

Reviewing Ideological State Apparatus and Repressive State Apparatus in the *Snowpiercer* by Bong Joon Ho

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Abstract

This study explores the existence of the state as a repressive and ideological apparatus even in the futuristic world in Bong Joon Ho's Snowpiercer. To analyze this, Marxist theory of the state and Louis Althusser's concepts of the Ideological State Apparatus (ISA) and the Repressive State Apparatus (RSA) have been used. It aims to focus on the character of the state in a system that is divided into classes. The paper uses a qualitative, interpretive, and text-based film study as its methodology. There are mainly three key findings in this research paper. First, the state is always repressive by its character indifferent to time and situation. Second, ideology is the main base of the state no matter in what situation it operates. Finally, the working class must revolt and occupy the means of production to have a state that works in their favor. Even the devastation of the world and the only remaining closed ecosystem could not change this character. Therefore, revolt becomes compulsory at a certain point. This paper concludes that the repressive and ideological character of the state persists in any kind of situation. It has mainly six sections which are introduction, literature review, statement of the problem, research objective, methodology, and conclusion.

Key Words : Class Struggle, Means of Production, Ideological State Apparatus, Repressive State Apparatus, Closed Ecosystem

Introduction

Ideological State Apparatus (ISA) and Repressive State Apparatus (RSA) are two key concepts in the theory of Marxism which were proposed by Louis Althusser. These ideas explain how state acquires power and operates to make itself strong and relative. This research expands the idea of Althusser to a hypothetical futuristic world and tests his concepts on that apocalyptic imaginary world of *Snowpiercer* (Bong, 2013), directed by Bong Joon Ho. It is a post-apocalyptic film which shows a perpetual train with some group of people living a sophisticated luxurious life in the front section and some people living a life full of scarcities in the tail section. This research is important for testing the ideas of Althusser and find the gap in his ideas. Althusser's ideas on ISA and RSA are concerned with the existing world of the contemporary capitalist societies. He has not directly said anything about futuristic and hypothetical societies. This is the gap in his theory regarding the nature

of the capitalist states in the future. The film presents a hypothetical futuristic world to apply the theory of RSA and ISA and creates an analytical space to fill the gap.

The division in the film is a satire on capitalist political economy which creates a clear line of fraction between the proletariat and bourgeoisie. It explores capitalist mode of economy as a complete system and an eventual class conflict to bring it down for creating a new world system controlled by the working-class people. So, this film is one of the most perfect literatures to understand the concepts of ISA and RSA. The application of ideas by Althusser on literatures based on a realistic contemporary society has been more frequent than its application on apocalyptic futuristic world. Therefore, this article is important to see RSA and ISA in a broader context.

Literature review

Snowpiercer has fascinated many scholars and academicians for its strong ideological foundation. Suandi, Khairunnisa, and Alfazari (2025) note that “The train functions not only as a means of survival but also as a representation of an entrenched and highly stratified social hierarchy. The film portrays systemic inequality and class conflict, making it a compelling subject for analysis through a Marxist theoretical lens.” (para. 2). They have seen the system in the film as the reason behind inequality but idea on how ISA and RSA function to make a system for this kind of hierarchy is missing their research. This research examines the missing ideas to give a wider picture for the Marxist Lens. Similarly, M.P. Gading believes in power exercised by the ruling class as a main reason behind the marginalization of the working class. “The bourgeoisie, represented by the elite, salariat, and proficians, wield significant power and privilege within the train's stratified society. In contrast, the proletariat—comprising the working class, precariat, unemployed, and detached—is marginalized, enduring harsh conditions and limited access to resources.” (Gading, 2025, p. 1). Gading sees the division between the bourgeoisie and proletariat because of limited access to means of production but lacks how the ruling class is occupying the resources using ISA and RSA. This article enhances the idea of ISA and RSA as the key elements of the state in any kind of society divided by class.

Althusser distinguishes between institutions that function primarily through violence and those that function through ideology, naming them the Repressive State Apparatus and the Ideological State Apparatus respectively (Althusser, 1971). He believes, “I shall call Repressive State Apparatus the Government, the Administration, the Army, the Police, the Courts, the Prisons, etc.” (Althusser, 1971, p. 143). The physically present institutions like government, administrative bodies, the armed forces, police, judicial bodies, and jails work as repressive agencies for the state in capitalist society. This idea has been expanded in the film to a futuristic apocalyptic world which needs to be further explained to test the ideas by Althusser. This article looks in the gaps in his ideas regarding futuristic world and extends his theory in such a hypothetical situation. Althusser’s ideas are focused on existing capitalist societies, not the far futuristic world. He thinks, “I shall call Ideological State Apparatuses a

certain number of realities which present themselves to the immediate observer in the form of distinct and specialized institutions” (Althusser, 1971, p. 136). He sees realities present in the observer which they believe they are a part of as ISA. This is more concerned with the immediate observer, which indicates the existing societies. The idea of RSA and ISA in a closed ecosystem takes Althusser’s idea to another level. This is where this research is focused and departs from what Althusser believed.

