

Nick Davis
Film Discussion Group
April 2016

Midnight Special (dir. Jeff Nichols, 2016)

On Camera

Alton Meyer Jaeden Lieberher: *St. Vincent* (14), with Bill Murray and Melissa McCarthy
Roy Tomlin Michael Shannon: *Take Shelter* (11), our recent selection *99 Homes* (14)
Sarah Tomlin Kirsten Dunst: *Interview with the Vampire* (94), *Melancholia* (11)
Lucas, the friend Joel Edgerton: *Zero Dark Thirty* (12), *The Gift* (15), *Black Mass* (15)
Paul Sevier Adam Driver: *Girls* (12-16); *While We're Young* (14); Han Solo's evil son
Calvin Meyer Sam Shepard: legendary playwright and actor; frequently acts for Nichols

Off Camera

Director-Writer Jeff Nichols: *Shotgun Stories* (07), *Take Shelter* (11), *Mud* (12), *Loving* (16)
Cinematography Adam Stone: shot all of Jeff Nichols's films as well as *Compliance* (12)
Film Editing Julie Monroe: works often with Oliver Stone; three with Nichols; also TV
Original Score David Wingo: *George Washington* (00), *Our Brand Is Crisis* (15)← a goodie!

Earlier films by Jeff Nichols:

Shotgun Stories (2007) – A cotton-farming family in rural Arkansas erupts into bitter feuding when their patriarch passes away. Made for less than \$500,000, this movie earned awards and festival attention and began Nichols's series of collaborations with Michael Shannon. This film also showcases family as a complex mix of broken and unbreakable bonds.

Take Shelter (2011) – Nichols's breakthrough feature again starred Shannon, this time as Curtis, an Ohio construction worker who begins having visions of an apocalyptic storm and building an underground shelter that his family cannot afford. His wife (then-newcomer Jessica Chastain) worries about Curtis and the effect of his paranoia on their young daughter. Friends wonder if Curtis has inherited his mother's madness. But clouds are gathering. You could see *Midnight Special* as a *Take Shelter* in reverse, with a parent rather than a child as the conduit of strange visions, and religious portents rather than alien signals as the catalyst.

Mud (2012) – A surprising box-office hit, even though Lionsgate held it back almost a year after its Cannes debut. Two pre-teen boys find a mysterious drifter (Matthew McConaughey) living on an island in the Mississippi River, with obscure connections to a local crime circuit (including Sam Shepard) and a former lover living in a nearby hotel (Reese Witherspoon). As in many Nichols movies, family is again a source of strength as well as extreme tension, and lines between virtuous and criminal behavior, friends and strangers, get very blurry.

Loving (2016) – Joel Edgerton, Michael Shannon, and Bill Camp will all return for this true story of the *Loving v. Virginia* U.S. Supreme Court case that finally legalized interracial marriage.

Some trivia about *Midnight Special*

The film was slated for release in November 2015, but Warner Bros. delayed its debut, believing that its weird plot and tone gave it better prospects as a winter/spring cult discovery than an awards-season contender. Box-office so far has tallied around \$1 million, though the budget was significantly higher, at \$18 million. Still, the release is wider than was planned at first and represents confidence on behalf of Warner Brothers, given Nichols's indie origins.

Jaeden Lieberher, who stars as Alton Meyer, has just completed production on a film called *The Book of Henry*, a drama where he plays the brother of *Room*'s Jacob Tremblay.

Shannon's and Chastain's daughter in *Take Shelter* was deaf, and played by a deaf actress, prompting another plot by which parents and children shared an especially close bond but also struggled to communicate in some elementary ways. The kids and the adults in *Mud* also inhabit almost entirely different plotlines until they belatedly converge in the climax.

Kirsten Dunst's career began with a Golden Globe nomination at age 12 for playing a child with unusual powers in *Interview with the Vampire*. Here, she plays the mother a similar child.

Most of the cast and crew members of *Midnight Special* have collaborated with Nichols before and/or will do so again for *Loving*, which has already been announced as a red-carpet premiere at next month's Cannes Film Festival. Increasingly expensive stars like Edgerton, Shannon, and Dunst almost certainly took big pay cuts to appear in the film, based on Nichols's growing reputation. Only his female leads have not yet returned for later movies.

Some film connections to *Midnight Special*

Close Encounters of the Third Kind (1977) – Studios do not often make sci-fi features without trying to market them to teens and kids. *Midnight Special* belongs more in the tradition of Spielberg's *E.T.* and especially *Close Encounters*, in which a father diligently follows instructions he believes he is receiving from an alien civilization, at the risk of his sanity and his family. He turns out, as the characters in *Midnight Special* do, to be right about listening.

Looper (2012): This sci-fi twister starring Joseph Gordon-Levitt, Bruce Willis, and Emily Blunt also centered around a child with supernatural abilities and the attempt to keep him safe. Some of the rural landscapes, especially toward the end, also echo those in *Midnight Special*.

Tomorrowland (2015): Disney, George Clooney, Pixar's Brad Bird, and *Lost*'s Damon Lindelof had a rare commercial misfire last May with this story of a man, a woman, and a kid gifted at science who all harbor inexplicable memories of the same futuristic city here on Earth.

The Leftovers (2014-16): This HBO series, returning this August, concerns a mysterious event in the near-future when 5% of the world's population somehow evaporates in an instant. The survivors are left in doubt as to why the 5% departed (and where they went), prompting reactions all the way from cult-style fundamentalism to attempts at preserving routine.

