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Capstone Context/Description

> Have you ever dreamt of a better version of yourself? You. Only better in every way. Seriously. You've got to try this new product. It's called The Substance. IT CHANGED MY LIFE. It generates another you. A new, younger, more beautiful, more perfect, you. And there's only one rule: You share time. One week for you. One week for the new you. Seven days each. A perfect balance. Easy. Right? If you respect the balance... what could possibly go wrong? (Fargeat 3).

The Substance, a body-horror film released in September of 2024 and directed by Coralie Fargeat, is a satire set in a world of Hollywood stardom and exploitation. The film is a rich text to be analyzed and offers a critique of the society we are currently living in that is just slightly exaggerated. What may appear to be a seemingly insincere movie that revolves around the life of a fictitious celebrity, The Substance represents the real-life insecurities and problems nearly every single woman–famous or not–encounters on a daily basis. Media texts such as this film must be given scholarly attention, as it is a direct reflection of the patriarchal, Westernized system in which we are living. The Substance functions as a warning sign to everyone, showing the hard truth of what being a woman is in an extremely violent and gruesome way.

The film takes place in what appears to be a time-elusive Hollywood, starring Demi Moore, Margaret Qualley, and Denis Quaid. Demi Moore plays the main character, Elisabeth Sparkle, a longtime star who is struggling with her self-image and is being aged out of the industry. Alongside Moore is Margaret Qualley's character, Sue, the younger, hotter version of

Elisabeth. Denis Quaid plays Harvey (rumored to represent Harvey Weinstein), the ageist, misogynistic studio executive who is over Elisabeth Sparkle.

The movie opens showing Elisabeth Sparkle's Hollywood Star, a metaphor for the life of Elisabeth Sparkle. We first see the installation of the star; the many photos taken with it and of it, the awe and attention it receives, and then the inevitable: the slow loss of attention. The star becomes cracked, stepped on, spilled on, and hardly noticed, foreshadowing what will take place in the movie. While it is not exactly disclosed to the viewer what Elisabeth Sparkle is actually famous for, we know that she is a Jane Fonda-adjacent aerobics instructor with her own show. Turning 50, Dennis and the other studio executives decide Elisabeth is no longer cut out to be the face of the show, as she is considered too old. After being fired, Elisabeth gets into a car accident, sending her to the hospital. On her way home from the hospital, she notices something has slipped into her coat pocket: a hard drive that reads "The Substance". After some consideration and feeling insecure, she decides to order The Substance, a neon-green liquid, along with a full kit to deal with the upkeep. The grueling process of injecting the substance into herself creates another version of her, Sue. Sue, a conventionally "hot" young woman with perky breasts, a flat stomach, and a curvy butt, is born. Immediately, Sue is hired as the new face for the studio, replacing Elisabeth. As the movie progresses, Sue begins to cheat the rules and takes more than her share of seven days. This results in Elisabeth's body starting to decay. It starts small, with just her left hand having aged probably 20 years, but eventually gets worse. Sue ends up getting cast for the New Year's Special and takes 3 months of time from Elisabeth. In doing so, Elisabeth is transformed into a shell of herself, transforming into a terrifying, bald, witchy-esque Elisabeth. Deciding to finally end this, she goes to kill Sue. At the last moment, she changes her mind, leading to both Elisabeth and Sue being alive at the same time. Waking up

and seeing what Elisabeth just attempted to do leads to Sue brutally killing Elisabeth in a bloody and gruesome fight. Killing Elisabeth results in the matrix being dead, meaning Sue can no longer function. The pinnacle of the movie takes place now with the New Year's show. Sue's teeth, amongst other body parts, are falling out. As a Hail Mary, she attempts to create a "newer, better" version of herself by injecting the reminiscence of the substance into her. Backfiring immensely, a monstrous version, combining both Sue and Elisabeth, is created; Monstro-ElisaSue, to be precise. Deciding to still go to the show in this disturbingly gross form, the audience tries to kill her, resulting in a camp display of a bloody, gory mess that ends with Elisabeth dying on her Hollywood star.

The Substance is not exactly the first of its kind. For years, there have been media texts depicting beauty standards, exploitation of women, and the way women are aged out of society. The 1950s movie, Sunset Boulevard, shows a similar story, with an aging silent film star who refuses to become irrelevant. Song artists have also been writing about this phenomenon for years as well. Taylor Swift, Billie Eilish, Ariana Grande, the list goes on. The concept of women being exploited for their bodies and their worth being tied to their bodies is not new. We are currently living in an age of GLP 1s, cosmetic enhancements, and the expectation of having a "fat ass" and small waist. This, of course, only applies to women, though. Impossible beauty standards have always been around for women, but within the last decade, there has been an extreme surge in these standards.

