"Has anyone seen this?": Imaginary Apocalypse in Jeff Nichols' *Take Shelter*

LAURA COPIER

In this essay, I will consider the following two films, which were released in the year 2011: on the one hand Lars von Trier's *Melancholia* and on the other hand Jeff Nichols' *Take Shelter*. Both films feature protagonists that are mentally unstable: *Melancholia*'s Justine (played by Kirsten Dunst) is plagued by depression and Curtis (Michael Shannon) in *Take Shelter* slowly succumbs to paranoid schizophrenia. Both films are characterized by endings that have been commonly described as apocalyptic. Also, these films share a protagonist who simultaneously fears and desires this apocalypse. *Melancholia* ends with the literal depiction: the destruction of the earth by the eponymous planet. *Take Shelter* builds up to a storm that fully materializes in the end. As a literal depiction, *Melancholia* is stunning, and quite unusual in its genre. The film fully delivers on its promise, the end of the world. As I will argue, this fully realized apocalyptic ending is a rare thing in cinema. However, it is *Take Shelter*'s more ambiguous apocalyptic ending that is more instructive when it comes to understanding the enduring appeal of apocalyptic narratives in general. As such, this film will serve as the main object in my discussion on the divergent manifestations of apocalyptic narrative, in particular the role of the end, in contemporary cinema.

Any discussion on the notion of the Apocalypse starts with a definition. The biblical, religious origin of the Apocalypse (here spelled with a capital A) refers to the Book of Revelation. It tells the tale of the end. Revelation, or as it also called, The Apocalypse of John, is a late first century CE text.[1] It is believed to be a scenario of God's final judgment on humanity. Apocalypse means a revelation, revealing (in Greek, *Apokalyptein*, to uncover, take the lid or veil off). Revelation is not the only apocalyptic narrative in the Bible.

There are other examples to be found, such as parts of Daniel (7–12), 4 Ezra, I Enoch and the apocryphal book of I Baruch. This has led to the general supposition among biblical scholars that there is an apocalyptic genre.

There is a difference, however, between the scholarly, academic conception of the notion of apocalypse and the popular idea. For the sake of terminological clarity, a three-fold distinction needs to be observed. As David E. Aune (1986) argues, there are "apocalypses" (as literature), "apocalyptic eschatology" (as a world view) and "apocalypticism" (as a socio-religious movement) (67). The three concepts are closely related to each other, however, their referents do not necessarily coincide. In the remainder of this article, I will focus on the literary aspects of apocalypses and how apocalypse as a genre is represented in popular culture.

In the popular conception, Apocalypse has become a synonym for doomsday, disaster, and the end. Although the biblical and academic definition and the popular notion of apocalypse are divergent, the apocalyptic as a genre is, according to Jon Paulien (2003), "very much alive and well in popular culture today" (158). The theme of the end is not just relevant within a religious context; it holds wider relevance not only for American, but also general culture.[2]

Narrating the End

Two disciplinary traditions, narrative theory and postmodern philosophy, engage with notions of time, temporality, and the question of the end. Although these traditions are assumed to be secular in character, their imagery and vocabulary have a distinct religious quality.

In his discussion on the importance of narrative, literary theorist Peter Brooks speaks

1. CE is the abbreviation of the term Common Era, or Christian Era.
2. For a detailed analysis on apocalypticism in American culture and mentality, see: Harold Bloom (1992), *The American Religion*, Paul Boyer (1992), *When Time Shall Be No More: Prophecy Belief in Modern American Culture*, and Robert Fuller (1995), *Naming the Antichrist: The History of an American Obsession*.

of a "sacred master plot that organizes and explains the world" (6). In his influential study on plot and narrative, R*eading for the Plot*, Brooks suggests the human need for "an explanatory narrative that seeks its authority in a return to origins and the tracing of a coherent story forward from origin to present" (6).

