

Snowpiercer Season 4: Comparisons to Le Transperceneige Graphic Novel

Reading Time: 14 minutes

I'll start with the simple bit. I'm a massive Snowpiercer fan. Graphic Novel, Film, TV Series...

I JUST FUCKING LOVE SNOWPIERCER!

I didn't even know that Snowpiercer existed until I stumbled upon a track called 'High Noon' by a DJ called Feed Me. It includes the iconic line from Minister Mason from the film version of Snowpiercer:

"Passengers, [sic] This is Disorder. This, This is Size 10 Chaos".

The clip in question is from one of the first really 'brutal' scenes of the movie, when one of the main characters has his arm stuck out of a train port-hole, for it to freeze, then be smashed off. You see, Snowpiercer exists in a world where the temperature outside is -100 Degrees Celcius, caused because in an attempt to reverse global warming, scientists 'went too far the other way', and froze the earth to it's core. It's worth remembering this bit for later on.

I've seen the movie version of Snowpiercer at least 50 times, and the TV Series? When my mental health was at it's lowest, I think I watched Seasons 1 - 3 on a constant loop. I can remember almost the entire series episode by episode, and certain bits almost line for line. That may be the autistic bit of me kicking in, or just the fact that it was one comfort I had to wittle down the hours of a day, no matter how bad things were outside of my little TV / Laptop bubble.

A Brief History Lesson.

The TV Series of Snowpiercer, like both it's film and Graphic Novel counterparts have had a bit of a mixed history. In terms of the film, that lovely gentleman Harvey Weinstein bought US distribution rights to the movie, and decided he wanted to do what he does to everything he touches. Fuck around until the finished product is a shell of the former. This caused delays and may well have impacted on the ability for the movie to have picked up more award nominations. Let's not forget that the director, Bong Joon-ho won an Oscar for Parasite a few years later.

The Graphic Novel version exists in multiple timelines, and there doesn't seem to be any real comparison to the or the TV show looking skin deep. The concept is the same, and there are some really good points of comparison, but it's not a linier universe so to say. One cool easter egg is that in the movie version of the film (Which takes after the TV series in this warped timeline), shows a woman in one of those hair salon driers reading the graphic novel, in French no less. The original name of the series isn't Snowpiercer, but Le Transperceneige, translating directly as Snowbreaker, not Snowpiercer.

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The TV show has had its fair share of what they like to call 'Development Hell', to put it mildly. Changes around the pilot, director and some cast impacted it getting onto airways, costing it three years before it finally ended up on TNT. Those three years proved to be a double wammy later on down the road, as TNT (Warner Bros Discovery) decided to cancel all scripted programming as a part of a tax writeoff. Even though Season 4 (The final planned season) had been recorded and produced, it was going nowhere, or so it seemed for a year before AMC picked the show up.

I'm writing this at the end of 2024. The show wasn't even supposed to be released until 2025, then before I knew it, it was on AMC in July of 2024. I didn't know this at the time as I was back at good ol' Bushey Fields Hospital, and anyway, technically I've not seen this, because it's not been released in the UK on Netflix, which has been the international distribution arm of the show. Of course I have, as otherwise, how the hell would I have been able to write this comparison!

When I started watching Season 4, I didn't expect there to be too many similarities to pick up on compared to the graphic novel and film. There's been a couple of similarities between each across seasons 1 - 3 of the TV series, the graphic novels and the film, and of course it has to be noted that Bong Joon-ho is an executive director of the TV series. By the end of the first episode however, the mind got a-ticking, and before I knew it, I had a post-it note of comparisons that grew as the season went on. Most of these relate to Terminus, the final book in the Le Transperceneige series. Let's explore a few.

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WARNING: THERE ARE SPOILERS BELOW, FILM, TV, AND GRAPHIC NOVEL RELATED.

