

The Horror of the “Better You”: Beauty Culture, Identity, and Feminist Horror in *The Substance*

Michelle Kiara Boediman and Jenny Mochtar

Master’s Program in Literature, Scriptwriting & Copywriting Study Program,
Faculty of Humanities and Creative Industries, Petra Christian University, Siwalankerto 121-131, Surabaya 60236,
INDONESIA
h21240003@john.petra.ac.id, jennymd@petra.ac.id

ABSTRACT

Coralie Fargeat’s *The Substance* (2024) is a bold, body-horror-infused exploration of what it means to be a woman aging under the glare of the public eye. The film follows Elisabeth Sparkle, a fading fitness icon who turns to a mysterious biotechnology promising youth, beauty, and a “better self.” What begins as transformation quickly collapses into self-destruction as Elisabeth’s younger clone, Sue, takes over her life. Through this grotesque evolution, *The Substance* dismantles the makeover narrative so familiar in popular cinema, the idea that physical transformation equals empowerment, and instead exposes its rot. This paper examines how *The Substance* rewrites beauty transformation tropes through horror, how this subversion fragments the identities of Elisabeth and Sue, and what the film ultimately reveals about societal pressures surrounding beauty, aging, and female selfhood. Drawing on genre theory, feminist film theory (particularly Laura Mulvey’s concept of the gaze), and cultural studies perspectives on beauty and post feminism, I analyze how mise-en-scène and performance work together to visualize the horror of internalized beauty ideals. In doing so, I argue that *The Substance* transforms the makeover fantasy into a nightmare of self-surveillance, turning the pursuit of perfection into a literal act of bodily consumption. Through its shocking imagery and deliberate ambiguity, Fargeat’s film critiques a culture that commodifies women’s bodies, punishes them for aging, and disguises conformity as empowerment.

Keywords: beauty standards, body horror, coralie fargeat, feminist horror

INTRODUCTION

The Substance is a movie directed by Coralie Fargeat, a provocative entry in modern feminist horror cinema. It follows Elisabeth Sparkle, an aging TV fitness icon who is fading into obscurity due to society’s harsh beauty standards and obsession with youth. Because of this, she turns to an experimental treatment known as “The Substance”, a mysterious product that promises to create a younger, more beautiful, better version of its user. This technology births Sue, a flawless youthful clone to Elisabeth who replaces her in the media spotlight. If the user “respects the balance”, meaning taking turns between the older body and the younger body, there will not be any side effects. While Elisabeth initially thinks that this is the solution to her problems, it ends up being a battle for identity and autonomy, as Elisabeth increasingly grows dependent on her “better self”. She ends up living longer and longer like Sue, disrespecting the balance, and hurting her own body in the process.

Releasing in 2024, *The Substance* resonates extremely strongly within the current cultural landscape that is obsessed with youth, beauty, and self-optimization, especially in women. In this paper, I will discuss three questions:

1. How does *The Substance* subvert traditional beauty transformation narratives in cinema using horror?
2. How does this subversion shape the film’s construction of Elisabeth and Sue’s fragmented identity?

3. What does this portrayal ultimately reveal about the cultural pressures surrounding beauty, aging, and female selfhood?

In addressing these questions, I will draw on genre theory to examine how the film disrupts conventions of both horror and feminine makeover genres. I will also use feminist film theory to explore the film's portrayal of fragmented female identity. Additionally, I will apply cultural studies perspectives on beauty and aging, alongside close analysis of *mise-en-scène*, to show how the film visually constructs its critiques.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

How *The Substance* Rewrites Beauty Transformation Through Horror

Based on the book *Studying Film*, genre refers to groups of narrative conventions, such as plot, character, location, that are organized into recognizable types (Abrams et al., 2001). This can sometimes pose a challenge for directors who seek to innovate within familiar forms. Nevertheless, *The Substance* takes on this challenge by toppling both the beauty transformation narrative and the conventions of the horror genre. In this section, I will evaluate how this film takes elements from the two seemingly unrelated genres to produce a feminist critique of contemporary beauty culture.

Beauty transformation narratives have long been part of popular cinema, typically in “girly” genres like rom-coms and chick-flicks, where an “unattractive” but secretly charming heroine would undergo a physical makeover that enables her to win social acceptance and personal fulfillment. Some examples include the film *My Fair Lady* (1964), where Eliza Doolittle is taught to speak and dress like an upper-class lady in order to be socially accepted, *Miss Congeniality* (2000), where an FBI agent gets a makeover in order to infiltrate a beauty pageant and in the process, discovers new social success, and *She's All That* (1999), where Laney's “ugly duckling” image is erased through a makeover that wins her popularity and love (Ferriss, 2009). In each of these cases, the heroine's external transformation is treated as the catalyst for inner growth and social validation, as these movies directly tie physical transformation to the stakes of the female protagonist's professional and personal life (Ferriss, 2009).

