

## CHAPTER 8

# Whirled pieces: Bong Joon-ho's *Snowpiercer* and the components of global transmedia production

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In July 2012, Disney's Marvel announced its production slate for Phase 2 of the Marvel Cinematic Universe. It would consist of six movies and run through 2015. Phase 3 would include ten movies and run through 2019. In 2013 Disney promised a Star Wars movie every year. In October 2014, Warner Bros. announced a competing slate of ten DC 'Extended Universe' movies running through 2020. These slates and other plans – for new Disney Princess instalments and 'live-action' remakes of animated classics; for Universal's classic-monster-centred 'Dark Universe' and for the expansion of its *Fast and Furious* series – are regular features of the contemporary mediascape.<sup>1</sup> Those slates may be revised or abandoned, but they are used to generate fan interest, to mark out release dates and to provide a framework for the deployment of intellectual property assets across media and licensed products.

Such enormous undertakings necessarily curtail the opportunities for creative serendipity. In response, studios turn to auteur-ish directors for both unique spins on the underlying property and to manage increasingly unwieldy character rosters (Joss Whedon). That auteury cred can be deployed from the beginning of a transmedial enterprise, as it was with Duncan Jones and the videogame adaptation *Warcraft*, or it can be part of a reboot strategy (Colin Trevorrow and *Jurassic World*; Josh Trank and *Fantastic Four*). When the

aim is to control every profitable point in the value chain, then the successful transmedia auteur looks like Matthew Vaughn, screenwriter and director of *Kick-Ass* (Lionsgate/Universal), *Kingsman* (Fox), *X-Men: First Class* (Fox), producer of *Fantastic Four* (Fox).

By contrast, *Snowpiercer* (Bong, TWC/CJ, 2013) was an indie assemblage from the beginning built around Bong Joon-ho's prior auteur status. Director Bong had built a career that combined art-house practices with a facility for crowd-pleasing genre conventions. *Memories of Murder* (2003) screened at international film festivals and went on to win South Korea's Grand Bell Award. The monster movie *The Host* (2006) both premiered at Cannes and finished the year as the most successful movie in Korean history. Yet even after his global successes, Bong regularly contributed to omnibus projects with limited market appeal. He was thus able to balance between his local-hero and transnational profiles. But where his prior projects had been set in Korea and marketed globally, *Snowpiercer* would be planetary in its story, production and marketing. This was a remarkable upscaling for both Bong and his underwriters. As such, the production was compelled to invent or reinvent each aspect of its passage from backlist French graphic novel to English-language action movie.<sup>2</sup> In that transition, it drew on the credibility and taste of Director Bong, Korean post-production infrastructure and generous Czech tax credits. Funded by an array of producers, distributors and state and quasi-state agencies, its underwriting mirrored its international cast and crew.<sup>3</sup> The production and distribution history of *Snowpiercer* illustrate the possibilities and constraints of the contemporary global transmedial system. *Snowpiercer* documents the potential emergence of a globalized, multipolar cinema just outside the purview of the majors. Whether that system is durable is another question that Bong's follow-up, *Okja*, may partially answer.

In many ways, *Snowpiercer* constitutes the inverse of the international co-productions of the 1960s. In that earlier era, quota systems required the participation of actors from a particular country as a condition of support from various national funders. As Mark Betz demonstrates, those contractual relations were regularly figured as international romances or scenes of translation. He goes on to suggest that the foundational experience of art cinema coproduction is *misrecognition*, the occlusion of the capital investments and industrial cooperation by the auteur's name above the subtitle. That signature renders the 'appearance of an actor from one nation in an art film from another ... the fortuitous meeting across national borders of a talented performer and a brilliant director'.<sup>4</sup> In the absence of any such quota systems today, actors and other bearers of the mark of talent *really are* artefacts of a general fortuitousness even as they *really are* instances of industrial cooperation, instances of the increasingly robust system of bilateral coproduction agreements outside the purview of the Hollywood system.<sup>5</sup>

In addition to a view of the edges of possibility for contemporary action cinema, *Snowpiercer* also offers a unique perspective on IP-centric transmedial production. By working through a contrasting model where the director drives the process, we are better able to understand the more general interplay of individual and systemic forces in contemporary world cinema. At the core of that interplay are the scalar differences between directors with ideas about the world, assemblages of talent and capital from across the world, global infrastructures of communication and aesthetic propagation and general systems that underpin the emergence of directors, assemblages, infrastructures and *even those systems themselves*. Those scalar differences are enacted, resisted, effaced and foregrounded only in occurrences. And those occurrences may themselves span from individual films to directorial oeuvres to strategies and on to that most evanescent of occurrences, policies.

