

colleagues who have either a clinical or an academic interest in childhood. But I will be honest; I struggled with it. I have an interest in childhood development born from my own parenting experiences, but I am not academically inclined towards childhood, nor clinically as I do not work with children. I may simply be in the parenting role too much to distinguish that from other aspects of the experience.

Ben Scanlan & ChatGPT

The Substance

2024. Film. Dir: Coralie Fargeat.

And this self that I am – this I am in a world which the Other has made alien to me, for the Other's look embraces my being and correlatively the walls, the door, the keyhole.

(Sartre, 2003: 285)

Anyone with a phobia of needles look away now. *The Substance* is a visual and aural assault-course that has divided festivalgoers, critics and audiences, with media attention focusing on people walking out mid-screening. There can be no doubt this is a tough film to endure, even for a seasoned horror buff such as myself.

It is a cornucopia of filmic references, particularly paying homage to early David Cronenberg. *The Shining*, *Carrie*, *Alien*, *The Elephant Man*, and the lurid 1988 cult satire *Society* all get a look in. It even manages to wedge in 'Also sprach Zarathustra', made famous by its use in the opening of *2001: A Space Odyssey*. *The Substance* has been touted as a critique of female ageing in the entertainment industry in particular – and society in general – and it certainly wears its feminism, of a fashion, on its sleeve. But there is also plenty in it to offer anyone looking for something a little more existential.

Demi Moore plays Elizabeth Sparkle, a one-time Oscar winner who at fifty has been reduced to presenting an old-fashioned fitness TV programme, *à la* Jane Fonda (even the leotards seem to have survived the Eighties). But this is L.A. and this is the United States; she already pretty much has one foot in her entertainment industry grave, and so it happens that her show is cancelled as the network looks for younger, fresher flesh. "I have to give the people what they want," reasons Harvey, the ultra-sleazy network exec (himself a well-creased individual past his prime – but, hey, he is a man, that is allowed), played brilliantly and hilariously by Dennis Quaid.

Following a car accident (Elizabeth is distracted passing a roadside billboard as her image is being taken down), a flawless, though rather

creepy, Adonis of a male nurse gives her a card with a number on it, which leads to a phone conversation with a mysterious, disembodied voice in which she is offered “a better version of yourself”. Surprise, surprise! This ‘Better Version’ is thirty years younger, flawlessly beautiful and has a body which is a wet dream for the likes of Harvey. No names required, she is henceforth customer 503, and off Elizabeth trundles to collect her kit, simply known as The Substance.

The injection of the Activator leads to an *Alien*-esque set-piece where Elizabeth’s back splits open and out pops the Better Version, Sue (Margaret Qualley). Of course, such a Faustian deal comes with rules and pitfalls. The two versions are not two different people (“Remember,” Elizabeth is instructed, “you are one. You cannot escape yourself. Everything comes from you.”) They cannot exist without the other, for there is no Other (although, confusingly, the kit includes food for both the Matrix (Elizabeth) and the Other Self (Sue)). Thus, they must swap being conscious every seven days, without fail, no exceptions. Whilst Elizabeth is unconscious, she is drip-fed food for the Matrix, and Sue must be sustained with nutrition for the Other Self when it is her turn. They are also expected to inject stabilisers to keep everything functioning properly.

What could possibly go wrong?

Because Sue selfishly starts to extend her share of conscious time, Elizabeth quite literally starts to decay before our eyes. This is *Dorian Gray* for the twenty-first century; not only does the younger Sue get to gaze at the older, decaying version whilst Elizabeth is unconscious, she, in turn, is gazed on by the older Elizabeth. There is also a good deal of both selves gazing at their own reflection in the bathroom mirror. In this, they are one, for they both look at the Elizabeth self in disgust and the Sue self in wonderment at such perfection. We too are invited to become voyeurs as we gaze upon their gazing. There is clearly much to be found in this film in relation to Sartre’s The Look.

Elizabeth hopes that by taking The Substance she will regain her substance as a person. It is, after all, what the product is offering in its marketing. But the reverse occurs, for it is of course impossible for one person to inhabit two different bodies, and Elizabeth and Sue come to despise each other. They compete to disrupt the other’s conscious time as much as possible. This is quite literally Sartre’s (2003: 289) assertion that “the Other is the hidden death of my possibilities in so far as I live that death in the midst of the world”. Whilst one lies unconscious the other deliberately sets out to first curtail, and then utterly destroy, the other’s freedom.

There is no Dr Jekyll in this situation, only two Mr Hydes. The two halves of the one cannot but help objectify each other, because Elizabeth’s (and subsequently Sue’s) whole *raison d’être* (and, apparently, source of

happiness) is to be objectified by others. Merleau-Ponty says that

When I become absorbed in my body, my eyes present me with no more that the perceptible outer covering of things and of other people, things themselves take on unreality, behaviour degenerates into the absurd, and the present itself, as in cases of false recognition, loses its consistency and takes on an air of eternity.

(2002: 192)

The Substance seems to have taken this to heart; it is an absurd situation and things certainly degenerate, for both Elizabeth and Sue, because all they can do to find meaning for their existence is to absorb themselves in their own – and each other's – physicality.

There is an emptiness to Elizabeth's life that I find sad. It is reflected in her apartment, a cavernous place with a sweeping view of Los Angeles below, almost devoid of furniture, bar a big television and an even bigger portrait of Elizabeth in her prime. When things spiral out of control and Sue starts to take over, she gets her revenge by making the apartment an absolute pigsty, a clear analogy of the mess her life has become resulting from taking *The Substance*.

It is a lonely life. We rarely see Elizabeth interacting with anyone other than Sue. The one neighbour we meet clearly wants nothing to do with her, but becomes a dribbling, bumbling macho idiot when he meets Sue. Elizabeth's one shot at future happiness – in the form of a geeky, ordinary old school mate – she sabotages when she cannot bear the sight of herself in the mirror as she prepares for the date. By now, she is too haunted by Sue. Although her existence is a lonely one, paradoxically she craves to keep the very things that have made it so. We also see the emptiness that Sue's life takes on; it is all surface and shine and there exists little of substance.

I can only presume that *The Substance* sets out to revolt and to offend, because the very way women's physicality, young or old, is treated in Western society is often itself revolting. It is a lurid film and topic, largely shot in garishly bright colours in contrast to its pitch-black heart. I remarked earlier that it wears its feminism on its sleeve, but the lingering camera on the female body throughout is certainly reminiscent of the worst sort of misogynistic voyeurism Hollywood has to offer. Again, I can only presume that this is supposed to be some sort of parody. No one in this film comes off well, or likeable. When it comes to objectification and judgment, the worst offenders are Elizabeth and Sue themselves. I often hear from my female clients that they chose a male therapist because they would feel more judged by a female therapist. I find that deeply disturbing and sad.

It leaves me constantly wondering why so many women buy into that which oppresses them.

Clearly there were difficulties in knowing how to end *The Substance*, and it becomes absurdly grotesque (not unlike Hollywood and the ‘beauty’ industry themselves), descending schlock horror. However, the very last scene is amusingly apt, when the only thing left of Elizabeth, fittingly her face (do not ask how!), is swept away by a street-cleaning machine over her Hollywood star. She has had her time but, in the end, there is only nothingness.

Dean Andrews

References

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- Sartre, J-P. (2003). *Being and Nothingness*. Trans. Barnes, H.E. London: Routledge.