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Capstone Prospectus

Introduction

Media provides a reflection of what we care about and what our values are. Media can be used to influence and share new ideas, but also mirror who we are. Film, especially, is a direct representation of cultural or societal values. Not something that we are always conscious of, Jeffrey Brown says that "Films reflect, influence, and naturalize social beliefs often assumed to be 'common sense'" (Brown 2084). Through examining the film, *The Substance,* we can see clear patterns that reveal cultural beauty standards and body norms set for women. The movie, similar to what Brown describes, functions like a funhouse mirror that shows images of our society in a slightly distorted, freaky-looking manner. When looking in a carnival funhouse mirror, although it reflects an ugly, distorted version of you, it's still you, and *The Substance* is doing the same thing.

Releasing in 2024 in the body-horror genre, the film serves as a satirical performance of extremely rigid Western female beauty standards and the disposability of women. Director Coralie Fargeat strategically chose to depict this film through the lens of body horror to represent the horrors that women truly go through. Showing the unfortunate realities that women face daily, the movie perfectly encapsulates the feelings of wrestling with self-loathing and the struggle of dealing with body image in a world that demands perfection. The film uses what's called "The Substance," a green liquid that is injected into the body to create a younger, better version of yourself, as a metaphor for the lengths that women will go to just to maintain a certain image.

To address one of the most important yet vaguely ambiguous questions of "who cares?" I propose Susan Bordo's text, *Unbearable Weight*. Although *The Substance* is a fairly new film, this conversation around women's bodies and aging did not appear out of thin air. In Bordo's 1993 book, written mainly in the 1980s, she discusses the ways in which culture has shaped women's bodies and their relationships with them. Bordo emphasizes that women's image is indeed created by cultural constructs and images. She claims:

> [Women] are no longer given verbal descriptions or exemplars of what a lady is or of what femininity consists. Rather, we learn the rules directly through bodily discourse: through images that tell us what clothes, body shape, facial expression, movements, and behavior are required. (Bordo 170).

The Substance, comparable to what Bordo said, shows us the result of the female body when constructed by a damaging Westernized culture.

Other academic work examining *The Substance* has been done. This includes Henrieta Krupa's work, centering her analysis around the monstrous-feminine, abjection, and male gaze, along with Uyug Sengun et al.'s work focusing on the commodifiable aspect of aging for women. While I side with both texts, my essay will provide further insight into the film's communicative functions of the film. It is extremely vital that we analyze *The Substance* and texts like it, as it offers a critical reflection of our patriarchal society. The film serves as both a warning and a way to correct. Through my analysis, I will aim to answer three questions: 1) How does *The Substance* depict a critique of society's view of the female body? 2) How does the utilization of satire throughout the film communicate reflecting images of our society? 3) How do the juxtaposing ideas of female beauty and horror create perspective by incongruity and, in turn, open up corrective ways of thinking?

Literature Review

The Mediated Body Through "Old" Media:

In an attempt to better categorize these sections, I have defined "old media"–although historically speaking, not old–as television and physical print media like magazines, while defining "new media" as social media strictly.

There is a growing collection of scholarship around 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). I want to further extend on this idea of the mediated body by including the uses of social media in relation to mediating the female body. The female body has historically been portrayed as a site of transformation (Jerslev).

Prior to the era of social media, physical 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 became the new norm. 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 undergoing transformation for years and years. With the rise of post-feminism and popular feminism, body modifications like Botox and plastic surgery can be viewed 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.

The Mediated Body Through "New" Media:

In contrast to television and magazines, social media has provided a much more dynamic and evolving form to promote body standards for women. Richard Perloff accurately contextualizes the magnitude of social media's reach on today's generation by describing it as "The playing field of today's youth, places where lessons are learned, attitudes are formed, and body image concerns can be cultivated and metastasized into convictions" (Perloff 11). Social media is interactive, personal, and accessible (Perloff 4), in comparison to old media. The effects of social media must be uniquely studied, as the results of TV and print media have different impacts on viewers (Huang et al.). Social media has a different effect due to peer comparison,

where instead of comparing yourself to a celebrity in a magazine or a character on TV, you are comparing yourself to your peers on social media (Perloff 7). Within social media, communities are formed, and through these communities, different ideas and standards are created and promoted. One effect that can be partially tied to social media is disordered eating. With fitness and healthy eating trending immensely on social media, it has led to negative perceptions of one's own body, compulsive exercise habits, and even disordered eating (Hefner et al.). As mentioned earlier, body ideals can be viewed as a way of self-improvement, not necessarily a means of harm. In relation to this, scholars also demonstrate that social media, despite its perceived negative effects, can be used as a site of resistance to beauty standards and body norms for women (Jia; Perloff). There have been various body-positivity campaigns over the years that have gotten some traction; along with platforming fitness for well-being, there is no strong evidence that there are lasting effects of either (Breves et al.). While it is true that social media can be used to push back against harmful narratives around standards for women, ultimately it cannot be fully said that social media is more beneficial than it is damaging when it comes to women's perception of self.

