

Facing Apocalypse: Climate Mobilities and the Cinematic Child

Andrés Buesa 

Abstract

This article engages with the representations and meanings of child figures within US films about environmentally induced displacement. At the intersection between film studies, childhood studies, and the emerging scholarship on climate mobilities (Boas et al., 2022), it explores the ways in which three contemporary apocalyptic films—*The Road* (2009), *Take Shelter* (2011), and *Greenland* (2020) — mediate the relationship between mobility and environmental collapse through child characters. It argues that the functions attached to the child in these films—those of seer, victim, and carrier of hope and futurity—work to depoliticize climate mobilities, obscuring the varied aspirations, sociopolitical factors, and power structures that shape mobility choices in the context of environmental threat. As imaginary projections of an upcoming climate collapse, these films provide fertile ground for an exploration of the cultural ideals underpinning the construction of child characters, and the influence these have in the articulation of climate mobilities.

INTRODUCTION

In one of the early scenes of Michael P. Nash's documentary *Climate Refugees* (2010), the film crew travels to Bangladesh to document the destruction caused by Cyclone Sidr in 2007. Interviewed in the streets, an old woman affected by the storm expresses her concerns for the future of her country: "I pray for the generations to come, the children that must leave Bangladesh to survive" (2010). The film then cuts to a later moment in which the filmmaker, directly addressing the camera, shares with the audience an unrecorded encounter with a 7-year-old child. As a photograph of the child—soaked hair and sad countenance—takes over the screen, the director narrates:

Departamento de Filología Inglesa y Alemana, Universidad de Zaragoza, Zaragoza, Spain

Correspondence: Andrés Buesa. Email: abuesa@unizar.es

Funding information: Ministerio de Universidades, Grant/Award Number: FPU19/03436; Departamento de Educación, Cultura y Deporte, Gobierno de Aragón, Grant/Award Number: H23_20R; Ministerio de Ciencia e Innovación, Grant/Award Number: PID2021-123836NB-I00.

This is an open access article under the terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/) License, which permits use and distribution in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, the use is non-commercial and no modifications or adaptations are made.

© 2023 The Authors. *Sociology Lens* published by John Wiley & Sons Ltd.

He asked me if I would do him a favor, and the favor was when I get back to America, would I tell everybody that Bangladesh is not going to survive unless America helps them. Here's a young boy that probably should be thinking about playing soccer, but he's thinking about the survival of his country. [...] All he thinks about is whether America is going to save his family, his friends, and his country.

(*Climate Refugees*, 2010)

Beyond its unapologetic investment in racist myths—the supremacy of the US and the trope of the white savior—this fragment illustrates the overwhelming presence and symbolic currency of the child figure in narratives of environmentally-induced displacement, both fictional and non-fictional. The film draws on the cinematic child—as an embodiment of the future of the nation, a victim to be saved, an uncannily mature citizen who understands the gravity of the climate crisis—to emphasize the drastic consequences of climate change in terms of mobility. At the intersection between film studies, childhood studies, and the emerging scholarship on *climate mobilities* (Boas et al., 2022), this article deals with the ideological implications of such a deployment of the child figure in the context of US fiction film. In particular, it explores the ways in which three contemporary apocalyptic films—*The Road* (2009), *Take Shelter* (2011), and *Greenland* (2020)—deal with the relationship between mobility and environmental collapse through child characters. It argues that the functions attached to the child in these films—those of seer, victim, and carrier of hope and futurity—work to depoliticize climate mobilities, obscuring the varied aspirations, sociopolitical factors, and power structures that shape mobility choices in the context of environmental threat. As imaginary projections of climate collapse, these films provide a fertile ground for an exploration of the cultural ideals underpinning the construction of child characters, and the influence these have in the articulation of climate mobilities.

FRAMING MOBILITY AND ENVIRONMENTAL CHANGE

At present, most scholars agree that “environmental degradation has far-reaching consequences [...] for human mobility and migration patterns” (McLeman & Gemenne, 2020, p. 4). Sea level rise, flood, and draught, among other factors, have affected the livability of certain places world-wide (from Pacific Island states to Sub-Saharan nations) and have indeed influenced the patterns of mobility in which these places are embedded. Yet, the connection between mobility and the environment can be conceptualized—and thus narrated in film and media—in different ways (see Bettini, 2013; Ransan-Cooper et al., 2015 for a detailed analysis of the variety of existing discourses). The opening example from *Climate Refugees* presents a clear chain of events. Climate-related catastrophes will lead to massive migration. As a result, Western countries (in particular, the United States) will have to take action to prevent an uncontrolled flow of refugees. Filled with alarming voice-over statements—“there'll be climate wars if that amount of people [100 million refugees] come to the US”—and maps that predict an invasion—threatening red arrows emerge from sub-Saharan countries towards European and US main capitals—the film epitomizes the so-called “climate refugee” narrative (Wiegel et al., 2019, p. 2). Developed in the 80 and 90s, this approach interprets environmentally induced mobility as a “linear, massive and world-transforming movement of people under climate change” (Boas et al., 2022, p. 3365). Prompted by a sense of urgency on the advances of climate change and a wish to promote policy action, it highlights uncontrolled international migration as one of the major consequences of climate degradation and warns of the potential threat that an uncontrolled flow of refugees might imply for the security of nations.

