



THE MONSTROUS FEMININE RE-IMAGINED: THE SUBSTANCE

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Abstract

This article examines Coralie Fargeat's *The Substance* (2024) as a feminist intervention within the body horror genre. By critiquing patriarchal norms surrounding beauty, aging, and the commodification of women's bodies, *The Substance* offers a provocative narrative that challenges phallogocentric structures and patriarchal systems. Anchored by Demi Moore's transformative performance, the film subverts the male gaze through grotesque imagery and visceral depictions of bodily disintegration; operating through the abject, it reconfigures monstrosity as a site of resistance and empowerment. Drawing on Julia Kristeva's concept of the abject, Barbara Creed's notion of the monstrous-feminine, and Laura Mulvey's theory of the male gaze, this study foregrounds *The Substance* as a significant yet underexplored contribution to feminist horror cinema. Through an analysis of the film's narrative and visual strategies, this article situates *The Substance* within the broader landscape of feminist New Wave Cinema, highlighting its capacity to interrogate societal norms by amplifying marginalized voices.

Keywords: Feminist body horror, the monstrous-feminine, abject, grotesque, male gaze.

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YENİDEN HAYAL EDİLEN MONSTRÖZ KADIN: THE SUBSTANCE

Öz

Bu makale, Coralie Fargeat'ın *The Substance* (2024) filmini bedensel korku türünde bir feminist müdahale olarak incelemekte. Güzellik, yaşlanma ve kadın bedenlerinin metalaştırılmasına ilişkin ataerkil normları eleştirerek *The Substance*, fallosantrik yapılar ve ataerkil sistemlere meydan okuyan kışkırtıcı bir anlatı sunmaktadır. Demi Moore'un dönüştürücü performansı ile güçlenen film, grotesk imgeler ve bedensel parçalanmanın etkileyici tasvirleri aracılığıyla eril bakışı altüst etmekte ve abjekt üzerinden işleyerek monströzlüğü bir direnç ve güçlenme alanı olarak yeniden yapılandırmaktadır. Julia Kristeva'nın abjekt kavramı, Barbara Creed'in monströz kadın kavramı ve Laura Mulvey'nin eril bakış teorisinden yola çıkan bu çalışma, *The Substance*'ı feminist korku sinemasına önemli ancak yeterince incelenmemiş bir katkı olarak öne çıkarmaktadır. Filmin anlatı ve görsel stratejilerinin analizi yoluyla bu makale, *The Substance*'ı Feminist Yeni Dalga Sineması bağlamında konumlandırmakta ve marjinalleştirilmiş sesleri güçlendirerek toplumsal normları sorgulama kapasitesini vurgulamaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Feminist bedensel korku, monströz kadın, abjekt, grotesk, eril bakış.

Introduction

Coralie Fargeat's *The Substance* (2024) emerges as a groundbreaking contribution to the body horror genre, blending grotesque imagery with a sharp feminist critique. Featuring a transformative performance by Demi Moore—who garnered widespread acclaim, including a Golden Globe—the film is both viscerally unsettling and deeply thought-provoking. Through its portrayal of grotesque bodily transformations, *The Substance* interrogates societal norms surrounding women's bodies, aging, and beauty standards, positioning itself as a significant text in contemporary feminist cinema. The film explores themes of bodily autonomy, societal control, and the objectification of women, aligning itself with a lineage of horror films that represent the challenge of the patriarchal norms and the cultural taboos surrounding the female body. In doing so, *The Substance* exemplifies the potential of body horror to interrogate and subvert entrenched societal anxieties about femininity and bodily agency. The present article explores how *The Substance* re-imagines body horror as a site of feminist critique, engaging with themes of abjection, the grotesque, and the cultural pressures exerted on women, particularly within the intersecting spheres of women aging, celebrity culture, and bodily autonomy.

Body horror, as a cinematic and literary genre, is characterized by its depiction of grotesque bodily transformations and violations. From the invasive parasitism of the maternal body in Ridley Scott's *Alien* (1979)¹ to the visceral metamorphosis in David Cronenberg's *The Fly* (1986),² body

¹ See Charles Hicks's "If the Exosuit Fits: Becoming the Alien Queen in *Alien* and *Aliens*" (2017), which explores the representation of body horror through maternal dynamics in Ridley Scott's *Alien* (1979) and James Cameron's *Aliens* (1986), critiquing the simplistic binary framing of Ellen Ripley as the "good" and the Alien Queen as the "bad" mother. The article argues that the films use body horror to explore themes of abjection, subjection, and the traumatic embodiment of maternity, and demonstrates how Ripley's physical and psychological evolution parallels the Alien Queen's, emphasizing the visceral intersections of motherhood and monstrosity within the frameworks of phallic law and symbolic representation.

² See Wayne Egers's *David Cronenberg's Body-Horror Films and Diverse Embodied Spectators* (2002), offering an interdisciplinary exploration of how Cronenberg's body-horror films engage with the embodied experiences of their viewers. Egers argues that the horror in these films transcends the vulnerability of the physical body, probing the unsettling repercussions of cultural frameworks that perpetuate the philosophical separation of mind and body. Through this lens, the study examines how Cronenberg's work challenges spectators to confront the entanglement of corporeality and identity. Also,

horror fixates on the fragility and vulnerability of the human form. Central to the genre is its ability to elicit unease by confronting audiences with the repressed corporeal reality that Julia Kristeva (1982) terms the abject—a concept articulated in *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*. As Kristeva explains, the abject disrupts boundaries—such as between self and other, human and non-human, or life and death—threatening the Symbolic Order by intruding upon the Lacanian Real.³ Body horror externalizes deeply-seated fears, often reflecting broader societal anxieties about disease, identity politics, technology, and philosophical/ideological concerns of contemporary societies. Often by utilizing grotesque imagery to depict the abject, the genre exposes the fragility of identity and the human form, making it a potent site for critical reflection.

While body horror traditionally engages with universal fears and archetypal anxieties, it has also served as a fertile ground for exploring gendered anxieties. Barbara Creed's (1993) seminal work, *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis*, highlights how the genre often positions the female body as a locus of both mesmerizing fascination and petrifying terror. Films like Andrzej Żuławski's *Possession* (1981),⁴ Jennifer Kent's *The Babadook* (2014),⁵ and Julia Ducournau's

see *The Philosophy of David Cronenberg* (2012), edited by Simon Riches, featuring a section entitled "Body Horror and Bodily Transformations", which deals with issues of identity and body horror as a challenge to the mind and body dichotomy in Western philosophy.

³ See Jacques Lacan's *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan* (1991), exploring how psychic functions operate within the three interconnected orders: The Real (the ungraspable and traumatic aspect of experience), The Imaginary (images and illusions shaping identity), and The Symbolic (language, social structures, and meaning-making).

⁴ See Rachel Sharpe and Sophie Sexon's "Mother's Milk and Menstrual Blood in *Puncture*", (2018), which explores the abject symbolism of blood and breast-milk by juxtaposing late medieval depictions of Christ's wounds with feminine tropes in horror films like *Suspiria* (1977) and *Possession* (1981). By exploring the symbolic interchangeability of milk and blood across historical contexts, the article highlights how these substances have consistently engendered fear and revulsion towards maternal bodies, bridging medieval and contemporary conceptions of abject maternity.

⁵ See Shelley Buerger's "*The Beak That Grips: Maternal Indifference, Ambivalence, and the Abject in The Babadook*" (2017), examining how Kent's film re-imagines maternal abjection. Drawing on Kristeva's theory of abjection and Creed's concept of the monstrous-feminine, Buerger argues that the film inverts traditional narratives by portraying Amelia's rejection of the mother-child bond as the source of abjection. This inversion offers a provocative depiction of maternal experience that remains unsettling despite a redemptive narrative arc.