In the contest for authoritative control over which occurrence will supervene over the enactment, resistance, effacement or foregrounding of scalar differences, we are thrown back onto cases. In the case of *Snowpiercer*, it is, I hope to show, Bong's agency – an agency that is not to be reduced to his intention – that volatilizes the possible poles of authority. That agency *configures* the transmedial and transnational totality according to a hallmark, what the older vision of the auteur criticism singled out as the overriding conviction of the work. In Bong's case, that conviction is a belief in strategic competence – a belief so strong that questions of *possibility* can be bracketed in favour of ethical questions of *consequence and entailment*. In other words, these characters are so certain that they *can* they spend all their time wondering whether they *should*. That Bong's agency is nevertheless and at the same time delimited, undermined, dissipated and so on only highlights the ways in which his authoritative competitors, those possibly contestatory vectors of determination, nevertheless conjure a place for his agency as their own occasion for activation. (As one might say, 'We want to be in the Bong ~~Joon-ho~~ business.')

In order to reconstruct the contours of those competing authorities, I have relied principally on interviews with crucial players in *Snowpiercer's* production and distribution process. Those interviews are of course not self-interpreting. In particular, they register the players' strong sense of the differences between this project and others, differences they often ascribe to Bong, but which they might account for in any number of ways. Realizing that the most common agents in these histories would likely be individuals, I explicitly asked about the role other, non-individual actors might have played – corporations and regulatory bodies, pieces of software or other technologies, policies or images. Finally, I have tried to be attentive to un- and under-identified agents – mystified collectives such as 'the studio' or processes kept just outside the narrative line such as contractual negotiations. Such moments of narrative deficit are the complement to moments of narrative surplus that, in this case, revolve around Director Bong.

In an extensive French-language documentary on the making of *Snowpiercer* (*From the Blank Page to the Black Screen*), Bong recounts the moment when he first encountered *La Transperceneige*:

The day I met this comic book, was two years ago, in the winter of 2-0-0-4. In that period I was writing the script of *The Host*. In that kind of period I need some kind of feeling and inspiration. That situation, I always visit comic book shop or cinemathèque ... suddenly I discovered *La Transperceneige*. So I discover Part 1 of *Transperceneige* and I read the whole story in the bookshop. When I was reading the comic book, at the same time, I think, oh, this is just for movie. In this kind of story, the structure of the space is just at the same time the structure of narrative. That kind of integrity.<sup>6</sup>

Given that this interview was conducted in 2006 – half a decade before *Snowpiercer* began production in earnest – it is unlikely to be mere mythmaking. He is proclaiming his fandom and, however improbably, staking his claim on the cinematic adaptation of the book. Even then, it is already clear that a crucial feature of the text, for Bong, is the harmony between its spaces and its story. As he recounts his perception of that convergence – a perception, remember, that has yet to become anything like a design principle – he draws his spread hands together and then pushes them forward in parallel: the train and the story of the train are fused.

Let us dig deeper into that first encounter. Jerome Baron, who is in charge of foreign rights at Casterman, ascribes the complexities of foreign publication to two sources.<sup>7</sup> First, the French concept of the *droit d'auteur* – moral rights – gives an author continuing approval over the course of the work. By contrast, producers – particularly Hollywood producers – have long required complete authority as a matter of course, part of their efforts to centralize control. US authors may be used to such a situation, as Baron explains it, but because European authors have an expectation of continuing involvement, it is difficult to convince them to ‘give up control at a level they usually don’t’. Second, *whatever* the amenability of the author to adaptation, the publisher’s attempts to monetize the back catalogue are thwarted by the sheer volume of work. Casterman’s backlist includes some 4,000 titles, but Sophie Levie, who handles audiovisual rights, can only concentrate on five to seven per year. These she markets at specific fairs such as Shoot the Book or film markets. That work is only made possible by a prior extension of the title’s reach, thus it remains the case that the key metric for the adaptability of a property is the number of prior translations, even though the print runs for those editions may range from a low of 1,500 in many territories to a high of 5,000 in the United States. In the absence of large, oligopolistic players in the European comics field, transactionality dominates: nearly every relationship is reforged anew; nearly every market extension is rebuilt

from the ground up; every approval is another occasion for the process to become undone. This hand-built nature persists even though Casterman is part of Madrigall, the third largest French publisher.

*Snowpiercer* was, for decades, no different than its list mates. Its first translations appeared in the 1980s in Italy and Spain, then Greece. There were discussions in the mid-1980s about an adaptation with French actor-producer Robert Hossein, but Jacques Lob, who had ultimate authority, resisted.<sup>8</sup> Later, in roughly 1987, Lob enlisted his friend Benjamin Legrand to do the adaptation. 'Frankly it bores me,' Lob said. The two would sign a contract with an unnamed production company, then argue among themselves (about what also remains mysterious) and the project would be dropped. The result was doubly semi-ironic: the friendship frayed over the project that went nowhere, but that frustrated attempt positioned Legrand to continue the *Snowpiercer* series as its semi-authorized-legatee writer. Lob died in 1990; in 1999, Legrand and artist Jean-Marc Rochette would produce volume 2; and the next year there were again discussions with the earlier producers about re-acquiring the rights. Nothing came of them.

