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## Abjection, Telesthesia, and Transnationalism: Incest in Park Chan-wook's *Oldboy*

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**Abjection, Telesthesia, and Transnationalism:  
Incest in Park Chan-wook's *Oldboy***

by

Daniel L. Holland

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Masters of Liberal Arts  
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## Abstract

Many consider *Oldboy* be the defining film of the most recent wave of South Korean cinema, with scholars such as Terrence McSweeney and Kim Kyun Hyun arguing the film's representation of South Korean culture through collective memory, trauma, and Westernization. However, most of the current scholarship that surrounds the film does not adequately address the film's prominent theme of incest. My thesis explores the anxious implications of the film's incestuous imagery and reads it as a figure for the film's transnational presence. Specifically, in my project, incest is the nucleus on which I build each argument outward. First through abjection and desire for self and other, onto telesthesia and desire for private and public, then finally, transnationalism and the desire for national and global. These desires we typically take as binaries, but in fact, we experience an anxiety of being simultaneously on both sides of the binary. I argue that attentiveness *Oldboy's* representation of the incest taboo brings necessary nuances to the current scholarship that surrounds it: Contemporary South Korean culture cannot be a primary focus, as South Korea has always been entangled within an "other", be it through Colonization, Westernization, or more recently telecommunications. In conclusion, by closely examining the incest taboo in *Oldboy*, this project sheds light on the simultaneity within the desires of self and other, private and public, and finally, national and global.

## **The Trouble with Incest**

Park Chan-wook's *Oldboy* (2003) quickly gained international notoriety after receiving the Grand Prix (second place) from the Cannes International Film Festival in 2004. The film is adapted from an eight volume manga series of the same name, written and illustrated by Garon Tsuchiya and Nobuaki Minegishi. While Park maintains the core structure of the manga, his key addition to the narrative is two transgressions of the incest taboo. Given the film's international notoriety, it is not surprising that *Oldboy* is frequently referenced in the contemporary scholarship surrounding South Korean Cinema. What is surprising is that among the multiple texts that use *Oldboy* as a primary source, so few address the dual transgressions of the incest taboo. Most scholars only mention them in passing, which is puzzling considering it is the primary reason Park's narrative is unique.

Oh Dae-su, a middle-aged businessman, is kidnapped on his daughter's third birthday, only to wake up in a prison cell that bears striking resemblance to a modern hotel room. His incarceration lasts for fifteen years and then he is released onto the city streets, where he sets out to find revenge for his imprisonment. Along the way he meets a young woman named Mi-do who offers to help him on his quest to find the man who took fifteen years of his life from him. Over the course of the film, Dae-su learns through his memory, that this man is Lee Woo-jin: A former classmate that Dae-su caught engaging in incestuous activities with his sister, who then killed herself as rumors began to spread. With Dae-su's discovery of the significance of his

imprisonment, Woo-jin reveals that it was merely a distraction: Mi-do, now Dae-su's lover, is revealed to be his very own daughter that he was taken away from fifteen years prior.

Naturally, these transgressions are shocking to spectators, as incest prohibition is widely considered to be a universally held. Perhaps this is the reason most scholars only mention it in passing, but I believe its significance to Park's film is too great to ignore. My thesis explores incest directly, creating a new mode of scholarship that acknowledges, but also complicates the arguments that have been written before me. Using incest as a figure, I trace the anxieties created by the transgression through the desires of self and other, private and public, and finally, national and global. Drawing upon Julia Kristeva's writings of abjection and McKenzie Wark's writings of telesthesia, I offer that each theorists' argument is structurally similar and creates a new way of considering our relationship to the contemporary media that are dominant images in *Oldboy*.

## I. Contemporary Literature

The dominant texts that use *Oldboy* as a primary source typically focus on how the narrative's themes of trauma and memory are implicitly concerned with South Korean history and culture. While I agree with these texts' discoveries, my argument complicates the idea of what is considered to be South Korean history and culture. In her book *The South Korean film Renaissance: Local Hitmakers, Global Provocateurs*, Jinhee Choi claims that fixating solely on a nation's history or culture results in a "symptomatic approach" to analyzing national cinema. She argues that, "To reduce national cinema to that element exclusively is to discount the nuances that a national cinema embodies."<sup>1</sup> My thesis embraces the nuances provided by *Oldboy* through a synthesis of the local and the transnational. By spending more time with the incest taboo within the narrative, as well as other aspects of film form (cinematography, editing, sound, etc.), I

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<sup>1</sup> Jinhee Choi, *The South Korean Film Renaissance Local Hitmakers, Global Provocateurs* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 2010), p. 9.

propose that *Oldboy*'s implicit concern with South Korean culture is unable to draw the line at the country's borders.

Beginning in the late 1990s, South Korean filmmakers have produced local box office hits by borrowing from their Hollywood competition and transforming production practices in order to address contemporary Korean issues. It is this synthesis, this marriage of Hollywood and the South Korean film industry, which underscores the entanglement of national and global that Choi refers to as the "second renaissance" of South Korean cinema.<sup>2</sup> Yes, South Korean cultural issues are addressed in this cinematic movement, but they are inclusive of being influenced by an other. These influences range from the lasting traumas of British colonization and American occupation, to the country's national cinema being tremendously informed by Hollywood and European Art Cinema alike. The themes of trauma that are typically addressed in *Oldboy* must be understood to be iterations of the entanglement between the self (South Korea) and the other.

In providing an in-depth analysis of *Oldboy*, I open conversation with texts concerning the reflections of South Korea's identity. In "Memory as Cultural Battleground in Park Chan-wook's *Oldboy*," Terence McSweeney provides one such reading of the cultural landscape of South Korea as represented in the film. For example, McSweeney argues that Park's depiction of South Korea echoes that of a phrase spoken in the film's dialogue: a bigger prison. With this, he briefly states that South Korea's (the city of Seoul's in particular) Westernized capitalist economy has not produced the deliverance that was once expected.<sup>3</sup> This claim is made in comparison to the prison which incarcerated Dae-su; it is a private enterprise that imprisons people for a price. While his argument may be true, he does not acknowledge that

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<sup>2</sup> Choi places the "first renaissance" during the 1960s, when South Korea began to see more commercially successful films with a new generation of directors.

<sup>3</sup> Terence McSweeney, "Memory as Cultural Battleground" in *Millennial Cinema Memory in Global Film* (London: Wallflower Press, 2011), p. 226.



Westernization is not something wholly South Korean. A similar account can be found in Kyung Hyun Kim's *Virtual Hallyu: Korean Cinema of the Global Era*, as Kim lists formal elements that figuratively represent a clear sense of yearning. Dilapidated concrete cells as well as a saturated color scheme contribute to *Oldboy*'s desolate cityscape.<sup>4</sup> While the authors have developed similar arguments concerning local imagery in the aftermath of Westernization, I argue that Westernization is once again an example of the entanglement of self and other, in this case national and global.

Joseph Jonghyun Jeon departs from McSweeney and Kim in that he provides the reader with more close readings at the level of the individual to support his argument. One unique reading in Jeon's essay is the idea of *chaebŏl*, or large conglomerates, that receive state support and are given tax breaks that allow a competitive edge. He pinpoints this imagery in specific word choice during one scene: "He then calls him... 'Ŭrŭsin hoejangnim!'... *hoejang* refers not just to any boss, but usually to the head of a *chaebŏl* and the suffix, *-nim*, turns the address into an honorific form."<sup>5</sup> Jeon's concern with this scene is one of improper translation (boss of a *chaebŏl*, rather than a 'regular' boss), is brought about through the film's international distribution. By introducing the idea of a problematic translation from Korean to English, Jeon evokes the aforementioned entanglement of national and global outside the realm of narrative, as it critiques the transnational *reception* of the film. While Jeon's full argument is still largely concerned with local interests within the narrative, it is the implicit nods to this entanglement that fuels my argument.

## II. Theoretical Discourse

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<sup>4</sup> Kyung Hyun Kim, *Virtual Hallyu: Korean Cinema of the Global Era* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), p. 182.

<sup>5</sup> Joseph Jonghyun Jeon, "Residual Selves: Trauma and Forgetting in Park Chan-wook's *Oldboy*," *Positions: East Asia Cultures Critique* (2009): p. 726.

In her book *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, Julia Kristeva theorizes that abjection is a social process by which we define our beings. “The abjection of self would be the culminating form of that experience of the subject to which it is revealed that all its objects are based merely on the inaugural *loss* that laid the foundations of its own being.”<sup>6</sup> That which is expelled from this process, the abject, “simultaneously beseeches and pulverizes the subject.”<sup>7</sup> The subject, in this case, would be ‘I,’ but the object expelled is not wholly other, as I recognize it as my own loss. The overwhelming urge to marvel at *and* be disgusted by a discarded fingernail or the peeling-off of dead skin: These bodily examples make Kristeva’s theory accessible, but can be pressed into deeper aesthetic readings of the moving image.

The abject is both attractive and repulsive at one time, and through it, our beings are defined as “dejects.” Deject is the name Kristeva has given to social beings defined via abjection. The most important characteristic of a deject is that it is a wandering being, constantly navigating through its abjections. The more the deject moves, the more he is able to redefine the borders he sets for himself through abjection: “The more he strays, the more he is saved.”<sup>8</sup> Only through constant movement through the boundaries we erect for ourselves, may we begin to understand our relationship to them in order to transform them. It is this constant movement of this simultaneously attracted and repelled social being where I will intersect the work of Kristeva and McKenzie Wark.

Wark is a new media theorist who proposes that it is not ‘who we are’ that matters so much as ‘where we are.’ In his book *Telesthesia: Communication, Culture, & Class*, Wark raises important questions about telesthesia and how it has become common practice in our

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<sup>6</sup> Julia Kristeva and Leon S. Roudiez. *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), p. 5.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Kristeva and Roudiez, *The Powers of Horror*, p. 8.

contemporary culture. Telesthesia is defined as perception at a distance, which has been made increasingly possible via advancements in telecommunication technologies. Telephones and televisions have become increasingly accessible in our contemporary societies, and Wark takes interest in how these technologies affect our beings. Because we constantly use these new technologies for instantaneous communication, we have become avid consumers and producers of oscillating information.

It is with this theory of telesthesia and individual movement that I am able to tie Wark directly to Kristeva. If we are dejects defining our own borders via abjection, introducing technologies, such as cellphones or television, becomes necessary as they have become inseparable from our contemporary social beings. One way I will be addressing this issue is through what Wark refers to as ‘cellspace.’ He claims that the cellphone creates an imaginary bubble that we believe replaces the privacy that a landline used to provide. Returning to Kristeva, our individual privacy becomes the inaugural loss we experience in order to define ourselves as contemporary beings. When we realize that our privacy has indeed become public, we experience the repulsion/attraction that the abject instills within us.