In Brooks' conception, plot is the dynamic logic of narrative, which in turn is a form of understanding and explanation (10). Narratives function as a way of coming to terms with death, since every story presumes an ending. Following Walter Benjamin, Brooks argues, "only the end can finally determine meaning" (22, 52). The end might take up an even more imperative position if one observes the principle that the end is instrumental in shaping the beginning and the middle of a narrative (22).

This estimation of the end is also crucial for Frank Kermode's classic study on the relationship between fiction and apocalypse, *The Sense of an Ending*. By imagining an end for the world, apocalyptic discourse imposes "coherent patterns" on history. These patterns "make possible a satisfying consonance with the origins and the middle" (Kermode 17). Kermode thus argues for the recognition of apocalyptic patterns in literary fictions; at the same time, he acknowledges that this pattern also functions as one of "our ways of making sense of the world" (28). The human need for an "imaginatively predicted future" often results in the calculation of a certain end. As it turns out, these prophesized ends have never come to pass. This, Kermode points out, is an important characteristic of apocalyptic discourse: "The great majority of interpretations of Apocalypse assume that the End is pretty near. Consequently the historical allegory is always having to be revised; time discredits it. And this is important. Apocalypse can be disconfirmed without being discredited. This is part of its extraordinary resilience" (8). Despite numerous miscalculations in the past, the idea of an impending end remains in place. In relation to this apocalyptic resilience, I would add another narrative mechanism. The historical abundance of failed prophesized endings leads to the assumption that predicted endings never come to pass. This logic is driven by a desire to imagine the end in the certainty that this end will never happen. I return to this below in relation to contemporary Hollywood apocalyptic films, and in particular *Take Shelter*.

Whereas Brooks and Kermode support the idea that the grand narratives of history structure the apparent human need for an ending, perhaps the end has already happened or is an illusion altogether. These two assumptions are crucial for Jean Baudrillard's postmodern, philosophical

conception of time and history. In the aptly titled *The Illusion of the End*, the human need for an end is characterized by Baudrillard as a "fatal exigency, a false strategy of time which wants to shoot straight ahead to a point beyond the end" (8). Understandable as this desire may be, it is futile, according to Baudrillard, since "hyperreality rules out the very occurrence of the Last Judgement or the Apocalypse or the Revolution" (8). There are no longer any events, there is only the endless circulation of consumer goods. Baudrillard's main argument entails the idea that history is already finished: "All the ends we have envisaged elude our grasp and history has no chance of bringing them about, since it will, in the interim, have come to an end" (8).

Baudrillard's notion of an ending is a disappointing one: the end might have taken place but, if so, went unnoticed. Not only have we missed out on the experience of "the original chaos, the Big Bang," but our hopes for experiencing the final moment, "the Big Crumb" are similarly useless (115). Whether or not one chooses to agree with Baudrillard, his analysis of the "demonic temptation to falsify ends and the calculation of ends" (8) resonates with current narratives in popular culture.

Following Baudrillard, apocalyptic narratives are contradictory in nature. On one hand, they thrive on the imminence of the end, which functions as the catalyst for the story. On the other, the expected ending can never be reached. Or, to be more precise, the ending is cancelled, delayed or postponed. As literary critic Northrop Frye comments, "[w]e notice that while the book of Revelation seems emphatically the end of the Bible, it is a remarkable open end" (137). Elsewhere, I have called this the paradox of apocalyptic narrative: the anticipation of an

3. The idea of anticipation followed by cancellation is elaborated on in *Preposterous Revelations*, 176.
4. For a discussion on the genre of the disaster film, see *Disaster Movies: The Cinema of Catastrophe*, Stephen Keane (2001) and Geoff King's *Spectacular Narratives: Hollywood in the Age of the Blockbuster* (2000).

end that will eventually be forestalled.[3] This, to me, seems a principal narrative structure in apocalyptic cinema. They all thrive on the narrative of impending apocalypse, only to have that end cancelled at the very last minute.

