

Thinking about White Weddings

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This article aims to conceptualise how girls, brides-to-be and others interested in the bride and the wedding are invited — through what is commonly referred to in cultural studies as the practise of the everyday — to consume, produce and reproduce popular discourses on wedding traditions. It engages in and responds to existing dominant views that focus on weddings as a social institution — a celebratory cultural event between predominantly heterosexual couples. Weddings are significant as a cultural and social celebration but they also provide an important commentary on how they are constructed as rites of passage for girls. As well as revealing how popular and public discourses reproduce and privilege culturally and socially normative behaviour such as heterosexuality and prescribed gender roles, weddings reinforce a range of other discourses and ideas including Australianness, the ‘nuclear family’ and the ‘couple’.

In the 1980s a body of feminist cultural studies literature emerged that explored how women and girls are active in, receive pleasure from and negotiate their role within patriarchal structures through the consumption of popular and mass produced romance narratives.¹ This article aims to understand how public and popular discourses validate the role and performance of the bride through positioning her as both the planner and star of the wedding and will consider the necessary transience of the event. This analysis is achieved through a discourse analysis and through a deconstructive reading or semiotic reading of popular cultural texts produced for brides-to-be including *Universal's Complete Wedding Planner*, the *South Australian Bride's Diary*, the Australian film *Muriel's Wedding* (1994) and a variety of girl's and women's magazines including bridal magazines.² *Muriel's Wedding* is an ‘off-beat’ comedy that is both a celebration and an ambivalent critique of white wedding culture.³ While these forms might produce radically different discourses on ‘white weddings’, I attempt to point to some similarities between them. These texts focus on the bride's agency in designing the wedding and managing of a range of ‘white wedding’ traditions. They draw upon and depend upon a set of assumed traditions which define the popular and public parameters of the ideal white wedding and are produced, distributed and consumed with different agendas and emphases for different audiences. The white wedding narrative manifests itself in a variety of ways, but the ‘white wedding culture’ maintains a degree of consistency across important variations.⁴

Within public and popular discourses, weddings are constructed as one of the defining moments of a girl's life in her progression toward womanhood. The centrality of weddings in the lives of girls is evidenced by narratives on romantic love and weddings in film, television, literature, romance novels and magazines. The *South Australian Bride's Diary* makes this presumed centrality explicit: ‘[y]our wedding will most likely be the most important celebration you'll ever have to organise ... it's not often we have the chance to completely orchestrate a

whole day for ourselves! Make it everything you've ever dreamed'.⁵ The proliferation of wedding magazines, bridal shops and bridal paraphernalia, and the mass production of these cultural artefacts points to the commercial success of this discourse on weddings, which is all marketed predominantly to young heterosexual unmarried girls.

These cultural forms invite girls to aspire to the idea of the ideal bride through the construction of their centrality in the planning and performance of the white wedding. In using the term 'girls' I refer to how the bride is constructed in popular and public discourses, for regardless of their age or social position, 'girls' as a cultural group are central to the construction of the wedding. Catherine Driscoll has observed that 'not all brides are young, but participants in bridal culture are predominantly constructed as immature and/or incomplete and the bride crucially functions as a mode of feminine development'.⁶ Popular and public discourses invite girls to aspire to discourses on power and femininity through the ideal of the bride. These are far more relevant to 'girls' than the ideal roles of wife or mother, although these seem to be logical extensions of the bride.

Although wedding traditions vary from one culture to another, popular public discourse on white weddings maintains a great deal of consistency across this diversity. The cultural and social importance of the wedding act situates girls as the bearers of such traditions in the continuation of cultures from one generation to the next and in the intersection of different cultures. The white wedding narrative manifests itself in a myriad of forms, practices and rituals, but it is structurally consistent even if the content changes.

Feminists have engaged in critiques of the social institution of marriage with a particular focus on the roles that men and women undertake within this institution, but there is a noticeable absence of feminist analysis of the cultural form of weddings and the roles that brides and grooms are encouraged to undertake during the planning and the performance of the wedding. There is also an absence of research that examines how the performative aspect of the bride-to-be validates girls in this public appearance and prescribes specific kinds of significance in relation to the lives of girls.