This meeting of Kristeva and Wark is important for *Oldboy* in that it provides a strong parallel between Dae-su and spectators when thinking about media use and the figural representation of incest. Through Kristeva, we must continuously stray through our abjections in order to save ourselves from them by transforming our relationships to the boundaries we create. Applied to Wark, “straying” represents the anxieties experienced with our constant bilocation with the use of telecommunications: We are always private and public, which is more often than not extended to national and global. “Saving” in this context is recognizing and appreciating this bilocation, or simultaneity, transforming our relationship to our use of media. The similarity

within their theoretical structures opens up a new analysis of the film that explores the consequences of being simultaneously self and other, private and public, and national and global.

### III. Revealing the Transnational

Using incest as my project's nucleus, each chapter will build upon the next. Beginning with incest as a figure for the entanglement of self and other, I explore Julia Kristeva's theory in depth, in relation to both the characters in the film and spectators. Primarily focusing on Woo-jin, his sister, and Dae-su, each character provides examples to explicate the anxieties of self and other within abjection. The chapter introduces the idea that we are always attracted an 'other', but that 'other' has always been entangled with the self and is, therefore, repulsive. Through spectators, rather than exploring this relationship through incest, I explore similar attractions and repulsions through our relationship to the cinema. The chapter also introduces the straying deject who constantly wanders through his abjections, simultaneously attracted and to repelled by each one he encounters: Transforming his boundaries, or saving, along the way. Finally, the chapter encourages spectators to apply movement introduced through the deject through their own relationship to cinema.

Expanding the theme of incest outward, the next chapter explains McKenzie Wark's writings of telesthesia. Where in the previous chapter incest and abjection demonstrate the anxieties of self and other being finely entangled, the entanglement now shifts to private and public through the use of telecommunications. Maintaining the pattern of consequences for character and spectator, both Dae-su and Woo-jin provide examples of the anxieties produced by being simultaneously private and public. Consequences differ for spectators once again in that we are made aware of the anxiety of simultaneity through the figural actions of each character. The anxiety, as modeled after abjection, is that the publicness of media attracts us, but we are

simultaneously repelled as we realize its use is a communion (or communication) of private and public. However, it is only through the constant use of telecommunications, or ‘straying,’ that we are able to ‘save,’ or to understand, transform, and appreciate our relationship to the anxiety of their bilocation.

The third chapter remains constant in these motions forward: Keeping incest central, I have moved from self and other to private and public, and now on to the national and global entanglements that are permitted by telecommunications. This chapter focuses on what I take to be the film’s primary images that demonstrate the anxieties felt by being simultaneously national and global as a byproduct of telesthesia. Through the bilocation of telecommunications, nations are never singular as they are always simultaneously self and other. Rather than national, they are *transnational*. Afterwards, I return to specific texts that cite *Oldboy* as a transformative reflection of South Korean identity and provide a more in-depth critique using the structural overlap I discovered in Wark and Kristeva. Finally, I offer ways in which *Oldboy* itself is a transnational film that is consistently foregrounding the anxieties that conceived it transnational in the first place.

## **Erecting Porous Borders**

### **I. Transgressions and Abjections**

*Oldboy*'s narrative is intricately woven around two incestuous relationships. While these relationships are integral to the story as a whole, a single theme adheres each portion of the story to its incestuous core: transgression. After all, it is the transgression of the incest taboo that makes us aware of the act in the first place. The narrative primarily transgresses the border between heteronormative and incestuous sexual desires, creating a tension between self and other. With incest, there is a desire of other, but knowledge of self within other. By transgressing the taboo, the film shows a temporary, ambiguous stasis within the threshold of the boundary before pushing through to the opposite side. We as spectators experience the same stasis demonstrated through the characters within the diegesis: Incest arouses feelings of fascination (other) and disgust (self within other) simultaneously, placing us in a temporary stasis even as voyeurs. Using the narrative's two incestuous relationships as a foundation, a critical engagement with transgression accentuates our relationship to incest and allows an exploration into similar moments of stasis represented in the film.

The following is *Oldboy*'s narrative events told in chronological order: As an adolescent, Oh Dae-su witnesses Lee Woo-jin engaging in sexual activities with his own sister. Dae-su speaks of the event he witnessed to a friend; the gossip spreads through their social network, and Woo-jin's sister commits suicide as a result. Years later, Woo-jin is still blaming Dae-su for his sister's death and develops a complex plan in order to trick Dae-su into sleeping with his own

daughter. In other words, Dae-su unintentionally destroys a conscious relationship, and Woo-jin intentionally creates an unconscious relationship. *Oldboy*'s plot, however, reverses these two relationships presenting the fraternal transgression as a memory from Dae-su's past.

In order to fully appreciate the complexity of *Oldboy*'s transgression of the incest taboo, the two relationships must be approached and dissected individually. Although each relationship is incestuous, they are not without difference: One is conscious and fraternal, the other unconscious and paternal. They also occupy two different temporal planes. However, before narrative is addressed, the taboo itself must be understood separately. The goal is not to understand what incest is per se, but to understand why the act of incest within the film creates both disgust and intrigue in both character and spectator. By linking character to spectator, we are able to begin unraveling the social implications presented through cinema. In the case of *Oldboy*, coming to this understanding via abjection is appropriate, as I believe that it reflects the film's overall fascination with disgust.

If one of our fascinations with *Oldboy* lies with the disgust we experience through its dual transgressions of the incest taboo, we are indulging the repercussions of abjection. Abjection is a social process: one in which we participate daily, whether we know it or not. We collectively cast aside certain social practices in order to further develop ourselves as social beings. The processes that have been cast aside become abject, but they are always present, reminding us of what was once ourselves. In her book *The Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, Julia Kristeva repeats multiple times that the abject simultaneously attracts and repels us to and away from it. Never one or the other, these repulsions and attractions are simultaneous when we confront the abject.

The simultaneity of the attractions and repulsions experienced when confronted with the abject can be attributed to seeing ourselves within it. We are intrigued by our recognition of self within what is initially perceived as other. However, the abject is neither self nor other. In turn, the abject elicits a feeling of ambiguity with each confrontation. No sooner are we fascinated by what is abject than we are immediately repulsed by it. Kristeva states the abject is “[that which] disturbs identity, system, order... does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite.”<sup>9</sup> Being in-between is the best way to describe the abject: It is in between self and other because it is the remainder of ourselves, yet it is still not ourselves. It is an other in which we can see ourselves. As a result, confronting the abject often results in tension and anxiety, as it threatens our sense of structure. However, it is a necessary anxiety as it is a constant reminder of how we forged and sustain our own selfhoods.

In an effort to protect ourselves from our abjections, we erect borders around our beings. These borders we erect, however, are not concrete pillars that keep the abject away from us. No, these borders are porous and malleable, allowing the abject to transgress them. For example, at multiple points in our development, we learn to: clothe ourselves in public, excrete waste in private, and discontinue intimate contact with our mothers or fathers. Each of these common practices is the result of abjection. If at any time, we are confronted with these examples of the abject (public nudity, non-private excretion of waste, or the thought of post-infantile, paternal intimacy), we experience some form of bodily reflex and responsive prohibition. A sudden internal tightness (cringe), followed by a conscious step away from what has been deemed abject. Each one of these examples of transgression, incest especially, aligns itself with taboo building as observed by Sigmund Freud or Claude Lévi-Strauss: both abjection and incest

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<sup>9</sup> Kristeva and Roudiez, *Powers of Horror*, 4.



prohibition are found where the social order of humanity is established.<sup>10</sup> Nevertheless, our fascination, our desire, draws us towards the abject placing us in between social order and where that order breaks down.

In order to apply the notion of in-between to *Oldboy*, it is important to bring focus to the first incestuous relationship within the narrative to better understand the effect that the abject has on our subjectivities. Shown within Dae-su's flash back, Woo-jin chases his sister, Soo-ah, around an abandoned classroom with a camera. After she gives in to the chase, he has her pose for a few photographs and attempts to lift her skirt for a new pose. She refuses multiple times, yet allows him to reach inside and pull off her underwear. He then begins to unbutton her dress hesitantly, to which she resists once more, only less adamantly. Before he is able to finish, Soo-ah *helps* him undo the rest of the dress, as well as her brassiere. It is this hesitation that comes back to Kristeva, as both Woo-jin and Soo-ah hesitate before transgressing the border into the incest taboo.

In this scene, hesitation is figural for what Kristeva calls 'in-between.' There is an obvious willingness to follow through with this forbidden act, but the hesitation implies recognition that the act has been prohibited through abjection. Woo-jin carries out each of his advances slowly and carefully and Soo-ah resists each of the advances, yet the border is mutually transgressed through the siblings' joint efforts of unbuttoning the dress. The characters' hesitation demonstrates the simultaneity of fascination and repulsion that the abject elicits.

The camera that captures these events is from Dae-su's point of view, looking through a hole in a broken window. The broken glass creates a tight frame around the siblings' playful chase. However, the film cuts to a zoomed close-up of the siblings, still from Dae-su's position. We know this because the camera's movement is exaggerated: The further the zoom the more

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<sup>10</sup> Kristeva and Roudiez, *Powers of Horror*, 67-68.

sensitive the camera is to operator movement. In addition to the camera's sensitivity to movement, there are also blurred shapes that enter the foreground as the camera follows the movement of the characters. These blurs are the aforementioned fragments of broken glass that had previously framed the shot of the siblings. Essentially, the camera mimics fascination and repulsion, but in reverse. With the camera's zoom, we are able closer to what is repulsive within the scene, but we are reminded of the fascination that voyeurism brings through the blurred glass, as we still occupy Dae-su's POV.

The cinematography described above echoes the reflexivity of Woo-jin's diegetic camera. Although he and his sister occupy the same space, the camera acts as a border, but a border with a view. Through this view, Woo-jin is able to see the object of his desire as a voyeur. From here, a layering of borders similar to Woo-jin's camera extends outward, character to spectator. Dae-su uses the hole in the window as a camera's eyepiece, and because the shot is from Dae-su's POV, the *actual* camera's eyepiece affirms the voyeurism of spectators. Where Woo-jin and Soo-ah hesitantly transgress the border of the incest taboo, Dae-su lingers at the window, watching intently. In turn, our spectatorship is challenged as we too linger on the images we desire. Only through the siblings' transgression do we see the abject, and through our experience with the abject, we become aware of our relationship to cinema.

In addition to the layers of voyeuristic borders, a second figure demonstrates a similar dynamic between abjection and our relationship to cinema. After Soo-ah helps Woo-jin unbutton her dress, she also helps undo her brassiere. As Woo-jin mimics nursing at her breast, Soo-ah picks up a mirror in order to watch herself. First, she watches her breast be suckled and slowly pulls the reflection up to her face, where she smiles. Because the act within this scene is abject, Soo-ah's reflection within the mirror is a figure for a constant self within the abject. Through the

action of pulling the reflection from her breast to her face, she foregrounds both the image of the self and the image of the transgression. This shot is a fantastic example of abjection: She sees herself within the abject (her face), but also sees the abject within herself (intimate fraternal contact with *her* breast). Her desire for the other is ambiguously connected to the self through a fluid movement in between her breast and her face. The reflections demonstrate the attraction and repulsion experienced when confronting what is abject.

