

All About Sue: Myths and Theologies of Diva Succession in Coralie Fargeat's

# **THE SUBSTANCE**

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December 16, 2024

American Diva

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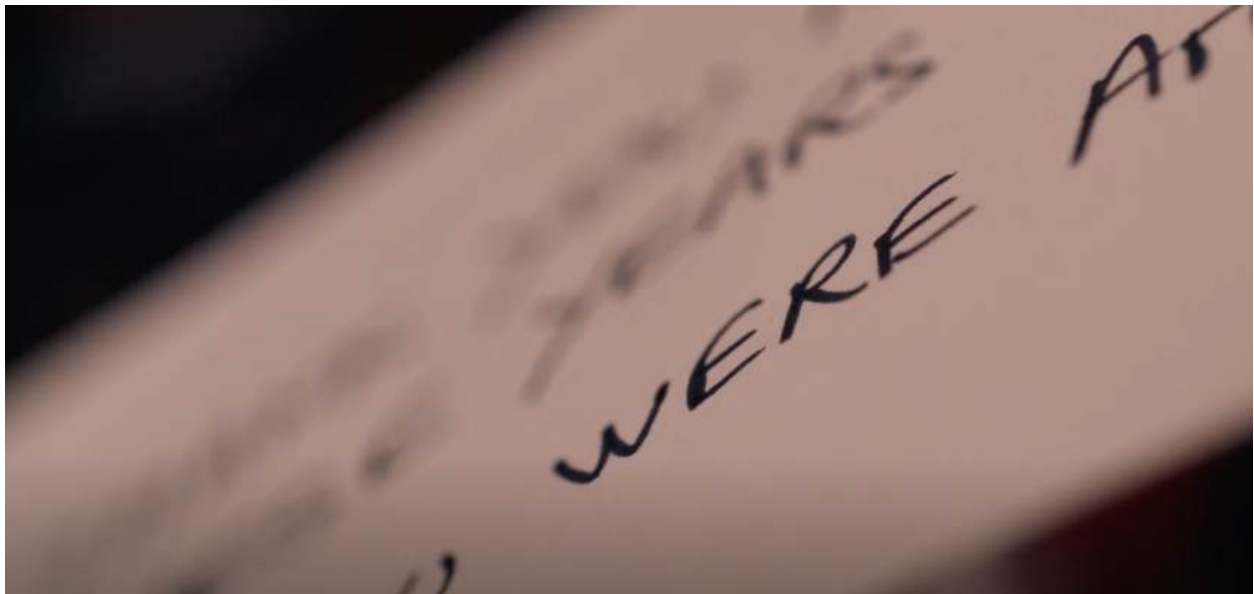
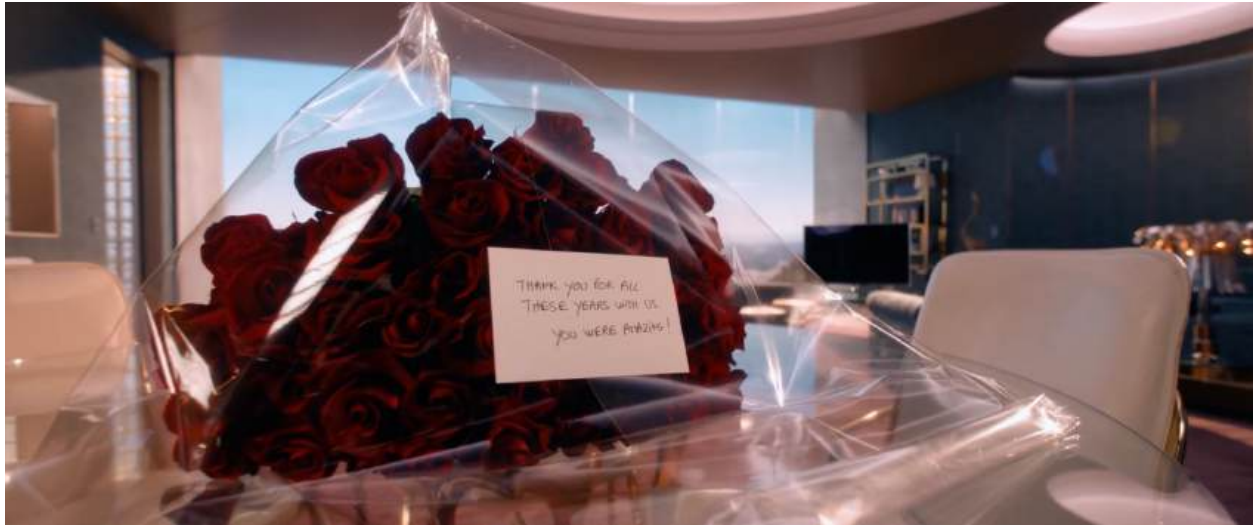
How does the diva die? Since the early dawn of homosexual fanaticism, this question has haunted the theologies of diva worship. The interlocked processes of expiration and rebirth — and this point of cyclical *turnover* — have long been a locus of speculation, mysticism, and intrigue throughout studies into the lifecycle of the diva supreme Wayne Koestenbaum profuses, "It is a mystery, how power is passed between women, how divas discover each other... I want to be present when a diva and her protégée meet — when the diva decides to pass on her fairy dust."<sup>1</sup> Coralie Fargeat's 2024 film *The Substance* acts as the latest entry to this legacy of academic inquiry, offering a new, bloody perspective on the processes of diva formation and succession. As the film follows Elisabeth Sparkle and her mother/daughter/rival dynamic with the alternate (*younger, beautiful, more perfect*) version of herself, Sue, it self-consciously enters itself into the great canon of other works (such as *What Ever Happened To Baby Jane?*, *Mommie Dearest*, or *All About Eve*) that offer an illicit glimpse into the diva's undoing. *The Substance* notably follows the same cyclical structure as *All About Eve*, offering a parallel parable of Elisabeth/Sue/Monstro-Elisasue to Joseph L. Mankiewicz's Margo/Eve/Phoebe. Each repeated alternation of succession/secession further articulates this passing of power and *fairy dust*. A close examination into each phase of this cycle of succession, as manifested and explained by *The Substance*, allows for a newly realized *dissection*, equally horrifying as nuanced, of the diva and her death.

