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Colleen Boyle
Denison University

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PUBLIC ANXIETIES IN *WALL-E*, *INTERSTELLAR*, *CAPTAIN MARVEL*, AND *DON'T LOOK*

UP

Public Anxieties in *WALL-E*, *Interstellar*, *Captain Marvel*, and *Don't Look Up*

Colleen Boyle

Jeffrey Kurtz

Department of Communication

Denison University Summer Scholars Project

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Abstract

Science fiction films have encapsulated the American public's imagination for years, telling stories about flying cars and distant governments in far off galaxies. Films often mirror who we are as people at the time of release and grapple with themes such as death and the role of technology, poking at the underlying theme of anxiety. This paper investigates human anxieties evident in four science fiction films: *WALL-E*, *Interstellar*, *Captain Marvel*, and *Don't Look Up*, and argues the role of anxiety in illuminating our fears about the world and ourselves. The questions used to guide this research were: how does anxiety manifest in these films? and: what does that say about ourselves and what we fear? A close reading technique was used, watching the films several times and grounding them in the time period they were released as well as an extensive literature review on the science fiction genre and themes. I consider themes relating to the human condition such as moral values and vulnerability. I argue that ultimately we are scared that the human spirit will diminish and the world will fall into ruin, and we are collectively anxious often believing there is nothing we can do about it.

Public Anxieties in WALL-E, Interstellar, Captain Marvel, and Don't Look Up

From 2008 to 2021, there was an average of 686 movies released every year in the United States and Canada (*Statista*). Film has become a central component of Americans' lives, whether that be watching movies in the theater or on the couch through a streaming service at home. Film, specifically science fiction, has the power to reflect and even influence our society. What we consume tells us a lot about ourselves, the world that we live in, and what we think about our world. A study by Renee D. Goodwin found that from 2008-2018, anxiety increased among Americans under fifty years old, especially those ages eighteen to twenty-five. We can only assume that the COVID-19 pandemic only increased this number. The relationship between film and anxiety is important because our societal values and norms appear in films, including our anxiety and attitudes towards different subjects. We are able to analyze these films for a deeper understanding of human anxieties over the last several decades and possibly future decades.

In this paper, four science fiction films are analyzed in chronological order to look for anxieties that reflect and outlast the time period they were made. The research question used was: "how does anxiety manifest in these films and what does that say about ourselves and what we fear?". Each film analyzed presents a different path, but each leads to an uncovered state of anxiety. Overconsumption and automation are examined in *WALL-E*, then anxiety around the loss of moral values is reflected in *Interstellar*; thirdly *Captain Marvel* illicit high anxiety with danger and deception, and finally, *Don't Look Up* holds a mirror up to ourselves to look at greed and the disintegration of society. These themes are explored in each film to understand the anxiety we have about the world and our place in it.

Review of The Literature

Science fiction films have fascinated Americans for decades; showing massive spaceships that can cross the galaxy with a press of a button, aliens coming to invade Earth, or humans pushing the limits to what we once thought possible. Science fiction is a place where we can let our imaginations run free and where we dare to explore the boundary of what we consider possible. Science fiction is different from other genres, argues Knight and McKnight in “What Is It to Be Human?: Blade Runner and Dark City”, in that it “exploits a wider range of philosophical themes than other genres. Sci-fi asks ‘what is it to be human? What are the conditions of personal identity? What are the roles played by reason/desire/memory in human existence?’”(Knight & McKnight 27). Through dreaming about far off worlds, we can ask these sorts of questions that have been central to the human experience. These themes that are explored do not exist in a vacuum, however. Neighbors and Rankin in *The Galaxy is Rated G* emphasize that “sf is also a living and popular art form of identity, which is to say that the alternative worlds of science fiction are continuous with our world. Sf engages with contemporary language and culture, historical materiality, social and scientific processes, philosophy, religion, psychology, anthropology, but sf pushes the preceding to their limits, and possibly beyond” (Neighbors & Rankin 5).

Even though science fiction films depict outrageous and foreign worlds and ideas, they are impacted by and cannot be separated from the historical period in which they were written, filmed, and released in. Thus, these films contain important messages and beliefs about those moments that can inform us about who we are as humans. Similar to the films cited below, the films I researched each have common public anxieties that when explored tell us about what we value, fear and desire. In this literature review, I will examine differing themes discussed about

science fiction films and the underlying historic, cultural, and social currents flowing through each one while interpreting the anxiety in that theme.

Scientists in Science Fiction

Science is at the core of science fiction and it influences all of the themes discussed, but what is done with that science impacts how it is perceived. In many science fiction films, scientists push the narrative forward, whether that be the mad scientist, the scientist trying to save the world, or science gone wrong like in *Jurassic Park*. As previously discussed, historical moments can impact a film and its messages. The portrayal of scientists and their role in science fiction has changed quite a bit over the decades as anxieties of those times boiled up and were reflected in various films. In *Science Fiction Film*, Johnston talks about how the nuclear age complicated the perceptions of scientists. In the nuclear age, perceptions of scientists were complicated quite a bit. Nuclear weapons (and nuclear scientists) were thought to represent positive progress for the US as it solidified the country as a world superpower. However, when the USSR began their own nuclear program and testing, an anxiety crept in as to what the Soviets might do with that same power. During this time, science fiction varied between the traditional “investigator” and mad scientist stereotypes, but scientists became central to the genre, specifically when in relation to the military. As technology advanced, climate change raged on, and other turmoil mounted, people grew more anxious. By the 2000s, the sense that science can save us disappeared from science fiction and was replaced by a pessimistic view of the future where both science and scientists fail, and the world is left in ruin. Some examples include the *Jurassic Park* films and the *Planet of the Apes* films.

Not only does the current moment affect films, but in turn, these films can affect us negatively in turn. In “Toys, a T-Rex, and Trouble: Cautionary Tales of Time Travel in Children’s

Film”, Larsen warns that the depiction of the mad scientist who is insensitive to others, selfish, and secretive with their work causes people to become skeptical of real world scientists most of whom are ethical. In addition, Larsen argues that scientist stereotypes are having effects on young girls. Scientists are portrayed as dorky and weird, and girls stray away from the sciences because of these “negative” depictions and what is associated with them. Larsen cites a study done with young girls and who were asked what they would like to be when they are older, with both groups answering professions in the sciences equally until a few years later where the boys out answer the girls in that category.

