



## Existential Anxiety in Contemporary Cinema: The Example of the Film "The Substance"

Hasan Tutar Merve Diltemiz

### ABSTRACT

This study conducts a psychoanalytic examination of Coralie Fargeat's "The Substance," analyzing its representation of existential anxiety within contemporary cinema. Framed by the theoretical lenses of Freud, Jung, and Lacan, the research investigates how the film translates its characters' unconscious dynamics, internal conflicts, and identity crises into a cinematic language. Employing semiotic analysis as a qualitative method, the study interprets selected scenes, visual motifs, and narrative structures. The findings reveal that the film powerfully reflects the existential dread individuals face in confronting mortality and meaninglessness, articulated through the tension between the body, societal norms, and the pursuit of an authentic self. The narrative forces its characters to confront the inner void of an existence reduced to mere physicality. This process signifies a transformative reckoning with the fragmentation and reconstruction of the ego. Ultimately, this analysis posits that cinema, as exemplified by "The Substance," can function as an effective psychoanalytic tool for concretizing and deciphering unconscious conflicts and existential anxieties, highlighting the productive dialogue between film and psychoanalysis in understanding body-centric existential dread.

**Keywords:** Existential pain, Future anxiety, World pain, Self-perception, Body perception.

HASAN TUTAR  
Prof. Dr.  
Bolu Abant İzzet Baysal University  
hasantutar@ibu.edu.tr  
ORCID: 0000-0001-8383-1464

MERVE DİLTEMİZ  
Asst. Prof. Dr.  
Bolu Abant İzzet Baysal University  
mervediltemiz@gmail.com  
ORCID: 0009-0003-9685-064X

**Citation:** Tutar, H. & Diltemiz, M. (2025). "Existential Anxiety in Contemporary Cinema: The Example of the Film "The Substance". *Journal of Selçuk Communication*, 18(Cinema special), 24-50. <https://doi.org/10.18094/josc.1813863>



# Çağdaş Sinemada Varoluşsal Kaygı: “The Substance” Filmi Örneği

Hasan Tutar  Merve Diltemiz 

ÖZ

Bu çalışma, Coralie Fargeat'ın “The Substance” filmini, çağdaş sinemada varoluşsal kaygının temsili bağlamında psikanalitik bir yaklaşımla incelemektedir. Araştırma, Freud, Jung ve Lacan'ın kuramsal çerçeveleri ışığında, filmin karakterlerinin bilinçdışı dinamiklerini, iç çatışmalarını ve kimlik bunalımlarını nasıl sinematik bir dile dönüştürdüğünü analiz etmektedir. Nitel bir yöntem olarak benimsenen semiyotik analiz aracılığıyla, seçilmiş sahneler, görsel motifler ve anlatı yapıları incelenmiştir. Bulgular, filmin, bireyin ölümlülük ve anlamsızlık karşısında duyduğu varoluşsal korkuyu; beden, toplumsal normlar ve özgün benlik arayışı arasındaki gerilim üzerinden güçlü bir biçimde yansıttığını ortaya koymaktadır. Anlatı, karakterleri salt fizikselliğe indirgenmiş bir varoluşun getirdiği içsel boşlukla yüzleşmeye zorlamaktadır. Bu süreç, benliğin parçalanışı ve yeniden inşasına dair dönüştürücü bir hesaplaşmaya işaret eder. Çalışma, nihayetinde, “The Substance” özelinde sinemanın, bilinçdışı süreçleri ve varoluşsal bunalımları somutlaştırarak çözümleyebilen etkili bir psikanalitik araç işlevi görebileceğini öne sürmektedir. Bu analiz, beden merkezli bir varoluşun yarattığı kaygıyı anlamak için sinema ve psikanaliz arasındaki verimli diyalogu vurgulamaktadır.

**Anahtar Sözcükler:** Varoluş sancısı, Gelecek kaygısı, Dünya ağrısı, Benlik algısı, Beden algısı

HASAN TUTAR

Prof. Dr.

Bolu Abant İzzet Baysal Üniversitesi

hasantutar@ibu.edu.tr

ORCID: 0000-0001-8383-1464

MERVE DİLTEMİZ

Asst. Prof. Dr.

Bolu Abant İzzet Baysal Üniversitesi

mervediltemiz@gmail.com

ORCID: 0009-0003-9685-064X

**Atıf:** Tutar, H. & Diltemiz, M. (2025). Çağdaş sinemada varoluşsal kaygı: “The Substance” filmi örneği. *Selçuk İletişim*, 18(Sinema özel), 24-50. <https://doi.org/10.18094/josc.1813863>

## INTRODUCTION

Existential anxiety, as a reflection of the fundamental tensions individuals experience in their search for meaning, holds an essential place in contemporary philosophy and psychoanalytic theory. Recent systematic reviews emphasize that existential anxiety is not limited to fear of death, but also includes concerns about freedom, isolation, and meaninglessness (van Bruggen, Vos, Westerhof, Bohlmeijer, & Glas, 2015). Binder, Hjeltnes, and Schanche (2022) further describe it as a pervasive existential orientation that colours how individuals experience health, suffering, and the search for a meaningful life. This concept analyzes the individual's conflicts between life, death, and self-consciousness, while also revealing the role of the body in this process (Tomer & Eliason, 2007). The film *The Substance* presents a visual that has attracted the attention of modern psychoanalytic discussions by focusing on the priority of the body in the individual's existential crises. In this context, the film investigates how individual and collective anxiety are structured through bodily representations.

Recent research on digital culture and body image shows that social media platforms intensify the link between bodily concerns and existential anxiety. Systematic reviews report that exposure to idealized and edited images is consistently associated with body dissatisfaction and internalization of thin- and fit-ideals (Bonfanti, Lo Coco, Ruggieri, & Ingoglia, 2025; Castellanos Silva et al., 2023). These reviews also link such exposure to increased symptoms of disordered eating and appearance anxiety (Vandenbosch, Fardouly, & Tiggemann, 2022). Other recent studies have shown that scrolling, selfie practices, and comparison with influencers intensify self-surveillance and the fear of social exclusion (Blackburn & Irfan, 2025; Czubaj, Szymańska, & Nowak, 2025). Merino et al. (2024) argue that these processes can deepen feelings of emptiness and loss of meaning, especially when the body becomes the main condition for social visibility. In this sense, the body appears as a digitally governed project through which individuals try to manage vulnerability, mortality, and their need for recognition.

