UNIVERSITAT DE BARCELONA

Grau d'Estudis Anglesos

Treball de Fi de Grau

Curs 2024-2025

The Picture in Motion Picture: A Comparative Analysis of Aesthetics, Social Status and Fame in Two Adaptations of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*: Oliver Parker's *Dorian Gray* (2009) and Coralie Fargeat's *The Substance* (2024)

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Barcelona, 19 de juny 2025

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

To my parents, who mean the world to me and have taught me that no effort is ever in vain.

To Dra. Sonia Amalia Haiduc, for her guidance during the writing of this paper.

To my friends, Aida, Basma and Jenaba for their uplifting company during this special semester.

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ABSTRACT:

This end-of-degree paper aims to compare and contrast two film adaptations of Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Oliver Parker's *Dorian Gray* (2009), and Coralie Fargeat's *The Substance* (2024), both of them released in the 21st century. This analysis is done through the lens of cultural studies with a focus on the concepts of aesthetics, social status and fame. These are seen as intertwined concepts that converge into aspiration towards social recognition. Parting from Wilde's stance on the Aesthetic Movement, the picture as a diegetic element is analyzed as the visual manifestation of the discourse surrounding social status, in Parker's adaptation, and fame, in Fargeat's film.

Keywords: Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, social status, fame, film adaptation

RESUM:

Aquest treball de fi de grau té com a objectiu comparar i contrastar dues adaptacions cinematogràfiques de *El retrat de Dorian Gray* d'Oscar Wilde: *Dorian Gray* (2009), d'Oliver Parker, i La substància (2024), de Coralie Fargeat, ambdues estrenades al segle XXI. Aquesta anàlisi es duu a terme des de la perspectiva dels estudis culturals, amb un enfocament en els conceptes d'estètica, estatus social i fama. Aquests són considerats interrelacionats i convergents en l'aspiració al reconeixement social. Partint de la postura de Wilde envers el Moviment Estètic, el quadre com a element diegètic s'analitza com la manifestació visual del discurs al voltant de l'estatus social, en l'adaptació de Parker, i de la fama, en el film de Fargeat.

Paraules clau: Oscar Wilde, *El retrat de Dorian Gray*, estatus social, fama, adaptació cinematogràfica.

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INTRODUCTION

This research paper examines how the themes of art and beauty, and their relationship with social status and fame, in Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* are interpreted and represented in two film adaptations released in the 21st century, namely, Oliver Parker's *Dorian Gray* (2009), and Coralie Fargeat's *The Substance* (2024). The paper attempts to illuminate how the discourse on Aestheticism and its perception was and is used by those in the upper classes, be they Victorian or part of modern Hollywood 'aristocracy', as part of their self-fashioning. This discourse on beauty and art is therefore explored by looking at the Victorian aristocracy's aestheticism rhetoric and how that particular rhetoric is similar to the dynamics of contemporary celebrity culture. The painting of Dorian Gray as a physical object is taken as embodying the themes of art and beauty. I have approached my chosen topic through the lens of cultural studies, combining the analysis of aestheticism with issues such as class, gender, and power dynamics at play both in Oscar Wilde's novel and the two film adaptations under consideration.

The research methodology consists mainly of three components: an exploration of critical articles to support the theoretical and introductory sections; the use of critical reviews from established newspapers as the main source for understanding how the films have been received by audiences; and, finally, a close reading of the films themselves. The film analysis consists of comparing the two films in light of the concepts mentioned above. The choice of these films is based on the intention of finding, on the one hand, a film that is both recent and acknowledges itself by the title as an adaptation of the novel, and on the other, a contemporary film that is not initially perceived as an adaptation but shows instances of taking the novel as a reference. Parker's *Dorian Gray* (2009) presents itself as an adaptation or a modern re-telling of Wilde's novel; this is evident by its title, its featuring of the novel's main characters and its mise-en-scène that captures the Victorian aristocratic environment. Fargeat's *The Substance* (2024) is a film that can be read by an audience who is not familiar with Wilde's novel as an exploration of the dangers of the celebrity industry and its unattainable beauty standards. However, this paper draws parallels between *The Substance*'s representation of celebrity culture and the novel's elements, to discuss how fame and the social positioning that comes with it, just like the social status of the Victorian aristocracy, is an aspiration that involves, according to Wilde's novel, beauty as a central factor.

To deliver a contextualized comparative analysis, the paper begins with a section that explores Aestheticism as well as the themes of class and social status and how these are presented in Wilde's novel. This part also discusses how the dynamics of fame and celebrity culture as an aspiration are similar to the ones present in the novel's Victorian aristocratic environment. To expand on the novel's exploration on the topic, the previous section is followed by a biographical discussion on Oscar Wilde, focusing on how his being part of the Aesthetic Movement influenced his novel's interplay between art and social status. Once the main themes are discussed based on the novel and the author's background, comes an introduction to the theory of adaptation. This section is devoted to discussing the emergence of film adaptation as a field of study as well as a brief discussion on how adaptations have been received throughout their history. Next comes a chronological overview of the adaptations, both on stage and on screen, of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* to describe briefly how the novel has been re-interpreted and how these adaptations were realized and received by the audience. To delve more in-depth into previous adaptations, following the overview comes a brief analysis of Albert Lewin's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1945). This film has been chosen due to, besides it being the first non-short film adaptation of the novel, its success and its public acclaim. It also serves as a pertinent option to prelude the comparative analysis of the two films and to see what elements or techniques have been recycled in the two films. All of the previous parts constitute the theoretical base that the comparative analysis stands on. What comes next is the comparative analysis, which begins with a discussion of Parker's film.

The analysis features a brief introduction to the film; given that *Dorian Gray* (2009) falls within the category of heritage films, the introduction is followed by an overview of heritage cinema and its characteristics. After the film is introduced, there is a unit devoted to mentioning film critics' takes to assess how it has been received by the audience. Then, comes a chapter devoted exclusively to the portrayal of the character of Dorian Gray in the film. This part is followed by a chapter that is devoted to the portrayal of Lord Henry Wotton. As will be discussed in the pertinent sections, this choice of focusing the analysis on Dorian and Henry comes from the argument that Dorian is the clean slate onto which Henry introduces the discourse on art and Aestheticism; therefore, these two characters share a dynamic that is relevant to the topic in question. Given that this paper takes the object of the picture as the material recipient of the main themes of research, following the section on Lord Henry Wotton comes a section on the physical picture's role in the film as well as how it is staged. The analysis continues with Fargeat's film

which, just as with Parker's, begins with a brief introduction on the film followed by a summary formed by various film critics' comments to display the audience's variety of opinions. In parallel to the discussion on Dorian Gray, the analysis continues with a chapter dedicated to discussing the portrayal of the character/s of Elisabeth Sparkle, Sue and Monstro Elisasue. These characters are analyzed following the film's premise that they are versions of the same character. In parallel to the chapter on Lord Henry Wotton, the analysis continues with a section dedicated to the portrayal of Harvey, the TV producer. This paper will argue how Elisabeth Sparkle along with the characters that derive from her can be textually perceived as the equivalent character, or parallel character, of Dorian Gray. The same relation is argued to exist between Lord Henry Wotton and Harvey. Lastly, in symmetry with the analysis of Parker's film, the analysis finishes with a chapter on the portraits, or pictures, that appear throughout the film.

1. The theme of social status in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*

As Eagleton argues, Wilde's colonially oppressed Irish background makes space for his nonconformity with stable representational forms. Wilde is able to see beyond such stability, parodying and opposing realist fantasy, as he is free from any continuous cultural tradition (1989, p. 29). Wilde was not afraid to criticize the faultlines of the Victorian elite's ideology, with which he interacted while living in England, and his literary production displays his critical opinions through discussions on Aestheticism, individualism, and the conflict between private reality and public image. *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, in this case, can be read as a portrayal of Wilde's critique of the dangers inherent in Aestheticism and its capacity to distort identity, agency, and moral perception.

In *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, the social critique or commentary is not as explicit as depicting a hostile relationship between master and servant. Instead, Wilde presumably centres his argument around the Aesthetic Movement and its dangers when taken too far. Therefore, the commentary on power dynamics is shifted into the realm of Aestheticism and how the movement impacts both power dynamics and social relations. A quote that illustrates Wilde's questioning of how Aestheticism relates to established Victorian conventions and power structures is Lord Henry's statement: "Crime was to them what art is to us, simply a method of procuring extraordinary sensations" (Wilde, 2003, p. 203). This is reinforced by his further remark, "People like you—the wilful sunbeams of life—don't commit crimes" (Wilde, 2003, p. 51). These quotes

articulate how the Victorian aristocrats enjoyed art as a pleasure and considered crime a way of experiencing a life free from ordinary moral constraints, seeking extraordinary sensations regardless of ethical and legal consequences. Ultimately, Wilde's storyline challenges and contradicts Lord Henry's assumptions through the character of Dorian Gray and his downfall, particularly with the help of his symbolic portrait.

