

# **Body Alienation and Gender Performativity: A Feminist Critique in the Film *The Substance***

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**Abstract:** Released in 2024, the film *The Substance* employs body horror as a narrative vehicle to vividly depict the physical predicament and gender anxiety of contemporary women under the dual oppression of patriarchal culture and consumerism through the story of Elizabeth, the female protagonist who derives the young body "Sue" with the help of "the perfect substance" and ultimately moves towards destruction. As the winner of the Best Screenplay Award at the 77th Cannes Film Festival, the film adopts a controversial expression of "using the gaze to counter the gaze" and exposes the dual exploitation of women's bodies by the "male gaze" and capital through extreme visual impact. Centering on the symbiosis, confrontation, and disintegration of the "mother body" and the "other body," the film interprets the core proposition of Judith Butler's "gender performativity" theory—gender is not an inherent essence but a performative effect formed through repeated behavioral practices and discursive construction. This paper adopts a research method combining close textual reading and sociological criticism. Combining Butler's gender theory, Foucault's thought on power discipline, and feminist body politics theory, it interprets the feminist connotations in the film from three dimensions: the symbolic metaphor of body alienation, the predicament and resistance of gender performativity, and women's self-alienation under consumerism, revealing the struggles and breakthroughs of contemporary women in the face of gender norms, physical control, and capital exploitation.

**Keywords:** Feminism; Gender Performativity; Body Politics; Consumerism; Power Discipline

## **1. Symbolic Metaphors of Physical Alienation: The Predicament of the Female Body under Patriarchal Discipline**

### **1.1 The Stigmatization of Aging Bodies: The Hierarchical Order of Bodies in Patriarchal Discourse**

In the context of patriarchal culture, women's bodies have always been a field of scrutiny and discipline, and "aging" is a crucial node where women's bodies suffer systematic stigmatization. At the beginning of the film, Elizabeth, a 50-year-old Hollywood star, loses her job as the host of an aerobics program because she is "too old." The producer Harvey bluntly says: "Audiences need younger, more beautiful faces and more attractive bodies." This sentence nakedly exposes the patriarchal society's discipline over women's bodies: young and tight women's bodies are endowed with aesthetic and social value, while aging women's bodies are labeled as "useless" and "outdated," facing the dual fate of being eliminated from the industry and marginalized by society.

Capital's exploitation of women's bodies is often complicit with the male gaze. When the male supervisor Harvey dines with Elizabeth at a restaurant, he keeps belittling women while gobbling down shrimp. The deliberately amplified chewing sound echoes with the quick camera cuts to the female waiter's buttocks, embodying the materialization and contempt of women by capital. More ironically, the greeting card with the flowers Elizabeth receives says "The 'past' you was extraordinary," where the word "past" is extremely dazzling, like the ultimate declaration of capital to aging women—when the body no longer has commercial value, it can only be nailed to the label of "the past."

After Elizabeth differentiates into Sue, Sue smashes a room in the bathroom to place Elizabeth's body. The noise angers the male neighbor, who angrily bangs on Elizabeth's door

and wants to make trouble. However, when he sees Sue opening the door, his attitude undergoes a polar reversal, and he even obsequiously offers to help Sue. This double standard nakedly exposes the pervasiveness of patriarchal aesthetic discipline-young bodies are regarded as objects "worthy of kindness," while aging bodies are reduced to being ignored and belittled.

Butler states in *Bodies That Matter*: "The body is not a natural container but the core field where power operates. Power produces subjects that conform to norms through the discipline of the body."<sup>[1]</sup> In the film, patriarchal power constructs "youth and beauty" as the "natural" standard for women's bodies through media, the workplace, and other fields. However, Elizabeth's aging body does not meet this standard, so she is deprived of professional discourse power. More ironically, although Elizabeth is unharmed after a car accident, she collapses when she sees her advertisement being demolished-the young body in the advertisement is proof that she once met the patriarchal aesthetic standard, and the demolition of the advertisement symbolizes her complete abandonment by the patriarchal aesthetic system, concretely embodying the "valuelessness" of the aging body. This plot profoundly confirms Simone de Beauvoir's argument in *The Second Sex* concerning the fate of the female body: the female body is always an object defined and judged by patriarchal society, and its value is entirely dependent on external norms.<sup>[2]</sup>

