The Female Body and the Burden of Youth: Symbolic Violence and Marginalization in *The Substance*

العنف الرمزي والتهميش في تمثلات الجسد الأنثوي تحت عبء الشباب الدائم في فيلم The Substance

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Abstract:

This study examines the cultural construction of beauty, aging, and femininity through a feminist analysis of The Substance. It explores how societal fears of aging and the loss of beauty are reinforced through both contemporary media and traditional cultural narratives such as fairy tales. Drawing on feminist film theory, age studies, and media theory, the paper argues that beauty operates not merely as an aesthetic ideal but as an ideological system that regulates and disciplines the female body. The analysis situates The Substance within a broader historical framework in which women's value is closely tied to youth and physical appearance. It highlights how hegemonic media representations and early narrative forms construct binary models of femininity—associating beauty with virtue and aging with decline. These ideals are further intensified by contemporary media culture. Through a close reading of the film's narrative, visual language, and protagonist, Elisabeth Sparkle, the study demonstrates how The Substance critiques the extreme pressures placed on women to maintain youth and beauty. The film's body horror aesthetics expose the psychological and physical consequences of internalizing unrealistic standards, revealing beauty as a site of control, self-surveillance, and symbolic violence. Ultimately, the paper argues that The Substance subverts dominant beauty norms by exaggerating them to grotesque extremes, thereby exposing their artificiality and violence. It concludes that the pursuit of beauty, rather than empowering women, often results in self-alienation, reinforcing the need to reconsider cultural definitions of femininity and normality critically.

Keywords: Beauty Standards; Aging; Femininity; Media Representation; Body Horror.

ملخص:

تتناول هذه الدراسة البناء الثقافي لمفاهيم الجمال والشيخوخة والأنوثة من خلال تحليل نسوي لفيلم *The Substance* وتستكشف كيف يتم تعزيز المخاوف المجتمعية من التقدم في العمر وفقدان الجمال عبر وسائل الإعلام المعاصرة، وكذلك من خلال السرديات الثقافية التقليدية مثل الحكايات الخرافية. وبالاعتماد على نظريات السينما النسوية، ودراسات الشيخوخة، ونظريات الإعلام، تجادل الدراسة بأن الجمال لا يعمل بوصفه مثالًا جماليًا فحسب، بل كنظام أيديولوجي يتحكم في الجسد الأنثوي ويخضعه للانضباط. تضع الدراسة فيلم *The Substance* ضمن إطار تاريخي أوسع تُربط فيه قيمة المرأة ارتباطًا وثيقًا بالشباب والمظهر الجسدي. كما تُبرز كيف تسهم التمثيلات الإعلامية المهيمنة والأشكال السردية المبكرة في بناء نماذج ثنائية للأنوثة، حيث يُقترن الجمال بالفضيلة، بينما تُربط الشيخوخة بالتدهور. وتزداد حدة هذه التصورات في ظل الثقافة الإعلامية المعاصرة. ومن خلال قراءة تحليلية دقيقة للسرد الفيلمي، واللغة البصرية، وشخصية البطلة إليزابيث سباركل، تُظهر الدراسة كيف ينتقد الفيلم الضغوط الشديدة المفروضة على النساء للحفاظ على الشباب والجمال. كما تكشف جمالية رعب الجسد في الفيلم عن العواقب النفسية والجسدية لتبنّي معايير غير واقعية، حيث يُقدَّم الجمال بوصفه طريقة للسيطرة والمراقبة الذاتية والعنف الرمزي. وفي الختام، ترى الدراسة أن الفيلم يخرب معايير الجمال السائدة من خلال المبالغة فيها إلى حدود التشويه، كاشفًا عن طابعها المصطنع والعنيف. وتخلص إلى أن السعي وراء الجمال، بدلًا من تمكين النساء، غالبًا ما يؤدي إلى العزلة الذاتية وفقدان الهوية، مما يستدعي إعادة النظر النقدية في التعريفات الثقافية للأنوثة الطبيعية.