Feminist analysis can provide a useful focus on the patriarchal foundations of and associations with weddings, and an opportunity to challenge them. Established sociological feminist studies of marriage, especially in relation to the power and pleasure of the bride in wedding planners and bridal diaries or in films like *Muriel's Wedding* where the bride is a complex and contradictory figure, seem limited because the bride and the wedding seems so difficult to separate from the institution of marriage. Despite the fact that the ideal bride conveyed in mainstream culture does not reflect the social and cultural diversity of girls who get married in Australia, all girls are invited to identify with this ideal and practice a relation to it. Through the performance of this ideal, girls are positioned as producers of cultural norms such as heterosexuality and other forms of cultural belonging in contemporary western culture. The white wedding functions as a social institution for continuing a set of culturally normative practices from one generation to the next through the performance of becoming a bride and in the form of the white wedding.

A feminist discourse analysis allows for an understanding of how the idea of girlhood is constructed in popular culture, represented as a transition from adolescence to womanhood. Bridal cultural forms constrain girls within, but also allow girls to move beyond, prescribed gender roles, including dependence and innocence, which are idealised in the white wedding. Representations of white weddings figure girls as being especially validated by this special day and their public appearance, which associates them with dominant discourses on love: the bride constructs girls as loving and as images of love, and they are thus constructed as nurturers and are representative of a human ideal. Weddings are representative of the domestic or private sphere but are themselves held in the public sphere. The wedding is the public arena for the appearance of the bride-to-be and is more than a sign of the woman's centrality in the home and the monopoly she assumes within this space as wife, mother and nurturer. The role of the bride during the planning of the wedding, in relation to the groom and within the context of 'the couple' (as a juxtaposition of prescribed gender roles) reveals that the bride is constructed as selfless, nurturing and loving, as well as selfish, ego-centric and self-serving.

A cultural studies approach to bridal culture might reveal what is explicitly and implicitly articulated by these texts — the visible and hidden meanings — and may provide a way to read public and popular discourses on weddings and bridal culture, as well as the construction of the roles of bride and groom in the planning and the performance of the wedding. The lack of information on the role the groom might undertake during the planning and performance in the wedding reinforces the idea that the bride is the central figure. Moreover, the white wedding privileges heterosexuality through the cultural ritual and constructed tradition of throwing the bridal bouquet — an act clearly represented as the passing on of good fortune, assuming heterosexuality and monogamy as socially normative behaviour while reinforcing weddings as a significant cultural institution for articulating such traditions. Understanding the function of these traditions in attracting girls to marriage as a cultural institution does not necessarily entail an understanding of the specific pleasures involved in being the bride, and can obscure important elements of the bride's social role.

That wedding planners and diaries are produced for brides specifically (rather than any person involved in a wedding) is indicated by the fact that many of them include the word 'bride' in the title. In some instances they employ 'wedding' in the title, although structurally they are still directed at girls planning a wedding. While providing a fantastic narrative on white wedding culture, they also reinforce the importance of the process of becoming a bride and elaborately engage with the agency of the bride. Wedding planners contain, construct and define popular traditions associated with weddings and provide spaces for readers to practice them. They are mass-produced to disseminate and produce bridal traditions and reinforce the importance of a range of wedding goods and services as part of that field of tradition. Wedding planners assume that the bride-to-be identifies with a generic group of heterosexual, engaged girls. This genre encompasses girls from diverse cultural, social and economic backgrounds, even when they take up specific subsets within this genre. *Italian Bride* is produced for brides-to-be from

a specific cultural, social and economic background,⁷ and *Bride Again* is a wedding planner marketed toward brides having a second wedding.⁸

While there are variations between the audiences specifically addressed by these planners, they are structured in the same way and reinforce the same general field of traditions. They are all interactive and invite readers to practice wedding traditions which vary less than might be expected. Specialised planners reinforce the neutrality and centrality of the generic bride for whom all ordinary planners are designed. Variations between wedding planners acknowledge their audience or readers: *Bride Again* has photos of mature brides, *Italian Bride* has photos of 'Mediterranean' brides, and so forth. The brides are visualised differently and include different details (different specificities about services and receptions) but the traditions which they are asked to practice remain structurally the same.

