



Exploring the Contributing Factors of Social Class in Bong Joon-Ho's Film *Snowpiercer* (2013)

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ABSTRACT

*This article examines socio-economic themes in the film *Snowpiercer* (2013) through the lens of critical theory, focusing on three primary contributing factors: technological development, capital accumulation, and economic insufficiency. Drawing on Marxist and contemporary socio-economic theories, the analysis explores how technological developments, depicted through advanced weaponry and security systems, reinforce social hierarchies aboard a post-apocalyptic train. It also delves into the stark contrast between the opulent front section and the impoverished tail section, illustrating the concentration of wealth and power among the bourgeoisie. Economic insufficiency is highlighted through the plight of tail section passengers, trapped in conditions of deprivation and labor exploitation, unable to compete with wealthier classes. The study underscores how these factors perpetuate entrenched social inequalities and reflects on their broader implications for understanding contemporary socio-economic dynamics.*

Keywords: technological development, capital accumulation, economic insufficiency, bourgeoisie, proletariat

ABSTRAK

*Artikel ini mengkaji tema-tema sosial-ekonomi dalam film *Snowpiercer* (2013) melalui lensa teori kritis, dengan fokus pada tiga faktor kontribusi utama: perkembangan teknologi, akumulasi modal, dan ketidakcukupan ekonomi. Berdasarkan teori Marxis dan teori sosio-ekonomi kontemporer, analisis ini mengeksplorasi bagaimana kemajuan teknologi, yang digambarkan melalui senjata canggih dan sistem keamanan, memperkuat hierarki sosial di dalam kereta api pasca-apokaliptik. Artikel ini juga menguraikan kontras tajam antara bagian depan yang mewah dan bagian ekor yang miskin, yang menggambarkan konsentrasi kekayaan dan kekuasaan di kalangan borjuis. Ketidakcukupan ekonomi ditekankan melalui kondisi penderitaan penumpang di bagian ekor, terperangkap dalam kondisi kekurangan dan eksploitasi tenaga kerja, tak mampu bersaing dengan kelas yang lebih kaya. Studi ini menyoroti bagaimana faktor-faktor ini memperpanjang ketimpangan sosial yang dalam dan merefleksikan implikasi mereka secara luas untuk memahami dinamika sosio-ekonomi kontemporer.*

Kata Kunci: perkembangan teknologi, akumulasi modal, ketidakcukupan ekonomi, borjuis, proletariat.



INTRODUCTION

Social class, a crucial aspect of societal structure, is shaped by various elements that influence or determine a person's status within a capitalist society. Factors such as the expansion of global markets, technological development, capital accumulation, historical evolution, economic insufficiency, and the recruitment of the proletariat play significant roles in the formation and establishment of social classes (Marx & Engels, 1955; Marx, 1867; Marx in Panichas & Hobart, 1990). These elements create a framework through which individuals' positions and roles in society are defined and understood. Exploring these factors within the context of media, particularly in films like Bong Joon-Ho's *Snowpiercer* (2013), provides a compelling lens to examine socioeconomic dynamics and their implications on human behaviour and societal organization.

Despite the importance of these factors, there is a limited understanding of how they specifically contribute to the depiction of social class in *Snowpiercer*. Previous studies have primarily focused on the broader themes of Marxism, political allegory, and necro-futurism within the film, analyzing its critique of capitalist realism and its reflection on contemporary social issues (Akandi & Mila, 2019; Canavan, 2014; Koechlin, 2024; Lee & Manicastri, 2018; Pinem, 2023; Ozbey, 2019). However, the intricate factors influencing social class within the film's narrative remain underexplored. This gap in the literature highlights the need for a detailed analysis of how *Snowpiercer* portrays the contributing factors of social class and their implications on the characters and their interactions.

