The Ideological Train to Globalization: Bong Joon-ho’s The Host and Snowpiercer

by Brandon Taylor

Bong Joon-ho’s Snowpiercer (2013) is the culmination of the filmmaker’s fascination with and signification of America in relation to South Korea. Throughout his esteemed body of work, Bong’s films have dealt with the pervasiveness of the American empire in a series of diverse ways. In his first feature-length film, Memories of Murder (2003), the United States plays a pivotal role in identifying, or misidentifying, the perpetrator of a series of serial murders. His second film, The Host (2006) represents an ideological pivot towards the American film genre grammar, themes, and photography. Snowpiercer, Joon’s most recent film, with its American actors, Hollywood-level budget, and English as its standard language, ultimately concludes that transition. Christina Klein has contended that Bong’s relationship with America is “ambivalent”, a term that is often used to describe Korean cinema’s relationship with the United States. While Memories of Murder suggested a stark degree of ambivalence, Snowpiercer is utterly saturated with the cultural residue of American cinema, specifically the Blockbuster film. Klein persuasively argues, in 2008, that Bong’s relationship with Hollywood was troubled and that he manipulated typical genre tropes to approximate a certain unique Korean-ness in most of his films. This argument may be ably demonstrated by the oafish depiction of specific Korean characters and the brazenness of the Americans in Bong’s The Host. Even though Bong uses American blockbuster film tropes to approximate and articulate Korean-ness, Snowpiercer represents the filmmaker’s pivot toward subverting, rather than emulating, Hollywood’s filmic language; The Host’s genre-redefining moments are all but absent from his latest film. A cultural materialist analysis would indicate that Bong attempts to create a trans-national film vocabulary with Snowpiercer, subsequently separating himself from both Korean and
American film history in a peculiar hybrid form that uniquely merges both styles.

Bong Joon-ho’s career is inextricably intertwined with the history of Korean national cinema. Klein has argued that Bong’s films “have substantive roots in the Korean Golden Age cinema of the 1950s and 1960s.” Applying the auteur theory to Bong’s films perhaps ignores the cultural materialist processes innate within the filmmaking practice, which has been so often dominated by American Blockbuster cinema. International cultural legibility requires that certain filmmakers adopt American hegemonic film tropes to articulate their creative ambitions in a more universalized fashion. This assertion is particularly true in the case of Snowpiercer. However, tracing back to Memories of Murder, this film is most assuredly situated within a South Korean nationalist discourse in relation to American cinema. Joseph Jonghyun Jeon’s article “Memories of Memories” (2011) articulates an argument similar to the one in reference to Park Chan-wook’s Oldboy (2003). Both Bong’s and Park’s respective films deliberately set out to manage and subvert the national discourse surrounding the way memory operates. This tension resonates with Klein’s assertion that Bong’s films, specifically The Host, owe a particular debt to the “historical continuity of Korean cinema.” In terms of craftsmanship and filmmaking standards, Bong’s films have ignored the limitations typically attributed to a foreign film’s ability to compete with—critically, at least—the American hegemonic standard. His accomplishments are therefore situated in a national imaginary but, with the advent of Snowpiercer, he has extricated himself from the Korean national approach and entered into a liminal space with no assured or concrete discursive formula. Snowpiercer is thus neither an American film nor a Korean film. It operates in a trans-national discourse that makes it culturally illegible to both American and Korean audiences. Conversely, The Host’s critical and cultural legibility is contingent upon its debt to Korean film, national tensions, and the primacy of its genre subversion.

The Host’s plot machinations ably demonstrate the aforementioned ambivalence of South Korea’s cinematic relationship with Hollywood films. There are a series of distinct moments where the American characters are depicted as evil, brainless, deeply corrupt, or simply ineffectual. However, the South Korean characters are not necessarily depicted in a much more positive fashion. The lead character, Park Gang-doo (Song Kang-ho), is an enormously incompetent and feeble man-child incapable of completing the most menial tasks. However, Bong does not seem to be offering a social critique so much as an analysis of the relationship between the national imaginaries of South Korea and America. Klein uses a series of sources to conclude: “modern articulations of Korean national-ism often depend upon the United States as an antagonistic secondary term.” Bong’s depictions are therefore more problematic than a simple binary of evil Americans and heroic South Koreans. The South Korean characters eventually destroy the creature, despite the United States’s incompetent interventions, but it is also ultimately a Pyrrhic victory. As demonstrated by Jeon in an article about Oldboy, titled “Residual Selves” (2009), it seems likely that these types of victories are the only ones possible after the International Monetary Fund (IMF) crisis in South Korea. The Korean heroes have been castrated or infantilized and must assert their authority and masculinity in relation to the American hegemon. This relationship characterizes the ambivalence but it does not seem to totally qualify the need to use distinct Hollywood genre tropes as a definitive quality of the film. The textual connotation of The Host suggests a complex relationship with Hollywood blockbusters but the cultural materialist methods point to something more troubled and less concrete than simple mimicry for national legibility.

