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“If the Engine Ever Stops, We’d All Die”: *Snowpiercer* and Necrofuturism

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Abstract

Applying Mark Fisher’s “capitalist realism” and Subhabrata Bobby Banerjee’s “necrocapitalism” to the study of sf, this article reads the post-apocalyptic French comic *Le Transperceneige* (1982) and its film adaptation *Snowpiercer* (2014) as critiques of necrofuturist visions of the future. Necrofuturism posits a future that is doomed to continue modern capitalism’s unsustainable and immoral practices even as those practices become more and more destructive and self-defeating; films such as *Snowpiercer* interrupt this well-rehearsed vision of a world of universal death to open the mind to new possibilities for alternative futures. Key to *Snowpiercer*’s critique of necrofuturism is its depiction of necrocapitalism as a deliberately constructed thing, rather than a law of nature, reminding us that someone chose to build this world of unhappiness and prompting us to recognize that other sorts of worlds might be built instead.

Although only a modest box-office success, *Snowpiercer* nonetheless became a frequent subject of commentary on left-leaning web magazines and blogs in summer 2014. The first English-language film from acclaimed South Korean director Bong Joon-ho, it updates Jacques Lob and Jean-Marc Rochette’s comic *Le Transperceneige* (1982), modifying it to depict a world in which a technological attempt to reverse global warming has backfired, entirely freezing over the planet. Human life persists only on a single long train, christened *Snowpiercer*, which circumnavigates the globe on an immense, continuous loop linking what were once disconnected railways in Europe, Asia, Africa, and the Americas.¹ Social order on the train breaks down as passengers in the starving tail section violently revolt against the well-fed passengers in the second- and first-class cars. This satiric depiction of “class” struggle

¹ A map briefly shown during the film depicts two passages across the Pacific Ocean, presumably over bridges yet to be built, as well as another set of train tracks over the Sea of Japan.

combined with the film's surface-level interest in climate change and ecological futurity undoubtedly accounts for much of its appeal to writers on the online left. Peter Frase, for instance, writing in *Jacobin*, takes up the film's "genuinely subversive and radical themes," as well as its interrogation of "the limitations of a revolution which merely takes over the existing social machinery rather than attempting to transcend it." Aaron Bady, in *The New Inquiry*, advances precisely the opposite line, reading the film as less an allegory than as a *literalization* of a present situation that offers precious little hope beyond the nihilistic thrills of death and destruction. Jason Read, writing at the blog Unemployed Negativity, takes the film as a study in the power of ideology to make revolution seem literally unthinkable, while "Emma F. England" in a well-circulated post at elucipher.tumblr.com considers the imagery of the film's ending as it suggests that "white Westerners are too compromised and complicit with the capitalist system to bring about its downfall" and thus "true revolution against capitalism must come from elsewhere."

Nearly all of the writers who have engaged with *Snowpiercer* take up, either implicitly or explicitly, the by-now-familiar line variously attributed to Fredric Jameson and Slavoj Žižek (among others) that "it has become easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism."² It is already a critical commonplace, that is, to read the film's apocalyptic milieu as a deconstruction of what Mark Fisher calls *capitalist realism*: "the widespread sense that not only is capitalism the only viable political and economic system, but also that it is now impossible even to *imagine* a coherent alternative to it" (2). Critics who like the film, such as Frase, posit that it helps to break us out of this cognitive malaise by forcing us to, in Jameson's terms, "think the break itself" (*Archaeologies* 232); critics more ambivalent about the film and its politics, such as Bady, suggest instead that it ultimately *endorses* the capitalist realist viewpoint, embodying, in Fisher's terms, "the deflationary perspective of a depressive who believes that any positive state, any hope, is a dangerous illusion" (5).

This article develops a reading of *Snowpiercer* by way of Subhabrata Bobby Banerjee's "Necrocapitalism" that seeks to move beyond some of the limitations of this binary. I ultimately propose the world of *Snowpiercer* as a critique of the kind of capitalist-realist speculation about the future I will call "necrofuturism"—the endlessly rehearsed landscape of death and disaster that dominates contemporary visions of

² An early formulation of the concept does originate with Jameson: "It seems to be easier for us today to imagine the thoroughgoing deterioration of the earth and of nature than the breakdown of late capitalism" (*Seeds* xii).

the coming decades. Necrofuturism premediates the unhappy economic and ecological future that will emerge out of current trends, but not in a register that suggests or nurtures alternatives; rather, necrofuturism resigns us to a coming disaster we can anticipate but not prevent. In an analogous critical move to the Jamesonian reading of apocalyptic narrative as a tool to help us to think historical rupture and thereby reinvigorate our sense that significant change remains possible, I argue that *Snowpiercer*’s allegorization of the bleak prospects of late capitalism pushes us to recognize the necrofuture not as a historical inevitability or as an arbitrary law of nature but as a deliberately designed atrocity machine: someone laid the tracks, someone built the train, someone is even now driving the cars and stoking the engine. What the allegory within *Snowpiercer* ultimately traces, in both its filmic and comic varieties, is the radical *constructedness* of a market system that claims to be ahistorical, autonomous, and naturally occurring, challenging the so-called “realism” of political elites that has licensed them to disavow the necrofuture they have chosen, and are every day still choosing, for the rest of us.

