



There is a storm coming!

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This video essay explores the storm as a metaphor and structuring device in the 2011 film *Take Shelter* and links it to the U.S. housing crisis, extractivism, and the climate unconscious.





Creators' Statement

The most memorable—and shocking—scene in *Take Shelter* (Jeff Nichols, 2011) takes place at a community event. Michael Shannon's character Curtis yells: "There is a storm coming! Like nothing you have ever seen! And not one of you is prepared for it!" The lines are meant as a warning to his friends and acquaintances—a call to action—but they feel like a threat from someone on the brink of a mental breakdown. Shannon's intense performance and towering physical presence make Curtis at once a menacing and vulnerable character, crumbling and diminished by his fears. The boundaries between his anxiety-fueled nightmares and waking life begin to blur in the movie, as his mind keeps stubbornly circling back to the threat of a coming storm and the need to construct a shelter to protect his wife and hearing-impaired daughter.

Our video essay "There is a storm coming" takes on literal and metaphorical meanings in *Take Shelter*. The metaphor of a storm elegantly evokes all kinds of coming dangers, as well as the obvious allusions to extreme weather disasters. Scholars Agnes Woolley and Glen Donnar also refer to the sentence in their respective academic articles about the threat of climate crisis and the combination of financial crisis, masculine anxieties, and vulnerable homes that the movie negotiates. Our video essay also takes its cue from Curtis's exclamation and probes its many different implications. We interpret the storm metaphorically, signifying the multiple threats that haunt Curtis's nightmares and waking life, including the U.S. housing crisis, extractivism, and the climate crisis. As we focus on this rich metaphor, we also try to tease out and engage with the form and aesthetic of *Take Shelter* in our videographic work.

Along with Curtis, viewers experience his increasingly severe nightmares and attendant uncertainties about his mental stability. Like a storm that consolidates

different components (wind, precipitation, electricity) into a coherent entity, *Take Shelter* itself assumes the form of a spiral or cyclone, whirling in circles of increasing intensity and resulting in distress and disorientation. The film depicts the gradual degeneration of Curtis's mental health as a nightmare-fueled amalgamation of anxieties erodes his grasp of reality; day by day he wakes gasping in fear, consumed by dread. *Take Shelter* replicates this process by cycling through repeated scenes and motifs and thus echoes the dream logic that contributes to Curtis's (and viewers') suspicion that he might suffer from paranoid schizophrenia, like his institutionalized mother. Our video essay lingers on close-up and low-angle shots of Curtis and juxtaposes them with scenes that show his nightmares and how he wakes up from them. The spiraling structure and the repetition of certain shots and scenes condenses *Take Shelter's* form, but also leads us to ever more urgent interpretations of the storm.

Many cli-fi (climate fiction) movies are concerned with ensuring the survival of the human species and/or the planet through scientific responses and tech solutions, as we discuss in our other collaborative video essay, "[Climate Fictions, Dystopias, and Human Futures](#)". This cycle of films makes an ideal object of study for ecocritical perspectives that have developed in the disciplines of film, television, and media studies at the intersection of the environmental humanities (e.g., Weik von Mossner 2014; Kaplan 2016). Here, we contribute to that ongoing research with a case study of how one unique cli-fi film, *Take Shelter*, explores the immediate psychological repercussions of a climate crisis that is not yet tangible but already happening. And it is not the only crisis: it intersects with other man-made crises of late capitalism and the Anthropocene. Yet, even as the movie develops psychological complexities new to cli-fi, it propagates many of the same tired tropes of the genre in its focus on a white male protagonist and the protection of the nuclear family. *Take Shelter* thus plays into the discourse of white male decline and vulnerability (under threat from feminism, Black Lives Matter, financialization, etc.), while failing to challenge the default whiteness and anthropocentrism of North American movies (e.g., Dyer 1997; Ray 2021). The film's dependence on these cli-fi clichés perpetuates the fallacy that climate-related anxieties and pre-trauma of what Julia Leyda calls "the climate unconscious" can only be imagined from a white, male, heteronormative point of view (Leyda 2016; 2021; 2023).

