

A Comparative Analysis: The Swan Song of Love - "Titanium" and the Destruction of Love-"The Substance"

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Abstract: Directed by Julia Ducournau, *Titane* is a feature film that won the Palme d'Or in the main competition at the 74th Cannes Film Festival. In the history of human cinema and for human beings themselves, "love" is a proposition that cannot be avoided and always talked about the most. This paper is prepared by combining "love" with Freudian personality theory, including the ego, id, and superego. The love shown in the film is discussed from the basis and point of view of the film that is different from that of film scholars and even directors. "The Substance" is a feature film written and directed by Coralie Fargeat, which won the Best Screenplay Award at the 77th Cannes International Film Festival. The film also has a sci-fi thriller, yet somehow different from "Titanium". The two will also be analyzed and compared in this paper.

Keywords: Love; Metal; Cyberpunk; Technology; Freudian Personality Theory (Ego, Id, Superego)

1. Introduction

The overture to "Titanium": this paper begins with Julia, the French director of "Titanium". Her work "Raw" set the tone of her plays. "Titanium" was obviously more vigorous than the vertiginous "Raw", with a strong sense of resistance. Julia herself is an avant-garde feminist director. In directing *Titanium*, she tried to overturn the conventional way people perceive the female body and the male gaze. Julia elaborated: "Personally, this gaze is a metaphor for the social structure, especially when you're talking about the male gaze. In fact, the same is true for the female gaze. As a consequence of social construction, this gaze is biased to a certain extent. And desire is the way to escape such kind of gaze. For me, desire means freedom." It's a queer movie with a large number of metallic elements in it,

full of cyberpunkism in its atmosphere and tone. Unlike the millennial technology wave y2k, y2k is more of an extremely optimistic and prospective attitude towards the development of the new era and the progress of science and technology. As far as color is concerned, it is mostly reflected in the jump of high saturated bright colors. Cyberpunk, on the other hand, is a kind of alienation and worry about the overdevelopment of technology, where metallic colors are often used. Therefore, for the audience, this film is stripped from universal values from the visual to the core, characterized by darkness and clammy coldness [1]. As soon as the film was released, a large number of media and film critics called Julia "the terrorist of the festival". But the opposite is true, as argued in this paper that will disprove this idea in conjunction with Freud's personality theory. The narration will target the director's heart from a certain angle, as well as love, the grand theme that is reflected in the deep depth of this film.

2. Analysis of Titanium Under Freud's Theory of Personality (Ego, Id, Superego)

2.1 Id - Carbon in Engine Oil

The progress of science and technology has brought a large number of new technological products to mankind. From the advent of the first steamship in 1807 to the birth of the first airplane in 1903, then to the military J-35 and nuclear submarines, the core covered inside these metal shells is inseparable from fuel. In the case of automobiles, for example, engine oil is the internal driving force of the entire car, including the common-used No. 92 and No. 93 petroleum and diesel fuel, which are collectively referred to as engine oil. Nevertheless, no matter what kind of engine oil it is, the most basic and core substance is carbon. Id is equivalent to this "carbon element". Some film and television critics believe that the Id in "Titanium" is metallic.

This is true from a visual analysis: the heroine Alexia implants titanium plates in her skull, taking car as her sexual orientation, the milk oozing from her breasts as motor oil, and the spine of a new-born baby as a metallic titanium, etc. It "seems" that the core lies in the representation of metal, but is that really the case? Alexia implanted titanium plates in her skull because of her mother's love for her, expecting her to live no matter what the cost. Even though her sexual orientation is cars, it's just as a normal feeling as love. She loves this species, just as it is as understandable as the mutual love of men and women in the world. In queer films, she is a member of the queer community. But love is the identification of one's own heart, whether it is a man or a woman, or even a species. All she wanted was to start with something already dead or a gloomy soul, and she interacted with metal rather than humans in a way that could express more emotion than any words [2].