The relationship and duality between the body and the self are essential in Freud's (1961) conceptualization of the "Ego and Id." As the representation area or space of the unconscious, the body serves as the carrier and space for the individual's anxieties and desires. According to Lacan (1977), the individual relies on the reflection of his body at an imaginary level while constructing his self through the "mirror stage". This theoretical background reveals that the body is at the center of existential anxiety. It can be argued that the body's priority in contemporary literature stems from cultural and technological influences, especially the desire to be visible and noticed. In the digital age, the individual's body perception is a frequent subject of psychoanalytic analyses. In this research, the film *The Substance* was

used as an example, assuming that individuals express their existential concerns through the body and that placing the body before the self in modern society causes an existential crisis. To support this assumption, the film analyzes how the body has become a means of representation and demonstration from a psychoanalytic perspective. The analysis of the film *The Substance* presents a critical opportunity to understand the body-centered representation of contemporary individuals' existential crises.

In recent years, studies on the role of the body in an individual's existential crises have offered a broad perspective through multidisciplinary approaches. For example, McDougall (1995) suggests that individuals express their unconscious conflicts through the body and presents findings that psychosomatic experiences play a decisive role in identity construction. Grosz (1994) argues, on the other hand, that the body is not only a biological structure but also a dynamic space shaped by social norms and cultural discourses, indicating that this situation leads to an increase in the individual's need for social approval. In line with their psychoanalytic perspectives, Freud (1961) and Lacan (1975) also argued that the body is an essential reflection of the subject's unconscious processes and structural transformations.

In addition, studies by Tiggemann and Slater (2013) and Fardouly et al. (2015) examine the effects of digitalization and social media on body perception, revealing that modern technology creates new dimensions in individuals' existential questioning. On the other hand, Žižek (2006) and Mulvey (1975) have contributed to the reinterpretation of individual and social dynamics by emphasizing the intersection of the body with social unconscious processes in cinema and popular culture. However, the existing literature's relatively limited concrete analyses of popular culture texts necessitate a more in-depth consideration of the relationship between the body and existential anxiety (Parr, C., 2023). For example, although films such as *The Substance* provide essential clues about how the superiority of the body over the self is experienced at both the individual and social levels, it is observed that such analyses are not given enough space.

Digital culture further sharpens the relationship between the body and existential anxiety. Idealized body images in social media environments not only set aesthetic expectations but also establish a system of norms that directly influence an individual's self-esteem, psychological well-being, and desire for social acceptance (Merino et al., 2024; Vandenbosch, Fardouly, & Tiggemann, 2022). Recent reviews show that the relationships between social media use and body dissatisfaction, eating disorder risk, and appearance anxiety are moderate but consistent (Bonfanti, Lo Coco, Ruggieri, & Ingoglia, 2025; Castellanos Silva et al., 2023). Thus, the contemporary subject is forced to live not only with a mortal and

fragile body, but also with a digital body that is constantly measured, compared, and scored. This situation deepens existential anxiety both quantitatively and qualitatively (Brzozowska & Gotlib, 2025; Czubaj, Szymańska, & Nowak, 2025).

Lacan's approach to the imaginary and symbolic levels, Freud's concept of the unconscious, and views on digital body representations in contemporary literature form the basic analytical framework of this research (Parr, 2023; Žižek, 2006). In particular, Lacan's theory of the mirror stage draws attention to the bodily alienation of the individual in the subjectification process. At the same time, Freud's structuralist conceptualization of the unconscious prepares the ground for expressing internal conflicts through bodily representations. In this context, the visual and narrative representations in the film *The Substance* are analyzed in detail, aiming to reveal the relationship the individual establishes with the body and the effect of this relationship on existential concerns. Studies conducted in recent years have made the impact of digital media on body politics more visible. In particular, social media's reproduction of aesthetic norms shows that the body is positioned as a site of social control and individual alienation (Perloff, 2014; Tiggemann & Slater, 2013; Fardouly et al., 2015).

Turkle (2017) emphasizes that the relationship between the self and the body has become fragile in the digital age, addressing how technological representations contribute to individual identity crises. However, the existing literature has remained chiefly theoretical; there have been limited studies on how these theoretical approaches are embodied through cultural products such as cinema (Grosz, 1994; Sobchack, 2004). Films such as *The Substance* offer a crucial opportunity to understand how individual and social unconscious processes are represented through cinema. The film's normative, fragmented, and transforming representations of the body offer an opportunity to develop a psychoanalytic critique of the modern individual's identity crises and social norms. Therefore, the study aims to provide theoretical contributions and realize the existential and psychoanalytic interpretation of the body through modern cinema texts. Thus, it is aimed to develop a new understanding of the individual's identity fractures, social pressures, and internal conflicts in the contemporary world.

This study examines how the individual's body perception is represented in modern cinema within the framework of psychoanalytic theory. The study provides a critical framework for understanding the contemporary world counterparts of individuals' body perceptions and existential concerns. Understanding individuals' body representations, especially in the digital age, can contribute to a broader understanding of social and individual identity crises (Grosz, 1994; Turkle, 2017; Elias & Gill, 2018). In this context, the basic hypothesis of the study is that *The Substance* represents the body's

central role in the individual's existential concerns and that these representations can be evaluated as a psychoanalytic tool for understanding the conflicts in individuals' unconscious minds.

Testing this hypothesis is necessary to understand the modern individual's identity dynamics. The film "The Substance" offers a case study that fills the gaps in the literature. The main research question of this study can be summarized as "How does the film The Substance represent the individual's existential concerns and the superiority of the body over the self?" The study makes significant contributions to the existing literature by analyzing the individual's existential concerns and the body's relationship with the self from a psychoanalytic perspective, expanding the theoretical framework that views the body as a tool in the individual's existential crises. However, studies in the literature have explored how the body gains meaning in social and cultural contexts (Parr, 2023; Hockley, 2018; Fardouly et al., 2015). Addressing this theme through a psychoanalytic approach in cinematic representations remains a limited endeavor.

## CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

### Psychoanalytic Approach in Cinema and Related Film Examples

The psychoanalytic approach focuses on understanding the impact of an individual's unconscious mental processes on their behavior, thoughts, and emotions. This approach is based on Sigmund Freud's concepts of the unconscious, the conscious, the id, the ego, and the superego. Following Freud, Jacques Lacan reshaped psychoanalytic theory in the context of language and identity. Lacan's "mirror stage theory" argues that an individual's self-perception is shaped through the gaze of others (Sherritt, 2022). Lacan also analyzed the processes of constructing an individual's identity by associating the unconscious with the structural dynamics of language. This perspective suggests that identity has an impermanent, fragmented, and constantly reconstructed structure (Zizek, 2006). The psychoanalytic approach is not limited to understanding individual psychology; it is also used to analyze literature, art, cinema, and social dynamics. For example, Mulvey (1975) combined psychoanalytic theory with a feminist perspective and developed cinema's "male gaze" concept.