Already, one can see why Baron's account began with the complexities introduced by the *droit d'auteur* system. The long history of failed attempts to film *Transperceniege* emerged not from a fundamental unwillingness but from the proliferation of frustrating conditions. But Baron's account also expresses his frustrations with the limits placed on adaptability by the small amount of attention each title can receive and the difficulties in properly sequencing the expansion of a title's availability, hence its adaptability.

That adaptation logjam was broken five years later. Alongside the balky system of piecemeal property extension through translation and fitful adaptation through extensive negotiations lies a far more flexible system of piracy and happenstance. In the case of *Snowpiercer*, a Korean publisher issued an unauthorized version in 2004. It may, or may not, have been based on an authorized serialization agreed to in 2000 – Casterman's records are sketchy.<sup>9</sup> It was undertaken as part of 'the first wave of translations of European material to Japan and Korea', in the early 2000s as Baron describes it.<sup>10</sup> Here, again, we see the small-scale expansion of the model: more territories improve the intermedial adaptability of the text. But if adaptability is a possibility on the horizon, the actuality of the system behind it is a semi-regular process of translation in which a constellation of intermediary institutions (that is, similar publishers and bookshops) feeds a niche market (that is, college kids and genre film-makers). That configuration affirms the reliability of a market for semi-unauthorized entrants (the translation). The appearance of an object, then, regardless of its legitimacy, becomes the crucial occasion for the operation of intraindustrial capital: Bong's *taste* confirms the suitability of the object for adaptation and that confirmation can be leveraged into the proffering of actual capital necessary to begin the process.

In the ordinary telling, Bong is immediately taken with *Transperceneige* and decides that it will be his next project – or the project after that since *Mother* was already in development. Still, such moments of effective affection require the mobilization of any number of ancillary systems. Here, those systems are routed through director Park Chan-wook, who has a production company and a development fund that will allow *him* to serve as an even more direct vehicle between capital and cinematic development. In keeping with the usual protocols of career management among successful creative workers, Park asks Bong whether he has any idea of what he will work on next. Park’s company then makes inquiries about the rights to the book, and, as *Histoires du Transperceneige*, a making-of coffee-table book, describes it, the Korean publisher and Casterman ‘intelligently’ ‘normalize their relations: the “pirate” translation ... is transformed into an official edition. No more anomalies in the landscape: *Everything is back in line so that Bong Joon-ho is able to take control of his project.*’ The ‘traduction sauvage’ is legalized.<sup>11</sup> Now, the object can become part of a regular system of contract. Here we find the characteristic alignment of serendipity, taste and borderline illegality that gives rise to an aura of indie auteurism. We also find that the public story crowds out the decidedly less hip process of retroactively negotiating for the rights to the underlying work. Finally, we see in the immediate recourse to train-talk (‘back in line’ ‘take control’) a principle of production discourse: when systems reinforce each other, the allegorical becomes irresistible.

With the legal mechanics of the adaptability of the text taken care of, and with the promise of access to some degree of financing, those systems can assume an ancillary position. Now Bong’s own credibility as an auteur constitutes a countervailing figure of creativity that can serve as real capital’s proxy in the negotiations. *He* can impress Legrand and Rochette; he can be the one to solicit their participation. Their authors’ rights can be transferred in part because within that transfer there is no weakening of the *notion* of authorship. The moral principle is maintained. Thus, to dial out a bit, the ethical seriousness that Bong’s oeuvre carried even at that point can function as the stalking horse in an indie production strategy. The Frenchmen wouldn’t have sold out for a mere payday; they know Bong isn’t just buying.

In practice – again, this is the emergence of the allegorical in situations of systemic reinforcement – this will mean enlisting both Legrand and Rochette as silent-witness extras on the movie. Moreover, Rochette will serve as the on-set artist, drawing the images that are attributed to the character of The Painter (Clark Middleton). Authorship thus survives not only through the proxy of Bong but in metonym. That surplussive, happy relationship is then – as always – seized upon by the publicity apparatus and plugged back into the distribution process. In the extensive making-of documentary, Rochette in particular becomes a sympathetic figure, a thorny artist-for-hire

whose career is revitalized by the *Snowpiercer* deal. From his work on-set to his trips to the Korean premieres to shots of him in his new Berlin studio, Rochette's story is one where the global system of transmediation has not only been *fair* but where the pursuit of cinematic art has had other beneficial effects (Figure 8.1). Furthermore, as the aesthetic conscience of the property, Rochette solidifies the idea that what independent production offers is the chance at multivalent authorship, distributed according to desert. But if *Snowpiercer's* origin story is imagined as the fortuitous tale of authorial or artistic talent finding and fostering itself across the globe, the infrastory of the production shifts the register of that globalism towards a more modular and more regularized approach.

