

Abstract

Designed to Be Desired: Biopower and the Construction of Female Identity in *The Substance*

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This project critically examines the construction of women's identity and value in contemporary society through an analysis of *The Substance* (2024). This film exposes the violent intersections of beauty, science, and control. Drawing on Michel Foucault's concepts of biopower, the medical gaze, and docile bodies, alongside Donna Haraway's theory of cyborg identity, the study explores how female bodies are regulated, disciplined, and technologically re-engineered to meet patriarchal ideals of desirability. The film's narrative reveals how women are reduced to biological and aesthetic commodities, whose worth is measured through youth, beauty, and productivity. These interventions, framed as progress, instead become instruments through which patriarchal power is preserved, and female agency is gradually diminished. The film, therefore, presents a cyborgian identity shaped by processes of regulation and control, revealing their destructive impact.

**DESIGNED TO BE DESIRED: BIOPOWER AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF
FEMALE IDENTITY IN *THE SUBSTANCE***



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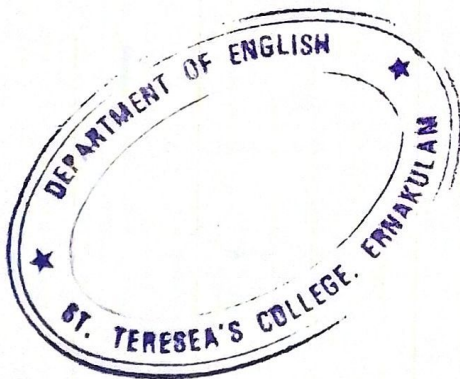
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DECLARATION

I hereby declare that this project titled “Designed to Be Desired: Biopower and the Construction of Female Identity in *The Substance*” is the record of bona fide work done by me under the guidance and supervision of Ms. Athira Babu, Assistant Professor, Department of English.

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CERTIFICATE

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Introduction

Modern society consistently exercises power over the human body through the systems of medicine, surveillance, and discipline by imposing strict norms. Michel Foucault's concepts of biopower, the medical gaze, and docile bodies describe how bodies are manipulated into conforming to the norms in the name of beauty, health, and productivity. The clearest manifestation of this is the dehumanization of female bodies, which are reinforced with the help of the media, reducing them to mere specimens, waiting to be controlled and evaluated.

The concept of cyborg identity, on the other hand, worsens this situation by blurring the line between natural existence and technological advancement. The identities of female bodies become fractured and complicated through scientific intrusion.

The movie *The Substance* (2024), directed by Coralie Fargeat, subtly critiques society's obsession with beauty through the genre of body horror. The narrative centers on a woman who willingly undergoes an alarming transformation in her body as a desperate attempt to stay relevant. She injects an unauthenticated substance into her body, which promises beauty and youth, but results in the disintegration of identity and loss of self. Through her psychologically disturbing transformation, the film exposes the destructive effects of the normalized aesthetic standards.

This project is divided into three chapters. The first chapter provides a theoretical framework by explaining the key concepts of biopower, the medical gaze, docile body, and cyborg identity, drawing primarily from the works of Michel Foucault and Donna Haraway. The second chapter offers an in-depth analysis of *The Substance*, examining how the concepts of biopower, medical gaze, and docile bodies operate within the film. The third chapter extends this analysis by solely focusing on the film's representation of cyborg identity, shattering the conventional boundaries of the human and the artificial.

The central argument of the study is that a woman's value in society is primarily determined by her physical appearance. Through the lens of biopower and the medical gaze, *The Substance* proves that physical beauty becomes a mechanism of power to determine social value and belonging, making female bodies a cyborgian project.

Chapter 1

Power, Image, and the Post-Human Body

Michel Foucault's theories mainly focus on how power is exercised to control society through various social institutions. His theories and arguments earned him a reputation as a unique and controversial thinker. His *Society Must Be Defended* is derived from a series of lectures delivered by Michel Foucault at the Collège de France during the years 1975–76 (Faubion).

In *Society Must Be Defended*, Foucault describes how the state tried to control the lives of human beings in the 19th century. To prove this, he refers to the concept of sovereignty, where the ruler had the right over life and death. This means that life and death are not natural, but solely depend on the ruler. Therefore, people are not truly alive or dead. They only exist because the ruler allows it. The ruler's right over life and death is about having the power to kill, and this results in an imbalance. When a sovereign is created, the ruler is gifted with ultimate power. This is because people believe that they need protection or because they are forced to accept the authority.

