

Buying the Perfect Bride

Critiquing Martha Stewart Weddings

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SOSC 3315 6.0 A Tutorial 08

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The wedding ceremony is seen as one of the major life events in our society – though some ceremonies, like graduation, would arguably involve much greater effort and celebration, a wedding is still foremost among the ‘big’ events in one’s life. Although there is much made in the news about how divorce rates are rising and people are waiting longer to get married, it does not seem to have affected the number of people planning weddings, nor the amount spent on them. The wedding industry is a 10 billion dollar a year industry, while individual weddings have reached an average cost of approximately 20 000 dollars in the United States.¹ When I was planning to be married about a year ago, I could not conceive of spending this amount on one day. I watched other women try on two-thousand dollar dresses in bridal shops, paged through magazines advocating everything from welcome baskets for out-of-town guests to receptions including cocktail hours, coffee bars and dessert buffets and was astounded. Even though I certainly didn’t take it as seriously as most, the expectations and the stress surrounding the ceremony were undeniable.

Martha Stewart Weddings functions to commodify readers and reinforce a consumerist ideology by building anxiety in its audience through the idea of perfection. The perfect wedding, the perfect bride and the perfect ceremony is invoked constantly through both advertising and editorial copy, making readers feel that no expense should be spared in the quest for flawlessness. For this essay, I will first examine the magazine’s audience; next, how anxiety is created within it through the notion of perfection; and lastly, how consumption is offered as a way to relieve anxiety and achieve said perfection. I will then move on to a semiotic analysis of an ad from *Weddings* for the Romona Keveza Collection, which neatly plays on both the need for perfection, and childhood fantasy.

¹ Source: <http://www.windsorpeak.com/mediacenter/bridalkit.pdf>

Martha Stewart Weddings is an example of segment-making media; media that encourage small slices of society to talk to themselves.² The ultimate aim of this new phase of marketing is to reach different groups with specific messages about how certain products tie into their lifestyles by building primary media communities. These are formed when viewers or readers feel that a magazine, TV channel, newspaper, radio station, or other medium reaches people like them, resonates with their personal beliefs and helps them chart their position in the larger world.³ 'Signalling' is one way that that this is done. It involves the creation of media materials in ways that indicate to certain types of people that they ought to be part of the audience and to other populations that they do not belong.⁴ *Weddings* is a prime example of segment-making media, first as part of a larger corporation, Martha Stewart Omnimedia. This is made obvious through the magazine, as the other branches of the corporation are advertised throughout: *Martha Stewart Living* on television and in print form; *Martha Stewart Food*; and the Kmart line of household goods, *Martha Stewart Everyday*. The audience is then signalled to be at least partially Martha Stewart's general audience; if you are the sort of person who follows Martha's way of life, you are most certainly the sort of person who would want her involved in your wedding planning. Arguably, the first way an audience is signalled is through the cover – the first point of contact with a reader. Magazine covers are used as a touchstone for signalling points of distinction about preferred audience. The general feeling among producers is that the cover must make most of a short instance of opportunity by quickly and easily telegraphing the right prejudices to the right targets.⁵ The cover of *Weddings* follows the Martha Stewart Omnimedia branding for

² Joseph Turow, "Segmenting, Signalling and Tailoring: Probing the Dark Side of Target Marketing," *Critical Studies in Media Commercialism* 2000: 239.

³ Turow, 242.

⁴ Turow, 243.

⁵ Turow, 242.

magazines – a picture dominates with ‘classic’ and ‘elegant’ fonts for the title and the contents. On the cover of this particular issue, a picture of a colourful, perfectly arranged – and expensive bouquet has been chosen. This arrangement, with the riot of flowers and ribbon-bound stems, has been popularized through Martha Stewart’s influence. The content explanation doesn’t really explain what is in the magazine at all, opting for a rather generic description of ‘glorious rose bouquets, beautiful dresses, classic favours, cake and dessert buffets’. To this audience, it is assumed that the specifics are less important than the brand.

Who, then, is the sort of person who might buy *Weddings*? First and foremost, the audience is women. Meehan states that a feminist perspective on media reveals that societal divisions of labour based on gender and prejudicial assumptions about gender play a significant role in defining and differentiating the commodity audience.⁶ In the case of *Weddings*, the assumption is that women do the work of wedding planning, and that only women would be interested in this work. Men do not figure into the picture of weddings beyond their role as groom, nicely expressed in an ad for a ‘Wedding Day Essentials Kit’ by BridesMade: “The most important thing to have at your wedding, other than the groom, of course.”⁷ According to Meehan, these assumptions are to the advertiser’s benefit: “Indeed, restructuring markets to foster the liberation of women and working people would actually undermine the interests of individual capitalists and of capitalism, which profit from disparities in income and oppressive social relations.”⁸ It is therefore quite useful to primarily focus on women, both to sell to those who ‘traditionally’ put together a wedding, but also to maintain the inequality in the divisions of labour between men and women.

