Monstrous Disorders: The Dysmorphic Gothic in *Frankenstein* and *The Substance*

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Abstract

Although centuries separate Coralie Fargeat's *The Substance* from Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818, 1831), both texts conceptualize self-representation through scenes of reproduction. *The Substance*, less concerned with men 'playing God,' provides a feminist critique of the ways female bodies are often violently objectified by technologically reproduced images. In so doing, the film elucidates the ways that Shelley's novel likewise stages problems of self-representation through the gothic disjunction between the body and its image. Read together, Fargeat's film and Shelley's novel surface the dysmorphia that underwrites processes of self-representation and technological reproduction. *The Substance* turns the leitmotif of gothic doubling and the dysmorphia it entails in *Frankenstein* into a critique of bodily norms for women. When Elisabeth Sparkle attempts to revivify her aging body by taking a drug that promises rejuvenation, the eponymous substance

leads to a monstrous birth where the hypnotically sexualized Sue bursts from Sparkle's back. This scene inverts the processes of abjection at work in *Frankenstein*: the 'perfect' woman is the monster produced by Sparkle's dysmorphic relationship to her aging body. Sparkle's desire and hate for the 'perfect' monster manifest through intense fits of rage she directs at herself, locating her own body as the abject maternal. By interpreting the ways *The Substance* reimagines *Frankenstein*'s concern with self-representation and reproduction, the essay reveals how body dysmorphia produces a disjuncture between the body and its image that begets abject monsters who elicit hate. Ironically, both Victor and Elisabeth turn their hate on the body in an effort to destroy the monstrous image their bodies beget.

Introduction

When Sue first bursts out of Elisabeth Sparkle's spine in the first act of *The Substance* (2024), Coralie Fargeat's film thematizes the problems of self-representation through a monstrous birth. Although centuries separate the film from Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818, 1831), the two texts both conceptualize self-representation through scenes of reproduction. *The Substance*, less concerned with men 'playing God,' provides a feminist critique of the ways female bodies are often violently objectified by technologically reproduced images. Read together, the film elucidates the ways that Shelley's novel likewise stages problems of self-representation through the gothic disjunction between the body and its image. In other words, Fargeat's film and Shelley's novel surface the body dysmorphia that underwrites processes of self-representation.

According to DSM-IV, body dysmorphic disorder (BDD) names an experience in which an individual demonstrates "a preoccupation with an imagined defect in appearance" or obsesses over "a slight anomaly" (Bjornosson et al. 222). The emphasis in diagnostic language on imagined defects and exaggerations of slight imperfections situates BDD as a disorder marked by the disjuncture between body and the image of the body an individual perceives. In turn, this disjuncture often leads the individual suffering from BDD to engage in compulsive exercise, diet, or pursue cosmetic procedures to reshape the body (Bjornosson et al. 222). However, because the sufferer imagines the bodily defect, these material interventions, unable to address the psychic disjuncture, fail to achieve the desired end. As a result, the dysmorphic subject compulsively attempts to construct, and reconstruct, an image of themselves both materially—diet, exercise, surgery—and technologically.

While Fargeat's film turns body dysmorphia into body horror in less than subtle ways, *Frankenstein* provides a template for considering how self-representation produces dysmorphic self-relations. In her essay "My Monster/Myself" (1982), Barbara Johnson argues that the creature represents Victor's "impulse to construct an image of himself" (4). That Victor finds this image horrifying suggests he experiences a dysmorphic relationship to his body. Moreover, the creature is not just a body image. As Eve Sedgwick argues, "paranoid gothic" texts like *Frankenstein*

introduce a split within the subject to represent intrapsychic conflicts as intersubjective exchanges (187). As Victor's dysmorphic body image, the creature represents psychic states that he cannot integrate into a narrative about himself. In other words, the creature's abject body encodes what Victor must exclude from himself.

Julia Kristeva explains that abjection results from the "narcissistic crisis" that ensues for an infant when they confront the division between themselves and the maternal body (40-41). In the face of separateness, the infant attempts to rid themselves of privation by externalizing their disappointed desire: a hallucinatory image of the revengeful and cruel mother bears the burden of disassociated psychic pain. The process of abjection displaces distressing emotional states into these "highly condensed," abject bodily images that threaten the individual from the outside but nonetheless remain deformed self-images—what Barbara Creed terms "the monstrous feminine" (Kristeva 41, Creed 5, 8-11). Put another way, abjection produces representations of an individual's archaic undifferentiated relation to the maternal body that have been so thoroughly separated from their self-concept that they appear as monsters. In turn, abject matter—vomit, urine, excrement, blood, and corpses—become reminders of this psychic process. Thus, Victor's abject self-representation takes the form of a body made up of abject materials: human and animal remains. Moreover, the unfinished body of the monstress points to the maternal origins of his creature. While Victor's mother insists on his quasi-incestuous marriage to his "more than sister" Elizabeth in ways that, according to Johnson, cannot but induce Oedipal terror and rage, Victor represents both women throughout the novel as nurturing victims (9). He splits off their monstrous desires, banishing them into an abject maternal body he can destroy (Johnson 9-10).[1]

