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Aging and the Screen: Toxic Commodification of the Female Body in The Substance (2024)

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Cover Page Footnote

This media review was initiated before Zeynep Ozdamar Ertekin became an editor of MGDR. In the external and editorial reviewing of this, Zeynep Ozdamar Ertekin played no role. Nikhilesh Dholakia solely handled the editorial process.

Markets, Globalization & Development Review



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Introduction

The pursuit of longevity and the desire to reverse or control the visible effects of aging has long shaped both social norms and the marketplace (Aktekin et al. 2024; Brina and Zlata 2024; Levy 2017; Lewis et al. 2011). This obsession with youth and the idealization of unrealistic beauty standards prevalent in contemporary life is brought to the screen in a striking way with the film *The Substance* (2024) by Coralie Fargeat. Being an absurd, postmodern, and formally accomplished body-horror experience, the film gives us a provocative critique of the results of the idealization of youth and *the treatment* of the aging female body. The main character Elisabeth's (Demi Moore) transition to her *younger and better* version Sue (Margaret Qualley), while her body turns into a monstrous one as she grows old, is a deliberately excessive yet striking representation of the embodiment of ageist norms and commodification of the female body.

While the aging female representations have increased in contemporary media, their presence is still shaped by market-driven ideals. These portrayals remain largely governed by idealization of youth and beauty, and standards that ultimately serve commercial interests more than the authentic expression or agency of aging women (Laberge 2018; Petersen 2018; Searing and Zeilig 2017; Thompson and Hirschman 1995). Emergence of framings such as positive aging, aims to manage the narratives that reinforce a fearful anticipation of aging and creates a social preference that devalues alternative experiences as negative, still implicitly rejecting aging as a normal, natural process (Katz 2001). This shift from understanding aging as a biological human process to perceiving it as a disease – a pathology to be feared, managed, and even eliminated – reflects a broad sociohistorical transformation that shows not just how we perceive older individuals but how we conceptualize human development as a whole (Laberge 2018).

One powerful cultural site where these narratives unfold is the cinema screen, which highlights the media's role in legitimizing cultural representations (Humphreys and Latour 2013). Female bodies have long been assigned symbolic meanings, transforming them into ideological commodities within dominant sociocultural and commercial discourses (Bordo 1993; Gill 2007; Fredrickson and Roberts 1997; Wani 2016). In this sense, the portrayal of aging is never neutral; it is deeply embedded in cultural narratives (Hirschman and Thompson 1997). And it is precisely this

set of narratives that *The Substance* critiques. It offers a sharp commentary on the way our culture defines and commodifies aging, especially in relation to women's bodies and identities.

In this regard, we discuss *The Substance* from the lens of Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) and incorporate Julia Kristeva's concept of the abject (*Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* 1982), Laura Mulvey's theory of the male gaze (*Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* 1975), and Barbara Creed's notion of the monstrous-feminine (*The Monstrous-Feminine* 1993) to examine the toxic commodification of the female body. The following sections first discuss feminist and CCT lenses on aging and identity. Next, examining the body as a cultural and ideological site, we discuss representations of female aging bodies in the media. We then examine body horror and self-hate in *The Substance*, along with the visual language and the male gaze. In concluding remarks, we highlight how the marketization and commodification of the female body are presented in a grotesque body horror that offers a sharp feminist critique.

Feminist and Consumer Culture Theory Lens on Aging and Identity

Feminist Consumer Research, grounded in Feminist Theory, reveals how marketing systems often reinforce gendered and ageist inequalities (Bristor and Fischer 1993; Hirschman 1993). The emergence of Feminist Theory stems from the systemic power imbalances and the marginalization of women, highlighting the social and market structures that shape women's roles, bodies, and representations. Feminist Consumer Research looks beyond individual agency and examines broader institutional and cultural factors that regulate how female bodies are targeted, portrayed, and valued in the marketplace.

Building on this, postfeminist approaches offer insight into how feminist ideals have reshaped popular culture and marketing by framing empowerment as being achieved through individual choice, beauty work, and consumption (Gill 2007; Gill 2008). In this sense, postfeminist theory helps us explain why the marketplace encourages women to choose aging well and stay young, while still placing youthfulness as the beauty ideal. However, this creates a double bind where women are encouraged to fight against aging as empowered individuals by continuing to reproduce normative and commercialized ideals of femininity as a result of their actions. This paradox produces pressures on women to perform aging as an act that is culturally determined and market-driven.