Necrocapitalism

Banerjee’s necrocapitalism calls our attention to the degree to which the smooth functioning of capitalism in the present moment is dependent on the ever-more-efficient production of death. Building on Achille Mbembe’s “necropolitics” and Warren Montag’s “necroeconomics,” Banerjee proposes the term “necrocapitalism” to refer to those forms of “organizational accumulation that involve dispossession and death” (1542). His particular focus is on the intertwined practices of “privatized military forces” (as an adjunct or replacement for state militaries) and “conflicts over resources between transnational corporations and indigenous communities”—connecting these to the larger history of postcolonial resource extraction that tightly links coloniality and imperialism to both global capitalism and the ecology that can be traced back at least as far as the East India Company. “Territories,” he writes, “are cleared of rebels (‘outlawed citizens’) to make way for logging concessions, petroleum pipelines, mines, and dams” (1545); across colonial history and into the neocolonial present, functioning local markets and local histories are crushed by the imperial center in order to facilitate both resource extraction and the subsequent reselling of those resources back to the colony for the profit of capital owners in the distant metropole. Death—either actively caused by capital through directed

violence, or else passively “allowed to happen” through the supposedly autonomous actions of market forces—“disciplines” these colonial markets; Banerjee cites Montag’s theorization of a necroeconomics wherein “the state can compel by force ‘those who refuse to allow themselves to die’” and force them to keep up their part of the deal (1549). Examples of the profit that can be derived from the creation of death worlds are ample: alongside the renewed violence of the US military apparatus, now typically augmented by private security forces, Banerjee cites myriad examples from India and elsewhere ranging from the dislocation caused by dam construction to struggles over water and sanitation to the dispossession caused by the energy industry in oil-rich regions (the so-called “resource curse” of developing economies, whereby the discovery of valuable resources in a region paradoxically immiserates its citizenry further, inviting new violence from Western states and aligned corporate conglomerates while destroying once-functional local economies). A 1975 government advertisement promoting the Philippines as a “business friendly climate” makes a stunning case for this relationship between corporate profit and mass death: “To attract companies like yours ... we have felled mountains, razed jungles, filled swamps, moved rivers, relocated towns ... all to make it easier for you and your business to do business here” (1551). This affinity between the intentional creation of death-worlds and the total reorganization of social institutions and natural formations towards private profit—what Naomi Klein famously called the “shock doctrine” or disaster capitalism—is an increasingly common engine of crisis in the Western metropole as well; in the case of Detroit, for instance, state-imposed “emergency managers” are debating selling off the city’s art museum (endowed and held in trust in the name of the public good) to pay back the city’s debts at the same moment that citizens are appealing to the United Nations to have their water turned back on (see Bomey and Abbey-Lambertz).

“The fundamental feature of necrocapitalism,” Banerjee writes, “is accumulation by dispossession and the creation of death worlds in colonial contexts” (1549)—but once theorized the concept of necrocapitalism becomes easy to extend across the entirety of capitalism past and present. Marx, after all, showed how the creation of a “death world” of a desperate proletariat who has been stripped of any ability to live but through the sale of labor is the foundational violence of capitalism³—and our contemporary moment of Marxist ecocritique

³ For example: “In proportion as the bourgeoisie, i.e., capital, is developed, in the same proportion is the proletariat, the modern working class, developed—a class of labourers, who live only so long as they find work, and who find work only so long as

confirms in a second sense that *all* capitalism is necrocapitalism, insofar as all capitalist exploitation of resources destroys the conditions for that exploitation’s own continuation. As Marx notes in *Capital*, all agriculture, in the hands of the capitalist, is necrocapitalism:

all progress in capitalistic agriculture is a progress in the art, not only of robbing the labourer, but of robbing the soil; all progress in increasing the fertility of the soil for a given time is a progress towards ruining the lasting sources of that fertility. (638)

At its core, necrocapitalism may therefore simply be another, more depressive framing for Joseph Schumpeter’s “creative destruction,” the animating spirit of capitalism that “incessantly revolutionizes the economic structure *from within*, incessantly destroying the old one, incessantly creating a new one” (82–3). Aside from a few moments—the primitive accumulation of a genuinely open frontier, more fantasy than historical reality, or the early moments of oil capitalism when the substance was so plentiful it could simply be scooped off the ground—it is hard to think of *any* practice of capitalism that is not predicated on the production of suffering and destruction of one sort or another. Creative destruction—or necrocapitalism—is indeed from this perspective “the essential fact about capitalism” (83); it is the whole ballgame.⁴

Extending our reading of necrocapitalism beyond the colonial sphere, we can see the same impulse at work all across contemporary neoliberalism, from the evisceration of the welfare state to the contemporary frenzy for technology-fueled “disruptive innovation” across all industries that destroys what were once careers as cab drivers, teachers, coders, lawyers, and doctors, as well as the rapid buildup of military equipment in private security firms and local police departments and the widespread environmental degradation across all ecosystems that is increasingly impossible to deny and ignore. Indeed, we might

their labour increases capital. These labourers, who must sell themselves piecemeal, are a commodity, like every other article of commerce, and are consequently exposed to all the vicissitudes of competition, to all the fluctuations of the market” (Marx and Engels 87).

⁴ Banerjee would likely agree with this characterization, as he writes “Violence, death, and dispossession and their relationship with capitalism is not new” and approvingly cites Marx’s claim that “capital comes dripping from head to toe, from every pore, with blood and dirt” (1547). Where Banerjee wants to limit necrocapitalism to the colonial sphere through its reliance on “states of exception,” I would respond that these too are rapidly being re-imported to the imperial center to create the same sorts of death-worlds across the Western world as well.

be tempted to conclude that in the contemporary moment capitalism is increasingly deploying the violence of colonialism towards more and more citizens in the so-called metropole. For example, North Carolina has famously responded to predictions about rising sea levels by making it illegal to discuss them in a real estate context (see Harish), while myriad state governments across the US have passed laws prohibiting localities from banning the ecologically destructive practice of hydrofracking as well as prohibiting doctors from so much as *discussing* hydrofracking with their patients, even as more and more studies reveal its toxic effect on the local water table and those who depend on them to live. The ongoing creation of these kinds of “states of exception” wherein citizens are prohibited from making decisions about their own locality recalls precisely Banerjee’s theory of necrocapitalist colonialism, which confines “democratic rights” to a ritualized “political sphere” while “continuing forms of domination, exploitation, and violence” exert the real power (1547).

What necrocapitalism marks, then, may be not so much a novel feature of capitalism but rather the ongoing intensification of these technologies of suffering past the point where they are possible to deny. And things are getting worse: the need for new sources of profit (even in the post-2008-crash world of economic turmoil and declining fossil-fuel energy sources) has meant ever-more-brutal discipline-by-death of the world’s workers. Soon, we are told, jobs for humans will vanish entirely as they are replaced by apps and robots—yet futurists like Tyler Cowen argue that this will not lead to some techno-utopia of plenty but rather an even more brutal scramble to not be left behind by the march of progress with the rest of the 99.9%.⁵ In Singularity fantasies, the familiar “rapture of the nerds,” one can see this coming calamity articulated in quite utopian terms, as the natural and proper order of things; in a more dystopian valence, we can see it at work in such sf as *Elysium* (Blomkamp 2013) and Kim Stanley Robinson’s *2312*, where the rich escape into luxurious satellites and leave the Earth as a sweltering, miserable slum planet.