### **1.2 The Duality of "The Perfect Substance": The Illusion of Regaining Youth and the Capital Trap**

As the core prop of the film, "the perfect substance" has profound metaphorical significance, inspired by Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*: Dorian Gray makes a wish to the portrait to stay young forever, his own sins do not stain his face, while the portrait becomes increasingly ugly. In *The Substance*, the more radiant Sue is, the more aging and ugly Elizabeth becomes, forming a cruel contrast of mutual growth and decline. On the surface, it is a "lifeline" for Elizabeth to fight against aging and regain her youth. The institution's advertisement claims: "One injection can unlock your DNA, initiate a new type of cell division, and release a brand-new version of yourself." By literally peeling off Elizabeth's back, a young body, Sue,

is split off. This "perfect substitute" with tight skin and a sweet smile quickly helps her recover the lost career opportunities and social attention, successfully taking over as the host of the aerobics program, shooting magazines, participating in talk shows, and hosting New Year's Eve parties, intuitively showing the dividends of youth and beauty. This seems to make Elizabeth see the hope of "salvation" for her aging body.

But in essence, "the perfect substance" is by no means a tool for liberation, but a physical shackle under the collusion of patriarchy, consumerism, and capital. Consumerism packages "youth" and "perfection" as purchasable commodities, while capital further exploits women's bodies through this "perfect substance." It sets a cruel symbiotic rule: only one of Elizabeth and Sue can stay awake, and they switch every seven days. When Sue is awake, she must inject Elizabeth's cerebrospinal fluid every day to maintain vital signs. This setting completely alienates women's bodies into "resource containers," and capital reaps commercial benefits from this physical consumption.

Over time, Sue's independent consciousness gradually awakens. Corrupted by the privileges and admiration bestowed by capital, she begins to break the agreement-she delays the switching time for dates, and later invades Elizabeth's time again and again just to enjoy the glamorous life endowed by capital. At first, Elizabeth only feels tired and lackluster skin, but as Sue's demands become excessive, her body accelerates aging: one finger quickly ages like dead wood, her hair falls out in clumps, her teeth loosen and fall out, her skin becomes dry, loose, and covered with age spots, her limbs atrophy, and finally she becomes emaciated like a skeleton, with vital signs declining sharply. This aging is irreversible.

This confirms Foucault's power theory: "Power is not only repressive but also productive."<sup>[3]</sup> Through "the perfect substance," consumerism and patriarchal power not only produce the norm that "women must pursue young and perfect bodies" but also produce alienated subjects like Elizabeth, trapping them in a fatal cycle of "pursuing perfection-body alienation-life exhaustion," and even depriving them of the most basic interpersonal kindness due to their "unqualified" bodies. As Du Fangqin points out in her research on contemporary feminist

movements, the control of the female body by capital is often under the guise of "liberation" and "beautification", but in reality it is a form of deeper oppression.<sup>[4]</sup>

### **1.3 The Ultimate Metaphor of Physical Disintegration: The Collapse and Resistance of Gender Norms**

At the end of the film, Elizabeth, exhausted to the limit, and Sue, who tries to completely replace her, have a fierce confrontation, and their bodies disintegrate at the same time, merging into a terrifying-looking monster-the grotesque Eliza-Sue. Inspired by *The Elephant Man* and *The Hunchback of Notre-Dame*, this monster has a heavy hunchback, a crooked face, teeth on the chest, and a human face on the back, with every part breaking away from the "beauty" rules set by patriarchy and capital. Director Coralie Fargeat uses 36,000 gallons of fake blood to create the scene where the monster explodes at the New Year's Eve party, and the gushing blood sprays onto the audience, becoming an intuitive vent to all the gazers.

This scene is not a simple presentation of horror visuals but has profound feminist metaphors: it symbolizes the "out-of-control" state of women's bodies after breaking free from patriarchal discipline and capital gaze, and is a complete subversion of inherent gender norms. In patriarchal culture and capital logic, women's bodies are forced to maintain "elegance," "exquisiteness," and "controllability." The interviewer's comment on Sue during the interview, "Every part looks like it's in the right place," is a straightforward expression of this discipline; the emergence of the monster completely breaks this shackle. Her deformed body and terrifying face no longer conform to any female aesthetic norms, but exist in the most primitive and authentic state.

