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From Subjects to Assemblages: Insights from *Oldboy*

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Abstract: Drawing on the insights of media ecology, this essay explores the potential of media to mobilize representations, feelings, and habits to transform individuals into extensions of media themselves. Specifically, I undertake an analysis of the South Korean film *Oldboy*, which I argue demonstrates how, in the contemporary moment, media narratively and affectively mobilize individuals to become not only ideological subjects but also media appendages that, consequently, carry out cinema's central functions.

Keywords: media extensions; assemblages; *Oldboy*; cinema; affect

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1. Introduction

For decades, the view of media as ideological state apparatuses that interpellate individuals into ideological subjects—a view which is indebted to the French structuralist Louis Althusser—dominated critical understandings of the role and function of media [1]. Both the technological structures of cinema generally and the aesthetic features of classical Hollywood cinema specifically, film scholars observed, worked to create the illusion of coherent, autonomous individuals solving conflicts. This process, in service of furthering the agendas of capitalism and liberal humanism, was evident across cinematic discourses (i.e., media as ideological state apparatuses). Film theorists argued that cinema served an ideological function not only in its content but also in its underlying form and mode of presentation. The concept of interpellation still provides a useful framework in those instances when the audience seems to react in sync with the ideological cues within a media text, especially when the cues relate to individual psychology and character identification.

In this essay, I consider an alternative to Althusser's notion of interpellation by exploring the potential of media to transform individuals into assemblages rather than (or, at least, in addition to) subjects. Drawing on the insights of Marshall McLuhan and Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, I suggest that media, at least in some instances, encourage individuals to become extensions of media themselves through their unique mobilization of representations, feelings, and habits. In considering this possibility, I undertake an analysis of the South Korean film *Oldboy*. Although Park Chan-wook's award-winning adaptation of a Japanese manga series of the same name was initially released in 2003, it has endured as a recognized masterpiece of Korean cinema. As a result of continued widespread interest in the film, *Oldboy*, the second of three films comprising *The Vengeance Trilogy*, was restored and remastered in the summer of 2023. Since its release, the film has garnered considerable attention from cult film enthusiasts, as well as popular critics and film scholars. In this essay, I offer my own reading of the film as an example of the ways in which, in a contemporary moment, media mobilize individuals to become not only ideological subjects but also appendages of media that, consequently, carry out its operations and functions.

Toward that end, this essay unfolds in three parts. First, I highlight several theoretical considerations that served as inspiration or launching points for my analysis. These include McLuhan's understanding of media as extensions of humans and Deleuze and Guattari's conceptualization of media as assemblages. Second, I analyze the film, focusing on both

the film's narrative and affective domains. This reflects a deliberate attempt on my part to recognize that films are always, at once, symbolic and material. Finally, I provide concluding remarks and reflect on the broader implications of my analysis.

2. Extensions and Assemblages: Theoretical Considerations

The notion that technologies are ostensibly the extension of the human organism is not new. In the late 19th century, a German philosopher, Ernest Kapp, articulated the first philosophy of technology in his study titled *Grundlinien enier Philosophy der Tehcnik* ("Foundations of a Philosophy of Engineering"). In this treatise, widely regarded as the origin of the field, Kapp [2] argues that technological artifacts are imitations and improvements of human organs [3]. "Humans unconsciously transfer form, function, and the normal proportions of their body to the work of their hand" [4] (pp. v–vi). This transfer, however, is less of an extension of the human organism and more of a replacement for the limitations of the body's capacities [4].

A more notable—or perhaps the most notable—account of this idea comes from Marshal McLuhan. In 1964, McLuhan offered an in-depth analysis of a changed human condition resulting from technology and argued that all technologies are, in one way or another, extensions of human physiology [5]. "All technologies", McLuhan writes, "are extensions of our physical and nervous system to increase power and speed" [5] (p. 90). Technologies, he asserts, extend human physiology by enhancing—amplifying or accelerating—bodily and cognitive functions traditionally executed solely by the human organism.

McLuhan distinguishes between two types of extensions: extensions of the body and extensions of the mind or cognitive functions. The two categories of extensions, according to McLuhan, are closely related to two respective eras: mechanical and electric. The mechanical era was marked by the emergence of the fundamental extensions of the body. These extensions were concerned with protecting the body from or assisting the body with various environmental and/or existential circumstances. Bows, spears, knives, clothing, function as extensions of hands, nails, teeth, and skin. During the electric era, the extensions of cognitive functions appeared, that is, extensions of the senses, nervous system, and consciousness.

The visual media, radio, and telephone are extensions of sight and sound, functioning as augmented ocular anatomy and, as Brey observes, "long-distance ears" [4] (p. 3). Media extensions, on the other hand, have far greater implications as they radically modify the central nervous system and alter consciousness. While mechanical extensions are "explosions of physical scale outward", extensions precipitated by electronic technologies are "inward explosion toward shared consciousness" [6]. As McLuhan asserts, "rapidly, we approach the final phase of the extension of man—the technological simulation of consciousness, when the creative process of knowing will be collectively and corporately extended to the whole of human society, much as we have already extended our senses and nerves by the various media" [5] (pp. 3–4).

