

(In)Commensurability of Korean Cinema: *International Coproduction of Korean Films in the 2010s*

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Abstract

*Probing into South Korea's international co-produced films in the 2010s, this article assesses Korean films' commensurability in the globalized world sharing capitalist modes of living. Since the 1980s, neo-liberalistic globalization has been in full swing in most part of the world. In the course of this transition, capitalist modes of living, such as economic inequalities, the rise of social precariats, and social fragmentation, have become commonplace conditions easily recognizable by any individual with access to their external world. Since the 2000s, the development of Internet technology and media content in East Asia have created an environment wherein the South Korean film industry has an aspiration to expand its market share beyond Korea in terms of its own globalization. With the media globalization, films co-produced by South Korean and foreign filmmakers have appeared in earnest since 2010. These internationally co-produced films, which endeavor to go beyond the realm of Korean national cinema, address external audiences by seeking commensurability in a way of negotiating global audiences. This paper argues that *Snowpiercer*, *Okja*, and *Parasite* by Joon Ho Bong contain commensurability in addressing international audiences who communize capitalist modes of living.*

Keywords: Korean cinema, (in)commensurability, heterotopia, retrotopia, globalism, Korean film industry in the 2010s, Joon Ho Bong, international coproduction

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Introduction

Global financial crisis, which was triggered by the collapse of Lehman Brothers in the United States in 2007, has influenced on the most capitalist society throughout the 2010s and has briefly stalled the rapid pace of neo-liberalism accompanied by globalism (Roberts 2016, 171–176).¹ Economic inequalities caused by neo-liberalistic economic systems have become so universal that anyone living in a globalized society can commonly recognize them. It has now been less than twenty years since the start of the 21st century and more than 40 years since the initiation of neoliberalism. It has been remarked how this divide is seen in the emergence of “two Americas,”² social inequality has exacerbated other social problems that are not limited to class issues, while low-wage and low-skilled non-regular workers, or “precariats” (Standing 2011, vii) are being mass-produced. The increasing gap between the haves and have-nots has also resulted in social ills, such as a decline in social trust and an increase in crime (Wilkinson 2016). Resistance to inequalities that exposes common problems around the world has also become more visible, such as the Occupy Wall Street movement in New York and protests against the discrimination of non-regular workers in South Korea. As Ulrich Beck points out, however, society with “liquid modernity” has been fragmented and we have entered an “era that individuals must seek, find, interpret and apply solutions to problems caused in society, respectively by using their own skills and resources efficiently” (Bauman 2000). The Occupy Wall Street Movement, in which individuals allied with one another with no clear political purpose, ended with forced dispersion by the state. Meanwhile countless scholars are releasing books on inequality in their respective academic fields, but by producing and profiting from such well-selling books, they only separate themselves further from the have-nots.

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1. As Roberts points out, globalism forces individual states to abandon their diversity in its drive to turn the world into a unified capitalist economic system. Roberts quotes Herman Daly to the effect that economic globalism is the “space into which transnational corporations move to escape regulation by national governments.”
 2. See Caldwell (2014); see also, Cannon (1948).

Neoliberalism has grown in tandem with globalism, and perhaps the best instantiation of the practice of globalism in industry is to be found in the Hollywood film industry. From early on it sensed the importance of the global market and audiences beyond the United States. Even before the 1980s, Hollywood films attracted movie goers around the world, but since the 2000s, when theatrical infrastructure (multiplexes) and distribution networks in foreign markets began to be established, globalized markets have become even more attractive to Hollywood. Having already experienced such American blockbusters as *Jaws* (dir. Steven Spielberg, 1975), *King Kong* (dir. John Guillermin, 1976), *Star Wars* (dir. George Lucas, 1977), and *Terminator* (dir. James Cameron, 1984), global audiences equipped with their infrastructure have become loyal consumers of Hollywood films. Disney's animation films of the 1980s also found new life as remakes in the 2010s, drawing those films' former fans, now in their 30s and 40s, back to theaters. Hollywood films have also become franchised,³ thanks to the expansion of overseas markets, and Hollywood producers are also endeavoring to create more loyal audiences. For instance, in one film they changed an Asian villain of uncertain nationality to a North Korean to avoid complaints from Chinese audiences; or created a new villain from some exotic nation. In addition, the Hollywood film industry has penetrated some globalized markets that have acquired homogeneity with it, by opting to invest in local film productions through a localization strategy.

Against this backdrop, the South Korean film industry is one of only a handful to control 50 percent of its domestic film market share since the 2000s, at the same time that South Korea serves as a market for Hollywood productions.⁴ Moreover, South Korea's film industry has not only aimed at maintaining its domestic market share, but has also prioritized the goal of expanding into global markets (including the United States).⁵ This goal

3. This refers to a collection of serialized films that share the same fictional universe or are marketed as a series.

4. Countries holding over 50 percent of their domestic film market share in 2017 include the United States, India, China, Japan, and South Korea according to the Korean Film Council (hereafter, KOFIC)'s statistics.

5. For details on the Korean film policy implemented by KOFIC before 2015, see KOFIC's

was set because the Korean film industry, which cannot amortize domestic production costs as can its counterparts in China and Japan, had to amass external investments in order to complete its big budget projects. And the global increase of platforms and channels for media content in the East Asian region was one of the reasons the Korean film industry dreamed of expanding overseas markets. But shortcoming of South Korean films compared to those of Hollywood is that the former have too short a history to be competitive with Hollywood's preponderance, and to find external audiences familiar with them, and further, the medium of film is not impromptu enough to count on the Korean Wave (Hallyu) for its overseas success.⁶ Then, with what strengths then is Korean cinema trying to enter the global market? I would like to examine whether South Korean films work well or find commercial success in overseas markets in this era of capitalistic homogeneity built by globalism.

