

AirSpace Movie Club: Snowpiercer

Music Intro

Nick:

Hi, welcome to AirSpace from the Smithsonian's National Air and Space Museum. I'm Nick.

Matt:

I'm Matt.

Emily:

And I'm Emily.

Nick:

Today. We're going to talk about Snowpiercer, more specifically, we're going to talk about the world of Snowpiercer. Snowpiercer is a film of course, but it's also a bit of a franchise that began as a French language graphic novel called, Le Transperceneige in 1982, which was the basis for an English language Korean action film in 2013 from Academy Award winning director, Bong Joon-Ho, and is now a TV series starring Daveed Diggs, and Jennifer Connelly. The first episode premiered this month on TNT in the United States and in Netflix and the rest of the world.

So, all of us prepared for this by watching the movie, which is available on Netflix and something that we should tell you, the movie is really, really violent, as in Quentin Tarantino levels of violence at times. And the story itself has some really dark moments. It's rated R and is definitely not for kids. If that's not your thing, then the movie probably isn't for you.

But the world of Snowpiercer, which is common to the books and the film and the new show, is what we're going to be covering today. And if you like what you hear, maybe check out the TV show, which is more of a murder mystery set in the same dystopian future.

So, now for a little bit of context, what is the world of Snowpiercer? Matt, Emily, do one of you want to try and summarize this rolling hellscape of a storyline for our viewers?

Matt:

It's snow, it's snow. [crosstalk 00:01:39] just like the name implies, right?

Nick:

And the snow is pierced.

Matt:

Yeah, the world has been forced into this extreme ice age that's probably colder and icier than even the ice ages of the history of the Earth have been, at least that's how it seems to me. And it's been forced in a very unintentional way through a huge geoengineering project that was intended to reverse the effects of global warming.

Nick:

Okay. So it's set in the near future, post-apocalypse, and the particular apocalypse was triggered by the countries of the world trying to fix global warming all in one fell swoop. And instead, we went radically in the other direction when they released this compound called CW-7 into the atmosphere. Is that about it?

Matt:

Right. Yeah.

Nick:

Yeah. And now all of humanity, everything that's left, every human survivor on the planet is in a train, onboard a train that is 1001 cars long that is perpetually circling the globe, not looking for anything in particular, just perpetually circling in the snow and ice. That's the movie and the TV show and everything that we all saw, right?

Emily:

Yeah. That about sums it up in a really simplistic way.

Movie Clip:

Mr. Wilford knew that CW-7 would freeze the world. So what did the prophetic Mr. Wilford invent to protect the chosen from that calamity?

Group:

The engine. Rumble, rumble, rattle, rattle, it will never die. *Clip under and out*

Emily:

The train is the place where every living thing left on the planet Earth, is living. In this case, it's mostly humans and then every kind of agriculture and husbandry, that they can fit on this train is on this train. So the train is literally an entire ecosystem, from humans to plants to animals. And if you manage to buy a ticket for this train, you got on the train. And like most ticket buying structures, the more you pay, the better you're treated.

Nick:

And we're going to get into a little bit more of the kind of story this is. And one of the commonalities, no matter what format or medium you're catching this story in, is that the train, which is very long and contains the whole world at this point, is radically, rigidly stratified by class lines.

There are poorer classes, the tailies, towards the rear of the train. And at some point in each story, the tailies stage a revolution and try and push forward to the more luxurious, less privation stricken areas of the train in the front, and eventually towards a reckoning with Wilford, the mysterious builder of the train who lives in the engine, that is what's carrying the story forward.

Emily:

So, first we need to talk about why we'd want to talk about this movie today on AirSpace. There's no airplanes really in this movie. This is not a movie about space travel. Frankly, it's a movie about travel on

a train. But Snowpiercer is a really great example of a certain type of science fiction, specifically what we're going to call dystopian fiction.

Nick:

So, Snowpiercer the film, the movie, the graphic novel, all of it is akin to science fiction. It is the kind of speculative fiction, let's say, that is often shelved in the science fiction category alongside 1984, Fahrenheit 451 or something like the Handmaid's Tale, where it's about society and humanity grappling with big environmental or political or moral upheavals, that take place in a world like our own with similar kinds of technology, without like the big fantastical technological set pieces, like you would find in a Star Trek for instance, but it also lacks that kind of optimistic self-determination.

These movies are not always as bleak as something as a Mad Max or a Road, for instance, the movie The Road, but they do have some kind of dramatic upsetting upheaval that takes place either at the very beginning of the story or even before the story begins.

And what we're left with is an exploration of how the characters and society as a whole, react to all of these challenges. And then kind of tries to explore moral and political lessons drawn from those situations, which is to say that Snowpiercer is an allegory.

So let's break down some of that symbolism. And then let's get into a little bit of how Snowpiercer sets that scene in the various mediums. Matt, what's the symbolism here. You're a professor of literature and related kinds of art. What are we supposed to learn from this? What would the middle school Lord of the Flies pop quiz on symbolism look like for Snowpiercer?

Matt:

Lord of the Flies going deep. *laughs* Yeah, so I mean, the first clue that this movie is not to be taken literally and is mostly allegorical, right? Is that there's no real explanation in this film, but of how the train works or why it is that the train is able to keep these people alive.

Instead, we're just given these sort of hyperbolic statements about the need for balance, and the importance of people staying in their place and knowing their place and doing the function that they are meant to do.

