



Original Article

Representation of Pre-Traumatic Disorder in *Don't Look Up*: A Textual Analysis

JHSS
85-99

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Vol. 33 (1), 2025

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Abstract

Humans and the environment are closely interconnected; however, colonization, urbanization, industrialization, and technological advancement have significantly damaged the environment. Global environmental and climate change affect people mentally due to their looming consequences. *Don't Look Up* is a movie about a comet about to hit Earth within six months. The comet is used as a metaphor for climate change in the film. The researcher applies Ann Kaplan's theory of pre-traumatic stress to analyze the movie, which she discusses in her book *Climate Trauma: Foreseeing the Future in Dystopian Films*. To examine the film, the research article employs Catherine Belsey's textual analysis method. The analysis focuses on the dialogues to uncover their hidden meanings and decipher the metaphors. The film analysis offers insights into the manifestation and effects of pre-traumatic stress within a literary context. The paper emphasizes how the capitalist class exploits nature for their benefit, a theme that plays a vital role in the movie.

Keywords: urbanization, technology, pre-traumatic stress disorder

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Introduction

In recent years, global environmental changes have affected both the physical world and people's mental health due to their consequences. This is an issue that requires immediate attention. In a series of fifteen tweets, 'rebel meteorologist' Eric Holthaus shared his struggle with feelings of hopelessness in the face of climate change. His tweets served as a powerful reminder of the growing body of studies showing that climate change has become a mental health concern, impacting an increasing number of people with what one researcher has called pre-traumatic stress disorder (Oberhaus, 2017). Moreover, it seems that Holthaus was right, judging by the very positive response to his tweets. After receiving thousands of likes and retweets for each post, Holthaus quickly gained popularity on Twitter. He claimed to have received hundreds of messages over the following week from people who said they experienced the same feelings he described.

Environment and human beings are interdependent (Ives et al., 2017). People can only survive with environmental resources, and it becomes difficult to exist without natural resources. The environment provides humans with clean water, pure air, soil fertility, organic and inorganic food, and climate regulation, which means the environment supports humanity in many ways. Human activities after industrialization, urbanization, and colonialism have degraded the environment in several ways. The prime example is climate change, which has caused habitat loss, insufficient rainfall, and pollution. Activities such as burning fossil fuels, deforestation, and excessive use of chemicals have increased the global temperature, leading to climate change.

Various international conferences and debates are held around the world to protect the environment. Environmental issues that need solving have become critical due to their impact on the planet and human society. Literature also discusses environmental problems and promotes awareness because it reflects societal values and norms. Climate change and environmental degradation require attention, so literature addresses nature-related concerns. Writers explain the complexity of environmental degradation to inspire responsible actions for ecological crises. This paper focuses on a popular genre to examine how environmental degradation affects people's mental health. The theoretical framework used in this research is a critical analysis of Ann Kaplan's concept of pre-traumatic stress applied to the movie *"Don't Look Up"* to explore the

relationship between humans and nature. Ann Kaplan states that in pre-traumatic stress disorder, people cannot escape stress and remain worried about future disasters.

The connection between environmental degradation and pre-traumatic stress is fundamentally linked through people's worries about ecological disasters. Environmental degradation involves not only physical damage but also psychological harm. According to Kaplan, pre-traumatic stress disorder occurs in individuals due to exposure and awareness of climate change. In this context, people become anxious and stressed about the consequences of environmental changes. Environmental degradation presents serious threats to ecological sustainability and human well-being, worsened by pollution, deforestation, climate change, and natural disasters. The chosen theory for the study is an emerging area that warrants extensive discussion because humans are directly affected by climate change. Understanding how nature is depicted in literature is important because literature shapes our worldview. The study emphasizes the reckless exploitation of natural resources, which has resulted in environmental issues such as habitat destruction, food shortages, and a lack of clean drinking water. Therefore, contributing to the ongoing conversation is crucial to protect both people and the environment.