In the 17th and 18th centuries, power was exercised over the human body, with individuals being rigorously trained and disciplined to increase productivity through surveillance, hierarchies, and punishments. In the second half of the 18th century, a new form of power appeared, which focused on humans as a whole, as living beings or species rather than individual bodies. This new power aims at populations, not individuals, which is what Foucault describes as Biopolitics. Birth

rates, death rates, reproduction, etc., became the first things the government tried to control and began to measure them statistically. Death now becomes the limit of power as it concentrates on making life livable.

Biopower, hence, consists of two kinds of powers working together. The disciplinary power, which focuses on the individual body, molds individuals into being useful and obedient through training and control. And the regulatory power, which focuses on life itself. Both of these powers deal with the body, but in different ways. One treats the body as an individual organism, while the other treats the body as a part of general biological processes. Even though both the disciplinary and the regulatory powers do not work on the same level, they can be connected. Medicine and hygiene combined the knowledge of both individual bodies and the population. It controlled individuals through disciplinary measures and the population through regulatory measures.

Humans can potentially misuse biopower to control life excessively, such as creating monsters or uncontrollable viruses that can cause destruction. As a result, when faced with population growth and industrialization, sovereign power declines while disciplinary and regulatory power rise.

When utilizing biopower, race becomes an important factor simply because political power creates hierarchies to eliminate the biologically inferior and dangerous individuals to strengthen the accepted race. War, for example, was no longer about defeating political enemies but about killing the threatening races to make one's race stronger. Hence, justifying the death function of biopower (Foucault 240-258).

In *The Birth of the Clinic: An Archaeology of Medical Perception*, Foucault notes how patients' symptoms functioned as a source of knowledge for the doctors while simultaneously serving as objects to study. A disease, with all its hidden pains and difficulties, was reduced by medical language and became a mere object for the gaze. The medical gaze drew a connection between the visible and the invisible. i.e., what could be seen and what could be spoken about. What the doctors observed could be explained through complex medical language. Initially, the gaze was not on the individual because it was seen as too subjective. But now, it dehumanized the patient into an object of study, an object of science. The unique qualities and appearance of an individual were now distinct phenotypes. Through the medical gaze, a patient became a subject of observation, and the patient's bed became a place for science.

Foucault points out the change in the way doctors looked at the human body. Rather than asking "What's the matter with you?" where the focus was on the patient's subjective experience, the attention shifted to the exact location of the discomfort, where the question "Where does it hurt?" was asked instead (xviii). Diseases and discomfort of human beings became mere problems to be solved. In the era of medical gaze, doctors believed that by examining and studying the body, they could determine the obvious issue and the logic of the disease. Doctors classified illnesses into species, genera, and families as they followed the rule of "Never treating a disease without knowing its species" (qtd. in Foucault 4).

Doctors in the eighteenth century referred to this way of thinking as historical knowledge rather than philosophical knowledge. Historical knowledge is about

describing the visible signs in a patient's body. It explained what appeared to the gaze. Philosophical knowledge examined the causes of the discomfort. The medical gaze viewed disease as a portrait, a flat image with a collection of symptoms listed together that lacked depth. In this system, the principal focus is on the disease. Both the doctor and the patient are secondary because they interfere with the medical system's ability to treat the disease (Foucault ix-4).

In Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison (1975), Part Three:

Discipline, Foucault explains how in the early seventeenth century, an ideal soldier was someone strong, courageous, and proud. He was skilled in fighting, bravery, movement, and posture, which he learned through rigorous training. But by the late eighteenth century, an ideal soldier wasn't born, but made into one. He was molded into one like clay, exposed to training that corrected his posture, controlled his movements, and turned his actions into habits. In this way, his body became both an object and a target of power.

The goal was to achieve a body that could be used, shaped, and improved. This is what Foucault calls a docile body. Bodies were trained individually, with constant supervision, resulting in the creation of docile bodies that were both submissive and useful. Discipline is focused on the smallest action, as this gives power over people. It often starts by controlling the movement of the individuals, which is done by keeping them in one location so that they can be watched, kept in order, and prevented from causing any trouble. For example, barracks had enclosed walls so that the soldiers could be managed easily.

