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Capstone Draft

> 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?
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> --Press Kit for *The Substance* (2024)

The Substance, a body-horror film released in September of 2024 and directed by Coralie Fargeat, is a satire set in a fictional world of Hollywood stardom and exploitation. 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. *The Substance* creatively demonstrates and critiques the vast control that the patriarchy maintains over society. The film is a social commentary, showing our worst flaws. Furthermore, it can be seen as a critique of the way women are treated, looked at, and judged within the culture, as well as how women internalize those ideologies. This film must be given scholarly attention, as it dramatizes a detailed critique 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. In my analysis of the film, I argue that if we use a critical lens to examine this

movie by looking at the incongruities it dramatizes, we can gain a new perspective and shift out of our current way of knowing and thinking.

The movie is filled with metaphors and juxtaposing ideas that are, in actuality, tools to help us wake up and self-correct. I believe that the metaphors in this movie are strategic, as metaphors can help viewers to better understand something that is fact by substituting it with a metaphor, as opposed to "using the ordinary intellectual method of substituting abstractions reached by analysis" (Burke "Permanence and Change" 95) Following a Burkean format, I argue that the film is laid out in such a way that first, highlights our pieties (a main theme that I will touch on a lot throughout this analysis) and how we choose to blindly accept our norms, then uses body horror and other incongruent images and ideas to reveal the absurdity, finally leaving the audience with choice to adopt a new perspective, through the comic corrective.

Synopsis of *The Substance*

The film takes place in what appears to be a time-elusive, slightly fictionalized version of 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.

The movie begins with Elisabeth being fired after 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 this, Elisabeth discovers "The Substance" and decides to take it. The grueling

process of injecting a neon green liquid into her body 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 ultimately results in Elisabeth being transformed into a shell of herself, turning into a terrifying, bald, goblin-esque Elisabeth. Deciding 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 supporting matrix of the Substance dying, meaning Sue can no longer function. The pinnacle of the movie takes place at the scene of 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. After she decides to still go to the show in this disturbingly gross form, the audience tries to kill her, resulting in a *campy* display of a bloody, gory mess that ends with Monstro-ElisaSue dying on her Hollywood star.

The Substance is not exactly the first of its kind. For years, there have been media texts depicting and critiquing beauty standards, exploitation of women, and the way women are aged out of society. For instance, 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, but seems particularly amplified right now. 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.

Narratives Around Aging Women

The term "successful aging" or "aging well" has been thrown around a lot in contemporary culture, especially with female celebrities. In Hollywood specifically, Brown refers to these women as "Ageless Beauties," defining them as "Adhering to conventional Hollywood beauty standards past their 40s…with little, or no, overt recognition of their actual ages" (Brown 2098). Essentially, to age *well* is to appear to not have aged at all (Brown). In agreement with Brown, I follow this idea in how *The Substance* uniquely highlights this concept that Brown is describing of aging without aging through Elisabeth's character.

Anxieties around aging continue to be an issue for women as perpetuated by conversations about women's bodies and what it means to age successfully. Taking a closer look at what women are actually experiencing is vital here. Interviewing a set of women about their lived experience and the discourse surrounding anti-aging and health, Claire Carter reveals the tension between aging and still being feminine. For many women, aging poses a threat, representing a "Loss of control over their bodies, loss of health, and a loss of their gendered identity" (Carter 208). General discourse around women's bodies, film, and magazines all contribute to the narrative on the proper way to age. Adding to these scholars' arguments around

aging, I submit that *The Substance* challenges this described narrative on how a woman must age correctly.

Media's effect

There is a growing collection of scholarship around legacy media's influence on women and their bodies. Focusing on Anne Jerslev's idea of the "mediated body" (Jerslev), I want to demonstrate how various forms of media shape women's ideals of what their bodies are supposed to look like. Jerslev describes the mediated body as one that is shaped, modified, and transformed by uses of media such as reality television and fashion photography (Jerslev). As Jerslev argues, the female body has historically been portrayed as a site of transformation in legacy media, and part of media's role is to show women that they must always transform their bodies to fit an ideal (Jerslev). I want to further connect this idea to my argument by showing how Elisabeth's body is mediated throughout the film.

Prior to the era of social media, imagery in films and in the content and advertisements in magazines and television demonstrated the golden standard for the female body. Fashion magazines had been a prominent way of pushing this narrative forward (Mazur 288). Whatever was being depicted in mainstream media essentially became the new standard. Bordo discusses the rise of mediated bodies through pop culture, fitness magazines, and celebrity influence (Bordo 246-250). The female body has been the subject of transformation for years and years.

With the rise of post-feminism and popular feminism, body modifications like Botox and plastic surgery can be sold as an act of agency for women (Lirola and Chovanec 488). Looking through a lens of popular feminism, typically described as a mainstream, palatable, trendy

version of feminism, such as “girl-boss” feminism (Benet-Weiser), we can see how this narrative of body modification as agency exists. In fact, female body enhancement has been linked to a greater sense of self, showing that society deems these procedures as having better social standing. In a study conducted by Shu-Yuh Lee exploring the implications of plastic surgery reality TV shows on viewers, it was found that there was a greater association with happiness, high self-esteem, better social and romantic relationships, and a higher likelihood of getting a job from undergoing cosmetic procedures (Lee 10). Essentially, after watching these shows, they felt as if undergoing a cosmetic procedure would result in greater privileges in society.

