

***The Substance*: Have you ever dreamt of a better version of yourself?**

Imogen Swift – Sociology

The Substance (2024), directed by Coralie Fargeat, examines the obsessions with being youthful and ageing “correctly” in a society which is based upon patriarchal and consumerism standards. It is largely about the relationship women have with their bodies as they age, and how far they may go to reverse the “faults” in which society has deemed ugly with the female body. The film follows character Elizabeth Sparkle (Demi Moore), who is a Hollywood star who finds herself at a standstill in her career and life, where the men around her are looking for a younger, “perkier” replacement.

In the opening scene, viewers see Elizabeth’s Hollywood Star being made, shiny and new, however as the scene progresses it becomes cracked and dirty. This reflects how she was once enamoured with by viewers of the daytime TV fitness

class that she ran when she was younger, however the more she ages, the more invisible she becomes. As soon as she has turned 50 nobody wants to work with her, and she is constantly reminded of just how “old” and “useless” she is by the men in charge of her career. She watches as her posters and old magazine covers are ripped down, ready to be

replaced with someone deemed better because they are younger, the one thing Elizabeth cannot change herself to be.

She is therefore introduced to *The Substance*, which is depicted as a black-market drug that can be injected to create a younger, hotter and “better version of yourself”. This younger version is named Sue (Margaret Qualley) and is a glistening twentysomething girl who is born out of Elizabeth’s own back after she takes this substance. Sue is depicted to be who Elizabeth was in the height of her fame, and she finds it difficult to return back to her old self after she has experienced the taste and attention that



surrounds who she once was. This is not without consequence however, as she is only allowed to activate her younger version once, and every seven days, the versions must switch back and therefore take turns inhabiting the world they live in, or they risk grotesque

side effects. As they continue, they learn about the cost of pursuing youthfulness by any means possible, and the old Elizabeth is cast into a dark room as though she is truly invisible.

Patriarchal consumer societies primarily value women for their looks and aesthetics, rather than what they do or are naturally good at. For

decades now, women have been devalued through consumer societies that attempt to persuade women that their bodies are in constant need of alteration and improvement (Gurrieri, 2020). Hollywood especially has shown this in the erasure of older women, and it has become clear that women “of a certain age” in mainstream film, see their careers and roles run out long before their male counterparts (Jermyn, 2012).

In *The Substance*, this is reflected where Elizabeth is fired because she is seen to be too old, yet every other male producer still have the power and status in their career, and they seemingly gain more power the older they get. Old age for women today, encompasses a double absence, of both not being male and not being young (Biggs, 2004). This means that older women become invisible, as the masculinised and youth obsessed society does not focus its attention on them (Biggs, 2004). While Elizabeth is in her own body, she is continuously ignored, people bump into her on the street, and nobody seems to recognise her from when she was at her peak of fame. She is devalued as a woman by society and is therefore only recognised for her past when she was young and deemed as attractive, hence why she feels as though she must turn to *The Substance*.

Elizabeth is constantly faced with an obnoxiously large billboard of Sue in front of her penthouse apartment, reminding her of the attention that a youthful woman receives and driving her to resent her older self even more. This is reflected in our society by the

“frozen frame” concept, where women of an older age group often remain captured in time, and are haunted by images of their younger selves that remain in constant circulation (Jermyn, 2015).



Some women try to reverse their ageing by getting cosmetic surgery and other invasive procedures. These procedures are not without risk and could invite more disdain from the public eye (Jermyn, 2015). Fairclough (2012) describes the “hyper-scrutiny” that women celebrities are subjected to in a contemporary society that sets impossible standards, where undetectable surgery is to be admired yet when its detectable it is highly condemned. It is becoming increasingly obvious that it is not just ageing women, but all

women in a patriarchal consumer society that are increasingly held to a ridiculous standard of beauty, due to the elite creating and maintaining society’s beauty ideals (Saltzberg & Chrisler, 2006).

