



NEW RELEASES

The Substance

The Substance

Director: Coralie Fargeat
Produced by: Coralie Fargeat, Tim Bevan,
Eric Fellner

Casting Directors: Laure Cochener,
Léa Moszkowicz

Written by: Coralie Fargeat

Cinematography: Benjamin Kračun

Editors: Coralie Fargeat, Jérôme Eltabet,
Valentin Féron

Production Design: Stanislas Reydellet

Costume Design:

Emmanuelle Youchnovski

Music: Raffertie

Sound Designer/Sound Editor:

Valérie Deloof

Cast:

Demi Moore (*Elisabeth Sparkle*)

Margaret Qualley (*Sue*)

Dennis Quaid (*Harvey*)

Hugo Diego Garcia (*Diego*)

Oscar Lesage (*Troy*)

Joseph Balderrama (*Craig Silver*)

Alexandra Barton (*encourager*)

Tiffany Hofstetter (*the stylist*)

Gore Abrams (*Oliver*)

UK-USA-France 2024

140 mins

Digital

A MUBI release

The bravura opening of Coralie Fargeat's bonkers body horror *The Substance* tracks, via time-lapse photography, the installation and subsequent deterioration of a Hollywood Walk of Fame star. At first bright and gleaming and thrilling to tourists, over time it cracks and dulls, suffering the indignities of stubbed-out cigarette butts and spilled ketchup that seeps into its cracks and stains its faded surface.

Not since Pixar's *Up* (2009) has a film offered such a masterclass in narrative exposition in its first wordless five minutes, gracefully cueing in the backstory of Elisabeth Sparkle, a once white-hot ingénue who is now the rather worn-down presenter of a cheesy Jane Fonda-style aerobics show, gamely incarnated by Demi Moore. It's a potent metaphor for the vicissitudes of celebrity, and a smart explanation for Elisabeth's decision to experiment with 'The Substance': a sinister product that promises a better version of herself (provided it's properly administered, which of course it won't be). Elisabeth is still gorgeous but exhausted by the upkeep involved in maintaining her looks in middle age: little wonder she wants a quick fix. Rather than an Ozempic-style makeover, though, Elisabeth gets Sue (a radiant Margaret Qualley) – a younger, more beautiful incarnation of the actress who rips her way out of a gaping wound in Elisabeth's back and immediately replaces her at work. And as Sue pushes at the limits of the rules governing The Substance's use, Elisabeth begins to age at a horrifying rate, giving new meaning to the phrase 'she's her own worst enemy'.

'I work a lot with symbolism,' Fargeat explains, discussing the origin of the Walk of Fame sequence. *The Substance* was inspired by the mid-life crisis of sorts that Fargeat underwent when she turned 40, her sense that society has little time or attention for women of a certain age. 'The fact that the main character is an actress was a way of symbolising a heightened version of what every woman can feel, and the heightened version of an actress is the Walk of Fame: all those symbols that stand in for love, the fact you exist, that you're seen, that people want you. So I liked this image of the star that would represent her previous life and how violent it can be to have, like, the light that is taken out of you.'

As Elisabeth becomes increasingly decrepit, Moore had to withstand up to seven hours a day in make-up, emerging as a grotesque hag: toothless and desiccated. In response to the suggestion that the film perhaps reinforces the perception that the most monstrous thing a woman can be is old, Fargeat insists that the film addresses 'how at any age, women are led to feel that their only value is what they look like'; that there is always 'some kind of preconceived appearance that you're supposed to follow to be a woman: to be nice and polite and pretty and smile, of course, always smile.'

Hence the casting of one of the most beautiful stars in the world, as a woman so disgusted by what she sees in the mirror that she can't stand to leave the house. 'You can be as beautiful as you want, you will always be hard on yourself. The violence of society leads you to inflict violence on yourself.' So while the fear of female ageing has lent itself to genres from comedy (*Death Becomes Her*, 1992) to melodrama (*Another Woman's Life*, 2012), from the outset, Fargeat – whose previous film, *Revenge* (2017), about a woman seeking vengeance on the men who raped her, was warmly received as an exemplary entry in the post #MeToo film canon – was clear *The Substance* had to be a horror film, and a surrealist one at that.

'The movie is about flesh, sensations, violence, bones, blood. I wasn't interested in filming age in a realistic way: filming an impaired person who can no longer work or leave the house for physical reasons.' The film, she says, is a mirror of society's misogynistic mentality. 'People tell me, "Oh yes, it's a caricature." I'm sorry, it's not. It's concentrated in one movie, but unfortunately, it is that gross, it is that violent in the real world.' More than this, she argues, Elisabeth's ageing is more a reflection of how we see her, not how she feels. In both *Revenge* and *The Substance*, Fargeat's heroines display superhuman feats of strength. Both films climax, too, with extraordinary, almost risibly bloody acts of vengeance that serve as expressions, Fargeat explains, of female anger. 'Elisabeth's metamorphosis, while of course hurting her, at the same time gives her strength and freedom. I like the idea that becoming an old, crippled shell of a woman gives Elisabeth a lot of strength. Once she finally doesn't care any more what she looks like, she can say "I don't give a fuck, I do whatever I want. I can be rude, I can be gross, I can speak loud. I can be violent." Finally she can express how she feels inside. It was really important for me to show her expressing all her anger, all the violence that had been imposed on her.'