Titane (2021)⁶ delve into themes of maternity, sexuality, and bodily autonomy, reflecting societal unease surrounding the female body's potential to disrupt cultural norms. *The Substance* builds upon these body horror genre conventions, but operates within a distinctly feminist framework. Through utilizing grotesque transformations and abject imagery, the film critiques patriarchal constructions of femininity, beauty, and bodily control. Fargeat, as a female director, succeeds in subverting the patriarchal signifying norms—often from within—by deploying and amplifying their normalized aspects, exposing the often unconscious and unseen mechanism of gender oppression.

At its core, *The Substance* tells the story of a woman navigating grotesque situations and bodily transformations that serve as a potent metaphor for the societal pressures imposed on women's appearances and autonomy. The film's narrative and visual style, focalizing on the theme of appearance of women's bodies, oscillates between an empathetic gaze and an exaggerated male gaze, drawing attention to how women's bodies are often treated as commodities, subjected to control and sexualizing practices—including self-inflicted regulation due to internalized patriarchal values and the male gaze within. Through the use of visceral imagery and abject elements—such as oozing substances, decaying flesh, and invasive transformations—the film forces viewers to confront their own discomfort with bodily boundaries, anxieties about bodily autonomy, and the insidious nature of societal controls, making it a powerful vehicle for feminist critique. In doing so, the film aligns with a growing body of feminist horror cinema that seeks to challenge patriarchal mechanisms of power, including the male gaze and phallogocentric signifying systems.

The feminist potential of body horror lies in its ability to reclaim

⁶ See Jiwoo Choi's "Powers of (Body) Horror: *Titane* and the Queer Posthuman Abject" (2024), which situates *Titane* (2021) within the New French Extremity, interpreting its cyborg protagonist through Donna Haraway's posthumanism and Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection. Choi argues that the film envisions a queer, posthuman mode of kinship that challenges patriarchal and heteronormative structures. Also see Bilal Khan's "Subverting the Male Gaze: *Titane* (2021) and the Abject" (2024), examining how *Titane* initially employs Laura Mulvey's concept of the male gaze, only to subvert it through body horror elements that destabilize traditional gender and sexuality norms. Khan highlights the film's transition from objectification to an anti-male gaze, presenting a radical, non-heteronormative form of visual storytelling. The analysis underscores the film's subversive use of body horror to question the concept of woman and create a space for nonconformist gender ideologies on screen.

and subvert traditional representations of the female body. Creed (1993) argues that horror frequently constructs the female body as monstrous or abject, particularly in relation to female reproductive functions and sexuality. However, feminist filmmakers have repurposed these tropes to critique patriarchal structures, transforming the abject into a site of resistance, and thus subverting the established phallogocentric system from within. In *The Substance*, the female protagonist's grotesque transformations magnify societal expectations surrounding female beauty, revealing the oppressive standards imposed on women's bodies. By challenging these norms from within, the film critiques the cultural pressures that demand women to conform to unrealistic standards and unattainable ideals. Recent works by women filmmakers within the body horror genre—such as Karyn Kusama's *Jennifer's Body* (2009), Julia Ducournau's *Raw* (2016), or Rose Glass's *Saint Maud* (2019)—illustrate the growing prominence of feminist perspectives in horror, particularly through their use of abjection and the grotesque as tools for subversive critique. By exploring *The Substance* within a similar context, this article contributes to ongoing discussions on the role of body horror in feminist cinema and its ability to provoke critical reflection on societal norms. Additionally, the study expands on the existing literature that reflects of the body horror genre from feminist perspective by foregrounding the liberatory powers and the potential for a more emancipator mode of signifying as well as being one that transgresses the traditional phallogocentric order.

The paper thus argues that Coralie Fargeat's *The Substance* employs body horror conventions precisely to engage in feminist critiques of bodily autonomy—or the lack of it when it comes to women—the mundane normalized practice of objectification and sexualization of women's bodies, and the pervasive societal control exerted over women defined by their bodies. By leveraging visceral disgust through grotesque and abject imagery, the film challenges cultural taboos surrounding the female body and interrogates the phallogocentric systems that seek to regulate it. The analysis focuses on three key aspects: the film's use of grotesque imagery to provoke visceral reactions, its engagement with abjection as a means of challenging societal norms, and its feminist reinterpretation of body horror tropes. In this way, the article aims to situate *The Substance* within the broader context of feminist horror cinema while highlighting its unique contributions to the genre.

The theoretical framework for this analysis draws on two key works in the study of horror and feminist theory: Julia Kristeva's concept of the abject and Barbara Creed's exploration of the monstrous-feminine. Kristeva's *Powers of Horror* (1982) defines abjection as a psychological and cultural process that involves the rejection of what is impure, taboo, or liminal—those elements that defy established systems of order. In body horror, abjection manifests through depictions of bodily fluids, decay, and other elements that blur the boundaries between self and other, provoking both fascination and repulsion. This makes it a powerful tool for interrogating norms and taboos on the most elemental level by eliciting visceral reactions (Kristeva, 1982). Creed's *The Monstrous-Feminine* (1993) extends Kristeva's work by examining how horror films construct the female body as a site of fear and monstrosity, particularly in relation to female reproductive functions, female sexuality, and the maternal body. By reclaiming these elements, feminist horror films challenge patriarchal constructions of gender and sexuality, offering a subversive alternative to traditional portrayals of women in horror cinema. In *The Substance*, the film's portrayal of grotesque bodily transformations can be thus interpreted as an act of feminist reclamation, using the abject to critique societal attitudes toward women's bodies and autonomy. By situating *The Substance* within contemporary feminist horror discourse, this article underscores the film's role in interrogating and subverting cultural anxieties surrounding the female body. In conclusion, *The Substance* represents a significant addition to the body horror genre, offering a nuanced feminist critique of bodily autonomy, objectification, and societal control. Through its use of grotesque and abject imagery, the film challenges viewers to confront their own discomfort and biases, demonstrating the power of horror as a tool for social commentary.

Synopsis of *The Substance*

On her fiftieth birthday, former Hollywood star Elisabeth Sparkle (Demi Moore) is absurdly fired from her long-running aerobics TV show by its producer, Harvey (Dennis Quaid), who deems her too old for the role. Distraught, she crashes her car after witnessing a billboard of herself being dismantled. At the hospital, a young nurse discreetly hands her a flash drive advertising "The Substance", an illicit serum that promises a younger, more beautiful version of oneself. Desperate, Elisabeth orders and injects the serum, triggering violent convulsions that birth a younger version of herself, Sue (Margaret Qualley), grotesquely (and grossly)

emerging from a gash in her back. Bound by strict protocol, they must alternate consciousness every seven days, with the dormant body remaining unconscious and sustained intravenously. To maintain Sue's form and prevent deterioration, stabilizer fluid must be extracted daily from Elisabeth's original body.

Sue quickly ascends to fame, replacing Elisabeth on the TV show and landing the coveted role of hosting the network's New Year's Eve special. As Sue revels in her newfound success, Elisabeth sinks into self-loathing and isolation. Their fragile balance shatters when Sue, craving more time, hoards stabilizer fluid and delays their switch, causing Elisabeth's body to age at an accelerated rate. Panicked and horrified, Elisabeth contacts "The Substance" supplier, who warns that any disruption to the schedule results in irreversible deterioration. The women, metaphorically a singular entity and shared consciousness, now see each other as adversaries: Elisabeth resents Sue's recklessness, which accelerates her aging, while Sue despises Elisabeth's self-destructive tendencies. Their relationship devolves into mutual hatred and tensions escalate when Sue, determined to maintain her independent lifestyle, refuses to switch back, further exacerbating Elisabeth's physical decline.