All in all, how scientists are portrayed in film affects how people feel about science and the people in charge of our advancements; our anxieties lead to negative depictions in film which causes mistrust and skepticism in the real world. It is a never ending cycle and this progression of the scientist and our attitudes towards them can be traced throughout the years in science fiction films when trust towards science would shrink and grow. It is important how we show science and scientists in film because those implicit attitudes from the films will then imprint on the viewers, causing them to become more skeptical of real valid science.

Technology & The Future

Although tied together, more important than the scientist in science fiction is what they create. Technology and scientific advancements are at the forefront of science fiction and contemplate what the next technology will be. Johnston argues in *Science Fiction Film*, that new technology in cinema allows us to explore new questions, worlds, and ideas. This can be portrayed as fantastical and exciting, but it also stirs up a lot of anxiety around how our world will be dramatically changed and thus can be portrayed in a negative light. Johnston continues by explaining that “robots and computers often bear the brunt of science fiction’s uncertainty about

new technology”, such as in *The Mechanical Mary Anne*, *Forbidden Planet*, *The Terminator*, and *The Matrix* (Johnston 16). He argues that the fear stems from the idea that this technology is controlled by humans and that “technology will either go wrong (of its own accord), be taken over, be misused by its creator, or become self-aware and want to destroy the human race” (Johnston 16). Johnston expresses that even if technology is used for good, it can backfire where a test subject goes insane or may develop a god complex with the powerful technology’s help.

In *Vivid Tomorrows*, Brin enters discourses surrounding machines in science fiction films by asking about their possible real world application. He asks important questions such as: will robots be good or evil? What happens once they become too intelligent for their repetitive tasks? What will it look like if machines and humans are to live together? How do we ensure they will stay loyal to their human creators? Brin uses examples of movies that portray the anxieties around these questions and how the questions above will be answered. He is focused primarily on technology and the anxieties that arise there. As technology became a bigger part of our lives, science fiction films shifted their portrayal of the current anxieties, according to Johnston. These films showed that “technologies are problematic, often lethal, machines that threaten humanity’s future, demand the ability to reproduce and attempt to pass for ‘human’”(Johnston 101). People were nervous about the role of technology in their everyday lives as well as how much tech would replace human activity. They were also concerned about whether this technology would be friend or foe, citing movies such as *Wall-E* and *The Motor Valet* where machines are a big part of the world created in the film. These growing concerns reflected the current moments where people were anxious about what these advancements would bring.

Again in *Vivid Tomorrows*, Brin reminds us of the “uncanny valley”; the negative emotional response we get toward machines that appear too human. Brin makes note that the line

between human and machine is slowly dissolving. Machines are becoming more and more able to participate in human functions, such as bipedal walking and hand-eye placement. Due to this, humans have been “preparing ourselves” through our sci-fi films such as *Bicentennial Man* (1999), *Her* (2013), and *Transcendence* (2014) where we question what the blurring of human and machine will look like. Abrams agrees in “The Dialect of Enlightenment in *Metropolis*”, when talking about the film *Metropolis*. He argues that the movie aims to “dissolve humanity into robotics”, thus losing the human spirit (Abrams 164). Abrams comments on the increasing prevalence of technology and the thinning gap where science fiction becomes science fact. He uses the machine woman in *Metropolis* as an example of today’s real world technology, where scientists are working to put a human mind into a robot machine in a process called uploading. The anxiety around technology and innovation left many people worried about the future and what was to come, but some strived to paint a more positive picture around technology.

A Happy Ending to Tech?

Not all science fiction film was doom and gloom about the future of technology, however. In “No Future Shock Here: *The Jetsons*, Happy Tech, and the Patriarchy” Cowlshaw discusses *The Jetsons* and how the show eased people’s anxiety about the future. The original *Jetsons* episodes were all about the glamorous technology we would have in the future and how great it would be. Other installments in later years had little success as they looked at the relationship between humans and machines with anxiety. The original *Jetsons* instilled a sense of optimism about all the amazing things technology would yield in the future and reassured Americans that everything was going to be ok after the start of the space race. The Soviet Union had just launched Sputnik, and there was simmering anxiety around technology and its capabilities. *The Jetsons* used the future and the technology there to show the Americans that in the future,

everything will be under America's control. Children at this time grew up doing nuclear blast drills and there was an overwhelming sense of doom that *The Jetsons* tried to calm. After humans walked on the moon, pop culture was flooded with exciting predictions for space travel such as flying cars, colonies on the moon or Mars, and several space stations. This media caused the public to consider that eventually, humanity would leave Earth and completely inhabit another planet due to the way we treated Earth. With the boom of technological advancements, people were nervous and *The Jetsons* helped to lighten that sense of future shock and provide a glimpse into a happy tomorrow.

Death

Death is a universal human experience and the quest for extending or evading death both in the real and fictional worlds continues. In *Vivid Tomorrows*, Brin recognizes a change in how we view death today compared to the past. He states "While our lament against extinction remains just as [intense], what's different is the power that's at work— no longer mystical spells or prayers or incantations, but the kind of technological interventions that might be wielded by normal, flawed or arrogantly daring human beings" (Brin 32). The methods Brin describes for life extension incorporate technology: cryonics as well as different forms of self-altering such as blending human and machine, gene editing, and becoming "like a god". Because dying is a universal experience, the fear of death is natural and the urge to ease that anxiety is strong. Many films explore the mystery of death and how we may escape our fateful ends.

These methods are used in many films and show our anxieties around death and how we dream we can ease that anxiety. McMahon studies the philosophical fear of death in *Frankenstein* in "The Existential Frankenstein", arguing that the film illustrates people's anxiety towards death, their tendency to deny it, and their desire to overcome it. Death is at the core of

the human condition, thus it is what makes us human. It is unavoidable, making the anxiety perpetual throughout lifetimes. Science fiction has often dreamed of how to conquer or avoid death, McMahon writing “most people [do not] formally acknowledge their mortality...most people deny the reality of their death, just as they do most other aspects of their being. [He] uses the term inauthenticity to describe this state of denial... Most people are inauthentic because they are trying to avoid anxiety” (McMahon 75). To cope with this anxiety and fear, our culture is embedded with images and youth and things associated with death are taboo, such as nursing homes or discussing illness. Death is not discussed and we praise liveliness to push away that lingering anxiety of our mortality.