Like Woo-jin's diegetic camera, Soo-ah's mirror directly links character to spectator through cinematography. As Soo-ah pulls the mirror from her breast to her face, we assume that she is looking at herself within the film. However, with the camera remaining static, the mirror is moved so that each angle of the reflection is aimed directly at the camera. As with most narrative cinema, the spectator and the camera are generally interchangeable, placing us at the receiving end of Soo-ah's reflection. Here, it is important to return to Soo-ah's smile, which would typically indicate pleasure. We are repulsed by the image of the transgression, but the reflection of her smile reminds us of our desire for the moving image. In the same fashion as the abject, we see our smiling selves within the other, the moving image.

## II. Incest, Memory, and Cinema

Memory is an important function for abjection, as it is how we see ourselves within the abject: It was once part of us, and the attraction/repulsion experienced is the result of our memory of what was cast aside. The prohibition of incest, memory, and cinema each share in the meeting of past and present, as well as real and imaginary. The scene I have already recounted is shown through a flashback, cinema's go-to function for a character's memory, creating a simultaneous linking experience between character and spectator. With that said, it is important to consider this link across each idea presented: Cinema makes our shared experience of incest

and memory possible. The social implications of this link must be explored in order to bring extrinsic meaning to the dual representations of the incest taboo.

Memory and the prohibition of incest function similarly in that both occupy a phantasmatic plane of existence. I would argue however, that incest prohibition is also a memory, but a dormant one. Only when we confront ourselves with incest does this memory become active, an immediate reflex that reminds us of the taboo's implications. Returning to Dae-su's memory of the incestuous actions of Woo-jin, we are given the chance to visually experience this reflexing memory. Though it is unclear whether or not Dae-su (at the time) was aware that the couple he was watching were related, we know as spectators, given the information gathered over the course of the film. This allows us to be knowledgeable of the incest and, in turn, we experience our own memories' reflex.

However, our reflexive memory is not limited incestuous imagery. Instead, it is the simultaneity of the repulsion and attraction through our memory of the abject that distracts us from narrative. Even if this moment of distraction is small, it allows spectators the opportunity to understand that cinema is an art predicated upon distraction. We go to the cinema to be distracted through narrative, escapists in a sense, but the art form itself also distracts our attention from its inner workings through continuity editing or realistic mise-en-scène. As such, where most films' goal is distraction from the cinematic form itself, *Oldboy's* incest disrupts this distraction by challenging our own desires for cinema. We escape into the film's narrative, but it confronts us with simultaneity of our fascination and disgust with incest, creating a moment of hesitation among spectators. We always have the option to not watch, but our desire to look onward consistently draws us in.

The second transgression of the incest taboo differs from the first in that it is hidden from both character and spectator, waiting to be revealed (as opposed to the first transgression, which is revealed to us immediately within the flashback). After being released from prison, Dae-su begins courting a young woman, Mi-do. She begins as a caretaker, but over the course of the film, she becomes a nuisance, a sidekick, a helping hand, and eventually, a lover. After Dae-su confronts Woo-jin about his unjust imprisonment, he is directed to a large purple box sitting on a desk. Within the box is a large photo album. Upon opening the first page, Dae-su sees a family portrait from a time prior to his imprisonment, depicting his deceased wife and infant daughter. The camera cuts to a close-up of Dae-su's face as he closes his eyes and breathes deeply, as if he knows what is in the coming pages: He hesitates before embracing the abject.

With each consecutive turn of the page, he watches his daughter grow up in a time lapse of still photography. To his horror, the daughter that he was unable to rear grows into Mi-do before his very eyes: From adolescence, to young adulthood, to recent pictures of the couple searching for answers together. Finally, the page turning ends on an overdeveloped photograph, so that Dae-su may see his reflection on the glossy black surface: once again, a reflection of self within the abject and the abject within the self. Where as in Soo-ah's reflection we see a smile, in Dae-su's reflection, we see concern or discomfort. Dae-su's reflection gives us the completed reciprocal of the character/spectator connection's fascination and repulsion to the abject. However, Dae-su's reflection is more closely tied to the relationship of character and spectator because the film's narrative, *his* story, served as a desirable distraction. The consequence of his desired distraction is a confrontation with the abject, placing him in critical communication with his past through his present (once again, both photographic image and memory offer an ambiguous meeting of past/present or real/imaginary). In this moment, *Oldboy* once again

confronts both character and spectator to see narrative as a distraction. Dae-su has been distracted from incest, as we have been distracted from film.

How the reveal is presented to spectators differs from the way it is presented to Dae-su. Yes, we are given Dae-su's POV of the pages turning in the photo album, but we are given extra clues as spectators. Images of Mi-do finding a pair of wings (established earlier in the film as a gift for her at age 3) are intercut within the page turning sequence. However, because we are already given the abject information through the photo album with Dae-su, the images of Mi-do and her wings become excessive clues to what is already known: Mi-do is Dae-su's daughter. In addition to the excessiveness of the clues given on screen, our memory provides more excessive clues from earlier in the film. We begin to recall moments when Dae-su's relationship to Mi-do is more like a father than that of a lover: He blow dries Mi-do's hair; He refers to her as "a little girl who cries a lot", and he becomes frustrated with her actions frequently. We cannot stop remembering just as Dae-su is unable to stop turning pages within the photo album.

It can be argued that the sole purpose of cutting to Dae-su's previously mentioned close-up of hesitation (eyes closed, breathing) is to imply that he *immediately* knows the horror that awaits him just by looking at the first photo. If that is true, his hesitation, his moment of in between, is short lived. As he progresses through each photo of the album, he quickens the pace at which he turns the pages. It is as if he is so fascinated by the knowledge of his transgression that he is obliged to see each bit of proof, but because the proof is terrifying, he increases pace so as to move through his confrontation with the abject as fast as possible. For spectators, the obligatory nature of his page turning mirrors that of the reels of film in cinema, as we desire completion. This movement through what is abject is an important conclusion to be made as

Kristeva details it in her writing, but also, *Oldboy* has a rather strong fixation on movement: especially through the character Dae-su.

### III. The Movement of the Deject

As previously stated, I take Dae-su's quickened pace flipping through the photographs to be a movement away from the abject. Movement, like the self, is a key part of abjection. When confronted with the abject, yes we hesitate, but we are always in motion. We move through the abject as it simultaneously repels and attracts us. Kristeva addresses movement in her writings as a byproduct of abjection. We cast out the abject and, at the same time, move away from it. "The one by whom the abject exists is thus a *deject* who places (himself), *seperates* (himself) situates (himself), and therefore *strays* instead of... belonging."<sup>11</sup> We are the deject. We are wanderers who stray, unable to settle in relation to our abjections. This inability to settle is what constitutes our straying, as our movement through the abject is a constant process that never ceases.

Many scenes within the film show Dae-su moving through space in an exaggerated manner. One scene, in particular, the now well-known fight scene, delivers what I take to be an accurate figure for the deject's relationship to the abject. Challenged by ten to twelve thugs, Dae-su fights his way down a long corridor armed with a hammer. The fight is filmed in one continuous take and lasts over three minutes, which is not typical, given the fast-paced editing of other contemporary fight scenes. Instead, the camera slowly follows Dae-su as he repels and moves towards the thugs, while moving forward and backward (depending on the direction from which he is being attacked). Also, the corridor itself adds to the figure of the deject, as it introduces and concludes itself as finite (as you are able to see where it begins and ends), but when the film cuts to the uninterrupted fight, it is framed to suggest an infinite amount of off-screen space. Through the extended duration of the fight and its implied infinite amount of space,

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<sup>11</sup> Kristeva and Roudiez, *Powers of Horror*, 8

the ceaselessness of straying while being simultaneously attracted/repelled or pushed/pulled offers a figurative example of our relationship to the abject.

Furthering the argument, Dae-su (our connection to narrative), is an exaggerated example of the deject, as he constantly wanders. While his wandering provides the narrative, and therefore distraction for us as spectators, it is important to revisit areas of the film to understand what lies behind the distraction. For example, the film harbors recurring references to the opening lines of Ella Wheeler Wilcox's poem "Solitude": "Laugh and the world laughs with you; weep and you weep alone." The quote's significance to the film stems from Dae-su's imprisonment, as he first encounters it hanging on the wall in his cell: painted onto a canvas along with a weathered yet smiling man. Having been placed in a cell, where he is being confined illegally, it makes sense that his captor placed it there in an effort to torment his psyche. Upon his release, this becomes Dae-su's motto that aids him in navigating himself towards revenge, as he repeats it to himself (or to us) when he is confronted with the abject.

When Dae-su first repeats Wilcox's colloquialism he is surrounded by abjection, two taboos to be precise. After retelling his story of imprisonment to a man about to take his own life, Dae-su takes an elevator to leave the roof of the building. Within the elevator, there is a woman, and Dae-su stretches himself against the far corner, strongly resisting the sexual urges he is feeling towards the first female he has consciously occupied space with in fifteen years. The camera exits the elevator as it drops to the ground floor. We then cut to Dae-su slowly walking away, wearing said woman's sunglasses, as she screams at a security guard behind him. This scene is interrupted by the man to whom Dae-su had previously spoken, leaping to his death onto a parked car. The woman screams, Dae-su stops momentarily to repeat Wilcox's phrase, and slowly wanders away, smiling. Through the conventional wisdom provided by Wilcox's poem, it



is implied that Dae-su chooses to laugh and remain a social being: a social being that moves through and away from the abject. Wilcox's poem is not without significance to the theory I am arguing. Kristeva also mentions in her writings that the deject does not perform his wandering without laughter, as laughter is a way to either place or displace abjection.<sup>12</sup> Laughter is the social response to the hesitation of moving through the abject. It is not the only social response, but it certainly represents our attraction to the abject.

Being a wandering deject is an exhausting venture as movement is constant, yet so is the erection of borders that attempt to keep the abject exiled. I imagine carrying a large dilapidated piece of wood, riddled with holes, so that even though we shield ourselves from the abject, we are able to see it coming. Yet it can always circumvent our shield. We tirelessly place the wood in new positions, erecting new borders with each attempt, but each is futile. No matter if we drag the wood behind us or walk cowardly behind it, we always see. We always know. I believe this is why laughter is important to the deject. It is a tool to ease our minds to the abjection: We laugh at the abject so that it may falter, but mostly we laugh at ourselves for fighting a hopeless battle. As such, Dae-su laughs at each taboo he comes across, when in the end he is encouraged to laugh at himself: The aforementioned overdeveloped photograph in the album echoes once more Wilcox's quote. Spectators, in turn, are encouraged to appreciate (or "laugh at") our desire for cinema. When we identify with a character, his desires become our own; but with Dae-su's incestuous plight, we want to detach ourselves from the narrative, but are unable to do so, as the desire for distraction is too great. In this way, *Oldboy*'s narrative challenges us to 'save' ourselves by understanding our relationship to the cinema through our constant 'straying' through its distractions.

