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Habituated to Denial¹

Keywords

climate change, climate crisis, denial, Anthropocene, Margaret Mead, consensus

Abstract

The article discusses the mechanisms of climate change denial. It starts from the observation that habituation to denial is based on a process that is exactly the opposite on the content level: the process of repeated aha-experiences, i.e., sudden insights into reality of the climate crisis. In the first part, the author summarises the developments of recent years, which came to a symbolic end at COP 28 in Dubai, when the President introduced the contradictory idea that the transition to a sustainable paradigm is only possible by simultaneously maintaining the fossil fuel paradigm. In the second part, the article summarises some of the main points of what was probably the first interdisciplinary symposium on climate change, organised in 1975 by Margaret Mead. Referring to the conference's position paper, the author first develops the basic framework for productive interaction between the social and natural sciences as Mead envisioned it and then presents the social consequences of the fact that the relationship remained institutionally disorganised—and eventually had to organise itself.

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Privajeni v zanikanje

Ključne besede

podnebne spremembe, podnebna kriza, zanikanje, antropocen, Margaret Mead, konsenz

Povzetek

Članek obravnava mehanizme zanikanja podnebnih sprememb. Pri tem izhaja iz opažanja, da proces habituacije zanikanja temelji na procesu, ki je po vsebini ravno nasproten: procesu ponavljajočih se aha-doživetij, torej nenadnih uvidov v realnost podnebne krize. V prvem delu povzame razvoj zadnjih let, ki je svoj simbolni konec doživel na COP 28 v Dubaju, kjer je predsedujoči vpeljal protislovno idejo, da je prehod v trajnostno paradigmo mogoč le s hkratno krepitevijo paradigme fosilnih goriv. V drugem delu članek povzame nekatere ključne poudarke najbrž sploh prvega interdisciplinarnega simpozija o podnebnih spremembah, ki ga je leta 1975 organizirala Margaret Mead. V navezavi na programski tekst konference avtor najprej razvije osnovni okvir produktivne interakcije med družboslovjem in naravoslovjem, kot si ga je zamišljala Mead, nato pa predstavi družbene posledice dejstva, da je razmerje ostalo neorganizirano – in se je naposled organiziralo samo.



From Aha! to Nu-Uh!

The history of the climate crisis is a history of recurring aha-experiences.² Not a year goes by without us finally recognising, yet again, that climate change is real. Some acknowledge, for the first time, the basic fact that anthropogenic climate change exists and is not merely a manifestation of natural variability. Others realise, as if for the first time, that we are dealing with a pressing social, economic and security issue that society will have to confront at some point in the foreseeable future. Still others keep recognising for the first and final time, with growing fervour but also with increasing impotence and diminishing inner conviction, that climate change is an existential risk with potentially catastrophic consequences that demands urgent action. The intensity of these recurring

² See Øystein O. Skaar and Rolf Reber, “The Phenomenology of Aha-Experiences,” *Motivation Science* 6, no. 1 (March 2020): 49–60, <https://doi.org/10.1037/mot0000138>.

revelations varies significantly from person to person. However, this does not change the fact that, overall, we are dealing with a repetitive process where, to rephrase Lacan, we keep waking up to reality only to keep on dreaming, dreaming of the moment when we can finally wake up in the world that will have already solved the problem.

Clearly, the sudden realisation, in all its variations and repetitions, has never been directly universal. While a public consensus has been achieved a number of aha-experiences ago (and has remained in place at least since the Paris Agreement, and before Paris it was Copenhagen, and before Copenhagen it was Kyoto, and before Kyoto it was Rio), many have nevertheless remained outside the realm of revelation. This outside, however, is becoming increasingly less neutral and unmediated. Indeed, the number of individuals or collectives who are directly ignorant or indifferent to climate change is decreasing with each passing year. This is partly due to the gradual transmission of knowledge, partly due to the eventual ruptures embodied by exceptional individuals (from James Hansen in 1988 to Greta Thunberg in 2018) with whom one can ally both intellectually and emotionally and that have initiated sequences of fidelity, and partly due to the exponential aggravation of material conditions (which first became recognisable only in model projections, then in still relatively abstract climate trends and today in directly visible catastrophic signals).