CCT research examines aging female bodies from multiple levels. Seeing consumers as not passive recipients of messages but active agents

and makers of identity, CCT provides a lens to explain how these messages are shaped and interpreted (Arnould and Thompson 2007). However, consumers' identity projects are also shaped by market logics and marketplace ideologies, and these are deeply rooted in culturally embedded norms and meanings surrounding aging, beauty, and worth, which often link aging with asexuality, poor health, and diminished social capital (Bytheway 1995; Calasanti 2005; Holstein 2001). Market logics create dominant cultural values that shape aging as a problem to be managed through consumption by rendering consumers responsible of their own youthfulness and self-maintenance. As a result, these marketplace ideologies regulate how consumers think, feel, and act about age/aging through messages in media (Coupland 2007). Accordingly, youth is equated with beauty, worth, and empowerment, which responsabilize women to manage their aging to stay socially visible and valued (e.g., Bardey et al. 2024; Mortaş 2008). These perspectives help us understand how market logics, gender norms, and consumer identity intersect to shape women's experience of aging.

The Body as a Cultural and Ideological Site

Anti-aging has grown to be a powerful yet problematic phenomenon that reflects both consumer-driven fears about aging and problems with regulatory issues. This can be seen in the promotion of market offerings, which exploit the concerns of an aging and youth-oriented society (Holstein 2001; Ring 2002). Through the lens of CCT, age, gender, and class emerge not as fixed categories but as dynamic social performances that are maintained and transformed through consumption. Within this framework, the body is not just a biological or natural entity, but a cultural site that is managed, corrected, and concealed, which is referred to as the socialized body (Thompson and Hirschman 1995). The body thus becomes a problem to be solved through consumption, treated as an object to be disciplined and shaped, in opposition to its nature to resist aging. This situation promotes the idea that our authentic selves are somehow separate from and not constrained by the physical body we inhabit. As a result, individual and cultural level tensions on aging bodies persist. On one hand, there is a desire to express personal agency and resist aging. On the other hand, there is pressure to conform to dominant ideals of youth and beauty, which are deeply rooted in consumer culture.

Consequently, appearance equals social value, and women are often the victims of self-monitoring and regulation of their bodies (Bordo 1993). Ageist and healthist norms construct the aging female body as abnormal and undesirable, which leaves individuals morally obligated to improve their bodies (Bordo 1993; Clarke and Korotchenko 2012). The

postfeminist view, however, has resisted this and expresses that women are not passive and submissive to this system, but empowered and active creators of their own selves (Beausoleil 1994; Negrin 2002). Examples of this empowerment can be seen in individuals who undergo alterations of their bodies (e.g., through plastic surgery), which also changed their sense of self (e.g., Dolbec and Fischer 2015). These adjustments are not just related to appearance; they are tools to manage who they are. There is ongoing negotiation with societal norms; navigating cultural ideals about how bodies should look, how they should age, and how individuals are responsible. Reflecting on Plüg, Collins, and DeJong's (2024) concept of a *good neoliberal citizen*, this is someone who is expected to be self-controlled, authentic, and always improving. In this sense, physical maintenance in the process of aging becomes a moral responsibility, a performance of social and economic ideals.

Representations of Female Aging Body in Media

Aging bodies, particularly female aging bodies, are positioned in the media as sites of sociocultural anxiety and body maintenance (Carter 2016; Calasanti 2005; Thompson and Hirschman 1995; Veresiu and Parmentier 2021). Youth, beauty, and sexuality are often portrayed as forms of capital, and as women age, drifting away from the beauty ideals leads to the loss of their social and cultural value. Lauren Gurrieri (2021) argues that this dynamic is perpetuated by the concept patriarchal marketing, a system that symbolically annihilates aging women by rendering them invisible or irrelevant (Åberg et al. 2020; Sontag 1972). In postfeminist media, female protagonists are often presented as empowered and assertive, yet we still see the same narratives that participate in heteronormative, traditional, and even regressive behaviors. Recently, Whiteman and Kerrigan (2024) provide a review of the film *Good Luck to You, Leo Grande* (2022) that illustrates how the narrative of an older woman exploring her sexuality is an empowerment story that is conditional on acceptance of femininity, elegance, and wit. Also present in the 2023 film *Barbie*, which La Porte and Cavusoglu (2023) describe as being an example of faux feminism for its progressive narratives on the surface, but ultimately reinforcing existing beauty norms and gender expectations. Films and TV shows from early 2000s such as *Sex and the City* (1998-2004), *The Princess Diaries* (Garry Marshall 2001), *The Devil Wears Prada* (David Frankel 2006), and *Bridget Jones's Diary* (Sharon Maguire 2001) are other examples that feature female characters portrayed as empowered and self-driven, but at the same time, whose actions and worth are ultimately framed through their relationship with a male partner. These postfeminist examples of media