A bit of background: the world has frozen. All that remains of humanity lives aboard a thousand-car train, a nearly perpetual motion machine that loops, endlessly, around the planet. The first volume of the graphic novel tells the story of one man's movement forward from the nightmarish cars at the tail of the train to the upper-class carriages towards the front. And



**FIGURE 8.1** Images of Marc Rochette: drawing for the camera; drawing on camera; and the array of drawings decorating the painter's bunk. By connecting Rochette's work on the graphic novel with his work on set, the production was able to finesse the questions of artistry at the heart of the adaptation: 'Le Transperceniege: From the Blank Page to the Black Screen' (dir. Jesús Castro-Ortega, 2015), on *Snowpiercer* (RadiusTWC/Starz/Anchor Bay, 2015; Blu-Ray).

while there are similarities in his affect, the progress is entirely different. In the graphic novel, he sneaks around the outside of the train before ducking back inside. In the movie, he leads a collective from the tail as they fight their way forward. The adaptation also adds a vast array of characters; a history of revolts and the cold instrumentalization of those conflicts; Mason, a managerial figure played by Tilda Swinton; a religious cult of personality centering on Thomas Wilford (Ed Harris), the train's inventor; a legacy of anthropophagy in the tail cars; and drug-induced telepathy that helps the insurgents reach the front.

Unlike the Bong's initial discovery of the book, which was a material collision, the adaptation process was spatially dispersed and digitized. In that sense, *Snowpiercer* offers a window into ordinary screenwriting processes as a result of its specifiable differences. 'Screenplay studies' is still an emerging field of inquiry. On the one hand, there is a robust history of attention to the collaborative effort that goes into a screenplay and to the ways in which, as a document, the screenplay exerts a disciplining force over the production once it is put into action. On the other hand, screenplay studies, as of now, lacks the long-standing traditions of attention to digital textuality one finds in literary criticism (this trend is charted in Matthew Kirschenbaum's book *Track Changes*, for instance).<sup>12</sup> There are, to be sure, fragmentary accounts of the consequences of screenwriting software such as Final Draft, for example, Julian Hoxter's essay on screenwriting in the 1980s and 1990s. As Hoxter explains, these programmes 'facilitated online collaboration and moved a project more seamlessly all the way from first draft through production. ... Built into the design of these new programs was an assumption that the screenwriting process was not a solitary endeavor.'<sup>13</sup>

In the case of *Snowpiercer*, that collaborative flow could not rest on the screenwriting software alone. Initially Bong generated a thirty-page, fleshed story outline in Korea that was then translated and sent (digitally) to Kelly Masterson, then in New Jersey.<sup>14</sup> At the same time, Masterson was also sent a hastily prepared English version of the graphic novel (Figure 8.2). The JPEGs of individual pages show that dialogue in the word balloons has simply been obscured and then English text in comic sans has been entered over it. (The translation and lettering are not the same as the version published to coincide with the movie's release.) Masterson converted Bong's outline into standard Hollywood screenplay form. That version was then translated back into Korean for Bong's contributions, then back into English and so on. Such translations, as well as the on-set translation once the movie entered production, were usually handled by fresh-out-of-film-school Koreans or Korean-Americans.<sup>15</sup> Thus while the script would eventually take its standard place as a production reference document for budgeting and dialogue, and while it would be broken into smaller chunks for storyboarding, at this early stage it did far more. Its iterations set the pattern for the marshalling





**FIGURE 8.2** *The materiality of global exchange. The upper image shows the quickie translation provided to screenwriter Kelly Masterson early in the process. The English dialogue is jammed into the balloons. The lower image is the same page from the published English translation, more idiomatic and better positioned (Production document courtesy Kelly Masterson; Jacques Lob and Jean-Marc Rochette, *Snowpiercer*, Vol. 1 [Titan Comics, 2014], 11).*

of additional labour (translation). That labour would prototype the transmediations the movie both relied on and would market.

Scripts are also central objects in the provision of 'notes' – that ritualized feedback process that allows for both the maximum delegation of authority and, in theory, the maintenance of executive oversight. But in contrast

to typical studio film-making, *Snowpiercer*'s script meetings were held entirely via videoconference (Skype) and between Masterson and Bong *alone*, without the participation of studio execs or producers and without extensive written exchanges. Masterson attributed these departures from the norm to Bong's influence, not the studio's modesty. He and Bong had their first interaction on 31 August 2010. In May 2011 they had reached agreement; by July they had a first draft. Three passes later, the script was ready to shoot. The heavily digital adaptation process was discursively configured around Bong's unique status which in turn insulated the project from outside interference and reduced the lines of authority dramatically.

