Snowpiercer: A new ice age and its consequences

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Directed by Bong Joon-ho; written by Bong and Kelly Masterson; based on the novel by Jacques Lob, Benjamin Legrand and Jean-Marc Rochette

Released this past summer, *Snowpiercer*, an adaptation of the French graphic novel *Le Transperceneige* (1982), is a science fiction film about the minuscule fraction of humanity that survives a future apocalypse. The film is directed and co-written by South Korean filmmaker Bong Joon-ho (*Barking Dogs Never Bite* [2000], *Memories of Murder* [2003] and *The Host* [2006]).

In *Snowpiercer* humanity has largely been wiped out by a disaster produced when scientists attempt to counteract global warming by putting a chemical called CW-7 into the atmosphere. The purpose of the chemical is to lower global temperatures, but unintended consequences result in a new ice age that largely wipes out the human race.

A small remnant of humanity survives on a train that endlessly traverses large parts of the earth, including even its oceans. However, those in the front of the train live in leisure and plenty while the inhabitants of the back of the train live in squalor, are fed vile, black food bars and are used and abused by those in the front.

Curtis Everett (Chris Evans) is an adult who has spent half of his life on the train, in the tail end, along with the other residents there. Curtis and Gilliam (John Hurt), his mentor and leader of the tail-enders, have the respect of the other end train residents and serve as their leaders. Curtis and Gilliam are preparing a revolt to take over the train.

During a raid on the rear of the train, two children are selected by an agent of the train's engineer for removal. After one man protests the taking of his son, he is severely and sadistically punished in front of the others. Mason (Tilda Swinton), a spokeswoman for the front-end residents, berates the tail-enders. She tells them all of the train's residents must "remain in our allotted stations" and "our preordained particulate positions."

Once they realize the security guards' guns have no bullets, Curtis and the rest of the tail-enders put into motion the plan to "take the engine." Along the way they enlist the help of a drug-addicted front-ender, named Namgoong Minsoo (Song Kang-ho), who designed the security for the train. His daughter, who appears to have some kind of telepathic powers, accompanies them.

The WSWS reviewed Bong Joon-ho's intriguing *Memories of Murder* in 2004. *Snowpiercer* is an interesting and provocative film. Though based on a graphic novel, much of the film is the director's own creative invention.

Despite taking place almost entirely on a train, the film does not feel claustrophobic. On the contrary, Joon-ho effectively portrays an entire world. Even in the tail-end of the train, one gets the sense that this is a community and not simply a group of people squeezed into a compartment.

Joon-ho's direction is quirky and mixes genres. There are elements of action and adventure, and also a fair amount of humor, most of it dark. This admixture is successful at times, and at others, less so.

In one of *Snowpiercer*'s more powerful scenes, the tail-end residents wage a life-and-death battle against dozens of nightmarishly dressed, axe-armed, fascistic thugs. The tail-enders, despite their worn out and bedraggled state, fight bravely. The battle begins to go badly, but, with courage and some quick thinking, they are able to turn the tide. The scene is marred only by the inclusion of a brief break in the fighting so that both sides can celebrate New Year's, which, obviously

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intended as a bit of dark humor, it detracts from an otherwise serious and valuable scene.

The film contains a number of strong performances, including by Song as Namgoong and Ed Harris as Wilford, the engineer and cold, calculating leader of the train's ruling class. Swinton brilliantly portrays Mason, Wilford's cowardly and pompous lackey. Her speech referred to above undoubtedly expresses the sentiments of the front-end residents--and much of the contemporary world's elite. Evans is also quite effective and moving at times. His character is compelled to press onward, in spite of all the losses, by a relentless determination to reach the front of the train and take the engine.

But along with *Snowpiercer*'s strengths come a host of problems.

Joon-ho's portrayal of the oppressed and of their uprising, though sympathetic, is rather superficial. This becomes more evident as the film progresses--especially after the aforementioned battle. The pretense of a revolution is then largely dropped. The tail-enders, badly depleted in numbers and injured, are reduced to a small group of the most capable fighters, led by Curtis.

There are still valuable moments in the scenes that focus on this group. As they press toward the front of the train, Curtis and the others are confronted with increasingly decadent displays of the wealth of the front-enders. The people in the front are clean and healthy, well dressed and can indulge in luxuries that the tail-enders have not experienced in years.

In the span of only a few train cars, there is an extreme divide between immense poverty and depraved debauchery on the other. There no doubt that the vast social inequality of contemporary life has made an impression on the director.

Unfortunately, though the film starts off strong and continues in a relatively interesting fashion for much of its running time, toward the end it essentially unravels. Through a series of revelations and actions taken by the surviving main characters, *Snowpiercer* rapidly descends into pessimism and cynicism.

In the end, without giving too much away, the train's elite may well be largely manipulating events for its own purposes. Is the "revolution" itself merely part of a plan to maintain the "order" and "balance" evoked by Mason earlier in the film?

By all accounts, Bong Joon-ho seems to be a serious artist who, as he stated in regard to *Memories of Murder*, wants "to show reality" in his films. And there are many strong scenes in *Snowpiercer*. The decision to treat with the idea of revolution—a revolution of the oppressed—is an intriguing one. The conclusion that Bong comes to, however, says far more about his own disorientation than it does about the realities of life.

In an interview with *io9*, the filmmaker elaborated his perspective: "Is it more revolutionary to want to take control of the society that's oppressed you," he asks, "or to try and escape from that system altogether? The Korean character whom Curtis rescues, Nam, is not concerned with Curtis' ideas of class struggle, and turns out to have ideas that are 'above' Curtis.'"

What can one make of such an outlook? In our era of unrelenting social tension and global class conflict, what is the value of a perspective that essentially advocates shrinking away from human life and all its problems?

Snowpiercer is a remarkable film in many ways, but one with major flaws. A concerted working through of some of the issues that the director is contending with could have produced a more consistent and a better film overall. One hopes that he will take this up in future works.

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