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<sup>12</sup> Kristeva and Roudiez, *Powers of Horror*, 8.

At the beginning of Dae-su's journey, he is confronted with rape and suicide. Yet he chooses to wander on with laughter as a way of moving with and against the abject behind him. Slowly he trudges away from his abjections, unaware he is moving into a world filled with them. The reason he is able to move away so quickly is that the next abject obstacle unwittingly fascinates him, as it is the abject: something he once had, but has now lost through abjection. "He has a sense of the danger, of the loss that the pseudo-object attracting him represents for him, but he cannot help taking the risk at the very moment he sets himself apart. And the more he strays, the more he is saved."<sup>13</sup> This is why the deject wanders tirelessly: he exiles social practices through abjection, yet when he does not have them, he realizes there is a void he wants to fill. Only when he returns to these practices, the abject, does he realize the reason he exiled them in the first place.

Returning to incest, as Dae-su strays further away from the knowledge of his transgression through hypnosis. With the epilogue of the film, he asks a hypnotist to rid him of the knowledge of his sexual relation to Mi-do. After the procedure is finished, he is greeted with the embrace of his daughter, to which he reacts with a smile that gradually turns into wincing, then further into ambiguity. By failing to fully escape, or stray away from, his transgression, Dae-sue "saves" himself from the abject by seeing it anew. Whether the hypnosis was successful or not, Dae-su has a new understanding of his transgression which he must always consider while continuing a relationship with his daughter. As such, we, as spectators that have seen our own distraction, must consider our desire for narrative and character identification (an other that has always harbored a self) in the moving image critically as we continue our own relationship to cinema.

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<sup>13</sup> Kristeva and Roudiez, *Powers of Horror*, 8.

### **Technology, Telesthesia, and Porosity**

Through an analysis incest and abjection, *Oldboy*'s narrative explores the desires of self and other via character and spectator. While each transgression of the incest taboo links characters and spectators through self and other, the film builds on these linkages by foregrounding the characters' consistent use of telecommunications. Cellphones, television, and the Internet are among the many forms of media that are represented in the film that have become almost a necessity to our modern social beings. It only makes sense that abjection follows us into the high-tech world in which we reside, developing more complex practices we exile, which in turn yields only a more complex object. Through the ambiguity and porosity between self and other suggested by incest and abjection, *Oldboy* complicates our relationships to telecommunications by challenging us to see the same principles (ambiguity and porosity) applied to the notions private and public in addition to the desire for self and other.

Both Dae-su and Woo-jin are crucial points of analysis when it comes to telecommunications, as both men seem to be sustained by its use. Televised images accompanied by Dae-su's pseudo-philosophy of the medium dominate the first fifteen minutes of the film. This block of time is presented to spectators as a flashback as Dae-su wishes to recount his story, once again directly linking to character and spectator. The way the television is filmed during this sequence more often than not mimics the way in which we watch television: A static view of the entire device, not just the screen. These shots of the television are intercut with Dae-su participating in multiple activities such as staring blankly into the camera (sometimes while

eating) or jotting notes down into his journal. Dae-su, like us, consumes television through active and/or passive engagement. Dae-su also consumes television for the same reasons we consume it ourselves, but claims that his own circumstances are unique. Addressing the audience, he offers the advice: If you are ever kidnapped, make friends with the television because it is clock, calendar, school, home, church, friend, and lover. However, everything he has listed essentially defines our own uses of the television, from leisure to education.

Woo-jin, on the other hand, does not harbor the same relationship to television, but his relationship to Dae-su is constantly mediated through telecommunications (be it through cellphones, video recordings, audio surveillance, etc.). Woo-jin creates a mediated game of cat and mouse in an effort to victimize Dae-su but tries not to acknowledge his own participation in the game. If Dae-su is literally imprisoned within the film, but shares our interests in the television, what does that say about us? Perhaps it is the media represented that is central to the feeling of imprisonment. Similarly, does Woo-jin's use of telecommunications in his role as victimizer suggest something similar? Here I will offer that the use of telecommunications represents a new form of 'straying and saving' to our beings, not unlike the one set forth by abjection. Both men are attracted to and repelled from telecommunications because of porousness between private and public (they stray), but they learn that they must transform their relationship to this boundary in an effort to better understand it (they save).

## I. The Cell

As previously stated, we spend the first fifteen minutes of the film within Dae-su's flashback, which immediately connects character and spectator. He is confined within a cell for fifteen years and his only connection with the outside world is a television. Although, we as spectators, are not imprisoned, television is one of our primary connections to the world outside

our homes or cities. The televised image has reached a state of ubiquity in the twenty-first century. I have encountered television sets in multiple homes, hospitals, and hotels. Because the television finds its origin in the home, I would argue that the latter establishments adopted television in an effort to bring comfort to our beings in times of distress or desire; so that we may be *reminded* of home outside of the comfort that it brings. In other words, the televised image has become something we expect, and therefore, it is increasingly inseparable from our social beings. It should come as no surprise that a social process such as abjection would become more complicated as a result. *Oldboy* recognizes this complication as many scenes in the film involve a combination of taboos and telecommunications. These combinations broaden the conversation of abjection from cinema spectatorship to a critical engagement with our relationship with telecommunications.

Two scenes from the film best describe the combination of taboos and telecommunications mentioned above. First, just as Dae-su describes the television as ‘lover,’ the performance of a female pop star appears on screen followed by his hand reaching out to touch the cold surface. The image of the performance is intercut with multiple angles of Dae-su masturbating while touching the television screen until the performance ends (a little too early for Dae-su). The affective experience of on-screen masturbation is indeed uncomfortable for spectators, but what of character? While pop stars may be held as ‘sex symbols’ in certain regard, the performance of the song itself is not something that entices sexual arousal. Rather, it is Dae-su’s personal communication with the image on screen that compels him masturbate.

As with the abjection of incest, telecommunication places Dae-su in an area of in between. Both incest and telecommunication are inseparable meetings of private and public. The prohibition of the incest taboo is shared publicly and transgressed privately, but only through the

desire of what cannot be obtained publicly. Dae-su's masturbation echoes this pattern: The singer is televised publicly, fetishized privately, but only through Dae-su's desire for sexual gratification from the singer. By fetishizing the image of the pop singer, Dae-su attempts to cast aside the bilocation that telecommunication implies. He willfully ignores the in-between nature of telecommunication in an effort to make it his own object of desire. The meeting of flesh and technology are important to this scene as together they demonstrate the communion of private and public within telecommunications: Dae-su is unable to climax (private) because the song on the television ends too early (public). As with abjection, this places Dae-su both in a position of desiring media, but also within the very same media he desires.

Second, upon his release from prison, he meets a young female chef at a restaurant, later revealed to be his daughter, Mi-do. However, their relationship begins in an eerie manner as they both seem to know, or have known, each other. The familiarity between the two is incorrectly justified when Dae-su realizes he has seen her on television as the "youngest female chef in Japanese cuisine." This begs the question: What happened when he first saw the television show featuring his daughter? Did he recognize her then, or should we assume that he engaged in masturbation as with the singer? Or both? Either way, Dae-su's relationship to her began in his cell through the mediation of telecommunications.

The mediated origins of this relationship are echoed later in the film, when Mi-do sings the same song performed earlier in Dae-su's cell. After reading his prison journals and halting his first sexual advances, Mi-do promises Dae-su that when she is ready to be intimate, she will sing the song from his journal. Sure enough, Mi-do eventually sings the song, ultimately leading to their transgression. A few moments after she begins to sing the song, its sound begins to reverberate as it leaves the car they occupy to Woo-jin's spacious suite via the bug placed on

Dae-su.<sup>14</sup> The moment we hear Mi-do's reverberating voice, the song has been mediated five times: Once on the television, twice through Dae-su's prison journals, three times through Mi-do singing, fourth through Woo-jin's surveillance, and a final time to us through cinema. The song that had once accompanied Dae-su's fetishization of the televised image now beckons him, through iterations of mediation in which he participates, to ignorantly transgress the incest taboo.

It is in this way that our relationship to media is the same as abjection: We push through each interaction with media and are affected by it as a result. Still, the ubiquity of telecommunications has rendered us ignorant to the fact that our use of media is not a one-way street. Even though media cannot be considered something we had originally cast aside, the frequent use of media has been added to our behaviors. Now a new set of behaviors regarding the use of media may be included in the abjection process. For example, just before Dae-su is seen masturbating, he claims the television can be a church or a school, both far from being associated with masturbation. So the same device he uses for education or devotion is also the same device he uses to carry out his perversions. Changing channels is not a simple switch from lust to learning. There is a period of transition, an in between, that constitutes a newer abjection: One that considers our relationship *within* media and technology.

## II. Cellspace

Once released from the cell where he found himself in between notions of private and public regarding telecommunications, Dae-su is free to wander and stray through the unfamiliar city streets. As Kristeva recognizes a deject that exists by way of his abjections, we recognize Dae-su as one that exists by way of abjection and mediation. Whether it is through the fighting skills he picked up from watching televised boxing matches, or the encyclopedic information he

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<sup>14</sup> Woo-jin's audio surveillance will be much more significant later in the chapter, but for now, its placement here is crucial to make a point about mediation.

is able to regurgitate while examining the fish in a market, he can not escape the fact that he carries remnants of media with him as he travels. In essence, he has not escaped his cell; rather, he now strays with it surrounding him at all times. Once again, Dae-su can be seen as a caricature of ourselves, as we too carry mediated information with us throughout our daily lives.

How we receive most information from the television, or all telecommunication for that matter, can be defined as telesthesia. Telesthesia is the perception of distant occurrences made possible through all forms of media. Although our sense of sight allows us to see televised images, we are actually only looking at a screen. Television brings images from a production hub to millions of screens nationally and transnationally. Similarly, telephones, or the more contemporaneous cellphones, allow us to hear and be heard from afar. However, what interests me most about telesthesia is what Marshall McLuhan describes as “the technological extension of consciousness.”<sup>15</sup> Maintaining my example of the cellphone, McLuhan would argue that through the cellphone, we are increasingly translating ourselves through *and* into media. Telecommunications allow us to participate in systems of information. Recalling Dae-su’s masturbation as an example: The television itself is not an object of attraction. Rather, Dae-su extends his consciousness via the televised image in order to achieve pleasure. This extension implies a connection, and if the host is his consciousness, it shares his journey through abjection.