Without any psychoanalysis of the metal, it is understandable why she would hit on the car. In Greece mythology, we learn about the constant intercourse between Gaia, the mother of the earth, and Ouranos, the father of the sky, and how they gave birth to the Titans. Some of the Titans are male and some are female, but their gender is not clear. Alternatively, when you read these myths, you will find that their gender is blurred. When we tear off the qualitative and label of a "person" and watch this film again, everything seems "doable". At the end of the film, Alexia and Vincent's reconciliation is also because of love. The director himself mentioned in an interview that it was Vincent who evoked the love in Alexia's heart. But Freud's definition of the id explicitly mentions that the id is difficult to "wake up". It is a completely subconscious existence, the very bottom of the iceberg. This overturns the original theory of "id is not love", and it can be re-argued. Therefore, even if it is a WEIRD, stripped of its dark shell, there is love in its true id.

2.2 Ego-Titanium

As mentioned earlier, the heroine Alexia has a titanium plate implanted in her skull, but she still has a sense of her own existence as a human being. Her ego is influenced by three aspects: being human, implanting metal, and being in society. In the first place, as a human

being, her ego thrives on her own feelings, the teachings of the school, and the clinging of her family. The implantation of metal as a downtime prompted her to become a different individual, while her own life was also affected by the metal titanium. And society is the biggest repressive element for her. Rather than her essence any more, she became a stifled woman. Her specialness and her uniqueness are no longer important, all being "disappeared". As a social person, Alexia's job is car modeling. People covet her seductive body and look for value at the base of her thighs and between her breasts. After winning the award, the director expressed her creative ideas to the media: "I wanted to create a person's journey towards her own humanity and love. I had to start my narrative with a person who could not perceive everything – she had no nature of her own, and was rejected by human nature itself, incapable of feeling any emotion. So, my thinking went an extra mile from that point. Her aversion to the flesh, to her life, to the love of metal, is really a reflection of her inner nature." The ego refers to the conscious part of an individual, which mediates the id on the one hand and is subject to the superego on the other. As discussed earlier, Alexia's id is love. From this, it can be deduced from the ego that the real superego is not the love that directors and film critics are talking about, but the one that is confined to society, imprisoned by the dogmas and definitions of society. This film is not about discovering love, but about finding the root and finding the "love" of the id.

2.3 Superego–Sisyphus Who Kept His Promise but Was Still Punished

Sisyphus was punished for not keeping the promise of the Death and pushing stones. But as a woman in this society, Alexia needs to live under such an unfair dogma system, even if she has done nothing wrong. The director used a very subtle technique, exaggeratedly interspersing the "male standard" in her works silently. For example, only men come to watch the auto show, and the firefighters are all made up of men, so that the audience is imperceptibly immersed in such a society like the heroine. The superego is located at the top of the personality structure and is the moralized ego, which is internalized from social norms, ethics, and values, and is

opposed to the id. The superego here is a paradoxical existence. The superego described by Freud is to achieve a better ego. Lin Yihan pointed out in her posthumous work that society's moral standard for women is patience (patience is virtue) and "gentleness and humility". In this society, instead, the discipline of the so-called "better" self is obviously a false proposition. At the beginning of this paper, it is suggested that the film is full of rebellion, and yes, Alexia rebelled. Instead of the meekness, forbearance, and emotional heart that a woman should have in the traditional sense, she is as cold as metal, and even seems to have no physical sense and emotion. The director created such a female character, a rebellious individual who is coerced by society. This leads to the seemingly cold and loveless heroine who is actually the superego, and the id she has been looking for and finally realized, that is, love. The director shows that in this work, what is embodied is a "person" who has been reshaped by love. Nonetheless, judging from the arguments and discourses in this paper, she is actually a "person" who has been alienated by society and finally returns to her origin.

