

Mirror Blade: Extreme Body Modification, Colonoscopy Cinema, and Abjection in *The Substance*

Claudia Calabresi

Johns Hopkins University, USA

Abstract: In contemporary ideals of beauty, women undergo extreme body modifications in order to build a perfect body as a practice of self-discipline that risks their alienation from embodiment. *The Substance*, a film directed by Coralie Fargeat in 2024, stages the doubling of the self that extreme body modification and beauty makeover cause to Elisabeth Sparkle, an aging television star in search for her lost youth and beauty. This essay analyzes the blend of colonoscopy cinema, and feminist strategies of filmmaking enacted by the director through a feminist, semio-psychoanalytical analysis drawing on the most prominent contemporary feminist film theorists, individuating *The Substance* as a feminist film focused on abjected femininity. In particular, the analysis will focus on how colonoscopy cinema is repurposed to expose abjection through the specific sites of the mucous, the bathroom, the navel, the eardrum, and the mirror.

Keywords: body modification, beauty, abjection, excess, mirror, colonoscopy cinema

Introduction

In the shifting paradigm of contemporary ideals of beauty, social media and cinema's aesthetic expectations of women have transferred onto their flesh, such that the mediated image has collapsed into the body itself—demanding eternal beauty. As stated by Bernadette Wegenstein,

“In today’s culture, the concept of beauty, on a marker of nature’s harmonies, is no longer clearly distinguishable from the efforts, desires, and even deformations that go into making it”¹ for women on and off the screen to stay “beautiful” forever. Maintaining youth is the first requirement, *conditio sine qua non* of this beauty.

This age of viral, dramatic beauty makeovers and upturning aesthetic surgeries corresponds to a variety of body horror films exploring women’s “extreme body modification.” In *The Substance* (MUBI, 2024), directed by Coralie Fargeat, a woman’s attempt to claim control over her aging body through an extreme modification destroys her life, provoking a not only physical, but also semiotic split. This plot twist constitutes a “behind the scenes” of the viral social media posts about makeovers, body modifications, and beauty routines that reveal the self-surveillance required for women to sustain the contemporary, impossible aesthetic standards imposed on them, in an increasing dissociation between their embodied experience and their social media avatars, devotedly committed to an eternal sequence of beauty routine and makeover that alienates them from real life and erases their identities.² The theorist Vivian Sobchak observes that if she underwent surgery to escape aging, she would become unrecognizable to the eyes of others, but mostly to her own: “Surgery ... would create of me an uncanny and disturbing double.”³ What are the consequences of the obsession with eternal beauty on women?

This essay will apply a feminist, semio-psychoanalytical framework to inquire how *The Substance* is informed by this question. Psychoanalysis and semiotics are employed for two

¹ Bernadette Wegenstein, *The Cosmetic Gaze: Body Modification and the Construction of Beauty* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2012), 88.

² Silvia Semenzin, *Internet non è un posto per femmine* (Milano: Einaudi, 2026).

³ Vivian Sobchack, *Carnal Thoughts: Embodiment and Moving Image Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 38.

renowned reasons. First, my analysis acknowledges the interplay and correspondence between preexisting social dynamics in the formation of the subject and the experience of the medium of cinema as their unconscious reenactment. Second, semiotics and psychoanalysis have been fruitfully turned by post-Lacanian feminist theorists against the patriarchal society that conceived it,⁴ and continue to be essential for a contemporary feminist film theory and filmmaking. Specifically, I will deploy an innovative blend of Anna Kornbluh's codification of colonoscopy cinema and a genealogy of feminist theories of abjection developed by Luce Irigaray, Julia Kristeva, Anneke Smelik, and Kaja Silverman.

Colonoscopy Cinema

The Substance generated widespread debate over the claustrophobic beauty standards imposed on—and incarnated by—the star system. Elisabeth Sparkle (Demi Moore), a world-famous television star, is appalled when the producer of her aerobics show fires her on the day she turns fifty. Elisabeth is desperate. What would she do to get her beauty back? Anything—even becoming someone other than herself.