The sphere of pure denial is, again, becoming smaller and smaller in numbers. Yet, it is impossible to overlook that the affirmative side has been, on the one hand, contaminated at the level of cognition by its own secondary resistance, requiring ever more intense signals to trigger the next aha-experience. On the other hand, those who avow climate change have become discredited at the level of behaviour by their entrenchment in business as usual, taking part in the “implicatory denial.”³ As a consequence, the numerically inferior sphere has

³ “British sociologist Stanley Cohen (2001) describes three varieties of denial: literal, interpretive, and implicatory. His framework is useful in explaining this book’s particular focus. Literal denial is ‘the assertion that something did not happen or is not true’ (the global warming skeptics). In interpretive denial, the facts themselves are not denied but are instead given a different interpretation. Euphemisms, technical jargon, and word changing are used to dispute the meaning of events—for example, military officials speak of ‘collateral damage’ rather than the killing of citizens. [. . .] In the case of implicatory denial, what is minimized is not information, but ‘the psychological, political or moral

become, ironically, more attuned to the reality it has been effectively denying, and far more vibrant.

Indifference to climate change, which has become objectively impossible, has not simply disappeared but has been transformed into a genuine nuh-uh-experience that often surpasses its affirmative counterpart in its political impact. “Nuh-uh!,” claim the denialists, “Climate change is obviously not real.” However, what they do see as real is their own sudden realisation of the goals of the climate change agenda. In their view, the discourse on climate change has no intrinsic scientific value. It instead serves as a metaphor for the general desire of the “woke” to denaturalise all aspects of human society, from the economy (by questioning the One of capital) to the family (by questioning the One of the two complementary sexes). This process, by which climate change denial becomes part of the general endorsement of the natural, also explains the otherwise incomprehensible fascination of climate change deniers with the ideal of (natural) science. On the one hand, the natural is self-evident in their eyes and, therefore, only accessible to intact common sense. On the other hand, the natural is infinitely incomprehensible in its eternal autonomy. The correct scientific approach to climate change can thus only be one that resists the temptation to interpret signals of human-induced climate change as a fundamental shift in the functioning of the natural climate system. Attributing any agency to humans in the functioning of an essentially natural system should, in their view, be seen as an epistemological hoax, an artificial way out of the inability to face the incomprehensible. (This, in turn, is the reason why the idea of the Anthropocene will, for some, remain forever incomprehensible.)⁴

implications that conventionally follow.” Kari Marie Norgaard, *Living in Denial: Climate Change, Emotions, and Everyday Life* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2001), 10–11. See also Stanley Cohen, *States of Denial: Knowing about Atrocities and Suffering* (Cambridge: Polity, 2001), 8–9; Andreas Malm, *The Progress of This Storm. Nature and Society in a Warming World* (London: Verso, 2018), 136–37.

⁴ The reason for denying the essential human influence on the functioning of a fundamentally pre-human system is, of course, to ward off the extreme consequences of the Anthropocene thesis, which is fundamentally *anti-anthropocentric*. The dominant influence of human activity does not imply perpetual control over the dynamics of the system, quite the opposite. “The Anthropocene could thus be defined as *an irreversible transition to a new regime of the Earth System’s dynamics in which the human factor, precisely at the point of its maximal intensity, is deprived of its former relative autonomy*. Once human activity becomes one of the drivers of the System’s dynamics, it is no longer able to dissociate

The sphere of denial in which the nuh-uh-experience is generated must not only be understood in its literal form. This sphere does not only concern the limited, really existing sphere of pure denialists who derive their certainty from the perfect correspondence between the denial of the imaginary construct of climate change and the denial of the imaginary construct of social change. While this actually existing but utterly delusional existence is intriguing for its ability to completely foreclose cognitive dissonance, denial is much more effective and far-reaching when it returns to the realm of affirmation and positions itself as a purely realist and pragmatic common-sense option that acknowledges the reality of the climate crisis—but in a way that also mobilises the previous failure to break with business as usual for the purpose of maintaining it.