2.4 The Return of Love in "Titanium"

The content of "Titanium" is more similar to Denis's "Beau travail", a reflection of a patriarchal society. This portrayal of men's quest for power and authority is connected with the new-age discussion of gender expression and queer identity. Julia DiCuno's protagonist in Titanium represents people who want to fit into the masculine world but can't get rid of their femininity entirely. It is a paradox between men and women, where a group of victims of Stockholm syndrome end in pain. From the rapid development of technology to the mechanical crisis, the tone of the entire film is shrouded in a tense atmosphere. What the director really wants to convey is that the film shows the dark side from the beginning, and this is just to let people see the light that unconditional love brings. In the last part of the movie, something new will be present. This film, like the characters in it, is like a snake that is constantly shedding its skin. At the end of the movie, you'll get something essential. All that's left is love. This paper takes the heroine Alexia as the first perspective, and explores

the id-exposure of love, the ego-metal cybergirl, and the superego - social oppression from Freudian personality theory. All three perspectives are used to deny what directors and scholars believe that "the id is not love" and that the ultimate achievement of love is a "return" rather than an "awakening". It is worth mentioning that compared to Julia's controversial "Raw"(2016), "Titanium" is more optimistic, choosing to side with God as in "Faust".

3. "The Substance": Aesthetics and the Body in The Intertwined Violence

At the 2024 Festival de Cannes, Coralie Fargeat presented her work, "The Substance", which quickly attracted a lot of attention from the film industry. The film explores the plight of aging in Hollywood stars and the extremes of combating it, revealing the complex relationship between beauty and self-worth. Combining body horror and feminist critique, "The Substance" shows the violent transformation of the body. By way of aesthetic violence, the work also delves into how standards of beauty affect an individual's identity and psychological state. This paper is prepared to give an in-depth analysis of the film from three levels: physical transformation, violent aesthetics, and deconstruction of gender power.

3.1 Physical Transformation and Ethics of Beauty

(1) Dual identity and bodily struggle:

The protagonist, Elizabeth Sparker, a former Hollywood starlet now reduced to hosting a past- its- prime aerobics show, accidentally discovers a mysterious liquid called "The Substance" that temporarily restores her youthful appearance. However, this comes at the cost of sharing her body with a younger version of herself, Sue.

This physical transformation is not merely superficial; it is a twisted battle for survival and destruction. The conflict between Elizabeth and Sue embodies not only the alternation of bodies but also a profound crisis of identity for women in society.

(2) Control and objectification of the body:

Through the bodily struggle between Elizabeth and Sue, the film exposes society's control and objectification of women's bodies. The body becomes a tool shared and exploited,

prompting deep reflections on ownership.

(3) Extreme physical deformation and psychological distortion:

The film is filled with scenes of extreme physical deformation and psychological distortion, such as Sue's brutalization of Elizabeth's body in pursuit of a perfect image. These scenes not only have a powerful visual impact but also reflect the twisted obsession with beauty.

(4) Society's single standard of beauty:

The film critiques society's narrow aesthetic standards and the immense pressure they place on women. Elizabeth's story symbolizes countless women who linger between self-loathing and the desire for rebirth after their glow fades.

(5) Cost and consequences of beauty:

Through Elizabeth's experience, the film showcases the cost and consequences of pursuing beauty. While "The Substance" temporarily restores her youthful appearance, it comes at the cost of a fierce battle with her younger self, potentially leading to self-destruction.

(6) Profound reflections on beauty:

The film not only showcases the seduction and danger of beauty but also prompts viewers to deeply reflect on it. In a society that judges by appearance, how do women find their true self-worth? This is a significant question left for viewers to ponder.

3.2 The Aesthetics of Violence and The Symbolism of the Female Body

(1) Violent aesthetics

Extreme physical transformation and bloody scenes:

In the film, the protagonist Elizabeth undergoes a drastic transformation after consuming "The Substance," with her once beautiful body gradually becoming distorted and ugly, even featuring scenes of flesh separation. This extreme physical transformation and bloody imagery constitute a significant component of the film's violent aesthetics.

The director skillfully combines prosthetics with fake blood to create a surreal and bloody world, challenging viewers' physiological limits while also sparking deeper reflections.

Eruption of 36,000 Gallons of Fake Blood:

The climax of the film concludes with the eruption of 36,000 gallons of fake blood, a

scene that not only sets a new record in cinematic history but also perfectly combines emotional collapse with a bloodbath carnival, taking viewers on a peak visual and psychological journey.

This scene is also an ultimate exhibition of violent aesthetics, captivating viewers through stunning visual effects and pushing the film's theme to its climax.

