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Ljubica MATEK
Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences
Josip Juraj Strossmayer University of Osijek
Lorenza Jägera 9
HR – 31 000 Osijek
lmatek@ffos.hr

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ALTERATION UNTIL ANNIHILATION: BIOPOLITICAL ASPECTS OF BEAUTIFICATION IN *THE SUBSTANCE*

Abstract

The film *The Substance* (2024), directed by Coralie Fargeat adapts R. L. Stevenson's novella *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886) by making it a woman's story. Fargeat's film is both a body horror and feminist satire, and shows how the male gaze, mediated via screens, determines contemporary society's oppressive focus on women's bodies and aging prompted by a distinct biopolitical agenda. In particular, showbusiness and media encourage women to base their self-esteem and sense of purpose on their youthful looks rather than moral development, close relationships, and education. By combining Foucault's notion of the docile body with the theory of affect and relying on the notion of biopower segregating bodies according to their economic value, the article provides a close reading of the film to show that permanent youth and attractiveness are represented as imperative for women, even at the cost of resorting to extreme self-violence for the purpose of beautification and youthification. This creates a controlling culture which normalizes and promotes all forms of self-inflicted violence, and even death, if they are in the service of beauty. The woman observes her body as a mass, a shell to be modified by unsafe chemicals and unnecessary surgical procedures, which ends up in the moral obliteration of personhood and extreme physical damage.

Keywords: beauty, biopolitics, body horror, docile body, self-harm, *The Substance*

> [W]hatsoever it is that naturally doth happen to things natural, hath somewhat in itself that is pleasing and delightful: as a great loaf when it is baked, some parts of it cleave as it were, and part asunder, and make the crust of it rugged and unequal, and yet those parts of it, though in some sort it be against the art and intention of baking itself, that they are thus cleft and parted, which should have been and were first made all even and uniform, they become it well nevertheless, and have a certain peculiar property, to stir the appetite. . . . many other like things, though by themselves considered, they are far from any beauty, yet because they happen naturally, they both are comely, and delightful—Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations* (3.2.)

The audience's perception and reception of any work of art is, as Hans Robert Jauss has established, both highly individual and enjoyable because it represents life through distance, so "a person will aesthetically enjoy and understand with enjoyment the real-life situations that he recognizes or that concern him" (5). Aesthetic interest is for Jauss a "new kind of seeing which functions as discovery" (4) and which can both be used to expose or hide, that is, "transfigure social conditions" (4). Various aesthetic techniques have been developed to achieve, by means of artistic manipulation, an even more conscious engagement that surpasses automatic and superficial sensory observation. Perhaps the most notable of such devices is defamiliarization (estrangement), which disrupts automatic perception through unexpected or exaggerated representations (Shklovsky [1925] 2009); Brecht [1963] 1977). Coralie Fargeat's award-winning body horror film *The Substance* (2024)[1] relies almost exclusively on such tactics in

[1] Nominated in numerous categories at various festivals, the film won the Cannes Film Festival Award for Best Screenplay (C. Fargeat, 2024), the Oscar for Best Makeup and Hairstyling (Pierre Olivier Persin, Stéphanie Guillon, and Marilyne Scarselli, 2025), the Golden Globes Award for Best Leading Actress—Comedy or Musical (Demi Moore, 2025), the BAFTA Award for Best Make Up and Hair (Pierre Olivier Persin, Stéphanie Guillon, Frédérique Arguello, Marilyne Scarselli, 2025), the Best Cinematography (Benjamin Kracun) and Best Visual Effects (Bryan Jones, Pierre Procoudine-Gorsky, Chervin Shafaghi, Guillaume Le Gouez) at the 2024 European Film Awards, the People's Choice Award (Midnight Madness) at the Toronto International Film Festival (TIFF 2024), Best Performance by a Female Actor in a Leading Role (Demi Moore) at the 31st Screen Actors Guild Awards 2025, the Best Actress (Demi Moore), Best Original Screenplay (Coralie Fargeat) and Best Make-up & Hair (Hair and Makeup Team) at the 30th Critics Choice Awards 2025, Best Use of Visual Effects at the Chicago Film Critics' Awards 2024, Best Actress (Demi Moore) and Best Make-Up (Pierre-Olivier Persin) at the 52nd Saturn Awards, Actress in a Motion Picture, Comedy or Musical (Demi Moore) at the 29th Satellite Awards (International Press Academy), and Best International Actress (Demi Moore) at the 69th Sant Jordi Awards.

her representation of Hollywood's treatment of an aging female star as a symbol of the contemporary attitude to female beauty. R. L. Stevenson's Gothic story scrutinizing Victorian masculine ethics, repression of instincts, and the duality of human nature, which serves as a source for the adaptation, has become under Fargeat's direction a hybrid, much like its protagonist, Elisabeth Sparkle (also Sue and Monstro Elisasue). In this body horror and feminist satire, women are expected to mould their physique according to male phantasies even if this is harmful, painful and unnecessary for women. The film's graphic representations of self-harm through substance abuse, physical violence, and overeating, interlaced with scenes of TV-aerobics, point at society's schizophrenic conceptualizations of female health and beauty, which women seem to internalize.

Despite its critical success, importance and timeliness, the film has, so far, evaded academic attention (its echoes are as yet visible only in film reviews), so the article tries to address and amend this gap. The film's rich and layered narrative presented in the body horror aesthetic is rooted in the notion of controlling and disciplining the (ageing, female) body, which invites and directs this article's biopolitical reading of *The Substance*.[2] Combining Foucault's idea of the docile body and his conceptualization of biopower with the postulates of theory of affect, the article aims to show that the docile body becomes complicit in its exploitation as it desires to be useful. Additionally, the argument will rely on the notion of thanatopolitics to point to biopolitics' expansion toward regulating not only life but also death. Fargeat's film reveals that painful and violent methods of forced beautification are used as mechanisms of biopolitical control in neoliberal economies of the globalized world, rendering individuals less concerned with their bodily and personal integrity than with complying to ideological, that is, aesthetic, demands. Such methods annihilate personhood, turn the body into commodity and lead to physical, psychological, and moral damage, since constant beautification is mediated to people as a matter of personal hygiene, and a means to social success, when it actually promotes uniformity and blind conformism. The film's radical ending signifies the extreme consequences of a regime that demands alteration until a person's annihilation. Beautification thus emerges as a perfidious type of violence that women have been inculcated with in order to keep them disempowered, docile, and willing to please. Rooted in misogyny and marketed to women as healthy and empowering, these aggres-

[2] Indeed, Xavier Aldana Reyes's 2024 study *Contemporary Body Horror* relies on the premise that body horror is a repository of biopolitical discourse.

sive, body-altering treatments that ostensibly preserve or return youth to ageing women or give beauty to women who, by certain problematic standards, are not beautiful enough, teach women that their worth is only in their appearance as judged through the filter of male gaze. The film graphically illustrates the social power given to the obsession with youthful and sexy bodies and its detrimental effects on both women and society in general. *The Substance* is inarguably a film about the female experience and the gendered character of the politics of beautification because it is women who bear the brunt of such an abusive ideology, but its biopolitical reading points to its broader significance, suggesting that the cult(ure) of beauty affects all bodies as they willingly participate in it, co-creating it. The article first addresses the gory aesthetics of the film to establish how the visual represents the ideological. It then turns to the notions of bio- and thanatopolitics to elaborate on the mechanics of the ideology of beautification, finally turning to the specifics of the main protagonist's case.