Still dominant in media, NGOs, and policy spheres (Boas et al., 2022, p. 3367), this narrative fails to attest to the complexity of the relation between mobility and the environment. First, it understands international, cross-bordering migration as the inescapable consequence of environmental pressure, thus ignoring other possible outcomes: from temporary relocation to small-scale, local forms of migration. Similarly, criticism has been drawn towards the mono-causal link established between climate change and migration in this discourse, which some have

called “climate reductionism” (Hulme, 2011). When climate change is positioned as the main trigger of international migration, the interplay of political, economic, social, and cultural factors that shape mobility patterns at micro and macro-level is largely omitted. Furthermore, climate refugee discourse rests upon problematic assumptions on the characterization of migrants and on the supremacy of Western worldviews. Through the label of “climate refugees”, migrants are at the same time victimized and de-individualized (Bettini, 2013, p. 69). They are represented as helpless victims in need of protection from Western states; but, at the same time, they are constantly invoked as part of a homogeneous, threatening mass—often heavily racialized (Durand-Delacré, 2022, p. 3399)—and therefore devoid of any agency or political subjectivity. At the same time as they are made visible in media discourse, they are equally projected as a security threat (Methmann & Rothe, 2014). In cultural terms, these narratives prioritize “Northern ideas of sustainable development as self-evident and/or superior” (Ransan-Cooper et al., 2015, p. 109), thus undermining non-Western understandings of the issue.

As these different lines of criticism suggest, scholars (unlike media and popular culture) have widely veered away from climate refugee discourse towards alternative understandings of the issue. Under the label *climate mobilities*, a strand of scholarship has sought to expand the discussion of climate change-related human mobility by means of a mobilities perspective (Boas et al., 2022; Durand-Delacré, 2022; Farbotko, 2022; Wiegel et al., 2019). From an understanding of mobility as an “elastic, inclusive and multifaceted concept” that highlights the interrelated nature of different forms of movement, this approach acknowledges the multiplicity of possible mobilities resulting from environmental pressure, beyond uni-directional, long-distance migrations (Biasiori et al., 2023, p. iii). Changes in everyday commuting, temporary relocation, circular movements, and even immobility are also potential consequences of environmental change (Boas et al., 2022). Besides, climate mobilities are always relational, that is, mobility and immobility do not exist in absolute terms, but are co-dependant, and thus interact with each other in the different outcomes resulting from climate degradation. This approach highlights the ways in which international migration “does not just involve movement, but also moments of rest and temporary stationing” (Wiegel et al., 2019, p. 5). Conversely, those who stay in a place threatened by climate change are not necessarily static.

Crucially, a climate mobilities perspective brings the political nature of mobility to the fore. Mobility is thought of as socially produced (Cresswell, 2010, p. 21); it is governed by power structures which make it unevenly distributed and accessed depending on differences of race, gender, and class, among others. Environmental change, then, is but one among the variety of factors that shape people's patterns of mobility, and their choice whether to remain or leave from a certain place. In opposition to the “climate reductionism” of previous accounts (Hulme, 2011), climate mobilities scholars stress the extent to which race, gender, class, disability, ethnicity, or sexuality, among other issues, influence people's capacities to be mobile. In particular, the notion of “network capital” has been put forward to highlight the relational interaction between these differences (Elliott & Urry, 2010). The unequal distribution of network capital needs to be properly acknowledged if one wants to fully understand the potential altering of mobility patterns in relation to the environment. At the level of the individual, scholars warn of the important role that aspirations to move—and not only capacities—play in conceptualizing climate mobilities (Adams, 2016; Wiegel et al., 2019; Zickgraf, 2020). Beyond structural differences, individual aspirations—such as the sense of belonging to a certain community, a wish to improve the economic situation of one's family, a desire to have access to certain services and commodities—also play a part in conforming climate mobilities.

This article draws on the insights afforded by a climate mobilities perspective—the multiplicity and relationality of mobility, its uneven distribution, its embeddedness in power structures, its link to aspirations—to explore how contemporary apocalyptic films construct the links between mobility and the environment via the child figure. While the links between cinema and the environment have increasingly gained prominence in film studies (see Fay, 2018; Kääpä and Gustafsson, 2013; Paszkiewicz, 2021; Willoquet-Maricondi, 2010), mobility concerns remain largely overlooked in the discussion. The few existing approaches to mobility as a consequence of climate disruption deal with non-fictional work, in particular, Pacific climate change documentaries. Several articles explore how films like *There Once was an Island: Te Henua e Nnoho* (2010) or *The Island President* (2011) negotiate the

pressures of displacement caused by sea-level rise (see DeLoughrey, 2018; von Mossner, 2015; Walker, 2015). Recently, David Durand-Delacr  has surveyed this body of films through a climate mobilities perspective, aiming to find those films that “better represent” the multi-faceted nature of these phenomena (2022, p. 3400). In his analysis, he favours those documentaries that rely on a closer attention to subjects on location, as they might more adequately grasp the complex patterns of mobility arising from environmental threat.

