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Calculating Deaths, Dystopic Futures: Bong Joon Ho's *Snowpiercer*

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Abstract

From climate apocalypses to techno-dystopias, many film genres offer novel insights into social theories about our potentially violent futures. Analysing Bong Joon Ho's *Snowpiercer* (2013), this article argues that the film does more than raise ethical questions about the quantitative management of life and death; it explores what happens when the violence of statistics is pushed to its extreme. Through visualising extreme hierarchies of violence within a dystopian society confined to a continuously moving train, Bong's dystopian outlook depicts a world-system in which a specific percentage of the population must die to sustain the life of the rest. Although a division between worthy and expendable life already exists in our reality, Bong's forward-looking glance provides an interesting provocation for social theorists concerned with the possible violence of even more statistically-orientated futures, while also showing how this violence will always contain numerical gaps where alternative worlds beyond quantification can emerge.

Keywords

Bong Joon Ho, *Snowpiercer*, social theory, future, statistics, necropolitics

Introduction

> Films remain the supreme art of the apocalypse, no matter what the refinements, because the image has such an ability to have us 'walk into fear'. (Kristeva, 1989: 223)

Artificial intelligence, algorithms, machine learning, and other statistical models increasingly govern many aspects of society. Whether concerning the quantification of life,

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death, or even migration, elements of humanity are often reduced to a number, becoming a means of assessing how demographic changes impact the security of a territory. The power of quantification is particularly evident in risk calculation; governments evaluate the dangers of acting on alleged threats in their ongoing efforts to govern a population (Amoore, 2013). These endeavours exemplify the attempt to manage particular future social phenomena through speculation. As argued elsewhere (Abbey, 2025a), by calculating future risks, the state can assert an authority over the future, permitting mathematics to play a role in presenting speculative possibilities while simultaneously foreclosing what else might unfold through morphing, rejecting, or transforming the future into what the state desires. While numerous facets of demography are subject to future speculation, there has only been, so far, a more overt empirical focus on how statistics can sustain diverse aspects of future life or regulate future migration (O'Neil, 2016; Tulchinsky and Mason, 2023). This has occurred across various contexts, from determining the risk associated with providing a home loan to a specific individual, to estimating migration trends for the following months.

In contrast, the third facet of demography, death, has been curiously neglected in the attempt to speculate on the future world, at least beyond actuarial mortality studies. This is surprising considering the number of unnatural deaths occurring globally, resulting from war, genocide, famine, dehydration, and poverty, to name just a few causes. In light of this empirical gap, while social theory has explicitly engaged with many questions concerning life, migration, and death, the field has only addressed speculation regarding these first two facets of demography (Abbey, 2025a; Amoore, 2020; Zajko, 2023). Building on this scholarship, what might be the social implications of analysing how risk is calculated in relation to future death? This presents a novel question for social theory, one that is troubled by the lack of empirical insights into how this could unfold materially. How many individuals are likely to die while attempting to migrate amidst the fortification of borders? How many individuals are likely to die in the aftermath of the devastation caused by climate change? How many individuals are likely to die following increased austerity? Morbid questions, of course. Do we even want to know? Even if these questions are impossible to answer, they raise many ethical tensions that social theory might investigate in light of the increasing reliance on speculation to address future demographic concerns. This is especially important if 'The task of looking into the future is . . . not a matter of formulaic prediction, but one of human imagination' (McKenzie, 2024: 2).

While drawing on social theories of the future (see Delanty, 2024), this article primarily seeks to learn from South Korean filmmaker Bong Joon Ho's depiction of a statistically dependent world through a close analysis of the film *Snowpiercer* (2013). Already widely recognised as an astute social commentator, Bong's films mark him as a director concerned with envisioning dystopian futures, while always leaving open a space to avert the excesses of violence. From climate apocalypses to techno-dystopias, various film genres offer novel insights into social theories that address the future of violence. To examine *Snowpiercer*, this article draws upon Daniel Yacavone's (2015) theories on how films cultivate a world-making capability that enhances the viewer's immersion into a conceptually rich universe. Moving through phenomenology, aesthetics, and film theory, Yacavone contends that these worlds rely on a complex relationship between form,