According to Mulvey, classical Hollywood films reinforced the patriarchal order by representing women as objects of male desire. Similarly, Zizek (2006) considers cinema as a manifestation of the social unconscious; structural film gaps are analyzed to trace repressed desires, fears, and ideological contradictions. Examining how the unconscious manifests itself in art and daily life offers a more profound understanding at both the individual and social levels. Lacan considered the unconscious as a

structure of language, addressing the identity formation processes of the individual from a deeper perspective (Zizek, 2006; Parr, 2023; Turkle, 2017). Current research provides psychoanalytic frameworks for analyzing how individuals' body perceptions and identity processes are transformed in a digitalizing world (Elias & Gill, 2018). This offers new insights into how the unconscious is reflected in art and media within modern societies.

Cinema, a powerful medium for storytelling, has long served as a mirror reflecting the complexities of the human psyche. Among the various theoretical perspectives applied to cinema, the psychoanalytic approach is one of the most influential frameworks for understanding characters, narratives, and the unconscious desires and anxieties of viewers and filmmakers. Rooted in Freud's theories and developed by Jacques Lacan, this approach examines the layers of identity, repression, and desire embedded in cinematic texts. Freud's psychoanalytic theory introduces concepts such as the unconscious mind, repression, and the Oedipus complex, which form the basis for analyzing characters and stories in film (Muckenhoupt, 2002).

Freud's ideas influenced early cinematic interpretations, particularly through the use of symbolism and visual motifs to represent hidden desires and fears (Gabbard, 2021). Lacan's reworking of Freud's theories, particularly the concepts of the imaginary, the symbolic, the real, and the "mirror stage," made significant contributions to the psychoanalytic analysis of cinema. Lacan's emphasis on constructing self and identity through the gaze is consistent with film's visual and narrative structures (Sherritt, 2022; Zizek, 2006). Psychoanalysis also intersects with feminist film theory, particularly through Laura Mulvey's (1975) groundbreaking work on the "male gaze." Mulvey argues that classical Hollywood cinema often reinforces patriarchal power structures by positioning women as objects of visual pleasure for a presumed male audience. This theoretical foundation is instrumental in understanding the dynamics of spectatorship and the role of desire in film (Kaplan, 2000; Tasker, 2017).

The following films, made within the framework of psychoanalytic theory, can be considered exemplary productions for psychoanalytic analysis, as they demonstrate the complexities of identity, repression, and subconscious conflict.

Alfred Hitchcock's "Psycho" (1960): This classic film uses Freudian psychoanalysis to explore Norman Bates' fractured psyche, embodying the struggle between the id, ego, and superego. The recurring motif of mirrors and split personalities reflects guilt and the repression of desire (Pope, 2012).

David Lynch's "Mulholland Drive" (2001): Lynch's surreal narrative blurs the boundaries between reality and fantasy, reflecting Lacanian concepts of desire and the nature of reality. The protagonist's fractured identity and dream-like sequences reflect the workings of the subconscious mind (Jones & Woodward, 2017).

Stanley Kubrick's (Eyes Wide Shut) (1999): Kubrick's exploration of repressed desire and marital tension draws on Freudian psychoanalysis, particularly in his depiction of dream sequences as windows into the subconscious. The film also critiques social taboos and the performativity of desire (depiction and transformation) (Parr, 2023).

Darren Aronofsky's Black Swan (2010): This psychological thriller delves into the protagonist's descent into psychosis, exploring the pressures of perfectionism and the consequences of repressed emotions. This film also aligns with the duality of the self and the shadow self, Jungian archetypes, and Lacanian psychoanalytic theory. The psychoanalytic approach goes beyond analyzing characters and narratives to provide insight into the audience's interaction with the film. Cinema is a "dream screen" that allows viewers to project their subconscious desires and fears onto the narrative, encouraging emotional identification and catharsis (Metz, 1974). This dynamic emphasizes the psychological impact of cinema and its ability to address universal human concerns.

Furthermore, psychoanalytic theory provides a critical framework for understanding cultural and social influences on film. Analyzing films as reflections of collective unconscious processes reveals how cultural anxieties and taboos are expressed and processed through cinematic storytelling (Jones & Woodward, 2017). The psychoanalytic approach remains a vital tool for analyzing the profound psychological layers of cinema. This approach, which includes the theories of Freud, Lacan, and Mulvey, reveals how films reflect and construct human desires, anxieties, and identities. Examples such as "Psycho," "Mulholland Drive," and "Black Swan" demonstrate the enduring importance of psychoanalysis in exploring the hidden depths of cinematic storytelling. As cinema evolves, psychoanalytic theory offers a lens for understanding the complex interplay between the unconscious and the screen.

Recent film studies, particularly in the horror and body horror genres, have revived the feminist and psychoanalytic implications of the "monstrous feminine" theme. Creed's updated study suggests that the monstrous nature of the feminine should be reinterpreted through the desires and fears repressed by the patriarchal order (Creed, 2023). In this vein, Ducournau's films create an uncanny space of subjectivation by placing the female body at the center of both desire and disgust (Trevisan, 2025).

Krupa's current analysis of *The Substance* positions the film as a feminist body horror intervention in which bodily integrity is fragmented while simultaneously revealing normative ideals of beauty (Krupa, 2025). In Turkish literature, psychoanalytic film analyses, which consider both mythological and existential themes, focus on the uncanny, dream logic, and processes of repression (Sunal, 2024). This study aims to contribute to both psychoanalytic film literature and contemporary discussions on body politics by bringing these perspectives into Ducournau's universe.

### **Psychoanalytic Representations in *The Substance***

*The Substance* provides a rich text for psychoanalytic analysis, offering deep insights into themes of identity, repression, and the unconscious. The film explores the complex relationship between the body and the self through narrative and cinematic techniques, as well as the anxieties and conflicts that arise from this dynamic. Drawing on Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalytic theories, the film uses symbolic imagery, character development, and narrative structure to explore the human psyche and its underlying fears and desires. One of the key psychoanalytic elements in *The Substance* is the depiction of the body as a site of repressed desires and anxieties (Gabbard, 2021).