Following the contemporary collapse of the mediated image into the real body, the fantasy of eternal beauty that Elisabeth desires materializes as a girl born from the woman's back, in the grotesquely extrauterine pregnancy of a younger, merciless copy of herself. In the film, biohacking humanity and womanhood to create renewed beauty and youth is reduced to a process of mere chemical production from the incipit: a naked, sunny-side-up egg simply pops in two after the injection of "the substance." Sue is born from Elisabeth through the same macrocellular mitosis: in contemporary cinema and beyond, "Human bodily existence is

⁴ Laura Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 14.

foregrounded as a material surface amenable to endless manipulation and total visibility.”⁵ In *The Substance*, the careless disposability of the human body is even more ruthless because Elisabeth is a woman—a woman in her fifties—in a profession where feminine aging equals a death sentence. The naturally aging body of Elisabeth Sparkle is suddenly deformed by the scrutinizing gaze of a producer (Dennis Quaid); caught under the inescapable sharpness of this judgmental look, Elisabeth will undergo a literal fragmentation of her body and psyche and generate the incarnated idealization of a perfected self in-the-flesh that will lead to the total decay of Elisabeth’s authentic body.

At the beginning of *The Substance*, nothing seems left to interpretation. The film has been cited in a *New Yorker* article as a perfect example of the recent “New Literalism” of Hollywood films, characterized by a “pre-digested” flow of images and didactic displays of meaning.⁶ Anna Kornbluh codifies this cinematic style as “colonoscopy cinema” for its quest for hyperbolic proximity between the camera and the spectator, and of both to the object being observed. “The medium is missing ... Immediacy crushes mediation,” she writes, so that the camera becomes a colonoscope able to penetrate instead of simply framing bodies.⁷ The camera-colonoscopy privileges extreme close-ups and first-person point-of-view angles as an effect of the shortening distance between reality and cinema, and between cinema and social media. Colonoscopy cinema can be weaponized from Hollywood’s renowned misogyny to continue framing female bodies as cuts of meat at a butchery.⁸ The scalpel of this new type of camera is sharper than it has ever been on women; its blade cuts, penetrates, and phagocytizes, only to

⁵ Sobchack, *Carnal Thoughts*, 50.

⁶ Manwali Serpell, “The New Literalism Plaguing Today’s Biggest Movies,” *The New Yorker*, March 8, 2025, <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/critics-notebook/the-new-literalism-plaguing-todays-biggest-movies>.

⁷ Anna Kornbluh, *Immediacy or, the Style of Too-Late Capitalism* (London: Verso, 2023), 6.

⁸ Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures*.

render a female body more and more “edible” to the audience. Elisabeth becomes an egg, a concrete star on the Walk of Fame, a poster. The producer crushes and swallows shrimp while announcing that he is firing her; while he speaks, a waitress beyond his shoulder leans on a table, displaying her young buttocks.

Producer: Renewal is inevitable. And at fifty... Well, it stops.

Elisabeth: What stops?

The immediacy that characterizes colonoscopy cinema demands an uninterrupted exploration and capture of bodily surfaces that Elisabeth’s wrinkles and weary appearance can no longer sustain; with menopause, the “flow” of contemplation she is expected provoke as a woman is interrupted and lost. Having consumed the shrimp (and Elisabeth), the producer has no reason to speak to her further and walks away. A fly dramatically—prophetically—drowns in the woman’s glass. While she drives back home, a billboard with her picture is ripped off. If the film stages a perpetual “signposting,” as the writer of the New York Times article on New Literalism might put it, it is one of a woman-sign that has lost her identity. Elisabeth is haunted by her own persecutory, obsessive iconography, a flowing redundancy of iconic and indexical signs that restricts Elisabeth to no more than an aging body ready to be substituted. “YOU ARE ONE,” says the substance’s advertising that she watches. But soon she will not be anymore.

In a perfect enactment of colonoscopy cinema, we watch extreme close-ups of the needle sweeping under her skin, the substance entering her veins. Elisabeth seeks in vain for a sign of rejuvenation on her own body before collapsing on the floor, but the younger flesh she craves will not belong to her. The pupil of her eye pops in two, as the egg previously did, and a young woman, Sue (Margaret Qualley), breaks out of Elisabeth. The signs Elisabeth was haunted by quickly devoured her psyche and flesh and left a hollow body that now lays down on the floor,

with its back cracked into an open wound. Sue sews it shut, but the wound will never truly heal, as a hyperbolic trace of the loss Sue was born from, and on which depends to survive.