Another method is to give each individual their own space to make it easier for the authorities to control and monitor them. For example, in hospitals, beds, medicines, and records were carefully organized so that each patient could be tracked easily. In factories, this was combined with work. Each worker had a specific task and location so that the supervisor could see how fast and how skilled they were. This created a system where everyone was controlled. They established hierarchies where the workers were ranked based on their skills and performance. In this way, a docile body is submissive, obedient, and efficient, making it easier to control. A docile body is a meticulously molded object of power (Foucault 135-148).

Donna J Haraway is a feminist scholar who has made noteworthy contributions to feminist theory, science and technology studies, and animal studies. Haraway's works are known for their critical and multidisciplinary approach as she brings together science, technology, and cultural studies. She is best known for her essay *A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century* (1985), which provides a whole new perspective on the relationship between human beings, technology, and nature. This essay has had a significant impact on feminist theory as it describes the present scenario of modern reality, where technology has become an essential part of our lives (Khan).

A cyborg is part machine and part living being; it is both real and fiction, a being that breaks all traditional boundaries. Haraway describes how women's experience is both real and a social construct. Cyborg, being both real and imaginary, changes how we perceive women's experience in the late 20th century. The line between science fiction and social reality does not exist, as it is an illusion. She

points out how modern medicine creates cyborgs by blending our bodies with technology (prosthetic limbs, pacemakers, and even genetic manipulation). Therefore, all human beings are cyborgs, mixing the imaginary and reality at the same time, making historical change possible. The cyborg does not belong to the traditional narratives of salvation, nor does it belong to the historical context of psychoanalysis. Instead, it represents a break from the old systems.

The cyborg exists in a world beyond gender as it has nothing to do with childhood unity with the mother, bisexuality, or fantasies of complete wholeness. The cyborg never had an original unity with nature to begin with. Separations do not exist, as one cannot differentiate between nature and culture. Old hierarchies are challenged. Modern machines are tiny, fast, and invisible, and have a significant effect on how we live and work. Unlike humans, cyborgs are everywhere and invisible, making it extremely dangerous as they shape our consciousness or even stimulate it.

Haraway further explains how it has become difficult to conceptualize feminism or a woman with a single fixed identity because race, gender, and class are all historically constructed and contradictory. The idea of a shared essence of womanhood has always excluded women of color, poor women, and queer women, resulting in a crisis for feminist identity. Haraway argues that feminism must take the fractured and constructed identities into consideration. She describes how we are transitioning from an old industrial society with rigid hierarchies to a new information-based society shaped by data, networks, and codes. Gender, race, and class are no longer natural but rather governed by systems.

Technology now mixes humans with machines, showing how power is now exercised through a network where women are deeply exploited. For Haraway, the Cyborg is a symbol of "the self" that is now mixed up with machine and network. Hospitals and clinics reinforce the idea of how women's bodies are linked to machines, especially around reproduction, stress, and the immune system. Cyborgs challenge the traditional concept of binaries in Western thought: self/other, male/female, human/machine, mind/body, and culture/nature. They show how boundaries are fluid, identities are multiple, and power is never centralized. It shows that identity, gender, and technology are connected, and that feminist politics can thrive without depending on the idea of purity, innocence, or rigid hierarchies. Haraway argues that rather than being a goddess, it is better to be a cyborg that is capable of shaping the world (149-181).

Chapter 2

The Disciple Beauty

Paul Michel Foucault, in his lecture series *Society Must Be Defended*, discusses the concept of biopower, which means the power over life. This type of power does not control people by threatening to kill them like rulers, but tries to control their lives, bodies, and even their perspectives. The ubiquitous existence of power shapes and controls the lives of people. In modern societies, various institutions focus on keeping people alive. These institutions include schools, hospitals, prisons, and even the media, which has a significant influence on how women view their bodies.

In the movie *Substance*, the impact of biopower on both the celebrities and the general public is presented explicitly. The protagonist of the movie is Elisabeth Sparkle, who hosts a televised aerobics show that is well-loved by men and women. What made the show popular was not because of the potential health benefits but solely because of the focus on body. Elisabeth is represented as this iconic celebrity who has remained a prominent figure for decades simply because of her physique. Women followed the workout routine with the hopes of looking like her, and men watched her shows to lust over her.

