

“WTF?”

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Asked for a curated format to talk about 7 questions she has, the first question my artist colleague Trisha Donnelly chose, after an excuse for the profanity, was: “What the fuck??”.¹ As a question “WTF?” tells a lot about our situation today. It is not the ironic, arrogant or self-confident “wtf” of much of the internet slang, more the opposite. It is the expression of a pressured “What is going on?” oscillating between incredulity and shock, outrage and unsettlement, that a lot of events and developments we are facing today might in fact trigger as a reaction and whose profanity is telling. It is expressive of a deep disturbance by wrong policies and powers causing harm and pain, that nonetheless endure in their business-as-usual or are even rapidly intensifying their impact on our lives.

Don't look up! tries to put this disturbance with regard to climate change and the social and political response to it, by using a comet as an unexpected imminent threat that will destroy most of the life on earth. In fact, also in the movie the WTF-question appears. It is uttered by Randall Mindy to Kate Dibiasky during their flight to Washington D.C. as reaction to their recent discovery: “What the fuck? It this real? Is this a goddamn yoke? [...] Are we really telling the President of the U.S.A. that we have just over six month until human kind and basically every species is completely extinct?” This first “WTF?” echoes throughout the whole movie, in which the first shock about the comet—a slightly misleading metaphor for climate change—is followed (and even overshadowed) by further shocks about the reactions of the U.S. government, the press, the economy, the people: indifference, instrumental use for political campaign, social media defamation, greed for profit etc. This WTF?, however, is also related to internet slang, since the movie not only shows, but uses the visuals and language of memes, a new fast version of criticism related to the public/private sphere of social media.

The movie is not only a satirical critique of corruption in politics and economy and the emptiness of media information. It also exposes the expert's strategies to reach out for public opinion, by showing their failure in the attempt to raise awareness for the

¹ Also Trisha Donnelly's other 6 questions were very inspiring as the whole series of contributions to minimalistic format curated by the architect Inge Vinck (<https://sparta-kunstakademie.com/>) of talking about “7 questions” without answering them.

imminent disaster. This failure, the movie suggests, is not only due to the intrigues between politics and economy, but also to the position of the experts, struggling with their own inaccessible jargon (and panic attacks) and ending up in despaired outbursts: “We are all going to die!!”, whose affectivity is completely taken apart in social media. In showing all this, the movie tries to be more effective than the two scientists it depicts in awakening the audience from its slumber. It tries to be transformative critique by using a mixture of humor and the means of visual popular culture like special effects and Hollywood starship, i.e. exactly the ingredients of memes, to reach out for its audience. The film wants to move by instructing and delighting: it transforms the “hyperobject” climate change, as Timothy Morton would call it, into a more graspable and datable threat like a comet and shows its devastating effects as well as all the factors that do not prevent, but facilitate destruction. And it wants also to delight, in order for the audience not to freeze in fear, by making fun even of the end of the world, in showing the privileged survivors in the limbo of a devastated earth asking for likes in social media or on an uncanny Eden-planet, where nemesis happens and the president of the U.S.A. gets killed by a bird.

If Donella Meadows 1994 was asking her colleague scientists to formulate also positive *visions* in their fight for a sustainable world and not only critique and pragmatic agendas, almost 30 years after, confronted with an increased “critical urgency” facing climate change, the movie uses (digital) *visualizations* in order to shake up people and move them to action. Meadows and the movie are dealing with a similar problem in different forms, namely the denial of pain in front of the damaged planet and the fear of the impossibility to stop it, but the calm intensity of Meadows has been replaced by the restless “WTF?” of a movie figure.²

It is interesting for a discussion about the role of critique in our days that Meadows sees also in scientific critique a mean for denial, a way of dealing with the problem and yet not fully encountering or metabolizing it. In the case of Meadows’ colleagues, people occupied with concrete measures and politics, this applies for pragmatic forms of critique that, lacking a vision, remain confirmed to short-hand solutions. A slightly

² Here how Adam McKay and Dr. Ayana Elizabeth Johnson describe the aim of the movie: “Don’t Look Up tries to do something that perhaps doesn’t feel natural with a story as dark as climate change: make the audience laugh. Because when people laugh together it gives them perspective, relief and, most of all, a semblance of community. This is not conjecture. Research shows that humor can lower our defenses and make hard truths easier to hear.” In: “Why our secret weapon against the climate crisis could be humour”, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2022/jan/13/director-dont-look-up-climate-crisis-ending>

different form of denial can be seen in those practices of academic critique (in science as well as humanities) that remain confined within the boundaries and the discourses of academic disciplines.