narrative, and the viewer; one that permits these worlds not only to support the flow of narrative but also to reveal an inner logic, one that transforms what the film comes to represent. As Bong illustrates in *Snowpiercer*, a self-contained reality exists on a train that adheres to its own principles, creating an alternative world that is useful for considering social theories of the future. The train is not merely a backdrop; it constitutes the world, a point noted by the characters within the film too. Rather than simply representing pre-existing types, logics, or systems of violence, *Snowpiercer* depicts novel kinds of violence that remain conceptually difficult to approach. While existing scholarship has examined how *Snowpiercer* illustrates different typologies of violence, ranging from border control (Huff, 2023) to capitalism (Canavan, 2014) to the global division of labour (Lee and Manicastri, 2018), this article concentrates on how Bong's world generates a new type of statistical violence predicated on calculating the degree of necessary future death, or to put it more bluntly, what percentage of people must die for others to live. Exploring this world of statistical violent excess is important because, as Suckert (2022: 394) puts it, "'imagined futures" i.e. perceptions and representations of a future that is yet to come, are highly instructive for understanding societies of the present'. There is much to learn from dystopian films; one of their most important insights is about what we might want to change in the present. To depict the violence of statistics being pushed to excess serves as a warning of what might happen when too much faith is placed in numbers to reveal everything we need to know about the world.

To begin, it is important to note that *Snowpiercer* is an adaptation of the French graphic novel *Le Transperceneige*, written by Jacques Lob. While acknowledging the graphic novel as the narrative's origin, I focus on the film because Bong intensifies the story's concern with the role of statistics in sustaining hierarchical power. While much of the population is ignored by the powerful within the graphic novel, the film places greater emphasis on the means of controlling this population via statistics, rendering the train not just a metaphor for society, but a tightly governed system of quantitative governance. Bong's adaptation highlights the cold, rational calculations that underpin violence, making the film a compelling medium for examining the future of quantification. In other words, do we want to quantify everything? Amidst the film's brutality, it presents a realm where the continued survival of much of the population is used to justify calculating the necessary amount of death for others. While the protection of a privileged few at the expense of the many has frequently been a defining feature of post-apocalyptic films (Colebrook, 2023), Bong's worldmaking ability introduces the additional challenge of quantifying this necessary death. Although the question of who gets to survive the many interlocking crises plaguing society has long been explored in social theory, as most evident in Mbembe's (2019) scholarship on necropolitics, the quantification of how many might die to ensure the safety of others has yet to be critically addressed.

Before proceeding, it is worth noting that speculating on the future in this manner raises more questions than it provides answers. As Adrian McKenzie (2024: 1) puts it, 'The future is a slippery concept in sociology. Future speculation is deemed risky, reckless and unacademic.' Nevertheless, Bong offers an opening to delve into this thorny issue with depth, allowing us to apply existing scholarship on biopolitics, necropolitics, and risk calculation to investigate the futurity of death's number. Of course, there is a cruelty inherent here, a risk calculation regarding the violent future to come, which

necessitates that we tread carefully. How might we grapple with the violence of this future-oriented necropolitics? How could we propose exploring the development of a social theory that accounts for the quantification of future death? What ethical questions arise when pre-empting the violence to come? As we shall see, *Snowpiercer* plays a significant role in encouraging our 'walk into fear' through its novel creation of a world where the quantification of death becomes essential for some of society's survival, leaving us haunted by a future of ever-heightening quantitative segregation.

The Statistical Governance of Life and Death

To begin understanding *Snowpiercer*, we will start by comparing the statistical biopolitical governance of life with its necropolitical underside. Foucault (1976) introduced the concept of biopolitics to describe a form of governance where power is exerted over a population. This biopolitics involves the statistical monitoring of life processes – such as birth rates, health, and longevity – transforming populations into objects of calculation. This represents a form of governance that 'aims to establish a sort of homeostasis, not by training individuals, but by achieving an overall equilibrium that protects the security of the whole from internal dangers' (Foucault, 2003: 249). Building on this, Mbembe (2019) coined the term necropolitics to describe instances where a segment of the population is designated for death, even as others are granted the means to live. It describes a mode of power that not only neglects certain lives but actively determines which lives are disposable, orchestrating death through abandonment, exposure, or direct violence. While biopolitics focuses on the optimisation of life, necropolitics concerns itself with the strategic exposure of specific populations to death. This necropolitics centres on how power manifests through control over death; a form of punishment that, even if it does not lead directly to physical death, keeps individuals alive despite their proximity to death. As Mbembe (2019: 92) notes, necropolitics describes how critical the governance of death has become in contemporary life, leading to 'new and unique forms of social existence in which vast populations are subjected to living conditions that confer upon them the status of the living dead'.