Looking at the various interpretations of the end, ranging from religious to secular, post-modern perceptions, the similarity between these modes of thought is striking. The distinction between secular forms of narrative and history and religious apocalypticism is not clear-cut. This points to the syncretic nature of Apocalypse as a concept. As Marcos Becquer and José Gatti argue, syncretism "entails the 'formal' coexistence of components whose precarious identities are mutually modified in their encounter, yet whose distinguishing differences, as such, are not dissolved or elided in these modifications, but strategically reconstituted" (447). In apocalyptic discourse as a syncretic practice, religious and secular discourse come together; reciprocally alter each other, yet without losing their particular characteristics.

Revelations of the end in film

The idea of apocalyptic discourse as a syncretic practice, is exemplified in contemporary cinema. As I stated in the introduction, *Melancholia* and *Take Shelter* share a number of characteristics that make it productive to compare the two films: both films are dominated by an obsession with the apocalyptic end. However, contrary to many other films that share this obsession, these two films do not belong to the genre of the Hollywood, blockbuster disaster film. Examples of this generic cycle include *2012* (directed Roland Emmerich, whose entire oeuvre is the epitome of the disaster genre), *End of Days*, *Deep Impact*, *The Core* and *Armageddon*.[4] Rather, *Melancholia* and *Take Shelter* can be labeled as examples of independent cinema (even though the commercial value and appeal of an established auteur such as Lars von Trier should not be underestimated). As such, these two films are an interesting addition to the apocalyptic disaster film genre. They show that cinematic apocalyptic narratives do not necessarily need the whole range of Hollywood's visual effects to deal with this theme, or to be convincing in the first place. From the perspective of narrative, both films add a new dimension to the representation of the Apocalypse in film. Unlike many other films in this genre, *Melancholia* and *Take Shelter*, seem to embrace the apocalyptic end unconditionally.

In an essay on the dynamics behind the use of the biblical Apocalypse in film, Melanie Wright remarks, "some of the most heavily theorized

of film genres—amongst them horror and the Western—regularly invoke the Bible and the Book of Revelation in particular" (76). Yet, as is clear, apocalyptic ideas are certainly not limited to those genres, "the mobilization of Revelation in film transcends any one genre or single ideological position, frustrating the cataloguer's efforts" (77). The function of Revelation's outline of the Apocalypse as a narrative structure Wright describes as follows, "cinema constructs Revelation as a text that describes, more or less cryptically, the end times: it is a blue print both for those who wish to actualize the final cataclysm and for other who seek to avert it" (78).

Both positions are discernible in the protagonists of *Melancholia* and *Take Shelter*: When *Melancholia*'s Justine tells her sister Claire: "The Earth is evil, we don't need to grieve for it. Nobody will miss it," she expresses the hope that the end of the world will simultaneously signal the end of her unrelenting depression. Curtis, the protagonist of *Take Shelter*, finds himself in a more ambivalent position: his recurring dreams and hallucinations either signal the onset of genetically determined schizophrenia, which would sentence him to a life in a mental institution, a fate already suffered by his mother. Or, the storm that haunts Curtis' dreams will actually come to pass, with terrifying results for his family and the community he is part of. Either way, the prospects are grim. So, unlike Justine in *Melancholia*, Curtis does not stand to gain any kind of respite from his apocalyptic nightmares, whether they are real or not. It is precisely this ambiguity, expressed in *Take Shelter*'s dream sequences, that enables me to read this film as a good example of two resilient features of apocalyptic narratives in general: their visionary quality and the indefinite ending.

Visions of (Imaginary?) Apocalypse in *Take Shelter*

Frank Kermode points out a critical aspect of Apocalypses, when he states: "The dreams of apocalypse, if they usurp waking thought, may be the worst dreams" (108). This quote underlines the visual and hallucinatory character of an Apocalypse. In the context of this essay, though, it is also an apt description of what Curtis in *Take Shelter* experiences. True to the nature of apocalyptic narratives, dreams, hallucinations or visions are typically the manner in which a revelation is delivered to the recipient. In Revelation, John receives a series of visions through an angel. These visions instill such a terrifying fear in him that he falls to the ground as if dead: "When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead. But he placed his right hand on me, saying, 'Do not be afraid'"(Revelation 1:17).

