A portrait of contemporary anxiety in Take Shelter

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Written and directed by Jeff Nichols.

"I think that's the best compliment you can give a man: take a look at his life and say, 'That's good.'" A version of what happens when such a life is threatened, or perceived to be threatened, is offered in *Take Shelter*, the second feature from independent filmmaker Jeff Nichols (*Shotgun Stories*, 2007). Written in the summer of 2008, only weeks before the near collapse of the global economy, the film, in its emotional and physical texture, conveys social or quasi-social foreboding.

Take Shelter opens with storm clouds gathering over the flat terrain of a northern Ohio town. Curtis (Michael Shannon), the chief of a sand mining crew, is a dedicated worker and devoted husband to wife Samantha (Jessica Chastain) and father to small daughter Hannah (Tova Stewart), who is deaf.

Curtis is plagued by recurring nightmares about a cataclysm the likes of which the world has never known. From brown, oily rain falling out of the sky to menacing funnel-like formations on the horizon, the images of impending doom become more threatening. The dreams' terrors also include violent encounters with beings close to him—the family dog, his long-time co-worker and eventually his wife. Physical manifestations, such as injuries, are present when he awakes. As his premonitions get stronger, Curtis gives away his dog, asks for his co-worker to be reassigned and frets over his feelings toward his wife.

The sense that he might be losing his mind does not stop him from pursuing his obsession: a bomb shelter in his backyard. He manically pushes on, despite the fact he gets fired for borrowing heavy equipment from his employer without permission. His joblessness means the termination of his health benefits, and therefore the inability to pay his child's hefty medical expenses. Desperate, he visits his institutionalized mother (Kathy Baker) to gain insight into her mental illness, the onset of which occurred in her mid-thirties—Curtis' own age.

He depletes his savings, borrowing money from the bank to realize the shelter project, whose finishing touches include gas masks and other extreme survival gear. Meanwhile, Samantha herself has dreams, but of a much needed family vacation. Towards this end, she saves the pittance she earns from selling handmade goods at her regular booth at a flea market, where bargaining always favors the most aggressive buyer.

Eventually Curtis and Samantha seek professional help for what both are convinced is his delusional state. But the film's finale puts a question mark over that assumption.

In the film's production notes, director Nichols talks about wanting to access his own "free-floating anxiety [that] was part economic, part just growing up, but it mainly came from the fact that I finally had things in my life that I did not want to lose … The question for Curtis becomes, what is he protecting them [his wife and child] from, the storm or himself? I wrote *Take Shelter* because I believed there was a feeling out in the world that was palpable. It was an anxiety that was very real in my life, and I had the notion it was very real in the lives of other Americans as well as other people around the world. The film was a way for me to talk about that fear and that anxiety."

Nichols does succeed in creating a disturbing film that taps into increased levels of social and individual psychological stress. The fact that he has chosen to focus on a working class community, where fears of homelessness, joblessness and a lack of heath care are

very real and urgent, must have some significance. Not every anxiety is created dramatically equal. He might have chosen to depict a rich Manhattanite anguishing over a diminishing stock portfolio, itself of course an entirely legitimate subject given the appropriate treatment, but he did not. (The Russian Marxist Plekhanov cites British art critic John Ruskin to the effect that "a maiden" singing "of her lost love" and "a miser" singing "of his lost money" are quite different artistic propositions.)

Furthermore, Nichols is careful in his detailing of life in the small town. As well, the more mundane facets of Curtis and Samantha's marriage seem authentic. And the talented cast skillfully supports the film's atmosphere of trepidation, even as it spins out into the irrational. The cinematography makes its own eerie and poetic contribution.

The question, nonetheless, arises: why couldn't or didn't Nichols deal with the issue of popular disquiet and apprehension more directly? From both an artistic and social vantage point, the metaphor of an unearthly apocalypse is not entirely successful. What was its great attraction?

One senses the filmmaker felt a certain nervousness about concretely addressing the sources and circumstances of the current social malaise. Illogical fears and mental illness exist and are problems. However, these are not the film's main concerns, or at least, so its denouement implies.

The disaster allegory is useful to a point and, in fact, speaks to various social, ecological and infrastructural realities. But only to a point, after which it tends to hold back a more precise understanding of the social breakdown and more fully developed treatment of the personalities and dilemmas involved.

That the youthful filmmaker (born in 1978), unsurprisingly, has foggy conceptions about the present state of affairs in the US comes across in an interview with ifc.news: "We all carry these fears and doubts. They will always be there, whether it's fear of the government collapsing, or the environment, or you can't pay your bills, whatever." As a solution, he goes on to suggest rather weakly that people need to get back on track with each other by communicating better.

This is not good enough. And a one-size-fits-all anxiety does not accurately represent real, existing anxiety, which always has a particular social and historical component. One individual's concerns, in fact, may be the source of another's relief. The fear of a worker about losing his job stands in opposition, so to speak, to the unease of a major shareholder whose holdings may diminish in value *unless* layoffs take place.

In the interview, Nichols says, "We'll always have something to worry about." However, an apocalypse, unless it literally means the end of the world and all its inhabitants, will have an uneven impact on different social layers. The difficulty is, the filmmaker's disaster designed to be *vaguely* appropriate for everyone is *entirely and exactly* appropriate for no one.

Nichols wants his audience to fill in the blanks on a generic "stress" questionnaire. His concerns are legitimate and pressing, but tossing the ball to the spectator in this fashion is something of an easy way out and weakens the impact of the work. The filmmaker, in my opinion, needs to have a more precise notion of what he is responding to and what it means.

Furthermore, while a serious crisis inevitably produces irrationality and overreaction, not everyone becomes unhinged like Curtis. In fact, that is not the prevalent response, or people would be so damaged that social change would be impossible.

Take Shelter genuinely communicates something about an increasingly stressed and insecure population, but stops short of painting a picture in rich and more specific social colors.