Media enhance the information processing function such as "information management, storage and retrieval normally performed by the central nervous system" [4] (p. 3), thereby extending, shaping, and redefining "the human sensorium" [7]. McLuhan's preoccupation with the implications of the newly formed human ecology imbued by the media and technological artifacts of the electric age led him to observe that any extension of the human organism "numbs" human physiology. Any extension is at once a "self-amputation" of the physical body [5] (p. 45). As such, the state of numbness, the autoamputative condition induced by the electric technological artifacts, carries significant social and psychological ramifications. McLuhan's "proper heir" as a philosopher concerned the media as an extension of human faculties; Gilles Deleuze builds on McLuhan's insights and provides an advanced theoretical perspective initially explored by McLuhan [8] (p. 56). For the purposes of this essay, I focus on the refinement of McLuhan's conceptualization of media by Deleuze along with his collaboration with Guattari. Specifically, I summarize

Deleuze and Guattari's advancement of McLuhan's perspective concerning the notion of assemblage as well as the explorations of media as generators of affect and desire.

Media as Assemblages

In their work *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari refer to what McLuhan calls the medium in his famous axiom "the medium is the message" as the "machinic assemblage" [9]. A "machinic assemblage" advances McLuhan's notion that the content of any medium is always another medium and for Deleuze and Guattari the term refers to a complex alliance of media, their configuration, and reconfiguration [5]. Translated from the French word *agencement*, assemblage holds various meanings such as "to arrange, to dispose, to fit, to combine, to order" [10] (p. 41). However, assemblage does not imply a fixed state or a static condition; instead, assemblage is the process of active linking, arranging, and organizing. Its dynamic nature is characterized by "a becoming that brings elements together" [11] (p. 91). Deleuze and Guattari call an assemblage "every constellation of singularities and traits deducted from the flow—selected, organized, stratified—in such a way as to converge (consistency) artificially and naturally; an assemblage, in this sense, is a veritable invention" [9] (p. 406). The encounters of media, the forms produced by these connections, and the offspring generated by these new relations, are themselves a dynamic symbiosis that can produce other forms. As Delanda observes, the properties of assemblages produced by the interactions of the parts "can be used to model any of these intermediate entities" [12] (p. 5).

The machinic nature of the agencement refers to the idea that the assemblage functions like any machine "combining flows and breaks into a whole operation" [8] (p. 59). Throughout his work, Deleuze insists that life is machinic, marked by a "proliferation of connections among natural and technical powers" [13] (p. 9). Entities at various levels of existence, crystals, and rocks, for instance, constitute a machinic assemblage, but also languages and societies [9], which in and of themselves are machinic assemblages. An assemblage cannot be reduced to the parts that configure it, because each assemblage is defined by "what its affects are in the context of the individuated assemblage it is part of" [9] (p. 257). In other words, affects that define a machinic assemblage are characterized by the powers, the capacities that enable the machining assemblage to accomplish things that the parts, entities, and other assemblages involved in the assemblage's composition, cannot accomplish as individual units or ensembles organized in a different form.

Buchanan explains that the assemblage "is the productive intersection of a form of content (actions, bodies, and things) and a form of expression (affects, words and ideas)" [14] (p. 390). The interaction between the viewer's senses and the light flows of television programs generates a new, dynamic ensemble that "may evoke affect" in such a way that "what was once the flow of expression (the televisual flow) now becomes the flow of content that the viewer's sensory system processes into expression" [8] (p. 60). Machinic assemblage produced by the encounters of the eye with the cinematic screen shifts focus from the content of media to the affective experience generated by this symbiotic entity and redirects attention to what the assemblage evokes within and how it triggers and stimulates the human sensorium [13].

Assemblages as networks of forms of content and expressions, are at once systems of collection of elements, their qualities and relations, and systems of signs, semiotic systems—systems of discourses and meanings [11]. The Deleuze–Guattarian perspective, however, acknowledges the shortcomings of semiotics and focuses on affect to explain how media transforms cultural desires. For Deleuze and Guattari, affect is "a bloc of sensations, that is to say, a compound of percepts and affects" [15] (p. 164). As an unconscious, prelinguistic sensation, and precognitive response of the body to stimuli [16], affect is unqualified intensity and "'matter in motion' since it 'moves' the body quite literally" [17] (p. 225).

A body, Deleuze and Guattari write, is not defined "by the form that determines it" [9] (p. 260). Rather, a body comes into being through various machinic assemblages, as "an individual thing distinguished from other things in respect to motion and rest,

that is, a body without organs" [18] (p. 10). The sensory and suasory modification or change within a body emerges from the interaction and collision of bodies and things. As a result of the process of indefinite configurations, affect is a "dynamic of desire within any assemblage to manipulate meaning and relations, inform and fabricate desire, and generate intensity" [19] (p. 13) in the affected body. Conceptualization of the body as a machinic assemblage that can possess a range of properties—whether "technological, material, organic, cultural, sociological, or molecular" [20] (p. 98)—rather than a predetermined sensory structure enables "the possibility for a wide variety of becomings" [8] (p. 64). These ideas are germane for the cinematic experience. Rather than being merely a text with meaning, a film is a body in the Deleuzean sense of the word [20]. Film produces sensation and is itself synesthetic of sensation because "it connects, as a body, of matter, with other bodies and matter, through a consideration of process of consciousness within which sensation becomes an important element" [20] (p. 69).

