

‘Have you ever dreamt of a better version of yourself?’:

The Representation of Ageing Women on Screen in *The*

***Substance* (2024)**

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Abstract

This research project examines the representation of ageing women on screen through the lens of the 2024 film *The Substance*. Grounded on posthuman and feminist theoretical frameworks, this study addresses how modern cinema engages with cultural expectations surrounding femininity and ageing.

Driven by the growing visibility of cosmetic surgery, it interrogates how *The Substance* critiques societal pressures placed on women's ageing bodies, and how its protagonist, Elisabeth Sparkle, functions as a metaphor personified for the cultural demonisation of older women in the media. By combining stills from the film with concepts of the *abject*, the *monstrous-feminine*, and the *male gaze*, this project illustrates how *The Substance* uses body horror to convey the internal anguish midlife women can feel from misogynistic society praising perpetual youth. Complementing this film analysis, cultural reception theory is mobilised through the examination of Instagram, TikTok, and Reddit threads, encapsulating how film reflects reality and propels audience discussion over why women feel compelled to defy ageing.

Through visual analysis of the film, and discourse analysis of the script, *The Substance's* portrayal of midlife Elisabeth's bodily disintegration, where she grotesquely births her younger counterpart called Sue through her spine by injecting 'the substance', captures her desperation to reclaim her youth. Elisabeth's metamorphosis into Sue resonates with older women harnessing agency to alter their appearance through plastic surgery to regain control over their identity. Yet, Elisabeth's desire for eternal youth, and Sue's disdain over Elisabeth's

aged body from *internalised misogyny*, reinforces the invisibility of ageing women in the media, highlighting how female beauty cultures stigmatise women for biologically ageing.

Accordingly, this research contributes to feminist film scholarship by offering a contemporary critique of patriarchal beauty narratives, layering film analysis with cultural reception to highlight how film both mirrors and resists ingrained societal expectations surrounding ageing and femininity.

Keywords: ageing women, beauty ideals, cosmetic surgery, feminist body horror, abject, monstrous-femininity, male gaze

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Introduction

As society's feminine beauty ideals remain tethered to youth, this research project explores how representations of female ageing bodies through the film *The Substance* (2024) oscillate between celebration and *abjection*.

Hollywood's Cultural Shift

This thesis argues that Hollywood has witnessed a cultural shift towards acknowledging the presence of ageing women on screen. The 2025 Golden Globes exemplifies this, where midlife actress Demi Moore revitalised her career by being awarded best actress in *The Substance* (2024), which explores the fear of ageing and the pursuit of perpetual youth among women (Ginnivan, 2025). Moore became a major sex symbol in the 1990s from her sexualised roles in film, particularly in *Striptease* (1996) where she became 'the highest-paid woman in Hollywood', yet she was condemned for her overtly-eroticised portrayal in the media (Marks, 2025). Moore shared that her 'status as a sex symbol', alongside the public scrutiny she experienced over her body, helped her portray Elisabeth Sparkled in *The Substance* (2024), successfully conveying social anxieties regarding maintaining conventional beauty in midlife. Themes of ageing and femininity now seen in cinema illustrate the changing representation of ageing women in film as, hitherto invisible or type cast in peripheral and desexualised roles, midlife actresses are performing roles which challenge ageist and sexist stereotypes.

Yet, despite Moore's accolade, this cultural shift alludes to midlife actresses only receiving praise when conforming to narrow definitions of beauty. This is witnessed on Hollywood's red carpets, where older actresses are stylised glamorously to accentuate their youthful physiques, as well as the scrutiny surrounding Moore's supposed facelift to conceal her

naturally aged appearance (Ellen, 2025). This focus on youth renders their newfound presence on screen conditional and precarious to their adherence to portraying traditional femininity, questioning the authenticity of cinematic perceptions of older women.

The Proliferation of Cosmetic Enhancements

The evolving visibility of older women is undermined by the prolific use of cosmetic procedures seen on older actresses, such as filler and pharmaceuticals like Ozempic. In posthumanist Anne Balsamo's (1996, p. 1) discussion of new technologies and how they impact the gendered body, she argues that advancements in cosmetics result in 'the dimensions and markers of what counts as a "natural" body' changing the way ageing is represented in society. While surgical advancements have increased dramatically since Balsamo's (1996) study, the paradox of these enhancements within the celebrity and public sphere prevails. As both mediums of self-expression and conformity to youth-centric beauty norms, plastic surgery's increase among women signals whether this representation of ageing women in Hollywood perpetuates unrealistic beauty ideals. Moore also epitomises this cultural tension, since her 'uber-thin, aggressively tweaked' (Ellen, 2025) image undermines how representative her image is in providing authentic representation of ageing women in the media. Moore's age-defying image evokes discussion about how midlife women negotiate their gendered identities in a society where the media celebrates midlife actresses' sanitised appearances, erasing signs of biological ageing.

Consequently, this leads to the question: how do representations of the ageing female body in *The Substance* (2024) both reframe and reinforce societal judgments of femininity? This thesis will provide insight into the commonalities and differences between the portrayal of

ageing women both on screen and in reality, and how this affects audience perceptions of ageing and femininity.

Defining Feminine Beauty Ideals

In this project, I refer to ideal beauty as a culturally constructed 'set of normalised and regulatory discourses' which outline a standard of physical appearance for women to achieve that is perceived as universally desirable (Dolan, 2014, p. 346). Feminist Naomi Wolf (2002) argues that these beauty standards constitute being youthful, toned, and white, demonstrating how adhering to these male-judged beauty standards function as a currency system in society where women gain privilege in patriarchal institutions from embodying this desired beauty. This archetype of female beauty is specific to Western culture, linking back to colonialism where women with different colours of skin were seen to be deviating from Eurocentric ideologies of white supremacy, and were consequently othered from being primitive in modernity (Said, 1978). Moreover, these beauty standards are heteronormative, designed for the *male gaze* which aligns to traditional gender roles that sexualise and eroticise women exclusively for male satiation (Mulvey, 1989). These ideal beauty standards marginalise individuals who do not conform to this narrow framework of beauty.

Accordingly, as a white, heterosexual woman, I recognise that my positionality as a researcher is influenced by these ideals. However, through my analysis, I have exercised my lived experience from feeling pressure to conform to socially acceptable representations of femininity to critique the *male gaze* and its oppressive functions. Acknowledging my positionality has ultimately enabled me to deeply engage with Western beauty ideals and the heteronormative power structures they reinforce. The perpetuation of gender inequality

through beauty ideals evokes discussions on body modification's relationship to female agency and self-worth, questioning why midlife women feel urged to undergo surgery to gain social acceptance in a patriarchal society.

The Body Horror Subgenre and *The Substance* (2024)

The paradox of women using surgery to empower or subvert themselves to patriarchal beauty standards is presented in the body horror film subgenre, where the female ageing body becomes a site of grotesque bodily transformation, an uncanny spectacle which reflects society's distaste for the ageing body. Feminist film scholar Carol Clover (2015, p. 35) expands on this dualism, engaging in gendered analysis to emphasise how horror uses the female body to present cultural anxieties surrounding femininity, becoming 'abject terror personified'. This evokes how body horror provides an outlet for spectators to capture 'corporeal nightmares... through extreme representations of the body' through film, forcing the audience to confront their relationship with their body (Reyes, 2014, p. 56).

These feminist discussions of body horror closely align with the film *The Substance* (2024), directed by Coralie Fargeat, which is a body horror movie that sheds light on the unachievable beauty standards women are subject to, causing ageing and the transition into midlife to be seen as a fearful and undesirable experience. The film follows Moore portraying an ageing actress called Elisabeth Sparkle who, having been fired on her fiftieth birthday, undergoes an experimental procedure by injecting 'the substance' to regain her youth and allure. Although *The Substance* (2024) never depicts Elisabeth undergoing real cosmetic procedures, the very premise of the film revolves around the quest for perpetual youth through medical intervention from 'the substance' which births Elisabeth's younger counterpart Sue. While

Elisabeth and Sue have separate bodies, they are 'ONE' (Fargeat, 2022, p. 18), constituting different embodiments of the same self who are bound together as a fractured identity polarising old and young.

The plot of *The Substance* (2024) channels the real world proliferation of plastic surgery into an analogy of self-destruction, warning viewers that the technologies we embrace may ultimately consume us. By exploring the consequences of harnessing technology for body modification, the film highlights the consequences of altering your appearance, exposing social anxieties surrounding technological interventions in reversing the ageing process. Fargeat (2022) dramatises the fear of ageing among women by channelling these anxieties through body horror conventions, expressing society's contradictory relationship with the ageing female body by staging rejuvenation and decay as contrasting outcomes from surgeries.

Overview

By integrating posthumanist frameworks to analyse female beauty ideals and bodily transformation, while situating this in *The Substance's* (2024) engagement with the *cyborg*, *monstrous-feminine*, and *abject* body, this research investigates the representation of ageing women on screen both defying and conforming to notions of femininity. By asking 'have you ever dreamt of a better version of yourself?' (Fargeat, 2022, p. 16), the film forces spectators to confront the cultural costs of midlife women altering their natural physique in the pursuit of perfection. This study demonstrates how body horror highlights ageist beauty regimes prevalent in contemporary society, investigating the politics of portraying the ageing female body on screen.

Using *The Substance* (2024) as a case study, this thesis aims to illuminate how the body horror film genre portrays midlife women, referring to actresses in the transitional life stage between adulthood and old age, both challenging and perpetuating dominant beauty cultures. Grounded in Donna Haraway's (1984) *cyborg theory* which argues how technological advancements liberate the female body from patriarchal beauty standards, this thesis constructs an analytical framework that bridges feminist film scholarship with ageing and body horror to examine how midlife actresses are visually inscribed with meanings of beauty, decay, and technological intervention. By analysing the film's cinematography through its depiction of bodily transformations, this project interrogates how cinema reflects societal anxieties about the ageing female body. The study also assesses how the interplay of *male* and *female gazes* shapes power relations around desires for perpetual youth and how, within a transhumanist and patriarchal context, cosmetic interventions become both acts of self-empowerment and vanity. Tracing the film's cultural reception online helps situate the movie within broader discourses surrounding female beauty culture, ultimately revealing how body horror can simultaneously reframe and reinforce societal judgments of femininity.

This thesis is divided into three chapters, each addressing a key objective through analysis of scenes from *The Substance* (2024). Chapter I, *The Rebirth of Youth*, examines the birthing scene in the film, Elisabeth's first transformation in pursuit of perfection, where she injects 'the substance' and proceeds to give birth to her younger counterpart Sue. The chapter studies how bodily surveillance, reproductive biotechnologies, and female archetypes are visualised in the film to interrogate ageing, femininity, and the *monstrous-feminine*. Chapter II, *The Battle of the Gazes*, investigates the interplay between the *male* and *female gazes* and

their influence on interpersonal dynamics between women, particularly through the lens of envy, rivalry, and *internalised misogyny*. Finally, Chapter III, *The Punishment of Vanity*, analyses how the protagonist's obsession with youth and beauty leads to her bodily disintegration, illustrating how cosmetic enhancements intended as acts of self-improvement result into the erosion of female identity and authenticity. Therefore, this thesis unpacks how *The Substance* (2024) critiques cultural narratives surrounding women, ageing, and toxic beauty standards through body horror visuals, confronting its audience to the costs of conforming to idealised femininity.

Literature Review

This literature review traces how feminist theory, body horror analysis, and midlife scholarship intersect around the representation of ageing women's bodies in film. I first build on Haraway's (1984) *cyborg* theory from a posthumanist lens, incorporating transhuman discussions alongside feminist scholarship of beauty ideals to illustrate the complexities of female agency entangled in the proliferation of cosmetic procedures to reverse signs of ageing. By combining feminist film theory with this discussion over how reproductive technologies have provided unprecedented possibilities for the human condition, I express why it is important to analyse film, since cinematography captures social anxieties surrounding ageing and femininity. Accordingly, from critically evaluating foundational theoretical frameworks on posthumanism, to cosmetic procedures reinforcing how ageing women are seen as *abject* and monstrous, this review highlights the need to explore how ageing women portrayed in film are a product of, and productive in, reframing and reinforcing conventional beauty ideals.

The 'Cyborg': Liberating and Subverting the Body with Technology

Posthumanist theory helps illustrate the evolving representations of ageing women in cinema because it demonstrates how women exercise their agency to both emancipate and adhere to feminine beauty ideals. Haraway's (1984) *cyborg* theory argues for women to mobilise technological advancements to liberate themselves from patriarchal power structures, regaining control over their bodies to move towards a society free from gender inequalities. By expressing how 'biotechnologies are the crucial tools recrafting our bodies... [they] embody and enforce new social relations for women worldwide' (Haraway, 1984, p. 164), her argument captures how the *cyborg* embodies a metaphor to disrupt essentialist gender binaries,

advocating how technology can intertwine with the female body to overcome prejudice. Similarly, feminist Balsamo's (1996) work charts how cosmetic technologies inscribe femininity onto the flesh, revealing how women can gain autonomy through technologised, hybrid bodies which are fluid and malleable. This defiance to patriarchal beauty standards outlines the need to intersect age with gender and technology to express how age is culturally mediated, both liberating and oppressing women thanks to technological advancements in surgeries.

Yet, this celebration of technological agency neglects analysis on the aged body, rather focusing on the youthful, reproductive body as a process of *becoming*. Elisabeth Grosz (1994) speaks of *becoming*, encapsulating how humans are in flux and constantly shaped by sociocultural forces. While *becoming* provides insight into how *cyborg* theory translates into modern day, explaining how technology assists individuals into transitioning into later life, these accounts are medicalised and ignore the emotional toil midlife women experience from discussion over 'compulsory able-bodiedness' in youth-centric society (Oudshoorn, 2020, p. 24). Therefore, further analysis is needed to explore how the ageing body acts as a site for cultural inscription, being technologised in film as a grotesque spectacle to reflect society's praise of perpetual youth.

From a Transhumanist Lens: The Possibilities of Humanity

Transhumanism helps explain cultural fears of ageing, fading beauty, and of losing control to technologies designed to liberate us, evoking how technological advancements make future possibilities of enhancing the human body unfathomable. Transhumanists Max More and Natasha Vita-More (2013, p. 1) argue that, while transhumanism shares key postmodern

values with posthumanism, such as a continuous drive for 'change, reevaluating knowledge... and opposition to sharp classification of what humans and humanity ought to be', transhumanism acts from an anthropocentric lens to uncover 'life-promoting principles' through 'science and technology' to enhance the human body's health, beauty, and longevity. These differences in perspective portray how posthumanists perceive the posthuman body in more abstract terms, seeing the ideal technologised body as a metaphorical *cyborg* which individuals could become, whereas transhumanists see the posthuman body as a constantly evolving form which can better humanity from enhancing the physique.

Prolific engagement with enhancement technologies reinforces the prevalence of transhumanist values in modern day, since the increase in cosmetic surgeries highlights the agency and freedom people have to choose how they present themselves in society. However, from having endless possibilities over how to alter the human physique it provokes discussion around the consequences of pursuing constant self-improvement. For example, cosmetic interventions gone wrong serve as reminders that 'the choice to enhance could give rise to considerable regrets and harm', as irreversible modifications may make individuals lose their social value and identity over time, undermining the actualisation of transhumanist ideals (Miah, 2013, p. 298). This tension reflects postmodernity's desire for control over altering appearances and the fear of losing control over technologies, alluding to the way women deploy emerging biotechnologies in pursuit of beauty which can result in self-annihilation from losing the natural self in the process. Researchers Wendy Wagenaar and Anne-Mette Hermans (2024, p. 2) emphasise contemporary culture's 'addiction to cosmetic procedures', where women abuse plastic surgery through excessive use and psychological dependency on filler and enhancements to feel content. The abuse of cosmetic surgery in modern day among

women shows how it is necessary to interrogate the emotional and corporeal cost of bodily perfection, since the notion of self-improvement is heavily infiltrated by subversive discourses such as ageism, sexism, and technological fears.