However, as she grows older, she ceases to be of public interest. She is now undesirable as her appearance is no longer youthful as it once was, making it boring and repulsive for the male audience.

I don't care if we have to see every f***** girl in this f***** town. Look, I'll make it simple. We need her young. We need her hot. We need her now. How the old b**** has been able to stick around for this long, that's the f***** mystery to me. Oh! Oscar winner, my a**! When was that, in the 30s? Find me somebody new! I don't care. I don't give a f*** about what we promised her! (*The Substance* 00:06:27 – 00:07:12)

The above lines are said by the director, just moments before firing Elisabeth. His temperament and choice of words indicate a lack of respect for her. This is reinforced by his failure to show remorse, despite the success she has brought to the industry. Elisabeth's body is purely a commodity for business, and now that she is no longer young and desirable, she is fired without an explanation. The company refuses to offer her a farewell party, making it clear how she is not acknowledged for her achievements, but shoved out of the spotlight. Now that Elisabeth is no longer needed, she is left with nothing but a bouquet and a thank-you note saying "You were amazing". The next shot focuses on the word "were". She was only amazing when she met the standards of being young and beautiful.

The director is attempting to reason how Elisabeth has stopped being the star of the show and has to be replaced soon. When he is asked about "what stops", he is unable to answer. He fidgets, and this very action travels up to his left hand, where he shakes the shrimp. The shrimp here directly represents the male sex organ that struggles to form an erection. This means that the reason why Elisabeth was made into a fitness star was not to spread the positive ideas of fitness but to target the male

desire who uses this opportunity to sexually fantasize over her. Sparkle is only a source of sexual desire for men.

The concept of biopower is seen in the way women are pressured to look a certain way to be recognized or taken seriously. And when women fail to meet these unnatural beauty standards, insecurities slowly grow inside, resulting in body dysmorphia. Elizabeth sees her posters being taken down, symbolizing how she is slowly being erased from the public eye. People who once touched the Hollywood Walk of Fame Star of Elizabeth in pure awe now walk over it. The crack so formed on the tile represents how Elizabeth Sparkle is no longer of public interest. Random side walker accidentally spills food all over her Hollywood Walk of Fame Star and smears it all over the tile with his footwear as an attempt to clean it. All these actions show that Elizabeth is now undesirable and boring to the public eye.

Elizabeth starts to become envious of a young woman at a bar who seems to have all the male attention on her. She stares longingly at her. Elizabeth, who was once the “most beautiful girl on television,” is now just an ordinary old woman. This describes the superficial mentality of a society that only favors certain physical appearances. Women who look the part flourish, while the others are treated with indifference. This is known as “pretty privilege” in modern-day society, which is the belief that one gets treated better if they are attractive. Elizabeth’s action also shows how women tend to place their value on how much male attention they receive.

All of Elisabeth's pent-up frustrations lead her to contact the dealer from the black market to place an order for the Substance that promises her youth and attractiveness. This one decision foretells the tragic events of the movie.

The looksmaxxing trend reflects the most intimate form of biopower by making the body an object to be constantly optimized to meet the beauty standards that are hyper-idealized. Looksmaxxing encompasses a range of various techniques aimed at optimizing one's physical appearance. The trend is centered on the belief that a person's physical appearance is all that is required to live a happier and more fulfilling life. The main objective of the trend is to attain the most perfect physical appearance, ensuring romantic, economic, and social success in life.

Features like hollow cheeks, positive canthal tilt, high nose bridge, and prominent cheekbones represent the ideal and desirable traits, while the opposing features are deemed inferior. To determine facial attractiveness, facial features are mathematically calculated into an overall score out of ten. One being the least attractive or otherwise known as "incel" and ten being the most attractive or otherwise known as a "PSL God or Goddess". An incel is someone who desires a romantic partner but is unable to have one because of their physical appearance.

The looksmaxxing trends became a huge sensation in 2023, when various social media platforms like TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube consisted of edits, i.e., videos ranging from twenty seconds to one minute with catchy music, with the sole aim of creating an impression in people's minds that an individual is somehow better than the other if they are good-looking. The edits also attempted to justify the actions of criminals who had committed heinous crimes by claiming that it was acceptable

since they are attractive. Such videos humiliated people with average facial attractiveness and promoted AI-enhanced pictures of celebrities to establish unrealistic beauty standards for the viewers.