3. *Oldboy* as an Assemblage

In my reading of the film, *Oldboy* as a media assemblage functions at two levels. It is a model of the theory I have laid out, in a sense that it symbolically, and representationally, demonstrates how media transform individuals into assemblages. One part of my analysis will, therefore, look at the narrative development of the film and its visual imagery to pursue this argument. But I additionally argue that the film extends its machinic assemblage capacities by eliciting affects and so transforms itself as well as the audience into an assemblage. I contend that what is happening narratively in the film and the appeals of the film to the audiences' senses create a homology between these two dimensions. The form of the content and form of the expression in *Oldboy*—powerful affective moments of the film—generate a homology between representing the idea and embodying the idea. The film, in short, is what Deleuze and Guattari call "the productive synthesis, the production of production" [21] (p. 5) in the ways that it both stories the theory via the narrative progression and visual content and performs the theory as an assemblage via affect. As my analysis demonstrates, the film engages a number of Deleuzean concepts even if Chan-wook did not purposefully intend to do so.

The structural homology between the semiotic, narrative, and representational plane and what is happening in an embodied, performative, suasory way through the transmission of affect, enables the audience to become a part of the machine and its extension. The film functions as a series of structured invitations creating new modes of becoming eliciting affects and inviting spectators to become extensions of the affect system. While the semiotic, representational, narrative, and affective, suasory, sensational, elements of the film are simultaneous and intertwined, I treat them separately in this analysis to demonstrate how the film appeals to the audience on two levels. The film both invites the audience to view the transformation of the central character in the film into an extension of media that performs its functions as well as transforms the audience into assemblages. To understand the key tenets in *Oldboy*'s as a machinic assemblage, it is helpful to briefly review the film's strange but engaging plot. As Peter Bradshaw noted in *The Guardian*, *Oldboy* is a film that "you feel you're not so much watching on screen as having beamed directly into your skull from some malign, alien planet of horror" [22].

The story centers around the character of Oh Dae-su (played admirably by Choi Min-sik), a Korean businessman who is abducted and imprisoned for reasons unknown to him (and the audience) at the film's outset. After 15 years of captivity, Dae-su is mysteriously released and quickly falls in love (due largely to hypnotic suggestions planted in his unconscious during his captivity) with Mi-do (Kang Hye-jeong), a young sushi chef. Dae-su is later contacted by his former captor, Woo-jin (Yu Ji-tae), and instructed that he must discover the motivations behind his imprisonment or Mi-do will be killed. Through a combination of sleuthing and torture, Dae-su discovers that he inadvertently started a rumor about his captor's sister during his childhood that led to her suicide. When Dae-su confronts his captor with this revelation, Woo-jin reveals that Mi-do is Dae-su's daughter.

I am far from the first critic to comment on this film. Before offering my reading, I pause to acknowledge the previous analysis of *Oldboy*, which is both profuse and compelling. Its polysemic nature led critics to make insightful observations, many of which are centered around the film's narrative as an allegory of numerous themes and concepts. For instance, Boman suggests that the film is a commentary on han, a sociocultural concept linked to the Korean traumatic colonial past. Referring to a uniquely Korean collective experience of unresolved pain as a result of a Japanese colonial period, Boman finds han exemplified in the film's sorrowful music and rancor [23]. Thanouli looks at the film's system of narrative logic, narrative time, and narrative space to explain what makes a film translate to other cultures [24]. She argues that merging the new post-classical mode with a South Korean sensibility evident in the themes enabled the film's widespread success.

Others suggest that it offers insights into the contemporary culture of South Korea, arguing that the film illustrates its global, metropolitan character, and material character [25]. Similarly, for Tomkins and Wilson, capitalism is a central force in the film, represented through the logic of revenge [26]. The film depicts a world in which one can purchase as a commodity anything ranging from a prison cell to human organs, such as the hand which Woo-jin buys, as Jeong points out; however, in Chan-wook's vision of the world, one can even purchase somebody's subconsciousness [25]. Paik sees Dae-su along those lines as well, as a transnational figure oscillating between authoritarianism and democracy [27]. Dae-su, in Paik's reading "confronts democratic capitalism from a subjective position radically outside of it, whether as a master, who has conquered his desire, or as a monster, who is ready to meet force with force in his pursuit of revenge" (p. 55). The themes of transnationalism are foci of Chung and Diffrient's reading of the film as well [28]. Their analysis suggests that the film functions as a dual allegory. One dimension of the film, Chung and Diffrient maintain, offers a transnational interpretation of the film in the context of the US War on Terror but they also argue that the film serves as a commentary on South Korea's past military dictatorship as well as the post 9/11 New World Order.

Lee also views the film as an allegory or revenge. She analyzes incest in the film, arguing that, indicative of a mythical essence of humanity, *Oldboy* represents "the abyss of our psyche where the irresistible desire for a forbidden pleasure finds its moralistic vent in the deadly spiral of revenge as a means of self-punishment" [29] (p. 127). Kim similarly unpacks the theme of incest and its presence in the film, pointing out that the connection between the film and the Oedipus myth is evident even in the homonymy of names: "the Korean pronunciation of the name 'Oh Dae-su' sounds similar to 'Oedipus'" [30] (p. 71). The sense of stylized revenge that animates the characters in the film, Ulutas and Aytas argue, evokes feelings among the audience to problematize morality and functions as equipment for living of sorts for the audience in that it provides "a kind of pleasure as compensation for their mistakes" [31] (p. 59).