In contrast to interpretations that read the creature as Victor's monstrous double, critical disability scholars like Martha Stoddard Holmes view the creature as an allegory for relationships between new parents

1 For more on the mother and incestuous desire in *Frankenstein* see David Collings' "The Monster and the Maternal Thing: Mary Shelley's Critique of Ideology;" Paul Youngquist, "*Frankenstein*: The Mother, the Daughter, and the Monster;" Elissa Marder, "The Mother Tongue in *Frankenstein* and *Phedre*."

and visibly disabled infants. In this interpretive framework, Victor rejects the creature to which he "gives birth" because of the creature's "deformity" (Holmes 373). Rosmarie Garland-Tompson observes that "the birth of a disabled child or the onset of disability is [often] seen as a catastrophe or a failing," in which putative pleasures of parenthood give way to a fear of the disabled body (340). Still, the monster's deformity lacks specificity, and, if anything, he is more able-bodied than humans—larger, faster, and stronger. As Essaka Joushua contends, the creature separates physical "impairment from the social disadvantages of deformity" (31). Put differently, though the monster is ugly, his deformity remains entirely aesthetic. Even so, as Denise Gigante argues, his "unearthly ugliness" ruptures systems of aesthetic judgement, challenging representation itself (367). As such, the creature, who is "almost too horrible for human eyes," threatens social intelligibility and even Victor's ability to see (Gigante 367-8). Each time the creature appears he disrupts Victor's visual field. The abject monster, then, is not only deformed, but proliferates visual impairment: Victor sees him by "a glimmer of half extinguished light," "the yellow light of the moon," "flashes of lightining [sic]," "gloom," "impenetrable darkness," reflections in glass, and split images (127, 59, 60, 74, 75). While the creature narrates the horrified reactions of those individuals he encounters, the novel's narrative framing and these two strains of criticism about the novel force readers to choose: does this monster exist as an allegory for a 'hideously deformed' and rejected 'child,' or is the creature a blinding and abject hallucination? By joining psychoanalytic and disability interpretations of *Frankenstein*, this article uncovers how the leitmotif of gothic doubling produces abject body images that appear through and reinforce social constructions of beauty and ugliness.

The Substance, however, turns the leitmotif of gothic doubling and the dysmorphia it entails in *Frankenstein* into a more explicit critique of bodily norms for women, including the social construction of beauty and deformity in terms of race, gender, class, and disability. When Elisabeth Sparkle attempts to revitalize her aging body by taking a drug that promises rejuvenation, the eponymous substance leads to a monstrous birth where the hypnotically sexualized Sue bursts from Sparkle's back.

This scene inverts the processes of abjection at work in *Frankenstein*: the 'perfect' woman *is* the monster produced by Sparkle's dysmorphic relationship to her aging body. Sparkle's desire and hate for the 'perfect' monster manifests through intense fits of rage she directs at herself, locating her own body as the abject maternal. Read together, *Frankenstein* and *The Substance* reveal how body dysmorphia produces a disjuncture between the body and its image that begets abject monsters who elicit hate. Ironically, both Victor and Elisabeth turn their hate on the body in an effort to destroy the monstrous image their bodies beget.

In this respect, although *Frankenstein* and *The Substance* are works of fiction, as paranoid gothic texts, they represent the abject disjuncture between the body and its image at work in body dysmorphia. To explain body dysmorphia in terms of the abject, the article proceeds in three parts. The first section analyzes the importance of eating and feeding to the relationship between Victor and the creature. Drawing on Kristeva who grounds abjection in the bodily and psychic relations between mother and infant, this section first shows how these dynamics inform the symbiosis between Victor and the creature before turning to the ways that *The Substance* foregrounds feeding regimes more explicitly. The second section tracks the implications of these symbiotic links by surfacing the aggression that Kristeva argues maternal-infant feeding regimes always entail. The symbiotic feeding regimes between dysmorphic gothic pairs become increasingly destructive both of the body and its image because, as Kristeva suggests, hunger and aggressivity are "chronologically separable but logically coextensive" (39). The final section considers two possible outcomes for the dysmorphic subject: while *Frankenstein* implies that dysmorphic pairs can be reintegrated only through self-destruction, *The Substance* holds out a more reparative possibility. Even though the monster at the film's end, a disfigured, disabled composite of Elisabeth and Sue, falls to pieces, the scene of monstrous destruction and bodily disintegration nonetheless celebrates the reintegration of Elisabeth and Sue. Victor never recognized himself in his monster. However, Elisabeth and Sue finally embrace their monstrosity, healing a psychic split and, in so doing, resist the bodily norms and beauty standards that tore them apart.

