

Midnight Special: “Shining the light” on unfreedom in America

Joanne Laurier
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Written and directed by Jeff Nichols

“Midnight Special” is a traditional folk song, popularized by the legendary Huddie “Lead Belly” Ledbetter in a 1934 recording made in Angola Prison in Louisiana. Its refrain speaks of the light from a passing train beaming into the balladeer’s jail cell, a metaphor for the hope of escape from a life behind bars.

The image of illumination from an external source bringing salvation is a key motif in Jeff Nichols’ *Midnight Special*, a disturbing science fiction thriller that conveys deep anxiety about the state of the world.

Each of Nichols’ previous efforts, *Shotgun Stories* (2007), *Take Shelter* (2011) and *Mud* (2012), in distinct ways, tapped into intense levels of psychological and social stress. In his latest movie, Nichols uses a disaster parable, but in an ambiguous, quasi-mystical manner, thus rendering the denouement largely ineffective.

Midnight Special opens in a cheap motel room in Eldorado, Texas, where the sunlight has been blocked from entering by cardboard taped over the windows. Roy (Michael Shannon) and Lucas (Joel Edgerton), a state trooper, have just rescued Roy’s eight-year-old son Alton (Jaeden Lieberher) from the clutches of Calvin Meyer (Sam Shepard), the guru of a religious cult housed on a ranch in rural Texas.

It is apparently urgent that the rescuers both evade Calvin’s gunmen and reach an unknown destination in a few days’ time. As Alton, who wears swim goggles, must shield his eyes from the light, the trio travel in darkness. It is soon clear that the boy is endowed with special powers.

Alton has been introduced by Lucas to comic books in which super-heroes vanquish society’s foes. He diligently pores over them as if they were a guide to the use of his own extraordinary gifts.

Meanwhile, the FBI raids the ranch, which has been

under surveillance because Calvin’s sermons have somehow been encrypted with data by Alton that supposedly endanger national security. “You all don’t know what you’re dealing with, do you?” exclaims Calvin to the government operatives. There is no code or secret the boy cannot penetrate.

Roy, Lucas and Alton careen along dark, empty roads in foreboding terrains. They eventually pick up Alton’s mother, Sarah (Kirsten Dunst). At a run-down gas station Alton’s uses his abilities to dissolve a spy satellite into fiery streams. (FBI: “What could cause a satellite to go out of orbit?”) The eight-year-old is number one on the most wanted list of the FBI, NSA, Homeland Security and the military, and they collectively step up their efforts to capture him.

Nichols sets *Midnight Special*, like much of his work, in America’s decaying, depressed wastelands. The imagery and sparse narrative for the most part exude dread and paranoia. In one scene, as the father races to catch up with Alton’s abductors, his facial expression is set in laser beam-like focus. (Nichols: “Mike Shannon [is] behind the steering wheel—he can’t do anything, he’s powerless. To me, it’s a much more intense thing to watch than a well-executed chase scene.”) Roy is obsessed with protecting Alton, whose eyesight and hearing are so sensitive they need to be disabled, from an off-kilter society and its militaristic guardians.

In a chilling scene, the diminutive boy is shackled and seated in a blindingly white room. He is being interrogated by a large group from the FBI, NSA et al. (Adam Driver plays the NSA’s lead agent.) “Are you a weapon?,” they bark at him.

All in all, Nichols depicts a social landscape in which sinister religious lunatics jockey for power with even more sinister agents of spying and repression.

Meanwhile, in the background, the general population faces narrowing economic prospects and various states of non-freedom. Everyone nervously awaits miraculous deliverance.

In creating, with considerable skill, these drab and claustrophobic circumstances, Nichols gives himself the possibility of exposing something important about American life. But the vagueness of his ideas and themes is a big problem. In response to a question from interviewer Alissa Wilkinson about his interest in people “who have strong systems of belief,” Nichols replied that “faith in the unknown” was present in *Midnight Special*.

He continued: “And then you have faux-systems of belief. You have either the government’s belief in the boy or this religious group’s belief in the boy. They all come from the wrong place—they come from what that group wants out of the boy. ... The only ones that are even attempting to try to understand are his parents, and this group of people with them. So it’s a movie about the nature of belief, what’s real belief and what’s this fake, dogmatic belief that a lot of times we’re raised with.”

Nichols seeks to puncture “faux-systems of belief” in the powers that be and the existing order. He is attuned to certain political realities, such as global spying, torture, black sites and military occupation (At one point, like a prisoner in Guantanamo, Roy wears an orange jumpsuit.). But the director’s opposition is fragmented, individualistic and operates almost exclusively on the emotional plane. His criticisms are blunted.

Moreover, the answer to the unfolding disaster of American society in *Midnight Special*—if one takes the film at face value—is some sort of elevated, extra-planetary existence, which exists nowhere at all. In another example of wishful thinking, Alton possesses the ability to unscramble the plans and dismantle the weapons of the authorities. Fortunately for the FBI, CIA and NSA, he is a super-hero belonging to another time and place.

Midnight Special attempts to “shine a light” on an angst-ridden population hemmed in by limited opportunities and persecuted by a repressive establishment. In the end, however, Nichols’ minimalistic approach expresses his general bewilderment and pessimism more than anything else.

He therefore opts for the *deus ex machina* finale, i.e., for a supernatural power that intervenes in a seemingly hopeless state of affairs.



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