Bridal planners have hard covers for durability so that they may be kept as a memento of the wedding day by the reader. While some wedding diaries, like the *South Australian Bride's Diary*, are formatted like a magazine with elaborate advertising features interspersed with small sections of written information, they still provide the reader with the space to record their own research on the availability of cultural goods for weddings.⁹

Women's magazines such as the *Australian Women's Weekly*,¹⁰ *Cleo*,¹¹ and *Who Weekly*¹² also convey detailed information on weddings and the traditions associated with them. In many instances, these magazines display cover stories about the weddings of celebrities, which reinforces the significance of weddings in the lives of women and helps form a market for more specifically bride-oriented publications (which are often, of course, produced by the same publishing houses). Many planners and bridal diaries are spin-offs of bridal magazines. Despite the fact that wedding planners are structured differently from wedding magazines, both present an idea of the ideal white wedding through shared assumptions about what is traditionally associated with weddings, and both are mass-produced for an audience of girls from diverse backgrounds. Interrelations between publications places these cultural forms as elements of a capitalist 'culture industry', a term drawn from the proto-cultural studies work of Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer.¹³ Although women's magazines provide various helpful hints on wedding traditions and survival guides for bridesmaids,¹⁴ they also contain advertisements, articles and advice about diets, boyfriends and husbands, sex, clothes and other elements of women's supposed lives. Unlike wedding planners and diaries, women's magazines do not provide the reader with as much space to interact with the text.

The *South Australian Bride's Diary* and *Universal's Complete Wedding Planner* are a representative sample of popular wedding planners available for brides-to-be. The planner contains more information on wedding traditions than the diary, but both provide the reader with the space to record details of the availability of wedding goods and services, which in turn invites the reader to practice popularly constructed wedding traditions. The wedding planner and diary provide vehicles to analyse how white wedding narratives and traditions are structured, constructed, produced and practiced for brides-to-be, and how the agency and the empowerment of the bride is recognised as well as standardised

and exploited. For simplicity, I will be referring to the planner and diary as 'wedding planners'.

Wedding planners are produced to assist brides-to-be in planning the ideal wedding and convey specific details on the role of the bride. Although they also outline the groom's role and responsibilities in the planning of the wedding, a juxtaposition of these roles reinforces the idea that the bride-to-be is central in orchestrating the 'white wedding'. These cultural artefacts position the bride as central to the planning of the white wedding, reinforcing and validating the bride as star of this public ritual. The absence of the groom in the planning of the wedding, according to this popular discourse, reflects his role in the wedding — necessary in appearance but completely secondary to the bride. The groom's planning role in the wedding is instigated, organised and undertaken by the bride-to-be:

While the bride and her family usually have the most to do, the groom also has a few duties he's responsible for. Most of these you'll end up doing together, such as visiting reception venues, caterers, checking out bands or DJs and finally — if you're not already living together — making decisions about your new home. You'll find that nearly every aspect of the wedding and reception will be discussed together, even if it is you as the bride who will have to finalise most of the arrangements. (We hope this makes you feel better as, following, the groom's schedule is considerably shorter than the bride's!)¹⁵

Wedding planners are formatted similar to a magazine, and are structured and designed for the bride-to-be to practise wedding traditions and rituals. They are complex and interactive, allowing interaction with the publication itself through letters and competitions. The *South Australian Bride's Diary* includes pages which can be used by the bride to organise a wedding budget and list the various places where desirable products can be purchased. Written information on wedding traditions, the honeymoon and setting up a house is juxtaposed with advertising on where these goods and services may be purchased, but the text is only a frame for advertisements. In the 'Wedding Fashion' section of the wedding diary, which contains information about bridal gowns and accessories, there is a brief written introduction to be followed by twenty-three pages of advertising interspersed with two more pages of written information.¹⁶ This advertising is always articulated as endorsing a narrative about the bride's significance and her agency.¹⁷ For example, the *South Australian Bride's Diary* states that it 'features the best bridal fashion available and you need go no further than to select a bridal fashion expert from these pages. This will be one dress you'll never forget, take your time to decide and don't be afraid to go where your fantasies take you'.¹⁸ In addressing girls through the use of the term 'you' planners reinforce the bride as the reader, planner and star of the wedding.

Wedding planners contain, define and construct wedding traditions, which are always understood as a blend of traditional and contemporary wedding practices. The descriptors used to characterise wedding traditions by these planners, most consistently 'traditional' and 'contemporary', are designed to be blended to suit the bride as an individual — the younger bride, the mature first time bride, the modern bride, the traditional bride and the 'Italian' bride. Wedding traditions are apparently normative and monolithic and exclude a multitude of diverse wedding

cultural rituals, practices and traditions. The bride is invited, inspired and able to replicate the fairytale wedding of the glossy magazines by practising pre-packaged traditions: '[t]he Bride's Diary will be your ultimate assistant in making your dreams a reality! It's been designed to help you plan everything and it contains a wealth of information, advice and both traditional and contemporary ideas which you can use from the time you announce your engagement right through to setting up your first home'.¹⁹