The Korean studio infrastructure was more traditional. Park Chan-wook's Moho Films have a production/distribution deal with CJ Entertainment, which, along with Lotte, Orion and Next World, dominate the Korean industry, with over 90 per cent of the market. CJ in particular is the largest theatre owner in South Korea (nearly half of all cinemas) which for years helped it maintain its position at the top of annual market share rankings.<sup>16</sup> Korea's massive diversified conglomerates (*chaebols*) have also been at the forefront of the effort to rationalize production in the country. Bong's deal with Moho guaranteed him sufficient funds to go forward. Casting followed, and principal photography took place in the spring and summer of 2012.<sup>17</sup>

In the lead up to production in 2012, the crucial factor shifted away from the adaptation of the property or a budget guarantee to the actual mechanics of the set and the orchestration of principal photography. Again, labour and material concerns dovetailed. Even before Czech production designer Ondrej Nekvasil was hired, Bong knew that he wanted a studio where a vast section of the train could be built. In particular, for the breakout sequence, the production would need four cars on separate gimbals. The crucial term is 'need'. Here, need does not mean something like 'must have if the project is to be complete at all', but rather 'would be required to complete the project in a way up to Bong's preferred standard', a standard that would, of course, be subject to negotiation and, of course, evolve. How that need would interact with the budget is a crucial question. For example, instead of gimbals, the production might have relied on the 'poor man's process' where the camera tilts and the actors sway like the crew of the Starship Enterprise when it takes a blast from a photon torpedo. Such a workaround is always an option, but it is a cheap-looking option. Saving that money and reducing the movie's production values at the early stages can interact negatively with the production's ability to attract its preferred talent mix, including both below-the-line technicians and actors, and that weakness can in turn hinder the production's ability to generate publicity and its presales profile, thus further dampening the budget overall. Again, these chains of value-interaction are hand-built in the case of *Snowpiercer*, not set in advance as part of a slate budget. At CJ or Mojo there were likely models for forecasting potential revenue, but because this was budgeted as the most

expensive ‘Korean’ production to date, those comps were necessarily slightly speculative. So while there is remarkable coherence to the production, it is nevertheless contingent at each decision point.

While the primary production constraint is the need for a very long soundstage, at the same time, every large production is also eager to shoot in a jurisdiction that will provide a substantial production incentive. Given that the global system of production incentives is largely mature, the production likely only needed to *find* that studio because the odds were that it would be located in a jurisdiction where motion pictures enjoy favourable tax status. As a result, the production’s *discourse* could be shaped around the material circumstances necessary to realize Bong’s vision, and the production’s desire to find the best deal could take a backseat. In this case, Barrandov studios in Prague is large enough to accommodate the train, and the Czech Film Commission incentive is 20 per cent of Czech spend, with an additional bonus for VFX work undertaken in-country.<sup>18</sup> Bong got his stage; the production got its subsidy.

That incentive structure was the outcome of a continent-wide scramble for film and video production. The Czech Republic had in the post-Cold War 1990s enjoyed the advantages of historically preserved locations, highly skilled labour and a convenient central European location. Subsequently Hungary and Germany both managed to lure away productions through aggressive tax policy changes. In the Republic, Ludmila Claussova was the point person in convincing the legislature to support a Czech Film Commission that would rebalance the production landscape; the CFC was launched in 2004. The overall effect was a race to the bottom: each jurisdiction touted the size of its incentives and the ease with which expenses could be recouped. That incentive structure stabilized at 20–25 per cent of overall, in-country spending. While production tax credits have not been increasing, they have proven remarkably resistant to reduction even in periods of stark austerity (table 8.1). Such credits were firmly in place in ~~the~~ 2012 even as the Czech Republic ran up record budget deficits in the wake of the Great Recession. Currently, each year the Republic hosts more than a dozen German films and TV shows, several Scandinavian period subjects, a few marquee US/UK productions, and an increasing number of global streaming series. ‘It’s a good mixture,’ Claussova feels.<sup>19</sup> *Snowpiercer* took its place at the more expensive end of the non-Hollywood productions.

These taxation regimes are not only insulated from macroeconomic cycles, they function almost autonomously. State-sanctioned agencies play less of a role in certifying foreign productions than one might expect. While tax incentives throughout the European Union are contingent upon a ‘cultural test’ in which the project must pass muster, in practice, that test is simply a way of distinguishing between film-and-television and commercials. As Claussova explained, ‘You don’t need to give it so much importance because the cultural test for the film fund is just an instrument. ... Once it passes it

Table 8.1 Tax credits

	California	Louisiana	Czech Republic	UK	Canada	New Zealand	South Korea
<i>Organization</i>	California Film Commission	Louisiana Entertainment	Czech Film Fund	British Film Commission / British Film Institute	Canadian Heritage + provincial organizations	New Zealand Film Commission	KOFIC (Korean Film Council)
<i>Annual Budget</i>	\$330m	\$180m	€31 production; €14 "selective support"	No cap / -£100m	No cap	No cap / \$12m	No cap
<i>% Refunded</i>	20% + 5% Uplift (25% for indie and relocation)	25% + 10% for Louisiana Screenplay + 5% outside New Orleans	20% on Czech spend	25% / n/a	16% on Canadian labor; 20% in Quebec; 35% in British Columbia	20% + 5% Uplift / n/a	25%
<i>Form</i>	Non-Transferrable Tax Credit	Tax Credit, transferrable to state at 88%	Cash Rebate	Cash Rebate / Recoverable Grant	Refundable Tax Credit (usually)	Cash Grant / Cash grant	Cash Grant