The need to find legibility in relation to a cultural
hegemon creates a problematic paradigm wherein the subordinate force cannot truly distinguish itself from the dominant ideological framework. Raymond Williams, in an essay entitled “Dominant, Residual, and Emergent” (1977), traces through cultural materialist processes in relation to a hegemonic force. His argument can be ably mapped onto Bong’s growing filmography as an evolution in the processes by which the South Korean filmmaker apprehends the signification of American genre forms. Williams argues that cultures exist “not only in its variable processes and their social definitions ... but also in the dynamic interrelations, at every point in the process, of historically varied and variable elements.” This assertion resonates with Klein’s argument that Bong’s filmography is indebted to both American and Korean film practices. Her argument falters, however, when she hypothesizes that Bong “appropriates and reworks genre conventions, using them as a framework for exploring and critiquing South Korean social and political issues.” Klein is correct, in a strictly textual sense, that The Host offers an intriguing mix of genre conventions that upend critical expectations and critique South Korean anxieties. However, from a cultural materialist standpoint, this claim exclusively ignores the film’s need to find global cultural legibility in the appropriation and use of Hollywood’s forcibly universalized filmic tropes. Bong’s apprehension of the United States’s mode of signification merely replicates the American lens, points it at South Korea, and creates myriad issues with the representation of the film’s bumbling protagonists. Williams also claims, “[a] distinctive and comparative feature of any dominant social order is how far it reaches into the whole range of practices and experiences in an attempt at incorporation.” The Host both resists and further naturalizes American cinema as the “residual” or epoch of articulating the national imaginary.

Hollywood’s hegemonic dominance of the blockbuster has distinct ideological resonances that often manage to problematize potential subversion. Chris Berry’s “What’s Big about the Big Film?” (2004) opens a space for a diasporic analysis of Hollywood’s blockbuster dominance. He contends, deploying the theoretical framework of Arjun Appadurai’s “Disjunction and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy” (1996), that globalization is “a multiplicity of localized events as different cultures are brought into contact.” The blockbuster consequently occupies a liminal space from both a textual and cultural materialist analysis. Klein’s article buttresses this concept but cannot address the emergence of Snowpiercer as part of Bong’s œuvre. Bong’s latest film is too dependent upon the American genre to be able to resist its cultural materialist influences. The film’s cast even includes Chris Evans, who also plays Captain America in the popular Marvel film series. In a cultural materialist sense, Bong is no longer attempting to use Hollywood genres as a resource to articulate South Korean tensions; he is subverting and repurposing the United States’ blockbuster filmmaking forms to criticize the American caste system. Snowpiercer’s metaphorical themes are clearly illustrated by the film’s plot, as the lowly poor who live at the back of the train try to stage a revolution and change their social conditions. The film
is ripe for a Marxist analysis as it most explicitly deals with the American caste system and its post-2008 economic uncertainty. Whereas The Host dealt strictly with South Korean issues through a subverted genre lens, Snowpiercer is almost explicitly an American film about American anxieties with a titular American hero as the lead character. Clearly, this development represents an ideological shift in how Bong's filmic sensibilities have evolved.

