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SIGNIFYING SPACE WITH VISUAL KNOWLEDGE IN SNOWPIERCER

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Synopsis:

This paper explores the nature of space by focusing on its signification by visual observation in the film *Snowpiercer*. It links showing spectacles as consolidating the space knowledge. By claiming that visual observations define space, it questions the fixed meaning of space in the film.

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From a perspective of seeing the film as an allegory of social revolution, *Snowpiercer* is a metaphorical narrative that takes place in an imaginative space, whose genre as science fiction reinforces it. Heup Cho claims that the film “educates the audience of the workings of capitalism” (123, translation mine). Likewise, Sung Ryul Kang asserts that the film “directly deals with the class system in the capitalist society” in an “allegory” (60, translation mine). Such readings establish the narrative in the film as an allegory for the class struggle under a capitalistic system.

However, as much as the reading might be viable, it overlooks the importance of the literal space in the film. The film deals with two kinds of space—the inside of the train and the outside. The significance of these spaces is well captured in the title of the film *Snowpiercer*. “Snow” designates the space outside and “piercer” the space within. The combination of these two words stitches together different and even opposing spaces whose relation to each other remains central to the narrative. The binary opposition of the spaces relies on their signification by visual observations. Thus, the film illustrates a narrative about signifying the given space with production and registration of visual knowledge based on observations

The binary opposition is presented and reinforced in the film. The sequence of the public punishment of Andrew who injures a front sectioner Claude when she takes his son away, reproduces the spatial configuration. When Andrew is forced to put his arm through a hole in the train wall to stick his arm out outside as a punishment, everyone understands the outside space as a malicious, threatening zone the mere exposure to which can serve as a penalty. The juxtaposition of the close-up shot of

agonizing Andrew and that of his arm in the freezing cold establishes the spatial opposition between the nature and the train. That is, there is on the one hand the relationship between the nature and the interiority of the train as polar and incompatible. On the other hand, there is the signification of the spaces as death and life.

This spatial configuration is intertwined with justification of the social hierarchy based on train sections as the spectacle is accompanied by a propagandist speech by the minister, Mason. She preaches the sanctity of order crucial in maintaining the train by taking Andrew's shoe as a visual metaphor for chaos and thus death. She claims that the train is life, that the train can be sustained by order, and that whatever threatens the order of the train means death. So, the shoe thrown at a front sectioner, she holds it up, is a "size ten chaos" which threatens the boundary between "our warm heart and the bitter cold" (*Snowpiercer*). Based on the fundamental idea of the train as the only space of survival, the logic of hierarchical order of train sections motivates and perpetuates itself in spectacles.

Nonetheless, the discourse of the order based on the visual information of the inside and the outside oppresses the tail sectioners and prompts them to rise up. Crucial to this revolt is the act of seeing as a means to gain knowledge about the system against which they think they stand. The leader of the revolt, Curtis, corroborates the power of seeing, not as an act of passive reception of a given spectacle, but as that of generating a knowledge ready at hand. In planning the revolution, Curtis stands up during a head count and looks at a series of gates to the front section. He counts the time it takes for the gates to open and close serves to revolt the insurgency. Similarly, in the sequence of the battle against armed guards, Curtis is caught between Edgar held as a hostage and Mason running away. Here, the

object of his vision is clearly indicated as a close up shot of his left profile looking at Edgar—backward—and that of his right profile looking at Mason—forward—show his options. Then his decision to move forward, indicated in his right profile in the frame, to get Mason, suggests that he has calculated the benefits of capturing Mason, which is a form of knowledge that lets him sacrifice Edgar. Such calculations based on observation help Curtis progress to the front. They help him earn the title as leader of the “great revolution” (*Snowpiercer*).