In *Snowpiercer* (2013), the depiction of social class is stark and vividly portrayed through the division of the train's inhabitants. The movie starkly contrasts the opulent front section with the impoverished tail section, illustrating the exploitation and oppression of the lower class (Kasim et al., 2024). The tail section, representing the proletariat, is characterized by overcrowding, squalor, and subjugation, while the front section, symbolizing the bourgeoisie, enjoys luxury and control. Advanced technology in the movie, such as security systems, reinforces social hierarchies, serving the interests of the bourgeoisie while subjugating the lower class (YILMAZ & ÖZEN, 2023). Moreover, the narrative reflects on how capital accumulation leads to entrenched social inequalities, mirroring real-world capitalist dynamics (Pinem, 2023).

All these insights probably allow for an examination of how the contributing factors of social class, such as technological development and capital accumulation, manifest in a microcosm of society. The film's narrative of rebellion and class struggle provides a rich text for analyzing how these factors influence the interactions between different social classes and the resulting social hierarchies.

This study aims to address this gap by employing a Marxist framework to analyze the contributing factors of social class depicted in *Snowpiercer* (2013). By examining the



film through the lens of Marx's theory, the research will explore how elements such as global market expansion, technological development, capital accumulation, historical evolution, economic insufficiency, and proletariat recruitment are represented and their impact on the characters' social positions. This analysis will provide a more nuanced understanding of the film's depiction of social class and contribute to the broader discourse on socioeconomic issues in media. Through this approach, the study argues that *Snowpiercer* effectively illustrates the complexities of social class formation and the underlying factors that sustain it, offering valuable insights into the dynamics of capitalist societies.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Karl Marx's theory of social class provides a foundational framework for understanding how economic and political structures engender social hierarchies. According to Marx, economic inequality is intrinsically structured around class divisions, with class serving as the principal determinant of how economic resources are distributed (Anthias, 2001). This distribution of resources shapes individuals' social environments and motivations, fostering disparities that manifest in various aspects of life. Politically, the economically dominant class frequently wields power, which exacerbates the unequal allocation of resources. This dynamic perpetuates hierarchical systems and marginalizes lower-status social groups, reinforcing the stratified nature of capitalist societies (Anthias, 2001).

One of the significant contributing factors to social class formation in capitalist societies is the expansion of global markets. Marx and Engels (1955) argue that opening new markets and colonizing territories significantly boosted trade, driving the development of navigation and industry. This expansion facilitated the bourgeoisie's accumulation of wealth and power, creating a global network of economic interdependence. Consequently, the bourgeoisie could extend its influence and consolidate economic power, thus reinforcing class distinctions. Technological development further worsened these divisions by replacing traditional manufacturing systems with modern industry, leading to the rise of industrial millionaires and the contemporary bourgeoisie. This technological shift not only enhanced production capabilities but also centralized wealth and power, fostering social class divisions (Marx & Engels, 1955).

Capital accumulation is another critical factor in the formation of social classes. Marx (1867) states that the exploitation of labor generates surplus value, which the bourgeoisie captures when workers produce more value than they receive in wages. This accumulation process allows the bourgeoisie to invest in new technologies, expand enterprises, and dominate markets, thereby consolidating their economic and social power (Marx & Engels, 1955). Historical evolution also plays a pivotal role, with the modern bourgeoisie emerging from a long process of revolutions in production and exchange modes (Marx, 1990). The bourgeoisie's ability to adapt to changing economic conditions



and drive technological and industrial innovation has been key to its historical development and dominance.

Economic insufficiency and proletariat recruitment further illustrate the dynamics of class structures under capitalism. Marx and Engels (1955) highlight that small business owners, unable to compete with large capitalists, gradually fall into the proletariat as they are forced to sell their labor to survive. This continuous expansion of the proletariat includes individuals from various classes, reflecting the dynamic nature of class structures. As industries evolve and competition intensifies, more people are pushed into the working class, demonstrating the fluidity and complexity of social class formation under capitalist systems.

To analyze the contributing factors of social class in *Snowpiercer* (2013), this study employs Karl Marx's theory of social class as the primary theoretical framework. Marx's theory provides a comprehensive understanding of how economic and political structures create social hierarchies and influence individuals' social positions. This framework will be supplemented with concepts related to global market expansion, technological development, capital accumulation, historical evolution, economic insufficiency, and proletariat recruitment. By examining these factors within the context of *Snowpiercer*, the study aims to explain how the film portrays the intricacies of social class formation and the underlying elements that sustain these divisions.