Beauty Cultures: The Erasure of Ageing Female Bodies in Youth-Centric Society

Despite being able to use technology to create a non-gendered world with transgressive bodies, feminist scholars such as Suzanne Fraser (2003, p. 143) express how, due to patriarchal power structures disseminating idealised beauty standards that fetishise youth, women choose to modify their bodies through cosmetic surgery to 'redeem their body's integrity'. These unrealistic beauty standards diminish women's identities to their bodies for male sexual gratification, illustrating the all-consuming nature of appearance in determining female worth in society. Michel Foucault's (1977) analysis of *self-surveillance* and *body politic* through a feminist lens encapsulates how women internalise patriarchal beauty ideals from power institutions like the media, which coerce women into monitoring their bodies to conform to societal judgements of femininity. Foucault (1977) also argues how these powerful forces indoctrinate society into self-regulation, perpetuating the visibility and invisibility of bodies which either align or deviate from beauty ideals. Through the stigmatisation of certain body types deemed imperfect, Foucault's (1977) concept of *discourses* solidifies how misogynistic institutions disseminate oppressive beauty values onto women to maintain the patriarchy, compelling women to police their bodies and become preoccupied with their appearance. Feminist Kirsty Fairclough (2012, p. 101) adds to this discourse of women disciplining their bodies by encapsulating how 'endless reinvention' of the self through surgery is celebrated in society, stigmatising the biological process of ageing. This normalisation of plastic surgery, rendering surgically altered bodies perfection and demonising natural bodies as imperfect,

highlights the cultural pressure women feel to conform to ideal beauty standards and punish any visible ageing as a sign of loss and decay.

The contemporary shift of cosmetic surgery becoming an elitist practice further highlights the increasing erasure of ageing bodies in youth-centric society, since Hollywood actresses can defy time through technological advancements. For instance, Virginia Blum's (2005) analysis on cosmetic culture elucidates how plastic surgery operates as a marker of social distinction, where the ability to aesthetically change your appearance acts as a commodity and a status symbol for women. This elitism expresses how wealthy celebrities have accessibility to undergo age-defying procedures, signalling to their spectators their 'biocultural capital... that requires considerable financial investment', and in turn reinforcing class hierarchies through biological enhancements (Miah, 2013, p. 296). The visibility of high profile figures, such as Moore undergoing invasive procedures including facelifts, amplifies these elitist beauty norms, prompting women to see natural ageing as a mark of failure from not being wealthy enough to appear beautiful rather than a biological process.

The conformity to traditional notions of femininity, pursuing youth to feel attractive and valuable in society, sheds light on the taboo of ageing intersecting feminist studies on beauty culture. Grosz (1994) shines light the taboo on the ageing body, portraying how literature on menopause medicalises this stage of women's lives, rendering the female body a site of decay and absence, and ignores the lived experiences of midlife. J. Robyn Goodman (2014, p. 358) affirms this in her study on idealised beauty portrayed in the media, showing how the media associates beauty and success with 'hallmarks of youth', compelling ageing women to undergo cosmetic procedures to acquire 'economic, emotional, romantic, and social success'. This

discourse of 'successful ageing' (Dolan, 2014, p. 350) desensitises women in midlife to bodily alteration, highlighting the process of *othering* midlife women experience as natural ageing processes of gaining wrinkles, which are erased in the media, generate body dissatisfaction and diminish female self-worth.

Julia Kristeva's (1980, p. 5) theory of the *abject* enhances how women evade natural ageing through cosmetics, explaining how 'the abjection of self... [is] the inaugural loss that laid the foundations of its own being'. By defining *abjection* as revulsion of the self, Kristeva (1980) illuminates how women deviating from conventional ideas of beauty are marginalised in society, fuelling self-hatred that perpetuates the *abject*. This disdain over the self links to the experience of ageing, implying that women transitioning into midlife are losing their identity and are decaying into a subject void of their past selfhood. Even though Kristeva (1980) aptly illustrates how horror is induced when the body breaks down societally acceptable visceral boundaries where blood and human waste are visible, the *abject* is presented as a universal category, neglecting how age shapes the dynamics of disgust and desire. Accordingly, this thesis captures how midlife women negotiate the *abject* from naturally ageing, using *The Substance* (2024) as a key case study to evaluate how the ageing female body posits itself as a site of cultural anxiety around decay and gendered worth from biological processes.

The way aesthetic makeovers are presented as a remedy to perceived *abjection* expands the discussion on ageing women harnessing their agency to reclaim their youth, as this perpetuates the narrative of the female identity being underpinned by appearance and rendering older women as unattractive in society (Covino, 2004). This 'abjection management' (Covino, 2004, p. 103) highlights how beauty culture in western society induces fear among

midlife women over their supposed decay, showing the power in cosmetic culture which diminishes women's self-worth. Applying these theories to ageing flesh in horror within this research project, while examining the portrayal of ageing actresses themselves with their cosmetic enhancements, will provide a deeper understanding of how cultural fears of ageing, desire and objectification of the female form, and social expectations of conventional femininity bound in youth, intersect on screen.

Feminist Film Theory: The Gaze and the Fetishisation of Women

Translating beauty culture and femininity onto film studies provides insight into why women are portrayed in particular ways in cinema, evoking discussion on how societal expectations of Hollywood glamour reduce actresses to their appearance. Feminist film theorist Laura Mulvey's (1989, p. 11) seminal work on the *male gaze* in film expresses how visual culture fragments women, fetishising their body parts to deconstruct the woman as a whole and undermine her autonomy, outlining how women are reduced to 'puppets' to reinforce masculinity. This eroticisation of the female body indicates the importance of cinema when analysing the representations of older women, as cinematic techniques fashion the body to express how bodies are 'performative and situated' due to beauty culture in society rendering only certain body types attractive (Di Summa, 2022, p. 57).

The fragmentation of women on screen relates to the fetishisation of women and youthfulness, where male-focused desirability ostracises women deviating from conventions of eternal youth. According to psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud (1927, p. 352), fetishism acts as 'a substitute for the woman's (the mother's) penis that the little boy once believed in and... does not want to give up', due to castration being unbearable to comprehend. The fetish is

underpinned with his theory of castration anxiety, where boys repress their hostility towards their father, due to lusting after their mother, over fears that their father will discover this rivalry and castrate them as retaliation (Miller, 2016, p. 51).

Fetishism has been harnessed by other theorists to link fetishism with fashioning the body, illustrating how men fixate on phallic symbols adorned on women's bodies to fetishise them from embodying the castrated female phallus. For example, feminist psychoanalyst Valerie Steele (1997, p.2) shines light on mainstream fashion's emphasis on exhibiting sexual fetishism to satiate the *male gaze*, demonstrating how the visuality of women, depicted with slender necks and long toned legs to portray the erect phallus, reinforces the fetishisation of women to be used as objects for sexual gratification. These dominant discourses over idealised beauty mould women into homogenous forms for male pleasure, silencing their agency and preserving patriarchal control over women. Despite this phallogocentric perspective neglecting how women navigate their own sexual development, it encapsulates how women are belittled in patriarchal society to render women passive fetishised projections to please male voyeurism. Accordingly, this thesis addresses the relationship between fetishism and age to elucidate society's fetishisation of youth through its analysis of Moore's character Elisabeth in *The Substance* (2024). By unveiling the pressures placed on women to maintain youthful appearances through cosmetic enhancements, this study highlights how technological interventions transform the body, yet also expose the dubious level of agency women possess over their appearance from the *male gaze* silencing midlife representations of women.

Carol-Ann Evans and Linda Gamman (1995) complicate Mulvey's stance by revisiting gaze theory to incorporate female spectatorship, emphasising that viewers of all genders resist,

subvert, or reconfigure the gaze. 'Internalised misogyny' (Manne, 2018, p. 11) from the female acknowledgment of the sexual gaze, which occurs when women absorb and enact patriarchal expectations concerning femininity, depicts how monitoring the female body through disseminating suppressive beauty ideals 'serves to police and enforce these social roles' of women as passive objects of male spectatorship. Postfeminist Rosalind Gill (2016) expands on the *female gaze* by emphasising how the internalised patriarchy women absorb leads to jealousy and rivalry among women to please the *male gaze*, arguing how internalised patriarchal beauty standards were reframed as female empowerment in postfeminist discourse, resulting in women pursuing perfection for male acceptance. By women in modern day neglecting how beauty standards stem from unequal power dynamics, Gill's (2016, p. 625) work demonstrates the nuances within feminism, where feminist bodily autonomy can be expressed through 'revitalised misogyny' when presentation of the self aligns to male voyeurism. While these feminist perspectives depict the myriad gazes which suppress female liberation from subversive beauty ideals, rewarding conformity to gendered expectations of femininity, these scholars overlook the relationship between older female bodies and spectatorship. This thesis accordingly looks at audience reaction via online platforms, exploring how midlife women are perceived by film spectators to examine how the portrayal of age on screen both reiterates and enforces traditional femininity.

Grotesque Spectacles: Dramatisation in the Body Horror Film Subgenre

Feminist theory surrounding body culture has been developed by film scholars, analysing how the genre of 'body horror' dramatises corporality to highlight the cultural connotations viewers possess with ageing flesh. Leading film scholar Xavier Reyes (2014, p. 64) defines body horror film as a melange of splatter and gore which is 'concerned with the anxieties and pains

that transformation entails', allowing for 'new carnal restructurings... that conceive life outside the ordinary'. By emphasising how the genre 'goes against what is considered normal anatomy and function in biological species', instead celebrating 'monstrous hybrids', Ronald Cruz (2012, p. 161) demonstrates how body horror engages anxieties about the body's fragility and its entanglement with the sense of self. Therefore, taking a feminist viewpoint to analyse body horror literature allows for an analysis of how women can become mutated through bodily transformation, blurring the boundaries between the feminine and monstrous while disrupting the sense of self in the process.

Horror scholar Barbara Creed's (1993) term of the *monstrous-feminine* helps exemplify this celebration of flesh through the portrayal of women in film, combining theoretical perspectives on the fetishisation of women with film studies to encapsulate how body horror dramatises visceral corporeality. Creed (1993, p. 71) develops Kristeva's (1980) concept of the *abject* to explain how the monstrous nature of the reproductive female body is visualised in cinema, arguing how the representation of the female body produces a desire for 'perverse pleasure' among viewers to witness viscera such as internal organs and blood which are both disgusting and fascinating. While Creed (1993) contextualises *monstrous-femininity* in film, she focuses on horror entanglement with the victimisation of younger women, undermining midlife women's intrinsic role in horror. This neglected role of midlife women in film theory conveys how film scholarship has focused primarily on the horrors of reproductivity, reading pregnancy, menstruation, and maternity as *abject* and overlooking analysis on the post-menopausal female form.

Feminist mythologist Marina Warner (1994, p. 4) expresses how the role of older women on screen is intertwined with youthful protagonists, arguing how myths reflect contemporary attitudes on ageing women and allude to the portrayal of 'she-monsters' in fairytales symbolising the fear of ageing in society. Warner (1994, p. 4) contextualises *monstrous-femininity* through her analysis of the 'evil stepmother' seen in fairytales, such as Cinderella, noting how their spitefulness and malevolence directed towards their younger, prettier stepdaughter is rooted in their jealousy of her youth. While there has been progress in portraying midlife women on screen with greater complexity, the prevalence of cosmetic enhancement narratives suggests that the stigma of ageing prevails.

However, film scholar Clover's (2015) research redefines gender roles in film, challenging assumptions of horror solely victimising women in film. Her study on the role of women in slasher horrors presents how youthful women in cinema are often the 'final girl' in slashers, who is the last surviving female protagonist in horror movies who 'perceives the full extent of the preceding horror and of her own peril... she is abject terror personified' (Clover, 2015, p. 35). This analysis of women in horror, restructuring the gender dualism of masculine/feminine through assertive female protagonists, shows the gender fluidity in horror movies which mutates the female body, resulting in the blurring of oppressive gender boundaries which defy women being helpless victims to male perpetrators. Yet, this gendered body analysis still bypasses midlife protagonists, rendering them as peripheral roles in film and overlooking how ageing women on screen both reinforce and reiterate societal expectations of femininity.

It is important to acknowledge that recent scholarship has begun to analyse *The Substance* (2024) through the lens of ageing and femininity. For instance, Rose Capp (2025)

takes a gerontology-focused approach on the movie, foregrounding the film's critique of anti-ageing norms entrenched in society which define biological ageing as failure for women. Henrieta Krupa's (2025, p. 58) article studies *The Substance* (2024) through the *monstrous-feminine* and *abjection*, emphasising the film's feminist interventions in body horror where the movie's excessive viscera reframes female 'monstrosity as a site of resistance and empowerment' in patriarchal landscapes. While these studies successfully intersect ageing and femininity within the body horror film genre, this thesis offers extensive visual, discourse, and cultural response analysis to *The Substance* (2024) to encapsulate the movie's critique of the proliferation of cosmetic surgery impacting the representation of midlife women.

Accordingly, a gap in literature emerges where ageing, technology, and horror intersect to provide new insights into the politics of the ageing flesh in cinema. *The Substance* (2024), with its ageing protagonist and extreme body transformation, offers an ideal case study, enabling the interrogation of how representations of ageing women on screen both reframe and reinforce public perceptions over ageing and femininity. By focusing on Elisabeth as the central protagonist of *The Substance* (2024), this thesis focuses on midlife women's subjectivity over oppressive beauty ideals. Rather than relegating midlife women to peripheral roles like the 'evil stepmother' in fairytales (Warner, 1994), this research project invites analysis on how *The Substance* (2024) mobilises aged flesh to demonstrate how femininity is founded on perpetual youth, both reinforcing and contesting societal judgements about femininity.

Methodology

Research Design

To dissect how body horror both reinforces and defies feminine ideals over ageing, this project combines visual analysis, discourse analysis, and audience response theory to examine *The Substance* (2024), triangulating research for an in-depth investigation on the representation of ageing women on screen. These methods are founded on film analysis, providing a deeper understanding on how and why cinematic techniques are deployed by directors to confront their audience with sociocultural themes. The research centres on *The Substance* (2024) as the film explores the ageing female body in cinema directly, visualising contemporary social anxieties over female ageing which demonise the biological ageing process.

Film Analysis

Film analysis is the critical examination and interpretation of a film's narrative concerning its visuals, thematic content, and cultural impact (Lapsley, 2024). With this grounding of film studies, my research on cinematic depictions of ageing enabled me to study how *The Substance's* (2024) director, Coralie Fargeat, utilised cinematography to mirror society's qualms with ageing bodies. Drawing on Graeme Turner's (1988, p. 66) framework as inspiration, I explore how film acts as a 'social practice' which 'incorporates the separate technologies and discourses of the camera, lighting, editing, set design, and sound' to contribute to the overall 'meaning' of the film. By studying Fargeat's (2022) manipulation of the camera and design choices regarding mise-en-scène, it demonstrates how the film is deeply entangled with societal judgements over female beauty ideals, positioning itself as a critique to society's obsession with perpetual youth and the consequences of having cosmetic enhancements to reverse what nature intended.

The representation of ageing women in film in this project is examined through stills from the movie to help helping to investigate how the cultural shift of ageing women's visibility on screen is both a product of, and productive in, the perpetuation of rigid feminine beauty ideals. Through the cinematic visualisation of themes, like ageing and femininity in *The Substance* (2024), the film conveys how cinema reflects on contemporary culture, portraying cinema as a 'cultural event' which responds to sociocultural issues (Turner, 1988, p. 2). This research examines the mise-en-scène in the film, which encompasses 'all the visible components that make up a shot in front of the camera' for the audience to see (Ghosh, 2022, p. 9), and the cinematography, which constitutes the techniques of capturing narratives in film through framing, camera angles, and lighting, to shine light on the movie's reflection of postmodernity.