When we talk about the sphere of acknowledging the climate crisis, it is hard to imagine a more representative setting than the annual Conference of the Parties (COP), and it is hard to imagine a more representative person than its president. It is perhaps only a coincidental irony—but in this irony lies an almost transcendental necessity—that in the very year of the glaring escalation of the climate crisis COP 28 took place in Dubai and was chaired by Sultan al-Jaber, the head of the Abu Dhabi National Oil Company and chairman of Masdar, Abu Dhabi Future Energy Company. Al-Jaber is, by his very credentials, a direct epitome of the present moment, i.e., of the unsustainable attempt to come to a compromise within the Anthropocene reality between the simultaneous active sustainment of the old fossil fuel paradigm and the gradual introduction of the future sustainable paradigm.

It is therefore no surprise that he caused a scandal even before the conference began when he claimed: “There is no science out there that says that the phase-out of fossil fuel is what’s going to achieve 1.5°C.”⁵ The statement, which is true only in that the 1.5°C limit would very likely be exceeded even if the fossil fuel

itself from the other processes of the now reconfigured Earth System.” Tadej Troha, “The Age of H: Towards the Anthropocene Imperative,” *Filozofski vestnik* 39, no. 1 (2018): 125. See also Owen Gaffney and Will Steffen, “The Anthropocene Equation,” *The Anthropocene Review* 4, no. 1 (April 2017): 53–61.

⁵ Damian Carrington and Ben Stockton, “COP28 President Says There Is ‘No Science’ Behind Demands for Phase-Out of Fossil Fuels,” *The Guardian*, December 3, 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2023/dec/03/back-into-caves-cop28-president-dismisses-phase-out-of-fossil-fuels>.

paradigm were immediately shut down, was accompanied by another of the standard modern *topoi*, namely that phasing out fossil fuels would prevent sustainable development “unless you want to take the world back into caves.”⁶ In his keynote speech, of course, al-Jaber avoided this kind of directness; instead, he called for cooperation and decisive action. But in choosing a lowest common denominator to motivate and orient the global community towards action, he had no choice but to resort to a term that also resolves his own contradiction: *energy*.

Energy is our friend. It runs everything we rely on. Our phones and our factories. It keeps your homes warm, and our homes cool. It allows children to study at night and treat them, if they become ill. In short, the world does not work without energy. Yet, the world will break down if we don't fix the energies we use today. The world will break down if we don't mitigate the emissions at a gigaton scale. And the world can potentially break down if we don't rapidly transition to zero carbon alternatives.⁷

As already pointed out, the term “energy” initially resolves the inner conflict of a particular speaker who wants to prepare the ground for a sustainable paradigm in 2023 by sticking to the fossil fuel paradigm. Once it becomes an all-encompassing umbrella term, other contradictory concepts also become tolerable, such as the “decarbonization of fossil fuels” project he later spoke of, which serious climate scientists can only understand as an obvious oxymoron, a fully developed form of greenwashing.⁸

Yet, the actual rhetorical effect of introducing “energy” as an umbrella term is not limited to the resolution of a logical contradiction. The real impact of the affective dimension of introducing “energy” that suppresses the “but nonetheless” of the potential breakdown of the world, the real impact of presenting energy as friend, as ally, as guardian of our everyday lives, and as protector of our

⁶ Carrington and Stockton.

⁷ Ahmed al-Jaber, “COP28 | WCAS Day 2 | Energy | Dr Sultan Al Jaber's Keynote Speech,” YouTube video, uploaded by COP28 UAE, December 3, 2023, 1:07, <https://youtu.be/E3XBeg6sjY8>.

⁸ See Meyer Steinberg, “Fossil Fuel Decarbonization Technology for Mitigating Global Warming,” *International Journal of Hydrogen Energy* 24, no. 8 (August 1999): 771–77, [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0360-3199\(98\)00128-1](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0360-3199(98)00128-1).

children, is that it mobilises the repressed moment pertaining to the affirmative position, or better, to the sphere of implicate denial. Once we accept that our friend, our guardian, and the protector of our children is energy *of any kind*, a certain path is brought back to life that we have given up in the process of accepting the reality of the climate crisis, namely the possibility that the fundamental goal of reconciling theory and practise, cognition and behaviour, could actually be achieved *in any way*. Or, more specifically, what becomes possible again—but this time really for the first time—is to abolish the increasingly palpable gap between the theory of urgency and the practice of collective procrastination by changing the point of view of our cognition.