Oldboy has clearly been approached from various angles and much of this analysis is concerned with the representational and narrative aspects of the film. My reading of the film is somewhat different in the sense that it is interested in the way that the film produces "disparate orders of experience" [32] (p. 4) via structural homology between what the film says or means in the purely specular economy and what it does as a mechanism that merges "the mimetic, the pathic, the gestural, the cognitive, the affective" [20] (p. 69). The focus on the rhetorical enactment of representational aesthetic enables us to read the film not only as a form of semiotic articulation but also as a somatic performance.

To that end, in the following analysis, I first draw attention to the narrative/visual plane of the film. Here, I explain how the film highlights the dual function of media: it serves both as an educational tool, imparting habits, skills, and patterns of speech, while simultaneously asserting its omnipresent gaze, indicating a pervasive control over all aspects of our lives. I then demonstrate how the film through a particular combination of content and form, assemblage indeed, invites the audience to not only intellectually know what the media does but makes the audience experience what the media does, viscerally for that matter.

3.1. The Narrative/Visual Plane

3.1.1. The Teacher

There are several key instances in the film that ostensibly illustrate how individuals transform into media extensions. The most obvious and pervasive example is that Dae-su learns to fight from watching TV. As he is frequently drugged with Valium gas to prevent him from killing himself, he is unaware of being occasionally visited by his captor and the hypnotist. At a conscious level, however, for 15 Kafkian years of no judge, no trial, and most importantly no charge, his only interlocutor is TV. Dae-su not only learns how to fight effectively, but after being abruptly released from the prison in a box left on the top of an apartment building, he proves to be a martial arts machine. A fighting apparatus on a vengeance spree wonders whether "years of imaginary training can be put to use" seizing every opportunity to test this hypothesis. While the traditional martial arts genre features fights between characters through graceful action scenes, in *Oldboy*, visceral, gritty forms of fist-fighting utilizing a mechanical extension of the hand—a hammer—dominate the combat.

To reinforce the notion that he reproduces and enacts the media content he was exposed to, Dae-su narrates his experience as well. "The TV is both a clock and a calendar. It's your school, your home, your church, your friend and your lover", in the voiceover narration reflects Dae-su on the ultimate infiltration of media in all domains of life blurring the boundaries between himself and the medium and the peculiar oneness with the media that he now exhibits. The extensive exposure to crime and martial arts programming functions as a form of priming. Coached by the programming, Dae-su's fists hit the imaginary opponent in his cell. He simulates the strikes and punches of the movie protagonists embodying the characters' maneuvers. What sets apart this mental rehearsal, the "imaginary training", is that fiction becomes actualized in reality. The make-believe scenario translates into a lived experience and materializes into a corporeal form as the injured bodies of his opponents pile up. The skills and techniques, the chokes and the kicks, become tangible and embodied.

Dae-su's voice-over narration and his speech patterns after his imprisonment additionally confirm the film's explicit commentary on how the spectators are groomed to become media appendages. He adopts a speaking style and reproduces rhetoric reminiscent of news anchors and television narration. His grin is artificial and unmotivated; his interpersonal language and esoteric knowledge he randomly shares with Mi-do resemble news or documentary-style reporting. The mimicry is not subtle. The film unmistakably, with no metaphors, no allegories, in no uncertain terms, indicates that the properties of media became the properties of the viewer as he speaks and adopts the habits of mind that of the media itself. Confused, but impressed with Dae-su, a street fighter and, turns out an erudite, Mi-do asks "do you always talk like this?" Similarly, when Mr. Park, the leader of the gang involved in the kidnapping and imprisonment, reveals their routine administration of a hypnosis-inducing drug, Dae-su knowledgeably inquires "sodium barbiturate?" "Ha!", Mr. Park says, "TV man knows it all".

While there is no novelty in the notion that media teaches us things, rarely do we see this idea so explicitly represented as in *Oldboy*. The pedagogical feature of media is unambiguously articulated in the way Dae-su is transformed through this didactic process. He is not only a container in which the media content is stored and readily available to be recited. He instead both embodies the content and acts, behaving as the content. The film renders this idea overtly, marking it as its unique characteristic. This reflexive feature of the film, in acknowledging that media taught Dae-su information and patterns of thought, but also skills and behaviors, dominates its plot and its narrative progression.

3.1.2. The Gaze

Another narrative clue that serves as a commentary on contemporary media is the role of surveillance in the film. While searching for his captor and answers that would explain his captivity, Dae-su finds out that the hotel-like windowless room in which he was kept

was located in a private facility where people can pay to have others incarcerated. This facility is equipped with its own version of the control, broadcast-like room where each area within the facility is under continuous surveillance. Mr. Park, in a television director-like manner, comfortably sits and rocks in a chair closely monitoring the uneventful bank of screens.

This hotel complex evocative of Jeremy Bentham's prison architecture is a particular kind of panopticon. Introduced by Foucault, the model of panopticon explains the changes and expansions in mechanisms of social control [33]. Panopticon illustrates how modalities of power, disciplinary and regulatory, by enclosing people in various spaces (schools, factories, prisons) create a disciplinary society. Panopticon, thus, is a disciplinary tool, and, as any tool, it is an extension, an extension of the gaze. As such, it is also itself an assemblage "a concrete assemblage consisting of lighted passageways, walls, entries and exits, and an apparatus for recording all that passes in and out of the assemblage" [34] (p. 35). Prisoners themselves are transformed into assemblages as they adopt the gaze of the observer, turn it inwards, internalize it, and behave as if they are monitored regardless of whether the guard actively watches over them or not—"the prisoner became his own overseer" [35] (p. 625).

