01. Initial research

A new semester begins, and with it comes a new project – a movie hotel for true cinephiles! Having spent some time deliberating, I chose to use Coralie Fargeat's body horror The Substance as the basis for my design.

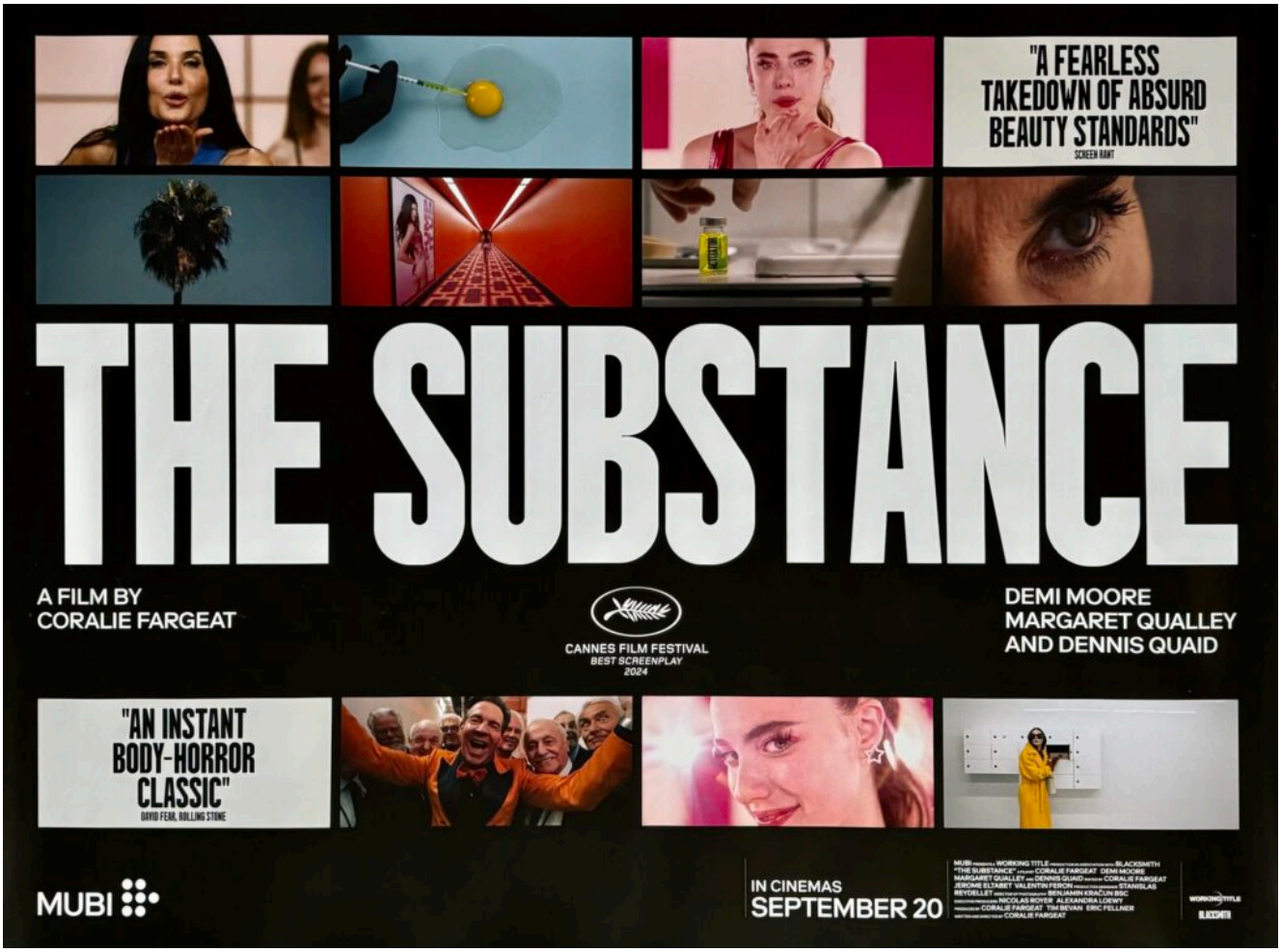


Image courtesy of Mubi, via VintageMoviePosters

Released in 2024, the film centres around Elisabeth Sparkle (Demi Moore), a fading star who has just celebrated her 50th birthday only to be promptly fired by her boss, Harvey (Dennis Quaid). Exploring themes of fame, femininity and society's view on ageing , the film pays homage to the body horror genre, making thematic and direct visual references the works of David Cronenberg, Stanley Kubrick, David Lynch and John Carpenter (to name but a few of the Easter eggs hidden through the films visuals and set design).