⁶ Eileen R Meehan, “Gendering the Commodity Audience: Critical Media Research, Feminism, and Political Economy,” *Sex and Money: Feminism and Political Economy in the Media* 2001: 216.

⁷ *Martha Stewart Weddings*, 197.

⁸ Meehan, 220.

It may be assumed that, among women, only the bride-to-be would be the target audience. Not so, as Martha herself tells us in her ‘Letter from Martha’: “Whether you are walking down the aisle soon, just got engaged, or are dreaming of a wedding day far off in the future...”⁹ Through this, the audience can then legitimately include all women, no matter whether they are even engaged or not.

Aside from being female, the audience is also predominantly white and affluent. According to Turow: “An even more effective form of targeting ... simply excludes [undesirables] in the first place. This activity is ‘tailoring’, the capacity to customize media content and ads to the backgrounds and lifestyles of particular individuals.”¹⁰ *Weddings* is tailored to a white audience by simply excluding women and people of colour. Predictably, an ad for Aruba tourism¹¹ has one woman of colour featured, evoking exoticism. Other than that, there are (at my count) about five women of colour in total through *Weddings*. Only one woman of colour is featured in an article.¹² The magazine is also tailored to an affluent audience by excluding images and mentions of more modest brides and weddings. If the notion of saving money is mentioned, it is only in passing, such as in the article ‘Wedding Day Transportation’.¹³ Even the ‘real brides’ that are featured¹⁴ are primarily from well-to-do backgrounds. If one cannot afford the ideas contained in *Weddings*, they are undesirable as an audience.

The word ‘perfect’ is mentioned many times in *Weddings* – in columns and advertisements both.¹⁵ The ‘Letter from Martha’ mentions it no less than three times: “We know that there is no single approach to the perfect dress, the perfect ceremony, the perfect

⁹ *Martha Stewart Weddings*, 28.

¹⁰ Turow, 244.

¹¹ *Martha Stewart Weddings*, 50.

¹² *Martha Stewart Weddings*, 170.

¹³ *Martha Stewart Weddings*, 162.

¹⁴ *Martha Stewart Weddings*, 100, 164.

¹⁵ *Martha Stewart Weddings*, 28, 83, 107, 116, 120, 161.

reception.”¹⁶ Perfection is near impossible to achieve, but *Weddings* would have its audience believe that perfection is well within one’s grasp, causing anxiety in the reader: What will happen if they fall short? Martha Stewart herself signifies ‘perfection’ in the realm of all things domestic and traditionally feminine. Therefore, for a wedding, she would seem to be the authority. However, she is also a daunting figure – if one cannot live up to the standards set by Martha, the wedding will not be perfect, and what will that say about the bride – the hostess of the event? Further in her ‘Letter from Martha’, Stewart says: “... you will be prepared if you read this magazine on a regular basis.”¹⁷ This leads to the question: What might happen if I don’t? The implication is that to ignore *Weddings* is to be unprepared, and likely far from perfect. Alternately, the ‘One Thing I Learned’ feature¹⁸ offers the reader a chance to become a Martha bride – provided you do everything right.

Issues of money and class also raise reader anxiety in *Weddings*. The people and weddings featured in the magazine – what Martha terms as ‘real weddings’¹⁹ – seem to be well above the financial capabilities of even the affluent reader. One such featured wedding, that of a Rothschild to a Shipman²⁰ is a glaring example of standards of perfection being set by the upper classes. The pressure to ‘keep up with the Joneses’ does not come from neighbours, but now from television and advertisements – and in this case, magazines. At least when the attempt was made to keep up with the neighbours, incomes were similar.²¹ By featuring the weddings of people whose income far outstrips that of most readers, anxiety is created. Even if a bride is reasonably affluent, she could not reasonably put together the same sort of event that ‘old money’ can.

¹⁶ *Martha Stewart Weddings*, 28.

¹⁷ *Martha Stewart Weddings*, 28.

¹⁸ *Martha Stewart Weddings*, 100.

¹⁹ *Martha Stewart Weddings*, 28.

²⁰ *Martha Stewart Weddings*, 291.

²¹ Joanne B. Ciulla, *The Working Life: The Promise and Betrayal of Modern Work*, (New York: Three Rivers, 2000) 202.