Marx's insights into the expansion of global markets and technological development will be particularly relevant in understanding how the film's setting and narrative reflect broader socioeconomic dynamics. Additionally, the concept of capital accumulation will be used to explore the power dynamics between the train's different sections and the historical evolution of the bourgeoisie and proletariat within the film's dystopian context. The notions of economic insufficiency and proletariat recruitment will help analyze the characters' struggles and their shifting social positions, providing a nuanced understanding of how *Snowpiercer* depicts the complexities of social class.

In summary, this literature review underscores the relevance of Marx's theory in examining social class and highlights the key factors that contribute to its formation in capitalist societies. By applying these theoretical concepts to *Snowpiercer* (2013), the study aims to fill the existing gap in the literature and offer valuable insights into the film's portrayal of social class dynamics.

METHODS

The primary setting for this study is the film *Snowpiercer* (2013), directed by Bong Joon-ho, which is available for viewing on *Prime Video*. The film's rich visual and narrative elements serve as the primary data source for analyzing the contributing factors of social class.

This study is a film analysis, to explore the depiction of social class in *Snowpiercer* (2013) through the lens of Karl Marx's theories. The research design involves a detailed examination of the film's dialogues, actions, and visual imagery to assess their



significance in portraying social class dynamics. The analysis is conducted in a descriptive format, allowing for an in-depth exploration of how various factors contribute to social class formation and hierarchy within the film's narrative.

The main data source for this study is the film *Snowpiercer* (2013). The data collection process involves:

1. Viewing *Snowpiercer* (2013) and comprehending its storyline: the author watches the film multiple times to fully understand its plot, themes, and character dynamics.
2. Categorizing and describing scenes aligned to the topic: relevant scenes are identified and categorized based on their depiction of social class dynamics. These scenes are described in detail, focusing on key dialogues, actions, and visual imagery.
3. Addressing the research question using the gathered data and the TEEL (Topic – Elaboration – Evidence – Link) method: Each scene is analyzed using the TEEL method to connect the film's content with the theoretical framework. This involves elaborating on the topic, providing evidence from the film, and linking it back to Karl Marx's theories on social class.
4. Drawing conclusions based on the data and analysis: The findings from the analysis are synthesized to conclude the depiction of social class in *Snowpiercer* (2013). These conclusions are based on the identified contributing factors and their representation in the film.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The main elements influencing social class in *Snowpiercer* (2013)—technological development, capital accumulation, and economic inadequacy—are consistent with the concepts put forth by Karl Marx.

Technological Development

Technological development plays a pivotal role in the stratification of social classes depicted in *Snowpiercer* (2013). The film unfolds on a global train during a post-apocalyptic ice age that shelters humanity following the failed attempt to mitigate global warming with the CW7 cooling substance. At the heart of the narrative is the snow-piercer train, powered by a perpetual-motion engine—a groundbreaking technology designed to sustain continuous movement and provide energy for the train's perpetual journey across a frozen Earth. This innovative energy solution underscores the critical role of technological development in addressing and adapting to intricate challenges.



Picture 1 The globe-spinning snow-piercer train

Wilford engineered the train, and its sophisticated design and intricate operation have sustained it for 17 years. The train's design serves as a metaphor for technological hierarchy: proximity to the engine correlates with greater power. This advanced technology guarantees survival and establishes a hierarchical class system onboard. Contrasting sharply with the impoverished tail section, the affluent front section demonstrates the uneven distribution of technological advantages. This phenomenon illustrates how new technology fragments the class structure into smaller, more defined groups.

00:10:06 -->	Curtis	"Tail section, quarantine section, prison section.
00:10:12		Gate, gate, gate."