show us that a woman can reinvent herself if she wants to; however, being better often equals to becoming the *better* version of oneself through losing weight, getting a beauty makeover, having a better career, being sexually active, and having the man of your dreams. Hence, neoliberal feminism is critiqued to be a form of feminism that embraces capitalism and self-management. There has been reflections of these tensions in recent romcoms (e.g. *Good Luck to You*, Leo Grande 2022; *Babygirl* 2022; *Lonely Planet* 2024; *A Family Affair* 2024; *The Idea of You* 2024), where older female protagonists are granted visibility and agency, but often within narratives that still privilege youthfulness, aesthetic conformity which ultimately reinscribe the very norms they seem to challenge.

Similarly, in the horror genre, aging women are often cast as figures of threat, decay, or monstrosity, whether through uncanny behavior, the grotesque image of witches, or associations of old age with fear. While such works grant visibility to older female bodies, they do so by aligning them with otherness, dread, and corporeal breakdown. In contrast, *The Substance* (Coralie Fargeat 2024) offers a distinctive commentary on how aging and femininity are commodified in contemporary culture, shifting the focus from the externalization of old age as menace to the systemic forces that discipline and marketize women's bodies. In this review, we examine this distinct representation of aging women and idealization of youth through Mulvey's (1975) concept of male gaze, by formal analysis of visual pleasure and spectatorship. At the same time, we briefly draw on Creed's (1993) concept of the monstrous-feminine and Kristeva's (1982) notion of the abject to illuminate the film's body-horror reflections, while Butler's (1990) reflections on exclusion and parody further expand the discussion of how the gaze is reframed.

Body Horror, Self-Hate and Monstrosity in *The Substance*

Fargeat's *The Substance* (2024) offers one of the most radical and transgressive representations of the aging female body in contemporary cinema. Although a growing wave of films claim to restore older women's existence on the screen, their visibility is typically secured by reinscribing female sexual agency within youth-centered, commercially palatable aesthetic codes. The aging women may be visible, yet only insofar as they conform to contemporary ideals of bodily discipline, elegance, and aspirational femininity (De Sutter and Van Bauwel 2023; Geena Davis Institute 2024). In stark contrast, Fargeat's film resists such cosmetic reconciliation, confronting audiences with a grotesque, satirical, and viscerally violent meditation on beauty, aging, and identity. This thematic concern resonates with Fargeat's earlier short *Reality+* (2014), which

similarly critiques how insatiability and artificiality are normalized through prevailing ideals of beauty. Krupa (2025) further argues in a recent study on *Return of the Monstrous-Feminine: Feminist New Wave Cinema* (Creed 2022), that feminist filmmakers have increasingly repurposed horror tropes to critique patriarchal visual culture, transforming the *abject* into a site of resistance and exposing the unrealistic standards imposed on women's bodies. *The Substance* follows this tradition by using grotesque transformation to challenge these ideals from within and destabilize the phallogocentric order¹.

At the center of the narrative stands Elisabeth Sparkle, a once-famous TV personality whose bodily deterioration and increasing social invisibility render her obsolete within Hollywood's youth economy. To regain public interest and attention, while also battling her own sense of obsolescence in an industry that excludes aging women, she submits to a biomedical treatment — the substance — that creates her younger double, Sue. What follows is no rebirth but annihilation, a rivalry and existential horror. Through this metamorphosis, Fargeat frames aging not as biological inevitability but as social indictment; a manufactured disappearance, shame, and self-loathing imposed on women. Drawing on and extending Kristeva's (1982) notion of abjection, the aging female body becomes abject, something to be expelled, concealed, or reshaped because it disturbs the ideal of femininity anchored in youth, beauty, and reproductive value. Elisabeth's abjection is both corporeal and symbolic; her very presence disrupts the visual and cultural economy of desirability, making her intolerable to the patriarchal order. Importantly, abjection here is not triggered by her later bodily distortions but is already inscribed in her aging body. Elisabeth does not become abject through transformation; she begins as abject precisely because she has aged.