Beginning from this extreme body modification, Fargeat contaminates colonoscopy cinema with a feminist filmmaking methodology: an immediacy that disrupts mediation potentially exalts a visual excess that highlights the fundamental lack on which the cinema is built⁹ and foregrounds abjection—especially in the case of a protagonist who is twice as abjected as she could be: an aging female character. In the words of Kathleen Woodward, “In our mass-mediated society, age and gender structure each other in a complex set of reverberating feedback loops, conspiring to render the older female body paradoxically both hypervisible and invisible.”¹⁰ This is hyperbolically manifested in *The Substance*’s doubling, but while the immediate surface of the film is concerned with the young, beautiful appearance of Sue dramatically overshadowing the horribly decaying skin of Elisabeth, subtle clues in the film increasingly suggest other semiotic truths. The New Literalism of *The Substance* is disturbed by the progressive resurgence and bridging of Elisabeth/Sue’s split body and will, so that immediacy and lack of mediation are repurposed to exalt visual excess and unearth abjection.

Elements and Sites of Cinematic Excess in *The Substance*

The collapse of meaning that the object represents tears down the illusory, unstable boundaries between Self and Other: it is a carnal, terrifying irruption into the Symbolic order otherwise dictating our psychic balance—an open wound disrupting our stability.¹¹ What is internal, invisible, and deemed to stay as such suddenly threatens to tear apart the fragile border of the

⁹ Anneke Smelik, *And the Mirror Cracked: Feminist Cinema and Film Theory* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1998); Christian Metz, *The Imaginary Signifier: Psychoanalysis and the Cinema*, trans. Celia Britton et al. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982).

¹⁰ Kathleen Woodward, “Performing Age, Performing Gender,” *NWSA Journal* 18, no. 1 (2006): 163.

¹¹ Barbara Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis* (London: Routledge, 1993).

skin and break free outside the body:¹² it is not only a visual but also a bodily, psychosomatic excess that women can adopt as a tool to demonstrate the lack they are obliged to bear is, in reality, a projection cast onto them by men.

Anneke Smelik describes visual excess as a “subversive element creating other meanings” that moves beyond narrative as such.¹³ This article broadens the concept of excess as not only a visual configuration. In the following section, I will analyze the forms that it takes to articulate abjection in *The Substance*: the mucous, the bathroom, the navel, the mirror, and the eardrum.

The notion of mucous developed by Luce Irigaray is considered a type of excess inducing both fascination and disgust and exceeding the patriarchal representation of women.¹⁴ No one can agree on its meaning. Mucous is something neither inside nor outside the body, its most unspeakable configuration. Mucous, moreover, does not rely on the patriarchal regime of sight but rather on touch to be experienced and articulated. This helps explain explains the capillary presence of mucous and consequent body fluids in many body horror films, including *The Substance*.

Once Sue has been created, Elisabeth self-segregates at home and observes her uncanny double taking over both her domestic and mediatic space. Sue hides the giant poster of Elisabeth in the living room, mocks her during an interview, and her face and body progressively substitute Elisabeth’s image in the entire city; the aerobics exercises Elisabeth used to perform for her female fans become vacuous, obsessive displays of Sue’s buttocks, inner thighs, and lips meant

¹² Nicole Majewski, *Material Reality. Feminine Abject in Body Horror Films* (New York: School of Liberal Arts and Sciences Pratt Institute, 2023).

¹³ Smelik, *And the Mirror Cracked*, 125.

¹⁴ Margaret Whitford, “Irigaray’s Body Symbolic,” *Hypatia* 6, no. 3 (1991): 97–110, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3809841>.

to provoke a voyeuristic and fetishistic control. The camera, obsessively fixed on her orifices, surveils a border and thus preserves the integrity of the captured female image preventing it from being invaded and liberated by the unrepresentability of her abjected sex.

The abjection of Sue and Elisabeth is momentarily removed, but not destroyed, so that it continues gathering force in the domestic space that signifies both the mucous bridging “outside and inside” and the immediacy of colonoscopy cinema that attempts to disrupt it: Elisabeth’s bathroom, a squared, pristine space that exalts the fluids bursting out from Elisabeth and Sue and the acid color of the substance. The bathroom in *The Substance* holds together and yet threatens the unity between Sue and Elisabeth, configuring as a perfected site to host abjection and to both feed and contain its manifestations (see figure 1).