While most flicks portray this makeover trope as lighthearted and fun, often presenting these scenes through a fast-paced, colorful montage, the message that they are ultimately conveying can be harmful. The values reinforced in these films seem to reflect post feminism, a cultural movement that suggests that the primary goal of feminism has been achieved and that feminist activism is no longer needed (Butler, 2013). According to Butler (2013), post feminism frames women's participation in beauty culture, fashion, and consumption as empowerment. This is the message that these makeover narratives are implying; that beauty work is a liberating choice that women make, masking systemic pressures. Through the framing of beauty labor as being lighthearted and fun, it is showing that changing your body and self to conform to beauty standards is simply a minor sacrifice, when such acts of “self-improvement” can cause horrific effects to your body.

In addition to breaking makeover narratives, *The Substance* also draws on, and at the same time, subverts horror genre conventions. Gaut (1993) points out that horror movies tend to rely on stereotypical figures to intentionally evoke negative emotions of fear and disgust within the audience. While much of the horror genre involves supernatural monsters, like vampires, zombies, and ghosts, human psychopaths and slasher villains have been seen to fulfill similar genre conventions due to their ability to commit acts of violence and aggression (Gaut, 1993). Whether it is a bloodthirsty vampire or a merciless human serial killer, traditional horror movies tend to use “external” monsters, even when they are trying to critique an abstract cultural fear. Some examples noted by Hawco and Salmon (2025) include racial anxiety, presented

in the white family in Jordan Peele’s 2017 movie *Get Out*, and climate change, presented in the presence of zombies in the video game *The Last of Us*.

Like these examples, *The Substance* critiques modern cultural systems, which in this case is the beauty industry, through horror. Nonetheless, it does so without the use of an external monster by using the beauty transformation narrative. The makeover storyline in this film centers around Elisabeth’s unhappiness with her current appearance, resulting in her turning to The Substance to create a younger and more beautiful version of herself, only for it to backfire on her. However, different from the usual portrayal of the makeover, the result of the transformation in this movie is an outer being, Sue. The “perfect” body of Sue serves as the supposed external monster in the movie, but not in the conventional sense. In truth, there is no external villain. The horror in the narrative comes from Elisabeth’s own self, and her internalization of beauty standards. It is only through this that her efforts of self-improvement results in something grotesque and violent.

By presenting the beauty transformation narrative in this way, *The Substance* delivers a message opposite to empowerment. While the traditional makeover narrative frames the process as a conscious choice that women make, the transformation in this feminist horror film occurs because of society’s pressures on women, showcased very clearly through the film’s iconography from the start of the film. The movie opens up with a montage of Elisabeth Sparkle’s Walk of Fame star, all the way from when it was first placed, then showing her at the peak of her career, with people coming over and admiring her star, to it slowly being forgotten, cracked, and then destroyed with little to no regard from anyone around. It then cuts to a scene of Elisabeth leading a dance routine as a TV fitness star, followed by her walking through a red hallway covered in glossy posters of her throughout her career.

This red hallway works as a symbol of her entrapment within her commodified public image. This is immediately followed by her going into the bathroom and overhearing her show’s producer loudly remarking about replacing her with someone younger and hotter. After this, Elisabeth looks into the bathroom mirror looking silent and downcast, possibly internally criticizing her aging appearance. Another piece of iconography is shown through the billboard of her face, which she sees while driving. The billboard here likely symbolizes clout, or the idea of being someone, so when it is torn apart, it triggers a literal loss of control, and Elisabeth crashes her car. All of these scenes together invite the audience to sympathize with Elisabeth, so when she eventually decides to turn to The Substance, it is not a liberation to be celebrated, but a last resort; a product of a destructive culture that devalues women as they age.

Moreover, the creative decision of the makeover storyline birthing a new, separate individual, instead of changing Elisabeth’s body directly likely functions to externalize the toxic dynamic of beauty culture and communicates the idea that the ideal is fundamentally unsustainable. Sue here acts as an embodiment of the unattainable beauty standard. Now that Elisabeth has had a taste of what being the beauty standard is like, she cannot get enough of it, leading her to live longer and longer as Sue, neglecting and actively destroying her own body and self. This demonstrates how women in real life are obsessed with keeping up with the beauty standard through various procedures that they know may negatively affect their health, well-being, and self-worth. Based on how the green chemical works, to constantly be the ideal under the beauty standard, one needs to sacrifice their authentic self. This tension between the real and the ideal becomes central to how *The Substance* constructs Elisabeth and Sue’s fragmented identity.