As Fayard states, "the moral climate of the Victorian era is one of strict standards, prudence, and the importance of the upper, elite class in control of society" (2017, p. 13). Wilde's life exemplifies how Victorian English society could either embrace or repudiate individuals according to its established conventions of propriety. The idea of appearance is central to Victorian conventions as it served as an indicator of one's social status, occupation, and morality. Tangible signifiers such as attire revealed one's status and occupation, while facial features were believed to reveal the "inner intentions and emotions of the person as accurately as attire reveals one's occupation" (Drumova, 2015, p. 7). Despite these conventions, certain artists, along with the working and middle classes, voiced their unrest regarding some of the standards, criticising the elite class for failing to uphold the moral principles they imposed (Fayard, 2017, p. 13). The Aesthetic Movement emerged from the unrest of Victorian culture, and among its members was Oscar Wilde. *The Picture of Dorian Gray* pushes Aestheticism's boundaries to an extreme in which its main principle, based on the pleasure found in the overlap of art and quotidian life, is ultimately undermined by the dangers of excessive obsession. As Fayard claims, Wilde uses the character of Lord Henry as the embodiment of "the doctrine of a focus on decadence in one's life and valuing artistic experimentation over traditional standards of morality" (Fayard, 2017, p. 14). Fayard argues that Wilde's Aesthetic rhetoric seems to criticize the power of an Aesthetic philosophy which can lead to dismissing human agency as one aims to convince another individual of the philosophy's discourse (2017, p. 14). In other words, Dorian can be seen as a blank character who, due to his youth and naïveté, easily absorbs Lord Henry's words, which gradually shape his new lifestyle. Fayard also describes how Lord Henry manipulates and orchestrates Dorian's sense of self to control his agency and subjugate his identity. Lord Henry acts as a talent manager, discovering a young boy, Dorian, whose gifts fascinate Henry, and he proceeds to exploit Dorian's potential; "he would try to be to Dorian Gray what, without knowing it, the lad was to the painter" (Wilde, 2003, p. 38), and Dorian would be "sat like one under a spell" (Wilde, 2003, p. 42). This leads to, as Fayard claims, a great example of the dynamics of power relations in English Victorian

society, “By using rhetoric, those in the upper hand of the power dynamics were able to dehumanize others based on aesthetic perceptions and manipulate their sense of identity in order to maintain that authority” (Fayard, 2017, p. 24).

In addition to Lord Henry’s influence, Wilde introduces the Yellow Book as a tangible object that holds the philosophy of Decadence, which accelerates Dorian’s detachment from Victorian morality. As Haley explains, Wilde’s take on Aestheticism is related to the idea of subjectivism and individualism, “if all evolution tends toward individualism, and art is the purest individualism, all evolution tends toward the development of the artist or the aesthetic critic” (1985, p. 222). The Yellow Book affects Dorian in a way that separates him from what his environment considers moral and immoral, and this results in him losing “the sense of the order of things. Whether that is good or bad in itself is disputable” (Haley, 1985, p. 227). If Aestheticism is based on the motto of “Art for Art’s Sake,” Wilde introduces Dorian as a character who embodies art in its sense of aesthetic beauty. As Mighall argues in his introduction to Wilde’s novel, it is Dorian’s beauty and charm that allow him to gain both fame and acceptance among the elite, and in doing so, Wilde exposes a society that prioritizes external attributes over other qualities, revealing the faultlines of an established ideology (2003). Equally significant is the role of Dorian’s beauty itself, which transcends conventional social privilege. Dorian’s physical beauty is priceless by nature; it is not a commodity that can be purchased, which allows it to transcend the usual principles of class privilege while contributing to his exceptionality.

Moreover, since ‘natural’ beauty as sexual attractiveness is typically ephemeral and subject to the passing of time, Dorian’s ability to remain physically intact further elevates his status in society. This artificial permanence not only reinforces his privilege but also highlights that his advantage does not stem from social class alone, but it belongs to the higher sphere of ‘art’ – artificial comes from Latin *artificalis* “of or belonging to art”. In other words, Dorian’s eternal beauty distinguishes him because it is a rare, supernatural privilege unattached to his upper-class status. The picture, or portrait, is the physical object that can be understood as that which articulates Wilde’s critique of the over-glorification of art. It is possible to contend that without the picture, Dorian would not be able to look at his moral corruption and decay with a naked eye; instead, he could have remained a proud hedonist aesthete just as Lord Henry. The picture also serves as the object of artification of Dorian’s radiant beauty. The picture’s artificial nature relies

on Dorian's biological and anatomical beauty. In other words, his beauty places him as a living masterpiece, something that contradicts the non-living and life-span transcending nature of material works of art, while the picture is merely a representation, a non-living masterpiece.

2. Oscar Wilde: An Anglo-Irish aesthete

Oscar Fingal O'Flahertie Wills Wilde's ethnic background was "Anglo-Irish in the true sense of the word" (Zelter, 1993, p. 4). He was born in a Protestant and Anglicized upper-class family, "a political, social, and economic elite, the descendants of Protestant Ascendancy, that is, the successors of English-born settlers who colonized Ireland during the 17th century and governed it ever since" (Zelter, 1993, p. 4). Wilde was born and raised in Ireland, but at the age of 20, his father sent him to study at Magdalen College in Oxford, and that is where he became the literary icon he is to this day. During his stay at Oxford, Wilde lost his Irish accent and adopted the culture, and mannerisms of the English, to the point where he is nowadays known as an English writer (Zelter, 1993, p. 1). Even if Wilde was both born and brought up in Ireland, the Irish question is not thematized in any way in his literary work (Zelter, 1993, p. 5). In contrast, England and Englishness are ubiquitous themes that are displayed and discussed in his literary productions. As Zelter points out, it is Wilde's Anglo-Irish background which provided both familiarity and distance, attachment and detachment, domesticity and foreignness, that allowed him to challenge, mock, and thematize the idiosyncrasies of English society (Zelter, 1993, p. 5).

The Ireland Wilde was born into was a predominantly rural country. Since Wilde's work required a certain level of urbanity, with frequented and successful theatres and an inspiring cultural and literary environment shaped by known artists, it is pertinent to claim that London was a more suitable place to cultivate and realize his potential. Not only was London logistically more suitable for Wilde's production, with its vibrant theatre scene, there he was also able to come in contact with figures like John Ruskin and Walter Pater, both of whom influenced and inspired his embrace of the Aesthetic Movement (Zelter, 1993, p. 2). For this reason, it is fair to say that Wilde's successful career is closely related to his becoming a member of the English society (Zelter, 1993, p. 1). It is worth noting that it was particularly complicated for an Irishman to enter English society, which "partly defined itself through its alleged cultural superiority over Wilde's native country" (Zelter, 1993, p. 1). As Eagleton observes, British cultural imperialism had long annexed Irish talents to its literary canon, and Wilde was eager to be recruited (1989, p. 29). Zelter

argues further that, Wilde's membership in English society, despite being a long and successful episode in his life, ended as soon as the accusations of homosexual activity emerged. Consequently, his downfall as a writer coincides with his downfall as a member of the English society (1993, p. 2). That is why Wilde's relationship with England can be described as "a tragic liaison from which both sides benefited (and from which the other side still benefits today)" (Zelter, 1993, p. 2). In a symbolic gesture, in 2017, with the introduction of the 'Alan Turing Law'[1], the British government posthumously pardoned Wilde (McCann, 2017).

3. Adaptation theory: Then vs now

Nowadays, film adaptations of classical literary texts seem to have retained their appeal with the average film even in the digital age. The world of film adaptation has often been judged by popular audiences on the basis of its fidelity to the source text, such as whether characters match their textual descriptions or whether changes occur in the dialogue and storyline. However, this has not always been the case. While these adaptations might be seen by the idle literature student as a shortcut to reading a text without actually going through its pages, researchers in the field have argued that the art of film adaptation goes beyond transforming a text into an audiobook played in synchrony with a motion picture sequence. Adaptation scholars have debated, not only the issue of fidelity but also the intention of the filmmaker as well as whether the film adaptation and the source text are seen to be chain-related or as two different units of narrative.

During the earliest days of film, film adaptation was perceived as a threat, or a potential threat, to writing and literature. As Deborah Cartmell puts it, "film was initially regarded by some as sucking the life out of a literary text" (2012, p. 2). Even Virginia Woolf devoted an essay to the topic of cinema where she uses Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* to argue how cinema cannot communicate the complete message that a text contains saying: "The brain knows Anna almost entirely by the inside of her mind – her charm, her passion, her despair. All the emphasis is laid by the cinema upon her teeth, her pearls, and her velvet" (Woolf, 1926). She continues by discussing how the audience is not allowed full access to the text, but instead it receives simplified versions of novels and these are spelt out "in words of one syllable, written, too, in the scrawl of an illiterate schoolboy. A kiss is love. A broken cup is jealousy. A grin is happiness" (Woolf,

[1] A British law passed in 2017 that pardons homosexual men who were previously warned and/or imprisoned due to their homosexuality.

1926). When it comes to Hollywood, the most salient film industry at a global level, studies have detected the impact that cinematic adaptations have on writers and their literary production. This has been received by some scholars as proving the threat of adaptation to literature "The contemporary novel at its most advanced now consorts with the coldness and passivity of the photographic plate" (Spiegel, 1976). This impact not only affects writing but also the interpretation of the writing. Taking *Frankenstein* as an example, it is nearly impossible to find a Halloween costume that does not depict Frankenstein's creature in the way Whale's 1931 adaptation does, with green skin, neck bolts, and facial scars, even though these details are not central to Mary Shelley's original novel. It has also been noticed how some novels are written with the hope that these will be eventually adapted; this intention can be noticed, for instance, in the saga of *Harry Potter*, "it has been argued that the experience of reading the books is akin to watching a film" (Cartmell and Whelehan, 2010, p. 73-83). Adaptations have been successful enough to be awarded with an Oscar, and films such as *Rebecca* (1940) and *Gone With the Wind* (1939) have been honored with an Academy Award for Best Picture. It is important to note that in adaptation, not only novels are adapted into films, but their authors are also often represented in cinema. These films are known as biopics, and as their name suggests, they aim to cinematize an author's biography. However, many biopics have been classified as romances. Biopics like *Wilde* (1997) based on Oscar Wilde, or *Becoming Jane* (2007) on Jane Austen are both under the romance/drama classification, reducing the author's personal experiences and talent to their love interests (Cartmell, 2012, p. 6).