In his book *Telesthesia: Communication, Culture & Class*, McKenzie Wark discusses our relationship to telesthesia as one of movement. He claims that the advent and subsequent growth of telecommunication technology has made the movement of our extended consciousness more relevant. With devices such as televisions and cellphones, the immediate exchange of information is possible, allowing our individual consciousnesses to interact with technology more frequently. This causes our relationship to information to shift from physical to abstract.

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<sup>15</sup> Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (Berkeley: Gingko Press Inc., 2013), 82.



“When information can move faster and more freely than people or things, its relation to those other movements and to space itself changes. No longer a space of places, we move to a space of flows.”<sup>16</sup> This “space of flows” he refers to as “antipodality,” or the ability to traverse the globe instantly through telesthesia. Here, the importance of antipodality is its strong relationship to Kristeva’s writings of abjection.

Wark describes the feeling of antipodality as something very unnerving and he uses very similar language to Kristeva when describing it: It is something that is ‘lurking’ within and around us. “Antipodality is the feeling of being neither here nor there.”<sup>17</sup> Being here nor there is reminiscent of what Kristeva describes as the in between nature of our straying relationship to abjection. Their language is similar: both “flowing” and “straying” are defined by movement; however, one implies movement towards something and the other an aimless movement away. Within *Oldboy*, there are flows of mass telesthetic communication, such as television and cellphones, and the anxiety of an individual that strays to and fro between the flows. As mentioned in the section above, Dae-su’s anxiety stems from his desire to have the impossible: a one-sided relationship to a medium for the sole purpose of visual bilocation.

*Oldboy* offers many other representations of this anxious telesthetic simultaneity, most of which center around Dae-su, Woo-jin, and their communication with each other. Dae-su, still a representation of the deject, interacts with multiple forms of media such as cellphones, photographs, and tape recorders provided by Woo-jin. Also, unbeknownst to Dae-su, Woo-jin plants audio surveillance equipment within Dae-su’s clothing, adding an extra (unknown and unwanted) medium. Interestingly enough, Woo-jin not only provides media to Dae-su, but also lives a mediated existence through the help of a pacemaker. Through imprisoning Dae-su and

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<sup>16</sup> McKenzie Wark, *Telesthesia: Communication, Culture and Class* (Cambridge: Polity, 2012), 34.

<sup>17</sup> Wark, *Telesthesia*, 35.

releasing him well equipped into a high-tech world, the mediated Woo-jin creates a telesthetic maze in order to play with his object of desire. Each clue Dae-su receives (or wrong turn he makes) is more often than not centered on some form of media, and therefore fuels his anxiety from one telesthetic flow to the next.

To start, Dae-su receives a cellphone and a wallet full of cash from a homeless man towards the beginning of the film. When he finds himself in the aforementioned restaurant where he meets Mido, he gets his first cellphone call. It is important to emphasize that there are two firsts in that phrase: It is both his first phone call from Woo-jin, but more importantly, it is his first cellphone call *ever*. He was kidnapped in 1988 outside of a payphone and therefore has had no previous relationship to a cellphone whatsoever. It can be argued that he may have seen someone use a cellphone while watching the television during his imprisonment, which only further envelops him in the telesthetic labyrinth he has entered. With that said, this scene is integral to the film as a whole since it ignites Dae-su and Woo-jin's telesthetic relationship.

Having just explained his knowledge of "the youngest female chef in Japanese cuisine" to Mido, Dae-su reacts to a familiar tune coming from his cellphone with a sharp glance. This tune is a waltz played in the style of chip music (or 8-bit music) and was heard twice before while he was imprisoned.<sup>18</sup> After a few short moments recognizing the tune's familiarity, he quickly picks up the phone and brings it to his ear. With his face in close-up looking in the direction of the camera, Dae-su hesitates before asking, "Who are you?" As the camera maintains the close-up, the mysterious voice belonging to Woo-jin replies with another question: "Do you like your clothes?" The camera slowly zooms in closer to Dae-su's face as his lips begin to tremble and he has an audibly noticeable shortness of breath. With a cut away from the

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<sup>18</sup> The tune itself and the amount it is played will become relevant later in the chapter, but for now, it is important to know that it is a motif.

Dae-su's close up to a close up of Mido eavesdropping, we hear a final exchange of questions: "Why did you imprison me" and "Do you know who I am?" This is followed by Dae-su reciting a list of names attempting to guess at the mysterious voice, and with each attempt, he becomes louder and more frustrated, resulting in screaming at the voice in a public restaurant. Yet, the only people who are there to receive his screams are Mido and the other restaurant patrons who look at him with both fear and curiosity.

Because Dae-su stares directly into the camera (rather than through a mirror as in the previous chapter), our relationship to him shifts from self to other. If we were within the film receiving his stare, we would be occupying the same space as Mi-do, as he initially begins talking to her from that very camera angle. If we are occupying the space of Mi-do, we, too, are eavesdropping on Dae-su's conversation: We too become fuel to Dae-su's anxiety of a private phone call turned public. The way the scene is shot affirms this anxiety, as it first presses two close-ups of Dae-su (one from the front, the other from his lower side), keeping only him in frame, then cuts to a slow tracking shot towards him, revealing that it is indeed a public setting. A once private individual must now interact within a more flowing public space, a transition far from immediate. Though this is his first time using a cellphone, his behavior is not unlike our own 'more experienced' use of cellphones in public.

We, like Dae-su, are straying dejects that have been introduced to a new technology. Recalling my metaphor of the wooden shield in the first chapter, and combining the notions of telesthesia and abjection, the metaphor must transform in order to match our current state of being. Once carrying a large, dilapidated shield of wood, we now surround ourselves with a seemingly impenetrable, transparent bubble. We carry out all of our mediated conversations in this bubble under a false sense of security. The bubble is sleek and shiny (as is newer

technology); surely, we hope, it is less porous than our wooden shield. However, the bubble shares the same characteristics as the wooden shield: We are able to see through it and the abject is always able to circumvent its supposed protection. The transition from wood to bubble I am describing echoes Dae-su's transition from inside his cell, to what he believes to be "outside" his cell. Having once surrounded himself with solid walls, he desires the very same protection on the outside, so he attempts to take the protection with him. However, the protection he is able to muster, this bubble, is nothing but a shell of the shield that consistently failed him in the first place.

Wark calls this bubble "cellspace": a blending of public and private. He sees it as a result of movement rendering our individual borders porous and ambiguous, subjecting us to a multitude constantly moving away from our individuation. Thus, the border between private and public begins to wane, creating the porousness of our aforementioned bubble. He offers:

Nowhere is the breakdown of the distinction between public and private more evident than in the way the multitude organizes itself with its constant cellphone calls, blithely talking, in earshot of anyone, even about anal warts or erectile dysfunction. With the cellphone, the multitude finds its tool for creating its own spatiality – cellspace – inserting its difference into public space refusing to keep the details private.<sup>19</sup>

Although it is not demonstrated in the film, the consequences of Dae-su's behavior are typically felt internally, with the realization that our bubble has not protected us and we have been noticed. However, with Wark's mentioning of "anal warts" and "erectile dysfunction," the conversation is lead back to abjection. While these topics are not necessarily heard daily, they provide a more visceral example of the abjection process within the context of telesthesia. In other words, when unwittingly speaking out loud about these topics in public, two layers of 'in between' are functioning simultaneously. First, the state of being in between private and public, privately on a

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<sup>19</sup> Wark, *Telesthesia*, 58-59.

cell phone, publicly occupying physical space; Second, and perhaps more complex, each party's state of being in between fascination and disgust as set forth by abjection.

It is important to note that my recurring visual metaphors of the large piece of wood, and now, transparent bubble, are in the spirit of Kristeva's writing. She offers the notion that we are always in possession of the way we erect our borders, as we constantly subject ourselves to our abjections: "Thus casting within [ourselves] the scalpel that carries out [our] separations."<sup>20</sup> The cellphone in this case acts similarly to the scalpel in that it is one way in which we, as individual social beings, might navigate through the multitude that we have created. However, the cellphone only acts similarly, as it is only an extension of us. As we stray between our telesthetic flows, surrounded by our porous cellspace, we must understand that we are individuals within a multitude. Telesthesia confronts each individual within the collective with the anxieties of virtual bilocation, of being both here *and* there, or private *and* public. Only through consistent use of telecommunications might we learn to accommodate our anxieties: Echoing Kristeva, the more we stray, the more we save.

### III. Both Inside and Outside

Even though *Oldboy* represents the anxiety of being in between physical beings and abstract extensions through Dae-su, it complicates the same notion with the antagonist Woo-jin. Woo-jin is the 'outside' mastermind that placed Dae-su inside the telesthetic maze, but he does not realize that his desire to see Dae-su consistently fail requires him to run alongside his victim. As mentioned earlier, Woo-jin represents all things media and is even mediated himself through a pacemaker. Basically, Woo-jin represents the impossibility of a living being capable of mastery over media, so much so that he is able to manipulate Dae-su through the constant use of media. Essentially, Woo-jin fantasizes he is a living being able to transgress the virtual bilocation of all

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<sup>20</sup> Kristeva and Roudiez, *Powers of Horror*, 8.

things media, completely free of anxiety: And why shouldn't he? After all, he himself is mediated. Woo-jin's belief in his own fantasy blurs the lines between film and reality further, emphasizing the 'in between' characteristic of the cinematic image.

It is not until about halfway through the film that we actually meet Woo-jin, but we have felt his presence through Dae-su in the first half: He had kidnapped, imprisoned, hypnotized, released, clothed, and given Dae-su the gift of telecommunication. Now appearing as a physical entity, he is confronted by Dae-su in an abandoned apartment building. When Dae-su enters the room, it is shown as a close up of his hand attempting to turn on the lights by flipping a switch on and off. This cuts to a different close up, this time of Woo-jin's hand, pressing a button on a remote that causes a stereo to play a waltz: The same waltz that we hear coming from both Dae-su's cellphone and prison cell. Only this time, the waltz is played softly on a piano rather than through the compressed synthesized sounds of chip music. This brief mirroring of the characters' hands emphasizes each of their relations to technology and media: Woo-jin succeeds where Dae-su falls short. This scene introduces Woo-jin's perceived control over media and his desire to be enveloped by it. However, through the mirroring of the characters, it also begins to hint to spectators that it is indeed a *perceived* control. Even though Woo-jin has the ability to operate media, it is important to him that Dae-su is there to witness it.

