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Lights, Colours, and Sounds: Visual Grammar in *The Substance* and *The Neon Demon* as a Lens on Beauty's Horrors

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Abstract:

This study examines the subgenre of body horror in contemporary cinema through Coralie Fargeat's *The Substance* (2024) and Nicolas Winding Refn's *The Neon Demon* (2016), focusing on mise-en-scène elements—cinematography, lighting, colour palettes, sound design, costumes, and prosthetics—as tools for narrative depth and socio-cultural critique. Drawing on visual grammar (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2020) and embodied event theory (Sharjeel and Dadabhoy, 2013), the analysis reveals how these films subvert hegemonic ideals of beauty, aging, and commodification in Hollywood and fashion industries. Mirrors, empty spaces, Dutch angles, and fish-eye shots evoke alienation and unease; warm hues juxtaposed with grotesque decay heighten irony; sonic elements like squelching sounds and silence amplify somatic empathy; and costumes symbolize power hierarchies and psychological shifts. Ultimately, the interplay of visual and auditory modes crafts multimodal discourses that terrify while provoking reflection on body image exploitation, urging reevaluation of visual culture's impact on identity in a digitally scrutinized era.

Keywords- Body horror, mise-en-scène, visual, beauty.

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Introduction

The horror genre, particularly its subgenre of body horror, thrives on the subversion of the corporeal and the psychological, challenging audiences to confront the fragility of the human form and the societal constructs that govern it. In contemporary cinema, films like Coralie Fargeat's *The Substance* (2024) and Nicolas Winding Refn's *The Neon Demon* (2016) exemplify this through their masterful deployment of mise-en-scène—encompassing lighting, colour palettes, and costume—as pivotal tools for narrative conveyance and thematic depth. These elements do not merely embellish the visual frame; they constitute a multimodal discourse that, as Kress and van Leeuwen (2020) articulate in their framework of visual grammar, decodes complex socio-cultural codes embedded within the imagery.

Visual grammar is a methodology that involves the understanding of visual elements such as composition, colour, and perspective to understand the complex social and cultural codes present in the films. By prioritizing visual language over dialogue, both films immerse viewers in a sensory realm where the body becomes a site of contestation, critiquing hegemonic ideals of beauty, aging, and commodification in the entertainment and fashion industries.

In *The Substance*, the protagonist Elisabeth Sparkle's descent into self-loathing and monstrous transformation is amplified through strategic lighting and colour contrasts that underscore her alienation from her aging body. Similarly, *The Neon Demon* employs a neon-saturated palette of blues and reds to symbolize the predatory allure and violence of the modeling world, where Jesse's ascent to stardom is marked by high-key lighting that evolves into ominous shadows, reflecting the industry's ephemeral valorization of "natural" beauty.

Costume, as an extension of character ontology, further reinforces these critiques. Drawing from Yin's assertion that attire reveals shifts in aesthetic tastes and emotional

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conveyance, the films utilize wardrobe to delineate power hierarchies and psychological states. In *The Neon Demon*, Jesse's initial flowy, ethereal dresses signify innocence, only to be supplanted by metallic, rigid ensembles that mirror her hardening narcissism and the industry's commodifying gaze. Prosthetics in *The Substance* elevate this to the posthuman, with Elisabeth's warped forms—crafted through innovative makeup—embodying the "monstrous feminine" as a rebuke to societal pressures on women's bodies. These techniques align with Tony Brown's view that films reinforce or challenge ideologies by mirroring cultural norms, here exposing the destructive obsession with youth and perfection.

This analysis posits that the mise-en-scène in these films—particularly lights, colours, and costumes—serves as a genre-defining apparatus for intensifying horror while engaging with ethical dilemmas surrounding body image and exploitation. By examining the shots, mirrors, and spatial compositions alongside auditory elements (though secondary here), this chapter illuminates how visual elements create unease, fostering a deeper understanding of body horror's role in cultural discourse. Ultimately, these films' innovative interplay of mise-en-scène not only terrifies but also provokes reflection on the visceral impacts of beauty standards, inviting audiences to decode the "unsaid" horrors lurking in plain sight.