The Substance - 2024
Lost Highway - 1997

The Substance - 2024

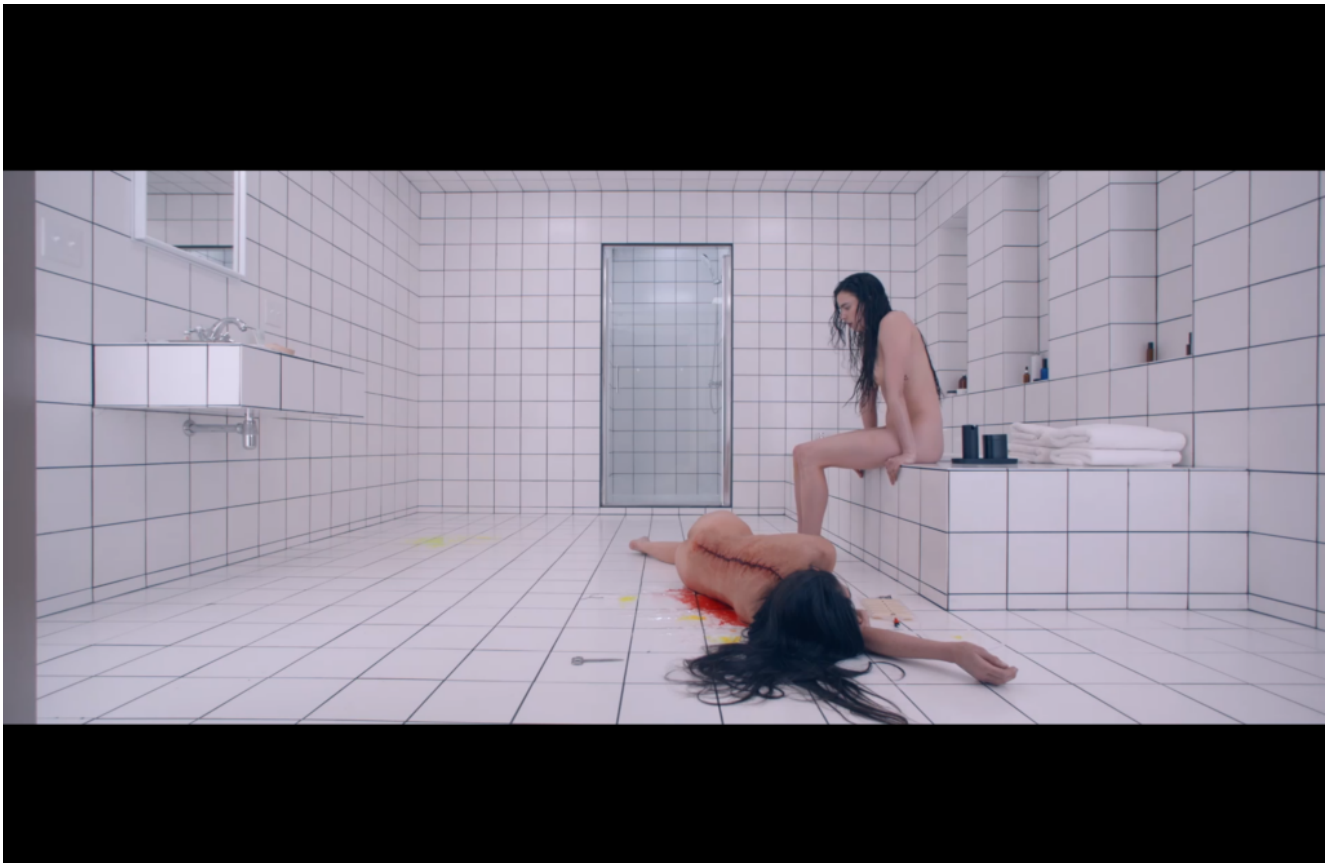
Videodrome - 1983

Images via facebook.com/NightmareNostalgia

The film takes place largely in Elisabeth’s apartment and at the television studio where she has been working. Both within the private, domestic setting and in the more public spaces, the set design places great emphasis on two key interior

features: long corridors, often shot in dizzying Kubrick-style single point perspective or in a chaotic wide angle, and stark, white tiled bathrooms which seem rather at odds with the more elaborate surroundings of the apartment and studio, and which, as one Reddit user put it best, “reflect a space where we’re most critical of ourselves (naked, white lights and tiles, to emphasize flaws)”.

