

The Substance (2024), by Coralie Fargeat³⁶²

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In *The Substance* (2024), director Coralie Fargeat doesn't just dip a toe into body horror. She dives headfirst, dragging the viewer into a bubbling vat of viscera, shame, and impossible beauty standards. With surgical precision and neon-drenched brutality, the film dissects not only flesh but the cultural conditioning that renders female bodies monstrous the moment they sag, bleed, or assert autonomy. This isn't just horror; it's critique, satire, revenge fantasy, and a high-gloss scream of rage.

From the film's opening frames, we find ourselves in a world where women must be dazzling or disappear. The protagonist, portrayed by a striking yet visibly aging Demi Moore, is discarded from her TV fitness role not due to a lack of skill or charisma, but for the crime of no longer being 25. Her fall from grace is swift, humiliating, and surrounded by men whose own bodies are, to put it politely, *fungus*. These male figures aren't just unsympathetic; they're repulsive and cartoonishly grotesque. The camera lingers on their sweat, snot, pudgy hands, and open pores, while the women are illuminated and styled to near-mythic perfection. It's a grotesque inversion of Hollywood's usual treatment of gendered bodies, one that aligns with Julia Kristeva's notion of the abject: that which is cast off, rejected, yet hauntingly present. The aging woman is rendered abject not because she is inherently horrifying, but because culture has marked her as a *leak* in the symbolic order: a disruption to the fantasy of eternal, compliant beauty.

The horror, however, does not lie only in what society does to her; it lies also in what she does to herself. Offered the chance to "improve" through a mysterious injectable substance, Elisabeth undergoes a transformation that literalizes the toxic fantasy of becoming someone *new*. But this transformation is not seamless. It is slimy, bloody, and traumatic. She splits, literally, into two selves: the perfect, young, commercial-ready double,

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and the increasingly rotting original. The *old* body becomes an exoskeleton to be shed, a prison to be escaped. Here, Fargeat stages a violent rejection of femaleness itself—not in terms of identity, but in the physical, hormonal, biological sense. Menstruation, pregnancy, menopause; these are not milestones but horror motifs.

The metaphor becomes clear: to survive, to succeed, to be seen, the female body must be fragmented, commodified, and ultimately destroyed. *The Substance* weaponizes its genre to express this idea. It doesn't flirt with body horror: it *marinates* in it. There is no subtlety here, and that's precisely the point. The film isn't interested in metaphorical hauntings—it wants blood on the floor and guts on the ceiling. This is the horror of transformation, of becoming the ideal and losing the self.

The result is a vicious commentary on how society treats aging women, not just as invisible, but as monstrous. There's no room for ambiguity here, and Fargeat knows it. In fact, she exploits it. Mirrors, screens, and reflections recur throughout the film, each one echoing the same impossible message: be young, be beautiful, or be gone. It's *Black Swan* on steroids, *Videodrome* with a lipstick mirror.

As a matter of fact, as the film plunges us into horror, it never loses its biting intertextual edge. *The Substance* is littered with visual and narrative references, some explicit, others sly. The use of black-and-white command slogans and billboards calls back unmistakably to John Carpenter's *They Live* (1988), a film also concerned with false consciousness and capitalist horror. The finale echoes *Cinderella*, with its shimmering light blue dress and desperate flight from the ball before the transformation expires; but here, the magic curdles, the beauty collapses, and the clock doesn't strike twelve: it detonates. There's also a bold musical nod to Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* in the final sequence, with the famous *Also sprach Zarathustra* theme playing over an orgy of grotesque rebirth. But instead of ascending into higher consciousness, this evolution is reversed. If *2001* was about transcending the human, *The Substance* is about being trapped in it, and loathing every wrinkle.

That said, *The Substance* is not without its contradictions. It relishes the spectacle of the beautiful young body almost as much as it critiques it. There's a danger here of reinscribing the very gaze it aims to dismantle. The film invites us to recoil from the aging

female body but also forces us to watch its destruction with almost operatic flair. Is this subversion, or repetition with a wink? Fargeat doesn't give us an answer, and maybe that ambiguity is intentional. Maybe the true horror isn't the transformation, but the fact that it works. For a while, anyway.

In under two hours, *The Substance* manages to lacerate the toxic demands placed on women, expose the flesh trade of fame, and splatter the screen with metaphorical (and literal) bile. It is not a subtle film. It is a scream disguised as a fable, a satire soaked in acid. It asks not what it means to be beautiful, but what it costs, and whether survival is worth that price.

Works Cited

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Notes on contributor

Martina Villani holds a Master's degree in American Studies from the University of Turin, where they graduated in November 2024. Their thesis, *At the Intersection of Verse and Vision: Claudia Rankine, Eileen Myles, and the Evolution of Video poetry*, explores the fluid boundaries of video poetry as a hybrid form that merges literary text and moving image. Their research interests include contemporary American literature, feminist and queer theory, experimental film, and media studies. Martina has a background in audio-visual editing and has participated in video poetry competitions, blending creative practice with academic inquiry. They are particularly drawn to interdisciplinary approaches that connect literature, film, and digital media.

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