

On a Possible Crisis of the Current Scientific Ideal

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Abstract

The assumption that triggers the following research paper is that, despite the legitimate claims, the scientific approach of the actuality can be ideologically diverted from its natural purpose, that of joining the trajectory of getting closer to the truth. Such an ideological drift of science manifests its risky presence, especially in an era abundant in events of global impact, a period in which the coordinates of the scientific agenda tend to be enslaved to those who build the complex architecture of the political agenda.

Keywords: *science, technology, ideology, modernity, post-modernity.*

Why should a philosopher go to the cinema? Despite the apparent frivolity of such a question, it represents one of the main reasons that made the following pages possible. *Don't look up!* (2021, Adam McKay, NETFLIX) is, at first glance, just another controversial production about climate change and the dramatic impact of humanity on the environment. But if we choose to look down, that means to look deeper, the film can also be assumed as a pretext for a series of relevant philosophical inquiries. Among the problems that the film brings before viewers endowed with a minimum of philosophical culture is that of the relationship between science and popularization culture, as well as the relationship between science, technology and politics. Regarding this, if we want to point out the main reasons why a philosopher should go to the cinema, then these reasons are multiple. For example, for Paisley Livingston, movies can be adequately used as pretexts to illustrate philosophical themes and perspectives. Despite the abstract language and the many difficulties of understanding, philosophy can be translated, through the efforts of talented screenwriters and directors, into an inspired and memorable cinematic language, because "(...) films can be appropriately used to illustrate philosophical topics and positions." (Livingston, 2009, p. 39) Another author who tries to convince us of the philosophical importance of cinematographic productions is Nathan Andersen who claims that the film is capable of provoking existential questions into the minds of the viewers, through

the links they establish between what it shows and everyday life. “Even popular art forms, such as cinema, have the potential to provoke philosophical inquiry. It is in their likeness to life that they encourage us to reflect on it. It is in their difference from life that they create a distance, allowing us to confront directly and examine the prejudices and assumptions regarding everyday life and experience that we ordinarily take for granted.” (Anderson, 2014, p. 118) As changeable as the events in our lives, films can not only offer us the opportunity for valuable reflections on controversial themes and topics, but they can help us discover new approaches, new types of reporting on these issues. “Cinema, like art and like life, is dynamic; it grows, always giving birth to new approaches, new forms, new ways of communicating, new ways of getting us closer to or creatively complicating the realities that depicts.” (Anderson, 2014, p. 128) A more systematic perspective on the film as a philosophical tool is offered by the author Jerry Goodenough, in his book *Film as Philosophy. Essays on Cinema After Wittgenstein and Cavell*. In this book, the author lists four main reasons why philosophy must focus on film. First of all, philosophers are interested in technology, in the way a film is produced, in the social and cultural meanings of this artistic form. Philosophy is invited to deal with the study of social or psychological aspects and problems, such as for example human perception, social conventions involved in cinematic experience. The second reason why philosophy must be interested in film is that it facilitates the teaching or transfer of philosophical ideas from one generation to another. In other words, the film has certain pedagogical virtues. For Example, *The Matrix* (1999, The Wachowskis, Warner Bros.) illustrates skepticism towards the surrounding world, the difference between reality and appearance or illusion, the problem of solipsism, the nature of dreams and another relevant philosophical themes. Or, *Total Recall* (1990, Paul Verhoeven, Carolco Pictures) presents in an accessible manner the complicated problem of personal identity. The third reason why a philosopher should go to the cinema is that, sometimes, the subjects and themes are presented in a serious manner, and in this case we are talking about the *film about philosophy*, or film as philosophy. For example, we can think about not so many but enough documentaries that describe the life and activity of recognized thinkers. In the end, the film can be conceived as a philosophical artifact in itself, to the extent that it contributes to the intellectual debates of a specific era. A cultural product like this is also the movie *Don't look up!* that gave us a proper incentive and context for our article.