Wedding planners detail the importance of constructed cultural traditions and rituals associated with white weddings, such as the throwing of the garter and bridal bouquet. A 'traditional' wedding is always conceived of as relative to 'modern' one and traditions can be modified: 'we will give you the "traditional" steps and practices, remember that nowadays nothing is set in stone and traditions were made to be broken and re-created in another form — your own'.²⁰ This reinforces the importance of traditions, which can be modified, tailored and adjusted but cannot be dispensed with. These modifications do not necessarily challenge the patriarchal meanings that are attached to the traditions of white weddings but, dislocated by the specialisation of these genres and their consumption from social histories of marriage, they do not necessarily directly transmit them either. For example, a planner might provide detailed information on how the traditional wedding cake can be modified and tailored to suit the bride as an individual. The wedding cake can be changed in its appearance and composition but not avoided without this being constructed as a dramatic deviation from the tradition. These traditions, however recent or trivial, take on the force of the bride as a cultural and social meaning: '[w]hile you and your groom are the highlights of your reception, so too, is the cutting-of-cake ceremony'.²¹

If popular discourse dictates that it is tradition for guests to take a piece of the wedding cake home, brides-to-be generally only know about these traditions through their mass dissemination. *Universal's Complete Wedding Planner* states that a 'popular tradition is to give your guests a bag with a tiny slice of cake in it, besides the piece offered after the cake-cutting ceremony. It is considered lucky for guests to take home a piece of the cake and sleep with it under their pillows that night'.²² The manufacturing of bridal traditions is not accomplished in wedding planners alone, or even exclusively in bridal culture marketed directly at brides-to-be. In one of the opening scenes in *Muriel's Wedding*, Muriel is given a piece of the bridal cake at a girlfriend's wedding. The cake is displayed on a decorative table and is being served to the guests by a couple of women. Muriel takes a piece of the wedding cake from an older woman who states: '[n]ow if you put this under your pillow you will dream of your future husband'. As much as the wedding planner, this scene transmits knowledge about wedding traditions and a certainty that wedding ceremonies reinforce the social and cultural importance of weddings to girls' lives.

Another cultural tradition associated with weddings and marriage is the wearing of rings. Tradition indicates that a girl receives a ring from her groom-to-be: in the western twentieth century this was even articulated specifically as a diamond stone set in gold to signify that she is engaged to be married. The wedding planner's account of tradition suggests that rings are exchanged during the ceremony between the bride and groom as a symbol of their love and

commitment to each other. It does not matter when this tradition appeared or how 'traditional' it is: this tradition narrates the placement of the bride in relation to sex, embodiment, marriage and motherhood. Despite the fact that the act of giving an engagement ring symbolises a commitment made by a young man to a girl, it is the girl who is marked as being unavailable to other men. A young man makes a commitment which is assumed to make a statement about fidelity and monogamy. This sign of commitment is marked on the woman's body and it is her fidelity which is articulated by engagement.

Historically, this can be associated with the need to protect the specific paternity and inheritance of children born of that marriage but as this tradition is now disconnected in most respects from that function it retains only its symbolic effect. Furthermore, the profusion and increasing specificity of rings involved in bridal culture — the engagement ring, the wedding ring, and in some cases an eternity ring traditionally given by the husband to the wife after a year of marriage — has undermined the relation of the ring to virginity and pregnancy. While a man's commitment to marriage is only signified by the gold ring that he may exchange during the wedding ceremony, this further complicates any association between the ring and social histories of marriage institutions. These wedding traditions, though often varied in contemporary western culture, are preserved by the wedding planners' reiteration of them, and the planners distinguish between these explicit acts and the significance of the bride they symbolise.

The audience of *Muriel's Wedding* are not asked to practice bridal traditions in the same way as in a wedding planner. The film is produced for an audience with less specialised relations to the bride, and is distributed and consumed in different ways, but the film's narrative about bridal culture relies on and disseminates white wedding traditions. The opening scene emphasises the importance of weddings in the lives of the female characters, and in particular for Muriel. The hysterical screaming which accompanies the fighting, pushing and shoving for the bouquet suggests the competition between women in their quest to have their own white wedding. The camera quickly cuts from different shots of the bouquet falling to the women with outstretched hands trying to catch it, effectively creating a feeling of anticipation and anxiety. Audience members are left for several moments wondering who the lucky girl is going to be, who Muriel is, and whether she is going to have a wedding.