By shifting the focus towards fiction films, this article takes a different path. Films are crucial sites in which the meanings and politics of mobility are put forward, negotiated, or contested. Filmic representations, both fictional and non-fictional, have the potential to shape our perceptions of mobility, and these perceptions, in turn, inform our future renderings and practices of mobility. Yet, fiction films can unveil aspects that go beyond the faithful rendering of “real life” Durand-Delacr  seeks for in his article (2022). Neil Archer has appropriately argued for the “capacities of the fictional” to provide access to subjective ideas of mobility that are impossible to grasp in more objective, sociologically oriented methods (2017, p. 518; see also Archer, 2019). More than documentaries, fiction films construct worlds. In the process, they have the potential to project the pre-conceived ideas and values that underpin our understanding of climate mobilities, even if they seem to be detached from a faithful account of reality. The choice of apocalyptic films in this article is grounded in this logic. These films fictionalize the collapse of the world through imagined, supernatural, and spectacularized scenarios, often without an explicit acknowledgement of the role of human agency in the destruction depicted. Yet, in this move, they also reimagine the relationships between humans and the environment, and how this link structures people’s patterns of mobility.

The inclusion of child characters—according to Nicole Seymour, the “sacred cow of environmental art, activism, and discourse” (2018, p. 180)—is an essential part of this process of creative construction. This article approaches the child as an ideological figure; a means towards a certain goal rather than an end in itself. It argues that the set of cultural values associated with childhood in Western thought—in particular innocence, victimhood, and a raised affinity with the natural world (Jenks, 2005)—turn the child into a powerful ideological vehicle from which to articulate social concerns; in this case, those linked to climate mobilities. As Karen Lury contends, the child in cinema is a “hollow” category, one which can “be used for almost any purpose, filled by and shaping whatever ideology is desired” (2022, p. 5). Thus, this article unpacks the construction of childhood in the films under analysis—around ideas of victimhood, futurity, and a raised ability to foresee what is coming—as a form of gaining access to how they work to represent climate mobilities in specific ways.

THE CHILD IN CONTEMPORARY APOCALYPTIC FILM

Making use of, as Pablo G mez puts it, the genre’s “matchless and almost boundless freedom to explore social concerns” (2023, p. 3), contemporary science fiction films increasingly address anxieties about climate change and its effects on mobility. *Take Shelter*, *Greenland*, and *The Road* project apocalyptic scenarios in which humans face the consequences of environmental collapse, each film addressing a different stage of the process—before, during, and after. In *Take Shelter*, Curtis LaForche (Michael Shannon) is a construction worker whose suburban middle-class life is disrupted when he begins to have recurring nightmares of an upcoming apocalyptic storm. Even if he thinks that these nightmares could be symptoms of a genetic mental illness, he chooses to read his dreams as real and builds a shelter to protect his wife Samantha (Jessica Chastain) and his hearing-impaired daughter Hannah (Tova Stewart)—getting, for this, a home improvement loan that puts the family’s financial stability at risk. Structured around the questioning of Curtis’s dreams as real prophecies or delusions, the film closes with an ambivalent epilogue—it is unclear whether it is one of his hallucinations or not—in which the apocalyptic storm anticipated is shown to be finally approaching.

In a way, *Greenland* starts where *Take Shelter* ends. A comet is about to hit the Earth and threatens to cause the extinction of all forms of life. As the apocalypse starts to unravel—with smaller pieces of the comet already falling—John Garrity (Gerard Butler) embarks on a perilous journey with his wife Allison (Morena Baccarin) and their

diabetic 7-year-old son Nathan (Roger Dale Floyd) in an attempt to reach the only safe shelter of the US government, set in Greenland. Mixing conventions of both the disaster film and the road movie, the film follows the family's desperate flight—faced with countless obstacles, most of them triggered by Nathan's illness and his need for insulin—until they finally reach the shelter. They manage to survive the comet's impact. The film's closing scene—birds fly in the sky and people from different countries emerge from shelters—hints at the survival of humanity and a potential reconstruction of society and civilization. *The Road*, an adaptation of Cormac McCarthy's celebrated novel, is also focused on the survival of a father and his son—unnamed and credited as Man (Viggo Mortensen) and Boy (Kodi Smit-McPhee)—but this time in an already post-apocalyptic world, in which all forms of life are dying as a result of an unexplained ecological catastrophe. Man and Boy walk through the devastated landscapes of a world in ruins in an attempt to reach the South coast of the US, where the higher temperatures might offer them a better chance to survive. Their encounters with other nomads—including gangs of cannibals who patrol the road in the search of victims—shape their journey, which ends with the death of Man, but also with the hope that Boy might be able to survive.