Gothic Pairs and Feeding Regimes

While it is commonplace to view Victor and the creature as doubles, few scholars have attended to how the novel's representations of feeding underwrite this premise. This section reveals how feeding structures the psychic split between the body and its image that begets dysmorphic pairs by focusing on the ways hunger and visual perception structure the creature's narrative about his earliest experiences. For Kristeva, the abject self-image begins with the infant's relationship to the mother's body, namely the breast. As a source of sustenance, the infant both wants this breast and, in wanting it, angrily devours: "want and aggressivity are chronologically separable but logically coextensive" (39). Unable to bear the psychic pain of their own aggression, the infant, like Victor, evacuates anger into an abject figure that threatens them from the outside: "I'm not the one that devours, I am being devoured by him; a third person therefore is devouring me" (39). The displacement of an aggressive hunger for the mother onto an invented creature depends on a dysmorphic misrecognition. In other words, Victor displaces his hunger onto a body that is the distorted image of his own.

The creature's first experiences, then, fictionalize the birth of the dysmorphic image in terms of the perceptual distortions that enable it. The first experiences the creature narrates are "a strange multiplicity" of sensations (95). To achieve perceptual coherence, the creature must disrupt vision momentarily by blinking: "a stronger light pressed upon my nerves, so that I was obliged to shut my eyes. Darkness then came over me and troubled me, but hardly had I felt this when, by opening my eyes… the light poured in upon me again" (95). Once he learns to see his surroundings, he feels the torments of "hunger and thirst," linking his acquisition of perceptual coherence to the comprehension of hunger as a bodily need (95). In contrast, after seeing the creature open his eyes, Victor flees to his bed chamber in "breathless horror and disgust" and falls asleep (60). He wakes up to the creature: "He held up the curtain of the bed; and his eyes, if eyes they may be called, were fixed on me. His jaws opened, and he muttered some inarticulate sounds, while a grin wrinkled his cheek" (60). The creature grins and opens his mouth in greeting or as if to ask for food. Victor gives no response but

narrates the creature's eyes without giving them an explicit shape. His inability to describe the eyes beyond calling them into question suggests that these monstrous eyes disrupt Victor's vision in ways that mirror the creature's acquisition of it. That is, the visual distortions that enable the creature to see blind Victor. The split between the body and its displaced, hungry image binds Victor and his creature together as a symbiotic reproductive and reflective pair.

The creature's disruption of Victor's visual field informs his failure to register the newborn creature's hunger. Earlier in the novel, when Victor labors over the construction of the creature, his body becomes "emaciated with confinement" (57). Instead of eating, Victor substitutes the work of shaping and reshaping the monstrous body: "in scientific discovery there is continual food for discovery and wonder" (54). A dysmorphic subject, Victor refuses to eat until he perfects the body on which he labors. Concomitantly, the only descriptions of actual eating he gives during this period are abject: in his lab "bodies deprived of life … had become food for the worm" (55). Victor displaces descriptions of the corpses from which he harvests spare parts with the worms that feed on them. The description transforms the life-sustaining activity of eating into an abject act and 'food' into the most abject material: the corpse. These worms reappear in Victor's dream where his fiancée Elizabeth turns into the dead body of his mother. After he kisses her, he realizes that "I held the corpse of my dead mother in my arms; a shroud enveloped her form, and I saw the grave-worms crawling in the folds of the flannel" (60). Victor then wakes up to his hungry creature. The desire to kiss Elizabeth both conceals and reveals Victor's desire to consume his dead mother like a worm. However, Victor cannot own his desire. Instead, he displaces this dream logic onto his hungry, dysmorphic double.[2] When Victor evacuates the physical sensation of hunger into the body of his creature, he also attempts to empty himself of his mother—to abject his desire for her into the monstrous image. As such,

2 Barbara Johnson, Paul Youngquist, Elissa Marder, and David Collings all interpret this dream, arguing that it reflects in different ways Victor's desire for his dead mother. Barbara Johnson, "My Monster/Myself;" David Collings, "The Monster and the Maternal Thing: Mary Shelley's Critique of Ideology;" Paul Youngquist, "*Frankenstein*: The Mother, the Daughter, and the Monster;" Elissa Marder, "The Mother Tongue in *Frankenstein* and *Phedre*."

Victor splits himself in two: he is both an emaciated sufferer and a hungry, furious monster.

