

Reinterpretation of *Snowpiercer* : Posthuman, Cyborg, and the New World

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Abstract

We aim to reinterpret Bong Joon-ho's Snowpiercer through theory of posthumanism. Posthuman is a compound word of 'post' and 'human', which means transcendent-man. However, we would like to extend the meaning of posthuman or cyborgs as not only to "new human figure, or transcendent-man" but as to "human living in a digital age of converged technology". Through the extension of the meaning of posthuman, we would be able to not only find posthuman in Science Fiction movies but also apply it to our real world. Also, through the extended meaning, we will reinterpret all the elements from the film as cyberspace and as posthuman or cyborgs. Moreover, through examination of these "cyborg figures" in Bong Joon-ho's Snowpiercer (2013), we argue that the film is criticizing posthumanism in the reality that these days, people are losing the humanity due to the combination with the machine. It seems that he claims of the collapse of the current system, suggesting new human generation as the solution.

Keywords: *Posthuman, Snowpiercer, Machine, Cyborg, Technology.*

1. Introduction

Questions about human being always start from René Descartes' famous quote,

"I think, therefore I am (Cogito ergo sum)."

He has strictly separated human with thinking faculties from non-human who fails to do so [1]. After twentieth century, human invaded by technology cannot be easily defined as understanding of dichotomous way of mind and body. Change of body and reinforcement of technology made the essence of human complicated. What kind of thought do human have about themselves in this age of technology? In the reality of mixed with virtual reality and high-technological fusion machine, we may be already living as a 'posthuman'.

Posthuman usually signifies transcendent-men. However, its meaning can be different depending on how we define human. In the modern society, we tend to imagine these posthuman as a new figure of human,

carrying enhanced abilities. As for posthuman body, we mostly imagine two things. One we think of mechanic or consolidated body and the other is eugenic figure by genetic engineering, nano technology, or neuropharmacology – we may call this as ‘cyborg-ized’ human. In this context, protagonists often appeared from popular culture such as Science Fiction novels or movies, especially, marvel movies characters could be brought up. However, in this essay, we would like to extend the meaning of posthuman or cyborgs as not only transcendent-man, but as human living in the digital age of converged technology. According to Haraway, by the late twentieth century, our time, a mythic time, we are all chimeras, theorized and fabricated hybrids of machine and organism; in short, we are cyborgs [3,292]. Through the extension of the meaning of posthuman, we would be able to not only find posthuman in Sci-Fi movies but also apply it to our real world.

A large number of Science Fiction films which present posthuman had been up on the screen. *Terminator*, *Star Trek*, or *The Matrix* are the most well-known films when precedent studies discuss about posthumanism since those movies contain cyborgs, or virtual realities. Posthuman characters are appeared with the feature of showing direct combination with high-technology in the films previously mentioned. However, *Snowpiercer* (in year 2013), Sci-Fi movie directed by Bong Joon-ho, seems quite unusual in the sense that it presents no typical posthuman figure in the movie. However, the film also well implies posthumanism by the way it presents the characters and background of the movie in terms of extended meaning of posthuman.

Films directed by Bong Joon-ho, always reflect present age, containing various symbolisms and he leaves much room for different interpretations. His most recent film *Parasite* (2019) shows the portrait of a modern society in which symbiosis of people of different classes is gradually becoming a fantasy. *Monster* (2006), although it is a horror movie, also contains various political satire. In *Snowpiercer* (2013), which will be mainly dealt in this essay, strikes the class problems caused by wealth and power in our society. Focusing on the theme, previous studies of *Snowpiercer* analyze narrative structures, characters, or film images. Taking things further, I argue that the film is criticizing posthumanism in the reality that people are losing the humanity due to the combination with the machine. He claims of the collapse of the current system; full of race, class, and gender problems, suggesting new human generation as the solution. Further essay questions how the director portrays the train and the characters as posthuman in the movie.

2. Cybernetic World

Snowpiercer is a film which maximizes the spatial feature of the train. It is narrow and long, and in order to move on from the end to another end, all sections in between should be passed. A huge lump of metal just run at a breakneck speed carrying the last survivors of the Earth. The train is a survival zone of the last humankind. Just as the previous earth, the world of the train is also the space of collapsed equality. The train has various facilities in each section but it is divided into two big sections; front and tail. The tail section is filled with the lower classes, who are suffering from cold and hunger – scraping by on protein-blocks. On the other hand, people of the front section live luxurious life, eating and enjoying everything in the train. The director satirizes such discriminatory system of the train through comparing two different lives of each class. He seems to find the cause of the problem in the train, viewing it as a cybernetic world.