In-Your-Face[3] Aesthetic and Gendered Science

The film depicts the tragic destiny of an ageing Hollywood star named Elisabeth Sparkle, and adopts a visually aggressive and provocative aesthetic to tell her story. This tactic is both suitable and typical for the body horror genre, which aims to challenge its viewers by pushing boundaries and provoking intense reactions from the audience, illustrating the idea of "how far a filmmaker is willing to take it" (Englander). In his review, Cody Englander suggests that the film is "absurdly well directed. The camera only moves to sicken you. Every single sound is used to make the audience queasy. Every cut is meant to be as jarring as possible. If the movie has gotten a visceral reaction, it has achieved its goal." The goal, of course, is not merely to sicken the audience, but to highlight the dark truths about how the global population is administered and regulated thanks to the ideology of beautification, that is, the biopolitics of beauty, according to which an essential part of a person's identity becomes a commodity determined and delimited by the same forces that regulate the market.

The diegesis of *The Substance* merges the mimetic with the fantastic to reveal the paradoxes of la-la land where reality is fictionalized and the fictional is con-

[3] The source phrase is the British expression "in-yer face," which means purposefully brash and provocative, and which is used to refer specifically to the aggressively provocative style of theatre as theorized by Aleks Sierz (2001).

sistently structured and represented to seem real. The male characters are made into caricatures through specific camera angles that highlight the grotesqueness of their desires, and all characters are highly styled and represented as either very attractive or very unattractive. For instance, Elisabeth and Sue wear leotards or other revealing outfits designed specifically to highlight the sexual quality of their physique. Later, Elisabeth's physical deterioration is dramatic and overemphasized, culminating in her transformation into a literal monster. Lecherous male characters are filmed in unflattering close-ups, or wide angles, often with a fisheye lens that visually represents moral deformation. The spaces they inhabit are impersonal and sterile because they are trapped in a world of images and superficiality; the TV studio, public bathroom, hallway of the secret lab, and Elizabeth's apartment are marked by mirrors, cameras, windows and images of her and Sue's face, exuding a sense of panopticism and business-like detachment. The film's strong colours and striking, carefully styled compositions highlight the artificial nature of its Hollywood setting, which functions as the epitome of not only the film but also the beauty industry. The two have developed an intense symbiotic relationship since the film industry's beginnings, as evidenced by the key role of make-up artists in film in general, and body horror in particular (Reyes 4), and by the creation of the ever-changing beauty ideals which blur the line between real and false. In fact, Max Factor, "whose makeup was most closely associated with Hollywood glamour," described make-up as "illusionism" that made it impossible to distinguish between the person and their painted face (Peiss 154).

With time, the idea of cosmetics evolved from powder and rouge to include more permanent interventions in the form of transformation through surgery. For Naomi Wolf, the myth of beauty is unequivocally "a political weapon against women's advancement" (10); yet, Peiss acknowledges that the public debate on cosmetics is polarized and that, however problematic it may be in economic and social terms, "the play of makeup" may serve as a means of empowering "self-invention" (268–69). Surgical alteration, however, seems to occupy the opposite pole: one where beauty is a "prison" and the person its victim (Peiss 268). In both cases, the woman, the beauty industry's primary target, is manipulated into an affective response that implies and provokes her willing participation in makeup or surgery practices that oppress her because they demand her conformation to male gaze, that is, to the standards of beauty that arise from male desire. *The Substance* succinctly acknowledges its patriarchal context, both in

the extradiegetic sense as being an artwork created in a patriarchal society and diegetically as representing a patriarchal world, in a scene where shareholders are represented as a group of old, white men led by the grotesque TV network director Harvey. They all glare at the teary-eyed Sue and, ignoring the obvious signs of her emotional distress, demand a smile: "Pretty girls should always smile" (01:54:30–01:55:06).

The striking physicality of the film, not only in the representation of blood spatter and deformity but also in the overt sexualization of Sue, whose lips or crotch are frequently the focus of a shot, is reminiscent of David Cronenberg's cinematography, which, as Englander suggests, Fargeat fuses "with modern horror filmmaking," to produce strong "social metaphors." Just as the introductory scene progresses from representing a shiny, new star on the pavement to a dirty, ruined one, so does the film progress, or rather deteriorate, in its representations of bodily beauty to illustrate the transition from objectifying to abjectifying women, which, as Creed suggests, is "crucial to the functioning of the patriarchal order" (173). In the film, a woman is never fully a person; she is either an object of desire or an abject being, a form of an ontological conundrum, or, as Kristeva formulates it, a dark revolt of being, looming as "a vortex of summons and repulsion" (1) and a "jettisoned object" (2). Starting with Elizabeth's impressive and elegant mature beauty, and Sue's startlingly sexual, young beauty, the film advances toward graphic representations of Elizabeth's abject and extreme ageing accompanied by Sue's moral downfall, and their transformation into a monstrous being, a hybrid of Elisabeth and Sue, patently named Monstro Elisasue. Elizabeth's drastically altered appearance exists as a separate identity: Sue is an uncanny double, reminiscent of its source ("the matrix" in the film's jargon) but not quite it, just like the film is suggestive of Stevenson's novella but has a life of its own.

The duality created by means of the mysterious substance represents the film's strongest link with its own source, R. L. Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886). In both cases, the experimentation on humans is secretive; it relies on private initiative, and is frowned upon by the public. In fact, in Stevenson's novella the outrage against the nature of the experiment is so strong that it quite literally kills the good Dr Lanyon, who cannot come to terms with the "moral turpitude" he has witnessed and feels that he "must die" (68). However, the motivation for transformation as represented in the hypotext radically differs from the one expressed in the hypertext. In Stevenson's novella,

a scientist produces and tests on himself a potion that divides a person's good side from their evil one, working on the premise that "man is not truly one, but truly two" (Stevenson 70), and that "all human beings, as we meet them are commingled out of good and evil" (73). The subsequent metamorphosis from a tall and handsome Victorian gentleman to a short and hideous man, whose "troglodytic" (23) appearance provokes a feeling of "disgustful curiosity" (65), serves to illustrate the man's moral duality. Contrary to this, *The Substance* is concerned with female characters and the duality at hand is primarily of an aesthetic nature. Elisabeth is motivated by the desire for a beautiful, that is, youthful, appearance, rather than desire for "pleasures" (Stevenson 75) and freedom from social constraints, which Jekyll relishes in as his alter ego provides him with a "sea of liberty" (75). While Jekyll is represented as having agency and desiring more of it, Elisabeth is shown as powerless. Her decisions and actions are in the service of complying with the rules of the Lacanian Symbolic Order she inhabits. In other words, Elisabeth succumbs to social demands for female youth and beauty because, as Rhode argues, for women aesthetic demands are directly related to economic ones, and not only in showbusiness but everywhere (xiv–xv). To keep her job and livelihood, she must be attractive.