Three months later, on the eve of the New Year's Eve broadcast, Sue runs out of stabilizer fluid and is forced to switch back to replenish it. When Elisabeth regains control, she finds herself grotesquely aged into a hunched, decrepit figure. Desperate to prevent further damage, she orders a serum designed to terminate Sue but hesitates, still craving the vicarious thrill of Sue's life. Partially injecting the serum, she ultimately resuscitates Sue. Realizing Elisabeth's intent to kill her, Sue viciously attacks and brutally murders Elisabeth by beating her to death before leaving for the broadcast.

Without Elisabeth to sustain her, Sue's body begins to rapidly decay. In a frantic bid to survive, she misuses the remaining activator serum, despite its single-use limitation. The result is a monstrous female hybrid—MonstroElisaSue—a grotesque fusion of Elisabeth and Sue. Masking her disfigurement with a cutout from one of Elisabeth's old posters, MonstroElisaSue attempts to host the broadcast, but the audience recoils in horror. Amid the ensuing chaos, an audience member decapitates MonstroElisaSue, only for a new, even more grotesque head to regenerate. As the body of MonstroElisaSue deteriorates, she violently disintegrates into a blood-soaked spectacle as her arm snaps off, dren-

hing the studio and audience in gore.

Fleeing outside, MonstroElisaSuecollapses and explodes into viscera. Amid the carnage, Elisabeth's original face detaches and crawls toward her neglected star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame. In a final hallucination, she smiles, imagining herself admired once more—before her face liquefies into a pool of blood. By the next morning, the remnants are unceremoniously cleaned away by a floor scrubber, erasing the last trace of her existence.

Literature Review: Limited Scholarship on *The Substance*

Since its premiere at Cannes on May 19, 2024, and its subsequent releases in the United Kingdom and the United States in September, followed by France later that year, Coralie Fargeat's *The Substance* has garnered both popular and critical attention. However, as a recent cinematic work, scholarly engagement with the film remains limited. This review synthesizes existing critiques and situates *The Substance* within broader theoretical and cinematic contexts, drawing on relevant scholarship in feminist film theory, body horror, and representations of the abject in visual culture.

A critical examination of *The Substance* necessitates situating the film within the broader discourse of feminist cinema. Feminist film theory has long interrogated the representation of women in film, from Laura Mulvey's (1975) foundational critique of the male gaze to Barbara Creed's (1993) analysis of the monstrous-feminine. Fargeat's film explicitly engages with and interrogates the cinematic male gaze, as theorized by Mulvey (1975) in "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema". The film's early sequences explicitly position Elisabeth Sparkle as the object of a voyeuristic gaze, aligning with Mulvey's assertion that woman serves as "bearer of the look" (p. 11). However, as the narrative unfolds, the film subverts this gaze, confronting viewers with grotesque bodily disintegrations and transformations that dismantle traditional visual pleasure. This thematic and aesthetic shift resonates with recent feminist critiques, such as Bilal Khan's (2024) analysis of *Titane*, which explores body horror as a means of challenging heteronormative and patriarchal paradigms (p. 50). Similarly, Fargeat's film rejects conventional visual pleasure through the male gaze, offering instead a biting satirical horror of societal beauty standards and the commodification of women's bodies.

More recent feminist scholarship has expanded these discussions

to address the intersection of gender, aging, and celebrity culture in contemporary media. Studies such as Naomi Wolf's *The Beauty Myth* (1990), Josephine Dolan's "Smoothing the Wrinkles" (2013) and *Contemporary Cinema and Old Age* (2017) highlight the persistent ageism in media and the film industry, where older female stars are often rendered invisible or subjected to narratives emphasizing loss and decline. Wolf (1990) argues that as women have gained more political, economic, and social freedoms, societal pressures regarding physical appearance have intensified. She contends that beauty has been weaponized as a means of control, creating an unattainable ideal that reinforces patriarchal power structures. Wolf identifies how industries—such as cosmetics, fashion, and diet culture—exploit women's insecurities to maintain a cycle of self-doubt and consumption and critiques the ways in which beauty standards are enforced through media, workplace discrimination, and even medical practices. She also examines how these pressures contribute to mental health issues, including eating disorders and body dysmorphia. Her key argument is that *the beauty myth* is not about beauty itself but about power. By keeping women preoccupied with their appearances, the myth distracts them from pursuing greater autonomy and equality. Dolan's (2013) "Smoothing the Wrinkles: Hollywood, 'Successful Aging,' and the New Visibility of Older Female Stars" examines the conditional visibility of aging actresses in Hollywood, arguing that while there is an increased presence of older female stars in recent years, this visibility is contingent upon their adherence to ideals of *successful aging*, which often involve cosmetic interventions and conformity to youth-centric beauty standards. She critiques how the film and media industry subjects "older female stars to abject objects of a pathological gaze", rendering any natural signs of aging as abject and undesirable (2013, p. 342). This dynamic reinforces the notion that aging women must maintain a youthful appearance to remain relevant, thereby perpetuating ageist and sexist ideologies within Hollywood. Dolan's (2018) *Contemporary Cinema and 'Old Age': Gender and the Silvering of Stardom* further explicitly examines how contemporary cinema portrays aging, focusing on the intersection of gender, celebrity culture, and film narratives. Dolan explores how aging is represented and commodified in Hollywood, particularly through the lens of celebrity culture. To illustrate, Dolan examines how films like *Mamma Mia!* (2008) and *The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel* (2011) shape consumer culture and tourism while zooming in on the *late style* images of actors like Judi Dench, Diane Keaton, and Clint Eastwood, she considers how their aging personas are

crafted and perceived. Additionally, the author discusses endorsements by aging celebrities for products like BrainAge and Nespresso, shedding light on how these endorsements normalize deferred retirement and reflect societal attitudes toward cognitive decline. Film narratives such as *Last Orders* (2001), *Going in Style* (2017), *RED* (2010), *Iris* (2001), and *The Iron Lady* (2011) are analyzed to understand how they portray aging masculinity and femininity and Dolan concludes that Hollywood uses old age to reinforce traditional gender binaries—aging femininity is often depicted as a loss of youth requiring rejuvenation, whereas aging masculinity is portrayed as a process that adds value, likening it to the aging of fine wine. This perspective underscores the persistent gender disparities in representations of aging within contemporary cinema. *The Substance* engages directly with these concerns, exposing the pressures placed on aging actresses to maintain youthfulness at any cost. However, by employing body horror as a means of critique, the film subverts conventional cinematic beauty standards, making the grotesque and the abject central to its feminist message. This approach aligns with the recent shift in feminist cinema, as noted by Creed (2022) in *Return of the Monstrous-Feminine*, where contemporary women directors utilize horror to challenge normative gender and beauty constructs. Highlighting that female monstrosity has evolved in response to issues such as post-humanism, digital culture, and ecological crises. Creed argues that the monstrous-feminine remains a potent tool for exploring contemporary fears about gender, power, and identity in an era of rapid social change. In this way, *The Substance* not only contributes to the evolving discourse on aging, beauty, and female autonomy in contemporary feminist cinema but also extends it into the tradition of feminist body horror.

