

## Climate Cinema as Environmental Pedagogy: Ecological Consciousness in *Snowpiercer* and *Don't Look Up*

P. Vydehi<sup>1\*</sup>, Dr. A. Anitha<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Dr. M.G.R. Educational and Research Institute, Chennai

<sup>2</sup>Professor and Head Department of English, Dr. M.G.R. Educational and Research Institute, Chennai

**Corresponding Author:** P. Vydehi (P Dr. M.G.R. Educational and Research Institute, Chennai)

Received: 16/03/2026

Accepted: 17/04/2026

Published: 28/04/2026

**Abstract:** Climate change has intensified the need for forms of public education that communicate ecological risk and social responsibility beyond scientific discourse. Cinema has emerged as a significant cultural medium through which environmental crises are translated into accessible narratives that shape public understanding. This paper examines climate cinema as a form of ecopedagogy by analysing *Snowpiercer* and *Don't Look Up*. The study employs ecopedagogy as articulated by Richard Kahn to explore how filmic narratives cultivate ecological consciousness and critical awareness of environmental crisis. The paper adopts a comparative approach to explore how two distinct cinematic modes represent the climate crisis. *Snowpiercer* presents a dystopian future shaped by a failed geoengineering attempt that freezes the planet. In contrast, *Don't Look Up* employs political satire to depict the inability of governments, corporations, and media institutions to respond responsibly to scientific warnings. The narrative illustrates how denial, spectacle, and profit driven interests undermine effective responses to ecological threats. Through these contrasting narrative strategies, the films reveal different dimensions of climate crisis. One visualises the consequences of ecological intervention and environmental inequality, while the other critiques contemporary political and media structures that undermine scientific knowledge. The paper argues that climate cinema functions as ecopedagogy by transforming environmental crisis into narrative experiences that encourage critical reflection on ecological responsibility and climate governance. Such representations expand public engagement with climate discourse and contribute to the formation of ecological consciousness.

**Keywords:** climate cinema, environmental pedagogy, ecological consciousness, climate governance, environmental justice.

**Cite this article:** Vydehi, P. & Anitha, A. (2026). Climate Cinema as Environmental Pedagogy: Ecological Consciousness in *Snowpiercer* and *Don't Look Up*. *MRS Journal of Arts, Humanities and Literature*, 3,74-78.

### Introduction

The silver screen has become the most potent laboratory for witnessing the end of the world. While scientific data provides the structural logic of our warming planet, it is the visceral power of cinema that translates these abstract statistics into a shared human experience. The issue of global climate change has turned what was once a problem of the environment into an important topic in all areas of conversation, including science, politics, and culture. With statements from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change indicating that carbon pollution is increasing, weather patterns are becoming more unpredictable (extreme weather conditions), and social consequences of ecological collapse (most notably, food insecurity) can no longer be denied. However, while we know there are scientific reasons for concern about climate change, it does not provide evidence that the public will engage or act politically. One reason for this is that climate change is difficult to perceive as problematic due to the magnitude of climate systems and the extent of changes occurring on our planet. Environmental humanities scholars have increasingly contended that cultural narratives have a key role in conveying to the public what climate change means for them. For example, literature, film, and visual arts convey information about scientific problems in formats that can help people understand the social and ethical ramifications of

change in the environment. A branch of cinema, known as "climate cinema," has arisen as a powerful and diverse means by which the ecological crisis can be experienced physically, emotionally, and politically by many people. In the past, this type of film was characterised by the spectacular viewings of disasters, as in "The Day After Tomorrow" (2004), which relied heavily on special effects to represent an abrupt, large-scale change in climate. In exploring how films have traditionally featured the theme of environmental issues, the trend has shifted with new films, which explore relationships between humans and nature, and the gradual destruction of habitats. Animated films such as *Wall-E* (2008), for example, employ speculative narrative to illustrate how consumerism and improper waste management culminate in environmental degradation. On the contrary, films such as *First Reformed* (2017) examine how eco-anxiety takes its toll psychologically and spiritually by demonstrating an individual's personal crisis regarding the threat of annihilation to our planet. Films such as *Gaia* (2021) and *Annihilation* (2018) illustrate how nature is not simply passively contributing to our demise, but that it is a dynamic, powerful force that is incomprehensible from a human perspective.