In this article, I will expound the (in)commensurability of Korean films produced through the international co-production process since the 2010s. Thomas S. Kuhn suggested the concept of incommensurability in his book *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* and it has been interpreted as the impossibility of comparisons between different paradigms (Kuhn 1970, 148). While his concept of incommensurability endures as a source of inspiration for linguists, historians, and philosophers, the question by Marx recited by Paul Willeman is still effective regarding the (in)commensurability of Korean films in the transnational film industry environment: "How is it possible for cultural productions that are formed within one set of social-historical conditions to be 'appreciated' in other social-historical configurations?" (Willeman 2007, 485). Willeman again directly asks, "How is it possible for a twenty-first-century European to appreciate Korean cinema, or any other non-European cinema, for that matter?" (Willeman 2007, 485). He maintains that understanding is not about "the question of

website do. Here the goal of global expansion is clearly by the fact it has taken an international coproduction approach as a strategy, supported by the global film policies that the KOFIC has steadily pursued after 2000.

6. The Korean Wave began in the late 1990s with exported Korean TV shows and K-pop music to Japan and China in East Asia, which refers to the expansion of the realm of Korean cultural media content. Contrary to these genres, the film requires the elapse of time for production.

where the film director's nationality is and where the film's production costs come from." Pointing out that despite his "lack of familiarity with Korean history," he can relate to the way a Korean film poses the questions in a Korean context, and its terms and the "way they are deployed" give him "a way into its historical constellation." In other words, this is a question about how audience can deal with the way a film deploys its historicity.

Since the 2000s, the Korean film industry (and the related national institution) has determined the goal of producing films that address outside audiences, not just Korean ones. This study also seeks to explore how Korean cinema, which has adopted a strategy of co-production (international pre-sales), addresses an external audience and how it seeks to pursue commensurability in different worlds with different social and historical configurations. By analyzing director Joon Ho Bong's international co-produced films in particular, I will probe into the terms related to Korean social-cultural specificity: the capitalist modes of living in the milieu of neo-liberalism and globalism. I argue that South Korean films, represented by director Joon Ho Bong, acquire commensurability by addressing external audiences through representations of globalized-capitalist modes of living.

Theorizing

Why look at the coproduced Korean films and the industry related in particular? How perceive audiences and stakeholders related for the coproduced films? Accounts of international coproduction in South Korea have analyzed its historicity and phenomenon, focusing heavily on the status quo of production and reception as promotional strategies in institutions. Kim and Kim (2010), Kim et al. (2013), and Park and Mun (2016) describe imperative methodology of how Korean film producers enter the Chinese film market with the coproduction strategy by making the films with Chinese sovereignty. Depending on a blind favoritism toward transnational coproduction particularly with China, their researches analyze coproduction limited to Chinese partners primarily as a strategy bolted on to existing economic development logics. The industrial analysis is based on the figures and statistics of the thriving Chinese

film industry but overlooks the steady number of South Korean film exports to China. These institutional or promotional research might pretermit audiences and industrial structure in terms of critical study and occlude readers' extension of field of vision to global level.

The broader impetus that animates this article is, "What rationales make Korean films accepted to non-Korean viewers?" Paul Willemen considers the process that a local cultural text encounters capitalism as a basic theoretical framework for comparative film research. He notes that the "encounter" here also involves the capitalist mode through which Korean films have been produced. He also emphasizes that the films from different regions are produced, based on "locally specific encounters with capitalism" (Willemen 2005, 103), and if we can understand different cultures, it is possible because there is one common condition, a "capitalist experience," despite and beyond cultural differences. This capitalist experience refers to what cultural producers and consumers have undergone in most neo-liberalist societies, and in this article, I term it capitalist modes of living. This is possible because the film is an "industrialized cultural form in nature," and Willemen also argues that the key to film studies lies in "the influence and transformative power of local materials and industrialization itself" (Willemen 2005, 103), rather than in the dichotomous relationship of "external form and local material" (Jameson 1993, 13). In other words, Willemen is positioning film studies in the context of the capitalist world system and the globalized film industry. In this article, Willemen's questions is linked to the commensurability of Korean films, and this concept of commensurability is not simply a question of impossibility of translation.⁷

In order to discuss the audience alluded in the previous chapter, I should make mention of Willemen's notion of national cinema. He adroitly notes that "a cinema addressing national specificity" will be anti-nationalistic, "since the more it is complicit with nationalism's homogenizing

7. Sakai (1997) emphasizes the impossibility of translation in individual intra-cultural communities. However, in cultural studies after the 2000s, Sakai's argument is meaningful in that it is necessary to examine commensurability in the common social context of the world system that goes beyond his untranslatability. Since this untranslatability is meaningful for suggesting the possibility of understanding cultural products.

project the less it will be able to engage critically with the complex, multidimensional, and multidirectional tensions that characterize and shape a social formation's cultural configuration" (Willemen 1995, 27). The result is that marginalized films will eventually remain as national cinema, unable to enter a multilayered social and cultural constellation of a state. Likewise, in the case of Korean cinema, it is ironic that the films now able to pursue globalism and to amortize production costs due to its industrial particularity are the ones promoting its nation-state with a nationalist discourse. As aforementioned, Willemen concludes that "the issue of national cinema is ... primarily a question of address, rather than a matter of filmmakers' citizenship or even of the production finance's country of origin" (Willemen 1995, 28). If South Korean films address an outside audience, they will be related to the term and the way of its deployment in them for transnational or global audiences. Therefore, along with (in)commensurability of Korean cinema, the question of addressing renders also the important issue of capitalist modes of living.