*The Substance* opens on fading actress turned television aerobics instructor Elisabeth Sparkle's, played by Demi Moore, 50th birthday, as she is fired by the show's producer for aging past the upper limit of spandex-clad aerobic divadom. She is given a bouquet of roses as severance, adorned with a note that reads "Thank you for all of these years with us! You were

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<sup>1</sup> Wayne Koestenbaum, *The Queen's Throat: Opera, Homosexuality, and the Mystery of Desire* (New York: Da Capo, 2001), 94.

amazing!” The camera dramatically punches in on “*were* amazing” to over-exaggerate this expiration, fully cementing the film’s tone and treatment to subtlety (namely: its abandonment of) first established by the opening scene of the story: A timelapse shot of Elisabeth Sparkle’s physical star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame as weathers time, becoming cracked, forgotten, and *defaced* as fewer and fewer people stop to remember her. As the film’s director and writer,



**LOVE FOR DEEP RED ROSES CAN'T SUSTAIN THE DIVA... IN PAYMENT FOR THE DIVA'S RITUAL SACRIFICE, FLOWERS PILE UP LIKE CARNAGE AT HER FEET.<sup>2</sup>**

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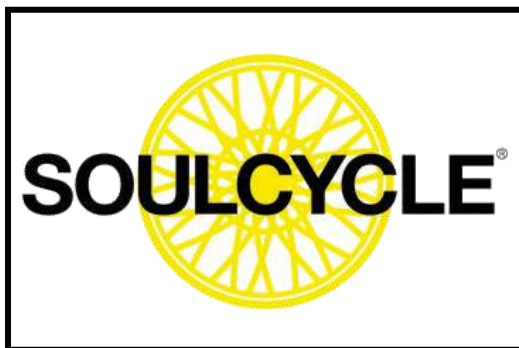
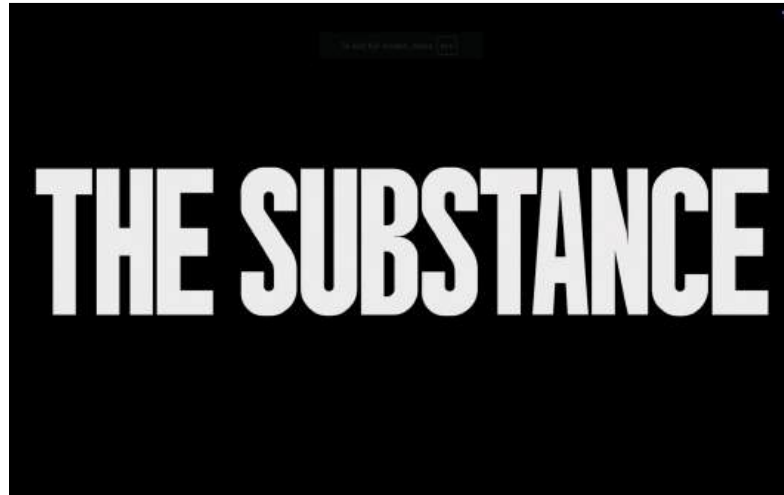
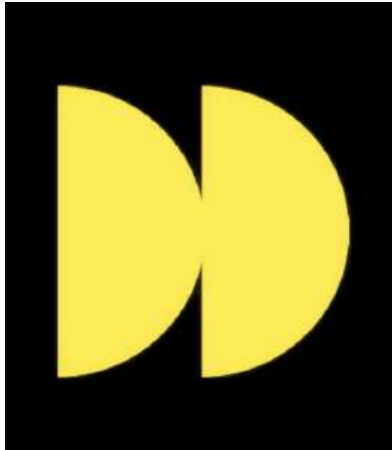
<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 112.