While Shelley's novel thematizes the relationship between Victor and his dysmorphic double through symbiotic visual fields and appetites, *The Substance* foregrounds visual distortions and feeding regimes that manage the symbiotic links between Elisabeth and Sue more explicitly. The film begins with a metaphor: the yolk of a raw egg is injected with the substance, and a new egg yolk bursts out of the old one, reproducing itself without fertilization (1:06-1:49). The substance replaces spermatozoa, exchanging the paternal phallus for the needle. However, this second yolk is both the offspring of the first *and* its double. As much as these eggs are symbols of self-reproduction, they *are* food and suspended in the same albumen, they must share it. Later, when Sue cannibalizes Elisabeth into infirmity, the significance of the double yolk becomes clear: once shared fluid runs out, the doubles will consume each other.

The film begins where Elisabeth's stardom ends; she has been fired from her job. As a TV aerobics personality, Elisabeth sold 'fitness.' Therefore, she sold the representation and dissemination of her body as a physically optimized and technologically reproduced image. However, because dominant ideologies determine which bodies are fit for representation and reproduction, when Elisabeth became too old, chauvinist television executives made the decision to fire her. The viewer overhears the motivating rationale in the men's bathroom when Harvey, played by a self-consciously disgusting Dennis Quaid, asks another man to whom he speaks on the phone while urinating: "Did you know a woman's fertility starts to decrease at the age of 25?" (7:12-7:16). The camera focuses on Harvey's face, situating the audience beneath him as if he empties his bladder onto the viewer. The loss of biological fertility becomes a leitmotif for Harvey's over the top misogyny. However, as much as he desires fertility in a woman, his speech, delivered flaccid member in hand, encourages the viewer to regard his sentiments as part and parcel of the abject matter he excretes: piss. Moreover, Harvey is not concerned with whether women have children. Instead, the visual appearance of biological fertility underwrites the technological

reproducibility of the idealized female body. As Laura Mulvey argues, the technologically produced 'male gaze' turns women's bodies into idealized objects by subjecting these bodies to fragmentation through "stylized … close ups" that chop them into eroticized, Frankenstein-like pieces: legs, breasts, thighs, and butts (808-812). Fargeat's film self-consciously draws on Mulvey's insights to destabilize the male gaze. Specifically, Harvey's invocations of fertility refer less to a biological quality than to representational qualities that authorize the fragmentation of the female body for visual consumption. However, Fargeat marks the male gaze that proliferates sexualized bodily pieces for visual consumption as disgusting—something which the viewer is encouraged to reject. The film, in fact, evokes disgust at Harvey's sentiments by turning the male gaze back on his body in extreme close ups that render his face and mouth in truly horrifying fragments. In this respect, Fargeat invites viewers to dismantle the ideological precepts of the technologically produced male gaze by redirecting it towards Harvey's grotesque bodily displays.

The film's ironic equation of the male gaze to abject matter comes into focus in another display from Harvey when he fires Elisabeth while eating shrimp. The camera moves between Harvey's lips and a distorted fish-eye view of him and the decapitated bowl of crustaceans that overflows onto the table. Sparkle and the viewer are force-fed this disgusting image of eating as Harvey ends Elisabeth's career: "I have to give people what they want and people always ask for something new" (8:16-8:22). Elisabeth, not quite understanding what Harvey means, asks him to explain: "At 50, well, it stops" (8:29-8:33). Elisabeth asks: "What stops?" (8:35). To which Harvey inarticulately responds, "the um, you know the um, the, the um," waving a denuded shrimp in her face (8:45-8:54). What the people want seems to be images of fertility, and Harvey, abjecting menstruation or the colloquial 'period,' opts instead for a sentence of sounds that trails off—a sentence that quite literally has no period. The detumescent shrimp that punctuates his unfinishable sentence subjects him to a withering symbolic castration. Harvey's view is not 'right,' but insofar as Elisabeth no longer appears fertile, her image is not fit for technological reproduction. That the

shrimp steals the scene, however, directs the viewer's visual pleasure away from the male gaze toward the gleeful abjection of its precepts. The piss that was associated with these views initially becomes worse: bad shellfish, and the threat of food poisoning.

Despite the film's insistent abjection of a buffoonish male gaze, Elisabeth internalizes Harvey's message. Unable to spit it out, the aging actress feels the pressure to revive her body for the standards of technological reproducibility. She seeks out the substance after watching a private advertisement that promises her a return to a body that conforms with these reproductive demands:

> Have you ever dreamt of a better version of yourself? Younger. More beautiful. More perfect. One single injection unlocks your DNA starting a new cellular division that will release another version of yourself. This is the substance. You are the matrix. Everything comes from you, and everything is you. This is simply a better version of yourself. One week for one. One week for the other … The one thing to remember: You are one. You can't escape from yourself. (14:06-15:02)