It is important to establish here that it is not being said that self-improvement is a bad thing, per se, but it is something that needs to be studied, as it clearly is having an effect on our world. Considering the information above, receiving or making physical changes to your body can be seen as a way of self-improvement and something that is meant to help you. Scholars have noted that it would be a broad generalization to assume “That people pursue a thinner or more athletic body only to comply with the norm manifested on media” (Huang et al. 479). Which is true: not all body modifications are inherently tied to something negative. However, in Elisabeth’s case, I will demonstrate how her body modifications are, in fact, to align herself with the norm.

In the exact same timeline that women are being encouraged and influenced to receive cosmetic enhancements, 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.

Patriarchy

In mentioning media's effect on the female body, the concept of patriarchy cannot be ignored, as it plays a substantial role in this film. First, we can broadly define patriarchy as a pervasive cultural system in which men disproportionately hold the power and are considered to be dominant throughout society. Patriarchy is what our country and most Western societies are built on. This means that patriarchy, for years, has defined women's beauty standards, their general roles in society, their value, etc., in particular ways that are always subordinate to men. While not necessarily upheld by men only, it was a system created by men and now kept in place by both men and women, as it has become the norm.

These dynamics are particularly pronounced in industries that specifically focus on propagating beauty standards, such as media and fashion, which have historically been and continue to be dominated by men in senior leadership positions. For example, Olumide Joshua

Oki describes the phenomenon of patriarchy in the fashion industry, explaining this as women having to receive an "endorsement" from "male figures who dictate the terms of desirability and worth" (173). Throughout *The Substance*, we see a consistent theme of patriarchal standards being enforced by male characters in power and lived by female characters, and this is especially apparent in the dynamic between Harvey and Elisabeth/Sue/Elisasue. Within this demanding industry that Elisabeth exists in, the patriarchy "serve[s] as mechanisms of social control over women's bodies, reinforcing gender hierarchies" (Oki 173). We are taught not to question this system and continue to live in a patriarchal society, despite the fact that it ultimately hurts men and women alike.

Significance of Horror

Horror is an intentional aspect of this film. Director Fargeat says that body horror is "a perfect symbol of the violence, of all the fears that we can project" (Vanunu). She explains how society expects women's bodies not to change and the terrifying feeling that comes with that expectation. Fargeat describes how, as women, we are taught not to show the world the realities of being a woman. Fargeat notes that moments in a woman's life such as a period or childbirth are considered "taboo" and things that women are expected to hide about themselves. (Vanunu). 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 (Vanunu). Building on Fargeat's intent of horror, Melanie Rapoport

discusses how the grotesque and exaggerated nature of horror fiction can be used as a way to shed light on women's issues (Rapoport). However, other scholars, like Barbara Creed, have argued that horror films have historically been oppressive to women and ultimately misogynistic (Creed). I acknowledge that this argument cannot be ignored, as many horror films, especially ones predating *The Substance,* tend to hypersexualize women and violence in a way that depicts women as inherently evil in nature. While it can be agreed upon in some capacity that Creed's argument of the monstrous-feminine (that women have historically been presented as monsters in relation to their reproductive nature), I suggest, similarly to what Melanie Rapoport is arguing, that when done correctly, horror can undoubtedly be used as a way to reclaim agency and narrative over women's bodies, like *The Substance* so eloquently does (Rapoport).

Methodology

Conducting a textual analysis, I will be examining specific moments from the film and analyzing their implications, arguing how the film serves as a tool to critically reflect on societal choices. Conducting a textual analysis will help to further investigate how this movie is challenging cultural scripts and hegemonic ideas of beauty and aging in women. Examining the camera placement, lighting, dialogue, body language, and visuals all at once is important here, as they each play a contributing role to the message of the film and my overall argument. This close examination will help to build a greater understanding of the symbols and metaphors throughout the film. Analysing various moments in the film, I will focus the majority of my analysis on Elisabeth's choices as well as the role that men symbolically play in the film.

Using the theoretical framework of "perspective by incongruity," theorized by Kenneth Burke, I believe that it will enable us to more clearly understand what is happening in the film

and for viewers to be able to adopt a more critical, reflective way of viewing. Perspective by incongruity is the concept of removing something out of its original context and establishing it in another that goes against its original meaning, in turn, opening up new perspectives and interpretations.

Burke proposes perspective by incongruity, as a way to allow audiences to critically think upon and go against our own pieties, (a loyalty to the source) as opposed to being passive consumers. Perspective by incongruity provides a way to shift your perspective of the world. In this case, I am arguing that *The Substance* uses many opposing ideas and examples to break down our perspectives. In making a text that combines such juxtaposing ideas, such as beauty and horror, *The Substance* allows for "atom cracking" (Burke, "Attitudes Toward History" 308), a way of breaking through outdated ways of thinking and opening up new possibilities. Burke argues that "One sees perspectives beyond the structure of a given vocabulary when that structure is no longer firm" (Burke, *Permanence and Change* 117). Supporting my argument, I will also touch on Burke's "tragic" and "comic frame" to further contextualize what is happening in the film. I argue that the majority of the film exists within the tragic frame, which "admonishes one to 'resign' [themselves]self to a sense of [their] limitations" (Burke, "Attitudes Toward History" 39). Essentially meaning that the tragic frame is a self-inflicted punishment where one has chosen to accept their fate and continue in a tragic cycle. The end of the movie, however, exists in the comic frame that works as a corrective that employs self-reflection and the ability to break said tragic cycle. Burke states that "the comic frame should enable people to be observers of themselves, while acting," and its goal "would not be passiveness but maximum consciousness" (Burke, "Attitudes Towards History" 171).

