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CAN THE SOCIETY BE CHANGED BY A HERO?: A NEW TYPE OF ANTI-HEROIC NARRATIVE IN SNOWPIERCER IN RELATION TO FOUCAULT'S POWER

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**Can the Society Be Changed by a Hero? : A New Type of Anti-heroic Narrative in
Snowpiercer in Relation to Foucault's Power**

Synopsis:

This paper tries to analyze how *Snowpiercer*, a movie directed by Korean director Bong Jun-ho, deconstructs the concept of modern revolution and creates a new type of anti-heroic narrative. The way *Snowpiercer* subverts the romantic concept of modern revolution is closely related to Foucault's concept of power.

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Abstract>

If our world is much more fundamentally controlled than what we imagine, how can it be changed? This kind of dystopic picture of the future has repeatedly appeared in literature and the films. At first sight, Bong Jun-ho's *Snowpiercer* also stands in the tradition of such dystopic anticipation of the world. However, unlike its predecessors such as *The Matrix*, *Snowpiercer* poses a radical answer to our present world under the Western-centered capitalistic system. This paper mainly aims to analyze how *Snowpiercer* deconstructs the pre-modern concept of social change through its anti-heroic narrative and how it presents its vision of social change. At first, *Snowpiercer* seems to produce a heroic narrative following typical modern concept of revolution. Curtis, the protagonist who is a hope of suppressed tail carriage people, heroically advances to the very front of the train. But he soon recognizes the painful fact that nothing would be changed unless the whole system – the train – would be stopped. Based on Foucault's viewpoint on power mechanism in the modern society, *Snowpiercer* refuses the fantasy of social change by the heroic resistance. Although the sudden destruction of the train by the avalanche may feel somewhat unnatural, it seems obvious that *Snowpiercer* successfully raises the fundamental question against our state of being by its anti-heroic narrative.

Keywords: Snowpiercer, Foucault, Power, Anti-heroic narrative, Social Change

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1. Preface

Since the Modern era, the civilization of mankind has rapidly grown. The development of scientific technology has carried an important role to build so-called global consumer society nowadays by narrowing the physical distance between faraway places. Meanwhile, such technological development has not always played a positive role. Advanced technology has made it possible for the government to observe and discipline its people more effectively. This negative aspect of advanced technology used to control people has given rise to fear of deception, fabrication, control, and surveillance over the society.

Starting from this fear, many SF novels and movies dealing with the dangers of the technology have been created. Some of them have even gone far to imagine desperate, dystopic visions of the society under total control and surveillance. *Snowpiercer*, at first sight, seems to stand in the same tradition of dystopic narratives like *The Matrix*. However, it shows us several things to think over. This work especially tries to analyze how *Snowpiercer* constructs a new type of heroic narrative. Not only does it deconstruct the modern concept of heroic revolution based on Foucault's viewpoint on power mechanism in the modern society, but also it draws a radical vision of social change, depriving its hero of a chance to do something.

2. Two Types of Power Mechanism in Relation to Foucault

The background of *Snowpiercer* is the frozen earth in 2031. In 2014, 79 countries agreed

to scatter CW-7, the artificial cooling substance, to stop global warming. However, CW-7 lowered the temperature too much, and all life on the earth died of cold except that were able to board Snowpiercer, a train-ark designed to permanently circulate the world, piercing the harsh condition. The movie focuses on people living in the tail section. As they got on the train without permission, they have been separated from the other carriages and suffered under inhumane condition for about seventeen years. Though there have been several rebels, all of them have failed.

For a while, the movie seems to follow the familiar narrative of civil resistance in which the suppressed people led by a hero/heroine rise against a tyrannical ruler. The movie starts from the moment when people once more plan a rebellion. Curtis, the protagonist of the movie, is a leader of tail section people. Consulted by an old wise man, Gilliam, Curtis and tail people have waited proper time to rise. Based on the information delivered from the unknown helper in the front, they finally break out in revolt. They firstly occupy the prison section and rescue Namkung Minsu, who knows how to open the gate between the train sections, and his daughter Yona. Despite of various difficulties and serious losses of his colleagues, Curtis finally reaches the engine. It seems that he almost come to achieve his goal that killing Wilford who is the maker of the train and regarded as the evil dictator and liberating the tail people.

However, he soon recognizes that how naïve he was when he meets Wilford who seems to watch everything from the start. Stating that his rebels were already anticipated, Wilford says that nothing would be changed unless the whole system – the train – would be stopped. Curtis just desperately wanted to take the engine to rule the whole train without having any specific plan after that. But he gets to know that the change of the ruler from Wilford to Curtis would not make any difference since what is problematic is the structure itself. Now, he really falls into a difficult situation, not knowing what to do. This was already given as an

advance hint at the beginning of the movie. During the conversation with his close friend Edgar, Curtis firmly declares that they will be different from the people in the front section when they get to the engine. Sadly, he gets to know that he cannot be different.

The problem which Curtis faces is also a problem to the pre-modern concept of resistance. What is the most important thing in pre-modern narrative of revolution is who owns the power. *Snowpiercer*, on the contrary, shows that the problem is not the matter of who exercises the power, but the way the power is exercised. Forbidden to move out of the tail section, the tail section people are treated like prisoners in jail. Wilford's private security guards who control them habitually resort to violence. What the tail section people can do is just obeying them in silence. Undoubtedly, they suffer physical abuse by the armed security guards who represent the power of the front section people.