In his book *The Uninhabitable Earth. Life after Warming*, David Wallace-Wells admits that the culture of popularization, or *pop culture*, has no other objective than to distract the audience from all the relevant issues. In other words,

even if a situation or a problem is a matter of life and death, this could become, through the complicity of pop culture instruments, nothing but a fairy tale. Major crises of humanity are transformed into Hollywood scenarios and mesmerizing plot devices, bringing the false impression of a unreal, insignificant and hilarious events. This aspect is more visible when it comes to movies that refer to a possible Armageddon. On the other hand, if we take the message seriously, we must face the truth of our potential extinction through a series of psychological mechanisms, in order to maintain our mental balance. “What does it mean to be entertained by a fictional apocalypse as we stare down the possibility of a real one? One job of pop culture is always to serve stories that distract even as they appear to engage – to deliver sublimation and diversion.” (Wallace-Wells, 2019, p. 138) Thus establishing a problematic relationship between the culture of popularization and the exclusivist language of science, between the mission of science to engage socially and the ideal of objectivity. Even if we are not willing to subscribe to the author’s main idea, according to which cinematography is nothing more than a sedative, a kind of a new *soma*, or opium for the masses, we should still admit some valuable assumptions. The first of these assumptions is that popular culture dispaces our anxieties about serious problems, and is placing them in the dangerous vicinity of derisory scenarios. The second aspect is the one related to the value of entertainemnt as cultural prophylaxis or as social therapy, in other words, the skepticism regarding the cathartic function of visual arts (especially cinematography). The third valuable element in this context can be understood by the fact that popularization culture cannot replace legal actions or public policies, at most it can be a means of sanctioning the possible abuses or ineffective actions of political actors. We consider that things must be seen and understood in a less radical way, in their nuances. As for popularization culture, it offers the academic discourse the chance to be translated and understood by the masses. The real danger comes from another area, because science can manipulate pop culture, and through it, can take real advantage from it, reinforcing the public *illusion of knowledge*. Science can be ideologically directed and reconfigured, especially when we admit that ignorance is deeply rooted in our nature, in our peculiar way of being. And even scientists are vulnerable to biases, if we think of a series of moments in history when they made uninspired and even catastrophic decisions. A conclusive example in this regard is the experiment on March 1, 1954, carried out by the United States Army, in the Pacific Ocean, when a nuclear bomb was detonated near Bikini Atoll. The event was a disastrous one due to the fact that scientists underestimated the power of nuclear energy: “the blast force was much larger than expected” (Sloman & Fernbach, 2017, p. 9). Evoking this major

incident, Steven Sloman and Philip Fernbach believe that it was caused by two “scientific errors”: (i). The scientists behind this major project expected the force of the explosion to be lower than it was in reality; (ii). The circulation of air masses at high altitude was incorrectly estimated, the radioactive dust being carried in completely different directions (Sloman & Fernbach, 2017). Such an incident illustrates not only the fallibility of scientific approach, but the paradoxical character of human mind. “The human mind is both genius and pathetic, brilliant and idiotic. People are capable of the most remarkable feats, achievements that defy the gods. We went from discovering the atomic nucleus in 1911 to megaton nuclear weapons in just over forty years. We have mastered fire, created democratic institutions, stood on the moon, and developed genetically modified tomatoes. And yet we are equally capable of the most remarkable demonstrations of hubris and foolhardiness.” (Sloman & Fernbach, 2017, p. 9)

Considering that common sense is vulnerable to irrational slippages, science claims to take control, being itself a tool in the hands of those who hold political and economic power. Turning back to the movie, *Don't look up!* Can be assumed as an emblematic exhortation translated in at least two ways. On the one hand, the film makes us pay attention to the skeptical attitude towards the boundless veneration of science and technology. We should abandon blind faith in technoscience and strive to look up, that is, to scrutinize reality as it is, in the absence of ideologically imposed directions. On the other hand, we should stop believing in the supposed epistemological neutrality of science, possibly trying to identify its ideological roots. The current scientific approach rather resembles a confrontation, a war in which control is at stake. If the scientific approach of modernity was focused on notions such as truth, objectivity, reason, autonomy of the knowing subject, today, the scientific realm tends to be characterized by relativism, ideological enslavement, political reconstruction of society. In *Science Wars. The Battle over Knowledge and Reality*, Steven Goldmann considers that wars of science take place on at least four front lines: the front line of social studies translates into an attack on the objectivity; the cultural front line means the conflict between Enlightenment's rationalism and also postmodern perspectivism; the political front line is equivalent to the corruption of the scientific agenda by the architects of the political agenda; the religious front line pits the Darwinist left against the creationist right (Goldmann, 2021, pp. 273-290).