Figure 1. The “mucous” derived by Elisabeth’s split invades the whiteness of the bathroom, film still.

In the era of an increasing obsession with the quest for eternal beauty and youth, the bathroom contains what, of a woman, must be kept in the dark; it is a membrane-place to discipline her own body. It is here that Elisabeth, looking at herself, decides to take the substance; here, where she splits in two and stores the “food” required to keep one another alive during their unconscious states. Elisabeth and Sue keep each other’s bodies hidden in the

bathroom during their alternating “shifts,” sheltering them from any other gaze. The room, at the beginning, successfully holds their secret.

But when Sue and Elisabeth understand their damnation to a perpetual regime of alternating invisibility and hypervisibility, the bathroom loses strength, revealing its double nature as both container and catalyst of abjection. Sue takes one step further and builds a bathroom-within-the-bathroom to hide Elisabeth even more deeply. Later, a man Sue is about to have sex with in the living room opens the zipper on the back of her bodysuit and a cascade of organs falls onto the floor—but this turns out to be Elisabeth’s hallucination (see figure 2). The woman wakes immediately afterward, weakened and decayed, still exiled in the bathroom. The mucous constantly threatens to burst with its fluids out of the bathroom, across the the screen, and to erase any border with its load of corporeal, abjected truths.



Figure 2. Sue’s vision of her organs falling out, film still.

The impossibility of recognizing herself as an aging woman pushes Elisabeth to keep Sue alive, but the precarious split between the two bodies is collapsing. Sue has another vision: while she is rehearsing, something pulls from inside her buttocks. The camera, obsessively fixated on her genitals and orifices, cannot miss it. The crew stops the rehearsal and dissects, “frame by frame,” the entire sequence of the choreography (see figure 3). Sue runs into the dressing room

and pushes the object toward her navel until she extracts a chicken leg. Her navel opening and sucking itself in is the last thing she sees before waking up and discovering that this, too, was a vision she had while she was in the bathroom, and Elisabeth binge-ate chicken in front of the television during the whole week at her disposal.

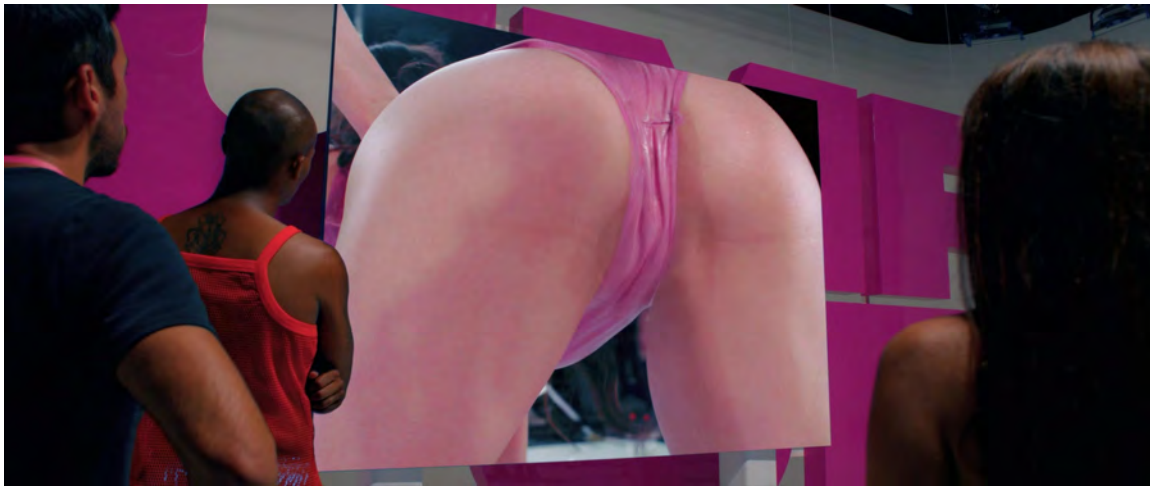


Figure 3. The crew fixating on Sue's anus and pubic area, film still.