The film dramatically presents how upper-class people control the system and deliberately create poverty instead of eradicating it, to keep the system in balance. The train, in the film, has been presented as a complete system where its engine is claimed to be eternal. The engine metaphorically stands as the engine that runs capitalism.

The film also presents a critique of how capitalism is exploiting nature and ecology for profit, which may ultimately lead to ecological collapse. Karl Marx (1867/1990) has explained how the capitalist mode of economy robs both workers and nature: “All progress in capitalist agriculture is a progress in the art, not only of robbing the worker, but of robbing the soil ... undermining the original sources of all wealth—the soil and the worker” (Marx, 1867/1990, p. 638). Marx argues that capitalism is the art of robbing working-class people by extracting from their labor and the Earth by extracting from it for profit, despite the truth that the earth is the original source of all wealth.

The material condition of the working class in the film is so poor that they live by eating protein blocks made from cockroaches in the train. Although it is they who are solely working at the fundamental level for the operation of the train, the system is sucking their energy in every way possible—just as Marx writes, “Capital is dead labor, that, vampire-like, only lives by sucking living labor, and lives the more, the more labor it sucks” (Marx, 1867/1990, p. 342). The ruling class of the front section is sucking the lives out of the laborers of the tail section, and they just get a protein block to eat for all their labor. Despite the laborers being the sole contributors to the engine, the ruling class in the film neither shows sympathy nor empathy to them. As claimed by Marx, the administration of the train works like a vampire to suck every part of their energy. The capitalist mode of economy has no heart of mercy. This idea presented by Marx is still relevant after more than a century has passed. New technologies have emerged, but the profit-earning nature of capitalism has not changed, and for capitalism, saving the ecosystem is not a responsibility unless it brings profit.

After the Industrial Revolution, the life of working-class people was miserable, and they had nothing to sell except their labor. The wages they earned after working were barely enough to sustain themselves. On the other hand, the owners of the factories earned all the profit. Marx observed a problem in this mode of economy and developed the theory of surplus value, noting that “surplus-value is in substance the crystallization of unpaid labor” (Marx, 1867/1990, p. 676). The film does not show the idea of paper money. So, no one is getting richer in the film in terms of money, but people are getting richer in consumption of

the goods produced by the labor. The labor done by the workers of the tail section is just adding facilities to the people living in the front section. The front-section people eat chicken and nutritious foods, whereas the people from the tail section are dependent on protein blocks made from cockroaches and other insects. The labor of the workers is not paid enough materially but adds goods to the lives of the front-section people. They have created a closed ecosystem after the destruction of the natural ecosystem outside. Wilford believes in maintaining the ecosystem not for the sake of natural balance but for the balance of the system built in the train. This clearly indicates how capitalists perceive nature through the frame of the capitalist spectacle of profit.

Historians like Francis Fukuyama claimed the end of ideological debate in his famous book *The End of History and the Last Man*. After the fall of the Soviet bloc, he argued that the debate of Marxism was over and globalization of liberal democracy is the ultimate form of political system. Fukuyama (1992) argues that we may be witnessing “the end point of mankind's ideological evolution and the globalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government” (p. 4). In contrast, the film shows the scientific possibility of proletariat revolution even in the future. It depicts the continuation of ideological debate and shows the probability of revolution in every historical period if unequal classes remain. The film behaves like a counter-argument to the idea of the end of history.

It is the working class in the film, living a miserable life at the tail, who fuels the engine and is responsible for anything produced but receives nothing produced. They are alienated from their labor, as “it is not [their] own, but someone else’s... in it [they] belong, not to [themselves], but to another” (Marx, 1844/2007, p. 83). The ruling class has created an ecosystem with almost every fundamental thing needed to live a healthy life, which is a result of the labor of the working class, but they are alienated from their labor. The claim made by Marx exactly fits the scenario of the film.

Statement of the problem

On the basis of the literature review, it is evident that most of the existing studies on *Snowpiercer* primarily focus on class conflict, inequality, and the control of the means of production through a general Marxist lens. While these studies successfully highlight the division between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat, they largely remain confined to economic determinism and class hierarchy. The structural mechanisms through which the state sustains this hierarchy—particularly through Louis Althusser’s concepts of the Ideological State Apparatus (ISA) and the Repressive State Apparatus (RSA)—have not been sufficiently examined in relation to the film.