Importantly, biopolitics and necropolitics are not opposites but coextensive logics of power – biopolitics sustains life for some precisely by enabling the necropolitical abandonment of others. As Jasbir Puar (2007) argues, the excesses of biopolitics are made visible through necropolitics, determining what is valuable to protect, while necropolitics itself remains partially concealed beneath the rationalities of biopolitics. This dynamic relation has become especially important to consider following the rise of statistics, making new forms of governance possible. While biopolitics and necropolitics help us understand how life is differentially valued, their dialectic can also be seen through Freud's (2003 [1920]) exploration of the tension between the pleasure principle's life-affirming Eros and death-driven Thanatos. Most poignantly for us to consider here is how Marcuse (1955) argues in *Eros and Civilization* that these dual drives underlie the workings of modern civilisation. For Marcuse, these questions about life and death assume greater political significance within advanced industrial society, where statistics reign supreme. As a result, Marcuse critiques how a technological rationality represses the life instincts in favour of death-oriented ones, making statistics a

potentially violent way of governance. As we shall see, this repression is literalised in *Snowpiercer* through the train's rigid, violent social hierarchy – a system that sacrifices many for the life of others. To explore biopolitics and necropolitics, then, we should examine how statistics are used to inform these dual mechanisms of power.

Snowpiercer relies on what appears to be a relatively simple formula: set in 2031, a train known as the 'Snowpiercer' runs in a continuous loop across all continents as the world succumbs to blistering cold temperatures following a failed global warming experiment in 2014. Despite protests from environmental groups, a stratospheric aerosol injection known as CW-7 was set off, unwittingly leading the world into a new ice age following the decimation of most of humanity. The few remaining survivors boarded a new train that connected all the railways of the world, believing that leaving the warmth of the train would expose one to blistering cold temperatures and, consequently, death. The movement of the train is fundamental, providing the necessary energy for humanity's survival. Round and round, the train moves with such precision that its passengers have countdowns repeating every cycle, ringing in a new year at one point to signify another loop around the world. Mimicking the class system of trains, the 'master' of the 'Snowpiercer', Mr Wilford (Ed Harris), remains at the very front; a figure whose authority is asserted via the mouthpiece of his henchwoman, Minister Mason (Tilda Swinton). While Wilford's novel creation is claimed to allow the train to continuously move forward, the governance of the population on the 'Snowpiercer' is claimed to depend on dividing the train's population into classes, leaving those towards the tail end, the 'tailenders', to suffer in cramped, poor living conditions under the watchful gaze of potentially armed guards, while others in the front of the train enjoy a life of relative luxury with an abundance of resources at their disposal. Most people in the front, or the 'head', seemingly live in relative disregard for what happens in the tail end; they have access to a host of different carriages with a range of purposes – a nightclub, a sauna, a sushi restaurant, a classroom for young students, to name a few options – all of which seem to distract the head from what transpires behind the closed, bolted doors. The point is clear: a class divide permeates humanity on the train, whereby those at the tail end occasionally become the necessary manual labour to support not merely the abundant lives of those at the front but also the very forward movement of the train, upholding the world itself, including for the various middle classes. In the confined spaces of the carriages, as Wilford remarks, 'The train is the world. We the humanity.'

Bong depicts a world where statistics become necessary to keep the world moving, even if the train itself is not so technologically advanced. If anything, this lack of technology brings to the forefront the use of statistics as the harbinger of violence. To keep the tailenders alive, they are fed insect protein bars, providing them with a precise amount of nutrients sufficient to sustain their life. In the past, the tailenders were forced into cannibalism, as no such food was made available. With the tailenders previously confined to the back carriage without sustenance, they sacrificed their own arms and legs to feed each other, desperate to survive – the idea coming from Gilliam (John Hurt), an ideological leader in the tail end, whose own role on the train will become clearer later. The protein bars came as a response to their cannibalism, knowing that it would only be so long that arms and legs could be chopped off until the population died out – the tailenders needing to be kept alive to provide a population

available for servitude. Now, the protein bars form one aspect of the wider train's food control. As Mason remarks regarding the food control, 'the number of individual units must be very closely, precisely controlled to maintain the proper sustainable balance'. Although food control leaves the tailenders with the bare minimum, Wilford is keen to insist that everyone, not just the tailenders, are the 'prisoners' of this closed ecosystem. Claiming to protect everyone from death, this is a cyclical system that demands adherence to statistics. To uphold the sanctity of this biopolitical governance, Wilford is portrayed as protecting the tailenders from death itself; he expects gratitude to maintain a moral high ground. Given his construction of the train, Wilford becomes a quasi-religious figure, referred to as 'the Divine Keeper of the Sacred Engine' by Mason, who regularly asserts that the tailenders must accept their place under his mastery. The elevation of a class divide into divine right perpetuates the myth that crossing a line resembles an assault on the world. Everyone is expected to be grateful for their rightful position in keeping the train moving in a loop.