Cyber space may be misunderstood as a notion of simply referring to a space which is technically intercede through network technology and virtual reality technology [7]. However, it also contains a meaning as a concept describing a widespread, interconnected digital technology. The train represents cyborg world in the film. According to Katherine N. Hayles,

“first-wave cybernetics envisioned the cyborg mostly as an amalgam between the organic and the mechanical, autopoietic theory uses its expanded definition of life to speculate on whether social systems are alive” [4,149].

Meaning that paradigmatic cyborg for autopoiesis is the state, not mechanical human. The train is run by the perpetual engine, which is able to break down the snow and ice of the outside world and turn into water. This makes the train self-sustaining, since it is able to produce food, water, or even plantation by itself with such computerized system. It is a small world or society which is separated from outside. According to Hayles, Maturana and Varela mention about autopoietic machines saying,

“through “their interactions and transformations...continuously regenerate and realize the network of processes (relations) that produced them,” in the process constituting themselves “as a concrete unity in the space in which they (the components) exist by specifying the topological domain of [the autopoietic machine’s] realization of such a network” [4,146].

Here the operation of the autopoietic entity itself – rather than a distinction drawn by an observer – creates the space in which the entity exists. Maturana and Varela have even claimed explicitly that individuality comes from the process themselves. They say, autopoietic machines have individuality; which means, by keeping their organization as an invariant through its constant production they actively maintain an identity which is independent of their interactions with an observer [4,146]. The train in this sense can be explained as autopoietic machine. It is a closed ecosystem but still maintains the balance in itself. An observer of the train would be the one who is in charge of the train – Wilford may be the one in the film. The role of the observer is just to keep the balance of the population of the organisms in the train. This means that it those not matter whether who sits in the very front section – the engine section. It appears in the Wilford’s speech in the film;

“I am old. I want you to take my station. It’s what you have always wanted. It’s what Gilliam wanted too. You must have the engine. Keep her humming...the train is the world, and we the humanity” [10,1:47:25-1:48:23].

The speech implies that the guardian of the engine can always be replaced. Thus, the engine and the observer independently interact with each other.

3. Cyborgs of *Snowpiercer*

According to Haraway, a cyborg world is a world of lived social and bodily realities, where people are unafraid of “permanently partial identities and contradictory stand points” [3,295]. Her cyborg world is that people no more fear fusion with technology. However, as robots or machine which are built by human, develop and sophisticate, they can finally circulate themselves. This could lead to the situation that they suppress human beings. In *Snowpiercer*, we can find people being dominated by the cybernetic train, and becoming posthuman or even cyborgs.

Cyborgs live in the cyborg world. Cyborg is under the category of posthuman, and in this essay, its meaning can be extended as posthuman, closely related to machine, and its mind and body highly influenced by the machine. A posthumanist such as Cary Wolfe tries to explain the relationship with technological phenomenon and human. In their point of view, technology is the one of the factors which is unexplained when they talk about human:

“thus analogous to Jean-François Lyotard’s paradoxical rendering of the postmodern: it comes both before and after humanism: before in the sense that it names the embodiment and embeddedness of the human being in not just its biological but also its technological world, the prosthetic coevolution of the human animal with the technicity of tools and external archival mechanisms (such as language and culture) of which Benard Stiegler probably remains our most compelling and ambitious theorist – and all of which comes before that historically specific thing called “the human” that Foucault’s archaeology excavates” [2,XV].

In other words, they see human and technology indistinct, that is to say, the border between them are receded. In such point of view, we can find some characters that has characteristics of cyborg in the film. Those characters are not human-machines, but the film show mechanized human in a cyborg world, the train. Along the essay, we would like to call them as cyborgs.



Figure 1. Minister Mason

Cyborgs of the film do not act as a normal human. They become more violent as the train goes around, and as they move toward to the front section of the train. Such change of character's actions could be explained by Rodney Brooks' theory of 'embodied cognition'. In Brooks' perspective, cognition is a result of the interaction of one's components that is adapted in various ways to maintain continuity of the environment they belong. Also, in the case of cyborgs, it is not logical configuration that is important but learning method of forming their cognition [6]. That is to say, cyborgs of the film, living in the cybernetic space, are in the stage of forming new cognition as they get along within the cybernetic environment.

