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Confronting Gendered Ageism: *The Substance*

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Abstract

In contemporary media and film studies, age and gender discrimination have become increasingly prominent topics of discussion. Within the visual media industries, the representation of women based on age and gender often manifests either through overtly sexist portrayals or through their complete erasure from visibility. The social construction of aging and its impact on women, particularly how women are rendered invisible both on and off screen in the media and film industries, remains a contested subject. Coralie Fargeat's *The Substance* (2024) vividly exposes, through the lens of body horror, the intersection of gendered ageism, the exhaustion caused by an obsession with youth and beauty, and the ensuing bodily/self-loathing, as embodied in the story of a woman dismissed from her job in the male-dominated media industry on her 50th birthday. This study employs a qualitative case analysis of *The Substance* through the lens of feminist film theory and gendered ageism, exploring the pressures, alienation, and burnout experienced by women in the media sector. Fargeat uses the film to generate a powerful awareness of the social norms surrounding age and gender, while revealing the profound psychological damage inflicted upon women as a result of this intersectional discrimination.

Keywords: ageism; gendered ageism; film analysis; body horror; male gaze

Confronting Gendered Ageism: *The Substance*

Meltem Cemiloğlu

Introduction

Cinema and television, as mass communication media, have historically functioned as platforms for the reinforcement of patriarchal values and masculine norms. Women have typically been represented on screen in secondary, passive, and objectified roles, thereby perpetuating gender inequality. In this respect, cinema operates not only as a medium that shapes individual identities but also as an ideological apparatus that constructs hierarchies based on gender roles and relations (Mulvey, 1975; Kaplan, 1983; Thornham, 1999).

As Ryan and Kellner emphasize in *Camera Politica* (1990), "Films accustom audiences to adopt the basic assumptions of a given social order and to overlook the irrational and unjust aspects of that order" (p. 18). For this reason, treating cinema merely as entertainment is insufficient. Cinema offers a multi-layered field for analysis that reveals social structures, ideologies, and individual experiences of selfhood. As Laura Mulvey's seminal *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* (1975) demonstrates, cinema is predominantly constructed through the male gaze, rendering women as objects that exist "to-be-looked-at." Mulvey argues that female characters in cinema are transformed into visual objects of scopophilic pleasure, wherein the woman becomes both the object of the gaze and a displayed image; she is stripped of

subjectivity and reduced to a passive object serving male desire (Mulvey, 1989; Kaplan, 2001). This positions cinema not only as a site of narrative construction but also as a key space for debates on gender and age discrimination in terms of representation and audience engagement.

However, media—specifically film, in the context of this study—also possesses the capacity "to challenge dominant power structures within society" (Edström, 2018, p. 78), to question prevailing stereotypes, and to open up possibilities for rethinking age and aging. One recent film that places this debate at its core is Coralie Fargeat's *The Substance* (2024). The film confronts the gendered ageism experienced by actresses as they grow older, presenting it powerfully through the lens of body horror. Aligning with Susan Sontag's argument in *On Women* (2023), [1] that aging is less a biological inevitability than a social judgment, the film centers on the idea that aging for women is not only a biological process but also a social experience of deprivation and invisibility. Through its protagonist, Elisabeth Sparkle (Demi Moore), the film invites audiences to question societal norms surrounding beauty and age. Moreover, by employing grotesque bodily transformations, it delivers an unsettling critique of gendered assumptions about women's bodies and prevailing beauty standards. In doing so, it stands out as one of the more provocative works in cinema history on this subject.

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This study examines how *The Substance* (2024) represents gendered ageism through the lens of feminist film theory. It explores how the body horror genre functions within contemporary visual culture at the intersection of gender, age, and the body. The article is structured as follows: the first section outlines the methodological framework; the second engages with literature on gender, ageism, and body horror; the third analyses the psychological dimensions of age and gender discrimination in the film, alongside selected scene analyses. The conclusion presents recommendations regarding age and gender representation in light of the findings.

This article does not limit itself to textual analysis of the film; it also draws upon interviews with the director and the lead actress to provide a unique and in-depth background. The rationale for selecting this film lies in its deconstructive critique of contemporary global obsessions with youth and beauty, body image, and the capitalist-patriarchal trends underpinning anti-aging discourse.

Methodology

The Substance is treated as a strategically selected case because it condenses multiple contemporary anxieties about aging femininity, visibility, and bodily modification into a single, highly stylized narrative form. This study employs a qualitative case study design (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2018), treating *The Substance* (Fargeat, 2024) as a single, information-rich case through

Volume 14.1 (2026) | ISSN 2158-8724 (online) | DOI 10.5195/cinej.2026.821 | http://cinej.pitt.edu

which to examine how contemporary cinema visualizes gendered ageism, embodied subjectivity, and patriarchal beauty regimes. The film is approached as an audio-visual text whose meaning emerges from the interaction of narrative, performance, cinematography, editing, mise-en-scène, and sound, rather than from plot alone (Bordwell & Thompson, 2019; Rose, 2016).

Corpus and Contextual Materials

The primary object of analysis is the film itself. Contextual materials (director and cast interviews, press-kit statements, and selected professional reviews) are used only to clarify authorial framing and reception discourse, not as evidentiary substitutes for the film text. In addition, a limited set of publicly available video essays and commentaries was consulted as *paratexts* to identify recurrent public interpretive frames, while keeping the analysis grounded in the film's formal construction (Gray, 2010).

Analytic Procedure and Operational Categories

The analysis proceeded in four stages:

1. Iterative viewing and memoing. The film was viewed multiple times to generate analytic memos focused on (i) narrative turning points, (ii) recurring motifs of the gaze, and (iii) formal strategies associated with disgust, excess, and bodily boundary violation.
2. Purposive scene selection. Scenes were selected to represent the film's escalation from institutional devaluation to embodied catastrophe, using four criteria:
    - Gatekeeping moments where age and gender hierarchy are explicitly stated or enacted (e.g., dismissal, casting logic, workplace interactions).

- Gaze-intensification sequences where the camera fetishizes, fragments, or displays the body as spectacle.
- Regime-and-extraction sequences where the "rules" of bodily maintenance and exchange are narrated, enforced, or broken.
- Terminal transformation sequences where the film's argument is condensed into grotesque metamorphosis.

3. Thematic coding guided by theory. Selected scenes were coded using a theory-informed thematic strategy (Braun & Clarke, 2006), with codes clustered into five operational analytic categories that structure the article's interpretation. This coding was not intended to produce an inductive codebook from audience data, but to organize scene-level formal and thematic patterns for interpretive film analysis. These categories are analytically distinct but interpreted relationally, allowing the study to trace how structural ageism, visual form, horror aesthetics, and psychic internalization interact across the film. The five categories are:
   - Gendered ageism and visual ageism: representational erasure, "replacement" logic, and the devaluation of aging women as a structural condition of visibility.
   - Male gaze and bodily fragmentation: formal techniques of partial-object imaging (close-ups, fetish framing, spectacle editing) that convert women into "to-be-looked-at" bodies (Mulvey, 1975; 1989).
   - Abjection and the grotesque: images of leakage, decay, contamination, and boundary collapse as an aesthetic grammar for shame, disgust, and cultural expulsion (Kristeva, 1982/2024).
   - Monstrous-feminine configurations: horror archetypes that encode patriarchal anxieties about female embodiment, aging, and reproduction (Creed, 1993).
   - Internalization and split subjectivity (persona/shadow): how structural ageism is translated into self-surveillance, self-erasure, and self-directed violence through the Elisabeth–Sue duality (Jung, 1959; Bordo, 1993/2003).
4. Integrative interpretation (conceptual synthesis). The final stage brought these categories into dialogue to support the manuscript's central claim: the film represents gendered ageism both as structural exclusion and as internalized self-violence, and it uses body horror as the formal mode through which that intersection becomes visible and affectively forceful.