Soon after, he tells Dae-su that in addition to his pacemaker, he requested that his doctor give him a remote he could use to stop his heart at anytime. As Dae-su comes near enough to assault him, Woo-jin reveals the remote, thus 'proving' to have control over the very medium that concerns his mortality. Again, this not only represents Woo-jin's incessant desire to control media, but it also represents the impossibility of that very control. He needs Dae-su to believe in the very same fantasy he created, so as to remain 'outside' the maze and untouchable. This scene

also provides a nonvisual mirroring in that it echoes Dae-su's earlier fetishization of the televised image. In the case of Woo-jin, he fetishizes a private control over Dae-su: His fantasy of controlling from the outside places him within private cell, so to speak. However, because Woo-jin uses media to torment Dae-su from the outside, he can never escape being in between outside *and* inside his own maze.

For Woo-jin, it is the direct line of communication that media provides that allows him this perceived control. Before, Dae-su falters because of the implication of the remote control communicating the command 'stop' to the pacemaker. Soon thereafter, Dae-su learns that the clothes given to him by Woo-jin have been bugged with audio surveillance equipment and has it removed. The removal of the equipment interrupts his direct line of communication from Dae-su, causing him to find other means to receive the direct line of communication he desires. In order to maintain a line of communication, Woo-jin eavesdrops cellphone conversations at the Internet café run by Dae-su's friend, Joo-hwan. The conversation consists of Joo-hwan reciting the story of Soo-ah (Woo-jin's sister) to Dae-su as he remembers it: Lacking every detail aside from the rumor she "was a slut." During this scene, as a result of the conversation being eavesdropped, Woo-jin breaks a CD-ROM in half and mercilessly stabs Joo-hwan in the chest multiple times. In this scene, media becomes a literal weapon for Woo-jin, rather than figural.

Woo-jin murdering Joo-hwan is anomalous as it gives his placement within his own maze a weighted physical presence. In the moments leading up to the event, Woo-jin is unable to pretend to be in control of media. The cinematography affirms his weighted presence, as this scene is shot in a single take, but a wall separates the two men. Rather than cut from one room to the next, the camera is placed perpendicularly to the wall and tracks between each room, creating a single space (preventing Woo-jin from being "outside" via a separate shot). He, like Mi-do and

ourselves previously, is put in the position of eavesdropper, with no control over what is being said. For the first time in the film, we see Woo-jin as we see Dae-su: a straying, contemporary deject navigating through the porousness of telesthetic flows and his abjections. His fantasy, his “cell” outside the maze, is broken; he must now stray in order to save. He no longer has an imaginary veil of safety: Instead, he, too, must acknowledge his own cellspace and wander tirelessly alongside Dae-su, transforming each border as he crosses it.

After it is revealed to Dae-su that he has indeed had sexual intercourse with his daughter, he is given the opportunity to use the remote control that he believes communicates with the pacemaker in Woo-jin’s heart. After Dae-su finishes groveling, Woo-jin spares his life and drops the remote in front of him. The film then cuts between Woo-jin walking towards his elevator slowly and Dae-su holding the remote in hand, ready to push the button. These cuts are coupled with a building score (not the familiar waltz), which ends on a dissonant chord as Dae-su finally pushes the button. The pushing of the button is once more part of a mirroring cut: Dae-su pushes the button on the remote and Woo-jin pushes the button on the elevator. Seeing that the button has had no effect on Woo-jin, Dae-su realizes he has activated an audio recording of sexual intercourse with his daughter that echoes through the penthouse suite. This recording was made possible by the surveillance equipment that was placed on Dae-su from the beginning of the film, once again affirming the anxieties of telesthesia through the bilocation of the media.

Woo-jin’s control over media through communication is now being shared with Dae-su. This audio recording forces Dae-su to relive the act of incest in some form of physical manner. When he first learned about his daughter, he only was able to remember that he did engage in intercourse with her. Now, through Woo-jin’s continued use of media, Dae-su experiences the act once more through sound, which is technically a physical medium (the sound waves



reverberate within his ears). Here, media has become an extension of memory, where it can be felt/heard as well as remembered. We experience the torment that it brings Dae-su as we followed him throughout the entire film as spectators. However, this torment is directed entirely at Dae-su.

There is also a single instance of media aiding memory the film provides that is implemented specifically for spectators. As Woo-jin explains to Dae-su how he was able to hypnotize both he and Mido, the screen splits into two separate frames: One of Woo-jin looking at the camera (therefore the audience), and one recalling earlier moments in the restaurant where the unhappy couple meet. The left side of the frame offers a free moving camera that starts with Mido and tracks down to the cellphone as it rings for the first time. While this happens, the right side of the frame shows the aforementioned static camera shooting Woo-jin's dialogue to us, but the camera slowly zooms to where only half of his face remains on screen. When the cellphone stops ringing, the left side of the frame cuts to half of Dae-su's face lining up symmetrically with Woo-jin's on the right side, thus creating yet another mirror between the two. Woo-jin furthers the mirroring implication by holding his hand up to his face, mimicking a cellphone, as he repeats his line of dialogue from before: "Do you like your clothes?"

However, this split screen offers spectators an opportunity to experience a moment of in between ourselves, as Dae-su's close up was previously used in the film. On the left, the image is familiar to us because we have seen it earlier in the film, and on the right, we are caught in the present moment with Woo-jin. However, when Woo-jin repeats his dialogue while miming the use of a cellphone, it is in response to the question proposed by the image of Dae-su from the beginning of the film. This particular moment of the mirrored faces mixes past and present, as well as memory and media. This moment lingers as the opacity of each side of the frame is

decreased, allowing each of the images to bleed through and overlap each other.<sup>21</sup> At this moment, the film reveals to spectators that cinema and memory are alike: In between both real and imaginary as well as past and present.

While Woo-jin and Dae-su pursue their desires on screen (first through incest, now through media), we are able to watch them stray in between the flows of telesthesia and abjection. The characters' consistent use of telecommunications introduce the anxieties felt by telesthesia, which in turn, are felt by spectators, as cinema is an industry predicated upon telecommunications. *Oldboy* demonstrates through character and the forms of editing, cinematography, and sound (primarily) that cinema is a porous medium and is a key player within telesthesia. The flows described in Wark's book are flows of communicating information, which is precisely what cinema offers. Like all art forms, cinema communicates. However, cinema is the primary art form in which every form of information within the piece moves, just as its communication is movement. Cinema has the ability to blur the lines between fantasy and reality, creating an art form that mimics the in between nature of both abjection and telesthesia. However, it does not stop there. The communication of cinema transgresses national borders and subsequently creates a stylistic in between for the art form itself. Cinema, as part of telesthesia, creates a noticeable porosity between countries, as I will demonstrate with the United States and South Korea in the coming chapter.

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<sup>21</sup> It is important to quickly note the similarities between this scene and a similar one in Ingmar Bergman's *Persona* (1966), as it, too, is a film concerned with the anxieties between private/public, self/other, and media. This comparison will return in the following chapter.

## **Incest and Transnationalism**

*Oldboy*'s preoccupation with incest demonstrates the anxieties between both the desire for self/other and private/public. I have proposed that its cinematic language exhibits a meeting of Julia Kristeva's writings of abjection and boundaries, as well as McKenzie Wark's writings of telesthesia and cellspace. Through the film's representation of transgressing the incest taboo, the desire for an 'other' in which we find self creates the in-between nature of abjection. Likewise, the figural representation of the incest taboo carries into the bilocation of telecommunications: Through cellspace we constantly harbor the anxiety felt by being both private and public at once. Now, I offer that *Oldboy*'s figural representation of the incest taboo must expand past individual media use (private/public) into the telesthetic anxieties between national and transnational.

Because the move to national/transnational stems from the previous arguments of private/public and self/other that are rooted in incest and abjection, Kristeva's idea of "straying and saving" must once again be acknowledged. Telecommunications allow the individual to connect to a worldwide collective, and I believe *Oldboy* challenges its spectators to make this connection. The televised image is one of the film's most frequent motifs and it is where an analysis of the larger questions of telesthesia can be answered. Telesthesia is founded upon the unstable structure of the bilocation of telecommunications, which pushes us to "stray", but in order find stability, we must "save." We consistently "stray" in between the flows of telesthesia, whether it is through televised global events, the consumption of foreign foods, and especially for *Oldboy*, transnational cinema and its scholarship. In order to "save," following Kristeva's

logic, we must continue to stray in order to find new understandings/possibilities within our anxieties.

### I. Transnational Telesthesia

Soon after Dae-su attempts to pleasure himself to the televised images of a pop singer, we are shown a montage of global media events, thus affirming the television's capabilities of bilocation. Recalling my analysis of the incarcerated Dae-su from the previous chapter, he communicates with the television as an extension of his being, trying to ignore the bilocation of the medium. In other words, he thinks the television is his own to view, given his solitude. The film makes an effort to address spectators' relationship to these media directly through Dae-su's own philosophy of television. He offers the advice to develop a relationship with the television if we, the spectator, are ever mysteriously imprisoned. This direct address is the first instance of an open communication between film and spectator, as it invites us to reflect on our individual relationships we forge with television. Communicating the idea of an individual relationship with television while displaying the perversion of masturbation is a necessary critique, as it asks us to look for our own perversions. However, the film complicates this notion further by including factual televised images that are not native to its diegesis.

The montage of different televised news events pushes into Dae-su's escape process, creating a split screen between the two images. The left shows a top-down view of Dae-su making a gradual progress in his escape, where the right shows a televised newsreel of world events through the years of 1988-2003. Each event in the montage is abbreviated, almost as if someone is impatiently flipping channels. It begins with the significant local event of former President Chun Doo-hwan being arrested in December of 1995, which further propelled South

Korea into a democracy.<sup>22</sup> These local images are immediately followed by images of the Hong Kong handover ceremony and the death and funeral of Princess Dianna, both in 1997. The montage continues a sequential representation of global media events as follows: the official approval of the IMF, a presidential inauguration in South Korea, a count down to the New Year of 2000, President Kim Dae-jung's visit to North Korea, footage of a plane colliding into the World Trade Center, the FIFA World Cup in Korea, and finally the election of president Roh Moo-hyun. Just as narrative film is not a random, coincidental sequence of events, this news montage was carefully constructed to include several events in televised media and not just those significant to South Korea.

The television in Dae-su's cell has now become not just a site in between private and public, but also of local and transnational. During his scene of self-gratification, Dae-su is indulging in the performance of a famous South Korean pop singer. He fetishizes a televised event that is native to his own country. As with incest, he experiences the desire for the familiar, or the local. Because incest and abjection act as the film's backbone it is not farfetched to suggest that through television (telesthesia), we desire the local (self) because it is transnational (other). Yes, Dae-su desires the 'locality' of the image of the South Korean singer, but the film also suggests that these images are far from local. Take, for example, the images of the 2002 FIFA World Cup within the montage: It was hosted and filmed in both South Korea and Japan, had international participants, and it was televised globally to fans, watching in their own homes. Imagine these fans cheering for their favorite team in individual living rooms across the world. Is this not similar to Dae-su's fetishization? We wish to privatize the public, or localize the transnational, in order to remedy the anxiety felt by being in between. Through telesthesia, we

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<sup>22</sup> B. C. Koh, "South Korea in 1995: Tremors of Transition," *Asian Survey* 36 (1996): 53

are always simultaneously local and transnational, just as with abjection we are always attracted and repelled.