Objecting to this state of affairs, either as it exists today or as these trends suggest it will continue to advance in the future, is assumed to be utterly pointless: necrocapitalism is not only here whether or not it

⁵ “The rise of intelligent machines will spawn new ideologies along with the new economy it is creating. Think of it as a kind of digital social Darwinism, with clear winners and losers: Those with the talent and skills to work seamlessly with technology and compete in the global marketplace are increasingly rewarded, while those whose jobs can just as easily be done by foreigners, robots or a few thousand lines of code suffer accordingly” (Cowen online). I discuss these kinds of Singularity fantasies in more detail in “Capital as Artificial Intelligence.”

is desired, the fact that it is obviously *not* desirable is perversely taken as the proof that necrocapitalist misery is necessary for social order and stability. As Mark Fisher writes:

If capitalist realism is so seamless, and if current forms of resistance are so hopeless and impotent, where can an effective challenge come from? A moral critique of capitalism, emphasizing the ways in which it leads to suffering, only reinforces capitalist realism. Poverty, famine, and war can be presented as an inevitable part of reality, while the hope that these forms of suffering could be eliminated easily painted as naive utopianism. Capitalist realism can only be threatened if it is shown to be in some way inconsistent or untenable; if, that it is to say, capitalism’s ostensible “realism” turns out to be nothing of the sort.

Necrocapitalist practices are thus reinforced on the level of ideology by a wonderful and terrible double-bind of perpetual threat: things must be *this* necrocapitalist because, if they were not, our society would be *even more* necropolitical and wretched than it is now. That is: necrocapitalism’s own horrors are perpetually taken as proof of necrocapitalism’s necessity, even its own self-prophylactic. We ingest the poison to keep ourselves from becoming even sicker.

Elsewhere in *Capitalist Realism* Fisher extends this point by way of Badiou:

Lowering our expectations, we are told, is a small price to pay for being protected from terror and totalitarianism. “We live in a contradiction,” Badiou has observed:

a brutal state of affairs, profoundly inegalitarian—where all existence is evaluated in terms of money alone—is presented to us as ideal. To justify their conservatism, the partisans of the established order cannot really call it ideal or wonderful. So instead, they have decided to say that all the rest is horrible. Sure, they say, we may not live in a condition of perfect Goodness. But we’re lucky that we don’t live in the condition of Evil. Our democracy is not perfect. But it’s better than the bloody dictatorships. Capitalism is unjust. But it’s not criminal like Stalinism. We let millions of Africans die of AIDS, but we don’t make racist nationalist declarations like Milosevic. We kill

Iraqis with our airplanes, but we don't cut their throats with machetes like they do in Rwanda, etc.

The realism here is analogous to the deflationary perspective of a depressive who believes that any positive state, any hope, is a dangerous illusion (5).

In this way Fisher suggests that *moral* critiques of capitalism thus have the opposite effect to what one might expect: they reinforce, rather than undermine, the appeal of hurting others to perpetuate the social order. Rather, he suggests, we must focus on *pragmatic* critiques of capitalism that show its supposed "realism" to be self-refuting, as these are the only sorts of critique that might break the spell.

Necrofuturism

The reading of *Snowpiercer* that follows attempts just such a demonstration. In particular, I propose a new category called *necrofuturism* to denote those capitalist-realist anticipations of the coming decades that anticipate the future as a devastated world of death, and yet simultaneously insist that this world of death is the only possible future. Necrofuturism arises from the juncture of two superficially contradictory propositions:

(1) CAPITALISM WORKS. As Žižek writes of capitalist ideology's self-understanding: "capitalism itself is presented in technical terms, not even as a science but simply as something that works: it needs no ideological justification, because its success itself is its sufficient justification ... Capitalism is a system which has no philosophical pretensions, which is not in search of happiness. The only thing it says is: 'Well, this functions.' And if people want to live better, it is preferable to use this mechanism, because it functions. The only criterion is efficiency" (25).

But also, and at the same time:

(2) CAPITALISM DOES NOT WORK. Boggled down by its own self-destructive tendencies, capitalism is producing a broken future. "Of course today any thought of a golden future for humanity," writes Benjamin Kunkel, "is all but stifled before

utterance by ecological dread” (102). Or, as Fisher himself puts it in one attempt to break the spell of capitalist realism, “far from being the only viable political-economic system, capitalism is in fact primed to destroy the entire human environment. ... capitalism is by its very nature opposed to any notion of sustainability” (18–9).

On the one hand: the system “works” when, here at the end of history, nothing else seems like it ever could. On the other hand: we can all see that the system is aggressively creating disaster after disaster, including the ultimate catastrophe of climate change that threatens to destroy the system altogether, and which is already making itself known in the droughts, wildfires, superstorms, and floods that have increased in both number and intensity in recent years. Necrofuturism, then, describes the ideological union of these two propositions, which when taken together pronounce a kind of curse upon humanity: necrofuturism names our deflationary belief that the conditions of exploitation and extraction that make contemporary society “function” are foundationally unsustainable and thus manifestly have no future, and yet despite this fact they will simply not be altered in any way, even if it kills us all.

Necrofuturism is, therefore, the key futurism of our time, hegemonic in media formations ranging from apocalyptic sf speculations to ecological jeremiads to familiar mass media proclamations about a generation that “for the first time in American history” will be poorer and less secure—“less successful”—than their parents. Necrofuturism is precisely the sense of impending and unavoidable disaster that permeates all our contemporary visions of the future. Necrofuturist media texts in this way can be seen an example of the ideological formation Richard Grusin calls *premediation*, in which one neurotically rehearses the catastrophe one believes is imminent as a (failed) means of dispelling its power and conquering the fear of it. From another perspective, necrofuturism can be seen as a depressive version of what Lauren Berlant calls *cruel optimism*—“a relation of attachment to compromised conditions of possibility” (24)—whereby the attempt to preserve what you value (here, the middle-class stability produced by late capitalist institutions) becomes in itself an obstacle to that preservation (we cling tighter and tighter to capitalist logics even as capitalism impoverishes an ever-increasing share of the world’s population, in the process destroying the environment).