The Fragmented Identity of Elisabeth and Sue

From the opening shot of *The Substance*, the viewer can already see the movie’s theme of fragmented identity. The film opens with a shot of a single egg yolk that is injected with a syringe, causing it to split, becoming two separate yolks, signaling the idea of a split self. By presenting the beauty

transformation not as a direct makeover of Elisabeth's body, but as a creation of a new individual, Sue, this movie brings forth an important question about identity: is Sue still Elisabeth but just another body that she gets to control, or has she become a separate being outside of Elisabeth? In this section, I will analyze how this creative decision shapes the film's construction of Elisabeth and Sue's fragmented identity, using Laura Mulvey's feminist film theory, particularly her concepts on the male gaze and the female body as a site of control, and *mise-en-scène* analysis.

According to Mulvey (1992, pp. 347-348), the female body is framed as a sexual object in cinema, coded to be looked at by the male gaze. The 2024 feminist horror release makes this point very clear from the start, especially with Elisabeth's career as a TV fitness star. Through the aforementioned scenes of the red hallway lined with posters showcasing her physical image over time, the overheard conversation in the bathroom where her boss explicitly dismisses her value as she ages, and her wardrobe of brightly colored, skin-tight outfits designed for maximum visual appeal on TV, *The Substance* repeatedly emphasizes Elisabeth's body as an object to be looked at. All these scenes demonstrate how Elisabeth's identity revolves around being seen, supporting Mulvey's argument that female figures in media are often reduced to spectacle.

Usually, this form of visual pleasure is showcased through the active, or male gaze, and passive, or female objectification (Mulvey, 1992). However, Fargeat's work portrays this gaze differently, with the gaze being internalized. Elisabeth becomes both the subject and object, through the creation of Sue. In the beginning of the movie, the viewer sees that Elisabeth's body is no longer good enough for the "male gaze", a case strongly made because the person making these comments about her was her male producer. Because of this, Sue was born, replacing Elisabeth as the object, performing the flawless image that Elisabeth can no longer provide. But as the film progresses, Elisabeth increasingly internalizes the gaze herself, watching Sue obsessively, becoming both the enforcer and the victim of the standards that erased her in the first place. This is seen through scenes of Elisabeth watching Sue performing on TV. Elisabeth's gaze on Sue, or herself, simulates that of the audience, reinforcing her objectification.

The *mise-en-scène* further emphasizes this split identity through mirroring techniques, which blur the boundaries between Elisabeth and Sue. Throughout the film, quite a few scenes show the two characters engaged in parallel actions, framed in very similar ways. Two of the most notable examples include the shots of Elisabeth and Sue looking at their reflections in the mirror, each filmed from the same angle, wearing a similarly evaluative expression, and the shots of both women blowing a kiss to the camera to end their TV segment. These matching shots of the two characters might function to suggest that despite the physical separation of Elisabeth and Sue, they are still the same person.

Nevertheless, other scenes in the film seem to suggest otherwise, particularly through the lens of costume and performance within *mise-en-scène*. The audience is made aware from the start that both Elisabeth and Sue are still controlled by the former, and only one body can be conscious at a time. So, it does not seem that Sue has her own consciousness, but the way the two figures are portrayed makes the audience question the truth of this more and more as the film progresses. Like Elisabeth, she is consistently shown with a strained, downcast expression, always dressing in oversized clothing that hides her body. On the contrary, Sue is always smiling, exuding confidence, and dressing in tight sexualized outfits. The way they carry themselves and speak are also vastly different, communicated through the performances of Demi Moore and Margaret Qualley. One might argue that this contrast simply shows Elisabeth's boost in confidence when inside Sue's body as opposed to her own aging one, but the increasingly stark differences in behavior suggest a deeper fragmentation, perhaps even that Sue is slowly evolving beyond Elisabeth's conscious control.

Through the film's use of *mise-en-scène*, this question of identity, whether Elisabeth and Sue are truly the same person or have become separate beings, is left unresolved. Mirroring scenes, framing,

costume, and performance work together to continuously blur the boundary between the two selves, keeping their relationship ambiguous. At one point near the end of the film, there is even a scene that hints that Elisabeth and Sue have two separate identities, with the two existing as conscious bodies at the same time. This moment though, was never explained. This deliberate ambiguity exhibits Mulvey’s (1992) point that the female body in cinema is often fragmented and objectified. In Fargeat’s film, the fragmentation becomes literal, as Elisabeth’s chase for the ideal image breaks apart her identity, revealing the psychological harm of internalizing the male gaze and impossible beauty standards.

