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TITLE OF PAPER:

Made to Measure: *The Dress* and the Politics of Sexual Citizenship

ABSTRACT:

This article examines questions of sexual citizenship in *The Dress* (2020). It situates the film's narrative alongside disability studies' repositioning in a social model of the sexuality of people with disabilities. It argues that interpreting *The Dress* as a contribution to discourse about sexual inclusivity is not at odds with seeing the film as one in which the representation of human desires and frustrations assumes a universal relevance. Analysis of mise-en-scène, and comparisons drawn from art history, query the film's use of aesthetics. Reference to *Intimate Encounters 20 Years On* underscores cultural specificities in turns between conservatism and progressivism.

KEY WORDS:

The Dress, Disability, Sexual citizenship, Achondroplasia, Anna Dzieduszycka, Tadeusz Łysiak

PAPER:

The Dress strikes an uncompromising tone from the outset as we hear death metal music over the opening credits. An edit establishes further that what seemed to be extra-diegetic music in fact devolves from the narrative. This is the soundtrack Julia, a woman with achondroplasia, is listening to through her earphones as she completes her work as a chambermaid in a motel somewhere on Poland's eastern border. The choice of music at first seems incongruous. Heavy metal clashes with the image of the

woman's petite frame and the calmness with which she goes about making up rooms. This moment of intra-diegetic music, and the connection it makes between the audience and Julia's consciousness—we are hearing what she hears, we are privy to her subjectivity—also signals a sense of defiance, of alienation, and of detachment. By taking us inside Julia's perception the film forecloses the possibility of regarding its protagonist as a spectacle. The sense of being at odds with the world, conveyed by the contrast between the character, the context, and the death metal music, will work itself out through the drama of a brief sexual encounter.

In his essay, 'On Seeing a Sex Surrogate', written in 1990, Mark O'Brien, paralysed by polio when he was a child, wrote:

No one in my family had ever discussed sex around me. The attitude I absorbed was not so much that polite people never thought about sex, but that no one did [...] This code affected me strongly, convincing me that people should emulate the wholesome asexuality of Barbie and Ken. (1990)

This passage is frequently cited in the literature on disability and sexuality, which speaks to the truth it captures about people with disabilities often being regarded as asexual, as incomplete subjects who are not stakeholders in the economy of bodily intimacy and physical exchange. Indeed, exclusion from sexual citizenship is a clear example of how impairment becomes disability, of how a difference that is not by itself disqualifying becomes so as a result of the way it is socially organized and valorized.

As Tom Shakespeare puts it:

While the social model has been used to highlight the failures of contemporary social organisation [...] it needs also to be used to show that *the problem of disability and sexuality is not an inevitable outcome of our bodily differences*. It is not because we

cannot walk, or we cannot see, or because we lack feeling in this or that part of the body that disabled people have sexual problems [...] The barriers to the sexual expression of disabled people are primarily to do with the society in which we live, not the bodies with which we are endowed. (2000: 161, emphasis added)

And, specifically with reference to dwarfism, Debra Keenahan observes that:

If confronted with situations/institutions/relationships in which the dwarfed individual is excluded from equal participation and denied enjoyments and benefits that could be provided and that exclusion is on the basis of their dwarfism, then the individual has become disabled. (2020: 237)

Exclusion from sexual identity is one of the ways, then, in which a reduced growth condition moves from intending impairment to becoming a disability.

Articulating a collective and defiant stance against the silencing of disabled sexuality, Shakespeare insists 'We demand the right to be hot and sexy' (2000: 164). *The Dress* interpolates us in Julia's routinary existence just as something snaps in her and the alienation conveyed by the death metal soundtrack cedes to defiance. She echoes the demand Tom Shakespeare makes on behalf of the disabled collective and ruffles some feathers in the confines of the small community where she lives and works.

