READING FILM

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My Body Is My Power: Sex as a Product in *The Dressmaker*

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Femininity—how it is displayed and taught—is a social value that is often based on physicality. When girls are growing up, they are taught to pay attention to how what they wear and how they wear their makeup attracts male attention. There is a collective focus on a girl's figure as she ages, as well. Is she too fat? Too thin? Are her body proportions in line with current cultural ideals? Debates around physical appearance and how it plays into social standards for women and girls (as well as how it factors into the general place of females in the social hierarchy) are ubiquitous, especially in the 21st century, as women increasingly critique the emphasis on the physical body in social hierarchies. The 2015 film *The Dressmaker*, co-written and directed by Jocelyn Moorhouse, attempts to provide a solution to the power that is placed upon the female figure while also commenting on how women often view their bodies within the patriarchal system. Moorhouse does this by featuring many women in her film, such as Gerturde Pratt (Sarah Snook), who fulfills the community's standards of how femininity should be performed and is rewarded for this portrayal of the social ideal by being given the opportunity to marry the town's most desired groom, even though she is just a store owner's daughter. The film's main focus, however, is Myrtle "Tilly" Dunnage (Kate Winslet), who uses her femininity as a way to combat inequitable social standards. At first, Tilly believes that she can leverage her beauty and sex appeal to create social power, but as the film progresses, she realizes that this created power is an illusion because her display of sexuality and gender, ironically, only solidifies her place as a sexual product within the patriarchal structure by affirming that the ostentatious display of the female body and powerful femininity is scandalous—something that must be controlled.

While the film alone does the work of portraying the ideas of femininity within society, it is important to introduce materials that reference the reality of women's value through physicality. In her essay, "The Traffic in Women," Gayle Rubin discusses Engels's theories of sexuality, extensions of Marx's theories on capitalism, and their role within societal systems, since sex and gender can be seen as products within social systems. Rubin argues that "sex as we know it—gender identity, sexual desire and fantasy, concepts of childhood—is itself a social product" (32). Physical attributes and gender codes usually applied to female bodies, therefore, can be understood as "products," since they serve as tokens of social value that can be exchanged, bought, sold, and traded (as images in media, in marriage, as conditions for economic and social opportunity, and so on). Put another way that is more pointedly relevant to the film, sex appeal

is a product because it can be used as leverage within social situations, giving it value within society. This power is bestowed upon sex because it is a form of power that is one of the highest forms of value a person can have within social structures, especially those that are rooted in patriarchal capitalism. As this theory applies to *The Dressmaker*, Tilly Dunnage attempts to deconstruct the capitalistic value of femininity and the female body by taking ownership of it. Still, as long as she participates in a patriarchal, capitalist society, there will always be attempts to control her because the system itself deems her body to have power that can be leveraged and exchanged. Therefore, that power must be owned by the capitalist system, which is founded upon male privilege and the presumed hierarchical superiority of men over women. Tilly will always be disempowered because control over her body is constitutive of patriarchal capitalism—it is inescapable.

The film stages this problem in a football game sequence, which opens with a series of cuts between the game and its spectators, all in conventionally gendered, dull-colored clothing barring a few who sport red scarves for the home team. The ball rolls out of bounds and is stopped, in a close-up, by a pair of bright red heels. The camera then tilts up from a leg shot to reveal Tilly in a red formal gown. Everyone else pauses and gawks; it is clear that she is not a standard participant in this pastime. What follows is a power struggle—not just between the footballers, but between Tilly and everyone there. Tilly eventually changes into a black dress in a teasing concession to the disturbance she's causing, and as the teams switch sides, she is now poised to disrupt the focus of the visiting team. She applies red lipstick while looking into a compact mirror, emphasizing the power she wields through femininity, because she knows that applying lipstick in this way will distract the players, and it does. Castanet-heavy music begins to play, recalling bullfighting scene tropes from other films. A man off-screen whistles. The camera cuts to him, seemingly looking at Tilly, followed by another cut to Tilly, seductively closing the compact and looking straight back at the man. Returning her gaze, the man is then knocked over by another distracted teammate. Tilly is actively seeking to upset a presumed balance; she wants the upper hand, and she claims


this power through her sexuality. Then the man's catcall revokes that power by making her physicality a mark of shame. But Tilly anticipates this mockery, turning it to her benefit by continuing to stage the blue team's failure.

