

## CHAPTER THREE

# Here to Help

### *Service Producers and the Labor of Film Friendliness*

At the 2016 Karlovy Vary Film Festival in the Czech Republic, entertainment industry executives, government officials, directors, and other creative professionals from around the world attended a glitzy reception at the city's Imperial Spa, an ornate nineteenth-century building that had doubled as the Montenegrin casino in the Bond film *Casino Royale* (2006) when it filmed in the region ten years earlier. Guests included Barrandov Studio CEO Petr Tichy, Czech Film Commissioner Ludmila Claussova, Comcast Senior VP for Government Affairs Rick Smotkin, and the Oscar-winning production designer and set decorator Allan Starski (*Schindler's List*, 1993), among others. They had gathered to celebrate the region's status as a "Billion Dollar Location." The accolade takes its name from a series of *Variety* special reports, and the event marked the first time an international location had been recognized after similar "Billion Dollar" profiles of Louisiana (2015) and New Mexico (2014). The magazine's twelve-page insert featured short and pithy coverage of the region's available infrastructure and where to source

facilities and equipment; updates on its then-recently revised production incentive scheme; reflections from visiting professionals on their positive experiences filming in the region; and a spotlight on some of the strengths of its local crew base, from animation and visual effects to more traditional crafts like set construction and costume design.<sup>1</sup> It was only fitting, then, that the soirée included crew from Barrandov's costume department, who had "transformed themselves into 17th-century partygoers, with women in boudoir-inspired corsets, bodices and low-cut frocks, while men pranced about in perukes, doublets and Cavalier boots, providing the atmospheric flare of racy period drama."<sup>2</sup>

Yet despite the pretense of celebration and the aura of legitimate award recognition, the event was just an elaborate advertisement for the country's recently expanded production incentive, and the "report" was an extended advertorial masquerading as trade news, sponsored in full by Comcast NBCUniversal in partnership with Barrandov Studio. Indeed, littered between the glowing write-ups about filming in Prague were full-page advertisements for the historic studio and its amenities. Certainly, the region's success and recognition are worth celebrating—conjuring Mobile Hollywood in all its spectacle—but not to be lost among the red-carpet revelry are the equally constitutive, if less spectacular and equitable, social relations that are driving it. It's still Hollywood, after all, even if it's relocating to the Czech Republic. Comcast executives will sip Champagne, while local crew members dress up as live-action party favors.

Reviewing other editions in the *Variety* series finds a similar format. Perhaps not to be outdone by its regional arrival, Hungary's profile the following year was nearly twice the size of the Czech edition, with full-page advertisements not from a single

facility but from an assortment of service providers in Budapest: multiple studios, service production firms, equipment providers, and even tax specialists.<sup>3</sup> Capitalizing on a string of high-profile productions based in the city in recent years, the Hungarian National Film Fund—which managed the country’s incentive program at the time and was the primary sponsor of the “Billion Dollar” report—elected as the cover image the iconic Széchenyi Chain Bridge, which links the eastern and western sides of the city across the Danube River. While its towering stone lion sculptures at each abutment have long been the backdrop to tourist photos, the bridge itself has become a recurring background player in a number of international film and television productions, most recently in the opening scenes of the trailer for Marvel’s feature *Black Widow* (2021). In a nod to the bridge’s growing cinematic profile, the cover of the magazine featured empty director’s chairs spaced evenly across the width of the bridge and continuing far into the horizon, disappearing from sight. The back of each chair was emblazoned with the name of a creative who filmed in the city, including Ron Howard, Angelina Jolie, Ridley Scott, Denis Villeneuve, Marc Forster, John Moore, Paul Feig, Brett Ratner, and Neil Jordan. “Thank you for helping us to become better,” the headline reads under the *Variety* masthead. Inside, a second full-page advertisement replaces the chairs with stacks of film canisters, labeled with titles of films, such as *Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy* (2011) and *Blade Runner 2049* (2017), and the television series *The Borgias* (2011–13) and *The Alienist* (2018–20). “The Hungarian film industry is proud to have served you,” it enthuses.

The somewhat carnivalesque assemblage of public servants, facility managers, corporate executives, highly decorated creatives, and costumed revelers at Karlovy Vary, alongside the

deference of a gracious Hungarian film industry in the more recent advertorial, captures the disparate ties that bind the performative logics and material conditions into the perception of a location's "film friendliness." Asked to explain her interpretation of the concept, one city film commissioner explained,

It means we're always open for business. We're film friendly, and we've got a [city] council that is completely on board with what we want to do, which is why when a big production comes like [redacted] or [redacted], I can safely say, "Yeah, we'll close this street." The details will need [to be]worked out, but it can be done. When and how or for how long is open for discussion, but I just don't want to give the impression that it's something we can't do or something we have to "wait and see" about. We can do it. It's an attitude that, if we don't, someone else will. So why didn't we?<sup>4</sup>

Indeed, as mobility has evolved into the presumptive mode of production over the past two decades, the "impression" or "attitude" in the context of increased competition needs to convince producers not only that the location has the requisite resources to fully service a large-scale film or television production with ease, but also that it has the ability to accommodate even the most logistically or creatively complicated demands, which have become no small feat in the era of high-octane franchise films and big-budget television drama. Even the whiff of risk will send producers elsewhere. But gaining trust requires more than projecting an aura of confidence and compliance. Film friendliness means adopting the posture as a deliberate policy maneuver, coordinating an extensive roster of services, agencies, and individuals—many of them not involved in film or television as their primary business—under an incentive-driven agenda to attract and facilitate international productions. It requires substantive transformations in policy, infrastructure provision, training,

community relations, and place-based marketing, all while projecting an outwardly accommodating posture. In the case of the Czech Republic, it was dressing up local crew in period frocks for the pleasure of investors. In Hungary, it was service with a smile and a big dose of gratitude.