Thus, Fargeat's film alludes to the notion of gendered science: scientific experiments on and for men are guided by the desire to improve their general quality of life, whereas experiments on women are directed at the improvement of their appearance in such a way as to match the aesthetic mould dictated by the male gaze. Indeed, as Daniel Varndell suggests, the female stars' "shelf life in Hollywood is decidedly shorter than that of their male counterparts" (55), regardless of their acting skills. So, "[a]s part of the prevailing social norms, women are encouraged to rigorously discipline their bodies through means such as make-up, restricted postures, diet, skincare, Botox injections, and plastic surgery" (Aharoni Lir and Ayalon 257).[4] To transform the ageing female body into a young, fertile, and sexy body becomes imperative not because the woman wants it (Jekyll's experiments are his own brainchild), but because a man demands it. The man in question is Harvey, the network director, and he is

[4] This requires more research, but it seems to be so radical that, thanks to private facilities and lack of insurance coverage, for many women cosmetic surgery seems to be more readily available, financially and in terms of waiting lists, than actual healthcare. See also: Lemperle et al. (2001), Wolf (2002), Bordo (2004), and Hurd Clarke (2010). In terms of gaze and looking, old(er) women become practically invisible, and therefore marginalized, both professionally and privately. See for example: Granleese and Sayer (2006), and Gendron (2022).

concerned with the marketability and profitability of the woman's body, which, to be profitable, needs to be young and sexy: "We need her young. We need her hot," says Harvey (00:06:33–00:06:37). It is with these directions that he demands of his subordinate to organize a casting for a new star of the program. His gaze and discourse effectively dismiss Elizabeth's fifty-year-old body as abject because he understands her age as a sign of "death infecting life" (Kristeva 4), despite Elizabeth's objective mature beauty and immaculate shape.

Furthermore, Alvaro E. Jarrín highlights the fact that cultural narratives such as those promoted in soap operas and reality-show beauty contests promote the idea that beauty can provide upward mobility, and these narratives are highly gendered as it is typically women who are (or are not) considered upwardly mobile because of their beauty (3). The ideas of contest, winning, and success contained in the notion of casting are particularly important here as they imply the need for a woman to display her physical attributes to a jury of men who then evaluate her based on what they see. The positive result of the evaluation is interpreted as success and is a proof of womanhood. Additionally, the narratives of beauty and success relate to morality in a different way: the beautiful body is represented as selfish and murderous, lacking any and all moral scruples, and, tragically, also lacking love for the self. Whereas the handsome Jekyll is an upstanding citizen, the ugly Mr Hyde is evil and directs his rage at others, hurting a child, and killing Mr Carew. However, Elisabeth and Sue's rage is directed at the self, her/their self-loathing nothing short of extreme. In Stevenson's novella, all the male characters are shocked by what Jekyll has *done* (both as Hyde and as himself), whereas in *The Substance*, the abjection arises from what Elisabeth *is*. Male ontology and agency seem to be treated as separate phenomena with Jekyll shown as being capable of making moral decisions, even if they are wrong. Elisabeth is represented as an entity with problematic ontology and no agency at all since decisions about her livelihood have already been made by Harvey. Disturbingly and irrationally, her age is equated with ugliness, which disqualifies her not only from showbusiness but also from life. The film thus depicts female ontology as subject to modification by means of science (medicine), and society in which "[u]gliness is not a biological destiny but a state of being that is subject to correction and improvement" (Jarrín 2).

Indeed, the film shows that Elisabeth is pressured into accepting that a man is authorized to judge and dismiss her based on her age and appearance, which in turn reveals the film's biopolitical subtext: a representation of reality in which

a woman acknowledges that she has no control over her own body. To continue working, she is given the Hobson's choice of "beautify or perish," so when she opts for untested, invasive treatment this is much less her own decision than her giving in to social and economic pressure. Jarrín's study seems to corroborate this article's claim that the situation in *The Substance* is much more realistic than fantastic as it depicts the causes and effects of gendered science. Namely, part of his research on biopolitical and affective aspects of beauty was conducted at teaching hospitals, where Jarrín has found that, although plastic surgery mostly targets women, "all the plastic surgeons were male, and very few of the medical residents were female," and that in this "male-dominated field" there exists "a certain male camaraderie" (22), the effects of which reflect on the doctors' treatment of patients. While women were expected to disrobe regardless of who was in the examination room, whereby they would be objectified, that is, reduced from person to body, doctors would be much more sensitive toward the privacy of male patients, whose personhood and feelings were taken into consideration. Even more significantly, the patients seemed to accept the problematic gendered treatment. Jarrín observes that women expected "the male clinical gaze" because that is what they were used to, and they revealed themselves and their stories freely to him, whereas "male patients were in general much more reserved and unwilling to share with me their reasons for having surgery" (22). Both Jarrín's research and Fargeat's protagonist, with her decision to undergo a radical body-altering procedure, show that women seem to internalize the belief that beauty is a social category that "produces value" (Jarrín 17) because they perceive it as the key factor that enables social success. Since beauty standards change, beautifying is both constituted and *accepted* as a continuous process that must be endured if women wish to be a visible part of society, and so it constitutes itself as a chief mechanism by which women's bodies are made docile.

Foucault, Affect and Complicity

In the last chapter of the first volume of *The History of Sexuality*, Michel Foucault outlines the concepts of biopolitics by defining bio-power as "power that exerts a positive influence on life, that endeavours to administer, optimize, and multiply it, subjecting it to precise controls and comprehensive regulations" (137). The power over life evolved into two connected extremes that centre on the body: one that perceives "the body as a machine" to be exploited by "disciplining, the optimization of its capabilities, the extortion of its forces, the par-

allel increase of its usefulness and its docility, its integration into systems of efficient and economic controls," and the other that is "focused on the species body, the body imbued with the mechanics of life and serving as the basis of the biological processes: propagation, births and mortality, the level of health, life expectancy and longevity" (*The History* 139). Biopolitics is thus a form of political rationality dedicated to optimizing and controlling life in such a way as to sustain power. Whereas in feudal society "power spoke *through* blood" (Foucault, *The History* 147), in contemporary society sex is the tool through which power speaks. For Foucault, our society is:

> a society of "sex," or rather a society "with a sexuality": the mechanisms of power are addressed to the body, to life, to what causes it to proliferate, to what reinforces the species, its stamina, its ability to dominate, or its capacity for being used. Through the themes of health, progeny, race, the future of the species, the vitality of the social body, power spoke of sexuality and to sexuality; the latter was not a mark or a symbol, it was an object and a target. (*The History* 147)

The biopolitics of sex relies on and engages the subject's desire for sex, which is its tool, rather than a liberating function: "We must not think that by saying yes to sex, one says no to power; on the contrary, one tracks along the course laid out by the general deployment of sexuality" (Foucault, *The History* 157). The ideology quite literally moulds the formless physical material (Foucault, *Discipline* 135) into a sexually desirable body by insisting on methods that increase its beauty and fitness; the body "is manipulated, shaped, trained, [it] obeys, responds, becomes skilful and increases its forces" (*Discipline* 136). For Foucault, "[a] body is docile that may be subjected, used, transformed and improved" (136). The disciplining of the body, he argues, is made possible due to "a policy of coercions that act upon the body, a calculated manipulation of its elements, its gestures, its behaviour. The human body . . . [is subjected to] a machinery of power that explores it, breaks it down and rearranges it" (138). The disciplined, docile body is rendered as both passive and helpless.

Yet, in *Volatile Bodies* (1994), Elisabeth Grosz rejects Foucauldian portrayal of the body merely as an inscriptive surface on which disciplinary regimes are imposed and through which discursive power is mobilized, which presents the body as problematically passive. Instead, she opts for a Nietzschean conceptualization of the body as active and emanating the will to power (146). The ideas

that people can either fully submit to bio-power, as per Foucault, or actively resist it, as per Nietzsche and Grosz, reflect a power dynamic frequently represented in dystopian texts. *The Substance*, however, is not a dystopia, but an aesthetically extreme reflection of the present, in which the subject is seen as *complicit* with the biopolitical regime in which it exists, that is, capitalism. Brian Massumi understands capitalism as "*the global usurpation of belonging*" (88), suggesting that all bodies are implicated in the capitalist market system that they perpetuate because they, in varying degrees, accept their own commodification as necessary. To be valuable, to exist as a valuable being in the capitalist system, the body must be understood as a form of capital that a person utilizes for their advantage because capital equals power.

For Jarrín, the bodily capital implies a collection of physical traits meticulously developed to validate one's status in a social order (16), in which people looking for upward mobility are "expected to transform their bodies to conform to upper-class standards" (14). He derives it from the notion of Bourdieu's cultural capital, which is partially inherited and partially acquired, and which can be converted into economic capital (Bourdieu 243–45). These relations confirm Patricia T. Clough's claim that the Foucauldian notion of biopolitics has undergone a change under the pressures of capitalism: it became enmeshed with an economy of affect due to the "body's capacity to act" ("The Affective Turn" 1) and seek its own—monetary, social—fulfilment. Indeed, Sara Ahmed recognizes the uncanny similarity between affect and capital in that they both move toward accumulation as they are both realized through circulation: "[a]ffect does not reside in an object or sign, but is an effect of the circulation between objects and signs" (45). The affective turn acknowledges the materiality and dynamism of the body as the body engages with the biopolitical discourses it encounters rather than passively enduring the effects of biopower. In a world dominated by screens whereby visual impulses direct our desires, biopolitical discourse and sensory perception are understood as mutually constitutive forces moved by affect. They depend on or exploit one another in the process of the constitution of the subject as people come to desire what biopower proposes, participating in their own subjugation. Rejecting the notion of power as an extrinsic force, that is power over, Massumi talks of the "power to form us. Power doesn't just force us down certain paths, it puts the paths in us, so by the time we learn to follow its constraints we're following ourselves. The effects of power on us are our identity" (18–19). Because of this, the notion of affect can better explain the capil-

lary nature of power by revealing its kinetics and reciprocity. Elaborating on Massumi's claims, Jarrín suggests that affect elucidates the dialectic relationship of power and resistance: "we are affectively attuned to power, providing it the intensity it needs to exist in the first place, but our perceptions are not entirely defined by the ways power crystallizes into certain patterns, because we all have different experiences of embodiment" (13). In his discussion of body horror, Reyes draws from Althusser's idea of ideology's interpellation and Foucault's biopower to point to a correspondence between medical and legal discourses, between expressions of identity and its policing/punishment in a process that leads to internalization of biopower (7–8). In other words, people co-create and participate in the system that subjugates them because they believe their situation is unique. In this way, the ideology of biopower remains hidden in plain sight.

In neoliberal economies the market exerts its invisible biopower by segregating bodies based on their economic value, which is what happens in *The Substance*, when Harvey tells Elisabeth that her ageing body is no longer profitable: "And I have to give people what they want. Slurp... That's what keeps the shareholders happy" (00:08:15–00:08:21). This is the driving moment of the film as it shows how capitalism and biopower converge in Hollywood by simultaneously constructing and feeding off the notions of lucrative beauty. Jarrín names this ideology the biopolitics of beauty explaining that "[t]here are no ugly people, only poor people. . . . Ugliness is not a biological destiny but a state of being that is subject to correction and improvement" (Jarrín 1, 2) because beauty is a kind of capital that significantly impacts one's social status (Jarrín 3). Beauty is thus correlated with social class, neither of which are perceived as essentialist categories, but as ontological categories subject to modification. This results in an affective and economic understanding of one's beauty as being crucial not only to self-worth but to survival, which is confirmed by Elizabeth's actions after first overhearing Harvey's phone call and then being dismissed by him during lunch. The instance of casual rejection is shocking because she both looks great and is highly accomplished, but the viewer comes to understand that Elizabeth's hard work and accomplishments, as well as her sacrifices—the film represents her as having no friends and family because she neglected her personal life in favour of her career—have no value in a world obsessed with images. Here, the film not only exposes showbusiness as misogynist but also deplores the mediation of its ageist and sexist values throughout global culture. Harvey's offensive and hate-

ful comments illustrate the harmful notion that female worth depends on the male gaze, and that at fifty women should behave and look like twenty-year-olds or be removed from sight, that is, the big screen. This functions as an extension of economy of desire, in which "[t]he affective and biopolitical dimensions of beauty . . . are inextricable from capitalism and its ability to assign value to the body in particular ways" (Jarrín 13).