The advertisement invites Elisabeth to imagine herself in terms of endless optimizations. Younger is not enough, more beautiful must follow. More beautiful is not enough, more perfect becomes the goal. The advertisement constructs the ideal body as absent but attainable, seducing Elisabeth by apostrophizing these ideals only to produce the body in which she lives as 'deformed.' In other words, because Elisabeth has a body in the present, her body fails to conform to the absent, but apostrophized, ideal body. The rhetorical structure of address, thus, turns the fact of Elisabeth's embodiment into evidence of her physical defects. Before Sue ever bursts from Elisabeth's spine, the advertisement introduces the dysmorphic interplay that governs their relationship: Sue's perfection leaves Elisabeth evermore violently abject. Critically, this dynamic reverses the processes of abjection that govern *Frankenstein*. Where Victor idealizes his own body by emptying his feelings into his

creature, the absent, but imagined ideal body constructs Elisabeth as a monster.

Still, like *Frankenstein*, the substance makes the dysmorphic relationship between the body and its image material. Specifically, Sue's monstrous birth echoes the symbiotic visual and appetitive relationships at work in *Frankenstein*. The advertisement's statement, 'you are the matrix,' suggests that Sue not only comes from Elisabeth, but that, because Elisabeth is the medium, these dysmorphic doubles are suspended in the same 'albumen.' Yet, matrix in middle English also means 'womb,' derived from Latin *mater*, or mother. To be a matrix, is to become maternal. Thus, the symbiotic relationship between Elisabeth and Sue must be understood as reproductive: the substance turns Elisabeth into the mother who gives birth to her idealized self. Elisabeth's self-reproduction begins when she injects the activator. While initially she expects the injection to work like Botox and stares in the mirror searching for its cosmetic effects, quickly she collapses into a fetal position. The exchange of the mirror for fetus further entangles dysmorphic self-representation with self-reproduction. Elisabeth is both mother and offspring to her own ideal and abject images. The reproductive mother-child dynamics, like those of Victor and his creature, overlay the reflective interplay between the body and its image.

When Elisabeth's spine cracks open and a new body bursts from her back, her self-reproduction returns to the mirror. Consciousness now inhabits a point of view that does not see clearly and must learn to organize its perceptual field, blinking repeatedly, like Victor's creature, before orienting itself to its image. In the mirror, her vision gains perceptual coherence, enabling visual pleasure as both Sue and the viewer are invited to stare at a naked Margaret Qualley (29:02-30:14). Sue celebrates her bodily integrity by admiring the self-representation that the mirror enables. Fargeat references Lacan's 'mirror stage' in this scene—a theoretical concept indispensable to Mulvey's critique of the male gaze and Kristeva's theories of the abject. For Lacan, by staring into the mirror, the infant shifts from the realm of the undifferentiated and implicitly maternally mediated *corps morcele* (body in pieces) to a coherent, separate self (97-98). Fargeat plays on the mirror stage to thematize the

ways the pleasures of coherence and self-representation depend on Sue's conformity with the male gaze. Moreover, Sue's conformity and the cinematic pleasure it induces also depend on Elisabeth's abjection. In other words, Sue coincides with the social standards for biological and technological reproduction because she is not the 'matrix,' or mother. Now, torn open from neck to back, Elsabeth's body appears corpse-like: an image of the abject maternal. As Sue sews up the wound from which she emerged, sutures pierce Elisabeth's back flesh, challenging the viewer's gaze not only with disgust, but with the materiality of Elisabeth's impairment (31:24-32:16). The juxtaposition of the visual pleasure of Sue's self-representation routed through a male gaze with Elisabeth's roughly sutured spine binds the near-pornographic images of Sue to the eviscerated bodily matrix from which she emerged. For the dysmorphic subject, the pleasure of self-representation and self-reproduction produces bodily impairment.

The relationship between the visual registers of Sue's hypnotic sexuality and Elisabeth's physical impairment becomes more pronounced by the feeding regimes that keep both bodies alive. To maintain Elisabeth's body, Sue intravenously administers a seven-day liquid bag marked "Food Matrix" (22:47). In turn, to maintain her own bodily integrity, Sue must inject herself with "Stabilizer" drawn from Elisabeth's spine every day (22:24). After seven days, Sue trades places with Elisabeth in what can only be described as a blood transfusion of consciousness. Elisabeth then attaches Sue to a seven-day liquid bag marked "Food Other Self" (22:47). The consciousness that moves fluidly between the two bodies must sustain each body in a corpse-like suspension to feed it. These feedings eschew mouths for needles, allowing both bodies to bypass oral consumption. While the needle initially appeared as a substitute for a phallus, the needle now enables quasi-umbilical feeding regimes. Sue, however, requires more. She needs the shared albumen: Elisabeth's spinal fluid. The extraction of fluid in repeated spinal taps exposes Elisabeth's dorsal wound to punctures that further mutilate her in a macabre and uncanny displacement of a Caesarian section. To sustain Sue, Elisabeth must expose her body to further impairments.