This chapter accepts both the performative logics and material conditions of film friendliness as a constitutive component of mobile production's political economy, but argues that its prominence has had an equally impactful effect on the contours of certain forms of film and television labor. In many regions, film friendliness has helped formalize a successful and externalized para-industry of "service producers." Doing much more than the name implies, service producers are often the first point of contact in distant production hubs for globe-trotting producers and thus occupy a critical position in the division of film and television labor. They have oversight of the administrative, legal, and cultural complexities entailed by an expanded production geography. Looking more closely at operations "on the ground" not only makes visible the demanding nature of that work, but it also underscores the practical complexities of space and scale-making projects that film friendliness works to obscure. Indeed, by featuring empty director's chairs and no local crew, the Hungarian cover image unintentionally captures that very erasure: the city awaits lead firms, top-tier creatives, and foreign capital, but the mess that accompanies them remains out of sight.

The first section of this chapter outlines the general roles and responsibilities of service producers. I extend this discussion in subsequent sections to chronicle some of the daily complexities they confront, underscoring both the unpredictable conditions of mobile production as well as the rising demands

placed on service producers to manage its spatial efficacy. My aim here is twofold: first, to highlight the ways mobile production not only thrives on differences (cultural, economic, ethical, and otherwise) but also engenders levels of standardization across geography; and second, to draw attention to the necessarily invisible yet integral work service producers perform to smooth over potential cracks and suture what is an essentially fragile enterprise.

#### SERVICE PRODUCERS

A production service firm's most obvious function is to unite foreign producers with the requisite locations, facilities, equipment, and crew in the production hubs where they are based. Service firms exist in both established and emergent locations, including London, Brisbane, Moscow, and Shanghai, where they are key mediators between visiting producers and local infrastructure and resources.<sup>5</sup> Service producers perform an open-ended list of duties: they estimate budgets, find locations, book soundstages, navigate local permits, obtain permissions, certify compliance with local laws and regulations, manage local crew and production personnel, ensure the comforts of A-list talent, mediate on-set conflicts, translate workflows (and language), lobby state and regional governments for more favorable business conditions, and, by the very nature of securing production contracts, generate continuity of employment and ongoing skills training for local film and television workers who labor for Hollywood in these locations.

Given the heavy organizational and administrative duties under their charge, service firms tend to staff the local production office in the city where the film or television project is

based. They hire native production managers, location managers, assistant directors, production assistants, and other administrative support to ensure local processes never impede a production's costs or schedule. They also deploy across a number of production departments local craft workers and technicians, who then serve under the tutelage of foreign department heads and their key assistants, likely flown in from Los Angeles or London. As an interface between foreign and domestic work cultures and bureaucracies, service producers are middle management, answerable in the final instance to the international producers who hire them but responsible for the domestic production personnel and crew members who work under their service contracts.

It's not that all these work functions are distinctively new. Someone somewhere always has had to store the props, source the wardrobe, rent the equipment, balance the budget, hire workers, and book accommodation. Rather, the point is that the spatial dynamics of contemporary production has fashioned a loosely linked infrastructure of providers that allows producers to generate competition and cost savings among private firms whose bids—successful or not—are now intimately bound up with the fates of different localities and local workers. In other words, what was once considered unproductive labor (necessary but costly administrative and logistical work), often integrated within a suite of services provided by a physical studio, is now an increasingly externalized spatial process in which international producers can capture added value. Of course, some of these services are still part of the overall support packages provided by physical production spaces, like Twentieth Century Fox Studios in Los Angeles or Pinewood Studios in Atlanta or (figs. 7 and 8), but at the same time, these firms are no longer

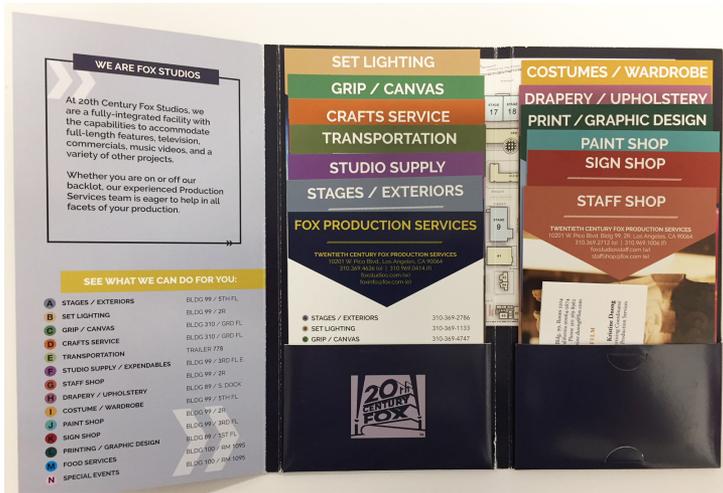


Figure 7. Services brochure from Twentieth Century Fox Studios. Photo by author.

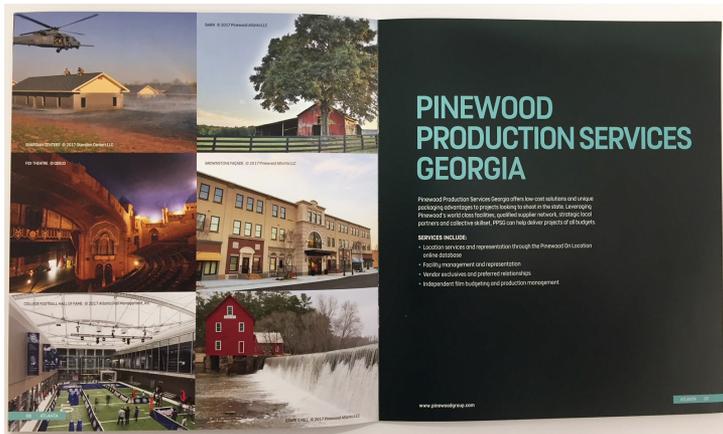


Figure 8. Services brochure from Pinewood Studios Atlanta. Photo by author.

the sole provider in town. These services now constitute the backbone of a number of small to medium enterprises that have emerged over the past few decades, whose entire business model rests on mediating the interests of global capital with the often incompatible elements of local complexity.