Headwoods & Babies

I didn't really clock onto this too much in Seasons 2 and 3, but what transpired at the start of Season 4, with Dr Headwood taking Liana from Leyton and Zarah, made me think back to Terminus, when it is revealed that the reason for babies being taken from their mothers, and the 'sex parties' that go on at the end of the quarantine period to facilitate fertility, are designed specifically to help the Headwoods.

In terminus, it's to keep the Headwoods 'alive' via the use of stem cells, but even though the kidnapping is as a tactical ploy in S4 EP1, one mustn't forget that the Headwoods had been experimenting on Liana in the womb, as part of their cold treatment genetic research. One must ask if this experimentation was used further, perhaps in terms of providing cells for others (Including Wilford) to enhance their own cold treatment aspirations.

Liana is really the only baby born in Snowpiercer S2 - 4. You hear about the baby lottery at the very beginning of Season 1 (Perhaps one of the reasons why Zarah was able to get pregnant in the first place, as she had won it as a part of her polyamorous relationship in 'The Chains'), and unlike the film where 'There's a constant stream of children being born in the tail', you don't see kids any younger than those found in the train school. Perhaps sex just wasn't on the cards in TV world?

As another loose end, there is no Headwoods in the film. There is however a need for small children, as to quote Wilford 'Although the engine is eternal, its parts are not'. Therefore, in each iteration, there is a need for children, not to keep population growth sustainable, but as effect parts towards a larger goal.

Radio Noise / Music / Signals / Caterpillar Treads

The TV series uses this concept twice in the space of four seasons. The first being at the end of Season 1, where Big Alice (With Wilford aboard) uses music to lure Snowpiercer close enough that they can connect to the rear of the train. The second is the signals picked up by New Eden in relation to the train, which combined with Liana's kidnapping is what leads to Layton eventually taking Big Alice on a hunt which eventually leads to the bunker. You could also use radiation signals in this as a method of the 'International Peacekeeping Forces' to capture Snowpiercer in the first place, though it is admittedly a bit wider in terms of scope.

The concept of music is what is used to lure Snowpiercer(s) to the train station / bunker in Le Transperceneige. This also brings together another part of world-merging in caterpillar treads. At the end of 'The Explorers' in Le Transperceneige, the train is able to run off track to make it to what seems to be an abandoned station. In Season 4 of the TV series, caterpillar treads are added to Snowpiercer to enable it to run off track in terms of setting off the device designed to denature CW-7.

Underground Bunker

I didn't clock onto this one immediately, but it clicked about half way into S4 EP2. In Terminus, the trains were 'called to' the abandoned station as mentioned above, but the station itself wasn't the

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important bit. It was in fact the massive bunker underneath.

In Season 4 of Snowpiercer, this is home of the 'International Peacekeeping Forces'. Like the graphic novel, some of the core concepts are the same: There's the need for deep sanitisation, there's an array of airlocks and sanitisation areas to keep 'germs' from the outside where they are. This is highlighted especially when it comes to Layton wanting to keep Liana's teddy with him, to be told that it would be destroyed if it wasn't handed over for de-contamination. A similar process is used in S2 EP1, when Melanie has to de-contaminate before being allowed to board Big Alice.

The bunker seems to have multiple different sections, for various groups of people. It's recognised that no-one really seems to know where is where, and that everyone is assigned to their own 'alloted station' of sorts, which is a class-like theme that runs throughout the Snowpiercer universe. In the film, everyone is to remain in their own 'pre-ordained position'. In TV land, the phrase 'Fortress to class' is used to describe the segregation of people, and in the bunker, it's clear throughout that there are privelages and punishments for behaviour.

Perhaps the most extreme example of this is where both Wilford and Layton are sent to Floor 3, which houses those used as test subjects to analyse the effect of this CW-7 killing compound. It's made clear that there's no way out of here in a usual sense of things, and when soldiers go down to this level, they do so wearing full Bio-Hazmat style suits, and perhaps are only feeding the pack as a method of understanding longer term impacts of their work. Whilst not immediately spelled out, the bunker does, for the most part seem like a place that once entered, you don't leave. Melanie is a perfect example here, in an office, 'alone', with no contact with the outside world.