The navel, as a psychoanalytic object, is both the scar of a wound referring to the violent separation from the maternal body and the most enigmatic passage of a dream¹⁵. Following the notion of the abject defined by Julia Kristeva as depending on fantasy to be visualized,¹⁶ Smelik individuates the navel as the unplumbable riddle of female sexuality represented in a film, akin in its implications to the mucous.¹⁷ Sue's vision of her navel expelling undigested, "unmediated" food is one of the most powerful representations of abjection in the film. The hypervisibility of the mediatic regime of immediacy forces her to keep hiding the body from which she was born, but the chicken she hallucinated having inside her thighs is scattered throughout the apartment,

¹⁵ Smelik, *And the Mirror Cracked*, 168.

¹⁶ Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980).

¹⁷ Smelik, *And the Mirror Cracked*, 153.

bearing trace of Elisabeth's body and of their failed relationship: the camera-colonoscopy could not stop abjection to find its way out of the body, invading the screen.

"I can't go back inside her," Sue says after this episode as she collects the fluid of Elisabeth in the hidden bathroom, "Gross, old, fat, disgusting!" as she withdraws as much liquid as she can from her "matrix"'s debilitated body. The substance that names the film reveals itself to be not the drug itself but rather this sort of spinal fluid that grows more and more opaque and eventually runs out, killing Elisabeth and Sue: the substance is one belonging to abjection. Sue despises it, but also needs it.

We have observed, so far, the attention of *The Substance* on the female bodily mucous and fluids as a site of abjection; I would now like to focus on the film's hyperdiegetic history of sounds both produced and lived from within the body, sounds that constitute an uncharted territory of feminine hearing that has usually been disavowed. It has frequently escaped theoretical attention that gender-based discrimination in films is the effect of dominant cinema's sound regime as much as its visual regime, and that the female voice is as relentlessly held to normative representations and functions as is the female body and psyche. The female voice and hearing have in cinema their own history of subjugation within the patriarchal mediatic system and have been neutralized as a projection of male castration.¹⁸

The voices of Elisabeth and Sue in *The Substance* are often strangled, muffled, and silenced by other men, but Fargeat ensures that we, as an audience, can hear what they hear and experience a hyperdiegetic "film-within-a-film,"¹⁹ or a sort of "otoscopy cinema." While Sue and Elisabeth barely speak throughout the film, it is their bodies that utter the extreme body

¹⁸ Kaja Silverman, *The Acoustic Mirror: The Female Voice in Psychoanalysis and Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988).

¹⁹ Silverman, *The Acoustic Mirror*, 56.

modification they undergo. Under the weight of the mediatic regime of hypervisible immediacy, Sue finds herself unable to continue switching with Elisabeth, as the perfected beauty she represents is demanded more and more by both the viewers and herself. Every time Sue experiences withdrawal—namely, when the spinal fluid she needs from Elisabeth is completely absorbed—it is as if spectators were feeling pulled “into her head,” as she is: so that they can hear the anxious breath and beating of her body reverberating as if it was a disturbing, keen tinnitus hammering against the eardrums. Underneath the regime of gazes and the illusion of hypervisibility that youth and beauty seem to grant, Sue and Elisabeth’s voices are perpetually unheard, rejected, and trapped inside a female body that has become a soundproofed prison.



Figure 4. The conductor eats shrimps with his fingers, framed by a first-person POV angle, film still.

At the beginning of the film, the producer announces over the phone that he is going to fire Elisabeth while urinating; the audience can hear the sound of him as he unzips, his urine streaming down the toilet, and his aggressive, merciless voice in an unsettling, cacophonous blend that is destined only to grow louder. When the producer communicates his decision to Elisabeth while eating shrimp, the extreme close-ups of his hands, his mouth, and the shrimp crushing in his mouth alternated with the first-person point-of-view angles (see figure 4) are accompanied by the complementary sound of his jaw growing nauseating and unavoidable, thus revealing the

abjection of a male subject that normally would be disavowed and projected elsewhere. A camera-colonoscopy, usually allied with the male gaze, is now counteracted by an otoscopic function: only a woman's auditory perspective could hear what the spectators hear, thanks to *The Substance's* camera-otoscope.