Rigor and Limitations

To enhance analytic coherence, the coding frame was applied consistently across the

Volume 14.1 (2026) | ISSN 2158-8724 (online) | DOI 10.5195/cinej.2026.821 | http://cinej.pitt.edu

selected scenes, and interpretive claims were checked against the film's recurring formal patterns (camera, framing, distortion, repetition, and sound-image relations). Given the interpretive nature of the analysis, claims remain theory-informed and situated; the aim is not to establish a single definitive reading but to produce a coherent, textually grounded account of how the film organizes gendered ageism through form and affect. Because this is a single-case qualitative analysis, the goal is theoretical insight rather than statistical generalization; conclusions are therefore framed as interpretive propositions about cinematic representation and embodied ideology.

Gendered Ageism and Intersectionality

Age-based discrimination, defined in the literature as *ageism* or *age discrimination*, refers to prejudiced attitudes towards all age groups, not just the elderly. Levy (2001) emphasizes that ageism operates not only in social relations but also in individuals' self-perception, noting that internalized ageism can erode self-esteem. According to Levy (2001), ageism is often an implicit process that manifests without conscious intent, influencing self-perceptions and interactions with others. When older individuals internalize negative ageist messages accumulated over their lifetimes, it not only diminishes their self-respect and sense of self-worth but also shapes their attitudes toward others and the quality of their relationships.

The intersectionality of ageism is central to this study. The concept of *intersectionality*

(Crenshaw, 1989) is used to explain how multiple inequalities—arising from race, gender, age, class, religion, national origin, or sexual orientation—can operate simultaneously in people's lives and experiences. Butler's (1969) conceptualization of ageism initially aimed to highlight the various forms of exclusion and discrimination faced by older individuals. Today, however, age is increasingly viewed not merely as an individual or biological trait but as a socially constructed category (Calasanti, 2003; Krupa, 2009; Nikander, 2009; Phelan, 2018). This perspective positions age as more than a temporal measure; it is understood as a socially situated concept embedded within social structures. In this context, age functions as a producer of social divisions, shaping individual identities, influencing institutional practices, and sustaining structural inequalities (Gullette, 2004; Krekula, 2007; Nikander, 2009; Krekula, Nikander, & Wilińska, 2018).

Of particular relevance here is the concept of gendered ageism, which describes forms of discrimination arising at the intersection of age and gender. Itzin and Phillipson (1993, 1995) first introduced the term in their examination of workplace age barriers, demonstrating that women are often categorized as 'old' at an earlier stage, thereby limiting their career opportunities and social visibility. According to Itzin and Phillipson (1995), women are typically labeled as old at a younger age and assumed to have reached the peak of their careers

Volume 14.1 (2026) | ISSN 2158-8724 (online) | DOI 10.5195/cinej.2026.821 | http://cinej.pitt.edu

by age 35. In contrast, men are perceived to develop professionally over a longer period and to reach their peak later in life. As a result, women are excluded from professional life earlier and, due to the glass ceiling, face restricted access to promotions and leadership positions. For women, ageism thus contains an additional layer of gender-based discrimination—a phenomenon frequently referred to in the literature as double jeopardy. Research shows that age-related prejudice in women leads to heightened pressure, invisibility, professional exclusion, and feelings of social devaluation (Barrett & Naiman-Sessions, 2016). In short, gendered ageism diminishes women's visibility in society, fosters the internalization of negative beliefs about aging, and undermines their self-worth, social relationships, and professional identities (Barrett & Naiman-Sessions, 2016; Pack et al., 2019).

Understanding this conflict can be aided by Jung's concept of the persona, which offers a useful interpretative framework. According to Jung (1959), the persona is a 'mask' that an individual wears in order to adapt to social life. This mask often conceals one's true identity and desires, functioning primarily to gain social approval (Zhu & Han, 2013, p. 325). "The persona is the mask we wear when we interact with others, presenting ourselves to society in the way we wish to be seen. For this reason, the persona may not correspond to our real personality" (Schultz & Schultz, 2011, p. 327).

Volume 14.1 (2026) | ISSN 2158-8724 (online) | DOI 10.5195/cinej.2026.821 | http://cinej.pitt.edu

When women are confronted with the social stigma of aging, this mask becomes an increasingly heavy burden. As age- and gender-based discrimination intensifies, the gap between the persona and the true self widens. To meet societal demands and render the signs of aging invisible, women may feel compelled to develop new masks that imitate the socially desired identity of a young, 'acceptable' woman. However, this persona—constantly reconstructed to secure social approval—damages a woman's connection to her own inner reality; as she ages, the gulf between 'mask' and 'self' deepens, and her sense of self-worth becomes destabilized.

One concept that has contributed to research on ageism is visual ageism. Loos and Ivan (2018, pp. 164–165) introduced the term to describe a social practice in which older individuals are either absent from visual media or depicted in biased and negative ways. Visual ageism encompasses portrayals in which older people appear only in the background or in secondary roles, are depicted in exaggerated, unrealistic, or distorted ways, and have their experiences of aging oversimplified or overgeneralized.

Gendered ageism further argues that older women lose social status far more rapidly than their male peers due to both patriarchal values and a cultural obsession with youth (Duncan & Loretto, 2004; Barrett & Naiman-Sessions, 2016). This form of discrimination is not solely

Volume 14.1 (2026) | ISSN 2158-8724 (online) | DOI 10.5195/cinej.2026.821 | http://cinej.pitt.edu

external but also operates internally, through the internalized norms that shape women's own perceptions of self (Levy, 2001).

The cumulative weight of discrimination and the internalized ideal body image are, in fact, constants throughout women's lives. Sexism, heterosexism, racism, and ageism continue to exert strongly normalizing functions within society. According to Bordo (1993), social norms concerning women's bodies cannot be reduced merely to individual choices; culturally internalized disciplinary practices also shape them. In contemporary culture, the ideal of thinness conveys not only beauty but also notions of strength, willpower, and professional success. As she explains: "a range of contemporary representations and images […] have coded the transcendence of female appetite and its public display in the slenderness ideal in terms of power, will, mastery, the possibilities of success in the professional arena" (2003 [1993], p. 191). However, many women striving to embody these ideals face eating disorders, compulsive exercise, and continual self-surveillance. As Bordo (2003, p. 191) notes: "Yet the thousands of slender girls and women who strive to embody these images and who in that service suffer from eating disorders, exercise compulsions, and continual self-scrutiny and self-castigation are anything but the 'masters' of their lives." For this reason, she argues that feminist theory must address not only cultural representations but also their relationship to bodily practices: "exposure and productive cultural analysis of such contradictory and mystifying relations

between image and practice are possible only if the analysis includes attention to and interpretation of the 'useful' or, as I prefer to call it, the practical body" (Bordo, 2003, p. 191).