The movie, however, reveals another mechanism of power under the visible force of arms, which seems more fundamental and immanent mechanism. This mechanism of power can be related to Michel Foucault's concept of power. In his *Power/Knowledge*, Foucault talks about the new type of power, "which can no longer be formulated in terms of sovereignty" (105). According to him, "sovereignty and disciplinary mechanisms are two absolutely integral constituents of the general mechanism of power in our society" (108). He also insists the close relationship between power and truth, saying that truth induces the regular effects of power (131). It is important that that 'truth' is no more absolute 'Truth,' but a type of discourse which [each society] accepts and makes function as true (131).

Then, how has this new type of power been operated in the tail section? The sovereign of the society in the train was definite from the beginning. Wilford, who is worshipped like a God, is a ruler of the train. What has been concealed is that the power has operated in the tail section not only through physical regulation and oppression over them, but through the knowledge of truths. Gilliam, the spiritual leader of the tail section, has voluntarily

cooperated with Wilford for a long time. Gilliam agreed with the fact that it is necessary to maintain the balance of the ecosystem in the train to survive since he knew that no one can live outside the train.

No life can exist outside of the train. That is the most important truth in the train, supported by the scientific knowledge. The whole structure of the train can be justified by that truth. All people's thoughts and behavior, even Wilford's, are not free from it. Curtis is not an exception. What he thought about was taking the position, not about questioning to the mechanism of the ecosystem in the train. Therefore, he cannot but get discouraged when he hears Wilford's persuasion. He does not have many choices. To accept or not to accept, that is the problem.

3. A New Type of Anti-Heroic Narrative

Although *Snowpiercer* has some aspects which could be analyzed by Foucault's theory of power, the movie moves forward to imagine a subversion of the whole society. When Foucault tells about the power mechanism, he does not mention social change or revolution. What he wants to do is to capture the various phases of the exercise of power. *Snowpiercer*, however, does not stay inside of Foucault's theory. Rather, it tries to go beyond the boundary.

Then, what kind of solution does the movie offer to overcome the problem which Curtis faces? The third road lies on Namkung Minsu's argument, insisting to get out of the train. Curtis, at first, ignored what Namkung Minsu's said. On the contrary, he nearly accepts the persuasive words of Wilford. If he accepted Wilford's proposal to take his place, the system would not be changed. However, after he observes little Timmy working in the engine, he changes his mind. Passing the match to Yona to explode the gate, he sticks his arm between gears to stop the engine, and succeeds to rescue Timmy. At this point, it seems that Curtis is finally completed as a hero. Not only does he save the child, but also he gets the will to go

beyond the system of the train. By rescuing Timmy, he exposes his will to stop the train and by passing matches to Yona to blow up the gate, he joins with Namkung Minsu's vision of escaping from the train.

However, the movie does not allow him a chance to do something. The explosion creates unforeseen huge avalanche. The whole train is buried under the snow, and all people including Curtis and Namkung Minsu die except Yona and Timmy. At this point, the movie betrays the anticipation of the audiences. The nature, which is so huge that cannot be controlled by a human being, suddenly kills the hero just after his awakening. In that sense, *Snowpiercer* created a new type of anti-heroic narrative. It seems like the movie appropriates Curtis as an agent who reveals the fundamental problem of the system in the train for the audience's sake. That is to say, Curtis's role is to make the audience realize that the train should be ceased. Like Mose who led the Israelite from Egypt to Palestine but he himself was not allowed to go into Palestine, Curtis is not allowed to live the life outside the train.

It is certain that *Snowpiercer* creates a new type of heroic narrative where the hero is eventually negated even he succeeds to subvert the society. Though Curtis still can be seen as a hero to some extent since his sacrifice saves the two children, it seems that he should be dead to begin a new story. The movie presents Yona and Timmy, who were born in the train and have never trod on earth before, as the second Adam and Eve on the snowy earth. After the whole people in the train were swept away, the movie starts the story from the beginning, without the hero.

4. Conclusion

Though Curtis still can be seen as a hero to some extent since his sacrifice saves the two children, the question can be raised whether the two survived children are able to build a new society different from the one in the train. Unfortunately, it seems that what Curtis has learnt

is only passed to the audience and not to Yona and Timmy. They neither seem to concern about the problem of the society in the train, nor to know how to survive in the outside world. Moreover, Yona already exposed her negative nature when she fired a revolver at people. She is also one of the descendents of Cain, the first murderer (Eom 119). Conclusively, the audience, who can hardly see any hopeful vision of the new society, unconsciously equates the death of Curtis with the loss of hope. In addition, starting from the beginning can be “to recover the habits of thought of some era in the past before the disruption of the human and natural world” (Phillips 598)

Snowpiercer shows us a radical vision of social change. Although some people – including the writer - might have been displeased with it, it is meaningful that *Snowpiercer* creates a new type of heroic narrative related to social change unlike *The Matrix* which ends with showing that heroic self-sacrifice of Neo saves mankind. Whether we agree with its vision or not, it is obvious that *Snowpiercer* make us turn our eyes on the society where we live and examine it. The society in the train is obviously the allegory of our society. What is the problem of our society? Can it be changed? Then, how do we change the society? *Snowpiercer* continually poses such questions in front of us.

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