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Biographies

Julia Leyda is Professor in Film Studies in the Department of Art and Media Studies at the Norwegian University of Science and Technology (NTNU), Trondheim, where she is a founder of the NTNU Environmental Humanities Research Group. She teaches and conducts research in and across the disciplines including the environmental humanities, intersectional feminist cultural studies, and film/television/media studies. She has written, edited, or co-edited six books, most recently, *Reframing Todd Haynes: Feminism's Indelible Mark* (Duke UP, 2022); her latest book, *Anthroposcreens: Mediating the Climate Unconscious* (Cambridge UP, 2023), focuses on the climate unconscious in contemporary U.S. and Norwegian television and film.

Kathleen Loock is Professor of American Studies and Media Studies at Leibniz University Hannover and director of the Emmy Noether Research Group "Hollywood Memories: Cinematic Remaking and the Construction of Global Movie Generations," funded by the German Research Foundation (DFG). Her research focuses on Hollywood's remaking

practice, seriality, and the role memory and cultural repetition perform on the levels of identity formation and for the maintenance of imagined communities. She has published on remakes, sequels, reboots, and seriality in film and television and written, edited, or co-edited seven special issues and books on these topics, including her latest book *Hollywood Remaking: How Film Remakes, Sequels, and Franchises Shape Industry and Culture* (UC Press, 2024).

Review by Adam Ochonicky, University of Wisconsin Oshkosh

One of the many things that I find so compelling about *Take Shelter* (2011) is its overtly interpretable nature. By design, writer/director Jeff Nichols challenges viewers to project meanings onto his film's often unsettling imagery and ambiguous ending. In their videographic essay, Julia Leyda and Kathleen Loock analyze *Take Shelter* via a pointedly immersive approach that replicates the film's own sense of psychological insularity. Here, Leyda and Loock illuminate several potential meanings of *Take Shelter*'s apocalyptic visions and situate the film within the larger context of the cli-fi (climate fiction) genre.

When initially identifying three primary topics of analysis in *Take Shelter*—the housing crisis, extractivism, climate change—Leyda and Loock utilize a four-panel grid onscreen. This straightforward technique visualizes the overlapping and sustained nature of troubled protagonist Curtis LaForche's (Michael Shannon) many anxieties. Of these three subjects, I found the detailed middle section on extractivism to be an especially essential addition to the bodies of scholarship on *Take Shelter* in particular and on American regionalism in general. Leyda and Loock interweave the specifics of Curtis's career in the mining industry with his paranoid construction of a backyard shelter. As they observe, Curtis's "seemingly irrational terror is . . . accompanied by images of extraction throughout the film." Further, Leyda and Loock discuss these fictional elements in relation to "hydraulic fracturing—or fracking—which is a controversial practice in many states, including Ohio, where *Take Shelter* is set." As a regional scholar, I appreciated this insightful connection of the film's Midwestern setting, Curtis's character profile, and the real-world impacts of extractivism.

Regarding the cli-fi genre context, Leyda and Loock provide a link to another of their recent video essays, entitled "Climate Fictions, Dystopias, and Human Futures," in the Creator's Statement. I also highly recommend watching this companion piece, which features larger contextual frameworks that Leyda and Loock purposefully omitted from their focused case study of *Take Shelter*. Together, these two video essays present viewers with contrasting and engaging approaches to studying cli-fi.

Review by Celia Sainz, University of Massachusetts Amherst

There is a storm coming! is a thought-provoking and insightful work that reflects on the multi-intersecting crisis of climate change in late capitalism depicted in the movie *Take Shelter* (2011), and highlights the limitations of Hollywood's representation of environmental anxieties through a white lens. Julia Leyda and Kathleen Loock organize their argument according to three main topics: the housing crisis, extractivism, and the climate unconscious; along with the mental health crisis that makes the Cassandra-like protagonist—as described by the authors—obsess over a storm in his prophetic dreams, representing the fear of the more-than-human. At the beginning of the piece, the themes are introduced through a quadriptych of images that are presented in a poetic game of appearance and disappearance. The sound of the clips merges seamlessly, rising and falling, and weaving together the four spheres of the crisis both aurally and visually.