As previously mentioned, film adaptations were not initially well regarded by critics and scholars; nevertheless, these films have been gradually acquiring more acceptance. Some researchers argue that, despite the acceptance of adaptations, these continue to be considered derivative of a literary text, and their likeability will be principally rendered to the source material. As Thomas Leitch states, "it is as if adaptation studies, by borrowing the cultural cachet of literature, sought to claim its institutional respectability and gravitas even while insuring adaptation's enduring aesthetic and methodological subordination to literature proper" (2008, p. 64). Deborah Cartmell persuasively argues how adaptation is the art form of democracy; her claim states that film has the ability to level class and audience, and when adaptation comes in so does literature's "cultural cachet". Considering that movies based on books were considered inferior to

literature, adaptations were seen as unserious and diluted versions of literature for the popular audience. And even nowadays "critics of adaptation […] begin their analysis with an apology, implicitly confessing to being a fan before a critic, with the study itself regarded as something of a guilty pleasure" (Cartmell, 2012, p. 3). This attitude towards adaptations displays how literature was not perceived as democratic, but rather as exclusively associated with the elite. Adaptation has challenged this attitude by bringing literature to the masses and the masses to literature, appealing to a more "democratized" and inclusive audience (Cartmell, 2012, p. 3). As Cartmell and Whelehan put it, "adaptations can be, possibly should be, conceptualized as film on literature rather than literature on film" (2010). Cartmell's discussion includes novelist and screenwriter Andrew Davies' list of what audiences look for in an adaptation. This list's items are not afraid to diverge from the source text, "the adaptor need not be a servant of the adapted author but free to change the text to appeal to a mass contemporary rather than elite audience" (Cartmell, 2012, p. 8). It is precisely the act of freeing a text from the limits of authorship and readership that enables its democratization.

Today, adaptation studies is an established field of study at numerous universities. In some cases, Austen on film as well as Shakespeare on film are part of the syllabus. As Dennis Hutchins argues, the study of adaptation usually involves a comparison or comparative method, "to study a text as an adaptation is, always, to study at least two texts" (Cutchins, 2018, p. 3). Additionally, the assertion of the field led to the publishing of journals dedicated to it; for example, the *Adaptation* Journal by Oxford University Press, and the *Journal of Adaptation in Film & Performance* by Intellect, both launched in 2008. As adaptations remain frequently featured in cinema's weekly showtimes, the field of adaptation continues to offer new opportunities for exploration, while keeping the debate on the relationship between the source text and its film adaptation alive and evolving with fresh perspectives. This ongoing debate around adaptation's relationship to literature is a space that allows for the examination of the cinematic adaptations of Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*; which is a classic that, due to its themes of youth, art and Aestheticism, continues to be attractive enough to adapt and re-write.

3.1 From 1910 to 1999: An overview of the adaptations of Wilde's novel

Oscar Wilde's novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray* has been adapted for both stage and screen numerous times, with each adaptation exploring and experimenting with its culturally significant narrative text. Up until 1999, more than 60 adaptations had been produced; these adaptations include European and American television series, operas, musicals, theatrical plays, ballets, films, short films and silent films. In his book *Oscar Wilde on Stage and Screen* published in 1999, Robert Tanitch includes a timeline which begins with an American theatre production that took place in 1910 at Temple Theatre. Tanitch's recollection features reviews from critics, reflecting their initial aversion to any and all adaptations. Some were as unfavorable as Jay Carr's take on a 1963 American play for the *New York Post* "To prevent the possibility of some unwary theatergoer inadvertently buying a ticket to this disaster, why doesn't someone rope off the theatre?" (p. 383). Other reviews reflect on the staging of the portrait, or the picture, as a physical object. Wendy Brandes wrote for *The Village*r on an American 1990 play "When the picture begins to suffer for its model's sins, it winds up as a weird day-glo mishmash. Alarming it is, but perhaps not in the way Wilde envisioned" (p. 395). Others also discussed the style and genre in which the novel is staged; Charles Spencer wrote for *Daily Telegraph* on an Irish 1995 play: "When the play strives for camp, it succeeds admirably and when the melodrama is deconstructed and played for laughs it's a very enjoyable piece of work" (p. 401).

The first film in the timeline is *Dorian Grays Portræt*, a short, silent Danish film released in 1910; which was followed by the production of an American short silent film in 1913. After a few more European silent films, a theatrical play was staged at Dublin's Gate Theatre in 1945. This play received a review in *The Irish Independent* that claimed that "Unfortunately this novel does not lend itself well to dramatization" (p. 377). From the reviews that Tanitch includes, it is noticeable that theatre and film critics tend to emphasize the actors' performances, in this case, those embodying the characters of Dorian Gray and Lord Henry Wotton. Gabriel Fallon wrote on Gate Theatre's 1945 production for *Standard (Eire)*: "Michel Mac Liammóir's Lord Henry Wotton is an evocative performance in which the spirit of the novelist's time is transmitted with deftness and grace" (p. 377). It was also in 1945 that Albert Lewin's film was produced, the first non-silent motion picture with a running time of one hour and 50 minutes, which was awarded the 18th Academy Award for Best Cinematography (Black-and-White). Despite the Academy's recognition, Lewin's work did not receive critical acclaim; James Agee wrote for *Nation*:

"Respectful, earnest, and, I'm afraid, dead" (p. 380). As for the actors' performances, Bosley Crowther stated for *The New York Times*, "George Sanders in the role of Lord Henry […] is brittle and dandified, at least, and drops the smooth and catty little bons mots of Mr Wilde with amusing aplomb. But Hurd Hatfield […] is incredibly stiff as Dorian Gray" (p. 379).

3.2 The first non-short adaptation: *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1945)

As previously mentioned, the first non-silent film adaptation of Wilde's novel is *The Picture of Dorian Gray* directed by Albert Lewin and released in 1945. This black-and-white film contains various symbols, the most salient being an experimentally cinematographic one: the appearance of a butterfly, which is being captured by Henry as he murmurs, "There is such a little time that your youth will last, and you can never get it back" (Lewin, 1945, 8:29) which are the words that trigger Dorian's corruption. After Henry captures the butterfly, he drowns it in formaldehyde, and as it flutters its wings for the last time, Dorian's face is shown in superimposition as he reflects on Henry's words. This could be read as a representation of the entrapping effect Henry's words have on Dorian. Additionally, the film introduces a biographical element on Oscar Wilde; after Dorian reads Wilde's 1894 poem *The Sphinx*, he states that it is written by an Irishman named Oscar Wilde.

When it comes to social status, the differences between the lower and upper classes are subtly conveyed. Besides the ornamented homes of the rich and the melancholic expressions on the faces of the less fortunate, there is no overt expression of aversion from the upper class toward the lower class, or vice versa. However, Dorian's character seems to function as the carrier of the contrast between classes. To begin with, his carriage drivers look surprised when he orders to be taken to lower-class areas. Once in a place like Bluegate Fields, his polished aspect and expensive attire make him stand out among the people around him. It is also his height in relation to the people and spaces; while he appears in proportion in his home, in a slum area, the bar, more specifically, he looks as if he were in a children's playhouse, and on the street, he seems taller than the people around him. When Dorian goes to the theatre to see Sybil perform, her mother is happily welcoming, as she recognizes that he is a rich man and is glad to see him falling in love with her daughter. When Sybil's brother confronts his mother and asks her about his name, she answers: "I don't know his name but I know he's rich" (Lewin, 1945, 23:53). Besides Dorian's aspect and the use of proportions, movement and directionality are also significant factors. When the characters

enter an upper-class home they go up a few stairs; whereas, when entering the theatre where Sibyl plays, they are shown to be descending into a basement; the film thus conveys visually their moral debasement? A similar thing happens in a scene where Dorian visits Bluegate fields, the frame presents a congregation of people in a square, while Dorian's carriage is seen in the background entering the area by going down a hill.

This film was released during the period when the Hays Code[2] was in efect. The impact of this code on the film directly relates to the topic of homosexuality. Given that Wilde's novel contains elements that hint at what was considered 'sexual perversion', Lewin might have decided to erase any trace of homosexuality between Basil and Dorian by introducing a new character related to Basil, Gladys Hallward, his niece. She appears as Dorian's love interest following Sibyl's death and is seen signing the painting with a 'G' under her uncle's signature. Another way the director seems to have avoided censorship was by playing with the audience's imagination. In the scene where Dorian seeks help from his long-lost friend Alan Campbell, he threatens to send a letter to persuade him, a letter that is never read aloud. It is Alan's response after reading the letter, 'It would kill her' (Lewin, 1945, 1:20:47), and Dorian's reaction to his successful persuasion, 'I didn't think you would want her name involved in such a scandal' (Lewin, 1945, 1:20:49), that suggest Alan's wife would react badly to an accusation of homosexual activity. Also, the word 'scandal' invokes Wilde's famous trials. What seems to confirm these suggestions is the moment in which Dorian thanks Alan for agreeing to help. The audience does not see Dorian's face, but instead, the camera focuses on his fully clothed lower abdomen, while the shadow of Alan's head falls right on Dorian's pelvic area.

As for the staging of the picture, the film features two different paintings; Henrique Medina painted the uncorrupted version of the painting, and Ivan Le Lorraine Albright was the artist behind the decayed version of the picture. The most striking fact about the picture is that, despite being a black and white film, the close-ups on the picture are shot in Technicolor. Therefore, the only moments in which the film is not black and white are when the pictures fully occupies the frame

[2] The Hays Code was a set of strict guidelines that controlled what could be shown in Hollywood films from 1934 to 1968.