(2) Symbolism of the female body

Metaphor for female body anxiety and societal pressure:

Elizabeth, the protagonist, was once a Hollywood star but gradually lost her shine as time passed. After eavesdropping on derogatory remarks from a male executive, her confidence shattered instantly, and a shadow of body anxiety enveloped every decision she made. This reflects the ruthless scrutiny of women's appearance and youth in contemporary society, as well as women's anxiety and struggle under such societal pressure.

Elizabeth's desire for youth is both a questioning of self-worth and a fear of being abandoned by the times. This fear and anxiety are profoundly expressed through the symbolism of the female body.

Duality of the Body and the Challenge of Self-Identity:

After consuming "The Substance," Elizabeth's body splits, and she must alternate weekly with her younger self in using it. This duality of the body not only evokes discomfort but also prompts deep reflections on the female body and societal expectations.

The struggle between Elizabeth and Sue is not only a physical confrontation but also a battle for survival and identity in this society. This struggle is vividly demonstrated through the symbolism of the female body, revealing the pathology and distortion in women's pursuit of youth and beauty.

Sharp Critique of Male-Dominated Society:

Details such as the "red light" symbol in the film are sharp critiques of the male-dominated society, pointing directly to the devaluation of women. This further emphasizes the symbolic significance of the female body in society and the injustice and oppression faced by women in a male-dominated society.

3.3 The Deconstruction of Gender Power: From Beauty to Destruction

"The Substance" not only explored the physical pressures of women in society, but also profoundly revealed how these external expectations erode the identity and psychology of the individual. Elizabeth expressed the powerlessness of women in the midst of social and cultural expectations through extreme modifications of their own bodies. In the second half of the film, her transformation reached an extreme, eventually exposing the dehumanizing violence that beauty brought. This process made the film a strong critique of beauty standards and gender oppression.

In Michel Foucault's *The History of Gender*, the French philosopher argued that modern society has developed an invisible power structure through the management of the body and the monitoring of the body. It is through the monitoring and manipulation of the body that "The Substance" showed the power relationship of society over women's bodies. The drugs and violence in the film were both a reshaping of the body and a deprivation of female identity, which ultimately led to the demise of the individual.

In short, Coralie Fargeat's *The Substance* is a profound critique of beauty, violence and gender oppression. Through the extreme presentation of body transformation combined with the use of violent aesthetics, the film explores society's control of the female body and the ethical dilemmas behind beauty standards. In the process of externalization and extremeization of beauty, the individual's body and identity are destroyed, and finally the pursuit of beauty becomes a source of destruction. Through this film, Fargeat succeeds in showing the audience the intrinsic connection between beauty and violence, as well as a profound reflection on gender power.

4. Analysis and Comparison of Titanium and Certain Substances: A Discussion of the Limits of Identity, Body, and Emotion

In the history of the Festival de Cannes, Julia Ducournau's "Titanium" and Coralie Fargeat "The Substance", both earned a lot of attention for their extreme exploration of the human body and emotions. The two films explored the complexities of identity, body, and human relationships with radical visual language and narrative strategies. The two films have their own distinct styles. "Titanium" focused on the fluidity of identity and metamorphosis, while

"The Substance" deeply revealed the symbiotic relationship between desire and violence. Nonetheless, they both challenged traditional viewers' perceptions of human nature and invite viewers to rethink the nature of human existence. This paper attempts to analyze and compare the two films from three aspects: the reshaping of identity, the boundary of the body, and the expression of emotion. The goal is to reveal their similarities and differences in theme and form, as well as their artistic value [3].

4.1 Mobility and Reshaping of Identity

The heart of "Titanium" is the identity transformation and mobility of the heroine Alexia. This process was embodied through her transition from a human woman to a "metal female" identity. Alexia disguised herself as a boy who had been missing for years after becoming pregnant and entered the life of Vincent, the boy's father. This ambiguity of identity challenged stereotypes of gender and human nature. The Scholar Laura U. Marks pointed out that "the body, as a field of meaning-making, is both a dynamic translator of cultural symbols and biological qualities" [4]. Right in this dynamic reinvention, Alexia's body was given a new meaning.

