‘Their time and their story’: Inscribing belonging through life narratives and role expectations in wedding videography

Matthew Wade & Michael J Walsh

Abstract

Despite some contentions and ambivalences, the Western wedding retains a vaulted place in cultural imaginaries. However, little scholarship exists on wedding videography, despite holding rich insights regarding memorialization of belonging. Accordingly, this content analysis of 132 videos explores their utterances, signifying artefacts, and ritual displays. Focusing on life narratives and role designations, we explore their discursive valorizing function. Wedding videos present rare occasions where actors explicitly inscribe requisite emotions, intimacies, values, and aspirations. Typically, however, these films reinforce ‘traditional’, heteronormative stances. Moreover, by skirting reflexive capacities through emotive and seductive repertoires, they may present problematic forms of belonging, given what is conspicuously excluded.

Introduction

‘Once the proposal has been accepted and the date set, the planning begins in earnest. And of all the plans and organizing, there’s one important decision you’ll be glad you made. It’s the wedding video you chose to capture the sights, sounds, and emotions of this very special occasion. So, what does your wedding really mean? We think it’s more than just the day of celebration and the planning that went into it. It’s about a union of two people, making a lifetime commitment to each other. It’s about the beginning of one of the most important chapters of your life. There’s a wedding video out there that does more than just record the events of the day. We understand that capturing memories on video means expressing in a clear and beautiful way all the hopes and dreams you have for your married life. So, when the day is over and quickly fading from a moment to a memory, you’ll be so glad you have your wedding video, to relive the experience, and share it with friends and family for generations to come.’

Cinestyle (2013)

The above quote is sourced from a promotional video for a Melbourne-based wedding videography company. In this video, we can observe the importance attached to the memorialization of life narratives. Significantly, however, there is an urging here to capture an emotive and aspirational quality of what has been achieved, and what is still to come. The wedding is deemed to constitute ‘the beginning one of the most important chapters in your life’,
with the not-so-subtle injunction that taking authorial control of the wedding day narrative likewise signals control of the narrative of your life. An ethical appeal resounds, suggesting that the couple’s hopes, dreams, and shared values must be inscribed for posterity, captured in vivid artefacts that can recreate the affective sentiments infusing their marital commitment. Memory is ephemeral and fragile, but through the carefully curated wedding film others may bear witness to idealized forms ‘for generations to come’. This artefact will both prove and preserve dutiful belonging within the institution of marriage, cataloguing graciously performed embodiments of the affections that characterize this ritual display. Indeed, for many to-be-wed couples today, this film may signify the culmination of long-practiced romantic tie performances ‘in front of the lens’ (Schwarz 2010).

Meanwhile, the wedding sustains itself in the cultural imaginary through an appeal of both belonging and ‘becoming’ (Bell 1998). For many, the occasion holds a ‘temporal placing’ in normative life trajectories, an event ‘girls are traditionally taught to look forward to, to plan and “rehearse”’ (Bell 1998, p. 471). The ritual reinforces an expectation of ‘role transitions’, not least through public utterances of vows often rigidly tethered to gendered obligations (Kalmijn 2004). Yet, at least in the Western world, a growing ambivalence is also emergent, an uneasy reluctance to perpetuate a tradition laden with discomfiting historical baggage. This laden history includes tendencies towards hegemonic and patriarchal subjugation, unrealistic expectations of marital bliss, and crass commercial exploitation, among many other incisive critiques (Fairchild 2014, Freeman 2002, Galloway et al. 2015, Humble et al. 2008, Ingraham 1999, Lewis 1997, Mead 2007, Ogletree 2010). Nonetheless, the typical wedding film remains a bastion of heteronormativity, powered by the promissory pull of the ‘marriage mystique’ (Geller 2001).