Other scholars have done similar work using this theoretical framework (Ciurel; Lowrey et al.; Scheibel et al.; Whedbee). Many scholars have analyzed speeches or public speakers. Looking at speeches, Jay Hudkins uses a textual analysis to examine a speech made by Donald Trump, specifically using a textual analysis to closely look at and identify misleading or untrue information that had not been looked at before (Hudkins). Examining a different speech, Karen Whedbee utilizes a textual analysis to look at an older speech from Norman Thomas, where she analyzes the ways in which Burke's perspective through incongruity applies in his speech (Whedbee). Both articles function differently, as Hudkins is more of a critique of the speech, and Whedbee's is a demonstration of Burke's theory and how the speech was ultimately useful. Another analysis utilizing Burke is an article looking at stand-up comedian Sarah Silverman and the extremely juxtaposing nature of her comedy style. The authors demonstrate how Silverman's comedy makes leeway for the comic frame, a theory that results from perspective by incongruity (Lowrey et al.). These texts provide insight into my research and analysis, and I hope to build off of these by opening up the realm of possibility for analyzing this film through a Burkean lens, one that pushes us to not just view pop culture elements, such as film, as something that is purely for entertainment.

Analysis

Harvey's character is an amalgam of patriarchy, sexism, ageism, and misogyny. Although not necessarily a "main character," he always appears in ways that directly antagonize women. In fact, it is not just Harvey who does so, but consistently we see men in positions of power, or in a position of judgment/overseer of judgment/overseeing women. Harvey's character can be viewed as the one who assigns value and worth in Elisabeth's eyes since he is an

executive, meaning that in Elisabeth's case, she has been trained to seek his stamp of approval without even consciously knowing. One of the movie's opening scenes is Harvey on the phone with who we can assume to be another executive or producer. Throughout this scene, the camera does not move; instead, Harvey just progressively gets closer to it in a way that feels like a violation of personal space, as if the viewer is the camera. In this moment, the viewer is forced to be in close contact with Harvey as he uses the urinal, as the camera is positioned directly above the urinal. We witness him simultaneously urinating while on the phone, calling Elisabeth an "old bitch," (*The Substance* 00:06:42-00:06:43), while we are, ironically, in close direct eye contact with his aged and wrinkled face. Harvey says, "I'll make it simple. We need her young. We need her hot" (*The Substance* 00:06:29-00:06:39). Meanwhile, Elisabeth overhears the whole conversation, and this is the beginning of what we know to be Elisabeth's determination to stay young.

Immediately following this scene is a scene where Harvey is firing Elisabeth. As Harvey is explaining to Elisabeth that she is being let go, he is grotesquely eating shrimp. The scene opens showing Harvey ripping off a shrimp's head, then immediately we see a close-up of him chewing his food while talking. We continue to watch him rip apart these shrimp, put them into his mouth, and spit out the shell. Although this scene is hard to watch because of Harvey's impolite and disgusting eating habits, it reveals a nasty, yet accurate representation of Elisabeth's life. The scene uses the shrimp as a metaphor for what is happening to Elisabeth: the process of being "chewed up and spit out." Harvey goes on to say, "At 50, well, it stops" (*The Substance* 00:08:28-00:08:33), referring to Elisabeth's age, to which she replies, "What stops?" (*The Substance* 00:08:33-00:08:34). This question leaves Harvey unable to answer. After some

stammering and avoiding the question, he sees his friend elsewhere in the restaurant and leaves the table, leaving Elisabeth alone and with no closure.

Harvey's inability to answer Elisabeth's question of "what stops" exemplifies Harvey's view of Elisabeth as a commodifiable object. Although there is not a direct mention of money, at this moment, capital is not an aspect that we can just ignore. This moment is dramatized to reveal this shared ideology that both Elisabeth and Harvey are under, but also the viewer. When Harvey says that it stops at 50, he is under the assumption that Elisabeth knows what he means; that they both share the same ideology of gender and aging; that truly, once you are 50, you are no longer valuable. Furthermore, as the audience, we can even infer what he is referencing because we also share this same ideology. When Elisabeth challenges his assumption, she makes the system of patriarchy visible, but then it is quickly hidden again as he just leaves the conversation. He doesn't know how to answer because he has never had to. This is a clear example of how patriarchy works. It is not meant to be logical or have a clear answer, but instead to be such a naturalized concept that makes it impossible to explain because it is rooted in pervasive discourse and a cultural system, not logic or reason.

Capital is at the forefront of the Hollywood industry; therefore, we can't look at this situation without considering Harvey's underlying motive other than Elisabeth being "old." We can correlate Elisabeth and her firing to commercial gain, or a lack thereof. In Harvey's eyes, Elisabeth is an object that makes him money, and now that this object is old and used up, he has to move on to a new one. Harvey does not view Elisabeth, or even Sue for that matter, as a person with agency; they are both seen only for their bodies, and what he can extract from the labor of those bodies. Harvey diminishes Elisabeth down to an object to be disposed of; one that no longer has any value or merit to him. Elisabeth's and Sue's bodies are seen through Harvey's

eyes and, more broadly, the patriarchy's eyes as "The ultimate commercial tool…reducing [them] to mere commodities rather than individuals with autonomy" (Oki 173). In this instance, Harvey is exerting his dominance and power over Elisabeth as a man, reinforcing the patriarchal ideals that men ultimately maintain control over women. In this case, Elisabeth is a commodity, as her body provides the labor, and Harvey is the one she is selling to, as he controls the means of production. Although they have a working relationship, the role of patriarchy is still prevalent here. Their relationship is a symbol for gender's role in capitalism, and Harvey is utilizing his patriarchal power "as a specific way of asserting power over [her] bod[y]" (Pierik 82). Capitalism here functions under the premise that the man holds the power and say over a woman's body and what is considered to be profitable.

