

**Say Yes to the Dress and the affective rhythms of repetition and reflection.**

**Natasha Whiteman and Helen Wood**

**Pre-published version, October, 2019**

**In Boyce Kay, J, Kennedy, M and Wood, H (2019) *The Wedding Spectacle across Contemporary Media and Culture: Something old, something new* Routledge, London and New York.**

## **Introduction**

*Say Yes to the Dress* (hereafter SY) is part of the recent proliferation of reality/lifestyle television programmes with a bridal theme discussed in the introduction to this collection. The original series, set in Kleinfeld Bridal boutique in New York, first aired in 2007 and is currently in its 17th series, with a total of 312 episodes. In 2010 a spin-off, *SY: Atlanta*, set in the bridal boutique Brides by Lori, was launched, with 164 episodes to date, and a growing number of nationally-focussed versions of the show have since followed<sup>i</sup>. The SY franchise is part of The Learning Channel's (TLC) stable, a network that is largely known for its production of numerous lifestyle and reality shows, many of which have concentrated on the transformative appeal of the makeover (e.g *What Not to Wear* 2003-2013; *Property Ladder* 2005-2007), alternative lifestyles (e.g *My Big Fat Gypsy Wedding* 2012-2016; *19 Kids and Counting* 2008-2015; *Sister Wives* 2010-2018) and reality celebrity (e.g *Honey Boo Boo* 2012-2014, *Long Island Medium* 2011-).

At first sight, SY offers a relatively mundane, repetitive format following numerous brides-to-be visiting a bridal salon to choose their wedding gown.<sup>ii</sup> With the help of bridal consultants and the bride's entourage – a collection of family members and/or friends and bridesmaids – the bride typically tries on 3-4 wedding dresses until she finds 'the one'. The programme is therefore essentially about a shopping experience in preparation for the big day. Like many TLC products, it is often screened back-to-back with long hours of binge-viewing encouraged by the scheduling of themed wedding events such as TLC's 'Friday Brideday.' In each version of the series this search is shaped by the input of male bridal experts who also bear a common SY family resemblance: these include Randy in SY; Monte in *SY: Atlanta*; Franc in *SY: Ireland*, and David Emanuel in *SY: UK*, perhaps in some cases repeating the tropes of the gay male as a cultural intermediary in the service of heterosexuality. As viewers of this series we found ourselves curiously drawn to SY, despite the repetition of dresses and bridal 'types' and the distinct lack of developmental narrative outside each individual bride's success or occasional failure to find 'the one.'

*SY* can be easily read within the context of ‘the wedding industrial complex’ (Ingraham, 1999) given that it places the bride at the centre of an aesthetic and commercial decision through which she is subject to multiple levels of scrutiny, supporting broader ideologies of self-surveillance within consumerist brand culture. To remain within that critique, however, tells only part of the story and ignores the affective *form* that the programme takes. In making this case, we draw attention to the shows’ ‘esthetic-textual’ construction (White, 2017), extending understandings of the effects of the institutionalised predictability and repetition of television as medium (Kompare, 2004; Grossberg, 1987) and reality television as a genre (Kavka, 2012). We argue that banal repetition in *SY* serves to textually animate the production of emotional intensity around other kinds of kinship and friendship relationships, drawing the emotional focus away from the hetero-patriarchal institution of marriage itself. The production of this intensity orients around a key feature of the series: the salon mirror. This invites the display of numerous gazes that become productive of other feelings, excitements and histories of care that abound around preparations for the wedding spectacle. Whilst banal repetition highlights the emotional intensities of the show, reflection via the mirror enables all manner of relational expressions – together these devices *exceed* the straight-forward terms of the wedding industrial complex.