Indeed, "the value of work had been replaced with the value of fashion, style, and consumption, with the body as the ultimate commodity to be enhanced" (Jarrín 15; also Taussig 2012) in order to advance socially. In a late capitalist world where it becomes increasingly difficult to succeed based on economic capital, because most people do not possess any, Jean and John Comaroff recognize "the allure of accruing wealth from nothing" (313), which includes excessive beautification and radical alterations of the body as a means to increase one's beauty capital. In other words, to be successful and worthy of anything people must beautify themselves constantly rather than work hard for it, which is what the desperate Elisabeth attempts to do. Paradoxically, the improvement of life/body seems to ultimately lead to moral and psychological decline, and, in the context of the film, to her literal death, revealing the biopolitics of beauty to be akin to politics of death. For Timothy C. Campbell, thanatopolitics exists "whenever Being, language, or life is divided against itself into proper or improper" (3), which is what happens in the film. Campbell sees the root of such thinking in Heidegger's elaboration of technē in the distinction between proper and improper writing because it has "ontological effects such that a division in life is constructed between one Art, or species of man, associated with proper writing and another with improper writing" (2). Although in neoliberal economies a person is not reduced to a "thing" as it was under Nazism (Esposito 10),[5] the politics of death is still made possible, only death is administered by the person themselves. Namely, the person and thing are crushed and made "coextensive in a living being. This thing in thanatopolitics is taken to be the body, the biological material that assumes both the person and the thing, the person as a biological thing. This biological thing that lives belongs to the person as

[5] Esposito suggests that Nazism used linguistic deconstruction to turn people into things: "The language conveyed and at the same time determined this reification through Akkusativierung, reduction of the nominative to the accusative case. Instead of talking about men and women, they referred to pieces (Stücke), replacement parts (Häftlinge), human material (Menschenmaterial), to be loaned (ausleihen), unloaded (abladen), shipped (verschiffen), and eventually, of course, destroyed, after the recovery of the recyclable parts" (61).

her property" (Campbell 72). The person can then do whatever they want to or with their body, which, as *The Substance* shows, includes radical cosmetic alterations, the effects of which extend far beyond physical appearance. To be sure, the unnamed substance taken by Elisabeth destroys her both physically and emotionally, which invites a more serious consideration of extreme beautification procedures, most notably cosmetic surgery, of which the imagined "magic potion" or chemical substance is a symbol. Inevitably, Campbell's consideration of thanatopolitics identifies Freud as the key figure that links technē and bíos in the process of the "intensification of the borders of the self, premised on a limitation of technē of bíos" (Campbell 138). Suggesting that "*the aim of all life is death*" (Freud 46), Freud argues that people are inherently driven toward self-destruction, or self-harm, which is a trait that can be easily exploited in promoting an individual's choice to undergo painful or body-altering procedures, which "erase" the former, objectionable and abject, self.

More to the point, Jarrín argues that in a culture where structural violence appears to be standard, plastic surgeons present themselves as healers of both the physical body and the societal body, offering everyone the opportunity to attain beauty (5), even if it means enduring horrific pain. Plastic surgeons are able to market and sell their invasive procedures and services as hygiene and necessity because they rely on neoliberalism's capacity to enable individuals to benefit from their own personal biopower (Campbell 73). In this way, beauty is double coded: because it represents a form of capital, it is a sign of social and economic standing, and because it is administered by medical professionals, it is also a sign of health, which fashions beautification into a form of personal hygiene that must be constantly practiced. This is particularly important if one is an ageing woman, for whom beautification is not seen as a matter of ego but as a trait fundamental to their social value and chances for upward mobility (Jarrín 4). In the neoliberal economy, then, women seem to be much more prone to internalize what Campbell refers to as the *dispositif* of personhood, according to which the body is separate from and belongs to a person (72). The separation between a person and the body's properties is what enables organ donations, to supervise and control one's body, one's "corporeal capital," and to utilize it as one desires for the sake of enhancing or optimizing personal freedom. This type of production, Campbell argues, relies on the premise of "the possibility of administering forms of death on oneself" (Campbell 73). In *The Substance*, the problematic notions of a person's ontological separation from their body and a

lack of concern for the (ageing) body are represented quite literally through the physical doubling of the protagonist into the person (Elisabeth) and the body (Sue), and the subsequent annihilation of both personhood and life in the process of excessive beautification.

Thanatopolitics: From Person to Body to Nothing

Elizabeth's destiny is foreshadowed by the film's introductory scenes: the audience sees the making of her star on the Hollywood sidewalk, a notable symbol of fame, and its slow degradation as punctuated by a passer-by dropping a fast-food meal onto it, smudging it with ketchup. Throughout the introduction the star is in focus, whereas people are represented from above, as faceless voices and, predominantly, feet. The scene ends with a close-up of the soiled star (00:02:00–00:04:22). Constructing a frame for Elisabeth's story, the film also ends with the image of the star, now covered in biological residue of what was once Elisabeth. The abject blob exhales its final breath[6] as it lies on the star, turning into a bloody stain that is washed away by a cleaning machine the next morning (02:13:16–02:13:51). The star thus becomes the film's central metaphor: Elisabeth is a Hollywood star, but stardom is an artificial construct, just like the star on the pavement, and it has limited warranty. Her final breath may be seen as a sign of relief of a being "destined to die" (Freud 55). Beauty, too, is a function of time: it naturally alters with age, so Hollywood's unnatural insistence on youthful beauty throughout a woman's life is represented as (auto) destructive. Jarrín refers to this as "dictatorship" of beauty: "a system of social relations that imposes an aesthetic hierarchy and threatens those who dare disobey with social death" (5), whereas Nguyen talks about beauty as a "redemptive promise" that can enable successful socialization (362). However, the film reveals beauty's socialization potential to be a myth, as Elisabeth is socially isolated both before and after the taking of the substance. She is rich and famous, but lonely and alone.

More to the point is the detrimental focus on the surface as well as fragmentation of the body into parts that are depersonalized and individually assessed for their appearance or health, as they are in a medical environment. Indeed,

[6] The visual representation of the blob very clearly evokes Caravaggio's painting *Medusa* (1597), infusing the final image of Elizabeth's death with additional layers of meaning as it relates to both the painting and the myth in which that which kills is Medusa's gaze.

Jarrín attributes this point of view to "the biopolitical discourses of surgeons" who, being fixated on photography and anthropometry, constantly limit beauty to the visual domain although it is well established that human perception of another person's beauty is strongly marked by affect, as well as "abstract qualities like style, charisma, wit, strength, or congeniality" (12). These notions are represented in the film first by Elizabeth's social isolation, and then by Sue's pronounced sexiness. Namely, Elisabeth lacks any meaningful intimate relationships in life, which accentuates both her singular and precarious identity as merely a toned body and her loneliness at a point when the body ostensibly ceases to perform its function, that is, serve the capital. Sue is less isolated, but her relationships are highly superficial as they are limited to excessive partying and casual sex. In this, she is also construed as nothing but a sexy body; her personhood is irrelevant. Neither of them is represented as having friends or even acquaintances with whom they converse. The next-door neighbour, Oliver, embodies the purely sexualized nature of Elisabeth's and Sue's social interactions: uninterested in or irritated by Elisabeth, he becomes "stupidly" (Fargeat 51) infatuated by Sue. Moreover, the film represents artificiality as a key feature in a society where objectification of body/life is a standard. Elisabeth is never seen in natural environments, like a park, woods or the beach, and she seems to venture outside only when she goes to the nameless facility where she obtains the illicit substance that spawns her younger self. The highly stylized but sterile interiors accentuate the already glaring artificiality of the main protagonist's surroundings and life, and the limiting and vicious nature of both showbusiness and patriarchal neoliberalism where women's bodies are perceived and treated as a commodity.