Visual Analysis

I conduct visual analysis of *The Substance* (2024) to express how the ageing female body is inscribed with cultural meaning, which the audience observes and interacts with from their own embodied experience of ageing. According to copyright laws (Intellectual Property Office, 2014, p. 6), 'students who need to copy parts of... films... for private study are allowed to do so', meaning I am able to use screenshots of stills from *The Substance* (2024) for this project. While I am unable to analyse all of the movie's scenes and themes due to the word limitations of the thesis, I chose the scenes I believe are the most significant in the film to examine the representation of ageing women and how this portrayal resonates with society's narrow expectations of female beauty. These scenes include the spinal rebirth scene which welcomes Sue's *becoming*; Sue's presentation of the self through fashion both defying and conforming

to the *male gaze*; Sue's corporeal assault on Elisabeth's body by syphoning too much stabiliser fluid from her spine; and Elisabeth bodily disintegration leading her metamorphosis into Monstro ElisaSue.

I use Stuart Hall's (1997, p. 64) concept of 'making things mean' to ground my analysis, which describes how everyday practices are encoded with cultural meanings essential for decoding ideologies and inequalities in society. This concept enables me to unearth the cultural meanings surrounding female beauty standards and representations of ageing portrayed in *The Substance* (2024), explaining why women perceive ageing as a scary process which threatens their femininity and renders them unworthy of attention. Semiology buttresses this framework as it unveils the 'network of meaning' and values conveyed in the film, shedding light on the broader cultural issues witnessed in *The Substance* (2024) regarding ageism and internalised misogyny which suppress female emancipation (Barthes, 1967, p. xii). Roland Barthes' (1973) examination of myths further strengthens his semiology, and therefore this study, as his theory elucidates how signs in the everyday are redeployed to communicate dominant values in society. By identifying visual signifiers of age in the film, like Elisabeth's grey hair, it allows the comprehension of broader cultural meanings over ageing and femininity, like greying hair signifying a decline of beauty (*The Substance*, 2024). Accordingly, through content analysis of the movie it provides insight into how scenes depicting Elisabeth's monstrous ageing reflect dominant cultural values, helping to reveal societal judgements over youth, beauty, and desirability which would not be visible without cinematography to adorn them.

Disciplining the Female Body through Film

Feminist film scholar Linda Williams' (1991) work on *body genres* enhances my ability to visually analyse *The Substance* (2024), since she argues how horror's focus on bodily excess produces physical reactions for viewers that shape how they feel about bodies in reality. Through the use of visceral cinematic techniques, body horror enables its audiences to feel sensations of disgust through the movie's female protagonists, moulding the female body into an object that encourages spectators to project their social anxieties concerning femininity into actresses' embodied performances. By linking *body genres* to power/knowledge regimes, Williams' (1991) work further reveals how cinema both reflects and reinforces dominant values proliferated in society which regulate and control women's bodies. Analysing *The Substance's* (2024) gory elements interacting with broader cultural discourses on ideal beauty, this project illustrates that the film posits the ageing female body as a site of contested beauty where *abjection* and femininity converge, emphasising how women are objectified and sexualised from mass culture.

Star-Audience Relations

Richard Dyer's study (1982) on stars in film adds another dimension to visual analysis, as his argument that casting particular actresses deepens the cultural meanings attached to films, which correlates with Moore being cast due to her relationship with her ageing body, linking to Elisabeth's pursuit of youth in the film. Turner (1988, p. 114) supplements this discussion over celebrity image, emphasising that 'the star can change meaning over time', outlining how cultural meanings attached to actresses in earlier career phases can be reinterpreted when they appear in roles in later life. Moore's own ageing trajectory, critiqued in the media, exemplifies these dynamics as news coverage lauds her age defying body, speculating over her supposed facelift (Jonsson and Oliver, 2025). Fairclough (2012, p. 98) labels Moore as a

'sanctioned' celebrity in the media, who is 'praised in gossip culture... [for] their ability to remain "ageless"'. These rumours over Moore's physique portray how an ageing female star's reputation is precarious and dependent on society's decision over whether they are managing ageing well through cosmetic technologies. Therefore, examining former sex symbol Moore's relationship with cosmetic surgery highlights the importance of tracing the off-screen career trajectory of actresses, contextualising cinema's casting choices in this thesis.

Discourse Analysis

To compliment visual analysis I use discourse analysis, focusing on the film's dialogue and power relations to reveal how language expresses the film's representations of reality. I build on Gillian Rose's (2001, p. 136) interpretation of Michel Foucault's (1977) *discourse*, where knowledge 'shapes how the world is understood and how things are done in it'. Accordingly, analysing how language is used in film to shape systems of knowledge and power over beauty culture enables this project to decode how *discourses* are deeply ingrained in society, deconstructing supposed truths over ageing and femininity to interpret how spectators perceive ageing actresses.

This project examines the ways *The Substance* (2024) frames midlife women by studying the script to reveal how the film intended to present cultural perceptions of ageing constituting a deficiency rather than a natural process. I quote from the script of *The Substance* (2024) directly, and ensure all emphasis within citations, such as capital letters, is included to demonstrate the emotional toil Elisabeth experiences as a midlife woman navigating youth-centric society. I also take the texts produced by members of society online via social media platforms, where flippant comments on Moore's appearance converge with in-depth and

reflective discussions over how to cope with ageing as a woman. This combination creates a nuanced perspective of digital culture, where raw and impulsive comments from everyday users are expanded on through the deeper contextual analysis from online communities. Thus, discourse analysis provides a framework to uncover the unequal power dynamics around beauty and ageing in *The Substance* (2024), mirrored in society, highlighting how dominant patriarchal *discourses* are conformed to, negotiated, and resisted against by film spectators.

Audience Response Theory

To add a contemporary dimension to my research, I examine audience responses to *The Substance* (2024) through the analysis of media coverage, including online news articles, social media posts, and comments generated from the film's release. While unable to conduct a thorough deep dive into all of these platforms, by searching 'The Substance' into TikTok, Instagram, and Reddit, it provides critical, intellectual responses to the film which illuminate toxic societal views on ageing and beauty surrounding the female physique. Reddit especially, as a deep thinking forum where people have 'built dedicated discussion boards' to discuss film theory in-depth (Eberhard, 2019, p. 1), demonstrates that without traditional gatekeepers limiting accessibility, social media platforms provide interactive comment sections which transform viewers into active agents decoding the film. These platforms allow both creators and viewers to globally reach one another and ignite debate over social issues, allowing this study to analyse how humans have responded to cultural shifts, like the increase of cosmetic surgery among women (Burgess & Green, 2018). Therefore, using digital methodologies to analyse *The Substance* (2024) helps trace how representations of ageing

women are encoded by filmmakers and then received by audiences online, revealing how the movie both fuels and contests cultural discourses surrounding the ageing female body.

Research Ethics

Regarding research ethics and code of practice, it is important to acknowledge my visual analysis' interpretive nature which shapes my own subjectivity of the film. Different researchers may have assigned other meanings to my analysis of *The Substance* (2024), leading to diverse conclusions. Rose (2001) shines light on subject positionality, arguing that critical reflection and reflexivity on the researcher's sociocultural position is essential when conducting visual analysis. This conveys how there are multiple interpretations through visual analysis, showing how visual representations are constructed, perceived, and analysed differently. To solve this potential bias, I comprehend the complexities of *meaning-making*, celebrating the plurality of experience which defies essentialism and praises diverse worldviews (Hall, 1997).

My positionality as a white, cisgendered woman in my twenties affects my understanding of *The Substance* (2024), as the film is centred around the notion of Eurocentric and heteronormative ideal beauty standards. My sociocultural position means I am the target audience of the film, portraying the problematic side of beauty, cosmetic surgery, and the dissemination of media which narrowly defines beauty and rejects bodily diversity in society. However, rather than acting as a passive member of the audience and perpetuating these beauty standards in the presentation of my body, I use my positionality to question how the film visualises sociocultural issues, spreading awareness of body politics and bodily transgression which are obscured by patriarchal power/knowledge institutions that preserve

toxic definitions of beauty. Consequently, acknowledging subject positionality strengthens my research as it makes the methodology transparent, accountable, and reflective. This ethical awareness also prevents the risk of reinforcing stereotypes, while demonstrating the complexities of representation regarding gender, ageing, and patriarchal power structures disseminating female beauty ideals.

Furthermore, I considered the ethics of incorporating digital methodologies when conducting audience response analysis for *The Substance* (2024), particularly regarding the use of user-generated online content. For opinions written in comment sections on social media platforms, I anonymise their usernames to protect individuals from identification and to respect their freedom of expression without the fear of backlash (Roger, 2019). I black out their identification in screenshots of comments, and refer to these individuals' contributions with pseudonyms. While I submitted an ethics form to inform the University of the Arts London that my research involves human perceptions regarding audience analysis, I understand that informed consent has not been obtained for my research as it is impractical to contact all those who have discussed *The Substance* (2024) on the online domain.

Chapter I

The Rebirth of Youth:

Bodily Surveillance, Biotechnologies, and Female Archetypes Visualised in *The Substance*

(2024)

In *The Substance* (2024), the visual language of horror and biotechnological transformation is mobilised to interrogate ageing, femininity, and the *monstrous-feminine*. At the beginning of the film, Elisabeth Sparkle is abruptly dismissed from her aerobics TV show by Harvey on her fiftieth birthday, the show's producer, purely due to her age. Devastated and in a crisis from feeling discarded by the industry which once praised her, Elisabeth drives away distraught and ends up in the hospital from crashing her car. A young nurse secretly places a USB stick into Elisabeth's coat pocket in the hospital, advertising 'the substance', which she later finds at home. 'The substance' is explained to Elisabeth via a video from the USB, where she discovers that the injection will create a younger version of herself, where they alternate consciousness each week and share time. Elisabeth, desperate to reclaim her youth and success in the limelight, decides to inject 'the substance' into her body. She proceeds to painfully birth her younger self, Sue, from her spine, displaying violent convulsions as her body horrifyingly splits to allow Sue to emerge from the bloody slit on Elisabeth's broken back.

By studying this metamorphosis of Sue as a birthing scene, this chapter argues that *The Substance* (2024) grotesquely literalises Elisabeth's desperation to reclaim her youth, resonating with society's patriarchal values which equate female worth with beauty and desirability. The spinal rebirth scene thus acts as a metaphor for society's expectations on

women to defy the natural ageing process through cosmetic surgeries to be perceived as attractive.

The Clinical Gaze and Bodily Surveillance

Elisabeth's lack of body confidence can be seen in *Figure 1.1*, where Elisabeth is stood naked in front of her bathroom mirror in a medium close-up shot, internally scrutinising her body under harsh, sterile overhead lighting. This clinical mise-en-scène with white sharp tiles framing her body alludes to Elisabeth undergoing a self-examination, inspecting and objectifying her body to assess her decreasing beauty and femininity. Being stripped of clothing, Elisabeth exposes her vulnerability both physically and symbolically, communicating her disdain surrounding her ageing body by disappointingly and defeatedly looking at her physique in the mirror. The absence of warmth from the lighting further emphasises her vulnerability in confronting her body in the mirror, critiquing her presentation of the self for the audience to recognise her self-loathing.

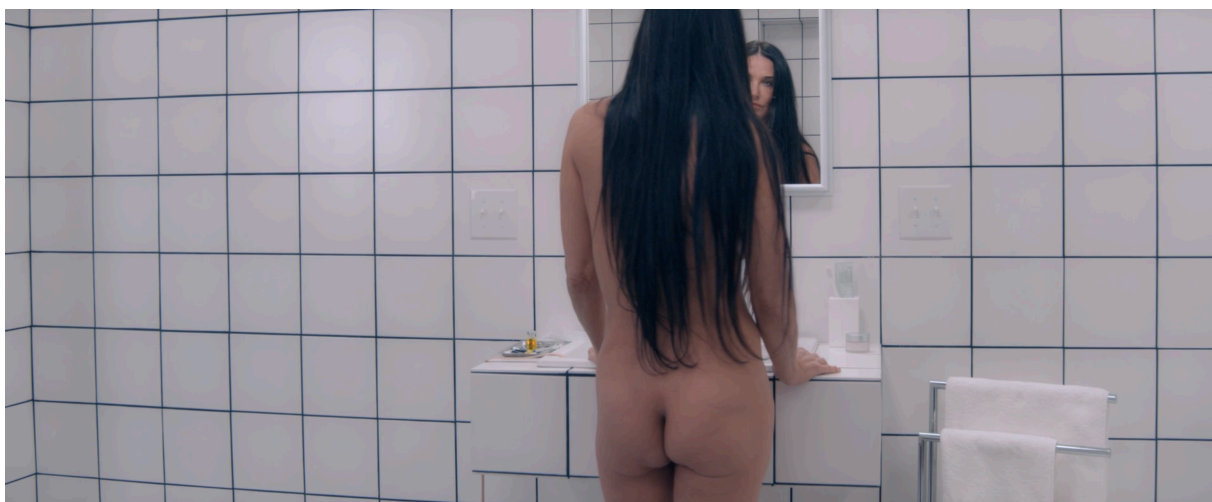


Figure 1.1, *Elisabeth examining her ageing body in front of her bathroom mirror naked*, in C. Fargeat (2024) *The Substance*, 23:24.

Elisabeth's clinical assessment of her body links to the distorted perception of ageing bodies, suggesting how midlife women inspect themselves to see a deviation from normative beauty ideals and feel compelled to remedy their features misaligned to youthful traits. Foucault's (1963) *medical gaze* enhances Elisabeth's visualisation of self-surveillance, as this clinical practice of dissecting and objectifying the patient's body transforms the patient into an objectified specimen which is examined to conclude its conformity to a healthy body. This gaze performs an imbalanced doctor/patient dynamic, where the doctor has the authority to define what constitutes a normal or 'pathological' body where disease prevails (Foucault, 1963, p. 8). Josephine Dolan (2014, p. 343) helps expand this discussion on self-surveillance, arguing how the *clinical gaze* is 'split between knowledge of the normal and that of the pathological', evoking how medical discourses and aesthetic discourses converge. Accordingly, to achieve aesthetic perfection women must self-monitor their physiques, rendering their success on their ability to discipline themselves and abide to patriarchal beauty ideals which suppress female autonomy and individuality. In this case of Elisabeth constituting both the subject and object of the *medical gaze*, it expresses how women internalise and attempt to conform to social norms over a healthy and desirable body by disciplining and critiquing their appearance.

Elisabeth's visual performance of self-surveillance is reinforced by the screenplay's description of this bodily policing, where in the script it is acknowledged that Elisabeth is 'still a very beautiful woman but doesn't seem happy by what she sees... basically she's just ageing... [but] everything and everyone around her leads her to believe it is the end of the world. The end of *her world*' (Fargeat, 2022, p. 24). The language here reveals the psychological violence

midlife women are subject to from beauty cultures stigmatising the natural ageing process. For instance, despite her natural beauty, 'everything and everyone' defines her value in society from her body, resulting in her older form being discarded from the entertainment industry, showing how ageing is framed as a decline and loss of femininity as it feels like the 'end of *her* world' (Fargeat, 2022, p. 24). Danielle Griffiths and Alex Mullock (2017, p. 224) observe that 'cosmetic surgery reinforces and heightens concern with body image and culturally prescribed standards of beauty, contributing to a youth culture that distains aging', highlighting the proliferation of anti-aging procedures which perpetuate ageism and misogyny. This rise of cosmetic surgery helps explain why Elisabeth is unhappy with her appearance, as her distorted self-perception from not aligning to society's youthful beauty narrative coerces her into taking 'the substance' to reclaim her youth. Therefore, *The Substance* (2024) holds up a mirror to society's normalisation of plastic surgery, exposing how women's relentless pursuit of an idealised and youthful physique has pervasively led to women internally policing their bodies for external acceptance.