Movie clip:

No, order. Order is the barrier that holds back the flood of death. We must all of us on this train of life, remain in our allotted station. We must each of us occupy our preordained particular position.

Matt:

The fact that nobody's trying to solve the problems of the world, but instead they're meant to just be trying to live the lives that have been dictated to them for the past 17 years on this train. Right? So there's some kind of metaphor at work you know right from the beginning, about why it is that society is structured the way that it is.

And that we're supposed to somehow buy into the places that people tell us we're supposed to live in, in society. It's kind of, the train itself is a perpetuation of the society that created the problem in the first place.

Musical transition

Matt:

Nick, you said the graphic novel was written in the '80s, right? At first was published in the '80s.

Nick:

Yeah. Yeah, '82.

Matt:

So the 1980s was around the time that the National Academy of Sciences was releasing its first reports about climate change. And the effects of increased levels of CO2 on climate change, on global warming as they were mostly calling it then. And in fact, there were a lot of people, including authors on some of those first reports who said, "Well, maybe we don't need to do anything about cutting our CO2 emissions. Maybe there will be some big technological fix that will help us to solve climate change."

So this idea of geoengineering or, you know, tinkering with the atmosphere in a deliberate way to, keep it good for human life and for all of the life as we know it on the planet. This idea has been around for a while and it's only become, I think a little bit more appealing as years have gone on since the 1980s and CO2 levels have just continued to rise in those years, to the point where people are now saying, well, we've passed this tipping point and that tipping point. And at some point we're just going to be at a stage where we're just going to have to do the big geoengineering project. And maybe that's something we should start doing experiments on now.

And in fact, people are doing experiments on geoengineering on a small-scale, nobody's doing, huge projects that might have the types of consequences that we see in Snowpiercer.

Nick:

So Snowpiercer wants us to think very carefully about viewing human ingenuity and engineering as a simple one-stop fix. And the predicament is that we may all end up living on a hellacious train scape, rolling ever around a frozen snowball Earth. But human engineering operating in and through extreme environments is not something that we're altogether unfamiliar with, right?

Matt:

The example I have in mind, isn't really a machine, and it didn't really operate in an extreme environment. But it was an experiment in creating this type of environment, in which you could have like this sort of closed system and balance. Which is when I was in high school, they built this crazy thing in Arizona called Biosphere 2, which was this enclosed environment that was meant to be a place where humans could live and operate and have a small-scale agriculture and have a completely enclosed environment with the atmosphere. Nothing leaves, nothing comes in. And it was kind of to experiment with, you know, these ideas of what makes Earth habitable, but also to experiment with, if we were to build a closed environment on Mars or some other extreme environment, how would we do that? Like, can we? Do we have the technology to create these closed systems and make everything work, so that you can grow crops, so that you can stay alive, so that you can live and function in a healthy happy group?

Emily:

I think that's a really good analogy to the train in *Snowpiercer*. I think the other good examples of real, intensely engineered environments for humans to survive in are things like the International Space Station, or some of the other scientific bases in Antarctica. But what's really different about the Space Station and even Antarctica, other than the real nice analogy to really cold temperatures, is that both Antarctica and the Space Station get regular deliveries of, just about anything you need from pizza ovens and coffee makers to mail deliveries and fresh socks, none of those are closed systems. So I think the Biosphere that Matt was talking about is a really good analogy to the train. But I think from a pessimistic standpoint, if you treat the Earth really nicely, the Earth itself is a pretty closed system. So like get it together y'all. But we do have some examples specifically, I think in space is really good one, and Matt alluded to it, there's a lot of good examples of the kinds of habitats that are being designed. I think the Moon is a really good example for this. So the Moon is really interesting, even though it's closest to Earth with comparison to say Europa, one of Jupiter's moons. It's got these places on its surface called PSRs or Permanently Shadowed Regions, which are places that never see the light of day ever.

And they're interesting for human space flight, because they probably have water ice in there because it's never sublimated away because it's never seen the Sun. So it's interesting when you think about where we're going to put humans back on the surface of the Moon for long duration missions, because we want to be near a readily available source of water, Permanently Shadowed Regions, but we also need to be in a place where the temperatures are reasonably moderate, and not some of the coldest temperatures we've ever seen in the solar system.

So there's this interesting sort of combination of factors that the Permanently Shadowed Regions are really valuable for humans, but also some of the coldest things we've ever seen. And I think that's actually maybe where we end up going back to the Moon, I think is a really good time to revisit *Snowpiercer* and talk about closed systems, that are fully sustainable in incredibly cold environments.

Music up and under

Emily:

You can go ahead and suggest a movie for us that we should be watching. You can go ahead and put it on our Instagram at AirSpace Podcast. And it sounds like we're headed towards some kind of aviation movies. So keep that in mind.

Nick:

AirSpace comes to you from the Smithsonian's National Air and Space Museum with help from PRX. AirSpace is produced by Katie Moyer and Jennifer Weingart, mixed by Tarek Fouda

Music under and out

Emily:

There was anything happy in that movie? Anything?

Nick:

Sure. Yeah. I mean, weren't you happy when you saw the cart of the boiled eggs, right? Even for a second before you realized they contained machine guns.

Emily:

No.

Matt:

When you saw what goes into making the protein bars come on.

Emily:

No.

Nick:

Or like the cheerful children singing that song is such a tonic.

Automated:

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