The trend also openly aims to glorify The Dark Triad, which is a group of three negative personality traits like Narcissism, Psychopathy, and Machiavellianism. The viewers are encouraged to be emotionally detached, apathetic, and show a lack of remorse for undervaluing someone solely based on their physical appearance. The concept of binaries is also fully exercised in this trend, as people are made to believe that they either have “hunter eyes” or “prey eyes”.

Psychopaths, Sociopaths, and narcissists are described as individuals with an extremely low score in emotional intelligence who view human relationships as something that is purely transactional. These individuals typically look for the weakest one in the room to prey on so that they can be controlled and exploited for their personal gain. The trend targets adolescents and young adults, who are more self-conscious about their appearance by instilling a belief that one can fix their life by fixing their face, and encourages them to adopt the behaviours of The Dark Triad.

Individuals are encouraged to follow an unnecessarily complicated eleven to fifteen-step skin care routine in order to achieve porcelain-perfect clear skin, also known as glass skin, to be more physically attractive. As a result, children as young as ten were brainwashed into using Tretinoin, which is a prescription-based drug that is used to promote the production of collagen and reduce visible signs of aging.

These influencer-pressured children were later known as the “Sephora kids” by the netizens after they had started to steal makeup and skincare products from the stores to be the prettiest girls in their school. In this sense, biopower has its most potent impact on children through various social media platforms.

In *The Birth of the Clinic: An Archaeology of Medical Perception*, Foucault notes how patients’ symptoms not only became a source of knowledge for the doctors but as objects to study. This is what he calls the Medical gaze.



Fig. 1. A hypodermic injection into an egg yolk (left frame) resulting in the emergence of a second yolk (right frame).

The above figure shows the very first scene of the movie, where we see how an egg is injected with the medicine. The egg yolk is symbolic of the human body that becomes the specimen in the future. The yolk begins to pulsate, undergoing physical changes as a second yolk emerges from the primary. The initial yolk that was injected with the substance looks stretched and worn out, while the newly formed yolk looks firm and fresh. This represents the undesired wrinkled and worn-out skin that has undergone the process of aging, and the firm and youthful skin that women desire to have. This shows the subtle foreshadowing of the events that are going to happen as the movie progresses. This exact medicine is named as the

substance, but the contents that make up the substance are unknown to both the viewers of the movie and the user (the characters), showing the lack of an ethical stance.

As Elisabeth sees her posters being taken down, she gets into an accident. The nurse who examines her spine in the ER describes how it is in perfect condition, making her a good “candidate”. The nurse secretly slips a pen drive with the name “substance” and a note saying “it changed my life” into her pocket. This is where Elisabeth gets to know about the substance. As Elisabeth chooses to contact the dealer out of desperation, she also becomes a victim of the gaze. Elisabeth is willing to undergo the tedious process of injecting the activator, stabilizer, and switch. As a result, Elisabeth’s body begins to make a second copy of herself inside her and emerges from her body from the back, making huge tears in her skin. The resultant body is named “Sue,” who is younger and more attractive.

Elisabeth is labelled as the host body and Sue as the matrix. According to the rules, put forward by the dealer, the host and the matrix must switch weekly, respecting the balance. In other words, Sue will be conscious for one week while Elisabeth lies unconscious. In the next week, they switch. The matrix depends on the host for survival by using the stabilizer that is extracted from the bone marrow of the matrix.

However, as the movie progresses, Sue starts to not respect the balance. The most important rule, as described by the dealer, is that the matrix and the substance must switch every other week without any exception. Sue, not wanting to switch, starts to inject more stabilizer than what is prescribed as an attempt not to switch for

one more day. As a result, when Elizabeth wakes up, one of her fingers is rotten. This means that if the substance takes more than one week to switch, it has a dire consequence on the “host” body.

Elizabeth, upon experiencing the deteriorating side effects of not stabilizing, desperately reaches out to the dealer. Elizabeth, despite being a famous person, is treated with indifference. The dealer’s voice is devoid of warmth and empathy, and responds in a detached manner. She repeatedly tells her name to reveal her identity, but is met with silence as a response. Her name and identity are of no importance. She is only recognized through her number “503”. This shows that both Elizabeth and Sue have no identity other than just a number. She is just a subject of her medical trial, through which she is completely dehumanized. This exact scene of the movie is where the concept of medical gaze fully comes into play. In their eyes, Elizabeth isn’t a human but more like a lab specimen.