While food control and other forms of biopolitical governance help maintain order, statistics also underpin the methods of punishment employed through necropolitical governance. This is revealed when one of the tailenders, early in the film, questions how the train functions. In response, guards coat his arm in a liquid, apply a clamp around the bicep, and hoist it through a hole in the wall, exposing it to the blistering cold outside. A guard then calculates the precise longitude, elevation, and temperature to determine how long the arm must remain exposed to freeze completely. Once the countdown ends, the individual's arm is brutally smashed off with a hammer. The infliction of this punishment relies on statistics to achieve the desired result of dismemberment, an act Jasbir Puar (2017) might term the 'right to maim'. In this way, while punished, the tailenders are kept alive but left in a debilitated state that arguably makes them more susceptible to control. The precise degree of debility imposed on a population is thus quantified and turned into a statistic. The ease with which such punishment is meted out means the tailenders exist in a 'deathworld', an experience of life as death, as discussed by Mbembe. They are encouraged to believe that this 'death' is necessary, demanding compliance to enable the train's continued functioning. Wilford justifies his actions by asserting that his methods are, in fact, about extending life – not only for the tailenders but for everyone on the train – even if this entails transforming the tailenders into the living dead. The tailenders are ostensibly part of the train's life, yet are excluded from the possibility of the living.

Bong can be credited with foregrounding a more technocratic, calculation-driven form of governance in *Snowpiercer* because key statistical elements of the train's governance, such as the protein bars made from insects (engineered to provide the exact nutrients necessary to sustain life) and the method of punishment (the calculated shattering of a limb), do not appear in the original graphic novel. These additions are intentional; they dramatise how statistical governance becomes a crucial mechanism for controlling the train's population, without reducing statistics to advanced technology. In Bong's *Snowpiercer*, the train's world relies heavily on statistics to manage the tailenders – not just to regulate life and death but to maintain the system's fragile balance. Every decision follows a strict logic of optimisation, enacting a form of biopolitics and necropolitics based on statistical accuracy. Bong's approach shifts the narrative from a

broader political allegory about class warfare to a more focused critique of overtly statistical governance, illustrating how statistics can become a form of violence. Next, we will explore how statistics can become even more violent.

The Risk Calculation of Future Death

As much as risk calculations try to govern their lives, the tailenders end up revolting to break free from the rigid system. The beginning of *Snowpiercer* establishes the plot: a revolt of the tailenders, led by a character named Curtis (Chris Evans), is being planned against the class divide. Mimicking the ideological assertion that the train *is* the world, Curtis claims that controlling the train's engine also equates to controlling the world. However, this time, he remarks, once the tailenders take over the means of governance will be different. Although they have been planning the revolt for some time, it is set in motion when the tailenders learn that the guards are unlikely to have any ammunition, despite their brandishing of weapons. After some calculations of their own (the number of doors ahead in the train, the seconds it takes for the doors to close after being opened, the expertise needed to open the bolted doors, and so forth), the tailenders overpower the guards during a headcount to begin their advance through the train. Styled like a video game, the film follows the group as they confront increasingly formidable challenges upon entering each new carriage. While the passengers in some of the carriages appear nonchalant about the revolt – for instance, those in a nightclub allow the tailenders to pass by without raising the alarm – other carriages are filled with more guards that the tailenders attempt to overpower. Armed with knives, axes, and various makeshift weapons, the brutality of the revolt is depicted within the claustrophobic space, leaving no one able to escape the bloodshed. With the only option being to move forward or to halt the group's progression, many of the heroic and villainous characters are left dead. Like other works by Bong (see Kim, 2022), the film dramatises a brutal class warfare.

Yet the revolt is not as straightforward as it appears, as the film reveals towards the end. When Curtis finally makes his way to the engine room at the front of the train, Wilford is waiting for him, explaining that he had orchestrated the revolt with his accomplice Gilliam, the ideological leader of the tail end. Gilliam is not merely a complicit harbinger of death; he is also a co-architect of the system's future, alongside Wilford. As the train's spiritual leader, he cultivates the myth of Curtis as a chosen saviour, deliberately shaping him into a manufactured prodigy to ultimately serve Wilford's design for controlled rebellion. While statistics are what keep the train running, Wilford sought to calculate the risk of allowing the tailenders to stage a revolt; the aim being to prevent overpopulation in the tail end by murdering precisely 74% of the tailenders in response to the uprising – a belief that this killing spree would be seen as a legitimate response to an insurrection. Statistics helped Wilford arrive at 74%, but this was merely an estimation, a calculation of risk that contained a multitude of variables – a risky, uncertain calculation that sought to enable those in power to achieve their desired outcome, justified by the head as necessary to defend the class divide on the train. In a lengthy explanation, Wilford notes how they seldom have time for natural selection; it is sometimes necessary to 'stir the pot' to ignite uprisings, allowing those in power to respond with violence that can be rationalised as essential to keep the train functioning.