This is mobile production's version of supply chain capitalism: the studios outsource responsibility for the messy details and awkward encounters to third-party providers who, in turn, stitch together additional suppliers—from high-end accommodation and equipment rentals to drivers, makeup artists, and location experts—all to ensure producers only ever register the warm embrace of distant production hubs. This dynamic isn't inherently malicious. As I will demonstrate below, these transformations generated a professional space for film and television workers to reimagine themselves as entrepreneurs and risk-takers rather than below-the-line laborers, even though their "independence" remains structurally dependent upon returning interest from Hollywood. This contradiction is a key tension within supply chain capitalism more broadly: "Compliance is both voluntary and required. Such practices remind us that supply chains weave complex corporate dependencies into the fabric of their commitments to the independence of firms."<sup>6</sup> As a result, service producers are both inside and outside the prevailing work cultures of Hollywood. They are mediators, problem solvers, relationship builders, and "translators," both literally and symbolically, in their attempts to discipline, tame, and convert disjuncture into something that resembles, though never fully achieves, full conformity.

Leading firms in Prague (Stillking Films, Sirena Film) and Budapest (Mid Atlantic Films, Pioneer Pictures) are managed by American and British expatriates or Hungarians with

transnational connections in the entertainment industry from their time spent working or studying abroad. Primarily former line producers or production managers, they saw an opportunity to formalize production services as the cities became popular filming destinations in the 1990s for London- and Los Angeles-based productions. It was primarily an entrepreneurial response—in the absence of a state-driven one—to the increased interest in Eastern European locales as cheap filming destinations. Later, that interest was sustained, as it has been in so many other cities, by the launch of competitive production incentives. Today, these firms manage the vast majority of Hollywood (as well as European) productions in the region. Furthermore, for the blockbuster films and television series based in their cities, these service firms can coordinate filming (and thus maneuver around another set of local bureaucracies) across a large swath of the region, which means both visiting and local crew must be ready to work in Romania, Croatia, Slovakia, Slovenia, and Bulgaria. Indeed, both Prague and Budapest can serve as central commands for international productions that want to take advantage of the region's geographic diversity, spending a few short weeks in, for example, Croatia for the necessary seaside exteriors before returning to the studios in the Czech Republic or Hungary, or coordinating a series of second unit shoots in the hills of Slovenia while principal photography remains in Prague or Budapest. In these examples, places like Prague and Budapest are both hub and spoke in a hub-and-spoke production metaphor—at a distance from the creative and financial authorities in Hollywood but nevertheless serving as a command center over a series of day-to-day operations that take place within and beyond the cities' sound stages.

Each of the producers that shared their pathway into service production recounted a version of the same story. Prague and Budapest in the late 1990s were in the midst of a market transition and slowly integrating themselves into the world economy, which made them affordable places to live and work and alluring places to launch small businesses. They were especially attractive to expatriates. Following a series of failed attempts to break into the production industry in his native England, for example, Matthew Stillman, then in his early twenties, decided, while visiting a friend in the city, that Prague offered a better chance at success, especially as initial interest spiked among foreign music videos and commercial productions that were intrigued by favorable exchange rates and low costs. Using money he made from a successful night club venture (that he launched in the city shortly after arriving), he says, “We had a look around and decided to give it a go because we did not have much to lose. So that is really how we started with a typewriter, and an answering machine and a phone at Barrandov.”<sup>7</sup>

His company, Stillking, is now the largest service firm in Prague, with offices in London, Cape Town, Bucharest, and Budapest. Drawing on Stillking’s success, Stillman founded in 2014 the 2020 Content Group, one of the world’s largest private companies that produces advertising and entertainment content across seven brands. His business partner in Stillking, the American David Minkowski, joined the company after a series of visits to Prague in the 1990s. He was returning to the city as a freelancing line producer on low-budget international productions so frequently that he opted to stay. He decided the service firm offered him more stability and greater opportunity than the job-to-job existence he had as a sole trader in California—a chance to settle down and have a family while working in the

industry he loved. Like Stillman's experience in London, Minkowski found Prague "easier" to advance his career in and to do it more quickly than Los Angeles.<sup>8</sup>

The American Jennifer Webster, who co-founded Pioneer Pictures in Budapest, tells a similar story. After graduating, she soon tired of the monotony of her corporate career in advertising in New York City. "I was looking for something different in my life. I was tired of waking up in the morning and facing the drudgery of my commute but I didn't know what to do," she told me.<sup>9</sup> At a holiday party in 1993, she met an American Hungarian who convinced her and a friend that the transformations in Budapest made it ripe for opportunity. Still in her twenties, she decided to leave her corporate job and open a coffee bar in Budapest—the intent was to launch the first American-style café before Starbucks entered the newly opened market. Soon after relocating but before the café ever materialized, she heard from a former business acquaintance who was coming to the city to film a commercial. He reached out to see if she was interested in serving as his production assistant, knowing at one time she had entertained transitioning from the corporate side of advertising into production. She readily accepted (largely because she would earn New York rates during the month-long production, and that would cover her living expenses in Budapest for the year).

Webster met the Hungarians Ilona Antal and Eleonóra Peták on the set, who were already "servicing" Italian commercial productions in Budapest but before the term or the role itself had become widespread in the region. Together, they saw an opportunity to take their experience working on the commercial and transform it into an idea for a small business that would assist top international commercial producers when they filmed

in the region. It was the first company of its kind in the city, and they eventually expanded into feature film and television and opened additional offices in Argentina and China. In addition to the production company, Webster built upon her interest in architecture and interior design to invest in real estate, managing a portfolio of high-end apartments that she rents to the likes of Keira Knightley and Rosamund Pike when they are filming in Budapest. In 2015, the film and television division of Pioneer entered into a full partnership with Stilling in an effort to pool resources and accommodate a larger number of productions in the region.

