Stef Craps

Jeff Nichols's *Take Shelter* (2011)

Released in 2011, *Take Shelter* is an American feature film written and directed by Jeff Nichols and starring Michael Shannon and Jessica Chastain.[1] Set in LaGrange, Ohio, it tells the story of a family man and construction worker, called Curtis LaForche (Shannon), who is plagued by a series of apocalyptic nightmares and visions. He starts to believe that he is developing paranoid schizophrenia, the illness with which his now-institutionalized mother was diagnosed when she was a similar age and which he has feared inheriting his whole life. At the same time, he becomes increasingly obsessed with the need to shelter his family – his wife Samantha (Chastain) and their hearing-impaired young daughter Hannah – from the coming storm that he cannot help thinking his terrifying dreams and hallucinations signal. Foremost among the protective measures he takes to keep his family safe is the renovation and expansion of the tornado shelter in his backyard, which he can ill afford and which causes him to lose his job and his health insurance, as a result of which Hannah cannot have the cochlear implant surgery she was scheduled to undergo. The question of whether Curtis is a prophet or mentally disturbed drives the film and remains unresolved until the epilogue, when his premonitions turn out to be true as an actual end-of-the-world storm is about to hit.

Take Shelter captures many of the anxieties of living in the post-9/11, post-Katrina and post-financial crisis USA, thanks to the 'flexible metaphor' of Curtis's apocalyptic visions.[2] Increasing in violence and intensity as the film progresses, they take the form of thunderstorms, twisters, flash floods,

1   *Take Shelter*, dir. Jeff Nichols (Hydraulx Entertainment, 2011).
2   Agnes Woolley, '"There's a Storm Coming!": Reading the Threat of Climate Change in Jeff Nichols's *Take Shelter*', *ISLE: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* 21/1 (2014), 174–91, 177.

Figure 8. Swarms of menacing birds. Michael Shannon in *Take Shelter*, dir. Jeff Nichols (Hydraulx Entertainment, 2011).

motor-oil-like rain, swarms of menacing birds and attacks by the family dog and zombie-like strangers as well as people close to him (Figure 8). They can be interpreted as relating to pervasive fears about the threat of terrorism, economic precarity, the implosion of the American dream and environmental devastation caused by climate change. Like several of Nichols's other films, *Take Shelter* can also be seen to explore the crisis of contemporary masculinity through Curtis's gradual loss of control over his family's financial, physical and emotional well-being, and his ever more desperate and self-destructive actions in response to a world becoming unhinged. A tempting rationalization that the film provides for Curtis's disturbing dreams and hallucinations, by drawing attention to the history of mental illness in his family, is that they are signs of an impending mental breakdown. Afraid that he is starting to lose his grip on reality like his mother before him, Curtis seeks medical help and counselling. *Take Shelter* spends considerable time depicting the realities of mental illness, including the hold of fantasy, the stigma associated with mental health problems, diagnostic difficulties, the dearth of providers and the high cost of mental healthcare.

Even so, the literal reading of Curtis's apocalyptic visions, as unsettling portents of catastrophic climate change rather than symbols of mental disturbance, is the one that ultimately prevails. They prefigure the extreme and erratic weather conditions of the climate-changed future in store for us if not already upon us, such as severe hurricanes, torrential downpours and devastating

floods, as well as hinting at the collapse of human civilization that climate change could bring about (with society overrun by zombies). Reminiscent of a Cold War-era fallout shelter purporting to offer refuge from nuclear war, the state-of-the-art storm cellar that Curtis builds in his backyard scales up the significance of his visions beyond the local context of small-town Ohio, suggesting the planetary proportions of the terrifying storm that he believes to be coming, as well as its nuclear-level destructive force.

Figure 9. Protecting Hannah. Michael Shannon and Tova Stewart in *Take Shelter*, dir. Jeff Nichols (Hydraulx Entertainment, 2011).