In contrast, "The Substance" explores the issue of identity through the setting of replicants. The heroine of the film, a replicant who was once a Hollywood superstar, faces a crisis of identity. She not only has to face the social prejudices and discrimination brought about by her identity as a replicant, but also has to face self-sacrifice and contradictory choices in the pursuit of eternal youth. This setting not only reveals the single criterion for judging women's value in society, but also reflects the fragility and uncertainty of individual identity in modern society. In the journey of following the heroine, the audience will deeply appreciate the complexity of identity, as well as the struggle and search of individuals in society.

4.2 The Limits and Boundaries of the Body

The body, as the core theme of the two films, was amplified to the limit in form and narrative. In *Titanium*, the body was a mechanized being that was constantly deformed and recreated. The film was both

uncomfortable and philosophical in visual representation of Alexia's body: Did the union of the mechanical and the biological mean the transcendence of the human? The critic Steven Shaviro viewed this as "exploration of the posthuman state" [5]. Alexia not only endured the mechanical changes in the body, but also redefined the relationship between motherhood and family through this change.

"The Substance" reveals the oppression and struggle faced by women in society through the technique of physical alienation. The heroine in the film splits into a young and beautiful self through a mysterious substance, but this split is not without a price. As the younger version of herself becomes more and more obsessed with Vanity Fair, she begins to break the rules, causing the original subject's body to gradually age, eventually turning into a monster. This manifestation of physical alienation not only allows the audience to see the harsh requirements of society for women's appearance, but also reveals the huge psychological pressure that women are under in the process of pursuing beauty. Through the plot of physical alienation, the film allows the audience to deeply appreciate the unequal status of women in society, and the huge price they pay for the pursuit of self-identity and dignity.

4.3 Extreme Expression of Emotion

In terms of emotional expression, the two films showed the unique form of emotions under extreme conditions. In "Titanium", Alexia and Vincent's father-daughter friendship contributed to the most touching part of the film. This emotion was based on identity deception and physical weirdness, but it became more and more sincere in the process of continuous temptation. The scholar Vivian Sobchack noted that this emotion "was not based on recognition or understanding, but achieved through the existential communication of the body" [6]

In contrast, the emotional discussion in "The Substance" is more complex and profound. Through the emotional entanglement between the heroine and the replica, the film reveals the ambivalence of human beings about perfection and self-replication. In the process of pursuing eternal youth, there is both an interdependent relationship between the heroine and the replica, and there is a fierce contradiction [7].

This emotional entanglement not only allows the audience to see the human desire and pursuit of perfection, but also reveals the profound impact of this pursuit on individuals and society. Through the confrontation between the heroine and the self, the film projects the audience's doubts and fears in the process of pursuing perfection, as well as the struggle and search of individuals in the face of the crisis of self-identity [8].

5. Conclusion

This study has provided a comprehensive analysis of the films "Titanium" and "The Substance," exploring the complex interplay between identity, body, and emotion through the lens of Julia Ducournau and Coralie Fargeat's distinct directorial styles. By applying Freudian personality theory, the paper has revealed the deep psychological dynamics that drive the characters' actions and the societal pressures that shape their identities. The films challenge traditional notions of love, gender, and the human condition, offering a provocative commentary on the limits of identity and the consequences of societal expectations on individual psyches.

"Titanium" and "The Substance" are not merely films about the weird or the grotesque; they are profound explorations of the human psyche and the struggle for selfhood in a world that often seeks to define and confine. The conclusion drawn from this analysis is that love, in its various forms, is a fundamental aspect of the human experience that transcends societal constructs and psychological barriers. The films suggest that while the external forces of society and technology may seek to shape and control, the internal desires and emotions of individuals ultimately drive the quest for authenticity and self-discovery.

The paper concludes by advocating for a deeper understanding of the psychological complexities inherent in the portrayal of identity and emotion in cinema. It calls for further research into the impact of such narratives on audience perceptions and the potential for cinema to foster empathy and understanding of diverse human experiences. By examining the boundaries of identity and emotion, "Titanium" and "The Substance" offer a rich terrain for discussing the human condition and the power of cinema to provoke

thought and reflection on the nature of love and existence.

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