

Snowpiercer (2013): The Fate of Capitalism as a Globalist Runaway Train.

Director: Bong Joon-ho; Spoiler Alert. Eco-Nihilism, Supra-Nationalism, and Societal Collapse.

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Theme: [History](#)

Global Research, June 11, 2020

*“Western countries see the rest of the world as their playing field fit only for exploitation.”
- Pramodya Ananta Toer in [conversation](#) with Andre Vltchek, in Jakarta, 2004*

“The “global playing field” is “level” only from the perspective of the west.”- Robert [H Wade](#)

Introduction

The success of Bong Joon-ho's film *Parasite* (2019) has drawn attention to his back catalogue, in particular his first mainly English-language film, *Snowpiercer* (2013).

Snowpiercer is a fast-paced movie about a train on a global circular train track, set in the future after a climate change engineering experiment goes wrong. Ice cold temperatures freeze the world into a new ice age. The train is designed and run by the magnate Wilford to circumnavigate the planet perpetually. The passengers, the earth's only survivors, are segregated: the elites in the luxurious forward cars and the poorest in the grimy tail compartments. The tail-enders, led by Curtis, decide to revolt and make a plan to get through the fortified doors of each carriage to take over and control the train. However, after battles with the train guards take a heavy toll on the insurgents, a select few are brought to the front of the train to meet Wilford.

The film encapsulates the class system very cleverly with different classes enjoying very different levels of comfort on the train. The tail-enders revolt was only the latest in a series of failed revolutions on the train. This latest revolutionary failure under Curtis' leadership heralds a change in the tone of the film from violent battle scenes to increasingly decadent and bizarre scenes as he moves through the elite carriages. The disappointing failure of the insurrection seems to have led some film critics to see the film as a depressing metaphor for class struggle. The journey of the survivors through the train to the cockpit seems surreal and pointless after the initial exciting revolutionary exuberance.

Metaphorically speaking

However, a different way of looking at the film might throw some light on the dramatic changes that take place throughout the narrative of the film. And that would be to look at the film, not as a metaphor of class, but as a metaphor of *time*.

There are many key symbols throughout the film that suggest the train and its carriages are a metaphor for the passage of time, not least that the train itself represents the arrow of time, but also the progress of capitalism through the twentieth century.

That is, a metaphor for the progress and profound changes of the twentieth century that led to climate change, and the attempts to rectify it in the twenty-first century experimental disaster that followed.

Seeing the train as a metaphor of time also clarifies why the narrative changes from a people's uprising to elite decadence. It is a view of the twentieth century which looks at class but does not have a class analysis. What it has instead is a nihilistic ecological analysis which prefers to see the destruction of society itself (and all those who both benefit from it and all those who are exploited by it) rather than face up to global issues of exploitation and injustice. If there is any hope it is rather vaguely put into a reverse biblical Adam and Eve symbolism whereby the survivors return to the earthly Garden of Paradise much chastened by their catastrophic expulsion.

Carriages and Time: Depicting the Twentieth Century

1910s and 1920s: Slum

The film starts with the failed climate engineering 'chemtrails' and moves swiftly to the carriage where the tail-enders, led by Curtis and his second-in-command Edgar, are being overseen by armed militia. The atmosphere is Dickensian as the living quarters resemble slums from the Industrial Revolution. The dirty grey clothes, drawn faces and squalor are straight out of the documentary photography of the early twentieth century and resemble descriptions from Upton Sinclair's extraordinary novel *The Jungle* (1906) of the meat-packing industry in Chicago. The first three train cars we see depict a ghetto slum, a prison and mortuary, and a factory respectively. In the prison car they release Namgoong, a captive security specialist, and his clairvoyant daughter Yona to open the doors. They enter the factory car that makes their black protein bars ('nutrient gel') and discover the large hoppers are full of cockroaches. This scene could be straight out of *The Jungle* as Sinclair describes the sausage-making [process](#):

"There was never the least attention paid to what was cut up for sausage; there would come all the way back from Europe old sausage that had been rejected, and that was moldy and white - it would be doused with borax and glycerine, and dumped into the hoppers, and made over again for home consumption. There would be meat that had tumbled out on the floor, in the dirt and sawdust, where the workers had tramped and spit uncounted billions of consumption germs. There would be meat stored in great piles in rooms; and the water from leaky roofs would drip over it, and thousands of rats would race about on it. It was too dark in these storage places to see well, but a man could run over these piles of meat and sweep off handfuls of the dried dung of rats. These rats were nuisances, and the packers would put poisoned bread out for them; they would die, and then the rats, bread, and meat would go into the hoppers together."