The present study aims to analyze the movie *Don't Look Up*, using Ann Kaplan's theory of pre-traumatic stress, to explore how capitalism, for its own benefit, neglects environmental degradation. The research paper focuses on how ecological deterioration leads to pre-traumatic stress for characters in the movie and how the capitalist class exploits nature for their own gain. The objectives of the study are to examine the connection between environmental degradation and pre-traumatic stress disorder and to analyze how the capitalist class exploits nature for their benefit. The study is limited to the movie *Don't Look Up*, focusing on pre-traumatic stress and the role of capitalism.

Literature Review

This section of the paper discusses the literature on the movie *Don't Look Up* and Ann Kaplan's pre-traumatic stress theory. Simply put, a literature review examines previous studies on a specific research area. The first part focuses on the movie, while the second part covers articles related to the theory. Clear communication requires sentences that express complete ideas. One study

analyzes declarative and interrogative sentences used in *Don't Look Up*. According to this study, the characters in the movie use two types of declarative sentences and three types of interrogative sentences. There are positive declarative sentences, which account for 79 or 67.6%, and 38 or 31.5% of negative declarative sentences. In this way, Fransiskus's research examines the declarative and interrogative sentences used in *Don't Look Up* (Fransiskus 111-121).

In the movie, postmodern concepts are also present. The study was conducted on different postmodern themes used in the film *Don't Look Up*. The paper focuses on themes of movies, including greed, ignorance, and the role of media. It discusses a postmodern analysis of the film from the perspectives of Baudrillard's hyperreality and satire. The study also addresses the theory of post-truth. It is based on the belief that truth no longer matters as much as feelings and beliefs in shaping public opinion and political discourse (Jovitta, 2023).

People have mixed reviews of the movie *Don't Look Up*, which shows a clear picture of what humans have done to nature in recent years. In one review, Kevin Burke calls the film a star-studded dud. Burke compares the conflict to COVID-19 since the movie reflects current events and offers no escape for viewers. It highlights how society is falling apart and how heavily we depend on social media. He compares the film to classic satirical movies like *Dr. Strangelove* and *Catch-22*, and claims it doesn't achieve the same level of success as those classics (Burke, 2022).

As a major influencer, Hollywood is responsible for raising awareness about the environmental damage caused by humans. In *The Hollywood Reporter*, chief film critic David Rooney offers a detailed critique, saying the film addresses serious issues but relies too much on satire. Rooney states that the film accurately portrays the media and government's response to the impending disaster, but lacks the facts to deepen the plot. Because of this, the film fails to fully engage its audience. Rooney praises the film for its comedic elements and witty dialogue, which add to its entertainment value. He also notes the support the film received from climate scientists, which helped draw attention to the crucial issue of environmental change.

In *Don't Look Up*, combat serves as a metaphor for climate change and humanity's inability to respond effectively. Cara Buckley's article highlights

the urgent need to protect the environment from climate change, viewed through the lens of the movie *Don't Look Up*. Buckley (2022) writes, “sniping between reviewers who did not like the film and scientists who did.” She also quotes director Adam McKay, “who wants this movie to be kicked in the pants,” which underscores the pressing environmental issues caused by climate change that require serious attention. Genevieve Guenther, founder and director of End Climate Silence, an organization advocating for increased media coverage of climate change, stated, “The goal of the movie was to raise awareness about the terrifying urgency of the climate crisis, and in that, it succeeded spectacularly.” In this way, the film uses metaphor to illustrate environmental degradation resulting from human activities.

People and critics have different opinions about the movie. Some praise it, while others criticize it. Daniel W. Drezner wrote in *The Washington Post* that the movie received mixed reactions from the public and critics. Some scientists appreciated its message to the audience, but others were unhappy with its tone, which they felt was not serious enough given that climate change is a serious issue. Some film critics even called the movie exhausting and inconsistent. A few critics also compared it to the movie *Dr. Strangelove* (Drezner, 2022).