The ‘perfect dress’ can also cause a great deal of worry. O’Sickey states “All women’s fashion and beauty magazines are ultimately manuals for particular kinds of training in femininity...”²² As a fashion and beauty magazine, albeit focused on brides, *Weddings* is also a manual, creating a standard for bridal beauty. Unfortunately, it is not a standard many women can meet. The women pictured in the dress advertisements and layouts in *Weddings* are all beautiful, thin, elegant and perfect brides. Whether they are models or not, they are the template for the bride and cause anxiety if the reader, like most women, simply doesn’t match up. There is also a concentration on a certain type of beauty: classic, as in the Amsale ads²³; or elegant and stylish, as in ads for Vera Wang.²⁴ Even when the attempt is made to make the brides more ‘modern’ or ‘edgy’, such as in the Helen Morley ad²⁵, the dresses are still fairly typical. If *Weddings* shows women how to be a bride, it only offers one way of doing so: all done up perfectly in makeup, thin and wearing the traditional white dress. Any other way of being would not fit into the mould of perfection.

Fortunately, there is a solution to the anxiety created by the possible absence of perfection – consumption. Martha and her team seem to be more than happy to help brides spend money: In the ‘Letter from Martha’ referenced earlier, the implication is that reading the magazine will help in the quest of perfection, therefore relieving any anxiety the reader may have. In the ‘Letter from the Editor’, Darcy Miller says: “In order to find the right vendors and the most helpful information, you can talk to friends...read magazines (like ours!)...”²⁶ Miller is friendly and helpful, acknowledging that planning a wedding is difficult – the reader is fortunate to have found help in *Weddings*! There is even an ‘Ask Martha’

²² Ingeborg Majer O’Sickey, *Barbie Magazine and the Aesthetic Commodification of Girls’ Bodies*, *On Fashion* 1994: .23.

²³ *Martha Stewart Weddings*, 13.

²⁴ *Martha Stewart Weddings*, 55-58.

²⁵ *Martha Stewart Weddings*, 238.

²⁶ *Martha Stewart Weddings*, 34.

section, where Stewart herself, the arbiter of good taste, supposedly answers questions.²⁷

These questions are fairly simple ones, in the order of ‘What can my fiancé wear other than a tuxedo?’, however Martha has a tendency to ‘upsell’ in her answers; in the example used, the different kinds of tuxedos are explained before acknowledging that the groom could wear a suit – but only for an informal wedding.

Perfection can also be achieved not only by consuming based on the advice directly from the editors, but also by following the example of the articles. These articles cover many different areas: Dessert buffets with a ‘unified look’ to be offered along with wedding cake²⁸; Bouquets that can be ‘unique as the bride that carries [them]’²⁹; transportation options that may not have been considered, such as transporting guests³⁰; and how to choose wines for the wedding – assuming that there should be more than one wine option.³¹ These are all ways to make a wedding perfect – and they all require further consumption. *Weddings* does offer ideas and ‘how-to’ sections with do-it-yourself instructions and recipes³², however most people do not have the skill or the time to make a full dessert buffet on their own. They are much more likely to simply bring a picture to a caterer – and then pay the price for perfection.

The perfect dress can also be found through consumption. Many people might buy a dress, but the way a wedding dress is seen makes it seem like no expense should be spared in finding one. In the layout called ‘In the Dressmaker’s Studio’, the copy states: ‘Wearing one of these dresses, you’ll look so beautiful – as if it had been sketched with you in mind.’³³

The dresses are, of course, designer gowns. The wedding dress is seen to hold a ‘magical’

²⁷ *Martha Stewart Weddings*, 82.

²⁸ *Martha Stewart Weddings*, 312.

²⁹ *Martha Stewart Weddings*, 282.

³⁰ *Martha Stewart Weddings*, 162.

³¹ *Martha Stewart Weddings*, 186.

³² *Martha Stewart Weddings*, 63, 67, 109.

³³ *Martha Stewart Weddings*, 298.

property – if a woman can find the perfect dress, she will be ‘magically’ transformed into a beautiful, perfect bride. In some ways, the advertisements for wedding dresses need no help from copy. O’Sickey says: “The only way the girls can escape the anxiety of insufficiency is by identifying with the photographed girl in order to compete with her.”³⁴ Therefore, the only way to measure up to the woman in the ad is to wear the dress, thus making the bride as beautiful and desirable. Most of the dresses featured would be difficult to find for under a thousand dollars.

