

THE CEASING OF RACIAL DIVERSITY – SNOWPIERCER

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ABSTRACT

Although racial stereotype is still a remaining issue in the society, the tendency to end its negative impact is slowly shown in the movie industry, especially apocalyptic movies. After analyzing apocalyptic movies from the 1950s to today's iconic works, such as Snowpiercer, and reviewing actors' opinions on certain race-related topics, it's obvious that more ethnic stereotypes are removed and there is way less prejudice between groups of characters in the film. From directors to actors, a lot of the minor details have reflected people's willingness to cease racial diversity in our world. Even though there is still a long way to go to fully transfer the improved and balanced society within these apocalyptic movies to reality, progress has been made to a significant degree.

Keywords: Racial Diversity, Social Prejudice, Revealed Humanity, Apocalyptic Movie

1. Introduction

The movie Snowpiercer, based on the French graphic novel *Le Transperceneige*, directed by Bong Joon-ho, is not simply an apocalyptic movie that shows environmentalism, classism, social revolution, and revealed humanity, but also demonstrates a new connotation behind it.

Flashing back to the first era of the apocalyptic movies around the 1950s, to the modern state of its type, Snowpiercer finally sets up a formal threshold for the apocalyptic film industry as the transition towards the ideal morality with the removal of the typical endings and stereotypical characteristics towards minorities.

2. Analysis

Although it can be jarring, peeking through the history of apocalyptic films, reveals a consistent theme about the hierarchy of race. Reflecting the broader mood of the film industry and its place in the cultural landscape, white people are often portrayed as the inevitable heroes, and

occasionally the lone survivors, of apocalyptic terror of various kinds. This tendency to overemphasize the value of whiteness persists throughout the film industry. As a recent study in *The Guardian* reveals, in 2018 only “twenty-seven films had a non-white lead or co-lead” (Shoard). In the early era of apocalyptic cinema, many movies directly indicate the superiority of white characters over the dispensable others.

For example, *Night of the Living Dead* (1968), George A. Romero’s new formula for the zombie film tells a familiar story about race and the end of the world. In this film, a group of people retreats to a small house to evade an army of undead ghouls. Although Ben, the only black character in the film, outlasts the other characters he is hiding with, he is eventually killed at the very end by a group of white vigilantes, led by a white sheriff, when they mistake him for a zombie. The 1960s was a sensitive time for the Civil Rights movement, and this film made a giant leap in the industry by casting an African American male as the lead. But even though this step forward was taken, the same old story is told in the end.

More recently, many apocalyptic movies, such as *The Divide* (2011) and *World War Z* (2013), retain this same structural relationship to race and its deployment within the narrative. In these films, black or minority characters are often killed off during the middle phase of the story. Very few, if any, survive to the end. And yet, no matter how dynamic the plot is, and no matter how severe the threat is, the white man always survives to save the world. This persistence of this trope white superiority creates embedded assumptions about race that may have detrimental effects, especially on younger viewers, who are still formulating their understanding of the world and themselves. According to *Variety*, Will Smith’s decision for not to attend the Oscars was due to his concern about the imbalance the racial representation in Hollywood: “This is so deeply not about me. This is about children that are going to sit down and watch this show and they're not going to see themselves represented” (Littleton). The lack of representation truly had internal consequences as well for its success and cohesiveness. It's obvious that people try to avoid talking about race and ethnicity in public, but these elements of fragmentary racial diversity are still present in society—and Hollywood is merely one avenue where the problem is visualized.

However, the film *Snowpiercer* completely reverses the ordinary paradigm of race. In this minority characters survive and offer a new vision of hope for a world that is built on something more than the tenets of white exceptionalism. Yona, one of the main characters in *Snowpiercer*, is one of the few Asian characters to appear in the history of apocalyptic films. Far from being merely a placeholder for the heroics of other characters, she, along with a small black child, survives to the end. This is the first time an Asian character acts as the Savior of a world that has been decimated because of climate change. It's intriguing how the director uses Curtis, the other main character, who is played by Chris Evans, as the slow but eventual transition of Asian

characters into the Apocalyptic tradition. In the course of the film, Curtis, who is one of the lower-class people on the train, succeeds defeating Wilford. However, instead of becoming the new leader and the savior of humanity, no doubt fulfilling the audience's expectation, Curtis dies protecting Yona from the final explosion at the train's side door.

Could this new plot develop signal the potentially increasing exposure of minority actors in the apocalyptic imagination? As of right now, not quite, but it casts a practical projection to the future, where more minority actors will be presented in apocalyptic films, or possibly the entire entertainment industry. According to Stacy L. Smith, the director of the USC Annenberg Inclusion Initiative, "companies are making more of an effort to be inclusive" (Shorad). Without a doubt, *Snowpiercer* marks a turning point and a point of departure, revealing that apocalyptic movies can be successfully structured around a world in which white people are not the only heroes capable of redeeming a failing world.

Whereas *Snowpiercer* offers a new landscape for the apocalyptic film to explore, there have been other moments in which the potential for racial liberation has been perhaps hinted at but never fulfilled. In some cases, the existence of longstanding racial stereotypes is merely the legacy of inherited and unchallenged images that originate outside of the writer's or director's intention. And yet, in the present day, where we have a greater understanding of the world and diversity, such representations can no longer be excused based on the accident.