Eventually, Sue cannibalizes the matrixial body—an act forecast by the opening scene of double yolks. Sue begins to harvest fluid from Elisabeth beyond her seven-day allotment to have a one-night stand with a biker. Straddling this anonymous man, her nose begins to bleed, her vision blurs, and she loses perceptual coherence (58:18). She runs to the bathroom, looking into the mirror in a bid to return to the coherence reflective self-representation once ensured. However, the mirror fails to hold her body together, and in her desperation, she grabs an old syringe from the trash to prepare another injection of stabilizer. After the injection, she returns to her one-night stand. As the man unzips Sue's catsuit from the back, organs fall out of her spine in pieces: *corps morcele* (1:00:20-1:00:27). The film cuts to Elisabeth waking up. The scenes, like Elisabeth's spine, are roughly sutured—physical and audiovisual wounds that perforate the film's dysmorphic fantasy. In one respect, the scene continues from Sue's injection of Elisabeth-stabilizer that reintegrates bodily and perceptual coherence. However, it is narratively clear that organs never fell out of Sue's back. Instead, the extra injection of stabilizer begets an in-between space in which Elisabeth's bodily impairment perforates Sue's experience. The hallucinatory wound in Sue's spine is Elisabeth's. Fargeat superimposes the body that enables visual pleasure and the wounded body from whence it came: they are one. The cut represents the oneness of Elisabeth-Sue, implying that Sue's distortion of the symbiotic link threatens the bodily and perceptual coherence of both.

When Elisabeth wakes, she discovers that Sue's parasitic hunger has decayed her finger into geriatric infirmity. Yet, the advertisement's warning, "remember you are one," ironizes this impairment (15:06). The film implies that despite her appearance, Elisabeth is no maternal monster but a woman who harms her own body in pursuit of reproducing masculinist standards of beauty: Sue. Moreover, her willingness to impair her own body to keep such an ideal alive underscores the self-destructive rage beauty standards elicit in the dysmorphic subject. While Victor empties his rage at his mother into a monstrous body, in producing Sue, Elisabeth initially directs rage at herself for her failure to conform to social constructions of beauty. While Sue's hunger for more

fluid, more days, and more pleasure symbolizes this dysmorphic rage, Elisabeth's fits of ravenous fury perforate Sue's 'perfect' body.

Body Hate

Because feeding regimes underwrite the relationships between gothic doubles, body hate emerges between dysmorphic pairs because, as Kristeva argues, eating entails aggression. While the previous section explored the ways that Victor displaces his hunger onto the creature all but erasing it from representation, he can narrate eating only when the creature enables him to reclaim desire, and therefore, aggression. In fact, Victor only narrates eating once in the entire novel after he tears the female monster's body into pieces. That is, his ability to represent his own hunger reemerges after he acts out his aggression at the abject maternal body. However, this aggression, too, is routed through the psychic split between his body and its image. Specifically, Victor decides to destroy the female monster after the creature suddenly appears: "I saw by the light of the moon the dæmon at the casement. A ghastly grin wrinkled his lips as he gazed on me… I thought with a sensation of madness on my promise of creating another like to him, and trembling with passion, tore to pieces the thing on which I was engaged" (144). Victor claims to see his creature, but the refraction of light through the window makes it equally probable that Victor sees his own reflection. Visual distortion makes his face appear "ghastly," a hateful "dæmon." However, the creature does not hate in this scene, but desires the monstress. It is Victor who hates, acting out the creature's aggressive want when he tears the monstress's body apart. Put another way, the creature and Victor exchange positions: Victor becomes the abject, threatening devourer of the creature's sentimental desire for a mother, or a mate. Once Victor acts out his hate, he eats: "I … sat on the shore, satisfying my appetite, which had become ravenous, with an oaten cake" (147). Even as Victor empties his hunger and rage into his monster, the monster too desires and, in so doing, provokes hunger and rage in Victor. The symbiosis of the reflective and reproductive pair produces an exchange of affect and bodily sensation across the psychic split between the body and its image.