Moreover, by putting Curtis's anxiety about Hannah at the centre of most of his hallucinations, where she is often in grave danger of attack or abduction, the film plays right into current fears about climate change: to the extent that they allow themselves to think about such matters at all, parents are painfully aware that their children will in all likelihood bear the brunt of climate change (Figure 9).[3] While *Take Shelter* does not include any explicit discussion of human activities' producing climate change, the phenomenon's anthropogenic nature is implied by the greasy, yellow rain that is repeatedly shown falling on Curtis's hands, which links the unusual weather he experiences to the world's addiction to oil (Figure 10). The film's focus on the drilling work Curtis does

3   E. Ann Kaplan, *Climate Trauma: Foreseeing the Future in Dystopian Film and Fiction* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2016), 44.

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for a living similarly ties the changes in the climate revealed in his dreams and hallucinations to human exploitation of the Earth's resources.[4]

Figure 10. Greasy, yellow rain falling. Michael Shannon in *Take Shelter*, dir. Jeff Nichols (Hydraulx Entertainment, 2011).

However, in marked contrast to most cli-fi films (and novels, for that matter), *Take Shelter* is set in the present rather than in a future world ravaged by climate change. Unlike Roland Emmerich's *The Day After Tomorrow* (2004) and many of the mainstream films dealing with climate change that have followed in its wake, Nichols's film steers clear of the prevalent post-apocalyptic or dystopian mode – or, at least, evokes it only in the dream and hallucinatory sequences. Instead, it opts to dramatize the pervasive culture of denial that refuses to acknowledge, let alone take action against, the impending environmental disaster. *Take Shelter* can be seen to denounce contemporary society's failure to register the threat of climate change and address it effectively by turning the tables on the community around Curtis and suggesting that in reality it, rather than he, is afflicted with a kind of madness: the insanity of denial, apathy and inaction in the face of climate catastrophe. His friends' and family's imperviousness to Curtis's visions, which are outside the realm of everyday life, and their bemused, embarrassed and dismissive reactions to his experiences and prophecies intimate that they are unable or unwilling to face the 'inconvenient truth' that Curtis

4   Woolley, 'There's a Storm Coming!', 184.

senses and whose messenger he becomes. Thus, without preaching, the film delivers a wake-up call to audiences to open their minds to the reality of climate change and the urgent need for effective action to avert its worst impacts.

Take Shelter achieves this effect through its clever play with genre. With a two-hour-plus running time, the film is a slow-moving psychological thriller that skilfully incorporates elements of horror, disaster film and family drama. It has a brooding, Hitchcockian atmosphere, creating persistent feelings of unease, foreboding and dread that intensify as the plot progresses. Sharing Curtis's viewpoint throughout the film, the viewer participates in his struggle to distinguish between vision and reality. *Take Shelter* deliberately blurs the boundaries between Curtis's dream-world and his waking life. The film's narrative present slides into Curtis's fantasies so subtly and slyly that the viewer is unsure, at first, as to the ontological status of the storms, zombies, etc. with which the protagonist is confronted there. Sounds and visuals are often maintained across Curtis's visions and the film's diegetic reality, thus confusing the dividing line between them. Sometimes his dreams also leave a physical mark that carries over into his waking life, as when he continues to feel the pain of a dog bite that happened in one of his dreams throughout the rest of the day, or when he discovers that he has wet his bed on waking up from a diluvial dream.

Figure 11. Taking shelter. Jessica Chastain, Tova Stewart and Michael Shannon in *Take Shelter*, dir. Jeff Nichols (Hydraulx Entertainment, 2011).