Regarding the study of cultural transit in East Asia, Koichi Iwabuchi's pioneering perspective cannot be omitted from the related research. In *Transnational Japan: Popular culture opens up cross-border dialogue in Asia* (2001), Iwabuchi presents a sense of hypocrisy over the transit of Japanese media culture throughout Asia in the 1990s. According to him, Japan and other Asian countries have a historical relationship in the context of Japan's imperialism and colonialism. Yet exports of pop culture by a former imperialist state (Japan) have been successful, even though it was thought they would be met with a negative backlash in these Asian countries. Iwabuchi cites the culturally "odorless" nature of Japan's media culture as the reason. In other words, the erasure of Japan's local characteristics in these media culture products was a determining factor in their economic success as exports. Additionally, their success may also be interpreted as the result of the creation of others who share Japan's capitalist modes.

Iwabuchi also points out that the phenomenon of transnational media culture transit in Asian regions can identify the "dynamics of decentralization" (Iwabuchi 2001, 37) caused by globalization. For instance, America's cultural hegemony declines relatively, as multinational

companies from non-Western states including Japan emerge as new global players. However, Iwabuchi ironically maintains that as Japan's media culture becomes more active, American cultural hegemony will become even more powerful. The reason being the necessity of "Japan's animation industry, which has not established an international distribution channel, to find partnerships or merge to simultaneously eat up various levels of global, regional, national, and local markets, and the necessity of having distribution power in Europe and the U.S. in order to penetrate their global markets" (Iwabuchi 2001, 37). Iwabuchi's astonishing prediction points to the unbalanced distribution network of global media and culture that the Asian film industry, including that of South Korean, currently faces. This is proven by the fact that the Korean film industry's production and distribution have negotiated with global OTT services whereby the structure of the Korean film industry ought to shift.

In addition to allowing for a more nuanced understanding of how coproduced films are received to global audiences in the 21st century's capitalist society, coproduced film texts also expose the tensions that lie within domestic politics and global audiences. In this article, I would like to examine the (in)commensurability of Korean films produced through an international co-production process in the 2010s in terms of addressing external audiences. I seek to explore how coproduced films adopt and negotiate with their strategies to this end, and how they pursue commensurability in different social and political configurations. Through the analysis of director Bong Joon Ho's international coproduced films, I will also probe into the signifiers of capitalist modes of living in globalized society.

Korean Cinema's Experiments in (In)commensurability since 2000: Globalization and International Coproduction

To delineate international co-production of the Korean film industry in the 2010s, it is necessary to elucidate media globalization in South Korea from the late 1990s. In South Korea, transnational coproduction across the cultural content industry began in the late 1990s; TV dramas coproduced between

Korea and Japan including *Peurenjeu* (Friends) in 2002, directed by Hogyun Shin, Setoguchi Katsuaki, and Take Keiko; *Byeolui sori* (Star's Echo) in 2004, directed by Nam-won Kim; *Rondo* in 2006, directed by Yamamuro Daisuke; *Cheongugui namu* (Tree in Heaven) in 2006, directed by Jang Soo Lee. In East Asian regions, television producers have been more active and assertive in transnational collaboration than their counterparts in the film industry. Due mainly to the geographical proximity of Korean and China, film coproduction projects have centered on location shooting. Korean and Chinese co-produced films appeared on the scene during this time; *Bichunmu* (dir. Young-jun Kim, 2000), *Musa* (The Warriors; dir. Sung Soo Kim, 2001) and *Anarchist* (dir. Young-sik Yu, 2000), among others. There are three patterns of globalization of the South Korean film industry since the 2000s as follows.

First, the mainstream Korean film industry has planned transnational coproduction projects targeting the Chinese market, where demand for media content has been maximized amid the development of Internet technology and the diversification of channels. Korean film producers have adopted coproduction with China as a strategy for penetrating the Chinese market, which has limited its foreign film imports (S. Kim et al. 2011, 77). East Asia, which obtained both proximity and technology from 2010, became the market where Korean cinema to experiment with (in)commensurability and the community for film production and consumption. Producing and directing films in China, Director Jae-yong Kwak recently completed *Zaishijie zhongxin huhuan ai* (Crying Out in Love; dir. Jae-young Kwak, 2016), a Chinese remake adapted from a Japanese original novel. I designate his films Chinese film, because they thoroughly address Chinese audiences in the Chinese language, as most Korean directors working in China direct films targeting Chinese audience. Outside audiences have few opportunities to view such films in other parts of the world. Besides Kwak, there are other Korean filmmakers who are actively working in China in the 2010s: Tae-ra Shin, Keun-sik Cho, Yoo-hwan Park, and Byeong-ki Ahn to name a few. But since 2016, most of the Korea-China coproduction projects have been canceled due to geo-political issues between South Korea and China, and their co-production projects have remained low as of 2019. The Korean Film Council has also deleted

its policy of supporting international co-productions on their website, such as by providing producers and writers free offices in Beijing, or mentoring screenplays in China and the US.

Another feature of the Korean film's globalization is that Korean filmmakers who had previously only worked in the Korean film industry came to direct American-made films.⁸ Chan-wook Park, Jee-woon Kim and other leading Korean directors went to the U.S. to produce low-budget films. Just as the world recognized foreign directors such as Ang Lee (Taiwan) and Lars Von Trier (Denmark) making their ways to Hollywood, Korean directors' advancement into the American film industry has been perceived as globalization of Korean filmmakers. Director Jee-woon Kim's *The Last Stand* (2013) was shot by a Korean cinematographer and its music was composed by a Korean, but it is an American film funded by American capital. Di Bonaventura Pictures, the producer of Transformers series, was in charge of the film's production and it featured such Hollywood stars as Arnold Schwarzenegger and Forest Whitaker. Director Jee-woon Kim even made a nationalist remark saying, "Please, love this American film a lot"⁹ at the theater for the preview promoting the film in South Korea. *The Stoker* (2013) is director Chan-wook Park's US debut. The Cannes winner Park directed and the cinematographer Jung-hoon Chung joined the project, but it is also an American independent genre film targeting and addressing indie film audiences. Although these films were not successful in any of box offices, they were recorded as one aspect of Korean film's globalization in Korean film history.