The movie is somehow exposing this problem and using the popular medium Netflix to spread. Although it can reach a mass audience and leave an affective trace of disgust and concern, it is questionable if the film is more effective than the scientists it debunks. The movie wants to “welcome more and more people into the work of driving forward climate solutions”,³ but the effectivity of the language and visuality of memes is restricted. Even if they push on you, they eventually leave it there, so that in the end the “WTF?”-question still endures.

Meadows’ softly intense speech goes further. It not only requests visions (instead of providing visuals), but describes a transformative process, from the need to acknowledge and to work oneself through the reasons or affects that block visions to the need for a collective sharing of these visions and transforming them further. This or similar processes are crucial, since as *Don’t look up!* shows quite well visions as such are not a valuable thing. The neoliberal guru-entrepreneur (very well visualized by the movie) has a lot of visions, visions built onto nothing or onto the total neglect for the material conditions of the world and the life of people.

In a way, also Bachelard’s call for imaginative acts is not fully free from this neglect. His “aerial psychology” not only leaves out “storms” in favor of “blue sky [...] clouds [...] and the milky way” (16), it wants to think of air but “set[s] aside all the problems of actual breath” (16-17).⁴ And it concludes: “The written word has an enormous advantage over a spoken one, because it can call forth *abstract* echoes in which thoughts and dreams reverberate. The spoken word requires *too much effort* on our part; it requires *too much presence*; it does not allow us *total mastery over our slow pace*.” (250-1; my emphasis, F.R.)

Although some of Bachelard’s points might resonate with Meadows’ quest for a visionary practice (and we could discuss further if it really does), he describes an aesthetic practice that explicitly leaves problems of the present behind. Does he not want inspiration for the mind, without taking into account its situation? What Meadow accidentally encounters by confronting her colleagues with the quest for visions, namely the need to working through pain and fear, seems therefore to describe a different path

³ McKay, Johnson, “Why our secret weapon against the climate crisis could be humour”.

⁴ BASH Industries in turn is developing an App against fear.

to visions.⁵ It reminded me of the practice of the Feel Tank of Ann Cvetovich and Lauren Berlant whose meetings started precisely by talking about one's own "political depression"—in the case of the Feel Tank depression about the effects of 9/11, the (second) Irak-war and the re-election of George W. Bush. The aim of sharing these feelings was to depathologize and see them, instead, as resources and energies for political action and thought, starting by embracing one's own becoming defective (depressed), but also by working with these affects.

A crucial moment of the meeting Meadows refers too, was also about working through blockages disguised as pragmatic attitudes (habits) as a first step to disclose new grounds for visionary actions. Maybe something similar needs to happen with the "WTF?"-expressions resonating in our days, which might also bear a defective, maybe even a latent visionary impulse. As I understand it, the process Meadows describes was about bringing in the person of the scientist, not only her knowledge, and situating her work not only in the material conditions of her existence, but in the *visceral reasons for critique*, something that does not count as an "academic skill". Going back to the visceral connects the negative mastery of critique with the affirmative needs that fuel it and from here to another practice critical academia does not leave much space to, and that Meadows calls vision. But what is it exactly? And is it only about visions for the future? A book that impressed me and comes to my mind here is Anna Tsing's *Mushroom at the End of the World*, a book also written with calm intensity, aimed at dismantling the critical construct of Capitalism (with a capital C) and finding different stories and collectives in the midst of it. It is a book not so much about visions of the future, but about noticing another present, about smelling and encountering, about transformation not so much through critique but through narrations of what is already otherwise. Maybe this is also "vision" and these two modes of "vision" are not exclusive but in need each other for a transformative practice. Still, the question of sharing remains. Who is addressed here and who is formulating? How to share these visions with others, that are not academics? Shall we not radically built different collectivities in order to transform? Is inter- and transdisciplinarity enough? Is it not also 'us', the gated community of the universities and academies, who needs to be infected? Is this the reason why profanity comes up?

⁵ Meadow is also a counter-example for Bachelard's hierarchy of written and spoken word, since her talk is more powerful if we listen and see it, rather than only read it.