In this context, it is, perhaps, crucial to rethink the counter-intuitive option that our desire to solve the climate crisis is actually stronger in the unconscious than in the conscious. The fact that the acceptance of the reality of the climate crisis on a societal level, but also on an individual level, takes place as a series of aha-experiences, is significant enough in this respect. We react to the signals we receive from external reality with sudden realisations that the crisis is real; but at the same time, the world in which the signals occur is precisely the world in which we ourselves continue to behave more or less the same way. A world that reveals itself repeatedly, that is serially constructed for us and that we decompose each time through our practical actions, is an untenable world—and therefore each subsequent aha-experience is less intense and further sapped of content, reduced to a mere signal of existence. In this situation, the al-Jaber's message (and of course he is not the first to convey such message) has a liberating effect on many. Since we do not know how to give up energy in practice, since we do not know how to give up cars, airplanes and cruise ships, the only way to solve the crisis is to return to a situation in which we can celebrate the unlimited use of energy without guilt. "We need to be real, serious and pragmatic," al-Jaber urged us, and what can guide us, as he suggests to our unconscious, is the transfer of agency to an impersonal concept that will guide us in our future (in) decisions. Energy, al-Jaber suggests, knows the way out of the climate crisis it has caused. And if we pay attention to it, if we trust it, if we show it our respect, it will present us with the world we have been dreaming of and in which we can finally wake up: a world that has already solved the climate crisis.

The Lesson in Farsightedness

In 1975, three years before her death, forty years before the Paris Agreement and almost half a century before the present text, the eminent American anthropologist Margaret Mead, in collaboration with William Kellogg of the National Centre for Atmospheric Research (NCAO), organised a conference that even today would still be praised as a fresh and innovative contribution to the inter- and transdisciplinary discussion of the problem of climate change. The basic premise of the event, for which she wrote the position paper, sounds unusually contemporary in its ground-breaking character at the time. In order to effectively grasp what could become the central problem of the future and set the course for practical solutions as quickly as possible, close cooperation between natural scientists, social scientists, humanities scholars, technologists, decision-makers and the public is essential. Only in this way, Mead believed, would it be possible to break through some of the major impasses arising from the socially innate characteristics of human beings, from insensitivity to the suffering of the indeterminate and distant other to the logic of pursuing short-term gains and solving acute matters. “What we need to invent—as responsible scientists—,” she wrote, “are ways in which farsightedness can become a habit of the citizenry of the diverse peoples of this planet.”⁹

On paper, the path looked relatively straightforward at the time. Although social scientists were facing “a set of technical problems,” creating a new social paradigm that would consider the long-term consequences of seemingly harmless interventions in the environment, particularly the atmosphere, was not an impossible task in Mead’s eyes. However, and this is crucial, it depended entirely on the natural sciences being able to clearly formulate the exact scope of the problem as a first step. Even then, (natural) scientists could not rely on the automatism of knowledge production, where field researchers would aggregate and refine findings in peaceful coexistence—quite the opposite. Science is a social subsystem and is, therefore, inevitably subject to deeply rooted socio-psychological patterns, in particular, what is called, in a well-worn phrase, the narcissism of small differences.

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⁹ Margaret Mead, “Preface: Society and the Atmospheric Environment,” in William W. Kellogg and Margaret Mead, eds., *The Atmosphere: Endangered and Endangering* (London: Castle House Publications, 1980), xxi.

At the center of this problem lie the relationships between scientists, technologists, human scientists, and political decisionmakers. Inevitably, different political interests will seize upon disagreements among scientists to buttress their own interests and to discredit scientific advice. Scientists themselves may value making a fine point against a rival more than the possible consequences of the intra-scientific battle; or be extremely cautious so as to protect their reputations—among scientists—which is a modern equivalent of fiddling while Rome burns or dancing on the eve of the Battle of Waterloo; or they may simply despair of ever connecting effectively the nature of science, with its built-in requirement for validation by other scientists, into the political decision-making bureaucracies of the world.¹⁰