What *The Substance* Reveals About Cultural Pressures on Beauty and Aging

Having shown how this genre-bending horror film rewrites the beauty transformation narrative through horror, and how this subversion shapes the film’s construction of Elisabeth and Sue’s fragmented identity, it is also important to examine the messages this film is trying to convey. Using body horror, *The Substance* delivers several important critiques surrounding beauty, aging, and female selfhood, including how women become invisible as they age, how beauty is treated as a commodified product, and how the idea of striving for a “better self” causes endless cycles of self-surveillance and detrimental modification. Drawing on Mulvey’s feminist theory and evaluating the film’s mise-en-scène, I will explore how these cultural pressures toward women are demonstrated in the film.

One of the earliest and most noticeable critiques brought forth by the movie is the ageism and misogyny that dictate a woman’s social value based on her physical appearance and desirability. Through various scenes, the audience notices how Elisabeth is facing immense pressure regarding her aging body, and how it directly causes her public status to decline. The film’s use of makeup accentuates Elisabeth’s aging process, with her having visible wrinkles and saggy skin. Mulvey (1992) states that once a woman’s body no longer conforms to the standards of sexual desirability, it is effectively removed from the visual economy of the gaze. It is no longer an object of erotic interest and therefore erased from view. In *The Substance*, this is established explicitly, with Elisabeth clinging on to Sue, the younger and more beautiful version of herself, so that she can become “acceptable” for the public eye. Through this split, the film critiques the way society undermines and invalidates the aging female body, forcing women to disassociate from their authentic selves to remain relevant and visible.

Another pressure that *The Substance* sheds light on is how beauty functions as currency, with the cloning of Sue that makes the idea of beauty being turned into a product literal. The opening shot of the cold image of an egg yolk splitting into two against a sterile blue background foreshadows this. The drastic contrast between the bright yellow egg yolk and the clean clinical setting presents beauty as a product that can be engineered and sold. This is further emphasized through the brutal production of Sue. The scene of Elisabeth going through an intense, painful, and invasive procedure to achieve the ideal body mirrors real life procedures that women go through to enhance their beauty, blurring the lines between enhancement and harm. The horror framing of these scenes critiques the beauty industry’s sanitized narratives of self-improvement and highlights the vicious truth behind it. This is made clearer through the way the chemical itself works and how Elisabeth and Sue must share time, reducing the body to a product to be rationed, controlled and consumed.

Other than that, *The Substance* also criticizes society’s obsession with self-improvement promoted by the beauty industry. The narrative that self-optimizing procedures allow women to become a better version of themselves is deeply rooted in neoliberal individualism and postfeminist discourse. Women are encouraged to believe that achieving perfection is their responsibility, and that failure to do so is a personal shortcoming (Budgeon, 2015). As noted by Butler (2013), women’s participation in beauty culture is considered as empowerment through the lens of post feminism, which hides the systemic pressures that

cause these choices in the first place. Through its *mise-en-scène*, Fargeat's work makes this dynamic visible, especially with the hyper-feminine pink set designs of Sue's fitness show, reflecting the superficial promises of perfection sold by the media.

Another significant example is the scene where Elisabeth prepares for a date but keeps returning to the bathroom to fix her makeup, each time feeling that she does not look presentable enough. In the end, she misses her date entirely. The audience may initially view this as irrational or excessive, thinking that she looks completely fine, but that is why this scene works so beautifully. It invites self-reflection, prompting viewers to think about how they themselves may engage in this obsessive self-surveillance in their own lives. Under this gaze, Elisabeth constantly polices her body, using Sue as the perfect version of herself. This echoes what Mulvey (1992) describes as the internalized male gaze, and what Čakardić (2017) identifies as neoliberal feminism's tendency to shift responsibility onto individual women to meet impossible standards. *The Substance* critiques the seemingly minor sacrifices of self-optimizing practices by exposing its brutal reality; that it deliberately targets women's insecurities, fueling endless cycles of treatments to achieve something unattainable.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, through its subversion of the makeover narrative and use of horror, *The Substance* offers a powerful feminist critique of contemporary beauty culture. By fusing body horror with the beauty transformation trope, the film exposes the toxic pressures surrounding beauty, aging, and female identity. Through the splitting of identity between Elisabeth and Sue that is deliberately left ambiguous, the film shows the damage of internalizing impossible beauty standards. Moreover, the film goes against neoliberal and postfeminist ideals that frame beauty work as empowering through its *mise-en-scène* and narrative choices. Instead, by demonstrating how beauty is treated as currency nowadays, it argues that there are systemic pressures that cause women, particularly aging women, to make these choices. In doing so, *The Substance* dares the viewer to ask themselves how much they have already surrendered to the gaze.

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