The legitimacy of the science, technology and their supposed ideological neutrality can be discussed in a historical and, possibly, in a polemic manner. For example, if we return to the well-known perspective assumed by Martin Heidegger, in his 1953 lecture “The Question Concerning Technology”, then we

must accept that science and technology have a special relation with human way of being, or *Da-sein*. The author of *Sein und Zeit* (1927) understands the technological civilization “as a threat to the very essence of humanity” (Clark, 2001, p. 30). Even if we understand his hate for technology as a sentimental “anti-technological agrarian conservatorism” (Tallis, 2002, p. 183), it is a fact that science underpins technology and Heidegger’s warning that technology risks getting out of human control is still relevant today. Both science and technology are not neutral or autonomous from the concerns of power and ideology: between truth and correctness a rupture can occur. Such a rupture occurs especially when “technology and its twin, modern science” (Aronowitz, 1988, p. 6), become institutionalized, which means that they can be enslaved to political domination. Ideologically associated with science, technology can encourage the natural ignorance of individuals. It succeeds in this by promoting the “illusion of knowledge”: *the illusion of explanatory depth*, [false] privilege of *deliberative-rational mind* in relation to *intuition*, equating the mind with the sequence of calculations operated by a computer or *computational mind*, limiting or closing mental processes and activities: *the mind* is strictly *in the brain* (Sloman & Fernbach, 2017). If the scientific approach imagined by modernity was based on the belief in truth and objectivity, on the other hand, the current perspectives are rather tributary to postmodernity. Instead of truth, rationality, the cognitive autonomy of the subject, we discover relativism, ideological enslavement, science as socio-cultural construct.

Scientific concepts such as *quantum gravitation*, *dark matter* or *dark energy* could be understood, in a postmodern way, as socio-cultural constructs. Such a way of conceiving scientific terminology seriously affects its core, and its credibility. The autonomy of research, the competence of scientists, the integrity of the scientific approach, all of these are vulnerable to what we may call *ideological contamination*. “If scientists are funded to produce specific results by government or business, the integrity and thus utility of their results will be diminished.” (Steel & Wolters, 2018, p. 171) The assumption of a possible decline of the scientific ideal could be also translated into the fact that values and ideology influence the public perception of science. The public outside the area of competence begins to see differently how the scientists participate in the decision-making process of the political bill, how they interact with political agenda. Even the scientific community faces controversies regarding the main elements of their own agenda: climate change, global warming, genetically modified organisms, research on Stem cells, vaccination etc. The controversies are related to the way scientists embrace one political doctrine or another, and this this political partisanship of

science leads to what David Wallace-Wells calls “scientific reticence” of the public (Wallace-Wells, 2019, p. 149).

The ideological vulnerability of science and its possible “political contamination” through and with the help of technology represents an extremely risky scenario: in addition to a virtual decline of trust in the rationality of science, it opens the way to major dangers. And if we still don’t want to be suspected of technophobia or unfounded skepticism towards the ideological neutrality of science, we can, at least, admit that today, more than ever, scientific knowledge has a pronounced contingent character. At the same time, we can lucidly analyze the idea that the theoretical architecture of science, beyond its practical, immediate needs, could be related to technology and can easily be incorporated into the strategies that make up the political agenda. We questioned the thesis of modernity according to which science is able to offer an objective image of reality and a corpus of knowledge that are *value-free*, obtained exclusively through empirical methods and successive testing of hypotheses. The conviction about truth and objectivity weakens in the absence of evidence regarding the transparency and autonomy of the scientific approach.

The scientific theories that gives power and influence to political statements are not at all immune to controversy and criticism. Some of these theories and practices tend to abandon the Enlightenment ideal of objectivity, sacrificing ethics and integrity on the altar of mercantilism. It is hard to deny that both research programs and theoretical constructions are funded by and through political decisions. Research objectives and themes could be discreetly aligned with policies dictated by pecuniary interests which are less or not at all visible to the public eye. As Karl Raimund Popper warned us, even scientists are vulnerable to errors and pseudo-truths, trying to establish their own dogmas or tenets. Scientifical conjectures could also involve hidden prejudices and/or biases, also political engagement that casts doubt on the ethical character of the intellectual endeavor. Confiscated by ideology, science tends to depreciate its own value, becoming at most a story or a modern myth of a stirred socio-cultural context.

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