The long hallway at the studio, reminiscent of the hallway in Kubrick’s The Shining

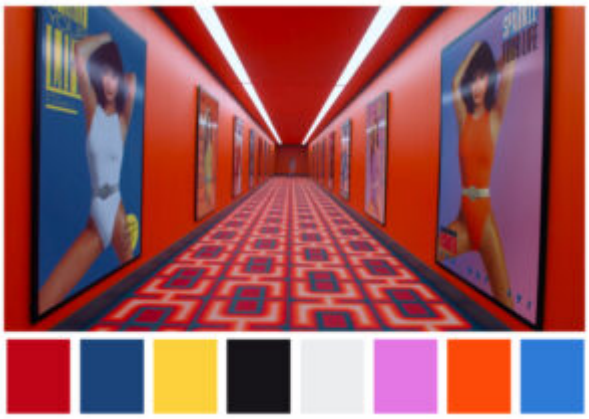


Stark, white tiled bathroom in Elisabeth's apartment

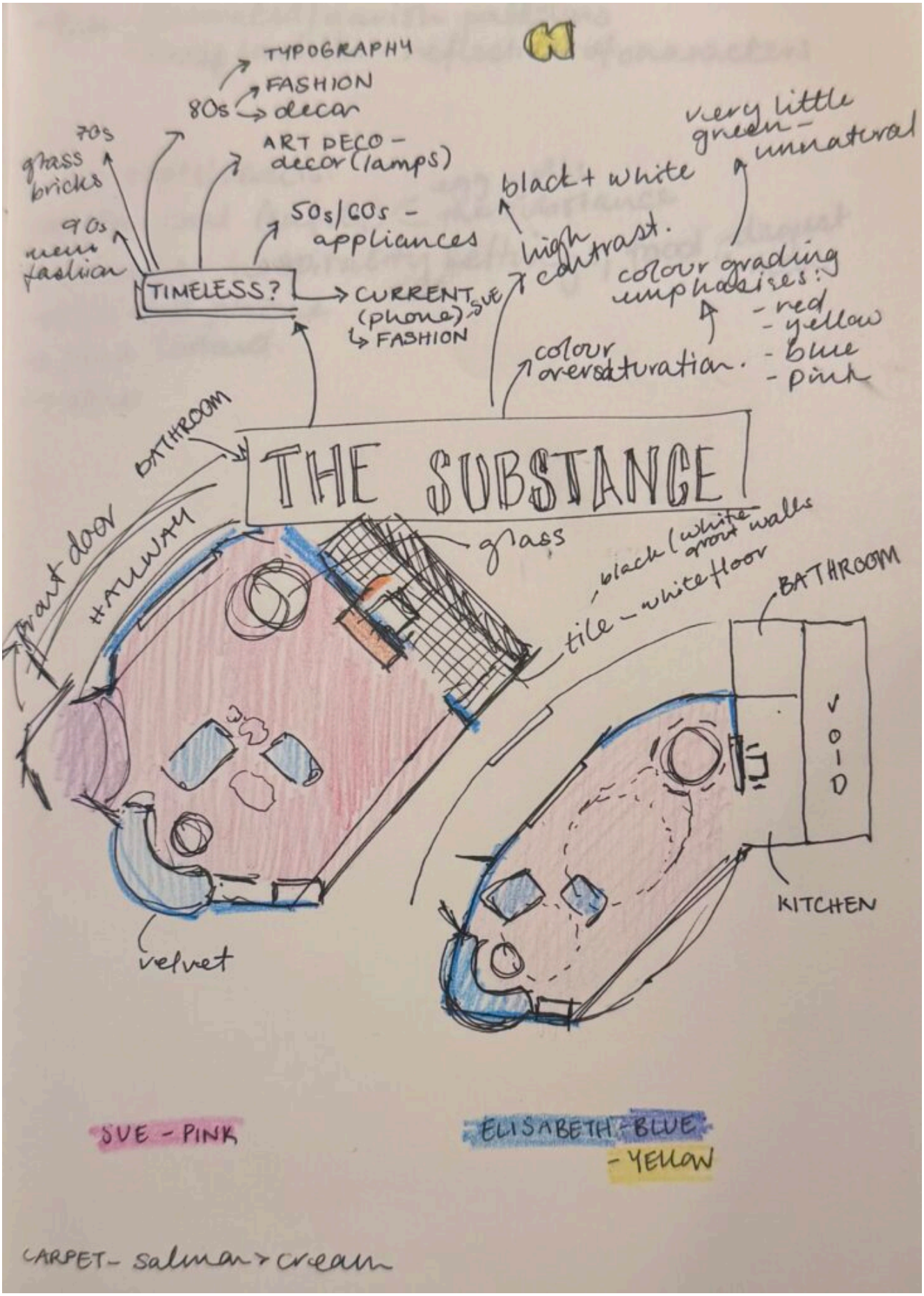
The set design is intentionally ambiguous, with Fargeat telling *Vogue* that "Taking it out of reality was a way to make it timeless and thus universal, like the story could happen today, yesterday, or tomorrow". The props suggest it could be happening anywhere between the 1980s and the near future – with Elisabeth's apartment subtly shifting from deeper tones and a Hollywood Regency style to a more playful, bubblegum pink 80s Art Deco revival reimagining of the space as she embodies her alter ego, Sue.