Based on Freud's (1923) theories, *The Substance* presents the body as a site where unconscious conflicts emerge. The physical transformations and distortions that the protagonist undergoes throughout the film symbolize the struggle between the id, ego, and superego. For example, recurring visual motifs, such as mirrors and distorted reflections, emphasize the protagonist's fragmented identity by highlighting the repression of traumatic memories and desires (Parr, 2023; Sobchack, 2004). These motifs reflect the concept of the "uncanny," a Freudian term describing the disturbing return of repressed material (Freud, 1919; Royle, 2003). From a Lacanian perspective, *The Substance* examines the construction of identity through the gaze of others. References to Lacan's "mirror stage" and the fragmented nature of the subject can be traced in the film's character construction and visual narrative (Sherritt, 2022; Žizek, 2006).

Lacan's (1975) theory of the "mirror stage" suggests that individuals construct their sense of self through external reflections. The film "*The Substance*" also critiques this concept by showing how social norms and external pressures distort the protagonist's identity. The protagonist's obsessive focus on bodily perfection and social approval leads to an alienation from his authentic self, reflecting Lacanian concepts of the imaginary and symbolic order. The constant presence of voyeuristic camera angles in

the film reinforces this theme by creating a sense of being observed and judged, consistent with Lacan's concept of the "gaze" (Sherritt, 2022; Hockley, 2018).

The Substance strikingly reflects another important psychoanalytic theme, the repression of death anxiety. As the protagonists attempt to overcome their physical limitations, they engage in behaviors that deny mortality and perpetuate life (Zimmermann, 2007). The protagonist's obsession with "preserving his physical form" reflects this denial, while his deteriorating mental state highlights the psychological cost of suppressing existential fears (Solomon et al., 2015). Symbolism plays a vital role in the psychoanalytic reading of the film. The repeated use of organic and synthetic substances in The Substance reflects the conflict between human natural limitations and artificial attempts to overcome them. This duality reflects the struggle between the conscious and the unconscious, as well as the tension between the acceptance and repression of the self, or more accurately, the tragic situation that arises when the body is put before the self (Žižek, 2006; Sobchack, 2004).

The film's reliance on surreal and incompatible situations, on essentially serious but seemingly ridiculous and exaggerated (grotesque) images, and the surprising combination of opposing images evokes an instinctive response that reflects the protagonist's inner conflict, further emphasizing its exploration of unconscious fears. This grotesque aesthetic represents the symbolic expression of repressed desires in a psychoanalytic context. The film's narrative structure, which alternates between linear storytelling and fragmented, dream-like sequences, mimics the workings of the unconscious mind. This non-linear approach is consistent with psychoanalytic theories of dream analysis, which suggest that seemingly disjointed events can reveal more profound psychological truths (Jones & Woodward, 2017; Revonsuo, 2006).

The fragmented narrative reinforces the central theme of identity dissolution by reflecting the protagonist's fragmented psyche. The Substance uses several psychoanalytic elements to explore the tensions between body and self, desire and repression, and life and death. Bringing together Freudian, Lacanian, and broader contemporary psychoanalytic theories, the film examines the complexity of the human psyche and critiques the social pressures that shape identity (Žižek, 2006; Gabbard, 2021). This layered approach offers a nuanced exploration of the unconscious and its manifestations, rendering The Substance an intriguing subject for psychoanalytic analysis.

## METHOD

### Semiotic Design

The research method employed was the semiotic method, which focuses on examining signs and their meanings. Semiotics was developed based on Saussure's linguistic studies and further expanded by Roland Barthes. Barthes' (1977) concept of myth enables the film's themes of the body and identity to be evaluated within a context that critiques social norms (Chandler, 2007). This method enables the analysis of how films convey deeper meanings through the use of symbols, codes, and structures. The film "The Substance" is quite suitable for this method, as it conveys identity, body, and existential anxiety through symbolic images, narrative structures, and visual motifs. The film's symbolic interaction between organic and synthetic materials stands out as a motif representing the tension between humanity and artificiality. Recurring visual elements, such as fragmented bodies and sterile, industrial environments, serve as signs that express the alienation of the self from the natural world (Barthes, 1983; Eco, 1979; Parr, 2023; Metz, 1974).

Semiotic analysis helps to unravel how these elements relate to broader cultural concerns about technology and the human body. Semiotics provides an effective method for analyzing these fragmented narratives in this analysis because it focuses on how meaning is constructed through juxtaposition and association. For example, the juxtaposition of organic decay and artificial healing in specific film sequences creates a visual code that expresses the protagonist's existential crisis and struggle for identity (Tutar, 2022; Hockley, 2018). In addition, The Substance frequently uses intertextuality to reference broader cultural and philosophical discourses.

The semiotic method enables the interpretation of these intertextual references by situating them within a system of cultural signs. The film's muted color palette and sterile lighting convey emotional detachment and psychological alienation, while the mechanical sound design reinforces the disconnection between the self and the environment (Jones & Woodward, 2017; Altman, 1992). These elements serve as signs that will strengthen the film's themes, making semiotics an ideal analytical framework. By analyzing the visual and narrative aspects of the film, the semiotic method not only provides an in-depth analysis of the themes but also situates the film within broader cultural and psychological discourses (Barthes, 1977; Chandler, 2007; Metz, 1974). This approach provides a powerful methodological tool for analyzing the film, revealing the construction of meaning through symbols in The Substance.

## Sampling of the Research

The Substance is a film that intricately weaves together the themes of identity, body, and existential crisis through its symbolic and narrative structure, necessitating that the research be designed according to the purposive sampling technique. Purposive sampling involves selecting information-rich cases to gain a deeper understanding of a particular phenomenon. Purposive sampling is a qualitative sampling technique used to select participants who are most likely to provide rich, relevant, and insightful information about the research objectives. It targets individuals or groups with specific knowledge, experiences, or characteristics important to the study. This approach is a sampling technique that aligns with the interpretive paradigm of qualitative research. It is beneficial for uncovering the true meaning of a contextual setting (Tutar & Erdem, 2020; Creswell & Poth, 2018; Patton, 2015). The Substance exemplifies this approach because of its thematic depth and symbolic complexity. The film's focus on a protagonist grappling with the boundaries between humanity and artificiality as he undergoes a series of transformative experiences related to his body and identity is particularly well-suited to the purposeful sampling technique.

### **Analysis of Data and Findings**

The analysis of The Substance focuses on the film's layered narrative, symbolic imagery, and thematic exploration of identity and existential anxiety. The film explores the psychoanalytic dynamics of the self, body, and the unconscious through its fragmented storytelling and visual motifs. The central theme of The Substance is the tension between the natural and the synthetic, symbolized through the protagonist's transformation and the repeated images of decaying organic materials juxtaposed with sterile, industrial environments. The film's tension reflects the protagonist's psychological disintegration and struggle for self-identity (Jones & Woodward, 2017; Parr, 2023). From a psychoanalytic perspective, the film embodies Freud's concepts of repression and the uncanny (Sletvold, 2013), as the protagonist's encounters with distorted reflections and surreal environments symbolize repressed fears and desires. It can also be analyzed within the framework of Lacanian (1975) theory, particularly the concept of the "mirror stage," as the protagonist's identity is fragmented and shaped by external pressures and societal expectations.