The three films emphasize the influence of environmental collapse in shifting patterns of mobility. In *Take Shelter*, Curtis's response to his apocalyptic visions is articulated in terms of immobility. Paralyzed by the threat of the upcoming storm, he gradually locks himself up, not only psychologically but also in spatial terms: he stays at home and becomes obsessed with the construction of the bunker. Staying still in the shelter is presented as the only guarantee of survival. Faced with a similar threat, the characters in *Greenland* start a dangerous and relentless journey. They walk, drive, and fly across the continent—by car up to Canada, and then by plane to Greenland—in their attempt to reach the US military bunker. In this articulation of cross-bordering, linear mobility as the only choice available, the film inverts the logic of *Take Shelter*. This time, staying at home equals death, while mobility encapsulates the promise of survival. Movement is also coupled with survival in *The Road*, albeit with different implications. In the film, the characters' constant wandering has no real destination. They head south in the hope that living conditions will be more bearable there, but this is not the final point of their journey. On the contrary, in a post-apocalyptic reality, survival implies being constantly on the move. The film does not really trace the linear journey of most cinematic narratives—from point A to point B—but one structured around fragmentation, combining movement and stillness in equal parts, and without a clear end point. The journey, this time, becomes part of the essence of the characters.

In combination, the three films attest to the variety of possible mobility outcomes that result from environmental pressure (Boas et al., 2022). Yet, this preliminary conclusion lacks a deeper engagement with the role played by child figures in the articulation of climate mobilities. Although with different degrees of agency and relevance within their respective stories, the three kids are crucial for the narrative construction of each film. In *Take Shelter*, Hannah is Curtis's main concern. Often in the background of the film's action, she takes center stage within her father's nightmares, thus emerging as a key figure for the articulation of the threat of environmental collapse. Similarly, *Greenland* features Nathan as a secondary role in terms of narrative agency. And yet, he works to justify the central turning point of the plot: although chosen for a place in the US official planes to Greenland, the family is ultimately rejected because of the child's diabetic condition. In turn, Boy stands as the co-protagonist of *The Road*. The film is structured around the (conflicted) relationship between father and son, which serves as a basis for the exploration of notions of futurity, hope, and humanity. The remainder of the article is devoted to the detailed exploration of the different functions fulfilled by these children, and how they affect the articulation of climate mobilities.

The child as seer

In a review of *Greenland* for Indiewire, critic David Ehrlich picks up on the role played by Nathan within the film. His “regular need for insulin”, Ehrlich states, works as a strategy to increase the viewers' emotional engagement—being at the heart of Nathan's role as victim, as will be argued below (2020). However, he then adds:

The other thing about Nathan is that he's super-obsessed with the comet that's speeding towards Earth. He talks about the interstellar object – dubbed “Clark” – so familiarly that it sounds like his best friend. Maybe it is, the poor kid. He loves Clark. Alas, Clark does not love him back.

(2020)

Ironic as this may sound, Ehrlich's comment hints at the special affinity the film creates between the child and the comet; and crucially, at how the comet is, especially at the beginning, filtered through Nathan's subjectivity. In one of the film's early scenes, John finds a drawing of the comet in his son's schoolwork. Nathan tells what he has been taught at school: “Clarke is like a big snowball but made of gas”. It comes “from a different solar system, that's why they do not know much about it”, he adds. Spectators learn of the nature of the comet, as well as of its potentially destructive power, through the naïve words of the child. More tellingly, the childlike version of the comet—a red and yellow fireball crossing the sky—is the first image of it shown in the film. Mediated by the subjectivity of the child, the drawing foreshadows the actual impact of the comet only a few minutes later. Also, it is the first of a series of moments in which Nathan displays an ability to perceive the threatening presence of Clarke before his parents do. “Look, there's Clarke!”, he says the morning after, while he is with John. “The sky is on fire”, he warns his parents, once the first piece of the comet has already impacted on Earth and they are getting ready to run away. In both cases, it is Nathan who feels the emerging threat and draws his father's (and spectators') attention to the presence of the comet in the sky.

A similar strategy is at play in *Take Shelter*'s ending sequence. Advised by a psychiatrist to break physically away from the storm shelter that he is obsessed with, Curtis goes on a trip to the coast with his wife and daughter. The scene opens with a series of shots of Curtis and Hannah as they are building sandcastles—perhaps evoking, as Agnes Woolley argues, the fugacity and fragility of this moment of rest (2014, p. 189)—while Samantha is cooking dinner inside the house. At one point, something off-screen catches the attention of the child. She stops playing, stands up and, in close-up, stares in awe towards the sea. When Curtis asks her what the problem is, she signs “storm” in ASL, a gesture that the audience can recognize from an earlier scene in the film. Curtis turns round, and his facial expression changes drastically as he looks towards the sea, which is still offscreen. In an instinctive act of protection, he holds Hannah into his arms. It is only when Samantha comes out of the house that, from her point of view, the coming storm is finally visualized: a series of giant, apocalyptic tornadoes have formed in the sea and slowly head towards the coast.¹

In these two examples, children display a raised perceptivity towards the world outside, a rather uncanny ability to sense what is going on before adults do. Like birds in the face of a climate-related disaster, they are the ones who first warn—not only the adults around, but most tellingly, also spectators—of the potential dangers that are about to disrupt their lives. This is not a trivial portrayal. On the contrary, it responds to an understanding of children as positioned on “the threshold between nature and culture” (Randall, 2017, p. xii). Although in a process towards becoming fully cultured subjects, they are still closely allied with animals and nature. Therefore, they are invested with a somehow “more-than-human” ability to feel threats (be it a comet, a tornado, or a sky on fire) while adults are still unaware of them. Crucially, the films' articulation of this ability in terms of vision (rather than other senses) evokes Gilles Deleuze's theorization of the child as a “seer” (1989, p. 3). For Deleuze, the child is a figure whose helplessness make it “all the more capable of seeing and hearing” (1989, p. 3). Insofar as its ability to act is more limited than that of adults, the cinematic child is thought to experience the world as seer. All it does is observe and hear the world, thus becoming more ready to notice a change or threat in its surroundings.