Fargeat makes explicitly clear, that this is not a film veiled in subtle allegory and metaphor; instead, it remains loyal to the ancient texts of diva succession, taking each story beat and exaggerating it to a new degree of blatant explication and explanation. Fargeat transforms these moments in the parable of the diva through a distinct lens of grotesque parody (often assuming the literal visual form and typography of wellness and beauty advertising) that often borders on gut-churning camp. After her card is blinded by a super-sized of her own face, blown by the wind from a billboard of her already being taken down, she is briefly hospitalized, where a nurse gives her a USB advertisement for the titular Substance. Through some form of mutant mitosis, The Substance promises to *release* a “younger, more beautiful, more perfect” version of yourself from within you. You get one week in each body, and you must switch without exception. The unused body is fed and kept alive through a week’s supply of liquid IV while the new body must be stabilized every day with fluid from the original body. The film further cements body horror as its primary medium of articulation as it details the gruesome scene of Elisabeth’s “activation,” as Elisabeth’s back is ripped open to *birth* her alternate form of Sue, played by Margot Qualley. Fargeat spares no visual detail in showing this horrific display of gore, again relying on over-emphasis to drive in each shot of grotesque mutilation and the sound of ripping flesh or cracking bones.

Through this self-disfiguration, Elisabeth successfully emerges as an entirely new, *perfectly* proportioned version of herself ready to replace her own self. *Diva self-mutilation helps the show go on.*<sup>3</sup> Indeed, this *mutilation* successfully does, as Sue is immediately hired back to her old network to replace *Sparkle Your Life with Elisabeth*. Clad in a tight-fitting rose gold lame one piece, Fargeat adopts the classic male gaze lens of much of film and advertising, letting her

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<sup>3</sup> 102.



camera linger on multiple close-up shots of Sue's perky breasts and butt. Thus Sue effectively enacts the central act of *replacement* that structures the narrative tension of *All About Eve*. Bette Davis's Margo Channing finds herself in a parallel situation to Elisabeth when, upon her 40th birthday, finds her career on Broadway beginning to decline with the emergence of a fan-turned-rival named Eve. After scheming and sabotaging her way into Margo's life, Eve steals the lead role for Lloyd Richard's next play — the same occupational subterfuge employed by Sue.

*The Substance* finds its narrative footing in this quintessential story of diva succession, by transforming the genre from drama to horror to make explicit the diva's aging body as a battleground for identity and legacy. The mutilating horror of Elisabeth's self-dismemberment makes explicitly clear the diva's "very process of probing the body and of opening its mysterious inner recesses has a bearing on her: a diva, when she sings, operates on herself, reveals her body, exposes an indwelling secret."<sup>4</sup> Elisabeth as the diva must literally *tear herself apart* to be (conditionally) reborn as this younger successor; Sue's physical emergence from Elisabeth's hollow body overtly visualizes this *indwelling exposition*. This secret, internal (*fester*ing) diva essence, Koestenbaum's *fairy dust*, is "gnomic... because it is an exception to natural law, even as it upholds a doctrine of Nature as divine infused. The diva supports cosmologies, and she shatters them." Elisabeth/Sue defy all doctrines of divine-infused Nature in their seismic act of age reversal and rebirth, transgressing every natural law. When Sue emerges, *placidly beaming* she examines her new body in the mirror before attending to her "elder diva [body] worn down by trauma and tremendousness," stitching back together her ruptured spine.<sup>5</sup> And so the cycle of diva succession spins further, as Sue/Phoebe *step* out of/into the role of their predecessor,

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 103.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 94.