Gender inequalities shaped by patriarchy and capitalist relations of production emerge with particular force in later life. Women face multiple forms of inequality throughout their lives, but these become more pronounced with age; older women often become invisible and experience restricted access to social and economic resources (Calasanti & Slevin, 2001; Krekula, 2007). The visual media industry replicates this double jeopardy. According to Martha Lauzen's (2024) research, male characters are generally depicted as older than their female counterparts. In her study, women in their 20s were twice as visible as men of the same age, while in their 40s, male representation was twice that of women. Similarly, men over 60 appeared twice as often as women in the same age group. This suggests that women's value is culturally linked to youth and beauty, whereas men's is associated with experience and power.

Woodward (2006) observes that the cinematic apparatus perpetuates a perspective that measures a woman's worth by her youth. Research shows that women actors are often labeled 'old' by their 40s, resulting in a sharp decline in leading roles (Lemish & Muhlbauer, 2012). Conversely, male actors in their 50s and 60s are frequently cast as desirable or authoritative figures. This stark disparity is compounded by the fact that older women are evaluated almost

Volume 14.1 (2026) | ISSN 2158-8724 (online) | DOI 10.5195/cinej.2026.821 | http://cinej.pitt.edu

exclusively on their physical appearance; if they fail to maintain the aesthetic of youthful femininity, their knowledge, experience, and professional competence are often disregarded or undervalued. As Liddy (2023, p. 8) points out: "Abandoning the cultural expectations around the primacy and continuity of a youthful and attractive appearance can be particularly concerning in an industry focused on external appearance and image. As a result, shame about age, denial of age, and investment in successful aging are often internalized by women, becoming an energy-draining process of constant maintenance and vigilance." This creates an enduring pressure on women to maintain a youthful appearance, reframing aging not as a natural process but as a source of shame. In the visual media industry, straying outside the system's prescribed age standards becomes virtually impossible for women. In Hollywood, this age-based double standard is not merely an aesthetic issue but a systematic practice of erasure—precisely as Elisabeth experiences in the film.

Gender and Body Horror

Gender is a cultural system that shapes the meanings and expectations attributed to masculinity and femininity within society. According to Butler (1999, p. 178), the boundaries of the body are determined by social structures. No gender identity precedes its expressions; rather, gender is performatively constituted through those very expressions. The concept of 'doing gender' (West & Zimmerman, 1987) emphasizes that gender is not an inherent personal

Volume 14.1 (2026) | ISSN 2158-8724 (online) | DOI 10.5195/cinej.2026.821 | http://cinej.pitt.edu

attribute, but a set of acts continually performed within social relations. Butler (1999) further argues that this construction is never self-evident: "As a cultural fiction, gender conceals its own production, sustained by an implicit collective agreement and reinforced through the credibility of its performances and the sanctions for resisting them. The historical possibilities embodied in diverse corporeal styles are, in turn, the result of punitively regulated fictions, alternately enacted or suppressed under constraint" (pp. 178–179).

Similar to the notion of gender as a social construction, concepts such as 'doing age' and 'undoing age' can also be discussed (Haller, 2009, p. 4). Age, too, is performative, in that individuals "carry out minute-by-minute the acts associated with a chronological age, and the repetition of these performances creates, for both the subject and those who interact with them, a purported reality of age" (Lipscomb & Marshall, 2010, p. 2).

Women experience a 'double jeopardy' based on both gender and age. This perspective highlights how, due to social expectations regarding women's appearance and sexuality, women are subjected to ageism more intensely than men, particularly in professional life (Clarke & Griffin, 2008; Krekula, 2009; Rodal & Menéndez, 2021; Liddy, 2023). The film industry is no exception. Lauzen supports this view in an interview (Jackson, 2021): "We see a few mature actresses and assume that ageism in Hollywood is declining. However, unless your

Volume 14.1 (2026) | ISSN 2158-8724 (online) | DOI 10.5195/cinej.2026.821 | http://cinej.pitt.edu

surname is Streep or McDormand, you are probably not getting much work in the industry." As illustrated by earlier examples, this issue has repeatedly become a subject for films.

One genre in which gender and gendered ageism find a distinctive cinematic expression is, as in *The Substance*, body horror. While the genre is rooted in bodily experience, the term *body horror* typically refers to the destruction of the human body in whole or in part (e.g. *The Fly*, David Cronenberg, 1986), its mutilation through torture (*Martyrs*, Pascal Laugier, 2008), its transformation or deformation (*The Thing*, John Carpenter, 1982), or grotesque mutations (*Tetsuo: The Iron Man*, Shinya Tsukamoto, 1989). In academic terms, it is "used to describe a subgenre of horror" (see Clover, 1992; Creed, 1993; Reyes, 2024). "These transformations can sometimes be presented implicitly; however, since the 1980s, the term has generally been associated with works that feature a detailed and often exploitative representation of the body" (Aldana Reyes, 2022, p. 107). Body horror interrogates the limits of being human and questions issues of identity. While David Cronenberg remains one of its most prominent exponents, in recent years, women and non-binary directors such as Julia Ducournau, Amanda Nell Eu, Jen and Sylvia Soska, and Laura Moss have approached the genre from innovative perspectives.

For these filmmakers, body horror provides a rich space for exploring issues such as the transition to puberty (*Tiger Stripes*, Amanda Nell Eu, 2023), sexual violence (*American Mary*,

Volume 14.1 (2026) | ISSN 2158-8724 (online) | DOI 10.5195/cinej.2026.821 | http://cinej.pitt.edu

Jen & Sylvia Soska, 2012; *Revenge*, Coralie Fargeat, 2017), female sexuality (*Rabid*, Jen & Sylvia Soska, 2019; *The Ugly Stepsister*, Den Stygge Stesøsteren, 2025), gender identity (*Titane*, Julia Ducournau, 2021), and body and identity politics centred on the female body (*Birth/Rebirth*, Laura Moss, 2023). In body horror, the feminine grotesque creates an abject space in which the fragmented and fragmenting female body gains visibility—embodied in a female protagonist or victim who, despite poor decisions, invites audience empathy through a form of voluntary abjection.

According to Williams (1991, p. 5), body horror films center on three primary elements: "first and foremost, horror. However, horror is accompanied by pornography and melodrama, with horror aiming to make the spectator feel pain through on-screen violence, pornography to evoke lust, and melodrama to inspire sadness." Williams' tripartite structure shows that body horror leaves the audience poised not only between fear and disgust but also between desire and emotional tragedy. In a genre often interwoven with female representation, bodily transformation, fragmentation, and the violation of norms constitute not merely physical threats but also challenges to social order, identities, and desires. In this context, common tropes such as the 'young, beautiful female victim' and the 'ugly old witch' are not simply horror devices; they also reflect patriarchal practices of exclusion and othering enacted through the body.