This evolution in cinema represents the increasing recognition that we are facing an ongoing and very real crisis of climate change, which is already impacting our lives and the makeup of society and our collective morality today. Therefore, climate cinema creates opportunities for viewers to discuss and explore their own views related to social inequality and shared survival within the context of the responsibility to protect our environment. In this paper, I will explore how climate cinema functions as ecopedagogy. Ecopedagogy refers to the importance of using education to foster ecological literacy and critical awareness of environmental inequity. Applying this framework to the analysis of *Snowpiercer* (2013) and *Don't Look Up* (2021), although there are many differences in genre and narrative strategies between both films, they both highlight the climate crisis and the role of institutions in shaping how we manage our planet's natural resources. The dystopian story of *Snowpiercer* presents a world of automation, technological domination, and unequal access to resources as a result of a catastrophic environmental event in a world frozen by ice; whereas the satirical portrayal of *Don't Look Up* is cutting-edge in critiquing the political structures and systems of media that create barriers to scientists' communication regarding climate change. These films together represent how climate change cinema can act as an educational tool for developing ecological awareness and stimulating critical analysis of the current state of the climate crisis.

Climate change is studied from two perspectives: as an objective phenomenon and as a cultural challenge requiring us to rethink our view of the environment. Understanding the environmental crisis requires interdisciplinary research connecting climate science to literature, media and culture. Climate change remains largely unknown to the masses due to its extended timeline and vast scale, dubbed "slow violence" by Nixon. Slow violence refers to the gradual environmental destruction that is hard to recognize as it occurs incrementally rather than suddenly. Cultural narratives help communicate these invisible scientific concerns to society tangibly. Literary and film representations of environmental crisis serve as laboratories for imagination, allowing us to envision ecological futures and consider their ethical implications before they occur. Climate fiction and cinema enable public engagement with climate change emotionally rather than just academically, according to Trexler (2015). Film particularly excels at depicting environmental catastrophe through vivid imagery and spatial representation, compelling viewers to confront ecological crisis through dramatic storytelling (Rust, Monani, & Cubitt).

Climate cinema research indicates that films are often a reflection of modern fears about technology's involvement and the way the environment is managed. The standard method that disaster films depict climate changes in the form of a momentary shock due to a major weather event; however, dystopian films take that further by depicting societies that are dramatically changed because of ecological disaster and lack of resources (Kaplan). These cinematic representations do more than entertain; they encourage a profound reflection on the systemic causes of our current predicament. Kaplan argues that climate films are particularly effective at addressing the "pre traumatic" stress of the Anthropocene, including the complex psychological layers of anxiety, denial, and collective responsibility. Furthermore, environmental scholars highlight the stark political dimensions inherent in these narratives. Cultural representations often expose the deep-seated social inequalities that environmental degradation

exacerbates. As Nixon points out, vulnerable communities frequently experience the most severe consequences of climate change despite contributing the least to its causes. Climate narratives therefore function as a critique of power, revealing how environmental critiques intersect with issues of class, race, and global governance. Fictional portrayals of environmental issues in film and literature can help audiences identify the social structures that are often invisible and determine who will survive after an ecological collapse and who will not.

In education, ecopedagogy provides a framework to understand how films can serve as vehicles for social change; it expands Freire's (1970) critical pedagogy into the ecological realm, emphasizing education for ecological consciousness and critical analysis of environmental injustices. Rather than treating environmental problems as technical hurdles, ecopedagogy examines the political and economic systems profiting from ecological degradation. Kahn argues that environmental education must address broader social structures of production and consumption. Applied to media studies, ecopedagogy asserts that cultural texts provide informal learning settings. Films serve not just as entertainment but as places of pedagogy where audiences experience environmental ethics (Kahn). Cinematic narrative creates public narratives that provide what Hulme calls "cultural stories," helping people understand risk, responsibility, and actions regarding planetary threats. *Snowpiercer* and *Don't Look Up* demonstrate different forms of cinematic education: *Snowpiercer* depicts a dystopic future from failed technological intervention, while *Don't Look Up* critiques media and political systems that fail to support scientific truth. Both films exemplify how climate films serve as ecopedagogy, transforming viewers from passive observers to active participants through ecological awareness.