The Controversy Surrounding Demi Moore's Face

The film's reception online concerning the spinal rebirth scene exposes how public discourse over scrutinising the ageing female body reflects *The Substance's* (2024) narrative of Elisabeth feeling like changing herself is her last resort to stay desirable. This is exemplified in the public's scrutiny of Demi Moore's face, since comment sections on Instagram under reels promoting the film feature ageist and misogynistic critiques focused on Moore's speculated facelift. In *Figure 1.2*, screenshots of Instagram comments show how one user feels that '[Moore's face] looks like plaster had been spackled over it...', while another notes that Moore 'makes me glad I didn't spend \$\$ on plastic surgery'. These critical statements reduce Moore's

performance as Elisabeth to an examination of her body, objectifying her appearance and rendering her artificial and inauthentic as a midlife woman (Instagram, 2024). This irony of undermining Moore’s performance in the movie, in contrast to prolifically examining her appearance, epitomises society’s dismissal of ageing women in film, since spectators render the ageing female body as unworthy and unsightly of screening, regardless of the talent older actresses convey.



Figure 1.2, Instagram comments criticising Demi Moore’s appearance, Instagram, 2024.

These comments mirror the logic Elisabeth internalises in the film, where any visible signs of ageing are seen as abnormal and must be masked, erased, or surgically modified. This public reaction also highlights the pyrrhic victory midlife women experience when engaging with cosmetic enhancements, as they are condemned regardless of accepting naturally ageing or defying biological processes of getting older through surgery.

Biotechnologies and Ageing: The Maternal Body as *Abject*

By comprehending Elisabeth's desperation to reclaim desirability, the 'grotesque spinal rebirth sequence' in *The Substance* (2024) sheds light on how technological advancements, such as bioengineering, have enabled women to overcome this demonised natural ageing process, for better or worse. Straight after the clinical mirror scene Elisabeth decides to inject 'the substance', immediately causing her to collapse on the floor and experience 'violent abdominal pains' similar to contractions (Fargeat, 2022, p. 25). The script at this point provides action lines that explain how, rather than experiencing a vaginal birth of Sue, Elisabeth's 'spine starts to crack... and split open' to reveal a 'SECOND SPINE' (Fargeat, 2022, pp. 25-26).



Figure 1.3, *Elisabeth's back splitting in two from her spine after taking the substance, revealing another body growing inside of her*, in C. Fargeat (2024) *The Substance*, 27:28.

The close framing on the skin around the emerging vertebrae in *Figure 1.3* evokes horror from reproduction technologies, capturing Kristeva's (1980) *abject* posited on the female body. The gash also provides spectators with monstrous vaginal imagery, connecting to Kristeva's (1980) *abject* where visuals of blood, flesh, and fluid contrasting the sterile white tiles exhibit the splitting body as a site both of fascination and repulsion (*Figure 1.4*). This contrast is further emphasised through the different colourings of the skin, where Sue's new spine is pink, soft, and delicate, whereas Elisabeth's skin appears thicker, duller, and wounded (*Figure 1.3*). For Kristeva (1980, p. 4), the *abject* does not 'respect borders, positions, rules', rather it leaks into societal order to confront individuals with their own mortality, blurring boundaries between the self and other. This resonates with the visceral materiality of pregnancy, where the mother's fluids leak and wounds from birth rupture their skin, breaching the boundary between inside and outside and disrupting society's expectations of bodily integrity. *Figure 1.3* epitomises this dichotomy between inside and outside, as the extreme close-up of the protagonist's back is a bloody slit, similar to genitalia, illuminates the raw peeling flesh experienced in birth, distorting perceptions of the inside and outside to reveal Sue's glistening new spinal canal.



Figure 1.4, *Elisabeth on the floor in blood and fluid from the spinal birth*, in C. Fargeat (2024) *The Substance*, 28:26.

Creed's (2012) concept of the *monstrous-feminine* helps link Kristeva's (1980) *abject* with the maternal body, shining light on how the vagina symbolises the patriarchal fear of female reproduction as threatening and uncanny in male-dominated society. Through the spinal birthing scene, the film literalises Creed's (2012, pp. 81-82) notion that 'the act of birth is grotesque because the body's surface is no longer closed, smooth and intact', rather it 'may tear apart, open out, reveal its innermost depths'. The scene's monstrous birth emphasises how reproduction is feared as *abject* in society, as the 'open wound' from birth 'violates the integrity of the skin' (Creed, 2012, p. 69). This horror expresses the monstrosity surrounding birth, stigmatising the evolving female form as undesirable. Similarly to ageing flesh being framed as defected and in need of improvement in cultural beauty narratives, the maternal body is also marked as repulsive and in need of erasure. Thus, the scene shockingly dramatises the relationship between the *monstrous-feminine* and the *abjection* of ageing, societally imperfect bodies. By casting leaking bodies as imperfect, the film depicts midlife women in society being labelled as failures, unable to maintain an attractive identity and feeling compelled to erase signs of ageing through plastic surgeries.

The Fear of Reproductive Technologies

When observed through a transhumanist lens, *The Substance* (2024) subjects the viewer to the simultaneous horror and awe of creation through the bioengineered spinal rebirth, where the vaginal imagery merges mothering and monstrosity to expose the inversion of maternity through technology defying biological functions like menopause. Transhumanist theorist Natasha Vita-More (2013) investigates how the human body is open to endless enhancement to improve vitality and beauty thanks to technology, positing transhumanism as an ideology

which coincides with society's obsession with youth and vitality. By framing ageing as a form of failure which erodes social value and beauty, Vita-More (2013, p. 20) emphasises the importance of aesthetics in enhancement through the 'primo posthuman': her idea of the perfect body which is harmoniously aligned with technology. This pursuit of bodily perfection reflects how transhumanists respond directly to this fear of ageing by offering the promise of longevity, where flaws from the human condition are redesigned to optimise the life of individuals and evade moral discomforts concerning mortality.

By translating this transhumanist framework onto the film's birthing scene, it expresses how Sue's rebirth can be analysed as a transhumanist ideal gone awry. In the context of the rebirth, Sue's creation by Elisabeth appears to promise this transhumanist transcendence of biological boundaries, echoing societal innovations like IVF which reconfigure traditional reproductive roles. Yet, instead of representing an empowering evolution of Elisabeth's age-defying body, Sue's rebirth subverts the beauty ideals it seems to embody by making Elisabeth's body a site of rupture. Sue's rejection of Elisabeth's body suggests a failure of the transhumanist ideology to harmoniously merge humanity with technology, rendering biotechnologies as a way to create monstrosity in society, not liberation. In doing so, the film underscores the societally perceived grotesque spectacle of the maternal body, exploiting society's anxieties about the reproductive body and the future of anti-ageing technologies. Elisabeth's splitting spine thus becomes a metaphor personified for the ambivalence society feels over biotechnologies, representing a site of both ageing and renewal to illustrate social concerns surrounding reproductive engineering defying mortality but controlling humanity.

'Like a Venus': Visualising Ideal Femininity through Sue

The Substance (2024) emphasises Elisabeth's aged physique by visualising Sue as the embodiment of youthful perfection. In the bathroom scene, the audience sees the camera pull back to reveal the younger, perfect body of Sue, lit softly in the misty bathroom posing to flaunt her body (*Figure 1.5*). The shot is front-lit to minimise shadows and emphasise the smoothness of her skin, rendering her the archetypal young woman. Written in the script, Fargeat (2022, p. 27) introduces Sue as a 'A MAGNIFICENT YOUNG WOMAN IN HER TWENTIES... perfectly formed... incredibly beautiful... and young...'. While this description aligns Sue's body with Western beauty standards, omitting the diversity of global beauty cultures, her toned white physique with long hair grasps what Elisabeth was seeking to reclaim from 'the substance'.



Figure 1.5, Sue posing in front of the mirror after being birthed, in C. Fargeat (2024) *The Substance*, 30:23.

Fargeat (2022, p. 27) also describes Sue 'like a Venus emerging from the water... a creature of almost supernatural beauty' in the script. By aligning Sue to Venus, the Roman goddess of love and beauty, the film blurs lines between myth and reality, embodying a divine figure in human form. By studying Sue's perfection set against Elisabeth's ruptured body, it evokes the

archetypal myth of Adam and Eve in which posthumanist Rosi Braidotti's (2002) provides insight into how Eve was grotesquely fashioned from Adam's rib, symbolising a mythical and alien-like act. Although this disfiguring birth of Eve was to craft the ideal woman to procreate in God's earth, she decides to eat the forbidden fruit and causes humanity's expulsion from Eden. This act expresses her vanity and curiosity over the apple, leading to harrowing consequences, correlating to Elisabeth's egotistical attempt of creating a better version of herself through technology, fashioning the perfect body at any cost. Braidotti's (2002, p. 105) concept of 'Techno-Eve' further illuminates this parallel of archetypal females and monstrosity, defining 'technologised Eve' as an archetypal woman through technological advancements whose genesis blurs boundaries between human and machine (Braidotti, 2002, p. 107). This posthuman theory surrounding Eve thus elucidates how biotechnology's endless possibilities to rejuvenate humanity are both empowering and oppressing, reflecting Sue's birth from biotechnologies which enables midlife women to defy mortality yet disrupts stability through fears of technology harming the natural human condition.

Sue's embodiment of Venus, in contrast to Elisabeth's post-partum disfigured body (*Figure 1.6*), highlights how this idealised posthuman body is largely unattainable and has mental and physical health risks attached to it through surgery. Women who desire wrinkle-free skin through repeated Botox injections or facelift surgeries often experience pain, scarring, infection and suffer from the 'harms of poorly regulated surgery' (Griffiths & Mullock, pp. 220). Psychologically, these physical risks also cause psychological violence, since this relentless bodily maintenance fuels body dissatisfaction from incessant exposure to supposed flaws that incite self-criticism (Griffiths & Mullock, pp. 224). These cosmetic risks resonate with the birthing scene, since Elisabeth, unaware of the full consequences attached to

injecting 'the substance', is left with a deep cut along her back which acts as a memory for her dislike over her aged body.



Figure 1.6, Sue watching over unconscious Elisabeth in the bathroom after suturing up her back, in C. Fargeat (2024) *The Substance*, 32:33.

Figure 1.6 depicts how Elisabeth's back has been sutured by Sue after the birth, similar to a caesarean, alluding to cosmetic surgery scars which contain the memory of corporeal *abjection*. The scar is a visceral memory of how ideal beauty standards are founded on artificiality from surgery, linking to the dichotomy between visible and invisible bodies present in society which define and perpetuate what is deemed as attractive (Foucault, 1977). Elisabeth's unhappiness over her body therefore shows spectators how cosmetic enhancements can leave patients physically and emotionally distressed, not cleansing the individual from insecurities but fuelling more to create a cycle of self-hatred. This brutal and unprecedented transformation alludes to technology controlling the human body, suggesting how the body can be subject to experimental, post-biological surgery to both enhance and destroy the human physique.

Prosthetics and Cosmetics: The Distortion of Natural Beauty from Plastic Surgery

The film's fixation on Sue's flawless youth highlights society's narrow beauty cultures, which coerce ageing women into renegotiating their relationship with their bodies. With the increasing representation of cosmetic surgery online, midlife women increasingly turn to cosmetic interventions, such as facelifts and breast augmentations, to achieve the supposed perfect body that the media disseminates. According to the International Society of Aesthetic Plastic Surgery (ISAPS), there has been a 75.9% increase in facelifts between 2020 and 2024, highlighting a significant jump in invasive cosmetic procedures (ISAPS, 2024, p. 9). These beauty ideals are reflected in *The Substance* (2024) with Marget Qualley, who plays Sue, wearing prosthetic breasts (*Figure 1.7*) and appropriating the hyper-idealised chest to emphasise how unattainable perfection has become both on screen and in reality (McIntosh, 2024).

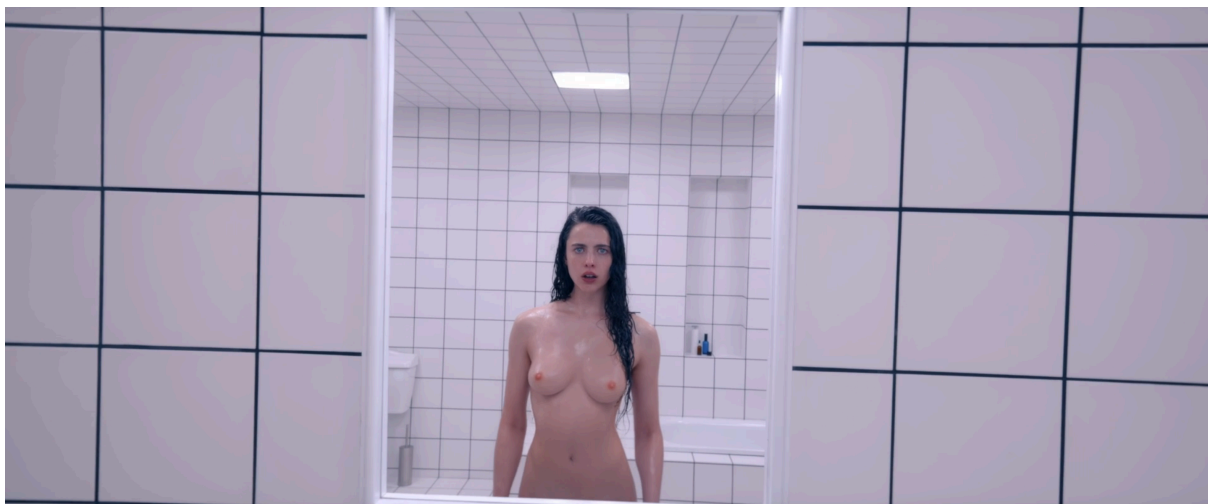


Figure 1.7, Sue looking at herself in the mirror after being birthed, in C. Fargeat (2024) *The Substance*, 29:37.

Qualley's interview with the BBC revealed how wearing breast prosthetics made her feel 'defensive' over her natural physique, as the pressure of 'playing perfect... wrapping yourself

up like a piece of candy' made the reality of her physique feel inadequate (McIntosh, 2024). Qualley's comparison illustrates how cosmetic enhancements can distort women's relationships with their bodies, obscuring what a natural female body looks like in comparison to societal expectations of femininity. By altering Qualley's appearance for portray Sue as the archetypal women, the film critiques the media's power to warp perceptions of beauty, exposing the dichotomy between screen ideals and embodied reality. Therefore, Sue's spinal birth acts as a visualisation of ideal feminine beauty, costumed with prosthetic enhancements to emphasise how unattainable society's beauty standards are. Through the use of Sue as a hyper-feminine archetype, *The Substance* (2024) reveals how perceptions of youth and beauty are tethered to contemporary cinema, influencing the lived experiences of women through the normalisation of unnatural bodies on screen.

Accordingly, Elisabeth's self-loathing in front of the mirror, her painful spinal rebirth symbolising *abject* reproduction, birthing Sue – an archetype of ideal femininity – all serve as a metaphor for the impossible demands placed on women to remain eternally young, simulating vitality through surgery. With Elisabeth emotionally and physically scarred from the birth, unconscious on the bloody floor, contrasting Sue's transformation into a flawless figure of femininity, it shines light on society demonising natural ageing and rendering midlife bodies as decaying ones. By forcing the film's audience to witness the terror of the *abject* body and the price of bodily perfection, the film reinforces how society's values remain tied to youthfulness.