Volume 14.1 (2026) | ISSN 2158-8724 (online) | DOI 10.5195/cinej.2026.821 | http://cinej.pitt.edu

The discomfort and revulsion triggered by these bodily and social transgressions can be read through Kristeva's concept of the abject. The abject refers to that which threatens the subject's sense of wholeness and violates the boundaries of the self. Complex relations with the maternal body, death, decay, and the 'unclean' are among the phenomena socially and psychologically cast out, where the abject manifests (Kristeva, 2024 [1982], pp. 14–15). Such encounters undermine the subject's sense of security not only physically but also psychologically, with their earliest precedents found in the child's separation from the mother (Kristeva, 2024, p. 6). The abject is not confined to bodily waste or corpses; deviance and moral transgressions also fall within its scope. Its exclusion is therefore essential to preserving both individual integrity and social order by violating the boundary between "I" and "not-I," the abject fractures narcissistic wholeness, bringing the subject to the brink of dissolution and reconstruction (Kristeva, 2024, p. 14). Thus, the abject holds both destructive and creative potential.

In translating this theoretical background into the representation of feminine otherness in body horror, Barbara Creed's *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis* (1993) is of particular significance. Drawing on Kristeva's concept of the abject, Creed examines monstrous-feminine imagery that provokes disgust and a desire for purification in the viewer. She argues that horror cinema produces a paradoxical effect, oscillating between the

pleasure of encountering disturbing images and the subsequent need to expel them (Creed, 1993, p. 71). The viewer thus becomes caught in the tension between the urge to look away and the compulsion to gaze.

In *The Substance* (2024), these theoretical perspectives illuminate how gendered ageism is staged not only as social exclusion but also as a psychic and bodily mechanism: external judgment is translated into self-policing, fragmentation, and ultimately self-directed violence. Accordingly, the analysis that follows attends to both representational content and cinematic form, focusing on how framing, distortion, repetition, escalation, and abject imagery construct the spectator's oscillation between attraction and repulsion. This approach clarifies the film's core intervention: body horror is mobilized as a critical method that makes the violence of patriarchal beauty norms visible at the level of affect, embodiment, and cinematic technique. Recent scholarship on *The Substance* has begun to map several of these concerns through distinct but overlapping frameworks, including toxic commodification and marketized beauty culture, patriarchal visual regimes and divided subjectivity, and feminist representational ambivalence in postfeminist media culture (Uyug Sengun, Aydın, & Ozdamar Ertekin, 2025; Aydın, 2025; Kalmár, 2025). Building on this emerging literature, the present analysis foregrounds gendered ageism as its central analytic lens and examines how the film renders

Volume 14.1 (2026) | ISSN 2158-8724 (online) | DOI 10.5195/cinej.2026.821 | http://cinej.pitt.edu

ageism simultaneously as institutional exclusion and internalized self-violence through the formal and affective operations of body horror.

Findings and Discussion

Film Synopsis

The Substance follows Elisabeth Sparkle (Demi Moore), a former Hollywood star. On her 50th birthday, she is dismissed by her producer, Harvey (Dennis Quaid), who bluntly remarks: "People are always looking for something new. At 50, that stops." Seeking to regain her youth and market visibility, Elisabeth turns to an illegal serum known as "The Substance," which creates Sue (Margaret Qualley), a younger, idealized version of herself. Elisabeth and Sue alternate within the same embodied system under strict rules: Sue's continued youth requires the extraction of a stabilizing fluid from Elisabeth's body. As the rules are violated, the alternation collapses into escalating conflict, culminating in a grotesque metamorphosis and bodily disintegration staged against Elisabeth's name on the *Hollywood Walk of Fame*.

Figure 1: The Substance movie poster.

Volume 14.1 (2026) | ISSN 2158-8724 (online) | DOI 10.5195/cinej.2026.821 | http://cinej.pitt.edu

Coralie Fargeat's satirical body horror *The Substance* (2024) stages gendered ageism as an embodied regime of visibility in contemporary media culture. Rather than treating aging as a neutral biological process, the film constructs it as a socially produced condition in which employability, desirability, and cultural legibility are tethered to youth as aesthetic capital. In this framework, grotesque and abject aesthetics are not deployed as gratuitous spectacle; they function as a critical method that externalizes what patriarchal beauty ideology attempts to disavow: bodily time, vulnerability, and the instability of the "acceptable" feminine body. Read in relation to Fargeat's debut feature *Revenge* (2017), which foregrounds gendered violence through a rape-revenge structure and confronts misogynistic power more directly, *The Substance* marks a notable shift in critical emphasis: it relocates the site of violence from overt male aggression to the systemic and internalized operations through which patriarchal beauty norms are reproduced. The film thus maintains an authorial preoccupation with gendered domination while rearticulating its mechanism, showing how a culture that equates femininity with youth sustains control not only through institutional exclusion and disposability but also through internalized self-surveillance and self-directed bodily punishment. This framing also enters into dialogue with recent feminist debates on the film's representational and political ambivalences (Kalmár, 2025), while shifting the emphasis here toward gendered ageism as a regime of visibility and internalized violence.

Volume 14.1 (2026) | ISSN 2158-8724 (online) | DOI 10.5195/cinej.2026.821 | http://cinej.pitt.edu

From a feminist film-theoretical perspective, *The Substance* is particularly incisive in showing that patriarchal control over women's bodies operates not only through external judgment but also through internalization. The film repeatedly aligns visibility with discipline by mobilizing strategies of fragmentation, display, and optical distortion that render the body simultaneously an object of scrutiny and a site of breakdown. This is precisely where body horror becomes conceptually productive: abjection and grotesque excess do not merely signify bodily threat but make perceptible how the imperative to remain young is enforced as a regime of self-surveillance that can turn violently inward. The Elisabeth–Sue duality functions as a dramatization of split subjectivity under gendered ageism: a divided self compelled to perform youth while disavowing the aging body that materially sustains that performance. This account of split subjectivity also resonates with Aydın's (2025) Lacanian and feminist reading of the film's patriarchal gaze and divided subject. However, the present analysis re-situates that division more explicitly within gendered ageism and the embodied logic of body horror. In this sense, the film's satirical body horror functions as a critique of beauty standards and the objectification of the female body, consistent with Fargeat's public framing of the project (Fargeat, 2024).