The Substance elaborates the ways that hunger and rage produce reversals in the symbiotic relations between dysmorphic pairs. Before Sue's ravenous hunger takes over, Elisabeth tries to claw back her sense of desirability by going on a date. The sequence involves the mirror once more, juxtaposing Elisabeth's hair and makeup rituals with a billboard of Sue. The sequence repeats this juxtaposition three times. The first time Elisabeth checks herself in the mirror before she walks down the corridor to her living room. Then she sees Sue's billboard. Sue, scantily clad in a pink leotard, gazes back. Sue's gaze both hides and discloses the male gaze that produced her. Ironically, the larger-than-life reproduction of Sue's body while literally bigger than Elisabeth nonetheless renders Elisabeth's reflected image increasingly abject. Confronted with her difference from Sue, Elisabeth heads back to the bathroom mirror. She anxiously removes her make up and reapplies it, adding a scarf, and redoing her hair before trying to leave once more. However, again, confronted by Sue's gaze and the male gaze it enforces and disseminates, Elisabeth heads back to the mirror. The scene culminates at the mirror in a rage: Elisabeth rips off her scarf, smears her lipstick, and with violent gestures rubs her face to tear off false eyelashes, pulling at her hair (1:12:17-1:16:07). The self-attack manifests the rage Sue created in Elisabeth who, untouched by special effects or prostheses, appears monstrous in her aggression as she seems to pull her face to pieces. The film cuts to her open fridge and she grabs a quiche situated next to a whole chicken (1:16:32). The implication is that Elisabeth's rage at her own body's failure to conform to the perfect body she also ironically inhabits induces hunger. While Sue devours Elisabeth, Elisabeth devours everything.

After Elisabeth grabs the quiche, the film cuts to a taping of Sue's exercise show, *Pump It Up*. Electronic music pulses as she directs the viewer to "contract, contract, contract, contract," before bending over to put her head between her legs (1:17:06-1:17:12). The instructions and choreography reiterate Sue's image as one of reproductive fertility. The repeated instruction to contract mimics the maternal contraction as if Sue were teaching pregnant women how to deliver. Her head, thrust between her own legs, moreover hints at the truth: she was born from

Elisabeth who is also herself. As Sue is bent over and the camera lingers on her ass, a shape pushes to the surface of her skin (1:17:14). Her purportedly 'perfect' body is quite literally dysmorphic, marred by a misshapenness that stops the taping entirely. The fear: Sue's body fails to conform to the standards of technological reproduction. As Sue explores her thigh, she begins to pull the protuberance up towards her stomach. Using her fingers, she reaches into her navel to extract a chicken leg (1:19:03-1:19:37). The dream logic of the double connection hints at a bulimic fantasy in which Sparkle's rage-fueled binge necessitates that Sue practice extractive techniques for preserving bodily conformity to the standards of technological reproduction. That the site of extraction is the navel rather than the mouth codes Sue's bulimia as an umbilical regurgitation: the abject matter of maternal symbiosis. However, that this scene induces Sue's months-long binge on her host-mother's spinal fluid suggests that this reproductive pair, like Victor and his creature, share hunger and aggression as they gorge themselves in acts of body hate that penetrate one another.

Roughly Sutured

Frankenstein ends with a scene that takes place after Victor's death in which Walton and the creature have a conversation over Victor's corpse. The creature announces his own death: 'I shall die. I shall no longer feel the agonies which now consume me or be the prey of feelings unsatisfied, yet unquenched. He is dead who called me into being; and when I shall be no more, the very remembrance of us both will speedily vanish' (188). The symbiotic link between Victor and the creature expresses itself in this final scene in appetitive terms—the creature is left "unsatisfied" and his desires "unquenched" (188). Cut off from Victor, the creature's aggressive hunger without a reflective and reproductive partner no longer has an object toward which to direct bodily need or displace affective intensity. When the one who 'called [him] into being' dies, the creature ceases to exist because he is the parts of Victor that Victor abjected: hunger and aggression for his dead mother. Only in death can Victor integrate this part of himself, and, because we never see the creature die, Victor's reintegration remains an open question.

The Substance imagines a somewhat different, and I argue, more reparative end for the dysmorphic subject. Elisabeth attempts to terminate Sue but fails to complete the task, seduced by the praise that Sue garners from a culture dominated by the male gaze. To bring Sue back, Elisabeth once again tries to switch into Sue. However, the body switch is incomplete. The consciousness that Elisabeth and Sue share now inhabits both bodies: the psychic split materialized. In a rage, Sue turns hate on Elisabeth, bashing her head into the mirror, beating her senseless, before killing her by throwing her mother-host through a glass table. The mirror as weapon materializes the violence enacted by self-representation, recalling the earlier scene in which Elisabeth tears at her face before the mirror (1:45:35-1:48:15). The table, too, with its reflective glass, situates Elisabeth's death as a death by reflection (1:49:07-1:49:10).

However, her bloody end, unlike Victor's death, is not an end. Sue, now cut off from her food source, begins to lose bodily coherence. In arguably the film's grossest display, her teeth start falling out, and, as they do, she participates in their extraction, transforming her once perfect smile into a monstrous grin, like the creature's at Victor's bedside, in a reiteration and displacement of bulimia's extractive techniques (1:53:05-1:53:43). The film's destruction of the ostensibly 'perfect woman' reverses her image's epistemic violence. Where the male gaze promoted this perfect monster, Sue's disintegration tears apart a beauty purchased through homogenizing social exclusions. Moreover, as her body falls apart, *The Substance* materializes the physical impairments endemic to binging and purging behaviors.