The film's critique over the impossibility of this pursuit of perfection through body horror provokes further discussion on the power dynamics between Elisabeth and Sue. Chapter II

examines how Sue's rise to fame and medial approval contrasting Elisabeth's sudden dismissal, dictated by her misogynistic agent Harvey who represents the views of mass culture, encapsulates the myriad gazes constructed from internal and external pressures women face over achieving ideal femininity.

Chapter II

The Battle of the Gazes:

Female Agency, Fetishism, and Internalised Misogyny Portrayed in *The Substance* (2024)

The Substance (2024) depicts the myriad gazes present in patriarchal society through body horror, provoking discussion on the dubious emancipatory nature of cosmetic surgery among women. These battling gazes are portrayed in the film after the first transformation which welcomes Sue's *becoming*, shining light on the deeply entangled nature of Elisabeth and Sue's bodies to expose how beauty cultures demonise the ageing female frame. After the spinal birth of Sue, Elisabeth and Sue share 'ONE' life (Fargeat, 2022, p. 18), where every seven days consciousness transfers between their bodies. While one body actively experiences the world, it must take daily injections of stabiliser fluid derived from the inactive body to sustain vitality, while the other remains unconscious and survives on a feeding fluid drip.

After Sue adjusts to her new youthful physique, she auditions and replaces Elisabeth on the aerobics show. She becomes successful overnight, depicting how her youthful appearance and charisma aligns to the industry's obsession with youth. Weeks pass and Sue begins to prioritise her lifestyle of partying and working with celebrities over the strict weekly switch schedule, not wanting to switch into Elisabeth's aged physique which does not garner the same attention and success in the media. However, the instructions of 'the substance' explain that this weekly crossover must remain balanced, without exception, making the viewer question what would ensue if the balance was disrespected.

This chapter argues that *The Substance* (2024) uses body horror to express the sceptical level of bodily autonomy women navigate in patriarchal society with plastic surgery. By dissecting the guts of the film through the deteriorating relationship between Elisabeth and Sue, this chapter examines how agent Harvey dictates their career trajectories, using them to satiate the *male gaze*. The rise and demise of the two female protagonists in the movie, solely due to their differing ages, illuminates to Kate Manne's (2018, p. 1) 'internalised misogyny' imbedded in the patriarchy that compels women to compete against each other and present themselves in a particular way to feel accepted in their career. The pressure on women to be eternally young alludes to the internalised misogyny women enact, implicitly dictating how women should present themselves and driving jealousy among women in pursuit of individual acceptance by the *male gaze*.

Embodied Defiance: Sue's Leather Catsuit and the 'Phallic Woman'

Sue's bodily resistance to misogynistic norms which pressure women into being passive objects is seen in *Figure 2.1* and *Figure 2.2*, where the camera pans over her dressing in a leather catsuit. When Sue steps into her tight leather catsuit, the act of dressing becomes a performative assertion of sexuality and domination. This narrative of erotic domination is enhanced by Fargeat (2022, p. 57) noting in the script that the audience perceives the catsuit 'becoming one with the body, allowing the body to express its full physical potential'. Emphasising how the body and leather are intertwined as one portrays the confidence the leather provides Sue, liberating her sexuality and self-assurance over her physique.



Figure 2.1, *Consecutive shots of Sue dressing in a leather catsuit*, in C. Fargeat (2024) *The Substance*, 55:33.



Figure 2.2, *Consecutive shots of Sue dressing in a leather catsuit*, in C. Fargeat (2024) *The Substance*, 55:34.

Valerie Steele's (1997) study of the *phallic woman* evokes how Sue embodies female domination over her sexuality, arguing that a 'phallic woman' embodies an 'armoured phallus', reappropriating phallic symbols to regain control over female sexuality and challenge oppressive gender binaries. The script's description of Sue's bodily *becoming* within the catsuit expresses her embodiment of the *phallic woman* through filming directions, where Fargeat (2022, p. 57) writes that the crew 'film up her entire leg... around her thigh and does an EXTREME CLOSE UP on the black and shiny material as she slips on the ultra tight suit'. The

fetishised yet empowered visualisation of Sue through the camera tracking her body parts transforms her body into a phallic sculpted object, where the leather garment weaponises her physique and strengthens Sue's authority over her sexuality. Sue's catsuit, with its zippers and angular seams, mirrors Steele's (1997) description of garments that invert feminine passivity into active agency, blurring gendered boundaries which suppress female autonomy. Steele's (1997) psychoanalytic study on the dominatrix further bolsters discussion over Sue exemplifying an eroticised authority figure who resists female suppression, as the dominatrix deploys fetishised materials like leather and metal to transform the female body into a site of resistance. *Figure 2.3* deepens this analysis, as Sue's phallic shaped latex leather stiletto heels with erotic red soles contrasting the white virginal tiles in her bathroom convey how fetishised garments reclaim feminine bodily liberation and defy feminine traits of purity which render women passive to male influence.



Figure 2.3, *Sue's leather-bound and red soled stiletto heels contrasting her white bathroom flooring*, in C. Fargeat (2024) *The Substance*, 55:55.

These styling decisions highlight Sue's empowered choice to present herself as a fetishised object, evoking feminist psychoanalyst Alison Bancroft's (2012, p. 2) notion of female resistance to misogyny by disrupting misogynistic female beauty ideals that praise feminine passivity. Bancroft (2012, p. 2) argues that women curate their own erotic spectacle through dress as an act of embodied resistance, where hyper-sexualised attire defies traditional femininity. Body horror's use of combining invasive camera angles with material fetishism through leather in the film demonstrates how the catsuit acts as armour to protect Sue from patriarchal oppression, conveying how the fashioned body through fetishised clothing embodies power and domination over female sexuality. Sue's catsuit thus transcends eroticised fashion and instead becomes an embodied site of agency, challenging the film's audience to reconsider the gender power dynamics to perceive how women reappropriate their sexualisation from the gaze to feel empowered.

Despite Sue's embodiment of the *phallic woman*, her success and acceptance in the entertainment industry remains firmly dictated by the men curating her image and value, most notably her agent Harvey. Drawing on Mulvey's (1989) *male gaze* elucidates society's unequal gender dynamics, which render the female body a passive object for voyeurs to observe for pleasure. By studying Harvey and his malevolent influence over Sue, the film uses his character as an embodiment of the *male gaze* to outline how women are moulded for success then discarded when they cannot maintain the image of perpetual youth. The sequence at Sue's anticipated New Year's Eve special demonstrates Sue's subversion from the *male gaze*, as *Figure 2.4* depicts Sue's point-of-view when she bumps into Harvey and a panel of shareholders: an all-white, middle-aged male cast. Their approving grins convey their approval of her image, implying their lack of respect for Sue as a person to express Sue's

objectification as their commodified investment. Their overbearing presence, reducing Sue to their possession, reminds the film's spectators that Sue's expression of female liberation and sexuality is mediated by male choices who celebrate the sexualisation of women's bodies. Fargeat's (2022) decision to name Sue's agent 'Harvey' also insinuates the correlation between the film depicting the objectification of women in the media and Harvey Weinstein, a predator in Hollywood who used his power who sexually assault women and control their career success (BBC, 2020).



Figure 2.4, A shot from Sue's POV where Harvey introduces her to the shareholders of her show, in C. Fargeat (2024) *The Substance*, 1:54:37.

Sue's encounter with Harvey, embodying the *male gaze*, details *The Substance's* (2024) critique of fetishism, emphasising how Sue's body and performance are objectified and consumed by men. Mulvey (1989) argues that classical Hollywood cinema positions the spectator to identify with a heterosexual male point of view, transforming women on screen into passive and sexualised objects without agency. Her explanation of filmmaking defining 'sexual imbalance' where the 'pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and

passive/female' signifies how women are solely valued for their attraction on screen (Mulvey, 1989, p. 19). Sue's reduction to an objectified spectacle is witnessed when Harvey proudly declares to the shareholders that they 'won't be disappointed, she's my most beautiful creation. I shaped her for success!' (Fargeat, 2022, p. 141). This emphasis on shaping Sue for stardom conveys how the female body is manufactured for the entertainment industry, exclusively based on their beauty in the eyes of controlling male voyeurs.

The Cycle of Beauty: The Commodification and Sexualisation of Women as Passive Objects

Figure 2.5 further captures Harvey's seal of approval over Sue's curated appearance when Sue is costumed in an enchanting blue gown. His approving hand gesture signals that the dress meets the network's standards, validating Sue as a marketable body (Figure 2.5). By externalising the *male gaze* through Harvey, this still conveys Harvey's control over Sue's on-screen identity, shaping her into an object whose value depends entirely on masculine sanction.



Figure 2.5, Sue in a blue gown with Harvey giving her an approving hand gesture, in C. Fargeat (2024) *The Substance*, 1:51:35.

Mulvey (1989) argues that this gaze either grants or revokes a woman's place in the media, linking to the expiry date women face due to their naturally ageing bodies misaligning to

idealised beauty standards. Sue's approval from the *male gaze* in this highly staged presentation indicates the precarity of her situation, since when her youth fades she will no longer comply to beauty ideals and will be discarded and forgotten, much like Elisabeth's dismissal and Sue taking her place. Harvey and Sue's exchange thus demonstrates how *The Substance* (2024) critiques the entertainment industry's impossible standards for women to maintain, emphasising how the *male gaze* shapes and governs actresses' career trajectories.

Sue's blue organza gown for the New Year's Eve special, detailed in *Figure 2.6*, reinforces the way women have expiry dates over their physiques. Her gown is reminiscent of the archetypal Cinderella princess dress in the fairytale, where Cinderella is running out of time to remain beautiful at the ball as, after midnight strikes, her façade of opulence will disappear. The blue of Sue's gown also evokes 'Marian' iconography, where the Virgin Mary is adorned in blue to signify her purity, youth, and reproductivity (Kelleher, 2018). The emphasis on Sue's innocence and fertility provides a stark contrast to Elisabeth's ageing physique, exemplifying Elisabeth's lust for perpetual youth.



Figure 2.6, Sue's Cinderella gown, in C. Fargeat (2024) *The Substance*, 1:34:20.

Warner's (1994) work on fairytales underscores this narrative of controlling women's bodies through the *male gaze*, as ageist stereotypes in fairytale stories cast older women as 'crones' whose envy of youth fuels their marginalisation. Sue's Cinderella appearance comments on a broader cultural pattern where women's time being beautiful will eventually run out, where the spell of perceived beauty from the *male gaze* will be broken. The tension between the gown's fairytale promise of desire and the reality of running out of time illuminates how femininity and desirability must be perpetually youthful or risk erasure, since, just like Cinderella outrunning the spell before midnight, Sue's 'youth-currency' will eventually expire and dissipate (Miah, 2013). Therefore, by invoking the Cinderella tale of running out of time, Sue's embodies a critique of how ageism and beauty ideals conspire to make women feel like they will vanish when the clock strikes twelve unless they undergo surgery to reclaim their youth.

Expanding the Gaze: The *Female Gaze* and Gendered Competition

Sue and Elisabeth's deteriorating relationship, born from voyeurism and comparison, strengthens how this patriarchal regime of voyeurism breeds jealousy and repulsion among women, driving women to despise one another as much as they despise themselves. Their tumultuous relationship is apparent in the film when, during the promotion of Sue's new show, a billboard of her youthful physique appears opposite Elisabeth's apartment, opposite the poster of Elisabeth in her heyday of aerobics TV (*Figure 2.7* and *Figure 2.8*). The script amplifies this divide between the two protagonists, as the zoom-in into Sue's face contrasting Elisabeth's zoom-out, fading out of the limelight, presents like 'a cowboy standoff' (Fargeat, 2022, p. 52). The zoom-out/zoom-in functions as the film's critique of the misogynistic and ageist media which pits women against each other for individual success, presenting the

standoff between the portraits as a metaphor for beauty acting as currency in commodified patriarchal society, demonising midlife women who do not look perpetually youth.



Figure 2.7, A long shot of Elisabeth's photo in her apartment, in C. Fargeat (2024) *The Substance*, 51:14.



Figure 2.8, A close up shot of Sue's face on a billboard outside Elisabeth's apartment, in C. Fargeat (2024) *The Substance*, 51:17.

Sue and Elisabeth's hostility towards one another evokes the gaze of female spectatorship, where the dissemination of patriarchal beauty standards impacts how women see both themselves and other women's physiques. Building on Mulvey's (1989) foundational work,

feminist scholars have interrogated how women enact a *female gaze* as both viewers and subjects, and how this dynamic can fuel competition among women. Feminists Evans and Gamman (1995) argue that women possess internalised patriarchal norms and adopt a critical stance toward other women's bodies. While the *female gaze* is not inherently oppositional to the *male gaze*, it replicates female objectification by policing femininity, praising idealised beauty and demonising midlife women who are 'perceived as violating patriarchal norms' (Lopes, 2018, p. 2517). Female animosity towards each other is exemplified in the film through these abrupt shifts between Elisabeth to Sue's portraits (*Figures 2.7 and 2.8*), as this rising tension mirrors the way women, conditioned by patriarchal beauty standards, can internalise and perpetuate ageist norms.

The *female gaze* reflects how this self-surveillance and evaluation of other women's bodies results in women feeling relentless pressure from the media to maintain their youthful image. Sue's desire to succeed in the entertainment industry, severing ties with her older counterpart Elisabeth, correlates to transhumanist's Miah's (2013) *biocultural capital*, where individuals accrue social value through their use of technological advancements, including cosmetic surgery, to improve the body and self. Equating beauty and youth as a form of social currency implies that ageing bodies lose their value and worthiness, compelling women to try to regain their youth through plastic surgery to compete with more youthful women who receive greater praise over their appearance. This fear of diminishing status among ageing women when patriarchal society dictates that feminine value is dependent on youth illustrates how women wage a surgical battle against their bodies and other women to reclaim their societal worth. Manne (2018, p. 16) further suggests that this internalised scrutiny generates a competitive social economy where women battle to meet and exceed these beauty ideals,

resulting in a 'self-masking phenomenon' where female suppression through toxic beauty cultures is reframed as female autonomy to control their bodies however they wish.

The film's visualisation of the *male gaze* becoming internalised and moulded in to the *female gaze* is prevalent in this Reddit thread focused on *The Substance* (2024), which discusses how ageing women cope with their reduced conformity to idealised beauty standards. For example, a Reddit user comments that they found 'aspects of womanhood... [including] the male gaze, and the competition between younger and middle aged women... [who] are made invisible by our culture' pertinent for modern day's obsession with looking perfect (*Figure 2.9*). This observation indicates how the fear of middle aged women becoming invisible in society perpetuates women to reclaim their youth to feel praise over their appearance, like younger women experience.

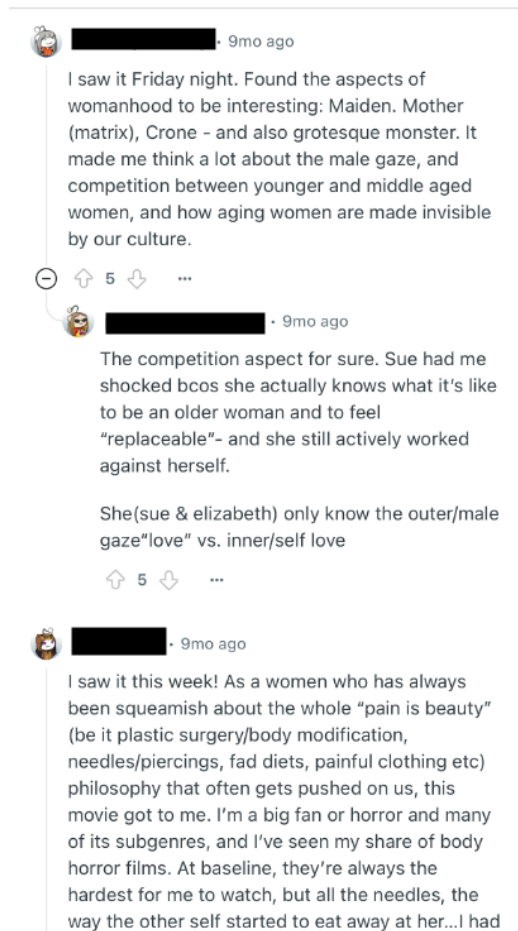


Figure 2.9, *Reddit comments regarding the competition between Elisabeth and Sue*, Reddit, 2024.