Towards the end of the film, we also see the continuation of the pattern of Harvey as a patriarchal symbol. In the same manner that Harvey was able to determine that Elisabeth was done, he is also able to "create" a star as well. Leading up to the New Year's show, Harvey tells the other white male executives, braggingly, that Sue is his "most beautiful creation" and that he has "shaped her for success" (*The Substance* 02:04:23-02:04:27), implying that Sue is his to take credit for. This interaction reveals that Harvey feels as if he has ownership over Sue, the same way he felt he had ownership over Elisabeth. In calling her his creation and saying he has shaped her, it implies she is an object to be created, shaped, and molded, not an autonomous human being.

Men Assigning Worth

Throughout the entirety of the film, we see the continuing theme of men being the ones who determine women's worth. We see two men hosting auditions to replace Elisabeth. It is

important to add here that neither of these men is objectively good-looking, and yet, they are responsible for finding someone who is. They even make an off-handed comment about a woman auditioning, saying “too bad her boobs aren’t in the middle of her face instead of that nose” (*The Substance* 00:37:12-00:37:17). After these two men deemed this woman to be unworthy of the part, Sue comes in, in which the men react by saying, “looks like everything sure is in the right place this time” (*The Substance* 00:37:33–00:37:37) implying that her body is the deciding factor of this role, and again, reducing her worth down to being an object. The pattern we are seeing here is that men have the authority to say what they want about women’s bodies, and have the power and control over them. They have the capability of both hiring and firing, directly tying women’s worth to the say of the man.

In this world, women are not respected or regarded as valuable beyond their looks. This idea is reinforced when Harvey can’t even remember his (female) assistant’s name. As the assistant reminds him that her name is Isabella, he mocks her and tells her that he is calling her Cindy now because “who has time to say [Isabella]” (*The Substance* 00:39:12-00:39:15). This scene is important as it establishes that Harvey not only has no respect for Elisabeth because she is no longer making him money, but for all women in general, even his young assistant. We can see this through the way he says he allegedly has “no time” to say her real name; he does not denote women as being worthy of his time unless they truly have something to offer him, as Sue does. As we can see through Harvey’s actions, it is clear why Elisabeth would be willing to take something like the Substance, because she has been taught that her worth only correlates to her body and her looks. Without them, she is useless and finds no value in herself because she has not been told otherwise. The men in this film represent a larger issue we have in our society where the patriarchy has become the deciding factor of women’s value and worth.

Elisabeth's Piety

An important part of Burke's theory that will help us to better understand Elisabeth's actions is the concept of piety. To further explain what piety is, it can be described as a sort of default orientation that we are socially constructed under. Burke explains that everyone utilizes piety as a "System builder" ("Permanence and Change" 74), defining piety as "Loyalty to the sources of our being" (Permanence and Change 71). It is a tool we use to make sense of the world and a way for us to decipher "What properly goes with what" (Burke, "Permanence and Change" 74). Ultimately, though, it can become harmful as it leads to passivity, which is an important aspect here. As I will demonstrate here, Elisabeth's piety does in fact lead to passivity and an "acceptance" of the way things are in a way that is not beneficial to her.

Now I would like to circle back to my earlier notion of Elisabeth aligning herself with the patriarchy. Now that we have an understanding of the culture and setting in which Elisabeth exists, we can see more clearly why she adheres to the unrealistic expectation of staying young instead of choosing to resist. Elisabeth, as we can see throughout different spots in the film, is deeply insecure, but rightfully so, as her job, success, and liking depends on the state of her body and overall physical looks. Elisabeth conforms to patriarchal ideals because she assumes that she will be liked again and find worth in herself finally. In falling in line with her own piety, we see a sense of what Burke described as "Gregarious obedience" ("Permanence and Change" 76). She follows her own knowing and "orientation." Despite the fact that it is taking her down a bad path, it is still *her* orientation, so she chooses to accept it. We see that throughout the movie, she is chasing this feeling of wanting to be liked and accepted, hence why she chose to take The Substance. One example that shows us Elisabeth's longing for validation (again, directly from

Harvey) is that even after she is fired from the company that she had been working at for years, and then becoming Sue, she goes right back to the same production company to audition for the role that Elisabeth was just fired from. This is a direct "loyalty to the system of [her] being" (Burke, "Permanence and Change" 71). In Elisabeth's mind, it is essentially her only choice; she does it to appease what she knows: that being young and hot again will make her feel good about herself. This demonstrates the power of the ideologies that Elizabeth inhabits.

