

The Substance: Youth, aging and Hollywood

Carlos Delgado
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Coralie Fargeat's 2024 film *The Substance* opened to widespread praise from critics, who hailed it as "outrageous, audacious, and ambitious" (*Salon*) and a "visionary feminist body-horror film" (*Variety*). The film has been nominated for a number of awards, including Best Picture at the upcoming Academy Awards ceremony, a rarity for a film in the horror genre.

Horror films are not, generally speaking, the first place one typically expects to find "substantive" artistic, social or psychological material. More often than not the makers of such films aim for little more than cheap thrills on a (relatively) cheap budget. Blood and gore are to the horror genre what gunfights and mindless pyrotechnics are to action films. At their worst, such films wallow in sadism and misanthropy, mirroring, in a way, the callous disdain for human life that pervades in official circles.

Still, certain filmmakers, working in the right conditions, have created works in the genre that stand out, at least in some aspects. One thinks of *Night of the Living Dead* (George A. Romero, 1968), *Rosemary's Baby* (Roman Polanski, 1968), *The Shining* (Stanley Kubrick, 1980), *The People Under the Stairs* (Wes Craven, 1991). More recently, Jane Schoenbrun's *I Saw the TV Glow* showed a sensitivity toward the plight of young workers, even if that film remained murky and unsatisfying.

The Substance centers around Elisabeth Sparkle (Demi Moore), an aging, formerly popular film star who has been reduced to hosting a TV exercise program. When the show's vulgar, sexist producer Harvey (Dennis Quaid) fires her from the show and pledges to replace her with someone "young" and "hot," Elisabeth spirals into a personal crisis. (The use of the name "Harvey" should already set off certain alarm bells.)

Through a chance encounter, Elisabeth learns of a black-market drug known as "the Substance" that promises to "unlock your DNA" and produce a "better version of yourself." The rules involving the Substance are somewhat nonsensical, but briefly: Elisabeth injects a serum that causes a younger version of herself to emerge from her body in gruesome fashion. The young version, who adopts the name "Sue" (played by Margaret Qualley), is able to live for seven days while Elisabeth's body is in a comatose state. Sue must extract fluid from Elisabeth's spinal column and inject it into herself daily, or else her youthful body will begin to break down. Every seven days they must switch places, with one of them alive and conscious and the other in a coma.

Though it is not entirely clear how much of a consciousness is shared between Elisabeth and Sue, the organization that produces the Substance insists that users must remember they are one person, not two. "You can't escape from yourself," a promotional video asserts, ominously.

At first, Sue revels in her youthfulness and beauty. She wins back the job on the exercise program, which is given a sleazy pornographic revamp. Men who either ignored Elisabeth or treated her with disdain are now captivated by Sue's beauty, giving her a feeling of power over them. She becomes the new Hollywood "it" girl, with her face plastered all over town.

However, all the attention and success experienced by Sue only causes Elisabeth to sink deeper into self-loathing and loneliness. She spends "her" weeks in a state of self-imposed isolation, no longer feeling worthy of being seen, haunted by a large billboard of Sue outside her window. As another Substance user says to her, "Each time you feel a little more lonely. ... It gets harder each time to remember you still deserve to exist." When Elisabeth tries to go on a date with an old classmate who reconnects with her, she becomes so overwhelmed with disgust for her face and body that she can't even get out the door.

Sue begins extracting more of Elisabeth's spinal fluid to stay beyond the seven-day window. In consequence, Elisabeth's body begins to rapidly and grotesquely age. Elisabeth becomes bitter and resentful at the young girl's literally stealing years from her life, at one point screaming at the television when she sees Sue giving an interview. Still, she cannot bring herself to stop using the Substance, feeling like her life has no meaning without Sue's beauty.

Harvey and the network hire Sue to host the "New Year's Eve show." Sue, seeing this as her big break, ends up draining Elisabeth's spinal fluid for three months leading up to the event. When Elisabeth finally runs dry and Sue is forced to switch, Elisabeth is now a horribly deformed hunchback. Their conflict explodes, violently. With the New Year's Eve program looming and Sue's body in a state of rapid decay, she decides to take drastic measures. The finale, in which Elisabeth and Sue are finally joined together as "one," is a nightmarish spectacle of blood and gore.