Wright points to "religion's historic connection of seeing with belief—an association which is central to the Apocalypse, with its injunctions to 'come and see'" (90). The dreadful fear these visions instill in its recipient and the notion of seeing is believing, are two guiding principles in *Take Shelter*. The idea of seeing is unpacked in the film through the dreams, visions and hallucinations of its central character, which the viewer is constantly privy to (lending the film its most horror-like qualities). However, during the course of the film, it is the viewer him/herself who also needs to assess what is to be true, or real, in these visions.

Take Shelter is the second feature directed by American director Jeff Nichols. It tells the story of Curtis LaForche, a blue collar construction supervisor who is plagued by recurring dreams about a storm of apocalyptic proportions. Given that he comes from a family with a known history of mental illnesses, Curtis is terrified about what happens to him, but he does not share his fears with his wife, Samantha (played by Jessica Chastain). When his dreams spill over into his waking life, resulting in hallucinations of violent attacks on himself and most importantly on his young, deaf daughter Hannah, Curtis decides to take action. He reconstructs an old tornado shelter, so his family will have a place to hide. His plan has grave financial consequences: he misses work and takes out a risky loan, thereby jeopardizing the opportunity his daughter has to get an operation that will restore her hearing abilities. After Curtis is fired from his job, a very upset Samantha urges Curtis to seek professional help and to find a new job. Not long after, Curtis' dream of a super storm apparently becomes reality and the family takes shelter. As it turns out, a tornado did pass, but it was nowhere near the kind of storm Curtis dreamed about. Even though Samantha and Curtis are shaken by the whole episode, they decide to stay together and face their problems. Despite their financial problems, they take a short holiday on Myrtle Beach. It is there, that Curtis' recurring nightmares about a super storm become real: as he is playing with Hannah on the beach in front of their house, a giant storm and tsunami gathers at sea. Finally, Samantha sees what Curtis has been seeing all along, and there is nothing they can do.

From the very first scene of the film, the viewer of *Take Shelter* needs to be cautious, and pay close attention. The opening of a film is always important, since it often functions as what Thomas Elsaesser and Warren Buckland call a manual, or a special kind of meta-text. They explain that a film's opening introduces the viewer to "rules of the game," it "prepares the stage and often presents … the whole film in a nutshell" (47). The reason

I am particularly interested in the beginning is because common knowledge in film analysis presumes that every beginning has close connections to the ending.

Take Shelter shows its premise in miniature form in the first few minutes of the film. The film starts out with an outdoor scene, where Curtis stares at the gathering of clouds into what could become a massive storm. Then it starts to rain, but it is no ordinary rain. As Curtis explains to Samantha later on in the film, the rain is thick and yellow, "like fresh motor oil." This short opening scene is followed by a scene depicting Curtis in the shower and a little later by the family having breakfast. From this short sequence of three uninterrupted scenes, the viewer may presume that all three events took place in the objective diegesis of the film, that is, the depicted world of the film. Furthermore, it seems logical to causally connect the events: first, Curtis is standing outside watching the storm gathering, after he goes inside, he takes a shower (presumably to clean himself of the rain/motor oil) and finally, has breakfast with his family. All these events are shown in the same objective manner, thereby prompting the viewer to take them at face value. This opening however, sets up a pattern that is repeated a number of times throughout the film. The pattern is as follows: Curtis has a bad dream, wakes up, and has breakfast with Samantha and Hannah. Obviously, the viewer who sees the film for the first time will not be immediately aware of this pattern. Only on repeated viewings, does this pattern become obvious. It is from the first scene of the film, that *Take Shelter*'s apparently objective style and narration seek to confuse the viewer as to what is real and what is imaginary. I will return to this in more detail when I analyze