In *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (1975), *Part Three: Discipline*, Foucault explains how bodies were trained individually, with constant supervision, resulting in the creation of docile bodies that were both submissive and useful. The body is controlled, improved, and transformed for maximum productivity. In *The Substance*, we see multiple instances in which both Elizabeth and Sue are subjected to disciplinary power. Elizabeth is fired as her body is “too old” for the industry. This action itself establishes how the media prefers “perfect” bodies to increase profit.

Elisabeth's involvement with the dealer to recklessly sacrifice her current body to undergo multiple biological changes just to have a youthful and more desirable self reflects how bodies are subjected to various modifications to meet the ideal.

The host and the matrix are supposed to switch every week to attain a balance. The procedure is started by injecting the activator, which aids in the creation of the matrix from the host body that ultimately separates from the host as a different and fresh being. The matrix requires daily doses of stabilizer, which is extracted from the spinal fluid of the host body. Without the stabilizer, the matrix begins to experience hallucinations and nausea, which is eventually reflected in the host body as it slowly begins to decompose. The host and the matrix must switch after seven days without fail. These are the various disciplinary techniques that are imposed on both Elisabeth and Sue. Failure to comply with these norms has dire consequences, as witnessed in the climax of the movie when Elisabeth's body transforms into a grotesque figure, leading to her death.

Elisabeth's age functions as the main catalyst of her insecurity. She constantly stares at her reflection, only noticing her flaws. She compares her looks to Sue, who is younger and beautiful. She becomes increasingly irritated seeing her own reflection. Her fixation on her external appearance deprives her of having any social life. She is unable to socialize and make friends. She becomes lonely. The film repeatedly uses mirrors, polished doorknobs, and shattered glass to show various moments of Elisabeth obsessing over her reflection.

When it comes to the aerobics show, the dancers are deliberately dressed in such a way that their breasts and buttocks are fully exposed. Every aspect of the show is deliberately constructed for the male gaze. The casting directors are more focused on the bodies of women rather than actual talent and physical fitness. The more desirable the woman looks, the more profit the company gets. Their bodies become objects of power, crafted for men's visual pleasure and sexual fantasy.

Chapter 3

Constructed Femininity and Hybrid Identity

Donna Haraway, in her essay, *A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century* (1985), points out how modern medicine creates cyborgs by blending our bodies with technology through genetic manipulation. As technology now studies humans through science, power is now exercised through a network where women are deeply exploited. A cyborg, as a result, blends the lines between the real and the unreal, existing as a matter of both reality and fiction.

The concept of cyborg identity becomes apparent in the film's opening scene, where an egg is injected with the medicine, triggering the formation of a second yolk. This scene serves as a metaphor of the formation of Sue, who emerges from Elisabeth's body. This grotesque and horrifying birth of Sue matches Haraway's concept of split identity.

Sue's physical attractiveness is not natural, as her very existence is the result of genetic manipulation. Her beauty is created through technology rather than being biologically inherited. The host becomes a site of technological intrusion, and the matrix becomes the byproduct.

This split of the matrix and the host is the consequence of Elisabeth internalizing multiple contradictory beauty expectations imposed on women. Elisabeth is expected to remain youthful and attractive while existing in an aging

body. The presence of Sue instantly erases the identity of Elisabeth from the public eye, as people seem to forget her regardless.

Sue's body becomes a commodity for business and profit. The company treats her beauty as an asset that must be optimized and eventually replaced when it no longer excites the public. As Sue's artificial body represents perfection, Elisabeth's natural aging body becomes repulsive and inferior.

Sue's existence is an aesthetic reproduction. The substance is not used to create life but to create beauty that could be advertised. Sue's body becomes a puppet used for performance rather than a natural living body.

The fitness program makes Sue's body look like a visual promise, convincing the viewers that this is the body they will achieve if they follow their routine. The audience internalizes the idea that their body must look like Sue's without knowing the artificiality behind her existence. They are never taught what real bodies look like or how they naturally function. Therefore, these women never end up understanding their bodies. As a result, beauty becomes something that should constantly be corrected.