Within this somewhat uneasy milieu, the professionally-produced wedding video proves a popular and malleable signifier of belonging. Eva Illouz (1997, p. 155) has observed that ‘Romantic love is frequently embedded in a higher-order narrative, or “life story”, in which past, present, and future are linked in a coherent and overarching vision of the self.’ The wedding occasion thus becomes a crucial life marker, one where relations of past, present and future are performed by its key actors; explicitly through speeches and ritual, and implicitly through intimate interactions. To this end, the ‘multimodal enmeshment’ (May 2013, p. 152) of video affordances is expressly curated to inscribe ‘shared sentiment’ (Wright 2015, p. 398) and foment a ‘stickiness’ of emotion (Ahmed 2004, p. 194-5). The resulting text is thus a document of performing rootedness, archiving the couple’s ‘arrival’ as fully-fledged subjects. As Vanessa May (2013, p. 101) notes, modes of belonging are often tethered to narrative artefacts, serving as orienting tools upon which we inscribe loyalties in ways transmissible to others, using whatever cultural currency may prove resonant. In contemporary weddings that aspire to be both broadly palatable but uniquely one’s own, this can result in seeking increasingly sophisticated ways of repackaging ‘tradition’ – rather than exploring possibilities of reframing these conventions – along with tendencies to ‘sacralise’ luxury commodities (Illouz 1997, Winch and Webster 2012, Ottes and Pleck 2003). Ultimately, these memorial texts attempt to simultaneously inscribe a
communal coherence of worldview, uphold cherished customs, and weave an instructive tapestry of shared norms. However, those who find themselves ill-fitting may feel excluded from such narratives, or otherwise co-opted into uneasy displays of heteronormative assent (Oswald 2000, Harzewiski 2004).

Photographic artefacts have long played a role in particular styles of remembrance in wedding culture (Bezner 2002, Lewis 1997, Strano 2006). The task of professional photographers and videographers, after all, is to provide ‘an enhanced version’ of the wedding (Mead 2008, p. 154). Photographers and videographers carefully scrub out moments of role strain or mishap, and focus instead on imagery that best elevates the couple as a model of affection, intimacy, moral standing, and overall admirable habitus. Wedding videography, in particular, provides a vivid narrative in which ‘the couple are literally actors in their own drama, enacting – and re-enacting – crucial moments of the ceremony’ (Mead 2008, p. 164). Professional wedding videos are exactly selective, framed as the authoritative text for how the occasion is to be remembered, and therefore play a crucial role in shaping memory, affixing ‘temporal notions and relations between past and present’ (van Dijck 2008, p. 17).

Yet, despite this discursive hold over a ritual prominent in the cultural imaginary, wedding films remain surprisingly understudied. While a few studies broadly trace the emergence and professionalization of wedding videography (e.g. Mead 2007, Bezner 2002), there is a decisive lack of close inquiry regarding the function of the texts in themselves (with Moran 2002, proving a rare exception). This is further surprising given that professional videography provides an enormously rich body of data via the content of wedding speeches (also curiously understudied). This dearth is regrettable, for weddings constitute a rare occasion where key actors are obliged to speak explicitly, emotively, and semi-publicly about their intimate relationships, normative stances, and hopeful aspirations. In these utterances key actors must directly articulate their life narratives in ways tightly adherent to convention, but also resonate as uniquely their own. These videos thus serve as potent tools of socialization through what is valorized for posterity and what is otherwise excluded.

This study aims to address the importance of ceremonial talk and display through the prism of belonging, offering an overview of the rituals, habits, practices, and other multimodal interplays by which alliances of inclusion are deployed. Wedding films foster particular modes of belonging in emotionally salient ways, deploying evocative repertoires that may enrol us in endorsing somewhat rigidly gendered role expectations and performative displays. The wedding film genre – in its current popular modes – leans heavily on popular romanticisations of marital affections and loyalties, re-inscribing them in creatively and technically novel ways that toe a line of convention through invention. Given this repackaging of ‘new traditionalism’ (Leslie 1993), it would prove fruitful to closely analyse the narrative tropes which carry these norms in novel ways. This study elucidates the amor fati stories and aspirational hopes that emerge
throughout these films. Through this we may better understand the forms of belonging and exclusion that permeate the wedding ritual, and posit reimaginings of this occasion in ways more inclusive of those who value the institution, but perhaps find the performative expectations of the wedding burdensome, alienating, or even denied to them entirely.

**Methods, Data Set, and the Scenes of Past, Present, and Future Belonging**

With these aims in mind, this study analyses a data set of videos sourced from Melbourne and Sydney-based wedding videographers. Wedding videographers promote their work via web-based platforms, enabling prospective clients to browse their portfolio through videos that the featured couple have consented to sharing on public platforms (including hosting sites like Vimeo, which functions similarly to YouTube, but is largely preferred by industry creatives). These publicly disseminated showreel videos are usually short-form films, ranging from approximately two to fifteen minutes in duration. These distinct short-form texts – in contrast to the longer ‘feature’ film versions – are crafted not only as keepsakes, but also to be more widely shared, especially via social media. The content generally includes selective excerpts from speeches, key moments of ritual, and relationally significant interactions, all accompanied by a tailored soundtrack. For this study our sample included 132 videos sourced from 40 wedding videography businesses based in Sydney and Melbourne, all filmed between 2011-2016 and which were subsequently used as promotional materials, publically available on websites and actively disseminated by videographers on their social media profiles. Broad initial coding was conducted using a grounded theory approach (Charmaz 2000), followed by multimodal coding, with a specific focus on the incorporation of music (see Walsh and Wade, under review). Finally, a third coding was conducted, this time exploring explicit articulations and thematic allusions to ‘belonging’.