Users in *Figure 2.9* also note that Sue ‘actively worked against herself’, rather than respecting Elisabeth and acknowledging how the *male gaze* perpetuates female oppression. By Sue justifying her decision to ‘eat away’ (*Figure 2.9*) at Elisabeth’s vitality to gain more beauty, the film signals how older and younger women are pitted against each other in the patriarchy. This hostile dynamic over beauty ideals reinforces how the *female gaze* instils rivalry and self-objectification among women. Therefore, by staging this female standoff in cinema, *The Substance* (2024) highlights to its female audience how misogynistic power structures pit women against one another to suppress female solidarity and maintain the patriarchy.

Corporeal Violation through Injection

Sue's repulsion for Elisabeth's aged body is epitomised when she decides to delay the scheduled switch back to Elisabeth's body by extracting extra stabiliser fluid from her spine. The script portrays Sue's harsh judgement over Elisabeth by exclaiming that she finds Elisabeth's 'body increasingly ugly. Flabby. Unattractive and USELESS' (Fargeat, 2022, p. 94). *Figure 2.10* embodies this disdain, Sue's lack of respect over handling Elisabeth's unconscious body show that rather than offering empathy to her older counterpart, Sue views Elisabeth's natural signs of ageing as repulsive and a threat to her own social standing. The dim lighting creating a dark silhouette around Sue's frame emphasises her lack of respect over Elisabeth as her shadow, looming over Elisabeth's unconscious and vulnerable body, reinforces Sue's emotional detachment and contempt (*Figure 2.10*).



Figure 2.10, Sue manhandling Elisabeth's unconscious body before extracting stabiliser fluid, in C. Fargeat (2024) The Substance, 1:33:35.

Sue also physically attacks Elisabeth's aged body through the exploitation of stabiliser fluid, extracting all the vitality out of Elisabeth's body. Her addiction to siphoning Elisabeth's beauty is depicted in Elisabeth's wounded back, *Figure 2.11*, where Sue's incessant syringing of fluid has left Elisabeth's spine infected and painful. These grotesque visuals of pus, raised veins, and bloody plasters are amplified through the script, detailing how Sue stabs her needle into

Elisabeth's 'inflamed, swollen, pus-oozing puncture wound', where she 'VIOLENTLY RIPS OFF the bandage from her back... [and] violently stabs the needle into her back and starts draining the fluid... draining... draining...' (Fargeat, 2022, p. 112).



Figure 2.11, *Elisabeth's infected puncture wound*, in C. Fargeat (2024) *The Substance*, 1:23:07.

Sue's exploitation of Elisabeth's body underscores the dubious emancipatory nature of cosmetic surgery, where Sue's compulsion to siphon Elisabeth's stabiliser fluid illustrates her loss of control over wanting to remain beautiful, desperately extracting the last trace of Elisabeth's vitality for social acceptance. Contemporary scholarship increasingly frames cosmetic surgery as a paradoxical site of both empowerment and emotional entrapment, such as Wagenaar and Hermans (2024) outlining how society's normalisation of cosmetic procedures, fuelled by social media and celebrity culture, has heightened the risk of women becoming addicted to surgery. Relentlessly undergoing new treatments and altering their physique highlights how women's supposed agency of choosing to enhance their appearance is driven by fears of ageing, where cosmetic surgery becomes the last resort to remain visible and desirable in patriarchal society. While Sue still embodies youthful beauty, her desperation to maintain her appearance exposes the inevitable reality that she will succumb to the same fate as Elisabeth once she cannot preserve her youth.

The needle's penetration enacts a corporeal assault on Elisabeth's body, alluding to a grotesque violation where the needle, emerging like a clinical phallus, forces its way into exposed flesh (*Figure 2.12*). This act of physical assault mirrors the dynamics of sexual violence, since Sue's extraction of Elisabeth's vitality is invasive, non-consensual, and painful. Kristeva's (1980) *abject* helps explain why this wound is unsettling for the film's audience, as the film literalises the body's expulsion of what it perceives as unacceptable, forcing viewers to confront the horror of flesh rejecting itself. By deploying this body horror imagery, *The Substance* (2024) externalises Elisabeth's inner turmoil, outlining her fear of decay in an industry that prizes youth which compels the audience to viscerally experience the symbolic and physical violence of ageing.



Figure 2.12, Sue inserting the needle into Elisabeth's back to extract stabiliser fluid, in C. Fargeat (2024) *The Substance*, 1:23:13.

Accordingly, the movie resonates with midlife women undergoing plastic surgery without knowing the full consequences, risking their natural appearance in pursuit of eternal youth. *The Substance* (2024) sheds light on the trauma of internalised misogyny through Sue and Elisabeth's decaying relationship, forcing viewers to confront the violence of pursuing bodily

perfection to the detriment of other women, eroding the sense of self in the process. The toxic interplay of female agency, fetishism, and the many gazes infiltrating society encapsulate how internalised misogyny drives women to scrutinise each other in the pursuit of bodily perfection, triggering competition between women to achieve social acceptance in patriarchal society. Sue's transformation, fuelled by Elisabeth's decay, thus crystallises the irony that, in a culture where beauty equates to worth, women feel driven to exploit one another's bodies to satisfy the male gaze for success.

To expand on this assault on Elisabeth, Chapter III examines the consequences of Sue disrespecting the balance of 'the substance', studying Elisabeth's bodily disintegration from not switching back into her body every other week.

Chapter III

The Punishment of Vanity:

Bodily Disintegration, Becoming the *Abject*, and Retaliating Against Erasure Depicted in *The Substance* (2024)

The grotesque consequences of Elisabeth's bodily alterations in *The Substance* (2024) are depicted through body horror, demonstrating how the film's excessive viscera and corporeal gore reflect modern day risks of cosmetic enhancements for midlife women's mental and physical health. By analysing the demise of Elisabeth, resulting in the metamorphosis of Monstro ElisaSue, this chapter encapsulates the punishment of vanity where ageing women undergo incessant surgery to reverse the ageing process, losing their identity and authenticity in the process.

As studied in Chapter II, Sue's enthusiasm for her new life, and her disgust for Elisabeth's body, intensifies as she stockpiles stabiliser fluid in jars. Offers for high-profile roles, particularly the New Year's Eve special which Harvey wants her to host, keep Sue motivated to delay switching, draining Elisabeth's vitality. As weeks turn into months, Sue's prolonged dominion in the younger body coincides with Elisabeth's relentless physical decline. Her decaying flesh underscores a moral reckoning that critiques society's demand that women preserve a youthful façade. This obsession with a perfect, unchanging exterior ultimately catalyses Elisabeth's unravelling physical collapse, dramatising how the pursuit of idealised beauty becomes self-destructive for ageing women on screen.

Elisabeth's Bodily Disintegration

The punishment of vanity is first witnessed in the sequence where Elisabeth confronts the irreversible collapse of her body in the shower, waking up weeks after Sue should have switched back into her body. The mise-en-scène in *Figure 3.1* stages a stark, clinical unmasking of the decaying protagonist, providing a low-angle shot of Elisabeth's despairing face which forces the audience to look up through steam and water to comprehend Elisabeth's internal agony.



Figure 3.1, *Elisabeth looking at her aged body in the shower*, in C. Fargeat (2024) *The Substance*, 1:24:04.

Her *becoming* of the exact aged version of herself she desperately wanted to evade, resonating with Grosz's (1994) notion of *becoming* where Elisabeth's aged body stages a corporeal metamorphosis which unsettles the self and destabilises her feminine identity. No longer radiant, her skin's wrinkles and translucency portray the veil of youth peeled back to expose her fragility and vulnerability. By this scene occurring in the shower it also captures how water ceases to be cleansing and rejuvenating, instead the water becomes a way to accentuate her isolation and agony which is stripping away her final resistance against mortality.

Figure 3.2 reinforces Elisabeth's distress from ageing, using a close-up of her arm flattened against the tile grid of the shower to express her severely aged arm, as well as her misery stemming from her haggard physique. The symmetrical tiles contrast Elisabeth's lack of bodily control to the audience, where her body is no longer disciplined but relentlessly ageing against her will.



Figure 3.2, *Elisabeth's withered hand in the shower*, in C. Fargeat (2024) *The Substance*, 1:24:09.

The birds eye shot of Elisabeth in a foetal position (*Figure 3.3*), defeated in the shower further captures her diminishment, reduced to a crumpled form which yearns for her pre-'the substance' body she once hated. The zoom-out of this shot also emphasises the whitewashed and sterile shower, reflecting the movie's dramatisation of Elisabeth's regret to convey how Elisabeth is subverted to oppressive beauty ideals that have engulfed her happiness. The towering shower walls capture her loneliness, sadness, and her bleak realisation that there is no going back to her previous body which she once loathed but now craves. The camera's

clinical precision helps dramatise the punishment of vanity for midlife women, signifying that Elisabeth's confidence is totally eroded.



Figure 3.3, *Elisabeth curled up in the shower*, in C. Fargeat (2024) *The Substance*, 1:32:34.

The protagonist's anguish and ruin thus forces spectators to reckon with society's idolisation of youth, expressing how youth-centric society denies ageing women the dignity of natural maturity. By demonising the biological ageing process it highlights the true cost of vanity, where authenticity over the female identity is abandoned and replaced by a hollow shell which perpetuates patriarchal beauty standards.

Distressed and angry, Elisabeth's calls the mysterious creator of 'the substance' to exclaim to them that her younger self is 'STEALING MORE AND MORE TIME FROM ME' (Fargeat, 2022, p. 102) and not respecting the balance of the switch schedule. The anonymous creator responds saying 'you simply have to stop taking it [the substance]' if Elisabeth is dissatisfied with the results; however, if Elisabeth stops taking 'the substance' the creator emphasises that 'you go back to being just you on your own' and the bodily changes which she despises will remain (Fargeat, 2022, p. 102). Elisabeth answers that she 'can't stop', then slaps herself in the face (Figure 3.4).



Figure 3.4, *Elisabeth slapping herself after realising her bodily disintegration is irreversible*, in C. Fargeat (2024), *The Substance*, 1:25:24.

Her distress and self-inflicted physical violence capture how the injectable has become an addiction, where Elisabeth cannot stop switching into Sue's body as she loathes her own midlife physique too much. Despite Elisabeth's distress over her haggard appearance she decides to switch back to Sue, exclaiming that 'I HATE myself... I need you... YOU're the only interesting part of me' (Fargeat, 2022, p. 125). Her dependence on Sue's youthful exterior mirrors women's abuse of cosmetic surgery in contemporary society, where women mobilise their agency and undergo procedures for self-improvement, but instead spiral out of control with an 'excessive and out of proportion' number of cosmetic enhancements (Wagenaar and Hermans, 2024, p. 7). Since Elisabeth and Sue are intertwined from 'the substance', Elisabeth's disdain over Sue translates as self-hatred over her own ageing body, assaulting visible signs of ageing she cannot bear. Psychological dependence on plastic surgery, reflected in *The Substance* (2024) through Elisabeth's descent into bodily abuse, thus highlights how unrealistic beauty standards obscure authentic representations of ageing women on screen and lead to compulsive, normalised, and abusive engagement with surgery.

Obsession as Addiction: TikTok Reflections on Elisabeth's Loss of Control

TikTok comments over Elisabeth's disintegration capture how Elisabeth's obsession with defying ageing is reminiscent of a 'perfect portrayal of substance abuse/addiction' (Figure 3.5). Her bodily abuse shines light on how Elisabeth's initial agency where she decides to enhance her ageing body mutates into compulsive self-harm for impossible perfection. These insights from spectators accentuate how the shower sequence becomes more than a visualisation of moral punishment of vanity, rather it mirrors the bleak reality of addiction where the technological intervention women thought would reclaim their beauty and confidence instead leaves them desperate for another fix.

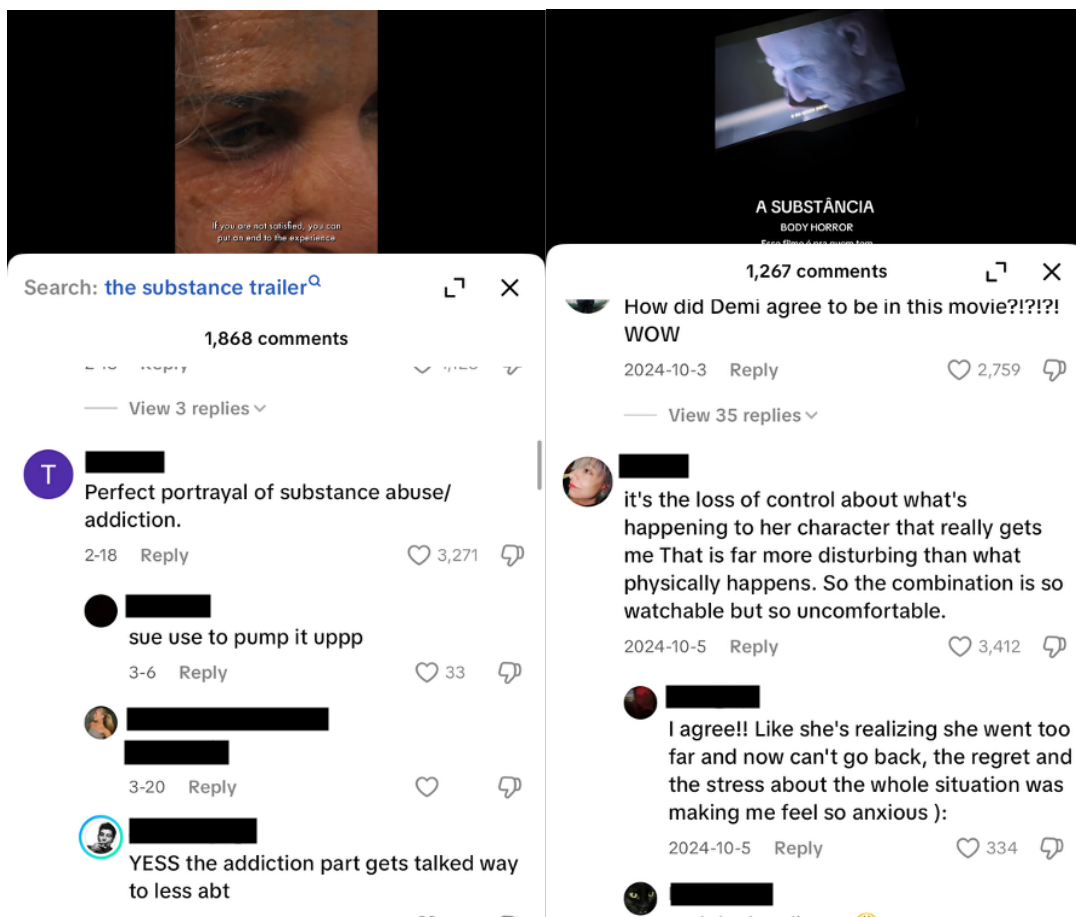


Figure 3.5, Comments talking about Elisabeth's bodily decay after Sue disrespects the balance of using 'the substance', TikTok, 2024.