Pre-traumatic stress syndrome, as discussed by Kaplan in her book, refers to a mental condition disturbed by environmental degradation and climate change. A person worries about future conditions and experiences stress. Kaplan and Wang (2024) argue that pre-traumatic stress disorder differs from post-traumatic and other traumatic disorders because, instead of focusing on past and present, it centers on future situations that cause mental distress. Kaplan has written extensively about pre-traumatic stress and trauma, particularly after 9/11, analyzing post-colonial and post-modernist perspectives. Around 2007, as climate change debates intensified, Kaplan developed an interest in dystopian fiction and films depicting future societies where human actions led to the collapse of the natural world and urban infrastructure. She critically examines symptoms of pre-traumatic stress disorder, where individuals feel intense worry about the future due to climate change caused by human activities. Theoretically, symptoms may include nightmares, fear-induced dissociation, and flash-forwards, now triggered by references to future events rather than past ones.

People suffer from trauma in their lives because they face different negative experiences in their past, which have a significant impact on them. Literature writers explain traumatic disorders based on different fictional characters. Alicia Berenson's novel *The Silent Patient* is analyzed from the perspective of post-traumatic stress disorder by Pratiwi and Pramesti (2022). Alicia's character experiences traumatic events such as sexual abuse, childhood abuse, verbal abuse, a car accident at a young age, and her husband's behavior, which causes her mental disorder. She begins to live in isolation and becomes aggressive toward others. Complications increase in her relationships, and she starts to develop negative views about herself and others. The paper uses Carlson and Ruzek's theory of post-traumatic stress disorder to critically analyze Alicia's character in the novel. Alicia's traumatic experiences can also be understood through her flashbacks, in which she does not want to see the color yellow because it reminds her of a car accident she and her mother had. These experiences affected her mental health and contributed to her post-traumatic stress disorder.

Traumatic disorders affect a person's mental health. Filmmakers depict how individuals suffer from traumatic disorders and how these affect their well-being and lives. The movie *Wild*, directed by Jean-Marc Vallée, is analyzed from a perspective of traumatic disorder based on the main character, Cheryl's, traumatic experiences. Cheryl faced traumatic events after her mother's death, which impacted her mental health because, in childhood, her mother provided excellent care. Even after her mother divorced her husband, she treated her children well despite poverty. Her mother consistently loved Cheryl and her brother. Due to cancer, at age forty-five, Cheryl loses her mother's affection, and her mental health becomes disturbed. Sutrisno (2019) analyzes the character of Cheryl from different types of post-traumatic stress disorder.

Hannibal Lecter's character in *Hannibal Rising* and *The Silence of the Lambs* by Thomas Harris suffers from psychopathic traits and post-traumatic stress disorder, as Kirana analyzes. His early psychopathic behavior eventually developed into a severe mental disorder, yet he refused to see a psychiatrist to discuss his trauma and seek treatment. His PTSD symptoms become evident through his nightmares. Hannibal Lecter's traumatic experiences contributed to his becoming a serial killer. The fact that Hannibal kills individuals without hesitation, even when they should be held accountable, indicates he is a psychopath. He initially killed out of revenge, but killing then became

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ingrained in his soul and transformed him into a psychopath (Kirana, 2018). Kirana employs descriptive qualitative methodology to analyze Hannibal Lecter's traumatic experiences.

Writers also experience pre-traumatic stress disorder at some point in their lives, which affects them. Virginia Woolf, a prominent writer of her era, suffered from trauma, and she incorporated her traumatic experiences into her writing. To cope with her trauma, she created an imaginative character, Mrs. Ramsay, who exemplifies qualities she desires. The fictional character Mrs. Ramsay represents what Woolf hopes for in her life, and although Mrs. Ramsay faces difficulties, she maintains harmony despite these challenges (Salam et al., 2022; Silvestrin, 2023). For Woolf, life becomes complicated when one encounters negative experiences, and in efforts to overcome suffering, she built an imaginative world through her writing that helped her cope. Virginia Woolf's personal life was marked by anxiety, fear, and trauma, as evidenced by her suicide attempts, since she endured post-traumatic stress disorder throughout her life. Woolf depicts Mrs. Ramsay as a figure full of harmony and love to compensate for her own traumatic experiences.