Though sourced from Melbourne and Sydney-based practitioners, the videos analysed were shot across the globe, from the cliffside cubiforms of Santorini to French countryside villages, the Baroque sandstone buildings of Sicily, the hustle-and-bustle of New York City, exclusive hamlets in the Hamptons, pristine vistas around Sydney Harbour, the eccentric laneways of Melbourne, and various rural vineyards and homesteads, among many other locations. Faith, ethnicity, and other cultural affinities were equally varied in their expression, ranging from: tea ceremonies and ancestor worship in Chinese and Vietnamese celebrations; Eastern Orthodox, Protestant, and Catholic ceremonies within Christian traditions; the colourful spectacle of the Hindu Vivaha; various nationalistic sentiments; numerous modes of secular celebration, and many other forms of cultural expression. Indeed, the spheres of belonging accommodated proved so expansive that it rendered one form of exclusion in Australian contexts all the more apparent. Though no longer the case, throughout the period in which these videos were recorded, same-sex marriage remained prohibited. Tensions of belonging, exclusion, and ambivalence towards the very desirability of ‘recognition’ thus reverberate throughout. The hurt of non-recognition retains
a ghostly presence in the otherwise saccharine-sweet idealizations of these texts, for one of the most commonly included shots is of bride and groom proudly signing their government-issued wedding certificates.

Contemporary wedding videos tend to adopt a bricolage of several genres, combining elements of documentary, reality television, drama, music video, montage, still photography, and more. Ultimately, all these influences are turned towards crafting a text that will prove narratively coherent, normatively adherent, and aesthetically salient. The intended effect is to create a tapestry of feeling, a sense of multiple forms of capital being woven into a whole cloth of affirmation. Embedded in this rapid-fire genre and modal ensemble are expectations that viewers can parse this pastiche without becoming disoriented (an assumption of cultural capital which, in itself, has implications for belonging and exclusion). Still, in most contemporary wedding videography a three-scene narrative arc is sustained. This broadly mirrors the composition of photographic albums (Bezner 2002), with pre-ceremony preparation, the formal binding ritual, and the oft-bacchanalian reception comprising the three scenes. All three prove necessary in crafting an assuasive narrative of belonging; the first scene effects a nod to the past and the transition into idealized roles, the second is a present-focused formal and public assent of entry into these new roles, and the third scene documents raucous celebrations of the successful transition, while also looking towards hopeful futures. The three ‘scenes’ are also clearly delineated by each comprising a distinctive space of belonging. This is most notable when pre-wedding scenes are set in the domestic home, ceremony scenes within a faith-based setting, and where the reception draws together significant figures in the couple’s life in joyous affirmation.

Most videos in our data set fall into a broad ‘highlights’ genre, which typically comprises a three to seven minute video. These short form films are often cut together in a manner akin to contemporary music videos, with visuals shifting back and forth through different scenes and settings, but always maintaining a forward momentum through the events of the day. Moreover, the soundtrack plays a vital role, providing a sense of continuity, shot-to-shot rhythm, and tonal anchoring (Walsh and Wade, under review). Accompanying song lyrics may further accentuate the life narrative significance of the occasion. Some lyrics, for example, refer directly to the wedding event, while others express that ‘this is the perfect day’ or even literalize what is first analogized in the lyrics. One video, for example, features a song with the repeated lyric ‘When I’m with you the fireworks go off’, resounding as the bride and groom dance together, surrounded by white geysers of fireworks. Such multimodal intertextuality testifies to the affective intensity evoked throughout, a sensory panoply designed to induce irresistible good feeling, thereby enrolling viewers in further endorsement of the couple’s affections.
Acknowledging the Past and the Passed

Most wedding films sought to incorporate some acknowledgement of how the bride and groom were formatively shaped through their upbringing and key figures in their life. This is often achieved through brief vignettes of the family home, especially common during preparation scenes. Videographers use this opportunity to further personalize the film, including through close-up shots of family photos. Similarly, in one later reception scene, we are presented with an array of framed photos showing other couples within the extended family on their respective wedding days, thus placing this occasion in a long, esteemed tradition, and so further valorizing normative expectations. In pre-ceremony scenes actors display a ‘backstage’ looseness, rather than adopting later pretenses of role performance. Telling of this added textual richness is one scene wherein the groom wistfully observes that the very room in which he is now donning his wedding suit was once his childhood bedroom; both a reflexive acknowledgement and contribution to the life narrative currently being composed. Another groom, similarly, stands with his parents outside the family home in a wide, soft-focus composition. Accentuating this affecting tableau is a post-production sepia-tone overlay, creating a worn patina that prematurely ages what was already likely to be looked back upon with nostalgia.