This "out-of-control" body is a fierce resistance to patriarchal physical discipline and capital exploitation: it refuses to be defined and beautified, refuses to be an object of male gaze and capital consumption. Even if it ultimately moves towards destruction, it challenges the hegemonic discourse that "women's bodies must be perfect" in a subversive manner. Butler points out in *Gender Trouble*: "The gender norms lies in their naturalized disguise, constructing specific gender forms as the 'only possible' forms."<sup>[5]</sup> The physical disintegration of the monster is a negation of this "only possibility"-it

proves that women's bodies can break through the limitations of aesthetic norms, and even if they present a "horrible" and "deformed" form, it is an expression of the subjectivity of women's bodies, opening up space for the existence of diverse gender and physical forms. This form of resistance is consistent with the path of feminist resistance explored by Lü Dongxu and Yan Guiti, which is to reconstruct the gender order by breaking inherent norms<sup>[6]</sup>.

## **2. The Predicament and Resistance of Gender Performativity: The Confrontation Between Gaze and Counter-Gaze**

### **2.1 Sue's Gender Performativity: The Replication of the "Ideal Woman" Under the Male Gaze**

As the young body derived from Elizabeth, Sue is shaped as the "ideal woman" model recognized by both the patriarchal aesthetic system and capital logic from the moment of her birth. She possesses all the traits admired by patriarchal culture: a young and tight body, a sweet face, and a gentle and approachable temperament. More importantly, she "shapes herself through the way men look at women," fully complying with the expectations of the male gaze. In the aerobics program, she wears revealing sportswear that can fully show her perfect body curves, accurately replicating Elizabeth's peak movement style, and adding vitality and obedience that conform to current aesthetics. The camera shows her "charm" in an all-round way through spiral ascending angles, close-ups, and even frame-by-frame analysis of her buttocks. This extreme accumulation of "male gaze shots" is precisely the first step of the director's strategy of "using the gaze to counter the gaze."

Sue's success is essentially the perfect performance of the female gender script under the patriarchal aesthetic. Butler believes: "Gender performativity is not a single act but a repeated ritual that produces the illusion of gender essence through the stylization of the body."<sup>[1]</sup> Every program hosting and public appearance of Sue is an accurate repetition of the behavioral mode of the "ideal woman"-the arc of her smile, the tone of her voice, and the posture of her body all conform to the expectations of patriarchal culture for women. This repetition constantly strengthens the norm that "women should be young, beautiful, gentle, and

obedient," and at the same time produces the illusion that Sue is "naturally an ideal woman." The pursuit of her by capital and the male world further consolidates this illusion: the TV male supervisor Harvey is only impatient when he sees Elizabeth, but excitedly takes Sue around twice when he meets her, praising her as "a rare beauty in the world"; the male neighbor Mark takes the initiative to strike up a conversation, share new things, and even reserves the flowers he grows specifically for her. This daily positive feedback strengthens and affirms Sue's gender performativity at the practical level.

But in fact, Sue's gender identity is not "naturally" formed, but a joint construction of Elizabeth, patriarchal culture, and capital logic-Elizabeth sets action scripts and imparts professional skills to Sue, patriarchal culture provides living space and recognition for Sue, and capital obtains commercial benefits by consuming her young body. Sue is nothing but a performative tool without independent consciousness. It is worth noting that with the continuous occupation of patriarchal social resources and capital dividends, Sue's independent consciousness gradually awakens: she begins to be dissatisfied with Elizabeth's control over herself, not only frequently disrupting the agreed body switching time, but also feeling shocked and disgusted by Elizabeth's "imperfect" behaviors such as overeating in her body. She also takes the initiative to cater to industry rules and neighborhood expectations, trying to get rid of Elizabeth's constraints and become an independent symbol of the "ideal woman." The awakening of this independent consciousness means that Sue begins to break away from the limitations of the preset script, attempts to break through the boundaries of performativity, and lays the foundation for the resistance of gender performativity. This transformation confirms Chen Binghui's interpretation of Foucault's power theory: resistance is inevitably nurtured in the process of power operation<sup>[7]</sup>.

## **2.2 Elizabeth's Performative Predicament: The Conflict Between Self-Identity and Dual Oppression**

As the "mother body," Elizabeth's gender performativity is always in conflict between self-identity and gender norms. On the one hand, she longs to re-obtain a female identity that conforms to patriarchal norms through Sue's

