



REVIEWS

The Substance Review: The Horror Movie You Need to See This Spooky Season

Belive the hype. Demi Moore gives the performance of her career in *The Substance*, a frightfully original body horror that borders on Grand Guignol levels of excess.



By [David Crow](#) | September 16, 2024 |

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The last time I remember really noticing Demi Moore in a movie was in *Margin Call*. The film was an excellent (and unfortunately still timely) portrait of the type of Wall Street backbiting and greed that precipitated the 2007 housing collapse. It's also an ensemble where Moore stands out while still being positioned in support of male co-stars like Jeremy Irons and Kevin Spacey, one of whom scapegoats Moore's character in her biggest scene. Before that film, it was *The Joneses* and *Mr. Brooks* where Moore twice played "the wife," which often is Hollywood code for the most underwritten character in a movie.

I bring this up because not one of these pictures was released in the last 10 years. Two of them not even in the past 15. It's a remarkably depressing thing, especially when one remembers Demi Moore was among the biggest stars of the '90s. And she radiates still, ferociously so, when given the chance. Well, Coralie Fargeat just provided her a great one in *The Substance*, the most original, and pitiless, horror movie I've seen this year.

The film is deftly aware too of the transient nature of stardom for women. Before we ever see Elisabeth Sparkle (Moore), we witness this fictional movie person awarded her own spot on the Hollywood Walk of Fame. The slab of decorative concrete is lovingly installed along Hollywood Blvd., and after a glitzy party commemorat

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all of which is filmed from a godseye view above, time dissolves. The leaves fall and the snow accumulates (in LA?!). The seasons turn. Through it all Elisabeth's star weathers, cracks, and finally fades.

It's practically gone by the time the movie begins in earnest and we meet the woman behind the stone. She's a smiling and faintly desperate TV personality who hosts a morning aerobics show. Her anxiety also proves well-founded, as we soon learn that while she might have won an Oscar, she's now... 50.

In the following scene, network honcho Harvey (Dennis Quaid) pays more attention to the shrimp he slovenly scatters around his mouth and tablecloth than the woman he's letting go like she were a once prized racehorse ready for the glue factory. We know almost nothing about Elisabeth's life before this moment, but the emptiness of the afterward, complete with a barren luxury apartment, is deafening. It also makes her an easy mark to unseen parties with a miracle cure for aging which they'd like to sell her.

Receiving solicitation over the phone and through the mail for an experimental substance that can create a younger, "better" version of herself—literally the doppelgänger bursts forth from the host's body like it's a Ridley Scott creature—Elisabeth's skepticism lasts barely a scene before she enthusiastically buys into a mad science Amazon Prime kit. It's a success, too, insofar as Elisabeth's body of 50 years is depleted like a discarded husk in favor of a shinier, perkier model who changes her name to Sue (Margaret Qualley).

Yet this bit of Frankenstein-ing comes with a catch. While Sue can easily beguile and enchant any male mouth-breather with eyes, including Harvey who lustily hires her to replace Elisabeth at the network as the next nubile young thing, every seven days Sue must return her consciousness to Elisabeth's body for the following week. This experiment only works if Sue and Elisabeth can share a life and never steal even a minute between youth and wisdom. So guess what happens when one decides she'd like to stay in the driver's seat a little longer?

The Substance has taken world cinema by storm since premiering at Cannes last summer, and it is easy to see why. As the next film from Fargeat, who wrote and

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a brutal deconstruction of final girls in rape/retribution genre flicks, *The Substance* is every bit as fetishistic in its wrath, albeit with a heightened, darkly funny mean-streak. One will not need to squint to spot the metaphor for the impossible double standards placed on women by society and culture. This is true well beyond the media, entertainment, and health industries, but the pressures are undeniably exacerbated in these spaces, and Elisabeth exists in all three. Her suffering must therefore be magnified by a multiple of infinity in Fargeat's hands.

Moore is fearless in depicting that nightmare. It is the performance of her career and never has she appeared more nakedly vulnerable, often literally so. As with *Revenge* before it, Fargeat uses *The Substance* to subvert and dilute the male gaze. There is nothing sexy or titillating about the flesh on display in this movie. It's sometimes clinical, often comical, and eventually Cronenbergian. Mostly, though, it's honest: Demi Moore is a beautiful woman. Not of a certain age, or "for her age," or any other qualifier we're trained to say in the absence of youth. She is simply, factually, beautiful. And yet, much like the woman playing her, Elisabeth internalizes the gaze of every man around her (or the lack thereof) into a motivation to transform her body to self-annihilating extremes.

The Substance is a body horror movie, but its flashes of violence are ultimately about externalizing the inner-agony, both mental and physical, women endure for the shallow, fleeting approval of lascivious eyes. For even after such pain, self-inflicted or otherwise, the woman who once was a young girl remains visible.

This is countered in the bitter irony of Sue's experience. Played with sharp intuition but a curious lack of self-awareness or irony by Qualley, Sue is a younger, "more perfect" version of Elisabeth, although neither party can see themselves in the other. Whether it's the girl of the past or the woman of the future, each is treated as the *other* by the actresses. Which is why Qualley's scenes are so cynically dispiriting.

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Despite having literally lived a version of this life before, Sue makes no attempts to do anything differently. She recovers Elisabeth's old job and bats her eyes for the same man who put Elisabeth out to pasture, giggling like a girl 10 years younger than her twentysomething visage. Even after a lifetime of playing this game, she wants to do it the same, right down to wearing the mask of sex kitten in front of strangers, and a villain before herself in the mirror. Only when she is alone with her own thoughts, or opposite Moore's comatose body, is Sue a full, self-loathing person. Desperate, still.

Fargeat captures all of this with the heavy air of farce and parable. Sue's scenes are mostly filmed with the glossiness of a car or beer commercial. Elisabeth sequences, by contrast, have a more measured naturalism about them, yet after every time she trades places with Sue, the darker and more oppressive the shadows of her home become. She turns her life into a physical sunken place while envying the youth of others. Whether the Substance "succeeds" or not, her lost girlhood can never be personally regained.

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When the movie eventually turns toward hard horror, it's almost a relief for Moore's sequences. Elisabeth, and the movie, is liberated to wallow in the gallow humor and an

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anger that's hot to the touch. By the climax of the film, it even bursts into an accusatory inferno from which none of us are innocent.

The end of the movie is such a grandiose spectacle that it frankly overstays its welcome and gilds the lily. Personally, the movie reached its bitter inevitability about 15 minutes before it ended by simply repeating the miseries and humiliations inflicted on both Elisabeth and Sue to levels of Grand Guignol excess. However, I can also recognize my own critiques might amount to one more male voice *The Substance* seeks to drown out with a primal, delirious scream. In the end, the power of that cry is louder than any criticism one might apply. *The Substance* really is one of the most original, and likely unforgettable, cinematic experiences you'll find this year, be it in the horror genre or otherwise.

The Substance opens on Friday, Sept. 20. [Learn more about Den of Geek's review process and why you can trust our recommendations here.](#)

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David Crow is the movies editor at Den of Geek. He has long been proud of his geek credentials. Raised on cinema classics that ranged from...

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