Often, creative means of reverent acknowledgment will be given to family members who have recently passed away. This may be achieved through shots of bride or groom looking upon photographs of deceased loves ones, sometimes further contextualized through voiceovers collected from interviews or during reception speeches. This solemn deference during speeches will typically elicit emotional responses from gathered family and friends, which are in turn incorporated into the final film, heightening its affective sway and further tailoring a close narrative of kinship. In one video, a bride provides voiceover narration of a pre-ceremony letter penned for the groom, observing how saddened he must feel that his deceased grandfathers cannot witness this occasion. Meanwhile, images show the groom wiping away tears as he gazes upon a locket containing photos of these two men. This affecting scene demonstrates how the affordances of videography can incorporate ‘the ephemera of individual life cycles while preserving them for posterity within a larger family biography’ (Moran 2002, p. 61). Another video draws close attention to the recent death of the groom’s father, including a speech excerpt where the groom addresses his mother directly:

Groom: ‘Mother, you are a tough lady. Physically a lightweight, but a heavyweight example of what love and marriage is all about. Not only the last twelve months I have seen strength, and determination, it has been there all my life. Hang in there, because with [Bride and Groom’s young son] we have plenty of good times to come.’

Reaction shots of the mother further enhance this charged moment of love, loss, and solace. Throughout these videos, the weight of expectation of the wedding as a crucial narrative marker and genealogical imperative burbles barely underneath the surface. One father of the bride
effuses how this occasion has been at the very top of his ‘bucket list’, the event he most dearly hoped to witness before shuffling off this mortal coil.

**Courtship Stories as Affirmations of Belonging**

Wedding videos also draw out narrative threads that espouse the couple’s shared worldviews, thereby stoking an *amor fati* quality of homophily (Bourdieu 1984, Illouz 1997, p. 214-5). Often this is achieved by placing emphasis on niche interests and subcultural affinities. For example, one wedding of two aficionados of the Melbourne music scene was wholly themed around ‘Rockers in Love’. The resulting video thus incorporated and added to the semiotic markers on offer. A pre-wedding scene shows a close-up of a guitar case, emblazoned with ‘rockers in love’ and equipped with the wedding rings secreted in a hidden compartment. Frequent shots of Melbourne’s laneways and high-cachet cafes punctuate throughout. Décor shots of the rock ‘n’ roll aesthetic at the reception are plentiful, and the performing Beatles tribute band also get their due. Speech excerpts tell stories of the couple’s shared love of the music scene, which culminated in the groom’s proposal during a Dandy Warhols gig. The groom’s speech praises the bride as ‘so cool, and so beautiful, and so rock ‘n’ roll’. Together, they all toast ‘to the rockers in love’. The closing shot is especially significant in uniting ‘sacred’ and ‘profane’ forms of belonging evident in wedding videos, with the ‘rockers in love’ guitar case foregrounding the bridal party walking down the Catholic church aisle after the ceremony. This is just one among many instances of subcultural affinities being incorporated into the narrative, personalizing otherwise set templates of wedding films.

Similarly, excerpted speeches and interviews draw upon shared values that drew the couple together. Woven throughout are stories of initial courtship, first impressions and first dates, facing good times and bad together, and inventive proposals. This will occasionally be complemented with footage shot prior to the wedding day, such as one couple shown in close embrace on the University of Sydney campus, with voiceover contextualizing that this was where the couple first met. One pre-wedding film is even shot in the form of a music video. Here, bride and groom lip-synch to a balladic duet, interleaved with re-creations of how they first met, and ending with a proposal re-enactment. Similarly, in wedding speeches, besotted flushes of affection are used for mild teasing material, along with poking fun at poor first impressions gradually overcome as love loosens its guises:

Maid of Honour: ‘[Groom], the first time I heard of you was back in [Bride’s] early highschool days, and – as all teenagers do – I asked if she liked anyone in her class. [Bride], who looked rather disappointed replied “No, there are no cute guys, but, I think there’s this one guy who likes me. He’s tall, but he’s so skinny and pale, and, oh my god, he has really big ears!”’
Courtship narratives are also woven into personalized wedding vows, which videographers use to further mould a bespoke narrative:

Groom: ‘You’re present to witness that I – [Groom] – take you – [Bride] – to be my lawfully wedded wife. [Bride], I find it so fitting to be standing here today wearing this tuxedo. This tuxedo, which, with four days notice, I scrambled to purchase and tailor, all in an effort to impress you on our first date.’