Here I want to bring to light Audre Lorde's notion of "The Master's Tools," an idea that tells us that choosing to fall in line with the dominant will not reward you because, at the end of the day, "the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house" (Lorde). This framework can help to describe what Elisabeth was trying to accomplish initially; if she does what Harvey (the patriarchy) wants, she can then be rewarded with all the validation, right? But what is slowly shown to us throughout the movie is that even when she tries to work within the system, it still fails her. We can foreshadow, even from the beginning, that this will not work out for Elisabeth, no matter how hard she tries, because the system is not set up for her to succeed. In this case, the "master's tools" metaphorically represent The Substance procedure and the "master's house" is Harvey, or more broadly speaking, the patriarchy. Elisabeth presumes that taking the substance will result in some sort of liberation for herself. If she can just be young again, she can get her job back, she can be liked again, she can like herself again. However, the ending of the film reveals to both the audience and to Elisabeth that working within the system will never dismantle the system, and while there may be temporary rewards (such as Sue's success at first), there is no long-term payout.

Here we see that Elisabeth has taken an extremely systemic issue and turned it into a personal one to take on as her own. Instead of Elisabeth viewing this situation as a structural

issue, where there is a never-ending pattern of women being turned away and dismissed under the guise of patriarchal ideals, she internalizes it as a personal failure. This sentiment reveals how the patriarchy is successfully working: it is not meant to be questioned as a system as a whole, but turns it around to make it the woman's individualized problem. Even though, as viewers, we know it is not.

Juxtaposition in Elisabeth

The juxtaposition we bear witness to throughout the film with Elisabeth's actions is one between love and hate. Elisabeth takes The Substance to gain back confidence, to relive her stardom, and feel loved again. However, once Sue is born, we actually see a significant increase in Elisabeth's insecurity and self-hatred. This is the beginning of what Burke would call "atom cracking" which can be described as the result of the juxtaposing ideas being put together (Burke, "Attitudes Towards History" 308). In other words, the "atom cracking" in a sense is a revelation or new discovery of sorts, whereas viewers, we're observing these conjoined ideas critically separated into opposing ideas that reposition our perspective. The juxtaposing ideas here are that Elisabeth decides to take The Substance to regain validation, self-security, and confidence. This is then contrasted with the progression of self-hate after taking The Substance, which demonstrates what happens when you inadvertently stay locked within the predetermined terms of the ideology you are trying to dismantle.

One instance where we see this juxtaposition of Elisabeth's decision is in the scene where she is getting ready for a date. A little over the halfway mark of the movie, Elisabeth, feeling extra down, has a recollection of Fred, an old classmate (that, respectively speaking, is just an average guy) she had run into earlier in the movie, telling her that she is "still the most beautiful

girl in the whole wide world" (*The Substance* 01:10:30-01:10:35). Elisabeth decides to call him, and they set up a date. At this point, it appears as if things are looking up for Elisabeth. She even smiles, which is one of the first times we have seen her smile throughout the whole movie, even further highlighting Elisabeth's internalized need for male validation specifically.

As she is in the midst of her getting-ready process, we see her revisit the mirror several times, as if contemplating whether or not her body is worthy of even going on a date after looking at Sue and making adjustments to her makeup and wardrobe each time. The scene progressively gets more intense and aggressive. Elisabeth is visibly growing frustrated, as she forcefully reapplies more makeup. Finally, we think she is going to leave. She makes it all the way to the door this time, before seeing a reflection of Sue's billboard in the doorknob. It is almost as if Sue is taunting her, reminding Elisabeth that no matter the fact that they are "the same person" at the end of the day, Elisabeth still has to live inside this "old" body. Coming to the pinnacle of the scene, Elisabeth returns to her mirror for a third time, angrily ripping off the scarf she had used to conceal the wrinkles on her chest. She then begins to aggressively wipe off her bright red lipstick in a messy, enraged way. The lipstick residue is now spread across her face, and she begins, in a fit of rage, rubbing both of her hands on her face out of frustration, almost looking as if she is ripping out her eyelashes and hair because she is so mad (*The Substance* 01:10:42-01:16:10).

The anger and frustration that build here in the back-and-forth of returning to the mirror show the audience how Elisabeth's relationship with herself is only worsening. The repetition of revisiting the mirror every time she questions her beauty is significant here, as she has an unhealthy obsession with viewing herself. The mirror serves as a site of both reflection and self-discipline. She doesn't actually decide to make changes to her appearance until she is looking at

herself in the mirror. This image she is seeing of herself is contrasted with the one of Sue, the hotter younger version of herself. She intentionally returns to the mirror as a way to punish herself, as a reminder that she is not good enough and she has to live with it. When she sees herself in the mirror for the final time in this scene, her facial expression is one that is furious, not sad or dissatisfied. In this anger, she copes by taking it out on herself. Elisabeth essentially begins to self-discipline because she no longer deems this version of herself lovable or worthy, not even worthy enough of going out with an awkward, dorky guy from high school, for that matter.

This scene reveals a juxtaposition in that Sue was created for Elisabeth to gain back some form of self-love and agency, and yet it is resulting in the exact opposite directly because of Sue. This juxtaposition continues when Sue's misuse of The Substance results in Elisabeth's body decaying and turning into a hairless, hunched-over, immobilized, terrifying version of herself. Elisabeth tried so desperately to get a younger version of herself that it backfired and resulted in the oldest, most horrifying version of herself. Over the course of the film, we begin to see a resentment building for Sue that was not initially there. At the beginning of The Substance's cycle, we see Elisabeth longing for her 7 days to be up to switch over to Sue, as she does not value her time as Elisabeth. However, we begin to see a shift in Elisabeth's attitude after Sue begins "stealing" from her by going over her 7 days. Elisabeth's anger, of course, made sense, as Sue was misusing the Substance, which drained Elisabeth, resulting in her turning into the monster-esque version of herself.

