




C A P Í T U L O 1

Abjection as an Interruption of the Aesthetic Canon: Body, Semiosis, and Beauty in *The Ugly Stepsister* (2025)

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Citlaly Aguilar Campos

Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México

ABSTRACT: This article examines beauty as a hegemonic discourse that operates on bodies through processes of signification that become naturalized and culturally embodied. Through a case study of the feature film *The Ugly Stepsister* (2025), abjection is approached not merely as an aesthetic or narrative device, but as a semiotic interpretant capable of interrupting the normative canon of beauty and exposing the symbolic violence it exerts upon female corporeality. Adopting a qualitative approach, the study draws on discourse analysis and Charles Sanders Peirce's triadic semiotics to conceptualize beauty as a category in constant becoming, embedded within open and situated processes of semiosis. The theoretical framework integrates the contributions of Julia Kristeva, who understands abjection as a destabilizing boundary of the symbolic order; Judith Butler, whose work problematizes bodily performativity under normative matrices; David Le Breton, who conceives the body as a semantic filter of experience; and Jean Baudrillard, whose critique of simulacra and fetishization illuminates contemporary regimes of representation. The analysis shows how the abject body functions as a site of rupture in relation to ideals of beauty, youth, and social validation, revealing the fragility of the aesthetic canon and the violence sustaining competition among female bodies. In this sense, abjection emerges as a critical force that introduces a fissure in dominant interpretive processes, enabling alternative modes of sense-making that challenge the naturalization of hegemonic discourses. As a central contribution, the article argues that disruptive cultural content, such as body horror cinema, not only denounces aesthetic hegemony but also activates interpretants capable of reconfiguring the relationship between body, discourse, and experience. This reflection is extended

to contemporary models of artificial intelligence, whose training systems tend to statistically reproduce prevailing canons of beauty and normality. Recognizing this dynamic opens a critical dialogue on the need to generate alternative cultural and technological interpretants that expand the realm of what can be seen, thought, and embodied. From this perspective, the body is proposed as an embodied semiotics in continuous becoming, capable of resisting, fracturing, and reimagining the limits of hegemonic discourses

KEYWORDS: body; semiosis; abjection; discourse; beauty

INTRODUCTION

This article departs from a premise that is both simple and deeply embodied: we live immersed in discourses that shape the ways we perceive ourselves, narrate our identities, and inhabit our bodies. As Paul Ricoeur (2001) suggests, we are mythopoietic beings, continuously configuring reality through narratives that permeate us in an integral manner. Ernst Cassirer (2009) supports this view by defining the human being as a *homo symbolicus*, one who requires mediations in order to dwell in the world. Cassirer refers to these mediations as symbolic forms, among which he includes religion, art, science, language, and myth. Through them, we translate the world into meaning. Linguistic practices and the production of shared narratives within each social group allow what surrounds us to acquire significance not only at a cognitive level, but also at emotional and corporeal ones.

From this perspective, no experience is free from the filters that each culture inscribes upon bodies. In this sense, the analysis of the Norwegian film *The Ugly Stepsister* (2025) becomes a privileged site from which to examine beauty as a hegemonic dispositif that operates simultaneously on bodies and subjectivity. The film offers a fertile terrain to interrogate how aesthetic norms are produced, sustained, and internalized as forms of embodied knowledge that regulate visibility, value, and belonging.

Cinema can be understood as possessing a mythopoietic capacity insofar as it creatively imitates reality through moving images that do not merely represent the world, but actively reconfigure it. As Deleuze (1984) argues, cinema does not reproduce reality as it is; rather, it constructs structures of perception and sensation that reorganize our relationship with the real. Through images, cinema enables a *sentipensar* of the environment and of ourselves, generating new ways of seeing, feeling, and inhabiting the world. In the case of concepts such as beauty, cinema does not simply produce representations, but percepts in the sense articulated by Deleuze and Guattari (1991): forces that traverse the subject and acquire an autonomy that exceeds individual experience. These percepts gradually infiltrate

collective imaginaries and become guides or points of rupture for discourses that are embodied in practices, affects, and actions.