The movie *Geostorm* (2017), directed by Dean D, exemplifies this movement toward a more self-conscious notion of race. This is an apocalyptic film where the earth is fully monitored by a universal system called "DutchBoy". Because of human-made pollution, this system has been put in place to fulfill the role of a climate moderator. One of the only Asian characters in the movie, Cheng Long, played by Daniel Wu, shows up as a computer engineer in the International Climate Council. In the whole of the two-hour film, he appears for about five minutes and has barely any lines. After discovering the scandal in the system, he is predictably got murdered. In this case, whether it means to or not, the film upholds two stereotypes at once. The Asian character is technically adept but functionally expendable. He discovers the problem, but he does not survive the effects of his cleverness.

Alongside, the movie *Independence Day: Resurgence* (2015), directed by Roland Emmerich, underscores the claim of this paper. Even though the film attempts to minimize the stereotype by making Rain Luo, played by Angela Wing, a fighter pilot, the attempt fails to escape some of the traditional pitfalls of standard cinematic treatments of race. The movie depicts the struggle against an alien civilization. A large of the plot centers on the human command center, in which people collect and analyze large quantities of data and manage the satellite system to secure the

Earth. In looking at the way the characters are deployed, the same problem of racial stereotyping rears its head. All the staff members in front of the computer screen are Asian, who play minor roles in the film, and all the leaders are white people who make the decisions. Once again, Asian characters are seen as superior when it comes to matters of technology but are never promoted to positions of true leadership or importance. Both of these films project limit Asian people to cogs in the technical workforce. They are not permitted to act as leaders but instead reinforce the existence of the global stereotype of Asians as both mathematically gifted and quietly obedient to the capitalist structure. They are portrayed as mindless and expendable cogs who care only about performing their role, silently accepting rules that are made for them.

In the construction of these films, the role and placement of African American characters play a similar role. They are both reduced to minor characters who are there to follow the orders that are proposed for them. The black characters in the film never possess intricate technical jobs; in fact, they always showed up in the conflict/combat scenes and often carry heavy weapons with them. In this sense, because they are the infantry of the human race, they are seen as useful, in part, because of their capacity to be sacrificed. They are expendable, whereas the leaders are always held in reserve because of their importance. Secondly, they are reduced to the effects of their bodies and not on the strength of their minds.

These forms of representation amount to cinematic microaggressions. According to Marc Choueiti, programmer director at the Annenberg Inclusion Initiative, the current situation in the film industry is amounts to mass whitewashing. By turning away from the reality of racial complexity, thereby relying only on perceived and discredited knowledge, films deny the complex subjectivities of other people: "You're basically seeing the erasure of whole communities" (Shoard). But as we rewind to *Snowpiercer*, the light at the end of the tunnel is still bright. Rather than support the sort of conventions that we have already detailed, the movie refrains from creating characters whose role within the landscape and the hierarchy of work is predetermined by race. Minorities do not need to be a specialist in one area but are instead outfitted with the potential to be leaders. For example, although the revolution is started in the film by Curtis, one of the main Asian characters, Namgoong, played by Kang Ho Song, also serves as a leader. After the capture of Mason, the second in command aboard the train, Curtis and Namgoong selected a group of people to keep exploring the rest of the train to avoid risks. Here comes a historical scene in the movie. The director uses a long shot to show the members of this small group. Unlike most apocalyptic films, the main squad is occupied with every ethnic delegation. Curtis and Andrew, played by Ewen Bremner, represent the white community; Namgoong and his daughter Yona, represent the Asian American community; Tanya, the black determined mother, played by Octavia Spencer, representing the African American community; and Grey, played by Luke Pasqualino, represents the Latin American community. This is what

the pluralistic world is supposed to look like, where people do not judge each other by their background and work together as one team.

Another interesting area of life that the film reveals is the classroom. When this space is filmed, it shows both the multi-ethnic student body, which affirms the message that everyone deserves equal education and points to a segment that is missing from the train—a group of frozen people. In the story, people have tried to escape the train. But owing to the harsh external environment, they froze. The director emphasizes that the leader of that movement is Yona's mom, which again solidifies the opinion that minorities can also become the leader in society.

Along with these, there are multiple scenes in the movie that eradicate general stereotypes. For example, instead of the bulky and action-driven black character, Tanya is more cerebral when she slaps Curtis out of his hallucination after the death of Gilliam and tells him that he has to lead the team. Also, rather than the nerdy and vulnerable status of Asian characters, Namgoog and Yona are not only stripped of vulnerable markers, but they also demonstrate leadership, which rarely happens with minorities.

3. Conclusion

In conclusion, racial diversity will be, and always be one of the biggest uphill battles in not only the apocalyptic movie but the entire industry. Joaquin Phoenix, the winner of the best actor of the 2020 Oscar, said in his speech “We have to do the hard work to truly understand systemic racism. It is the obligation of the people who have created and benefit from the system of oppression to be the ones dismantle it” (Shoard). The vision of movies can not only be on a specific group of people but to the entire civilization. Apocalyptic, being the most dynamic genre that can represent the plurality of the world, could be the potential first step toward the destination.

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