In *Snowpiercer* (2013), technology is portrayed as a tool for control and order maintenance, exemplified by the security gates separating each section of the train. These gates are pivotal in illustrating how technological developments contribute to divisions in social class. The train features multiple security gates that regulate the movement of passengers, preventing free passage between sections. Curtis, a character in the film, refers to sections like the "Tail section, quarantine section, prison section," each delineated by these gates. These barriers symbolize the use of technology to reinforce class distinctions, denying tail section passengers access to the privileges enjoyed in the front section. This security technology signifies the bourgeoisie's ability to safeguard their resources and perpetuate the marginalization of the proletariat, underscoring the absence of social mobility and the struggle against oppressive systems. As a technological innovation, these security gates embody the train's design and operational strategy to uphold social order, echoing Marx's theory of the bourgeoisie consolidating wealth and power through technology.



Picture 2 The soldiers with advanced weapon

Furthermore, in *Snowpiercer* (2013), the presence of soldiers armed with advanced weaponry demonstrates how technology is employed to uphold the supremacy of the bourgeoisie. During a revolt by the tail section passengers, soldiers equipped with frog-like goggles are deployed as the train crosses Yekaterina Bridge. These goggles, emitting a green light enabling clear vision in darkness, provide the soldiers with a significant advantage as the train enters a lengthy tunnel. This technological capability underscores the disparity between the powerful and the oppressed. The soldiers' ability to navigate darkness contrasts sharply with the unpreparedness of the tail section passengers, illustrating how technology empowers the bourgeoisie to effectively quell rebellions. The frog-like goggles symbolize the bourgeoisie's authority to intimidate and dominate the proletariat. This discrepancy in technological access between soldiers and tail section passengers reinforces the social hierarchy perpetuated through technological developments.

Snowpiercer (2013) portrays technological development as crucial for humanity's survival but also as a catalyst for creating social class divisions. The depiction of security systems and soldiers equipped with advanced goggles exemplifies how technology drives economic and social transformation while exacerbating inequalities and hierarchies. Technological progress creates barriers that impede resistance and trap individuals in precarious circumstances. This portrayal reinforces social class divisions, echoing Marx's assertion that new technologies frequently favor the powerful bourgeoisie (Marx & Engels, 1955).

Capital Accumulation

According to Karl Marx, capital accumulation results from the exploitation of labor, where the bourgeoisie profit from the work of the proletariat, thereby securing their dominant position (Marx, 1867). In *Snowpiercer* (2013), the proletariat in the tail section is exploited for their labor to benefit the bourgeoisie. The story of Timmy exemplifies this exploitation, showing how child labor is utilized to further capital accumulation.



01:51:03 --> Wilford *"The space only allows for a very small person.
01:51:30 Young children under 5. The engine lasts forever but
not to all of it's parts. That piece of equipment went
extinct recently. We needed a replacement. Thank
goodness the tail section manufactured us a steady
supplies of kids. So, we can keep going manually."*

The compelled enlistment of children from the tail section to labor in the train's engine illustrates labor exploitation. Timmy, a young boy from the tail section, is separated from his mother and compelled to work in the engine room where the train's machinery cannot function properly without adequate protection. He undertakes perilous tasks to manually operate the train, despite his young age and the life-threatening risks involved. Wilford's remark underscores this situation: *"Thankfully, the tail section provides us with a steady supply of children so we can continue operating manually,"* revealing how Wilford, representing the bourgeoisie, perceives the proletariat as a source of unpaid labor for his own gain, subjecting them to hardship while the bourgeoisie enjoys comfort. This depiction symbolizes the dehumanizing impact of capital accumulation and illustrates how the bourgeoisie exploits labor to amass wealth.

Capital accumulation is further demonstrated in the control and distribution of resources. Wilford's authority over the train's engine and all onboard resources exemplifies the pinnacle of capital accumulation. His efforts to manage a balanced ecosystem by controlling these resources underscore how capital accumulation perpetuates social hierarchies.