The film advances the idea of surveillance beyond the physically marked boundary of the prison cell. After Woo-jin releases Dae-su, he continues to watch over his every move. With a tracker placed on Dae-su and a surveillance system in place over the apartment where Mi-do and Dae-su live, Woo-jin has insights into Dae-su's daily activities, conversations, and actions. The film illustrates the concept of disciplinary societies and its successor—Deleuze's notion of societies of control. While disciplinary power restricts the activities of individual bodies and transforms individuals into ideological subjects, regulatory power, concerned with the regulation of masses, capitalizes on an apparatus of security to control populations. The two modalities of power as "the two poles around which the organization of power over life" [36] (p. 139) constitute what Foucault calls biopower, a concept closely related to Deleuze's notion of societies of control. Fluid as opposed to concrete, territorialized, and demarcated, social control in a contemporary society is accomplished by mapping and directing our movements [37]. The assemblages emerging out of these encounters, Galič et al. argue, "turn into systems of domination allowing someone or something to direct or govern actions of others" [38] (p. 21). Woo-jin surveils Dae-su's movement and outward behaviors but not merely as a voyeur. He controls his movement—largely determines where he will go, where he will sleep and live, what he will wear, what he will eat. But he also controls Dae-su's desire.

Gaze and power of perpetual visibility are important narrative plot points as they are indicative of the new ecology created by media apparatus, warning us that we have all been trained to surveille everybody and that we are ourselves the technological apparatus of surveillance. While Foucault's conception of power serves as inspiration for Deleuze and Guattari's notion of assemblages [35], his focus on discourse in an exploration of power fails to account for "the relationship between discursive and nondiscursive practices" [39] (p. 63). I raise this point because it will be relevant in the subsequent analysis regarding affect and the basis for an argument that follows in terms of what the film does for the audiences beyond its representational elements.

3.2. Generating Affect

In this section, I explain how *Oldboy* generates affect, creating a sensory experience for the audiences and turning them into assemblages that carry forth the film's affective impact. Specifically, I explain how the film, as a technology itself, elicits the affect of disgust, one of the primary affects [40], as well as induces guilt to transform viewers into extensions of the media, embedding affective residues within the audience that persist beyond the film's conclusion.

3.2.1. Disgust

I start this section on disgust elicited in the film by first explaining what happens narratively. Given the complexity of scenes, establishing the storyline first provides important context for understanding the interplay of content and form. "I said I want to eat something alive". This sentence is a prologue to one of the most memorable scenes not only in the film itself but as one critic observes "in the history of onscreen consumption" [41]. Dae-su's appearance, as he walks into a sushi restaurant, already has a shock value. His disheveled suit, wild and dirty hair, and motionless face stand in stark contrast with the orderly, pristine, and quiet ambiance of the place. He is, however, unphased by his surroundings, the exquisite professional clientele, the graceful movement of the waitresses; the slick sounds of sushi knives. "I said I want to eat something alive", he says to Mi-do, who works there as a sushi chef. She serves him a live octopus.

Although the audience understands that eating Sannajki, a traditional way of eating sliced live octopus in Korea is a delicacy, even for Koreans, eating an octopus in the way Dae-su consumes is unconventional [42]. For one, even if consumed in chunks, eating live octopus can cause injury, as suction cups may stick to a throat, posing a choking hazard. Mi-do offers to slice the octopus for him, but Dae-su is not interested. He grabs the wiggling, fighting-for-its-life animal, with its tentacles attempting to find an escape route into Dae-su's nostrils as he almost absentmindedly devours the creature shoveling it into his mouth. The camera captures a close, focused, and patient shot of Dae-su's upper body as the slimy creature's head is first ripped off, pushed all the way into the mouth with a hand shiny and wet from octopus's secretions, then overtaken by the esophagus, then gravity.

The longevity of the shot, and the biting of the creature's head "with sickening elasticity" is "incontrovertibly real" [41]. This barrage of sensations at once invites both pity for the creature as well as a stomach-turning sensation. Behind-the-scenes footage explains this realism. When Chan-wook filmed this scene, he did not use special effects or any CGI. The octopus was real and live, and Choi Min-sik (Dae-su) took 42 s to swallow it. It took four takes to achieve the desired result, so Choi Min-sik, who is a vegetarian, ate four live octopuses, not without serious struggle, to get the scene right. The actuality of the event further contributes to the affect of disgust, as the oral and tactile fixation of the eating scene alarms the body and produces a synesthetic of the suasory experience. As soon as the decapitated creature's tentacles, still squirming, descend into the stomach, Mi-do, programmed to do so by the hypnotist, touches Dae-su; he, also programmed to do so, passes out.

The scene is mesmerizing; at once difficult to watch and not to watch. This tension is achieved through a unique combination of content (what is presented) and form (how it is presented), keeping the audience captive to a repulsive scene much like the creature is a captive of Dae-su's fist. The interplay of close-ups cutting abruptly to Mi-do standing behind the counter and Dae-su sitting at a table plays an important role. First, a low-angle, close-up shot, both from beneath and to the side, catches Mi-do's semi-profile. Typically, when the camera captures the subject from beneath, looking up, it gives the subject "a sense of importance, power" but "the language of the camera" [43] (p. 134) in this shot says something else.