The concept of the bunker as a science lab refers also to the situation found in Terminus. I've already talked about Drs Headwood and their attempt to keep the earth going via their science, but the wider issue is trying to keep the world going when sat underneath a leaking nuclear power plant. Big issues, causing the need for big decision making is a concept which seems to have a sense of urgency in both the graphic novel and TV series here: The only real issue comparable in the film edition is the overpopulation situation, leading to the quasi-planned 'Curtis revolution'.

Forced Labor

OK. I'm using the US version of Labor here as it's just easier. Forced Labor isn't a new concept in Snowpiercer. It's been used throughout the film, graphic novel and all 4 seasons of the TV series. It takes a more sinister tone however in S4 of the TV series.

Despite the 'International Peacekeeping Forces' claiming that all on Snowpiercer will be treated well, so on and so forth, things were anything but. In some ways, you could say that it was **MORE** brutal than when Wilford took control of Snowpiercer late on in Season 2, and especially in the gap between Seasons 2 and 3. The train had in effect become a sweatshop (In more ways than one), with punishment being burned halfway to hell in these dark, heated 'buckets'. One doesn't just suffer with 'International Peacekeeping Forces', you're made to know that you're suffering because someone else just damn doesn't like you.

Forced labor is used in the graphic novel at various points, but no more so than under the guise of the mice men. This is explored just after being introduced to the colony, where they are told that all the

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privileges they had during quarantine were in essence just a way of being 'nice', and that everything had to be worked for. Considering the fact that the first graphic novel came out in 1982 and Terminus in 2000, it could be argued that this had some threads relating both to pure communism, but also a warped approach to other 'socialism' concepts. It's mentioned clearly that there are jobs that are more risky and more dangerous, but these come with added benefits, and it's also outlined how everyone is expected to contribute their very best effort at all times. There is a hierarchy in place here, with the 'mice men' being highest up the proverbial food chain, but the reasons for this become more clear later on in the novel, as it's revealed the reasoning behind the masks (More on that below).

In the majority of the TV series, one isn't rewarded more for more intense / hard work, in fact the opposite seems to be true. If you consider the roles of janitorial, food preparation, sanitation and service level work, those working are confined to third class, with only skilled roles moving into second class accommodation. Heck, with the exception of Roche, even brakemen, breachmen and jackboots are third class passengers on the train, so the socialism approach doesn't ring true here. Instead, the concept 'fortress to class' and a capitalism approach is one which rings more true. Only doctors, managers and highly skilled staff seem to reside in second; heck, we don't even know where Ruth lives, and Hospitality are the best of the bunch! It's almost impossible to make a comparison in terms of the film, as we don't really see any living accommodation outside of some examples in 1st.

This change in Season 4 of the TV series, even from Wilford days could show a sense of Fascism more than anything else, ironic for a 'Peacekeeping Force'. This could be borne out of resentment, need to manufacture at pace, or just a military style approach to resource, something seen with Juntas and other Military Governments around the world. It needs to be harsh to explain the shift in requirements for those aboard, drawing perhaps the closest comparison to the movie. No longer people, but individual units.

Masks & Burns

As mentioned above, in Le Transperceneige, there are those who wear masks. We find out later on in the novel that this is due to the hair loss and burns caused by those having to work in the nuclear power plant, trying to fix the damn thing. In Season 4 of the TV show, we also see a set of people wearing masks.

At first glance, you could make the closest comparison not to the novel, but the movie. In the fight scene that occurs during the crossing of the Yekaterina Bridge, Wilford's fighters are wearing masks, a move perhaps to protect the identity of those doing the killing, providing a nod to medieval executioners. There was no 'medical' reason for this, at least not one made clear to anyone watching. It could have been argued at first glance that the reason for the masks / helmets for those in the 'International Peacekeeping Forces' was similar: To hide identities. After all, as Melanie proves inadvertently in S4 EP1, it's harder to reason with someone who has no identity, and just a mask. Masks can be used with conditioning to remove the 'personal' nature of a person; in fact Wilford did the same thing with his Jackboots as seen in Season 1.