1.1Cinematography

“Cinematographers utilize a new language in which numerous expressive means have become intimately entwined after synthesizing the works of literature, painting, music, theater, and photography” (Orifjonovich 25).

The dystopian Hollywood world of Los Angeles in *The Substance* places the viewers in a realm of uncertainty and fear – quintessential elements in body horror – to establish their alienation from their realities. Such a disconnection is being brought sequentially, often interrupting the harlequin, rainbow-like landscape of the TV reality-world through the

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monotonous shots of empty city alleyways. By following Elisabeth's secretive movements through such spaces to collect the "elixir", Benjamin Kracun, the cinematographer of *The Substance*, was successful in creating distressing and often claustrophobic illusions in the audience on the confusing or even predatory nature of the setting. The insipid or almost abandoned environment also functions to reveal the inner turmoil and deep-rooted insecurities of the main character regarding her body image and crippling societal pressure upon her.

Mirrors remain a substantial symbol in the selected films. In *The Substance*, Elisabeth's self-loathing appears to have begun from seeing her reflection in the mirror; the multiple long stare-downs in the mirror by Elisabeth and Sue, at different instances, stand to reimburse Elisabeth's socially inflicted self-hatred for her aging body and her destructive obsession with a younger and socially acceptable appearance. Elisabeth, not feeling beautiful even after dressing up to go out for a date with one of her old friends and wiping off her makeup aggressively, is a powerful scene that portrays the complete breakdown of identity; she can no longer accept or even exist, embracing her natural self.

In *The Neon Demon*, the recurrent motif of mirrors generates an inherent instability in subjectivity, as characters are often portrayed solely through their reflections, preventing a fixed positioning within the visual frame. Exemplary scenes include Jesse and Ruby's initial meeting amid the photoshoot, the washroom dialogue among Ruby, Gigi, Sarah, and Jesse during the party, Jesse's fleeting appearances and vanishings in her motel room mirror, and her intimate kiss upon her own reflection. These moments collectively pulse with a critique of society's entrenched obsession with beauty, which in turn engenders hierarchical power dynamics within an industry already embedded in hegemonic social frameworks. Moreover, the film consistently applies the golden ratio principle, strategically placing subjects in compositions that prioritize visual prominence and enhance spectator engagement.

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There are empty spaces in the films, where the characters are placed with empty spaces ahead of them, as if they are walking into a new arena. Elisabeth walking away from the studio through the long hallway and Sue walking into the studio through the same corridor embody the rejection of the old and veneration of the new body. Jesse, in *The Neon Demon,* stepping into the fashion industry, the scene at the party, with only her moving forward while other similar-looking bodies of the models are static, and her standing on the edge of a cliff spreading her hands towards the vast expanse of the city represents her sudden journey to the top of the fashion world.

Lines seem to be a major meaning-making tool by Coralie Fargeat. The static images of long corridors, tiled bathrooms, and an assortment of lockers where the substance is kept for possible customers all have an abundant usage of lines, which elongates the shot and seems to extend out of the frame, which extends the world of horror. The full body shots of Elisabeth standing in the corridor represent the TV world that does not see women as anything more than their bodies. The sensations created by images have been used by horror as if what is left unsaid yet in plain sight to decode is scarier than what is said outright.

The Dutch angle, also known as an oblique angle, which tilts the image to one side of its horizon, is commonly found in horror movies. It is present in The Substance when the shift between Elisabeth and Sue occurs, and it is dominant in the final scene of transformation, where the "monster" is born. The surreal and dreadful feel to the scene is mainly due to the angle used to capture it. The sudden switching of angles creates a sense of intimacy of threat, creating a startle reflex.

The fish-eye shots in *The Substance* play on the spatiality of characters and make the viewers feel as if they are taking a closer look at them while simultaneously taking up the whole space

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in the frame, Coralie calls it the "eating of the space", the character walking into an extreme closeup, especially of the eyes in the movie (Vanity Fair 2025).