One of the quintessential examples of this phenomenon is the overpopulation disaster film *Soylent Green* (Flesicher 1973). As the narrative begins, we see immediately the necrofuturity that the cancerous

growth of capitalism has caused. A loudspeaker announces which fraction of New York City's 40 million residents will be allowed to use the streets for the next hour, while on the tiny television in the cluttered apartment of Detective Thorn (Charlton Heston) the news announces that market-based consumer choice has been replaced in this era of austerity by centralized food distribution. Capitalism's free-market economy and its ecstatic devotion to unrestrained growth has ultimately generated its dialectical opposite, undoing itself into central planning and tight scarcity in the name of permanent emergency. An advertisement claims that this government-distributed food substitute, Soylent Green, which looks like a bright green tofu cube, is a revolutionary foodstuff "harvested from plankton from the oceans of the world" but, as anyone who has ever *heard* of this film knows, the true horror is that it is really made of human remains. The system has begun consuming itself. And yet, as we move beyond Thorn's famous cry at the very end of the film—"Soylent Green is people!"—we can anticipate that little or nothing will change as a result of this exposé; the environment is so badly destroyed and the world so totally overpopulated that America has resorted to systematic mass cannibalism, but even here there are no alternatives. Indeed, the film's stunning opening title sequence—a photographic montage depicting the expansion of American capitalism from the days of earliest settlement through the postwar boom to a future nightmare of overpopulation, starvation, and pollution—gives away the ending: the photographs of overflowing junkyards, smog, and poisoned rivers that mark the coming necrofuturity were all photographs from the film's own present. The disaster had already happened. It was always already too late.

Other examples of necrofuturist imaginings abound, all of them employing a nearly identical interior logic of paradox. John Brunner's *The Sheep Look Up* (1972), in which the US, collapsing into maximum crisis on every level, still breeds nothing but denialism and complacency no matter how bad things get, is paradigmatic. It opens with a micro-chapter entitled "SIGNS OF THE TIMES":

THIS BEACH NOT SAFE FOR SWIMMING

NOT Drinking Water
UNFIT FOR HUMAN CONSUMPTION

Now Wash Your Hands
(Penalty for noncompliance \$50)

FILTERMASK DISPENSER

Use product once only — maximum one hour

OXYGEN 25¢. (3)

As with *Soylent Green*, capitalist “freedom” has here produced its political opposite, authoritarian constraint and maximum scarcity in the name of “survival” that is both miserable and plainly unsustainable—commodifying even the ability to breathe. As the novel proceeds, catastrophes only accumulate, as if at the feet of Walter Benjamin’s famous Angel of History, but no serious challenge to capitalism ever emerges. The “sheep” of this future America are never shocked by horror into organization or collective action in response to a world that’s gone entirely to hell, even as they are beset by widespread pollution, chemical spills, fierce new cancers, and medication-resistant superdiseases.

In a closing scene, an eco-revolutionary tries to rally the nation through a heroic speech given over live television:

When did you last bask in the sun, friends? When did you last dare drink from a creek? When did you last risk picking fruit and eating it straight from the tree? What were your doctor’s bills last year? Which of you live in cities where you don’t wear a filtermask? Which of you spent this year’s vacation in the mountains because the sea is fringed with garbage? Which of you is not now suffering from a nagging complaint—bowel upset, headache, catarrh... (354)

He eloquently begs the listener to change in the name of reproductive futurity, that there be some place “where children grow up healthy, bright, and sane” (355), but the president has already ordered the feed cut off, and no one has heard a word he said. A bomb then goes off in the studio, killing everyone there—and, to drive the point home that our toxic system has no future, in the next chapter a pregnant woman is admitted to a hospital after a leaking microwave “literally cooks Jeanine’s baby in her womb” (356). The final image of the novel is no less dire: a woman in Ireland exclaims that a hayrick is on fire and that they must call the fireman to put it out, only to be corrected that the foul smell is actually blowing over the Atlantic from America (364). Worse yet, all these horrors have occurred over the course of but one year—and so the last words of the novel, an open-ended section break labeled “Next Year” (365), chill us to the bone as we are invited to imagine the horrors still to come.

As opposed to those now-*retrofuturist* visions of glittering skylscapes, flying cars, and rocket ships that once populated American visions of an optimistic tomorrow, the *necrofuture* is a vice grip of misery, tightening and tightening, squeezing out all hope. Necrofuturist themes in texts like *Soylent Green* and *The Sheep Look Up* reveal contemporary necrocapitalism as a pathology akin to drug addiction: locked in an entropic, self-destructive cycle, we compromise more and more in the name of keeping the system remaining unchanged, as necrocapitalist dispossession and violence slowly spread across more and more domains of all our lives. (This week, an American city is evacuated by flooding and never repopulated; this week, an entire province in Japan is rendered permanently uninhabitable; this week we fired all the career teachers and replaced them with Teach for America recruits and YouTube videos; this week, American police forces use tear gas, rubber bullets, and riot dogs on their own citizens night after night after bloody night with no consequences or opposition...) Necrofuturism is thus a relentless doubling-down on necrocapitalism, the knowledge that necrocapitalism is creating a world of horrors coupled with the ironclad belief that there is no possible alternative to such a future. Even knowing the oil is running out, even knowing the oil we have yet to burn will poison the climate, the only thing we can think to do is drill harder.

It is little wonder that 1970s eco-disaster texts have been the subject of such renewed critical interest in recent years, as the distance from that necrofuture to our present seems to collapse by the day. “No one, except possibly the late John Brunner, in his brilliant novel *The Sheep Look Up*, has ever described anything in science fiction that is remotely like the reality of 2007 as we know it,” says William Gibson (online). “There are lots of Brunners now, but Brunner was first ... And so *The Sheep Look Up* still dares us to read it,” writes Kim Stanley Robinson (10-11). The apocalyptic scenarios and zombie futures that so dominate contemporary sf look, from this perspective, like nothing so much as depressive premediations of the nightmare world we all know we are rapidly building—a sizzle reel for the coming dystopia that is increasingly visible all around us.