Women are often compelled to bear disproportionately high personal and corporeal costs to remain professionally legible within gendered labor markets. In this context, the pursuit of

Volume 14.1 (2026) | ISSN 2158-8724 (online) | DOI 10.5195/cinej.2026.821 | http://cinej.pitt.edu

beauty, youth, and vitality operates less as an individualized preference than as a socially organized form of aesthetic and affective labor, requiring not only financial investment but also sustained emotional and psychological effort. The result is frequently a divided life in which women are pressured to manage competing demands across professional and private spheres, with "looking young" serving as a compensatory strategy against the penalties associated with visible aging. Elisabeth's trajectory embodies this logic in an intensified, literalized form: the work of maintaining an external persona becomes a disciplinary regime that turns the body into both project and problem. The sheer scale of the global aesthetic industry underscores the economic dimension of this battle. The economic scale of the aesthetics sector helps to contextualize the infrastructural conditions that normalize such demands. The medical aesthetics market has grown substantially in recent years; valued at USD 67.79 billion in 2024, it is projected to reach USD 74.41 billion by the end of 2025, with a compound annual growth rate of 9.8%, and is expected to reach USD 104.62 billion by 2029 (Research and Markets, 2025). In contemporary culture, a youthful appearance is equated with "successful aging", while looking old is perceived as failure in the anti-aging project (Van den Bulck, 2014). These dynamics reveal how the female body has been transformed into a consumable object of intervention and how deeply beauty ideologies have been internalized. This emphasis on aging, marketized beauty, and the female body as a site of consumable intervention aligns with recent

Volume 14.1 (2026) | ISSN 2158-8724 (online) | DOI 10.5195/cinej.2026.821 | http://cinej.pitt.edu

analyses of *The Substance* that foreground toxic commodification within screen and consumer culture, even as the present article places greater emphasis on gendered ageism as a regime of visibility and embodied self-discipline (Uyug Sengun, Aydın, & Ozdamar Ertekin, 2025).

In *The Substance*, Elisabeth's attempt to craft a "new" identity aligned with cultural expectations of youth and beauty produces not restoration but bifurcation: a corporeal split that simultaneously operates as a psychic and social division. The film makes clear that this is not simply a personal crisis of confidence; it is a coerced negotiation with an evaluative visual economy in which feminine value is tethered to youthful legibility. Elisabeth is compelled to maintain multiple personae to secure recognition, employability, and a sense of social intelligibility, and this demand generates an ongoing tension between the "performable" self and the increasingly disavowed remainder of bodily time. Read through the concept of persona, the film dramatizes how public roles are not merely worn but enforced, and how the costs of maintaining them accumulate in the form of alienation, shame, and self-surveillance. Crucially, this tension is rendered legible not only at the level of narrative but also at the level of form: strategies of display, fragmentation, and optical distortion repeatedly situate the body as both the object of scrutiny and the site where subjectivity begins to fail. The film's satirical register is therefore inseparable from its disciplinary logic: it exaggerates the mechanisms through which youth is performed and policed, so that the violence of "acceptable" femininity becomes

Volume 14.1 (2026) | ISSN 2158-8724 (online) | DOI 10.5195/cinej.2026.821 | http://cinej.pitt.edu

visible as a cinematic experience rather than a purely thematic proposition.

Figure 2: Harvey character.

Patriarchal power and the prevailing gaze of the media industry are crystallized in the figure of Harvey (Dennis Quaid), a late-middle-aged gatekeeper whose authority is exercised through evaluative speech, managerial dismissal, and the normalization of replacement as a professional rule. Harvey's function is not simply to represent an individual antagonist; he operates as a condensed institutional position through which gendered ageism is articulated as policy, common sense, and "market logic." The character's name may also be read as inviting intertextual association with Harvey Weinstein, not as a biographical claim about authorial intent but as a critical shorthand for the structural continuum linking the entertainment industry's economies of visibility to histories of coercion, exploitation, and impunity. Framed in this way, "Harvey" becomes a symbolic figure through which the film materializes the institutional dimensions of gendered domination: a regime that does not merely look at women, but organizes which women can appear, for how long, and at what cost to their bodies and

Volume 14.1 (2026) | ISSN 2158-8724 (online) | DOI 10.5195/cinej.2026.821 | http://cinej.pitt.edu

selves. These scenes operationalize the article's gatekeeping category by showing how gendered ageism is verbalized, visualized, and normalized as institutional common sense.

This logic is first made explicit in the restroom sequence, where Elisabeth overhears Harvey's phone conversation instructing a male colleague to "get rid of" her and replace her with a younger, more attractive woman. His sexist joke about female fertility further condenses the film's critique, reducing women's professional value to a biologized timeline of usefulness. The force of the scene lies not only in Harvey's speech but in the film's visual encoding of that speech. The fisheye lens exaggerates Harvey's facial and bodily features, producing a grotesque distortion that links physical deformation to moral and institutional corruption. Rather than presenting his authority as neutral or merely realistic, the sequence renders patriarchal judgement itself aesthetically repulsive, positioning the spectator in an uneasy relation to the evaluative gaze being staged.

The subsequent "prawn-dinner" scene extends the restroom sequence by translating evaluative speech into institutional action: replacement is no longer implied but enacted through Elisabeth's dismissal. Here, the film intensifies its critique through a disturbing aesthetics of consumption. Harvey's open-mouthed chewing, the insistence on bodily detail, and the sensory excess of the meal establish a material metaphor in which patriarchal power appears as appetite, entitlement, and extraction. Within this framework, the female body is positioned as both

Volume 14.1 (2026) | ISSN 2158-8724 (online) | DOI 10.5195/cinej.2026.821 | http://cinej.pitt.edu

commodified and disposable: desirable so long as it remains “fresh,” and devalued once it is read as aging.

In the dinner scene, Harvey’s conspicuously open-mouthed chewing and the insistence on bodily detail establish a disturbing parallel between the body and consumption. The meal is not merely a prop but a material metaphor through which the film renders patriarchal power as appetite, entitlement, and extraction. Within this framework, the female body is positioned as both commodified and disposable: desirable so long as it remains “fresh,” and devalued once it is read as aging. The scene’s excessive aesthetic, intensified by the continued use of distortion and the meal’s repulsive sensory emphasis, pushes the encounter toward abjection. Read through Julia Kristeva’s notion of the abject, what is at stake is not simply disgust at bodily matter but the cultural logic of expulsion: the aging female body is cast as “out of place,” managed as waste, and removed to preserve the fantasy of an ordered visual economy (Kristeva, 2024 [1982], pp. 14–15). In this sense, Harvey functions less as an individualized villain than as a condensed institutional figure through which the film critiques how patriarchal media industries regulate women’s visibility by attaching value to youth and treating aging as failure.

Rather than claiming a uniform viewer response, it is more precise to say that the film positions the spectator in an ethically uneasy relation to looking. By foregrounding Harvey’s

Volume 14.1 (2026) | ISSN 2158-8724 (online) | DOI 10.5195/cinej.2026.821 | http://cinej.pitt.edu

evaluative gaze while simultaneously rendering it grotesque through form, the film invites a critical distance from the very optics it depicts. The "shelf life" logic that structures Harvey's decision is thus made legible as a regime of visibility: the loss of youth and normative femininity is translated into professional disposability, culminating in exclusion from the public sphere.

This institutional logic is then internalized and literalized through the Elisabeth–Sue alternation: youth is not simply desired but operationalized as a resource to be maintained. At the same time, aging becomes the material substrate from which visibility is extracted. The rules governing the alternation therefore function as a disciplinary economy in which femininity is managed through regulated time, bodily debt, and enforced replenishment.