The interplay between the symbolic and real worlds creates a disconnection consistent with Lacanian psychoanalysis's identity crises. Semiologically, The Substance employs visual codes, such as muted colors and mechanical soundscapes, to convey alienation and existential dread. These cinematic elements serve as signs that convey more profound meanings, creating a multi-layered narrative that critiques contemporary anxieties about technology, mortality, and the body. By combining

psychoanalytic and semiological themes in the analysis process, the film's analysis was attempted to be drawn within a framework that would reveal its depth as a critique of contemporary existential and cultural anxieties.

## The Substance Movie and Cast

The Substance is a 2024 body horror film directed by Coralie Fargeat, and the cast of the film is briefly introduced below:

*Demi Moore (Elisabeth Sparkle):* Moore plays a fading celebrity who resorts to black market drugs to create a younger version of herself.

*Margaret Qualley (as Sue):* Qualley plays a younger, more vibrant version of Elisabeth.

*Dennis Quaid (as Harvey):* Quaid plays a television executive who exemplifies the exploitative and anti-ageist tendencies in the entertainment industry.

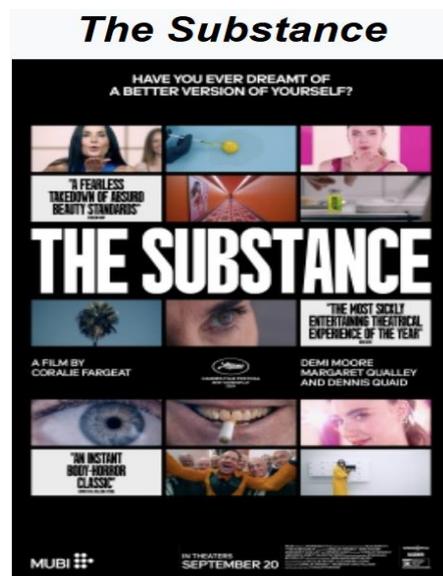
*Supporting cast members include:*

*Gore Abrams (as Oliver):* Abrams plays one of Elisabeth's neighbors, highlighting the film's commentary on the everyday sexism and abuse women face.

*Oscar Lesage (as Troy):* Lesage appears as a young man whom Elisabeth and Sue encounter, contributing to the film's exploration of identity and transformation.

*Robin Greer (as Nurse):* Greer plays the unnamed nurse who introduces Elisabeth to the concept of the Self and sets the narrative in motion.

Image 1 Film Poster [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_Substance](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Substance)



The Substance poster features the following text: Top Section of the Poster: Have you ever imagined a better version of yourself? Title: The Substance: Fearless overthrow of absurd beauty standards. The most morbid, entertaining, and theatrical experience of the year, this film instantly becomes a body-horror classic with its poster.



Image 2: A surreal portrait of a woman's face, her mouth drawn out and her features rearranged, unnaturally stretched and distorted. This disturbing image symbolizes the manipulation of physical identity and critically presents societal pressures on beauty standards and the extremes to which people will go in pursuit of perfection.

Image 3: A face shattered into pieces, like broken glass, reflects themes of self-image, identity, and fragmentation. The pieces hint at the emotional and psychological costs of striving for unattainable ideals, emphasizing fragility.

Image 4: A poised woman looks at herself in a mirror, her hand on her face, signaling deep dissatisfaction or anguish. This image suggests self-reflection and an internal struggle with identity or external expectations.

Image 5: The woman appears distressed, clutching her face, with a look of tension etched into her face. This moment reveals a breaking point that symbolizes resistance to societal pressures or the emotional costs of self-doubt and perfectionism.

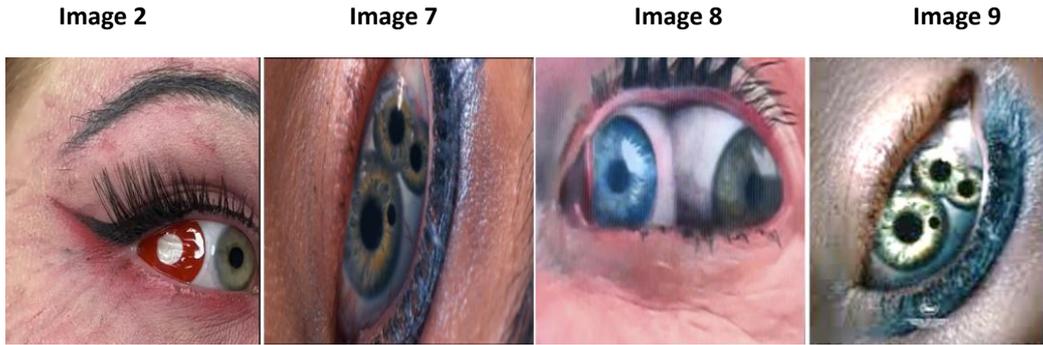


Image 6: This close-up of a red eye, white pupil, suggests physical or emotional strain. The redness or color suggests blood, discomfort, tension, and transformation, symbolizing the cost of adhering to beauty standards or societal pressures. It suggests that pursuing perfection likely comes at a physical and psychological price.

Image 7: This eye has multiple pupils within a single iris, creating a surreal and disturbing picture. The image represents the distorted perception of oneself, as one is forced to view oneself from myriad perspectives, each imposing its judgments or expectations. It also refers to the extent to which increasing pressures for beauty, whether self-imposed or societal, have become prevalent. The overly distorted eye with overlapping shapes represents overstimulation, obsession, and lack of boundaries. This image strongly emphasizes that the themes of societal surveillance and excessive focus on beauty are focused on appearance, not the self.

Image 8: Another eye with multiple pupils represents fragmented perception and a divided self. This image also represents confusion, inner turmoil, and the struggle to reconcile aspects of identity.

Image 9: Similar to the previous one, this multi-eyed eye also evokes a sense of hyper-awareness and constant surveillance. It highlights societal pressures to meet impossible standards, evoking a sense of anxiety and vulnerability.



Image 10: A woman with a long surgical scar on her spine strikingly reflects the physical transformation or the lengths she is willing to go to gain approval from others. This represents the magnitude of sacrifice individuals endure to reshape their identities or bodies under societal pressures, evoking themes of pain, sacrifice, conformity, the quest for perfection, and a distorted perception of beauty.