Mirror Blade

According to post-Lacanian psychoanalysis, abjection constitutes a possible escape from the male gaze in Lacan's mirror stage of identity formation: it could enable the woman to enter the Symbolic Order without being captured by the paternal "gaze," which reduces the woman's genital organs to a lack producing—or rather recalling—castration anxiety. Cinema is a "strange mirror,"²⁰ and cinematic meaning always carries the trace of the Other²¹. *The Substance* ultimately plays with the importance of the mirror as a psychoanalytic and cinematic device only to expose its weakness.

At the climax of the first fifteen minutes, Elisabeth throws a snow globe containing her miniature against a poster of herself. The clash between her actual self and her past representation explodes to make space for the younger self that will soon be born. Sue's first act is to contemplate herself in the mirror and measure her own *to-be-looked-at-ness*.²² While the young woman watches herself reflected by screens and giant advertising posters, increasingly radiant and successful, Elisabeth grows to hate her own reflection more and more. In fact, the first woman's "rupture" in the film happens in front of a mirror. As soon as she discovers to have a rotting finger, Elisabeth becomes aware of how much Sue's existence demands of her and tries, one last time, to leave the apartment and just be herself. This means looking for the positive

²⁰ Metz, *The Imaginary Signifier*, 49.

²¹ Silverman, *The Acoustic Mirror*, 12.

²² Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures*, 19.

sanction of a man who “still” wants to date her—but the two will never meet. The reflection on the lock of the door mirrors a face she cannot show anymore. Elisabeth goes back to the bathroom, looks at her reflection, and manifests her psychosomatic split: first hiding her cleavage under a scarf, then brushing the makeup from her face with increasing violence and frustration; the woman tries to erase her image from the mirror, incapable of accepting an imperfect, aging reflection of herself (see figure 5).



Figure 5. Elisabeth cries removing her makeup, film still.

Approaching the end of the film, the two women finally confront each other. Elisabeth runs to hide in the bathroom and locks the door. Sue breaks in and lifts Elisabeth’s body so that they can look at each other through the mirror. Elisabeth smiles, thinking Sue will “recognize” her; instead, Sue smashes her face against the mirror, inflicting blood-dripping, disfiguring wounds. In a bathroom populated only by women, the mirror reveals its precarious and ephemeral nature of membrane. Instead of marking sexual difference, the broken surface represents the dangerous consequences of idealization, revealing how easy it is for the mirror to turn into a sharp weapon against women. Its rupture and weaponization induce the final collapse of the reciprocal invisibility marking Sue and Elisabeth’s split.

Throughout the film, all the elements and sites of excess blend into an abjected “substance”

progressively pervading the film and the spectators, until the border between “inside” and “outside”—between Elisabeth and Sue, between them and the audience, hypervisibility and invisibility, silence and scream, image and sound—collapses. The mirror separating the idealized image of a woman from her abjected bodily reality breaks, and the two women finally face each other in the last sequences of the film. Sue represents all the aesthetic and psychological traits demanded of a woman in the contemporary age: not only beauty and youth, but also a sunny personality and a thoughtless mind exclusively dedicated to the maintenance of her own body, while Elisabeth bears all the abjection that their split produces. Sue is desperate to hide Elisabeth and forget about her, yet she cannot renounce *The Substance* Elisabeth has: her abjected, aging body retains the meaning that Sue is devoid of. Elisabeth *is* the substance.

At the end of the film, Sue kills Elisabeth in a cascade of violence and blood and heads to the studio for the New Year’s Eve television show she was supposed to host. Sue’s body, however, has also received a final blow through the death of her “matrix.” Her flesh starts decaying, her teeth falling out. Sue makes a last, desperate attempt to save “the show”: she injects herself with the substance that separated her from Elisabeth’s body.

What awakens is “Monstro ElisaSue,” who represents the “inside-out” that both Elisabeth and Sue had desperately tried to keep hidden in the bathroom: a raw, skinless body that has become an open wound, a mucous in plain sight. Yet ElisaSue seems strangely satisfied with her new “look.” She prepares for her big night with a parody of a beauty routine and makeover, similarly as the women in the social media posts cited at the beginning of this article. She pierces her bald head with an earring and covers her disfigured face with the picture of Elisabeth taken from the shattered poster in the living room—not one of Sue—finally ready to show the abjection that her past, split selves rejected until the point of tragic consequences (see figure 6).