The scene is shot in an enclosed space, a restaurant, with other people present, but the close-up "rips the face from the narrative sequence to hold it up for expressive display, detaching the face from its surroundings to put it in relief" [44] (p. 46). While there is a great variety of close-ups of faces as Deleuze acknowledges, he argues that "in all these cases, the close up retains the same power to tear the image away from spatial temporal coordinates in order to call forth the pure affect as the expressed" [45] (p. 96). In this chamber setting, where mise-en-scène and the close-ups isolate Mi-do and Dae-su, blurring the background, positioningthem in a private space within the space of the restaurant facing each other, the angle of the shot brings the audience into this intimate atmosphere. The studious close-up of Mi-do, not shot from the position of Dae-su—independent from Dae-su' gaze—

primes the audience affectively to witnessing something they are not supposed to see, foreshadowing the disturbing revelations yet to come. Mi-do, whose focus is exclusively on Dae-su, unaware of our intrusion, is cast as an unwitting participant. The audience, although ignorant of the nature of the drama about to unfold, is now privy to information Mi-do does not possess.

Stripped of power typically granted by the low angle, her interpersonal intimate interaction is violated by the entity emerging out of the relations between the audience and the camera, teaming up to get to Mi-do's extreme proximity. Her bright red lipstick, which she only wears as prominently in this scene, juxtaposed with the green tint emanating from the photography and low-key lighting, functions as a "modulator of sensation" [20] (p. 115), eroticizing her. The repeated close-ups of Mi-do with emphasis on her striking red lips create a visceral assemblage between the camera and the audience. Cinema's inherently tactile nature, where eyes function as organs of touch (Marks, 2002) draws the viewers into a haptic and erotic relationship with Mi-do. The color appeals often operate as a subconscious element of the film; they are "atmospheric rather than conspicuous or intellectual" [46] (p. 21). The interplay of close-ups and the atmosphere of intimacy heightens the sensual experience, eliciting desire as a prelude to the disgust that will soon follow. Viewers are an intrusive gaze into Mi-do, aroused by the gaze, and primed with a desire to not only endure the slurping and swallowing but to indulge in the sensuality of it all.

Disgust and desire are only seemingly unlikely companions. Tracing the ways philosophers have thought about disgust, Brinkema summarizes its "erotic, intimate, and incorporative haptic" properties, suggesting that one of the major features of disgust is that it generates a lust for the object that "provokes the repulsion" [47] (p. 165). Disgust creates intense conflicting sensations, at once an attraction and aversion, repulsion and fascination, and elicits "a desire for nearness and proximity, not of an experience, but of a thing in its thingness" [47] (p. 165). Dae-su asks for live food; Mi-do serves him live food; the characters as well as the viewers see that the octopus is alive. While there can be no confusion about whether Dae-su's meal is alive or not, Mi-do nonetheless says "It's alive, right?"

The camera then cuts to Dae-su briefly and slides down to the plate where the octopus is served. The plate is unappealing, not only because there lies a wiggling creature. The art of plating to bring about an aesthetically appealing gastronomic experience is absent as the restless creature is placed next to a wilting leaf of lettuce noticeable only because its brown ends reveal its presence on a plate of a similar green color. Wilted and limp, decaying leaf mimics the texture of the soon-to-be decaying octopus. The camera follows Dae-su's fist, which grabs the crawling animal. In the frame are Dae-su's headshot from below the eyes, his fist, and the creature's tentacles with part of its head visible between the fist and Dae-su's wide open mouth. Both are decapitated; the octopus by Dae-su, Dae-su by the camera, emphasizing the scene's sensorial dimension while severing the cognitive. Primal sensations of disgust and fascination take over rational thought. The hand-held camera slightly shakes as close-ups shift from Mi-do to Dae-su, up and down. Each movement contributes to the sensation of an upset stomach getting ready to eject, while the accompanying music score by Cho Youn Wook crescendos in the background. Its title: "It's Alive!".

The octopus-eating scene in *Oldboy* illustrates how "the intimacy of disgust with its perceiver" happens on "a formal level in addition to contagion and immediacy ascribed to sensation as such" [47] (p. 162). "Sensorial shocks and corporeal agitations" [47] (p. 26) elicited by the color, texture, and framings in the scene transform the audience into an assemblage of voyeuristic participants, devourers themselves. The erotic undertones elicited through close-ups of Mido juxtaposed with the grotesque, but no less erotic act of devouring simultaneously allures and revolts. In this context, it is not so much that Dae-su wants to "eat the life, not the food, because he has been buried in death for 15 years" as Ebert points out [42]. It is that the thing, the octopus—an authentic, unadulterated, and, more importantly, unmediated thing in its thingness—is the only thing in Dae-su's

media-consumed and orchestrated life that is real. Non-organic is never disgusting in and of itself, writes Kolnai [48]. The scene is an ode to the real, and a farewell to it, in Baudrillard's sense of the term.

The scene encapsulates on both narrative and formal levels a microcosm of the film's overarching themes of secrets, moral quandaries, and forbidden desires. Disgust is, as Kolnai argues, "connected with something which is concealed, secretive, multilayered, uncanny, sinister, as well as with something which is shameless, obtrusive, and alluring; that is, in sum, to be something which is taunting" [48] (p. 47). The scene not only moves the audience on the affective register, but it transforms viewers into accomplices. It implicates them. This complicity compels the viewers to bear witness to the unsettling drama about to unfold but also to shoulder the responsibility for it.