body-when living in Sue's body, she is confident and calm, enjoying the privileges brought by the young body: being sought after by the audience, valued by the industry, and treated warmly by neighbors. This sense of recognition makes her strongly dependent on Sue's body; on the other hand, when she wakes up and returns to her aging body, she falls into self-loathing and anxiety. She confines herself in a dark residence, refuses to socialize, refuses to look in the mirror, and even refuses to face her aging self. When her old classmate Laura sincerely extends an invitation, Elizabeth dresses carefully in front of the mirror. She takes out the most decent dress in the wardrobe, puts on makeup meticulously, and styles her hair, trying to cover up the wrinkles at the corners of her eyes and the loose skin. Although she is no longer young in the mirror, she exudes elegance precipitated by time. She hopes to temporarily get rid of the label of "aging and useless" and regain her dignity and value as a person through this meeting. However, before going out, she sees Sue's huge poster outside the window again, with a young face and a tight body. Then she looks down at her carefully made-up but still vicissitudes face and hands. The previous expectations and confidence collapse instantly. She breaks down and wipes off the heavy makeup on her face, standing up Laura. At this moment, she deeply realizes that under the aesthetic discipline of patriarchal culture, no matter how well decorated, the aging female body can never escape the fate of "valuelessness."

This split state profoundly reveals the universal predicament of contemporary women in gender performativity: under the strong discipline of patriarchal culture and capital logic, they not only long to cater to gender norms to obtain social recognition and commercial value but also cannot completely abandon their true self-identity, eventually falling into a vicious cycle of "catering-anxiety-self-denial." Elizabeth's performative predicament is essentially the dual violent oppression of women's self-identity by patriarchal gender norms and capital exploitation. In patriarchal culture and capital logic, the identity of "woman" is strictly bound to specific behavioral modes and physical forms. If women want to be recognized, they must force their self-identity into this framework. Elizabeth's loathing for her aging body does not stem from the "flaws" of the body itself, but from the systematic negation of

aging bodies by patriarchal culture and the ruthless abandonment of valueless bodies by capital-she internalizes the stigma of aging bodies by society and capital into her self-cognition, firmly believing that her aging body "is not worthy of being loved" and "is not worthy of being respected." Even the indifferent attitude of the male neighbor Mark becomes evidence to confirm this cognition, eventually leading to severe self-alienation.

But Elizabeth is not completely passive in submitting to discipline. When Sue's betrayal and excessive demands accelerate her physical decline, she tries to end Sue by ordering a terminator to break free from the constraints of the symbiotic relationship and regain control of her body and identity. Although this attempt ultimately fails due to her obsession with fame, it clearly reflects Elizabeth's active resistance to the predicament of gender performativity-she longs to break the binary opposition between the "mother body" and the "other body," get rid of the limitations of gender norms and capital logic on self-identity, and redefine the connotation of "woman." This act of resistance echoes de Beauvoir's core view that "women must achieve self-liberation through active action"<sup>[2]</sup>.

### **2.3 The Subversion of Performativity: From Physical Confrontation to Identity Reconstruction**

In the film, the situation where Sue kills Elizabeth to completely replace her and eventually derives a monster marks a fundamental transformation of gender performativity from passive submission to active subversion. Sue's act of killing Elizabeth is not a simple power struggle but a complete resistance to the control of the "mother body"-she refuses to exist as Elizabeth's "young substitute" any longer, longing to completely get rid of her instrumental nature and become an independent gender subject; the emergence of the monster is the ultimate subversion of patriarchal gender norms and capital gaze-it integrates Elizabeth's aging and Sue's youth, breaks the binary opposition of "young/aging," "perfect/deformed," and "obedient/rebel," and presents a new gender form that does not conform to any existing norms.

The monster puts on a gorgeous dress, puts shiny earrings on the sarcoma on her head, curls her messy hair with a curling iron, sticks Sue's photo on her face, and struggles to walk towards the

New Year's Eve party stage she has always been obsessed with. This act is the ultimate deconstruction of gender performativity: she no longer caters to any script of the "ideal woman," but completes the final performance in her true form. However, the audience under the stage does not give her recognition. All the praise and obsession with Sue at the beginning turn into sharp blades stabbing her. All the men who once courted her roughly push her away and call her a "freak." This violent response exactly confirms the director's intention: the more absurd and playful the gaze in the first half, the more resounding the counter-gaze in the second half; the more glamorous and sexy the body in the first half, the more terrifying and pitiful the monster in the second half.