Sue runs home in search of the substance in the hope that she might reproduce herself in an even more 'perfect' form: "I just need a better version of myself. Please give me a better version of myself," she cries before she injects the single-use activator for a second time (1:57:56). Unlike the creature at the end of Shelley's novel, Sue holds on to life by begetting another dysmorphic image: Monstro ElisaSue. This creature, unlike Elisabeth or Sue, is defined by deformity, rendered monstrous for the way she rearranges faces, mouths, ears, and breasts across the surface of the body. Elisabeth's mouth pulled into a scream or a hungry cry, even appears embedded in Monstro's back. Such anatomical

dislocations are redoubled by impairments of speech, posture, facial expression, and movement. Monstro is the visibly disabled infant 'born' from the psychic split and physical impairment dysmorphic misrecognition induces. Yet, this monster may actually prove a 'better version' of Sue. Monstro's pleasure in her own image points towards her reparative potential: this creature sutures Elisabeth and Sue back together, healing dysmorphic suffering by rejecting bodily norms.

When Monstro steps on stage for the New Year's Eve Show that Sue was supposed to host, Harvey explains to his fellow executives that "she is my most beautiful creation," reiterating the role of the male gaze in making monsters (2:04:14-2:04:18). Yet when she appears to the music from *2001: A Space Odyssey*—a stark contrast to the film's otherwise fast-paced electronic soundtrack—the reveal leaves the audience bewildered (2:05:05-2:05:58). After a silence, a breast squelches out of an unidentifiable orifice and lands with a squish on the stage. Monstro's body, now literally in pieces, confronts the viewer and the fictive audience with a dismembered breast (2:06:46-2:07:09). The horror of this abject image plays on Kristeva's sense that the infant's hungry aggression for the maternal breast must be denied and reimagined as an external threat. The film suggests that the male gaze might be less about the hyper sexualized images it disseminates than a desire for the female reproductive body and a hungry aggression for the breast that Monstro proffers. Once received, however, this breast can only horrify. Confronted with the literalization of an aggressively infantile male fantasy, the audience responds: "Monster! Shoot the Monster! It's a freak!" (2:07:30-2:07:41). In the face of this rage that can only view the disabled body as horrific, Monstro asserts "Don't be scared. It's me. I'm Elisabeth. I'm Sue. I'm the same" (2:07:50-2:07:55). While the audience persists in its characterization of her as a "freak," Monstro declares bodily and psychic integration. That is, she no longer internalizes their rejection of her in a dysmorphic rupture. Instead, Monstro sutures the body and its image back together in a reparative expression of self-integration. Her body might be in pieces, but this monster is whole.

As a result, Monstro no longer directs rage at her body. As Melinda Hall argues of the horror genre, the film makes Monstro its hero,

opening possibilities "for alternative encounters and visions of disability" that reject "the violent and degrading dominant culture" that so often seeks to exclude disabled bodies from representation (5). In a blood bath reminiscent of *Carrie*, the hyper sexualized, objectified, and then rejected woman revenges herself on the audience that made her (2:09:00). The fertility that, according to Harvey, Elisabeth lacked, comes back as Monstro soaks the crowd in a glut of blood from which they cannot escape. The horror of the reproductive, menstruating body destroys the male fantasy of it. Yet the film revels in the power of horror that Monstro's self-integration induces in the audience. By embracing her self-image, the body in pieces—Sparkle, Sue, Monstro—falls apart together. While the destructive finale seems to offer little in the way of reparative ethos for those individuals who suffer from dysmorphic self-relations, read as a psychological reintegration of disparate forms of self, Monstro at once captures the destructive impulses to perfect the body and the necessary work of holding these psychic and bodily impulses together against the onslaught of a social and cultural milieu that demands the body be remade, again and again, in a homogenized, impossible image of perfection.

Conclusion

While *Frankenstein* and *The Substance* both reveal how dysmorphia underwrites gothic pairs, the two texts end in quite different places. Where Victor's dysmorphic creature disappears onto the ice presumably to take his own life, Fargeat's film ends with a more reparative message about how one might live with their body and the various ways it falls to pieces, changes, and shapeshifts over time. Put another way, *The Substance* insists that even if one cannot escape the dysmorphic split between the body and its image, learning to love one's 'monstrosity' begins to heal the disjuncture dysmorphic suffering induces. The bodily transformations that occur over a lifetime, though they might hurt or take individuals ever farther from imagined states of perfection, need not split the individual from themselves, or impair them even further. For Monstro suggests that there are ways of living in less than perfect bodies that are no less worthy or beautiful.

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