(Figures 1 & 2). This contributes to understanding the pictures not merely as a symbolic element of fiction, but as crucial elements that represent Dorian's conscience.

Figures 1 & 2.

Close-ups of the uncorrupted and corrupted pictures respectively.

THE COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

4. *Dorian Gray* (2009)

Oliver Parker's *Dorian Gray* (2009) offers a broader exploration of the character, providing Dorian with greater depth and complexity. In this adaptation, Dorian's childhood trauma plays a significant role in shaping his descent into moral decay. The source of this trauma is his grandfather, Kelso, whose abuse leaves a lasting impact on Dorian, ultimately leading him to become abusive himself.

This film does follow the gothic aesthetic of Wilde's novel, but at the same time, it does have a 'campy' quality to it. Parker's film also falls within the category of heritage films. 'Heritage cinema' entered the mainstream in the late 1980s stemming from the great success of British period films such as *A Room with a View* (Vincendeau, 2001, p. 17). A heritage film is usually a European production, and "refers to costume films […] usually based on 'popular classics'"(Vincendeau, 2001, p. 17). Heritage cinema concentrates "on the careful display of historically accurate dress and decor, producing what one might call a 'museum aesthetic'" (Vincendeau, 2001, p. 18). The mise-en-scène is usually intended to exhibit the bourgeoisie or aristocracy (Vincendeau, 2001, p.18). These films are not exclusively based on popular classic texts but also on historical figures and events (Vincendeau, 2001, p. 18). Another relevant aspect of heritage cinema is the

establishment of specific actors as "part of the 'heritage' the films are about" (Vincendeau, 2001, p. 24). When actors are frequently cast in these films, they inevitably become associated with both heritage cinema and the cultural material they are part of. Even though heritage has been labelled as "conservative" (Vincendeau, 2001, p. 19), these films also have the ability to both challenge and subvert traditional conventions, particularly those surrounding gender dynamics and sexuality (Vincendeau, 2001, p. 19). In the case of *The Portrait of Dorian Gray*, while the mise-en-scène celebrates the conservative pleasures of heritage in terms of costume, its campy undercurrents and the casting of Ben Barnes, who had played Prince Caspian in the 2008 *The Chronicles of Narnia* fantasy film, as Dorian, add a playful, subversive dimension to the adaptation.

4.1 Historical context and the film's reception

Released in 2009, Parker's adaptation arrived years after the dissolution of the Hays Code[3]; by this time, sexuality in cinema was more openly explored and celebrated. Generally, film critics were particularly impressed by its elements of horror and its camp style. A review that captured the most popular opinion1 was Todd McCarthy's article for *Variety*, in which he described it as "a film as coarse and crude as its source material is refined and sublime" (2009, para. 1). McCarthy's take was clarified by Phillip French's comment for *The Observer*, who noted that the film concentrates "less on its philosophical aspects than on the gothic horror", and also pointed out how "The film is nicely lit […], costumed […] and designed […], but depravity is better suggested than made explicit when it becomes vulgar, pornographic or comic, and possibly all three" (2009, para. 1). Lewin's adaptation was mentioned by French: "I much prefer Albert Lewin's undervalued, black-and-white 1945 MGM version" (2009, para. 1). Since this was not Parker's first Wildean adaptation, Peter Bradshaw commented for *The Guardian*, "Parker has made a name for himself with Wilde adaptations. This is the least respectful and the most fun" (2009, para. 1). Regarding genre, considering that this adaptation was classified as horror/fantasy, critics such as Peter Brunette wrote for *The Hollywood Reporter* that the film "aspired, almost against its will, to be a horror movie" (2009, para. 2).

[3] The Hays Code dissolution took place in 1968.

4.2 Dorian Gray: Villainy and trauma

The character of Dorian Gray is played by the British actor Ben Barnes, whom Todd McCarthy described for *Variety* as rating "high percentiles in the looks department". Despite not aligning with the novel's description of Dorian having blue eyes and crisp gold hair, Barnes' dark hair and intensely dark eyes, and pale and vampiric features, align with the gothic elements of Wilde's novel[4]. The choice of casting Barnes as Dorian could also be seen as a way to make him appear potentially dangerous. His intense, Byronic hero look and villainous attractiveness align with Dorian's immoral behaviour. Toward the beginning of the film, Dorian arrives in London at a grand townhouse he has inherited from his grandfather, Lord Kelso. It is understood that he has been absent for a long time as he mentions: "Nothing's changed since I was a boy" (Parker, 2009, 04:42). The viewer is told that Kelso passed away during Dorian's absence; as a portrait of Lord Kelso is on frame, a servant tells Dorian: "I am sorry for your loss, sir" (Parker, 2009, 05:01). Once he settles at the townhouse, he is seen playing the piano at a charitable fund for needy and deserving orphans at Toynbee Hall. That is when Basil sees Dorian for the first time and becomes obsessed with his features. As Dorian dresses up to have his picture painted, his back appears to show the effects of physical abuse; he has numerous scars that suggest he has been cruelly beaten. The viewer does not know the cause of the scars until Dorian starts to have visions, or flashbacks, of what seem to be traumatic memories from his childhood. While in the townhouse, he visits the attic and experiences flashbacks to his childhood trauma. These sudden flashes of images and voices get gradually clearer until they reveal young Dorian, scared and hiding in the attic, as his grandfather Kelso finds him and proceeds to scold and hurt him.

During the portrait sitting, Lord Henry tells Dorian's story, explaining that his father was a painter, a fact that angered Kelso and fueled his resentment toward his daughter and grandson: "His daughter falling for some penniless painter. No wonder they eloped" (Parker, 2009, 13:47). Kelso blamed Dorian for his mother's death, but Henry states that she had typhus. Given that in Wilde's novel Dorian's father was not a painter, this scene can suggest that, in this film, the art of painting and paintings are the cause of Dorian's punishment, and the attic is the space associated throughout the film with sin and guilt, as well as punishment. Accordingly, the attic is where he

[4] Ben Barnes is often cast in period dramas as well as fantasy films and television series, frequently in villainous roles, owing to his striking, classically contrasting facial features.

will be keeping his portrait once it starts to suffer from his sins. It is also worth mentioning that Kelso's rejection of art seems to contaminate Dorian, leading to a decay that is embodied and intensified by a painted portrait. Once Dorian's picture is finished, it is hung in the townhouse's central hall, facing Lord Kelso's picture. This could be interpreted as foreshadowing Dorian's descent into villainy, following Kelso's example. Dorian then meets Sibyl; he goes to the theatre by himself, and after the play, he introduces himself to her, and from that moment they become lovers. One night, as they are sleeping, Dorian has a nightmare of Kelso hitting him in the attic. Startled, Dorian wakes up and unintentionally hurts himself with a glass. As Sibyl tends to the wound, Dorian states how this would not be his first scar, showing her his back. Sibyl notifies how she does not see any scar, which Dorian checks with a mirror, only to find Sibyl is right. It is as if the picture cured the scars from his trauma. After Dorian is notified of Sibyl's death by her brother, he looks deeply affected and sad. As he cries, holding Sibyl's dress, he tells Henry that "Kelso said I was death" (Parker, 2009, 41:43). A memory of Kelso whipping Dorian flashes across the screen. "He's part of me, Harry. I turn all love into death" (Parker, 2009, 41:53), adding to the information the audience has on Kelso's abuse towards Dorian. As Dorian's moral corruption grows and the picture grows more horrid, he visits it at the attic but does not look disgusted; he is instead happy that his previous scars have disappeared and that his recent acts do not affect his appearance. Basil expresses to Dorian his horror at what he has become, but Dorian takes pride in his triumph over moral and physical corruption which have been transferred onto the picture. Eventually, Dorian proceeds to kill Basil in a bloody scene in which, to add to the campy, gothic quality of the film, Basil's blood splashes Dorian continuously as he stabs him repeatedly. The frame only shows Dorian's bloody and villainous expression. Unlike in the book, where Dorian has someone else get rid of Basil, in the film he is made to carry the corpse and throw it in the sea, underlining thus his agency and embrace of the 'villain' mode. This change could represent Parker's intention to highlight Dorian's individuality as he both faces and hides the terrible consequences of his pride. After Dorian's long trip around the world, the first thing he does once he is back in the townhouse is visit the picture in the attic. As Dorian is seen entering the attic, the door closes on the frame, and the audience cannot see what happens behind that door. This could be considered a way to reinforce Dorian's relationship with the picture, as the audience is forced to let Dorian and the picture have privacy, or the director's mere intention to add suspense, as the

audience has not yet seen the full picture in decay. It could also be done to follow the gothic tradition of suppressing a traumatic memory.

After Dorian's mysterious meeting with the picture, he attends a welcoming party in which all of the attendees but him have visibly suffered the passing of time. Their wrinkled and stained faces, along with their greying and thinning hair, contrast with Dorian's intact and youthful appearance. His resisting the passing of time is received by society with both fascination and suspicion. After the party, Dorian is seen visiting a slum bar in which, traumatized about what he has seen in the attic, he drinks heavily as he has visions of bleeding wounds and worms moving in the picture. These visions come from what he might have seen in his mystery meeting with the picture; the audience at this point only sees, mediated through Dorian's disturbed mind, portions of the picture's worsened state. After seeing Sybil's old poster at one point, Dorian is shown crying, visiting her grave and seemingly expressing remorse. It is fair to say that this version of Dorian is visibly regretful and self-loathing after he is back from his trip, where he has been away from the picture for a long period of time, and it is after that mysterious meeting with the picture where his sins haunt not only his portrait but also his thoughts.