*Oldboy*'s montage of world news expands my previous conversation of Wark's telesthetic flows and antipodality to a transnational level. Through the telesthetic flows of television, we are able to virtually traverse global antipodes instantaneously. While the majority of the images from the montage have a direct connection to South Korea, the inclusion of a global event such as the attacks on the World Trade Center carries enough significance to be included in the film's representation of time passing. It was a traumatic event that connected individuals globally through telecommunication, regardless of its importance to each individual. Wark refers to this type of instance as a "weird global media event." He uses each word in this particular phrase (as well as the World Trade Center attacks as an example) as a four-part checklist to describe what exactly constitutes a weird global media event. The following paragraph is a brief explanation of each word's significance to the phrase, as the meaning of the phrase will make clear the significance of these events within the film.

The specific televised image is 'weird' in that the instant it happens is unplanned, causing news 'narratives' to become improvisations until they are able to refine the information gathered to fit some semblance of a stable narrative. Something I hinted to earlier, the specific televised image is 'global' in that it places a sense of connectedness upon us without explanation, even if the event is not as important to other individuals. The specific televised image is 'media' in that *the fact it is even mediated* is a significant element in how the event progresses. Finally, placing a little more emphasis on the 'weird' portion, the specific televised image is an 'event' in that it is something unexpected that a narrative must be formed around. Wark emphasizes this last word

to create a concise difference between ‘event’ (as described) and ‘ritual,’ which he describes as a predetermined news narrative.<sup>23</sup>

News events are contingent, but so are our abject desires: As we stray we never look for desires, only wander towards them given our attraction. However, these contingencies soon repel us, and in an effort to move through the repulsion, we create narratives for these contingencies. With televised news, as Wark explains, narratives are created around events and are quickly practiced until they become more refined. With our abject desires, the “narrations” are the fantasies in which we rationalize our desire for the other that contains the self. Where as Dae-su fantasizes that he is able to privatize the public, as with the pop singer, we, too, fantasize that we are able to separate our privacy from our relation to the public. However, they are inseparable because through telesthesia the private will always be public.

A weird global media event (the attacks on the World Trade Center) included among the local images (South Korea hosting the World Cup) interrupts the stability we believe mediation allows us. This interruption in stability is similar to the one brought upon by transgressing the incest taboo in that a single event (typically traumatic) affirms a sense of connectedness among all who witness it. Dae-su is connected to the tragedy of the World Trade Center in the same way we are connected to the characters through incest. The way in which we handle the interruption of stability incest brings us is through abjection: We move through it to understand it anew; we stray in order to save. Saving, in this case, would be sharing in the horrors of each event. Through factual televised events, Dae-su shares in the horror of the World Trade Center attacks. Through cinema, we are able share in the horror of Dae-su’s incest and continue to experience it through the end of the film.

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<sup>23</sup> Wark, *Telesthesia*, 64-65.

In this way, the aforementioned scene depicting the split screen provides an interesting figure. Once again, on the right, we see this montage of televised footage showing a telesthetic passage of time, and on the left, we see Dae-su escaping from his prison cell showing a cinematic passage of time. Placing the images side by side shows a physical resistance to Dae-su's cell of telesthesia. Yes, he is escaping from the prison, according to the narrative, but the split screen reminds us of the nucleus of his cell, the television. In this sense, he is not escaping from television per se, but he is resisting his desire for telesthesia by moving through the walls of the physical cell keeping him in place. In the same manner of abjection pushing him through/pulling him towards his knowledge of incest later in the film, this scene visually demonstrates the push/pull in reference to media. It is not with one clean blow he is able to create an opening, as he is constantly moving in and out of his tunnel, digging one little bit at a time.

This is one instance of telesthesia's pushing and pulling plaguing Dae-su in the film. It represents a symptom of our desire for a local media. Where Dae-su's masturbation demonstrated a perverted infatuation with media in a local televised image (a South Korean pop star on a South Korean television), his escape demonstrates a resistance to telecommunication's global potential (World Trade Center bombings on a South Korean television). These two scenes are figures for our current relationship to media: We treat it like it is private ignoring that it is public. The moment we stop ignoring its publicness is the moment our initial resistance to media kicks in. However, it is the global nature of media gives it the irresistible quality that draws us in. This is similar to the attraction and repulsion brought forth by the abjection of the incest taboo. When Woo-jin and Dae-su stop ignoring its prohibition, they begin to hesitate and resist their desire for the other, because they realize it is also a desire for the self.



Telesthesia is largely responsible for global mediation, as it expanded the communion of local and global. It popularized the desire for the exotic other, but in a way that assimilated us within it. *Oldboy* recognizes this symptom of telesthesia as well and demonstrates our anxieties concerning being in between national and global through a second montage involving movement, or straying, through a series of ‘foreign’ restaurants. In order to find Woo-jin, Dae-su believes the best course of action to be finding the prison in which he stayed for fifteen years. He thinks the best way to find the prison is to find the Chinese restaurant from which the prison purchased its food to feed the prisoners. Having eaten nothing but dumplings for fifteen years and finding a torn piece of paper with the words “Blue Dragon” in his food, he thinks he has enough to narrow his search for the correct restaurant.

The scene begins with Dae-su and Mi-do in a Chinese restaurant tasting the first plate of dumplings. Having not found the taste he believes is so familiar to him, he and Mi-do begin their journey through this second montage, only this time, signifying less a passage of time (as with the televised images) and more a passage of space. In this montage, the two wander from one “Blue Dragon” Chinese restaurant to the next, sitting down to eat similarly arranged plates of fried dumplings until they find the right one. Movement is mostly compromised of panning or tilting (with some tracking) and flawless transitions from one restaurant to the next. The transitions consist of either dissolves or seamless, invisible cuts between shots panning steadily to the left. Together, the editing and camera movement are figural for the way in which we traverse telesthetic flows. The dissolves and invisible cuts mimic the state of being in between, as they join what is taken to be separate.

Both the mise-en-scène of the Chinese restaurants and the camera movement and editing affirm global mediation. What is implied with this scene is that there are at least ten Chinese

restaurants with the words “Blue Dragon” somewhere in their names (They appear on a checklist Dae-su is using.) as well as countless others without the specific name. (Dae-su notices that there are five restaurants between the correct one and the prison.) The multitude of Chinese restaurants in South Korea (or the United States, for that matter) is symptomatic of rampant telesthesia. The exotic, in this case Chinese food, has become so common in places other than China that it can no longer be called exotic. Wark argues that the exotic no longer exists, by its very definition.<sup>24</sup> The outside, or the exotic, is now always straddling the line between inside and outside because of our growth within the connectedness of telesthesia.

For example, although the montage consists of several Chinese restaurants, the fact that Dae-su constantly orders the same meal within them speaks to the tension between local and global through telesthesia. Although his motives differ (his goal is to find the prison), consistently choosing foreign cuisine suggests that he gravitates towards the other. Each plate being arranged in similar ways emphasizes this constant desire for other, as he has developed his own taste for foreign cuisine. However, these restaurants are multiple mediated connections to China rather than multiple Chinese restaurants in South Korea. In other words, the ‘foreign’ dish for which he has developed a taste has always been local cuisine.

As with the similarities between abjection and telesthesia, we can understand there is always a desire for the self within the other, private within public, and now national within global. In order to save ourselves from the anxiety of being in between each of these binaries, we must stray through each one: Transgress in order to transform. In this case, both desire and media act as a figure for incest in the form of transnationalism. The anxieties of incest are social, in that they stem from the meeting of private and public. Likewise, the anxieties of transnationalism are

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<sup>24</sup> Wark, *Telesthesia*, 55-57.

found in a similar meeting of national and global. Through these images, *Oldboy* encourages spectators to maintain a critical distance from the resistance/ignorance of telesthesia in order to better understand the way in which we interact with it. It trains us as spectators to be attentive to our transnationality, to embrace being in between national and global, private and public, self and other.

## II. Resisting Resistance

Despite the film's overtly transnational imagery, there is an interesting disconnect among its contemporary scholarship: Just as Dae-su frequently resists his transformations, spectators and scholars alike resist the implications of the film's transnational conception. *Oldboy*'s narrative was adapted from an eight-volume manga series of the same name, written and illustrated by Garon Tsuchiya and Nobuaki Minegishi, respectively. The film's narrative is a very loose adaptation, maintaining the plot point of illegal imprisonment as well as some visual cues. Even though the two narratives differ in many ways, it is the principle of adaptation that serves my argument. The film's source material is Japanese; therefore, it has been involved in the transnational characteristics of telesthesia since its conception. The film is a product of artistic communication from one nation to the next, and it is filled with images of characters attempting to resist the very same communication. Likewise, much of the critical discourse surrounding the film follows suit, offering thoughts and theories about how the film is reflecting South Korea's culture.

The typical reception of *Oldboy* and other films conceived in this most recent wave of South Korean cinema is that of a reflection of South Korean identity, be it commercially or academically. Terrence McSweeney is one such author who engages Park Chan-wook's film through the ideas of memory and nationhood. His argument primarily focuses on how well the

film represents South Korean identity through the collective memory its people. He offers many examples of traumatizing events that have shaped the country, such as British colonization or American occupation, and suggests that these traumas are now memories that still haunt South Korea. He reads the film as an important “visceral cultural artifact” through its preoccupation with trauma and memory through the characters.<sup>25</sup> With each example he provides to reinforce his argument, he only acknowledges South Korea’s identity in relation to each trauma that involved a self and other. His argument suggests that traumas such as the United States’ occupation elicits a memory that is to be had by South Koreans, when in fact, the traumas he suggests are events that are in between self and other.

While his ideas of *Oldboy*’s relationship to South Korea’s collective memory are concise, I am adding a necessary “other half” to his critique. We both share a common interest in the montage of televised images shown as Dae-su attempts to escape. McSweeney claims that Dae-su is being compared to “Contemporary South Koreans by showing how these recorded events have become part of the collective memory of South Korea, even though most have not directly experienced them.”<sup>26</sup> While this is absolutely true, what of the recorded events’ relation to the rest of the mediated world? This is why the analysis of incest is incredibly important to *Oldboy*. Where as Dae-su’s fetishization of the local image of a South Korean pop singer prompts him to masturbate, I argue that focusing solely on the collective memory of South Korea within critical analysis is a different form of masturbation. The result exercises the desire for seeing the self within the other.

The historical montage of televised images is the most frequently analyzed scene from *Oldboy*. Authors Kyung Hyun Kim and Joseph Jonghyun Jeon visit the scene as well, each in a

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<sup>25</sup> McSweeney, “Memory”, 222.