The film thus also invites comparisons to the works of David Cronenberg, a pioneer of the body horror genre, whose films interrogate the instability of the human body and the anxieties surrounding its transformation. Scholars like Wayne Egers (2002)⁷ have analyzed Cronenberg's oeuvre as exposing the fragility and malleability of the human form while critiquing philosophical mind-body dualism. His films, such as *The Fly* (1986) and *Videodrome* (1983), depict bodily mutation as both a source of terror and transcendence, often reflecting deeper anxieties about technology, disease, and self-identity. Fargeat's *The Substance* extends this tradition, employing grotesque imagery and visceral sequences to cri-

⁷ See Note 2.

tique patriarchal systems perpetuating societal obsessions with youth, beauty, and self-reinvention. However, where Cronenberg's work often centers on male protagonists whose bodies become sites of uncontrollable transformation, Fargeat shifts the focus explicitly to female embodiment and the cultural expectations imposed upon it. By situating its horror within the context of aging, celebrity, and commodification of women's bodies, *The Substance* embeds a distinctly feminist critique, positioning itself not only as an extension of body horror but also as a challenge to its historically male-dominated lens. Unlike Cronenberg's male-centered narratives of bodily excess and mutation, *The Substance* foregrounds the specifically gendered pressures placed on women, making its critique of corporeal transformation deeply political. In this sense, Fargeat's film aligns with the work of contemporary feminist horror directors like Julia Ducournau (*Titane*, 2021) and Jennifer Kent (*The Babadook*, 2014), who similarly use horror to deconstruct gendered anxieties surrounding the body and identity. Thus, while thematically aligned with Cronenberg's preoccupations, *The Substance* marks an evolution of the genre, reclaiming body horror as a feminist tool for exposing and subverting oppressive beauty standards.

A crucial critical lens through which *The Substance* emerges is undoubtedly Julia Kristeva's concept of the abject and Barbara Creed's application of the monstrous-feminine to horror cinema. The film's grotesque body duplications and transformations disrupt boundaries on multiple levels—between self and other, subject and object, conscious and sub/unconscious states, to name just a few. In this regard, studies such as Jiwoo Choi's "Powers of (Body) Horror: *Titane* and the Queer Posthuman Abject" (2024) and Bilal Khan's "Subverting the Male Gaze: *Titane* (2021) and the Abject" (2024)⁸ highlight the emancipatory potential of the abject, particularly in feminist and queer discourses. Although these works focus on Julia Ducournau's *Titane* (2021), their theoretical frameworks provide valuable insights into *The Substance* as another text that destabilizes traditional representations of gender, identity, and bodily autonomy by utilizing the abject as a feminist trope.

While critical reviews have praised *The Substance* for its audacious themes and Demi Moore's acclaimed performance,⁹ scholarship on the

⁸ See Note 6.

⁹ Demi Moore's performance has garnered widespread acclaim, signaling a significant cultural shift toward embracing older women as multifaceted and

film remains in its early stages. Early critiques from online platforms such as *The Atlantic* and *Vulture* have focused primarily on its provocative style and thematic resonance, particularly its critique of ageism and the entertainment industry's relentless pursuit of youth. These reviews have drawn comparisons to Gia Coppola's *The Last Showgirl* (2024), starring Pamela Anderson, Pablo Larraín's *Maria* (2024), starring Angelina Jolie (Li, Review of *The Substance*, *The Atlantic*, January 8, 2025), and Halina Reijn's *Babygirl* (2024), starring Nicole Kidman (Peitzman, Review of *The Substance* *Vulture*, December 26, 2024). However, such analyses often lack the theoretical depth and scholarly rigor of academic discourse. Given the scarcity of scholarly engagement with *The Substance*, this article seeks to contribute to the academic conversation by situating the film at the intersections of body horror, feminist theory, and the abject. In doing so, it aims to illuminate how Fargeat's film extends the legacy of body horror while addressing contemporary anxieties surrounding aging, gender identity, and selfhood. This article also underscores the need for further critical analysis of the film's complex narrative and aesthetic strategies, which hold significant implications for feminist studies.

Body Horror and the Female Body

Body horror, or biological horror, occupies a distinctive and often debated position within cinema and literature due to its unflinching focus on the human body as a site of unsettling violation manifested through transformation, mutilation, graphic violence, zombification, or unnatural body movements. The genre often explores themes of physical decay,

commanding protagonists. The film's premiere at the Cannes Film Festival was met with a 13-minute standing ovation, underscoring its profound impact as a feminist statement. Critics have lauded Moore's portrayal of Elisabeth Sparkle, a fading star confronting the brutal realities of aging in a youth-obsessed industry. Phil de Semlyen of *Time Out* (May 20, 2024) drew parallels between Moore's performance and Isabelle Adjani's intense portrayal in *Possession* (1981), praising her vulnerability and sorrowful depth. De Semlyen further suggested that Moore might be channeling her own Hollywood experiences into the role, adding depth to her character's emotional resonance. David Ehrlich of *IndieWire* (May 19, 2024) described *The Substance* as an epic, audacious body horror masterpiece, emphasizing its role in challenging societal beauty standards and the commodification of women's bodies. Moore's fearless embodiment of Elisabeth not only elevates the film but also contributes to the evolving landscape of the body horror genre as a platform for feminist critique. Her performance has sparked meaningful conversations about the intersections of gender, horror, and cultural anxieties, reaffirming the genre's capacity to interrogate and subvert prevailing narratives surrounding the female body.

disease, mutation, and identity loss, depicting the body as both a site of terror and a battleground for broader anxieties. In "Mutations and Metamorphoses: Body Horror is Biological Horror", Roland Allan Lopez Cruz (2012) defines body horror precisely through a biological lens, arguing that "its powers of revulsion" lie in how it disrupts normative anatomy and function, transforming the familiar into the grotesque, rendering the genre "indeed biological horror" (p. 161). Hence, by confronting audiences with abject imagery, body horror provokes visceral reactions such as disgust, fear, and even empathy. It highlights the fragility and vulnerability of the human form, and by dealing with the boundaries between the body and the (monstrous) other, it pushes audiences to confront their deepest fears and anxieties. Films, literature, and other media in this genre may thus address deeper psychological and societal fears, such as the loss of control, illness, aging, or identity, making the horror due to not only gore or unsettling images but also about the challenge of the viewer's relationship with the body and the idea of what it means to be human. As Creed (1993) asserts, body horror not only taps into deep-seated cultural anxieties about physical boundaries and mortality but also engages with contemporary issues such as identity politics. Consequently, Julia Kristeva's (1982) concept of the abject—as that which disturbs identity, order, and conventional systems, such as bodily fluids, decay, the breakdown of bodily boundaries that collapses the distinction between self and other—is central to the genre's unsettling impact. These elements, which societies seek to exclude or repress to maintain order, are foregrounded in body horror to elicit visceral reactions of both fascination and disgust. In feminist interpretations, body horror can serve as a critique of the ways women's bodies are objectified and controlled, often addressing themes of bodily autonomy, violation, and transformation.

However, the classification of body horror as a distinct genre remains a point of scholarly debate. Philip Brophy (1983) first introduced the term body horror in "Horrority: The Textuality of Contemporary Horror Film", describing the horror genre's preoccupation with bodily transgression. While some critics regard body horror as a subgenre of horror (Cruz, 2012; Reyes, Shapiro, and Storey, 2022; Reyes, 2024), others argue that it functions more as a thematic mode or a trope that permeates multiple genres, including science fiction, psychological horror, and surrealist cinema. Although body horror frequently intersects with

related horror subgenres, such as slasher,¹⁰ splatter,¹¹ and monster horror,¹² it distinguishes itself through its focus on bodily transformation as a central narrative and thematic device (Reyes, 2016). Some scholars even perceive the horror genre per se as a *body genre*—a form of low culture that relies on explicit bodily sensation to evoke physical reactions from viewers (Williams, 1991; Cruz, 2012; Clover, 1993). Film scholar Linda Williams (1991) identifies body horror as one of three *gross* or *excessive* genres, alongside pornography and melodrama, all of which rely on heightened physicality to provoke visceral audience responses.