By building an impossible standard of perfection and creating anxiety in its audience, *Martha Stewart Weddings* commodifies its readers and reinforces consumerist culture. *Weddings* offers a vision of a wedding that few can achieve, but many will aspire to, in fear of seeming inadequate on a day that is touted to be among the most important of a woman’s life. Consequently, weddings have become increasingly extravagant over time. This suggests that, though women have made great strides in equality, ‘traditional’ conceptions of weddings work to maintain a disparity in relations between genders through divisions of labour and concerns about body image. Given all this, it’s no surprise that more and more women are rejecting traditional ideas and ditching it all for Las Vegas or City Hall.

³⁴ O’Sickey, 28.

Semiotic Analysis

I have chosen an advertisement for the Romona Keveza Collection. Though the advertising spread goes for several pages, I have decided to focus on the first two pages (pp. 128-129)

On a denotative level, the ad projects an image of classic elegance and style, hearkening back to the first half of the 20th century. The fonts used are classic, unembellished and simple. The text uses several different methods to evoke meaning: ‘couture’, implying the mass-produced gowns are designer-made, close to one-of-a-kind; the designs are inspired by ‘legendary weddings’, giving the dresses a similar allure; and lastly, the mention of Letitia Baldrige’s book links Romona Keveza to Baldrige’s reputation as an expert on ‘etiquette and manners’.

On the facing page, pictures of classic gowns are interspersed with pictures of royalty – Princess Grace, Princess Christina and Sophie Rhys-Jones – adding to the elegance of the ad. All the dresses are white, invoking a traditional ‘classic’ view of a bride, in keeping with the women featured. The picture of Romona Keveza in her own design denotes the designer as ‘artiste’ and offers a feeling of personal connection – from the dresses to the designer and the designer to the reader.

On a connotative level, there are many meanings to be examined. The text on the first page refers to the ‘Legendary Brides’ book: as Keveza’s designs are featured in this book, presumably wearing one of these designs will elevate a bride to legendary. The name of the book is not the only important referent; Letitia Baldrige was once the Social Secretary for the Kennedy White House. The Kennedys, particularly the presidency of John F. Kennedy, is a strong reminder of ‘Camelot’ - a different, more idealistic time. The mention of Kennedy also immediately suggests Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis – the most beloved and

stylish of First Ladies. The Kennedys are as close to royalty as Americans have – invoking that name gives the product positive associations, equating it with a class of people, a time that is romanticized, and a woman who is idolized. This seemingly off-the-cuff reference is almost as, if not more potent than, the images facing. Baldrige and her book also lend legitimacy to the product; if she has featured Keveza's gowns, they are obviously on the same level as Baldrige is used to – that of Kennedys and 'legend'.

Nonetheless, the images are indeed important. Again, the picture of Keveza gives a personal connection – she is a woman and though attractive, not a model, so the reader is 'mirrored' to some extent. There is also the implication not only is this woman is making the dress for you specifically; but through the juxtaposition with the other women featured, she is like those women – and by buying the product, so is the reader.

Princess Grace can be argued to be indexical of many things – that is, her mere image brings to mind several systems of significance. She represents romance, as a commoner woman swept off her feet by a prince and turned into a princess; glamour and fame from being both a major Hollywood star and a princess; wealth, through royalty and the storied wealth of Monaco and its denizens; and lastly, youth – Grace died fairly young, so is always remembered as such.

The image of Sophie Rhys-Jones, Countess of Wessex could be a picture of Princess Diana, for how remarkably alike they look in the photo. This is obviously purposeful choice: Sophie is no longer Sophie, but Diana – and Diana connotes much of the same things as Grace. Diana is still beloved and remembered as incredibly compassionate and a wonderful mother – in her death, she has been practically sainted.

Princess Christina of Spain is also pictured – she is less well-known, but also a princess. The idea of 'princess' is a powerful system; it taps into childhood fairy-tale

fantasies that the bridal industry is ruthless in exploiting. The refrain is familiar to anyone with a passing acquaintance of weddings: ‘It’s your day – You look like a princess...’ All the women chosen – or referenced – have very specific meanings, easily called up by the reader on viewing the ad. The choice of black and white photography for the images of royalty also evokes another time and place, adding to the ‘fairy-tale’ like feeling.

As for the Keveza dresses pictured, models wear them, but their faces are partially cut off, covered or turned away so it is easier to imagine oneself in the dress. This is also a method to objectify the women, so it is not the model wearing the dress that the reader pays attention to, but the dress itself.

The connections the advertiser intends to encourage are easily made in the state of anxiety over looking ‘perfect’ on the wedding day. It is easy to believe that, by buying one of these dresses, the reader will be on the same level as these women; be a refined and elegant princess; be legendary; be remembered. The ad is actually rather simple, with very few graphical embellishments; the signs used are more than enough for the reader to do the ideological work necessary.

References

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