كلمات مفتاحية: معايير الجمال، الشيخوخة، الأنوثة، التمثيل الإعلامي، رعب الجسد.

Introduction:

The universal societal issue of the fear of aging and the loss of beauty transcends cultural boundaries, frequently manifesting within media and the film industry. This paper introduces a complex examination of how these fears are constructed and perpetuated, drawing insights from contemporary cinema and traditional folklore. Specifically, this study centers on the 2024 body horror film The Substance, analyzing its critical commentary on the societal pressures faced by aging women and the lengths to which individuals will go to preserve youth and beauty.

The core problematic addressed in this research derives from the societal obsession with eternal youthfulness, which extends beyond a mere rejection of femininity to represent a fundamental rejection of women's humanity and their normal right to age naturally. This phenomenon is starkly reflected in the ways women are compelled to suppress their emotions and change their physical appearance—such as consciously avoiding expressive facial movements to avoid visible signs of aging—prioritizing an aesthetic that pleases observers over authentic emotional expression. This pressure is worsened by the media, which plays a significant role in perpetuating a continuous cycle of gender issues, including sexism, lack of representation, gender discrimination, and gender division, primarily through its consistent portrayal of negative and conservative statements and gendered messages targeting women.

The Substance (2024) serves as a powerful contemporary illustration of these problematics, exploring the height of desperation for 'beauty'—or the definition of beauty through a hyper-perverted-capitalist male observation. The film reviews societal expectations on women's bodies, aging, and identity, highlighting the dread that comes from aging and the extreme, sometimes harmful, measures individuals undertake to remain beautiful. It presents a savage and thought-provoking exploration of self-modification and societal beauty standards through body horror, intending to call out, reject unrealistic beauty ideals, and challenge the notion that women have "no choice but to be perfect".

Based on this problematic, this research posits the following hypotheses: The Substance (2024) will serve as a critical commentary on the societal pressures faced by aging women, illustrating the extreme measures taken to preserve youth and beauty in response to a hyper-perverted-capitalist male observation.

Furthermore, this study aims to achieve several objectives. First, to examine The Substance (2024) through a feminist lens, focusing on its themes of fears of aging, loss of beauty, and the societal pressures on women. Second, to analyze how the film's protagonist, Elisabeth Sparkle, navigates her journey in maintaining beauty and youth, reflecting stereotypical societal expectations and the consequences of such pursuits. Finally, to uncover how The Substance contributes to and critiques the cultural discourse on aging and beauty, investigating its portrayal of female characters against the backdrop of societal beauty standards.

This study adopts a feminist film analysis approach to examine The Substance. It relies on a close reading of the film's narrative, character development—particularly that of Elisabeth Sparkle—visual language, and key thematic elements. The analysis is grounded in a feminist perspective that challenges dominant norms of beauty and youth, rejecting the social pressure placed on women to conform to idealized standards. More specifically, the study draws on a feminist framework that advocates for the recognition of women as full human beings, rather than as bodies defined by appearance. It emphasizes the importance of accepting imperfection and reviews the unequal expectations imposed on women in comparison to men. Through this lens, the research explores how the film represents the female body and engages with issues of agency, autonomy, and the burden of maintaining eternal youth and beauty.

1. Literature Review

Feminist film theory has long been concerned with the representation of gender in cinema and the ways films reproduce or challenge dominant social norms. Emerging in the late 1960s and early 1970s alongside second-wave feminism, this wave interrogates how visual media constructs gendered identities and power relations. In recent decades, feminist film theory has evolved to incorporate intersectional approaches, recognizing that women's representation is shaped by overlapping factors such as race, class, and sexuality. This shift has enabled more nuanced analyses of how multiple forms of oppression operate simultaneously within cinematic texts. Parallel to these developments, scholarship has increasingly examined the cultural construction of aging, particularly as it relates to women. Media representations often perpetuate negative perceptions of aging, framing it as decline rather than transformation (Woodward, 1999). Women, in particular, are subjected to ageist and sexist discourses that equate beauty with youth, leading to the early

internalization of societal anxieties about aging. The effects of aging are culturally imposed on women earlier than on men, reinforcing gendered inequalities.