Despite its fluidity, body horror remains recognizable as a distinct category due to its consistent engagement with bodily violation and transformation. The term is versatile and somewhat fluid, and while some classic examples, such as David Cronenberg's *The Fly* (1986) and John Carpenter's *The Thing* (1982) epitomize the genre, films like Darren Aronofsky's *Black Swan* (2010) and Julia Ducournau's *Titane* (2021) also employ body horror elements within psychological and thriller frameworks to explore identity and psychological disintegration. These films underscore the genre's capacity to reflect societal anxieties surrounding disease, contamination, and corporeal fragility through depictions of bodily transformations, mutations, invasions, or disfigurement, while exploring themes such as identity, mortality, and the fragility of the human form. Films like David Cronenberg's *The Fly* (1986) and John Carpenter's *The Thing* (1982) use the body as a canvas to reflect broader societal fears, manifesting the genre's fascination with bodily transformation. *The Fly*, for instance, presents the protagonist's gradual transformation into a grotesque human-fly hybrid, serving as a metaphor for the dehumanizing effects of technological advancement and unchecked ambition. Similarly, *The Thing* explores bodily invasion and replication, reflecting

¹⁰ A slasher film is a horror subgenre centered around a murderer or group of murderers who hunt down and kill multiple victims, often using sharp or bladed weapons. For more details, see Wickham Clayton's *Style and Form in the Hollywood Slasher Film*, (2015).

¹¹ A splatter film is a horror subgenre that emphasizes explicit depictions of gore and intense violence. Using special effects, these films explore the fragility of the human body and the dramatic spectacle of its mutilation. For more details, see John McCarty's *Splatter Movies: Breaking the Last Taboo of the Screen*, (1984).

¹² A monster horror film centers on characters fighting to survive against one or more hostile creatures, often of unnatural size. The genre traces its roots to adaptations of horror folklore and literary works.

Cold War-era anxieties about trust and identity loss.

Given its reliance on visceral imagery and the disruption of bodily boundaries, body horror also serves as a potent site for feminist critique. Historically, horror cinema—and cultural narratives more broadly—have centered on the subjugation of women's bodies, making the genre's thematic preoccupation with bodily autonomy particularly significant. Films like *Raw* (2016) and *Titane* (2021) exemplify how body horror can subvert patriarchal representations of the female body, reframing it as a site of power, transformation, and resistance. By interrogating the contested genre status of body horror while recognizing its unique thematic and aesthetic characteristics, this article situates *The Substance* within a lineage of films that utilize corporeal horror to challenge dominant socio-cultural discourses on gender, identity, and embodiment.

The Female Body in Horror

Within the horror genre, the female body has historically been positioned as a central site of transformation, fear, and terror. Body horror's preoccupation with bodily fluids, reproduction, and corporeal instability often intersects with cultural anxieties surrounding femininity, female sexuality, and maternity. As Creed (1993) highlights, horror films frequently construct the female body as monstrous, particularly in relation to its reproductive capacities and sexuality, reinforcing societal deep-seated fears about femininity and womanhood. Films like Andrzej Żuławski's *Possession* (1981)¹³ and Brian De Palma's *Carrie* (1976)¹⁴ exemplify this dynamic, portraying women's bodies as both sources of power and sites of abjection. In *Possession*, the protagonist's grotesque transformation and eventual duplication reflect societal anxieties regarding female autonomy and desire, while *Carrie* explores menstruation as

¹³ See Note 4.

¹⁴ See Patricia Pisters's "Carrie's Sisters: New Blood in Contemporary Female Horror Cinema," which examines how women directors have increasingly adopted and adapted horror aesthetics since the early 2000s. Drawing on Barbara Creed's concept of the monstrous-feminine, Pisters investigates representations of female monstrosity as abject and/or castrating phenomena. By analyzing films such as Brian De Palma's *Carrie* (1976) alongside Kimberly Peirce's 2013 remake, Jane Campion's *In the Cut* (2003), and Lucile Hadžihalilović's *Evolution* (2015), she traces the motif of blood as a central aesthetic in contemporary horror. Pisters argues that female-directed horror films introduce intimate perspectives and unconscious desires that intersect with depictions of social violence and environmental connections, thereby expanding the scope of horror aesthetics.

object, linking it to the violent repercussions of repressed female rage. Such films tap into cultural fears surrounding womanhood, portraying menstruation, pregnancy, and childbirth as monstrous processes.

However, body horror also offers subversive potential. By embracing the grotesque and the abject, it critiques patriarchal constructions of femininity and aesthetics. Despite its historical tendency to depict women as passive victims or objects of fear, the genre can be appropriated to undermine these representations and critique patriarchal phallogocentric norms. By foregrounding bodily transformations and appropriating the abject and the grotesque, feminist approaches to body horror challenge traditional narratives that victimize women, often by embracing and amplifying those representations in order to undermine the signified, and the signifying systems per se, from within. To illustrate, films like Julia Ducournau's *Raw* (2016)¹⁵ and Claire Denis's *Trouble Every Day* (2001)¹⁶ exemplify this potential, using visceral imagery to interrogate gendered expectations surrounding female sexuality, consumption, and autonomy. In *Raw*, the protagonist's metamorphosis into a cannibalistic predator serves as a metaphor for the constraints placed on female desire, while *Trouble Every Day* explores the intersections of desire, violence, and consumption through its portrayal of a woman whose insatiable hunger disrupts conventional gender roles.

Barbara Creed's (2022) *Return of the Monstrous-Feminine: Feminist New Wave Cinema*, a follow-up to her seminal *The Monstrous-Feminine*

¹⁵ See Serafina Muniz's thesis, *From Girlhood to Cannibalism: Feminine Abjection and the Monstrous Coming of Age* (2024), which examines how horror films such as *Ginger Snaps* (2000), *Jennifer's Body* (2009), *Raw* (2016), and *Bones and All* (2022) explore feminine adolescence through themes of self-discovery, societal marginalization, and otherness. Drawing on Creed's concept of the monstrous-feminine, Muniz analyzes how these films use the female body as a site of abjection to confront anxieties surrounding female sexual agency and gender identity. By depicting bodily excess, destruction, and transgressions tied to feminine biological cycles and societal judgments, the films critique cultural frameworks that regulate gender identity. Additionally, Muniz highlights the otherworldly intimacy found in queer female friendships, sisterhoods, and partnerships, which challenge social and physical constraints on gender and sexuality.

¹⁶ See Janice Loreck's "Science, Sensation and the Female Monster: *Trouble Every Day*" (2016), where she examines Claire Denis's film as a departure from conventional portrayals of violent women in genres like horror and exploitation cinema. Loreck argues that *the trope of a violent woman in Denis's work emerges as a complex figure that destabilizes and disrupts dominant representations of femininity and womanhood on multiple levels.*

(1993), further expands on these ideas. Creed introduces the concept of Feminist New Wave Cinema, examining contemporary films that engage with social justice issues, including women's equality, gendered violence, and queer relationships. She argues that the monstrous-feminine has evolved over the past two decades, particularly in works by women directors who merge everyday horrors with traditional horror motifs. Her analysis of films such as *The Babadook* (2014), *A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night* (2014), *Raw* (2016), *Revenge* (2017) as well as the series *The Handmaid's Tale* (2017), situates these narratives within broader social movements, including #MeToo, third- and fourth-wave feminism, queer theory, and critiques of anthropocentrism. Creed's updated framework provides a crucial lens for understanding the feminist potential of contemporary body horror, highlighting how the genre continues to evolve as a space for subversive storytelling and cultural critique.

The Subversive Potential of Body Horror

The Substance continues the tradition of body horror as a subversive genre, using grotesque visceral imagery not merely to shock but to challenge traditional representations of female beauty, critique societal attitudes toward the female body and autonomy, and subvert the phallogocentric power dynamics that govern gender politics. The film's portrayal of nightmarish bodily transformations within the grotesque framework of the abject serves as a powerful carnivalesque metaphor for the pressures imposed on women, from the commodification to regulation and ultimate disposability of the female form within the patriarchal consumer culture. Through extreme corporeal mutations, *The Substance* exposes the ways in which beauty standards, ageism, and consumer culture function as mechanisms of control, dictating how women should present themselves while rendering them obsolete once they deviate from these expectations.