Another user highlights Elisabeth's anxiety over ageing by noting how the 'loss of control' Elisabeth experiences from 'the substance' is 'disturbing' (*Figure 3.5*). By relating the film's portrayal of losing bodily control to society's prolific use of plastic surgery, it shows how self-improvement through cosmetic enhancements can mutate into a toxic compulsion to rid the body of natural signs of ageing. Self-improvement turning into abuse resonates with societal fears of women experiencing complications and side effects of plastic surgery, driving them to go under the knife again to remedy their botched appearance. Therefore, these viewer responses extend the film's critique of vanity into the realm of addiction and abuse. Their concern over Elisabeth's agency being blurred with self-loathing conveys how Elisabeth's pursuit of ideal beauty is not just an aesthetic choice but a compulsion that erodes her identity.

No Going Back: Ageing as the *Abject* Personified

As Chapter II discussed, Sue stockpiled Elisabeth's stabiliser fluid to prevent switching back into her aged body. However, the night before Sue's New Year's show she discovers that Elisabeth is barren of stabiliser fluid from her spine, being forced to switch bodies with Elisabeth in order to survive. The still in *Figure 3.6* captures the moment of horrifying revelation as Elisabeth awakens as an elderly, deformed figure after three-months of unconsciousness, finding her body grotesquely transformed. Emaciated, sagging, and wrinkled, her physique presents visual embodiment of the very decay she had sought to erase using 'the substance'.



Figure 3.6, *Elisabeth looking at herself in the mirror for the first time in three months after Sue extracted all her stabiliser fluid*, in C. Fargeat (2024) *The Substance*, 1:38:22.

Her hunched, skeletal frame and hollowed eyes confront the viewer with the *abject*, with her body breaking down social and aesthetic boundaries, blurring the line between self and *other* (Kristeva, 1980). Elisabeth's descent into *abjection* also links to the demonisation of ageing women due to their lack of reproductivity, evoking how midlife women who are past fertility are defined as socially worthless. Posthumanist Nelly Oudshoorn's (2020, p. 14) argument over the 'rise of anti-ageing medicine' enabling ageing women to 'construct and redefine the ageing body' expresses how midlife women's inability to reproduce actively shapes cultural understandings of ageing, rendering ageing bodies as problems to be remedied through technology. Elisabeth's ageing grotesque physique, no longer capable of 'producing' anything useful, emphasises how younger women's praise over their appearance and reproductivity making them socially valuable indicates why midlife women feel compelled to undergo cosmetic enhancements, reasserting their femininity and securing the sociocultural validation in patriarchal society (Goodman, 2014). Elisabeth thus becomes the materialisation of cultural fears around ageing, exemplifying what was once hidden or managed through beauty practices is now violently exposed. Elisabeth's horror over her appearance is buttressed in the

script, where it 'takes her a moment to understand that this horrible old wrinkled thing whose eyes are reddened from conjunctivitis is... HER' (Fargeat, 2022, p. 120). This linguistic violence, battering her appearance, mirrors the visual violence in the film, where the clinical bathroom environment strips away traces of warmth or empathy, objectifying her as a horrifying spectacle.

Accordingly, this bodily deterioration articulates the punishment of vanity. Elisabeth's desire to remain young, to resist the loss of female value that comes with midlife, is met with retribution from her egotistical perspective. She becomes what she most feared: an aged, undesirable, discarded version of herself. Woodward's (1999) work in *Figuring Age* helps encapsulate Elisabeth's mindset from seeing her deformed body, since she argues that ageing women experience a cognitive dissonance between how they feel about themselves and how they are seen. While Elisabeth's image is amplified through body horror, this outlook her transformation dramatizes how midlife women are othered through visible signs of ageing, becoming symbols of failure in a youth obsessed society. This horrifying transformation ultimately forces viewers to confront the limits of cosmetic control over the ageing process, using Elisabeth's aged body as a visual critique of a system that equates femininity with beauty and youth.

Kristeva's (1980) *abject* illuminates how women who diverge from entrenched beauty norms become socially marginalised, experiencing a self-revulsion that perpetuates their own *abjection*. This dynamic is seen in midlife women, when ageing women experience both a cultural decay of identity and a visceral horror of their body changing against their will, where socially unacceptable signs of age emerge. By framing *abjection* around ageing and how the

abject borders the interplay of disgust and desire, it conveys how older women are vulnerable to the punitive gaze of dominant beauty cultures. As Deborah Covino also (2004, p. 13) argues, aesthetic makeovers are posited as empowering reclamations of female autonomy, but in practice they reinforce how female social acceptance remains bound to adhering to beauty ideals. By comprehending the female 'desire to identify with the society of clean and proper bodies', constituting youthful women who align to patriarchal beauty standards, midlife women feel compelled to undergo 'self-objectification of abject body parts', such as visible signs of ageing, and alter their physique through cosmetic interventions to feel accepted in youth-centric society (Covino, 2004, p. 13). In horror films, this 'abjection management' (Covino, 2004, p. 103) is visualised through grotesque transformations that punish vanity, elucidating the shallow nature of beauty ideals. By examining the depiction of ageing women on screen, it thus presents how cultural anxieties about ageing, desire, and objectification converge to portray a gendered punishment of vanity to society.

Elisabeth, finally conscious and desperate to stop further ageing damage, orders a termination serum to end Sue's existence and halt her decay. However, at the last moment, Elisabeth's lingering desire for the fame and desire Sue has gained causes her to use the termination fluid to revive Sue. Her interruption of the termination fluid from giving dying Sue a direct heart injection to force a switch triggers a glitch in 'the substance', resulting in both consciousnesses being active simultaneously in their separate bodies. Their resentment culminates into a violent struggle, where outraged Sue kills Elisabeth in a bid to permanently inhabit the younger body.

However, after the murder of Elisabeth, Sue's body begins to deteriorate rapidly during the lead up to the live event, since, without Elisabeth's original body to cycle with, 'the substance' is redundant. Panicked over her deterioration, Sue attempts to use leftover activator serum to create another youthful version of herself so she can host the show, ignoring the single-use warning on the product. This second transformation yields a grotesque, mutated hybrid called Monstro ElisaSue.

The *Becoming* of Monstro ElisaSue

In the progression from Elisabeth's first *abject* awakening to her full Monstro ElisaSue form, the body becomes a site of radical hybridisation and rupture. By branding Elisabeth's grotesque transformation 'Monstro ElisaSue', Fargeat (2022) literalised Creed's (1993) *monstrous-feminine*, manifesting Elisabeth's body into a fear-provoking spectacle to expose how women with transgressive bodies are vilified and othered. In the earlier stills, her aged, sagging flesh already violated the boundary between self and waste, yet in *Figure 3.7* that violation escalates into a grotesque synthesis of human and other. The creature that confronts the audience is neither fully Elisabeth, fully Sue, nor an autonomous monster, but a 'monstrous hybrid' which distorts the sense of identity and bodily integrity (Cruz, 2012, p. 161).



Figure 3.7, *The scenes visualising the becoming of Monstro ElisaSue in the bathroom*, in C. Fargeat (2024) *The Substance*, 1:59:07.



Figure 3.8, *The scenes visualising the becoming of Monstro ElisaSue in the bathroom*, in C. Fargeat (2024) *The Substance*, 1:59:14.

The tiled bathroom with sterile bright lighting from the beginning of the film, which emphasised Elisabeth's self-loathing from her naturally aged body, captures the extreme grotesquery of Monstro ElisaSue's swollen and misshapen form. Her flesh folds into itself and contains disfigured mouths, irregular breasts, deformed noses, and jagged bones piercing her slimy veiny skin (*Figure 3.7*). Elisabeth's screaming face in *Figure 3.8*, forcing her jaw to remain wide open, illustrates the physically and emotionally painful transformation which has left Elisabeth a monster. This grotesque imagery forces the viewer's gaze to oscillate between

fascination and revulsion, mirroring Kristeva's (1980) *abject* which decentres the proper and clean body as repulsive. The script further underscores the bodily collapse and annihilation of Elisabeth's body, expressing how Monstro ElisaSue becomes 'A MONSTROUS VISION... a being with a hybrid face, shapeless and hideous... [with] AN OUTGROWTH OF ELISABETH'S FACE IN A FROZEN SCREAM' (Fargeat, 2022, p. 137). This language objectifies Monstro ElisaSue as the *abject* personified, where the capitalisation in the script resonates with the screams of spectators of the film who are repulsed with her hybrid appearance.

A posthumanist lens deepens Cruz's (2012) discussion of monstrous hybridity visualised in body horror, since Haraway's (1984) cyborg theory, originally envisioning technology as a tool for female liberation from repressive gazes, becomes inverted through gore to reveal how cosmetic surgery and enhancements can further alienate midlife women from their bodily integrity. This inversion of emancipation expresses how cosmetic technologies do not simply empower, but also entrench women in new forms of patriarchal domination where their identities are in a state of *becoming* that does not conform to idealised beauty traits. Sue's metamorphosis into this creature ultimately crystallises the film's central irony, where Elisabeth's desperation to evade ageing to satiate her ego led to her becoming the *abject* she feared. This new hybrid form embodying *monstrous-femininity* embodies society's anxieties about the ageing female body that deviates from youthful normativity. Braidotti's (2002) posthuman perspective on *becoming* further elucidates how Elisabeth's transformation into Monstro ElisaSue personifies the dissolution of human boundaries, mutating into an *abject* in flux identity, devoid of stability. By portraying Elisabeth's final transformation into a monster, the film confronts viewers with the ultimate cost of chasing ideal beauty: erasure of identity

and agency. The film's moral reckoning of Elisabeth's vanity quickly reinscribes this *becoming* as a cautionary tale to viewers, illuminating how the hybridity that might suggest liberation instead becomes the ultimate punishment of vanity. Through this analysis of hybridity and bodily *abjection*, Elisabeth's final metamorphosis thus reveals how body horror negotiates women's ageing bodies by portraying them in a state of flux, neither human nor other but a form self-annihilated from bodily integrity.

Elisabeth's Retaliation Against Erasure

However, Monstro ElisaSue appears content with her appearance, even though her features are distorted, misshapen, and overtly misaligned to idealised beauty standards. The script observes that 'she's strangely calm... as if she was finally seeing herself for the very first time, and finally, accepting herself' (Fargeat, 2022, p. 138). This moment reframes Elisabeth's grotesque hybridity not a corporeal punishment but as a site of radical self-recognition, where she achieves clarity, self-acceptance, and female agency after her loss of patriarchal beauty standards. This calmness, where she is free from sexualising gazes, reorients spectators of the film, who confront the façade of idealised beauty equating to happiness, since external image does not equal internal confidence.

After Monstro ElisaSue's *becoming*, she decides to host the special, sneaking into the studio to welcome the audience for the live New Year's Eve broadcast. While she repeatedly tries to reassure the audience by saying it is 'ME!', the Elisabeth and Sue they used to adore, the audience responds with panic and violence and attempt to kill Monstro ElisaSue due to how horrible her appearance is (Fargeat, 2022, p. 143). After this violence inflicted onto her, the

creature flees the studio, collapses outside, and explodes into a mass of viscera on the floor. Within this pile of guts a small face emerges from the gore, reminiscent of Elisabeth's, and crawls across the ground toward her star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame (*Figure 3.9*).



Figure 3.9, Elisabeth's face smiling on her Hollywood Walk of Fame star, in C. Fargeat (2024) *The Substance*, 2:12:42.

Smiling while hallucinating the admiration from onlookers on her star (*Figure 3.9*), she melts into a pool of blood which is cleaned up the following morning like a food spillage. The ending's unrelenting gore, leaving Elisabeth dead and disintegrated for her old fans to forget, outlines the consequences of trying to cheat time in an unequal system that prizes youth above all. Laura Di Summa's (2022) analysis on fashion in film applied to Elisabeth's bodily annihilation, presenting cosmetic surgery as an extreme form of fashioning, demonstrates how standardising the female body through enhancements erases individuals identity and undermines personal agency. Despite this moral reckoning of Elisabeth being punished for her vanity, Elisabeth's joyfulness in her hallucination portrays her act of retaliation against ageist erasure, insisting that womanhood encompasses more than a narrowly defined beauty standard celebrating youth. Elisabeth redefines female success by not fitting into an oppressive ideal imposed by the *male gaze*, but as embracing her evolving self. Her final self-acceptance over her transgressive body resonates with midlife women finding happiness

through natural beauty, resisting patriarchal society's proliferation of cosmetic surgery to reverse ageing to feel authentically themselves transcending the boundaries of normative femininity.

The climactic ending of *The Substance* (2024) helps interrogate how on screen depictions of ageing women can simultaneously subvert and uphold cultural judgments of femininity. Through the gore of Elisabeth's disintegration and metamorphosis into Monstro ElisaSue, *The Substance* (2024) operates as a dark satire on ageism and beauty standards in Hollywood and society, where Elisabeth's self-destructive quest for eternal youth shows how incessant surgical transformations erase the identity and authenticity of women. Her violent, body horror transformation externalises female self-hatred over ageing, critiquing the destructive obsession with youth and the disposability of midlife women. However, Monstro ElisaSue's final resurrection, crawling towards her Hollywood star, becomes a radical retaliation to this erasure of femininity. Even when the entertainment industry attempts to dispose of midlife women like they are decaying and monstrous entities, a resilient trace of their identity can persist in the media, demanding recognition that they are still the woman the media once adored.

Conclusion

This research project illustrates how *The Substance* (2024), a film deploying body horror visuals to depict a middle aged woman's grotesque bodily transformations in pursuit of perfection, both reflects and reinforces broader societal discourses surrounding female beauty cultures. The film's premise, asking its audience 'have you ever dreamt of a better version of yourself?' (Fargeat, 2022, p. 16), confronts spectators with patriarchal society's demonisation of ageing female bodies, and how the allure of cosmetic surgery compels midlife women to reverse natural ageing in a bid to maintain value in male-domineering society. These subversive dynamics controlling the presentation of the female body are exposed in *The Substance* (2024) through the evolving representations of protagonists Elisabeth and Sue, enabling the film's audience to comprehend the ageism and misogyny imbedded in the entertainment industry which perpetuates patriarchal judgements of ideal femininity.

Building on existing feminist scholarship regarding whether technological interventions, such as cosmetic surgery, empower female sexuality or reproduce youth-obsessed beauty imperatives, this thesis encapsulates the physical and emotional toll midlife women are subjected to through beauty cultures. Through this it highlights how striving for aesthetic ideals through cosmetic enhancements is not emancipatory, but rather destructive for female autonomy and psychology. Concepts of Kristeva's (1980) *abject*, Creed's (1993) *monstrous-feminine*, and Mulvey's (1989) *male gaze*, contextualised in *The Substance* (2024), shed light on contemporary society's obsession with perpetual youth, forcing midlife women to negotiate their authenticity, visibility, and self-worth in a patriarchal society that renders natural ageing as a female failure. The increasing portrayal of older actresses in Hollywood echoes this paradox of female autonomy and proliferation of cosmetic enhancements

distorting natural ageing since, regardless of this cultural shift in the newfound visibility of midlife women in the media, their use of plastic surgery reveals that only ageing women who appear eternally young are accepted on screen. The rumours surrounding Moore's facelift help present this paradox in Hollywood's messaging, epitomising how *The Substance* (2024) is art imitating society's contradictory notions of feminine beauty. Despite Moore performing as an aged actress in the film to increase the visibility of ageing women on screen, the supposed surgeries she has undergone in real life to defy biological ageing enable her to remain aligned to Hollywood's beauty standards disseminated by the patriarchy. Therefore, director Fargeat (2024) captures in film how contemporary society's representation of ageing women on screen as eternally youthful has deepened societal judgements of ideal femininity, underscoring the cyclical futility of beauty cultures which has resulted in new and endlessly developing forms of female bodily regulation and oppression.