In a conversation between Emily, Lord Henry's daughter, and Dorian, in which she points out how a life of pleasure looks good on him, to which he answers, "Pleasure is different from happiness […] Some things are more precious because they don't last" (Parker, 2009, 1:19:46), expressing his disappointment and repeating what Basil has said towards the beginning of the film. To those words, Emily responds, "You do have a heart" (Parker, 2009, 1:20:15). This could indicate how Emily is the only character with whom Dorian feels comfortable enough to not be afraid to show his internal feelings and contradictions. In that same conversation, Dorian argues how "Those who go beneath the surface do so at their peril" (Parker, 2009, 1:20:15), which is a quote from the preface to Wilde's novel. In this case, a quote that does a great job at encapsulating the novel's plot is implemented at a point in the film in which Dorian himself is reflective of where his fate has taken him. Towards the end of the film, in a scene that mirrors an earlier one, Dorian plays the piano at Toynbee Hall again, this time for the military benevolent fund. On this occasion, a man stops the performance as he urges his daughter out of the hall, saying: "I'd crawl the sewers before I'd let my flesh and blood near him" (Parker, 2009, 1:23:32), displaying the downward evolution of Dorian's reputation. Once the man and his daughter are out of the hall, Dorian resumes

his performance, playing nervously while he has visions of Basil, covered in blood, watching him play to show how his guilt starts to take control over him.

Possibly in an attempt to mirror certain biographical details from Wilde's life, Parker decides to include a redemptive act from Dorian, in which he visits a priest to confess his sins illustrating Dorian's sense of guilt. Following this, Dorian decides to move to New York and sell the townhouse. He covers the picture and asks the servants to prepare it for New York. The decision to move to another continent might be motivated by his desire to escape his bad reputation as well as the memories of his sins. At this point, Lord Henry has already started to investigate Dorian's intact youth, and the clues take him to the picture in the attic right before the servants prepare it for the move. After Dorian arrives just in time to impede Henry from seeing his picture, they engage in a physical altercation, in which, after Henry sees Basil's cloth covered in blood near the picture, he tells Dorian, "Kelso was right, […] you're death" (Parker, 2009, 1:41:32). This affirmation by Henry can be interpreted as a reiteration of the grandfather's abuse towards Dorian, an abuse that ultimately shaped his fate. Eventually, Henry locks Dorian in the attic as he leaves. Here, Dorian is trapped with the representation of his moral decay that is his picture. Unlike in the book where Dorian, overwhelmed by his actions, chooses to enter the attic and stab his picture, Parker's Dorian is trapped, and his decision to stab the portrait is motivated by his desire to escape. As Dorian stabs his picture, he initially adopts its aspect and then passes away.

4.3 Lord Henry Wotton: Addiction, intoxication and hedonism

The character of Lord Henry is played by actor Colin Firth, who has featured heavily in a great number of heritage films, an actor who is "part of the 'heritage' the films are about" (Vincendeau, 2001, p. 24). Just as in the novel, Parker's version of Lord Henry can be considered the agent who carved Dorian's hedonist personality. The following analysis will be on how his existence impacts the character of Dorian, and how his discourse paves the way towards Dorian's moral decay. Lord Henry's first appearance is at the first party Dorian attends once he is back in London, and his first words in the film are: "Cigarette? […] I find a cigarette to be the perfect pleasure. It is exquisite and leaves one unsatisfied" (Parker, 2009, 08:29), establishing thus that the act of intoxication and the cultivation of addiction is his means to get to Dorian. Dorian eventually accepts Henry's offer and takes a cigarette; it seems to be one of the first cigarettes he might have ever had, as he starts to cough at the first smoke. From then on, intoxication will

become the visual and practical indicator of Henry's influence on Dorian, such as in the scene at the bar where they consume alcoholic drinks. As Dorian observes the business of prostitution taking place around him, he asks Henry: "I was asking was about the effect on […] one's soul" (Parker, 2009, 16:11), to what Henry, as he holds his shot of gin, answers: "One's soul? This is my church" (Parker, 2009, 16:19).

Later, as Dorian is getting his measurements taken for a suit, Lord Henry gifts him with a cigarette case with the name 'Dorian' engraved, similar to the one he was seen using in the first party. This can be read as the material indicator of Henry's hedonist rhetoric passing onto Dorian, encapsulating the idea of intoxication, addiction and temptation. As Sibyl is waiting for Dorian and Lord Henry to watch her play at the theatre, Henry takes Dorian to a brothel instead. As Dorian speaks about how excited he is to marry Sibyl, Henry disagrees with him. Dorian states: "Well, perhaps I have a stronger conscience" (Parker, 2009, 31:57), to which Henry answers, after smoking from his pipe: "Conscience is just a polite term for cowardice. No civilized man regrets a pleasure" (Parker, 2009, 32:00). Lord Henry then passes that same pipe to Dorian, who accepts it gladly. It is worth stating that, right before Dorian made a point on conscience, he had rejected a pipe offered by a prostitute. Dorian's acceptance and smoke of Henry's pipe can be considered a sign of Henry's powers of persuasion, as one hedonist thought passes from one man to another through an object of addiction. The immediate product of Henry's persuasion is conveyed by Dorian agreeing to enjoy the services of numerous prostitutes. When Sybil exhorts Dorian to resist Henry's temptations, he denies having been influenced. As Dorian is seen leaving the theatre, Lord Henry's silhouette appears as he is smoking and watching from the theatre's gallery as if he were watching a play. This frame might suggest Lord Henry's role as a proud spectator of Dorian's moral decay. One could even interpret this as a metacinematic gesture, insofar as Henry's position mirrors the audience's own delight in being entertained by a story of moral decadence.

At a party where a group of women seem captivated by the new Dorian, Lord Henry uses the cigarette case as if it were a screen to show Dorian the potential pleasures awaiting. Dorian, seduced by Henry's projections of power and pleasure, participates willingly and even aids Henry in extending his corrupting influence across society. He is shown seducing several women, mothers and daughters, as well as party goers of both sexes, pointing to his voracious appetite and the contagious quality of Henry's hedonistic influence. This party, hosted by the Radleys, can be

seen as a way to perceive how Henry's words have started to pollute Dorian's reasoning. As Dorian introduces himself to the young Ms. Radley, he proposes a toast. "To what?" (Parker, 2009, 46:32), Celia Radley asks, to what Dorian responds: "Intoxication" (Parker, 2009, 46:35). After Dorian says the word 'intoxication,' Lord Henry, who is in the background among the crowd, appears in frame as he takes a sip of his drink. The camera then focuses on Celia, who proceeds to drink as well. As soon as Celia approaches the drink to her mouth, the scene abruptly cuts to a sexual encounter between her and Dorian, in which he pours a drink on her. It is as if the same process that happens between Lord Henry and Dorian now happens between Celia and Dorian. At this party, Dorian has two sexual encounters: one with Celia, and the other one with her mother, Mrs. Radley. Once Dorian is done engaging in sexual activity, he finds Henry and Basil. These three have a conversation that ends with Basil saying: "A good gambler understands that there are limits" (Parker, 2009, 50:00), to which Henry and Dorian, in synchrony, answer: "There are no limits" (Parker, 2009, 50:03). The act of them answering in unison can suggest that, at this point, Henry has fully 'intoxicated' Dorian, even, potentially, Dorian having become Henry. The consequent scenes feature clips of Dorian engaging in various sexual activities with varied sexual partners, as well as him closing the attic's door after visiting the picture. The next party Dorian attends is a masked ball at his townhouse. It is at this ball where his hedonism is fully liberated; he is seen kissing the invitees regardless of their age or gender while Lord Henry proudly watches him. "He's young" (Parker, 2009, 54:31), he says. As Dorian is dancing, Lord Henry's wife asks Dorian to "Tell [her] husband to not be so disagreeable" (Parker, 2009, 51:21), to which Dorian answers: "But I always agree with him" (Parker, 2009, 51:24). This response contrasts with Dorian's initial attitude towards Henry's views. "Well, perhaps, I have a stronger conscience" (Parker, 2009, 31:57). This contrast reflects Dorian's evolution and assures that Henry successfully transformed Dorian.

Unlike in Wilde's novel, Dorian does ask Henry to accompany him on his long trip around the world; however, Henry is forced to decline the proposition as the birth of his daughter is imminent. Once Dorian is back, Henry notices that he lost his charming cheer, to which he says: "Dorian, it's quite clear why you've lost your passion for life. You've been away from me for too long. We must go out. Take on the town, as we used to" (Parker, 2009, 1:11:01). As Dorian re-takes his visits to the bars, Sibyl's brother Jim finds him thanks to the cigarette case, which fell

from Dorian's pocket on the street, again, the cigarette case causing Dorian to sin as he causes Jim to die. Parker's version of Henry does suspect Dorian as he sees him having a relationship with his daughter. It is as if Henry approves of Dorian's embrace of hedonism until he fears for his daughter's safety and reputation. "Stay away from her" (Parker, 2009, 1:32:05), says Henry to Dorian. Dorian's relationship with Emily Wotton, Henry's daughter, triggers Henry's rejection of Dorian, as well as his suspicion of his intact youthful aspect, leading him to attempt to find Dorian's picture. As Dorian arrives in the attic just in time to have a confrontation with Henry, Henry asks Dorian: "What are you?" (Parker, 2009, 1:40:45), to which Dorian replies: "I am what you made me. I lived the life that you preached but never dared practice. I am everything that you were too afraid to be" (Parker, 2009, 1:40:46). This statement by Dorian summarizes Henry's role in Dorian's life, introducing hedonism to Dorian while guardedly observing him from a distance. After Dorian's death, Henry takes Dorian's picture to his own attic. "Who can bear to look at you now" (Parker, 2009, 1:45:42), he says as he looks at it. This utterance can be interpreted as an example of Henry's lack of guilt and amoral, hedonistic attitude towards his actions. He was proud of Dorian before he met his daughter, but even after his death, Henry does not seem to display any trace of remorse towards the influence he has had on Dorian and how that shaped his fate. In the film, Henry's fascination with, but also dissociation from Dorian might be a critique and reflection of current attitudes towards destructive behaviours and hedonistic lifestyles amongst the rich and famous – we like our celebrities dissolute, their lives and deaths made into spectacles. Indeed, we consume them as marketable products of the entertainment industry nowadays.