Snowpiercer as necrofuturism

Snowpiercer is only the most recent in a long chain of necrofuturist blockbusters that cast the future as a world of death rather than opportunity or open possibility. In *The Walking Dead* (2010–), still smashing viewership records for cable television, the broken survivors

of a zombie apocalypse wander a ruined American landscape, hiding in prisons from both the zombie threat and the neofascist communities that have arisen in the disaster’s wake. Cormac McCarthy’s Pulitzer-Prize winning novel *The Road* (2006), adapted as *The Road* (Hillcoat 2009), makes *The Walking Dead* look optimistic—its zombies are just other starving people who have turned to cannibalism in desperation after an ecological catastrophe killed nearly all life on Earth. In *The Hunger Games* franchise (2012–), after some unspecified disaster that has seemingly reduced the population of America to a handful of tiny districts populated by perhaps a few hundred thousand people, children are forced to fight each other to the death as a means of social pacification and narcotization. Joss Whedon’s *Dollhouse* (2009–10) is an anti-Singularity, in which late capitalism’s thrall to digital gadgetry zombifies the population, leaving nearly everyone on the planet brain-dead, emotionally broken, or enslaved to corporate interests (if not, alas, all three). In *Elysium*, the rich hoard food and medical care for themselves in suburban-paradise orbital satellites, while the masses on a crowded and warming Earth scramble for employment. *The LEGO Movie* (Lord and Miller 2014) is predicated on a necrocapitalist plot orchestrated by President Business (voiced by Will Ferrell) involving superglue that will kill all the inhabitants of LEGOLand by rendering them lifeless statues; *WALL-E* (Stanton 2008) similarly enthralls its child audience with a vision of a future Earth so wrecked by overconsumption that humans have been forced to flee the planet altogether. Even *Star Trek* (Abrams 2009), once sf’s paradigmatic example of utopian cosmopolitanism, sees Spock’s home planet of Vulcan destroyed and its population (cherished by the fanbase as a vision of the transformative power of rationalism) decimated and scattered in diaspora.

The bleak future of *Snowpiercer* results from a failed attempt at geo-engineering.⁶ A chemical, CW-7, is dispersed in the atmosphere in an effort to control the speed of global warming, but it is too effective, freezing the entire globe: “All life became extinct,” the title sequence explains, accompanied by the rumble of a train engine.⁷ Diegetic news clips provide a guide to how this situation unfolded, to how technological

⁶ In the original comic, it is a consequence of the atomic bomb, though no one is quite sure how.

⁷ The word “extinct” is repeatedly used to describe anything that has vanished, typically objects rather than living things: “Cigarettes have been extinct for more than 10 years now”; “They’ve used up all their bullets 4 years ago on the last revolt. Bullets are extinct.” It is only very late in the film that it is used to refer to a living thing—a chicken—and this tiny gesture speaks to *Snowpiercer* as a necrofuture: the future is a space of universal extinction and contraction, rather than vibrancy or life.

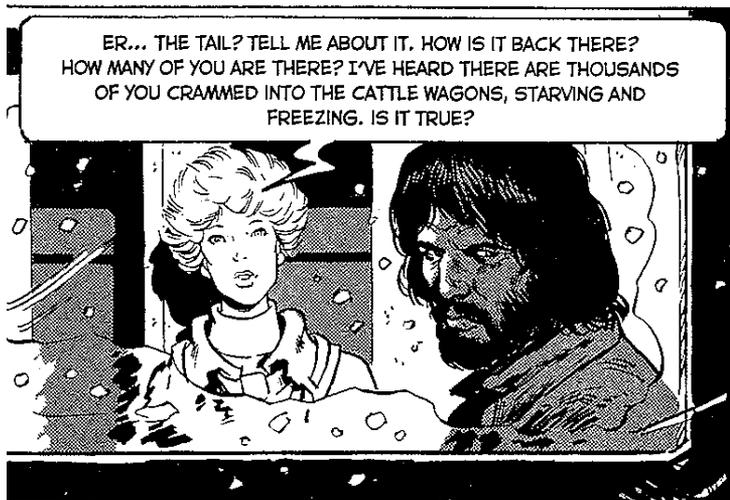
capitalism destroyed the planet twice: it destabilized the climate by making it dangerously warmer, then destabilized the planet by releasing CW-7 (undoubtedly produced by some private corporation in the first world, as we are told over the objections of environmentalists and nations in the Global South). This is the cruel optimism at the heart of necrofuturism: there is no hope of averting a future of collective death because the only possible solution to the problem is precisely the cause of it.

In much the same way, the characters are beholden to the newly emergent system of the train because, without the constant addition of heat released from the perpetual-motion-machine Engine, they too would all freeze instantly. No alternative to the system is possible; Snowpiercer's continual movement is the *only* possible future for humanity. This, as in *Soylent Green* and *The Sheep Look Up*, is a capitalist realism that turns into a *post*-capitalist realism: even though capitalism ultimately destroys the conditions for its own existence (as we knew it would, as we all saw it doing), the structural deprivations it produces nonetheless survive in the future to be reproduced in an unhappy post-capitalist context, human misery taking on the force of a law of nature. The future will be *necro-*, whether or not it is *-capitalist*. The original comic is actually obsessed with this sort of imagery: all of the interior chapters begin with a brooding monologue on the dual futility-necessity of Snowpiercer's transit, typically alongside some ironic juxtaposition of the train's status as the "last bastion of civilization" and the horrors aboard.



Jacques Lob and Jean Marc Rochette. *Snowpiercer*. Titan, 2013

This is the (scientifically ludicrous) setup of both the comic and the film: the entire world has frozen over, and only this huge, perpetually moving train harbors any life at all. *Snowpiercer* in this sense takes the facility of the sf imagination that Jameson calls world reduction⁸ and uses it to develop its plot: the entire world is killed off, and humanity reduced to just the inhabitants of this very long, very claustrophobic train. The echo of the Holocaust’s trains to concentration camps, strongly felt in the film, is similarly visceral and immediate in the comic. The Holocaust has, after all, always been one of two major necrofuturist endpoints of necrocapitalist modernity, the other being the silence after nuclear holocaust — which is also echoed in *Snowpiercer*’s bunker-like environs and radical enclosure against exposure to the outside elements, here cold snow rather than radiological fallout.