Moreover, Althusser’s theory itself was developed in the context of contemporary capitalist societies. His formulation of ISA and RSA addresses the functioning of the state within historically existing socio-political systems. However, the application of these concepts to a futuristic, apocalyptic, and closed ecological system has not received adequate

scholarly attention. The film presents a unique scenario in which human civilization survives within a mechanically sustained ecosystem after global catastrophe. Whether ISA and RSA retain their relevance, transform in structure, or intensify in function under such extreme conditions remains an unexplored theoretical question.

This creates two significant research gaps. First, there is a lack of focused analysis connecting ISA and RSA directly to the internal functioning of the train as a state-like structure. Second, there is limited exploration of how Marxist state theory operates within a closed ecosystem where natural selection, open society, and traditional political institutions no longer exist.

Therefore, the central problem of this study is to examine how ISA and RSA function within the closed ecosystem of *Snowpiercer*, and whether the film extends or reinforces Althusser's understanding of the state. In doing so, this study seeks to answer the following questions:

1. How are ideological and repressive mechanisms represented within the social structure of the train?
2. In what ways does the closed ecosystem intensify or modify the functioning of ISA and RSA?
3. Does the film reaffirm or challenge the continuity of class struggle and state repression in a futuristic apocalyptic world?

By addressing these questions, the study attempts to clarify the relevance of Marxist state theory beyond its traditional historical context and to evaluate its applicability in a hypothetical future where human survival itself depends on a controlled mechanical system.

Objectives of the Study

The main objective of the study is to fill the research gaps found in the previous studies on the film. Certainly, there is a plenty of room for the for the research from extra Marxist lenses including ISA and RSA. This research paper aims to build some other premises for the researcher to come and test the relevancy of Marxist ideas and believes in films. The article also aims to make ideological framework on ecology and Marxism.

Methodology

This research takes the film *Snowpiercer* as its main literature for review. So, qualitative research methods are used in this paper. The research is more focused on interpretation, arguments and counter-arguments. Theory of Marxism in general and to be more specific the ideas of ISA and RSA have been applied to the text. Marxism has been one of the global theories for interpretation of literature since long. Some in-text citations from the film have been used to show the ideology of the characters and oppressive nature of the

state. Arguments of different scholars have been discussed and research gap has been presented to understand the significance.

School as a foundation of ideological state apparatus

In their movement from the tail section to the front, the influential part of the film comes in the section where a school for children is operated by the controllers. These schools work as one of the main pillars constructing the ideology necessary to strengthen the system controlled by the front-section passengers. The classrooms are well decorated and furnished and look like they are giving the best education possible, but in terms of ideology, they function as a wing of the state to maintain exploitation. Children are taught false and inappropriate ideas about the working class of the train. They are taught to admire and support Mr. Wilford, the head of the train. Moreover, they are taught to believe that the train is eternal and the system in the train is the only possible system.

It shows how knowledge that supports the capitalist mode of economic system is manufactured in schools. All the children read the glorified history of Mr. Wilford and his decision to make an eternal train. Although there are army and government forces using direct violence as Repressive State Apparatus in the film (Althusser, 1971, p. 143), institutions like schools help build the ideology to strengthen the system. Althusser added some ideas to Marxist theory and believed:

“We must therefore add something to the Marxist theory of the State. We must say that the State contains two bodies: the body of institutions which represent the Repressive State Apparatus (the Government, the Administration, the Army, the Police, the Courts, the Prisons, etc.), and the body of institutions which represent the Ideological State Apparatuses (the religious ISA, the educational ISA, the family ISA, the legal ISA, the political ISA, the trade-union ISA, the communications ISA, the cultural ISA, etc.). What distinguishes the Repressive State Apparatus from the Ideological State Apparatus is not so much the use of repression as such, but the distinction that the Repressive State Apparatus functions by violence, whereas the Ideological State Apparatuses function by ideology” (Althusser, 1971, p. 143).

In the film, it is clearly seen how the state has occupied the educational system and uses it to implant ideas into the minds of children. Both forces work together to strengthen the state, but at last, even the teachers use force to repress the revolution. The class teacher starts shooting to suppress the revolution of the tail-section people. The film partially supports Althusser’s ideas but takes a different turn at the end. Even though ISA is crucial, it is ultimately RSA that protects the state. The revolution cannot be completed unless RSA is defeated or made to surrender. Althusser adds a crucial idea to Marxist theory but underestimates the supremacy of RSA over ISA.