What exactly does Wilford's risk calculation involve? As Amoore (2013) argues, emerging forms of risk calculation in various attempts to control national security increasingly focus on the capacity to act. Instead of concentrating on the probability of an event occurring, 'risk in its derivative form precisely mobilizes the possibility of catastrophe in order to calculate and decide even where there is doubt' (Amoore, 2013: 62). Acknowledging the necessity of precaution in every act of sovereignty pre-empts the range of possible outcomes. While specific events may alter the state's response to a perceived risk, these breaches of typical behaviour nonetheless remain part of the apparatus of risk calculation itself (Amoore, 2013). The potential for an event to deviate from assumed norms is incorporated into the risk calculation – this constitutes the very logic of accounting for various possible futures. The unknowable is hence included in the calculation of risk. Since certainty is impossible, this has become the modus operandi of governments, allowing them to assert authority while relying on speculative possibilities. Thus, Wilford is not merely calculating the probability of revolt; he is consistently preparing for it, time and again, whenever the demographic balance of the train threatens to go awry. He may not possess the same means of calculation as those described by Amoore, but the underlying logic is present. The assessment of risk demands action in the face of uncertainty to maintain demographic balance. Even in the face of incomplete data, indicating the existence of a void in what can be known about a population (Abbey, 2025b), there is still an attempt to govern the tail enders with statistics. In an essay on the film, Seung-Hoon (2019: 490) puts it as follows: 'calculating [the] desirable scale of a massacre forms a demographic routine'. This shifts the revolt from being a challenge to the train's functioning to being a means of sustaining it; the revolt becomes a crucial aspect of population control.

Whereas the tailenders may have believed they were heroically igniting change, the revolt aligned neatly with the risk calculation involved in sustaining the train's operation. While the need for population control fits within the concept of biopolitics – whereby, rather than focusing on control of individual lives, there arises a necessity to contain the threat posed to the populace – in this instance, the perceived threat is characterised as the growth in numbers of the tailenders, necessitating a form of necropolitics that condemns such individuals to death. The train's operation depends on a risk calculation marked by embedded uncertainty. Regardless of the calculations involved in the various forms of biopolitical and necropolitical governance of the train, Wilford does not act with certainty regarding the outcomes; he *risks* them. *Snowpiercer* compels us to confront this necropolitical form of risk calculation, which assesses the requisite amount of death within a portion of the population to allow another segment to survive. As the revolt unfolds, Wilford creates the risk to rationalise the response.

These attempts to gauge the revolt perpetuate the notion of having control over the future, specifically by exercising control over the tailenders, imposing on this particular population the label of risk. This action upholds the authority of a class division, implying a sanctity in delineated territorial lines that restrict access for the tailenders to death. Is this an entirely novel type of calculation? Somewhat yes. A few cases of extreme violence involved creating necessary death figures – such as Stalin's order to arrest 259,450 people and execute 72,950 of them (Sebag Montefiore, 2003) – but these remain

few and far between, often situated within the context of war or genocide. Wilford makes this banal.

To consider this type of calculation on the societal level in times of relative stability, the work of John Graunt in 17th-century England (cited in BayatRizi, 2008) is worth considering here. An essential figure in the emergence of modern statistics, Graunt used mortality bills to predict plague outbreaks and subsequently future population sizes. As BayatRizi (2008: 124) explains:

> The work of Graunt and other early modern statisticians discursively transformed death, however inadvertently, from a fate, a predestined moment around which one could prospectively build one's whole life, into a statistically calculable contingency or, what amounts to the same thing, a risk. . . . This transformation resulted in an overt 'instrumentalization' of the knowledge of morality so that it could be used for the purpose of better management, surveillance and regulation of statistical variables correlated with higher risks of death.