Lastly, there was an increase in the number of Korean film productions invested by foreign stakeholders since the 2000s. Hollywood productions have entered the Korean film market as investors of: *Thirst* (dir. Chan-wook Park, 2009; Universal Pictures) and *The Yellow Sea* (dir. Hong-jin Na, 2010;

8. *Yiguoqingyuan* (Love with an Alien; dir. Chang-geun Jeon, Tu Guang-qi, and Wakasugi Mitsuo, 1958) is the first Hong Kong-Korea coproduced film. Director Chang-hwa Jeong and some Korean directors started working in Hong Kong in the 1960s, and their historical context differs from that of the 2010s. In this paper, I focus mainly on international co-productions after the 2000s under globalism and how those films address external viewers.

9. Park (2013).

Twentieth Century Fox). In a different case, *Running Man* (dir. Dongoh Cho, 2012) is a localized film produced by Twentieth Century Fox participating as a main investor and producer. The film was also selected for support by the Korean Film Council as part of a “global project” introduced by the Korean Film Council in 2012 to boost the overseas expansion of Korean film. It is one of the localized projects for the foreign entity, but at the same time, is also a globalization project in the discourse of the Korean film scene. Although a Korean production agency, a Korean director, actors, and staff joined the project, thus making it a thoroughly Korean film, Twentieth Century Fox, a major Hollywood studio, invested 100 percent budget of the production of the film and distributed it to Korean audience. In the film, there is a sarcastic scene where the Korean American suspect uses his US citizenship to evade investigation. Actor Sang-ho Kim, who starred in the film, said, “Money has no borders. A film’s best virtue is that it should be funny.”¹⁰ A different case, *Mr. Go* (dir. Yong Hwa Kim, 2013) is the title invested by the Huayi Brothers, China’s largest private investment and distribution company. Huayi directly invested US\$5 million (approximately ₩5.5 billion) into the film’s production, which is 25 percent of the total production costs of ₩22.5 billion. *Mr. Go* was released as a Korean film in Korea, and as a Chinese film in China. Since the main protagonist speaks Chinese, the film’s main language is Chinese, with some Korean and Japanese mixed in. In China, it was released on more than 5,000 screens and broke even financially, but its Korean box office performance was a crushing flop of only about 1.3 million viewers. As a result, though the film was domestically released as a Korean film, the viewers are the judge whether the film contains an elaboration to address Korean audiences.

Several Korean films have been directly exported overseas and released in various regions, including Sang-ho Yeon’s *Train to Busan* (2016), Jee-woon Kim’s *The Age of Shadows* (2016), Chan-wook Park’s *The Handmaiden* (2016), Seung-wan Ryo’s *The Battleship Island* (2017), Yong Hwa Kim’s *Along with the Gods: The Two Worlds* (2017), and Joon-hwan Jang’s *1987: When the Day Comes* (2017). Most of these films were exported in the circulation of arthouse distribution in Europe/the United States and Asian countries (with

10. Park (2013).

the exception of China) and opened in local theaters. In these cases, mainly the films have already been verified as box office successes in Korea or known through film festivals, and some of them are released only for diasporic Korean audiences unless distributed by local distributors.

Ut supra, Korean cinema has tried to expand its scope to international audiences by experimenting (in)commensurability in terms of globalization. It continues to expand even at this point in time to exploit international coproduction against the backdrop of globalism. In the following chapter, I will examine the commensurability of Korean cinema by analyzing director Joon Ho Bong's *Seolgyuk yeolcha* (Snowpiercer, 2013), *Okja*, and *Gisaengchung* (Parasite). The two former films can be classified as international coproduction projects aimed at global audiences. The language of these two is also a combination of Korean and English. *Parasite* is a partly co-produced project since it was pre-sold to other parts of the world to recoup the production costs. Although *Parasite* has details addressing Korean audiences, it represents capitalist modes of living and related themes, including social inequality, in its unique and allegorical cinematic space.

(In)commensurability of International Co-produced Films: *Snowpiercer* and *Okja*

In terms of themes, the general trend of Korean cinema since 2000 has included the criticism and satire of the power elite, reproduction and appropriation of history, national rebuilding, and the dystopian imagination of a risk society. *Banchikwang* (The Foul King; dir. Jee-woon Kim, 2000), *Soreum* (Gooseflesh; dir. Jong-chan Yoon, 2001), *Jigureul jikyeora* (Save the Green Planet; dir. Joon-hwan Jang, 2003), *Yeongashi* (Deranged; dir. Jung-woo Park, 2012), *Gamgi* (The Flu; dir. Seong-hun Kim, 2013), and *Seongsilhan nara-ui aeliseu* (Alice in Earnestland; dir. Goojin Ahn, 2014) are typical presentations of risk society. Especially, *Gokseong* (The Wailing; dir. Hong-jin Na, 2016), *Busanhaeng* (Train to Busan; dir. Sang-ho Yeon, 2016), and *Teoneol* (The Tunnel; dir. Seong-hun Kim, 2016) describe the frustrations of petit citizens living in a neo-liberalistic system, where various

forms of corruption, violence and irregularities are rampant following the disappearance of the public security net, the injustices of the power group, the despair of the younger generation with no hope for the future, and the suffering and anger of ordinary people abused by public power.

Belonging to this context of Korean cinema, director Joon Ho Bong's *Snowpiercer* (2013) and *Okja* (2017) reproduce these aspects in global-scaled sci-fi frames. Although the way of exploiting capital and addressing the audience is apparently oriented to their external worlds, his films elaborate common globalized problems—such as capitalist modes of living—in their storytelling. Next, I will look into how each film's production background, plot, and capitalist modes constitute a commensurable film.