By employing the abject as a site of feminist critique, the film compels viewers to confront their own discomfort with the female body, revealing deeply ingrained cultural biases, anxieties, and taboos surrounding femininity, sexuality, aging, and bodily autonomy. Within this framework, body horror inscribed upon the female form becomes a potent tool for exposing patriarchal mechanisms of oppression, subverting traditional representations of idealized female beauty, and reclaiming bodily transformations within the abject as a site of resistance. Utilizing the body horror genre, *The Substance* disrupts conventional expectations by rejecting the pristine, hypersexualized image of femininity—precisely by

subverting it from within as the film grotesquely magnifies objectification and sexualization of the female body—and instead representing the female body as an abject site of grotesque transformation. The protagonist's (Elizabeth, Sue, MonstroElisaSue) bodily deterioration exemplifies this subversion—not only does it defy the idealized, flawless image of femininity that dominates mainstream media but it also functions to shift her body into a site of horror, marked by abject decay and distortion, both internally and externally. This transformation, however, is not simply a grotesque spectacle—it emerges as a critique of societal expectations placed upon women, inviting the audience to visually face the discomfort viscerally arising not only due to viscerally disturbing images of metamorphosis but also due to the conventional gendered norms. When the protagonist undergoes a gory metamorphosis—in a grotesque inversion of reproduction, engendering a younger version of herself, splitting from her naked backside in a slow, vivid, and deeply unnerving sequence—the scene literally inscribes the abject on the naked female form. This scene literalizes the societal pressures inscribed upon women's bodies, transforming them into sites of unnatural renewal and relentless self-replication. The horror does not lie solely in the mutation itself but in its implications—the relentless demand for youth, the erasure of aging, and the objectification of female bodies as endlessly consumable products.

The critique deepens through the depiction of the character of Elizabeth. As Sue overuses her allotted time, Elizabeth's body deteriorates, visibly embodying the consequences of the struggle against time. Her transformation into a grotesque, age figure—the stereotypical old hag—manifests not only her physical decline but the societal rejection of women who have outlived their perceived usefulness. Her decay serves as a potent metaphor for the societal pressures that demand from women eternal youth and perfection, revealing how the relentless pursuit of these ideals and beauty standard ultimately leads to self-destruction and loss of identity.

The film intensifies these themes in a brutal confrontation between Elisabeth and Sue, where their bodies become violently distorted, starting in a gruesome fight. Their physical struggle, vividly depicted as gore, symbolizes the larger battle over bodily autonomy, revealing how patriarchal structures pit women against each other in competition for beauty, power, and acceptance. This conflict, rendered in grotesque bodily destruction, also reflects the internalized aggression women often

direct towards themselves under oppressive beauty standards. The scene's visceral impact underscores the violence—both literal and figurative—wrought by these societal pressures. At the film's climax, ElisaSue, emerges as the ultimate manifestation of the grotesque abject, a monstrous fusion of disfigured flesh and fractured body parts, ElisaSue manifests as a terrifying embodiment of the distortions imposed by ideals of beauty and femininity. Her form—a horrifying materialized abject, transgressing the boundaries of the human, an amalgamation of disfigured flesh and mutilated identity—both repulsive and disturbingly mesmerizing, represents the culmination of female physical and emotional disintegration, a body forced to conform until it has become a wholly unrecognizable abject. At the final stage of transformation, ElisaSue exposes the horrifying consequences of a society that demands women's self-modification while punishing them for their inevitable failure to meet impossible standards.

Through its depiction of body horror and violent transformation, *The Substance* provokes not just visceral disgust but deeper critical reflection on how gendered power dynamics shape and manipulate the female form. By embracing body horror and employing the grotesque to deconstruct the notion of an idealized female body, the film exposes beauty standards as constructed to control the female form, challenging the viewer to confront the horror of these dynamics. Therefore, the film's function within the body horror genre does more than simply unsettle—it actively dismantles the idea of the idealized female body by exposing its construction as a controlling discourse. As Barbara Creed (1993) argues, horror has historically framed the female body as monstrous, particularly in relation to its reproductive capacities. *The Substance* builds on this tradition but subverts it from within, turning the monstrous-feminine into a tool of resistance rather than fear. In doing so, *The Substance* transforms body horror from a tool of shock into a profound feminist statement on the complexities of gender and bodily autonomy.

This approach aligns *The Substance* with feminist body horror films such as Julia Ducournau's *Raw* (2016) and Claire Denis's *Trouble Every Day* (2001), both of which use corporeal transformations to explore female agency, desire, and transgression. Like *Raw*, which links cannibalistic hunger to the repression and eventual liberation of female desire, *The Substance* weaponizes bodily instability to challenge dominant narratives of beauty, control, and self-worth. In doing so, Coralie Fargeat's

film exemplifies the subversive potential of body horror—not merely to provoke but to dismantle ingrained cultural norms surrounding sex and gender. By embracing body horror as a site of feminist critique, *The Substance* transforms the object of fear into a means of defiance. It forces audiences to confront the cultural forces that dictate how women's bodies should look, age, and behave, exposing the violence—both implicit and explicit—embedded within these expectations. Through its radical engagement with body horror, the film therefore does not simply unsettle; it destabilizes, challenges, and resists, making the abject not just a spectacle, but a weapon against patriarchal control.

The Grotesque and the Abject (The Grotesque Abject) in *The Substance*

The Substance employs the grotesque along with the abject as the central aesthetic and narrative device of its body horror, provoking intense, often unsettling visceral reactions utilizing the abject while offering a liberating grotesque element, compelling audiences to confront taboos and the monstrous on a visceral, even archetypal, level. Before engaging with the specific visual and narrative strategies in *The Substance*, it is essential to briefly delineate the concept of the grotesque—a notion profoundly influenced by Mikhail Bakhtin's studies. In Bakhtinian framework, the grotesque is characterized by the deliberate exaggeration and distortion of bodily forms to expose their raw, unmediated, and often absurd nature. This process of distortion is not intended solely for aesthetic shock; rather, it functions as a critical tool that destabilizes established norms and hierarchies. By embracing bodily excess, decay, and transformation, the grotesque subverts conventional representations of the human body, thereby creating a liberatory space for alternative identities and forms of self-expression (Bakhtin, 1984). In its capacity to challenge sanitized, idealized portrayals, the grotesque actively disrupts the power structures that enforce these representations, inviting a reimagining of both individual subjectivity and collective cultural narratives.

The film's use of hyper-saturated colors—for example, the shiny hot pink leotard worn by Sue contrasted with blood-soaked scenes—creates a jarring visual juxtaposition that heightens the film's grotesque aesthetic. Moreover, the grotesque imagery in *The Substance* primarily explores the dissolution of boundaries between self and other, human and non-human, addressing the abject within grotesque framework. Through its portrayal of radical bodily transformations, the film blurs

lines between the natural and the artificial, suggesting that identity is fluid and mutable. This post-human perspective challenges traditional binaries of the phallogocentric signifying system and embraces hybridity as a form of resistance.¹⁷ To exemplify, the cyclical transformation that Elisabeth undergoes destabilizes the very notion of a stable identity (including the fixed phallus), reflecting broader philosophical anxieties about identity politics and societal fears about the malleability of the human body in an era marked by cosmetic surgery and biotechnological intervention. By foregrounding Elisabeth's loss of control over her own body and identity, the film critiques societal mechanisms that seek to not only regulate women's bodies but also dominate their psychic autonomy. *The Substance* thus critiques the societal pressures women face to conform, utilizing the grotesque as a liberatory device to re-signify the female body into an active force of subversion.

Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection provides a critical framework for understanding the unsettling grotesque imagery in *The Substance*. According to Kristeva, the abject represents that which exists on the margins of the self, challenging the boundaries between subject and object, life and death. The abject symbolizes that which must be expelled to maintain order and the integrity of the self, yet its persistent presence serves as a reminder of the fragility and constructed nature of these boundaries. In *The Substance*, abjection is embodied through bodily transformations, explicit close-ups on bodily fluids, and the depictions of decay. A particularly striking scene features Elisabeth undergoing a metamorphosis after ingesting the titular substance. Her body mutates in ways that are both horrifying and mesmerizing— with the camera zooming in on her skin slowly peeling away to reveal layers of raw sinew and pulsating organs beneath. This powerful imagery forces the audience to confront the fragility of corporeal boundaries, representing the body as

¹⁷ See Donna Haraway's *A Cyborg Manifesto* (1985), which challenges traditional binaries embedded within the phallogocentric signifying system—a framework privileging masculine modes of knowledge and rigid dualisms. Haraway introduces the concept of the cyborg, a hybrid of machine and organism, to illustrate how hybridity can serve as a potent form of resistance. By destabilizing entrenched dichotomies such as nature versus culture, human versus non-human, and masculine versus feminine, the cyborg paradigm envisions identity as fluid, contested, and in constant negotiation. This embrace of hybridity subverts the hegemony of binary oppositions and provides a framework through which marginalized subjects can re-conceptualize and reclaim power, challenging normative structures that have historically regulated and constrained forms of existence.

a site of transformation and decay. Close-ups on bodily fluids—oozing blood, bile, and other secretions—underscore the abject nature of the human body, disrupting the illusion of unity and containment. The recurring focus on substances excreted from the Elisabeth's body—blood, sweat, tears, and an unidentified viscous fluid—symbolizes the abject's disruptive force that symbolically rejects norms about cleanliness and beauty. These bodily excretions break the established artificial boundaries regarding the human body, challenging the audience to engage with the corporeal reality of human existence on visceral level. In doing so, the abject becomes a site of resistance, critiquing societal taboos surrounding the female body, particularly its functions, processes, and autonomy.

Wendy Ide of *The Guardian* (September 22, 2024) rightly comments the film's feminist perspective, noting its subversion of traditional tropes by focusing on the post-fertility phase of the female body—a stage too often ignored or vilified in cinema. Here, Kristeva's theory of the abject clearly intersects with Barbara Creed's concept of the monstrous-feminine, which identifies the female body as a recurrent site of horror in cinema, deriving power from its association with the abject—rooted in the maternal body's link to birth, blood, and decay (1993). In this context, the abject emerges as a powerful tool for resistance, challenging cultural norms around bodily autonomy and taboos regarding female aging. Elisabeth's grotesquely rapid decay manifesting as the abject thus becomes a metaphor for the inevitability of aging and the societal disdain for older women. By centering this process within the narrative, *The Substance* compels audiences to reconsider the cultural stigmatization of aging female bodies. The visceral disgust elicited by these transformations becomes a means of resistance, disrupting the male gaze's idealized vision of women and reclaiming the female body as a site of agency and defiance. As Alisa Wilkinson's review of *The Substance* in *The New York Times* (September 19, 2024) points out, the film's satirical use of exaggerated camera angles serve to mimic the male gaze only to critique and subvert it from within, highlighting the absurd standards imposed on women's bodies. What is more, the grotesquely monstrous body of ElisaSue—metaphorically born from the (lesbian) fusion of a monstrous, post-fertile female body with the flawless, hyper-fertile ideal—becomes an emblem of grotesque abjection, both feared and revolved. Therefore, the film's depiction of transformations challenges traditional representations of femininity by re-imagining the female body within the grotesque abject as

a locus of power, agency, and resistance. The visceral reactions elicited by the film's grotesquely abject imagery force viewers to confront their own complicity in perpetuating these standards.

The narrative structure intertwines scenes of bodily transformation with flashbacks to Elisabeth's experiences of objectification. This juxtaposition establishes a parallel between the external social horrors inflicted on the female body and the internalized trauma turning into a nightmare, suggesting that the disintegration of identity under oppressive systems can be both physical and psychological. A pivotal sequence—in which Elisabeth's body gives birth to a grotesque hybrid humanoid form, MonstroElisaSue—signifies the transgression of categorization evoking the abject. This moment not only blur the lines between human and non-human but also evokes the latent, unconscious forces within the female body, threatening established boundaries and giving birth to deep-seated anxieties. In this context, the abject grotesque also addresses anxieties surrounding technological advancements and scientific intrusions into bodily integrity, particularly as they pertain to the female form.

The fusion of human and non-human elements not only destabilizes established notions of identity and autonomy but also symbolizes the external impositions of societal norms—particularly those governing and defining the female body. In reclaiming the grotesque and the abject in the portrayal of the non-human as the embodiment of internalized societal norms (MonstroElisaSue), *The Substance* critiques established phallogocentric systems that govern female bodies and women's positions in societies. Thus, through its use of visceral, transformative imagery that elicits both physical repulsion and emotional uneasy, the film engages with feminist critiques surrounding the female body, ultimately redefining it as a space of resistance concerning rather than conformity.

Feminist Critique in *The Substance*: Resisting the Male Gaze

The Substance subverts conventional horror tropes by deliberately rejecting the male gaze—a cinematic construct that typically sexualizes and objectifies women as passive subjects of visual pleasure—and instead foregrounds female agency and subjectivity. As Creed (1993) observes, the traditional horror genre often constructs the feminine as the object of male anxieties. In contrast to films that cast women as either victims, mere props to advance male heroism, or objects of male desire, *The Substance* foregrounds female agency and situates the female subjective

experience at the centre of its narrative. The female protagonist, Elisabeth, is portrayed not as a *damsel in distress* but as an active agent who negotiates her own transformation and, in doing so, becomes her own antagonist through her internalized patriarchal norms. This narrative strategy not only undermines the phallocentrism of the signifying system but also resonates with Laura Mulvey's seminal critique of cinema, where she argues that traditional filmic practices are designed to address and satisfy a male, voyeuristic perspective that reduces women to objects of male, heterosexual desire and fear (Mulvey, 1975).

In feminist discourse, the concept of the male gaze becomes prominent, referring to a narrative and visual perspective that positions women as objects of heterosexual desire, and by doing so, imposing this perspective on the audience, regardless of gender; thereby reinforcing patriarchal norms and values. In her influential 1975 essay, "*Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*", Mulvey's concept builds on historical precedents—such as Renaissance art's idealized yet voyeuristic representations of the (nude) female form—to illustrate how women are constructed for male visual consumption (Mulvey, 1975; Berger, 1972¹⁸). In cinematic practice, the male gaze operates on three levels: the perspective of the filmmaker, the portrayal through male characters, and the viewpoint imposed on the audience. Grounded in Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalytic theory, Mulvey interprets this phenomenon as an expression of scopophilia—the fundamental pleasure in looking—which simultaneously delivers aesthetic enjoyment and sexual gratification. Additionally, the male gaze has been critiqued for fetishizing and marginalizing women, particularly black women, whose bodies are often simultaneously sexualized and excluded from dominant beauty ideals. In contrast, emerging frameworks such as the Matrixial Gaze¹⁹ or the female gaze²⁰ offer

¹⁸ See John Berger's *Ways of Seeing* (1972), which first articulated how Western visual culture—particularly Renaissance nude painting and contemporary advertising—positions women as passive objects to be viewed rather than active subjects, thereby introducing the foundational notion of the *male gaze*.

¹⁹ See Bracha Lichtenberg-Ettinger's *The Matrixial Gaze* (1995), which re-conceptualizes the cinematic gaze beyond phallocentric binaries by introducing a *matrixial* field of co-emergence and shared subjectivity. In this framework, the boundaries between self and other, human and non-human, are fluid and mutually constitutive, enabling an inter-subjective aesthetic grounded in empathy, vulnerability, and ethical responsibility that challenges objectifying and isolating modes of vision.