Jacques Lob and Jean Marc Rochette. *Snowpiercer*. Titan, 2013

The leftist political allegory comes in through the irrational retention of a class system, spatialized in linear fashion by the familiar class system of railway travel: the very rich in the front, and so on back to the starving masses in “tail section,” stowaways who never had a ticket and were only able to get on board the train in the chaos of its departure. The first-class passengers frame their continued toleration of the tail section as a kind of humanitarian pity, even a kind of dangerous weakness (we ultimately discover that the tail section provides a necessary component of this system’s continued functioning). This class system is retained even

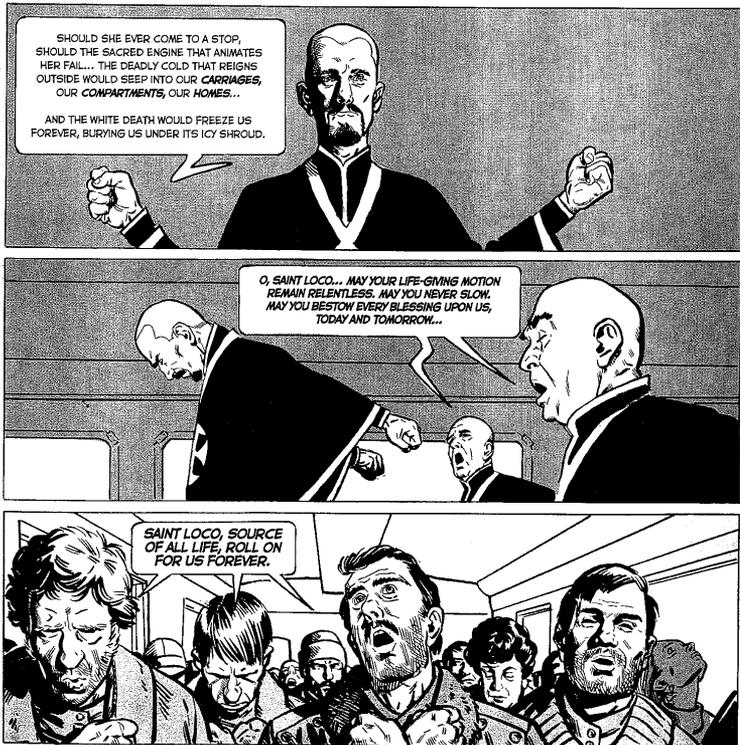
⁸ World reduction is “a kind of surgical excision of empirical reality”; through this “operation of radical abstraction and simplification” sf readers better understand “the sheer teeming multiplicity of what exists” (*Archaeologies* 271).

though class distinctions from before the disaster have no force or logic in the world afterwards; soldiers happily enforce the feudal hierarchy even though it lacks even the slimmest relevance to the actual conditions on the train. This is undoubtedly what has led so many critics to describe the system of class difference on the train as “capitalist,” even though there is nothing particularly capitalistic about the political economy of the train—a misreading that recalls Evan Calder Williams’s Žižekian description of *The Bed Sitting Room* (Lester 1969): “*The problem with the apocalypse was that it wasn’t apocalyptic enough: it did not clear away the dead weight of the previous world configuration*” (47).

The vulgar Marxism of this literalized class allegory drives the narrative. The protagonist, Curtis (Chris Evans), is the latest charismatic leader to arise from the tail section as he leads the latest in what has been a series of failed revolutions against the heavily-armed front. He leads a group forward through the entire length of the train, ultimately confronting Wilford (Ed Harris), the engineer who built and now maintains the engine. As setups go, and as the critics who do not like the film have noted at length, this is all completely preposterous. The absurdity is best highlighted in a pseudo-religious video that plays as Curtis and his group pass through a surreal “classroom car” on their way towards the front. The children are being instructed to worship Wilford as a messianic figure; the claim, seemingly intended to be understood by the audience as propaganda rather than history, is even made that Wilford knew the CW-7 would backfire and deliberately outfitted *Snowpiercer* to help his “chosen” survive. After the video, the children are shown the corpses of several passengers who attempted to escape the train, including an Inuit maid who believed humans could still live outside, but froze solid just a few yards from the track. The teacher (Allison Pill) gravely leads them in a grim call-and-response chant: “If we ever go outside the train? *We all freeze and die*. If the engine stops running? *We’d all die*.”⁹

We see in these moments the basic coordinates of *Snowpiercer*’s intervention as ideology critique: the capitalist realism of the contemporary moment insists that any deviation from existing power structures would be suicide: no alternative is possible; all alternatives to the system are the same as (instant!) death; those in charge of the system are always doing what they do no matter how horrible it seems in the name of collective survival.

⁹ Parallel moments of religious worship can be found in the comic, where passengers ecstatically exhort “St. Loco” to “roll on forever.”



Jacques Lob and Jean Marc Rochette. *Snowpiercer*. Titan, 2013

When Curtis finally reaches the lead car, Wilford reveals that Curtis has been groomed to replace him as the master of the train all along. Echoing the “Architect” scene in *The Matrix Reloaded* (Wachowski and Wachowski 2003), the cycle of hopeless revolutions is revealed to be just a population control device, keeping the numbers in the tail manageable and thereby ensuring the sustainably balanced management of the train’s “closed ecological system.” Curtis’s beloved mentor, Gilliam (John Hurt), was in on everything from the start, taking orders directly from Wilford, and Curtis must now stop attacking the system and instead decide to lead it. His suitability as a replacement for Wilford is oddly undermined by revelations that call into question his moral worthiness to lead. The film repeatedly teases a *Soylent Green*-style reveal, seeming to hint that either the people in the front, or those in the tail, have been eating the children who disappear after failing some sort of measurement or growth test. But this is not the case. The suspect protein bars are actually made of cockroaches, and the cannibalism came at a different point in the journey altogether: during the chaotic early

days of the journey, the people in the *tail* openly turned to cannibalism in the name of survival, and Curtis was one of the cannibal ringleaders. He only stopped when Gilliam offered one of his own limbs for him to eat instead of a baby. “I know what people taste like,” Curtis reveals with self-loathing during a moment of psychological breakdown at the end of the film, “and I know babies taste best.”¹⁰