The film draws on the aesthetics of body horror, not merely to shock, but to make visible the violence of beauty culture. Elisabeth's monstrous transformation is viscerally physical (she vomits, sheds skin, bleeds, and finally splits), casting her aging body, long coded as a site of failure, as incompatible with continued social existence. This disintegration literalizes what Searing and Zeilig (2017) describe in cosmetic advertising as the narrative of *correction* and *repair* demanded of older women, while also enacting what Barbara Creed (1993) calls the monstrous-feminine: a leaking, devouring female body that horrifies precisely because it collapses

¹ Derrida (1981) uses the term *phallogocentrism* to describe the intertwining of logocentrism and phallogocentrism, a structure that privileges masculine subjectivity and binary hierarchies in the production of meaning; see also Irigaray (1985) for a feminist critique of how this order marginalises female subjectivity.

the boundary between inside and outside, self and other. By reframing Creed's paradigm from reproductive anxiety to cosmetic panic, the film shows how contemporary culture pathologizes any female body that exceeds youthful containment. In one of the film's most emblematic scenes, Elisabeth sabotages Sue by force-feeding herself excessive amounts of junk food in a late-night kitchen binge, knowing their metabolic link will distort her double's perfection (see Figure 1). At once both absurd and tragic (as is the case in many parts of the film), the scene dramatizes female rivalry internalized as self-harm and offers a dark satire of consumer capitalism that turns women first against their own bodies and ultimately against each other.

Figure 1: The Kitchen Binge Scene



Source: *The Substance* (Coralie Fargeat 2024)

Ultimately, Elisabeth's physical fragmentation is not simply a horror spectacle but also a metaphor for the psychological and social breakdown caused by a culture built on self-surveillance, competition, and shame. By turning aging into a monstrous spectacle, Fargeat reveals how femininity is sustained through bodily control and aesthetic conformity. Rather than offering recovery or transformation, the film shows the cost of these ideals on the body, identity, and subjectivity of women. By doing so, it presents monstrosity not as something from outside or separate, but inherent in the very systems that claim to uphold beauty and value.

Visual Language, the Male Gaze, and Postmodern Aesthetics

The film's visual language directly engages with Mulvey's theory of male gaze, but only to distort it. In Mulvey's theorization (1975), the male gaze designates the way mainstream cinema structures women as objects of visual pleasure for a presumed heterosexual male spectator. As Butler (1990) suggests, representational frameworks derive their meaning from what they exclude. *The Substance* inverts this logic by placing the aging female body, typically marginalized by the male gaze, at the center of its imagery. Rather than reproducing the gaze, the film reframes it through deliberate parody, using its own visual codes as tools of critique. As Vitriuel (2025) notes, the film initially appears to replicate the male gaze but quickly subverts it through horror and absurdity. Even though *The Substance* seems, at first glance, to cater to the male gaze, its postmodern body horror elements offer a formally radical and ideologically provocative intervention into dominant screen representations of older women, precisely through its own context and reception. The film further exemplifies what Whiteman and Kerrigan (2024) describe as the ongoing postfeminist commodification of female sexuality, in which visibility is permitted only if it conforms to specific consumerist ideals.