Robert Butler (1968), an American film and Emmy Award-winning television director, who provides a critical framework for understanding discrimination based on age, first introduced the concept of ageism. Butler compares ageism to racism and sexism, emphasizing how individuals are reduced to stereotypical categories rather than recognized as complex subjects. Feminist age studies build on this framework by examining how aging women are both socially marginalized and culturally erased. Simone de Beauvoir's Coming of Age (1973) remains a foundational text in this regard, exploring the socio-cultural conditions that render older women invisible. Similarly, Gullette (2004) critiques the dominant "decline narrative," which constructs aging as a loss of value and identity, particularly for women whose social worth is tied to physical appearance.

This intersection of ageism and sexism is further reinforced by the global beauty industry, which promotes narrow and often unattainable standards of attractiveness. As Putri et al. (2023) argue, the beauty industry plays a central role in shaping societal expectations, encouraging women to pursue youthfulness as an ideal. Such standards are not merely aesthetic but deeply ideological, promoting distorted and physically impossible models of femininity that shape women's self-perception and value (Abdedaim, 2024). In The Substance, this dynamic is dramatized through the protagonist's desperate attempt to reclaim youth, revealing how internalized societal expectations can lead to self-alienation and bodily fragmentation. The film thus exposes beauty not as a natural attribute but as a constructed norm imposed through media and cultural narratives, reinforcing the idea that a woman's worth is inseparable from her appearance. This pressure is intensified by global consumer culture, where beauty is commodified and marketed aggressively, particularly toward younger women (Dobson, 2016). Consequently, women's engagement with beauty practices is often framed in reductive terms, overlooking the broader socio-cultural forces that shape these behaviors.

2. Hegemonic Mainstream Media Images of Beauty

One of the primary concerns of Feminism was how dominant cultural narratives construct and regulate women's bodies, moving from a focus on representation to a more complex analysis of the ideological systems that allow such images. Within this context, fairy tales emerge as early cultural texts that create and reproduce restrictive models of femininity. As scholars observe, female characters are typically divided into binary roles: passive, beautiful, and virtuous heroines versus ugly, wicked, and morally corrupted antagonists (Stone, 1985). These representations are not just narrative devices but deeply celebrated in body expectations, where beauty becomes a qualification for worthiness, particularly in relation to marriage and social validation. As one critic notes, "what we generally learn as children is that all princesses are beautiful and may even try to improve their beauty" (Talairach-Vielmas, 2007). This early association between beauty and virtue reinforces a moralized aesthetic, where physical appearance signifies inner goodness. Similarly, "good-temper and meekness are so regularly associated with beauty, and ill-temper with ugliness" that such patterns shape children's expectations of gender roles (Lieberman, 1972). Feminist readings thus highlight that beauty is not an isolated trait but part of a broader ideological system linking femininity to passivity, kindness, and submission. Notably, audiences are not purely passive

recipients of these images; many actively seek out and engage with idealized representations, reinforcing their psychological impact (Noumeur, 2025).

This passivity is central to the construction of the ideal feminine subject. Traits such as patience, helplessness, and acceptance of fate are appreciated, promoting what Yolen (1988) and Waelti-Walters (1982) describe as the "nice girl" archetype. In canonical versions of tales like Cinderella, heroines are rewarded not for support but for obedience, as they must "show off their beauty and submissiveness to win the appropriate mate" (Zipes, 2016). Moreover, this passivity extends into the regulation of female bodies, where, as Bottigheimer (2004) argues, male characters act upon women's bodies, reinforcing a dynamic of control and domination. Notably, these traits do not function independently but as an interconnected system. Baker-Sperry and Grauerholz (2003) conclude that fairy tales consistently reinforce the cultural importance of feminine beauty. As Stone (1985) notes, the emphasis on beauty, passivity, and dependence in fairy tales reflects and supports broader Western cultural norms. In The Substance, however, passivity is reshaped: the female body is no longer merely waiting to be chosen but is actively manipulated, modified, and consumed. This shift does not eliminate hegemonic beauty norms but intensifies them, revealing their underlying violence.