Image 11: A close-up of a stitched scar on a body, on the back, highlights themes of dehumanization and the brutal consequences of artificial changes. The image creates a sense of discomfort and the impression that the need for approval has transformed women into decorative material. It also gives the impression that the perception of beauty has transformed the female body into laboratory material.

Image 12: The woman, with blood spattered on her face, looks shocked and fearful. This probably indicates an emotional trauma related to physical transformations or societal demands. The woman's horrified gaze indicates an internal conflict or the realization of the cost of these pressures.

Image 13: In cinema, it is a narrative style that uses grotesque, distorted, exaggerated, or absurd elements. It combines aesthetics and disturbing elements to provoke the viewer's emotions and thoughts. In this narrative, surreal, comic, frightening, and tragic elements are intertwined, challenging conventional norms. In Visual 13, a grotesque humanoid figure with distorted facial features represents the great price paid to meet excessive social expectations and the dehumanization and loss of identity caused by these expectations.

Image 14



Image 15



Image 16



Image 17



Image 14: Two women, one older and one younger, stand together in contrasting appearances, perhaps symbolizing the passage of time or societal ideals of youth and aging. The woman on the left's desire to be like the one on the right is reflected throughout her body, along with jealousy and lust.

Image 15: An older woman with visible wrinkles and signs of aging is talking on the phone, her expression quite tense. This represents the challenges of aging in a society that often glorifies youth yet

reflects resilience in the face of societal neglect or judgment. No matter how great the price paid for visual beauty, the inevitable end of old age and the deformed facial expressions that accompany it reflect anger and disappointment.

Image 16: A close-up of the same older woman, her face worn and lined with experience, reveals her emotional facial expression. This moment suggests fragility and the struggle to reconcile inner strength with outer appearance in an age-conscious culture.

Image 17: The older woman smiles softly, reflecting acceptance and surrender to the passage of time. This image contrasts with the previous ones, symbolizing the journey of self-acceptance and finding beauty beyond societal standards. The look of disappointment reflects the futility of the price paid and the cruelty of the inevitable end.

## DISCUSSION

This research comprehensively examines the psychological and social effects of modern beauty standards and the pressure on individuals to conform to prevailing norms. The study examined the impact of idealized body images on perception using visual stimuli that contained distorted and symbolic images. Additionally, the emotional and psychological burden of societal expectations on individuals is thoroughly explored. The research reveals the conflict between perceived perfection and personal identity through surreal and exaggerated representations. The findings reveal three main conclusions: First, societal beauty ideals distort individuals' perception of self-worth, creating emotional discomfort and dissatisfaction (Fardouly et al., 2015; Perloff, 2014).

Second, the effort to reach impossible ideals triggers feelings of alienation and fragility in the individual (Tiggemann & Slater, 2013). Third, individuals face a dilemma between acceptance and resistance as they struggle with these pressures (Grabe, Ward, & Hyde, 2008). These dynamics are successfully represented in *The Substance*. The film symbolizes the pressure of rigid beauty norms on individuals and the internal reaction to this pressure with grotesque imagery. The fragmented and unrealistic body representations in the visuals highlight the adverse effects of the media on body perception, while drawing attention to the relationship between pressure for physical transformation and emotional fragility (Calogero et al., 2011). In conclusion, this study reveals that media-induced perfection pressures contribute to psychological problems such as low self-esteem, body dissatisfaction, and identity confusion in individuals.

The study analyses symbolic imagery to investigate the psychological and emotional effects of societal beauty standards. The findings reveal that unattainable beauty ideals contribute to the phenomenon of fragmented selfhood by feeding distorted self-perceptions, emotional distress, and internal conflict. Distorted facial features, grotesque imagery, and visual representations of emotional fragility emphasize the impact of societal expectations on identity and mental health. These results are consistent with previous research showing that societal beauty standards increase body dissatisfaction and emotional struggles (Grabe et al., 2008; Perloff, 2014; Fardouly et al., 2015).

The study concludes that societal beauty ideals are not merely aesthetic but also profoundly affect emotional well-being, highlighting the urgent need for a shift toward more inclusive and authentic representations. Future research requires longitudinal studies to assess the long-term psychological impacts of societal beauty norms. Additionally, implementing media literacy programs and advocating for diverse representations in the media may help reduce the adverse effects of beauty standards on emotional well-being (Tiggemann & Slater, 2020; Cohen et al., 2019). This research contributes to a growing understanding of the complex relationship between societal expectations and individual identity, providing actionable insights for policymakers, mental health practitioners, and educators.

Through symbolic analysis of images depicting body image distortion, transformation, and emotional distress, the psychological and social effects of beauty standards highlight the problematic nature of such perception. Societal beauty norms create distorted self-perceptions and emotional vulnerabilities. As seen in the visuals and successfully portrayed in the film, the relentless pursuit of perfection fosters inner conflict and dissatisfaction. Furthermore, aging and individuality are often overlooked in a culture of unattainable ideals. The findings are consistent with previous studies that have highlighted the detrimental effects of beauty standards on mental health, such as low self-esteem and body dissatisfaction (Grabe et al., 2008; Fardouly et al., 2015; Perloff, 2014). However, this study extends the literature by emphasizing how visual representations, such as fragmented or grotesque images, serve as metaphors for societal pressures. This visual approach provides innovative insights into how individuals internalize and resist these norms. The findings also suggest that societal beauty ideals lead to a “fragmented self,” aligning with observations of media-induced insecurity. However, the images in the study further highlight how cultural expectations erode individual identity, foster emotional distress, and contribute to a deeper understanding of the psychological dimensions of the issue.

Visual representations of body image distortion, transformation, and emotional conflict suggest that the psychological and social effects of beauty standards are highly problematic. The findings provide

a nuanced understanding of how societal beauty norms affect self-perception, emotional well-being, and identity. The study contributes to theory by developing the concept of a “fragmented self,” where unattainable beauty ideals exacerbate internal conflict and vulnerability, and is consistent with previous literature on media-induced insecurity (Grabe et al., 2008; Perloff, 2014; Fardouly et al., 2015). Paradoxically, while some studies emphasize empowerment through self-enhancement (e.g., cosmetic procedures) (Tiggemann & Zaccardo, 2018), this study emphasizes emotional distress and dehumanization as the dominant outcomes.