4.4 The picture: The rotten man in the attic

The portrait in the film, painted by Paul Benney, is, as in Wilde's novel, a central element of the story as well as a significantly realistic depiction of the film's version of Dorian (Figure 3). This picture is staged in a way that becomes organic, a living being; it rots and growls. Right after the painting is finished, Dorian's scars disappear from his body, as if the picture had absorbed and erased his only visible flaws, which also happen to be the traces of his trauma. Therefore, this picture not only prevents Dorian's visible ageing but also erases his physical imperfections. After Dorian's first wrong-doing, a fly lands on the picture's eyes, adding to its organic quality. Later on in the film, Dorian's representation is seen to come to life. It moves within the canvas, it develops open wounds and its mouth twists grunting and growling; these sounds are exclusively

heard by Dorian. Although Dorian has placed the picture in the attic, away from view, its presence haunts him.

Adding to the picture's humanization, the audience is shown the other characters from its perspective. As the picture is observed in different instances by Dorian, Henry and Basil, the audience sees how the picture looks back at them. The picture's view is characterized by the change in focus and filter, the focus of the camera becomes similar to a peephole, and the saturation is lowered to an illuminated but almost achromatic filter. As the film goes on, the picture gradually grows visibly rotten, with worms, maggots and cockroaches invading its painted fabric. The picture's progressive decay is not shown in its entirety; the audience never sees the full picture in its corrupted state. It is only towards the end that the frame displays its complete decomposition. Before this, the film offers only close-ups of its infested rot. Towards the end of the film, when Dorian is about to stab his picture, Henry sets it on fire; this can be read as a way to castigate the Dorian that lives in the picture following the biblical tradition of employing hellfire as a punishment for sins (Figure 4). Finally, when Dorian stabs his portrait, his painted self comes out of the canvas with a defiant attitude, with the intention to frighten Dorian, who eventually confronts his painted double and destroys it completely. This both maintains and highlights the close relationship between Dorian and his picture that Wilde presents in his novel.

Figure 3.

Dorian and his picture.

Figure 4.

The picture on fire.

5. *The Substance* (2024)

Coralie Fargeat's successful body horror *The Substance* (2024) is a film that explores the ageism surrounding women in Hollywood, the world of fame and celebrity, while criticizing the strict beauty standards within the industry. As Capp argues, "Fargeat's canny casting of [Demi] Moore, an actress who has been the subject of decades of speculation in relation to her changing appearance and bumpy career trajectory, recalls the self-reflexive mid-20th century storylines" (2025, p. 3). Notably, the film's trailer introduces Elisabeth, the protagonist, initially through a still photograph rather than showing her directly as a moving character, an interesting choice given *The Substance's* intertextual connection to Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890). As lead actress Demi Moore states, the film is inspired by *Jane Fonda's Workout* (1982), Robert Zemeckis' *Death Becomes Her* (1992), and Wilde's novel (Ryzik, 2025, para. 7). It also features various references to the late 70s and 80s wave of horror films; from Monstro Elisasue's resemblance to the creatures in John Carpenter's *The Thing* (1982), to a bloody finale reminiscent of Brian De Palma's *Carrie* (1976).

5.1 Historical context and the film's reception

Nowadays, the concept of fame is deeply ingrained in various cultures around the world, with celebrity culture commanding an ever-growing influence. The idea of fame can be explored and theorized through various disciplines, from psychology to socio-cultural studies. The term 'celebrity' can be defined as "an adjective that signifies that someone possesses the quality of attracting attention" (Furedi, 2010, p. 493). As Braudy claims, the nineteenth century marked the rise of fame and mass culture (2011, p. 1071). In the twenty-first century, however, "with the expansion of visual media—photography, film, television, the Internet—the enabling apparatus of instant fame becomes more widespread" (Braudy, 2011, p. 1072). The introduction of new technological tools not only expands the cultural presence of fame but also turns celebrities "into object[s] of mass consumption" (Braudy, 2011, p. 1072). As Furedi notes, the rise of the massification and commodification of the celebrity-industrial complex is partly due to the introduction of cable television and 24/7 media coverage (2010, p. 494).

Fargeat's film also brought the hot topic of cosmetic procedures to the big screen yet again. Having cosmetic surgeries, especially rejuvenation, was once the prerogative of the rich and powerful, but "Today it is not only the *haut monde* getting nipped and tucked, but also the average

American" (Rosen, 2004). As Keogh's 2013 report states, the rise in demand of cosmetic procedures is "driven by a wide range of social, economic and technological factors. Cosmetic interventions have been normalised" (p. 9). Considering the popularization of cosmetic procedures, Fargeat's film has been mostly discussed as a commentary on beauty standards as well as the act of altering one's body, specifically, women's bodies. As Adrian Horton wrote for *The Guardian,* "*The Substance*, the new, buzzy body horror film, sends up oppressive beauty standards with the subtlety of a blowtorch" (2024, para. 1).

This film has been awarded with the Cannes Film Festival Award for Best Screenplay, but as Horton states, "it netted Fargeat a screenplay award and led some viewers to walk out mid-screening. Reviews have been similarly divided between effusive praise […] and exhaustion" (2009, para. 4). The influence of Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* has been immediately perceived by critics such as Wendy Ide, who wrote "It's a macabre Faustian pact – part Dorian Gray, part Gremlins" (2024, para. 4) for *The Guardian*, and as Horton who stated "(Suffice to say, there's a Dorian Gray asterisk to the substance, and neither obey the rules.)" (2024). *The Substance* has been criticized as a flawed film despite its success. As Horton states, "That *The Substance* provokes at all, though, may be evidence of its success" (2024, para. 7). Among its flaws, Ide points out that "this is not the film to look to for realism and internal logic" (2024, para. 7) and articulates how it "conjures up outrageous and monstrous images and then covers them all with yet more blood" (2024, para. 2). "Well, the movie is ridiculous and a bit redundant towards the drawn-out end" (2024, para. 6) said Peter Bradshaw for *The Guardian*. Others said that it fails to explore thoroughly the dangers of societal beauty standards; Lovia Gyarkye wrote for *The Hollywood Reporter*, "A stronger version of the film might have dug into the complexities of that truth, instead of simply arranging itself around it" (2024, para. 12). The fact that it is a horror film has also been discussed; Owen Gleiberman from *Variety* said, "Even if you watch horror movies all year long, this is still one of the rare ones to come up with a true *monster*, not just a mass of warped flesh but a deformation of the spirit" (2024, para. 8). Clayton Davis, also from *Variety*, pointed out how Demi Moore's nomination for the Academy Award for Best Actress "won't just be *her* moment. It will be a defining moment for horror — a genre that will finally secure its place at the table" (2025, para. 13). Eventually, Moore lost the Oscar to Mikey Madison, leading

disappointed fans to immediately criticize The Academy on various social media platforms[5]. Some even argued that awarding a 26-year-old over a 62-year-old corroborates the ageism in Hollywood Fargeat's film exposes, as noted by Lindenberg in *Daily Mail* (2025).

5.2 Elisabeth Sparkle, Sue & Monstro Elisasue: The destructive cellular division

The characters of Elisabeth Sparkle, Sue, and Monstro Elisasue are presented as three different versions of the 'mother' character, with Elisabeth as the mother, or matrix, that 'gives birth' to Sue, while Sue 'gives birth' to Monstro Elisasue. Fargeat uses title cards with the names of these characters to present them. These do not appear right before the characters' first appearance; instead, they appear after the audience has had time to get a first impression of the character. As previously mentioned, the name 'Elisabeth Sparkle' is first seen being put on a star on Hollywood's Walk of Fame. On this same star, the audience gets a first look at Elisabeth with her face not visible as the camera is directly above. On that star, Elisabeth is seen posing in a golden dress for the photographers, enjoying the blinding flashlights and being acclaimed by the photographers who repeatedly tell her, "We love you"; a scene that gives a glimpse into Elisabeth's glorious times as a famous figure. After that quick glimpse, fans appear posing on the floor with the star. However, the star begins to gradually crack and suffer the passing of time. The last indignity the star suffers is a splash of ketchup from a person walking by who tries to clean it but only manages to smear it around and then leaves it, predicting the film's ending. Next, a woman is seen dancing in a choreographed workout set, and the audience knows it is Elisabeth from the poster on the wall that reads: 'Sparkle Your Life with Elisabeth'. Once Elisabeth's workday is over, after being congratulated by her workmates on her 50th birthday, she goes to the men's bathroom because the women's one is out of order. As she is in the bathroom, the producer of the show, Harvey, enters the same bathroom. Elisabeth overhears Harvey speaking on the phone asking for a younger woman to replace her. Once Harvey is out, Elisabeth appears hurt by Harvey's intention to replace her because of her age. Right after the audience views the sad look on her face, the title card saying 'Elisabeth' appears in white letters on a black background. This suggests that Elisabeth is centrally defined as an aging woman in the entertainment and fitness industry, an industry obsessed with youth and beauty at all costs, and one that has normalized extreme body modification. After a car accident, Elisabeth visits a doctor and, in that same visit, she receives a

[5] Social media platforms like X, Letterboxd and other forums.