Source: https://www.thecut.com/article/review-the-substance-movie-gets-aging-wrong.html

Contemporary media plays a decisive role in amplifying these standards. As Kellner (2003) argues, media culture provides the materials through which individuals construct their identities and understand gender, race, and selfhood. This process operates through what Gramsci (1972) conceptualizes as hegemony: a system in which dominant ideologies are internalized as common sense. Media, as theorized by Hall (1997), Chomsky (1987), and Hooks (1992), functions to manufacture consent through repeated images and representations. In this context, the pursuit of beauty becomes a central cultural obligation. Mainstream media promotes a monolithic standard of attractiveness, increasingly framed as attainable through technological and consumerist means. As Bordo (1999) notes, women are not striving for perfection by itself but for normality in a culture where "normal is being radically [re]defined." The Substance dramatizes this condition by

literalizing the pressures of self-optimization: the body becomes a site of endless modification, where the boundary between improvement and destruction collapses.

Moreover, these hegemonic beauty standards are not neutral; they are deeply implicated in structures of power. As Chavez et al. (1999) argue, media messages can negatively shape identity, particularly for those who do not conform to dominant norms. In this sense, The Substance can be read as a critique of the same ideological system that fairy tales helped to establish—one that equates beauty with value, normality with conformity, and transformation with reward. In short, from fairy tales to contemporary cinema, hegemonic images of beauty have consistently defined women's bodies through narrow and exclusionary criteria. While fairy tales naturalize these ideals through narrative enchantment, The Substance exposes their grotesque and violent implications, revealing the cost of sustaining a system in which beauty is both a requirement and a trap.

3. Doxa of Youth: Symbolic Violence and the Body in The Substance

The film The Substance offers a compelling lens through which to examine the "doxa of youth" — the deeply unquestioned societal beliefs that assign value to the female body based on its youthful appearance. This doxa is historically reinforced by media, advertising, cosmetic productions, and technologies of enhancement (like the "substance" metaphor in the film), which treat youth as the norm rather than one stage among others. The movie uncovered the underlying power structures that punish women for the natural process of aging, thereby maintaining a narrow and oppressive standard of feminine worth.

In contemporary Western societies, the concept of the "ideal body" is largely constructed and disseminated through mass media, featuring models and actors who embody specific aesthetic standards. These pervasive media ideals establish a powerful standard, compelling young women to strive for a particular vision of "true" beauty. As DeBraganza and Hausenblas (2010) observe, the American mass media frequently promotes a "homogeneous Caucasian thin physique imposed on a heterogeneous audience" (DeBraganza & Hausenblas, 2010). This imposition constitutes a form of symbolic violence, where a singular, narrow beauty standard adopted and devalues those who do not conform. The Substance vividly dramatizes this societal pressure, portraying a protagonist whose professional and personal value is tied to her youthful, conventionally attractive appearance. The film illustrates the relentless pursuit of this ideal, highlighting the psychological and physical tax demanded by a culture that equates youth with worth.



Source: *https://www.bykristin.net/another-one/the-substance-of-the-substance*

The concept of "beauty" within narrative structures, often extends beyond mere physical attractiveness, serving as a potent signifier of deeper societal values. In the realm of fairy tales, for instance, beauty frequently functions as a "transparent code for [heroines] fertility potential" (Cardigos, 1996). This symbolic equation implies that a woman's perceived beauty is directly correlated with her romantic and sexual availability to men. This perspective is echoed in evolutionary psychology, where, as Gottschall et al. (2008) contend, "men place great value on female physical attractiveness because it is a trustworthy indicator of relative fertility" (p. 176). In The Substance, this connection between beauty, availability, and perceived value is starkly foregrounded. The protagonist's career and public image are predicated on her youthful allure(Vaz da Silva, 2002). The film thus critiques how a woman's worth is often reduced to her reproductive or aesthetic utility, and how the loss of these attributes can lead to societal rejection and self-alienation.