3.2.2. Guilt

While scholars have interpreted the incest, one of the major themes in the film, largely as an allegory emphasizing its representational and symbolic elements [29–31], I propose that references to Greek mythology—the Oediupus myth and also the myth of Philomela, the princess brutally raped by her brother in-law who cut off her tongue to hide his guilt—serve a different function. After Woo-jin's revelation that Mi-do is Dae-su's daughter, Dae-su begs him desperately to keep this fact from Mi-do. Terrified that Mi-do might learn the abhorrent truth—especially being already struck by tragedy believing that her mother was murdered by her father—Dae-su grabs a pair of scissors previously used in combat, pulls a handkerchief out of his pocket, snatches his tongue, and places it between the blades. The audience then sees Dae-su's hand holding the scissors and hears his distorted, eerie screams, then just a crisp snap. Dae-su cuts off his tongue in exchange for Mi-do's oblivion. Auto-amputation ensures that the harrowing secret remains hidden.

Before Dae-su and the audience learn that he and Mi-do are in an incestual relationship, the film encourages the viewers to be invested in their romance and cheer on it. In part because young, angelic, and somewhat naïve Mi-do is clearly in love with Dae-su. The moment when they become lovers is infused with intimacy and eroticism. The prelude to the scene is charming, comical in its romantic clumsiness animated equally by Dae-su's lack of practice and Mi-do's lack of experience. The scene also invites the viewers to be an unwitting accomplice leaving them shocked and guilty when the truth is later revealed [42]. The viewers are meant to be horrified and disgusted by Dae-su's gulping of a live octopus, by the act of cutting off his tongue, by the incestual relationship with Mi-do. But this deeply unsettling state is still insufficient for Chan-wook. Another incest, more precisely the rumor about it, is at the heart of the film's narrative. The rumor is the inciting incident that sets the *Oldboy* story in motion and upon which the entire narrative is premised.

As a young boy, Dae-su inadvertently witnesses a fondling act involving Woo-jin and his sister. Dae-su later shares what he saw with a close friend but urges him not to tell anyone. He conveys the story casually during an ordinary everyday encounter seemingly with no malice or ill-intent. The event itself and its recounting are not considered significant moments in his life. While imprisoned, he generates a list of all the people who he may have crossed or harmed. But Woo-jin does not make his list, as Dae-su has no recollection of telling this story during his childhood. In fact, Dae-su needs to be reminded that they even happened. With no further intervention by Dae-su, the rumor, however, had a life of its own. Like all rumors, this one also involved details about its alleged distribution. How rumor is transmitted is in and of itself a rumor, and through this evolution, Woo-jin came to learn that Dae-su was its original source. Because of its networked character, rumor gained momentum, and its transmission led to its mutability. An incident, benignly shared, subsequently evolved into an elaborate rumor—Woo-jin is said to have gotten his sister, Soo-ah, pregnant.

The precise contours of how Dae-su's story mutates into the rumor that Woo-jin has impregnated Soo-ah occur outside of the diegesis. The viewers are left in a state of discomfort, trying to make sense of the missing parts. The unstable structure of rumor with

no trace and in constant flux that develops in the unseen disorients the viewers affectively while they are bombarded with a disturbing narrative plane. Though rumor is a discursive form transmitted orally, Chan-wook gave it an affective dimension, an atmospheric quality, rather than a purely symbolic characteristic. The film elicits discomfort generated through the ambiance rather than what is perceived through language and visuals alone.

Atmosphere, which German philosopher Gernot Böhme defines as a sensation that mediates between the objective properties of an environment and bodily-sensual states of the perceiving subject fluctuates between symbolicity and materiality [49]. This "floating in-between" [50] (p. 3) is felt as personal, yet is impersonal, because the atmosphere "belongs to collective situations" [51] (p. 79). It is precisely atmosphere's collective nature that makes it an especially useful concept for explaining how the rumor in the film, as a symbolic structure, translated the event—witnessing incest and recounting it—into material reality, into a concrete experience [52]. Woo-jin's entire life is solely focused on designing and executing a sophisticated vengeance: Dae-su's captivity, the incest, and Mi-do's orphanage are all results of the rumor. Yet, none of these events—driven by the rumor as a catalyst that triggers their journeys—has as profound an impact as those involving Soo-ah. The material effects of rumor are most strikingly evident with regard to her. After the rumor circulates through the community and in the process grows in severity, Soo-ah begins to exhibit actual symptoms of pregnancy. Her own body has a material response to the rumor in the form of pseudocyesis, ultimately driving her to take her own life. While rumor itself is not an affect, the mechanism of rumor—from its viral spread to the sentiment—is a metaphor for affect. Like affect, rumor is moved among bodies and elicits public sentiment about it. While public sentiment is often mobilized to protect social norms, the film instead presents a series of moral transgressions. The ambience created through a sensation that oscillates between the symbolic and affective plane of the film implicates the viewers in a complex pathic experience.

From the representational elements about the rumor, the audience gets an understanding that rumor is pure destruction; it destroys everyone, and no one is vindicated. Woo-jin's desire for revenge, which he gets at the end, is also unsatisfying; as soon as he gets it, he commits suicide. At the end, there is ultimately no way to undo the harm caused by it. A desire for vengeance, at least in this part of the trilogy, is both an utterly destructive effort and a futile one. The belief that acting out the desire for revenge to punish the wrongdoer will provide an emotional release, in fact, does not elicit satisfaction. At a level of story, the loss of life is presented as a matter of fact. The audience is not traumatized by the visual flow of images. In part, because it is not clear entirely who we as spectators are meant to identify with. The horrible tragedy on all sides, the unsettling disquieting horror show, the senselessness of it all, and the banality, is rather nihilistic. How are, then, the spectators affected by the salvo of nihilism that envelops the film and the mobilization of the public sentiment of disgust with rumor and its destructive qualities?