While there are productive scholarly discussions about a location's "film friendliness," which overlap with some of the aspects outlined above, the concept is framed more as a conscious policy maneuver and place-based marketing strategy on behalf of film commissions than a condition made possible through the grit, business savvy, and entrepreneurial spirit of individual producers. Film commissioners perform many of the same duties as service producers to attract projects to a city or region, but service producers, unlike commissioners, remain central figures throughout production and handle a much larger roster of duties, making them as much place-based advocates as they are expert practitioners who have leveraged mobile production into a career and private enterprise that otherwise remained unavailable to them. It wasn't always easy. Service producers are quick to recall the early days of mobile production, when they had to pitch British and American executives quite aggressively in order to convince them that the experience in Prague or Budapest would be a good one. "Most Americans we pitched couldn't find Budapest on the map or thought it was part of Germany. Remember, this was only a

few short years after the [political economic] changes, and we had to convince them Budapest wasn't some abandoned city of a fallen empire."<sup>10</sup> Accordingly, a closer look at the work service firms perform betrays some of the increasingly complex demands "film friendliness" obscures, and how central their labor has become in managing the shifting spatial dynamics of mobile production.

#### ARMS SMUGGLING IN MOBILE HOLLYWOOD

As an entrée into this discussion about service producers, I want to share an anecdote from a conversation with service producer Adam Goodman, a British expatriate who now operates one of Budapest's premier production service firms, Mid Atlantic.<sup>11</sup> Given the various roles these individuals and their firms perform, I was explaining to Goodman my misgivings about the term, that the work he does stretches the limits of what most individuals might consider a "service." He nodded in agreement and shared the following experience as further proof.

Goodman is on set in the city's 10th district as his crew readies to film Brad Pitt's zombie thriller *World War Z* (2013). He receives a call on his mobile that the weapons the crew needs for a shoot three or four days away have been impounded by Hungary's Counter Terrorism Centre (TEK) after a tactical team raided a customs free zone in the airport where the weapons had been delivered. The entire cache included more than one hundred weapons: pistols, machine guns, sniper rifles, and grenade launchers. Goodman was ordered the following day to report to the National Bureau of Investigation for questioning. He heard his colleague Bela Gadjos, in charge of the weapons on set, had already been arrested earlier that

morning, pulled from his home in the middle of the night in nothing but his boxer shorts while the authorities raided the residence.

According to Goodman, British Airways originally had agreed to transport the props from London to Budapest but at the last minute refused to make the trip for unknown reasons. In order to ensure the weapons arrived in Budapest with no adverse impact on the shooting schedule, the producers chartered a private jet.

Unfortunately, I think the problem for us began when the chartered jet arrived at 3 a.m. at a smaller airport in the region. Someone called a tip into the national security service and here we are with what looks like a chartered plane with a weapons cache arriving in the middle of the night under the cover of darkness. It also happened less than two weeks before October 23, which is a very politically charged public holiday in Hungary [it marks the start in 1956 of what was a failed rebellion against Soviet-imposed policies]. The plane lands. The tactical team swarms. They're wearing balaclavas with machine guns ready to go. I get the call the next day, informing me that I'm under suspicion of arms smuggling because my name was on the permit.<sup>12</sup>

Eventually, the producers were cleared of all charges, but the episode underscored for Goodman the enormous pressures service producers face and the lengths to which they must go to smooth over any wrinkles (big or small) that interfere with a production. It's far too easy for foreign producers to conflate any logistical challenge they experience in Budapest with the process of filming in the city itself. In other words, what might be just another run-of-the-mill headache in Hollywood risks becoming perceived as a symptom of deficient skills and infrastructure, whether real or imagined, in Budapest, and that

narrative is bad for Goodman's business. It's his job to ensure that the experience is a positive one. After all, his company is viable only as long as there is ongoing interest in filming in the city.

As for the weapons debacle, the problem was the result of different national regulations. At the time, Hungarian law required permanent deactivation of all munitions used on a film set. Yet in the US and UK, regulations only stipulate temporary deactivation, commonly a screw through the barrel to prevent live ammunition from exiting the weapon. Remove the screw, for example, and the weapon is fully functional and not sufficiently modified under Hungarian law: "It looked like I was smuggling a fully functional arsenal. Obviously we weren't the first production to bring in weapons. Productions have been bringing them into the country illegally, probably unknowingly, for years. We just got caught. And we got caught—I think but I can't prove it—because a local munitions company that wanted the film's business but didn't get it turned us in to the authorities."<sup>13</sup>

As a result of this experience, Goodman successfully lobbied the Hungarian Parliament to change what he characterized as some of its less film-friendly laws, including the use of weapons on set, citing the millions of dollars in lost revenue should incoming productions start to find the area less accommodating than a competing territory. Yet in a final bitter twist, while the scene with the weapons was filmed in Budapest without further troubles, it was ultimately edited out during postproduction. It never made it into the final cut of *World War Z*.

I find this story instructive because it provides a glimpse into the local labor practices and logistical intricacies of mobile production, while also capturing some telling details about the

cultures and social relations that start to crisscross this production geography. It not only complements existing explanations of screen media's globalization but also extends those discussions to better account for the daily entanglements and practical encounters that propel the operations of capital on the ground.

The location—Budapest—signals perhaps the most obvious contours of what we already know. With a government subsidy in place for more than a decade, Budapest quickly became a popular location for tentpole feature films and hour-long television drama, often edging out its neighbor and former location favorite Prague in a battle for the Hollywood dollar. Budapest, in fact, has had one of the most robust incentive programs in Europe since 2003, allowing studio producers to claim a 30 percent tax rebate on combined local and foreign expenses. Thus, even costs incurred outside of Hungary—like a second unit shoot in Croatia—are eligible for the rebate if the production is based in the country. Likewise, the economic development arguments used to convince the Hungarian Parliament to loosen its gun control laws draw attention to the investments (and less explicitly in this particular example, the jobs) made available to locations that play willing hosts to foreign producers, as much as the lobbying effort also underscores what some critics might perceive as the dangerous collusion between international production and public authorities in those very locations. Meanwhile, most, if not all, risks, including charges of international terrorism, are shifted to the international producer's junior partners.