The determinant of this evolution seems to be marked by both creative and economic concerns. Nikki Lee's article, "localized Globalization" (2011), argues that The Host demarcated a reversal of South Korea's global intentions with their film industry. Lee notes, "[the] box-office success of The Host marks a consummation of [South Korea's] intense industrial momentum ... [and] provides evidence of a frontier disjuncture between the nationalist ideology appropriated by the domestic film industry and its economic interests. This trend enabled Bong to attract his attention to a wider global film audience and thus Snowpiercer emerges. However, it is pertinent to note that Bong's signification of a global film entails a white lead actor, English as the primary spoken language, and lavish special effects dotted throughout. Considering the critical arguments of Jeon, Lee, and Klein, it seems likely that Bong's subversive use of genre typification and standard Hollywood blockbuster tropes is not merely a gesture towards purely emulating the American film model; instead, it offers the emergence of a trans-national film vocabulary, extricating Snowpiercer from both Korean and American film language in a peculiar hybrid that merges both styles. Curiously, though, the film's critical reception in the United States has been almost uniformly positive. Bilge Ebiri, a writer with Rolling Stone magazine, contends that Snowpiercer is "a piece of [Hollywood] counterprogramming that's hands down the coolest movie of the summer."

Ebiri's and Lee's assertions appear to be at odds with the filmmaker's intentions. Snowpiercer features subtle genre variations and Bong's signature auteurist flourishes, but it manifests itself as a film that is very much part of the typical Hollywood programming, rather than ambivalent South Korean counterprogramming.

Snowpiercer's Marxist intentions are nearly explicit and critically engaging with them might prove to be reductive in an analysis that relates to this paper's central argument. Instead, it may be productive to analyze the use of the imagery of the global train, the film's racially and geographically diverse cast, and the environmental disaster that is the film's inciting incident. Klein notes that, in The Host, Bong has a "strategy of arranging [a] genre's 'Lego pieces' in a way that opens up a space for Korean realities." The inverse appears to be true with Snowpiercer. Bong utilizes his auteurist style and American "lego pieces" to assemble a discursive space for globalized realities. The titular train runs a course that stretches across the entire globe in a constant loop, traversing a post-apocalyptic snow-scape. The environmental disaster that is swiftly explained in the film's prologue is part of a global event that has impacted the entire world. In a way, it is merely an expanded version of the threat found in The Host. Bong has apprehended the cultural materialist apparatus of the Hollywood blockbuster film, with South Korean financiers, and subsequently extended and globalized his film's concerns. The three aforementioned textual elements are in distinct contrast with The Host's narrower concerns, which include the mutant beast, the strictly South Korean main cast, and the American-made environmental crisis that leads to the mutation of the film's monster. Based on Snowpiercer's reception in the United States and the rest of the West (the film currently sits at 95%, with over 164 reviews, on rottentomatoes.com), it seems likely that Bong was successful at developing a trans-national film that addresses global concerns rather than strictly South Korean anxieties.

The Host and subsequently Snowpiercer demonstrate that Lee's article establishes Bong's globalized intentions and South Korean film's economic interests. However, a cognitive dissonance appears to occur when film scholars attempt to draw conclusions about Korean film's need to address national interests and signify a new globalized version of the Hollywood blockbuster. Berry, in his conclusion, openly wonders "how Korean blockbusters engage local Korean issues and what possibilities and limitations are imposed upon them by the blockbuster strategy. Snowpiercer addresses Berry's question in that the globalized blockbuster film applies universal articulation strategies to apprehend and signify meaning for trans-national audiences. Bong's strategy emerged in expanding upon the national tensions of The Host and repositioning them for global audiences in Snowpiercer. As Klein notes, "[genre] also serves as an excellent place to trace the intimate relationship between the global and the local." Therefore, the hegemonic and pervasive force of the American blockbuster has manifested its own demise by creating a shared filmic language that is transferable to a global discourse. Bong's Snowpiercer demonstrates that this subversion has the ability to articulate itself with Western audiences, based on the universal acclaim it has garnered.

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in North America and Western Europe. However, without the extraordinary domestic box office success of *The Host*, the extent of *Snowpiercer*’s globalized reach would not have been possible.