There are also those who become fascinated with death and their belief they can overcome it to avoid that anxiety. McMahon uses *Frankenstein* to talk about what happens if we are to overcome death. In *Frankenstein*, technology is utilized to create an undead being. Since death is at the core of the human experience, “actual mastery of death could well result in a loss of humanity. It shows that victory over mortality could make us monsters” (McMahon 74). Brin chimes in by agreeing with McMahon that overcoming death can lead to issues. If we are to harness the capabilities to champion death, it may be hoarded by people in power and leave everyone else vulnerable to the ultimate end.

Nostalgia

Science fiction is largely about the future and what it will hold, but if you take a closer look, lots of science fiction films have currents of nostalgia running through them where we look back on a “golden age”. Brin illuminates the gap between the future and the past in *Vivid Tomorrows*, stating “science fiction, in effect, has become a central battlefield in one of the most important disputes roiling the human mind: the decision whether to continue with our obsession

with hierarchies, demigods, and the past... or to turn with confidence and wary optimism toward the future”(Brin 158). We tend to look back on the past out of our anxiety for the future and the technology that will exist there. Brin argues that science fiction is different from other genres in that it investigates real problems that our children may face, thus ensuring everything is going to be alright is essential, like what *The Jetsons* aims to do. Palmer further discusses this in “Imagining the Future Contemplating the Past”, claiming “how different, according to the theorists of postmodernity, like Fredric Jameson, is the contemporary experience of temporality. We live, Jameson laments, in a world marked by ‘the failure of the new’ and imprisonment in the past’. The craze for nostalgia films (in which we return to our cultural past, there to ‘live its strange old aesthetic artifacts through once again’) marks, for Jameson, our collective inability ‘to focus on our own current experience”(Palmer 184). We are so anxious about our current moment that it will gloss over with a sense of nostalgia for the “good old days” than solve the problems we currently have and will have in the future. Palmer stresses that “who controls the present, controls the past. Who controls the past, controls the future” showing the power that nostalgia can have (Palmer 188). In craving a nostalgic world, we leave behind the world that we currently inhabit, selfishly turning away from the problems that are to come. Science fiction poses new fantastical worlds, but still clings to the hope that one day things will return to how they once were when everything was “right” in the world.

The themes discussed above: science, technology, the future, death, and nostalgia are all important to the science fiction genre, and as the authors note, worthy of exploring deeper. Truly, what lies at the core of these themes is anxiety. Whether that be anxiety around our own mortality or over our freedom due to technology, our fears are realized in science fiction films. Similar to the authors above, I am interested in how anxiety manifests in different themes

through my four films and what that can tell us about who we are. First, however, we must frame the films within their context to fully understand the moment in which each was made.

Context

The films I will be examining were released over a span of thirteen years, starting with the release of *WALL-E* in 2008 and ending with *Don't Look Up* released in 2021. As discussed in the literature review, several historical events, such as the space race, had effects on our culture and were reflected in our films, and a lot has happened in our country's history in the past twenty years. In my four movies, questions around technology, politics, capitalism, consumerism, and environmentalism are pondered, reflecting the time period. If we are to understand these movies and what they tell us about our anxieties, we first must look back into our society's recent past to understand the context that fueled these films making and success.

WALL-E

WALL-E is a Pixar animated film released in 2008. It features a robot, WALL-E, who was left on Earth to clean up humanity's garbage while they are away. The film is intended for children, but like most Pixar movies, adults can enjoy it just as much. However, because they are made for children, children may be extra susceptible to the messaging the filmmakers present in the movie. The film explores overconsumption due to the capitalist habits of the world as well as the harmful effects on the planet. *WALL-E* was released when Barack Obama and John McCain were vying for the presidential election. The country was in a recession and still involved in the Iraq war. One *New York Times* article by Frank Rich compared *WALL-E*'s release to that of *Fahrenheit 9/11* released in 2004 when "only 57 percent of Americans thought their country was on the wrong track [but] (now more than 80 percent do.)" In addition to an election and a war, global warming was also becoming a bigger public issue. Charlotte Allen of the *LA Times*,

however, commented on how *WALL-E* was coded as liberal when “the film never even goes near the climate-crusading vocabulary of ‘global warming,’ ‘carbon footprints’ or even ‘green.’”

These two articles show the frustration during the time *WALL-E* was made about politics, the economy, and the state of American people.

Interstellar

Interstellar tells the story of a failing Earth where survival is going to become impossible. In the film, NASA comes up with a top-secret solution to save the world involving missions through a wormhole to another solar system where potential habitable planets may be. *Interstellar* was released in 2014, and global warming continued to become a bigger and bigger part of everyday conversation. People were nervous about the environment and humanity’s impact. Technology had improved quite a bit from *WALL-E*’s release, but in a *Chicago Tribune* interview, Nolan (the director) explains that while watching the film “you don’t get a sense of a world where big electronics companies crank out new technologies anymore” and “I wanted to give this world, at the beginning of the film, a wholesome sensibility, an almost idyllic feel, a return to simpler times. The world (in the film) is in trouble and needs to start looking outward.” Nolan is alluding to the rise in technologies and the massive innovation that has occurred in the world up to 2014. This looming threat of climate change and the blooming threat of technology are reflected in *Interstellar* as these were big anxieties in 2014.

Captain Marvel

Captain Marvel, released in 2019, was the only film to be produced by a woman and is clearly a feminist movie. The original *Captain Marvel* comic featured a male lead superhero, but during the time this movie was made, feminism was all over pop culture. The #MeToo movement and the election of Donald Trump as President enraged many women who then

demanding better. Marvel made the decision to make the lead role for the film female, but not everyone was happy. In Heather Wilhelm's article for *The Chicago Tribune* titled "Captain Marvel' and today's exhausting feminism", Wilhelm sarcastically pokes at feminist moments in the film like Carol (the main character) being told to smile more. Wilhelm, interestingly, comments on how feminism has been entangled with capitalism, where "powerful women" have to be stone cold, humorless, workaholics. When *Captain Marvel* was being made, the Department of Defense reached out to a Marvel executive producer and asked that America's values be presented in space film as space is the next frontier for the military. The United States Space Force was founded in 2019 and *Captain Marvel* was intended to help grease the skids with the lead character's strong relationship with the Air Force and most of the movie fighting invaders from space (Jenkins & Secker).