The Ugly Stepsister (2025) reinterprets the classic tale of Cinderella from a displaced perspective: that of Elvira, the stepsister traditionally relegated to the margins of the ideal. This shift in point of view functions not merely as a narrative device, but as a critical operation that interrogates the cultural mechanisms through which beauty is produced and sustained as a norm. The film situates itself within an aesthetic that combines the fairy tale with body horror, exposing how female bodies are shaped, compared, and hierarchized according to a canon that presents itself as natural while operating as a disciplinary structure.

This film was selected because it places the body at the center as a site where the symbolic violence of aesthetic ideals is inscribed. Through abjection, the film releases a percept that destabilizes beauty understood as a desirable attribute and instead presents it as an imperative that permeates subjectivity and pushes bodies toward self-modification, sacrifice, and, ultimately, degradation. Elvira's body becomes a terrain of tension between desire and repulsion, where the grotesque emerges to reveal what the canon seeks to conceal: the materiality of flesh, pain, and vulnerability that sustain the fantasy of perfection. From this standpoint, the film does not aim to provoke solely through visual excess, but to deploy abjection as a critical strategy capable of destabilizing beauty as an unquestionable truth.

In order to engage critically with the film, abjection is approached following Julia Kristeva (2010) as an interpretant within a system of signs that operates not mechanically, but dynamically, as proposed by Peirce (as cited in McNabb, 2018). Abjection is thus understood as that which irrupts within the chain of signification, unsettling naturalized meanings and disrupting stabilized interpretive frameworks. From this perspective, the film functions as a laboratory of tensions, a staged scenario in which the body becomes semiosis in crisis, a contested territory where desire, repulsion, and social mandate converge.

The general objective of this article is to analyze abjection as an interpretant that challenges hegemonic discourses of beauty through the film *The Ugly Stepsister* (2025), with the aim of exposing how each culture constructs an empire of meaning around what a body should be. Specifically, the study seeks to: 1) explore how alterity is embodied through the abject body, enabling an acceptance of the human condition as inherently imperfect and unfinished; and 2) examine how the film's narrative makes visible the competition among female bodies under the structuring force of the male gaze.

METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

This study adopts a qualitative approach, which offers a less rigid field of action than quantitative methodologies and is particularly suited to the objectives of this research. As Binda and Balbastre-Benavent (2013) note, qualitative inquiry is characterized by its openness and flexibility, allowing researchers to follow emerging lines of investigation and to incorporate additional data as new ideas arise throughout the research process (p. 182). This openness is especially valuable when addressing complex cultural objects that demand interpretive depth rather than measurement.

The qualitative approach is particularly appropriate for the study of cinema, as it allows films to be examined as interrelated systems of signs in constant production of meaning. From a semiotic perspective, images, bodies, and cinematic narratives are not understood as isolated elements, but as part of open-ended processes of signification in which meanings are continuously negotiated, tensioned, and transformed. This type of approach makes it possible to analyze how cinema activates interpretants, mobilizes affects, and constructs cultural imaginaries that mediate our relationship with the world, with others, and with our own corporeality.

The research follows an inductive logic, taking a specific object of study, the feature film *The Ugly Stepsister* (2025), in order to develop broader arguments concerning abjection, the body, and hegemonic discourses of beauty. Rather than applying predetermined categories in a top-down manner, the analysis emerges from a close engagement with the filmic material and its discursive configurations.

Within this methodological framework, discourse analysis was selected as the primary research technique due to its flexibility, analytical strength, and precision (Sayago, 2014). Discourse analysis proves especially fertile for the study of cinema, as it combines methodological rigor with theoretical openness, enabling the complexity of cultural objects to be addressed without reducing them to closed structures. It allows for the construction of analytical categories not as fixed schemes, but as porous guides to meaning that are enriched through dialogue among concepts, images, and sociocultural contexts.

Through the application of discourse analysis, interpretation does not culminate in a single or definitive reading, but rather expands while maintaining methodological validity. As Sayago (2014) emphasizes, discourse analysis does not mechanically align aspects of the object of study with predefined variables; instead, it necessarily involves an interpretive task regulated by theoretical coherence (p. 10). In other words, the validation of analytical categories must remain consistent with the selected theoretical framework and contextual conditions, avoiding arbitrary interpretations. Discourse analysis thus enables the object of study to acquire new layers of meaning and opens a field of possibilities for future research.