When ElisaSue sings on stage, a deep, hollow voice emerges; still, nobody wants to listen. The audience, at first astonished, erupts in screams and vomits only when a breast pops out of ElisaSue's orbital cavity. The creature then explodes in a joyous, liberatory fountain of blood—a tribute to Carrie and its path of feminist revolt (1976)—in a rioting catharsis of abjected femininity, a liberating *jouissance*.²³



Figure 6. ElisaSue with the mask ripped off Elisabeth's poster, film still.

After the explosion of blood at the studios, what is left of ElisaSue—the face of Elisabeth on top of a bloody blend of organs and flesh—drags itself toward the star of the Walk of Fame displayed at the beginning of the film and melts there with a smile. Sue and Elisabeth are reunited as one and finally accept their body. Abjection has made its way to the surface. Fargeat's strategy of splitting a woman in two uses New Literalism to manifest the real split a woman must navigate between her public appearance and the bodily materiality she has to disavow.

Conclusion: For a Future of Abjection

In the words of Vivian Sobchack, "Cinema is cosmetic surgery—its fantasies, its makeup, and its

²³ Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 9.

digital effects able to “fix” (in the doubled sense of repair and stasis), to fetishize and reproduce faces and time as both “unreel” before us. And, reversibly, cosmetic surgery is cinema, creating an image we not only learn to enact in a repetitive compulsion but also must—and never can—live up to.”²⁴

The Substance offers an explicit representation of the dissociation and alienation that a woman today must endure between the body modifications demanded by society and the real, imperfect body she needs to conceal. Among other recognitions, the film has been acclaimed for the convergence of an on- and off-screen history of a woman star: during her Golden Globe acceptance speech, leading actress Demi Moore has shared the joy of returning to the spotlight with a project that recognized her value as an aging woman who had been put in the corner. Yet ElisaSue is not granted the same privilege to return to the stage.

The camera-colonoscopy applied within a feminist framework—and jointed to its “otoscopic” function—creates a short circuit: immediacy, proximity and hypervisibility exalt their opposite and abjection finds spaces of re-mediation negotiated by women. Yet despite this powerful eruption of abjected femininity, the path of liberation of ElisaSue is not destined to continue. As so often happens, a woman willing to explore and manifest her abjection is eventually punished through a scene exit that is also a literal death: the film collapses into a stereotypical ending of this type of narrative.²⁵ One wonders whether the death of ElisaSue, yet again in cinema, comes to signify the impossibility for a woman to survive on screen once no longer “abjected” from the discourse, diminishing the film’s attempt to repurpose colonoscopy

²⁴ Sobchack, *Carnal Thoughts*, 50.

²⁵ I extensively discussed this topic in Claudia Calabresi, *I’d Rather Be a Cyborg than a Goddess: Cinema, Sociosemiotics, Science Fiction and Feminisms* (master’s thesis, University of Torino, 2022), available from the author.

cinema for feminist filmmaking and give birth to an “all-round” woman. If the intent of representing this impossibility was to denounce its injustice, it is worth noticing that the spectators of today’s films already know innumerable stories of women condemned to a more or less literal death when they challenge the boundary between meaningless hypervisibility and abjected corporeality that the system of beauty standards oblige them never to cross.

When Demi Moore won the Golden Globe for Best Performance by a Female Actor in *The Substance*, her acceptance speech went viral:²⁶ spectators, especially women, crave positive stories of female all-rounded visibility and aging acceptance in which women can still live and be seen regardless of beauty and youth. Yet one year later Demi Moore herself has become the subject of deep concern for the extreme weight loss she appeared with at the Actors Awards: many users on social media asked whether the actress is “on the substance,”²⁷ indicating her as an example of contemporary *body fascism* targeting women. Erasing a woman’s body means erasing her voice, for diet culture has become a perfected “disciplinary technology.”²⁸

The Substance resists, in its entirety, as an accomplished example of how colonoscopy cinema can be combined with strategies of excess in New Feminist Cinema; however, ElisaSue’s death weakens its subversive message. Furthermore, the current authoritarian pressure on women’s bodies rushed to punish and erase the very actress who embodied ElisaSue’s rebellion. It is time to bring abjection into cinematic and public discourse without killing the woman brave enough to manifest it, and to dare to imagine her future—on and off screen.

²⁶ “Demi Moore Wins Best Female Actor – Motion Picture – Musical/Comedy | 82nd Annual Golden Globes,” YouTube video, uploaded by Golden Globes, January 5, 2025, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9SvW3XJP5Ic>.