1) *Snowpiercer*: Clear Genre and Two Nations

Snowpiercer's pre-production began in 2009 and the film was completed in 2013 as a multinational project costing ₩43 billion (US\$40 million), at the time the largest budget ever for a Korean film, though compared to the Hollywood films, this is a mid to low film budget. As befits a global project, the main production was performed in a Czech studio, starring American actors Chris Evans and Tilda Swinton, and the main language of the film is English. The story is based on the French cartoon *Le Transperceneige* (illustrations by Jean Marc Roc Rochette and story by Jacques Lob), from which the director has adopted only the concept of class differences in a train that runs infinitely, with the characters and stories rewritten by director Joon Ho Bong and Kelly Masterson. The Weinstein Company was in charge of the film's American distribution, but due to conflicts between director Bong and the Weinstein,¹¹ the film had to go through the negotiating process with the hegemony of Hollywood, which released it in only 350 theaters in the United States, and passed it over directly to the VOD (video on demand) service. Still, this critically acclaimed film in North America¹²

11. Brueggemann and Thompson (2014).

12. Rotten Tomatoes, accessed December 1, 2019, <https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/snowpiercer>.

became commensurable in that its audience evaluated it through common capitalist modes of living.

After producing *Snowpiercer*, director Joon Ho Bong remarked in an interview, “Airplane seats are divided into economy, business, and first classes. Usually on disembarking after a twelve-hour journey on a narrow seat, those in the economy cabin pass by the seats tilted horizontally in business or first class. There is this a moment when you discover that the business class passengers have enjoyed their reclining seats, and you get really pissed off, thinking ‘hey, these guys traveled so comfy.’”¹³ Here Bong speaks to relative deprivation due to differences in ways of being and living that the less wealthy witness when the two differentiated nations encounter one another briefly.

Reflective of Bong’s impressions of air travel, *Snowpiercer* shows two distinct worlds that exist in one space, aboard the train named *Snowpiercer*. The film is set in the not-too-distant future; in 2014, meteorologists used chemicals to stop the spread of global warming, which in turn caused the world to enter a new ice age and all species in which much of the human race was wiped out. But the wealthy capitalist Wilford has invented a bullet train that traverses the world, able to endure the extreme external weather conditions, picking up survivors of the human race around the globe. It has been 17 years and now it is 2034. The front compartment of the train is occupied by the rich’s hospital, school, restaurants, saunas, dressing rooms, and hair salons, while the back compartment is made up of storage, prisons and the train’s tail where the untouchable people are congregated. The haves live in comfort in the head cars, while the have-nots and downtrodden masses occupy cramped cabins and subsist on protein bars made from cockroaches.

The train was a symbol of nineteenth-century modernity, the core of what is now the capitalist system that finds its origins in the Industrial Revolution of England. In this film, the train is a giant symbol. People in the train’s tail want to move forward to resist repressive power. The rebel leader, Curtis (Chris Evans), takes the security designer Min-su Namgoong (Kang-ho

13. Jung (2013).

Song) out of the train's jail cell and together they find their way out of the tail compartment to face off against the larger system of the train as he progresses forward. For Curtis, the meaning of escape is to move ahead in the train, and he finally learns about the world (that is, the forward compartments) that his comrades have never seen. Nanmgoong, however, wants to escape the system itself. At the end of the film, the train owner Wilford offers a suggestion to keep the system by coaxing Curtis. Aboard the *Snowpiercer*, the rich seek to maintain the stability of the train system for themselves, no different from the instincts of the privileged class in real society.

The engine of the train is its moving force, which symbolizes the capitalist system. Inside *Snowpiercer*, the engine is deified, because the train has to move constantly so as to avoid freezing. The wealthy inhabiting the front cabins hope that the train will not stop moving and the system will be eternal. But we can see it is not eternal; it is operated by child labor, and only this constant labor keeps the engine from stopping.

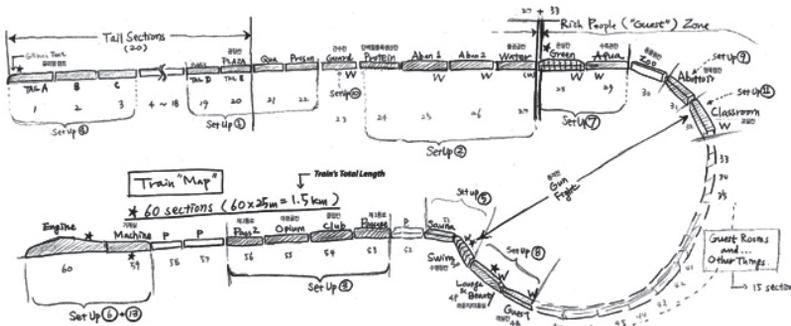


Figure 1. Joon Ho Bong's design of the train

Source: Cho (2018).

Those who are found frozen outside the train are used as learning cadavers in the train's school. This education is integrated with an underlying fear, a sort of warning that if you leave the train, you will perish like them. This creates a public fear established by authority. In this present world,

experiences of the extreme evils of neo-liberalism led to the Occupy Wall Street Movement in 2011, but it is also necessary to scrutinize the reason the movement emerged as late as it did, rather than why it actually took place. The reason is a fear of solidarity, a fear of imagining a world beyond the capitalist one. A fragmented world preventing human solidarity continues to exist today, and this fear is displayed in this film. The year 2034 on the train is actually 2011, and the passengers in the tail compartments (the demonstrators) have been unable to find a way to resist for 17 years (30 years of neoliberalism).

Snowpiercer also describes the collapse of Hobbes' *Leviathan* by representing children who are forced to labor to operate the train's engines. Without the state or the system, the commonwealth according to Hobbes, the socially weak are bound to appear, and the most socially vulnerable among the people in the tail compartments are the children. The failure of the state to protect the socially vulnerable is a common reality for those living in contemporary capitalist societies that have experienced collapse of a state since the 1990s. This common experience is the capitalist mode of living, exposed in the film and other media, and certainly not limited to a Korean audience.