5. A good example is the film *A Beautiful Mind* (2001), which, similarly to *Take Shelter*, has a protagonist who suffers from paranoid schizophrenia. Unlike *Take Shelter*, this film resolves its protagonist's pathology, leading to a satisfactory, and fairly closed, ending.
6. For instance, Curtis' physical symptoms are revealed to the viewer, including the dreams that cause these symptoms. As the narrative unfolds his symptoms are gradually getting worse: from the relatively innocent excessive sweating at the start of the film, to the embarrassing bed-wetting, and finally, a violent bout of vomiting.

the different kinds of dreams, nightmares and hallucinations Curtis is suffering from.

Take Shelter's aesthetics, its apparently objective style, create a deliberate ambiguity between what is real and what is not. Put differently, the film's objective style masks its highly subjective content. As David Bordwell explains in his study on the principles of visual storytelling in (Hollywood) cinema, films with subjective sequences have been a vital part of cinematic storytelling from the start: "The dream inserts of the earliest films were refined in the elaborate dream and fantasy sequences of 1920s European cinema. Then and now, these portions of the film are usually demarcated by technical markers like soft focus, distorted decor, slow motion, and slurred sound" (Bordwell 85). However, not all films follow these particular conventions. Films may also deploy the opposite convention, which "works to *conceal* the fact that we're in somebody's mind" (86 emphasis in original). In that case, viewers are "tricked… into believing in the reality of scenes that turn out to be mere illusions" (86). As I shall argue, *Take Shelter* uses the latter strategy.

However, apart from the film's ambiguous stylistic and narratological mode, another element complicates matters even more: Curtis is what Bordwell calls a problematic protagonist. As he observes, "Hollywood's current concern with giving its heroes and heroines a character arc usually doesn't yield neurotic extremes of behavior" (Bordwell 83). Nevertheless, in some cases, such as Curtis, the pathology of the character is instrumental in a film's narrative.[5] His mother was committed to a mental institution when he was five years old, and his defining fear is that he may suffer the same fate. Whether or not Curtis is suffering from the onset of paranoid schizophrenia remains unsolved. In a conversation with a counselor, after having read up on the matter, Curtis claims to suffer from only three of the supposedly twelve symptoms. The viewer may want to believe Curtis, but there is no certainty. As I already pointed out with regards to the opening of the film, since the main protagonist is unreliable and the viewer shares his subjective state of mind, the viewer constantly needs to (re)evaluate the actions as they are presented in *Take Shelter*'s plot.

Apart from this unreliable, subjective narration, the film also presents the viewer with a restricted form of narration, that is to say, we are restricted to what Curtis is going through.[6] There are only a few instances where we share Samantha's point of view, but, and this is crucial, those moments are always part of a sequence where we also share Curtis' point of view.[7] That is to say, the two are intercut: we see Samantha and Hannah

7. We see Samantha at home, talking to Dewart's wife, while keeping an eye on Hannah, or, we see her selling her embroidery at the local market.

at home, while this scene is intercut with Curtis at work. This restricted narration works to give the viewer allegiance with Curtis, even though we can certainly sympathize with Samantha, it is Curtis's point of view we share. This of course becomes problematic when we look at the apocalyptic visions: are we to believe Curtis?

In order to come to terms with *Take Shelter*'s visions, it is instructive to divide them into three separate categories. The first type of dream involves Hannah. Twice, Curtis dreams she is being preyed upon by strangers. The first time, he holds her in his arms while unknown strangers are surrounding the house, which then starts to levitate. The second time, he dreams they are involved in a car crash and Hannah is abducted through the shattered window. The second type of dream involves harm being done to Curtis. First, he dreams he is being attacked by the family dog. After that, his best friend and co-worker Dewart comes after him with a shovel. Finally, Samantha also tries to attack Curtis. What is noteworthy is that the film only shows the first attack by the dog. The other two dreams are being recounted by Curtis (in both cases to Samantha), but are not actually visualized. Since this is another aspect of the film's restrictive narration, aligning the viewer with Curtis, the viewer has no other choice than to believe Curtis, without having had immediate access (via his dreams) to his subjective point of view.