On the one hand, this episode is an anecdote about the ability of Hollywood's transnational reach to reconfigure labor markets for its own advantages.<sup>14</sup> Tactics that are both commercial and political undermine the autonomy of distant production locations and labor, keeping them dependent upon and

thus subservient to the global flow of production work from Southern California. In short, Hollywood capital obliterates obstacles that impede its expansion. On the other hand, Goodman's story (and the rise of service firms more broadly) points to the prominence of what other scholars have called a "film services framework" or, more colloquially, "film friendliness."<sup>15</sup> Both concepts are understood as matters of policy and performativity as a region looks to not only engender the coming together of the requisite organizations, infrastructure, and expertise necessary to sustain large-scale production, but also fundamentally refashion the identity of a particular place as a site defined by an outward-looking and welcoming embrace of footloose producers:

This process involves bringing together local, regional and sometimes national government agencies, business associations, film-related businesses and organisations, infrastructure owners and operators, representatives of the local community, "environmental managers" (those responsible [for] or with an interest in the use of places that filmmakers might to shoot in), police and emergency services, transportation services and agencies, health and safety officers—indeed any person or body that may be affected by film-making in a place—to ensure the needs of filmmakers are prioritised in order to make the experience of filmmaking in a place as straightforward as possible.<sup>16</sup>

Less visible in these accounts, however, are many of the hiccups mobile productions encounter and the governing role service producers embrace as both opportunity and obligation within Mobile Hollywood. While the financial wherewithal of Brad Pitt's production company makes it possible to charter a private jet for a transnational flight in the middle of the night, for example,

this whatever-it-costs mentality can't immediately escape certain devices, like national security measures, designed to control cross-border flows, never mind potential sabotage from a disgruntled local business. Furthermore, we can see the impact of local histories and cultures that, in this instance, make certain calendar dates matter more than international producers might think, and how national laws offer competing definitions of what constitutes a "functional" weapon. There's even evidence of the personal and professional risks associated with servicing screen media productions.

Certainly, arms smuggling is an extreme example. It nevertheless underscores the central yet precarious position these individuals occupy in the international division of cultural labor and just how expansive the "service" role has become in tandem with Mobile Hollywood's feverish pursuit of low-cost production venues. Such risks aren't even guaranteed to pay off with onscreen rewards when the decision to cut scenes from the final film are made in editing rooms at a safe temporal and geographic distance from the original clamor on location. Someone—in this case, the service producer—has to negotiate these challenges, otherwise the entire endeavor betrays its complexities and undoes its own dynamism. While the performative logics of film friendliness suggest locations can reconfigure their identities into plug-and-play components of mobile production, the labor of service producers underscores the differences, both cultural and professional; disparate intentions; contradictory assumptions; and sheer unpredictability that remains part of Mobile Hollywood. Such discrepancies further enable the mode of production to shift orientations on a whim (when other "differences" become more attractive), but they also are simultaneously

threatening, always in the background getting in the way and being pushed out of site.

#### STITCHING IT ALL TOGETHER

Despite the tone of inevitability that characterizes much of the current discourse on the mobile and dispersed nature of screen media production, especially among those in the mainstream news and trade press, such accounts pay less attention to the everyday misunderstandings and general messiness that constitute this scale-making process. In fact, sometimes (maybe even most of the time) mobile production happens when interests and agendas *don't* converge as seamlessly as the prevailing debates suggest. In this way, the dispersed nature of mobile production is less about the unimpeded flow of Hollywood capital in which difference is subsumed into a singular economic or cultural dynamic; rather, Mobile Hollywood is a more contingent process informed by multiple and overlapping agendas that are unpredictable and difficult to fully wrangle under the guise of rationality and efficiency. As Anna Tsing writes, “Friction makes global connection powerful and effective. Meanwhile, without even trying, friction gets in the way of the smooth operation of global power.”<sup>17</sup> This duality characterizes mobile production, a spatial nexus of enormous power that coalesces in particular places not in spite of numerous roadblocks but because of the enormous and persistent work to outmaneuver them. Indeed, differences in policy, economics, and labor capacity enable both the spread of mobile production and the work opportunities to keep them under control and out of sight.

Certainly, service firms play a key role in managing that friction in order to rationalize the production process and maintain an efficient division of labor, even if their reasons for doing so don't necessarily converge with those of the foreign producers

or local authorities, all of whom have their own vested interests in the success of mobile production. As a group, they represent one of the first waves of mobile workers—motivated out of personal interest and opportunity more so than necessity—who turned entrepreneurial, launching small businesses that became responsible for an array of administrative, legal, technical, bureaucratic, service-oriented, and creative functions that continue to feed the system responsible for their own precariousness. They are centrally responsible for managing access to the spaces and resources that sustain an expanded production geography. Yet so much of their labor remains invisible, not only to the casual observer but also to the international producer, and that's intentional. Service production facilitates a sense of seamless mobility despite the numerous fault lines service producers confront on the job. Any sense that the fault lines are opening up to a full-fledged earthquake draws attention to the very friction at odds with service production's primary role. Such a perspective often puts them in insecure situations, as Goodman's story indicates, but their actions—whether proactive and preemptive or reactive and immediate—nevertheless inflect the smooth operations of large-scale film and television production.

In what follows, I draw attention to the ways the work of service producers shapes and is shaped by the evolving contours of Mobile Hollywood. At first, they found themselves working across starkly different cultural and creative contexts. Repeat visits from Hollywood helped erase or obscure some of these differences, but the process of assimilation is never complete and remains an ongoing juggling act for service producers to master. As I highlight throughout this book, mobile production thrives on a "similar but different" dynamic across its geography. Given the feverish competition between jurisdictions, especially neighboring regions in Eastern Europe, service producers

also are acutely aware of the fleeting nature of Hollywood capital. For some, the pressure pushes them to sell false promises to producers and puts their professional reputations at risk. In the final section, I address the unequal power dynamics that characterize these sets and the role service producers play in managing the social relations of production.