The last time we see Elisabeth's point of view before she transitions to this version, she is furious at Sue and leaves the apartment disgusting, covering it with food and plastering newspapers over the windows to avoid seeing the billboard of Sue. Then, the next time she

wakes up is when she has turned into her current version, so as viewers, our assumption is that Elisabeth hates Sue now and is done with her. This assumption is further confirmed by her decision to order the injection to end The Substance. After Sue has betrayed Elisabeth so badly, leaving her to rot and turn into a decrepit human, Elisabeth goes to inject Sue with the shot, deciding to be done with The Substance, but stops halfway through and says, "I can't do this. I need you cause I hate myself… You're the only lovable part of me" (*The Substance* 01:44:06-01:44:36).

This scene is extremely vulnerable for Elisabeth. She is quite literally at her lowest point, and admits out loud that she hates herself as she is crying. The vulnerability and raw emotion in this part of the film reveal another extended metaphor. The juxtaposition that we are seeing here is Elisabeth's vulnerability contrasted with her abject nature. Rarely throughout the film have we actually heard Elisabeth blatantly express how she is feeling, other than when she was complaining about Sue's behavior. We have only been able to assume Elisabeth's feelings for the most part through her body language, facial expressions, and actions, but in this scene she is explicit with what she is feeling and states it out loud, despite the fact that no one can actually hear her. We could only infer that she was insecure and hated herself, but here, there is a shift where perhaps she didn't know it before, but now she has stated out loud that she hates herself and that Sue is the only part that is lovable. The emotional rawness of this scene, with Elisabeth being soft and crying contrasted with her monstrous appearance, reveals a new perspective.

The more Elisabeth has aged, the more she has been cast aside, not just by Harvey, but by Sue as well. Throughout the movie, as she becomes someone who could be characterized as the trope of "bitter old hag", who is arguably (but understandably) losing her mind, there is a natural feeling of uncomfortableness that is produced by Elisabeth. When she wakes up and turns into

this version, she is genuinely scary to look at now. Her bones are protruding, she is bald, her breasts are hanging off her body, and her skin is discolored; she is completely unrecognizable now in a way that feels uneasy to digest. As viewers, we don't want to. As humans, it is in our orientation to look away from or avoid things that make us uncomfortable.

Expanding on this idea, the film editing perpetuates this feeling of uncomfortableness and even develops it into a dislike of Elisabeth's character through her depiction. Throughout the film, there is a back-and-forth switch in point of view between Elisabeth's life and Sue's life. When showing Elisabeth's point of view, it is edited with a gloomy, depressing, and discomforting tone and is often shorter in time. Her scenes tend to be "boring," showing her just sitting on the couch watching TV. On the other hand, Sue's point of view is much brighter, literally and metaphorically. Sue's life overall appears through the edit to be fun and entertaining, the opposite of Elisabeth's. The most compelling example of this is before the halfway mark in the film. We first see a shot of the living room as Elisabeth is watching TV in complete darkness, with the only illuminating light coming from the television. She then goes to check on Sue to see how much longer is left until they switch. As she sees there are still two days left, she lets out a sigh, and the screen fades to black. We then see a total 180-degree tone switch to Sue's perspective. There is now fun, upbeat music playing and a drastic switch in the lighting as we watch Sue galavant through the house in her baby tee and thong. The same room we were just in that was dark and gloomy is now seemingly bright and colorful, revealing the stark contrast in their lives. (*The Substance* 00:46:50-00:47:47). As viewers, these signs indicate to us that Elisabeth isn't even worth looking at or having a good storyline. Her life through the edit, but also Elisabeth's eyes, appears to be invaluable and just a time waster until we get to see Sue again. Elisabeth at this point has been written off, as both unworthy in the film, but also outside

of the film. The way the film is composed reveals the patriarchal nature that is the underlying message of the film; even as viewers, we are being trained to value Sue's life more than Elisabeth's, just as Harvey did.

To tie both of these points together, I am trying to demonstrate that Elisabeth has been placed in the abject by herself, Harvey, Sue, and through editing of the film. Because we are being positioned to view Elisabeth's life as less significant, when we finally do get to see Elisabeth as someone with feeling and vulnerability, it repositions our perspective as we are seeing her in a new light. The atom cracking here is in her vulnerability contrasted with the abject. In this moment, when she is vulnerable and confessing just how deeply insecure she actually is and how much she feels she needs Sue despite Sue continuing to use her, the atom cracks and there is a gain of empathy from us as audience members. There is a realization in this moment that Elisabeth, like everyone else, just wants to be loved and valued. I believe that the relatability in this scene further deepens this shift in perspective as we are viewing an extremely intimate moment that Elisabeth is having with herself.

Shift to Comic Frame

In my final section, I would like to discuss the drastic switch at the end of the film as a transition from a tragic frame to a comic frame. I argue that here, both Elisabeth and we as viewers have been situated in the tragic frame up until this point. When faced with these incongruities and issues, Burke states that "the ultimate result is the need of a reorientation, a direct attempt to force the critical structure by shifts of perspective" (Permanence and Change 169). This is where we need to adopt the "comic corrective" to help us better understand what is happening within the film. Essentially, the comic corrective is a shift from the tragic frame and

allows one to reorient or resituate their way of thinking. Up until the ending of the film, we have been operating under the tragic frame, which can be described as enforcing limitations on oneself to the point where we cannot be happy, and it is a continued cycle. As demonstrated thus far, it has been laid out how Elisabeth is living within this tragic frame, choosing to accept her fate as "old" and "washed up." The tragic frame does not allow for self-reflection or correction; instead, it reeks of rottenness and drives one to a point of madness, as it feels there is no solution to said "tragedy."