The tracking shot of the profoundly aged Elisabeth, followed by the high-angle shot and low-angle shot simultaneously employed in the scene of the murder of Elisabeth by Sue, epitomises the destruction of Elisabeth. The overhead shot of Elisabeth's bloody body marks the instance of slasher horror where Sue is drenched in blood, Elisabeth's blood, which is in essence, her own. The brutality with which she kills her own matrix of life creates a gagging discomfort and threat. Elisabeth is reduced to a corpse in her quest for beauty and the beautiful being, Sue also meets the same fate due to her obsession with the body. The POV shot of Sue losing her teeth, ears, and attributes contrasts sharply with the scenes in the beginning where often her pretty mouth was shown in extreme closeups, a sexualised version for voyeurism.

1.2 Lighting

The Substance and *The Neon Demon* employ a clever play of lights to convey meaning, social commentary, enhance the surreal, and heighten anxiety. Lighting remains an irreplaceable tool of filmmaking. "Being able to manipulate lighting can create a great number of effects that are used to convey feelings, emotions, and even responses in the audience. Three-point lighting is the most common form of lighting" (Mahira et al 144). The added dimension of the image adds to the intensity of the effect. The tone and mood of a scene is established by the lighting and this technique have been used from the classics like *Nosferatu* (1922), *The Phantom of the Opera* (1925), *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1920), and *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1920).

Visual contrast is one of the best aspects of the genre and the high contrast scenes – the ones in black and white bathroom in *The Substance* and the dark and bright lighting in *The Neon Demon.* Refn loves using dark, moody and white settings with central composition and

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Rembrandt lighting, which creates a dramatic yet natural look like the scene at the café with Ruby,Sarah and Gigi talking about Jesse.

The evolution of the character, the brooding setting of the body horror, and the contrast of dark and light that intensifies the reaction of the audience are conveyed through lighting. The close-up shots of skin on Elisabeth get progressively more disgusting, critiquing the blind quest for beauty that ends in self-destruction. The micro shot of Harvey eating shrimp is considered as the scariest scene in the movie by Demi Moore. The scene becomes a metaphor as the shells of shrimps are similar to Elisabeth, whose body is discarded after consuming the succulent meat. The society's predatory nature on women and the temporary value attributed to their bodies is symbolised in the scene. The age is clearly visualised by the macroshots. The discomfort evoked in the audience is a result of those scenes that feel like the characters are breaking the wall and talking directly to the audience. The close-up of the eyes seems to be a repeated shot, an indicator of the constant viewership and scrutinising the women's body is subjected to.

Warm hues of yellow, orange, and pink—traditionally associated with vitality—subvert expectations by enveloping scenes of grotesque bodily disintegration, heightening the irony of her pursuit of eternal youth. The flashes and glitches of light, overexposure of lighting, and blank canvases of light make up the modern cinematic genre of body horror. The scene in *The Neon Demon,* where the light keeps on flashing while the smiles on the characters' faces grow with intense music, creates unease and a sense of progression to something horrific.

Ambient lighting of blue and red colours dominates *The Neon Demon* while *The Substance* uses warmer colours of yellow, orange and pink even in scenes of body horror, subverting the convention of using dark colours for horror. The warmer colours contrast heavily with the context portrayed- the psychological breakdown of Elisabeth, selfishness and

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obsession of Elisabeth and Sue and instances of even disgust. The scenes of Sue breaking out of Elisabeth's body, Sue's body falling apart after killing Elisabeth and the birth of the monster are depicted in hi The blurry relation or even the lack of relation with the setting and context exaggerates the horror.

The Neon Demon depiction of the brutal beauty industry that restricts women and cages them into a single beauty standard is through the usage of lights. High key lighting is employed during the beginning in scenes of Jesse. The dark scenes express the impending horror and the eerier set up for an industry that values appearance over substance. Ruby, Sarah, and Gigi are almost always featured in red lighting which gives a sense of danger and violence. All the scenes with red lighting are making the viewers anticipate a horrific tragedy that only unfolds in the end, surprisingly in dim ambient lighting. The medium shot at the party where they watch an aerobic show with the woman suspended in the middle of the room in which the contrast of red and black turning to white and black adds depth to the composition.