*Unpredictable Encounters and Divergent Aspirations*

The nature of the “service” these producers provide (and the disparate agendas they stitch together) is directly shaped by the local context. Service work doesn’t obliterate those differences but accommodates their nuance when forging the particular links necessary to facilitate operations on the ground. In other words, difference isn’t entirely evacuated under the weight of capital expansion but in many ways is conducive to its interests.<sup>18</sup> Indeed, if it wasn’t for the distinctiveness of the region’s immediate post-socialist histories and the economic advantages that those transformations brought about, they may not have emerged as persuasive contenders for mobile production. In both Prague and Budapest, the cities’ sociocultural and historical specificity further shaped the motivations and expectations of different actors, from local crew and government officials to visiting producers. There was a brief period in the late 1990s in places like Prague, for instance, when international producers were drawn to a location simply because it offered a compelling exchange rate, low costs, and a local crew base that had cut their teeth on quality national or regional motion pictures. Far from the prying eyes of studio executives, these visitors enjoyed a sense (however false) of creative autonomy and adventure, while local service producers, production managers, and location

experts had unparalleled access to elite producers and celebrity talent, like Jerry Bruckheimer, Matt Damon, and Barbara Broccoli. “You could take them out to dinner. You could hang out with them. You could learn from them,” Minkowski said.<sup>19</sup> In conversation, this moment is remembered with a sense of nostalgia. The glamorous aura that comes with making motion pictures turned awestruck local authorities into productive allies who simply wanted to see a little Hollywood magic transform their districts into other times and places. For the international visitors, however, over time, the Czech government has proved a less reliable ally (justified in part by its deference to the sentiments of residents who are “fed up” with the disruption large-scale productions can cause to city life) than its Hungarian counterpart, whose interest in the economic benefits of service production drives its robust policy support.<sup>20</sup>

Since the role of producer did not exist within the mode of production in Eastern Europe, it created an opportunity for expatriate workers, like Minkowski, to assume that role and act as “conduits of tacit, embedded organizational knowledge, which local players attempted to internalize through direct observation and imitation” as a means to improve their value to production.<sup>21</sup> In addition to dealing with the numerous inefficiencies that plagued the administrative and logistical aspects of production, much of the earlier work service producers performed focused on cultural mediation and organizational issues, dealing with disparate language competencies, different work routines, and upskilling to meet the demands of blockbuster film and television production. It was a continuous education for local production personnel from some of the most seasoned industry veterans, both above and below the line. At the same time, the knowledge exchange was mutual, with visiting workers

picking up insights from observing differences in work routines, value assumptions, and resourcefulness.<sup>22</sup> For a younger generation of workers in these cities, for example, the opportunity to work for Hollywood offers better pay, prestige, and higher levels of access than their respective domestic industries, even if opportunities for upward mobility are limited and the ephemeral nature of mobile production threatens professional stability.<sup>23</sup> These accounts are important reminders that abstract conceptions of globalization and their attendant frameworks like the NICL don't fully capture the contradictory motivations and complex aspirations of the individuals otherwise at risk of being perceived as the victims of such dynamics.

As interest in locations accelerated with the launch of production subsidies, and service producers trained up a new generation of crew, the operations of mobile production subsumed some of the idiosyncrasies into much more familiar structures. English became the lingua franca of film production. Hollywood's strict division of labor established the "proper" work routines and job categories. And yet Mobile Hollywood's ability to subsume and incorporate differences is never complete, with contingencies always proliferating at its edges. Some things may change, while some things remain the same. Indeed, my interviews suggest competitive tax incentives and increased business simply exacerbated or expanded the complexities service producers face as part of their jobs, with rebate-related issues occupying a substantial amount of time alongside actual production work. According to Minkowski, "I have become more of a lawyer and accountant and lobbyist. I spend so much time trying to understand how this whole process works from a legal perspective, from a financial perspective, from a policy perspective, and from a bureaucratic perspective. I spend time trying to figure

out how to game it and goose it just to secure work from foreign producers. I need to convince the government to support the film business. I need to figure out how to keep from losing business to other countries.”<sup>24</sup> Service work, in this sense, is never complete but a constant jostling of incongruent elements into a universal form that producers recognize as film friendliness.

*Fragile Promises and Risky Speculation*

Service firms commonly prepare ten to fifteen different budgets at one time up to a year in advance for projects, with only cursory interests in a location. Line producers commonly budget more than one city for the same project. Working on behalf of studios, they collect budgets from competing locations, typically London, Berlin, Prague, and Budapest, for comparison. Service firms receive the script, coordinate location scouts, and develop virtual presentations (sometimes just a PowerPoint emailed to the line producer with one hundred to two hundred images) with a tentative budget. Only about five or six of these initial requests will translate into a more detailed site visit with key creative personnel, during which they are “wined and dined” in addition to inspecting key locations and studio facilities. Only one or two productions will make the commitment to shoot in the location. The hubs and the workers who live there learn to treat each potential project as a priority, at least in terms of the economy of appearances, without becoming too emotionally invested in any one project—the market is simply too volatile to wager everything on a coveted production until there’s more certainty that the location is a serious contender.

It’s a tricky process rife with speculation and manipulation. Less honest service producers or film commissions can persuade

a gullible line producer with a budget that artificially reduces costs. Certain locations, like Romania, tend to look cheaper on paper, because budgets rarely include contingency costs for unexpected logistical disruptions, such as transporting wardrobe from a more cosmopolitan location when the wardrobe supervisor cannot find enough of what he or she needs in Bucharest. Line producers can adjust numbers to make certain locations more attractive to studio executives in Los Angeles simply because they prefer Vancouver or Berlin to Budapest. Furthermore, they tend to lowball below-the-line wages unless a service producer intervenes. Labor rates in Prague and Budapest are lower than in London and Los Angeles, but the wages for local crew are fixed. “Yet because they’re filming here [line producers] think they can tell me what costs *they* think are fair [for Budapest],” says Goodman.<sup>25</sup> Parochialism notwithstanding, he continues, good studio executives know if line producers are comparing apples to apples: “I can put \$1 million in the construction budget, and get a lot with that in Prague and Budapest. Can I keep the budget the same if I’m the line producer who is comparing Vancouver? Sure, but it won’t go nearly as far. You can goose each of those items to hit the overall budget number you want.”<sup>26</sup>

Location-based competition, then, has far more localized effects than policy-level adjustments to production incentives. Competitive pressures put livelihoods and reputations at risk. Here service producers face a moral dilemma with professional consequences: how to balance an honest depiction of the costs with an attractive pitch that maximizes the foreign producer’s savings, never knowing for sure if the opposing budgets are valid representations of a competing location. Of course, the most scrupulous service producer errs on the side of honesty in

a business where “reputation is everything.” But selling snake oil is a common practice within the spatial operations of mobile production, making some locations more appealing than others, for better or worse, depending on disparate individual agendas.