### ***‘Same Dress, Different Girl’: hyper-uniformity as televisual virtue***

The hyper-visibility of the bride is apparent across the exponential rise in wedding media which is ‘linked to a rise in branding culture and its exploitation of women’s apparent aspirations for visibility’ Winch and Webster (2012: 51). From a barrage of media and consumer guidance the bride-to-be is interpolated to emulate the celebrity wedding in order to achieve her ultimate moment through finding her own perfect ‘bride brand’. There is a good deal of pressure upon the bride, as seen in wedding-themed reality television like *Bridalplasty* (2010-2011) or *Bridal Bootcamp* (2010-) which centre upon the labour required to create a bride ‘fit’ for a wedding – casting the neoliberal logics of self-work as the proper route to good wifedom. Here the commercial imperatives of the brand are ultimately associated and realigned with the marital bond – the best wife is the one who has also made the right consumer choices in the pursuit of her best self-image (Leonard, 2018).<sup>iii</sup> With the dress at centre of the wedding spectacle, it is hardly surprising that narratives of its discovery and purchase abound across film and television.<sup>iv</sup>

*SY* therefore reflects this pressure upon the bride to achieve feminine perfection by putting in many hours of consumer labour. This aligns with contemporary postfeminist culture whereby patriarchy has seemingly been franchised out to the market via a broader appeal to women to claim their ‘free choice’ and individual empowerment (McRobbie, 2009). The title of the show references the narrative climax in each shopping experience: the moment when the bride-to-be is asked, ‘are you saying yes to this dress?’ To which, if they reach that point, the bride replies: ‘I’m saying yes to this dress’ (this question and answer ritual is preserved in the English language in *SY: Benelux*, which is otherwise in Dutch).

Through this move, the groom – who has already been acquired - is *replaced* in the bride’s attention, emphasising the ultimate end-point of the commercialisation of the wedding complex whereby ‘the one’ is the dress and not the groom. The groom is further obscured because in *SY* heteronormativity is not strictly observed, as there are some episodes which feature same-sex brides and transwomen. If a groom *does* appear in the salon, he is described in *SY: Atlanta* as a ‘fox-in-hen house’ – quite literally a different species.<sup>v</sup>

The spend on dresses is of differing centrality across the different versions of *SY*, but brides are often asked for their budget or ‘price point’ at the outset. Some brides have ‘outrageous’ requests and some even opt for more than one dress for the perfect day, with the ultimate being the bride with the ‘unlimited’ budget.<sup>vi</sup> The extent to which a member of the bride’s entourage – usually a mother, father or best friend – feels that they should find the extra money to give the bride what she wants, is often accompanied by proclamations that they ‘deserve’ it, or that you can’t ‘put a price’ on the way she looks in that dress. However, not all brides have such big budgets on the show and dresses on ‘sale’ are also valued.

As an exercise in ‘individualised conformity,’ selecting a wedding dress - like the wedding itself - is invested with personalised meaning whilst simultaneously conforming to a set of fairly pat expectations (Carter and Duncan 2016). Any expectation of finding ‘the one’ as an individual expression of the bride’s personality is ultimately undermined by the fact that the bride must fit themselves into taxonomic system of styles, designers and visions. On *SY*, brides choose from a limited number of silhouettes, with the mermaid ‘fit ‘n’ flair’ style and ‘princess ballgown’ styles being particularly popular. Finding the ‘right’ silhouette for you (both for your body and vision of yourself as a bride) becomes an important decision that the bridal consultant can help with. Very occasionally, a bride is able to afford a custom gown designed to fit her specific personality (something that happens rarely, and predominantly on the New York-set original series where budgets are more regularly ‘blown’). For those who *cannot* afford such personalisation, choice *is* extended by the way that these silhouettes are interpreted by designers and by the variation of fabrics (lace, tulle, satin), effects (illusion, the ‘bling’ of bejewelled fabric, glitter and sequins, embroidery) and features (lengths, neckline, strapped/strapless, low back, corsets, sleeves, pickups, pockets, removable skirts). Yet, despite the possibility of choice produced by these options, watching multiple episodes reveals that different brides can be drawn to *exactly* the same dress - with a Pnina Tornai satin ball gown being particularly popular in the original series (style 4019, retails at approximately \$13,000).

At first sight, then, *SY* is littered with the constant repetition of racks of dresses, lists of designers and price tags which foreground the commodification of wedding culture. But the very repetitiveness - seeing the same dress over and again, especially across binge-viewing experience - also visibly undercuts the ideology of individuality that is seen to be a key paradox at the heart of the wedding

complex. Series 7, episode 15 of *SY* is even titled, ‘Same Dress, Different Girl,’ editing together moments when the same dress has been purchased by different women. The closing and somewhat ironic voiceover suggests that this doesn’t matter: ‘Every bride is special and unique, even if they’re wearing the same dress, it’s the individual personality that shines through and makes the bride beautiful.’