The research project's grounding in film reflects contemporary attitudes through visual and discourse analysis, using stills and script action lines and dialogue to provide a contemporary dimension of analysing women on screen. The incorporation of cultural reception analysis via digital platforms, including TikTok, Instagram, and Reddit, further adds a modern dimension to this project, amplifying its originality by capturing the zeitgeist of the time surrounding ageing women's visibility and agency within patriarchal frameworks. Consequently, this research project provides an original contribution to feminist film scholarship, demonstrating how modern digital discourses encapsulate evolving representations of gender and age in mainstream cinema.

By dissecting Fargeat's (2022) choice of cinematography and character narratives, this project unearths how film actively mirrors sociocultural issues surrounding entrenched ageist and gendered stereotypes, shining light on oppressive beauty standards imposed on midlife women. Chapter I addresses Elisabeth's initial attempt to reclaim her youth, examining her bodily surveillance and disdain she feels over ageing. Objectifying her body through Foucault's (1963) *medical gaze*, alongside her desperation to be accepted as beautiful in an industry which discarded her solely due to her age causes Elisabeth to inject 'the substance', leading to the spinal birth of Sue. By examining the vaginal slit in Elisabeth's back as a technologised womb, it signals societal fears of biotechnologies which have the power to redefine the reproductive possibilities of the female body and defy the natural ageing process. The film turns this anxiety over biotechnologies into a horror spectacle, inverting the maternal body as a hybrid site of *abjection* and monstrosity (Cruz, 2012). The film's deployment of female archetypes through Sue's embodiment of youth and perfection resonates with Haraway's (1984) liberatory *cyborg* fusion of human and machine, yet paradoxically perpetuates narrow beauty ideals by valorising youth and punishing natural ageing.

Chapter II develops this analysis of beauty ideals *othering* the ageing female physique by studying the *male* and *female gaze* present in *The Substance* (2024), unpacking how visual power disseminated by men renders women as eroticised objects to satiate male voyeurism. Sue emerges as Steele's (1997) *phallic woman* through her confidence presented in the film, wielding her sexuality to assert agency and transcend patriarchal constraints over women. Yet, this emancipation from the *male gaze* remains contingent on male approval. The 'agent' Harvey is the personification of the *male gaze*, emphasising how Sue's value, marketability, and success is hinged on male approval and underscores the pressure women experience to

maintain patriarchal beauty standards and maintain value in the entertainment industry by male professionals. The tense and jealous dynamic between Sue and Elisabeth sheds light on how women mobilise Evans and Gamman's (1995) *female gaze*, laced with 'internalised misogyny' (Manne, 2018), in pursuit of bodily perfection which suppresses female autonomy. This competition among women visualised in the movie suggests that if women were able to embrace ageing authentically, rather than constantly comparing themselves to unattainable ideals, their lives might be lived with greater freedom and less 'discipline and punishment' imposed on the self (Foucault, 1977).

Chapter III further elucidates this decaying relationship between Elisabeth and Sue by examining the consequences of Sue extracting all of Elisabeth's vitality from her spine, depleting her beauty until she becomes a monster. By depicting Elisabeth's egotistical desire to prevent biological ageing, the film punishes her vanity by grotesquely transforming her into the *abject* she feared. This visualisation of Creed's (1993) *monstrous-femininity* signifies how Elisabeth is betrayed by her own agency to modify her body, enabling her body to become a site where gendered ageism and horror intersect. Her horrifying experience with 'the substance' consequently mirrors the way plastic surgery can mutate the human condition and undermine an individual's identity, leading to self-annihilation rather than self-improvement (Di Summa, 2022). However, by staging Elisabeth's resistance to beauty ideals, through her comfort in her appearance as Monstro ElisaSue, it conveys how embracing authenticity in midlife emancipates ageing women from patriarchal beauty ideals. Elisabeth's peace projected at the end of the film when she finally dies on her Hollywood star, relieved from fighting inevitable ageing, redefines representations of ageing women on screen, curating a

liberating portrayal of ageing bodies which transcend narrow definitions of beauty disseminated by the patriarchy.

Through Elisabeth's fatal journey of self-acceptance, *The Substance* (2024) ultimately posits itself as a tragedy which exposes the sadness at the heart of harnessing female agency within the patriarchy. Elisabeth's fleeting moment of peace, where she finally embraces her aged body, comes at the end of her life, reflecting broader cultural issues over women spending their lives in a relentless pursuit of beauty, only to reach acceptance too late and end their suffering. Elisabeth's failed liberation through technology insinuates that, while technological advancements claim to emancipate the body into Haraway's (1984) liberated *cyborg*, evading the *abject* through plastic surgeries can cause self-annihilation and the decay of the authentic self, leading to the ageing body becoming a site of horror.

It is important to acknowledge that this study focuses on a Western and heteronormative perspective on female beauty ideals. Further research to examine non-Western cinemas' engagement of female beauty standards from different sociocultural dimensions would provide a more holistic and diverse understanding of the subjection women face internationally from being defined by their appearance. Additionally, while this study is founded on my outlook as a cisgendered white woman, the intersection of ageing, gender, and sexuality would be interesting to explore in the future. For instance, Ravi Patel (2024, p. 42) discusses the representation of 'alternative bodies' in cinema, advocating for the visibility of authentic bodies in the media to 'diversify the cinematic landscape' and celebrate embodied lived experiences. Transgender, non-binary, or non-white individuals navigate beauty cultures from positions further removed from idealised beauty standards, facing

greater bodily scrutiny from not conforming to gendered traits. However, their transforming identity also alludes to transgressive bodies reaching a state of contentment since they are free from patriarchal pressures defining femininity. Researching how those with transgressive bodies negotiate their bodily autonomy would thus provide insight into how individuals both resist and reshape dominant beauty ideals, navigating newfound cosmetic enhancements and biotechnologies redefining the human condition. Finally, although this study has centered on women's experiences through a feminist lens, parallel investigations into men's engagements with anti-ageing technologies would be fascinating in uncovering how patriarchal structures also dictate the male ageing body.

Despite these limitations this research project exemplifies how contemporary cinema frames ageing women's bodies as sites of technological intervention, highlighting how the advancements of cosmetic procedures both empower and oppress midlife women. This paradox witnessed in *The Substance* (2024) exposes how, despite multiple tools for 'self-improvement' which supposedly emancipate ageing women by providing them agency and control, patriarchal forces governing society in fact impose a disciplining gaze onto women, which forever demonises the biological ageing process. Ultimately, the marginalisation of older women in society reflected in *The Substance* (2024) through Elisabeth's descent into *abjection*, demonstrates how linking cinematic body horror spectacles to female beauty cultures encapsulates how film mirrors, moulds, and reframes public perceptions surrounding the ageing female body.

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<ul style="list-style-type: none"> I have accessed the Ethics of Making https://ethics.arts.ac.uk website and applied the learning to my work 	Yes ✓
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> I have reviewed the ethics resources on Academic Support Online to help me consider the ethical parameters of the Code of Practice 	Yes ✓
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> I have discussed my work with my unit leader 	Yes ✓
<p>Please use these resources to inform your answers to questions 1 to 7 in the boxes below.</p>	

Applicant name:	Holly Smith
Course Title:	MA Fashion Cultures and Histories
Unit Title:	Masters Project

If you are a tutor applying on behalf of a student or student group, please give your name here:	
Tutor name:	

1. The code of practice sets out four key areas for ethical consideration. Which one or more of these ethical principles does this application for ethical consideration relate to?	
a. An ethics of care is supported by the Educational Ethics subcommittee as a positive ethic that is the University's responsibility to foster in relation to students, educational content, educational process including material resources, and in students' relations with anyone who participates or interacts with their work.	Yes / No
b. The principle of social justice obliges the student to identify the risks and benefits of participation in creative or investigative practice. Any risks to persons participating should be weighed against any potential benefits – to the participants or the student, and also the wider benefits to society of the knowledge gained. As with the principle of respect for persons, there is a need to promote equality and racial justice and protect vulnerable groups.	Yes / No

<p>c. Respect for persons recognises the capacity and rights of all individuals to make their own choices and decisions. It refers to the autonomy and rights to self-determination of all human beings, acknowledges their equality, dignity, freedom and rights. An important component of this principle is the need to provide special protection to vulnerable persons, both students and in student activity involving others.</p>	<p>Yes / No</p>
<p>d. Beneficence is the principle of acting for the good and wellbeing of others. It requires students to serve the interests of others. In so doing, students comply with the principle of neither doing, nor permitting, any foreseeable harm as a consequence of creative or investigative practice. This is the principle of non-maleficence, it is the principle of doing no harm.</p> <p>The specific duties of promoting equality and good relations are assumed under these principles, as defined by the Equality Act 2010.</p>	<p>Yes / No</p>

2. Please provide a 100-word summary of the ethical issues that relate to the work/enquiry that is planned. Please relate it directly to one or more areas of the code and resources above.

I have considered the ethics of incorporating digital methodologies into my masters project when conducting audience response analysis. As a researcher, I need to provide respect for people's opinions and privacy. I treat publicly available online posts discussing the film as public discourse because users provide public profiles for all to view. As a result, when engaging with a public user's commentary I cite their username. For opinions written in comment sections on social media platforms, where users have private accounts, I anonymise their usernames by putting a black mark over their names to protect individuals from identification and to respect their freedom of expression.

Does your work or enquiry require you to work with participants, or reuse personal data that has been obtained elsewhere? If people are participating directly, please ensure they fill in the participant information and consent template (Ask your Course Leader to provide these). If not, go to Questions 6 to 9.

3. Who will the participants be? Please tick the boxes as appropriate.

	Students at the University
	Staff at the University
	Other. Please specify:

4. What will participants be asked to do and/or how will their personal information be used? Explain in terms appropriate to a layperson.

N/A

5. What potential risks to the interests of participants do you foresee and what steps will you take to minimise those risks?

A participant's interests include their physical and psychological well-being, their commercial interests e.g. IP; and their rights of privacy and reputation. Please note that compliance with the Data Protection Act 2018 and GDPR is a legal obligation.

N/A

6. Does your project involve children or minors (anyone under the age of 18) or vulnerable adults (e.g. a person with a learning disability)?

No. Go to Question 6.
Yes. Please be aware that a project involving children or vulnerable adults is likely to require you to have a Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) check. Please discuss this with your unit or course leader. Please be aware that a DBS check normally takes 4 weeks but can take longer.

7. What potential risks do you foresee to yourself and what steps will you take to minimise those risks? E.g. does your work raise issues of personal safety, impact on vulnerabilities for you (or anyone with whom you are collaborating), especially if taking place outside working hours or off University premises?

My research is focused on beauty ideals which have impacted me in the past. Even though I have had an eating disorder and struggled with body image in the past, I have had therapy to help with my mental and physical health to enable me to engage with these themes without being personally impacted.

8. Are there other areas of ethical concern? How do you plan to manage these ethical considerations?

While I submitted an ethics form to inform the University of the Arts London that my research involved human perceptions in terms of audience analysis, I understand that informed consent from each individual has not been obtained for my research as it is impractical to contact all those who have discussed *The Substance* (2024) in the public domain. However, by respecting their privacy by not disclosing usernames I maintain their freedom of expression without fears of backlash.

9. I confirm my responsibility to deliver the project in accordance with the Code of Practice on Educational Ethics of the University of the Arts London (the University)

If I am using personal data: I will only store it on UAL-managed systems and will use the Participant Information and Consent Template to collect personal data. I will ensure I follow the data protection principles at all times.	
Print name of applicant:	Holly Smith
Signature of applicant:	<i>H. Smith</i>
Date:	10/7/25

10. I support this project and have reviewed it with the applicant.	
Print name of Tutor:	Lydia Kaye
Signature of Tutor:	<i>L. Kaye</i>
Date:	15 July 2025

Please submit this form and the relevant attachments to your Unit Leader/Course Leader/Programme Director.

Figures

Cover Photo, *Marketing poster*, in C. Fargeat (2024) *The Substance*.

Figure 1.1, *Elisabeth examining her ageing body in front of her bathroom mirror naked*, in C. Fargeat (2024) *The Substance*, 23:24.

Figure 1.2, *Instagram comments criticising Demi Moore's appearance*, Instagram, 2024.

Figure 1.3, *Elisabeth's back splitting in two from her spine after taking the substance, revealing another body growing inside of her*, in C. Fargeat (2024) *The Substance*, 27:28.

Figure 1.4, *Elisabeth on the floor in blood and fluid from the spinal birth*, in C. Fargeat (2024) *The Substance*, 28:26.

Figure 1.5, *Sue posing in front of the mirror after being birthed*, in C. Fargeat (2024) *The Substance*, 30:23.

Figure 1.6, *Sue watching over unconscious Elisabeth in the bathroom after suturing up her back*, in C. Fargeat (2024) *The Substance*, 32:33.

Figure 1.7, *Sue looking at herself in the mirror after being birthed*, in C. Fargeat (2024) *The Substance*, 29:37.

Figure 2.1, *Consecutive shots of Sue dressing in a leather catsuit*, in C. Fargeat (2024) *The Substance*, 55:33.

Figure 2.2, *Consecutive shots of Sue dressing in a leather catsuit*, in C. Fargeat (2024) *The Substance*, 55:34.

Figure 2.3, *Sue's leather-bound and red soled stiletto heels contrasting her white bathroom flooring*, in C. Fargeat (2024) *The Substance*, 55:55.

Figure 2.4, *A shot from Sue's POV where Harvey introduces her to the shareholders of her show*, in C. Fargeat (2024) *The Substance*, 1:54:37.

Figure 2.5, *Sue in a blue gown with Harvey giving her an approving hand gesture*, in C. Fargeat (2024) *The Substance*, 1:51:35.

Figure 2.6, *Sue's Cinderella gown*, in C. Fargeat (2024) *The Substance*, 1:34:20.

Figure 2.7, *A long shot of Elisabeth's photo in her apartment*, in C. Fargeat (2024) *The Substance*, 51:14.

Figure 2.8, *A close up shot of Sue's face on a billboard outside Elisabeth's apartment*, in C. Fargeat (2024) *The Substance*, 51:17.

Figure 2.9, *Reddit comments regarding the competition between Elisabeth and Sue*, Reddit, 2024.

Figure 2.10, *Sue manhandling Elisabeth's unconscious body before extracting stabiliser fluid*, in C. Fargeat (2024) *The Substance*, 1:33:35.

Figure 2.11, *Elisabeth's infected puncture wound*, in C. Fargeat (2024) *The Substance*, 1:23:07.

Figure 2.12, *Sue inserting the needle into Elisabeth's back to extract stabiliser fluid*, in C. Fargeat (2024) *The Substance*, 1:23:13.

Figure 3.1, *Elisbeth looking at her aged body in the shower*, in C. Fargeat (2024) *The Substance*, 1:24:04.

Figure 3.2, *Elisabeth's withered hand in the shower*, in C. Fargeat (2024) *The Substance*, 1:24:09.

Figure 3.3, *Elisabeth curled up in the shower*, in C. Fargeat (2024) *The Substance*, 1:32:34.

Figure 3.4, *Elisabeth slapping herself after realising her bodily disintegration is irreversible*, in C. Fargeat (2024), *The Substance*, 1:25:24.

Figure 3.5, *Comments talking about Elisabeth's bodily decay after Sue disrespects the balance of using 'the substance'*, TikTok, 2024.

Figure 3.6, *Elisabeth looking at herself in the mirror for the first time in three months after Sue extracted all her stabiliser fluid*, in C. Fargeat (2024) *The Substance*, 1:38:22.

Figure 3.7, *The scenes visualising the becoming of Monstro ElisaSue in the bathroom*, in C. Fargeat (2024) *The Substance*, 1:59:07.

Figure 3.8, *The scenes visualising the becoming of Monstro ElisaSue in the bathroom*, in C. Fargeat (2024) *The Substance*, 1:59:14.

Figure 3.9, *Elisabeth's face smiling on her Hollywood Walk of Fame star*, in C. Fargeat (2024) *The Substance*, 2:12:42.