Both *Take Shelter* and *Greenland* abide by this conceptualization of the child. Accordingly, their choice to present environmental threats through the eyes of children carries certain implications if approached from the perspective of climate mobilities. Seen from the point of view of Nathan and Hannah, the sense that these events come out of nowhere is foregrounded. Their extraordinary nature is brought to the fore. To an extent, of course, climate-related disasters do come out of the blue. Yet, such an articulation helps to obscure the degree of human responsibility behind these phenomena—which, beyond the use of the child as seer, is differently tackled by each of the films.

While *Greenland* largely omits any reference to the role of humankind in causing environmental collapse, *Take Shelter* hints at it by connecting extraction—Curtis' job at a sand mine implies drilling holes in soil—to the ecocidal anxieties experienced by Curtis in his dreams. Still, the articulation of the child as seer also overemphasizes the role of climate and environmental factors as triggers of mobility. It draws a direct, univocal link between the climate-related disaster and the reshaping of the mobility patterns experienced by the characters. The look of children projects a fascination for the unfolding of disasters, but at the same time draws spectator's attention away from the "differentiality" of mobility (Wiegel et al., 2019, p. 4): the ways in which it is embedded in structures of power. This way, the child works to obscure the ways in which social differences—having access to information, having a car at one's disposal, living in a specific area of a city—also contribute to shaping mobility outcomes, even in the event of an apocalypse.

The myth of innocence: victimhood, futurity, and the child

Depicted as particularly vulnerable and helpless in the face of adverse circumstances, suffering children—including those affected by environmental conditions—figure in popular imagery "as the most vulnerable, the most pathetic, the most deserving of our sympathy and aid" (Holland, 2004, p. 143). While the child seer features only in two of the movies under analysis—set in the wake of apocalypse, *The Road* does not present threats but already accomplished destruction—the three films are fully aligned with this conceptualization of the child in terms of victimhood. With a higher "susceptibility [...] to specific kinds of harm or threat by others" (Mackenzie et al., 2014, p. 8), children are always perceived as more vulnerable than adults. They are younger in terms of age, smaller in size, and less mature; therefore, they are more likely to be affected by harm. Yet, each of these films deploys specific strategies to foreground the vulnerability of child characters. *Greenland* exploits Nathan's medical condition for this purpose. If surviving through an apocalypse was not risky enough for a 7-year-old child, his dependence on insulin emphasizes the sense of constant danger for his physical safety. Crucially, it leads audiences' anxieties towards the wellbeing of the child in scenes—his involuntary involvement in a gunfight while attempting to get insulin in a pharmacy is a case point here—in which his blood sugar level becomes an extra concern, in addition to all the variety of threats that Nathan under.

While Hannah in *Take Shelter* is also depicted according to specific health problems—this time, hearing impairment—the film does not include scenes in which her lack of hearing implies a risk for her physical safety. Still, she is mobilized as a figure of victimhood through her presence in her father's hallucinations. Hannah plays a central role in generating the "generalized climate of fear" that these nightmares evoke (Woolley, 2014, p. 177). Throughout the film, she is about to be attacked by a dog, abducted by strangers while sitting in Curtis's car, and threatened by a flock of dead birds falling from the sky. Implicitly, these situations present Hannah as a mirror onto which her father projects his anxieties. Crucially, her position as a helpless child at risk triggers Curtis's paranoid state and works to intensify the emotional dimension of the dreams. A similar strategy is at play in *The Road*. While most encounters with strangers pose a threat to both Man and Boy, the film positions Boy as the object of the cannibals' gaze. Boy remains immobile and silent in these scenes, while his father tells him what to do. Less fitted for survival because of his physical fragility, his vulnerability leads to a pervading sense of constant danger, in which any new encounter is perceived—both by Man and by spectators—as a potential threat to Boy's life.

Through these different thematic and aesthetic strategies, children are largely depicted as victims in need of help and protection. Vulnerability is coupled with a sense of danger so as to engage viewers in the quest for survival depicted by each film. Understood to be innately good, and particularly vulnerable to the threats of adult world, Nathan, Hannah, and Boy are contemporary actualizations of the "myth of childhood innocence" (Jenkins, 1998, p. 1) that shapes most constructions of childhood in media. Another attribute of that myth, intimately connected with the idea of victimhood, is the conflation of children with notions of futurity and hope. If children are perceived as victims, it is also because they have their whole lives ahead of them; they embody the future and the "potential for

progress" that their parents lack (Lury, 2010, p. 26). In other words, they encapsulate "the potentiality for growth and renewal in the individual and, by extension, in society" (Wood, 2006, p. 189).