One single gene unlocks your DNA, starting a new cellular division that will release another version of yourself. This is "The Substance". You are the matrix. This is simply the better version of yourself. You just have to share...one week for one, and one week for the other. A perfect balance of seven days each. The one and only thing not to forget... You are one. You can't escape from yourself. (*The Substance* 00:14:22 – 00:15:04)

The above lines are said by the dealer when Elisabeth decides to purchase the substance. Here, rather than a single unified self, there are two bodies that belong to the same person, yet behave as two distinct individuals. The presence of both Elisabeth and Sue represents the concept of hybrid identity created through technological intervention. The dealer also states that Elisabeth and Sue must switch every week, and the host relies on the stabilizer derived from the bone marrow of the matrix. In this way, both the host and matrix depend on each other for survival. This resonates with Haraway's rejection of binary oppositions.



Fig. 2 Monstroelisasue

The above figure shows the grotesque form of Sue when she chooses not to switch with Elisabeth and injects the activator instead. Since the activator was to be only injected into the matrix and not into the host, it creates anamnestic cell divisions inside Sue. Her body does not supposedly divide into two, as there are multiple mutations forming inside of her.

Sue's body, as a result, becomes fully deformed, ceasing to look human at all. Her appearance becomes grotesque and monstrous. There are multiple partially formed heads and limbs emerging out of Sue; one of them is of Elizabeth. This monstrous hybrid becomes the symbol of the cyborg self.

Monstroelisasue also aligns with Foucault's concept of biopower, where he stated that humans can potentially misuse biopower by creating monsters or uncontrollable viruses that can cause destruction. The destruction in this case is self-inflicted, as Monstroelisasue is the final form moments before she experiences a painful death.

The host body becomes a site where technology and biopower meet. The matrix body so formed becomes the uncontrollable virus that spreads unrealistic standards onto women who chase and desire it. As a result, bodies become exploited and manipulated, destroying identity.

Conclusion

This study has shown how *The Substance* represents the female body as the classic example of biopolitical control, where power is exercised through medical intervention and social surveillance. Elisabeth's body is subjected to a medical gaze that distorts her identity to a mere number. Her ageing body becomes a flaw that must be corrected, showing how biopower is catalyzed through internalized insecurity. The film exposes how Elisabeth, like every other woman, has unknowingly become a victim of biopower.

The analysis further reveals the existence of Elisabeth as a docile body, as she internalizes all the hyper-idealized norms of femininity, resulting in a form of self-surveillance. Being subjected to constant disrespect and mockery, she develops an increased dependency on external validation, urging her to overindulge in the substance out of desperation to not be socially erased.

What initially appears to be a source of happiness turns into a living nightmare as her perfect identity clashes with the original. As a result, her identity and her sense of self deteriorate, turning her against herself. This form of self-sabotaging ultimately costs her life.

The visual language of the film reinforces the concept of surveillance and the effects of biopower. The repeated close-up shots of Elisabeth's naked body do not have an erotic intent. Instead, they represent the medical gaze. Most importantly, the majority of the key moments of the film take place in the bathroom, a space that represents true vulnerability. The constant focus on Elisabeth's reflection reinforces

the concept of self-surveillance as a result of body dysmorphia. The stark white coloured bathroom walls represent the sterilized labs, where she becomes a subject of a medical experiment.

The use of bright and vibrant colours when it comes to her clothing and her workspace interiors reflects her consistent desire to stay in the spotlight. The rest of the world remains dull and lifeless, bringing out the symbolism of death and decay that Elisabeth does not wish to associate herself with. The act of Elisabeth wearing a bright yellow trench coat in a seemingly dull environment indirectly symbolizes her desire to be the center of attention.

The excessive close shots of men's faces and their mouths visually violate Elisabeth's personal space. This subtly symbolizes the constant male intrusion into female matters, representing the disregard of consent and boundaries. The film's visual language is densely layered with multiple symbolic meanings.

While this study focuses on *The Substance*, the theoretical framework developed here can potentially open up possibilities for examining how biopower works in the contemporary digital world. Future research could analyze the role of social media applications like Instagram in setting unrealistic standards, where filters, AI-enhanced images, and cosmetic trends increase self-surveillance and body dysmorphia. The rise of plastic surgery and non-surgical cosmetic procedures are all prominent example of biopower. These areas open up possibilities for future research.

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