It is a smart method that director Bong delivers social messages in his cinematic manifestation to his audience in a genre film. Finally, *Snowpiercer* presents a hopeful ending as the ice age ends and Namgoong's daughter and a child walk out of the train to the ground. One system (train) has come to an end, and the film ends with the very typical ending of a genre film that human beings begin a new start at the end of the ice age. This ending is also profoundly suitable denouement for global audiences around the world who are not accustomed to the tragic ending.

2) *Okja*: Netflix and GMO

Director Joon Ho Bong's 2017 international coproduction film *Okja* is the one that completely manifests the desires for globalization of the mainstream Korean film industry in the 2010s. It is a sci-fi fantasy genre, an original Netflix film, with production costs of ₩60 billion (approximately US\$50 million).

Okja has been distributed to more than 190 countries around the world where Netflix services operate, with box office openings in three countries—South Korea (except for Multiplex), the United States, and Great Britain.



Figure 2. Korean promotional poster for *Okja*

Source: Daum Movie, accessed December 1, 2019, <https://movie.daum.net/moviedb/photoviewer?id=97728#1177082>.

Okja's story had the potential to attract global audiences surrounding real global issues; a Korean girl named Mija (Seo Hyun Ahn) has been caring for Okja—a genetically modified pig—at her home in the mountains of South Korea for ten years. As large as a medium-sized elephant, Okja is slobbery and sometimes flatulent, but also gentle, brave, and devoted to Mija. But the multinational conglomerate Mirando Corporation seizes Okja and transports her to New York, where CEO Lucy Mirando (Tilda Swinton) will hold the big Beauty Pig Pageant before the company butchers her. Mija sets out to rescue Okja and finally arrives in New York, but her already daunting journey becomes more complicated with the intervention of the Animal Liberation Front.

As can be understood in *Okja*'s synopsis, the target that Mija and Okja resist together is the global food industry and industrial farming, and the film accurately conveys a message about animal rights and genetically modified organisms (GMO). Its representation of brutal animal abuses and

re-enactment of grotesque factory farms in New Jersey has even turned myriad viewers into vegetarians.¹⁴ In addition, in the 2010s, vegetarian food became a top trend in the American food industry, and so such topics seemed perfect for attracting American audiences. In the United States, plant-based meat has long since acquired its corner in supermarkets, and people are increasingly rebelling against the indiscriminate carnage of animal killing. *Okja*'s globally zeitgeist theme of GMO and vegetarianism drew the attention of American audiences. *Okja* refers to the beloved main character, which is at the same time the very genetically modified animal that should be opposed. At a time when genetically modified food is a global reality, the film, depicting the existence of the food chain (human beings who eat genetically modified animals that eat genetically modified corn feed), comically conveys a clear message that anyone who shares the capitalist mode of living can recognize.

Okja is notable not only for its storyline but for its distribution format, as it was the first film to ignite the Netflix film debate. *Okja* drew worldwide attention when it was nominated for the competition section of the 2017 Cannes Film Festival. The debate over whether Netflix films are genuine films, and whether they are eligible to compete at Cannes, fueled interest in both *Okja* and Netflix,¹⁵ and the debate itself became a successful strategy for Netflix to attract subscribers. Audiences have chosen this easily accessible globalized OTT (over the top media services) format as a way to view films. This global approach also made it easy for Bong, who made the US release of *Snowpiercer* a success with the VOD format. In addition, Netflix's production system, which gives the director editing freedom without pressure from any Hollywood distributors,¹⁶ was considered as a new opportunity for Korean filmmakers. Although Netflix films were ultimately disqualified

14. Philip (2018).

15. "The incident followed weeks of back-and-forth between Netflix CEO Reed Hastings, the festival board, and the French film industry's governing body, bickering over whether a film that wouldn't be released in French theaters should qualify to compete for the Palm d'Or. Eventually, Netflix was disqualified from future years in competition. ..." See Tiffany (2017).

16. The conflict caused by Weinstein's plan to edit out about twenty minutes of *Snowpiercer* is a very well-known story.

from candidacy at the Cannes Film Festival,¹⁷ audiences all over the world remembered Bong Joon Ho and Netflix from the commotion.

Netflix, a global OTT service that projects the ideal goals of the Korean film industry, began its streaming service in the United States in 2007 (Lobato 2019). It expanded its streaming service to Canada in 2010 and Latin America in 2011. Especially with the original production of the drama series entitled *House of Cards* in 2013, the number of subscribers has increased. The promotion of original programming is a typical marketing strategy of subscription channels in the United States. HBO has increased its subscribers by producing and promoting its original, quality television series, such as *Game of Thrones* (2011–2019), a method that draws subscribers around the world each year at the beginning of a new season. Distributing television contents and films to approximately 190 countries as of 2019, Netflix, too, has been producing original content, such as *Stranger Things* (2016) and *Glow* (2017), as well as a large amount of media content as a means of increasing its subscriber base.

Okja differs from these aforementioned television series of Netflix; it takes the form of a film. In the United States, motion pictures as media are mainly distributed through large multiplex chains, which have a rule that they show a film for 90 days in theaters before it is converted to on-demand services. It is, of course, possible for independent distributors to have short-term screenings in theaters by dividing the screening dates for theaters and streaming service. However, in the case of *Okja*, which is shown on Netflix, it was exceptional that the film was shown simultaneously in theaters. *Okja* earned 82 points from Rotten Tomatoes as a must-see film and was acclaimed as Netflix's greatest film to date. Its commensurable theme made *Okja*'s theatrical debut possible in America. In the United States where there are some 50 million Netflix subscribers, *Okja* was released in five theaters—two in New York and three in Los Angeles. South Korean multiplex chains did not release *Okja*, but approximately 100 local theaters did, which resulted in a boost to Netflix subscription rates in Korea.¹⁸ This is exactly

17. See Richford (2018).

18. See Keum (2017).

in line with Netflix's global strategy which is in the same vein with Korean films' globalization. Because *Okja* had capitalist modes of living as integral to its storyline and was produced and distributed in the circle of global media, it became very visible to external and Korean audiences, increasing the commensurability of Korean cinema.