What the comic frame can do is allow for this stepping out of ourselves to reflect. When examining the last 10 minutes of the film, it is shockingly different from what we had seen before. As opposed to regarding it as just a "bad ending," (as some critics and audience members have claimed) viewing it from a lens of the comic frame, it makes much more sense as to what exactly is going on.

At this point in the film, Sue has now injected herself with The Substance, resulting in the creation of Monstro-Elisasue, a deformed, mutilated version of both Elisabeth and Sue. Elisasue shows up at the New Year's show. The audience is filled with people waiting to watch. The bright stage lights come on to reveal Elisasue. The audience is, of course, shocked and confused. After a brief moment of silence, Elisasue comes on the mic and expresses in her distorted voice that she is so excited to be there. After another beat, Elisasue begins to cough, regurgitating a detached breast onto the floor. The audience looks in disgust. Before Elisasue can do anything, the crowd erupts in screams. A man shouts "shoot the monster" (*The Substance* 02:07:46) and another "it's a freak" (*The Substance* 02:07:48). In the midst of the chaos, she says "no, don't be scared, it's still me" (*The Substance* 02:07:50-02:07:57). As she is crying and trying to explain to everyone that it's still her, they don't care and attempt to kill her. After this moment, there is a

huge shift in tone. There is now heavy metal rock music playing as blood from Elisasue's body sprays everywhere and on everyone, almost as if it is raining blood. We then see Elisasue continue on her blood-spraying journey through the hallways of the building, not leaving one wall untouched by her blood. Even the camera has blood dripping down the lens. She leaves the building, collapsing on the sidewalk. Her body falls to pieces, but we can still see Elisabeth's original face. We see her detach from the dismembered organs lying on the ground and painfully drag herself over to her Hollywood star. In this last moment of the film, Elisabeth lies on top of her star, staring up at the sky as it begins to sparkle, and we hear cheers and applause from her imagination. It seems almost as if she is finally happy in this instant, before melting away into a puddle of blood. (*The Substance* 02:05:11-02:02:13:41).

At first glance, the last 10 minutes of this film feel almost out of place. What was such a serious, richly packed movie that seems to hold an important message ends with an unrealistic, cheesy, bloody ending. However, if we look at these 10 minutes, shifting our point of view to see it as the comic frame, it is clear not only that this was intentional, but also that it is a crucial part of the film's overall cultural critique. The end of the film feels unserious and comical. It is almost laughable to see such an unrealistic scene of blood spewing everywhere with heavy metal music in the background, as if suddenly we are watching a totally different movie from a totally different genre than we were watching moments before. These are actually important elements that signify this transition from the tragic frame to the comic.

The spraying of blood from Elisabeth's body is freeing in a sense and reveals this switch to us that not only as viewers are we now in the comic frame, but Elisabeth is as well. Where Elisabeth had previously been abiding by the rules of the patriarchy throughout the whole film, here she is finally letting go and not letting Harvey, or anyone, for that matter, control her or

dictate her self-worth. Finally erupting out of the ideologies she inhabits for the first time in the film, she is not conforming to what others want or to her own insecurity. Her blood is literally on their hands—a shared problem to deal with, not only hers. We see throughout the entirety of the movie Elisabeth inhabiting the tragic frame through the pattern of her giving her body away. First, to her production company for years, then to Sue, and once she is Sue, it's the same cycle of giving her body to the production company. Harvey even tells Sue once she is hired that "[people] want more and more of [her]" (*The Substance* 01:21:47-01:21:49). Extending on this metaphor, their bodies are seen as a site of production, a body that has to give and give at the expense of itself. The notion of giving with no return is proven to us as Elisabeth creates a new body when she's told hers isn't good enough, and yet, even when she gives them what they want with Sue, it still isn't enough.

At the end of the movie, Elisasue is literally giving the audience her body. Her regurgitating her breast is a direct representation of this. This moment can be seen as a "violation" of the body's original "properties," as the breast is being disgorged from the body in a way that is unnatural and disturbing. (Burke, "Permanence and Change" 90). This is an example of casuistic stretching, as the breast is removed from the body–its original "linkage" (Burke, "Permanence and Change" 90), as Burke defines it– and laid on the floor to give to the people. In this way, we see an arguably disgusting moment that feels somewhat meaningless, carrying intense significance, as Elisasue is metaphorically saying, "you wanted my body, well here it is." There is a constant greed that manifests in the whole film, represented as a singular entity through Harvey, but ultimately Harvey is just the metaphor for our society, so while the greed may seem to be singular here, the film shows us that it is not. There is a greed for more; a greed for a body that is unattainable, a body that has been abstracted of any soul or human quality and,

in turn, is just a commodifiable object, only worthy if capable of giving something. The end of the film is Elisasue giving every last ounce of herself until she can't anymore. In doing so, it allows for a breakdown of our perspectives. The ending is so bad, so comical, that it becomes good. You're left thinking, "What did I just watch? And what does it mean for me?" Further building on this idea, as audience members, we are just outside witnesses to what is happening on screen. Meaning we have the capability of reflecting as we are watching, unlike Elisabeth. Being able to see the error that is happening on screen helps to further shift our perspective. Burke explains this as the audience having a "vantage point" as we can "see the operation of errors that the characters of the play cannot see; thus seeing from two angles at once" ("Attitudes Toward History," 41). Essentially, we can reflect on both Elisabeth's actions and our own at the same time, which in turn helps us to adopt the comic frame as a way of better understanding.