**DIVAS, LIKE GAY PEOPLE, FALL UNDER THE SIGN OF THE SICK, THE MAIMED, THE DERANGED. THE DIVA IS ASSOCIATED WITH DISEASE AND WITH INJURIES... THERE'S A BIZARRE AFFINITY BETWEEN THE DIVAS AND DISMEMBERED ANATOMIES.<sup>6</sup>**

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 102-103.

beginning their intrinsically linked rise and fall.

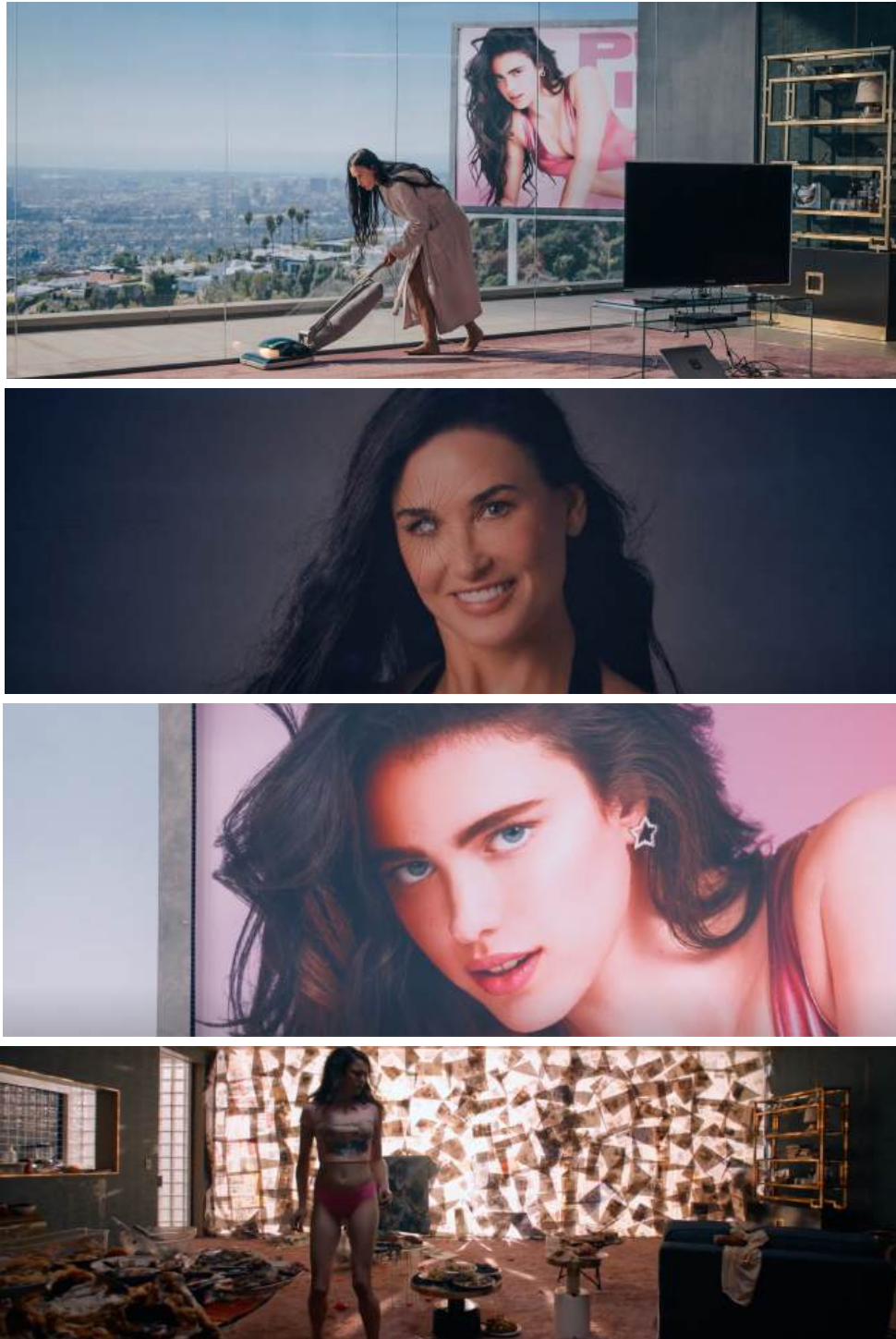
Though the two share the same consciousness, Elisabeth and Sue quickly develop an intrapersonal feud and mutual loathing of each other akin to that of Margo and Eve. As Sue becomes more successful and adored while Elisabeth becomes isolated and self-resentful, the two adopt a hatred of each other that explicates a fracturing of the diva's self, plagued by constant friction and turmoil. Unlike Margo and Eve who inhabit two separate consciousnesses/bodies, Elisabeth and Sue are dramatically unable to enact direct confrontation, and instead turn to haunting images of each other as stand-ins for the other fragmented self. Sue quickly moves a portrait of Elisabeth into a dark closet, while Elisabeth becomes infuriated with the constant sight of Sue's billboard outside of her apartment, opting to block the entire window with pasted newspaper. *Whether bonding or feuding, a diva is never alone; her solitude is peopled with reflections of herself... The act of self-contemplation has divided her; she is looking for herself and never finding it.*<sup>7</sup> Elisabeth's cracked portrait is deliberately staged facing out of the window, locked in a permanent stare with the billboard advertising *Pump it Up with Sue*. As their feud develops throughout their alternating weeks of agency, their images act as stand-ins for each respective career/body. Elisabeth's portrait cracks as her body rapidly deteriorates and is stored away in darkness as her career fades into obscurity, all while Sue's billboard triumphantly stares back at the void left by the portrait. Elisabeth's *erotic reverence and jealousy* for Sue's body soon fades to disdained repulsion, causing the haunting stare of Sue's billboard to become unbearably oppressive - requiring total censure.