The Road articulates the relation between father and son as a conflict between the past and the future. In appearance, futurity has no room in a world that is irrevocably dying. All forms of life are gone and humans are also on the verge of extinction. Yet, Man and Boy are differently positioned in the face of this context. Man struggles to leave the past behind. Through a recurrent use of flashbacks, the film visualizes moments of a previous life that he longs for. These memories—playing the piano with his wife, the birth of Boy in the midst of the catastrophe, his wife's desertion—haunt him in his sleep, and even if he makes the effort to forget—he throws his wife's picture away—he still carries the burden of loss. Man's sole reason to live—his "warrant", as he defines him in voice-over—is his son. Already for his father, then, the child embodies the promise of a future. More tellingly, Boy has no past. Born into an already destroyed world, he has no recollection of a previous reality, nor he misses the type of life he never got to know. There is no clearest emblem of futurity than a character without a past. Unlike his father, Boy can only look forward.

This translates into a different attitude towards others. The relationship between father and son, as Joseph Wiinikka-Lydon argues, also "illustrates the tension between survival, on the one hand, and moral ideals, on the other." (2015, p. 62). While Man perceives all humans as a potential threat to Boy's survival—he kills them if he has to, he refuses to share his food with those they come across in the road—Boy displays an innate compassion for those in need and a desire to help them. He confronts his father for his behavior and complains about his lack of empathy with the suffering of others. Previous scholarship has questioned the source of this morality: how Boy's behavior can be grounded on care without a memory of the past and without having been educated on those values (Kaplan, 2016, p. 94; Wiinikka-Lydon, 2015, p. 67). The answer to this question can be found in the myth of childhood innocence mentioned above: the child is good because he is inherently so. He was born that way. Crucially, the film presents Boy's innate compassion, still unspoiled by the corruption of society, as the last remnant of humanity on the face of the Earth. As such, he embodies the only possible glimpse of hope in *The Road*. Rather than with the survival of humankind, futurity is coupled in the film with the survival of humanity understood as a form of morality. The film's ending reflects this conflation of survival and hope into the character of Boy. He survives not because he has learnt to be tough as his father wanted, but because he has kept his humanity intact—caring for others, sharing his food, refusing to harm others—and thus encapsulates the only possible hope for the future of humankind.

In both *Take Shelter* and *Greenland*, the relationship between father and child also involves a tension over the future, even if not so clearly articulated in terms of conflict. In the former, the inadequacy of Curtis's choices—getting a loan, building the shelter, losing his job—is measured up against the consequences they have for his daughter's future. While he believes he is protecting her from the upcoming storm—and the epilogue, arguably, proves him right—he also jeopardizes the surgery that Hannah needs to recover her hearing. In *Greenland*, saving Nathan becomes the main drive for John throughout the film. Rather than with his own survival, John is mainly concerned with granting his son a future. Beyond the father-son link, this latter film introduces a scene which, quite paradoxically, evokes its own manipulative use of the child as a symbol of futurity. At one point, Nathan and Allison are picked up by a couple. Friendly at first—they offer Nathan a sandwich to balance his blood sugar level—they soon realize the opportunity that lies in front of them. They kick Allison out of the car, steal her bracelet to have access to the airport, and—rather than just keeping his bracelet too—they take Nathan with them. "A kid with a face like that", argues the man, cannot be turned away in the airport. He also justifies the kidnap as a form of "giving the boy a chance", rather than a choice triggered by his own self-interest. In short, they see Nathan as an entry ticket into the plane, and implicitly into the future. The couple's overt "use" of Nathan as a vehicle mirrors the film's own investment in the child as a figure of futurity. Nathan's angelical face presence—an emblem of his purity and innocence—is used by the film under the same rationale followed by the couple: he elicits (for his parents, and also for spectators) a belief in the possibility of a future.

The conceptualization of children as victims and icons of futurity grounds the mobility choices the characters engage in. The decision whether to move or to stay put—and all the potential variants in terms of where to go, how to move, at what speed and rhythm—is shaped by the sole purpose of protecting these helpless children and providing them with a future. Man's erratic and incessant walking through a dying world, Curtis's paralyzed stillness around the shelter, and John's frenetic journey to the North Pole are triggered by a firm commitment to the protection of their children and the potential for progress they represent. Aware that “the exhortation to ‘protect the children’ seems to add persuasive power to almost any argument” (Bernstein, 2011, p. 2), these films prompt viewers to understand mobility as resulting from the vulnerability and hope these children embody. In a similar way to the use of the child as seer, this deployment of the child figure strengthens the univocal link between climate-related disasters and mobility. The implicit call to protect the child emphasizes the role of climate events as the only factor which shapes mobility patterns, and once again diverts attention from the rest of factors at play: in particular, the extent to which these fathers' position as male, white and middle-class grants them a higher degree of “network capital” than the one held by other characters (Elliott & Urry, 2010). In a similar vein, the different aspirations—Curtis's desire for stability, John's professional ambitions, Man's longing for his wife—which might have been involved in framing mobility choices are conflated into just one: saving the child. Obscuring the different abilities and aspirations that people have in the face of a disaster, the child succeeds in erasing the sociopolitical dimension of climate mobilities.