But the playfulness of this sequence has a serious side, and it reminds us that Tilly's taking ownership of her sexuality here does not free her from the social system that inspires her to do so. The caricatured film tropes help make the audience feel in on the joke, judging Tilly's community for their dramatic fear of women who do not fulfill their traditional roles. Yet these same techniques keep us struggling to stay on the right side of conventionality ourselves. From the first tilt up on the woman in red, we are also implicated by the camera's gaze, especially when, in the middle of the sequence, there is a cut to a close-up on Tilly as she takes off her shawl. There is a sound cut; the Spanish music concludes and the spectators gasp. The viewer is shocked, just as the audience within the film is, because the framing of the shot starts above Tilly's strapless dress, and we momentarily assume that she has exposed her breasts to the crowd. There's another cut to the players all staring at Tilly, and a cut from that to a wide shot of the audience telling the boys to "come on." In this brief moment, the film turns its treatment of the feminine body as a weapon of sorts onto the viewer, emphasizing both the power of imagining the womanly figure and the social training that tells us it should not be seen. The film challenges the audience to confront their judgment of the female body, as Tilly's community is forced to do, and reevaluate how their own culture perpetuates these incompatible views of femininity.

Moorhouse then layers in more parodies of film tropes. The music switches to a wild-west type of whistling, as if the script has been flipped: the whistled catcall used to disempower Tilly before now morphs into a soundtrack for her control over the whole scene. We sense her feeling of power over the men when she flips her hair back in the wind, readjusts her hands on her hips, and turns her head to the side in a superhero-like silhouette. This lends her actions a hint of moral righteousness, celebrating the fact that she can make the men, and the spectators, look horrible and idiotic while she stands tall and untouchable. Next, Tilly seductively pulls off one of her gloves; she is intensifying her physicality and speeding up the demise of the blue team. A match-on-action cut moves behind Tilly, panning in shallow focus as she drops the glove on the ground to show the footballers being distracted by her "stripping." Another match-on-action cut shows Tilly from the side, this time pulling the other glove off with her teeth—an obvious sexual move—and dramatically flinging it away. She again stands with her hands on her hips, assuming the superhero stance; she is expressing, physically, that she is aware she has the most power in this situation.

At the end of the sequence, and the end of the game, Tilly sits down in her lawn chair, emphasizing her cleavage, and there is a cut to a low angle shot of her crossing her legs. This angle emphasizes her hold on all the power in this situation, because her legs almost seem larger than life. But it can just as easily be interpreted as how the men see her in this moment, just a large pair of "sexy legs" that are taking up most of the space in their mind. Either way, the move causes a major blunder by the blue team and allows Teddy (Liam Hemsworth), the only player not distracted by her stripping, to steal the ball and score the winning field goal. This outcome almost gives shape to a thought Rubin expresses later in her book—that if society were not organized around sexuality and gender positions, there would be major benefits and more focus on progress. Teddy serves as a symbol for this, but his death in the film dispels the vision. He dies trying to show Tilly how little he cares for the community's value systems, therefore affirming that patriarchal capitalism will always crush those who stand in the way of its persistence.

The character Sergeant Farrat (Hugo Weaving) symbolizes another possible perspective on the system: awareness. Watching Tilly's antics during the game, he mutters an emphatic "genius." He knows the power that women have to seduce, but allows it to occur because it can, at times, protect the patriarchal order, as in the home team's victory. Farrat mirrors Tilly in certain ways, as they are both outcasts within the community, but while Tilly openly embraces her differences to gain power, Farrat has hidden his to maintain his position. So, despite the fact that he seems a potential ally here, and he later stands up for her, we learn that it was he who allowed her to be exiled from the community as a child, even knowing that she was innocent. Thanks to his identity as a male authority, he had been able to sacrifice her to protect his secret life and his public standing.

Finally, though, it is more than the town's men who contain Tilly's rebellion; it is the system of the community as a whole. Despite their celebration of their team's win, they still condemn Tilly's behavior as promiscuous and a detriment to their values. While Tilly believes she is creating power by using her sexuality to make things happen as she believes they should, her community continues to treat her embrace of physicality and femininity as an overt fight against their values. This leaves her not a positive model of feminine power, but an example to the girls in her community that when they objectify themselves, they will be ostracized like she is. Ultimately, her performance at the game further entrenches the town's traditional values rather than breaking them down.

Overall, this sequence plays a major role in how *The Dressmaker* might be viewed from a feminist standpoint. Women in this film are often victims of their sexuality, unable to use it to their advantage in a social system that gives them no power *unless* they use it and then punishes them for doing so. The football sequence epitomizes the rise, fall, and return of Tilly's power within the film, but this power does change in that broader interval. At the beginning of the film, Tilly gains perceived power only through her ability to use her sexual wares and her ability to emphasize the sexuality of the other women in the community. Her fall comes when she realizes her victimization within her town's societal structure, and that by using her sexuality to gain power, she is only making that structure stronger. Men, and the community in general, have power over her because they determine the worth of her sexuality within their structure. They undermine her perceived power to reinforce their views of "proper" femininity, turning other women against her through the threat of social isolation. Really, this situation suggests, the only way for a woman to take true ownership of her femininity in a capitalist society is to simply decide not to participate. Tilly finally does just this by deciding that her community's opinion has no worth. She decides to stop using her sexuality to gain power by stepping away from her society as a whole. At film's end, she rides away on a train, watching the town burn down and their values, which have ruled her life, turn to dust. ❦

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