Close-ups of faces and body parts both draw attention to themselves and create a sense of oppression; the characters are trapped and isolated in closed spaces signalling their essential lack of freedom. Jarrín argues that rejecting participation in the affective economy generated by beauty is as unlikely as refusing to take part in the labour economy because having money and beauty is crucial in determining one's social worth, whereby aesthetic appeal and financial resources are perceived as fundamentally supporting one another (16). Elizabeth's role of an experimental subject highlights these connections further. Experimental subjects are not persons with individual identities but a depersonalized form of capital and labour, essential to the advancement of science and typically invisible (Jarrín 9; Petryna 2009; Abadie 2010). Science itself seems to be a function

of capital, not an altruistic venture, because it is made possible due to the underlying rhizomic connections between scientific institutions, private interests, the public, and the state (Martin 25–26), making it a complex product of ideology, capital, and interest that exerts its influence on the body.

That beauty should be treated as a form of social law or duty is paradoxical since physical beauty is a phenomenological result of perception achieved through social interaction, rather than an abstract absolute. Because of this, beauty can be considered a "relational object" that is "saturated with affect" (Ahmed 10–11) and achieves its realization through a dialectic of relationships and mutuality. In the same vein, Jarrín asserts that every aesthetic assessment is ultimately a social construct (3), which suggests that one is not beautiful in and of oneself, but becomes so through the workings of another's gaze or even in relation to one's own imagined ideal, both of which are subjective and affective. In the film, Elisabeth begins to question her beauty, and consequently self-worth, only after she overhears Harvey's phone call in which he suggests that an old or ageing body/face is undesirable and that women's fertility starts to decrease by the age of twenty-five (00:07:10.00:07:15), reducing women with both comments to their bodies and bodily functions. Elisabeth is left stunned, looking at her own face in the mirror as if she sees it for the first time (00:07:36), contemplating it as "material that will rot" (Varndell 58). This is starkly contrasted with the previous scene of her aerobics routine that shows us how the camera sees her, impersonally and therefore objectively, as a stunning 50-year-old woman. Shortly after, during lunch, Harvey tells Elisabeth that people always want something new and that "renewal is inevitable. And at fifty, well, it stops" (00:08:25). His remark is accompanied by an image of the back of a very young waitress in a shockingly short skirt, leaning over the table and allowing for a glimpse of her buttocks. When Elisabeth asks what stops, Harvey is unable to verbalize it, but, as he struggles to find words, the viewers are offered a close-up of his sauce-covered fingers shaking a limp shrimp (00:08:49–00:08:50). The image's double entendre reveals what he is unable or unwilling to articulate, namely, that men are sexually interested only in young(er) bodies, which make them "hard," whereas older bodies, like Elizabeth's, do not sexually excite them. The scene also illustrates that narratives of beautification are highly gendered: despite the stark contrast between Elizabeth's well-groomed, elegant, poised and well-articulated self, and Harvey's gaudy, grotesque, inarticulate, and literally mucky persona, as his face and fingers are covered with grease and sauce, Elisabeth is, ironically, identified as the one who has become unattractive and therefore unmarketable.

The implications of both Harvey's gaze and the articulation of his (sexual) desires are crucial because they are, in Lacanian terms, articulations of the patriarchal society's desires. For Lacan, desire, like language, is relational and cultural, since one's desire takes shape as the Other's desire (689). Lacan's the Other is the Symbolic Order, a conceptual entity, a network of socio-cultural relations and rules that shape our desires and judgment because people adopt them as they adopt language. In the film, the Other is represented as male-gendered since it is Harvey who utters the "truth" about patriarchal desire, a male nurse offers her information about the "life-changing" substance (00:11:31–00:12:02), and the disembodied voice that provides instructions with regard to the substance is male. People perceive themselves to be constantly under the Other's gaze because they require "the Other as witness" (Lacan 684) to constitute their own identity, so identity also emerges as a relational phenomenon. Lacan suggests that the question of what someone else wants "best leads the subject to the path of his own desire" (690). In patriarchal society, "[a]s is true for all women, and for reasons that are at the very crux of the most elementary social exchanges . . . the problem of her condition is fundamentally that of accepting herself as a man's object of desire" (Lacan 182). Elisabeth struggles for a short while, but ultimately accepts Harvey's point of view, internalizing first the Other's desire and then also the "medical norms" (Jarrín 10) of beauty. So, to avoid social suffering, Elisabeth accepts the idea that she must endure physical suffering and decides to take the illicit and nameless substance.

Playing with the fact that, as Jarrín establishes, plastic surgeons are "celebrities and household names" (6) in a culture where self-improvement is mandatory, the film has Elisabeth take on the role of the surgeon. It may seem that this gives her agency, but it actually reveals that she is out of options. Either she will undergo this beautification procedure, or perish. She is ashamed of her weakness and insecurity, and does not want to advertise it as a proof of her being in line with the trends, but sees no other way to keep working than to betray her sense of dignity and selfhood. By accepting the drug, Elisabeth subscribes to the idea that she only has value if she is young and that she must endure horrible pain and transformation to be socially accepted. Her secretive opting for experimental science is both a nod to the source text and a testimony of her defeat as she suppresses her individuality to fit in. She understands her inability to reject the request for beautification and youthification as weakness, or, in Althusserian terms, as her inevitable response to the ideology's interpellation

making her complicit with it. Harvey's sexist and ageist claims assume the role of Lacanian "Logos" or Law, the social convention which Althusser identifies as ideology, and Elisabeth responds to its call (interpellation), allowing herself to be "recruited" and thus transformed from an individual into a subject (Althusser 171–74). By administering the drug, and later on (as Sue) suturing the wound on her back, she ostensibly performs agency, but her act is merely an act of subservience to the ideology of self-inflicted suffering and depersonalization.