## Methodology

*Snowpiercer* presents a dystopian future in which a global attempt to counteract climate change through geoengineering results in a catastrophic freezing of the Earth. The remaining human population survives aboard a technologically advanced train that continuously circles the globe. The train ecosystem symbolises a technological attempt to maintain stability within an otherwise uninhabitable planet. Artificial agriculture, controlled ecosystems, and strict social organisation sustain the system. However, this technological order depends on exploitation and rigid social control. The film therefore raises questions about the ethics of survival systems that reproduce social inequality in the name of environmental stability. The story of *Snowpiercer* starts not with a weather disaster but rather with a catastrophic failure by mankind known as Project CW7 that released a chemical that was supposed to cool the atmosphere of the Earth by counteracting global warming on a global level. The CW7 chemical was used by international collaboration to help cool the earth and fight global warming. In its role as an Eco-pedagogical text, the film is meant to warn about the dangers associated with hubris brought by geo-engineering and searching for a single technical solution to an inherently complex and interrelated systemic crisis. The designers of CW7 tried to use technology to solve a problem without addressing the core causes of environmental destruction and attempted to use technology to manipulate global climate. CW7 led to a man-made ice age that killed the majority of living things on Earth. The majority of the film forces viewers to consider the dangers of relying on techno-fix, the manner by which it is possible

with technology to avoid making the necessary political, economic or social changes to create positive change.

The train portrayed in the film represents a self-sufficient environment that mirrors global disparity. Within the steel carriages, the film depicts a strict social hierarchy paralleling uneven resource distribution. The elite passengers in front indulge in luxuries like fresh sushi and gardens, while tail enders survive in overcrowded cars eating protein blocks. The train's layout shows how environmental disasters affect populations differently - the wealthy can isolate themselves from crises they helped create, while vulnerable groups suffer. The train's engine is revered as a god-like figure by the ruling elite, with industrialist Wilford as leader. The cult of the engine demonstrates ecological totalitarianism, achieving sustainability through mass extermination of lower classes and exploitation of those at the bottom. The film critiques the notion that environmental stability requires authoritarian rule. At the end of the film, Curtis discovers that society and its revolutions were designed to maintain a cold balance of power. By destroying the train, *Snowpiercer* shows that ecological and social freedom cannot exist within current systems. The final image of a polar bear suggests that life may continue if humanity escapes its mechanical constraints.

*Snowpiercer* uses the metaphor of a freezing wasteland to highlight consequences of a broken system. *Don't Look Up* satirizes our failure to communicate scientific information. It depicts a comet headed towards Earth to demonstrate how environmental degradation has become an urgent event. The film highlights cultural pathologies preventing society from seeing truth about world's realities - the pursuit of profit, political image-making, and celebrity obsession make it difficult to appreciate existential threats. The film's value lies in showing scientists Dr. Randall Mindy and Dr. Kate Dibiasky struggling to share their world-ending discovery in today's entertainment-focused media. Their discovery is treated like celebrity news on *The Daily Rip*, with hosts taking a light-hearted approach that trivializes the urgency of their findings. This dynamic shows how media structures often fail as sites of education by producing passive consumption rather than critical engagement. Dibiasky's public breakdown, screaming in frustration at the audience's apathy, serves as a poignant moment of pedagogical friction. It reflects climate scientists' exhaustion as they shout into a void of manufactured optimism and professionalized indifference.

Although the narrative centres on a comet rather than climate change, the film operates as a clear allegorical representation of contemporary environmental politics. The repeated dismissal of scientific evidence mirrors the dynamics of climate change denial that have shaped public debates in many countries. Scientific consensus regarding ecological crisis often encounter resistance from political actors who fear economic disruption or electoral consequences. Environmental debates are simplified to polarized opinion in media, not based on scientific climate consensus. Corporate forces aim to maintain the system relying on resource extraction. The fictional scenario shows situations where environmental warnings are dismissed. *Don't Look Up* highlights the convergence of populist politics and corporate greed. The Orlean administration sees the comet as a political tool, ignoring its threat until politically expedient. A billionaire discovers the comet's minerals, abandoning threat elimination for a mining operation. The "Don't Look Up" slogan encourages loyalty to their "tribe" over believing visible

environmental destruction. The film concludes without optimism, warning against salvation while communication and governance systems remain ineffective. The use of satire plays an important role in this pedagogical function. Satire exaggerates familiar patterns of behaviour in order to make them visible. Political leaders who ignore urgent scientific warnings, television programmes that treat catastrophe as entertainment, and corporations that prioritise profit over survival appear exaggerated in the narrative. However these exaggerations draw attention to tendencies that already exist within contemporary political and media cultures. The humour of the film therefore serves a critical purpose. It invites audiences to reflect on the absurdity of institutional responses that fail to acknowledge the scale of ecological risk. The narrative also illustrates the emotional and psychological dimensions of environmental communication. The scientists who attempt to warn the public experience frustration and disbelief when their message is ignored or trivialised. Their emotional reactions highlight the difficulty of communicating complex environmental risks within media systems that reward simplified narratives and dramatic spectacle. The film therefore emphasises that scientific knowledge alone does not guarantee political action. Effective responses to environmental crisis require institutional frameworks that allow scientific expertise to guide policy decisions.