01:38:45 --> Wilford *"We must always strive for balance. Air, water,
01:39:05 food supply, the population must always be kept in
balance."*

Wilford oversees the allocation of food throughout the train, ensuring that the front section receives superior and abundant supplies. Operating as a closed ecosystem, the train manages resources within its self-contained environment. Wilford stresses the necessity of maintaining equilibrium, asserting, "We must always pursue balance. Air, water, food supply—the population must remain balanced," underscoring its critical role in survival aboard the train. This distribution mechanism underscores the unequal distribution of resources and mirrors the hierarchical class structure onboard. By regulating food distribution, Wilford upholds bourgeois dominance while perpetuating deprivation among the proletariat.

01:05:26 -- Minister *"This is only served twice in a year. In January and
> 01:05:30 Mason July."*

01:05:31 -- Tanya "Why? Not enough fish?"

> 01:05:33

01:05:33 -- Minister "Enough is not the criteria. Balance."

> 01:05:37 Mason

Despite Wilford's oversight of resource allocation, he prioritizes delivering superior resources to the bourgeoisie, the elite class. Even while striving for balance, the elite continue to indulge in high-quality sashimi twice a year. This delicacy, demanding fresh fish and meticulous preparation, serves as a symbol of their privilege and affluence. Despite facing certain constraints, the elite luxuriate in privileges far exceeding those accessible to the proletariat, underscoring the disproportionate allocation of the train's limited resources toward the comfort and enjoyment of front-section passengers.



Picture 3 Sashimi for the front section passengers



Picture 4 Protein blocks for tail section passenger

In the confined ecosystem of the train where resources are scarce, offering such a luxury implies the exploitation of resources for the benefit of a select few. This starkly contrasts with the scarcity faced by tail section passengers, who endure extreme conditions including instances of traumatic cannibalism due to Wilford's deprivation of food and water. Their struggle persists as they rely on daily consumption of protein blocks, which are revealed to be made from insects.

In Pictures 3 and 4, a clear inequality emerges between the diet of the bourgeoisie and that of the proletariat. The image depicting sashimi is vibrant with fresh colors, highlighting the high quality and visually appealing presentation of the food. It is carefully arranged on a proper plate, emphasizing aesthetic detail. In contrast, the image of the protein blocks is characterized by dim lighting and dominated by shades of black and grey, presenting an unappealing appearance. The uniform shape and lack of personal serving dishes further underscore the stark contrast. All protein blocks are contained in a large container, and the proletariat must handle and consume them with bare hands. These contrasting visuals sharply illustrate the disparity in food quality between the privileged and the underprivileged aboard the train.



Picture 5 The tail section living condition



Picture 6 The front section living condition

The stark contrast in the train's setting and visuals vividly underscores the concentration of wealth in terms of space. Physically divided into distinct sections—the tail and the front—the train symbolically reinforces this division through its visual representation of each class as shown in Pictures 5 and 6. The tail section is depicted as crowded and cramped, with passengers living in close proximity in bunk beds. Visuals here evoke a sense of despair, emphasizing the harsh conditions of life in the tail section. In contrast, the front section is spacious and adorned with luxurious amenities that enhance passenger comfort and privilege.

Costume design further distinguishes between the classes: tail section passengers wear worn, dark clothing, with minimal changes throughout the film, reflecting their constrained circumstances. In contrast, front-section passengers don splendid, colorful attire and undergo costume changes, illustrating their affluent status and lifestyle. Additionally, the lighting in each section contrasts sharply—the tail section is dimly lit, while the front section is illuminated with abundant, elegant lighting. This visual dichotomy symbolizes the stark concentration of capital and power in the hands of a single individual.

The disparity in resources between the front and tail sections highlights the exacerbated inequalities resulting from resource exploitation and control. This portrayal resonates with Karl Marx's theories concerning the concentration of wealth and resources among a privileged few. Capital accumulation allows the affluent to reap extensive benefits, often by exploiting the resources of the less fortunate. This situation underscores broader concerns regarding economic inequality, illustrating how wealth consolidates within the bourgeoisie and substantiating Marx's and Standing's assertions that capital accumulation hinges on exploiting labor, thereby perpetuating social inequities.

Economic Insufficiency

Economic insufficiency is a pivotal factor that illustrates the proletariat's inability to compete with the bourgeoisie. Individuals with limited capital cannot rival wealthier counterparts in contemporary industry. Unable to match the competitive pace, they eventually assimilate into the proletariat.