She asks her friend and co-worker, Renata, what her first sexual encounter was like. It is a rhetorical question allowing her to establish the fact that she cannot share in this conversation, because there has been no first time. She breaks the discursive barrier O'Brien references, and by introducing the question of sexual experience, begins, indirectly at first, to demand recognition as a sexual being.

Julia circulates among the locals and the transient visitors who pass through the place where she works, and yet somehow she is not fully there. We see this in carefully

composed shots such as one where her reflection, as a solitary, is repeated across an array of screens in the bar she frequents (Fig. 1).



Fig. 1. Screenshot from *The Dress*: Julia's Reflection Across a Row of Fruit Machine Screens

However much Julia feeds these fruit machines with cash, they repeat the same message: winning is conformity and sameness. A line up of difference equates to being an outsider. Sublimating sexual desire in addictions—gambling and compulsive smoking—, Julia is detached from these surroundings, despite being there. Demonstrating the infantilization, and asexualization of disabled people, a voice in off tells her 'Smoking will stunt your growth'. Julia replies to this unseen interlocutor by giving him the middle finger, a gesture that condenses into a single sign the film's integration of a discourse of disability defiance and one of sexual frankness, and, ultimately, aggression and violence. Taking on ableist prejudice will also be to take on the prejudice that excludes people with disabilities from sexual discourse and from sexual encounters.

Having named the issue and come out as a sexual being, the frame around Julia in the bar widens and we see her interactions. She makes eye contact with Bogdan, a truck driver en route to Kiev. He initiates a conversation with her outside, and they agree to meet four days later, when he will be on his way back. The expectation of a date changes Julia's demeanour. She writes on her mirror: 'I am: Happy, Positive. Loved' (Fig. 2).

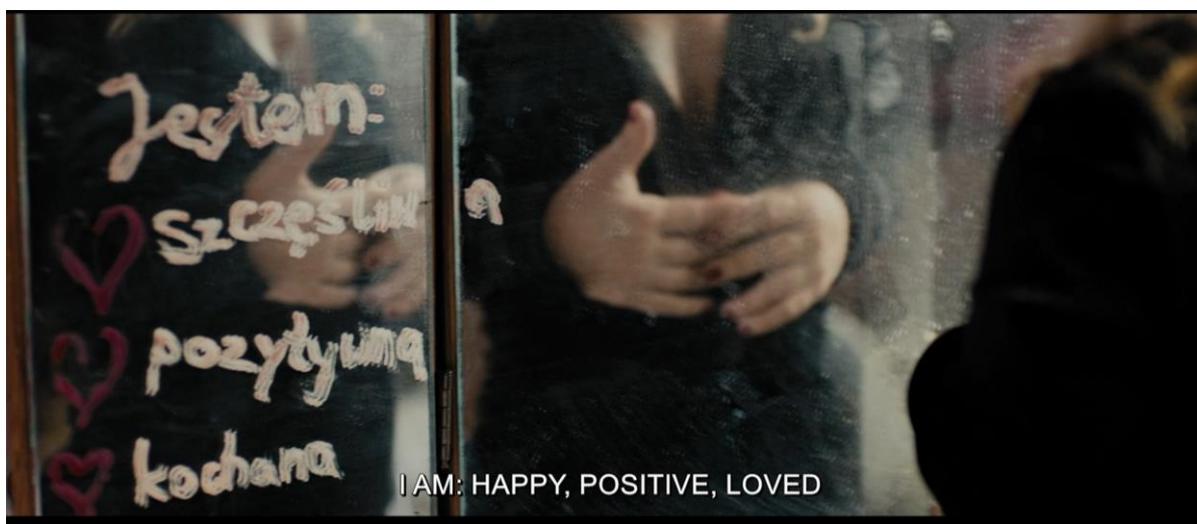


Fig. 2. Screenshot from *The Dress*. Julia's Transformation through Sexual Inclusion

This change encapsulates the insight of scholars of disability and sex that sexual inclusion is intrinsic to achieving a full sense of one's status as a human being. It is not an add on, or a luxury. Disabled feminist Liz Crow says, for example:

I've always assumed that the most urgent Disability civil rights campaigns are the ones we're currently fighting for—employment, education, housing, transport [...] now I'm beginning to believe that sexuality, the one area above all others to have been ignored, is at the absolute core of what we're working for. (cited in Shakespeare 2000: 165)

The dress, then, the pretty outfit that Julia wants to wear on her date with Bogdan, is a marker of self-esteem, of the self-worth that does not depend exclusively on sexual

identity, but is made more difficult to achieve when someone is dis-included from sexual discourse and intercourse.