USB drive that contains the advertisement for the substance and provides all the information to obtain it. Before she watches the advertisement, a red rose bouquet appears in the frame with a note that reads: 'THANK YOU FOR ALL THESE YEARS WITH US. YOU WERE AMAZING!'. The screen shows Elisabeth's disappointed expression and then the frame cuts to a shot of the bouquet note focusing only on the word 'WERE'. At this point, it is fair to say that, rather than simply feeling aged, Elisabeth feels both rejected and cast out from a world she is passionate about, one that once made her feel loved. Going back to the advertisement, it ends by saying: "The one and only thing not to forget: You are one. You can't escape from yourself" (Fargeat, 2024, 14:54). This instruction captures the relation between Elisabeth Sparkle, Sue, and Monstro Elisasue. Once Elisabeth acquires the initial kit of the substance, the last instruction she reads is: 'Remember you are one'. After Elisabeth takes the substance, Sue is born, and the audience knows her name as she presents herself in a casting to substitute Elisabeth; then a title card appears with the name 'Sue' in hot pink letters on a black background.

As Sue comes back to life after Elisabeth's tedious week, Sue looks repulsed by Elisabeth's traces as well as by her sleeping body. This disgust motivates her to find a place to hide Elisabeth, and she decides to create a door that opens from a bathroom wall to a dark and empty space. This space's limits are not visible; it is unclear how big or small it is, but it is large enough to fit Elisabeth's body as well as the needles and plastic bags required to keep up the substance's balance. Once the door is finished and Elisabeth has been dragged inside, Sue looks at her and proceeds to shut the door proudly. This new dark room can be read in parallel to Dorian's attic, a space both attached to the places the characters inhabit, but also separate and hidden from view as a receptacle of everything the characters wish to expurge from their lives, whether it be guilt or the signs of aging. This parallelism can also entail that Elisabeth becomes the 'living picture'; instead of a simulation created out of paint on a framed canvas, she is the picture that Dorian, just like Sue, hides in a dark and private space out of repulsion while his beauty remains intact. While Elisabeth lies in the dark room, Sue gradually starts to actively resist the weekly balance. The first instance of overlooking the substance's rules happens when Sue, enjoying an intimate moment with an attractive young man, decides to take some extra hours from Elisabeth. Once Sue is back from stealing stabilizer fluid from Elisabeth, she resumes the action with the man who tells her: "What did you do? You seem even more beautiful than before" (Fargeat, 2024, 59:57). The young

man's reaction displays how Sue's beauty comes at the cost of Elisabeth's physical and psychological deterioration. The first consequence of Sue's irresponsibility appears on Elisabeth's right index finger, which adopts a cadaverous aspect. Elisabeth proceeds to call the substance's contact number with the intention of reverting the effects, but to her disappointment, the voice on the phone reminds her that "There is no she and you. You are one" (Fargeat, 2024, 1:03:30). The cadaverization of Elisabeth's finger resonates with the progressive deterioration of Dorian's portrait, both serving as visible manifestations of concealed corruption. Following these events, Elisabeth visits a diner café, and there she encounters an elderly man who is the older version of the young male nurse who gave her a USB with the substance's advertisement. This man asks her: "Has she started yet? Eating away at you?" (Fargeat, 2024, 1:09:08). The wording 'eating away' can be understood as a reinforcement to reading Elisabeth as a living picture that is eaten away by the visually incorruptible Sue.

As time passes, Sue's success continues as she secures high-profile magazine cover features and, most importantly, is selected to host the New Year's Eve special. To keep up with her lifestyle, Sue repeatedly steals days from Elisabeth and talks to her as she extracts the stabilizer fluid from her: "If you don't open the door when opportunity knocks, you won't get another chance" (Fargeat, 2024, 1:22:21). The audience is notified of Elisabeth's revival as she lets out a loud scream of agony and anger. This time, half of Elisabeth's body is advancedly aged and livid. Her hair is both grey and dishevelled. Again, she complains to the substance's contact number, the voice asks her if she wants to stop, to which she replies: "No, no, no. I can't stop" (Fargeat, 2024, 1:25:02). As she aims to continue speaking, "She just…" (Fargeat, 2024, 1:25:07), she remembers that they are one and starts to bang her head in a deranged manner. Therefore, this time, besides having visible bodily changes, her conduct appears visibly destabilized. As Elisabeth sits at home watching Sue's appearance on a late-night show on television, at one point, the host asks Sue to share her beauty secrets for the audience. Elisabeth, angrily, tells Sue: "Say it! Tell them who your little beauty secret is" (Fargeat, 2024, 1:31:41) and, as she mockingly opens her robe to show her body, says: "Here's your little beauty secret" (Fargeat, 2024, 1:31:50). This reinforces the idea that Sue's beauty comes at the cost of Elisabeth's psychological and physical disintegration; Elisabeth is Sue's beauty secret. Following Elisabeth's reaction to the show, she renders her living room filthy and degraded; the living room as a physical space mirrors the degradation of the physical

body. Once Sue is back to life again, she is appalled by the filthy space she encounters and, consequently, she is even more repulsed by Elisabeth and her traces. “I can’t go back […] gross, old, fat” (Fargeat, 2024, 1:33:06), she tells sleeping Elisabeth, and proceeds to furiously extract an excessive amount of stabilizer fluid from her, filling numerous jars, completely disregarding the substance’s instructions. Sue’s actions represent the entertainment industry whose very survival depends on its voracious consumption and projection of youth and sexual attractiveness. Sue’s behaviour may also be due to the fact that the living picture that is Elisabeth is not Sue. These two have different names. What makes them one is that Sue is born out of Elisabeth. Therefore, since what Sue sees is not her own body in decay, like Dorian does, she does not associate her irresponsibility to herself. Instead, she only grows more disgusted, selfish, and resentful of Elisabeth.

The passing of time is shown through the use of a textual banner that states that three months have passed. The audience also knows that the fluid covered up until the day before the New Year’s Eve show because of the billboard announcing that it is tomorrow. Sue, who does not realize that she cannot use any more fluid, tries to take that day’s dose and realizes that the fluid has rotted. Desperately, she calls the substance’s contact number and the voice tells her, “It means you’ve reached the end” (Fargeat, 2024, 1:36:08). Sue decides to switch as she can barely control her body without the fluid. Once Elisabeth is awake again, she is in a grotesquely aged state due to the three months that Sue stole from her (Figure 5). Elisabeth’s aspect at this point resembles Gollum from Peter Jackson’s *Lord of the Rings* trilogy. This is the moment in which Elisabeth’s state reaches its peak of decay and she decides to call the substance’s contact number to desperately say: “I want to stop!” (Fargeat, 2024, 1:40:12). The voice listens, and the substance’s team prepare her termination kit for her to pick up the next day. This moment can be read as Dorian’s intention to destroy his picture; in this case, it is the living picture that possesses that agency. This argument will be further developed in this section.

As Elisabeth injects the ‘TERMINATION’ needle into Sue’s chest, she sees the note on a rose bouquet that reads: ‘BREAK A LEG! THEY ARE GOING TO LOVE YOU.’ and remembers her golden dress and how glorious she felt as photographers adored her. The note and her memories convince her to pull out the needle from Sue’s body before its liquid is fully injected. Elisabeth tries to awaken Sue: “I need you. Cause I hate myself” (Fargeat, 2024, 1:44:04), she tells her and

adds: “You gotta get ready. It’s our big night” (Fargeat, 2024, 1:44:13). The transition from ‘you’ to ‘our’ can express how Elisabeth considers Sue “The only lovable part of [her]” (Fargeat, 2024, 1:44:29) and might indicate her, at this point, arguably suicidal acceptance of her annihilation in exchange for the feeling of being admired.

Figure 5.

Elisabeth’s state of decay as the ‘living picture’.

Therefore, it is Sue who has to get ready, but Elisabeth would enjoy it as well. As soon as Sue wakes up, she is startled by Elisabeth’s aspect. Once she sees the needle, she immediately engages in a physical altercation against the weakened Elisabeth with the desire to terminate her. Sue successfully achieves her goal; however, right after Elisabeth takes her final breaths, she remembers that they are one, realizing that her body will soon begin to weaken. Retaking the argument on agency, an interpretation of these scenes would be that it is Elisabeth who first tries to kill Sue because she considers her the cause of her decay. However, Elisabeth depends on Sue to feel loved as Harvey fired her from a world that once submerged her in adoration and acclaim. It is Sue who eventually kills Elisabeth instead, and what motivates her to do so is her lack of guilt or sympathy for her.

On the New Year’s Eve show night Sue begins to notice her body’s breakdown, as some of her teeth, nails, and ears fall out. She rushes back home and injects the substance again, which goes against its instructions, with the intention of recovering her youthful beauty. However, Sue does not give birth to a prototypically younger, more beautiful, and more perfect version of herself. On the contrary, she gives birth to Monstro Elisasue, which, as her name indicates, is a monstrous hybrid of the two selves. She has Sue’s face but completely deformed, and Elisabeth’s intact face grafted onto her back. These two faces are both part of a completely disfigured body. After the

first looks at her, the title card with her name appears in neon green letters on a black background. Despite Monstro Elisasue's aspect, she goes back to the studio. As she enters the studio and walks the red corridor, she imagines the production team acclaiming her: "This is where you belong" (Fargeat, 2024, 2:03:28), making it more evident that that is what she wishes to hear. As soon as her deformed face is under the spotlights on the stage, the audience is immediately repulsed by her. Elisasue[6] tries to calm down the spectators, saying: "Don't be scared! […] It's still me! […] I'm Elisabeth! I'm Sue!" (Fargeat, 2024, 2:07:45). Elisabeth's face at the back of Elisasue joins to say: "It's me!" (Fargeat, 2024, 2:07:50). The audience reacts with physical abuse to Elisasue's deformity. In a gory scene, this abuse leads to her body exploding onto the disgusted audience in an orgiastic display of blood and body parts. The only body part that survives the explosion is Elisabeth's face, which, covered in blood, uses its own skin as tentacles to crawl on the floor. Eventually, Elisabeth's face, arrives at Elisabeth Sparkle's star on the Walk of Fame, where she, for one last time, experiences visions of acclaim, applause, and the camera's flashing lights on her. This ending can be seen as parallel to Wilde's novel ending, given that Dorian, after stabbing his picture, adopts the aspect of the picture's Dorian. In this case, after Sue and Monstro Elisasue disintegrate in the explosion, the face of the living picture that is Elisabeth is the one that survives. Also, the fact that the face chooses to rest on the star on the Walk of Fame clearly highlights that Elisabeth Sparkle tied her identity entirely to her stardom. After that, the face melts into a blood puddle, mirroring the fall of ketchup at the beginning of the film, tying it circularly, and designating Elisabeth as an object of consumption of the same nature as fast food.