In the first section, the piece explores the dismantling of the fantasy of the good life that Western white men have clung to, as well as the tearing down of one of the foundations of the American dream: the belief that house ownership will provide financial and environmental security. Leyda and Loock foreground the increasing anxiety experienced by individuals who have always occupied a privileged social position by interweaving images of the main character's elevated home with his diving into the subterranean shelter that he is building to protect himself and his family from the storm, like a downfall journey into madness and paranoia. The subtlety of that literal and metaphorical descent culminates with a scene that portrays a nightmare experienced by the protagonist, highlighting that the fears of encroachment into the confines of the home involve human and non-human forces.

In their statement, the authors explain that the video essay's style aims to mirror the aesthetic of the film *Take Shelter*, which itself emulates the effect of a storm in its structure of increasing intensity, anxiety, and urgency. The change of pace starts to be perceived halfway through the piece, with the tension escalating and the more frequent use of the shaky reddish transitions that accompany the feverish dreams of the main character. The authors skillfully draw a connection between the fear of the overwhelming power of the material forces embodied in the storm and the topic of extractivism in the second section. Through the juxtaposition of the tempest and the excavation activities with the oil rain, Leyda and Loock establish a correspondence between the two spatial metaphors of the movie: the downward motion of extractivism and the upward presence of the storm.

The third and final section of the video essay circles back to its most important point, namely the critique of the tendency of cli-fi Hollywood movies to filter climate change anxieties through a white perspective. Julia Leyda's concept of "the climate

unconscious” is persuasively exposed at the end of the video essay. While we look at the concerned expressions of the white protagonists, facing the storm, the voice draws our attention to the fact that the dominant focus on white narratives leaves out the reality of climate change that disproportionately impacts communities of color. The contrast between the images and the narrator powerfully transforms the absence of marginalized voices into a presence.

The video essay provides a panoramic view of several aspects that encompass the multiple vectors of the Anthropocene crisis. By analyzing a movie that could be classified within the “Nature Attacks” genre (Yacowar, 2012, p. 313), the authors dissect a sense of exposure that I connect with the work of Stacey Alaimo (2016). *There is a storm coming!* effectively shows how the Western conviction of impermeability that Alaimo reflects on is shattered quite literally by the storm that looms over the main character. Furthermore, the authors’ commentary on the housing crisis also speaks to Alaimo’s comment on the collapse of the home as “a bounded space, wrought by delusions of safety, fed by consumerism, and fueled by nationalist fantasies” (2016, p. 18). The piece’s focus on the oil rain that permeates the earth dialogues with Stephanie LeMenager’s concept of petroculture (2016), as oil’s material omnipresence in every aspect of our existence reaches the sky, like a godsent plague.

By highlighting various aspects and connections, the video essay presents a nuanced and compelling portrayal of the crisis depicted in the movie. The argument put forth in the piece would have been strengthened if the authors had included non-anthropocentric perspectives and drawn attention to their notable absence within mainstream narratives. Without losing the focus on social justice, references to approaches of material ecocriticism (Bennett, 2010) and multispecies studies (van Dooren et al., 2016) would have broadened the scope to include the assemblages that humans share with a great array of beings (animals but also plants, microorganisms, and so-called nonliving entities, like the storm). While the video essay represents a valuable contribution to the field of ecocriticism, the incorporation of non-anthropocentric perspectives would provide a crucial addition to the analysis as it would participate in breaking the logic of dominance that resides at the foundation of our current crisis: human exceptionalism.

In conclusion, Leyda and Loock’s video essay effectively brings to light the anxieties of our time, as well as the connections between late capitalism and the environmental crisis. Despite the absence of a non-anthropocentric perspective, their work is successful in revealing the problematic focus on the white, middle-class male perspective that overshadows the important connections in *Take Shelter*. Moreover, the video essay demonstrates how the film captures the subterranean presence of climate change in our minds and lives. Overall, it offers a valuable contribution to the field of ecocriticism.

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