Ultimately, what Graunt sought to show was that death became of interest due to its link to risk; hence, it became important to understand the possibility of the population succumbing to death. Many of these ideas would eventually pave the way for actuarial mortality studies. While Graunt was primarily concerned with public health, what about future war, genocide, famine, dehydration, and poverty, amongst the numerous other aspects of unnatural deaths likely to occur in the future? Could these be estimated? Would we want to? To what extent do these statistics involve the colonisation of the future (Adam and Groves, 2007)?

While health concerns have fuelled attempts to anticipate future mortality rates, the use of statistics to account for intentionally inflicted violence across the world has concentrated mainly on the past and the present, not the future. On the one hand, existing scholarship has examined how a broader array of calculations were employed to incite harm against various populations during colonialism, slavery, and other violent histories (Cohen, 1999; McKittrick, 2014). This also entailed assigning 'value' to the colonised, the enslaved, and other populations for varied economic purposes (Berry, 2018; Murphy, 2017). On the other hand, a number of death counts are increasingly used for a variety of purposes, whether in the present or recent history. From war casualties to victims of humanitarian disasters to migrants, many efforts have been made to tally the number of deaths from various prolonged crises or specific events (Cuttitta, 2020; Rodehau-Noack, 2024). While the reliance on numbers to comprehend the extent of violence has been rightly critiqued (Tazzioli, 2015), there remains something to learn about the power of these calculations. Indeed, there is symbolic value in mortality counts, enabling states, international organisations, think tanks, and charities to utilise these figures to advance a particular agenda, whether for security or humanitarian purposes. Seybolt (2013: 25) asserts that these actors 'seek to shape the numbers and beliefs about the causes behind them because they know the results can have serious consequences in the realms of politics, justice, and social reconstruction'. Therefore, mortality counts are an inherently political act, where politics influences who is counted, by whom, for what purpose, and using which methodology. As noted by Aronson (2013: 30), 'stakeholders such as the media, politicians, military officials, activists, and

scientists may choose to downplay or prominently publicise a count, depending on its value to their particular goals and imperatives'. Consequently, these numbers are transformed into narratives that depict certain events in specific ways, much like the use of 'risk' as a framing device (Beck, 1992).

The same type of politics concerns estimates made on the future, of any kind. Given that estimates are not objective, it is crucial to understand who generates them, how they are cited, their implications, whether they are contested, and whether they serve a particular purpose (Andreas and Greenhill, 2010). While it has long been recognised that estimates are framed in ways beneficial to the involved actors (e.g. securitisation, humanitarianism; see Porter, 1995), there is always the risk of specific estimates becoming entrenched as a dominant form of knowledge, despite the subjective choices involved in the calculations. As Becker (1998) argues, the standardisation of specific social phenomena leads to the reification of certain categories included or excluded within particular future estimates, meaning that an estimate relies on a subjective definition of what is being evaluated. To illustrate some of these disparities, the Institute for Economics and Peace estimated that 1.2 billion people could need to migrate by 2050 due to factors related to climate change and other ecological threats while Christian Aid estimated that up to 250 million people could flee the wider impacts of climate change by 2050; these disparities stem from differing definitions of concepts such as climate change and migration (see Abbey, 2025a). This underlines why Weber (1930) argued that statistics, rationality, estimations, and similar concepts shape the very functioning of politics, allowing various actors to frame issues in ways that highlight their perceived significance. An estimate implies a need to respond, whether that means altering the phenomenon itself or one's approach to it (Stone, 2002). Consequently, any estimate is tied to power, as it has the potential to influence how different actors respond to the future (Bowker and Star, 1999).

What about the deaths of the future, then? What happens when the violence of statistics is pushed even further? *Snowpiercer* showcases a peculiar logic of cruelty, one that engages with existing ideas regarding risk calculation to present a novel form of violence. This is not to say that Bong is presenting a warning about the possibility of governments counting the deaths of the future; instead, he is highlighting the damage caused by the overreliance on statistics to account for all matters of life and death. This violence pertains to what Alagraa (2021) describes as cruel mathematics; the 'matter of perfecting the numerical threshold between life and death, and the arithmetic logic applied to both the preservation and loss of life. . . . [where] certain populations will have their needs met, while others will not, and, even further, these groups represent obstruction to the health and futurity of our planet'. Bong's depiction of a world where the future of death is calculated extends the racialised, gendered, and ableist question of *who* will survive environmental destruction (as already critiqued; see Colebrook, 2023) to the inquiry of *how many* must die to enable survival. The question remains: as risk calculation becomes a means of governing society, to what extent do we allow cruel mathematics to remain the chief way of governing populations? *Snowpiercer* raises this crucial question for us. The forward-looking view offered by this world serves as a warning that we must address the risk of statistical violence becoming even more ingrained in the present.

