

The “Substance” of Ageism: Female Ageing and the Imperative of Eternal Youth in Contemporary Cinema

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INTRODUCTION & AIM

Ageing is a biological process, but its meaning is **socially constructed** through cultural narratives that assign value and visibility to bodies.

The Paradox

In contemporary societies, the "positive ageing" paradigm superficially promotes active longevity while masking a coercive market demand for eternal youth.

The Cultural Lens

Cinema acts as a mirror of social anxieties. This study uses the film *The Substance* (2024) to diagnose how ageism specifically targets and penalizes women.

AIM: To examine the socio-cultural regulation of ageing female bodies, and to analyze how appearance-driven industries structurally devalue women as they grow older.

RESULTS & DISCUSSION

SYSTEMIC DEVALUATION

Ageing is depicted not merely as a loss of status, but as the total devaluation of the female body within appearance-centred industries. Biological decay equals cultural obsolescence.

THE "POSITIVE" TRAP

Later life is framed as a personal failure to maintain desirability. "Positive ageing" operates as a moralised form of self-management and coercive biopolitical discipline.

METHOD

A **qualitative sociological analysis** was conducted through a critical close reading of the film *The Substance* (2024). This approach allows for the deconstruction of cinematic narratives, visual metaphors, and bodily representations as cultural artifacts. The analytical process was operationalized across **four interconnected phases**:

A. CULTURAL CONSTRUCTION

Guided by Narrative Gerontology

Analytical Focus: Tracking how the cinematic text establishes the initial social baseline of the ageing female body.

Application: Evaluating the dominant cultural scripts and stories that society forces upon individuals as they grow older.

B. METANARRATIVE OF DECLINE

Guided by the Notion of Abjection (Kristeva)

Analytical Focus: Deconstructing the camera's representation of biological decay and internal physical crisis.

Application: Examining how natural ageing is systematically framed as "monstrous", polluting, and socially intolerable.

socially constructed

C. INDIVIDUALISATION

Guided by the Myth of "Positive Ageing"

Analytical Focus: Dissecting the media and industrial demands for constant physical self-optimization.

Application: Analyzing how bodily decay is framed as a moral and personal failure of self-discipline and market desirability.

D. AESTHETIC LABOUR

Guided by Erotic Capital (Hakim)

Analytical Focus: Unpacking structural forces enforcing continuous, extreme biopolitical interventions.

Application: Tracing the exhausting physical labor older women perform to combat systematic cultural invisibility.

THE "FAILURE" NARRATIVE

Later life is framed as a personal failure to maintain desirability. "Positive ageing" acts as a moralised form of self-management and coercive biopolitical discipline.

OLDER MEN

LEGIBILITY

Value linked to status & wisdom

OLDER WOMEN

INVISIBILITY

Value linked to youth metrics

The film depicts ageing not merely as a loss of status, but as the devaluation of the female body. A gendered double standard renders women invisible unless they conform to youth norms through continuous bodily intervention.

CONCLUSION

The *Substance* foregrounds ageism as a **structural form of gendered inequality** rather than an individual issue. Challenging this paradigm requires **deconstructing cultural narratives** that equate biological ageing with a total loss of social value. It is urgent to **expand social and media spaces where growing older does not imply invisibility** or the rendering of the ageing female body as monstrous.

REFERENCES

Hakim, C. (2010). *Erotic Capital*. *European Sociological Review*, 26(1), 101–118.
Kristeva, J. (1982). *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*. Columbia University Press.