The cannibalism revelation suggests that *all* of the people on the train are all “guilty” and “complicit” with the *Snowpiercer* system, albeit in different ways and to different degrees; like any necropolitical survivor, they are all alive while/because someone else has died.¹¹ On the level of character development, much of the film is directed towards making Curtis feel as though he is worthy of great things *despite* the guilt he carries with him; characters frequently say this to him explicitly, even, most notably, the character he once tried to eat as a baby and who he later abandons to death in the name of the larger mission. In fact this guilt, in properly liberal terms, is indistinguishable from his worthiness to lead. His narrative arc is the more or less a familiar liberal drama about coming to terms with and moving past your own guilty complicity in the system—a process which, as if by baptismal magic, thereby makes you worthy to run the whole thing as if you had never been guilty or complicit in the first place, and, as a bonus, does not require you or the system to actually change.

Snowpiercer and utopia

As a political statement, however, *Snowpiercer* has different ambitions than a grim reinscription of neoliberalism’s familiar “hard choices.” In the end Curtis rejects the Engineer’s offer of power to reform the system, though he briefly appears to be tempted by it. The reason is that he discovers, finally, what the tail section is actually for: producing

¹⁰ One of the real pleasures of *Snowpiercer* is immediately watching it again and seeing how all the character interactions are informed by this secret, horrible history. It is an entirely different film the second time. To take two examples: nearly all the older people in the back of the train section are missing limbs, which is misleadingly framed as if it is an extreme punishment handed down by the front, but is actually the legacy of this early cannibalistic moment; and Curtis’s right-hand man, Edgar (Jamie Bell), is the very baby he once tried to eat.

¹¹ See Mbembe: “the survivor is the one who, having stood in the path of death, knowing of many deaths and standing in the midst of the fallen, is still alive. Or, more precisely, the survivor is the one who has taken on a whole pack of enemies and managed not only to escape alive, but to kill his or her attackers. This is why, to a large extent, the lowest form of survival is killing” (36).

a steady supply of children to replace the parts of the Engine as they entropically break down over time. (The children have not failed a measurement test, but rather *passed* one—and so, yes, it is all a retread of *Soylent Green* after all.) Although he seems willing to indulge the thought of administrating Snowpiercer’s other horrors, this last one is too much to bear, and so he takes another option. This is the way-out provided for by a secondary character, Namgoong (Kang-ho Song), a security specialist Curtis broke out of the prison car to open doors in the forward section. Namgoong is a drug addict, addicted to huffing an industrial waste product, who seems to be going along with the “revolution” so long as he can be paid in the drug—but it turns out that same industrial waste product is a potent explosive, and Namgoong is actually hoarding the stuff so he has enough to blow open Snowpiercer’s immense, bolted-shut exit door. Curtis initially rejects Namgoong’s plan as a doomed insanity, but returns to it in his moment of grief and horror and chooses this radical alternative as the future instead.

The explosion causes a massive avalanche that derails the train, seemingly killing everyone aboard. Only two survive, cushioned from the crash by Namgoong and Curtis’s crushed bodies: Namgoong’s daughter, Yona (Ah-sung Ko), and Timmy (Marcanthonee Jon Reis), a tail-section boy Curtis rescued from the Engine. Having gathered supplies, they climb out of the train wreck and survey their new world. Preliminary indications are that Namgoong was right: the world is cold, but it does not freeze them instantly, and the presence of a polar bear (that all-purpose icon of global warming) indicates that some sort of life must still be possible outside the train. The film ends on this ambiguous image of nonwhite futurity, as an Asian woman and a young black child, dressed as Inuits, stare out into a nonwhite, nonwestern, future.

In Aaron Bady’s reading of the ending, the situation of the two surviving characters is utterly hopeless:

Nam has decided that there is no alternative, and never was. That’s why he has a different plan: to blow up the train and destroy humanity, forever.

That’s not revolution. That’s the end of the world. And let’s take a moment and remember what a relief that moment was, what a catharsis. Everybody in this movie needs to die, and they all do, thank God. That’s the real ending of the movie, and it’s pleasurable to watch, a relief. The movie fades to black before we see the polar bear eat those two kids, but let’s not fool ourselves: those two kids are not going to wander off into a new Eden and repopulate the earth (and not only because there are

only two of them, though that lack of genetic diversity *is* one of humanity's many death sentences here). Nature is about to eat the children that were just saved from being eaten by the train. A polar bear is not a sign of hope, because polar bears eat people, and, anyway, how is a pair of children who have never been off the train—have never even *seen dirt*—going to be able to live on what is basically Antarctica? Those kids are already dead, in days, if not hours, if not minutes. (online)

And of course he is right about this on the level of cold realism. Like most such apocalyptic scenarios, the situation is too far gone to allow any sort of genuine renewal.¹² But a utopian reading of the film does not require us to imagine it as some practical alternative to the present so much as to figure the ongoing existence of alternatives in an era that, at every turn, loudly insists there are not any. As Jameson writes,

For it is the very principle of the radical break as such, its possibility, which is reinforced by the Utopian form, which insists that its radical difference is possible and that a break is necessary. The Utopian form itself is the answer to the universal ideological conviction that no alternative is possible, that there is no alternative to the system. But it asserts this by forcing us to think the break itself, and not by offering a more traditional picture of what things will be like after the break. (*Archaeologies* 232)

Snowpiercer, it seems to me, is plainly about this effort of the imagination; neither the setup nor the climax is really amenable to any sort of realistic analysis about the practicalities of the situation. The whole thing is genuinely preposterous from start to finish. The point of the film is not to work out the inner logic of some possible future but rather to disrupt our guilty comfort and our comforting guilt about the actually-existing system we all know is terrible but think we cannot oppose, only wring our hands about and be more beautiful than. It is likewise a refusal of any fantasy that the necrocapitalist system could be saved, reformed, redeemed, or made just with new leadership (even our own), in favor of an encounter with an alternative future of truly radical alterity and freedom (a future of life rather than death, which stares back at us through the eyes of the polar bear at the end of the film).