via [Mubi on Youtube]

Colour plays a vital role in the film – the colour grading is highly saturated, with bold pops of primary colours representing Elisabeth, and, for her younger counterpart, Sue, "a complementary color of the primary color." (Emmanuelle Youchnovski, costume designer, via [nextbestpicture.com]).

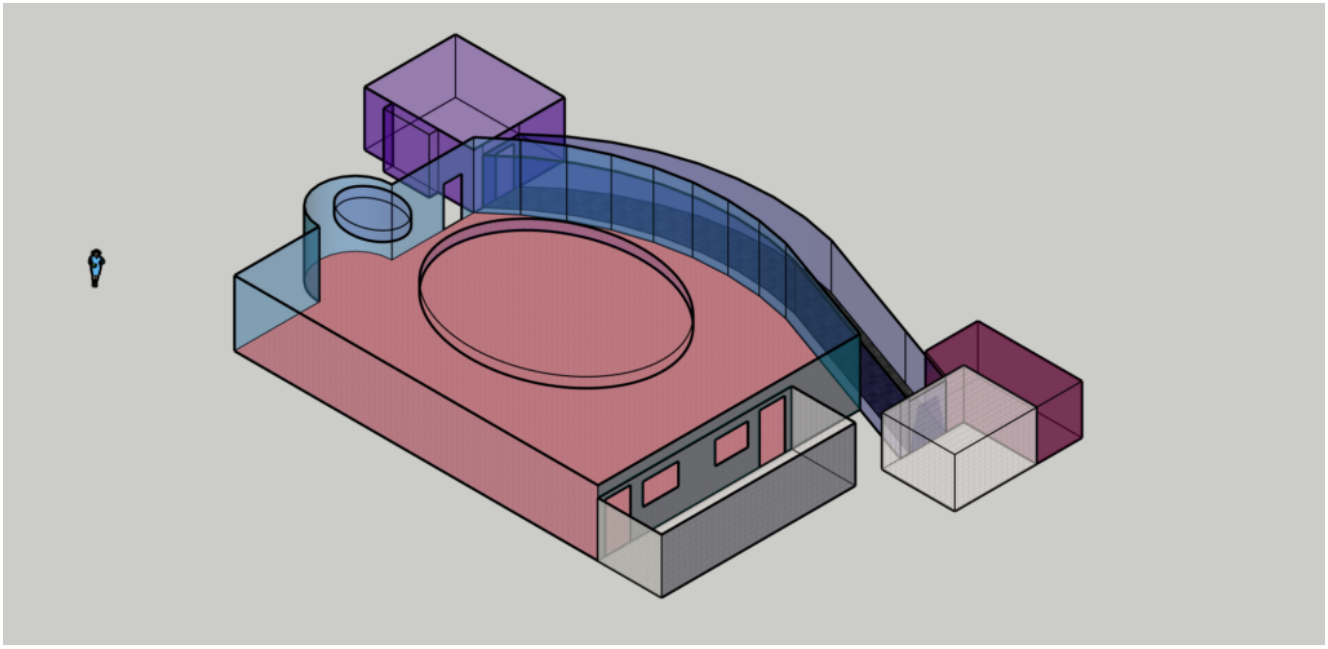


Having rewatched the film, I tried to sketch out what I imagined to be the floor plate of Elisabeth’s apartment – the primary setting of the film.



Quick sketches of Elisabeth's apartment floor plan made throughout a viewing of the film

A floor plan created by Instagram user @fplancroissant – some of which I found useful, however I believed there were some inaccuracies.



My own volumetric interpretation of Elisabeth’s apartment