The end of the film narratively provides a resolution. Dae-su's tormentor is gone and Mi-do is saved from the horrible truth. In the final scene, Dae-su gives a note to the same hypnotist previously hired by Woo-jin in which he makes a request. The cinema is simultaneously, as Pasolini writes, "fundamentally oneiric" and a "hypnotic monstrum"' [53] (p. 41). In the film, the hypnotist functions as a metaphor for the dual nature of media and its mesmerizing qualities. Similarly, Dae-su's suit, the same one he wears throughout the film, is only in this last scene replaced by a blanket. The blanket mirrors the oneiric qualities of media Pasolini speaks of, as Dae-su is about to forget parts of his life as one would forget parts of their dream. As the camera skims over the letter, the audience does not learn the nature of this request—whether he asks her to erase his memory of sleeping with Mi-do or the knowledge that Mi-do is his daughter. Either way, however, Dae-su is freed. Yet, the film does not provide a closure even though the narrative threads have been resolved.

Typically, closure creates a feeling of stability, comfort, and safety. Instead, the film unleashes a tension between the narrative plane and affective plane as the audience is left in a profoundly disturbed, disquieting, and unsettling state. After the film ends, the

audience must carry the grotesque knowledge that Dae-su's memory has been erased. The knowledge about the nature of his and Mi-do's relationship for him is no longer an abomination, but it continues to be for the viewers. Implicated in this horror, we continue to suffer. The body of the film conveys the affect, which extends itself onto the body of the audience. Semiotically, the plot is tied up in the Hollywood package, but somatically, the audience must carry on with disgust and guilt.

Oldboy serves as a compelling exploration of collective guilt, punishment, and responsibility. The audiences' continued torment invites a reflection to recognize that we have a shared culpability in the act of spreading rumors. A transgression we recognize in ourselves makes us complicit and, thus, not only implicates us in Dae-su's suffering but also ensures that we, too, are meant to suffer. By confronting this universal guilt and eliciting our senses upon its end, the film transforms the audience into extensions of the media it critiques. The film not only condemns the banality of rumormongering but also elicits a shared sense of guilt, compelling viewers to both acknowledge their roles in the perpetuation of harm as well as be held responsible for it.

4. Concluding Remarks

In the preceding pages, I explored the possibility that media encourages individuals to become extensions of media themselves. I attempted here to demonstrate how the film's narrative/visual plane stories the theory of humans as media extensions through the imitations of media—by regurgitating its content and becoming, ourselves, the apparatus of surveillance. In my analysis, I also attempted to draw attention to the film's aesthetic, affective appeals which, as I argue, at the level of form perform the theory of media assemblages in which the viewers are transformed into accomplices. I recognize that Deleuzean philosophical tradition would abandon the analysis of a representational plane altogether, likely viewing it as unproductive. I used this tradition as a useful launching point mostly because it invites us to, in compelling ways, think about the audience as an extension as opposed to an effect. The causal way of understanding the world may not be useful in a digital moment in which we are profoundly influenced by a medium where we never unplug and the invitations to becoming are non-stop; as a result, we carry and extend its logic.

While Deleuzean perspective is valuable, the text stands on its own. As Barthes insists, "each (single) text is the very theory (and not the mere example)" [54] (p. 12). The film, therefore, is its own theory, and as such offers unique insights into media assemblages, albeit it stands as an imperfect illustration of the perspective that imbues much of the assemblage theory. When *Oldboy* came out, the media landscape was mostly dominated by the monoculture of cinema and television. In the interim, the media landscape has changed, dramatically. Some of the lessons from *Oldboy* today seem common knowledge. Nonetheless, the film is a powerful reminder that clearly, succinctly, and dramatically shows us what being an integral part of media ecology looks and feels like. By mobilizing representations and affects, the film wants us to not only understand but also embody the ecology of media. The symbolic and suasory planes of the film work in sync to reinforce this notion—that we are an important part of media ecology. Without us, the machines are merely inputs and outputs. With us, they are assemblages.

The brand of storytelling Chan-wook propagates in this film is intensely affective turning the audience into an assemblage as we begin to take on the logic of extreme cinema. Affects involve both "the experiencing body" and "our body of experience," which together elicit affective responses [55] (p. 25). This corporeal continuum of affect suggests that it is anchored in "a past history of readings, in the sense that the process of recognition (of this feeling, or that feeling) is bound up with what we already know" [56] (p. 25). The film helps us think about media differently from the pure subjection paradigm because cinema, although in complete alignment with capitalist deterritorialization, via Deleuzean perspective, "can also represent a chance for salvation", [57] (p. 138). What makes the cinema machine an apparatus of subjection "can also be turned into new process for sub-

jectivation provided that one recognize the nature of machinic assemblages" [57] (p. 138). If we attend to Ott's lead carefully, to think of the affective dimension of embodied experience "as energies, intensities, and sensations that function as the first step towards an evolving attitude" [55] (p. 50), then we may see *Oldboy* as a truly pedagogical synesthetic intervention into understanding the media and our responsibility in its ecosystem.

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