The literature review shows that a research gap still exists. The psychological effects of prolonged exposure to environmental deterioration are not yet fully understood. This gap significantly hampers efforts to address the comprehensive impacts of environmental crises on human health and well-being.

Theoretical Framework

The study explores the theory of pre-traumatic stress, which Ann Kaplan discusses in her book *Climate Trauma: Foreseeing the Future in Dystopian Films*. Pre-traumatic stress relates to anxiety about climate events that have not yet happened but are imminent. Kaplan mentions such events in her book by referencing movies like *Take Shelter*, *The Happening*, *The Book of Eli*, and *The Road*. In these films, humanity faces environmental disaster, or the natural system has broken down, leaving no future for humanity. In *Take Shelter*, the main character is traumatized by a storm that has not yet occurred. Curtis, the protagonist, experiences future events directly and suffers from nightmares and hallucinations. Kaplan describes this phenomenon as pre-traumatic stress.

Trauma does not only happen when something occurs; it can also happen when someone thinks about a future event because it can cause destruction, and a person can become traumatized just by imagining that event. According to Kaplan, “future catastrophic events could also be traumatic” (Kaplan, 2015). Kaplan argues that the fear a person may have due to environmental degradation caused by human activities can, over time, turn into trauma because degradation can have serious consequences for humans. This stress related to potential outcomes is called pre-traumatic stress. Environmentalists and concerned individuals believe that if environmental degradation continues at the same pace, it will lead to complete natural destruction. The fear of total collapse causes people to think about what they would do if natural and human infrastructure were to fail, leading to pre-traumatic stress (Kaplan, 2015). Kaplan also claims that humans often do not realize what they are doing to nature, but over time, they come to understand that they have caused significant damage. The destruction of nature can, eventually, harm humans, creating anxiety about what the future holds. This anxiety impacts mental health and is known as pre-traumatic stress disorder.

Kaplan suggests in her book that the government in the future will be based on capitalism. She discusses the movie **Blindness**, where people are unable to see and are completely blind. These individuals are kept in an asylum under such conditions, yet capitalism persists. When the people in the asylum have no money to buy food, women start selling their jewelry and, eventually, their bodies to get sustenance. Kaplan explains it this way: capitalism continually recreates itself (Kaplan, 2015). It doesn’t matter how much human suffering there is—capitalism will keep going. Kaplan believes everything goes wrong with capitalism: “If the films and novels offer a somewhat predictable picture of what is wrong with capitalism” (Kaplan, 2015).

Kaplan argues that the problems with the environment stem from corporate capitalist culture. She describes this situation as “capitalism directly related to environmental degeneration” (Kaplan, 2015). In a capitalist society, the country’s leaders pay little attention to environmental issues.

Research Methodology

Different methods can be applied to the movie *Don’t Look Up*, such as visual, discourse, and critical discourse analysis. This paper uses textual analysis by

Catherine Belsey to critically examine the movie's characters through their dialogues. The researcher will employ the textual method for this study. The textual approach helps readers view the text from different perspectives, enabling a deeper analysis and revealing multiple interpretations. Textual analysis is used to uncover hidden meanings within the text. In literature, it primarily involves exploring themes, structure, literary devices, and the cultural context of the writing. Plot development, character analysis, and narrative style aid in uncovering hidden messages and signs. Word choice, figurative language, and tone can reveal various layers of meaning, including subversive nuances. Catherine Belsey states, "On the country, meanings are always ultimately undecidable" (Belsey, 2013). In this way, an author cannot definitively decide the meaning of a text. It depends on the readers' interpretation and their knowledge. Belsey emphasizes deconstructing traditional ideas of meaning and language presentation. Fixed interpretations are questioned. Her concept of textual analysis mainly focuses on the reader's perspective to evaluate and challenge established ideas within the text, encouraging critical engagement with hidden meanings. Literary criticism cannot be neutral; the perspectives of both writer and reader must be considered to understand the context in real time.