Within this discursive approach, the semiotic perspective of Charles Sanders Peirce and his triadic model of the sign (representamen, object, and interpretant) was chosen to address beauty as a discursive category whose meaning is not a priori or fixed, but rather a cultural process in constant becoming. This choice is grounded in the understanding that signs operate through continuous semiosis, allowing them to be analyzed as open systems configured within interactive and situated contexts. From this standpoint, abjection in *The Ugly Stepsister* (2025) is conceived as an interpretant that irrupts into the chain of signification, destabilizing the naturalized meanings of the aesthetic canon and enabling a critical reading of cinematic images beyond representation, within the realm of cultural and affective experience.



Figure 1. Triadic scheme applied to the analysis of the film *The Ugly Stepsister* (2025)

Source: Author's own elaboration

Figure 1 illustrates how Peirce's triadic model is operationalized in this discourse analysis as an interpretive instrument for the film and for the categories of beauty and abjection. The sign is understood as something that stands for something else and produces meaning. It is composed of the representamen (material form), the object (that which is represented or substituted), and the interpretant (dynamic signification). It is important to note that the sign does not function in isolation, but rather as part of a broader semiotic system articulated with other signs, generating semiosis, understood as the relational activity among signs that results in the production of meaning.

CRITICAL FRAMEWORK

To carry out the discourse analysis of the film from Peirce's triadic perspective, this study draws on the work of four authors: Julia Kristeva (2010), Judith Butler (2002), David Le Breton (2005), and Jean Baudrillard (2002). Rather than constituting a unified school of thought, these authors share a critical-cultural theoretical axis that may be understood as a poststructuralist critique of the contemporary subject, approached through the body as a symbolic construction inscribed within processes of signification, power, and culture.

As illustrated in Figure 1, abjection operates as an interpretant within the methodological approach to the film. For Julia Kristeva (2010), abjection functions as that which “opposes the self” (p. 8), reconfiguring the meaning of what we believe constitutes us and blurring the psychic and physical boundaries of identity. In the film, the drastic transformations undergone by Elvira’s body lead to a gradual annihilation of the self. Abjection is deployed as an expressive vehicle that allows the film to explore, in an extreme and visceral manner, how beauty is imposed through normative frameworks established by each society. The abject scenes of the feature film render visible the aesthetic violence underlying the pursuit of the idealized beautiful body.

Complementing this perspective, Kristeva (2010) argues that abjection perturbs the system not by breaking its rules outright, but by forcefully irrupting within them, destabilizing the unity of the subject. This dynamic is particularly evident in Elvira’s process of bodily and emotional transformation. The use of abjection as an expressive strategy and interpretant in *The Ugly Stepsister* (2025) marks a frontier between alterity and identity, insofar as it implies a rejection of the social order. This gesture is paradoxical, as the narrative revolves around how women actively align themselves with the patriarchal system that subjugates and conditions them. Yet it is precisely through her abused and degraded body, subjected to cruel procedures, that the protagonist ultimately fractures that order. As Kristeva (2010) states, “the abject does not assume a rule or a law; rather, it diverts, derails, and corrupts it, making use of it in order to deny it” (p. 25). The abjection depicted in the film thus enables a separation and ambiguity in relation to beauty, inserting the viewer into a spiral of judgment and repulsion that invites the formation of criteria beyond previously naturalized assumptions.

Judith Butler’s (2002) work complements this analysis by conceptualizing discourse as performative, operating through ritualized repetition that becomes normalized and internalized, as in the case of gender or, for the purposes of this study, beauty. From early childhood, bodies are progressively aligned with what has been operationally established as functional and acceptable. In this process, the biological dimension of human corporeality appears to dissolve into the artificiality of the concept, rendering it difficult to distinguish between the two. What is culturally constructed, such as beauty, comes to be perceived as natural precisely because it has been continuously embodied through dominant discourses. As Butler (2002) notes, “to conceive the body as constructed requires reconceiving the significance of construction itself” (p. 14). Discursive regimes at both collective and individual levels restrict and discipline bodies, limiting their intrinsic plurality and expressive possibilities, while producing abjection toward difference. Everything that is embodied becomes embedded within power dynamics that govern bodies and have tangible effects on their physical constitution, mental structures, and decision-making processes.