¹² I again think here of the way the *Matrix* sequels had to confront this, with the heroic rebels ultimately making an unhappy truce with the monsters they were supposed to slay because the world is already too far destroyed to *actually* free anyone any more.

What is utopian about this moment is precisely the realization that there can be a future, both for animal life and for human life, but only *outside* the self-defeating hopelessness of capitalist realism. This future of radical historical difference might not look much like the consumer lifestyle we live now, but then neither does the necrofuture that has proclaimed itself inevitable and imminent. *Snowpiercer*’s vivid, explosive confrontation with what both the filmic allegory and capitalist realism more generally insist is absolutely unthinkable—the upending of the system, the derailing of the train—and its demonstration of continued life *beyond* that maximum catastrophe interrupts capitalist realism to show that the necrocapitalist regime is the *barrier* to a living future rather than the guarantor of it. The train had no future, but Yona and Timmy might. The utopian impulse driving the end of *Snowpiercer* is thus the lifting of the curse of necrofuturity: there do in fact exist alternative futures that are not Western, or white, or ecologically unsustainable, or reliant on a vicious system of class difference, and we can access these futures by refusing to identify ourselves with liberal capitalism’s doomed structures of power and choosing instead to find other ways that we might live.

In the original comic this all plays out somewhat differently, but with a similarly Jamesonian utopian edge. The comic’s hero, Proloff, also makes a journey from the back of the train to the front, where he too is offered the job of lead engineer. However, he is not a revolutionary but a lone individual who has managed to break into the front cars by climbing outside the train and back in through a lavatory window. He has zero interest in any sort of class politics and is only trying to pull himself out of the misery of the back of the train. He does not even care when he discovers that the elites in the first-class cars are planning to dump the tail section in order to preserve speed, massacring everybody back there as well as their liberal humanitarian allies from the front section who have gone to provide aid at the back. We find out eventually that this is because Proloff knows something we do not: a plague has spread through the tail section, killing nearly everyone there, and he is both immune to it and a carrier. He infects everyone in the train as he makes his journey, so that when he *accepts* the Engineer’s offer to lead the train, he is in fact *Snowpiercer*’s sole survivor, custodian for a mausoleum of the dead, kicking futilely at the automated machinery and longing for relief.

Jacques Derrida spoke of the future in exactly this way, bifurcating futurity into two distinct concepts he called *le future* and *l’avenir*.¹³ *Le future* names the “predictable, programmed, scheduled, foreseeable”—

¹³ Thanks to Veronica Hollinger for bringing this to my attention.

the constrained hopeless necrofuturism built by the Engineer, *Snowpiercer*'s futile endless loop—which is juxtaposed to the messianic eruption of the unpredictable and the unexpected, *l'avenir*, Namgoong's derailing of the train that finally makes a *human* future possible once again. The miserable conditions of life upon the train cannot be divorced either from their necessary violence or from their basic unsustainability. Only a future that rejects the institutions that produce this unhappy stability has any hope of finding a way out. In this sense, the film advances a utopian vision whose happy ending emerges not through some liberal logic of reform—which would only prolong our sentence in the failed experiments called *Snowpiercer* and capitalism—but rather through revolution and radical historical rupture. As Derrida says in *Derrida* (Dick and Ziering Kofman 2002), “if there is a real future, beyond the other known future, it is *l'avenir* in that it is the coming of the Other when I am completely unable to foresee their arrival.” There seems to us today to be no escape from the necrofuturism, and from the perspective of capitalist realism, there truly *is* none; hope, and life, and indeed futurity itself, lay only in the miraculous suspension of the necrofuturism's hopeless inevitability that is *l'avenir*.



Jacques Lob and Jean Marc Rochette. *Snowpiercer*. Titan, 2013

The comic version is even more effective than its film adaptation in using the train metaphor as a deconstruction of the necrofuturism’s status as a supposedly ahistorical and apolitical inevitability. The train gives the illusion of forward movement while actually being limited to prebuilt rails, the illusion of progress while actually simply circling the same dead loop forever, the illusion of participation and “choice” whereas in fact all outcomes have already been chosen in advance. And, as in the film, we come to experience this necrofuturism not as a curse or a doom handed down by nature but as a built and constructed thing, a horror that has been deliberately designed for us and which is being actively managed by the powerful. At that point the only genuine choice left available to us is Namgoong’s: the radical refusal of our scheduled route.



Jacques Lob and Jean Marc Rochette. *Snowpiercer*. Titan, 2013

This is made visible in the comic’s fascinating retelling of the origins of the train, a moment that is quite similar actually to the film’s propaganda video, although Wilford’s supposed prescience about CW-7 plays out in much more sinister terms.¹⁴ No one in the comic knows the exact

¹⁴ A stronger parallel to this sense of designedness in the film can perhaps be found in Wilford’s assertions that Curtis has a “destiny,” that he has been bred for this, and that all events have been manipulated by Wilford and Gillam the entire time.

cause of the catastrophe, which is felt to have come like a disaster out of the clear blue sky—and yet here already waiting is the exact lunatic machinery required for a select elite to survive it: “A miracle indeed.” (And the sequel comics provide us with a double miracle: there was a second *Snowpiercer* on the same track! Miracles upon miracles, luck upon luck!)

What we see in this wonderfully odd little moment is *Snowpiercer* ingeniously reading its own preposterousness in the service of its critique of necrofuturist ideology. By demanding that we take the absurd existentialist metaphor of the never-ending train ride seriously as a literal proposition, *as a science fiction*—demanding that we actually consider the circumstances in which such a silly metaphor might somehow emerge out of the present as a real historical event—the comic makes us recognize the necrofuture is not an immutable law of the universe to which we are hopelessly doomed. It is instead the terrible future that the people in power have planned for us, and are at every moment deliberately bringing into existence—which means, by the same token, it is a future *we* might yet choose *against*, a freight train with a head of steam but one that we can yet derail.

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