1930s and 1940s: Fascism

After the shock of seeing the contents of their diet the insurgents move on to the next carriage door. As the doors open they face a large group of burly masked men dressed in black and carrying hatchets. They launch into a bloody battle. This scene is reminiscent of the street battles between workers and fascists in England, Germany and Spain in the 1930s. As if to make the point clearer the hatchets resemble the axe of the *fascis*, a bound [bundle](#) of wooden rods, including an axe with its blade emerging carried by the Roman

lictors. (The [licitor](#)'s main task was to attend as bodyguards to magistrates who held *imperium*. The axes symbolized the power to carry out capital punishment and became a symbol of the Italian fascists). And the group's leader is called Franco the Elder.

Things get worse as the train goes into a long tunnel while the 'lictors' put on night vision goggles. The complete overpowering of the tail-enders in the dark reminds one of the total war of Nazi Germany in the Second World War. Eventually, lit torches are brought up from the back of the train and the rebels overcome the men in black. Despite this victory, the group of insurgents is much weakened and at this point it is decided that Curtis, Namgoong, Yona, skilled fighter Grey, and Tanya and Andrew will go it alone to the top of the train. The revolution is effectively over and a select few are brought forward to meet the elite.

1950s: Self-Sufficiency

The small group are now brought through the fifth car showing a woman knitting in a conservatory listening to classical music. All is quiet as peaceful workers tend to the vegetable plants. The sixth car is an aquarium with a sushi bar. They sit down and have real food for the first time since they got on the train.

The symbolism of Japan at this point in the chronology is [interesting](#) as:

"Post-World War II Japan of the 1950s and '60s saw many changes. It experienced record economic growth and advances in manufacturing and design that resulted in a wealth of goods that fascinated people across the world."

Japan also has significance as an Asian country with a development curve similar to the West. The seventh car is depicted as a fully stocked refrigerated meat section. These cars of fruit, vegetables, and meat could easily represent the post world war nationalist ideology of self-sufficiency, that partly arose out of the war economy, but was soon affected by supranational free trade areas and international free trade agreements. For [example](#):

"In the 19th century, Britain did completely embrace free trade. It was enormously to our advantage to do so, as the workshop of the world, and we imported most of our food by the end of the 19th century. The result was that we nearly starved in two world wars. After the Second World War, we did not make the same mistake; even with the enormous change in tastes and increase in food imports in recent decades, we still produce more than half of what we eat."

The eighth car is a classroom where the teacher, a middle class lady dressed in 1950s style clothing, tells the children about the greatness of Wilford and the "sacred engine". The children are taught negative views of the 'Old Worlders' and the 'Tail Sectioners', for [example](#):

YLFA (8) a sweet little girl with blond pigtails waves her hand at Teacher. She jumps up without being acknowledged...

YLFA: I heard all Tail Sectioners were lazy dogs who slept all day in their own shit. [...]

YLFA: Old World people were frigging morons who got turned into popsicles!”

Boiled eggs are handed out to the children and the workers. However guns are concealed underneath and the teacher pulls out a machine gun and starts firing at the rebels and is killed. This is a shocking moment revealing the fanaticism and violence of Wilford’s supporters.

Curtis’ declining group continues through the ninth and tenth car which resemble luxury carriages from the Orient Express. In car 10 they pass by an academic, a dentist and a tailor all busy at work in their compartments.

1960s: Equilibrium

In the eleventh car there is a very plush bar where the elites inhabit their own world in their own older fashion sense. A staircase leads up to a row of women sitting under typical 1960s hair salon hair-drying chairs. The next car has swimming pools straight out of a 1960s James Bond movie where another gun battle takes place. The 13th car has two rows of individual sauna cubicles. These carriages (from the 5th to the 13th) have a mood of equilibrium and peace where the elites can live undisturbed and the middle classes can enjoy the good life.