Elizabeth's struggle with self-image continues even after she takes the substance which causes the spawning of her other self. Her anguish is represented very expressively as she becomes insecure and self-conscious to the point of not being able to go out on a date with her high school acquaintance, Fred, choosing not to believe his claim that she has not "changed a bit" and is "still the most beautiful girl in the whole wide world" (00:12:27–00:12:33). Fred's naïve and honest claim is made with no ulterior motives. He stands neither to gain nor to lose something from expressing his admiration because he functions as a symbol of the innocent past, so when she later calls him, he is completely taken by surprise saying he did not think she would call. As she gets ready, she catches a glimpse of her double's dormant—young and firm—body and goes back to the mirror, scrutinizing her own appearance. The whole sequence functions as a sort of menacing mise-en-abyme in which Elisabeth slowly loses herself through a form of distorted mirroring. The audience gets the impression that she looks at herself the way she believes a man would. She applies another layer of makeup and as she is ready to leave, she sees a billboard with Sue's picture through the living room window. This establishes a pattern in which her gaze switches from Sue to herself, and every time Elisabeth tries to come to terms with her looks, her peace of mind is unsettled by the image of her young, sexy double. As she looks at the billboard, Elisabeth seems to mimic a male gaze, focusing on Sue's crotch, and slowly looking up towards her bosom, then quickly returning to the bathroom before she catches full glimpse of Sue's face. Instead, she is seen looking at her own face, and having already reapplied her make-up, she now tries to amend her appearance by hiding her décolletage with a shawl. The scene is interspersed with images of the clock, suggesting both that she is running late for her date and that, in a broader ontological sense, her time is running out. With a sense of urgency, she removes her lipstick and adds another layer of concealer, a stronger shade of red lipstick and more blush. As she tries to leave, she is haunted by the billboard and Sue's youthful, natural appearance, which is

contrasted by her agitated, overly made-up self, reflected and distorted on the surface of her golden doorknob. She returns to the bathroom angrily, removing her make-up with rough, furious movements, first turning her face into an abject, clownish mask and then, veering between hatred and desperation, wiping her face unevenly with her hands, pulling on the skin as if she wants to tear it off. Raging, she starts to pull her hair and then the scene is cut (01:12:37–01:16:07).

The recursiveness of Elizabeth's image, both in the previously mentioned sequence, and in the entire film, and continuous changes that occur in the process of mirroring, point to the fact that beautification is a constant process that ultimately not only changes the individual but ultimately erases them. The biopolitical regime of beauty is, as Jarrín explains, more than just a compulsion: "it is also a felt relation to one's own body as well as a form of becoming" (4). It is an active process based on "an aesthetic hierarchy that produces a scale of value ranging from the beautiful and normative to the ugly and abject, and that is highly mobile because beautification practices promise to revalue those whose bodies are deemed lower in the aesthetic hierarchy, even if it seems like a Sisyphean task, repeated endlessly" (Jarrín 4). The constant changes of the body's morphology, however, contribute not to its improvement but to its demise. In discussing the transformations of the human body, Gareth Jones and Maja Whitaker highlight that, despite the techno-medical improvements that pave the way to transhuman existence, anatomists still find that "the human body is not an infinitely malleable piece of machinery" (256).[7] What is more, they highlight reasons for modifying procedures as crucial in determining their impact on a person's self-identity and well-being. If such procedures serve "to overcome a pathological deficit" (266), they may turn out to be beneficial, but "if used for insubstantial reasons" body modifications may result in "jeopardizing autonomy and serving as a threat to well-being" (266). Ageing is certainly not a pathological deficit, although showbusiness treats it as such. In fact, demanding that a fifty-year old body resembles a twenty-year old one is a delusional and harmful concept, which attempts to negate the body's natural processes which include "surprisingly large amounts of change" (Jones and Whitaker 254); indeed, the human body "is always changing, never in stasis" (Jarrín 12), which

[7] In *Plastic Bodies* (2016), Emilia Sanabria explores the notion of the limitless moulding of the body by the use of sex hormones in order to discipline social relations and subjectivities. The idea of what is "natural" is questioned by those who promote plasticity of the body, which is not always emancipatory. The study reveals a far-reaching friction between biological contingency and technological possibility.

makes demands for eternally youthful looking faces and bodies unnatural, and therefore ridiculous and harmful.

In the general population, the demands for uniform appearance that is marketed both by the media and by plastic surgeons may result in serious mental health issues. Body dysmorphic disorder (BDD), or body dysmorphia is a culturally imposed psychiatric phenomenon finding ground in the desire for beauty as related to gender, class, and the race inequalities people face every day. Singh and Veale explain that, while certain concerns about one's appearance are typical for people, they may become extreme. If they considerably distress a person or have an actual impact on their quality of life, BDD may be diagnosed (131). The sense of not being beautiful and therefore good enough is clear in Elizabeth's behaviour, which includes persistent preoccupation and insecurity about one's looks, constant mirror checking, excessive grooming and avoidance of social contacts (Singh and Veale 132). What is particularly worrying is that contemporary culture and media impose constructed ideas of beauty even onto young bodies, as young people are naturally more insecure and more involved with social media, resulting in very young individuals opting for unnecessary beautifying procedures such as lip augmentation. Singh and Veale argue that "adolescents who present with BDD have higher lifetime suicide rates and more delusional beliefs" (133), pointing to the conclusion that the excessive desire for a culturally imposed form of uniform beauty is harmful to the extent of being life-threatening. Citing relevant research, Chiara Rollero finds that, due to their prevalence and accessibility, mainstream media play a crucial role in promoting objectification, body surveillance, and internalization of media beauty standards, which equate "a person's worth with their sexual attractiveness" (1). Governmental neglect of the "direct impact on self-objectification processes and body surveillance for both adolescents and adults" (Rollero 1) points to a sort of biopolitical complicity with the fact that social media have changed how people perceive themselves and others.

In the obvious prevalence of the so-called Instagram Face, a product of "social media, FaceTune and plastic surgery" (Tolentino), Jarrín recognizes malevolent, almost fascist, intentions as "the discourses of surgeons are informed by eugenic thought and by a desire to produce a racially homogenous population" (8). That the claim of "a particular biopolitical vision" for the human race, "which explicitly ranked some bodies as more desirable than others" (8), is not exaggerated is confirmed by Mimi Thi Nguyen's article "The Biopower of Beau-

ty." She explains that beauty is not politically neutral but emerges as a form of biopower, "an important site of signification, power, and knowledge about how to live" (364) that renders certain bodies as proper and others as abject, dangerous or in need of liberation, such as bodies that are veiled by a burqa (364–69), and therefore hidden from the male gaze. "Beauty, in other words, produces forms of governmentality that manage the body in particular ways" (Jarrín 8), because beauty is "a politics of life" (Nguyen 376). *The Substance*, in particular, focuses around the materiality of the body to highlight the violent nature of beauty's administration.