Don't Look Up

In late 2021, when *Don't Look Up* was released, the world and the US was going through hard times. When Donald Trump lost the 2020 election, a group stormed the Capitol building and rioted, leading to the massive rift between the political parties to widen. Then, in March 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic shut down the entire world, forcing us all into our homes for over a year. COVID left everyone lonely and turning to technology and social media to connect with one another. During this time, mental health around the world plummeted. Donald Trump and COVID created a perfect storm where Americans found it appropriate to discredit science and spread false news. Michael Phillips with *The Chicago Tribune* says he did not like the "vapid media pundits; credulous, double-dealing journalists; an Elon Musk/Jeff Bezos/Mark Zuckerberg/Steve Jobs-inspired tech zillionaire [which] all come under fire" in *Don't Look Up*. Phillips argues that the film was released at the perfect time to make it a success; the country

being sent back to isolation due to COVID, the tremendous political divide, and the heavy media and technology usage, and the normalization of mental health conditions.

Analysis

Overconsumption and Automation in *WALL-E*

WALL-E is about a robot who was left on Earth to clean up humanity's mess. The opening scene is a spectacular tour of the cosmos with the song "Put on Your Sunday Clothes" from Hello, Dolly! playing in the background. The song, which was part of a motion picture produced in 1969 talks about the shine and sparkle of a world outside of their own. The song is both escapist and idealist, with the singers wanting a different world where consumption makes them happy but a world that is innately one of the future, the one shown in *WALL-E* if it were to come true. The song dreams of material items like brilliantine, a men's hair product, feathers, patent leathers, beads, buckles, and bows. The song states that consumption makes the world better with lyrics such as "you feel as fine as you look" and "beneath your parasol, the world is all a smile." It helps the movie introduce one of the main themes, overconsumption, by using an old song to usher a sense of nostalgia for the good old days when consumption made people happy while the film shows piles of trash larger than skyscrapers. These huge mounds of trash show our anxiety that consumption has gotten out of control and now the garbage both topples over and outlasts society. The nostalgic cheery song and a beautiful display of the cosmos shows our current (and past) positive attitude towards consumption but the trash towers warn of what that attitude will bring for our future generations. The song alludes that our naive mindsets will allow corporations to capitalize on our desire for material items to control and sedate us, as seen throughout the film.

Then, we are introduced to Buy N Large, a corporation with a monopoly over the entire world, through a BnL superstore that spans the width of a mall, BnL bucks outside a BnL bank, and marketing all throughout the city for BnL products. One of the marketing billboards reads “Do Your Part, Fill Your Cart,” hearkening back to World War II, where people were asked to do their part to help win the war by consuming more and stimulating the economy. *WALL-E* suggests that corporations warp this message for corporate gain instead of how it was formerly used to bring the country back to life after the war. Instead of encouraging consumption to help everyone, BnL is suffocating the market with its monopoly and tricking people into thinking it’s a good thing. BnL is the manifestation of our anxiety around what can happen when corporations get too powerful; customers have no choice but to purchase their products, allowing them to grow, and take over the market. When these corporations have too much power, they have more influence in the world. BnL in *WALL-E* can completely destroy and overpollute the world, but nobody can do anything because they all rely on their products. In *WALL-E*, our agency has been stripped by BnL and a collective anxiety remedied by technology has taken its place.

In addition, BnL has also overtaken governments; *WALL-E* passes by a “BnL Times” newspaper with the headline “Too Much Trash!!! Earth Covered, BNL CEO Declares Global Emergency” with a picture of the CEO behind a presidential podium with his hands up in a peace sign and a wide smile. It is now the corporation that has destroyed the Earth that is declaring an emergency, and by the looks of the picture, the CEO doesn’t seem to think an emergency is a big deal. The CEO depiction highlights our anxiety that corporations will say one thing to the public, but then continue on with their harmful behavior. The performative capitalists are all smiles assuring everything is going to be ok while they are the very ones causing the issue. The capitalists are performative in that they appear to care and do the right thing, but say what they

need to so they can make more money. They manipulate people to keep consuming their products while continuing their harmful behaviors. WALL-E passes by a “graveyard” of WALL-Es that have broken down and left the garbage skyscrapers as their legacy. A holographic message begins playing an advertisement promoting skyliners that will take its passengers on a five year cruise in space while all the WALL-Es clean up the garbage. During the cruise, passengers will be waited on twenty-four seven by a fully automated crew, with nonstop entertainment, fine dining, and there is all access hover chairs where “there's no need to walk.” This advertisement sounds like a great solution to the garbage problem, but throughout the movie it quickly becomes a warning for corporate use of technology to keep humanity controlled as well as the individual use of technology to numb our anxiety.

In the film, WALL-E is coded as male and EVE, another robot, is coded as female and shown as WALL-E's love interest. When WALL-E is looking for EVE on the Axiom ship, we see a man in a hoverchair on video chat with a friend who is actually sitting right next to him, discussing what they should do that day. The camera pans out showing a never-ending stream of people with small ears and stubby fingers living their lives through their hoverchair screens. They enter the BnL “economy” without leaving their chairs, presented with holograms of blue and red advertising food, clothes, and games. Food is served by robots in liquid form to make consumption more streamlined, requiring no utensils, cutting or chewing. One man mistakes WALL-E for a service robot and tries to give him his empty cup and falls off his hoverchair. He is so overweight and sedentary that he cannot get up and helplessly squirms while he waits for the robots to get him back up. Life for the children is no better. A classroom of toddlers in mini hoverchairs is shown learning the alphabet from a robot with BnL terms such as Axiom and Buy N Large. No one thinks for themselves anymore as shoppers blindly order new blue suits when

told that “blue [is] the new red”. Even something as personal as traditional dating is not safe as WALL-E overhears a woman talking about a date she went on, saying “every holodate I’ve been on has been a virtual disaster... [I want] one who [is]n’t so superficial” her friend replies with “but people are”. They are talking over each other and no one is listening. It is not until WALL-E breaks her hoverchair’s graphics that she sees what is real rather than what was her manufactured life. Her suit returns to red and she is in shock when she sees the holograms as faded. With the virtual facade gone, she sees a swimming pool that’s been left untouched for years as she stands up from her chair