It is the third type of dream, or rather, hallucinations, that present the viewer with the biggest challenge, both in terms of narrative as well as aesthetics. These hallucinations take place in broad daylight and involve the appearance of storm clouds, thunder, lightning and birds flying in strange formations. Curtis sees all these things happening, while being

surrounded by other people: Dewart and Samantha. They, however, do not notice either the threatening storm or the flocks of birds. In one of the last hallucinations, about a massive thunder storm, Curtis stops the car by the side of the road, gets out, and wonders aloud: "Is anybody seeing this?" (echoing an earlier remark: "[h]as anyone seen this?" while he was out at work with Dewart). Samantha, who is asleep in the back of the car, obviously does not, and neither are the other automobilists out on the road. Here we return to the problem I mentioned with regards to the opening sequence of the film: the film's deceptively objective style is undercut by the highly subjective and restricted narration through the problematic protagonist Curtis.

What is more, Curtis himself is also exceedingly uncertain how to interpret these appearances. Is he losing his mind, or not? As the scene at the counselor showed, Curtis may only display a few of the symptoms of paranoid schizophrenia, certainly not enough to make an unambiguous diagnosis. The stylistic and narrative system that the film deploys, enables the attentive viewer to recognize the onset of a hallucination or a dream. That is to say, after a few of these instances we recognize the signs that reveal a subjective sequence. So, even if Curtis is unsure, the film's narration puts the viewer in the position of the insightful observer. We *know* he is hallucinating, or at least we are pretty sure.

In one of the film's pivotal scenes, Curtis, who is increasingly shunned by the small community after losing his job, loses his temper at a local Lions Club meeting. He becomes enraged, and like a crazy prophet-like madman, predicts the doom and destruction of everyone. In this scene, the viewer is not aligned with Curtis, but with the shocked and terrified people in the room. We are positioned to identify with the onlookers' fear of this man, through the combination of long shots, which show the enraged physique of Curtis and in a number of close-ups of their faces. This scene is crucial to the remainder of the film: it shows the pathology Curtis is suffering from, not only to the whole community, but more importantly, to Samantha. In this sense, it confirms the viewer's hunch that Curtis is "only" imagining things. What is more, the scene represents the breakdown of the main protagonist. He has publicly hit rock bottom, and he is fully aware of it. Since this scene takes place roughly at two-thirds of the film, it can be presumed that this scene will mark the recovery of Curtis. The common understanding of narrative presumes that after a breakdown, the narrative will chart the recovery of its protagonist. This is not the case in *Take Shelter*.

Instead, starting with Curtis' breakdown, the film becomes increasingly unpredictable, especially with regards to its ending. The breakdown scene is followed by another dream, where Curtis protects Hannah from a flock of birds. The transition between dream and reality is indicated by the use of non-diegetic noise, namely, the sound of a tornado alarm. Curtis, Samantha and Hannah wake up and scramble to take shelter. After the tornado passes, and Curtis reluctantly allows Samantha and Hannah to leave the shelter, the film's narrative seems to have resolved itself unquestionably: even though Curtis was almost right, there was a storm, he also realizes that he needs help. In the next scene, Curtis and Samantha talk to a psychiatrist who gives a devastating diagnosis: Curtis not only needs to be put on medication, he also needs to "seriously commit to some treatment." Here, Curtis' nightmare of having to leave his family becomes reality. In a sense, this is one of the film's more devastating moments, because it signals the end of the life he and his family were having. If an apocalypse can take place on exceedingly personal, individual level, this just happened to Curtis.