Social media and influencers cannot be ignored in looking at this surge. With a wave of new media, there are more and more ways in which these standards can be upheld and enforced. The popularity of social media and content creators sets the stage to see what bodies are supposed to look like. Pre-dating today's content creators that are promoting a certain look,

people like the Kardashians had already been controlling a narrative of what the female body is supposed to look like. However, once social media platforms like Instagram and TikTok really took off, this allowed for a specific space to promote a certain look and how to obtain said look. Cosmetic procedures such as breast enhancements, BBL's (Brazilian Butt Lift), facial Botox, and more started to become extremely normalized with social media. Before social media, celebrities like the Kardashians obviously had cosmetic procedures done to their bodies, but it wasn't being promoted in the same way because there was not a clear platform to do so. Social media opened up a space for these bodies to be seen, promoted, and marketed. Influencers will promote things like collagen supplements, a supplement made to keep you "young", specific diets to stay thin, ways to reduce bloating, how to build the perfect body, and more. Social media made these standards more popular and accessible.

In addition to beauty and body standards on social media, there is the rise of GLP-1s, a "miracle" weight loss drug. Although GLP-1s have existed since the 1980s, in the last 6 years there has been a huge increase in use. Between 2020 and 2022, the demand quadrupled (Cylinder Team), and in December of 2025, the first pill version was approved by the FDA, skyrocketing the marketing for GLP-1s. (Joszt). Major GLP-1 brands include Ozempic, Wegovy, and Ro, and they have invested millions into their marketing and promotion. (Varghese and Wingrove). Many celebrities and influencers have been promoting these weight-loss drugs. One instance that sparked quite the controversy was Serena Williams, one of the most world-renowned tennis players. She released an ad with Ro, talking about how she is using the injection now and how much it has helped her. This messaging was ultimately harmful to many women, enforcing the idea that strong-looking female bodies such as Serena Williams, whose body has served her so much, are not good enough. Other public figures have promoted using the drug, even if you are

not considered to be “overweight”. Secret Lives of Mormon Wives star, Layla Taylor, came out and talked about her abuse of this weight loss drug, using it despite being 5 '9 and 99 pounds, a weight that is considered dangerously low for someone of that height. (Rahkonen). In a recent NCAA college Volleyball tournament in August of 2026, Ro was a main sponsor, having their logo plastered on the court, once again enforcing the idea that strong female bodies like these D1 volleyball players are not good enough. You must be thinner.

The narratives around thinness are not all there is to it, though. A major aspect of this film is aging. Of course, trying to figure out ways not to age has always been around. There are tales of the fountain of youth and trying to figure out how to put our heads on to robots to live forever. The tales of many Disney princess movies revolve around beauty and staying young, such as Mother Gothel in Rapunzel or the Evil Queen in Snow White. Women have constantly been fed a narrative that aging is bad, and once you reach a certain age, you are done; invisible, and no longer valuable. Cosmetic facial procedures are seen on almost every celebrity now, especially in female celebrities over the age of 40. Kris Jenner, JLo, and Jennifer Aniston are all examples of women who are aging “well”, and yet they all have had cosmetic procedures done to achieve this accomplishment. All this does is reinforce the idea that to be perceived as aging the correct way, you must make permanent changes to your body. We see these images in magazines, television, movies, billboards, fashion; the list goes on and on of ways we are reminded we must stay young. A quick Google search on “how to stay young” reveals a plethora of articles for women on beauty tips and how to “age gracefully” and the “proper” way to age, as if there is a correct way to do so.

According to the American Society of Plastic Surgeons, between 2019 and 2022 there has been a 73% increase in the use of Botox and other neuromodulators. (DeMaio). Small things

such as lip filler, forehead injections for wrinkles, and cheek filler have become the new norm. Nearly every influencer and celebrity has openly talked about a cosmetic procedure they have had done. Young influencers on TikTok like Alix Earle and Madeline White, both under the age of 30 and both with more than 5 million followers, have openly talked about getting Botox. While the openness of having these procedures done is often praised for transparency, this is nonetheless still a normalization of needing to alter or enhance your appearance. Others will make videos normalizing the procedure with "come with me to get botox" (Francesca Farago) videos, which are not a niche video category. Searching "botox" on TikTok reveals hundreds of videos all with the tagline "come with me to get botox." Another user, Leah Fish, posted a video saying "Trust me. Get the botox." (Leah Fish). Amongst the "botox" search was a video from @hillbillyprincess, an objectively good-looking young woman who poses the question "So like when are supposed to start getting botox" (Hillbillyprincesss). Reinforcing that young women are, in fact, supposed to get Botox, it's just a matter of when.

In the exact same timeline that all of this is trending, there is also a side of the internet that heavily shames people in the public eye for having too much work done, as they no longer appear to be "natural", another characteristic that women must achieve in their pursuit of beauty. Celebrities such as Nicole Kidman, Selena Gomez, and Khloe Kardashian are dragged for no longer "looking natural." A TikTok video posted by @Celebritea.blinds, an account with more than 270k followers, posted a video talking about Selena Gomez's "BAD" cosmetic work. (Celebritea.blinds). A Reddit post titled "Celebrities who went too far with Plastic Surgery/ Cosmetic Procedure" shows a carousel compiled only of women revealing 14 different celebrities with a photo of them before having gone "too far" with their cosmetic procedures and then a side-by-side comparison of them now, having gone "too far". The post has 13k likes and

4k+ comments affirming these women have done too much. (u/Overall-Claim2459). As we can see, there is a severe contradiction in pushing women to alter their appearance to look better vs. telling women they have done too much work.