The interweaving of courtship stories is enhanced through interviews, conducted in a manner broadly akin to reality television genres (though, of course, without the confected drama or willful provocations). In interviews, bride and groom will speak of first date nerves, humourous missteps, qualities they admire in their partner, hopes and fears for the wedding day itself, and desires for the future. Engagement proposal stories are also commonly included, particularly those especially inventive and spectacular, which in turn valorizes the proposal as a necessarily grand gesture in proving one’s sincere intentions.

In interviews, the bride and groom speak directly about the wedding as an important marker in their life narrative, and in articulating this trajectory lean on common discursive tropes of romantic love. One bride poignantly observes that

‘I have told everyone under the sun there’s no such thing as ‘the One’ or ‘love at first sight’, and I found myself in this phone conversation with my mum saying “Mum, I think he’s the one”, and she’s just gone “Did you just say those words?! Did that come from my daughter?”.... It’s about personal growth for me. I used to think weddings were a little “Why would you do that?”’, so it’s kind of nice to feel within myself that I’ve gone through that change. It’s celebrating my love for a man that I think the world of. I truly think he’s amazing, I feel so fortunate to have met him, and I wish this upon everyone else, I hope people can have their time and their story. Sorry, I’m getting a little bit emotional.’

Here, we see an underlying theme of ‘love as force’ (discussed below), a force that bequeaths a ‘story’ to the lucky soul upon whom it is met. What was once an apparent cynicism towards romantic ideals has been overwhelmed and transformed, turning an adversary into an advocate, one who hopes that others may realise the contentment she now feels. One groom similarly speaks of ‘not knowing what love was’ until he met his future wife. Belonging as a feeling of ‘at homeness’ is thus especially evident, evoking a sense of phenomenological reconciliation (Antonsich 2010). For many, a once dimly felt incompleteness is healed and made whole:

Bride: ‘Before we met, I considered myself to be happy and content with life. It only took one date with you [Groom] for me to realise that there was still a piece of my life not fulfilled… I love that making big life decisions with you comes with ease. Marrying you, although the biggest, is the easiest decision of my life. You make me feel as though I
have everything I need. In your ring I engraved the word ‘Complete’ because you really do complete my life.’

Observe here how popularly held sentiments of romantic love are imbued with personalized touches. Meanwhile, the key actors are acutely attuned to the threat of saccharine cliché and ‘token interdiscursivity’ (Dunn 2006) that may come with ritualized ceremonial talk, and so seek ways around this impasse:

Groom: ‘I will start by saying this, and not because it’s a courtesy, an obligation, or a nice thing to do. No, it is unmistakably a pure fact, the absolute truth, and proof of my happiness. [Bride], you are so beautiful, and I am a very lucky man to call you my wife.’

However, most feel no need for such qualifiers, and instead a sense of fantastical joy recurs throughout, explicitly inscribing all those ‘hopes and dreams’ the opening quote informs us are requisite components of the occasion. The ‘dream’ now realized motif is commonly invoked:

Bride: ‘Thank you for being so true and loyal to me. You are my Prince Charming, you make all my dreams come true… I can’t wait to grow old together.’

Groom: ‘I see a life with you as the ultimate goal, the dream, what life is really meant to be, complete and happy. You are my compliment and I am yours.’

Further reinforcing the bride and groom’s claim to ‘their time and their story’ is the way in which other actors are enrolled into this drama. Kinship belonging in particular is strongly emphasized to accentuate themes of achieved transition, role accomplishment, and embodying of new identities. Often this is implicitly rendered through displays of intimate interaction between family members. Typical examples include the bride dancing with her father, mothers helping sons with ties, and reaction shots of family seeing the bride revealed in her gown for the first time; all small but telling vignettes which further contextualize nuanced forms of belonging.