In this scene, we see the disintegration of humanity into self-centered, manipulated blobs. The friends talking about plans for the day don’t notice that they are right next to one another due to the screens in front of their face. The pan out to see a stream of people in similar condition is haunting, showing that everyone has fallen victim to technology and have lost legitimate connection with their surroundings and each other. They want what’s quick and easy, whether that be meals in a cup or going on virtual “holodates”. The woman discussing her love life complains that everyone is superficial in the world, but barely listens to her friend's response before droning on. She is given a rude awakening when her hoverchair breaks and she sees that they are all living in a fabricated, superficial world. With this innovative technology born out of the capitalism discussed in the opening scene, people don’t know any other way to live than with automation and technology as the foundation of society.

This obsession with technology builds off our collective anxiety around the impact that technology will have on future generations; future generations that will not know a time when they didn’t have access to a screen and the internet all hours of the day. The “all day care” run by a robot extends this anxiety further, imagining a world where we do not care about how our

children are raised and trust technology to educate them and keep them occupied. iPad babies, as they are commonly referred to, are children whose parents utilize technology to keep the baby engaged so they don't have to do as much interacting. *WALL-E* is highlighting this fear and taking it to the extreme, where parents send their children off to be taken care of by a machine all day so they can pursue their selfish manufactured pleasures.

The scene also makes note of just how impressionable humans are. In the "all day care", the babies in their hoverrockers learn the alphabet from the robot using capitalistic terms catered to Buy N Large such as "A is for Axiom" and "B is for Buy N Large, your very best friend". It only makes sense that as these people age, they remain in their hoverchairs and grow accustomed to being raised by and becoming fully dependent on technology. They are trained to be impressionable, and BnL maintains power by keeping them that way. Their small ears listen to loud speakers on their chairs, indicating that nobody really wants to listen or is even capable of listening to anything other than what is served to their ears; technology has made ignorance bliss. In the film we see that their screens as well as the ship around them is plastered with advertisements, the announcement that blue is the new red gets everyone to change their suit color immediately. *WALL-E* is showing just how easy it is to get people to follow what BnL wants, how to consume, how to become reliant on what BnL has to offer. Without BnL and the technology offered, the humans aboard the Axiom would be helpless, just like the man who falls off his hoverchair. The technology present in the film has actually made people even more helpless, as they cannot do anything on their own. The people in *WALL-E* are blind to the manipulation and loss of humanity because it is the virtual fish tank they swim in; only when they are broken free from the fabricated world, like the woman on the train who notices the pool, are they able to see the beauty that exist outside of the screen and begin to come back to their

humanity. Technology promises to enhance life, but *WALL-E* shows that technology strips our humanity and our agency away from us.

While both *WALL-E* and *Interstellar* are set in the future and warn of a failing Earth, *WALL-E* contains characters with strong morals who fight the system. In *Interstellar*, the values society had to relearn in *WALL-E* are completely gone, leading to an anxiety surrounding the consequences of the lost values.

Corruption of moral values in Interstellar

Interstellar takes its audience on a whirlwind ride through the universe. The catalyst for this adventure is the failure of the Earth to sustain life due to overpopulation and what appears to be climate change. The story follows an engineer, Coop, who is asked by NASA to help find another habitable planet, and his children Tom and Murph, who grow up as the world falls apart. During a parent-teacher conference, Coop is told that his son Tom's test score indicates he is going to make an excellent farmer and is not a viable college candidate. Coop is outraged because Tom is only fifteen but they are already counting him out for college. The principle attests that the world doesn't need more engineers, they need farmers and maybe Coop's grandkids could be engineers.

After discussing Tom, the teacher talks about Murph and how inappropriate it was when she brought in one of Coop's old textbooks to class about the lunar landings. The old textbook had been replaced with a "corrected" version that says the Apollo missions were a "brilliant piece of propaganda faked to bankrupt the soviet union". The teacher and administration don't believe the US went to the moon and stress "that we need to tell kids tales of saving Earth, not leaving it" and they need to put their resources into the world, not useless machines. This conversation leads to Murph getting suspended.

Education, invention, freedom, and our history are some of the beliefs held closest to our country and its citizens. This scene subtly shows that in a not so distant future, these things could be at risk. The world failing; bringing disastrous weather and destroying crops, is an anxiety in and of itself, but it provides a opportunity to look at human nature. When push comes to shove in this new world, only a few have access to education, innovation ceases, freedom to choose a future and freedom of speech are squashed, and our history is written over. NASA has gone underground due to lack of public support, the lunar landings are erased, and creativity and problem solving have been dubbed useless. Similar to *WALL-E*, the population at large has fallen victim to the sheep mentality, believing the way out is to plant more crops even though they continue to fail year after year.

The mindsets of the principal and the teacher, both authority figures in charge of shaping young minds, show a corruption in what humanity believes itself to be. Engineers and creative thinkers should be those encouraged to fix the problems on Earth rather than discouraged despite those in power insisting problems will miraculously get better. The teacher not believing in the moon landing unearths a new anxiety in addition to forgetting our history; one where conspiracy theories take over and people don't know what to believe. The government censored and replaced the school textbooks to spread the idea that space travel was impossible, unethically exercising their power to rewrite history. In today's society, there is so much information and misinformation available that people don't know what to believe. If the government is inflating these stories until they are true, it might as well be fact. If this is the case, the government is lying to its citizens and people are unknowingly spreading false information. Conspiracy theories can quickly be debunked, but there still is a portion of people who might believe them. When Coop speaks out, Murph gets suspended, denying her an education due to her beliefs and taking

away their freedom of speech. Coop and Murph know the truth but because of the government, people such as the teacher are led to defend the wrong ideals. This brings us to another big anxiety in *Interstellar*: selfishness and lying.