<sup>26</sup> McSweeney, “Memory,” 227.

way that takes the emphasis away from the medium itself. Kim, in fact, goes as far as to call the television images ‘meaningless’ because they don’t need a meaning to contribute to the film’s representation of South Korea’s contemporary lifestyle. His argument is similar to McSweeney’s in terms of trauma, but rather than foregrounding them as something to be remembered, he offers that they are symptomatic of the country’s post-modern identity. (The television is “always on” so to speak.)<sup>27</sup> However, I have argued for the meaning of the televised images, and now, the common thread of televised images that ties the authors (including myself) together promotes the argument that there is always a connection through mediation: from cinema to spectator, from public events to private television, and now from author to reader (and its reciprocal). It must be acknowledged that although these arguments for a cultural identity are concise and understood, the way in which media directly influences/is influenced by that identity is missing from the picture.

Speaking solely about the characteristics of a South Korean cultural identity within *Oldboy* ignores the implications of transnational source material, as well as transnational cinematic influence. In addition to the Japanese manga, *Oldboy* takes many cues from films such as Alfred Hitchcock’s *Vertigo* (1958) and Ingmar Bergman’s *Persona* (1966), borrowing from both Hollywood and European Art Cinema alike. Park has explained in multiple interviews that Hitchcock’s films inform his own, and of course, the split screen I analyzed in the previous chapter comes directly from Bergman. Each of these films influenced the conception of *Oldboy* just as equally as its Japanese source material. Cinema, not just *Oldboy* or South Korean Cinema, is consistently informed by and *continues* to inform a transnational industry. The desire to analyze a specific cultural identity within such a film creates the same anxiety Dae-su

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<sup>27</sup> Kim, *Virtual Hallyu*, 182.

experiences with media and with his daughter: An anxiety from resisting the connectedness of media and incest. Spectators desire the other, a national cinema, but must be prepared to embrace the self within the other: Transnational cinema.

We must understand that the way in which we are able to embrace these anxieties is by pushing through them, as they pull on us. *Oldboy* presented us with incest, to which we pushed through to find an understanding desire, media, and transnationalism. To borrow from Kristeva, we have become a collective of contemporary dejects: each of us carrying our own wooden shield, each of us surrounding ourselves with cellspace. Movement is constant because once we have cleared the first anxiety we are confronted by the next. Because of their individual preoccupations with movement, both Kristeva and Wark encourage their readers to ask, “Where am I” instead of “Who am I?”<sup>28</sup> When movement becomes normality to a social being, the concerns for spaces and movement should be equal to the concerns for selfhood. Likewise, when cinema is consistently informed transnationally, the concern for a national identity should not undermine the concern for transnational identities. Instead, the concern should shift to understanding the self’s relation to the other, every step of the way.

With that, any argument about *Oldboy*’s representation of a South Korean cultural identity is not wrong, but it is incomplete. With the telecommunications that dominate the images within *Oldboy*, half of South Korea’s identity is mixed within the other; half of the identity is in between local and global. Wark makes this powerful statement about cultural identities: “Whether we like it or not, cultural differences cannot be preserved from the impact of telesthesia.”<sup>29</sup> What makes his statement powerful is that it is not an ultimatum. His language acknowledges our desire (to either like or not like) and presents us with the fact that our

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<sup>28</sup>Kristeva and Roudiez, *Powers of Horror*, 8 as well as Wark, *Telesthesia*, 29.

<sup>29</sup> Wark, *Telesthesia*, 37.

resistance is futile. Returning to the example of the Chinese restaurants in the film, they have not become part of South Korea's culture. It is much more messy than that. What Dae-su tastes in the dumplings may be the authentic ingredients from China, but their mass production in South Korea (*every* restaurant carries the same dish) diminishes the authenticity. Likewise, what we as scholars analyze in *Oldboy* may be accurate depictions of South Korean culture, but the transnationality of the film industry proves that the culture has always been shared.

Dae-su does not want this in between, as it will not provide him with weight to find his locality and remain 'stable.' Likewise, we do not want this in between because it frightens us by threatening an identity. As with incest, we are reminded of Kristeva's writings on abjection, only this time with the telesthetic transnational in mind. In telesthesia we are not 'here' (self), nor are we 'there' (other). We are constantly moving in between the two, as we are both fascinated and horrified by the other. When both Wark and Kristeva challenge us to ask "where" instead of "who," the "where" that must matter to us is the in between. It is a place that is always occupied, but is increasingly expanding: self to other, private to public, local to transnational. In each case, the in between remains constant and our desires figure as variables. *Oldboy*, both as a narrative and as a film, maps these variables for us via the cinematographic image. It offers a concrete figure of our anxieties of being in between, libidinally, telesthetically, and transnationally.

## Recognizing Transnational Cinema

Through its representations of incest and media, *Oldboy* explores the porous borders between self and other, private and public, local and global. It encourages us to recognize that what we typically take to be concrete binaries are frequently transgressed, and we are never wholly aligned with one or the other. Situating my argument in the context of *Oldboy*'s contemporary scholarship, I have made a necessary complication to most of the arguments currently surrounding the film. Most scholars address *Oldboy* as an important film for analyzing many facets of South Korean culture, including traumatic memory or identity, and they are not wrong. However, I have offered that these facets that constitute South Korean culture are never plainly South Korean, but always simultaneously South Korean and other (e.g., Japanese, American, British, Chinese, etc.). My findings stem from the film's dual incestuous relationships and how they carry us from desire to telesthesia to the transnational

The taboo nature of the narrative's incestuous desires introduces the idea of simultaneity of self and other through abjection. We are always attracted to the abject as it masquerades as the other, but when we find that the 'other' is constituted through the self, we are repulsed by it. This process places us in between self and other simultaneously, as the attractions and repulsions we experience are of equal strength; leaving it up to us to push through each moment of in between. *Oldboy* demonstrates these attractions and repulsions through each character coupling, Oh Dae-su/Mi-do and Lee Woo-jin/Lee Soo-ah, as they experience a sexual desire for the other only to discover that the other is inclusive of the self. Woo-jin and Soo-ah demonstrate hesitation as they



slowly transgress the incest taboo, which is figurative for being in between, or being attracted to and repelled by its abject nature. Dae-su occupies the figure of memory, in that it is his *remembering* of intercourse through the newfound knowledge that Mi-do is his daughter that makes it incestuous. In order to displace the anxieties we feel through abjection we stray through each one we encounter, transforming our relationship to the abject through recognizing the desired other cannot be without the self.

This anxiety of being in between our attractions and repulsions moves from the film's representation of incest into its representations of media, especially telecommunications. As with abjection, we must wander through the flows of telecommunications, or telesthesia, in order to better understand our relationship to it. Media such as cellphones and television allow us to virtually occupy two spaces at once, creating a space where we simultaneously occupy the material and immaterial. Dae-su, having been incarcerated, is able to communicate with the outside world through television. During his seclusion, he desires the public other and then recognizes his private self is always a part of that other through television. This is demonstrated sexually, as he masturbates to a televised pop star but is unable to climax because she stops singing. His inability to climax (privacy) is directly linked to his communication with the medium (private within public). With the use of cellphones, this anxiety becomes mobile through cellspace: We believe we are able to take our privacy with us; however, our private selves have always been public via telecommunications.

Finally, we expand the use of telecommunications outward from private and public to local and global. The same principle anxiety of seeing the self within the other, or being in between, is applied at the global level. Telesthetic flows frequently transgress national borders, creating transnational connections, rendering the borders porous. *Oldboy* introduces this anxiety

through televised global events towards the beginning of the film: The television on which Dae-su lusted his country's pop singer now projects images of the Hong Kong handover ceremony, the World Trade Center attacks, and Princess Diana's funeral. The use of telecommunications connects Dae-su to these events in a similar way we connect to incest in the film. We witness a traumatic event that affirms our bilocation (we are between both self/other and private/public), and we choose to watch (attracted) even though we are disgusted (repelled). The issue mediates from the film into scholarship, where multiple authors (Western and Eastern alike) foreground the importance of the film to South Korea's culture. Just as Dae-su resists the bilocation of telesthesia by privatizing the public (masturbating to television), contemporary scholarship resists telesthesia through nationalizing the transnational. Through the reading of multiple scenes in *Oldboy* my project highlights a transformation, or 'saves,' our relationship to telesthesia, by encouraging spectators to think critically about the entanglement of the national and global represented in the film.

Projects focusing on South Korean cinema or the transnational production of cinema could be informed by my thesis. For example Park Chan-wook's most recent feature-length film, *Stoker* (2013), was produced in the United States with an all-American cast. However, Park maintained his choice cinematographer, Chung Chung-hoon, who has been filming for park since *Oldboy* in 2002. Does maintaining the same cinematographer make this film anymore a production of South Korea than it is a production of Hollywood? The prospect of exploring this film is exciting as its production is truly transnational. It is both self and other. The film also has a minor preoccupation with incest, which could possibly be Park's contribution. Where Park highlighted the anxieties causing us to stray in order to save within *Oldboy*, I believe *Stoker's* transnational production is the beginning of an effort to "save" through the art of cinema.

Not limiting future possibilities to Park's own work, Bong Joon-ho's *Snowpiercer* (2013) consists of a largely transnational cast and crew (including Park Chan-wook), and was adapted from the French graphic novel, *Le Transperceneige*. Although the film does not address incest in any way, the work I have done regarding transnational straying and saving can still be applied to its production and its subsequent commercial reception. Where as *Stoker* graced the United States with a limited release in select theaters before moving onto a wider release, *Snowpiercer* earned itself a wide release in both South Korea and the United States shortly there after. In essence, *Snowpiercer's* commercial reception, transnational production, and large budget create a new type of transnational blockbuster: A *popular* film that is always recognized as a self within other from the start. My project is a starting point for films such as *Snowpiercer* and *Stoker*, as they must be addressed through a transnational identity rather than a national one.

It is important to recognize that these types of productions are not the product of Hollywood appropriating the South Korean film industry; rather, they are meetings of the two giants wherein the self always constitutes the other. We must begin with the other, as these productions would not be without the initial attraction that the other provides. However, we must recognize the self has always been finely entangled within what we are so attracted to: We are attracted to South Korean cinema and vice versa, but it has always taken cues from Hollywood and other international cinema. The boundaries that separate Hollywood from South Korean cinema have always been porous: Where *Oldboy's* imagery strays through the anxiety of being in between, *Stoker* and *Snowpiercer* save by having been produced within the anxiety. I postulate that transnational films such as these will continue to be produced and will have increasingly better commercial reception. As scholars, I believe it is our responsibility to be aware and critical

of the transnational origins of these productions and we must do so by foregrounding the entanglement of each cinema.

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## Filmography

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