00:18:06 -- Minister "In the beginning, order was prescribed by your
> 00:18:13 Mason ticket. First bus, economy, and freeloaders like
you."

In *Snowpiercer* (2013), the depiction of economic inadequacy is illustrated by tail section passengers living in overcrowded and unsanitary compartments devoid of basic necessities. Early in the train's operation, passengers were initially segregated based on the type of ticket they could afford, as indicated by the dialogue, "In the beginning, order was prescribed by your ticket." This dialogue suggests that one's initial status, determined by their ticket type, dictates their place in the train's social hierarchy. The tickets—First Class, Economy, and Freeloaders—define passengers' positions. The elite who can afford First Class enjoy luxurious accommodations. Those in the Economy class, like the salariat and proficians, reside in the middle section with comfortable living conditions. In contrast, the freeloaders are relegated to the cramped confines of the tail section. The term "freeloaders" denotes individuals without financial means, implying economic insufficiency and minimal contribution to the system. As Marx observed, those lacking sufficient resources to compete will gradually descend into the proletariat.



Picture 7 The gate in between each section

Furthermore, the proletariat's social standing weakens due to their limited opportunities for skill advancement, evident in the segregated living conditions of the tail section separated by gates from other areas. As depicted in Picture 7, these gates act as barriers, blocking tail section passengers from observing activities beyond and restricting their social mobility. Moreover, soldiers guard these gates throughout the film, ensuring that tail section passengers remain confined, symbolizing an oppressive mechanism that enforces social order and reinforces class distinctions.

The heavily guarded and locked gates underscore the systemic barriers preventing upward mobility and access to better opportunities and resources in the front section. This aligns with Standing's perspective on restricted access leading to a lack of skill



improvement and professional advancement, as well as Marx's view on limited resource access perpetuating the exploitation of tail section passengers.

The utilization of initial tickets effectively illustrates how economic inadequacy determines the placement of tail section passengers into the proletariat class. Reflecting Karl Marx's concepts, individuals lacking sufficient economic resources are relegated to the proletariat. Furthermore, the gates equipped with robust security systems serve as potent symbols of systemic obstacles hindering upward mobility and personal development for tail section passengers. This situation resonates with Guy Standing's theories regarding the limited opportunities for the proletariat to transcend economic inadequacy, thereby perpetuating the existing social class hierarchy under bourgeois control.

CONCLUSION

Based on the analysis, this study has identified three of the six contributing factors depicted in *Snowpiercer* (2013): technological development, capital accumulation, and economic inadequacy. Technological progress is exemplified by advanced weaponry and security systems, highlighting how technology can reinforce social hierarchies. Capital accumulation is illustrated by the stark contrast between the opulent front section, where the bourgeoisie luxuriates in abundant resources, and the impoverished tail section, where passengers endure isolation and exploitation for labor. This contrast underscores the consolidation of wealth and authority among a select few. Economic insufficiency is depicted through the harsh conditions faced by tail section passengers, who lack the means to compete with more affluent classes. The bourgeoisie's control impedes the proletariat from achieving upward mobility or professional growth, trapping them in cycles of poverty and exploitation. These factors illustrate the deep-seated nature of social disparities.

SUGGESTION

This study examines *Snowpiercer* (2013) through Karl Marx's theoretical framework, providing a nuanced understanding of social class dynamics. Marx's delineation of the factors shaping social class forms the basis of this analysis. Future research could broaden this exploration by incorporating a range of theoretical perspectives, methodologies, and literary works. While this study centers on Marxist analysis, forthcoming studies might explore alternative theories such as Max Weber's theory of social stratification. Additionally, employing mixed-method approaches that combine qualitative and quantitative analyses could deepen insights into the complexities of social class interactions. Exploring other post-apocalyptic or dystopian narratives beyond *Snowpiercer* (2013) could further enrich comprehension, as could comparative studies spanning different genres, which could reveal diverse societal influences on depictions of social class. Such investigations aim to advance understanding of these themes across varied contexts.



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