Even when Elizabeth is Sue, she still receives comments by male producers such as “If only her tits were in the middle of her forehead”, so how far will society push women to conform to its patriarchal standards?

The idea that older women are up against impossible standards, means it is important to look into ageing in a neo-liberal society and how it is active. It has been argued that neo-liberalism entitles women to more autonomy and control over their own lives and occupations (Foyals, 2024). From this view, neo-liberalism encourages women’s independence and freedom of choice, where individuals are free to utilize themselves to the market (Petersson & McIntyre, 2021, cited in Foyals, 2024).

However, neo-liberalism has more recently seen the rise in consumer culture, and this targets women's insecurities, meaning it is able to commodify women's struggles (Foysal, 2024). Older women are constantly fighting the stigma of ageing "correctly", whilst men are allowed to age without penalty and sometimes even gain more status, in a way that women cannot (Jermyn, 2015).

Capitalism within patriarchal consumer societies commodifies the valuing of the young, and this affects how the anti-ageing market is priced and marketed. The current market is inherently patriarchal and gendered, and it exploits women's insecurities and struggles for the benefits of capitalism (Foysal, 2024). Women are sold back the fear of ageing "wrongly" in the form of expensive products that claim to fight the inevitable, life and death.

In contemporary adverts such as *L'Oreal*, we can see how "successful" ageing is tied to consumerism and how the use of the right products is exclusively designed for mature skin (Jermyn, 2015). In *The Substance*, we see the fear of wrongful ageing come to life in an extreme way. The more obsessed that Elizabeth becomes with staying youthful, the older and more grotesque she appears. As she resents her former self and misuses *The Substance*, she develops scaly skin, a hunchback, pale and swollen skin, loses hair and extremely brittle bones, becoming the exact thing she was afraid of. This is something that the youth-obsessed culture today fears, where old age can be seen to be exploited, with details such as varicose veins, wrinkles and sagging being the biggest fear of them all (Jermyn, 2015).

The Substance itself therefore commodifies ageing women's insecurities, by preying on those who are unhappy with their older selves and wish to be desired in the way they once were. This therefore shows the damaging effects of a patriarchal consumer society, and we watch as Elizabeth kills Sue, who is essentially her own self. This value-system we see destroys women, and turns Elizabeth against herself, destroying the new but also destroying the old at the same time.

Daniels (2023) states that women's consumer decisions are also strongly dictated by the male gaze that has subconsciously been planted through capitalist exploitation, they are made to think they have free will and that the choices they make are their own. It is important to consider the "seller" of *The Substance* in this instance, as Elizabeth only ever hears this male voice over the phone and has never seen him, yet he has so much power over her.

The male gaze is also depicted in *The Substance* through camera close-ups, to show how the men in Sue's life look at her. It always feels so



invasive and intimate as though she is constantly being studied by the male gaze, even to points where it makes the audience

feel uncomfortable. In cinema, the camera can be used to enact the male gaze, panning across intimate parts to project the objectification of women's bodies (Oliver, 2017). According to Daniels (2023) this would therefore lead her to carry herself differently as her value and career is determined by the male gaze. Sue has internalised what her viewers want in the way

she dresses in tight and revealing leotards and making sure to stay happy because “pretty girls should always smile”.

The Substance serves as a saddening yet powerful critique of the societal pressures that surround youth and beauty, particularly within the context of a patriarchal consumer society. The film reflects ageing women across the world through Elizabeth Sparkle, showing how women just like her are devalued as they grow older, showing the relentless pursuit of youth dictated by male standards. It highlights how women’s consumer decisions are strongly dictated by the male gaze (Daniels, 2023) and how this controls almost every aspect of a woman’s life without even realising.

Through Elizabeth’s transformation into Sue, the film reveals the emptiness that accompanies chasing an unattainable standard in a society which sees older women as invisible (Biggs, 2004). This pursuit not only affects a woman’s self-esteem, but also perpetuates harmful stereotypes that equate a woman’s value with her appearance, leading many to conform to harmful procedures that are not needed (Jermyn, 2015).

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