1.3 Sound Design

Michael Chion, in his 2018 work, *Audio-Vision,* has stated that studying a film's sound and image independently of each other would make no sense. This seems to be extremely true in the case of horrors and body horrors as the terror and uncanny can be evoked only with the attribution of disturbing sounds or even with the prolongation of familiar sounds that create unease. The sonic genre of horror adds to building viewer anticipation, often allowing the audience to create a mental map of the cinematic space. Bardini was of the view that one way of analysing films is by considering them texts: they are audiovisual texts composed of information conveyed via two modes, verbal and non-verbal, and two channels, auditory and visual**.** The fusion of image and sound produces dimensionality which the mind projects back onto the image as if it had come from the image.

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> "The most successful sounds seem not only to alter what the audience sees but to go further and trigger a kind of *conceptual resonance* between image and sound: the sound makes us see the image differently, and then this new image makes us hear the sound differently, which in turn makes us see something else in the image, which makes us hear different things in the sound, and so on"(Chion 19).

Sounds in films can be diegetic or nondiegetic; the former includes the sound that belongs to the fictional world of film, of visible sources like dialogues, live music, and ambient music, while the latter comes from outside the fictional world of film. They expand the fictional space beyond the borders of the screen. Sounds that invoke disgust are highlighted in *The Substance* to showcase the discomfort associated with aging and the disintegration of the human body and its limitations. Elisabeth's bones cracking as she tries to stand up after the misuse of the substance, the squelching sound when Sue extracts the fluid from Elisabeth's infected flesh and the famous scene of Harvey eating the shrimps with loud smacking and sucking noises are instances when sound and image shift perspective and the whole story of women being commodified and treated as a product to be marketed is evident in Harvey's line, "I have to give people what they want" (00:08:22). The click of Harvey's boots is a part of his visual presence, showcasing his dominating power in the industry and in extension, the dominant male gaze on women.

Nis Gron commented on how ambient noises contribute to this mental process of spatial mapping because they provide an aural backdrop that encloses the setting while simultaneously functioning, in collaboration with the music, to foreground the specific tone and direction of the scene. The ambient sound during the scenes of Jesse getting ready for the runway and at the house before being murdered creates a surreal mood as if the sound works as a medium that allows viewership into Jesse's thoughts, and the mood created is not as pretty as her. The

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meaning-making of the visuals can be drastically upturned with the sonic elements. The sound during the switch between Elisabeth and Sue adds to the sonic space, intensifying the uncanny in the movie as "when the volume fluctuates, the uncomfortable noise makes the audience nervous about what will or has happened on the screen" (Fu 39).

Silence stands as a metaphor for the psychological tension in *The Substance* experienced by Elisabeth and the viewership of the body in *The Neon Demon.* Metaphorical silence can be part of any genre, though it is perhaps best known in the genres of Gothic and horror. Silence, or the absence of sound, indicates the presence of invisible, intangible beings in these genres. The silent judgement passed about women's bodies and how they are constantly seen as emblems of mental health and value of women in the socio-cultural discourse is represented with the absence of sound.

1.4 Costume and Prosthetics

Clothing adds to the deeper symbolism of the movies as they become an extension of the characters themselves. "In visual arts such as film and television, costume is one of the most expressive elements. It can not only reveal the changes in people's lifestyle and aesthetic taste in the background of the times, but also express emotions and convey messages through the actors' styling" (Yin, 20). The costume designer of *The Neon Demon*, Erin Benach, said, "We knew from the start that we needed to find clothing that would carry the story on its own" (Clever&Chic 2021).

The attire of Ruby, Gigi, and Sarah showcases the different kinds of beauty they represent. Ruby is a makeup artist who creates beauty and is a professional in the field. Gigi stands for manufactured beauty, one who has fallen under the capitalist marketing of beauty and cosmetic surgery, while Sarah is the older model who has lost her relevance with the arrival of Jessie, with her embellished dress and minimal jewellery. The costumes are not just a

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tangible depiction of themselves but a reflection of the real psychological pressure they experience.