**Scripted Dreams of Belonging**

Most insistent throughout is the motif that the wedding depicts bride and groom at their most self-actualised, rendering all the more important that this occasion be preserved for posterity. Close-up shots of venue signs declare this to be the ‘Best day ever!’ and ‘This is where happily ever after starts!’, which signal to the viewer how this text should be interpreted. Typically evident in this composition is the fitting of bride and groom’s life experiences to an idealized path; one of love everlasting, of finding ‘the One’, of imagined fulfilment and self-actualisation, and performative displays of what is commonly anticipated to be the happiest day of their lives. This ecstatic happiness, we are regularly informed by family and friends, will only be surpassed when the bride and groom have children (see below).
However, where possible, videographers use the utterances of the bride and groom themselves to drive the narrative. This may be achieved through speech excerpts, or pre- and post-wedding interviews that are interwoven with scenes from the day itself. It is important to note, however, that a gendered imbalance persists in who articulates this narrative. Excerpts from speeches, for example, are far more commonly sourced from the groom. This may be due to editorial selection, or just as likely reflective of customs dictating who is expected to give a speech. Ironically, this imbalance can be almost tragic in its effects. One groom, for example, praises his wife’s ‘quick wit’ and claims her to be ‘one of the funniest people I know’. Yet, in the entire video, the bride does not speak. This reduction of the bride to iconographic display evinces longstanding expectations that ‘men act and women appear’ (Berger 1972, p. 47). Here, women must conform to a prescribed ‘stylized repetition of acts’ (Butler 1990, p. 191), adhering to the ‘schedule for the portrayal of gender’ in order to ‘constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self’ (Goffman 1979, p. 8). The frequency with which brides are filmed gazing into mirrors is but one example of this stylized display. However, perhaps an emerging correction to this imbalance is found in videos that incorporate interviews, wherein brides are far more likely to carry the narrative voice.

One particularly novel method borrowed from televisual drama is to feature vignettes of the bride and groom reading letters from each other. These billets-doux are shown through close-up shots of envelopes being opened, paired with over-the-shoulder angles, and sometimes with added voiceover from the subject who penned the note. When read aloud, these letters add emotional exposition, for within them bride and groom trace the path that has led them to this special day, and directly articulate their hopes for the occasion. Altogether, therefore, anything that serves to affirm prevailing idealizations of weddings – and can be accommodated within the multimodal format – is likely to be included in the final cut, such as when a groom expresses the occasion to be ‘a script I thought could only exist in a dream.’ Likewise, the father of one bride suggests that ‘This is a day that [the Bride] has wanted all her life, I know she’s rehearsed today in her mind for many years.’ Of course, embedded here are gendered role expectations, implicitly suggesting that if one wishes to stage an occasion of comparable spectacle and self-actualising potential, they had best start ‘mind-rehearsing’ from a young age.

**Love as Past Force, Love as Future Work**

Related to these implicit instructions of hopeful anticipation and diligent rehearsal, Eva Illouz (1997, p. 192-8) identifies two dominant discursive models of romantic love. One is of love as ‘intense force’, a transcendent power that overwhelms the subject, irresistibly enrapturing them. The other model is of ‘love as work’, with each partner ‘investing’ in the other towards mutual fulfilment. Both of these frames are evinced in wedding videos, though if a broad modal separation can be discerned, it is that ‘love as force’ is best captured in the visual, while ‘love as work’ lives in the spoken word. For example – and perhaps reflective of the changing social function of what weddings are intended to serve – love as work is often inscribed by
emphasizing the joint success of bride and groom in their professional and social lives. In one speech excerpt, a groom’s father proudly effuses

‘[Groom] is my best friend, we have no favourites as parents, but in your eldest son you live your dreams. I mean: “[Groom] is going to be the best golfer in the world, he’s going to be a professional footballer”, and in actual fact we both ended up as bankers, so I don’t think we’ve done a bad job. I’m so, so proud.’

Sentiments of celebrating earned success permeate throughout, with various actors praising the respective couples as ‘both extremely smart and hard working’ and having a ‘passion for working’. Success is also tied closely with shared experiential aspirations, such as a bride’s hope for ‘More countries, more adventures, more perfect meals, and lots more love.’ These aspirations can be quite specific, often related to future role expectations or material comforts. One groom even states in his vows that ‘We share the same vision about how our house is meant to look, where we will eventually live, and our future life together.’

Themes of both irresistible fate and considered choice run throughout, wherein part of the ‘work’ of love is knowing when the ‘force’ has sufficiently taken over, after which the couple must consciously craft the ‘fantasy’ into something sustainable. Contemporary love is thus framed as ‘a very reasonable madness’ (Illoz 1997, p. 215). The task of ritual memorialization is therefore to prove this ‘reasonable madness’, to show how bride and groom are consumed by their affections, but that those affections have also been dutifully refashioned towards mutually affirming practices of ‘confluent love’ (Giddens 1992, p. 49-64). Hence, some kind of observable transition is sought, a realization of an idealized state that can be inscribed in memorial texts. Echoing this refrain of ‘reasonable madness’, the mother of one bride posits that:

‘Love is a temporary madness, it erupts like volcanoes and then subsides, and when it subsides you have to make a decision, you have to work out whether your roots have so entwined together that it is inconceivable that you should ever part, because this is what love is.’