This rage and disdain slowly build just like Margo and Eve throughout their friendship-turned-rivalry, paralleling multiple incidents of conflict between the competing divas. Sue first breaks the balance by stealing an extra night, causing the permanent disfiguration of

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 114.





**BUT IF THE DIVA SINGS BY IMITATING HER MOTHER, EVENTUALLY THE VOICE ITSELF BECOMES A DEMANDING CHILD, AND THE DIVA MUST, AS GALLI-CURCI PHRASES IT, “MOTHER THE INSISTENT FLOW” OF THE VOICE. DOES THE DIVA MOTHER HER VOICE? OR DOES THE DIVA GIVE VOICE TO HER MOTHER?<sup>8</sup>**

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 96.

Elisabeth's hand. Similarly to Eve an understudy causing Margo to miss her performance, Sue sets their resentful feud into motion through a deliberate stealing of *one night*. Sue continues to steal more and more nights, withering more and more body parts on her original body. During her weeks of consciousness, Elisabeth becomes a total shut-in, sitting in front of the TV and gorging herself on meals from a French cookbook. What begins as a curious watch of Sue's interviews turns into a display of heated disdain for Elisabeth, as she mocks and *yells back* at the image of the pre-recorded interview. When asked about Elisabeth, Sue tells the interviewer "I cannot actually say I *watched* her show. You do know that were not exactly from the generation, and you have to admit, it was a bit old-fashioned... *Jurassic Fitness really.*" This sends Elisabeth into a *productive* rage as she violently prepares more and more food until her kitchen is full. She turns to stuffing herself as a rejection of her perfect, other self: *Eating is a reigning metaphor for [the diva because of her] vestigial and unconscious connections to sacrifice... so we project onto the diva's body an image of own cannibalistic orality, an image of how grotesque we consider our desires to be.*<sup>9</sup> Again, she turns to mutilation of her own image — this time through food and made permanent in her original form — as a means of enacting diva warfare against her own self.

Elisabeth/Sue and Margot/Eve all find themselves and their future structured by a patriarchal system of show businesses that uses a sexual gaze to find — and discard — stars. As Sue uses her new *unnaturally perfect* body to secure her own fitness show, she parallels Eve's seduction of Lloyd to win his leading roles. It is notable that with this new opportunity and body, Sue still chooses to create a show solely centered around the male gaze of watching her and her dancer's tight bodies jiggle as they suggestively dance along to a song called "Pump it Up." Both sets of divas ultimately find their careers, and lives, in the hands of a male-controlled industry

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 102.



