

Movie Review: *Snowpiercer*

SUAN SONNA

I first encountered *Snowpiercer*, a post-apocalyptic sci-fi thriller, in high school about ten years ago. After an exhausting finals week, I was looking for a light action movie and stumbled across this film. Little did I know, I was about to watch an intense and somber two-hour critique of capitalism.

Snowpiercer released in theaters on June 27th, 2014, to critical acclaim but meager box office returns—except in South Korea and China. In South Korea, it sold four million tickets within its first week which is, according to *The Hollywood Reporter*, “the shortest time span for a film to reach that level of admissions in South Korean box office history.”¹

The star-studded cast certainly played a part in the film’s success – Chris Evans, Jonathan Hurt, and Ed Harris held lead parts – but more importantly, the film resonated with these audiences because of the social critiques explored by its legendary director, Bong Joon-ho.

This name might not immediately register, but his 2019 film *Parasite* presumably will. At the 92nd Academy Awards in 2020, *Parasite* won Best Picture, Best International Feature Film, and Best Director for the esteemed filmmaker. But even before 2020, Joon-ho had established himself in South Korea as a master with movies like *Memories of Murder*, *The Host*, *Okja*, and many others.

I mention *Parasite* here because it shares much in common with *Snowpiercer*. Namely, both films are social commentaries and critiques of the excesses of capitalism. Although *Snowpiercer* did not initially perform well in Western countries, *Parasite*’s success has gradually brought *Snowpiercer* back into the spotlight and garnered it cult status.

In a 2019 interview, Bong Joon-ho explained the meaning of his film *Parasite*: “In today’s capitalistic society there are ranks and castes that are invisible to the eye. We keep them disguised and out of sight and superficially look down on class hierarchies as a relic of the past, but the reality is that there are class lines that cannot be crossed.” Whereas *Parasite* aims to capture and subtly expose those invisible divisions, *Snowpiercer* is more direct.²



For example, while commenting on a scene depicting child labor in *Snowpiercer*, Joon-ho said, “In Bangladesh when they decommission large ships and break them up for parts, a full-grown adult can’t fit inside, so they use small kids who are under 7 and they work for very little money—it’s very dangerous. If you watch ³ National Geographic, you see this. So in fact it’s not science fiction, it’s something that’s actually happening, which is quite sad.” What might seem dystopian beyond our wildest dreams is in some instances happening in our world today.

The story begins like this: in response to global warming, the cooling agent CW-7 is released into the atmosphere in 2014. It is designed to last a thousand years. Wilford (Ed Harris), head of Wilford Industries and a brilliant inventor, anticipates the ensuing disaster and builds a train, the *Snowpiercer*. When the earth freezes over as he predicted, he loads what remains of humanity onto his miraculous train.

Aside from its remarkable ability to withstand harsh conditions and house more than 3,000 people, it sports an “eternal engine” which is imbued with religious and cultic significance. The train itself is divided into three classes or sections: the tail, the middle, and the front. The train’s population is tightly controlled due to scarce resources and space, and everyone is told that they must accept their preordained place in life. There are only a few characters in the movie who lawfully move forwards or backwards in the train. Moreover, leaving the train is unthinkable because of the cold, which instills a sense of claustrophobia and limits the options for an alternate future. The revolutionaries and elite both feel compelled to work within the boundaries of humanity’s survival, preserving the train, despite the system’s vast social inequalities and the miserable living conditions of passengers relegated to the tail.

Jumping forward to 2031, Curtis (Chris Evans), the film’s protagonist, leads the rear into a major revolt against the front. There have been previous revolts on the train, but none have yet managed to reach the engine room where Wilford lives and tends to the Eternal Engine. Curtis aims for that room, desiring to replace Wilford with a more worthy leader: Gilliam (Jonathan Hurt), Curtis’ mentor and a paragon of wisdom and virtue.

Curtis and Wilford are set against each other, but viewers would do well to compare and contrast them. How might each answer this question: “How much are you willing to sacrifice for a noble cause?” One might wonder whether either Curtis or Wilford are pursuing noble causes at all.

Similarly, Curtis’ relationships throughout the film with his friend Edgar and his mentor Gilliam are revealing. The nuance of these two relationships tempers any blind endorsement of wholesale revolution. Despite being an outspoken critic of capitalism, Joon-ho demonstrates his awareness of the human toll that revolutions take, and it is possible to interpret *Snowpiercer* as a cautionary tale concerning (but not necessarily against) revolts—even while it critiques the system against which the characters struggle.

With its stark social inequality and graphic violence, does the fictional world of *Snowpiercer* actually reflect our society? Is the film a diagnosis, a criticism, a warning, a satire, or a lament? No matter how one interprets the “moral” of the story and the message of its director, the film prompts viewers to critically examine our own world and our own motivations through the lens of the abominable *Snowpiercer*.

¹ Hyo-won, Lee. “‘Snowpiercer’ Breaks South Korean Box Office Record with Four Million Viewers in Just over One Week.” *The Hollywood Reporter*, August 6, 2013. <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/general-news/snowpiercer-breaks-south-korean-box-600212/>.

² Dercksen, Daniel. “Writer-Director Bong Joon Ho Talks about His ‘unstoppably Fierce Family Tragedy’ *Parasite*.” *The Writing Studio*, October 8, 2019. <https://writingstudio.co.za/writer-director-bong-joon-ho-talks-about-his-unstoppably-fierce-family-tragedy-parasite/>.

³ Lawson, David Gregory. “Interview: Bong Joon Ho.” *Film Comment*, June 27, 2014. <https://www.filmcomment.com/blog/interview-bong-joon-ho/>.

⁴ Orquiola, John. “*Snowpiercer* Timeline Explained: When The Movie & TV Show Take Place.” *ScreenRant*, May 16, 2020. <https://screenrant.com/snowpiercer-timeline-movie-show-franchise-explained/>.

Ibid.