This leads to tropes of marriage as an ongoing ‘journey’, where bride, groom, and well-wishers speak of travails so far, catalogue their hopes for the future (e.g. ‘I cannot wait for all our adventures to begin’), and acknowledge inevitable obstacles they will encounter. These sentiments are then often complemented by visual imagery evoking this journey, quite regularly by bookending the film with motifs of sunrises and sunsets, or through inclusion of farewell scenes, such as the happy couple driving off into the distance.

While others may incline towards romantic ideals of ‘love as force’, marriage celebrants, whether faith-based or secular, are often tasked with explicitly articulating ‘love as work’:
Celebrant: ‘A good marriage must be created… it is the little things that are the big things. It is never being too old to hold hands. It is remembering to say I love you at least once a day. It is never ever going to sleep angry. It is having a mutual sense of values and common objectives. It is standing together and facing the world. It is forming a circle of love that gathers the whole family. It is speaking words of appreciation, and demonstrating grateful, thoughtful ways. It is having the capacity to forgive and to forget. It is giving each other room to grow. It is a common search for the good and the beautiful. It is not only marrying the right person but being the right partner.’

Romantic love, now bound in martial commitment, is framed as an ongoing project. This project requires shared labours, but in turn promises mutual self-actualisation. Such ethical appeals abound in wedding videos, further inscribing the commitment made, while also serving an underlying instructive quality. The officiant – regardless of faith stance – is not necessarily proselytizing to bride and groom, for presumably they have already encountered such teachings during their pre-wedding consultations, but rather is addressing those witnessing, including those contemplating commitments of like kind.

**Familial Achievement and Future Role Expectations**

The wedding event is firmly articulated as an achievement of the family, with the resplendence of bride and groom a reflection upon the esteem also due to the wider clan. One best man speaks of how the groom was raised solely by his mother, crediting her for the groom’s upstanding character, and this excerpt is duly complemented by shots of groom and mother sharing a tender exchange. Bride and groom frequently express gratitude to their parents for the fulfilled subjects they have become, while responses in kind ‘officially welcome’ them into their respective in-law families, noting how well each fits into established kinship relations. This ‘welcoming’ often retains conservative, traditionalist sentiments. One well-wisher states:

‘[Bride], you have found a great husband in [Groom], who for me has always been a reliable and trusting friend. And [Groom]… you have taken one of the [Bride’s surname] family’s greatest assets, and turned her into your wife, and most importantly, a [G’s surname].’

Of course, here we may briefly note here the persistent rhetoric of patriarchal possession, a form of belonging stubbornly resistant to dislodging (Rubin 1975). Another speech, this time from the father of the bride, records how he does not want to ‘give away’ his daughter, but rather ‘to keep her’. Frequently such speeches unwittingly infantilize and bind the bride to restrictive performative tropes:
Father of the Bride: ‘As I look on this beautiful woman before me, I cannot help but reflect on the girl she was, and the woman she has become. You were daddy’s girl when you were born, and you will always be my princess.’

Male possessive tropes can be expressed somewhat unknowingly, with some utterances intended as progressive but, upon reflection, perhaps missing the mark. For example, in one speech excerpt, the best man speaks of the groom’s love of cars. The groom, we are told, has had ‘more cars than girlfriends’, but, luckily for the bride, ‘he’s never traded you, he’s never sold you, and he’s never upgraded you’. Another courtship story echoes this awkward persistence of possessive tropes. One groom recalls his first encounter with the bride, at a nightclub, trying out his ‘creepy dance moves’. The groom then faux-confesses that upon seeing ‘this [metropolitan area] princess busting her moves on the podium, I did proceed to pull her down – without asking her – into my arms and into my life. The first words I whispered to [Bride] were “are you a dancer?”’. Of course, these quips are said with knowing jest, though it nonetheless reflects possible underlying expectations of rigid, stereotypical models of hyper-masculinity and femininity. It seems significant that of all the spoken sentiments that could be included, it remains many of the above kind that are selected for memorial inscribing by videographers and editors.