Test	Allocation via "Jobs Ratio" with bonuses for VFX, shooting outside Los Angeles, etc.	None	European Union Cultural Fund and Production criteria points system	Cultural co-production / Grantmaking Committee	None	Test for Uplift / Grantmaking Committee	Committee Evaluation (Tourism, Film Industry, Engagement)
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California: <http://film.ca.gov/tax-credit/the-basics-2-0/>  
Louisiana: <https://louisianaentertainment.gov/film/motion-picture-production-tax-credit>  
Czech: <http://www.filmcommission.cz/en/incentives/cultural-test/>  
UK BFI: [https://www.bfi.org.uk/2022/financial\\_plan.html](https://www.bfi.org.uk/2022/financial_plan.html)  
Canada: <https://www.canada.ca/en/canadian-heritage/services/funding/cavco-tax-credits/film-video-production-services.html>  
Quebec: <http://www.qfrc.ca/tax-incentives/information/>  
BC: <https://www.creativebc.com/programs/tax-credits/film-incentive-bc/>  
NZ: <https://www.nzfilm.co.nz/international/screen-incentives>  
ROK: <http://www.koreanfilm.or.kr/eng/coProduction/locIncentive.jsp>

passes. [The] criteria are so broad that somehow any project can pass.<sup>20</sup> Most larger productions make initial contact with the facility (Barrandov) or local production service companies with a track-record of handling major motion pictures. In this case, Stillking is the crucial partner, and they worked with *Snowpiercer* from the start. Thus while the production received the fourth largest incentive in the half-decade of austerity from 2010 to 2015 (on a \$39 million budget), the Film Fund played little role in linking it to its key Czech talent – its production designer, VFX firms, studio or production services company.<sup>21</sup> The state is along for the ride.

When national or local subsidy schemes ‘succeed’, they not only efface the active intervention of the state – converting state endorsements into ‘neutral’ tax policies – they also leave behind institutional, technological, material and labour resources for future productions in roughly the same location.<sup>22</sup> That geographic convergence reinforces the temporal disruption of the production process under new digital regimes. The formerly linear vision of sequential phases of production – development, pre-production focusing on design and casting, principal photography and post-production focusing on editing, sound and visual effects – has been all but replaced by a vision of coincident phases spread across multiple *sites*.<sup>23</sup> With *Snowpiercer*, and as a result of the Czech tax credits, many of those sites are collocated in the Republic.<sup>24</sup>

That constellation of sites continues into the-phase-formerly-known-as-post-production, where VFX firms in both Korea and the Czech Republic (UPP) worked in concert. But without the extra subsidy, both editing and sound were principally located in Korea. In contrast to the separated but rather linear writing process, production and post-production were wildly dispersed spatially *and* temporally. Sound, for example, was a Pacific Rim operation overseen by Bong’s long-standing sound partners in Korea, Live Tone. Live Tone’s work was supplemented in three ways. First, legendary New Zealand sound designer Dave Whitehead produced novel train sounds. Second, Whitehead drew on a new commercially available library of train sounds from Boom Library. Third, the final sound mix was done at Technicolor at Paramount in Los Angeles.

If that spatial dispersal is typical of the current global system, Bong’s relationship with Live Tone is not. As Nikki Y. Lee and Julian Stringer have demonstrated, Bong and Live Tone have a unique partnership. Over time, their working relationship has tightened, and Bong has brought the sound studio into his projects earlier and earlier. By the time he was making *Snowpiercer*, Live Tone was providing Bong with ‘film sound maps’ – ‘a full-service written document detailing all manner of conceptual and logistical arrangements at the earliest stage of pre-production’.<sup>25</sup> Lee and Stringer argue this document is a unique instantiation of Randy Thom’s contention that productions should engage in ‘screenwriting for sound’, and it surely seems to be. But even Live Tone’s CEO Ralph Tae-young Choi concedes that

the company finds its way into the earliest stages of Bong's projects because he is 'the only person who has a clear concept about the sound from the pre-production process'.<sup>26</sup> The digitally driven disarticulation of the production/post-production processes has allowed for the rearrangement of both their sequencing and, to a degree, a reshuffling of their hierarchical relations. In most cases, the system restabilizes around an economically rational allocation of work by site and quality (large soundstages; good VFX talent). But the relative openness of the hierarchy allows for auteurist reshaping; in this case, a rare prioritization of sound design.

At the same time, though, the early and meaningful involvement of the sound studio is in keeping with a discourse one finds in virtually every craft: bring us on board earlier. Whether production or costume design, cinematography or visual effects, sound or music, all argue for the importance of early participation.<sup>27</sup> What the digital turns in craftwork have allowed for is a contingent reshuffling of the order in which those crafts are engaged. That is, the ability to reconfigure separable aspects of the division of cinematic labour may be digitally enabled, but because such aspects revolve around shifting constellations of material and digital facture, they benefit from regular consultation. While a craft might be temporally shifted or spatially dispersed, the overlapping of what had been linear phases of the process has now become a production model.