From interviews with the director

Forbes: Jeff Nichols initially met with Warner Bros. before *Mud* premiered and became an unexpected mid-level hit. Before that happened, the studio was trying to convince Nichols to make the movie *bigger*, more in the mold of a typical, expensive action thriller. The low-cost return on *Mud* convinced them that a modest movie could yield a worthwhile return.

Multiple Interviews: *Midnight Special* was the first film Nichols wrote and filmed since becoming a parent. Though children had played a pronounced role in all his features, he got specifically attached to the idea of having to give your children up and trust their abilities.

Consequence of Sound: Edward Snowden's leaks of the scale and contents of NSA surveillance also transpired while *Midnight Special* was in early development, which made the scope and centrality of the government's interest in Alton even more believable, and slightly topical.

Slash Film: Nichols really wanted to get away from blatant exposition in his films, and to experiment with keeping the audience in suspense about backstory *and* upcoming events. To achieve that effect, he plotted the whole story from the characters' childhoods until well after the movie ends, preserving only the middle events and omitting scene-setting conversations.

Forbes: Some of Nichols's earliest, seemingly technical decisions were aimed at making the outlandish premise of *Midnight Special* feel more human and relatable. For example, he made the pricy decision to shoot on celluloid film rather than digital cameras for the extra grain and warmth in the images. He recruited a composer whom he knew would write a different kind of music than the John Williams kind that plays up spectacle and big emotion.

Hollywood Chicago: Nichols admits that his experiences growing up Methodist informed his portrait of Sam Shepard's congregation, but feels strongly that themes of faith extend to other characters in the film—including Adam Driver's, with his belief in science and knowledge.

Hollywood Chicago: Though Nichols grants that his plots and characters are often extravagant, he also feels that the core of his storytelling is a form of pragmatism that other people in the film perceive as extreme. In *Take Shelter*, the protagonist is trying to take clear steps to save his family from devastation. In *Midnight Special*, the parents are mostly problem-solving how to get their child where he needs to be at a key time. What do you think of this take?

Forbes: Nichols has avoided recruitment into Warner Bros.'s major superhero franchises, though the studio is still using them to help him out. By postponing the movie, they could play *Midnight Special* trailers before *Batman vs. Superman* in its massive opening weekend. The move didn't translate to huge box office but did create major awareness in advance of DVD.

Slash Film: Nichols fought for Joel Edgerton in the role of Lucas, even when Warner Bros. was trying to tempt him with "starrier" options like Tom Hardy—whom Nichols felt would have made the role too dark and would feel less like a relatable surrogate for the average viewer. What was Lucas's value to the story in your eyes? What difference, if any, did casting or performance style make in the way you understood each character, or related to their actions?

Broad questions about *Midnight Special*

Seeing and Not Seeing: The very first image in the movie, repeated later at key moments, is of heavy masking tape over a peephole. Not only is this an image of *not* seeing something, but even when the tape is removed, the looker has a very limited vantage on what's outside. How might this image embody themes in the story and aspects of how it feels to watch?

Supernatural Visions: In *Take Shelter*, Shannon's character sees storm clouds, flocks of birds, strangers standing in the road, and other menacing presences that suddenly vanish in the next shot. Other characters insist they are not there—at least until the final scene, when new questions open up. *Midnight Special* has versions of the same problem, but mostly all the characters see and hear the same things; they just have different levels of clarity and confusion about *what* they all see and hear. How would the movie have been different if the architectures and visions at the end were more debatably “real”? What might the movie have been like if it pressed further and longer into the world's reactions to these insane events?

Faith: Roy, Sarah, and even Lucas barely waver in their conviction that Alton is as special and unique as they believe him to be, even though it's hard to account for their confidence, or to understand his peculiar gifts. In the end, they are proved correct. Even the cult, which is presented as crazy in some respects, is not wrong to have placed such mystical faith in Alton. The federal investigators are also correct in believing that Alton is deliberately taking down satellites and poses a security risk. What message does the film send by corroborating the beliefs of almost every character on screen, even when they seem to oppose each other?

Sympathy and Identification: *Midnight Special* drops us into a story that is already well underway, with several implications. One is that we relate to Michael Shannon first as a child abductor, rather than trusting him as a father. We have much less exposure to and knowledge of the church-based cult than we might have if the movie began earlier. From story structure to costuming, we remain pretty uncomfortable with Alton. Did he grow more endearing to you later, or not at all? What did you make of the movie's choice to begin where and how it does? When, if at all, did you identify with any of the characters?

Gender: *Take Shelter* drew enormous praise for many reasons, one of which included the rich role and complex performance that Jessica Chastain contributed in the supporting role of Michael Shannon's wife. *Mud*, however, elicited some criticism for the underdeveloped role that Reese Witherspoon was given, by contrast to her male peers in the cast and to the young boys in the lead roles. In *Midnight Special*, Kirsten Dunst's appearance is delayed until quite a way into the plot. At certain moments it looks like she will assume a larger role, to include when she is the only adult who escapes being shot by Doak at the hotel, and when she is put in charge of Alton's rendezvous in the field. Did you feel her character and/or her performance emerged as fully as you wanted? (I'll admit I found this element frustrating.)

Genre: *Midnight Special* could fairly be called science fiction, or a drama, or a chase film, or a thriller, or a religious film, or a family movie, or an extension of film noir traditions. How did you mostly relate to the movie, and what does it mean to you that its genre is so mixed?