The film articulates this regime early and explicitly in Elisabeth's dismissal on her fiftieth birthday. Elisabeth's dismissal on her fiftieth birthday epitomizes the most brutal face of age discrimination and the youth–beauty binary. In this respect, it is apt to frame ageism in the terms defined by Bernárdez-Rodal and Menéndez-Menéndez (2021, p. 566) as "the existence of stereotypes that discriminate against people solely on the grounds of being old." At the center of *The Substance*, Elisabeth Sparkle (played by Demi Moore) confronts societal norms surrounding aging and beauty through her grotesque bodily transformation. Once an Oscar-

Volume 14.1 (2026) | ISSN 2158-8724 (online) | DOI 10.5195/cinej.2026.821 | http://cinej.pitt.edu

winning star, Elisabeth has, by the beginning of the film, been reduced to a marginalized figure, devalued by the industry alongside her aging body.

Hollywood's persistent evaluation of women against youth and beauty standards intensifies Elisabeth's crisis of self-relation. When she looks in the mirror, she registers her body primarily in terms of lack and defect, as if an anticipatory external judgment structured her reflection. This dynamic can be read through Jacques Lacan's account of the mirror stage and the logic of desire: the image promises coherence, yet the subject's relation to it is mediated by recognition, misrecognition, and the Other's gaze. In this sense, Elisabeth's estrangement from her own body and her longing "to be seen" are not reducible to vanity; they are symptoms of a visual economy that makes feminine legibility contingent upon youthful appearance.

Having tied her sense of self-worth to her appearance for decades, Elisabeth increasingly struggles to generate self-compassion or alternative sources of meaning. This is consistent with research on internalized ageism, which suggests that adopting negative images of aging can shape behavior and self-perception in ways that do not necessarily align with one's capacities or prior habits. Singh (2016, p. 6), for instance, notes that individuals may begin to "act old" as a response to internalized stereotypes, which can be associated with withdrawal from social activities and a diminished sense of agency. At a broader level, the internalization of ageist

Volume 14.1 (2026) | ISSN 2158-8724 (online) | DOI 10.5195/cinej.2026.821 | http://cinej.pitt.edu

imagery has been linked in the literature to adverse psychosocial outcomes (e.g., shame, self-blame, and depressive affect), underscoring how cultural stereotypes can be translated into embodied self-prejudice.

In this fragile state, Elisabeth turns to an illegal, experimental serum that promises the "best" possible version of her body. However, the intervention does not restore wholeness; it intensifies division by externalizing what has been disavowed. Read through Carl Jung's (2023) notion of the shadow as repudiated aspects of the self that return with disruptive force when unintegrated, the emergence of the younger double, Sue, can be understood as the materialization of an internalized demand to disown aging. As Sue increasingly dominates the narrative and accrues social legibility, Elisabeth experiences an accelerated physical and psychic decline, as if visibility itself were redistributed across the split. Sue's refusal to recognize Elisabeth as anything more than a substrate or remainder further erodes an already precarious sense of identity, sharpening the film's critique of gendered ageism as both structural exclusion and internalized self-violence.

The film situates this split within a broader cultural asymmetry: whereas men are frequently permitted to accumulate authority with age, women are more readily coded as declining. Harvey's aging, for example, consolidates his position as an industry gatekeeper, and

Volume 14.1 (2026) | ISSN 2158-8724 (online) | DOI 10.5195/cinej.2026.821 | http://cinej.pitt.edu

the authoritative figures in his orbit are overwhelmingly male, reinforcing the gendered infrastructure that normalizes replacement. The casting directors, functioning as "little Harveys," reproduce this evaluative logic through routinized decision-making that treats youth as a professional prerequisite. In the first audition scene, a young woman's enthusiastic declaration, "I am dying to be a part of this!", operates as more than an idiom; it becomes an ironic anticipatory cue for the film's central claim that women's inclusion in this economy of visibility can entail profound psychic costs, depletion, and disposability.

The opening sequence, which charts Elisabeth's career from her first star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame through advancing age, fading fame, and eventual disappearance, foreshadows the film's ending by formalizing aging as a trajectory of managed visibility. Elisabeth increasingly perceives herself through an external evaluative gaze, registering her face as "ugly" and "old" because it no longer conforms to the industry's norms of legibility. This dynamic can be articulated through Lacan's account of the gaze as a structure that positions the subject in relation to being seen and judged, thereby unsettling self-relation and relocating agency in the field of the Other (Lacan, 1976, pp. 74–76). In this sense, Elisabeth's crisis is not reducible to self-esteem; it is a structural predicament in which subjectivity is pressured to align with an image produced for others.

Volume 14.1 (2026) | ISSN 2158-8724 (online) | DOI 10.5195/cinej.2026.821 | http://cinej.pitt.edu

Figure 3: Elizabeth character.

After leaving the hospital following an accident, Elisabeth encounters Fred, a high school acquaintance she has not seen in years. Fred's compliment and invitation briefly reopen the possibility of recognition not anchored in industry evaluation. Elisabeth's subsequent refusal, however, is decisive: she declines not because she lacks desire, but because she has come to experience herself as unworthy of visibility outside the conditions of youthful beauty. This moment crystallizes internalized ageism as a lived constraint, converting social judgment into self-exclusion. In the make-up scene, where she perceives herself in the mirror as an aging monster, Sue's shadowy presence between her reflection and her body functions as a visual barrier, both literal and psychic, that divides her from herself. The shot thus renders split subjectivity as mise-en-scène, dramatizing how the demand to perform youth installs an internal adversary within the very space of self-recognition.

From Sue's audition performance through New Year's Eve, the film develops a visual regime that eroticizes and commodifies her body through controlled fragmentation. Repeated

Volume 14.1 (2026) | ISSN 2158-8724 (online) | DOI 10.5195/cinej.2026.821 | http://cinej.pitt.edu

close-ups and partial framings isolate specific body zones (notably hips, buttocks, and breasts), producing a pattern of "to-be-looked-at-ness" that aligns with the logic of scopophilic pleasure identified in Mulvey's influential account of mainstream cinema's gendered look relations (Mulvey, 1975). Importantly, the sequence does not require an appeal to "instinct" to make its point: the effect is formal and systematic. By privileging body parts over personhood, the cinematography reduces Sue's social legibility to a display of value, rendering desirability a function of visual availability rather than subjectivity. In this sense, the film stages the mechanisms of objectification at the level of film form, making visible how a patriarchal economy of looking can be built into framing, scale, and repetition.

This strategy also sharpens the contrast between Sue's hyper-visibility and Elisabeth's progressive de-valuation. As Elisabeth loses the industry's approval, she is increasingly displaced from the position of the desirable image and repositioned as the remainder that sustains Sue's display. Read through Lacan's theorization of the gaze as a structure that situates the subject in relation to being seen and evaluated, the film renders Elisabeth's crisis as more than a personal loss of confidence: it is the consequence of a visual regime that ties feminine worth to recognizability within youth-coded norms (Lacan, 1976). The film thus connects objectification to internalization: the more Sue is formatted as spectacle, the more Elisabeth

Volume 14.1 (2026) | ISSN 2158-8724 (online) | DOI 10.5195/cinej.2026.821 | http://cinej.pitt.edu

experiences herself as unfit for visibility, with self-relation reorganized around lack, shame, and self-surveillance.