The study addressed the research problem by using symbolic images to reveal the hidden emotional dimensions of societal beauty pressures and demonstrated how individuals internalize and resist these ideals. These findings suggest that beauty norms extend beyond aesthetics to impact emotional and psychological well-being (Cohen et al., 2019). This study makes a significant contribution to practice by providing practical insights for mental health practitioners and educators, emphasizing the importance of self-acceptance and emotional resilience. It also highlights the need to develop and embrace an understanding that societal beauty standards can cause psychological harm and that a shift toward inclusivity and authenticity is crucial for promoting societal mental health.

Recent studies suggest that social media-based appearance comparisons are among the strongest predictors of body dissatisfaction among women and young adults (Seekis, Bradley, & Duffy, 2020; Vandenbosch et al., 2022). Meta-analytic findings suggest that body image concerns and eating disorder symptoms significantly increase as online social comparisons increase (Bonfanti et al., 2025). Filters, edited images, and narratives of the “perfect” body, in particular, push beauty standards to unattainable levels, rendering imperfection or aging invisible (Brzozowska & Gotlib, 2025; Merino et al., 2024). The Substance grotesquely inverts this visual regime, inviting the viewer to question the promise of perfection and to recognize the “normalized violence” of beauty (Krupa, 2025).

The study examines the psychological effects of societal beauty standards by analyzing symbolic and surreal images, emphasizing that this problematic approach problematizes self-perception, emotional well-being, and identity perception. The study's strength lies in its novel methodological approach, which uses evocative visual stimuli to explore emotional responses. This method improves the existing literature, which predominantly relies on self-reports or textual analysis (Grabe et al., 2008; Perloff, 2014). Additionally, incorporating various visual themes enables a comprehensive examination of societal pressures. The findings suggest that societal beauty ideals exacerbate emotional fragility, foster internal conflict, and dissatisfaction. By introducing the concept of a “fragmented identity”

resulting from these pressures, this study builds upon previous research that emphasizes the more profound psychological consequences of striving for unattainable standards (Fardouly et al., 2015; Cohen et al., 2019). Policymakers must encourage inclusive media representation to reduce the psychological stress caused by unrealistic beauty norms (Tiggemann & Zaccardo, 2018).

Distorted self-perception, emotional vulnerabilities, and symbolic imagery suggest that societal beauty standards' emotional and psychological impacts are a significant problem area. While the findings provide important insights into the impact of beauty norms, it is essential to acknowledge that the research has some limitations. First, the study relies on visual stimuli as a vehicle for real-world experiences, which may not fully reflect the complexity of emotional responses experienced (Perloff, 2014). Second, the sample size is limited, which restricts the generalizability of the findings. Third, the study did not consider cultural factors, leaving gaps in our understanding of cross-cultural differences in beauty ideals (Grabe et al., 2008; Swami, 2015). Finally, the lack of longitudinal data limits the ability to assess long-term psychological effects. More studies should be conducted to investigate the long-term psychological effects of beauty ideals on diverse populations, with a focus on cross-cultural perspectives and longitudinal outcomes (Fardouly et al., 2018).

Current findings on the body positivity movement suggest that affirmative content can increase body satisfaction and mood in the short term; however, it may have contradictory effects in the long term, as it often circulates alongside idealized images (Duan et al., 2022; Jiménez-García et al., 2025). Messages calling for unconditional body acceptance can sometimes create a new "imperative to look good," transforming into an internal self-regulation regime where individuals constantly monitor and regulate themselves (Merino et al., 2024; Czubaj et al., 2025). The film analyzed in this study exposes body positivity discourse as an ideological cover instrumentalized by the market-driven beauty industry to manage its own crises (Cohen, Newton-John, & Slater, 2021; Vandenbosch et al., 2022). Thus, The Substance subjects the late capitalist body regime to a critical mirroring, which simultaneously produces both the call to "be yourself" and the command to "be a better body" (Krupa, 2025; Trevisan, 2025).

Future studies should investigate the cross-cultural variability and psychological effects of beauty standards. Additionally, longitudinal studies are needed to understand the long-term emotional effects of internalized societal ideals. Using longitudinal designs may provide deeper insights into how exposure to beauty standards affects emotional well-being over time. Combining visual stimuli with qualitative interviews or physiological measures may provide a more comprehensive understanding of emotional and psychological effects. Promoting inclusive and diverse representations in the media is crucial for

reducing the psychological harms associated with unattainable beauty ideals. This study underscores the pressing need for comprehensive, interdisciplinary research to address the adverse effects of beauty standards and develop targeted interventions that foster emotional resilience and inclusivity.

The study analyzes symbolic images to investigate the psychological and emotional impacts of societal beauty standards. The findings suggest that unattainable beauty ideals contribute to the phenomenon of fragmented selfhood by fostering distorted self-perceptions, emotional distress, and internal conflict. Distorted facial features, grotesque imagery, and visual representations of emotional vulnerability highlight the impact of societal expectations on identity and mental health. These results are consistent with previous research showing that societal beauty standards increase body dissatisfaction and emotional struggles (Grabe et al., 2008; Perloff, 2014; Fardouly et al., 2015). The study concludes that societal beauty ideals are not merely aesthetic but also profoundly affect emotional well-being, emphasizing the urgent need for a shift toward more inclusive and authentic representations. Future research requires longitudinal studies to assess the long-term psychological impacts of societal beauty norms. Additionally, implementing media literacy programs and advocating for diverse media representations can help reduce the adverse effects of beauty standards on emotional well-being (Tiggemann & Slater, 2020; Cohen et al., 2019). This research contributes to a growing understanding of the complex relationship between societal expectations and individual identity, providing actionable insights for policymakers, mental health practitioners, and educators.

## CONCLUSION

This study highlights the detrimental effects of contemporary beauty ideals on individuals' emotional well-being and self-esteem. The findings demonstrate that visual media, in particular, reproduce one-dimensional and perfect body images, narrowing perceptions of identity and deepening existential anxieties. Therefore, advocacy groups, in collaboration with lawmakers, should focus on regulating advertising and media content, limiting unrealistic beauty norms, and promoting pluralistic representations. Access to mental health services, including counseling and support groups, should be expanded for individuals experiencing body image issues due to societal pressures. Mental health professionals strive to offset the adverse effects of beauty standards by integrating body positivity and critical media literacy into their therapeutic practices. This supports individuals in establishing a more reconciled relationship with their bodies and constructing their self-worth independent of external validation.