The societal imperative to maintain youth and beauty creates a profound psychological and social dilemma, which Naomi Wolf (2002) famously termed the "beauty myth." Wolf argues that this myth is not fundamentally about women's aesthetics, but rather about "men's institutions and institutional power" (p. 13). The beauty myth traps women in a contradictory demand; those who fail to adhere to its ever-shifting standards are penalized, while those who relentlessly pursue it are ultimately destined to fail as standards evolve or as they succumb to the natural processes of aging. The effort itself can also be perceived negatively. The Substance serves as a terrifying cinematic exposition of these contradictory demands. The protagonist's desperate and ultimately self-destructive quest to reclaim her youth vividly illustrates the "impossible standard for women to strive to meet and to inexorably be punished for failing at" (Wolf,2002). The film's graphic body horror elements are not merely sensational; they function as a metaphor for the physical and psychological damages and wounds (Lüthi, 1986) inflicted upon women who are compelled to compete within a patriarchal hierarchy that values superficial youth above all. The narrative powerfully conveys that the punishment for failing to uphold the beauty myth is not just social isolation but also a profound disintegration of the self.

4. The Illusion of Perfection: Beauty, Control, and Body Horror in The Substance (2024)

In The Substance (2024), the pursuit of youth and the idealization of unrealistic beauty standards are taken to their most grotesque and logical extremes. The film serves as a provocative critique of how patriarchal systems and neoliberal market forces objectify the aging female body. By examining the film through the lens of feminist theory and consumer culture, we can see how the imposition of beauty standards functions not merely as a matter of aesthetics but as a mechanism of social control and female obedience.

The connection between beauty standards and obedience in The Substance operates through several key channels, transforming the female body into a site of ideological and physical battle. Naomi Wolf famously argued that a cultural fixation on female thinness and youth is not an obsession with beauty, but rather an obsession with female obedience. The Substance illustrates how beauty standards serve a structural purpose: by keeping women preoccupied with "beauty work" and physical maintenance, patriarchal systems ensure they remain distracted from

challenging the status quo (Wolf, 2002). When Elisabeth Sparkle (Demi Moore), a once-famous TV fitness personality, faces obsolescence on her 50th birthday, she does not rebel against the misogynistic network executives who discard her. Instead, she turns her energy inward, utilizing a black-market biomedical treatment to create a younger, "perfect" version of herself, Sue (Margaret Qualley). This desperate pursuit of self-correction keeps Elisabeth trapped in a cycle of bodily management, effectively neutralizing any threat she might pose to the patriarchal order.



An aging studio executive grotesquely embodies patriarchal power as he discards a woman for her lost youth.
Source: *https://screenrant.com/the-substance-ending-explained/*

Ironically, while ugly aging men see their value with life experiences, autonomous women are replaced by pliable, sexually obedient facsimiles, in the film, Sue embodies this ideal perfectly. She is the ultimate product of the male gaze—flawless, perpetually smiling, and entirely submissive to the demands of the entertainment industry. While Elisabeth possesses experience and autonomy, she is considered culturally worthless because she has aged. Sue, on the other hand, is rewarded for her physical "perfection" and her willingness to perform the submissive, hyper-sexualized role demanded by executives like Harvey (Dennis Quaid). The film suggests that society's demand for physical perfection is often a mask for a deeper demand for female submissiveness.

The modification of the body—whether through plastic surgery, rigorous fitness routines, or, in this case, "the substance"—is coded as "self-management" or "self-investment." It becomes a prerequisite for employability and social visibility. Elisabeth's decision to inject the substance is driven by the harsh economic reality that, in her industry, "life stops at 50." She feels she both chooses and has no choice but to conform to these extreme standards to survive in a competitive market. In The Substance, Elisabeth's tragedy is rooted in her profound self-objectification. She views her own aging body as an object of disgust, a failure to maintain her feminine role. The film literalizes this self-harm in scenes where Elisabeth sabotages Sue by binge-eating, knowing their metabolic link will distort her double's perfection. This female rivalry, internalized as self-mutilation, highlights how consumer capitalism turns women against their own bodies.