As noted in the literature review, contemporary horror by women and non-binary directors has frequently revisited and, at times, reworked inherited configurations of female monstrosity, embodiment, and maternity. *The Substance* can be situated within this broader tendency, particularly through the Elisabeth–Sue relation, which invites a maternal framing without collapsing into a simple mother–child allegory. The "birth" scene is especially instructive: staged in a clinic-like bathroom, white-tiled space that evokes both delivery room and operating theatre, it literalizes bodily emergence as pain, contamination, and boundary breakdown. In Julia Kristeva's terms, the sequence activates abjection not merely as disgust but as the destabilization of the borders that sustain the subject's sense of coherence (Kristeva, 2024 [1982]). Elisabeth's "delivery" of a younger, more perfect version of herself thus becomes a scene of forced separation and traumatic splitting, rather than triumphant renewal.

Sue first appears covered in a fluid resembling amniotic matter, foregrounding the film's insistence that rejuvenation is inseparable from leakage, debt, and bodily remainder. The ensuing dynamic can be read as an ambivalent attachment structured by simultaneous dependence and repudiation: Sue's insistence that "I won't be like her" is articulated alongside

Volume 14.1 (2026) | ISSN 2158-8724 (online) | DOI 10.5195/cinej.2026.821 | http://cinej.pitt.edu

her material reliance on Elisabeth's body. Here, the film converts a cultural demand ("be young") into a relational economy in which youth is maintained through extraction and aging is accelerated through depletion. The "seven days" rule formalizes this economy as a temporal discipline: visibility is rationed, bodily resources are regulated, and the pursuit of legibility becomes a cyclical regime of replenishment and decline. As Sue constructs a public identity, Elisabeth's visibility and agency diminish, rendering split subjectivity as a bodily allegory for gendered ageism. In this configuration, the monstrous-feminine emerges not as an external Other but as the product of a system that alternates between fetishizing youth and expelling aging, generating both empathy and unease as coexisting responses within the film's affective design.

The tragedy of Elisabeth's character stems not only from bodily aging but also from the intensification of self-directed anger, shame, and a sense of worthlessness. As youth and beauty are withdrawn as cultural forms of legibility, Elisabeth's capacity for self-compassion is

Volume 14.1 (2026) | ISSN 2158-8724 (online) | DOI 10.5195/cinej.2026.821 | http://cinej.pitt.edu

progressively eroded; alternative sources of meaning do not readily fill the void left by an identity built around appearance. In this respect, the film's critique of gendered ageism hinges on internalization: the industry's discriminatory logics are translated into a hostile self-relation that turns the subject against herself.

This dynamic resonates with philosophical work on how ageism can injure self-relations. Pritchard-Jones (2017) argues that ageism may be internalized as attitudes of weakness, worthlessness, or inferiority, thereby damaging the subject's relation to herself and providing a basis for self-undermining practices (please verify the quotation wording and page reference in your source). In the context of *The Substance*, this can be brought into dialogue with Jung's (1959, pp. 8–9) concept of the shadow: repudiated affects and disavowed aspects of the self can return with disruptive force when they are not recognized and integrated. In this reading, Sue is not merely a narrative double but a dramatized externalization of what Elisabeth has been compelled to deny, namely, the aging body and the rage attached to its cultural devaluation. The film thus figures gendered ageism as both structural exclusion and psychic partition, with the "younger self" operating as the socially rewarded mask that feeds on the remainder.

The cookbook Harvey gives Elisabeth on the day of her dismissal later becomes a crucial metaphor linking consumption to punishment. Eating ceases to function as comfort or pleasure.

Volume 14.1 (2026) | ISSN 2158-8724 (online) | DOI 10.5195/cinej.2026.821 | http://cinej.pitt.edu

It is refigured as a self-disciplining practice that harms the body, echoing the film's broader insistence that feminine legibility is maintained through damage. After deviating from the seven-day cycle, Elisabeth's body becomes increasingly deformed; the cookbook is mobilized less as domestic guidance than as a manual for abject transformation, turning the kitchen into a site where care is inverted into violence.

In these kitchen sequences, the film overturns the cultural association of femininity with docile domestic labor. Frying blood sausages evokes diseased flesh; "cleaning the turkey" is staged as dismemberment rather than preparation. The result is not merely grotesque excess but a visual argument: the body becomes the stage on which the split between socially acceptable persona and disavowed remainder is made literal. When fragments (a drumstick-like protrusion, exposed bone, viscous textures) disrupt the figure's integrity, the film materializes psychic division as a corporeal spectacle, aligning the breakdown of form with the breakdown of self-relation.

The scene in which Elisabeth whips egg yolks with an electric mixer intensifies this logic. Her hair becomes coated in a chalk-yellow paste, producing an image of forced degradation that folds the labor of "beauty maintenance" back into abjection. Rather than presenting violence as solely external (industry gatekeeping, misogynistic evaluation, age-based

Volume 14.1 (2026) | ISSN 2158-8724 (online) | DOI 10.5195/cinej.2026.821 | http://cinej.pitt.edu

replacement), the sequence emphasizes a recursive disciplinary loop: patriarchal norms are internalized, re-enacted, and turned against the self. Elisabeth thus appears as both target and agent of violence, while domestic space is transformed into a laboratory of self-punishment.

This dynamic becomes legible across the film's larger representational economy. Elisabeth's return to her forgotten star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame, only for it to disappear, condenses the logic of gendered ageism into a single image: the aging actress is reduced from subject to temporary brand-name, then erased from cultural memory once her market value declines. Read in this context, the film's critique exceeds individual tragedy. Elisabeth's decline is framed as a structural effect of an industry in which aging and femininity intersect as accelerated conditions of devaluation.

The casting of Demi Moore intensifies this critique through paratextual resonance, though the analysis here remains grounded in the film text. Moore's star persona and public history of

Volume 14.1 (2026) | ISSN 2158-8724 (online) | DOI 10.5195/cinej.2026.821 | http://cinej.pitt.edu

gendered scrutiny around aging amplify the film's exploration of visibility, replaceability, and bodily discipline in Hollywood. At the same time, *The Substance* does not rely on casting alone: its critique is formalized through repeated strategies of fetishizing close-ups, fragmenting framings, lens distortions, and rhythmic editing that isolate body parts as spectacles of display. In Mulvey's terms, the film foregrounds and hyperbolizes the reduction of women to "to-be-looked-at" bodies. However, it does so reflexively, forcing spectators to confront the violence embedded in such visual regimes rather than consuming them innocently.