Bong Joon-ho’s complex relationship with South Korea, the United States, and global audiences has shaped the discourse that surrounds both *The Host* and *Snowpiercer*. While the former demonstrably engaged with South Korean audiences, the latter attempts and succeeds in engaging a global audience more specifically within blockbuster terms. The international blockbuster is therefore no longer strictly an American product. As a result, Bong is playing an integral role in shaping the early filmic language of nascent trans-national blockbuster cinema. The trend towards globalization of large-scale films, particularly in South Korea, seems to have emerged due to the ambivalence towards Hollywood cinema. Rather than being absorbed or incorporated, as Williams has asserted, Bong has furthered embedded his subversion to an even larger physical scale. *Snowpiercer*’s explicitly Marxist content might therefore be a call to other national filmmakers to move forward within the international train to apprehend the engine and control their future. The metaphor ably traces through the impoverished early years of South Korean film and its perilous journey through the segmented train cars, growing more prosperous as it travels, until it eventually surpasses the front of the train and destroys the entire dominant system from within. Bong’s *Snowpiercer* ultimately represents a pivot outwards to the rest of the world that signals the death knell of the uniformly styled Hollywood blockbuster and the beginning of a much more complex diaspora of internationally renowned, grandly scaled, trans-national blockbuster films.

**Notes**

2. Ibid., 891.
3. Ibid., 894.
4. Ibid., 877.
9. Ibid., 462-463.
14. 203 critics weighed in on *Snowpiercer*, 193 offered positive reviews and only 10 were negative. The average rating of the critiques, a key indicator of overall enthusiasm, was 8.1, which is quite high.
Robert Alpert, formerly a practicing intellectual property attorney, teaches movies and media at Fordham University and Hunter College in NYC, where he also writes for various publications, including CineAction, Jump Cut and Senses of Cinema.

Gary Bettinson is Senior Lecturer in Film Studies at Lancaster University, UK, author of The Sensuous Cinema of Wong Kar-wai (Hong Kong University Press, 2015), co-author (with Richard Rushton) of What is Film Theory? (McGraw-Hill, 2010), and chief editor of Asian Cinema.

Troy Bordun completed his PhD in Cultural Studies at Trent University in 2015. He has published essays in Studies in European Cinema, CineAction, Synoptique, Offscreen, and Studies in Science Fiction Film and Television, among others, and has forthcoming articles in Cine-Excess, Porn Studies, and The Scattered Pelican. Troy is currently an adjunct instructor in Cultural Studies and Continuing Education at Trent.

Michael Boughn’s Cosmographia: a post-Lucretian faux micro-epic, was short-listed for the Governor General’s Award for Poetry. He co-edited Robert Duncan’s The H.D. Book with Victor Coleman for the University of California Press. City—a poem from the end of the world is forthcoming from Spuyten Duyvil Press (NYC) in 2016. He has also published on Zero Dark Thirty, Black Hawk Down, and other films. He lives in Toronto.

Jean-Pierre Geuens is the author of Film Production Theory. He teaches at the Art Center College of Design in Pasadena, California.

Jinhua Li is Assistant Professor of Chinese Studies and Language at the University of North Carolina Asheville. Jinhua Li received her Ph.D. in Comparative Literature from Purdue University, specializing in comparative cinema studies, transnational cultural studies and gender politics in visual culture.

Richard Lippe teaches film studies at York University. He is currently putting together a book of Robin Wood’s writings.

Lee Clark Mitchell teaches American literature and film at Princeton University, where he is Holmes Professor of Belles-Lettres. His recent essays have focused on Cormac McCarthy, the Coen brothers, Henry James, and noir fiction. Currently, he is completing a book on close reading in modernist American novels, as well as a study of contemporary film Westerns.

Richard Rushton is Senior Lecturer in Film Studies at Lancaster University, UK. He is the author of The Reality of Film (Manchester University Press, 2011), Cinema After Deleuze (Continuum, 2012), The Politics of Hollywood Cinema (Palgrave Macmillan, 2013) and co-author (with Gary Bettinson) of What is Film Theory? (McGraw-Hill, 2010).

Brandon Taylor is a Graduate Student at the University of Victoria in the Medieval and Early Modern Studies (MEMS) stream. He is specifically focused on the critical reception of John Milton and his subsequent impact on religion, philosophy, and politics. He also writes about television and film when time permits.

Editorial Collective

Scott Forsyth, Florence Jacobowitz, Richard Lippe, Susan Morrison
Design: Debi De Santis, Double Dee Creative
Website: Nicole Kay

Mailing address
40 Alexander Street, Suite 705
Toronto, Ontario CANADA M4Y 1B5
Telephone: 416 964-3534

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Front cover: Snowpiercer; Bong Joon-ho
Back cover: Ex Machina, Alex Garland

ISSN 0826-9866
Printed and bound in Canada

cineaction.ca