This subversion accurately echoes Butler's core view: the subversiveness of gender performativity lies in its ability to break the stability of existing norms through the repetition and deviation of them, opening up space for diverse gender possibilities.<sup>[5]</sup> The physical form and behavioral mode of the monster completely deviate from all the expectations of patriarchal culture and capital logic for women-she is no longer young and beautiful, no longer gentle and obedient, but full of aggression and destructiveness, yet exists in the most authentic state. This image powerfully proves that there is not only one "correct" form of female gender, and diverse gender expressions are equally legitimate. Gender norms and aesthetic standards are not unshakable iron laws. Although the monster ultimately dissolves, her appearance has an irreplaceable symbolic significance: she provides a new way of thinking for contemporary women to break through gender predicaments-women do not have to passively cater to patriarchal aesthetic norms and capital needs, do not have to bind their self-worth to a single physical form, but can break the shackles of the binary gender framework, reconstruct their self-identity, and ultimately achieve true gender liberation through active performative practices.

## **3. Women's Survival Tragedy Under Consumerism and Capital Alienation**

### **3.1 The Commodification of Women's Bodies by Consumerism**

Through advertising, media, and other channels, consumerism packages women's bodies as core

consumable commodities, constantly strengthening the hegemonic concept that "women must beautify their bodies by purchasing commodities." In the film, the advertisement for "the perfect substance" accurately captures women's deep anxiety about aging, transforming the "young body" into a directly purchasable commodity-"One injection, say goodbye to aging, and create a younger, more beautiful, and perfect version of yourself." This highly tempting propaganda is essentially the complete commodification of women's bodies by consumerism: women's bodies are no longer carriers of self-expression, but commodities that can be transformed and traded through money, and women's self-worth is crudely simplified to the aesthetic value of the body.

Elizabeth's crazy purchase and deep dependence on "the perfect substance" are typical manifestations of women's self-alienation under consumerism. She spends a huge amount of money to continuously purchase the agent, even at the cost of physical symbiosis and life exhaustion, trying to recover the lost professional status and social recognition by purchasing the commodity of "young body." The enthusiastic pursuit of Sue by capital and the male world further exacerbates this alienation-seeing the preferential treatment Sue receives due to her young body, she firmly believes in the consumerist logic that "youth = value" and falls into a deeper dependence on "the perfect substance." But she finally painfully discovers that this alienated self-salvation is nothing but a carefully designed trap by consumerism and capital-she not only fails to obtain true freedom and dignity but also falls into a deeper level of physical control, becoming a victim of the collusion between consumerism, patriarchal culture, and capital, and her life is ruthlessly swallowed up by "the perfect substance" and Sue.

### **3.2 The Distortion of Women's Relationships by Capital Alienation**

The profit-driven logic of capital not only completely alienates the relationship between women and their own bodies but also seriously distorts the relationships between women. In the film, the relationship between Elizabeth and Sue evolves from initial symbiotic dependence to final life-and-death confrontation, which is essentially an inevitable result of the role of

capital alienation-as a high-value commodity of "young body," Sue receives far more attention, resources, and opportunities than Elizabeth. This huge gap in "market value" not only threatens Elizabeth's status but also arouses her strong jealousy; Sue's extreme cherishment of the capital dividends carried by the "young body" also makes her have a complex emotion of both dependence and exclusion towards Elizabeth, who provides the "means of production," and finally chooses betrayal and destruction to monopolize the "commodity value."

As another person who uses "the perfect substance" says to Elizabeth: "Every time (you switch), it becomes harder and harder for you to remember that you are still worthy of existing." Capital plays a role in fueling the flames in this internal competition among women. It places women in a vicious competitive relationship of "zero-sum game." Instead of being mutual assistance and supportive partners, women become opponents who attack each other to compete for "young bodies" and "social resources." This internal consumption competition not only seriously weakens the cohesion of the female group but also further consolidates the rule of patriarchy and capital-women consume a lot of energy in internal competition, unable to resist external gender oppression and capital exploitation, and eventually fall into a vicious cycle of "being disciplined-internal consumption-being further oppressed." When Elizabeth and Sue finally face each other, there is no communication at all, only violent physical conflict. Essentially, the young self kills the old self, and at the same time kills its own existence. This phenomenon confirms Du Fangqin's judgment on the predicament of contemporary feminist movements: capital weakens the power of collective resistance by creating internal competition among women<sup>[4]</sup>.

### **3.3 The Breakthrough of Alienation: Subjectivity Awakening and Tragic Ending**

At the end of the film, Elizabeth's remaining face rests on her own star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame, smiling and dissolving into a pool of blood. This scene is not a simple tragic ending but contains profound breakthrough significance: at the last moment of her life, Elizabeth finally breaks free from the triple control of her body by consumerism, patriarchal culture, and capital logic, and regains the subjectivity of her

body-she no longer binds her self-worth to a young body, social recognition, or commercial value, but calmly accepts her identity, experiences, and imperfections. As director Coralie Fargeat says: "She no longer sees herself through any prescribed standards of beauty." Even if her body completely dissolves, she bids farewell to the world in a calm and composed manner, achieving spiritual liberation. This cognitive breakthrough of self-essence is one of the core goals pursued by feminism, that is, to achieve individual spiritual autonomy and self-consistency. In this sense, her awakening has undeniable feminist progress.