The children are brainwashed to believe that seeking an alternative system is impossible and there is no life outside the train. These ideas produce more supporters for the future. There are poems for school children which leave a deep impact, causing them to believe that no better world exists than the train. Outside the train window, children frequently see a group called the “Group of 7,” who attempted a revolt fifteen years ago and froze to death outside the train. This is taught as the Revolt of the Seven, which failed. Showing this scene regularly creates psychological fear. Children are taught a history of an unsuccessful revolt and the history of the ruling-class leader. History is portrayed from the capitalist perspective: “The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles” (Marx & Engels, 1848/1978, p. 14).

Children are taught to believe that tail-section people are lazy, but the truth is their labor is what makes the train operate and produces everything the train has. The school teacher works as an agent of the state to make children believe the train is eternal. This curriculum is designed to manipulate children from childhood.

Repressive nature of the state to oppress the revolution

In Marxist philosophy, the state is always repressive, legitimizing the use of power to protect itself. Army, security systems, surveillance systems, punishment systems, ministers, weapons, and other suppressing elements in the film represent the Repressive State Apparatus (Althusser, 1971, p. 143). Gates in almost every section of the train are guarded by security forces. The system has created artificial scarcity of food, clothes, and other fundamental needs. The army works as the protector of the system by creating fear and making the poor believe they might lose whatever they have. The state uses violent force to control the working class.

The machine guns carried by the army and the commanding language create an environment of fear. Friedrich Engels always understood state as a tool of oppression. “The state is nothing more than a machine for the oppression of one class by another” (Engels, 1891/1978, p. 258). Engels believed the state is a tool of oppression, where one class controls and suppresses another. In the film, the bourgeoisie controls the train and exploits the proletariat. Marxist philosophy believes in eradicating the idea of the state during social development to create a classless society.

Minister Mason presents the symbolic idea of the shoe to demonstrate the difference between front and tail-section passengers. She makes an analogy: “A shoe does not belong in your head. A shoe belongs on your foot. A hat belongs on your head. I am hat, you are shoe. I belong on the head and you belong on the foot. Yes? So, it is” (Bong, 2013, 17:40–17:52). A passenger is punished for disobeying this order. ISA works to create ideology, whereas RSA works through fear.

When Curtis reaches the engine, he finds Wilford, the main controller, and discovers spies in the tail section. Wilford was aware of the revolution from the start, as it was part of his plan. When the revolution begins, RSA kills participants to maintain population balance. Previously failed revolutions were part of Wilford's plan, but Curtis ultimately succeeds in taking control. The notion of the train being eternal is challenged. ISA-created ideas are overturned, but RSA remains the ultimate enforcer.

The train is self-sustained system which has created an artificial environment having energy to food production and supply system from inside making it a closed ecosystem. Although, there are inequalities in the distribution system in the train, the train has almost everything as a small sample of the natural world. Wilford explains maintaining balance in the closed ecosystem: "And this train is a closed ecosystem. We must all strive for balance. Air, water, food supply, population. It must all be kept in balance. For optimum balance, however, there'll have been time when more radical solutions were required, when the population needed to be reduced, rather drastically. We don't have time for true natural selection" (Bong, 2013, 01:38:43–01:39:16). In this closed system, natural selection was not possible, so Wilford secretly encourages revolution to maintain balance. Many die, but the population is stabilized, illustrating how capitalism may function in the future.

Conclusion

To sum up, *Snowpiercer* exemplifies Marxist philosophy regarding the state. This film adds a futuristic hypothesis on ISA and RSA, lacking in Althusser's concepts. The idea of the state in the film in an exceptional situation, where civilization could nearly end, is a main finding. Capitalist states control production and may develop artificial ecosystems after making Earth unlivable.

The capitalist mode of economy, focused on profit from nature, contributes to environmental hazards. Greenhouse gases and mass production drive global warming. The film predicts a scenario where CW-7 is spread to cool the Earth, leading to an Ice Age. Then the train is created which is a closed ecosystem and only hope for human civilization to continue. Economic inequalities in the closed ecosystem replicate the same system that devastated the Earth. No lesson was learned to correct the inequalities in the system. Wilford did not plan a world in the closed ecosystem of the train to have equal production and distribution. Thus, the film reinforces the state as an ideological and repressive apparatus used by one class to suppress another in any situation. Revolution becomes inevitable to achieve a classless world (Marx, 1844/2007; Althusser, 1971).

The film strengthens some of the basic ideas of Marxism at the same time the ideas of ISA and RSA are intensified which can be applied even in a futuristic hypothetical apocalyptic world where a closed ecosystem is the last hope for the humanity. Although, the traditional concept of the state has been modified in the closed ecosystem, the film reaffirms the idea of class struggle and state repression in the futuristic apocalyptic world.

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