Later in the film, the space crew has arrived at the planet where respected head astronaut Dr. Mann has been living and working for years to determine if it's habitable for humanity. Back on Earth Dr. Brand and (now grown) Murph are working to solve the gravity equation. However, Dr. Brand on his deathbed reveals to Murph that he had been lying about his equation and the plan the whole time. Murph, shocked and upset, videos the crew asking “[Amelia] Brand, did you know? He told you, right? You knew. This was all a sham. You left us here. To suffocate. To starve.” She continues, as Coop and Amelia watch, “did my father know too? Dad? I just want to know if you left me here to die. I just have to know.” Dr. Mann explains that Dr. Brand kept it a secret to keep everyone working to save humanity with plan B, using fertilized eggs to repopulate, thus leaving everyone stranded on Earth.

Things are not going well with Dr. Mann and the team on the new planet. Dr. Mann starts to sabotage efforts by his team to secure new prospective sites. Dr. Mann subsequently reveals that he botched his data and was lying about the habitability of the new planet. To prevent further detection of his failings, Dr. Mann attempts to kill Coop by cracking his protective helmet leaving him to die. Back at the basecamp, another astronaut tries to manually unlock Dr. Mann’s robot but it self-destructs, killing him. Amelia rescues Coop, but Dr. Mann tries to abandon everyone and takes a spaceship alone up to the main ship. He fails to lock on securely and blows himself and the dock up, sending it into a spiral with tons of debris.

Up until this scene, both Dr. Brand and Dr. Mann are trusted and respected people that use their powers for good. Mann is described as the “best and the brightest” as he was the leader

of the first mission. Dr. Brand is a head physicist for NASA who recruits Coop in to save the world. This revealed deception, first in Dr. Brand revealing that the equation would work and then Dr. Mann lying about his planet's survivability, correlates to an anxiety about people in power. Dr. Brand had been actively lying for years, securing funding and keeping people's hopes up that they will be saved. He promises Coop that his kids will be saved if the mission is successful, but knows this is not the truth. The fear that people who we not only trust but who have power are lying right to us materializes in this film, but it also segways into a fear at the core of the human experience: not being in control. The entire world has no idea that they are doomed, believing there will be a way to save everyone. With the help of Dr. Brand, the select few working for NASA know how to get it done. However, they are just as misguided as the average population due to Dr. Brand's massive lie. Instead of being honest and potentially getting more people to work on solving the problem, Dr. Brand was selfish and kept the information to himself believing anarchy would ensue if he let the truth out.

Dr. Mann and Dr. Brand are selfish with their lies in that they jeopardize the entire planet's survival. Dr. Brand's hubris led him to believe that telling everyone the truth was no use as nobody else could do what he couldn't do. However, Dr. Brand confesses his guilt to Murph at the end of his life, allowing her time to save humanity. Dr. Mann's selfishness is cowardly and greedy, making it far worse than Dr. Brand's lie. Dr. Mann lies to the mission with false data hoping they will believe his planet is habitable and thus save him from a lonely death. Dr. Brand thought that people would freak out if they knew there was no way they would survive, but Dr. Mann had only self-serving reasoning to lie. Dr. Brand felt guilty about his lie, but Dr. Mann apathetically acted on his egomania, threatening the survival of the astronauts and thus the mission. Dr. Mann's selfishness showcases the anxiety of what people will do for their own

survival. As noted above, Dr. Mann was considered to be the best of the astronauts on the previous mission. The team chose to go to his planet because they trusted his character and expertise. He manipulated them so he could be saved and didn't seem to feel any guilt when leaving Coop to die, abandoning the mission by stealing a ship, and trying to get on the spaceship. Dr. Mann's lie is more personal because he is willing to sacrifice others for his own survival. Dr. Mann's selfishness is almost a self-fulfilling prophecy of Dr. Brand's reasoning for his lie; that people would only fend for themselves. Overall, the anxiety of this scene is selfishness, lying and betrayal of trust from people in positions of power. This scene shows our fear that even though people may seem trustworthy and honorable, they may be keeping secrets or lying for selfish reasons.

Interstellar reveals anxieties around trust, truth, and people in power. *Captain Marvel*, a Marvel superhero movie released eight years later, wrestles with similar themes as the main characters attempt to distinguish real from fake and friend from foe. Differently, *Captain Marvel* deals with intergalactic threats rather than internal antagonists.

Danger and Deception in Captain Marvel

In *Captain Marvel*, Carol Danvers is taken hostage and brainwashed to believe she is part of an alien civilization, the Kree. The Kree are trying to hunt down another alien population, the Skrull, who resisted their rule. Initially, Carol and the audience believe the Skrull to be the shapeshifting bad guys, but it is revealed that the Kree are the invaders who tried to wipe out the Skrull. Carol is again captured and wakes up to a character who is the Kree Supreme Intelligence. She is led to believe that her powers come from the Kree and she can't control them on her own. Carol begins to fight the Supreme Intelligence, unsuccessfully at first. Carol is told she is nothing without the AI and that she was reborn on Hala as Vers. Carol fires back "My

name is Carol”, trying to break out. She says “I’ve been fighting with one arm tied behind my back. But what happens when I’m finally set free?” She removes the chip from her neck and throws it on the ground. She is freed from the simulation and thus the Kree’s rule.

The anxiety that people may not be who they seem is prevalent in the film. Our xenophobia makes us trust the Kree and fear the Skrull because the Skrull look less similar to humans. It was the Kree who manipulated Carol, making her lose her sense of self. Not knowing who you are and losing your memories is something many people are anxious about. Specifically older people who have the threat of dementia and alzheimers. Our personal identities are what shape our world experience and our memories make up who we are. The Kree steal Carol away and rip these things from her. They reprogram her to their needs and set her out on an unjust mission. Carol is brainwashed and thereby turned into a controllable weapon via the chip on her neck. She believes she is doing the right thing, similar to Coop in *Interstellar*, but they are both misled by the people in power.