The viewer is denied the satisfaction of domesticating the film by interpreting it as a conventional psychological drama, an exploration of one man's personal journey towards acceptance of his mental issues. While it seems to invite such a reassuring interpretation, *Take Shelter* eventually cuts the ground from under it. The film uses the device of the false ending to that effect. At a social function that Samantha insists they attend in an attempt to restore a sense of normalcy to their lives, Curtis gets into a fight with a former co-worker and unleashes a verbal tirade on everyone present. He announces that a devastating storm is coming and insists that none of them are prepared for it. His words are met with an embarrassed silence, as the community evidently regards them as the ranting of a madman. As if to vindicate Curtis's warning, this dramatic scene is followed by an episode in which a powerful storm sweeps through the town, sending Curtis and his family into the shelter (Figure 11). However, they emerge the next morning to a bright and sunny day with only some branches to clear up: the apocalypse has not happened, suggesting that Curtis was deluded after all and needs help. This ending, which 'places the film firmly in the realm of psychological drama', with 'the family find[ing] renewed strength in Curtis's acknowledgment of his problems', is subverted, though, in the final scene, which adds yet another twist.[5] During the subsequent family vacation in Myrtle Beach, recommended by a psychiatrist, a massive storm is seen gathering over the ocean: not another of Curtis's hallucinations – it is shown from Hannah's and Samantha's viewpoints as well – but a genuine apocalyptic climate event, just as he had prophesied.[6] In the final instance, then, the film is revealed to have been a 'supernatural thriller' all along.[7]

Take Shelter enjoyed widespread critical acclaim and won numerous awards, including several at the Cannes Film Festival. However, these plaudits did not translate into equivalent commercial success, as the film, made at a production cost of $5 million, brought in only a modest $1.7 million at the US box office and $3.1 million worldwide.[8] Reviewers were effusive in their praise for the acting performances, particularly that of Michael Shannon, with

5   Woolley, 'There's a Storm Coming!', 188.
6   Kaplan, *Climate Trauma*, 53.
7   Woolley, 'There's a Storm Coming!', 188.
8   These figures are derived from IMDb.com.

whom Nichols frequently collaborates. While the film's environmental theme was widely noted, it is mostly academic critics who give it pride of place in their analyses. In fact, reviewers and regular viewers often express puzzlement at the ending, which, as we have seen, is crucial to the meaning of the film. Extensive and in-depth ecocritical readings are provided by Agnes Woolley and E. Ann Kaplan, who emphasize the originality of the film's way of engaging with climate change. Woolley contrasts *Take Shelter* favourably with cli-fi films of the post-apocalyptic variety, which she criticizes for their 'lack of transformative value'.[9] Kaplan worries, though, that what she (mis)perceives as the film's silence on the human causation of climate change might hamper its ability to act as a 'wake-up call' and raise public awareness of the issue.[10]

As Kaplan demonstrates, *Take Shelter* can be fruitfully analysed through the lens of her concept of 'Pretraumatic Stress Syndrome', by which she means the traumatizing impact of future (rather than past) catastrophic events and which she sees as a defining condition of human beings living in the current era of climate change.[11] The same idea, of a psychic wounding produced by the anticipation of violence, has been put forward by Paul Saint-Amour, albeit in relation to an interwar period haunted by the prospect of a second world war even more devastating than the first one.[12] Nichols's film also lends itself to a reading through Timothy Clark's recent work on the need for the creative and critical imagination to rise to the challenge posed by the vast scale and complexity of climate change.[13] His notion of 'Anthropocene disorder', for example, can be productively applied to the self-enclosed community in *Take Shelter*, which exemplifies the 'alarming and pervasive "denialism"' that passes for 'normal life' these days.[14] In fact, the film's fictional community invites comparison with 'Bygdaby', a pseudonym for the actual rural community in

9   Woolley, 'There's a Storm Coming!', 181.
10   Kaplan, *Climate Trauma*, 56.
11   Kaplan, *Climate Trauma*, xix.
12   Paul Saint-Amour, *Tense Future: Modernism, Encyclopedic Form, Total War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 7–8.
13   Timothy Clark, *Ecocriticism on the Edge: The Anthropocene as a Threshold Concept* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015).
14   Clark, *Ecocriticism on the Edge*, 139–73, 160.

western Norway that Kari Norgaard took as the subject of her sociological study of climate change denial.[15] This, in turn, could lead to wider discussions on how citizens in industrialized countries are (not) responding to alarming predictions from climate scientists, and on the role that aesthetic practices can play in breaking through the prevailing paralysis and motivating people to take meaningful action on climate change.

15   Kari Marie Norgaard, *Living in Denial: Climate Change, Emotions, and Everyday Life* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2011).