The other incongruity that we are seeing here is the idea of the feminine contrasted with blood and horror. Throughout the film, there is an emphasis on feminine beauty, and the need to have it. It's not just about being young; there is also the aspect of being "hot." We never see Sue look bad; she only appears in tight-fitting clothing that accentuates the perfect curvature of her body, with full, long, bouncy hair that has the perfect curl to it and always appears to be "naturally beautiful." We see this reinforced in many ways through Sue's character. Multiple times throughout the film, other men comment on her beauty or ask what her beauty secrets are. Sue is this angelic, dazzling presence that you can't look away from because she is so alluring.

This idea of captivating beauty that we have seen from Sue is then in stark opposition to the idea of repulsion when seeing Elisasue. In the final scene when it breaks out into full-on gore, there is a crack in perspective. We are not used to seeing women as gross, in the abject. When we are faced with the idea of both femininity and the grotesque simultaneously, they do

not fit together. We see it even in the audience's reaction at the New Year's show. Despite the fact that Elisasue is wearing Sue's dress and telling them who she is, they cannot conceptualize that Elisabeth or Sue is now this monster. They cannot face the idea that a beautiful woman had been transformed into a scary, hideous monster. There is no logical thinking in the moment; they only act out of their pieties and decide they know best to kill her. This removal of femininity from its original context makes for an extreme discomfort, one that the audience cannot bear. Monstro-ElisaSue challenges the audience's conceptualizations and their own ideologies around gender and beauty. Even the concept of ElisaSue ruins this "perfect" system that is in place. Harvey's character has revealed this established patriarchal system to us throughout the film, and from what we've seen, no one has truly challenged or questioned it. When ElisaSue is revealed to the audience, if they were to reason with her, that would put cracks in their system; their ideologies and the whole thing would crumble. ElisaSue is truly the first time there has been a challenge to any of their ideologies, and they can't stand it. In immediately choosing to kill her, they are selfishly taking away the risk of having to deal with any logical thinking or reflection of their own ways.

Conclusion

The film shows a reflection of society's piety, our inability to break the loop, even for those like Elisabeth who are clearly not being served by piety, but also even for the audience, on whose behalf decisions are being made about what constitutes beauty and desirability. As presented to us in the film and established through analyzing Elisabeth's actions, we act based on our pieties, even if they are ultimately harmful to us. When pointing out or realizing these

moments of incongruity, it allows both women like Elisabeth, but also the rest of society, to transcend our past orientation, becoming a more critical consumer.

The Substance offers us a cultural critique that provides a way to self-reflect as a means of change. Taking a look outside of the film, all of these insights contribute to a broader understanding of our current culture. The film depicts our culture in a way that is revealing of many of our flaws. As it is a fairly new movie and set in a time that is very similar to 2026, it contains extremely relevant commentary for viewers, as its imagery is reminiscent of our own current society. Furthermore, I contend that the implications of the film are meant to make us as audience viewers drastically alter our way of thinking; not just pausing for a mere moment to reflect and continuing on, but instead shattering these coercive ideologies. Rather than residing in the tragic frame, the movie makes a direct call-out for us to see ourselves through the film and, in turn, encourages audience members to shift into the comic.

The importance of this analysis lies in the message of this film, in that it is revealing to us what a dramatized future could look like if we do not do something to change course. This analysis serves as the vehicle to perpetuate this message. It is vital for us to continue to give attention to media and films such as this, as they shed such a crucial light on the current time in which we are living. Media callouts like *The Substance* have to continue to exist and be discussed, as they function as bright red flashing lights to viewers. Structurally embedded systems like patriarchy must be challenged, and this film does exactly that. The film has uniquely opened up a new space, allowing for discourse around women, their bodies, and aging through its unsettling nature. Through its use of horror and implementation of metaphors, it takes complex, invisible issues and highlights them in a way that shows how detrimental they are.

This work aims to demonstrate just how deeply embedded our cultural ideologies are. Elisabeth's character is meant to depict a version of a woman that is relatable to the audience, and her actions reveal how women will drive themselves to the edge to maintain beauty in a world that constantly demands it. The emphasis I would like to make and further draw out is that this film is an attempt to critique the audience, not Elisabeth or one woman specifically. The film shows us Elisabeth's story as a way for society to reflect on their own ideologies. While yes, Elisabeth made her own choices and suffered the consequences of them, it is the influence of her choices that we cannot disregard. Seeing Elisabeth being driven to madness over beauty and age shows viewers just how prevalent our ideologies are. Having to acknowledge the obvious here, our world has many procedures and drugs to modify the body, ones that include age "reversal," meaning that *The Substance* is more significant than ever. By taking a piece of media that is watched for entertainment and extracting the message from it, one that speaks so broadly to our society, it highlights the value of analyzing what we consider to be just a performance. We must begin to break down our own ideologies around gender and beauty, as we cannot continue down a path of tearing down women and assigning worth only to their looks. As scholars, it is vital that we keep writing about women's issues, and not leave them out to dry as Elisabeth so clearly was.

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I have acted with honesty and integrity in producing this work and am unaware of anyone who has not. /S/ Brinn Rhodes