When individual scientists or scientific collectives find themselves in a field of pending consensus, the first casualty is their own directly acquired knowledge, which is artificially amplified and, in turn, significantly distorted in an effort to win the argument. The problem is thus not only that scientists are reluctant to give in and stick to their guns in the face of their opponents' perhaps more convincing arguments but also that they stick to their guns in such a way that they also lose their original point of view. The latter, therefore, is left without the typical scientific nuance that arises from humility towards the object (a prerequisite for any objectivism) and can become the building block of scientific truth about it. In response to the "prophets of doom," for example, who are accused of lacking an adequate scientific basis, more conservative scientists ultimately "tend to become in turn prophets of paradisiacal impossibilities, guaranteed utopias of technological bliss, or benign interventions on behalf of mankind that are none the less irrational just because they are couched as 'rational.'" The pragmatic realists, Mead makes clear, are themselves believers: believers "in the built-in human instinct for survival" or "in some magical technological panacea."¹¹

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The task of social scientists approaching a problem for which natural science is the primary authority is thus not simply to adhere to the already elaborated consensual understanding of natural science (which does not yet exist and to some extent never will). Neither is this task to select and combine partial views arbitrarily and form their own private pseudo-consensus (for which they are not

¹⁰ Mead, xix–xx.

¹¹ Mead, xxi.

qualified). The task is, rather, to invoke and instruct the primary domain of science in some way to form a consensus based on perhaps vague and ambiguous, but nonetheless factual, i.e. not yet distorted, insights. As Mead proclaims: “Only if natural scientists can develop ways of making their statements on the present state of danger credible to each other can we hope to make them credible (and understandable) to social scientists, politicians, and the citizenry.”¹² Consensus, Mead suggests, must be formulated differently: not as a secondary suppression of the conflict of irreconcilable positions that have clashed in struggle and turned into instruments, but as a synthesis of original perspectives that have been consciously recognised as partial by the scientist included.

Again, the role of the social scientist is not only to build on the findings of natural science in the second step and add a social perspective to a ready-made problem but also to help natural science formulate the first step appropriately, thus avoiding the virtually inevitable distortion caused by the sheer quest for dominance in an unmediated dispute, a result which leads to a delirious chaos of self-serving scientific fictions rather than a synthesis of nuanced partial insights. Mead’s critical insight, which was also the catalyst for the meeting she organised with experts in the field, lies—perhaps surprisingly—precisely in recognition of urgency, precisely in the realisation that the mediating intervention of the social sciences could not be delayed at all, even if it was as soon as 1975. The involvement of the social sciences in thinking about climate change and formulating policies is not and never has been optional but fundamentally necessary to arrive at comprehensive knowledge. It was, in fact, already urgent even in 1975 if policy-making and the social sciences themselves were to be prevented from being dominated by a distorted, incomplete or, in short, unrealistic view of the subject.

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First of all, it is clear that science, whether soft or hard, cannot absolve itself of responsibility for the behaviour of decision-makers and the public through passivity and silence. In this case, from zero does not follow a neutral zero; not even if the decision-makers join the scientific evasion of duty by bluntly insisting on “business as usual”; not even if the zero of the voice of science is used as a justification for the zero of transformation at the policy level.

¹² Mead, xxi.

Dr. Mead emphasized that the Conference was based on the assumption that policy decisions of tremendous depth are going to be made—*whether scientists provide input or not*. There is no way for scientists to avoid affecting the decisionmaking process on issues related to their discipline, even if they remain publicly silent. A decision by policymakers not to act in the absence of scientific information or expertise is itself a policy decision, and for scientists there is no possibility for inaction, except to stop being scientists.¹³

From today's perspective, another version of the same problem becomes visible, transforming Mead's gesture into a truly far-sighted, truly visionary one. The problem that runs through the entire history of the response to climate change is not just that decision-makers have done next to nothing; it is not just that they have ignored the science that has objectively been too quiet, but that in the last instance, they have not been entirely deaf to it.

It is probably already well known that a certain kind of science has been the basis for exactly the kind of climate scepticism that—with the help of oil industry—successfully crushed any idea (or rather, the idea of an idea) of quick action. In an effort to normalise the signals of an increasingly clear deviation from Holocene stability, any scientific *topos* that seemed eternal enough and cosmic enough to make human influence seem insignificant and laughable came in handy. The simpler minds have and will continue to emphasise the rise in solar radiation (we are near the minimum right now, but so what), while the more sophisticated will repeat to the end of times the eternal domination of the astronomic forcing, encapsulated in Milankovitch cycles, that shibboleth of climate scepticism (which themselves are not responsible of being overwhelmed by the human factor as the essential driver of system dynamics in the Anthropocene).¹⁴

¹³ J. Dana Thompson, "Summary of the First Day's Discussion," in Kellog and Mead, *Atmosphere*, 69.