The change that leads Julia to write on her mirror is also reflected in her self-presentation. Renata tells her that she seems different: 'You rarely smile. It looks good on you' (Łysiak 2020). She approves of this development, though the feistiness that accompanies it causes friction between the two friends. When Renata expresses surprise that Julia has a date, she retorts angrily: 'Can't I be having a date? I'm a dwarf, so I don't deserve a thing? I'm supposed to sit at home all the time, doing fucking nothing?' (Łysiak 2020). The exchange allows the film to reference the assertiveness that scholars of disability and sex have pointed to as necessary for disrupting a status quo that would happily remain indifferent to the sexual needs of people with disabilities. In her conversation with Renata, Julia makes audible the unspoken prejudice that asexualises her, filling in the ellipses in Renata's half of their conversation. The tense exchange in this scene plays out the dynamic described by Tracy de Boer where 'Regarding a disabled person as asexual [...] violates one of the simple conditions of sexual inclusion: to recognize or acknowledge an individual as a sexual being' (2015: 73). Julia demands that Renata recognise her and in turn the film asks the audience to see in its protagonist a human being with the same need for touch, contact, and intimacy as anyone else.

Being a stakeholder in the sexual economy allows Julia to engage differently with the world around her. She answers back when the assistant in the second hand clothes

shop acts as if she did not know her, trying to diminish her confidence by suggesting she ought to shop at non-existent special stores for people like her. She looks without inhibition at a physically attractive man as he runs in and out of the water at a lakeside spot. Her interlocutors, the people around her, are visible in a way they were not when she stuck up a finger to the man outside the frame who insulted her.

Julia's assertion of her right to be recognised as a sexual being seems also to be the catalyst for one of the film's pivotal moments. The prospect of a date with Bogdan brings with it not only a boost to Julia's self-esteem but also a process of introspection that shows some chinks in the armour that the character has developed to survive in this situation where, to all appearances, she is isolated from any sort of peer group or support mechanisms specific to people with disabilities.

The longest piece of uninterrupted dialogue in the film belongs to Julia and in it she shows that beneath the resilient exterior, apparently inured to unkindness and prejudice, is a woman keenly aware of what sets her apart from others and of the scrutiny her non-normative body invites (Fig. 3).



Fig. 3. Screenshot from *The Dress*:
Introspection Follows Julia's Coming Out as a Sexual Being

Demanding inclusion as a sexual being has put her in touch with her own feelings, not only about sex, but about what it is like to confront the sensation of continually being othered:

I don't give a shit about that dress. I want to be normal. I want to be a normal woman. I want to have normal legs. Normal hands, not some damned chicken wings. A normal face. I don't want anyone to point their fingers at me. I don't want people staring at me, treating me like some sort of circus. I want to be normal. A normal woman. (Łysiak 2020)

The use of anaphora here—repetition of the same sequence of words at the beginning of successive clauses—lends an element of political oratory to Julia's speech, and I would argue that this point in the film is in fact the one where it most clearly engages with the politics of disability and of ableism. The scene has dramatic value, marking a moment where the basis of Julia's coping mechanisms are destabilised. Furthermore, what she says also lays bare the disquieting socio-political reality of an ableist world where discrimination makes itself felt at every level, from the way in which someone is looked at, to lack of social and legal recognition, to

infrastructure designed for *l'homme moyen*, and after Adolphe Quetelet's invention of normalcy (see Davis 2014).

