

From “Don’t Look Up” to COP29

A Real-Life Satire on Climate Inaction

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The outcome of COP29 bears an unsettling resemblance to the 2021 satirical science fiction film “Don’t Look Up,” starring Leonardo DiCaprio. The film satirizes government inaction in the face of an existential threat, much like the current global response to climate change. It also critiques the corrosive role of media, social media, and corporate interests in distorting public perception of critical issues.

In the movie, two astronomers, Dr. Randall Mindy and Kate Dibiasky, discover a planet-killing comet on a collision course with Earth. When they alert the U.S. government and the public, their warnings are dismissed, mocked, and politicized. The administration, motivated by short-term political gain and corporate agendas, downplays the crisis. A social media-driven disinformation campaign ensues, where citizens are urged to “Don’t Look Up,” even as the comet becomes visible in the sky. Meanwhile, the scientists urge people to “Just Look Up” and take action, but their calls are drowned in a sea of memes, apathy, and partisan noise. In the end, the comet strikes Earth—with a severe catastrophic consequences.

This fictional story uncomfortably mirrors the current global approach to climate change. Despite clear scientific consensus and visible signs of planetary distress, political inertia and media trivialization continue to stall meaningful action. COP29, instead of being a breakthrough moment,

largely echoed this same paralysis—rhetoric over responsibility, optics over outcomes.

The outcome of COP29 in Baku, Azerbaijan, resonates with chilling familiarity against the backdrop of Adam McKay’s 2021 satirical masterpiece, “Don’t Look Up”. The film’s central narrative—scientists discovering an existential threat (a planet-killing comet), only to be met with political indifference, media trivialization, corporate co-option, and public apathy—serves not merely as allegory but as a near-documentary reflection of the global response to the climate crisis, crystallized in the failures of the “Finance COP.”

COP29: A “Don’t Look Up” Scenario Played Out in Real Time

The Unheeded Scientists, the Ignored IPCC: Dr. Mindy and Dr. Dibiasky’s frantic warnings mirror the increasingly dire, unequivocal alarms sounded by the IPCC. AR6 was the clearest ‘comet sighting’ yet, stating the rapidly closing window for 1.5°C and the astronomical costs of inaction. COP29’s procedural achievement of setting a trillion-dollar ‘floor’ for the NCQG, while acknowledging scale, lacked the binding commitments, quality guarantees (grants over debt-inducing loans), and concrete pathways that the scientific ‘need’ demands. Like President Orlean initially dismissing the astronomers, the NCQG outcome treated the scientific imperative as a negotiating chip rather than an existential mandate.

Political Downplaying and Diversion: The film’s President Orlean and her Chief of Staff (Jason Orlean) delay action due to midterm polls, ultimately crafting a flawed, profit-driven “BASH” mission. COP29 saw developed nations successfully downplay their historical responsibility (“Don’t look back at emissions!”) and divert focus towards an “expanded donor base” and the nebulous mobilization of private finance. The hard-fought but inadequate NCQG text, allowing loans and mobilized private capital to dominate, became the real-world equivalent of the compromised BASH plan—technically a “response,” but structurally flawed and unlikely to avert catastrophe, designed more to appease domestic constituencies and protect economic interests than to solve the problem. Azerbaijan’s fossil fuel backdrop added a layer of dissonance akin to the film’s tech billionaire exploiting the comet for mineral extraction.

The Battle of Narratives: “Just Look Up” vs. “Don’t Look Up”: The astronomers’ “Just Look Up” campaign versus the government and corporate media’s “Don’t Look Up” distraction perfectly mirrors the climate communication battlefield. At COP29, the stark reality of climate-vulnerable nations demanding trillions in grant-based, accessible finance for survival (“Just Look Up at the Need!”) was drowned out by technical jargon, disputes over definitions, geopolitical grandstanding related to other conflicts, and narratives emphasizing economic constraints or the potential

of future, unproven technological fixes (“Don’t Look Up at the Scale or the Injustice!”). The focus shifted from the planetary emergency to the minutiae of negotiation, much like the comet became a viral meme.

The Inevitable Impact Looms: While Earth hasn’t yet suffered the comet’s direct hit, the failure of COP29 to deliver adequate, just finance is an impact. It directly undermines the Global South’s ability to adapt, transition, and recover from losses and damages. It makes the 1.5°C target virtually unreachable. The “impact” is not a single event but the ongoing escalation of suffering, displacement, and ecological collapse that the NCQG’s shortcomings guarantee. COP29’s outcome ensures the climate crisis’s impact will be harder and hit the most vulnerable first and hardest.