Analysis and Discussion

The study aims to analyze the movie *Don't Look Up* through the lens of pre-traumatic stress and capitalism critique as discussed by Ann Kaplan in her book *Climate Trauma: Foreseeing the Future in Dystopian Films*. The first section will cover the theory of pre-traumatic stress, while the second part will explore the role of capitalism.

The opening scene of the movie *Don't Look Up* sets the tone for the rest of the film, and the stress related to humans' extension in the characters is also present. Kate Dibiasky discovers the comet about to hit the Earth, and Dr. Randall Mindy calculates when it will strike. As the camera shifts to Dr. Mindy's face, we see unmistakable signs of panic as he realizes that the comet will hit Earth within six months. He calls off the party and tells Kate to stay. "You stay" (5:19). Both characters display clear signs of stress and panic as they learn that humans have only six months to live on Earth. They inform Dr. Teddy Oglethorpe (Planetary Defense Coordination Office) about the comet. There is evident stress and anxiety in his voice regarding the impending

impact. The camera slowly zooms in from his shoulders to his face. The tense background music adds to the scene's anxiety. In this way, the opening scene sets the tone for the movie and highlights the stress because, after impact, life on Earth will end.

The stress and frustration caused by traumatic events in the movie are shown through the characters Kate and Professor Mindy. They experience stress throughout the film due to the effects of climate change. The scene where Dr. Randall Mindy and Kate meet President Orlean to explain the dangerous situation adds to the characters' stress and frustration (18:13). She gives them 20 minutes. "You got 20 minutes." The president ignores them. She tells them to call it 70% and move on instead of 99.78, as Dr. Randall and Kate tell her. This also creates fear in the characters' minds as the government does nothing about a hazardous event that Dr. Randall Mindy calls "An Apocalyptic event" (23:36). There is clear anxiety and stress in his voice as he emphasizes the word apocalyptic.

The pre-traumatic stress causes fear in the characters of the movie because they worry that the comet will hit Earth within six months, destroying human infrastructure and causing humanity's end. *Don't Look Up* shows fear through the character of Kate. Her fear grows when President Orlean tells them, "Sit tight and assess" (21:46). She shows her anger in front of the president and tells her that everything regarding the consequences of the comet hitting Earth has already been explained. The president dismisses their concerns by telling them to sit tight and assess. This statement makes Kate angry and increases her fear. Dr. Randall Mindy also explains the seriousness of the situation to the president, calling this decision extremely dangerous. Dr. Randall Mindy and Kate suffer from the burden of knowing about this planet killer, which is about to hit the Earth.

The fear and anxiety about the extinction of plants in Dr. Randall Mindy and Kate escalate when they appear on a morning show to leak news about the conflict. The show, called *The Rip*, keeps things light and fun. The host makes fun of the conflict, and Kate asks, "I am sorry, are we not being clear?" (39:29). She says this with anger and sadness because they are not taken seriously. She continues, "That the entire planet is about to be destroyed" (39:36). There is fear in her eyes about a future event that has not yet happened, but it troubles her. She leaves the show, telling everyone that we

are all going to die, which clearly indicates that the conflict will soon hit Earth. At the end of the show, Dr. Randall Mindy shows signs of depression and helplessness as he asks desperately, “The show is over” (41:21). Afterward, they find out that people are not paying much attention to what they say. A flood of social memes about Kate’s behavior appears. Both characters suffer from fears of future events that haven't happened yet, and they also suffer because nobody is listening to them.

As the movie approaches its conclusion, Dr. Randall Mindy appears on the morning show, *The Rip*. The host asks him if the comet exists or if it’s just a rumor about a potential impact on Earth. In this scene, Dr. Randall Mindy’s anxiety and fear are evident as he almost shouts at the hosts, telling them that there is indeed a comet and they have seen it through a telescope. What more proof do you need? Dr. Mindy responds that he and his student have observed the comet with a telescope and have estimated its impact time on Earth. He completely loses his composure due to anxiety about the future, expressing his points in anger and helplessness. He states, “We are all going to die” (50:27). This reveals Dr. Randall’s fear about the comet because when it hits the Earth, it will wipe out the entire planet.

