

Maile Schoonover

English 122CF

Reaffirming and Deconstructing Social Norms in Climate Fiction Films

Often times when we watch films we do so with the expectation to escape from our own realities or to simply be entertained. However, this type of viewing is problematic in its potential to turn the audience into passive viewers. A movie with a climate disaster plot in particular can either propel the viewer to reflect on current climate change issues, or miss an opportunity entirely by opting to take a purely action-packed approach. Such a distinction can be seen in the films *Snowpiercer* and *The Day After Tomorrow*. The former provides a thorough critique of man's relationship with nature as well as deconstructs several notions around race and gender. However, the latter film not only reinforces a sort of hierarchy over nature, but also seems to leave a white patriarchal structure intact. By analyzing moments within *The Day After Tomorrow*, we can see how certain societal expectations can be thoroughly saturated in film, in a way that subconsciously reinforces these norms within its viewers. In contrast, *Snowpiercer* provides a fantastic example of a climate fiction film that propels the viewer to reflect on the current climate discourse as well as challenge societal expectations in film.

Throughout the entirety of *The Day After Tomorrow*, action sequences are framed to pit man against his environment. Men are depicted as the victims of this environmental disaster, while the encroaching ice is seen as a sinister entity. A glaring example of this can be seen while Dennis Quaid's character is running from the ice, shot in parallel with a scene of his character's son outrunning the ice as well. In these two scenes, the surrounding floor, walls and ceiling are freezing over, mere feet from them at every turn. The sound effects that are paired with the ice's approach are reminiscent of a horror film, nearly imitating the sound of a slashing knife. In this

way, the film seems to be personifying the ice, and by extension the environment itself, as if it were a villain. This also has the effect of solidifying Dennis Quaid as the action hero protagonist of the film. The pitting of Quaid with the environment exemplifies a long history of human being's attempting to manipulate, and have dominion over the natural world. In this way, the film seems to be reinforcing a kind of hierarchy in which man rules over his environment. Even in the midst of climate catastrophe, this film seems to suggest that man is not at fault, and redirects the animosity towards nature.

Another upsetting element of this film is the way in which it addresses social constructs around gender. At the conclusion of *The Day After Tomorrow*, we are given a highly contrived, stereotypical father-son moment in which the lead protagonist Quaid shares a proud "atta-boy" look with his son. At this moment in the film, Quaid, his son, and his son's girlfriend are riding in a helicopter over the frozen city, seeming to have narrowly escaped the catastrophe. While the characters reflect on their survival, Jake Gyllenhaal's girlfriend rests her head on his shoulder in a move that is very reminiscent of a damsel in distress. In the short concluding scene, we are told many things by these small actions and exchange of looks. Most notably, this scene seems to suggest that even at the onset of global climate catastrophe, social constructs around gender—the role of the man as action hero, and the role of the female as the rescued damsel leaning on the male for comfort—are unchanged. The patriarchy is strong enough to survive even the near end of the world it seems.

In steep contrast with *The Day After Tomorrow*, *Snowpiercer* offers a critique of the human-nature relationship as well as the hierarchical class system that prevails in today's capitalist society. Each compartment of the train is sectioned for different purposes, most importantly in distinguishing the tail end lower class from the elitists at the front of the train. In

this way, the very construction of the train offers a small-scale depiction of society. The careful management of resources on the Snowpiercer train further creates class distinctions amongst these people—the elite members enjoying a life of luxury and excess, while the lower class merely exist to be a source of labor, surviving on ground up insect protein bars.

What is most compelling in director Bong Joon- Ho's film is his deconstruction of the white male action hero. In choosing to cast Chris Evans as the film's main character—who is widely popular in the film industry for his role as Captain America in the current Marvel franchise—Snowpiercer takes the opportunity to create a fallible protagonist, and turn him on his head. In the beginning of the film, Curtis is depicted as the leader of the tail rebellion, however our "hero" figure is continuously made into an anti-hero as the film progresses. The first moment in which he is knocked off his pedestal takes place during the axe battle scene, during which Chris Evans, slips on a fish. In what at first seems like a very displaced slapstick moment, by slipping on the fish, our hero is reduced to a source of comedy and shown to be vulnerable. In an industry that often elevates the white male action hero to be infallible and unstoppable, here we see our symbolic Captain America stumbling over something as absurd as a fish. In this same scene, the audience is made to question Curtis again when he chooses to sacrifice his friend and comrade in battle in order to capture the Minister. Our societal expectation of action heroes would normally require the hero to save his friend, yet in Snowpiercer, our hero is shown to be more concerned with his mission.

Finally, near the conclusion of the film, we learn more of Curtis' past on the train. It is revealed that he took part in cannibalism, and even worse, that he preferred the taste of babies. In this moment, it is clear that this character is not the hero we originally believed him to be. One can argue that Bong-Joon Ho's intention was to create an a white male anti-hero in order to

challenge preconceived, socially constructed hero expectations. In stark contrast with *The Day After Tomorrow*, the rugged white-guy doesn't save the world in the end, and our Captain America figure is revealed to be more villain than hero.

Lastly, *Snowpiercer*'s uncertain conclusion does not offer any comforting reassurance to its viewers, nor does it give any guarantees for the continued existence of the human race. In the final scene, we are left with two train babies stepping out onto the Earth for the first time. They are surrounded by the expansive snowy landscape, and in the distance they see a polar bear. In comparison to *The Day After Tomorrow*, the humans in this final scene are dwarfed in comparison to their environment. Even the polar bear is looking down at them from his elevated position on the mountain. In every way, this scene is designed to show humans at a disadvantage to nature, rather than in control of it. In this way, *Snowpiercer* destabilizes the human hierarchy over nature; rather than relying on the typical trope of man against the natural world, man must now find his place amongst this new environment in order to survive.

In thinking about the value of analyzing film in this way, it is important that we recognize the impact that films have in altering our perspective, and influencing how society is constructed. Films reveal a great deal about the way in which our society creates expectations and social constructs around race, gender and our relationship to the environment. The potential of a film to subconsciously reinforce a certain way of thinking is one that is highly problematic during our current climate moment. The consequence of a climate themed film that can be reduced to a simple action flick is that it encourages passive viewership, and continues to perpetuate harmful ideologies around race, class, gender and the human-nature relationship.