CONCLUSION

As climate change has gained prominence in media discourse in the last decade, its consequences for human mobility have equally entered the scene. Most media accounts of climate displacement predict an impending cross-bordering flow of “climate refugees”, who will be forced to migrate to the Western world as a result of climate-related disasters in underdeveloped countries. In line with recent scholarly work which criticizes this sensationalist, over-simplistic narrative (Bettini, 2013; Boas et al., 2022; Methmann & Rothe, 2014; Wiegel et al., 2019), this article has sought to expand the discussion on the links between mobility and the environment by looking at three contemporary movies—rather than journalistic or media accounts—and the role played by children in them. It has analyzed how the child, used as an ideological vehicle, shapes the representation of so-called “climate mobilities” (Boas et al., 2022) in three US apocalyptic films: *The Road*, *Take Shelter*, and *Greenland*.

As fictional projections of environmental collapse, the three films fictionalize the ways in which climate factors transform human patterns of mobility. By tracing different responses to the threat of climate change—from cross-bordering movement, through immobility, to erratic wandering—the three films exemplify the multiplicity of possible mobilities resulting from a context of environmental catastrophe. At the same time, mediated by child figures, these films fail to account for the varied aspirations, sociopolitical factors, and power structures which shape climate mobilities. The coding of the child in terms of foresight, victimhood, and futurity, by drawing attention to the sensorial and emotional potential of the figure, manages to construct the three films as personal quests for survival, structured around the need to “protect the child”. In this move, however, the political dimension implicit to any instance of climate mobilities is obscured.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank Marimar Azcona and Pablo Gómez for their feedback in the initial stages of this research. Research toward this chapter was carried out with a predoctoral grant (reference: FPU19/03436) funded by the Spanish Ministry of Science and Innovation, as well as with the funding provided by the research project no. PID2021-123836NB-I00 and the DGA research project H23_20R.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analyzed in this study.

ORCID

Andrés Buesa  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3601-6560>

ENDNOTE

¹ The film is not explicitly clear on whether this epilogue is one of Curtis's dreams or not. Yet, the activation of Samantha's point of view—while all the previous dreams were exclusively focalized from Curtis's perspective—supports the interpretation of it as a real catastrophe (Kaplan, 2016, p. 53).

REFERENCES

- Adams, H. (2016) Why populations persist: mobility, place attachment and climate change. *Population and Environment*, 37(4), 429–448. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11111-015-0246-3>
- Archer, N. (2017) Genre on the road: the road movie as automobilities research. *Mobilities*, 12(4), 509–519. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1080/17450101.2017.1330988>
- Archer, N. (2019) Science Fiction Cinema and the Road Movie: Case Studies in the Estranged Mobile Gaze. In: Aguiar, M., Mathieson, C. & Pearce, L. (Eds.) *Mobilities, Literature, Culture*. Cham: Springer International Publishing, pp. 281–306. Available from: https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-27072-8_12
- Bernstein, R. (2011) *Racial Innocence: Performing American Childhood from Slavery to Civil Rights*. New York: New York University Press.
- Bettini, G. (2013) Climate Barbarians at the Gate? A critique of apocalyptic narratives on “climate refugees”. *Geoforum*, 45, 63–72. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2012.09.009>
- Biasiori, L., Mazzini, F. & Rabbiosi, C. (Eds.) (2023) *Reimagining Mobilities Across the Humanities*. Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge.
- Boas, I., Wiegel, H., Farbotko, C., Warner, J. & Sheller, M. (2022) Climate mobilities: migration, im/mobilities and mobility regimes in a changing climate. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 48(14), 3365–3379. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2022.2066264>
- Climate Refugees*. (2010) [VOD]. Directed by Michael P. Nash. USA: Beverly Hills Productions.
- Cresswell, T. (2010) Towards a Politics of Mobility. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 28(1), 17–31. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1068/d11407>
- Deleuze, G. (1989) *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota.
- DeLoughrey, E. (2018) The sea is rising: Visualising climate change in the Pacific islands. *Pacific Dynamics: Journal of Interdisciplinary Research*, 2(2), 185–197. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.26021/868>
- Durand-Delacré, D. (2022) (Mis)representing climate mobilities: lessons from documentary filmmaking. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 48(14), 3397–3415. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2022.2066260>
- Ehrlich, D. (2020) *Greenland Review: Gerard Butler Stars in a Disaster Movie That's Better than 2020 Deserves*. *Indiewire*. 16 December. Available at: <https://www.indiewire.com/criticism/movies/greenland-review-disaster-movie-1234604799/> [Accessed 29th May 2023].
- Elliott, A. & Urry, J. (2010) *Mobile Lives*. London: Routledge.
- Farbotko, C. (2022) Anti-displacement mobilities and re-emplacements: alternative climate mobilities in Funafala. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 48(14), 3380–3396. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2022.2066259>
- Fay, J. (2018) *Inhospitable World: Cinema in the Time of the Anthropocene*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Gómez-Muñoz, P. (2023) *Science Fiction Cinema in the Twenty-First Century: Transnational Futures, Cosmopolitan Concerns*. London: Routledge.
- Greenland*. (2020) [VOD]. Directed by Ric Roman Waugh. USA: STX Films.
- Holland, P. (2004) *Picturing Childhood: The Myth of the Child in Popular Imagery*. London: I.B. Tauris.
- Hulme, M. (2011) Reducing the Future to Climate: A Story of Climate Determinism and Reductionism. *Osiris*, 26(1), 245–266. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1086/661274>
- Jenkins, H. (1998) Introduction: Childhood Innocence and Other Modern Myths. In: Jenkins, H. (Ed.) *The Children's Culture Reader*. New York: New York University Press, pp. 1–37.
- Jenks, C. (2005) *Childhood*, 2nd edition. London and New York: Routledge.
- Kääpä, P. & Gustafsson, T. (Eds.) (2013) *Transnational Ecocinema: Film Culture in an Era of Ecological Transformation*. Bristol: Intellect.
- Kaplan, E.A. (2016) *Climate Trauma: Foreseeing the Future in Dystopian Film and Fiction*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press.