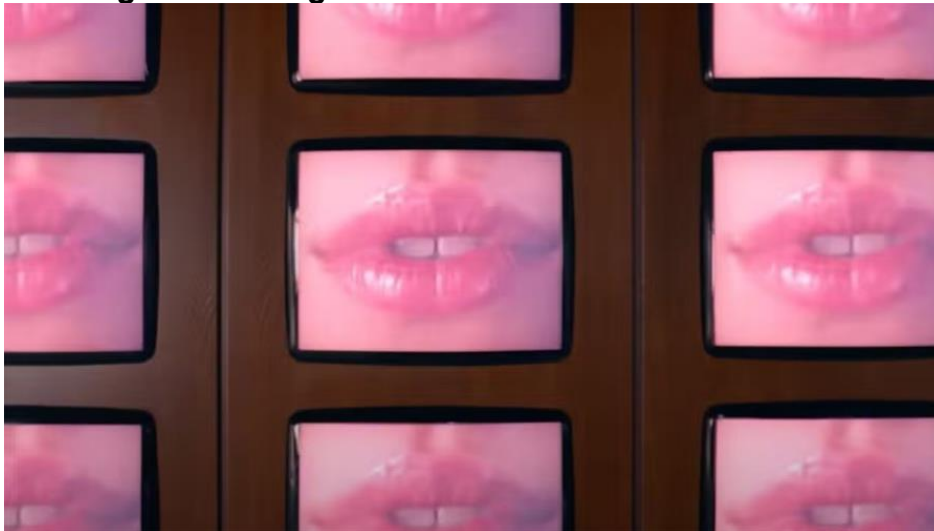
Figure 2: A present-day fitness program styled as 1980s TV culture "Sparkle Your Life with Elisabeth"



Source: *The Substance* (Coralie Fargeat 2024)

Additionally, the film is highly stylized with fragmented visuals — featuring saturated color palettes, abrupt tonal shifts, and hyperreal set designs — which reinforce a postmodern aesthetic (Firat, Dholakia and Venkatesh 1995). These elements not only break with cinematic realism but also serve to distance the viewer, encouraging critical reflection rather than passive consumption, aligning the film with a meta-cinematic aesthetic. By juxtaposing grotesque imagery with glossy commercial visuals, the director intentionally blurs boundaries between parody and horror, spectacle and critique: a hallmark of postmodern screen design. The use of pastiche (particularly in its references to 1980s fitness culture, classic Hollywood films, and exploitation cinema) further amplifies the film's critical stance, recycling and recontextualizing familiar visual tropes to expose their underlying absurdity and violence (see Figure 2). Such excessive stylization first produces a sense of seamless visual pleasure, but then deliberately interrupts it, making the mechanisms of looking that Mulvey (1975) described as more visible to the spectator.

Figure 3: Sue's lips on multiple analogue television screens, recalling Cronenberg's *Videodrome*



Source: *The Substance* (Coralie Fargeat 2024)

The film explicitly pays homage to a wide array of films, some references more subtle than others. The recurring themes of doppelgangers, physical transformation, and desire leading to self-destruction, while numerous scenes mirror classic films shot-for-shot, such as *Psycho* (Alfred Hitchcock 1960), *Videodrome* (David Cronenberg 1983), *The Shining* (Stanley Kubrick 1980), *Blade Runner* (Ridley Scott 1982), *Re-*

Animator (Stuart Gordon 1985), and *The Elephant Man* (David Lynch 1980). For instance, Sue's introduction scene, where she says "I'm Sue" in a close-up of her lips, repeated across analogue television screens, is a clear visual reference to Cronenberg's *Videodrome* (1983), emphasizing the entanglement of identity, media, and bodily transformation (see Figure 3). Similarly, the film features an important visual nod to *The Shining* (1980), not only through the replication of the iconic Overlook Hotel patterns but also by echoing its use of unsettling angles and architectural spaces, aligning itself with the legacy of psychological horror rooted in space and design (see Figure 4).

Figure 4: Intertextual visual reference: parallels between *The Shining* and *The Substance*



Source: *The Shining* (Stanley Kubrick 1980) and *The Substance* (Coralie Fargeat 2024)

Elisabeth's grotesque transformation into the *Monstroelisasue*² at the film's climax also evokes classic body horror iconography, particularly the deformity of John Merrick in *The Elephant Man* (1980) (see Figure 5), while the injection scene recalls *Re-Animator* (1985) (see Figure 6) and her fall in the bathroom mirrors *Psycho* (1960) (see Figure 7). This hybrid form not only extends the film's critique of beauty and visibility but also stages a horror-laden version of feminine transcendence. These intertextual references and meta-cinematic approach are fitting for a film centered on

² The term is used here to describe a hybrid form, combining Elisabeth, Sue, and the monstrous body into a single figure.