However, from a social structural perspective, the "tragedy" of this ending cannot be ignored: although the monster's explosion vents its hatred for the gazers, it does not shake the foundation of patriarchal discipline and capital logic except for splashing blood on others. This dilemma of "individual liberation but unchanged structure" exactly reveals the complex reality of contemporary women's liberation movements-individual resistance of women can often achieve self-breakthrough, but it is difficult to directly change the deeply rooted structural oppression. Elizabeth's self-destruction is not only a resolute accusation against the oppressive system but also an inevitable result of the sense of powerlessness of individuals in the face of a strong structure. It is not an "invalid resistance," but completes a dual mission in an extreme form: on the one hand, the individual achieves self-redemption through spiritual awakening, fulfilling the core pursuit of feminism for "subjectivity construction"; on the other hand, this tragic resistance reveals the stubbornness of structural oppression with its shock power, providing spiritual enlightenment and realistic mirror for subsequent collective resistance.

From a dialectical perspective, Elizabeth's ending is a unity of "limited victory" and "profound tragedy": its "victory" lies in the realization of individual spiritual liberation and subjectivity awakening, completing the redefinition of women's self-worth; its "tragedy" lies in the fact that this liberation can only be achieved at the cost of self-destruction, and fails to change the overall oppressive structure. This seemingly contradictory dual attribute exactly reflects the real dilemma of the feminist movement-in the current situation where structural oppression has not been completely eliminated, individual liberation is often

accompanied by sacrifice, and every individual's awakening and resistance are accumulating strength for collective liberation. As Foucault said, power and resistance are always symbiotic, and every resistance is shaking the foundation of power<sup>[3]</sup>. This clearly reveals a fact: within the binary opposition structure of the social gender system, from a historical and cross-cultural perspective, the male side always holds a superior position over the female side, possessing more power and resources than the females.<sup>[8]</sup> Elizabeth's ending is not the end of feminism, but in a tragic way, calling for a larger-scale collective resistance, promoting gender liberation from individual awakening to structural transformation.

#### **4. Conclusion**

With the narrative form of body horror, the film *The Substance* profoundly reveals the physical predicament and gender anxiety of contemporary women under the triple oppression of patriarchy, consumerism, and capital logic. As the winner of the Best Screenplay Award at the Cannes Film Festival, the film adopts a controversial expression of "using the gaze to counter the gaze," vividly shows the predicament and resistance of gender performativity through extreme visual impact and profound symbolic metaphors, and powerfully proves that gender is not an inherent essence but a performative effect that can be reconstructed through active practice; at the same time, through the physical symbiosis, confrontation, and destruction of Elizabeth and Sue, the film concretely presents the pervasiveness of patriarchal aesthetic discipline, consumerist alienation, and capital exploitation, sharply criticizes the commodification of women's bodies and the distortion of women's relationships, and calls on women to rebuild the subjectivity of their bodies.

In terms of practical significance, the film provides important enlightenment for the contemporary feminist movement: in today's society, women still face hidden and harsh physical control, gender oppression, and capital exploitation. To achieve gender liberation, it is necessary to break the traditional norms that "women must be young and beautiful" and "women must be obedient," and recognize the diverse forms of gender and bodies; at the same time, women must always be alert to the traps of consumerism and capital, refuse to bind their self-worth to bodies or commodities, but define

themselves through multiple dimensions such as self-identity and ability development; more importantly, the female group needs to unite, break the internal consumption competition, jointly resist structural oppression, and build a diverse and equal gender culture.

As Butler states in *Gender Trouble*: "The goal of gender politics is not to create new gender norms, but to open up the field of gender possibilities."<sup>[5]</sup> Exactly through image narrative, *The Substance* has opened up new space for the field of gender possibilities. It reminds us that gender liberation is not an unattainable utopia, but requires every woman to continuously break through norms, reconstruct herself through active practice and resistance, and ultimately achieve the dual freedom of body and spirit. This liberation movement not only requires individual awakening but also needs the unity and continuous struggle of the group to truly shake the dual rule of patriarchy and capital.

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