Or, rather, it has become the ground for a set of possible production models. In the one I have been tracing, that model is able to foster and sustain a broad consensus – among craft workers, cast members, funders, marketers and audiences – ~~that~~ the director not only meaningfully shapes the story we see and hear but also the order and intensity with which the forces of production are brought to bear. In Director Bong's case, a process of simultaneous engagement with the range of technical and aesthetic dimensions of the movie helps cultivate his reputation for attention to detail – 'Bong-tail' – while at the same time giving rise to a unique preeminence to the soundtrack. By contrast, in a major Hollywood studio production, a similar convergent process serves as a guarantor of the progress of the production as a corporate-sanctioned – even corporate-authored – endeavour. So, as Marvel producer Kevin Feige explains, beginning with *Iron Man* it became standard practice to gather department heads for weekly design meetings during 'pre-production'. Those conferences in turn served as the model for both the Marvel Cinematic Universe from then on and for director Jon Favreau's work on Disney digital live-action movies beginning with *Jungle Book*.<sup>28</sup>

It is time to bring to the fore a final crucial aspect of *Snowpiercer's* articulation of its conditions of production with its continuing status as a lucky convergence of possibilities: how the modularity of the indie production struggle is figured in the modular progress through the train. The linear globalism of the train's path seems to be a particular key that

unlocks the figurative heart of the system. In the case of *Snowpiercer*, Bong is hooked by the allegory. He is, as I discussed above, taken with the idea that the progress of the train in space is the progress of the narrative. In the climactic confrontation, Wilford will praise the story we have just seen as ‘the great Curtis revolution: a blockbuster production with a devilishly unpredictable plot’. Yet that spatio-temporal convergence is only part of what draws him: ‘What I found so interesting [is] that social segmentation, behind the wagons at the head for the privileged classes. ... There are survivors, but they are divided into different classes. And the division of the classes finds an echo in the structure of the train itself. That is certainly what most attracted me to this story.’<sup>29</sup> Thus the structure of the train allegorizes the class structure while the progress of the train allegorizes the narrative form.

One might push that doubled convergence even further. What attracts Bong is not one single allegory or a simple chain that would link allegories of social stratification to spatial progress to narrative form. Rather, what lies at the core of *Snowpiercer*’s figurative power is the fungibility of the allegory as such, its deployability across scales. Those scales span the individual story of Curtis fighting his way from one paternal figure to another, to the design language of the train cars, to the looping route the train – and the movie – take through the global circuits of production and distribution that link the movie’s facture to its exhibition, circuits that ultimately run through the homes of key actors – Korean, British, American and French. The train movie is thus an emblem *for* Bong but also an emblem of the translatability of this movie *for* others.<sup>30</sup> And just as the territory-by-territory expansion-via-translation process undergirded *Snowpiercer*’s adaptability, so the successful conclusion of territory-by-territory distribution deals is necessary for its profitability. In each of those negotiations, the decision that matters is not whether to advance but whether that advance will be joined or resisted.

As complex or malleable as those further dimensions of Director Bong’s investment in the story are, and as powerful as they were in enlisting others, there is still another, competing imaginary. If trains are modular, linear, vectorized, path-dependent, scheduled and so forth, train movies routinely instantiate direct contrasts to those aspects: the passage from car to car that links the modules; the separability of cars that breaks the unity of the train as such; the station stop and the crash which undercut the train’s ability to figure momentum; the slow curve which foregrounds the limitations of its linearity; the moment when the train is thrown into reverse which highlights the strongly vectorized nature of the engine; those stretches when the train is running late giving lie to the train’s inevitability. *Snowpiercer* holds in abeyance some of the usual aspects – the separability and crashability of the train appear only very late in the movie – while it alters the nature of a train’s schedule, reconfiguring it as a matter of cycles and geography, a lap



a year, with anniversaries celebrated at the Ykaterina Bridge and Tunnel. But whether held in abeyance or reconfigured, these are the usual versions of the train.

What trains are not is instantaneous and nonlinear. Those versions of space-time require a different figuration. For most of the production, Bong imagines the nonlinear in the modular, artisanal form of the drawing. Such drawings can be ordered and reordered, as in the storyboard; or arrayed, as in the production design images that surround Nekvasil. Further, those images can be searched, swiped through in an easy succession (Figure 8.3). Those versions of the nonlinear, though, can be betrayed. Curtis's passage from the tail to the engine turns out not to be a tale of moral declension. What looks like a journey from the nurturing father Gilliam (John Hurt) to the bad dad (Ed Harris) turns out not to be an ethical journey at all. Gilliam is not the source of resistance to the technocratic calculations of the engineer but rather his *supplier*. The great betrayal of the film is the discovery that the eruption of the revolution is itself part of a plan, scheduled not according to a temporal cycle but to a Malthusian one in which 'individual units kill off other units'. And what makes that schedule possible is the instantaneous, telephonic communication of the head and the tail.