With no intention of rejecting valuable insights by Žižek in *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (1989) or Butler in *Bodies that Matter* (1993), both of which rely on discourse's performative character, the article points to Marcia Ochoa's critique of this approach by suggesting that the power of logos cannot erase the factual carnality of the body's flesh (167–69), which feels, bleeds, and "splatters" (Nelson 210) under violent attacks that transform "beauty into an arena of struggle" (Jarrín 12). Being an instance of body horror, *The Substance* highlights the body's carnality and its vulnerability. When Sue is confronted with a hideously aged Elisabeth, she feels such extreme hatred and self-loading that she beats up Elisabeth brutally. As blood spatters everywhere, and Elisabeth lies helplessly under Sue's raging feet, the film switches to the image of a poster saying "Remember you are one" (01:49:00–01:50:08). The violent conflict between Elisabeth and Sue results from their abuse of the substance and Sue's purposeful neglect of the matrix, and symbolizes a devastating internal schism that occurs as a consequence of the *dispositif* of separation of the mind (personality) from the body, which, as Campbell contends, is the prerequisite for thanatopolitics. The youthful Sue literally sucks the life out of the rapidly ageing Elisabeth by overextracting the stabilizer fluid from Elisabeth's body, personifying the mechanics of the Freudian death drive. Seeing her life is in danger, Elisabeth wants to terminate Sue but is unable to do it. Having subscribed to the idea of herself as nothing but beautiful, she "needs" Sue to continue as her façade, as "the most lovable part" of herself (01:44:00–01:44:36). Sue, however, having subscribed to the same idea, continues to show extreme cruelty to Elizabeth. She believes herself to be fully apart from Elisabeth and fails to realize that every cruelty to the person (Elisabeth) will reflect horribly on the beautified body (herself), leading to the ultimate annihilation of both the body and the person.

Conclusion

In representing the story of Elisabeth Sparkle, *The Substance* addresses the issue of cosmetic surgery in its excessive form, suggesting that it usually does not truly beautify women, but provides them with a generic, artificial appearance and damages both their bodily and psychological integrity. The reason for this is the fact that desire for beautification is not authentic, but arises from the male gaze, which frames women as objects to be sexually desired, and the market, which demands from them to accrue economic worth by means of their youthful and sexy appearance. The idea of beauty as capital emerges from the highly gendered biopolitical discourse of patriarchal neoliberalism in which everyone is implicated and is made to participate in a docile way, but always under the guise of free will or choice. Ironically, these "choices" negate both the body's authenticity and the individual's personhood. Elisabeth's isolated lifestyle in which she fully identifies with a single aspect of her life—her job in showbusiness and her role as a star— reveals how the system in which she functions defines people's priorities. Everything she does must be in the service of capital. Neither is ugliness a source of suffering nor is beauty a guarantee of dignity and happiness; instead, women should work on their own social, intellectual, and emotional empowerment.

The film highlights that this is particularly true in Hollywood, which is a metonym for showbusiness, where beauty becomes the signifier of a missing sign: a representation of health and happiness where there is none. Instead, the desperate quest for eternal youth and beauty turns out to be an emblem of thanatopolitics, which exploits the potentials of the human death drive. The story of Elisabeth Sparkle is a case in point. Her desire for beautification is created through externally imposed self-loathing, since her body dysmorphia occurs as a result of Harvey's mercenary and sexist judgement. Her self-image unsettled, Elisabeth resorts to radical steps, using an untested, experimental drug, which ultimately leads to her own annihilation.

The fragility of the border between reality and fiction, which becomes blurred when mediated through screens, comes to the foreground while the audience attempts to make meaning from the film's visual and narrative representations. For those who (still) do not (feel that they) participate in the culture of extreme beautification, the film's explicit goriness can be seen simply as a part of its engaged poetics. Such representational directness and the film's intense visuality are gripping and point to the director's unapologetic and affective approach to

conveying her political messages about extreme beautification, and the urgency with which these messages should be received. For many viewers, however, and particularly those who felt they had to undergo aggressive procedures, who felt the surgeon's knife on their skin, lived through the recovery process, and had to deal either with the reactions of those around them or with the procedure's side effects (or both), the film functions as a brutally realistic and deeply unsettling representation of their own situation,[8] in which privacy becomes a commodity, and the value of their body/life is determined by another's gaze. Extreme beautification results in artificial, uncanny "beauty" that is ultimately revealed to be a deformity. The monstrous consequences of aesthetic surgery turn Elisabeth first into a sex-object (Sue) and later into an abject being (Monstro Elisasue) that both symbolically and literally breaks apart at the seams. Determined by the gaze of others, Elisabeth is liberated only in death.

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[8] Social media users are familiar with the fact that both doctors and patients (particularly influencers) advertise beautification procedures with graphic images of bleeding or brutalized body parts, and that various clinics or organizations offer "beauty make-over" procedures as prizes in contests which stipulate the obligation to publish before, during, and after photos. See for example, Smith and George (2018), Bennett and Vercler (2018), and Martineau et al. (2020).

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PROMJENOM DO UNIŠTENJA: BIOPOLITIČKI ASPEKTI ULJEPŠAVANJA U FILMU *SUPSTANCA*

Sažetak

Ljubica MATEK
Filozofski fakultet
Sveučilišta Josipa Jurja Strossmayera u Osijeku
Lorenza Jägera 9
HR – 31 000 Osijek
lmatek@ffos.hr

Ovjenčan brojnim nagradama, film *Supstanca* (2024.) adaptacija je Stevensonova romana *Neobičan slučaj dr. Jekylla i gospodina Hydea* (1886.) koji je pod redateljskom i scenarističkom palicom Coralie Fargeat postao ženska priča. Hibridnog karaktera, poput svoje protagonistice Elisabeth Sparkle (Sue i Monstro Elisasue), film pripada žanrovima tjelesnog horora i feminističke satire. *Supstanca* prikazuje kako muški pogled usmjerava i oblikuje, na ugnjetavački način, društvenu pozornost prema ženskim tijelima i starenju. Iz svijeta estrade posredovanog putem medija žene primaju poruke da vlastitu vrijednost trebaju temeljiti na mladolikom izgledu, a ne moralnom razvoju, bliskim odnosima i obrazovanju. Oslanjajući se na Foucaultov koncept poslušnog tijela, teoriju afekta te teoriju o biopolitici, napose ideju da biomoć različitim tijelima pridaje različitu ekonomsku vrijednost, rad tumači film kao prikaz suvremene kulture u kojoj se vječna mladost i seksualna privlačnost ženama nameću kao imperativ, uslijed čega su žene spremne trpjeti i same nad sobom vršiti nasilje, a sve s ciljem uljepšavanja. Od žena se očekuje da vlastito tijelo oblikuju u skladu s muškim fantazijama čak i kada je to štetno, bolno i samim ženama posve nepotrebno. To pridonosi normalizaciji svih oblika samoozljeđivanja, ako je ono u službi ljepote. U filmu su prikazi samoozljeđivanja putem korištenja nedozvoljene supstance, prejedanja i fizičkog nasilja ispresijecani scenama TV-aerobika, ilustrirajući mehanizme putem kojih žene pounutruju kontradiktorne ideje o vlastitoj ljepoti i zdravlju. Elisabeth doživljava svoje tijelo kao amorfnu masu koju može neprekidno oblikovati putem nesigurnih i nepotrebnih tvari i zahvata, što rezultira moralnom propašću osobnosti, tjelesnim oštećenjima i smrću.

Ključne riječi: ljepota, biopolitika, poslušno tijelo, samoozljeđivanje, *Supstanca*, tjelesni horor