This scene also establishes a dialogue between Muriel and her 'friends' about who deserves to get married. The banter between the bridesmaids and the bride about who deserved to catch the bouquet presumes that Muriel was not worthy of becoming a bride, and reinforces the idea that the meaning attached to this tradition can be realised. Throwing the bridal bouquet at weddings is a culturally significant event, and only single women are expected to participate. The ritual signifies the bride bestowing her good fortune in getting married onto another woman who desires to be married, but also works on the assumption that if you are a single woman you would want to find a man and be married. It reinforces the idea that all girls are heterosexual and following from that would want and should want to be married.²³

In effect, the construction of traditions associated with weddings by popular culture produces a discourse which positions heterosexuality as an ideal. This

ideal is achieved through the bride's performance of cultural rituals associated with white weddings, and weddings are situated as a ritualised institution for continuing the line of heterosexuality among other cultural norms. A wedding is understood as a public declaration of love, and it is a pivotal instance in which girls are validated in this public appearance as the centre of a romance narrative. According to long-established patriarchal histories, the roles girls and women are expected to undertake are performed in the private domain (the home), while the roles boys and men are defined by are performed in the public sphere. White weddings, however, appear to be a reversal of these roles. The groom is relegated to a secondary position while the bride is the centre of attention in this public declaration. This centrality also reinforces the idea that girls are the public bearers of cultural traditions not confined to the white wedding discussed here.

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- 1 Ien Ang, *Watching Dallas: Soap Opera and the Melodramatic Imagination*, Routledge, London, 1985. See also Janice Radway, *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature*, University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill and London, 1984.
- 2 A sample are *Adelaide Wedding Pages*, Issue Nine, 2000; *Vogue Brides*, 1999; *For the Bride by Demetrios*, Summer 2000; *The World's Best-Selling Bridal Magazine*, March/April 2000; *Bride to Be*, Autumn 2000; *Studio for Brides: Melbourne Edition*, Spring/Summer 99/00; *Weddings*, Nine Network Australia, 1996; *I do I do*, Channel Ten Australia, 1996; *Muriel's Wedding*, P J Hogan (dir), House and Moorhouse Films/Roadshow Entertainment, 1994.
- 3 The term 'white wedding' itself refers to the circulation of ideas about the ideal bride and wedding constructed through what is considered to be traditional wedding practices. Popular discourses on white weddings are those which construct an ideal of the perfect bride and wedding through the production of a set of cultural rituals that are designated and validated as traditional.
- 4 Some of these questions have been discussed in the text by Catherine Driscoll, 'Becoming Bride' in Meaghan Morris and Stephen Muecke (eds), *UTS Review: Cultural Studies and New Writing*, vol 4, no 2, 1998, pp 139-54.
- 5 *South Australian Bride's Diary*, 1999, p 10.
- 6 Driscoll, op. cit., p 139.
- 7 *Italian Bride*, July 1999.
- 8 *Bride Again*, January 2001.
- 9 *South Australian Bride's Diary; Bride Again*, January 2001.
- 10 *Australian Women's Weekly*, November 1999.
- 11 *Cleo*, June 1999.
- 12 *Who Weekly*, August 2000.
- 13 Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, 'The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception', in Simon During (ed.), *The Cultural Studies Reader*, Routledge, London and New York, 1993.
- 14 *Cosmopolitan*, op. cit.
- 15 *Universal's Complete Wedding Planner*, 1999, no 3, p 25.
- 16 *The South Australian Bride's Diary; Universal's Complete Wedding Planner*, 1999, no 3, p 25.
- 17 *ibid.*
- 18 *ibid.*, p 42.
- 19 *ibid.*
- 20 *Universal's Complete Wedding Planner*, op. cit., p 8.
- 21 *ibid.*, p 109.
- 22 *ibid.*
- 23 *Universal's Complete Wedding Planner*, op. cit., p 141 states that: 'The bridal tossing of the bouquet can be done in one of two ways. The first (which is the fair way) is to toss it backwards over her shoulder at the single women. The second way (well it's cheating but it's allowed), if she's a good shot she can aim at her best single friend or single sister. As with the garter catching, the woman who catches the bouquet — according to tradition — will be the next among her friends and family to wed. If you're all having a laugh during these proceedings, the fun can continue by having whoever caught the garter place it on the leg of the woman who caught the bouquet.'