However, hope still flickers on the horizon. Against the political failure satirized years in advance by Hollywood, President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva of Brazil, the incoming COP30 President, emerged at the G20 Summit on November 19, 2024, with a clarion call that cut through the noise: “COP30 will be our last chance to avoid an irreversible rupture in the climate system.” His speech was a direct rebuttal to the “Don’t Look Up” dynamics that crippled COP29, outlining a path grounded in justice, urgency, and leadership:

Confronting the “Last Chance” Reality:

Unlike leaders who downplay timelines, Lula explicitly framed COP30 as the final off-ramp before systemic collapse. This echoes the astronomers’ desperate pleas, refusing to sugarcoat the stakes. It’s a direct challenge to the complacency and incrementalism witnessed at COP29.

Demanding Accountability from the Polluters:

Lula forcefully reiterated the bedrock principle of Common But Differentiated Responsibilities and Respective Capabilities (CBDR-RC), calling out developed nations for their historical emissions. His demand for “larger accountability” directly addresses the core equity failure of COP29, where developed nations evaded binding public finance commitments. He didn’t just ask them to pay; he demanded they lead by example.

The Bold 2040/2045 Challenge: Lula’s most concrete and radical proposal was calling on developed G20 nations to bring forward their climate neutrality targets

from 2050 to 2040 or 2045. This is transformative:

- **Science-Based:** Aligns better with the rapid emission reductions needed for 1.5°C.
- **Restores Credibility:** Addresses the trust deficit by demanding developed nations “assume their historical responsibilities” first, before asking more of others. This undermines the “expanded donor base” deflection used at COP29.
- **Creates Space for Equity:** Recognizes developing nations “can all take steps forward” but “at different paces,” conditioned on the promised finance and technology transfer finally materializing. It links ambition to support.

Centering Indigenous Knowledge and Ecological Stewardship: Lula highlighted the “essential role of indigenous and traditional communities,” grounding climate action in the knowledge systems of those who have sustainably managed vital ecosystems for millennia. This counters the top-down, technocratic approaches often prioritized in finance discussions and offers a model for resilience.

Proposing a UN Climate Change Council: Recognizing the fragmentation plaguing global climate governance (evident in the weak links between COP29’s NCQG, L&D, and the NDC process), Lula proposed a dedicated Climate Change Council at the UN. This aims to:

- Integrate disparate efforts across mitigation, adaptation, finance, loss & damage, and just transition.
- Enhance coordination and accountability.
- Potentially elevate climate action within the UN system, giving it sustained high-level political attention beyond the annual COP frenzy.

COP30: Can “Just Look Up” Overcome the Inertia?

President Lula’s intervention provides a desperately needed narrative and political counterweight to the “Don’t Look Up” paralysis exemplified by COP29. He has framed COP30 in Belem – located at the heart of the imperiled Amazon – as the ultimate test of global solidarity and political will. However, formidable obstacles remain:

- **Overcoming COP29’s Legacy:** The weak NCQG and depleted trust cast a long shadow. Can Lula rebuild the coalition

needed for a genuine breakthrough, especially when developed nations resisted binding commitments just months prior?

- **Translating Vision into Binding Agreements:** Bold speeches must become concrete decisions. Can the 2040/45 target push gain traction? Can the Climate Council proposal overcome bureaucratic inertia and gain buy-in?
- **Geopolitics and Domestic Pressures:** Ongoing conflicts, economic instability, and the rise of climate-skeptic factions in key countries will continue to strain cooperation.
- **Corporate Capture:** The forces satirized in “Don’t Look Up” – corporate interests seeking to profit from or delay the transition – remain potent and will lobby against the radical shifts Lula proposes.

COP29 proved that “Don’t Look Up” was less satire and more prophecy. The world witnessed the triumph of political expediency, obfuscation, and inadequate compromise over the clear-eyed action demanded by science and justice. The climate comet’s trajectory grows ever steeper.

President Lula da Silva, in invoking the “last chance” and laying down a gauntlet with the 2040/45 demand and structural reforms, has issued the definitive “Just Look Up” call for the COP process. He has positioned COP30 not just as another meeting, but as the final diplomatic off-ramp before irreversible climate breakdown. His leadership offers a path grounded in equity, historical responsibility, and the urgent integration of efforts.

The world cannot afford another round of empty promises. COP30 must not be another scene from Don’t Look Up. It must be the turning point where humanity finally looks up and acts.

The question for COP30 in Belem is crystal clear: Will the world finally heed the scientists, embrace President Lula’s challenge, and deliver the transformative action required? Or will it remain trapped in the self-destructive farce of “Don’t Look Up”, ensuring the comet – in the form of runaway climate change – hits with full, devastating force? The success or failure of COP30 will determine whether humanity finally chooses to look up, act, and survive, or remains willfully blind on its path to destruction.

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