## Results and Discussion

Ecopedagogy situates environmental education within social and ecological transformation. It examines how social, economic, and political factors contribute to ecological crisis rather than viewing it as purely scientific. Through Paulo Freire's critical pedagogy, which saw education as analyzing power structures, Richard Kahn defines ecopedagogy as ecological literacy responding to planetary crisis (Kahn). While scientific knowledge matters in understanding environmental issues, ecological crises stem from our production and consumption systems. As Kahn explains, ecological literacy is understanding the relationship between ecological degradation, global capitalism, and social inequality. Environmental education enables individuals to contemplate ethical and political aspects of the ecological crisis, highlighting the importance of culture and media representations in developing ecological awareness. Climate change is difficult to understand due to its long geographic and historical timeframes not visible in daily life (Heise). Cultural narratives bridge this gap by transforming scientific knowledge into stories and images that audiences can experience. Environmental issues become significant through narrative, with film playing a crucial role in shaping understanding through visual imagery and emotional connections. Films construct fictional worlds in which ecological processes become perceptible through spatial environments, dramatic conflict, and character experience. These cinematic worlds allow viewers to encounter environmental change not as abstract data but as lived social reality. Eco cinema often functions as a medium through which environmental questions are explored through visual narrative and aesthetic representation.

Climate cinema frequently employs speculative and dystopian storytelling to explore environmental crisis. These narratives imagine future societies shaped by ecological disruption, resource scarcity, or technological intervention. By projecting contemporary environmental concerns into imagined futures, films reveal the potential consequences of present social and political choices. Speculative climate narratives create imaginative

frameworks through which audiences can reflect on environmental futures and the decisions that shape them (Trexler). Such narratives do not simply represent ecological catastrophe but also interrogate the social structures that contribute to environmental vulnerability. From an ecopedagogical perspective, these cinematic representations function as informal educational experiences. Film enables viewers to explore how environmental choices affect social organization, economic inequality, and survival. When viewers watch films about ecological crisis, they consider causes of environmental destruction and alternatives to development models. Film's emotional engagement enhances reflection and helps people see environmental issues as ethical and political. Climate change cinema shows that ecological risk is distributed unequally. Environmental scholars note that communities experience climate change differently. Economic disparity and lack of political participation significantly affect disenfranchised groups (Nixon). Climate change documentaries use an ecological lens to show climate change impacts on populations through social inequity perspectives. They critique how governments, industry and media shape public response to the climate crisis. Their narratives illustrate the tension between scientific evidence and political agendas, and how economics influence environmental protection. These documentaries allow viewers to challenge institutions managing climate change risks and reassess assumptions about social progress. They serve as a pedagogical model for ecological literacy by turning environmental crises into stories that reveal social structures shaping ecological futures. Through these films, viewers understand the connections between human societies and ecological systems, and the political decisions affecting environmental outcomes. In this way, climate cinema contributes to the cultivation of ecological consciousness and critical engagement with the challenges of planetary crisis.

## Conclusion

*Snowpiercer* and *Don't Look Up*, films about climate change, suggest that climate narratives convey more than ecological disaster representations; they expose societal systems that create and handle environmental collapses. One story shows a post-disaster world where technology creates inequality, while the other examines why societies fail to act on scientific warnings. Together, they demonstrate that environmental collapses are functions of political structures, economic priorities, and cultural responses to ecological knowledge. This paper argues that films can serve as teaching sources in environmental education. An ecopedagogical perspective uses climate narratives to influence thinking about social conditions causing ecological disasters. Class discussions of these films help students analyze environmental justice, political denial, and institutional accountability, including how climate narratives link scientific authority and technological solutions to economic power. This process transforms climate fiction and ecocinema into sites of critical inquiry that connect cultural representation with environmental ethics. However, the pedagogical value of these narratives depends on how they are used within educational contexts. Environmental communication often relies on catastrophic imagery that may produce fear or resignation rather than engagement. Ecopedagogy offers an alternative approach by emphasising critical awareness and collective responsibility. Instead of presenting environmental crisis as an inevitable apocalypse, educational practices can encourage students to analyse the political and economic structures that sustain ecological harm. This shift from passive consumption to critical interpretation allows cultural texts to become instruments