The Inability to Calculate Another World

While Bong introduces a novel form of cruelty, his world does not revel in hopelessness. As we see in the film, an issue for Wilford was that the tailenders responded unpredictably. The plan had been to crush the revolt before it progressed further up the train, allowing the few survivors to return to the tail end; another cycle of revolt completed. As Wilford describes, the miscalculation was that the tailenders would not be able to navigate between the poles of life and death outside the parameters for which the calculations were intended. The plan fails – the film's central point – indicating that risk assessments cannot always account for what can occur. Nonetheless, in response to Wilford revealing that his orchestration of the revolt failed, he further remarks that there is only one thing left to do: tally up the numbers. He intends to recalculate death in order to reconsolidate control, while also offering Curtis the position of master, a belief that he understands the necessity of this cruel mathematics. For Wilford, it would seem there is little chance of veering off the tracks in such a world, unless the tailenders were to risk this world's existence to escape the calculations.

At the end of the film, a character named Namgoong (Song Kang-ho), one of the characters who worked his way up the train along with the tailenders, reveals he had been planning to ignite an explosive to escape the train with his daughter Yona (Go Ah-sung), both of whom noticed the ice outside melting. Before confronting Wilford in the engine room, Curtis stops Namgoong from setting off the explosion, insisting he wants to speak to Wilford about the train first. Here, what is made evident is Curtis's ideological congruence with Wilford in the belief that the train sustains life. Where Curtis relies on moving forward within the train's confines, Namgoong is adamant about escaping – a form of exodus that confronts the difficulty of alternatives within this particular world, as Lee and Manicastri (2018) put it in an essay on the film. Abruptly, Yona bursts into the engine room where Curtis and Wilford are discussing the train, seeking matches for her father's explosive. In her desperation, she accidently pulls up a floorboard only to reveal a little boy called Timmy (Marcanthonee Reis), who had previously been abducted by those in the head section to conduct forced labour because his fingers were sufficiently small to work the engine, a mere 'part' of the machinery to keep the train moving. Now, it is finally revealed that young children, due to their smaller bodies, are an integral component of the engine, enabling the train to function. In response to the revelation of forced labour, disrupting the myth of the 'Snowpiercer's more mythical idea of continuous forward movement, Curtis rescues Timmy and gives Yona the matches necessary to light the explosive, resulting in an avalanche derailing the train. Thus the world of the 'Snowpiercer' abruptly ends.

With the train having derailed, the 'limits' of risk calculation are reached (Beck, 1992: 32); the perceived danger of being exposed to the ice age becomes omnipresent. Hence, the impossibility of calculating *every* possibility comes to the forefront. Although Amoore (2013) rightly highlights the increased use of speculation in risk calculation to guide the potential for action across a range of scenarios, some events shatter the world as it is known; the train derailment is one such event. There was no need for Wilford to predict what would occur if the train derailed because it was assumed that only death would follow – the end of the world. Risk calculations may indicate the end of the world,

but the limit halts there, at the precise moment before this end arrives. One perspective on this could be how Seung-Hoon (2019) connects the film's ambiguous ending to the negative dialectics of Frederic Jameson, suggesting that the 'utopia' of escaping the train is a negative one, which, instead of providing a solution to the train's violence, warns against deterministic futures that fail to escape the problem. The train is not sufficient to offer a satisfactory life, so the termination of this world signifies a desire for something different, even if this alternative remains unidentified. While this would go against McKenzie's (2024) argument that a sociology of the future should contain something rather than nothing, it is also important to avoid a too rigid claim that we know where we are heading. Yet, however briefly, there *is* an alternative interpretation of the film that allows for the possibility of something to emerge in the aftermath of 'Snowpiercer's worldly demise.

Who survives the explosion? The children, of course: Timmy and Yona. While Curtis's efforts to save the lives of these children could be viewed as perpetuating the filmic white saviour trope (Hughey, 2014), or even highlighting a problematic form of 'reproductive futurism' that regards the child as the future (Edelman, 2004), this interpretation overlooks the fact that, in the world of the 'Snowpiercer', the train is portrayed as the entity sustaining life; before the explosion, there is no expectation of life existing outside the train. Since the last remnants of humanity were aboard the train, the explosion effectively concluded the world as they knew it. This is particularly true for Timmy and Yona, who were born on the train and are thus unfamiliar with anything else. Lacking an understanding of the kind of world that existed before 'Snowpiercer', the train's derailment casts them into an entirely new, unfamiliar reality. Therefore, the children escape the confines of risk calculation to embrace the uncertainties of another existence. Confronting the snow, albeit possibly melting, they quickly notice a polar bear, indicating forms of life beyond the train's confines.