David Le Breton (2005) further enriches this framework by asserting that “bodily experience is always translated into a cultural language” (p. 43). The body functions as the phenomenological gateway to reality, enabling perception and, consequently, conceptualization of the world. Human understanding is not exclusively cognitive, but fundamentally embodied, made possible through the organism itself. The film engages deeply with this condition, as Elvira, her mother, and Agnes all shape their identities through their bodies. Womanhood, in this context, is not defined solely by physiological structure, but by a corporeality traversed as a moral and social construct. The narrative presents both female and male bodies not merely as flesh, but as codes that organize specific practices. As Le Breton (2005) puts it, “the individual makes a body with their culture” (p. 26). Each historical moment produces different corporeal inscriptions according to its system of meanings, giving rise to phenomena such as racism, xenophobia, or shifts in beauty canons. Those situated within a dominant interpretive framework normalize these standards in their own bodies, striving to fulfill socially expected norms, as exemplified by Elvira’s trajectory.

This critical framework is completed with Jean Baudrillard’s analysis of simulacra. Baudrillard (1978) argues that contemporary societies are immersed in artificiality, assigning added value to everything that surrounds them, including the body, endowing it with meanings it does not inherently possess. This dynamic leads to a mercantile logic that encompasses both the environment and subjectivity, producing a constant pressure to adapt to value systems that generate dissatisfaction, exhaustion, and degradation. Elvira’s experience throughout the film exemplifies this spiral, as she subjects her body to extreme transformations in order to become a “productive” and desirable woman, one whose value is validated through external gazes. As Baudrillard (2002) warns, humanity may be engaging in a form of automatic writing of the world, an operationalized reality in which human subjectivity is reduced to a set of useless functions (p. 75). Within this regime of simulation, what is socially deemed correct is continually reproduced, even when it undermines bodily health and balance, as evidenced today by the rise in eating disorders, addictions, and mental health conditions.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

In *The Ugly Stepsister* (2025), Blichfeldt revisits the tale of Cinderella from Elvira’s point of view, the stepsister traditionally relegated to the margins of the ideal. This narrative gesture enables a decentering of perspective: seeing from the position that is usually denied visibility, from the figure overshadowed by the dominant aesthetic norm. It is precisely within this displacement that the film situates its central conflict. Rather than functioning as a mere narrative twist, this shift operates as a direct critique of the crystallized ideal of beauty embodied by the “legitimate”

protagonist. In several interviews, Blichfeldt has stated that “we are all stepsisters because we are under the pressure of a beauty ideal, and there is only one ideal: Cinderella” (The Upcoming, 2025). This statement functions as a key interpretive lens: the stepsister is not an isolated character, but a metaphor for a collective position inhabited by many women, one defined by constant comparison and externally imposed measures of value.

The film also exposes a classic tension that is rarely interrogated through body horror: female competition for male recognition. Elvira and Agnes do not compete for a man in a romantic sense; rather, they compete for the gaze that validates, organizes, and certifies belonging within the canon. In scenes such as the ball sequence, the camera registers male presence not as an active subject, but as a structuring force: the eye that hierarchizes, consecrates, and punishes. Far from representing genuine desire, recognition becomes an affective commodity that structures relationships among women. As Judith Butler (2002) suggests, bodily performativity unfolds within a regulatory matrix that determines who is visible, who is desirable, and who remains outside the frame of social intelligibility.

Throughout the film, Elvira’s physical and psychological transformation is progressively revealed. Encouraged by her mother, she subjects herself to increasingly extreme aesthetic procedures in an attempt to approximate the beauty canon embodied by Agnes. In these scenes, the camera lingers on minimal gestures: the breaking of the nasal septum, the stretching and bleeding of eyelids stitched with needle and thread. Alongside this pain, Elvira finds solace in imagining the perfected version of her body, which she no longer experiences as her own, but as a strategic terrain for achieving social ideals. It is at this point that what Butler (2002) identifies as the governability of hegemonic discourse becomes evident: discourse acts upon the materiality of the body, shaping and deforming it according to normative expectations. It is not Elvira who looks at herself; rather, discourse looks through her.