Capitalist Modes of Living in Korean Cinema and *Parasite*

Then, what allows *Gisaengchung* (hereafter, *Parasite*), a Korean film on the face of it, to appeal so strongly to global audiences and ultimately win the Cannes Palme d'Or? I begin this chapter by re-invoking the question of Paul Willemen: "How is it possible for a twenty-first-century European to appreciate Korean cinema?"

Parasite embodies a Western melodramatic plot and setting that has been translated into a Korean one within a globalized form of capitalism. The plot involves a family whose members are all unemployed. Among them, the son Ki-woo (Woo-shik Choi) uses forged documents to secure a job as private tutor for a wealthy family. Ki-woo's family members work out schemes to evict the former employees (the butler and the driver) from the wealthy family and take over their positions. The story surrounding such class differences is a common theme of melodramas set in 19th-century Europe (Gledhill 1992, 147). The mansion in the film, designed by architect Hyun-ja Namgoong and which makes up a large part of the film, is a Korean-styled interpretation of a stereotypical estate of European dramas set in the 19th century. The unemployed family enters the mansion as servants for their wealthy employers. The former butler, played by Jung-eun Lee, is not common in contemporary Korean literature or film. And the rich family's modern-style house and garden is very rare in director Bong's previous films.¹⁹ In Korean films, housemaids usually appear in a way that

19. According to his speech at the University of Texas at Austin on September 26, 2019, he was planning to write the script of *Parasite* for a stage play but changed it to a screenplay which he is adept at.

describes the lowest class of society since the 1960s.²⁰ That is, the entire structure of the film is one most often seen in European melodramas, which would already be familiar to audiences.

It is apparent that the portrayals of the poor family and their semi-underground house (one or two dank rooms with a small strip of window) is very Korean and extremely realistic, and is immensely specific to the consumption patterns of low-income households in contemporary Korean society, namely, the consumption modes of living in capitalist society. The unemployed father Ki-taek (Kang-ho Song) and ex-champion shot-putter mother Chung-sook (Hye-jin Chang) struggle to find menial jobs, and their son Ki-woo and daughter Ki-jung (So-dam Park) try to locate an unsecure Wi-fi signal in their rooms. They work from home folding pizza boxes, drink the cheapest liquor named Filite, and eat at the cheapest buffet. Then, Ki-woo is offered a chance to replace a friend as the tutor for Da-hye (Ziso Jung), daughter of the wealthy Mr. Park (Sun-kyun Lee). “Does Oxford have a course in forgery?” The father Ki-taek asks admiringly, looking at the fake qualification that his daughter Ki-Jung has forged for her brother Ki-woo. Their modes of living are understandable to anyone living in a capitalist society, and the Korean audience in particular refers to director Joon Ho Bong as Bongtail (Bong with detail) and praises him as the perfect master of Korean realism.



Figure 3. Ki-woo and Ki-jung looking for a Wi-fi signal in their semi-underground house

Source: Daum Movie, accessed December 1, 2019, <https://movie.daum.net/moviedb/photoviewer?id=111292#1306732>.

20. See such films as *Hanyeo* (The Housemaid; dir. Ki-young Kim, 1960) and *Yeongja-ui jeonseong sidae* (Yeong-Ja's Heydays; dir. Ho-sun Kim, 1975). Most wealthy families in Korean films hire as housemaid poor teenagers who have migrated to Seoul with no skills.

In addition, the lifestyle shown by the upper class, such as snobbery and prejudice towards the lower classes, including discriminating them based on smell, and indulging in expensive private lessons, is also represented as an understandable element for the audience. *Parasite*, which delivers the message entirely in Korean, possesses a more specific film language than either *Snowpiercer* or *Okja*, telling a story that broader range of audiences can understand.

Parasite represents the division of the country between the haves and have-nots by depicting the differences in the height of their respective spaces. The rich family, headed by an IT CEO named Mr. Park, resides in a modern mansion with a picturesque and geometric garden surrounded by concrete walls on a hill, while the poor family lives in a semi-underground house where shabby passers-by can urinate on the window.



Figure 4. The stairway to the home of the impoverished family

Source: Captured from *Parasite* provided by the Korean Film Archive.



Figure 5. Another stairway to the home of the impoverished family

Source: Daum Movie, accessed December 1, 2019, <https://movie.daum.net/moviedb/photoviewer?id=111292#1313848>.

On a pouring wet day, Ki-taek, Ki-woo, and Ki-jung, who have successfully escaped from the mansion situated without being spotted by the Parks, descend to their house in the rain. As you can see in Figures 4 and 5, their semi-underground house is revealed only after they descend a long, long staircase. Their house has already been flooded and submerged by heavy rains. This extreme contrast is revealed in the depiction of the day after the rains. Ki-taek's family is exhausted from pumping floodwaters out of their house all night but must find clothes to wear to work in donation boxes from the shelter. Rain, which destroyed a house of the poor family, only functions to wash away dust for the rich. The rich family prepares a birthday party for their precious son the day after the rains, while the poor family has to work at the rich family's birthday party after having spent a day in the homeless shelter. Such class inequalities can be well appreciated by all audiences well-versed in capitalist modes of living.

Parasite also embodies a modern space called "heterotopia," conceptualized by Foucault. Foucault elaborates on the heterotopias that have an analogical relationship with real places of society. It has a different arrangement than a utopia, which does not relate to a real space. Foucault argues that heterotopias are common places in modern society in that they

are “real and practical places designed within the social system of all cultures and civilizations” (Foucault 2014, 47). The heterotopias, as he defines them, are “outside of all places even though it may be possible to indicate their location in reality” (Foucault 1984, 4). According to Foucault, the mirror is a utopian place, since “it is a placeless place.” In the mirror, there is “I” inside an unreal, virtual space that “opens up behind the surface.” It is a heterotopia where we see a real mirror existing in a real space that allows me to look at myself where I am absent. This is what *Parasite*’s basement is like.