Finally, concluding the narrative arc are projections into the future tied to normative role expectations, commonly that of motherhood. These injunctions are abundant in both speeches and interviews, and often paired with imagery of intergenerational tableaus, such as the bride holding a baby, or playing with the flower girl. The ‘good mother’ role is customarily framed as the next narrative marker of achieved belonging:

Maid of Honour: ‘I could not have asked for a better aunty to my children, you love and look after them as if they were your own. I can tell you are going to be a fantastic mother.’

Best Man: ‘Not only do you make a stunning bride, but I have no doubt you will be a wonderful wife, and hopefully an even better mother.’

Groom (in interview): ‘… she dedicates her life to our relationship, dedicates her time to making sure … that I’ve got everything I need. You know, they’re the qualities you want in someone who is going to be the mother of your child, and she will be the best mother in the world judging by the way she treats me.’

In some cases, bride or groom will even address their partner directly to the camera, consciously inscribing a performative declaration of their love, along with the duties they promise to uphold.

As an important qualification, please observe that the point of highlighting these sometimes patriarchal or otherwise highly gendered modes is not to enact a shallow critique that bemoans
any supposed lack of critical reflexivity on the part of key actors. That would be both patronizing and presumptive, along with being willfully blind to cross-cultural subtleties of ritual, custom, and other meaning making practices. Rather, a central consideration is to trace what is recorded for posterity, what is otherwise excluded, and the consequent implications for what functions this event purports to serve for those who may view these memorial texts. One of these implications regards whether to ‘belong’ in this institution now encourages performative declarations of love, sometimes direct to camera, and is altogether packaged in ways that accentuate the occasion as an affective spectacle intended to effect an ontological refiguring of its key actors. As these multimodal artefacts become ever more elaborate and technically complex, it is worth querying what impact this will have on the varying capacity to demonstrate affections in ways resonant to those from whom we seek affirmation. As Illouz (1997, p. 294) notes, ‘romance is a good unequally distributed in our social structure’, so can everyone enjoy ‘their time and their story’ under these demanding conditions of conspicuous display?

Conclusion

This chapter has presented an analysis of the utterances, signifying artefacts, and ritual displays brought together by videographers in creating affecting texts of marital belonging. The excerpts found within illuminate a rare occasion where key actors are obliged to speak explicitly about their emotions, values, hopes, and intimacies. Such utterances showcase the importance attached to ceremonial talk and its placement in generating spheres of belonging, for in these films we see subjects ‘in social bloom’ (Goffman 1979, p. 11). Through analyzing these multimodal texts, we have explored the discursive valorizing power of wedding films, most notably in the reification of contemporary romantic ideals of fated affections, realized dreams, mutual successes, role fulfillment, familial achievement, and deference to the past coupled with aspirational futures. Quite often, these films reinforce, reinscribe, and instruct the viewer on the great esteem attached to relationships predicated upon ‘traditional’ divisions of labour. Through emotive and seductive repertoires, the wedding video speaks to our longing for belonging, yet may remain problematic in what is conspicuously excluded. As Susan Sontag (1977, p. 7) sagely observed, ‘there is an aggression implicit in every use of the camera’. Perhaps we might more closely consider forms of embedded exclusion, especially via narrow depictions of gendered display, for these evocative texts may prove powerful tools of socialization in ways that constrain alternative ways of reimagining the ritualized display of the wedding.

References


Walsh, M.J. & M. Wade (under review). A soundtrack for love: wedding videography, music selection and the construction of romantic memory. *Continuum*

---

On the sourcing of the sample texts: The focus for this study was on ‘highlights’ or ‘showreel’ videos that are intentionally composed with an eye towards public dissemination. Usually 3-8 minutes in length, these videos have been freely distributed — with the consent of clients — on both dedicated websites of videography companies and wider video hosting platforms (e.g. YouTube, Vimeo). These short videos comprise part of the videographer’s public portfolio, which they try to distribute as widely as possible. Hence, the desired (and potential) audience for these videos is considerable. One of the videos in the sample, for example, has been watched over 963,000 times on YouTube. Prospective clients looking for a suitable videographer typically watch many of these videos, seeking out the aesthetic approach and technical capacities that best suits their aims and budget. Also, the short-form video is expressly designed to be shared, which clients typically do through their own social media platforms. Alternatively, long-form videos — which often comprise full ceremonies and speeches, rather than carefully selected excerpts — are not made available by videographers, nor were they sought for this study. Our focus was to analyse only those texts that are most widely disseminated with a public audience in mind, for they speak more directly to the culturally negotiated ideals of belonging that are germane to this collection.