The Supreme Intelligence is also a manifestation of anxiety around the ultimate powers of artificial intelligence and technology. At first, Carol is at the complete mercy of the Supreme Intelligence, who says she is only human. The Supreme Intelligence manipulates those under its rule by taking the form of who they most admire to feel safe and comfortable with the faceless programming that the Supreme Intelligence really is. This scene plays on the fear that AI may soon outperform humans and gain consciousness, knowing how to manipulate and control people. It is human vs artificial intelligence, but Carol is not an ordinary human; she has superpowers. An ordinary human would not be able to defeat the AI like Carol did, revealing the delicate mortality that we have and our anxiety around losing it. The film shows our anxiety

around control and technology. In the next scene, both these anxieties are brought further into the light.

Carol and her crew take an escape pod to Earth, but some Kree follow, trying to shoot them down. While Carol is fighting, the head of the Kree brings his spaceship to Earth and begins to deploy ballistic warheads, which are sure to obliterate the whole planet. Carol stops fighting to deflect the first one. She stops it and throws it back on the rest of them, exploding them all. The head Kree is in shock, “that’s impossible C-53 [Earth] doesn’t have a defense system advanced enough to destroy our warheads.” Their cameras zoom in on Carol and they deploy fighter jets to kill her. She crushes all of them and makes her way to one of the ships, where she cuts through the whole thing. She hovers outside the head Kree flight deck and threatens to level the ship. The head Kree says “return to the jump point. We’ll be back for the weapon.” Someone questions “the core?” He responds “The woman.”

This scene is interesting because it is inherently positive with Carol defeating the “bad guys.” However, Carol is the only thing stopping the complete annihilation of Earth, once again showing just how vulnerable we are. At the beginning of the film, nobody knew that there were alien civilizations in space. The scene shows how completely exposed we are to any threat in space and how helpless we are without a superhero to do our bidding. The anxiety in this scene is based around unknown threats that could destroy us at any moment and how we have no defense to stop them. Humanity is not powerful in the great scheme of things and must rely on supernatural phenomena to keep us safe. At the end when the Kree leader says they are coming back for the woman (Carol) they are trying to take the only protection that Earth has, hopefully to brainwash and control her yet again. This could also be read as seeing a woman as a weapon and trying to contain her so she can’t unleash her full potential. This film, as mentioned in the

context section, was endorsed and funded partly by the Department of Defense, The Air Force, and used as a platform to later introduce The Space Force. Clearly, this film portrays big anxieties we have as a country if it was used to help grease the tracks for USA dominance in Space Combat.

In *Captain Marvel*, almost the entirety of Earth is unaware that a threat is looming from space. They remain vulnerable yet oblivious of the threats that are above, unlike in *Don't Look Up* where a comet is heading straight towards Earth, but nobody cares.

The Ignorant Society in Don't Look Up

Don't Look Up features two scientists, Kate and Randall, who discover a comet heading straight towards Earth. The story follows them as they try to alert people of the asteroid and demand action to deflect it. They go on "The Daily Rip" talk show with hosts Jack and Brie to reach the greater public. The show starts off with the supreme court nominee being in a pornographic show. In the waiting room, Randall and Kate are sitting across from pop star Riley Bina. Riley Bina asks the producer if she can talk about her new single, saying that a portion goes to saving the manatees, but the producer says to talk about her breakup first. He then says Randall and Kate will talk about the planet they discovered and that Jack and Brie love science segments and to keep it light and fun. Riley makes a comment about how it's cool they discovered a comet and that she has a tattoo of a shooting star on her back. Randall says that he heard about Riley's breakup and is sorry. She responds with "why don't you mind your business, you old fuck." On air, Riley talks about her breakup and how she wants to take him back. The show patches in her ex and he proposes and they get engaged. When she says yes, the scene cuts to Randall's family whose phones are exploding with notifications to buy her ex's new music.

Then, Randall and Kate go on the show and we see how fake and scripted these talk shows can be. First, the host Jack asks if aliens are real, which is completely unrelated to why Randall and Kate are on the show. They try to tell the hosts that a comet will hit Earth and destroy it with Kate saying “I’m sorry, are we not being clear, we’re trying to tell you the entire planet is about to be destroyed”. The hosts downplay the statement and respond with “well its just something we do around here, it helps the medicine go down.” Kate interrupts like a wild woman saying that people should “stay up all night crying when we are all 100% for sure gonna fucking die” and runs off screen. The hosts laugh and make light of a truly grave situation. Instead of seriously listening to Kate as a scientist, the host and even discredit her, with Randall saying that he should have given her his extra Xanax and the hosts agree. When the show finishes, they say that Randall did great but “mullet girl” needs some media training. Afterwards, Kate immediately becomes a meme for saying “were all gonna die” instead of a respective scientist.

Don't Look Up is a satirical film mocking society today. It is the most recent film as well, thus it exhibits some of our most recent anxieties around what kind of society we have become. “The Daily Rip” is a talk show where the host’s rip apart current news and gossip. This scene holds a mirror up to ourselves and shows how superficial our society really is. Riley Bina is a dumb, rude pop star who doesn’t realize a shooting star is a comet and acts like she cares by talking to Randall. The producer shoots down Riley’s request to talk about the charitable work she is doing as the show wants the juicy details of her personal life. Even when Riley Bina and her boyfriend get engaged live on the talk show, it is over facetime and manufactured by the show for the whole country to see. Similar to *WALL-E*, *Don't Look Up* is highlighting the use of technology for human interaction. In *Don't Look Up*, technology it is used for the most personal

moments that should be happening in person. Then, Riley Bina and her boyfriend capitalize on this marketing, with everyone's phones going crazy and purchasing their new songs. The lines between personal and private business are blurred when Riley Bina tells Randall to mind his own business and then talks openly about the breakup on live television.

Randall and Kate are met with lighthearted jokes from Jack and Brie and are not taken seriously. The hosts claim they do it to help the medicine go down. This exhibits our anxiety around the state of the world. We have turned to making light of serious situations to keep ourselves from experiencing the weight that comes with all the bad news. As a society, we have become numb to all the news that we let it roll off our backs. News that a comet is going to kill everyone is terrifying, and the only way we know how to cope are to make fun of the situation or to try and forget it altogether. The normalization for drug use is also cause for concern. Throughout the film, many of the characters use or abuse drugs that both circumstances have become normalized. It shows an anxiety that our society has turned to drugs to cope with the pressures of the world. The internet makes a meme out of Kate, again coping through humor, but demonstrating the normalized numbness that is expected of everyone. Randall is praised over social media, and the message they went on "The Daily Rip" for is completely lost.