²⁷ Mike Boyce, “Demi Moore Sparks Fresh Concern Over ‘Skinnier-Than-Ever’ Appearance at Actor Awards — ‘Food Must Be Very Expensive in L.A.’,” *RadarOnline*, March 2, 2026, <https://radaronline.com/p/demi-moore-sparks-fresh-concern-over-skinnier-than-ever-appearance-at-actors-awards/>.

²⁸ Da'Shaun Harrison, “Let Us Explain: Body Fascism,” *Scalawag*, March 3, 2026, <https://scalawagmagazine.org/2026/03/let-us-explain-body-fascism/>.

Bibliography

- Boyce, Mike. "Demi Moore Sparks Fresh Concern Over 'Skinnier-Than-Ever' Appearance at Actor Awards — 'Food Must Be Very Expensive in L.A.'" *RadarOnline*, March 2, 2026. <https://radaronline.com/p/demi-moore-sparks-fresh-concern-over-skinier-than-ever-appearance-at-actors-awards/>.
- Calabresi, Claudia. *I'd Rather Be a Cyborg than a Goddess: Cinema, Sociosemiotics, Science Fiction, and Feminisms*. Master's thesis, University of Turin, 2022. Available from the author.
- Creed, Barbara. *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis*. London: Routledge, 1993.
- "Demi Moore Wins Best Female Actor – Motion Picture – Musical/Comedy | 82nd Annual Golden Globes." YouTube video. Uploaded by Golden Globes, January 5, 2025. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9SvW3XJP5Ic>.
- Harrison, Da'Shaun L. "Let Us Explain: Body Fascism." *Scalawag*, March 3, 2026. <https://scalawagmagazine.org/2026/03/let-us-explain-body-fascism/>.
- Kornbluh, Anna. *Immediacy, or The Style of Too Late Capitalism*. London: Verso, 2023.
- Kristeva, Julia. *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1980.
- Majewski, Nicole. *Material Reality: Feminine Abject in Body Horror Films*. New York: School of Liberal Arts and Sciences, Pratt Institute, 2023.
- Metz, Christian. *The Imaginary Signifier: Psychoanalysis and the Cinema*. Translated by Celia Britton et al. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982.
- Mulvey, Laura. *Visual and Other Pleasures*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009.

Semenzin, Silvia. *Internet non è un posto per femmine*. Turin: Einaudi, 2026.

Serpell, Namwali. "The New Literalism Plaguing Today's Biggest Movies." *The New Yorker*, March 8, 2025. <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/critics-notebook/the-new-literalism-plaguing-todays-biggest-movies>.

Silverman, Kaja. *The Acoustic Mirror: The Female Voice in Psychoanalysis and Cinema*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988.

Smelik, Anneke. *And the Mirror Cracked: Feminist Cinema and Film Theory*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998.

Sobchack, Vivian. *Carnal Thoughts: Embodiment and Moving Image Culture*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004.

Wegenstein, Bernadette. *The Cosmetic Gaze: Body Modification and the Construction of Beauty*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2012.

Whitford, Margaret. "Irigaray's Body Symbolic." *Hypatia* 6, no. 3 (1991): 97–110. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3809841>.

Woodward, Kathleen. "Performing Age, Performing Gender." *NWSA Journal* 18, no. 1 (2006): 162–89.

Claudia Calabresi is an activist, scholar, and filmmaker. In 2022, they completed their M.A. from the Faculty in Communication and Cultures of Media at the University of Turin, Italy, with a dissertation titled *I'd Rather Be a Cyborg than a Goddess: Cinema, Sociosemiotics, Science Fiction, and Feminisms*. At the present time, they are pursuing a Ph.D. in the Department of Modern Languages and Literatures at Johns Hopkins University. Their research centers on the critique of gender-based discrimination and violence as depicted in contemporary science fiction cinema and on the development of cinematic strategies of feminist resistance. Claudia actively participates in international semiotics conferences and art festivals and serves as the vice-

president of studiomatto, a nonprofit association dedicated to feminist practices of collective care and urban regeneration. Their last short film, *THE SHED*, was selected for screening at the 2026 Maryland Film Festival. Email: ccalabr7(at)jh.edu.