A similarly fragile dynamic is at work when securing locations for incoming producers. Making available a location’s geography is one of the fundamental services these firms provide to outsiders, and a key process in making visible what the region can offer, both creatively and logistically, to filmmakers. Domestic location experts—who I discuss in more detail in the next chapter—have already scouted a range of soundstages and exterior options for consideration as part of the initial pitch to producers, but deliberation among the director, production designer, and international location manager ultimately determines the final filming destinations. Often this process starts with thousands of digital images that are fashioned into a short list based on a production’s creative needs (e.g., Does this match the director’s aesthetic? Does it fit the script’s need for Victorian architecture?) and a location’s logistical feasibility (e.g., Does the location have a power supply? Will it accommodate crew parking, craft services, and portable toilets?). Location experts must then further weigh a location’s viability against a host of other variables, including production schedules, budgets, seasonal weather, and health and safety concerns.

Producers have grown increasingly wary about overuse, often pressing location experts to reveal what other productions have used a particular location, and property owners have become savvier, raising rental fees or limiting availability to odd hours so as to not interfere with their primary businesses or personal lives. As a location expert in Budapest admits, “It adds a level of complexity to finding the ‘best’ location when the production

designer sees gaffer tape from the last crew that filmed there. They hate it. . . . I now hear more often: show me somewhere no one has filmed.”<sup>27</sup> Securing permits and permissions for access becomes paramount once selections are made. These negotiations require a location manager not only to engage third parties external to a production but also maintain ongoing and meaningful relationships among private citizens, business owners, historical agencies, security firms, public authorities, and local politicians. Location experts acknowledge that negotiating with such disparate actors demands a nimble set of tactics to assuage concerns and engender acquiescence. Negotiating with local politicians and public authorities has become especially fraught, given the growing magnitude of the requests from foreign producers and the increasing pressure on representatives to protect historic sites, neighborhoods, and residents.

Service producers and, by extension, the location experts who work for them, thus face multifarious contingencies that threaten to undermine what otherwise appears as a rather routine aspect of the production process. Competition from other production hubs only intensifies the pressure, as it simply underscores the fleeting nature of global capital. Visiting producers remain invested in a particular location only as long as they remain convinced it serves a functional purpose. It falls to the service producer and his or her teams to maintain that impression of functionality, no matter the speculation or instability involved, because ongoing business depends on it. This places a particular burden on service producers to present an outwardly visible, anything-is-possible confidence that necessarily belies an at-all-costs work ethic behind the scenes. Minkowski captures this duality when recalling an experience during the filming of *Child 44* (2015) in Prague:

We needed a Metro station, and of course, the only one that worked for our needs also happened to be the busiest Metro station in Prague. No one has ever shot there before. . . . Our schedule called for two 12-hour days of shooting. . . . The locations manager was like, no, it's impossible. We can't do it. Why? Because we've never done it before! They'll never let us! I get involved. I call the Mayor of Prague [to get permission]. This is why it's important for me to keep my crews together and work with the same people. It helps them realize what's possible, that anything is possible, really. Let's say "yes" and then figure out how to get it done.<sup>28</sup>

There are a number of potential pitfalls service producers might encounter when securing locations: from disagreeable landlords and uninterested politicians to cumbersome bureaucracies and bad weather. Anything can go wrong, and many things do, but the implicit promise service producers make is to ensure the fragility of the entire enterprise never threatens a location's perceived amenability to foreign producers—they must say "yes" and then figure out how to get it done.

#### *Awkward and Uneven Relations*

As former line producers, service producers still struggle with an anxiety that comes from a lifelong freelance mentality. Like all contingent laborers, service producers work on a project-by-project basis. However, unlike their counterparts, service producers must also contend with the additional overhead of running a small business enterprise with a permanent and casual staff of its own. In other words, the ability of service producers to secure work from foreign producers is entwined with the personal and professional fates of the local crew and administrative support they employ. Most firms have a small permanent group of office administrators but engage crews on a

freelance basis as jobs arise. Service firms tend to work with the same crew members as a means to ensure efficiency and quality. As is common among craft workers and technicians, local crews also tend to coalesce into tight professional packs, meaning a production manager prefers to work with a particular production coordinator and so on.<sup>29</sup>

Service firms typically have about five core crew groups with which they staff projects of various sizes. While the crew members are technically free to take the first job available (i.e., they are not locked into exclusive contracts with any particular service firm), they remain reluctant to distance themselves too far from a single service producer because the earning potential on Hollywood productions is incredibly high compared to other sectors.<sup>30</sup> Additionally, the sense of trust and professionalism that accrues over time among crews that work together repeatedly helps offset the highly casual and contingent nature of film and television work.<sup>31</sup> “It’s not arrogance or selfishness, but they worry about new blood. They worry about someone shining on set and then replacing them. It’s the fundamental insecurity that the nature of this work breeds in the crew. You never want your current job to be your last,”<sup>32</sup> Goodman tells me. Consequently, service producers worry that the local crew base has become too exclusionary as a result of their precariousness, admitting that crew regeneration is a potentially serious threat to future sustainability and requires an ongoing and exhaustive quest for new trainees and apprentices to maintain efficient operations.

The social relations of production are further complicated by the transnational makeup of the production teams. Local crew, of course, potentially gain immense value in the knowledge and skills exchanged on a professional film or television set, though the social relations on set adhere to a strict hierarchy. There is

the international elite group of above-the-line talent, largely though not exclusively culled from Anglo-America; below-the-line department heads from Los Angeles or London; and local crew hired to support their foreign managers. The biggest staffing challenge service producers face is a process they refer to as “casting the crew,” in which they try to negotiate with their foreign partners the appropriate mix between local and foreign below-the-line crafts people and technicians. Service producers prefer international crew who “travel well,” industry slang for those heads of departments and key assistants who leave behind an entourage of trusted collaborators and thus make space available for more local hires, striking a productive balance in which the number of local crew isn’t diluted by the number of visiting collaborators.

