary sociopolitical anxieties, through different narrative techniques and cinematic approaches, underscoring cinema's growing role as a medium of political and social commentary. Following the shift towards at-home media consumption forced by the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions, the traditional boundaries between politics and popular culture have been blurred, creating new opportunities for a different form of political propaganda and speech. According to Kaes (2009), contemporary viewers are drawn to narratives that stem from anxieties and concerns they resonate with, using fiction as a tool for emotional engagement with the underlying statements.

The two chosen films use their narrative and cinematic disguise to provoke critical thinking and provide a platform for reflection and public discourse, bridging the gap between at-home watchers and the media crew. The cinematographic choices in *Don't Look Up* use dark humor and realism, together with a blend of fictional media pop-ups and real-world social media trends to create a relevant narrative and easily recognizable cross-media. While some perceived it as rather blunt, too obvious, it is the simplicity that overamplifies the satire, highlighting the message, rather than the medium. On the other hand, *Leave the World Behind* strived to convey an eerie and unsettling atmosphere using cold-toned coloring and extreme zoom-ins, tracking

shots, and other tension-building techniques. This offers an alternative stylistic approach to shaping a film of societal demise and world collapse, on a different, more serious tone. The split reviews and opinions received by both films can be justified through the dynamic decoding process explained by Stuart Hall. Drawing from this theory and adding onto the analysis that contemporary political satire no longer provides clear solutions, but rather dramatically emphasizes the failures of humanity to build a serious warning, it can be inferred that such political films are encoded and decoded based on socio-political biases. More often than not, the audience's negotiation, opposition, or alignment with the intended message will be affected by contemporary issues, like the COVID-19 pandemic, resulting in motifs and meanings being gained and lost.

Despite the comprehensive approach of this research, certain limitations need to be acknowledged to stimulate future developments on the matter. The primary weakness is the narrow scope of films examined, which can fail to represent the variety of contemporary political films with a symbolic or direct COVID-19 pandemic association. While focusing on only two case studies allowed for a more in-depth analysis of stylistic elements and techniques, together with a more thorough examination of the reception, it may have missed other important works that could potentially enhance the understanding of post-pandemic political satire and its responsibility on generating public discourse. Moreover, expanding the reception analysis from online commentary platforms to in-person interviews or other feedback forms, could provide more useful insights and reflect on the viewpoints of the wider audience. Further study could explore the film choices to include a wider array of films, allowing for a comparative analysis between more patterns and motifs. Additionally, having a wider lens of analysis, fostering platform viewer engagement analytics, psychological implications, and a categorized analysis of individuals based on their political affiliations and opinions and reception of the films, could be advantageous due to the increase in accuracy. Further research can expand upon the groundwork set by this thesis to formulate a deeper insight into how political cinematography and societal dynamics interact in a highly mediated post-pandemic society.

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