'What if it's not over?': The Apocalyptic Ending of *Take Shelter*

In his chapter on developments in Hollywood storytelling, David Bordwell makes the following observation regarding the denouement of what he calls "puzzle films," films that are characterized by intricate narrative maneuvering, such as *Memento* (2000), *The Usual Suspects* (1995), and, more recently, *Inception* (2010). At the end of these type of films, Bordwell observes:

> We're encouraged to doubt the actuality of the events. The usual revelation depends on subjectivity: something we've taken as objective turns out to be a character's fantasy or hallucination. Even to speak of revelations may be going too far, for some films create a lingering doubt. After the film ends, there may be a zone of indeterminacy within which we cannot say what definitely took place. (81)

This conclusion is interesting: the revelation upon which many of these types of films rely may not be all encompassing. The viewer is left with significant doubts. This "zone of indeterminacy" as Bordwell puts it (true to his cognitivist leanings), leaves room for discussion and alternative endings. *Take Shelter*'s ending is a remarkable variation on the way not only

puzzle films, with their unreliable protagonists and subjective narration, are ended, but also how apocalyptic films may end.

The film's final revelation, one of truly apocalyptic proportions, takes place in the last scene of the film. After all they have consulted with the psychiatrist, Curtis and Samantha have decided to stay together and, following the psychiatrists advice, take a short vacation. Curtis and Hannah are building sand castles on the beach right in front of the house, while Samantha is inside cooking dinner. This deceptively peaceful scene could function as the epilogue, or a conventional last scene of the film: even though Curtis and Samantha still have a lot of problems to solve, it seems they may actually make it alright. Instead, the film mercilessly pulls the rug from under the viewer's feet. It does so by breaking the established pattern on point of view. For the first time it is not Curtis, but Hannah who sees the storm and makes the sign "storm" to Curtis. As he turns around to face the ocean, the film breaks another previously established pattern: on the soundtrack we hear a stirring, non-diegetic orchestral score. Hitherto, a confusing mix of diegetic and non-diegetic noise accompanied Curtis' visions, which stress the ambiguous nature of the vision. Now, the full dramatic impact of the scene is gratuitously delivered: the end is here and there is no escaping from it. As Curtis takes Hannah in his arms and walks up to the house, his eyes meet Samantha's. For the first time, she also sees. In the final exchange between Samantha and Curtis, she acknowledges the reality of his hallucinations, by uttering a single "OK." After a loud crack of thunder, the screen goes black.

By ending the film this way, abruptly, without any kind of epilogue that may put things in a different perspective, *Take Shelter* breaks with the apocalyptic paradigm I discussed earlier. In *Take Shelter*, predicted endings *do* come to pass. What is more, the viewer's desire to imagine the end in the certainty that this end will never happen, is thwarted. The rules the film set up in the beginning, which led the viewer to interpret the hallucinations as subjective, are reversed in the ending: Curtis' desperate plea "has anyone seen this?" is unambiguously answered. Indeed, in the end Hannah as well as Samantha see the storm coming. Echoing the very first scene of the film, it is now Samantha who notices that strange, thick rain falling on her hands. So, if we follow the narrative and stylistic logic of *Take Shelter*, it has similarly to *Melancholia*, a fully materialized ending. In the end, the film gives the viewer no other choice than to accept that Curtis was right all along: the end indeed was near and in the end, it became real.