- Lury, K. (2010) *The Child in Film: Tears, Fears and Fairy Tales*. London: I.B. Tauris.
- Lury, K. (2022) Introduction. In: Lury, K. (Ed.) *The Child in Cinema*. London: BFI, pp. 1–18.
- Mackenzie, C., Rogers, W. & Dodds, S. (2014) Introduction: What Is Vulnerability and Why Does It Matter for Moral Theory? In: Mackenzie, C., Rogers, W. & Dodds, S. (Eds.) *Vulnerability: New Essays in Ethics and Feminist Philosophy*. New York: Oxford University Press, pp. 1–32.
- McLeman, R. & Gemenne, F. (2020) Environmental migration research: evolution and current state of the science. In: McLeman, R. & Gemenne, F. (Eds.) *Routledge Handbook of Environmental Displacement and Migration*. London: Routledge, pp. 3–16.
- Methmann, C. & Rothe, D. (2014) Tracing the spectre that haunts Europe: the visual construction of climate-induced migration in the MENA region. *Critical Studies on Security*, 2(2), 162–179. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1080/21624887.2014.909226>
- Paszkiwicz, K. (2021) Cinema and Environment: The Arts of Noticing in the Anthropocene. *Res Rhetorica*, 8(2), 2–21. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.29107/rr2021.2.1>
- Randall, R. (2017) *Children on the Threshold in Contemporary Latin American Cinema: Nature, Gender, and Agency*. Lanham: Lexington Books.
- Ransan-Cooper, H., Farbotko, C., McNamara, K., Thornton, F. & Chevalier, E. (2015) Being(s) framed: The means and ends of framing environmental migrants. *Global Environmental Change*, 35, 106–115. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.gloenvcha.2015.07.013>
- Seymour, N. (2018) *Bad Environmentalism: Irony and Irreverence in the Ecological Age*. Minneapolis; London: University of Minnesota Press.
- Take Shelter*. (2011) [VOD] Directed by Jeff Nichols. USA: Hydraulx.
- The Island President*. (2011) [VOD]. Directed by John Shenk. USA: ITVS International.
- The Road*. (2009) [VOD]. Directed by John Hillcoat. USA: Dimension Films.
- There Once was an Island: Te Henua e Nnoho*. (2010) [VOD]. Directed by Briar March. New Zealand: On The Level Productions.
- von Mossner, A.W. (2015) Small islands in documentary film. *Global Environment*, 8(1), 178–195. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.3197/ge.2015.080109>
- Walker, J. (2015) Projecting Sea Level Rise: Documentary Film and Other Geolocative Technologies. In: Juhasz, A. & Lebow, A. (Eds.) *A Companion to Contemporary Documentary Film*. Chichester; Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, pp. 61–85.
- Wiegel, H., Boas, I. & Warner, J. (2019) A mobilities perspective on migration in the context of environmental change. *WIREs Climate Change*, 10(6), 1–9. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1002/wcc.610>
- Wiinikka-Lydon, J. (2015) The Child Is My Warrant: Virtue, Violence, and *The Road*'s Radical Humanism. In: Olson, D. (Ed.) *The Child in Post-apocalyptic Cinema*. Lanham: Lexington Books, pp. 61–76.
- Willoquet-Maricondi, P. (Ed.) (2010) *Framing the World: Explorations in Ecocriticism and Film*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press.
- Wood, R. (2006) *Personal Views: Explorations in Film*. Detroit: Wayne State University Press.
- Woolley, A. (2014) "There's a Storm Coming!": Reading the Threat of Climate Change in Jeff Nichols's *Take Shelter*. *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment*, 21(1), 174–191. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1093/isle/isu036>
- Zickgraf, C. (2020) Immobility. In: McLeman, R. & Gemenne, F. (Eds.) *Routledge Handbook of Environmental Displacement and Migration*. London: Routledge, pp. 71–84.

How to cite this article: Buesa, A. (2024) Facing apocalypse: climate mobilities and the cinematic child. *Sociology Lens*, 37(1), 105–115. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1111/johs.12438>