3.1 Front Section Cyborgs

Upper-classes are the most like cyborgs. They call the train as "sacred engine", and they are highly dependent on the train system. They believe that they would die if the sacred engine does not protect them. They even kill or torture tail sectioners in order to maintain the system of the train. To them, the train is almost a God-like figure. Minister Mason is the one who plays vital role as ideologue of the theocracy. Her costume and image appeared in the movie is like a modeling of religious priest. She always appears wearing long dress or coat with bunch of men and soldiers to protect her and give speech to the people – as seen in Figure 1. She is the one who emphasizes strongly about the "sacred engine" and infuses that people should keep their place in order to maintain the system of the train. In her speech, she underscores to keep the order in order to retain the train and it is prescribed by the sacred engine, and if not, they will all freeze and die, which makes people strictly rely on the engine. This can be seen as the process of creating cyborgs, by governing people's minds, forcing them to identify themselves as the part of the system of the machine.

Minister Mason not only 'cyborg-ize' people but also, she is a cyborg herself. Through her speech to the people, we can find that her soul is totally captured by the train. She seems to work for Wilford. However, what she actually considers as sacred is the train and the engine. This is well shown in the scene where she makes a deal with Curtis. She speaks,

"If I take you to the front, you have to kill him (Wilford)" [10,59:11-59:14].

The machine is what she is trying to protect. She does everything in order to run the system of the train. Therefore, she tortures people of the tail section and even kill them, which is an inhumane action, to retain the order. The director well reflected such characteristics of Minister Mason in the movie. Her dialect is hard to understand, and the color of her clothes or hair style, even sunglasses she wears give impression of

non-humanistic figure. Thus, she is truly a posthumanic character, or even we can call her as a cyborg character in the movie.



Figure 2. Kindergarten section

Reproduction of cyborgs also appears in the scene of kindergarten section. Teacher teaches children, the train babies, about the sacred engine. The song they sing about the sacred engine, and Wilford has almost deified the train. As shown is Figure 2, children wearing same uniform, sing along the song, and perfectly answer teacher’s questions –as if they have learned those concepts repetitively, as we can see a boy yawning while watching the video about the history of the train – seems to be brain washed by the teaching. Children are taught about the specific history of the train engine and Wilford, and even take tests on it. They are educated to think that they should protect the engine, and they cannot survive without it. They are also taught that in order to protect the engine, people must keep their place, where they belong. They are already indoctrinated from the front-section adults that they should not get along with the tail section people. It is well shown in the speech of a young girl toward the tail section people;

“I heard that all tail sectioners are lazy dogs and that they sleep all day in their own shits”
 [10,1:08:03-1:08:08].

Through such rude behavior of a girl, we can notice that in the Kindergarten, teacher does not teach them about humanity or morality but only focuses on the world of the train. In this way, they are raised to become another cyborgs.

3.2 Tail Section Cyborgs

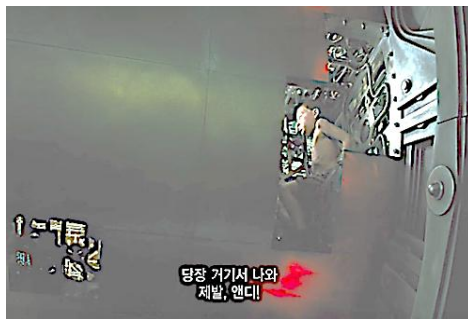


Figure 3. Andy

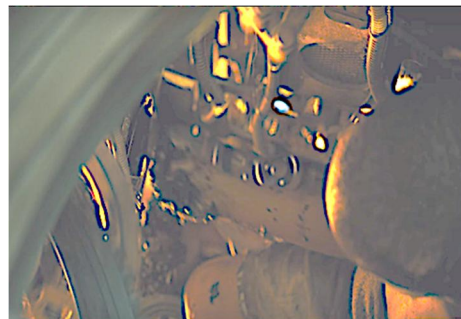


Figure 4. Timmy

Not only upper-class people but also people from the tail section are also becoming cyborgs. The first character is Paul, who is in charge of the section of producing protein-bars. Paul says,

“it used to be automatic, but the part went extinct...so no I gotta do it...manually!” [10,36:33-36:57].

According to his speech, the train used to be automatic but since they face the situation of unable to afford the components, they use human to take the place of the part of the train. In doing so, Paul seems that he has entirely forgotten about the life in the tail section and subordinated to a machine working in the fixed place. Edgar is surprised to see how Paul is changed, and we can see this from his speech,

“he is not that I know of” [10,36:48].