As the reader can probably surmise, *The Substance* is a heavy-handed statement about beauty standards and the pressure placed on female performers to appear conventionally attractive and youthful. Elisabeth's desire to remain relevant in youth-obsessed Hollywood leads her down a path of self-destruction and self-mutilation that mirrors the often extreme measures taken by actresses to stave off the effects of aging (cosmetic surgery, medication abuse, snake-oil supplements with dubious benefits, etc.). The conflict between Elisabeth and Sue is a conflict between the Hollywood "image" and the realities of human aging. In the end, Elisabeth ends up twice-objectified: as the hyper-sexualized Sue, leered at by drooling men, and as the hideous "object" she

becomes by the film's end.

The vagueness of the story and the world, the anachronisms in the plot and the visual design, hint at a self-conscious attempt at “feminist” allegory. As Fargeat told the *Guardian*, the film is about what women “usually want to hide, or are told that you should hide. That’s why it was important for me to make it very visceral, very present, because it was a real statement: no, everything you ask us to hide, to cut, to make thinner, to erase, it will explode.” Several reviewers praised the film for supposedly depicting the pressures universally experienced by women.

Of course, what doesn’t seem to occur to Fargeat or the film’s admirers in the press is that they are talking about the experience of a certain *social layer* of “women,” and a relatively privileged one at that. It is true that the Hollywood money-making machine and its fixation on youth and attractiveness places degrading pressures on performers. Actresses in particular are often thrown aside and ignored once they reach a certain age, considered “risky investments” by a rapacious operation obsessed with image and profits. (No doubt Moore herself resonated with this aspect of the film.)

But one cannot seriously present a wealthy film performer, even one whose star is on the decline, as some kind of allegorical “everywoman.” The pressures experienced by a self-pitying actress desperate to stay in the public eye are fundamentally different from those experienced by, for example, a woman working behind a sales counter whose low-wage job might be the only thing keeping her from homelessness, or a woman at work in a factory whose body is abused and broken down by exploitation. In such circumstances, age discrimination can become a matter of life and death.

Fargeat’s unsubtle debut feature film *Revenge* (2017) centers on a young woman raped and left for dead in the desert by three men, on whom she ends up wreaking revenge.

A breathless admirer (at *Dazed*) described the film as a

revved-up take on the controversial “rape and revenge” subgenre that rattled viewers’ cages in the 70s, *Revenge* is a ferocious, feminist film that owes as much to iconic action films like *Mad Max* and *Rambo* as it does queasy exploitation fare like *Last House on the Left* and *I Spit on Your Grave*.

In other words, Fargeat’s *Revenge* is associated with various right-wing film genres, which emerged as the radicalism of the 1960s and early 1970s receded and the increasingly hedonistic, affluent and anxious petty bourgeoisie pressed for “law and order.” The infamous Charles Bronson *Death Wish* franchise (the 1974 original and four remakes) led the vigilante charge in particular, but there were numerous other related works, including *The Human Factor*, *Rolling Thunder*, *Hit List*, *Vigilante*, *The One Man Jury*, *Walking Tall*, *Billy Jack* and the Clint Eastwood-Dirty Harry cycle.

The *Dazed* comment adds that *Revenge* is

one of the year’s most thrilling debuts—albeit one that’ll test even hardcore horror fans for the sheer unbridled energy of its bloodletting.

In an interview (with *Filmmaker Magazine*), Fargeat commented that

Revenge and *The Substance* are quite different, but they’re both strongly linked to women’s bodies—the way our bodies are constantly scrutinized in public spaces, the way our bodies define so much of the way people see us. They determine our place in society. When I started writing *The Substance*, I had just entered my forties. I thought, “OK, life is over! That’s the end of it. The world will no longer be interested in me. I’m going to become invisible.” Then, it really hit me how absurd this line of thinking is! That’s when inspiration struck. How to make a story out of this feeling that women of a certain age have entered a kind of jail?

Again, Fargeat is referring to a sliver of the population, upper middle class layers whose livelihood or mental health depends on their youthful looks.

In any case, a serious dramatization of the situation facing actresses in Elisabeth’s position would require an effort to expose the social and economic forces that dominate the entertainment industry. A vast moneymaking apparatus abuses and discards performers (and directors, and writers, and technicians ...) for the sake of maximizing profit, a process that has only accelerated in the wake of the sellout of the SAG-AFTRA strike.

But Fargeat contents herself with shopworn feminist clichés and tired visual metaphors: the leering camera as “the male gaze,” the sleaziness of the male casting directors and producers. None of this is convincing or interesting, perhaps not even to Fargeat; she lavishes much more attention on the various outlandish prosthetics, physical maladies and buckets of fake blood.

Despite all the overheated praise, *The Substance* is not particularly substantive.



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