As the comet continues its collision course toward earth, in comes private industry to the rescue in the form of BASH Cellular. BASH's owner, Peter Isherwell, plans to excavate the comet for profit and convinces the president to let him instead of launching a deflective mission. At the BASH hangar, Peter Isherwell introduces Randall and President Orlean to "Mankind's savior", the BEADs. He approaches one of them, who he's named Primo and talks to it like it is his baby, saying "It's your father... You're gonna be a god in the sky!" while President Orlean laughs. Randall asks about the efficiency of the BEADs idea and says that a lot of people have

been removed or resigned for asking too many questions. Randall wants to make sure that “[Peter Isherwell] is not approaching this entire mission like a businessman.” This offends Peter, and he says “did you call me a businessman? You think I’m just a businessman? You think you know me, Doctor? Business? This is evolution. This is evolution of the human species.” He asks the president why she would bring him to the Hangar and the President is embarrassed.

Isherwell continues “Do you know that BASH has over forty million data points on you and every decision you have made since 1984, Doctor. I know when you have colon polyps months before your doctor does, you’ve got four or five at the moment, actually, they’re not of concern but I’d have a check up as soon as you can. But more importantly than that, much more importantly than that, I know what you are, I know who you are. My algorithms have determined eight fundamental consumer profile types. You are a lifestyle idealist. You think you’re motivated by beliefs, high ethical beliefs, but you just run towards pleasure and away from pain. Like a field mouse.... Our algorithms can even predict how you’ll die to 96.5% accuracy. I looked you up after we met, your death was so unremarkable and boring, I can’t remember the details apart from one thing: you’re gonna die alone.” Peter then excuses himself and the President freaks out saying “you are just so lucky that Peter adores you.” She lights up a cigarette right next to a flammable canister, “You’re with the grown ups now, Randall.”

Isherwell and Orlean are incredibly corrupt; Isherwell threatening to stop donating to Orlean’s campaign and firing people for asking questions around the effectiveness of the BEADS, and Orlean doing what she has to win the next election. Isherwell is a very wealthy man and with that comes a lot of power. The film shows just how scary it can be when someone can change society’s direction. Isherwell has the highest clearance to all White House affairs because he donates a massive amount, and thus can influence the president to do as he says. This

relationship is a manifestation of the anxiety that corporations can do as they please. Though *WALL-E* and *Don't Look Up* are thirteen years apart, they both have the same anxiety that corporations and wealthy individuals can monopolize the world and change it for the worse. Isherwell, who normally is quiet and awkward, seems like a maniac when interacting with his machine. Randall questions his credentials and Isherwell tells him that what he is doing is evolution. Here Isherwell is contorting the situation. He wants the money and resources found on the comet, not because it is evolutionary or good for human kind. His speech to Randall exemplifies the same anxiety. Isherwell has knowledge that could help save lives, but instead he keeps it to manipulate his customers to his advantage. Technology and corporations have huge amounts of data on their users and can target them based on their profile. *Don't Look Up* takes this anxiety and pushes it one step further by making the powerful people idiotic. After Isherwell scares Randall, Orlean lights up a cigarette right next to the flammable container, claiming he's with the grown ups. Throughout the film, we see people in charge making poor decisions. As *Don't Look Up* is a satire, this anxiety stems from what we see in the real world. People see our leaders as brainless and selfish with no reason to care about the population at large. *Don't Look Up* shows just how ridiculous our world is becoming, by turning a mirror to us and making everyone uncomfortable because they know that even though the film is satire, it is true.

Conclusion

Though it may not seem apparent on the surface, these four movies all incorporate anxieties around what kind of people we have become and what we have created. In *WALL-E*, technology controls and sedates the people, who've become dumb and passive blobs to consume from the BnL monopoly. *Don't Look Up*, produced thirteen years later satirizes society for these same themes; technology and the brainless society we have become. The government, the media,

and corporations are corrupt, selfishly lying and cheating to get their way. While *WALL-E* fears that humanity will become vapid and selfish, *Don't Look Up* insists that society at large has already become that way.

In contrast to the piercing societal critiques of *WALL-E* and *Don't Look Up*, the other films examined here, *Interstellar* and *Captain Marvel*, framed humanity as fragile and unaware of the real world. The teacher and the principal in *Interstellar* believe the moon landings were false and have no idea that the Earth is doomed, indicating that almost everyone is oblivious to the true severity of the situation on Earth. Similarly, in *Captain Marvel*, Earth is going to be destroyed by an alien civilization, but nobody knows they are under attack let alone that aliens exist. Anxiety around the purpose of technology is at the forefront of these movies as well, ranging from machines taking care of our children in *WALL-E* to controlling our reality in *Captain Marvel*. What we do with said technology and innovation seems to be a greater anxiety; the CEO of BASH in *Don't Look Up* selfishly attempts to harvest the comet, while Dr. Brand in *Interstellar* keeps the solution to the equation to himself, and the Supreme Intelligence and technology used to control people in *Captain Marvel*.

These films capture the recent anxieties of the American people. Innovation and technology are becoming deeply ingrained in everyday life to the point where we begin to rely on these machines. People are fearful of where this could be headed in the future with machines that control us and outperform us. We are also scared of ourselves and who we've become; self-obsessed, dumb, shallow people jaded by the horrific world they live in. We are scared for our future not just because we may need to leave Earth, but because humans will be too selfish and ignorant to figure out solutions. Films are made to be enjoyed, but these films offer a stark

warning of what can happen if we continue to pursue our individual pleasures instead of the common good.

These four films matter as they are outward manifestations of society's anxieties and fears of the future. Each film has implicit viewpoints built in that show what we value, desire and fear. My scholarship on the films above highlights just how important it is to take film seriously and delve deep into the anxieties presented. As noted previously, *WALL-E* and *Don't Look Up* are the bookends of these films, separated by thirteen years. Yet, they both contain similar anxieties about the state of the world and where humanity is headed. Films act as a time capsule and become part of history. The fact that these two films illicit similar fears suggests that they have not gone away and have potentially gotten worse. Scholarship of films is important to advance progress in holding society accountable to publically address the core issues at the root of our anxieties.

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