5.3 Harvey: The TV producer

Harvey, played by the actor Dennis Quaid, is the producer who Elisabeth Sparkle works with and serves as the grotesque embodiment of the entertainment industry's inherent sexism and mechanics of fame and celebrity culture. This character can be read as the equivalent of Lord Henry Wotton from Wilde's novel since Henry is the one who influences Dorian to embrace a life where pleasure, youth, and beauty are valued above all else. Similarly, Harvey speaks for the entertainment industry, making Elisabeth feel futile in a life lived outside the spotlight. Harvey's first appearance is at the studio's bathroom, a place of excretion where the human body gets rid of unwanted waste, pointing to the entertainment industry's insalubrious mechanisms of consuming

[6] Monstro Elisasue.

and expelling young people. His face occupies the frame, looking slightly distorted due to the closeness of the camera lens. 'Find me somebody new. Now' (Fargeat, 2024, 07:06), he says on the phone while Elisabeth is in a stall. As director Coralie Fargeat explains for *Vanity Fair*, when Harvey urinates, it looks as if he were urinating on the audience in a movie theatre. Fargeat explains that this scene is designed to place Harvey as the 'bad guy' from the very beginning. Harvey later invites Elisabeth to lunch where, adding to his grotesqueness, he is eating shrimp ravenously, disgustingly open-mouthed, while flies surround him. During lunch with Elisabeth, Harvey states, "At fifty it stops" (Fargeat, 2024, 08:28); this statement impacts Elisabeth's fate as it makes her feel as if life actually stops for her now that she is fifty, and this feeling of obsolescence leads her to profound self-loathing. Just as in Lewin's adaptation of Wilde's novel, the moment in which a catalyst character persuades the protagonist with their ideas ends with a shot of an insect struggling not to drown in a liquid. In this case, instead of a butterfly in formaldehyde, it is a fly on a glass of wine.

The last interaction Elisabeth has with Harvey is the moment in which he gives her a box with all of her belongings that were at the studio, as well as a gift. This gift is a French cuisine cookbook, offered "To keep [her] busy" (Fargeat, 2024, 45:06), pointing to the sexism of the industry where aging women who are no longer considered desirable and marketable objects of consumption are symbolically sent back to the kitchen. Just as the yellow book Lord Henry gave Dorian, this book will mark the protagonist's path towards her downfall. As Elisabeth prepares the recipes, she looks visibly destabilized and hysterical. Her cooking looks unappealing, and both the living room and the kitchen are, for the first time, rendered revoltingly filthy. Just as Dorian's attitude is partly due to the yellow book, Elisabeth's loss of sanity is perceivable as she prepares the French dishes. It is also interesting to add that the yellow book is considered to refer to the novel *Against Nature* by French novelist Joris-Karl Huysmans, and, in parallel, the cookbook is on French cuisine. Adding to the parallelism between Henry and Harvey, Harvey feels proud of Sue, as he considers her a product of his great talent as a producer, his creation. This pride is expressed minutes before Elisasue enters the stage to host the New Year's Eve special. He is seen telling the men sitting around him: "You will not be disappointed. She's my most beautiful creation. I shaped her for success!" (Fargeat, 2024, 2:04:13). This moment not only reinforces Harvey's role as a manipulative catalyst figure, but also exposes the entertainment industry's

dynamic by which individuals become a product shaped for public consumption and personal acclaim.

5.4 The picture(s): The picture vs the billboard

Fargeat's film incorporates various forms of portraiture, including billboards, posters, and a framed picture, all of which reappear throughout the narrative. The studio's red corridor initially displays posters of Elisabeth, capturing her career as a television workout instructor. These are removed once Elisabeth is fired, suggesting they exist only while she remains a living product of fame. When her celebrity fades, the pictorial representations vanish with it. Similarly, as Elisabeth drives home, she sees a billboard of herself being ripped down to be replaced, which stuns her and leads to a car crash. When Sue's first television workout airs, a poster of her appears in the corridor, implying that the position of celebrity has been claimed. Later, a poster promoting Sue's New Year's Eve special is incorporated. The billboard visible from Elisabeth's living room is particularly significant. Before Sue's birth, no billboard is seen, but following her first photoshoot, a billboard featuring her image appears, which Sue observes with pride. This billboard can be read as a product of Elisabeth and Sue's imagination, disappearing and reappearing throughout the film, suggesting it may be a diegetically projected element. The billboard advertising Sue's show embodies both pride for Sue and torment for Elisabeth, intruding on Elisabeth's thoughts and affecting her actions.

Moving on to Elisabeth's framed picture (Figure 6), it is a photo hung in her living room, displaying her dressed in her aerobics attire. Right before Elisabeth chooses to order the substance, a decision that initiates her physical and moral decay, she throws a snow globe breaking the framed glass over its right eye. Similarly, in Wilde's novel, Dorian's first immoral act is reflected in his portrait. As Sue hides Elisabeth in the dark room, the billboard and the picture, which are placed facing each other, are seen in a shot sequence switching from picture to billboard as if they were having a conversation. This conversation ends with Sue removing the picture from the living room wall. Once the picture is gone, a shot from the kitchen shows two windows opening into the living room. Elisabeth is seen moving from the right window, where the picture used to be, to the left window, through which the billboard is visible (Figure 7). This could depict Sue's gradual takeover of control over Elisabeth. When Elisabeth attempts to end her experience with the substance, she brings her picture back into the living room, as if reclaiming control over herself. There, Sue will

shatter the glass further by pushing Elisabeth against it. Monstro Elisasue continues this struggle for control by cutting out the face of the picture and using it as a mask. This might suggest that the picture, besides facing Sue's billboard in rivalry, comes to symbolize both Elisabeth's and Elisasue's attempts to regain the agency that Sue had taken from them.

Figure 6.

Decayed Elisabeth and her framed picture.

Figure 7.

Elisabeth moving towards Sue's billboard.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this paper has explored how Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* continues to influence contemporary narratives concerned with beauty, art, entertainment, and social recognition. Both Oliver Parker's *Dorian Gray* (2009) and Coralie Fargeat's *The Substance* (2024) display, through their characters and storylines, a continuity with Wilde's critique of Aesthetic obsession and the consequences of surrendering agency to a social gaze built on appearances. The comparative analysis of these two films has discussed how the characters of Dorian Gray, Lord Henry Wotton, Elisabeth Sparkle, Sue, Monstro Elisasue and Harvey embody the dangers Wilde associated with excessive Aestheticism and the pursuit of public admiration.

Parker's film delivers a wider exploration of the character of Dorian, providing him with deeper complexity and individuality compared to Wilde's novel. Dorian's portrait remains the central physical object through which Wilde's ideas are conveyed. The picture absorbs not only the corruption produced by Dorian's acts but also the marks of his traumatic past. Lord Henry acts as the spokesperson of Aesthetic rhetoric, using addiction and intoxication to persuade Dorian with his discourse on pleasure and youth. The relationship between these two characters reflects the dynamic within Aestheticism, where beauty and art become tools for domination. The

humanization of Dorian's picture allows it to haunt Dorian through the sounds it emits. The fire that burns the picture in the end seems to punish Dorian for his sins, as if he were burnt in hellfire. Dorian's downfall can be understood as the consequence of the trauma caused by his abusive and villainous grandfather, a cycle through which Dorian himself eventually adopts the role of a villain.

Fargeat's *The Substance* translates Wilde's critique into a contemporary environment where fame and celebrity replace class. Elisabeth Sparkle, Sue and Monstro Elisasue repeat the dynamic between Dorian and his portrait, with the difference that here the body itself becomes a living and corrupted picture. Here, Harvey acts as the spokesperson of the entertainment industry, recruiting and dismissing women according to the industry's impossible beauty standards. His mistreatment of Elisabeth and pride in Sue can be read as a representation of the emphasis placed on the sexual attractiveness associated with youth. The framed picture, the billboards and posters function as modern versions of the portrait, preserving a controlled image while the real self undergoes visible deterioration. The rivalry between Sue's billboard and Elisabeth's picture seems to convey the dynamics of control between Sue and Elisabeth, and eventually Monstro Elisasue, as well as the question of the characters' agency.

Both films display how the characters construct and protect an image that ensures their social position while hiding the costs this implies. Wilde's stance on the Aesthetic Movement remains present in these narratives, as beauty is shown to be an aspirational but destructive force. The pictorial representations in both films, whether as portraits or public images, present the dangers of allowing beauty and youth to rule over moral agency. Ultimately, this comparative analysis explores how Wilde's critique of a society that bases its values obsessively on looks continues to be relevant in different historical and cultural contexts.

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