It's only later in the season that the real reason for the masks becomes clear. The masks are not just for show, but are designed to hide the physical deformities of soldiers, and provide a closed loop breathing apparatus, similar to... Darth Vader?!?! We learn that a part of the suit provides necessary

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compounds to aid in breathing, something which becomes clearer when one is offered a vial designed to make this easier. The hiding of physical deformities is something which clearly resonates with Terminus, and perhaps is one of the more obvious borrowings by Bong Joon-ho when looking at it with full retrospect.

The masks become necessary after working in and around the nuclear power plant, and in this case have an added necessity; not wearing them would scare others in the populace as to the true horrors of working such jobs, so by wearing them, it's both a mark of potential prestige (positive), and a simple coverup by the Drs Headwood. In Season 4 of the TV Series, the outward perception is one of power, prestige and conditioning, but inside, there is the same message about harm caused by operations. This time, it's the full horror of CW7 denaturing compounds, and one which proves to draw a pivotal story arc heading into the final few episodes. Had the impacts of this not had been as widely known, the final resistance towards not allowing the device to go off may not have happened. Great storytelling here.

Being Left On a Train

This is one which may have been looked over by most as the storyline arc is so small, but there is a link between Layton being left on the train in Season 4, with Puig being left on the train to rot by Laura, who takes over 'running' civilisation (It's too complicated to do a heirachal approach to train & civilisation leadership here... Another time).

In both cases, these are important figures deliberately being left to be forgotten about, as they eventually die. Normally, we would expect Layton to be the one clawing and finding his way out of an otherwise impossible situation, but here, he's actually rather useless. Instead relying on Roche to help him escape. In comparison, Puig is the one who finds his way out of captivity (Eventually), despite being dishevelled, and almost dead.

Fixing Something / End Goal

The movie's not really got an arc in terms of an end goal off train. The closest you have in terms of a comparison is when warm spots are conceived as possible in S2 of Snowpiercer (Which becomes New Eden, and in S4, known to actually just be an experiment), and the realisation by Namgoong Minsoo that the earth is warming in the movie, due to more of a downed plane being visible when crossing the Yekaterina Bridge. Aside from class revolution and 'wanting steak', all the issues that need fixing are on-train, something which is deemed to be a universally agreed necessity. From the school, to indoctrination's, and little flashes throughout, at no point until the end of the movie is life off train even considered.]

In both the TV series and graphic novel, there is an end game, both off, and eventually in terms of the graphic novel, back on train. Also, in both, there is a determined need to fix something, which almost seems like an impossible task, where the risks outweigh the rewards. For the novel, it's the aforementioned fixing of the nuclear powerplant, to enable life to be safe alongside this new resilient race created by the Drs Headwood. In the TV series, it goes from being a life off train, to not actually wanting to take another 'quick fix', recognising just how potentially dangerous the CW7 denaturing compound could be both short and medium term.

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We see some early indications as to the risks with fixing something in Season 4 of the TV series. These include Alex having nosebleeds, Mr Sprinkles dying from cancer. As the season progresses, and the plans for Snowpiercer's role in making the earth inhabitable beomes clearer, we see the counterpoints between allowing nature to take its course, and quick fixes, which of course is how life became to be a train in the first place. In both the graphic novel, the film, and the TV series, it all comes down to a split second momentary decision as to the entire fate of the world.

Conclusions

I'm not normally a comic / graphic novel guy. I don't know my DC from my Marvel, and honestly wouldn't give a shit if I messed up a crossover between the two. I do however find the Snowpiercer universe fascinating, and how Bong Joon-ho's been able to take a graphic novel and weave it into not one, but two relatable alternate visions.

There are plenty more comparisons between the graphic novel series and the 40 episode long TV series, as well as between both and the movie. I'm sure I'll figure out a few more over time, but if you know of any I've missed, let me know!

Peace And Love xx