NEW RELEASES

Sing Sing

From Sun 1 Sep 17:45

Starve Acre

From Fri 6 Sep; Sat 7 Sep 15:00 +
discussion with filmmaker Daniel Kokotajlo
and novelist Andrew Michael Hurley

My Favourite Cake Keyke mahboobe
man

From Fri 13 Sep

In Camera

From Fri 13 Sep; Preview Thu 5 Sep 20:35
+ Q&A with director Naqqash Khalid and
actors Nabhaan Rizwan, Amir El-Masry
and Rory Fleck Byrne

The Substance

From Fri 20 Sep

The Outrun

From Fri 27 Sep

The Goldman Case Le Procès Goldman

From Fri 4 Oct

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The film requires quite a lot of self-exposure from its female stars, who spend a great deal of time naked. While at first wary of casting Moore, Fargeat became convinced she was right for the part after reading her autobiography. 'I discovered a very different side of her that I didn't know at all. She's taken so many risks in her life. She really built herself alone. She's very rock and roll! And once I'd read her autobiography it became really important to me that she came on board, because she really understood the themes.'

The pair spent a lot of time discussing the nudity, and its centrality to the film. 'Because I knew that if I wanted to have this relationship of trust, even if you're ready to expose yourself, it's still tough. And I knew that nothing could be discovered on the day. Everything had to be prepped, discussed and understood, because that's the way those scenes were going to be powerful. It's a lot of risk. So the environment and the crafting needed to be strong. From the start Demi understood that it was an important part of the film. And what she managed to create with her bodily performance is amazing: for instance, in the transformation scene, where she is naked and suffering, and where her body really expresses everything that happens inside and that you don't see. That is so strong.'

Sue's laboured emergence from Elisabeth's writhing, bleeding body is a birth of sorts, a metaphor heightened by the repeated imagery of egg yolks, which appealed to Fargeat as 'something that is organic, something that you can touch, something that has fluid, something that has a perfect shape and that's gonna give birth to something else'.

Given that Qualley is also of an age to be Moore's daughter (indeed, Moore starred alongside Qualley's mother, Andie MacDowell, as a pair of beautiful twentysomethings in 1985's *St Elmo's Fire*), is motherhood an underlying theme? 'There is a parallel, of course, with birth. In some ways the film is about our desire to not die. That's why we fear getting older, and no longer being seen, because it's a metaphor for death. There's a quest for eternity. Sue, like a child [to Elisabeth], allows her to not disappear totally, because some part of her still exists in the world: an extension of her. On the other hand, motherhood is a kind of transmission. And here it's more replication. It's not about caring for another. It's more selfish, or more narcissistic. Cell division rather than birth.' Moore and Qualley's exposed, vulnerable bodies express, Fargeat says, a vital part of the language of a film that's light on dialogue and heavy on atmosphere: all the better to 'make the audience feel what the character is feeling'. This is typical of the director's approach to crafting her films. 'I don't really write backstories. I don't write regular kinds of scripts regarding characters. I really start by gathering images and music and sounds... what the feelings are going to be, what the sensations are going to be. I don't give myself any rules in advance, I don't intellectualise them at the moment, but I follow what comes, and I know that they have a meaning, that they come for a reason.' Of course, she concedes, the pieces have to make sense together. 'It's a lot of work to kind of choose what belongs to the movie and what in the end, doesn't. It's a very specific balance. There are things that you can love, but that in the end you know are not going to be right. It's an evolutionary process during the writing.'

Fargeat, likewise, is very hands-on at the editing stage, working here with Jérôme Eltabet and Valentin Féron to craft a film that feels both tightly controlled and increasingly feverish, contrasting its hallucinogenic violence with saturated primary colours, rigid compositions and minimal sets. The score, by British composer Raffertie, lends a lo-fi 80s feel ('I wanted it to be quite innovative, to have its own identity, to be something that scratches, causes discomfort,' says Fargeat). The setting, meanwhile – Cannes was used as a location to stand in for Hollywood – mixes elements from different time periods, lending a retro-futuristic tone and suggesting that in this world, anything might happen. 'I wanted to be totally free in mixing everything I wanted. That was a way for me to take this story out of reality. And to give that sensation that, yes, it could be yesterday, it could be nowadays, it could be somehow tomorrow, because I really wanted the story to feel relevant at any time. Because I think, unfortunately, it is still relevant.'

The locations, too, have their own symbolic and emotional sense: the long, Lynchian corridors of the studio that seem to suck Elisabeth and Sue in; the minimalist mid-century apartment dominated by a Dorian Gray-like portrait of Elisabeth and, through its vast windows, a billboard featuring a smiling Sue. The bathroom in which the protagonist's metamorphoses take place, a white tiled, neon-lit laboratory space, was particularly important to Fargeat. 'The bathroom is the place where she judges herself, where she looks at herself in the mirror, but also where she gives birth to her new self. So it's kind of the passage between two worlds – between the world of Elisabeth and the world of Sue. A kind of white cocoon.'

Catherine Wheatley, *Sight and Sound*, October 2024