Furthermore, the film enacts Barbara Creed's concept of the "monstrous-feminine" (1993), which argues that horror films often construct the female monster based on male anxieties regarding

the female reproductive body, rather than just viewing women as victims. Drawing on psychoanalytic theory, she highlights that the monstrous-feminine terrifies through her perceived power to castrate, possess, and dominate, representing the "horrible" (Creed, 2022). However, Fargeat reframes this paradigm from reproductive anxiety to cosmetic panic. The film shows how contemporary culture pathologizes any female body that exceeds youthful containment. Elisabeth's physical fragmentation is not simply a horror spectacle; it is a metaphor for the psychological and social breakdown caused by a culture built on self-surveillance, competition, and shame. The Substance does not offer a comforting narrative of "positive aging" or cosmetic reconciliation. Instead, it presents a grotesque, satirical rebellion against neglect. By turning aging into a monstrous spectacle, the film reveals that empowerment alone is insufficient to free women from the persistent policing of their bodies, exposing the inherent violence in the systems that claim to uphold beauty and value.



Source: *https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/films/news/demi-moore-the-substance-oscars-special-effects-b2685767.html*

5.Conclusion :

This study has examined the representation of women's bodies in The Substance, demonstrating how the film exposes and critiques hegemonic beauty standards embedded within contemporary media culture. Through an unsettling portrayal of bodily transformation, the film reveals that feminine identity is profoundly tied to appearance, where the value of the female subject is measured through her ability to conform to ever-shifting ideals of youth, beauty, and desirability. The analysis shows that beauty in the film is not merely aesthetic but ideological. It operates as a system of control that disciplines the female body, aligning with broader cultural expectations that define the "normal" feminine body as youthful, flawless, and infinitely flexible. In this sense, The Substance dramatizes what Susan Bordo describes as the redefinition of normality, where women are compelled not to pursue perfection as an abstract ideal, but to conform to standards that are presented as natural and attainable, despite being fundamentally artificial and exclusionary.

Furthermore, the film underscores the performative nature of femininity. Drawing on Judith Butler's concept of gender performativity, the female body in The Substance emerges as a site of continuous construction and reconstruction, shaped by repetition, surveillance, and external validation. The protagonist's transformation is not an act of empowerment but a forced process that reveals how femininity is produced through cultural scripts rather than inherent qualities. The body becomes both the medium and the evidence of this performance, inscribed with the pressures of visibility, desirability, and social acceptance.

Importantly, the film also highlights the role of the media in sustaining these norms. As Douglas Kellner argues, media culture provides the symbolic resources through which identities are formed, shaping individuals' understanding of gender and selfhood (Kellner, 2003). The Substance intensifies this dynamic by presenting a hyper-mediated world in which the body is constantly evaluated, modified, and consumed. In doing so, it reflects and critiques the mechanisms through which hegemonic ideals are internalized by audiences, often leading to anxiety, dissatisfaction, and alienation. Rather than reinforcing these standards, however, the film subverts them through excess and grotesque imagery. By pushing the logic of beauty to its extreme, it exposes the violence underlying normative expectations and destabilizes the illusion of naturalness that sustains them. The pursuit of beauty is revealed not as a path to fulfillment but as a cycle of self-erasure, where the subject is fragmented in the attempt to meet unattainable ideals.

In conclusion, The Substance offers a powerful critique of contemporary beauty culture, revealing how hegemonic standards operate through the body to regulate, discipline, and ultimately destabilize female identity. It invites a re-evaluation of the cultural norms that define femininity, exposing their constructed nature and the psychological and physical costs they impose. By making visible what is often hidden, the film opens a critical space for resisting and reimagining dominant representations of the female body.

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