However, questioning the kind of knowledge about space that his observations provide leads to a suspicion of how revolutionary his vision is. He looks forward, and learns more and more about the front section of the train as he goes forward. Nonetheless, his observations do not generate a new understanding of the space. They reinforce the opposition between the train and the nature and between life and death evident in his aim to take over the front section. They make him move inside the train, along the propelling movement of the engine that moves forward but draws a circle in eternity. In short, his vision never revolutionizes the definition of space and thus does not challenge the discourse based upon that spatial knowledge. This limitation of his observations attests to the fixture and predominance of power of the knowledge of the spaces which is visually ratified not only by Wilford and the system but also by the film itself as suggested in the analysis of the opening sequence.

Then arises the question of what one should endeavor to look at in the train. To this question answer Namgoong Minsu, the security specialist, and his daughter Yona—to look sideways and beyond. Lee also contrasts Curtis with Namgoong and Yona as the ones who “represent the movement outward from the inside” (106, translation mine). Throughout the advance Curtis and others make forward, Namgoong stops time to time to look outside the window and stands aloof from the

those involved in insurgency. The unexplained instances of Namgoong's vision become coherent and clear as he produce them into a form of knowledge by telling. In the sequence of the narrow bridge right before the engine section, Namgoong and Curtis come into a conflict. While Curtis wants Namgoong to open the gate to the engine section, Namgoong wants to open the "door" of the train (*Snowpiercer*). Namgoong's desire is based on his observations of what is outside. To explain it, Namgoong tells of the receding level of snow on the crashed airplane, of snowflakes all ready to melt, and of something that he does not elaborate fully, which is probably a sign of life outside. These observations challenge the prevalent definition of nature. They generate the seed of a new knowledge of the nature. This potential is visually hinted at in the film. The camera first takes a shot of Namgoong's face from the point of view of Curtis. In the shot, Namgoong says "we've come to think of this as a wall after eighteen years it's been locked. But in fact it's a fucking door," and points his finger to his right (*Snowpiercer*, translation mine). The camera reframes by craning to his left to capture what is being pointed at by his finger—the door to the outside. It is something that Curtis has not been able to look at. Looking at what is defined as closed and has been off screen to imagine the possibility of opening require the effort to look not forward but sideways. To realize the possibility, however, requires more than telling Curtis about it. Curtis must share that vision.

Visual knowledge becomes the foundation for a different understanding of the binary of the inside and outside for Curtis with Yona's clairvoyance. When Curtis decides to succeed Wilford as the protector of the engine by refusing to give the match to Yona who wants to light the explosives to open the door, Yona tries to lift a tile on the ground, an off screen area, seeing something beyond the tile. When Curtis helps her lift it, they discover Timmy literally operating as a part of the train to keep it

going. Here Curtis sees the train as something other than the space of life. The train becomes for Curtis the space of a “closed ecosystem” which sustains itself by eternal partial deaths of its members (*Snowpiercer*). As much as Curtis may believe Namgoong to be “fucking crazy” with his ideas about life outside, he becomes convinced that the logic of order for life in the train dissimulates a spatial knowledge that can threaten it. At this moment, he joins hands with Namgoong to save Yona and Timmy from the train by blowing it up. His visual knowledge opens his eyes to the redefinition of the train and makes him abandon the logic of the engine and order.

That the space outside the train be redefined against that authorized by the opening sequence is realized as Yona and Timmy, the only survivors, come outside on the space covered by snow. The assurance of life outside is visually confirmed. In the shot taken from behind Yona who looks up at the mountains covered in snow, she walks up to Timmy who is looking at something. The next long shot of the mountains shows a polar bear. It is evidence of life that Yona, Timmy, and the audience see for themselves that consolidates the signification of the nature as a space of life.

Examination of the spatial setting leads to the delving of how characters in the film interact with it. It shows the constitution of the definition of space in terms of visual knowledge. This analysis contributes to the scholarly discussion of the film by bringing it to the issue of the most prominent themes in the film—space. The malleability of space suggests that Space is not what it is in and of itself. It is what visual signification makes it to be. In this regard, *Snowpiercer* renders an insightful understanding about the usually fixated *meaning* of a spatial setting in a film.

Works Cited

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