The second part of the analysis will examine the movie through the lens of capitalism, as discussed in Kaplan's book *Climate Trauma: Foreseeing the Future in Dystopian Films*. When Kate and Dr. Randall discuss on the online show the impending conflict that will strike Earth in six months, the President of America learns about it. After hearing the news about the conflict, President Orlean’s first question is, “What is this going to cost me?” (21:10). In the face of imminent danger, she is more concerned about herself than what the people need. This reflects the hallmark of capitalism, which Kaplan describes as “what is wrong with capitalism” (Kaplan, 2015). In capitalism, the government thinks in terms of “I” rather than “we” as a collective, as seen in President Orlean's behavior. All she cares about is winning the midterm elections and maintaining her power.

Capitalism sees money in everything, and as humans, it is believed that they can solve every problem through modern technology. In the movie, the character Peter believes that he can not only destroy the comet in midair but also extract the most critical minerals from it. He wants to use these for his smartphone and computers. These are rare minerals. Peter states, “Actually

contains \$32 trillion of these critical materials” (1:09:59). In this way, capitalism values profit over the well-being of people.

In capitalism, political leaders often prioritize the interests of corporations over the well-being of people and nature. President Orlean calls Dr. Randall and tells him that she has a ship: “There is a ship... it holds 2000 people... it sets to find the nearest earth-like planet” (1:59:52). She offers Dr. Randall seats, but he refuses because he prefers to stay with his family. This scene highlights the inequality of capitalism. In capitalism, one class suffers while the elites enjoy the wealth of people with low incomes. They can even survive the world’s end, as shown in the movies. President Orlean uses money and power to save herself while the rest of the world suffers. This illustrates the inequality of capitalism and how leaders often disregard the well-being of the people and the environment.

In a capitalist society, a clear divide exists between the rich and the poor. The wealthy exploit the poor using their money. In the movie's final scene, the audience sees that the rich have traveled to another planet. Peter then tells them that “oxygen is higher than Earth” (2:09:38). Although the oxygen level is higher than on Earth, deadly birds are on the planet, as evidenced by the fact that they kill President Orlean first and then everything else. Humans believe they can use their wealth and technology to save themselves, but this movie delivers a message that climate change is a serious problem, and money cannot save us from it.

The analysis shows that the movie *Don't Look Up* depicts a clear view of capitalism and how it operates. President Orlean doesn't care about the people; she only cares about staying in power. Meanwhile, Peter symbolizes capitalism and how the system seeks profit from everything. Peter aims to use Combat for his own benefit. In this way, the movie highlights the inequality between the poor and the rich, where the wealthy can get away with anything, even as everything around them falls apart, as shown in the film.

Conclusion

This study examines the selected movie from an ecocriticism perspective, using Ann Kaplan’s theory of pre-traumatic stress. The characters in the movie *Don't Look Up* experience pre-traumatic stress. They suffer from an event that has not yet happened, but they are convinced it will occur in the future. This

pre-traumatic stress causes anxiety, fear, and tension, which lead to human suffering. The analysis shows that Ann Kaplan regards natural degradation as a cause of pre-traumatic stress. The movie *Don't Look Up* also illustrates how characters suffer from pre-traumatic stress due to environmental change. The analysis suggests that capitalism is a major factor in natural degradation because, to make money, humans destroy nature regardless of the consequences, and when destruction occurs, pre-traumatic stress ensues. In the film, President Orlean represents the self-serving nature of capitalist and political systems. Capitalist culture further exacerbates inequality between the poor and the rich, which also reveals that injustice is inflicted upon nature, and this injustice to nature is linked to injustice toward humans, as both are interconnected. This study is important because it offers a new perspective on the movie *Don't Look Up*. With limited existing literature on the specific intersection of character development and thematic elements in the film, this research aims to uncover new insights into how pre-traumatic stress manifests and impacts within a literary and cinematic context.

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