The final appearance of the composite figure (Elisabeth/Sue/Monstro ElisaSue) can be read through Creed's monstrous-feminine as the film's most concentrated image of gendered ageism, failed renewal, and abject embodiment. Earlier in the narrative, Elisabeth is linked to reproductive anxiety through the creation of Sue without male mediation, inviting comparison with the archaic mother. As the film progresses, however, the logic of rejuvenation mutates into grotesque recursion: rebirth becomes botched replication, and youth becomes inseparable from extraction, damage, and residue. Monstro ElisaSue does not simply symbolize a "failed" transformation; it visualizes the endpoint of a system that demands perpetual feminine renewal while expelling aging femininity as waste. As Stopenski (2022, p. 4), drawing on Reyes, suggests, the monstrous-feminine may remain recognizably human even as bodily disruption

Volume 14.1 (2026) | ISSN 2158-8724 (online) | DOI 10.5195/cinej.2026.821 | http://cinej.pitt.edu

and environmental corruption render it increasingly abhorrent and affectively horrifying. This formulation is especially useful for reading Monstro ElisaSue, whose grotesque recognizability sustains revulsion and legibility at once. In this sense, the final body stages what the film has progressively built through form: structural devaluation translated into self-division, and self-division rendered as horror spectacle. The co-presence of the aged Elisabeth and the young Sue within a single monstrous body also recalls Woodward's (2006, p. 165) claim that age, like gender, is performed. However, here performance appears not as free play but as a violent regime of compulsory legibility.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The Substance situates its exploration of age, identity, and gender within an exaggeratedly superficial Los Angeles backdrop, using the grotesque figure of *Monstro ElisaSue* to deliver a satire-laden critique. The findings reveal how Fargeat, having previously targeted male violence and toxicity in *Revenge*, now deepens this critique by focusing on women's self-directed anger, self-loathing, and fragmentation, exposing the chronic violation of bodily and psychological integrity. The film interrogates the patriarchal gaze's objectifying domination over the female body, framing it not merely as passive victimhood but also as a site of potential female agency that risks disintegration of subjectivity. In the New Year's Eve sequence, the abject and grotesque imagery presents the body as simultaneously subject and "other," pushing the viewer

Volume 14.1 (2026) | ISSN 2158-8724 (online) | DOI 10.5195/cinej.2026.821 | http://cinej.pitt.edu

beyond the familiar boundaries of empathy and identification, destabilizing the comfort zone with discomfort, disgust, and heightened self-awareness.

The film's *personal* duality and Jungian mask conflict illuminate the fractured identities of women caught between professional and private spheres, while also exposing the internalization of anti-aging and beauty norms as tools of social approval and the pressures of contemporary aesthetic capitalism. The narrative constructed through Elisabeth's body demonstrates, on the one hand, how the capitalist market and patriarchal order shape women's visibility, and, on the other, how bodily interventions can have a destructive impact on personal self-worth and being. The dominance of Sue and the erasure of Elisabeth make visible how the intersectional hierarchy of gender and age produces fragmentation and alienation within female identity. This performative duality underscores that social masks are not merely roles but structures that can result in the subject's disintegration and loss of self. Put differently, the *persona* conflict between Elisabeth and Sue—viewed through Jung's (1991) *persona* and *shadow* archetypes—demonstrates how women's identities become performatively split between societal expectations and inner desires. Here, the intersection of the social construction of aging and the concept of gendered ageism centralizes the fragility of women's social visibility and bodily integrity.

Volume 14.1 (2026) | ISSN 2158-8724 (online) | DOI 10.5195/cinej.2026.821 | http://cinej.pitt.edu

Harvey, as the embodiment of patriarchy, together with the grotesque and abject representations of sexist discrimination in the media industry, delivers a powerful cinematic critique of the commodification and consumption of the female body. The alienating relationship these representations establish with the audience illustrates that cinema can mediate not only the reproduction of gender politics but also its interrogation—both narratively and visually. On a psychoanalytic level, the Elisabeth–Sue relationship repositions motherhood, via Freud's archaic mother and Creed's *monstrous-feminine*, as simultaneously generative and destructive, as a space of both new possibilities and erasure. Drawing on the archaic maternal archetype, the film reconstructs the productive–destructive feminine potential within the context of gender roles and aging, embedding themes of motherhood, youth, identity, and selfhood in a symbolic, grotesque, and abject corporeality.

Demi Moore's performance and the tragedy of her character offer a powerful critique of ageism and women's social invisibility. The projection of Moore's personal experiences onto the film and character starkly reveals the extent to which anti-aging pressures and beauty standards are internalized within both the film industry and society at large.

Ultimately, *The Substance* employs an allegorical narrative that resists direct realist correspondence; thus, its plot and imagery should be interpreted symbolically rather than

Volume 14.1 (2026) | ISSN 2158-8724 (online) | DOI 10.5195/cinej.2026.821 | http://cinej.pitt.edu

literally. The film makes visible, through a radical *body horror* aesthetic, the systematic objectification and reduction of the female body to a consumable object within social and cultural discourse. *Monstro ElisaSue*'s body, oozing with blood, is the material embodiment of the accumulated anger against unjust and sexist objectification imposed by patriarchal norms. This representation exposes the conditional legitimacy of desire and consumption toward the female body—accepted only when 'ideal' beauty standards are met—and how, when those standards are violated, the gaze rapidly shifts to disgust and violence. By re-presenting the desired body in a state of decay and grotesquery, the film exposes the distorted nature of the social economy of desire.

Although individual acts of resistance may be insufficient to dismantle the cultural pressures or systemic gender inequalities entrenched in the film industry (Orgad & Gill, 2022), challenging these pressures and embracing the confidence that comes with aging remain crucial for women in a sector where youth and beauty are glorified, and power and authority are associated with a 'male' image. Within this framework, overcoming the structural inequalities women face in the visual media industry due to age and gender requires not only individual resistance but also broader social and institutional transformation. If the real 'monster' is the system itself, media organizations must develop more inclusive approaches to representing the

Volume 14.1 (2026) | ISSN 2158-8724 (online) | DOI 10.5195/cinej.2026.821 | http://cinej.pitt.edu

age and identity diversity of women. Furthermore, power relations and career opportunities, both creative and managerial, in the sector must be purged of sexist and ageist discrimination through active measures at both the policy level and via industry-wide training and awareness programs. The path to ensuring that women remain visible and valued as they age lies in challenging the myths of youth and beauty, opening space for diverse female narratives, and portraying women as multi-layered characters rather than reducing them to mere appearances.

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ENDNOTES:

[1] This book comprises seven essays written by Sontag between 1972 and 1975, which had not previously been published collectively. The book is edited by her son, David Rieff.

[2] It is possible to mention several films that address similar themes through different genres. In the context of the ageing female star becoming invisible within the film industry and its impact on women, examples include *Sunset Boulevard* (1950, Billy Wilder), *All About Eve* (1950, Joseph L. Mankiewicz), *Death Becomes Her* (1992, Robert Zemeckis), *Be Natural: The Untold Story of Alice Guy-Blaché* (2018, Pamela B. Green), *Mulholland Drive* (2001, David Lynch), and *Searching for Debra Winger* (2002, Rosanna Arquette); regarding the psychological and physical devastation caused by societal pressure and beauty norms, notable examples include *Perfect Blue* (1997, Satoshi Kon), *Requiem for a Dream* (2000, Darren Aronofsky), *Black Swan* (2010, Darren Aronofsky), and *Titane* (2021, Julia Ducournau).

[3] The glass ceiling is a concept used to describe the invisible and difficult-to-cross structural barriers that prevent women and minority groups from reaching senior positions in organisational hierarchies, regardless of their professional achievements or qualifications. The term first emerged in the United States in the 1970s (Wirth, 2001, p. 1). In a metaphorical sense, the glass ceiling symbolises the fact that women and minorities often cannot advance beyond a certain level in their careers, especially in the labour market, even though these barriers are not always overtly visible, their effects are deep and systemic.

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