for questioning dominant narratives about progress, development, and technological control over nature. The insights offered by these films also suggest broader implications for environmental communication and policy. Political denial, media trivialisation, and corporate influence are not simply narrative devices. They reflect persistent patterns in public responses to ecological crisis. Addressing environmental challenges therefore requires structural changes that extend beyond technological innovation. Governments must strengthen the relationship between scientific expertise and policy making. Media institutions must prioritise accurate and sustained engagement with environmental issues rather than framing them as temporary spectacles. Educational institutions must integrate ecological literacy across disciplines so that environmental awareness becomes a central component of public knowledge. By situating climate narratives within the framework of ecopedagogy, this paper proposes that cultural texts can contribute to the formation of ecological consciousness. Films such as *Snowpiercer* and *Don't Look Up* reveal how environmental crises are embedded within systems of power and representation. Their value lies not only in depicting catastrophe but in encouraging audiences to interrogate the social arrangements that produce environmental vulnerability. Ecopedagogical engagement with such narratives can foster critical awareness of environmental injustice and institutional responsibility. Ultimately, the task of environmental humanities scholarship is not only to interpret cultural representations of climate change but also to explore how these representations can inform ethical and political responses to ecological crisis. Climate narratives can become part of a broader educational practice that connects scientific knowledge, cultural critique, and public engagement. Through this approach, ecopedagogy offers a framework for transforming environmental awareness into informed and collective action.

## References

1. Bowers, C. A. (1993). *Education, cultural myths, and the ecological crisis: Toward deep changes*. State University of New York Press.
2. Bowers, C. A. (2001). *Educating for eco-justice and community*. University of Georgia Press.
3. Buell, L. (2005). *The future of environmental criticism: Environmental crisis and literary imagination*. Blackwell.
4. Carson, R. (1962). *Silent spring*. Houghton Mifflin.
5. Clark, T. (2011). *The Cambridge introduction to literature and the environment*. Cambridge University Press.
6. Crutzen, P. J. (2006). The Anthropocene. In E. Ehlers & T. Krafft (Eds.), *Earth system science in the Anthropocene* (pp. 13–18). Springer.
7. Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. Continuum.
8. Garrard, G. (2012). *Ecocriticism* (2nd ed.). Routledge.
9. Gruenewald, D. A. (2003). The best of both worlds: A critical pedagogy of place. *Educational Researcher*, 32(4), 3–12.
10. Heise, U. K. (2016). *Imagining extinction: The cultural meanings of endangered species*. University of Chicago Press.
11. Hulme, M. (2009). *Why we disagree about climate change: Understanding controversy, inaction and opportunity*. Cambridge University Press.

12. Kahn, R. (2010). *Critical pedagogy, ecoliteracy, and planetary crisis: The ecopedagogy movement*. Peter Lang.
13. Kaplan, E. A. (2016). *Climate trauma: Foreseeing the future in dystopian film and fiction*. Rutgers University Press.
14. Krishnan, Divya., Dugaje, Manohar. Capturing the Ekphrastic Gaze: An Analysis of Visual Perception in Jose Saramago's Manual of Painting and Calligraphy. Think India Journal. Vol-26-Issue-04. April. 2023. <https://thinkindiaquarterly.org/index.php/think-india/article/view/20427>
15. Latour, B. (2017). *Facing Gaia: Eight lectures on the new climatic regime*. Polity Press.
16. Morton, T. (2010). *The ecological thought*. Harvard University Press.
17. Morton, T. (2013). *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and ecology after the end of the world*. University of Minnesota Press.
18. Nixon, R. (2011). *Slow violence and the environmentalism of the poor*. Harvard University Press.
19. Orr, D. W. (1992). *Ecological literacy: Education and the transition to a postmodern world*. State University of New York Press.
20. Orr, D. W. (2004). *Earth in mind: On education, environment, and the human prospect* (10th anniversary ed.). Island Press.
21. Rust, S., Monani, S., & Cubitt, S. (2013). *Ecocinema theory and practice*. Routledge.
22. Slovic, S. (2010). Ecocriticism: Containing multitudes, practicing doctrine. In G. Garrard (Ed.), *The Oxford handbook of ecocriticism*. Oxford University Press.
23. Trexler, A. (2015). *Anthropocene fictions: The novel in a time of climate change*. University of Virginia Press.