Some of the insidious forms of disability discrimination, such as staring, work their way into Julia's experience of non-discursive communication. As a subject who experiences scrutiny much of the time, it is more complex for her to distinguish between a look of sexual interest, and a look of morbid curiosity. As she tells Bogdan 'I don't like it when someone stares at me and does nothing about it. I forbid you from staring at me' (Łysiak 2020). Though he betrays her, both sexually and emotionally, Bogdan does, however, enable the audience, and Julia, to see that while she can express herself more than adequately, her impairment, as a result of socially constructed discrimination, has affected her communication skills. Defensiveness has had an impact on her ability to engage in the art of conversation.

Though Julia's extended monologue has aspects of soliloquy to it, she is not speaking to herself. Some reaction is required from Renata who sees her friend, apparently for the first time, without the defensive mask she usually wears. The older woman's response is to aestheticize Julia:

Julka, you are beautiful, you know. Beautiful, just...just...a little different. You have such a pretty soul, you know. Sometimes I envy you your soul. (Łysiak 2020)

Within the parameters of the diegesis this sentiment may be genuine and yet having an attractive soul is no consolation for someone who is confronting what it is to be sexually disenfranchised, and speaking to the anger that this entails. Renata shifts

the topic to womanhood, an identity the friends have in common: 'Ain't nothing like us ladies. And fuck men!' (Łysiak 2020). This is, I would argue, both a gesture of solidarity and one of exclusion because it sidesteps the fact that Julia experiences intersectional discrimination, not simply misogyny, but misogyny coloured by ableism. It also misses the mark in the sense that it bypasses the sensation described by some disabled people of feeling they are outside the binary schema of gender, rendered neither as male or female but as disabled. Renata's gift to Julia of a dress suitable for a date is perhaps an unspoken acknowledgement of the fact that having a pretty soul does not compensate for being sexually invisible.

If Julia, and her disability, are aestheticized in the pivotal exchange between the two women friends, so too, I would suggest, does the film, to an extent, aestheticize Julia in a compensatory mechanism. For example, ten minutes in to the film, in a scene following the one where Julia first discusses with Renata her upcoming date, we view Julia undressing from behind. She lets her hair down and the evening light highlights its length and flaxen qualities. She is portrayed here in the pictorial idiom of *la toilette* and the scene evokes, for example, several of Degas' paintings of women combing their hair, in particular one from 1888-90 (Figs. 4a and 4b).