The audience is brought into a dramatic fashion world, where beauty is created, which heavily relies on visual pleasure for its business. The opening scene of Jessie wearing the Blue dress, a 2015 Armani set, a high-end brand, points to the materialistic and capitalist outlook of the industry. The colour-play in the scene, with Jessi's pale face contrasted with the saturated rhinestones and colourful makeup, adds to the juxtaposition of beauty as a philosophy and commodity to the industry.

The long and flowy dresses adorned by Jessie in the first half of the movie established her innocence as a sixteen-year-old girl and also hinted at the Greco-Roman Godly status associated with her in a world of cut-throat competition. Jessie's transformation from a naïve girl into a hardened model is conveyed through the change of wardrobe as the long and flowy dresses are replaced by black and metallic clothing. The gold colour being painted on her intensifies her position and her success in the industry. She is the girl with the 'thing' at the moment; the temporal nature of fame in the modelling world is exemplified. Jessi's character portrays the unattainable 'natural' beauty hailed by the fashion industry; her purity is elevated even in the end, in the blue gown she adorns at the time of her death. The look is eerily similar to an ad campaign, the medium that implements the industry's agenda of ethereal beauty in the mainstream cultural discourse.

The audition scene where the models are in their undergarments adds to the aperture that is formed between the young and old, Jessie, and other models. She is the only one in a light nude set, while Sarah has almost the same set in a darker nude colour, as if to represent her age, while others are wearing black sets. The narcissistic nature growing within Jessie takes its full form in the runway scene, where she is wearing a dress with Swarovski diamonds. She

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believes herself to be above everyone due to her 'natural' beauty, evident in the scene where she says, "I don't wanna be them. They want to be me" (01:09:57).

As fashion serves as a marker of societal norms as well as aspirations, the storytelling is visually carried with the fashion, adding a darker shade. The sculpted and non-pliable costumes of Gigi and Sarah symbolize the jarring, constricting nature of the fashion industry that still does not allow inclusivity and holds a single 'standardized' view on what it means to be beautiful.

Prosthetics have also been a dominant part of body horror, as it is the only way to showcase a non-human, human-made body. With the advancement in cinematic makeup and prosthetic design, contemporary movies are able to visually represent the posthuman elements, and movies like *Titane* (2021) and *Crimes of the Future* (2022). *The Substance* took the use of prosthetics to a higher level in its creation of the monstrous feminine- the crooked old witch look that Elisabeth takes due to Sue's disrespect for keeping the balance and the monstrous form that evolves into after injecting herself with the substance.

Conclusion

In synthesizing the mise-en-scène of The Substance and The Neon Demon, lighting, colour, and costume emerge as foundational to body horror, evoking terror while critiquing societal pathologies like female body commodification and unattainable beauty standards. These films' visual strategies mirror cultural anxieties: The Substance's warm, subversive palettes—juxtaposing pinkish hues with bodily decay—intensify Elisabeth's psychological breakdown, whereas The Neon Demon's ambient blues and reds signal the fashion industry's violent undercurrents. Costumes and prosthetics embody inner turmoil and constraints, as Yin's framework highlights their symbolic depth.

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This interplay crafts a multimodal narrative that decodes visual grammar to expose power dynamics and ethical dilemmas. Mirrors and empty spaces under high-contrast lighting symbolize fragmentation and alienation; costumes mark hierarchies, from Jesse's ethereal gowns to metallic armour, or Elisabeth's prosthetic transformations, critiquing posthumanism. Augmented by sound's somatic resonance, this creates an "embodied event", articulated by Sharjeel and Dadabhoy, inducing audience discomfort, subverting ideologies. By defying tropes with overexposed flashes and warm-toned gore, the films render the familiar uncanny and beauty grotesque.

In media studies, body horror lenses capitalist exploitation in Hollywood and fashion. The analysis underscores beauty's duality—shallow yet profound—warning against self-destruction amid digital scrutiny and urging re-evaluation of visual culture's identity impact.

Future research could explore AI-generated imagery's blurring of subject-object boundaries in horror. Ultimately, these films affirm mise-en-scene's power in body horror: not just to frighten, but to expose societal horrors through lights revealing vulnerabilities, colours stirring unease, and costumes signifying entrapment, cultivating empathy in a visually saturated era.

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