¹⁴ "When did *H* [human activity, defined as a function of population, consumption, including production, and the Technosphere] come to dominate the astronomical and geophysical forcings and the internal dynamics of the Earth System? Although there have been several proposed start dates for the Anthropocene [. . .] none can match the mid-20th-century, global-level, synchronous step change in human enterprise and the simultaneous human-driven change in many features of Earth System structure and functioning. That is, anthropogenic impact crossed a critical threshold around 1950 with the beginning of the Great Acceleration, when *H* moved from being a force of similar or smaller magnitude to *A* [astronomic forcing] and *G* [geophysical forcing], to usurping them entirely [. . .] An

However, this fundamentally anti-scientific *modus operandi* of relying on science was and is not the only one. In fact, it could only survive because the other, having absolute majority, instead of advancing knowledge of the increasingly real objective danger that all would not end well, was incessantly preoccupied with the obsession of reaching the fullest possible consensus on the bare minimum: the existence of anthropogenic climate change.

The obsession itself eventually became farcical. In a 2021 study, based on a random sample of 3,000 scientific papers, the authors came to the following conclusions about the consensus on anthropogenic global warming (AGW):

Our estimate of the proportion of consensus papers was $1 - (4/2718) = 99.85\%$. The 95% confidence limits for this proportion are 99.62%–99.96% (see R code in supplementary info), therefore it is likely that the proportion of climate papers that favour the consensus is at least 99.62%. Recalculating at the 99.999% confidence level gives us the interval 99.212%–99.996%, therefore it is virtually certain that the proportion of climate papers that do not dispute that the consensus is above 99.212%. If we repeat the methods of C13 and further exclude papers that take no position on AGW (i.e. those rated 4a), we estimate the proportion of consensus papers to be 99.53% with the 95% confidence interval being 98.80%–99.87%.¹⁵

It is precisely this obsessional type of science that, dare be said, was the last thing Margaret Mead had in mind when, in 1975, she called on the natural sciences to agree on a lowest common denominator so that the social sciences could join in the search for an adequate response of social systems as quickly and as precisely as possible. Indeed, a certain current has succumbed to scepticism in terms of form and became entangled in the endless project of reaching a perfect consensus (which currently stands at a maximum of 99.87%), after which the human survival instinct will finally activate and miraculously abolish climate

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obvious, and critical, next step is to represent *H* as a sub-system of the Earth System because it is now the prime forcing driving the rate of change of the Earth System.” Gaffney and Steffen, “Anthropocene Equation,” 57. See also Will Steffen et al., “Trajectories of the Earth System in the Anthropocene,” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 115, no. 33 (2018), 8252–59, <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1810141115>.

¹⁵ Mark Lynas, Benjamin Z. Houlton, and Simon Perry, “Greater Than 99% Consensus on Human Caused Climate Change in the Peer-Reviewed Scientific Literature,” *Environmental Research Letters* 16, no. 11 (November 2021): 4, <https://doi.org/10.1088/1748-9326/ac2966>.

change. However, the social sciences, decision-makers, the arts, the public and the world at large have not been that patient. While official climate science waited for decision-makers to give it the green light to finally tell the whole truth, all the protagonists reacted to the best of their ability and, above all, looked for substitute solutions that would give the impression of the absolute adequacy of their stance on the problem before a complete consensus was reached.

The Carnival of Social Reductionism

Once the opportunity was missed in the early days to establish a rational basic link between scientific knowledge and societal response, which would gradually evolve, which would generate its own acceleration and, because of its clear orientation, would be able to incorporate additional knowledge on an ongoing basis, the societal response turned into a race of miraculous solutions untethered from reality. In this move, there is no essential difference between the most heterogeneous of positions. The logic of miraculous solutions is always one and the same, and it can never escape the basic fact that it, put bluntly, takes place in a world that does not exist. We have already discussed above the COP 28 president's idea that the road to an energy transition must lead through a simultaneous reinforcement of the fossil fuel paradigm. Yet, a similar miraculous solution, which is blocked also in the short term, is also to be found at the other end of the politico-economic and class spectrum in the idea that the solution lies in the abolition of capitalism. The mobilisation of the climate crisis for the purposes of the overarching goal of building a fairer society does not end well, because it hits a practical impasse. Knowing that the climate crisis will certainly not be solved in a sufficiently just way, we are handed a ready-made ethical excuse not to solve the crisis at all. But because the solution to the climate crisis has nevertheless made its way to the foreground, and is perceived, at least declaratively, as the most urgent first step in the chain (but remains conditioned on the second step), the enthusiasm for the pursuit of justice disappears too.¹⁶