All of this sets the scene for the world in which The Substance exists. Although depicted as a horror film, the movie is not far off from the world in which we are currently living. The director, Coralie Fargeat, describes the experience that every woman goes through and how she utilizes the genre of horror to truly express the violence that encompasses the standards for women. When asked where she got the inspiration to create this film, she described her own experience dealing with being a woman. Drawing inspiration from her own life, she said: "I had been led to constantly judge [my body] in a negative way…I had been led to torture it in many way[s]" (Fargeat). Attempting to make her body fit within the beauty standards that were presented to her as "being the only valuable option," she felt that "at every age [she] kind of fought with something that [she] didn't like, or that [she] felt embarrassed with" (Fargeat). Fargeat emphasizes the way this movie is a depiction of what women really go through, claiming in her Director's Statement that she doesn't "know a single woman who doesn't have a troubled relationship with her body… who hasn't violently hated her body and herself because she didn't look the way society told her to look" (Fargeat). Continuing to explain the intent of the film, she says that body horror is "a perfect symbol of the violence, of all the fears that we can project" (Fargeat). She explains how society expects women's bodies not to change and the terrifying feeling that comes with that expectation. Body horror is something that women have to live with every single day of their lives. Fargeat describes how, as women, we are taught not to show the world the realities of being a woman. Women are told not to speak about the pain of their period. That would be considered inappropriate. Childbirth is often sugarcoated as a beautiful

experience, ignoring the bloody, excruciatingly painful, and often traumatic experience that comes with birthing a child. Menopause, another moment that every woman faces, is never to be spoken of. Fargeat notes these moments as "taboo" and things that women are expected to hide about themselves. (Fargeat). Women are trained to exist in a world that does not consider these moments, so body horror was something that Fargeat "naturally resonat[ed]" with, as it is something that women experience in their everyday lives (Fargeat).

With the release of the film, there were many conflicting thoughts from the public. Rotten Tomatoes scored an 89%, portraying the film as "Audaciously gross, wickedly clever, and possibly Demi Moore's finest hour" (Rotten Tomatoes). A review from The New Yorker by Rachel Syme said: "One of the best things you can do this season is to run to see…The Substance while it is still playing on the big screen." (Rotten Tomatoes). Another review from Rolling Stone UK called the movie "A daring feminist take on the body horror genre" (Smith). For the most part, public perception via a Google internet search reveals mainly positive feedback. However, examining a bit deeper into another media site, one that could be considered less credible, reveals different takes. Looking through various TikToks related to The Substance and their comment sections, it is clear that there is a divide in feedback. On one end of the spectrum, there are a plethora of comments resonating with and commending the film. On the other end, there is quite the opposite reaction, with people feeling the movie was terrible or disgusting. One video uploaded by Paramount+ UK and Ireland shows a clip from the film, and the comments are filled with negativity. One comment from @twedtmarly read "Worst movie ever" (Nika✨❤️) with 611 likes. A different TikTok uploaded by @Prisonrandom05 posted a clip from the movie as well. One of the top comments on this video with 1,530 likes reads "I'm very open minded with movies.. But this movie was absolutely terrible at the end" (💍). In

another video uploaded by Elocin, talking about how she enjoyed the movie at first but was left speechless in the last 20 minutes, the comments (in inverse to her video) were extremely positive. A comment from @kdhatesu_ said, “I’m in enemy territory. the last 20 minutes made it a 11/10” (Kd3000) with 7,352 likes. The discourse seems to be a mixture of liking and finding purpose in the film up until the last 20-30 minutes, and liking and finding purpose in the whole film, especially the last 20-30 minutes. There is a clear disconnect happening between the film and the audience in the last bit of the film. Many comments seem to sympathize and feel saddened by the ending. Others look at the ending like it ruined the whole point of the film.

The initial observation that can be made here before going any further is the rampant push for standards amongst women and the heavy scrutiny women are under. The encouragement of thinness, beauty, and staying young is more harmful than ever because of the climate we are living in, with these ideas being so accessible not only to women but young girls as well. These ideas are being embedded into girls starting at a young age, then being carried into adulthood, training women to associate their self-worth with their body. One major initial claim that can be made is that celebrities and influencers simultaneously uphold this system but are also victims of it. There is a vicious cycle of the public saying “you’re not doing it right,” resulting in celebrities changing themselves, in turn, reinforcing the idea to the public that you have to maintain a certain look. This film attempts to dismantle this system through its portrayal of an exaggerated story.

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