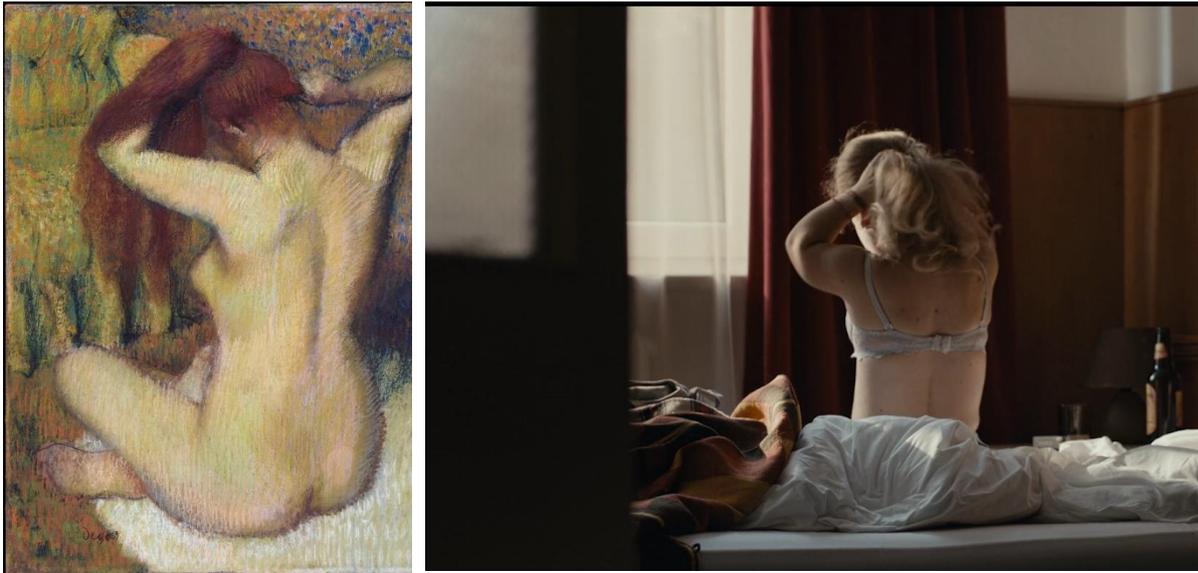


Fig. 4a. Left, Edgar Degas, *Woman Combing Her Hair* (1888-90);
Fig. 4b Right, Screenshot from *The Dress*

Like paintings by Degas and Bonnard this scene dramatizes an innate tension between an artistic interest in a woman's private moments and voyeurism. Here, though, the tension has added to it the fact that the woman is the subject of staring and voyeurism by dint of her disability as well as her gender. The framing of the shot—we see Julia on another plane, further away from us than the one that describes an internal structural partition—is also evocative of the orientalist iteration of *la toilette*—i.e., viewing women as they go about their ablutions in a screened interior. Does this reflect, perhaps, an unwitting displacement here of exclusion by exoticisation? The genre of *la toilette* creates an allure around the mystery of the subject's essence and here, perhaps, the aestheticization serves to channel the mystery of the trope as a way of remaining at a distance from a disabled subject. The framing of this scene is repeated at the end of the film, when Julia, now herself the voyeur, looks in on an interior where, this time, woman is configured not in an orientalist idiom, but as

Venus, all shapely curves and long legs, prone, in the Western artistic tradition of Titian and Botticelli. The contrast set up between these two moments is, I would propose, one of the film's most thought-provoking, leaving us to wonder what exactly is going through Julia's mind as the relationship of voyeur and subject is reversed.

The Dress is, I believe, a film that is very much available to a reading informed by disability studies and disability politics, in particular the politics of disability and sex. Arguably, looking at the film in this way does not diminish it or subtract from what it has to say about the human experience. This is the value of the film emphasised by Łysiak in press coverage and promotion where he says:

Like a mantra, we told ourselves that we are not making a movie about a short person, but a story about a woman who has desires and dreams just like any other. We wanted to create a world that would make the viewer forget about the physical otherness of the protagonist. [...] We wanted Julia to be a mirror in which we would also reflect our fears, prejudices, desires, and dreams. (Meuwissen 2022)

In an interview for the Warsaw Film School, the director says 'We did not want to go too deeply into social issues [...] We never felt that we were making a film about a disability.' Of Julia he says: 'She is no different from the rest of society. She is exactly the same as us' ('Warsaw Film School' 2021). I do not think these intentions preclude a reading of the film that does indeed see it as a film about disability, and about the ways in which ableist social construction can deprive disabled subjects of sexual inclusion and citizenship, and of the human status to which recognition as a sexual subject contributes. In fact, this reading is consistent with the film content: Julia tells us how she is different, and how this makes her feel.

An achievement of the film is to use the short genre's gravitation to the brief encounter to narrativize the way in which impairment becomes disability when people with functional diversity are excluded from physical intimacy, contact, and sexual expression. *The Dress* can be both a film that speaks to the wider experience of frustrated dreams and desires, *and* to the specifically disabled experience of how and why combatting isolation and loneliness is made difficult.

Anna Dzieduszycka does not exactly contradict Łysiak in the interview with the Warsaw Film School, but what she says lends a slightly different nuance to the intent of the film: 'My acting parts would normally range from small parts, episodes, parts in comedies or being cast as a freak, which is how dwarves tend to be represented.' Importantly, she prefaces this remark by saying 'Socially difficult topics have always been avoided' (Warsaw Film School 2021), implying that *The Dress* is different, not only because it eschews the stereotypical characterisation of people with reduced growth, but precisely because it goes where other visual media have not gone before with this topic, to socially difficult themes.