**FIGURE 8.3** *Images of nonlinearity appear throughout the production. Like the array of Rochette drawings in Figure 8.2, the upper images can be shuffled in time. On the left, the storyboards; on the right, production designer Ondrej Nekvasil discusses the revolutionary plot in front of key design images. The lower images capture the instantaneous connection of engine and tail: 'Le Transperceniege: From the Blank Page to the Black Screen.'*

This, I want to say, is the movie's understanding of the dependence of its indie globalism on a mode that is not modular and artisanal, but instantaneous. As producer Dooho Choi explained:

We like to joke that without Skype we couldn't have made *Snowpiercer*. Credit to Skype. At the time it was really just Skype. Most of the development I was in LA and Bong was in Seoul ... it was really about doing a lot of Skyping ... that's really how we were able to do this global project if you will ... even during our postproduction VFX reviews Bong was editing in Seoul; post-production was in Los Angeles, Prague, South Korea, London, Germany, Los Angeles, Vancouver.<sup>31</sup>

When the film was looking for American distribution at the American Film Market in 2012, CJ, the Korean major, negotiated with The Weinstein Company. Choi and Bong read Peter Biskind's *Down and Dirty Pictures* as preparation, in an effort not to get screwed.<sup>32</sup> They pretty much got screwed. Presented with Bong's final version, Weinstein demanded twenty minutes be cut; Bong resisted and apparently prevailed – not on contractual grounds but based on an unsuccessful preview screening of the shortened version. Nevertheless Weinstein moved the distribution from the flagship studio to Radius-TWC, the VOD arm of the company. In the United States, then, *Snowpiercer* was only released in a few theatres for a brief window before being pushed to streaming. It received no theatrical release at all in other major Anglophone territories. And while it performed very well as a VOD feature, and while there was a great deal of trade press coverage of this 'new mode' of distribution, it seems certain that the Weinsteins left money on the table.

What made the sacrifice of the Anglophone markets a plausible option for CJ and Bong was the combination of their reduced financial interest – the title had been presold – and the movie's runaway success elsewhere. In Korea it was the third most successful film of 2013, and it performed very well in France and China.<sup>33</sup> However improvised and compromised, then, the result of this piecemeal negotiation looks like an arrangement of sufficient systematicity that we might say that it is the emerging norm for indie and streaming service alike: A movie with sufficient theatrical potential will be screened, or perhaps not, territory by territory, more or less at the same time around the globe. That system was novel enough with *Snowpiercer* that the serious arguments between Bong, Choi and the Weinsteins could be reprocessed in Slatepitch contrarianism as an innovative model: 'What the Economics of "Snowpiercer" Say about the Future of Film.'<sup>34</sup>

Following this trainwreck of distribution, it is no surprise that Bong's next movie, *Okja*, was distributed by Netflix. Nor is it a surprise that its socio-industrial allegory turned *not* on the disruption of a looped, linear process (cinematic rollout) but on the simultaneous development of independent

life forms – Super Pigs – in strategically chosen locations around the globe (simultaneous distribution). No longer required to line up and pull together (the indie train), each of *Okja*'s Super Pigs is left to grow on its own. Such a complex process requires explication. Where *Snowpiercer* divides its exposition between opening titles and an animated documentary played for schoolchildren much later in the movie, *Okja* combines the two into its opening. Tilda Swinton explains the impending Super Pig competition while slick graphics play behind her. As the backstory unrolls, Swinton's tale of hand-selected local farmers is punctuated by the various producers' credits, announcing an allegory where the 'livestock industry' stands in for our contemporary global digital distribution system for movies and television and in which Netflix boss Ted Sarandos is able to stand out as 'the expert'.

Neither the conclusion of *Snowpiercer*'s production and initial distribution nor the continuing evolution of Director Bong's career constitutes the end of this story. It is tempting to regard the production as a redoubt of the sort of creative serendipity that is often eradicated from major studio moviemaking. If one makes such a mistake, then the existence of a range of diligent lawyers, agents, producers and others looms threateningly over ~~the~~ Bong's authorship or even art more generally. To conceive instead those contingencies as nevertheless a part of the system that seems to oppose studio movie making at every turn requires that the supporting systems reinforce each other. That reinforcement, in turn, allows Bong's unique agency to span the production, from the discovery of the graphic novel to the renegotiation of a distribution agreement.

Yet even that configuration misplaces the industrial significance of *Snowpiercer*. As with Bong's other movies, *Snowpiercer* dwells on questions of consequence and entailment. Ultimately, its significance lies outside its own history, in the ways it revealed to its participants and might reveal to us the contingencies already present in the global production system. The train may wreck, the audience may be unnecessarily limited, but such events seem contingent. For those involved in the project such contingencies also include their negations: happy accidents, possibilities for innovative creative practices enabled by various digital turns and spillover effects from the enlistment of other artists in meaningful work. As a result of the manifold ways in which *Snowpiercer* takes its distance from other global cinematic endeavours, it conveys to its participants, and perhaps to us, a sense that however things are they might be otherwise.