The film's ending is at once bleak and strangely hopeful. On the one hand, it illustrates the catastrophic aftermath of a necropolitical order. On the other, it can be read as an allegory of Eros resisting Thanatos: the persistence of life, or the possibility of renewal, in the ruins of technological domination. As Marcuse (1955: 222) asserts, 'today the fight for life, the fight for Eros, is the political fight'. These two children, representing a reconfigured futurity outside the train's disciplinary system, may gesture toward what Marcuse describes as the potential for a different relationship between human beings and nature – one no longer premised on domination, but on the possibilities of freedom, interdependence, and care. Yet Bong does not take us that far, arguably. Whether the children can adapt, or even cultivate a new relationship with nature, is unknown. They might be equally confronting what Tremblay and Swarbrick (2024) call negative life, the failure to cohere human and nonhuman relations. All we know is that the survival of humanity now hinges upon their ability to find a place within nature; the train is no longer a viable world. Yet whether this is possible is another story. While arguably a dystopic film, its ending emphasises not loss but a future possibility, one of the important tenets of this film genre (see Manjikian, 2012). In sum, Bong starts with an argument about the violence of statistics, but ends with a question about how life might be lived otherwise.

Conclusion

This article explored what can be learned from Bong Joon Ho's *Snowpiercer*, focusing on his depiction of a world where statistics, rather than technology, is used with violent excess. While a television adaptation of *Le Transperceneige* made after the film provides a glimpse of a technologically sophisticated train, Bong keeps the train relatively simple; statistics is the more violent harbinger here, not technology. While engaging critically with various forms of violence already present in society, ranging from class division to resource distribution, his ability to construct this world introduces a range of questions about the reliance on statistics to govern all matters of life and death. While many societies are beholden to statistics, *Snowpiercer* takes this dependency to its extreme, with practices such as nutrient control and the statistical removal of limbs. Related techniques may already be employed on some populations (in prison, in war, in genocide), yet the scarcity of resources is what turns this into a form of biopolitical and necropolitical governance dependent on numbers within the world of the train. Further, Bong also depicts a world where new forms of violence emerge, specifically the statistical calculation of how much death is necessary to sustain the life of the rest of the population. As this article has argued, this complicates the question of who survives humanity's journey into the future by contemplating how many must die for survival to be feasible. Yet, despite the power of statistics in *Snowpiercer*, the film reveals the many cracks in such cruel mathematics, where the possibility of opening up other worlds can emerge. By contrasting the supposed rationality of statistics with the final need to explore other worlds, Bong critiques the overt quantification of life and death, pushing against the reduction of humanity to mere numbers.

As *Snowpiercer* illustrates, the never-ending game of risk calculations about populations ultimately fails to question the bounded conditions of statistics, until, finally, the game, or the world as it was once known, ends; the estimates go awry. For Bong, demographic calculations about life, death, and even migration (if we consider movement across the train as a form of migration; see Huff, 2023) are not the answers to societal problems but often create a limited world, as we observe with Wilford's calculations. Yet, a confined existence filled with risk calculations and other estimates can only endure for so long until those estimates prove fatally flawed; a form of resistance emerges against the cruel mathematics. Bong does not provide a solution to this problem, but this is not something we can always demand. Instead, *Snowpiercer* reveals the injustice of asserting that we are progressing socially with the growing number of risk calculations when, in reality, we are often creating new problems and then addressing them violently, moving in circles while thinking we are moving forward, just like the very movement of the train. For Bong, it appears that the inception of another world begins when the reliance on statistics ceases. We cannot fully predict what this world will look like, especially when influenced by factors like climate change, yet we can start to move towards it. As Yusoff (2018) suggests, it is crucial to interrogate what remains uncertain about the future, not necessarily with the aim of finding certainty, as statistics so frequently claim, but to further comprehend the problem, as social theory has long attempted. In summary, social theory might benefit from turning to filmmakers like Bong, who depict dystopian futures that pose novel questions about society. This becomes particularly important

when the spectre of future violence is invoked. To reinterpret what Avery Gordon (1997) discusses regarding the historical violence that haunts the present, we might do well to respond to what remains so haunting about the future too. To be haunted by the future does not entail accepting the dystopic future; instead, it requires grappling with how we can alter the present to cultivate a different future, a something-to-be-done. What is cruel mathematics already doing? What might be done instead?

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