The Dress uncovers not only the disappointments and rejections to which a cross-section of the audience will be able to relate, but also conjoins the brevity of Julia's encounter with questions of the exclusion of people with disabilities from sexual citizenship. Bogdan betrays Julia's trust with physical and verbal aggression. In this already transient space, this is not a relationship that is going anywhere, nor would anyone hope that a relationship that so quickly becomes abusive would last. More

durable though, both in terms of the diegesis and in terms of the discursive space opened up by the film, is the opportunity for naming the need for sexual inclusion of people with disabilities created by the promise of a brief encounter and of physical intimacy. Insensitive to her needs and with his hands around her throat, Bogdan stymies discourse and intercourse with Julia. The film however, contributes to the conversation that there needs to be, as disability scholars have underscored, about disabled people as sexual beings.

I have suggested that Tadeusz Łysiak's stated intentions of creating a cinematic work that privileges the common humanity that the viewer and the protagonist share need not preclude seeing also what the film achieves in the addition it makes to the discourse on disability and sexuality. Cognizance of the trend towards a more conservative, rather than a more progressive view of matters regarding sexuality, makes the boldness with which *The Dress* addresses its subject matter all the more significant. Citing some voices from *Intimate Encounters: 20 Years On*, is helpful in taking stock of how, with regard to the intersection of sexual and disability rights, the direction of travel in recent decades has not always been a progressive one.

This short documentary revisits the sitters for the series of photographic portraits made by Belinda Mason, in 1998, for her exhibition *Intimate Encounters*. The show comprised 40 portraits, all of them of disabled people, and all of them representing the subjects as sexual beings. Three of the portraits were of people with achondroplasia: Tom Shakespeare, Margherita Coppolino, and Debra Keenahan.

Some of the reactions to the exhibition, which toured Australia, Spain, the USA, Canada, and the UK, were visceral. Letters to newspaper editors described the content as 'filth' and 'pornography'. Looking back on the controversy created by Mason's images, Kath Duncan says: 'People's issues get aired with an exhibition like this. People aren't going to sit on their ableism. They're going to let it be seen' (Knierim 2018). Two decades on, as some of the other interviewees propose, attitudes have hardened, rather than relaxed. Robert Hindell says:

I think things have probably, if anything, gone backwards a bit overall with how much more conservative [they are] since the 60s. There's been a lot of ground lost, I think. We're not as comfortable or as progressive as we may have been. (Knierim 2018).

Denise Beckwith, a disability rights activist who also appears in the film, adds that the shift towards a newly conservative attitude about disabled people and sexuality is tied to the closure of institutions in the 1990s, and to the fact that people have 'Wanted to be more protectionist rather than give [disabled] people their sexual freedoms and rights' (Knierim 2018). In *The Dress*, showing Julia's date culminating in the way that it does, with Bogdan's aggression and lack of tenderness, cuts against the grain of the tendency outlined by Beckwith. The environment in the film is not one where there is concern about shielding disabled people from risk-taking.

Gauging an assertive defense of free love against the benchmarks used in *Intimate Encounters* is made complex, I would argue, with reference to *The Dress*, because the meanderings of the path of progressivism in the last 50 years will not necessarily have followed the same twists and turns in Poland as they have done in the UK, for

example. Furthermore, the situation of people with disabilities in the Warsaw Pact countries during the communist era remains relatively obscure, compared with the history of the disability rights movement in the UK and the USA, for example. The map made of turns between progressivism and conservatism by Mason's sitters, all from Anglophone countries, then, may not be one that fits perfectly with the chart of disabled rights in national contexts outside those where disability studies has been longest established as a discipline.

[Word count (excluding abstract, key words, title, and references): 3764]

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