*SY* self-consciously, and excessively, works to display rather than conceal the paradox of individuality at the heart of the wedding complex by foregrounding sameness and difference. It is not that the brides featured do not differ: *SY* draws in a wide diversity of women, racialised bodies, body types, class backgrounds, sexualities, including some same-sex and polygamous relationships (“This is my fiancé.. and this is his wife!” *SY*, S15E9) and transgender brides. Yet patterns of similarity are emphasised in voiceovers within episodes which swiftly position individual brides within broader categories of brides (e.g. ‘Brides Who Don’t Know Their Minds’) and via the creation of descriptors of bridal identity (e.g. ‘Southern Belle,’ ‘Fierce,’ ‘Princess’). Top-10 compilations in the spin-off series *SY: Randy Knows Best* help to fill TLC’s viewing schedule by classifying different women, entourages, and events as being of *similar types* (e.g. ‘Top 10 Classic Brides’; ‘Top 10 Budget Busting Brides’). These editorial patterns utilise the production of sameness and difference at the heart of wedding culture, rather than shrouding the paradox with mystery: the hyper-uniformity of wedding culture is practised here as televisual virtue.

### ***Repetition and revelation: banal overflow***

Formulaic repetition has been dismissed by critics of popular culture for succumbing to the process of industrialisation. But there can be pleasures in the compulsion to repeat: “the human body [...] may luxuriate in repetition” (Clymer, 2006: 5) and, as feminist writers about women’s genres such as soap opera in the 1980s have argued, repetition is part of the ritual of viewing pleasure that ‘offers reassurance in its familiarity and regularity’ (Brunsdon, 1984, 78). Similarly, in her study of the seductive seriality of pornography, Schaschek (2014) argues that understanding the genre requires ‘looking not only at the repeated representations of pleasure but also at the *effect* of this repetition.’ (2014: 41). Excessive repetition is important to the experience of watching *SY* and it requires us to think more fully about this ‘esthetic-textual’ dimensions of the programme. This is a term which we take from Mimi White (2017) to consider the look and form of the show beyond the singular episode to illustrate how ‘rote repetition gives way to other meanings’ (2017:579)

In White’s (2017) reading of the reality series *House Hunters* she describes how, despite the apparent blandness of couples looking for a house move and fairly restricted variety in their middle-class choices, the repetition within episodes, the merciless number of summaries and voice-over recaps, serve to do more than simply enable the viewer to tune in at any point. They also seem to provide an esthetic code which self-consciously uses this repetition to an effect which both ‘highlights and moderates the

program's sheer variety' (2017: 579). Like *House Hunters*, *SY* operates with repetitive editing sequences and a merciless number of summaries and recaps. For the binge-viewer there are cumulative comparisons which extend beyond individual programmes and versions of the *SY* franchise. We see the same dresses, veils and similar dilemmas amongst the wedding parties. We repeatedly see the 'nearly-there' dress being transformed *into a completely different dress* by the addition of a sequined belt, jewellery and veil – the process of what is called, in *SY: Atlanta*, 'jacking up.' The revelation of this transformation being the dramatic moment when the dress is finally seen by all as 'the one'.

Brides therefore essentially go through the same ritualised routine – one that echoes the shopping experience that is offered in many bridal stores (see Jenny Thatcher's chapter in this volume):

1. Conversation with the consultant/s about the wedding/fiancé/budget
2. Selection by the consultant/s of dresses for the fitting room (sometimes aided by the bridal party)
3. Trying each dress on in the fitting room and deciding whether to show the entourage
4. Coming out to stand on a pedestal in front of a large mirror to get the response of the entourage
5. A series of comments delivered by the bridal party (these often deliver emotional moments)
6. Depending on these comments, the salesperson derives a strategy (return to the racks to make new selection?)
7. 'Jacking up' (particularly if a final push is deemed necessary in order to convince the entourage/bride that this is indeed 'the one')
8. Finally, the bride indicates that they are ready to be asked the question 'Are you saying yes to the dress?'