According to my conversations, the right mix was always an abstract estimation but understood to make it easier for service producers to mediate misunderstandings on set. Foreign department heads are the unquestioned creative authorities, with local hires there to support them. Everyone who spoke with me clearly understood the hierarchies that structure their workplaces, though many of them questioned the logic. Service producers defended the arrangement, claiming the division of labor simply reflects the temporal and geographic logistics of production, not the depth of local talent. It’s much easier for executive producers and directors to coordinate with a production designer, for example, if they are in the same place at the same time and speak the same language. Of course, this national cultural makeup shifts among some of the lower-budgeted European fare shooting in the region, wherein you find a greater mix between foreign crew and local hires. Such productions have less money to support travel expenses compared to

studio films or television series, so more positions are open to local technicians.

Yet Hollywood producers are notoriously risk averse, with little willingness to relinquish control, likely because there is much more money at stake. According to this logic, it reduces creative and financial risk to employ known entities in key leadership roles rather than wager on a local hire without a similar pedigree, a cycle that makes it very difficult for local crew to advance professionally. Likewise, it also partially explains the strategic benefit Minkowski's and Goodman's leadership provides, respectively, to Stillking and Mid Atlantic. By working with expatriates with strong Hollywood connections, studio producers are a step removed from the prospect of negotiating directly with foreign partners while on location in Prague or Budapest. This point is an explicit part of their value proposition: "People say, what is it that Mid Atlantic films do, what are you here for? Well, we know what 10,000 forints should buy you. Not what some people tell you it should."<sup>33</sup>

For their part, local crews have expressed reservations about on-set hierarchies, alleging they benefit the service firms more than individual crew members. As individual crew members amass more and more credits on major productions, for example, they develop their own relationships with foreign producers and department heads. Some feel confident that they now have the professional network necessary to secure work on their own but can't because of the nature of service work that pitches complete packages of financial, material, and human resources to foreign producers. While the service firm can act as a helpful gatekeeper, providing a form of quality assurance for both incoming producers and local hires, they also maximize cost savings when local hires are priced as supporting players rather

than department leaders. Indeed, crew members are growing more and more aware of their own value as locations remain popular filming destinations, though, as one service producer admitted to me off the record, demands for higher wages reduce any cost savings from production incentives or cheap labor rates, and that's ultimately not good for the firm's business or the crew's livelihood. A less competitive environment will prompt foreign producers to look elsewhere. For the skeptical crew member, however, it raises questions about the service firm's allegiance, questions that cannot be addressed in any meaningful manner as speaking up would threaten the very relationships responsible for securing work for local hires.

Local crews also have come to understand Hollywood's highly regimented division of labor if not fully embrace some of what they perceive as its excesses. As Kristina Hejduková, a Prague-based service producer, tells me, "It's hard to justify to a [local] production designer why he can't pick up a hammer if someone from construction needs help. It seems inefficient to Czech crews not to help someone when they need it. It wastes time, which wastes money."<sup>34</sup> Service producers, too, claim the bloated production processes of the major studios cause some dissonance with the purported cost savings of location shooting. Reporting procedures, for instance, are complicated, with decisions that require approval from corporate overlords far removed from the culture and creative environment on set. She continues, "Rather than just let us use common sense to resolve some small problem, it requires memos to multiple assistants who have assistants who probably have assistants. We don't even see some of these people. Everything is documented and reported, especially insurance concerns, because no one wants to be liable for accidents. If it rains, we issue memos to wear a raincoat. At a

certain point, it starts to feel like a waste of time and money. You certainly don't see those expenses on the screen."<sup>35</sup>

But someone has to do it. So much of the labor of mobile production falls to service firms in key locations around the globe. While they delegate many of the more production-focused tasks to their teams of production managers, production accountants, location managers, and expert technicians and craftsman, service producers still stitch it all together, keeping the incongruent mechanisms that power production's mobility running as smoothly as possible.

#### THANK YOU, PLEASE COME AGAIN

The labor of service producers is a necessary component to sustain the spatial dynamics of mobile production and is furthermore characterized by its complexity, encompassing multiple aspects of production, from the administrative, legal, and political to the organizational, technical, and cultural. The nature of this work draws attention to the service producer's ingenuity and resilience in stitching together disparate agendas and untold details, a process that only ever serves as a conditional safeguard against the always-present hazards threatening the smooth expansion of a highly mobile production apparatus. In other words, global projects, like the dispersal of film and television production, must be made, work must go into forging connections and maintaining links, a messy and incongruent process that nevertheless gives shape to the possibilities and limitations of these encounters. In their roles as middlemen and -women, service producers provide a level of governance in which their loyalties are bifurcated between the foreign clients that help sustain the producers' independent businesses and

the local crew and other providers who depend on their service firms for continuity of employment.

Service producers are very aware of the role they play in nurturing these makeshift junctions, and that they do so under fraught circumstances. The structural differences that make locations attractive to Mobile Hollywood also give rise to the need to manage the consequences of disjuncture. In other words, if Budapest ever became “just like” Hollywood, in terms of, say, cost or skills, it would undermine its own value. Mobile Hollywood needs those differences, and those differences require service producers to provide a sense of familiarity and confidence in the face of disjuncture. The contingent dynamics of service production refuse the lie that conditions on the ground are somehow flush with comforts once characteristic of other places, like Hollywood, and that these production hubs have been somehow remade to fully align with the interests and rewards of global capital. Friction is helpful here because it recasts geographic expansion as an incomplete and tentative process. Global coalescence does not happen *to* particular places but is made possible *from* the practical and provisional encounters that emerge within and across its cracks. By calling attention to the immediate pressures and daily entanglements service producers face, these details trouble the friendly face and welcoming embrace of policy-driven publicity. Rather, focusing on the work functions of service producers not only extends our understanding of the gritty machinations of mobile production, but it also establishes some of the recurring characteristics of work in Mobile Hollywood, no matter where it takes place.