**WE CONSIDER THE DIVA FAT BECAUSE WE ARE THE HUNGRY ONES; WE WANT TO INGEST THE DIVA THROUGH OUR VORACIOUS, VULNERABLE EARS.<sup>10</sup>**

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 102.



that values ingénuity and youth over *substance*. Throughout this repeated tale of diva succession, time does not change this patriarchal structuring of the conditions of divahood. Koestenbaum writes,

It is possible that divas feud because they are powerless to battle the patriarchal system that rewards them with token acclaim and independence. But this hypothesis doesn't attribute enough intelligence or volition to divas, and doesn't account for what is inspiring in their rivalries. Battling divas offer lessons in the art of anger: how to fight an oppressive order by inventing a resilient self.<sup>11</sup>

Both *The Substance* and *All About Eve* explicate this hypothesis of rivalries for *token acclaim*, using their narrative to flesh out this patriarchal system and the limits of diva autonomy. Sue and Eve are only able to conceptualize their assumption of success through the narrow lens of possibility offered by the men controlling the show, forced into mere replication/enactment of the former diva. *The Substance* explicates this lack of attribution of intelligence (and volition) to its divas, limiting Elisabeth's/Sue's dream to being a disposable pawn for The Network.

But neither narrative concludes with the succeeding diva on top. In fact, both films parallel their third acts in introducing a third generation of fresh-faced diva, ready to take

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 113.





**OR DOES IT TAKE THREE HEADS TO CONVEY HER MONUMENTALITY AND SELF-ABSORPTION?<sup>12</sup>**

Sue/Eve's place. After securing the role and critical acclaim originally intended for Margo, Eve meets an obsessed teenage fan named Phoebe who uses her admiration to integrate herself into Eve's life, enacting the same ritual of succession once performed by Eve. We encounter this same repetition of ritual in *The Substance* too. After Sue goes on a months-long binge of consciousness and drains her entire supply of stabilizing fluid, her body begins to deteriorate the night of her big career moment of hosting The Network's New Year's Eve show. As she waits backstage in her dressing room, her teeth begin to rot and fall out of her mouth, shattering her image of bleached perfection. She quickly runs back home through the studio lot as blood pours out of her nose and one of her ears cleanly falls off. She returns to the single-use activator bottle of The Substance in hopes that it will reboot the cycle and give her another (new) perfect body.

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 114.

This activation essentializes the “aplomb, the antinaturalism, of the divas’s resurrection,” as Sue is given extended life through this next form.<sup>13</sup> Thus Phoebe’s parallel emerges from Sue, but not as visually anticipated. Instead, a mutated mass of rubbery flesh and tumors, aptly named Monstro-Elisasue by an intertitle (*Divas lose their names and become their titles*<sup>14</sup>) is born as a monstrous chimera of Elisabeth and Sue’s faces and limbs. So completes the inevitable cycle of each diva finding herself replaced in the same manner that she replaced the generation before her.

Both films use their finales to focus on the fading diva’s dress as a symbol of ascension. After her transformation/birth, Monstro-Elisasue puts back on the dress she had worn as Sue, and attempts to do her makeup, curl the one strand of hair she has left on her head, and pierce her tumorous flesh with a sparkly earring. She dons her old garment and returns to the studio so that she can still host the New Year’s Show and fulfill her vacant role. At the very end of *All About Eve*, after planting herself into Eve’s life (just as Eve had done to Margo), Phoebe tries on her dress while holding her award in the mirror, visually projecting this inevitable succession and replacement. Kostenbaum focuses on the gown as a potent vehicle for diva construction as it “confirms status, corroborates secret fantasies of self-worth”<sup>15</sup> The passing of the gown becomes a visual motif for this successive cycle, materializing this *putting on* of the former diva’s role, success, and identity. The narrative structure of three generations of succession unites these two films and articulates the continual, forward motion of the diva’s lifecycle. As Sue and Eve finally find their success and *singular* distinguishment as divas, Phoebe and Monstro-Elisasue emerge to turn ingénue into Norma Desmond. The diva’s status and success are never secured, and to dust they must return.

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 112.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid. 110.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 120.



**THAT FIRST IMPRESSION IS VERY IMPORTANT. EXUDE CONFIDENCE AND LET YOUR BOSOMS LEAD YOU.<sup>16</sup>**

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 95.

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