"Are You saying Yes to the Dress?" (*SY*)

As can be seen in the original version of the programme, the narrative of each episode is edited so that momentum builds towards the ultimate 'Say Yes' moment. Each instalment of this series focuses on two separate brides (with a third bride also featured as she returns to the store to have final alterations

made to a previously purchased gown). Early in each episode, the brides' back-stories are drawn out in order to reveal their distinctions (the one who wants to please her mum, for instance, or one who wants to look like a queen), and we get to know the entourage and the bride's relationship with them. As episodes proceed we move between the brides-to-be at a much faster pace as they try on dresses. Repetition of earlier footage constantly reminds us of their 'issue,' or of the first dress that they tried. Key moments of emotional rupture around family and friendship, which were teased in opening sequences, follow. These sequences are edited with 'to-camera' moments of the bride reflecting on her experience ('I never thought I'd like that style of dress,' 'I knew my mom would say that'). Whilst upbeat music plays during most of these scenes, we become aware that the bride might have come closer to finding the one as the music becomes more sentimental. Before this happens, prospective choices are again repackaged for the viewer, including any emotional moments of rupture. The SY moment is then delivered, before the episode closes with brief footage of the wedding of one of the featured brides. Whilst spin-offs of the original *SY* do not maintain all of these formal elements (*Atlanta* *does* include wedding footage, *Ireland* *does not*, for instance; and the return-to the store for alterations storylines are distinctive to the original), the momentum generated by the juxtaposition of 2-3 brides, repetition of footage, to-camera moments, and highlighting of emotional moments, is common across all versions.

There is thus a compulsive familiarity to episodes, one that extends across all the spin-off series. In *House Hunters*, the reassuring and seemingly cosy predictable formula, gives way to a platform for domestic conflict. White describes how the show focusses on the discord between couples' desires in the new home, whereby, 'through insistent repetition, the disparity between the couple furnish the dramatic and affective focus for the episode' (White 2017:581). *SY* operates with a similarly highly self-conscious play on repetition. Precisely *because* of the repetition of the formula, moments of discord and sentimentality between the entourage and the bride loom large. These can produce antagonistic outbursts which create anxiety for the bride: for example, possessive, critical and estranged mothers (e.g. 'Moms way or the Highway' (S6E3, *SY: Atlanta*)), and jealous sisters (e.g. 'Double the Trouble' (S2E11, *SY*)). There are also brides who have fought against adversity and overcome obstacles (such as the 23 year old bride who comes to the *Atlanta* boutique the day of her release from hospital after being shot and paralysed months earlier ('It's More Than a Dress' (S3E13, *SY: Atlanta*), or the emotional journey of the widowed bride who now seeks a second dress ('Bridal Baggage Blues' (S7E10, *SY: Atlanta*)).

Beyond the banalness of the dress, what *is* distinct are the bridal party members' attachments to each other and the way in which those attachments become articulated around the idea of the perfect wedding dress. This relationship can be quite literal, for instance where brides want the dress to conceal, or sometimes even to reveal, the scars on their bodies from battles with illness or disease. They can also be emotional, for instance brides that want to find dresses that mothers, father, grandparents who have passed, would truly love. 'The dress' thus carries emotional potency that exceeds the seemingly banal

choice of tulle or lace: Grandma loved tulle, the lace just covers the scar. These moments of emotional rupture around the dress, which include tears of joy, sadness and resentment, provide the dramatic peaks of the show which must be navigated by the bridal consultants in order to bring home the sale. The repetition of dresses here seems only to provide the banal backdrop to exaggerate the revelation of emotions in the room.

This reminds us of arguments about repetition in the everyday made by Lebevre (1971) in which he argues for the potency of ‘banal overflow’ where everyday life escapes and ‘exceeds’ as repetition is animated by the smallest details – the processual thus becomes important and meaningful. We can see how this works with the established affective registers of reality television whereby in its play with immanence and intimacy, we cannot quite predict the direction of travel (Kavka, 2012). Greg Seigworth (2000) asks us to consider the deep linkage between banality and intensity that generates the ‘curious vitality’ of everydayness’ (2000: 232). It is therefore possible to bring this analysis to our habitual and sometimes binged viewing of a programme that is already produced through repetitive editing, voice-over, and the racks of dresses. Seigworth’s (2000) discussion of ‘banal overflow’ describes the need to understand the rhythmic relationships between the material and subjective worlds:

Although it is peripherally co-extensive – in matters decidedly human – with consciousness, sense *and* sensation, the ‘unperceived’ of the banal overflow properly belongs to neither the subject nor the object of any encounter but to the movements and variations of intensity (as potential to affect or be affected) that constitute a ceaselessly oscillating foreground/background or, better an immanent ‘plane’ (i.e. this is an *in-between* with a consistency all of its own). (Seigworth, 2000: 232)

We could argue that *SY* operates across such an immanent plane. It is not just the bride-to-be (subject) or the dress (object) that create the emotional aspects of the show – but the movement between the repetition of the format and the racks of dresses, into another affective rhythm - the emotional peaks between the bride and members of her entourage. *SY* oscillates therefore between repetition and revelation which gives it its particular ‘esthetic-textual’ drive. These affective histories are played out through multiple gazes in front of the salon mirror – and it is to this that we now turn, keeping in mind that mirrors are already, of course, productive of more than one immanent plane.

### ***The mirror: from surveillance to affective surface***

Mirrors have been part of the Christian tradition of regulating and monitoring moral and spiritual behaviour since the Middle Ages and played a significant role in the rise of self-consciousness of the West and the ensuing regulation of the body (Sabine-Melchoit, 2001). In many ways the mirror in *SY* continues this tradition. The television audience are sometimes privy to the trying on of the dresses in the changing room before the bride comes out into the salon space. In the main, the key *SY* scenes play out in front of the large mirror in the salon in front of which the family and friends sit, and the bride

must stand in each of the chosen dresses, to enable the entourage and sales assistant (as well as viewing audience) to pass judgement. Pivoting in relation to this, the bride-to-be typically addresses the mirror first and assesses themselves (with her reflection and back being visible to their entourage), before turning to ‘reveal’ the front of the dress to the group. In doing so she shifts, sometimes uncomfortably, between self-assessment and the assessment of others. This presents a rather intense image of inter-subjective scrutiny, making the bride and her reflection subject to surveillant critique. What is captured below is the triumphant moment, where the bride-to-be is veiled, and the entourage cheer as they look at the bride, looking at herself in the mirror and she says ‘yes!’



“I’m Saying Yes” (*SY: Atlanta*, S9E9)

Numerous examples of difficult, even aggressive and antagonistic relationships are also born out of these moments. In the episode of *SY: UK*, ‘Mums and the Evil Aunt,’ (S1E1) for instance, the bride’s aunt suggests that her rather petite niece looks like a ‘rugby player’ in her first choice of bridal gown, “Her legs look fat in it, I’m sorry but it does”. As the mirror reflects-back not only onto the bride but also onto the relationships that are brought into the room – the pressure to find ‘the one’ can seem to become the focal point for other family feuds and disappointments.<sup>vii</sup> These can license a cruel postfeminist gaze, channelling an older figure of the disapproving pre-feminist aunt or mother, of the kind Melanie Kennedy (2018) identifies in the Princess narratives of popular film and television, or as in Alison Winch’s (2013) formulation of the ‘postfeminist girlfriend gaze’ which re-orientates friendship bonds to the logic of the market in the name of self-improvement.

Mirrors across different *SY* series are of varying degrees of ornateness, but they all perform a narrative function through which the brides and their entourage must both react, and consider their reaction to the dress and the body in the frame. Rebecca Coleman (2009) in thinking about the mirror as a reflective surface points to the doubling of the mirror’s possibilities: firstly, the imaging *in real time* in the frame, but secondly, the process of reflecting upon and *speculating* about the image. Mirror images therefore

create an immanent moment of the present with potential, whereby ‘It is thus difficult to capture and convert the movement of mirror images into a ‘text’ that can be read and deciphered’ (Coleman: 2013:6). It is in front of the mirror that the dramatic tension emerges as the dynamics of the group play out, and as the dress and its reflection become the vehicle around which all kinds of feelings are staged. Yet cruel and critical narratives are not consistent over the various stories of SY. For one, the entourages are not always made up of women, and often fathers, brothers, gay best friends, and cousins are important decision-makers. And secondly, resentment and animosity are not the only emotions brought forth by the mirror as the handmaiden of a strictly surveillant culture.