In one of the film’s final scenes, the protagonist intervenes her foot in an extreme and irreversible manner, motivated solely by the approval of the male gaze, which Blichfeldt identifies as a transgenerational source of aesthetic pressure (Kinótico, 2025). As the act unfolds and a grotesque image of desperation emerges, Elvira’s mother does not mitigate the crisis but actively encourages it. In mutilating her foot, Elvira not only destroys flesh, muscle, and bone, but also severs the remnants of her former self, the self that sought to fit in and be desired. Blichfeldt has stated that her aim in such scenes is to generate a tension between empathy and repulsion, not merely to horrify, but to allow discomfort to reveal the cruelty of the sociocultural ideal (The Upcoming, 2025). Here, abjection operates clearly as an interpretant: as Butler (2002) argues, “the object designates those unlivable and uninhabitable zones of social life which are nevertheless densely populated by those who do not enjoy

the status of the subject” (p. 20). Elvira has always occupied a marginal position, but this condition intensifies with Agnes’s arrival, deepening her familial and social subordination. In her attempt to avoid exclusion, she enters an excessive and absurd spiral that drives her body, mind, and emotions into an abject dead end.

Reinforcing the centrality of abjection as a catalyst for reflexive and somatic processes in viewers, Kristeva (2010) emphasizes that the abject is not simply what is repulsive, but that which threatens the symbolic order and exposes the fragility of the normative self. In striving to embody acceptable and desirable standards, Elvira collapses her own identity, revealing to the spectator the cultural cruelty that disciplines bodies, rendering them docile and perpetually dissatisfied. In this reading, abjection functions as an interpretant within bodily semiosis, interrupting the logic of the aesthetic canon and the normalized fetishization of corporeality.

From Baudrillard’s (2002) perspective, fetishization occurs when bodies and objects detach from their use value and become simulacra, surfaces saturated with imaginary value. The film visualizes this logic through the competition between Elvira and Agnes for social recognition and for meeting the standards expected by the prince and his entourage. Beauty becomes a symbolic commodity, a form of capital exchanged socially. As Blichfeldt notes (*The Upcoming*, 2025), the Cinderella ideal is sustained by an economy of constant comparison. The ballroom scene makes this tension explicit: Agnes enters flawlessly dressed, illuminated and celebrated by surrounding gazes, while Elvira follows with her recent efforts at transformation, only to encounter rejection. In this moment, the simulacrum becomes visible: beauty operates not as lived bodily experience, but as a shared illusion sustained by belief in its sign, echoing Baudrillard’s (1978) assertion that what matters is not beauty itself, but belief in its representation.

CONCLUSIONS

This type of film disrupts the hegemonic discourses that sustain the ideal of beauty as an unquestionable truth. Rather than reinforcing the frame, it fractures it, exposing its contingency and revealing the invisible forms of violence it produces. *The Ugly Stepsister* (2025) does not merely represent the cruelty of aesthetic norms; it makes them sensible, bodily felt, and emotionally resonant.

Within this framework, abjection emerges as an interpretant due to the effects it generates in the audience. The film’s explicit and visceral scenes trigger sentipensares and somatic responses that activate an open-ended process of semiosis. Each spectator links their reaction to the film with their own bodily experience, personal history, and social context. Beauty, understood as a sign, is neither universal nor predetermined; its meaning depends on how the interpretant articulates itself within the semiotic

process. While dominant interpretations often solidify into normalized meanings, the film enables an interruption of that flow, revealing that structures of meaning do not preexist experience, but emerge through communicative practices enacted by individuals and institutions.

In this sense, *The Ugly Stepsister* (2025) reminds us that beauty does not operate as ornament, but as a system of value that organizes what can be seen and lived. The phrase that resonates throughout the film, “beauty is not the most important thing; it is everything,” must be read as provocation rather than destiny. From a Peircean perspective, corporeality itself functions as discourse, as an interpretant capable of producing ruptures within moral and normative frameworks. The body is not the endpoint of the sign, but its becoming. We are flesh that signifies, embodied semiotics in constant transformation.