During the first half of the film, the audience does not know of the existence of the basement in the mansion. In other words, only a large modern house and a semi-underground house are portrayed in the film. However, the genre of the film suddenly changes as the basement is revealed after the former butler Moongwang makes her reappearance in the film. The basement of the mansion has existed even further below the semi-underground house of the poor family. When Ki-taek meets Moongwang’s husband Geun-se (Myeong-hoon Park), who has lived in the basement without food for a while, he asks the husband, “How can you live in such a place like this?” The basement becomes the space that allows Ki-taek to reflect momentarily about his status (and it later becomes the last place he will settle in). The basement, which exists as placeless place, is the place “juxtaposing in a single real place several spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible” (Foucault 1984, 6). That is, a place that exists but whose existence is not recognized and that is outside of all perceptions. This space reveals another heterotopia along with the basement, which is the garden of the mansion. It is the frame within a frame where we can see the heterotopic garden with sky, land, water, and vegetation from an angle when seated in the living room. The frame also presents the mise-en-scene in which the son hides himself in the more heterotopic tepee situated at the center of the garden. By the emergence of the heterotopia, the basement, the modern mansion appearing flawless as a homotopia now turns out to be a fantasy created by disposition and dispersion of heterotopias in which Chung-sook, Ki-taek and Moongwang’s husband coexist. The juxtaposition of heterotopias in *Parasite* illustrates that homotopias with the law of order pursued by modernity are the constellation of numerous heterotopias.

Although the homotopia ends with Ki-taek's killing the wealthy patriarch Mr. Park who holds his nose for smelling the dying Geun-se, the heterotopia still remains in the film as the poor patriarch Ki-taek flees to the basement.

The surviving image of a girl or daughter in Bong's *Snowpiercer* and *Okja* means hope in the end. In *Parasite*, however, the daughter Ki-jung dies in the end. Ki-jung is the only character who has a sense of reality in the film, and she is clever and aloof from her real life. She is also the person who is able to worry about the basement couple, asking her father, "What did you do with the people in the basement?" and "What is your next plan?" But the film's patriarch never provides us with his next plan. The film also cannot tell her any future plans, so in the film she is likely to face the inevitable fate of death. The daughter is murdered, the patriarch becomes a permanent parasite in the house, and the son dreams of becoming rich and buying the mansion someday. In a hereditary capitalist society where class has become social status, there is no future (the daughter's death) when the middle class becomes the lower, the workers hate each other and identify themselves with parasites, and the alliance between the weak is fragmented. As such, the film ends with showing the last vestiges of the have-nots.

What did the audience who had seen hope in *Snowpiercer* and *Okja* discern from the ending of *Parasite*? The final scene in *Parasite* evokes the compelling notion of the retrotopia of Zygmunt Bauman (2018).²¹ Bauman's retrotopia is a second-degree negation of Thomas More's utopia. Bauman critiques how people living through the trend of globalization and individualization endeavor to return to a failed past which they consider as a new utopia. The retrotopia is the place where Ki-woo's expectations are oriented; the beautiful good old days that merely exist in Ki-woo's memory

21. Retrotopia is a compound of retro and utopia, and first used by Bauman (2018) to signify a past (retro) that forms the utopia to which contemporary people try to return. Utopia is formed from the negation of reality. During the pre-modern era, utopia was a "topos" (a place represented by a sovereign state) that had secured the safety and freedom of its inhabitants, while in the modern era, utopia had no particular topos. The trend of globalization and individualization aims to make individuals replace the state and society with the goal of "capital without borders." But in this topos-free utopia, individuals are now placed under miserable conditions. Now people driven to despair and anger under these conditions have begun to establish the failed past as the new utopia.

are when he stays in the modern house with his family, and this memory forms his retrotopia. The film ends with leaving the retrotopia only he remembers, revealing the most capitalist reality.

Conclusion

This article observes the commensurability of Korean cinema by analyzing the Korean films *Snowpiercer*, *Okja*, and *Parasite* directed by Joon Ho Bong and produced and distributed in the globalized industry milieu of the 2010s. The international coproduced films *Snowpiercer* and *Okja* address audiences outside Korea with such common global common themes as environmental pollution, social inequalities, GMO food, and animal abuse in the capitalist modes of living. Joon Ho Bong's films evoke inequality in a globalized world, display capitalist modes of living, and exploit genre elements. By doing so, these films acquire commensurability.

Parasite won the Palme d'Or at the Cannes Film Festival, although it uses only the Korean language. The film also addresses audiences outside Korea by adopting capitalist modes of living as its commensurable element, able to be shared by audiences using the international distribution network. The increasing number of audiences sharing capitalist modes of living and thus able to recognize them is also evidenced by the films *Manbiki Kazoku* (Shoplifters; dir. Kore-eda Hirokazu, 2018) and *I, Daniel Blake* (dir. Ken Loach, 2016). They represent fragmented and unequal modes of living in capitalist societies. Capitalist modes of living based on neo-liberal inequalities of the 2010s have proved to be useful cinematic elements for commensurability; how low-incomers in Japanese society rely on the pension of a senior citizen, how they pickpocket to make a living, how a low-income single British mother and her children eke out a living, how a retired British elderly try to register his name for pensions online, and how a Korean boy tries to find a job by falsifying his educational background. The film audience who live in globalized capitalist system of inequalities share the capitalist modes of living and commonly consume the films that circulate within the global distribution system. Therefore, Korean cinema,

and specifically Korean films directed by Joon Ho Bong, have obtained commensurable storytelling by exhibiting such capitalist modes of living.

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