The second character is Gerald Mckinster, who was a top violinist from Boston symphony. He is recruited to the front section and when he leaves the tail wagon, he promises his wife that he would come back. However, the scene of the kindergarten section, where he appears again, reminds us the former meeting with Paul. He does not speak to the tail people, but just play the violin like a machine. Tanya speaks of him,

“Is that really Gerald? He looks damn great” [10,1:12:19-1:12:22].

Andy Figure 3 and Timmy Figure 4 also appear as being a part of the machine just like Paul. They don't answer to Curtis's call, but just continue to work as a part of the machine with dull-eyes. All four characters commonly became mechanized, playing as the part of the train. It is not specifically shown in the movie how they got brainwashed, but we can predict that they are educated by the front section cyborgs that they should play the role as a part of the machine in order to survive in the train.

Curtis who is the protagonist of the movie, seems to be the character preserving the human nature. However, as ‘The Great Curtis Revolution’ begins, and as he goes on to the front section, we can see him slowly becoming ‘cyborg-ize’. His revolution has started in order to free the tail section people. Unfortunately, as he takes a step forward, he is more eager to reach the engine section, more than to protect the tail sectioners. This is well shown in the scene when they have a big fight in the military section with Wilford's soldiers. During the fight, Edgar, who is Curtis's closest person among other people, is put in danger and at the moment, Curtis ignores him and run to capture Minister Mason, letting Edgar die. Also, even when he sees his mentor Gilliam, shut by the gun, he does not go back for the revenge but say,

“We are going forward” [10,1:15:15].

From these scenes, we can notice that his mind has already been captured by the thought of taking possession of the engine.

4. Toward the New World

The world of the train, which is full of cyborg characters, is a corrupted world of corrupted morality and humanity. Through presenting two Korean characters Namgoong Minsoo and his daughter Yona, the director seems to be suggesting a new world. Two characters are not dependent on the train but they dream to escape the huge metal. These two characters function as an “outsider” [9] in the train of cyborg world, and also in the language that they use – people of the train communicate in English as a common language, but they are the one who only command of Korean. By presenting them, the director is making a gap between the dichotomous worlds of train.

Yona and Nam always hide. When big fight occurs in front of the water supply section, between the tail-section people and Wilford's soldiers, they hide in the secret space of the train. Also, at the moment of becoming a target, they hide inside the sauna, behind a woman. Every fight, they act as an outsider, just hide rather to fight. To them, the train itself is more a place of refuge, than a place of accommodation.

The place Nam and Yona hide is ‘inside of the inside’, closer to the third world, which does not belong to the outside or the inside world of the train. This is because that their hide-and-seek is performed to seek the world of another direction [9]. Kronole which they have eagerly collected, was used as a bomb to actualize their real aim; opening the door to the outside world. Yona comes out from the place of refuge, and go to the outside world of the train with Timmy. The snow seems to be melting, and they find a polar bear up in the

mountain, which means that the Earth is becoming habitable. The world they are headed to is ‘outside of the outside’, which is a third world – the ground they are standing is the exterior of the train, but it is the more than just a space of external or internal world.

At the ending of the film, director Bong Joon-ho seems to be suggesting the new world of new human generation and recovery of human being, since the world of the train was full of dichotomous factors of gender, race, and class. The train can transfer to one place to another in the set time. The film also brought such characteristic of train. *Snowpiercer* also runs through the rail and it passes by the same scenery in same time every year. This signifies the stalled world on one track. Survivors of the *Snowpiercer* run through the same track for the survival. In the process, they become cyborgs of which their minds and bodies captured by the machine, losing humanity. In order to deconstruct such world, the director chose to blow up the door – the door to the outside world – of the train. Explosion of the door does not only mean by opening the door but cause the huge avalanche, which subvert the train. The scene symbolizes of the subversion of the old system.

5. Conclusion

New world that the director is suggesting is not clearly shown in the movie, but he is opening up various possibilities. Through the story, we can analogize the director’s intention about the new world. Therefore, I would say, that the director’s outlook on the world is that he is suggesting the new generation, which all dichotomous factors are collapsed and the humanity regained. According to Haraway, in modern days, people live in a cyborg world, surrounded and affected by technology whether they like it or not [8]. In her cyborg world, all the dichotomous factors are collapsed, and race, sex and class are rearranged due to high-technology. It is to say, that “high-tech culture challenges these dualisms in intriguing ways” [3,313]. Such world would be the ideal world to the director. The Science Fiction critic Darko Suvin mentions, science fiction, including all adventure, romance, popularization, and surprise in bound to be written on one of two horizons, in some way utopian or dystopian [5]. *Snowpiercer* is a post-dystopian Sci-Fi movie, drawing of a new future of a humanity.

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