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Amidst the gore and guts and body horror, "The Substance" is a subversive vindication of female self-worth. (MUBI)



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Editor's note: this article contains spoilers.

The premise of Coralie Fargeat's satirical horror film "The Substance" is straightforward: A middle-aged movie star (an Oscar-nominated Demi Moore) is panicking because the industry has declared her obsolete. So when she is offered an illicit treatment called The Substance, which promises "a better version of yourself," she takes it. The film pushes the body horror genre to its extreme, yet the result is

strangely liberating.

Nothing about this movie is subtle. The opening sequence of the protagonist's star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame becoming aged and dirtied makes it clear that we're in the realm of metaphor and archetype. Moore's character is named Elisabeth Sparkle, and the repulsive studio executive who fires her for being too old is named Harvey. The aggressive symbolism doesn't seem lumpish, though. It's a tad like Medieval allegory, which also leaned heavily into the grotesque.

When we meet Elisabeth, she seems brittle and unsure, her face fixed either in a forced smile or a deer-in-the-headlights blankness suggestive of Botox. She peers into mirrors, examining the creases on her skin, her thinning lips, her drooping eyelids. This discontented gaze is the inevitable corollary to the male gaze, embodied in the loud and vulgar Harvey, who we first meet in the bathroom, joking about Elisabeth's age, unaware that she can hear him. After urinating, Harvey does not wash his hands, and in the next scene, we get a regrettable close-up of him eating shrimp while telling Elisabeth she's being fired.

Harvey's criticisms seem especially ludicrous because the 61-year-old Moore looks fantastic. Emily Gould, [in a review](#) for The Cut, argues that the movie would be more plausible if Moore looked stereotypically old. But her beauty highlights the point that no matter how good a woman looks or how well she performs, it's never enough.

Still, even if Elisabeth's discontented gaze in the mirror is relatable, her life of luxury makes it difficult to sympathize with her. "Get a life, rich girl," I wanted to say.

And, well, she does. Elisabeth takes The Substance and convulses. Her spine splits open, and out wriggles a radiant Margaret Qualley in a disturbing parody of childbirth. The image points to the way women suffer in birthing life but also suggests a toxic mother-daughter relationship similar to fairy tales about wicked stepmothers. Qualley's character, Sue, struts out and auditions for Elisabeth's former job. The casting directors mock the other candidates ("Too bad her boobs aren't in the middle of her face instead of that nose!"), but when Sue steps forward, disdain turns to ogling: "Looks like everything sure is in the right place this time."

The rules of The Substance are that the two selves must take turns, one week on, one week off. So while Sue enjoys her exciting new life, Elisabeth's catatonic body sprawls inert on the bathroom floor, face pressed against the tiles in a nod to the shower scene in Hitchcock's "Psycho." This film is full of such allusions, and part of

the fun for viewers with strong stomachs is picking them out. The studio's long empty hallways suggest Stanley Kubrick's "The Shining." A scene involving bodily disintegration suggests David Cronenberg's "The Fly."

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When Elisabeth does get her week, it's not very satisfying. Sue starts stealing extra time, which is against the rules, and each time Elisabeth wakes up, she ages further. But, refreshingly, she also develops a personality: crone Elisabeth is sarcastic and funny. When Sue shows up on TV, Elisabeth makes snide remarks and throws eggs at her face.

Eventually, once she becomes unrecognizable, Elisabeth decides to terminate her "other self."

The obvious question is, why didn't Elisabeth do this at the first sign of aging? Maybe her hunger for validation is so great that she'll take it even vicariously. Plenty of us are comfortable trading real experience for curated appearance, proven by social media filters. We'll tweak our selfies until they're no longer recognizably us and still bask in the adulation.

For Elisabeth, this is practically an addiction. "You're the only part of me I don't hate," she says to Sue's body. So she changes her mind and, instead of terminating Sue, revives her. But Sue, guessing her prior intention, viciously attacks her in a scene of escalating violence, which ends with Elisabeth's shattered body in a pool of blood on her apartment floor.

Sue is supposed to host the studio's big New Year's Eve show, but her body begins to disintegrate. When she tries to use the leftover Substance to create another "better version" of herself, it results in a monstrosity, an amalgam of herself and Elisabeth, all misshapen body parts jumbled together. This time, nothing is in the "right place."

This new self looks in the mirror. Now that she has passed into the realm of the monstrous, she seems to accept herself at last. She fits a glittering earring to a misshapen ear and curls her single remaining tendril of hair. Then, wearing her ball gown and a mask of Elisabeth's face torn from a poster, she heads to the studio for her big night.

This is where Fargeat pulls out all the stops. "Monstro Elisasue," despite her appearance, despite the fact that she vomits body parts onto the stage, despite the fact that her voice is a guttural rasp, believes in her lovability. "It's me," she says. And, like a Biblical angel, "Don't be scared!" But the audience, in keeping with the archetypal tradition, becomes a mob and turns upon the monster. Everything erupts into mayhem, in a bloody parody of a dance party. Someone slices off her head, but a new one grows in its place. Someone hacks off her arm, and fountains of blood pump through the auditorium as club music throbs. Imagine the pig blood scene in *Carrie*, only more so.

The monster escapes but explodes into a roadkill-like heap. All that's left is Elisabeth's face on a placenta-like blob. Somehow, she wriggles along the sidewalk until she finds the Hollywood Star with her name on it. As she gazes up into a sky full of glitter, framed by dancing palm trees, she smiles radiantly, as pretty girls always should. Then she dissolves into goo.

Some reviewers have complained that this gory ending is meaningless and incoherent. But there is value in confronting those aspects of embodiment we prefer to ignore: physical frailty. The fact that we age. The fact that even the most beautiful body is made of blood and bile and intestines. The fact that we will die. By the end, I felt I had passed through the valley of the shadow or experienced the classic Aristotelian "purgation of pity and fear."

But this isn't just a cathartic existential confrontation, nor is it a simple morality tale about the way society punishes women for trying to do exactly what it told us to do: stay young and pretty. What captured my attention was the vindication of the monster. In her final incarnation, the fusion of her dissociated selves, she is freed from the male gaze, freed from the requirement that women bludgeon one another to satisfy patriarchal demands. And when society punishes her for doing what it told her to do, well, she punishes them back. Her blood is literally upon them.

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Catholic culture is far from immune to the societal issues "The Substance" highlights — the double standards, the male gaze and the patriarchal entitlement of men who presume to define women. Nor are we immune to the fetishization of beauty in general and youthful female beauty in particular. Look at the holy cards representing women saints, all winsome and bright-eyed. Many of these women lived long, difficult lives. Many experienced extreme physical and mental illness. Why don't we ever see Mary of Nazareth or Teresa of Avila portrayed as old? Is Christian culture unwilling to admit that an older woman, with scars and imperfections, might be holy and powerful? Are Christians unable to see the Imago Dei in bodies that are broken and "monstrous"?

The entertainment industry may condemn women to a Sisyphean pursuit of impossible beauty standards, but a church that worships a God who entered the world through the blood and mess of a female body and then died a gruesome, violent death should do better. Not all Catholics need to watch "The Substance" as a spiritual practice, but we can't hide from the gross physicality of the world or erase the truth that our bodies will wrinkle and sag and fall apart. And since obsession with surface perfection always leads to moral monstrosity, maybe learning to accept physical monstrosity is the wiser way.

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