²⁰ See Joey Soloway on *The Female Gaze*/ MASTER CLASS (2016), in which So-

alternative narratives that challenge these reductive and exclusionary portrayals, advocating for representations that foreground agency and diversity.

The Substance actively resists the male gaze in this sense by centering its narrative on female experience, subjectivity, and agency. The film deliberately amplifies traditional phallogentric tropes—such as voyeuristic camera angles and fragmented body shots—to grotesque extremes, thereby laying bare their complicity in the objectification and control of female subjects. By doing so, the film ultimately dismantles these conventions from within. To illustrate, Elisabeth is depicted from a perspective that explicitly reflects the internalized male gaze while the portrayal of Sue amplifies the objectifying and sexualizing male gaze. The film's hyper-stylized *Pump It Up* sequences for instance, explicitly magnify traditional male gaze tropes—close-ups isolating body parts and exploitative angles—exaggerating the male gaze to a grotesque extent. This deliberate overemphasis transforms the male gaze into a parody, eliciting discomfort and critical reflection. By confronting viewers with such hyperbolic spectacle, the film dismantles the appeal of traditional objectification, revealing the underlying insidiousness of such portrayals. This internal critique subverts cinematic conventions by turning exploitative visual practices—such as fetishistic close-ups and scopophilic framing—into parodic devices that undermine their intended function. In doing so, the film reveals the fragility of hegemonic visual structures and simultaneously, destabilizes phallogentric spectatorship from within.

The film's cinematography further reinforces its feminist shift in perspective by eschewing the fetishization of the female form in favor of sustained attention to grotesque and abject details—decaying flesh, rupturing sinew, and fluid excretions—thereby rendering Elisabeth's transformations both horrifying and empowering. Rather than offering the

loway expands the discussion of the female gaze in film and media by introducing additional dimensions to the concept. During a 2016 *Toronto International Film Festival Masterclass*, Soloway presented three fundamental elements of the female gaze: *feeling seeing*, *the gazed gaze*, and *returning the gaze*. These elements offer a contrast to Mulvey's framework of the male gaze. Specifically, *feeling seeing* refers to a filmmaking approach that renders the camera's perspective subjective, thereby capturing the emotional depth of the scene. Meanwhile, *the gazed gaze* invites viewers into the characters' experiences rather than positioning them as detached onlookers, enabling a more intimate understanding of the characters' inner thoughts, emotions, and feelings.

polished surfaces of conventional beauty, the camera privileges visceral close-ups of bodily mutation and oozing fluids, compelling viewers to engage with the raw immediacy of female experience. This refusal to sanitize the body not only dismantles voyeuristic scopophilia but also critiques a broader cultural obsession with youth and perfection by laying bare the violence implicit in those ideals. In doing so, the film challenges not only external modes of the male gaze but also its internalization, advocating for a re-imagined female subjectivity that finds agency in monstrosity as a site of liberation rather than condemnation or victimhood. Furthermore, these perspectival strategies gesture toward an alternative intersubjective mode of vision, one that emphasizes connectivity, relationality, and ethical engagement over detached objectification. Ultimately, the film advances an emancipatory paradigm by reconfiguring the cinematic gaze—from prurient to participatory—foregrounding female agency and subjectivity as central to its narrative and aesthetic project. This shift aligns with feminist scholarship advocating the reclamation of visual agency through the female gaze.

Reproductive Politics and Bodily Autonomy

At its core, *The Substance* engages deeply with feminist concerns surrounding reproductive politics and bodily autonomy. The film interrogates the societal mechanisms that aim to control women's bodies, drawing critical parallels with contemporary debates on reproductive rights and the marginalization of aging women—both culturally as well as medically. As Wendy Ide (2024) observes, the director of *The Substance* exposes the paradox placed on women—demanding perpetual youth while simultaneously vilifying women once they deviate from this imperative. Through its grotesque portrayal of bodily transformation—marked by abject mutations and the unsettling multiplication of the female form—*The Substance* offers a potent metaphor for the commodification of female bodies and the violent erasure of female aging. This imagery not only critiques the persistent cultural and medical pressures that confine women to narrow definitions of femininity, but also foregrounds the broader struggle against systematic violations of women's authenticity and autonomy.

Elisabeth's loss of control over her own body and identity, as depicted in the film, further exemplifies how external interventions serve as a means of regulating women's reproductive capacities and alienating their bodies from themselves. This narrative focus resonates with feminist

critiques of gender politics, which argue that patriarchal systems—through legislation, cultural norms, and medical practices—seek to regulate and control women’s reproductive capacities and confine women to narrow definitions of femininity. Moreover, *The Substance* interrogates the commodification of the female body by portraying it as a site of exploitation and unethical experimentation, echoing real-world issues such as the often-invasive surgeries within the beauty industry and the relentless pursuit of an idealized appearance.

The film’s representation of reproductive processes—particularly in its unsettling depiction of a grotesque, cyclical metamorphosis—challenges traditional notions of maternity. By reframing the act of reproduction as both a site of creation and destruction, *The Substance* subverts the idealized narrative of maternal sacrifice, exposing the profound physical and emotional toll imposed by patriarchal standards. Thus, the film not only critiques the male-dominated control over female bodies but also positions female monstrosity as an act of liberation—transforming what is traditionally perceived as a weakness into a source of power and resistance. A particularly disturbing sequence, in which Elisabeth appears to give birth to a younger version of herself, symbolizes both creation and destruction. This grotesque reframing of motherhood through the lens of body horror challenges the traditional representations of maternity and the idealized narrative of maternal sacrifice. In doing so, *The Substance* not only critiques male-dominated control over female bodies but also transforms female monstrosity into an act of liberation—recasting what is traditionally viewed as weakness into a source of power and resistance. Ultimately, *The Substance* offers a multi-layered feminist critique that dismantles conventional representations of the female body. Through its unflinching portrayal of the grotesque and the abject, the film calls for an emancipatory reimagining of female subjectivity—one that resists the constraints of phallocentric vision and reclaims the body as a site of self-determination and transformative potential.

Conclusion

The Substance exemplifies the transformative potential of body horror as a vehicle for feminist critique, challenging societal norms surrounding the female body. By centering visceral reactions, grotesque imagery, and abject transformations, the film interrogates gender politics and subverts traditional horror tropes that have historically marginalized women. Through its narrative and visual strategies, *The Substance* critiques

phallogocentric structures and patriarchal systems, re-imagining abject monstrosity as a source of empowerment and inviting viewers to reconsider conventional notions of femininity and womanhood. This subversive approach aligns with broader feminist reinterpretations of horror that seek to reframe the genre's legacy of objectification. Drawing on Julia Kristeva's concept of the abject and Barbara Creed's analysis of the monstrous-feminine, *The Substance* positions the female body as a site of resistance, blurring boundaries between self and other, and human and non-human. In doing so, the film disrupts societal taboos and exposes the oppressive structures that seek to regulate and control women's bodies.

The significance of feminist body horror in contemporary cinema is profound. Films like *The Substance* challenge conventional representations of women in horror while addressing complex social issues such as aging, reproductive rights, aesthetic politics, and gendered violence. By centering female experience and perspectives, the film not only disrupts the male gaze but also expands the genre's narrative and aesthetic depth, paving the way for alternative forms of storytelling and representation. Future research might explore comparative analyses of feminist body horror works or examine how these films intersect with issues of race, class, and sexuality to engage broader social justice concerns. Additionally, studying audience reception—particularly through social media and online discourse—could yield valuable insights into evolving cultural attitudes toward gender and horror. *The Substance* demonstrates how body horror can serve as a powerful tool for feminist critique, challenging patriarchal norms and broadening the boundaries of cinematic representation. Its success underscores the importance of feminist reinterpretations within the genre and signals exciting new directions for future exploration and innovation in horror cinema.

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