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There is, of course, another miraculous solution, another form of the illusion of the absolute adequacy of one's own attitude to the problem, namely the one that Hollywood produces from time to time. The fact that this only happens once in a while is quite telling, given the scale of the impending collapse. What is

¹⁶ See Tadej Troha, "Fetiš antropocena," *Problemi* 57, no. 1-2 (2019): 164-65.

even more remarkable, however, is that the trend, at least in terms of the most exposed and infamous cases, is exactly the opposite of what we would like to believe. We are supposed to know more and more, we are supposed to be more and more enlightened about the nature and urgency of the problem, and there is more and more direct social engagement from some of the most prominent climate scientists, but Hollywood itself is further away from effectively portraying the heart of the problem than it has ever been before. Roland Emmerich's *The Day After Tomorrow* (2004) still attempted to convey the basic fact that climate change, whether man-made or not, is a systemic process of change, but added the key characteristic of a complex system, namely its non-linear dynamics, which in the face of continuous perturbations sooner or later leads to an abrupt transition to *an alternative stable state*,¹⁷ in this case an abrupt “hyper” ice age. In contrast, Adam McKay's *Don't Look Up* (2021) avoids depicting a specific problem in its entirety, replacing it with a metaphor that should only be understood as the writers intended. The film's decision to shift the focus of the problem entirely to the depiction of a societal response to an impending threat is, to a certain extent, understandable. There is no doubt that the mechanisms of denial, evasion, wilful ignorance, and procrastination have become a popular topic of social and socio-scientific debate, particularly in recent years, but even more so since the pandemic, thus of interest to Hollywood. Ultimately, the decision to use the clichéd metaphor of a comet that manages to transform a strictly internal systemic problem into an external threat is certainly highly ambiguous. (Not least because it perpetrates the notion of climate change deniers, for whom only the sun as an external agent is capable of serious systemic change.) As a metaphor for the obviousness that we do not want to see and that will come crashing down on us even if we think it will not, the comet is undoubtedly appropriate. However, for a metaphorical representation of the coming climate collapse, which will be catastrophic even before the ultimate impact, even before it stops, even before it's over, the writers probably should have come up with something else.

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And yet, was the choice of a particular metaphor to frame the central focus of the film an unintentional product of creative laziness? Or, on the contrary, is it better to read it as a symptomatic, deliberate choice, a tool of the underlying

¹⁷ See Marten Scheffer, *Critical Transitions in Nature and Society* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), 11–36.

ing intention to equate the response to climate change with the response to the coming comet in a real, entirely non-metaphorical way? Are the mechanisms of denial in both cases really so identical that a metaphorical substitution is possible? Is the denial of climate change that we have gradually become habituated into, often with the reassuring concessions of science itself, really the same as the denial of a comet impact, where the non-acceptance of the threat stems from an unwillingness to give up one's existence overnight because of an external triviality?

Even if these questions remain unanswered, there is no doubting the fundamental gesture of *Don't Look Up*. By choosing this framework, the movie has, whether it wanted to or not, legitimised the reduction of the climate crisis to an internal social problem and thus itself achieved precisely what it should not have done in obedience to science. It is difficult to judge the author's degree of self-reflection, but in the broadest sense *Don't Look Up* is less a critique of societal response than a sheer carnival of social reductionism that has managed to free itself from the grip of science, the very science that long ago predicted a crisis that is much more immediately palpable than it was only some years ago. This crisis will not end, it will drag on and become more and more unbearable. If we adapt to it socially and psychologically instead of reducing it to a minimum (whatever catastrophic the minimum may itself be), we will somehow look as attractive as the rich, old, naked people in this movie's post-apocalyptic appendix. The fact that the movie really starts to enjoy itself in its final frames, when science has become irrelevant history along with the comet, probably speaks for itself.

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