Yet, even if this seems to be an obvious conclusion, I would suspend it temporarily, since I do believe there is still a zone of indeterminacy. Perhaps, *Take Shelter*'s true Apocalypse does not take place in the last scene, but in the second to last scene. The moment the psychiatrist tells Curtis he will have to be committed to a "facility," Curtis realizes that life as he knows it is effectively over. After the short family holiday, he will no longer be together with them. Devastated by this reality, Curtis dreams that one dream that ends all dreaming. Imagining the Apocalypse is then no more than a ploy, a way to find psychological relief. Given that the film has deployed a seemingly objective narration to narrate extremely subjective events, the final scene could just be another example of this recurring pattern in the film. However, what is missing in the final scene, contrary to the other instances of objective narration, is the validation that it was a dream. If we were to treat the final scene as Curtis' most apocalyptic dream of them all, what is precisely, and I would say deliberately, missing is the moment he wakes up from this nightmare. Instead, the viewer is quite literally left in the dark by the film's final image of a black screen. Similarly to Curtis, when he exclaims "[w]hat if it's not over?" after the tornado has passed, the viewer of *Take Shelter* may have the same feeling. What if it is not over? As an apocalyptic tale, *Take Shelter*'s visions of the end issue a warning to its viewer, namely: that if the Apocalypse is a dream, reality may even be worse.

WORKS CITED

Aune, David E. "Revelation 6–16". *Word Biblical Commentary; vol. 52b.* Nashville: Nelson, 1998. Print.

Baudrillard, Jean. *The Illusion of the End*. Trans. Chris Turner. Cambridge: Polity Press, 1994. Print.

Beqcuer, Marcos, and José Gatti. "Elements of Vogue." *The Subcultures Reader.* Eds. Ken Gelder and Sarah Thornton. London and New York: Routledge, 1991. 445–453. Print.

Bordwell, David. *The Way Hollywood Tells It: Story and Style in Modern Movies.* Berkeley and Los Angeles: UCP, 2006. Print.

Brooks, Peter. *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative.* Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984. Print.

Copier, Laura. *Preposterous Revelations: Visions of Apocalypse and Martyrdom in Hollywood Cinema 1980-2000.* Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2012. Print.

Elsaesser, Thomas, and Warren Buckland. S*tudying Contemporary American Film: A Guide to Movie Analysis.* London: Arnold, 2002. Print.

Frye, Northrop. *The Great Code: The Bible and Literature.* Toronto: Academic Press Canada, 1982. Print.

Keane, Stephen. *Disaster Movies: The Cinema of Catastrophe.* London and New York: Wallflower, 2001. Print.

Kermode, Frank. *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction (With a new epilogue).* New York: Oxford University Press, 2000. Print.

King, Geoff. *Spectacular Narratives: Hollywood in the Age of the Blockbuster.* London and New York: I.B.Tauris, 2000. Print.

Paulien, Jon. "The Lion/Lamb King: Reading the Apocalypse from Popular Culture". *Reading the Book of Revelation: A Resource for Students.* Ed. David L. Barr. Atlanta: SBL, 2003. 151–61. Print.

Wright, Melanie. "'Every Eye Shall See Him': Revelation and Film". *The Way the World Ends? The Apocalypse of John in Culture and Ideology.* Eds. William John Lyons and Jorunn Okland. Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2009. 76–94. Print.

ABSTRACT

This article explores the enduring presence and appeal of apocalyptic narratives in two recent films, *Melancholia* and in more detail, *Take Shelter*. After a short discussion on the definition and on the different ways in which apocalyptic discourse is manifested (not only in religious and scholarly discourse, but even more so in secular cultural expressions), the article will analyze the film *Take Shelter*. I will deal with this film in two different ways: on the one hand, it is a good example of a resilient feature of apocalyptic narratives: its visionary quality, on the other hand it seemingly breaks with the paradigm of unfulfilled apocalyptic endings.

BIOGRAPHY

Laura Copier (1975) is an assistant professor in Media Studies at the University of Amsterdam. She studied Film and Television Studies at the University of Amsterdam and completed her PhD at the Amsterdam School for Cultural Analysis (ASCA). Her dissertation, published by Sheffield Phoenix Press, is entitled "Preposterous Revelations: Visions of Apocalypse and Martyrdom in Hollywood Cinema 1980–2000." In this book, she analyzes the divergent popular representations of the Apocalypse, in image as well as in words, in contemporary Hollywood cinema.