The study offers theoretical and empirical contributions to the field by examining the interaction between societal beauty norms and emotional well-being within a holistic framework. The results highlight the psychological harm caused by the construction of beauty as a never-ending goal and the need for structural transformation. The findings suggest that future research aimed at mitigating the impact of beauty ideals should develop interdisciplinary approaches that integrate psychology, media studies, sociology, and public health. Furthermore, the study highlights the importance of redesigning media literacy programs, school-based interventions, and online campaigns within a critical framework. In this context, creative contributions from the fields of art, cinema, and literature generate alternative representations that challenge beauty myths and increase social awareness. Ultimately, it is argued that the pursuit of beauty should not be limited, but rather redefined, and an inclusive aesthetic understanding that recognizes human fragility should be developed. Such a transformation not only protects individual mental health but also contributes to the establishment of a more equitable and inclusive social climate.

## GENİŞLETİLMİŞ ÖZET

Bu çalışma, modern sinemanın bireyin kimlik arayışını ve varoluşsal kaygılarını nasıl beden temsilleri üzerinden ele aldığını, “The Substance” filmi özelinde psikanalitik ve göstergebilimsel analiz yöntemleriyle araştırmaktadır. Özellikle Freud, Lacan ve çağdaş psikanalitik kuramcılarının bakış açıları temel alınarak, bireyin bilinçdışı süreçlerinin beden algısı ve benlik inşası üzerindeki etkileri irdelenmiştir.

Psikanalitik yaklaşım, sinema gibi görsel anlatım biçimlerinde karakterlerin bastırılmış arzuları, kimlik bölünmeleri ve bilinçdışı süreçlerinin izini sürmek için güçlü bir teorik çerçeve sunar. Freud’un id, ego ve süperegö kavramları; Lacan’ın “ayna evresi” ve “bakış” (gaze) teorileri ile birlikte, bireyin kimlik inşasında beden rolü tartışmaya açılır. Lacan’a göre birey benliğini, başkalarının bakışı aracılığıyla kurar; bu durum özellikle dijital çağda beden algısını daha da kırılgan hale getirir. Bu bağlamda “The Substance”, çağdaş bireyin görünürlük arzusunu, beden takıntısını ve dijital çağın baskıları altındaki kimlik çatışmasını sinematografik olarak ortaya koyar.

Araştırmada, Roland Barthes’ın mit çözümlemesi ve gösterge sistemleri temel alınarak geliştirilen göstergebilimsel analiz yöntemi kullanılmıştır. Bu yöntem, filmdeki sembolik görüntüler, renk paletleri, anlatı yapıları ve ses tasarımları aracılığıyla anlam üretim süreçlerini ortaya çıkarmayı hedeflemiştir. Özellikle organik ve sentetik malzemeler arasındaki karşıtlık, parçalanmış beden imgeleri, yansımalar ve grotesk estetik öğeler bireyin içsel parçalanmışlığını ve toplumsal normlara karşı duruşunu sembolize eder.

Amaçlı örnekleme tekniği kullanılarak filmdeki belirli sahneler, karakter ifadeleri ve görsel motifler seçilmiştir. Filmin başrol oyuncularını Demi Moore (yaşlı kadın) ve Margaret Qualley (genç beden) arasındaki dönüşüm ilişkisi, toplumsal güzellik standartlarına karşı verilen bedensel ve ruhsal mücadeleyi gözler önüne serer. Filmde yer alan grotesk imgeler, çok gözlü bakışlar, deformasyona uğramış yüzler ve ameliyat izleri, modern bireyin güzellik takıntısının psikolojik bedellerine ışık tutmaktadır.

Araştırma, üç temel tema etrafında sonuçlar sunmaktadır:

**Kimlik Bunalımı ve Varoluşsal Kaygı:** Karakterler, toplumun dayattığı güzellik ideallerine ulaşmaya çalışırken içsel benliklerinden uzaklaşmakta, fiziksel dönüşüm süreci içinde parçalanmışlık ve yabancılaşma yaşamaktadır. Lacan'ın "ayna evresi" bu durumu açıklar: birey kendi görüntüsüne bağımlı hale gelir.

**Bedenin Üstünlüğü ve Dijital Gözetim:** Filmin çok gözlü motifleri, bedenin sürekli gözlem altında olduğunu, toplumsal bakışın birey üzerinde baskı yarattığını simgeler. Dijital çağda birey, güzellik standartlarına ulaşma arzusuyla hem fiziksel hem zihinsel dönüşüm geçirirken öz benliğinden uzaklaşmaktadır.

**Grotesk Estetik ve Psikolojik Gerilim:** Filmdeki grotesk görüntüler (dağılmış yüzler, yara izleri, deformasyonlar), bilinçdışının bastırılmış arzularını ve korkularını temsil eder. Freud'un "tekinsizlik" (uncanny) kavramıyla açıklanan bu görüntüler, izleyicide hem tanıdık hem rahatsız edici duygular uyandırarak psikolojik gerilim yaratır.

Filmdeki görseller, bireyin estetik ve gençlik arzusunu simgeleyen bedensel deformasyonları, yara izlerini ve çoklu bakışları öne çıkarır. Özellikle yaşlı kadın karakterin gençliğe dönme arzusu, toplumsal yaşlanma karşıtlığının birey üzerindeki etkisini çarpıcı şekilde temsil eder. Görseller, toplumun dikte ettiği ideal güzellik algısının bireyin benliğinde yarattığı baskı ve kırılmayı gözler önüne serer.

Film, modern toplumda güzellik standartlarının birey üzerindeki yıkıcı etkilerini psikanalitik ve kültürel bir eleştiriyle sunar. Birey, bedenini dönüştürerek toplum tarafından kabul görmeye çalışırken psikolojik olarak çözülür. Bu bağlamda film, sadece fiziksel değişim sürecini değil, aynı zamanda ruhsal parçalanmayı da gözler önüne serer. Göstergibilimsel analiz, bu çok katmanlı anlatıyı anlamaya katkı sağlar.

Bu araştırma, güzellik standartlarının bireyde yarattığı kimlik parçalanmasını ve psikolojik kırılma sembolik imgeler yoluyla ortaya koyar. Güzelliğin estetikten öte psikolojik bir travmaya dönüştüğü bu anlatıda, toplumsal normların birey üzerinde nasıl baskı kurduğu açıkça gösterilmiştir.

Araştırma, medya okuryazarlığı, beden olumlaması ve kapsayıcı temsillerin yaygınlaştırılması gerekliliğini vurgularken; terapötik uygulamalar ve kültürel eleştiriler için önemli bir zemin sunmaktadır.

#### Çıkar Çatışması/Conflict of Interest

Yazarlar çıkar çatışması olmadığını beyan etmiştir. /The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

#### Yazarların Katkıları/Author Contributions

Yazarların çalışmaya katkı oranı %60-%40'dir. / The contribution rate of authors to the study is %60-%40'dir

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