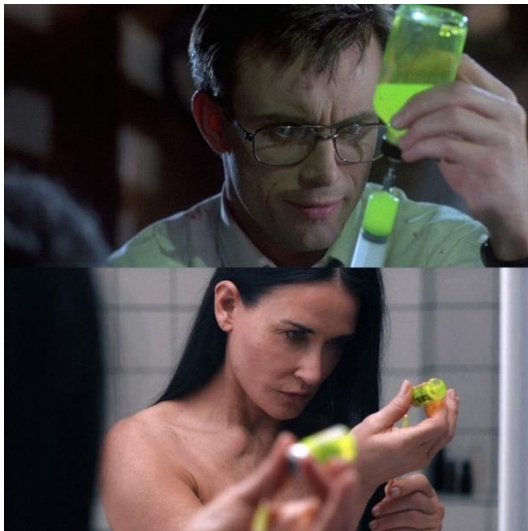
Hollywood itself, positioning *The Substance* within a broader cinematic tradition and highlighting the complex intertextuality of the industry's obsession with image, transformation, and female perfection.

Figure 5: Intertextual visual reference: parallels between *The Elephant Man* and *The Substance*



Source: *The Elephant Man* (David Lynch 1980) and *The Substance* (Coralie Fargeat 2024)

Figure 6: Intertextual visual reference: parallels between *Re-Animator* and *The Substance*



Source: *Re-Animator* (Stuart Gordon 1985) and *The Substance* (Coralie Fargeat 2024)

The film also reflects broader anxieties around bodily autonomy in neoliberal culture. Elisabeth's attempt to reclaim her agency through the substance is portrayed not as liberation, but as assimilation into a worrisome regime of self-regulation. That is why beauty is a perishable market commodity and quickly exhausted, while the entertainment industry simply finds and replaces the old product with something newer. This parallels with what Petersen (2018) describes as the promissory discourse of anti-aging treatments, which are marketing communications that involve assurances of treatments' influence on *stopping, defying, eliminating* aging, forming the illusion of empowerment that in fact deepens dependence on biomedical and commercial systems. Similarly, Elisabeth becomes both the consumer and the consumed. Her struggle with Sue is not merely psychological, but symbolic of an older generation of women being replaced, even cannibalized, by a younger, more marketable version of themselves.

Figure 7: Intertextual visual reference: parallels between *Psycho* (1960) and *The Substance* (2024)



Source: *Psycho* (Alfred Hitchcock 1960) and *The Substance* (Coralie Fargeat 2024)

Importantly, *The Substance* marks a shift from the symbolic annihilation of older women in media — as outlined by Thompson and Hirschman (1995) — towards a perverse form of hypervisibility. Elisabeth does not disappear quietly; she explodes, screams, bleeds, and reappears enlarged in the film's surreal final sequence. While she expects the substance to restore her youth and rescue her from abjection, it is in fact the substance (like a beauty product) that makes her abject. In this way,

Fargeat not only critiques the aesthetic norms that govern aging and femininity but does so by amplifying them to the point of absurd collapse.

Concluding Comments

To conclude, *The Substance* does not offer a positive representation of aging through the common media and advertising images of older women who remain young and beautiful owing to beauty industries. Instead, it presents a rebellion against forgottenness. Elisabeth's transformation offers a compelling case for exploring the pervasive commodification of the aging female body in contemporary media, driven by the pursuit of idealized, youth-oriented beauty standards. Her narrative illustrates the illusion of empowerment for aging women and highlights how deeply societal pressures remain internalized. It reveals that empowerment alone is insufficient to free women from the persistent policing of their aging bodies. By embracing horror, satire, and visual extremity, Fargeat exposes these gendered and forceful mechanisms that shape cultural ideals of youth and beauty. The aging female body, once discarded by the screen, returns not as a dignified elder or glamorous survivor, but as a disruptive presence that unsettles dominant fantasies of femininity and resists absorption into normative narratives. In this way, the film also invites a critical reflection on marketplace implications. The change in the visibility of aging women as disruptive figures signals a shift in cultural expectations, suggesting how media representations can influence consumer attitudes and reshape ideas of aging in the marketplace. Within this framework, *The Substance* serves as a critical lens that foregrounds the cultural ambivalence surrounding the aging female body and reveals how the media both reflects and reproduces broader market logics, wherein aging becomes a terrain for consumption, control, and identity negotiation.

In the disciplines that deal with the cultures of markets, media, and consumption, not just filmic ventures such as *The Substance* but deeper textual theorizing about geriatric challenges, feminism and gender issues, and the fast-happening AI-automaton futures are called for. We hope MGDR readers and authors are ready to reflect and contribute.

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