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. Brown upholds this discussion by giving

examples from film, while other scholars show a similar cultural standardization through magazines and advertisements (LaWare and Moutsatsos; Lewis et al.; Kociołek; Searing and Zeilig). Scholars examining a range of fashion magazines found a pattern of ageism and a promotion of youthfulness and slenderness, only acknowledging aging through an occasional well-known celebrity appearance or advertisements like ageing crème (Lewis et al. 107). Ultimately revealing that there was almost a complete lack of "The typical signs of natural biological aging processes" (Lewis et al. 107). Similar to these findings, another study conducted around the fashion magazine, *Vogue UK,* looked at skincare product advertisements, which centered on aging and beauty (Searing and Zeilig). They concluded that these magazine issues "Continue to service and stoke the insecurities of women who are aging" (Searing and Zeilig 30-31). Both of these studies prove useful to my argument, as they reveal both the underrepresented population of aging women and the push for women to remain youthful in advertising and magazine coverage.

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.

Satire, Camp, and Horror:

Satire and camp have been utilized in the media for years. Dieter Declercq defines satire as a "Genre... [that has] guided the interpretation and evaluation of works on the ground of their purpose to critique and entertain" (Declercq 319). While certain scholars find the employment of satire in media texts to be convincing (Gring-Pemble and Watson), others find more trouble in the use of satire (Johnson et al.). Johnson et al. propose the two primary issues around using satire as a persuasive tool: "(a) a reader or viewer may not read a text as satire, as intended; and (b) if that happens, the text might convey an argument that in some way undermines or even opposes that intended by the author" (Johnson et al. 397). While this is a valid take, Lisa Gring-Pemble and Martha Solomon Watson highlight how satire is in fact a valuable rhetorical device, claiming that "Despite its risks and complications, satire is nonetheless an important tool for questioning either established ideas or new proposals because it can create new insights" (Gring-Pemble and Watson 139). Aligning my own perception more with this view, I believe that satire is truly a powerful tool evident in *The Substance*.

Another framework that can be argued to be seen in the film, working together with satire, is the concept of camp. Susan Sontag explains that camp is "Unnatural: of artifice and exaggeration… [and] esoteric - something of a private code, a badge of identity even, among small urban cliques" (Sontag 1). Meaning that, similar to satire, it is not always understood immediately by the audience. When looking at the horror genre, camp can be especially helpful in unpacking its meaning. Camp primarily is a way to highlight and combat historically oppressive gender and sexuality scripts (Ryalls 167). Jack Babuscio claims that the horror genre is, in fact, one that can be read through a camp interpretation, characterizing camp horror films as those that include "Outrageous and 'unacceptable' sentiments" (Babuscio 23). On this same

sentiment of aligning horror and camp, other scholars have discussed 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). 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 (Rapoport).

Methodology:

Conducting a textual analysis, I will be examining specific moments from the film and analysing their implications, arguing how the film serves as a tool to critically reflect on societal choices. I want to conduct a textual analysis to further investigate how this movie is challenging cultural scripts and hegemonic ideas of beauty and aging in women. Using the theoretical framework of perspective by incongruity, theorized by Kenneth Burke, I believe that it will allow 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 explains that everyone utilizes piety as a "System builder" (Burke, *Permanence and Change an Anatomy of Purpose, Third Edition* 74), defining piety as "Loyalty to the sources of our being" (Burke, *Permanence and Change an Anatomy of Purpose, Third Edition* 71). He describes piety as 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 an Anatomy of Purpose, Third Edition* 74). Ultimately though, it can

become harmful as it leads to passivity. Karen Whedbee further explains it as "A desire to fit vocabulary and experience into a unified and stable whole" (Whedbee 48).

As a way to combat this, Burke proposes perspective by incongruity, allowing audiences to critically think upon and go against this 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 the opposing ideas of female beauty, delicacy, and perfection against horror and the grotesque. In making a text that combines such juxtaposing ideas, *The Substance* allows for "Atom cracking" (Burke, *Attitudes Toward History, Third Edition* 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 an Anatomy of Purpose, Third Edition* 117).

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 he used Burke's perspective through incongruity 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 analysing 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.

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