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Take Shelter

Dereck Daschke
Truman State University, Kirksville, Missouri, ddaschke@truman.edu

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Abstract

This is a film review of *Take Shelter* (2011) directed by Jeff Nichols.

Apocalyptic predictions could be said to represent a battle of certitudes – those predicting the coming end due to divine revelation and/or inspired textual interpretation certain that it will happen; the rest of humanity, due to apocalypse's one hundred percent failure rate thus far, certain that it will not. Each camp therefore must also explain away the other's false certitude. To the Endtimers, the disbelievers are arrogant and close-minded; to the disbelievers, the Endtimers are often thought to be, in a word, crazy. Yet as the recent example of Harold Camping and his Endtime predictions of May 21 and October 21, 2011 illustrated, if such prophecies were merely ludicrous notions proffered by the mentally unstable, they would not electrify the culture as these pronouncements routinely do (and as the "Mayan apocalypse" year 2012 promises to continue to do as well). Clearly, the certainty with which apocalyptic predictions are made inspire even unbelievers to take them seriously to a degree, even as much as they are openly dismissed and ridiculed. After all, they seem to ask themselves, what if the crazy people are right *this* time? It has to happen only once.

The idea that the "crazies" might actually be the sane ones has played out in many films, and typically the filmmaker directs the audience toward one resolution, then the other, then back again. This dynamic plays out in *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, *12 Monkeys*, *Frailty*, *Field of Dreams*, *The Rapture*, and many, many others. (It is a dramatic device in most any conspiracy thriller, as well – just because you're paranoid, it doesn't mean they're not out to get you.) A few such films, in fact, will focus the narrative drama on the "believer's" mental health itself. Such an approach makes explicit the thesis, often proffered to explain (or explain away) apocalyptic visions, that these revelations about the end of the world are evidence of acute mental illness.[1] Whereas one recent film, Lars von Trier's *Melancholia*, presented a more indirect connection

between severe depression and the fear of (or hope for?) the end of the world, Jeff Nichols's *Take Shelter* situates his film directly in the conflict of realities symptomatic of paranoid schizophrenia.

A construction supervisor, husband, and father of a deaf daughter, Curtis LaForche (Michael Shannon) begins to be plagued by horrifyingly realistic dreams that either depict an impending storm or find Curtis caught in the middle of one. The storms are massive and uncanny, producing unrelenting lightning strikes, an oily rain, flocks of erratic birds, tornadoes, and, worst of all, violent behavior in the people he loves (as well as his dog). Nichols relies on the immediacy of film's images to put the audience in Curtis's position, as the viewer does not know from one scene to the next what is real and what is a dream. Especially in the early exposition of the film, the viewer is forced to share Curtis's confusion over what, exactly, is happening. A scene begins in a relatively mundane way, and then becomes more chaotic and horrifying very quickly. Before Curtis – and the audience – really has a chance to work out what is happening, the film cuts to Curtis, stunned but unharmed, in the middle of his otherwise ordinary day. Stoic working-class American man that he is, he tries to carry on as normally as possible, hiding the incidents from his family even as he makes decisions that he cannot adequately explain to them, such as fencing off his dog in the back yard or spending time in their tornado shelter. But as the dreams become more disturbing and violent – and as they apparently start to creep into his waking life as well – he is forced to seek professional help. He first consults with the family physician, who recommends a good, but expensive, therapist a few hours' drive away. Curtis opts to see a local counselor, but also goes to speak with his mother, who had a psychotic break in her thirties. Curtis himself is thirty-five, and it is clear that his terror is not just due to the content of the dreams. His greatest fear may be about to be realized,

and he may be unable to do anything about it, let alone to keep his promise to his family to never leave them, as his mother did as she succumbed to the disease.

Shannon's portrayal of an ordinary man caught between forces he barely understands yet must address as best he can walks the line between abject terror and grim determination to do what needs to be done, a conflicted sentiment that would be familiar to most of the great prophets of the Western religious traditions. Noah, Abraham, Moses, Jesus, and Mohammad all faced situations where the fate of the world rested on their ability to confront both their own fears and the hostile and uncomprehending attitudes of friends, family, and the majority of ordinary people of their times. Curtis, in fact, finds himself confronting two diametrically opposed fears simultaneously. His dreams and hallucinations represent either the onset of schizophrenia, and thus he pursues a medical/psychological course of treatment – or they represent exactly what they depict: a coming storm, unprecedented, inexplicable, and deadly. As in the visions of the ancient prophets, as absurd as the message may seem, the recipient of the revelation is compelled to act according to it; it is more real than dream. In Curtis's case, the dreams linger into waking life, and thus he has to address them in his everyday life. Like Noah building his ark, Curtis sets about expanding his tornado shelter; like Abraham carrying Isaac up Mount Moriah, Curtis is willing to sacrifice his family's financial security and his daughter's chance for a cochlear implant just for the possibility that his dreams are, indeed, prophecy, and that he is given this foreknowledge in order to protect his loved ones. Even as he begins to doubt his sanity, the conviction in his course of action imbued in him by his dreams offers him no other choice. Only when he is certain in the reality of the impending apocalypse does he experience any kind of psychological relief.

So, as is often the case in a film based on this central ambiguity, the climax allows the "believer" to commit fully to the implications of the supernatural reality that has disrupted his life. After a series of horrible setbacks, Curtis experiences catharsis by finally embodying the prophetic role his visions have been driving him toward, confronting the pity of his neighbors with a jeremiad straight out of the Old Testament. "There's a storm coming…" he begins, echoing apocalyptic screeds since time immemorial, before predicting the doom of everyone in the room in front of him. As it happens, a storm does come, and, like Ray Kinsella in *Field of Dreams*, his certitude has inspired the trust of his family to the degree that they follow him down the path his vision has created, in this case the tornado shelter. At this point, the viewer has no idea what Nichols's resolution will be; one is once again thrust into the position of awkward agnosticism that the apocalyptic moment of truth seems to elicit. And appropriately enough, just as an apocalypse's failure ever and always spawns new hope for the End, Nichols's final scenes manage to affirm the reality of the world as it is, only to then undermine our certainty in it.

Take Shelter may not be comfortable viewing for everyone, and not just because of its disturbing imagery and relentlessly tense *mise-en-scène*, which is ratcheted up throughout by the omnipresence of loud and dangerous heavy machinery at Curtis's work, home, and doctor's visits. It is unforgettably troubling because of the effectiveness with which it places the audience in the same position of its protagonist, never knowing what is true or real, but both alternatives are horrifying and world-ending in their own way.