1970s and 1980s: Decadence

However, now the rebel group (Curtis, Namgoong, and Yona) enter a disco in the 14th car where we see the middle class youth for the first time dancing and taking drugs. They are kept constantly high and drunk. After the disco they pass through a nightclub VIP room where the drugged out ‘zombies’ loll about in animal skins oblivious to the drama taking over the train.

1990s and 2000s: Computer Age

This leads them into a carriage lined with banks of computers and large engine cogs turning the wheels of the train. The last carriage for Curtis is the section where Wilford himself resides behind massive metal doors. Here the system is digitised and runs on a perpetual power source. Despite its technological sophistication it still needs children (Tim) from the tail-end of the train to sit in the works as living components of its power generation. The ‘perpetual’ or ‘sacred’ engine feeds off the poorest and youngest to keep going indefinitely, symbolising capitalist dependence on children in the factories and mines of the nineteenth century, and the child labour scandals in the modern factories of today.

Thus the whole train seems to move through time as well as space. From slums to fascism, expansionism to decadence and finally technology and the 1%, the elites on the train promote a hierarchical system and ideology which they believe is ‘correct’ and ‘natural’. As Wilford [says](#) to Curtis:

“WILFORD: Curtis, everyone has their own pre-ordained position.

this way and that...and everyone is in it. Except you.

CURTIS: That’s what people in the best place say to the people in the worst place.

There’s not a soul on this train who wouldn’t trade places with you.”

This ‘correct’ attitude can still be seen among the aristocracy today, as Chris Bryant [writes](#):

“Historically, the British aristocracy’s defining feature was not a noble aspiration to serve the common weal but a desperate desire for self-advancement. They stole land under the pretence of piety in the early middle ages, they seized it by conquest, they expropriated it from the monasteries and they enclosed it for their private use under the pretence of efficiency. They grasped wealth, corruptly carved out their niche at the pinnacle of society and held on to it with a vice-like grip. They endlessly reinforced their own status and enforced deference on others through ostentatiously exorbitant expenditure on palaces, clothing and jewellery. They laid down a strict set of rules for the rest of society, but lived by a different standard. Such was their sense of entitlement that they believed – and persuaded others to believe – that a hierarchical society with them placed firmly and unassailably at the top was the natural order of things. Even to suggest otherwise, they implied, was to shake the foundations of morality.”

In *Snowpiercer*, the train hierarchy is a patriarchal system of which Wilford is the highest priest of the ‘sacred’ engine and father of all. The whole system is self-reproducing as the children of the middle class and elites are indoctrinated into it from an early age.

Throughout his journey through the cars Namgoong has been collecting the drug Kronole made from hallucinogenic industrial waste which is also highly flammable. He pushes the small blocks together to make a plastic explosive bomb which he uses to blow open a train door. However, the explosive shock waves cause the train to be hit by successively stronger avalanches and is eventually derailed and crashes. Everybody is killed except for Yona and Tim, (as far as we know).

This metaphor for the complete collapse of the whole system (and a catastrophe triggered by an unforeseen event) is typical of modern ecological ideologies that blame the ‘greed’ of the human race for climate chaos, and not the global class system which exploits natural resources relentlessly, and under which the vast majority of people have to struggle to survive. Thus, ideologically, the working class not only fails to take control of the train (and thereby the system) but is itself destroyed in the train crash.

Conclusion

On a broader level the survival of Yona and Tim has some interesting parallels with Mao’s Three Worlds Theory. In the *Snowpiercer* narrative, the First World [e.g.the US] and Second World [e.g. Europe and Japan] are destroyed while the Third World [e.g. Asia (Yona) and Africa (Tim)] survives to repopulate the world presumably with a more nature-friendly ideology. Thus the survivors become a metaphor for the supra-national entities of Asia and Africa, who, after centuries of colonialism and imperialism (by the First and Second Worlds) cannot be blamed for not investigating the destruction behind them as they walk away.

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