It is precisely within this possibility of transformation that critical potential resides. Bodies do not need to submit categorically to rigid schemes that dictate how they should be and how they should be felt. The body is potency and change; biologically, it is in a state of continuous transformation, despite its apparent stability. Tissues and organs inhabit alteration as a fundamental condition. Barrios’s (2010) assertion that the body is simultaneously a geopolitics and an aesthetics of the writing of power, as well as a site of resistance and transgression (p. 21), offers a critical lens through which to reconsider how bodies are molded by dominant discourses and why it is necessary to decolonize reductive judgments regarding corporeal possibilities.

Elvira’s figure allows us to understand how the abject body does not operate solely as excess or visual rupture, but as a space of alterity that returns the subject to the vulnerable, finite, and imperfect condition of the human. Through bodily degradation, the film renders visible what the ideal of beauty seeks to erase: the materiality of the body, its fragility, and its resistance to total domestication by normative discourse. In this sense, abjection functions as an interpretant that does not cancel identity, but destabilizes it in order to open it toward other possibilities of signification. Elvira’s body, far from being an error to be corrected, becomes a threshold from which imperfection can be accepted as a constitutive dimension of human experience, challenging the illusion of coherence, control, and perfection that underpins hegemonic imaginaries of beauty.

This critical genealogy is further reinforced by Jean Baudrillard’s (2002) concept of simulacra, which dominates contemporary culture and seeks to expel all traces of abjection from the visible field. In a system obsessed with surface perfection, difference, asymmetry, and that which does not align with the idealized self are rapidly classified as repulsive or intolerable. The simulacrum replaces the living materiality of the body with a sanitized image of what it should be. Yet bodies, our bodies,

Elvira's body, all bodies, are not clean display cases or smooth symbolic showcases. We are flesh, fluids, contradictions, and accidents. We are that which never fully fits within the canon. *The Ugly Stepsister* (2025) confronts the simulacrum not through abstract theory, but through the raw presence of a body that resists erasure, a body that insists on its truth, even when that truth is uncomfortable.

The film also makes evident that competition among female bodies does not arise from a naturalized rivalry, but from an economy of the male gaze that structures desire, value, and social visibility. The confrontation between Elvira and Agnes reveals how women's bodies are placed in constant comparative relation, compelled to perform an ideal that does not belong to them and that is legitimated externally. Beauty becomes a form of symbolic capital that regulates inclusion and exclusion within the social order, producing hierarchies, violence, and bodily sacrifice. The film exposes with clarity that this competition does not empower, but fragments, and that male validation operates as a dispositif that deepens abjection by turning the female body into a site of dispute, evaluation, and disposal.

Moreover, the film not only depicts the extreme violence Elvira endures in her attempt to approximate the beauty ideal, but also constructs, from the outset, a horizon of exclusion in which poverty, humiliation, and social contempt function as punishments for those who fail to embody the ideal. Even characters who appear to achieve it, such as Agnes or the mother, reveal that beauty does not guarantee autonomy or dignity, but rather demands constant obedience to the validating gaze. In this sense, abjection not only denounces excessive bodily sacrifice, but also exposes the structural violence that sustains the canon, showing that resisting or failing to meet its demands entails exclusion from what is considered livable and recognizable. The final scene, in which Agnes submits to the prince and abandons her father's corpse, confirms that beauty does not liberate, but perpetuates a cycle of submission that spans generations.

In a final conclusion, abjection can be understood as a fissure within bodily identity that renders visible what has historically been excluded from dominant discourses of beauty. By destabilizing the notion of a coherent and normative self, abjection opens a critical field from which to imagine other corporealities, not as deviations, but as potentials of meaning. This reading becomes particularly relevant in the context of contemporary technologies such as artificial intelligence, whose models are constructed through the statistical repetition of dominant patterns and therefore tend to reproduce hegemonic beauty discourses as if they were universal horizons. Recognizing this dynamic allows us to understand that neither cinema nor technology are neutral spaces, but rather sites of symbolic struggle in which the body can operate as a critical interpretant. Within this possibility of transformation lies the potency of the body as embodied semiotics, not as the closure of the sign, but as a becoming that resists, fractures, and reimagines the limits of what can be seen, thought, and lived.

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