It is worth thinking further about the function of the mirror to understand some of the other ways in which SY enables dramatic scenarios. In Greek mythology the mirror brings forth gendered effects – in the female Vanitas the act of self-contemplation in a dressing room mirror produces female vanity (Goscilo, 2010). Art has repeatedly represented individuals hypnotised by their self-image in mirrors (*ibid*, 314), and there are indeed moments in SY where the brides-to-be seem captivated by their own image as they admire how they look, or become emotional taking time looking at themselves. More commonly, however, the potential held by the mirror takes on a different form because of the way that the bride is not just looking at herself but is also at the centre of ‘being-looked-at’ as a more collective experience. In deciding to step out of the changing room, the safe intimacy of a (semi) private mirror is replaced by a public viewing situation.<sup>viii</sup> There the mirror does not just conjure an inward self-absorbed reflection but invokes the opening out of a more relational set of multiple yet intimate gazes.

In Brenda Weber’s (2009) discussion of body makeover television, the mirror operates in two distinct narrative moments. The first is in the shaming of the ‘before body’, but the second is in the ‘reveal’ of the ‘after-body’ where the participant is shown to have triumphed in their makeover struggle, securing the awe and admiration of her family, friends and potentially the viewer at home. For the new makeover ‘citizen’ the reveal is a significant moment of optimism and hope for a future which operationalises ‘the makeover subject’s new appreciation of being looked at, basking in a visuality that she or he once avoided, the gaze no longer perceived as objectifying but as a tool of empowerment.’ (Weber 2009:82.) In a similar vein, in SY the mirror is important for the potential it holds. This is a common trope of the mirror’s use in some film texts. For instance, in Vincent Minelli’s *Madame Bovary*, the mirror functions to capture the moment of *potential* and longing in the protagonist – Emma catches herself in the mirror in the ballroom where she sees herself, not as the plain housewife, but as the most beautiful woman in the room – as the woman that she always wanted to be. The film viewer (possibly like the TV viewer of SY) looks at the screen, at Emma looking into the mirror, and recognises that moment of expectation (Rappaport, 2011). Similarly, in her analysis of the mirrors in Frankenstein comics, Diedrich (2018) argues that ‘mirror scenes demonstrate what I call *being-becoming-monster*, a phrase meant to emphasize that the being’s monstrosity is not an attribute of his beingness but emerges in relation to the gaze of others and his own view of himself through the eyes of others.” (2018:389)

This visuality afforded to the bride-to-be in *SY* is therefore triply loaded, not only to herself but also to loved ones and friends and family, and the television audience. These perspectives are indicated in the different ways the bride is framed in front of the mirror within episodes. Sometimes a side view of the bride as she investigates her appearance is presented, the audience therefore taking on the view of an observer on the shop floor, witnessing her view of her reflection and the view of the sales assistant. At others, the bride stands looking in the direction of the camera, which is positioned close to the point-of-view of the mirror gaze that lies beyond: the mirror that the bride is constantly looking into cannot therefore be seen by the viewer and the camera lens takes its place. And sometimes the camera is placed from the point-of-view of the entourage as we look at the bride looking at herself in the mirror, viewing the actual dress from the back seeing both the bride's and the entourage's reflections.



(*SY*, S17E5)

In *SY* therefore the mirror operates as a persistent holding device for *potential* for reaction which, like reveals in the makeover, ‘are sanctioned zones for emotional rupture’ [Weber, 2009: 30] The gazes to be found here therefore are not limited to the ‘girlfriend’ gaze that Winch describes; they come from mothers, girlfriends, brothers, fathers etc. allowing a much broader affective repertoire. Many of these reactions thus bring forth strong feelings of care and kinship, which prioritize and *demonstrate* relationality, directly in the face of consumerist individualism.

### ***Reflections of love and care: SY Ireland***

Whilst there is potential across all versions of the *SY* franchise for caring relations to be brought forth around the dress, *SY: Ireland* seems to have chosen to concentrate on these elements. In *SY: Ireland* the space this provides is predominantly for the expression of intimate, emotional and *caring* relationships. Here the significance of the dress as commodity is downplayed - there is hardly any information at all about brands and price points (budgets, when mentioned, are smaller than those in NY/Atlanta— e.g. 1,000 euros). In contrast to the toxicity of ‘bad mothers’ (Karlyn, 2011) and problematic relations, there

is a sentimentalised emphasis on family and particularly female friendship, one that is explicitly signalled by Franc, ‘I think when you are shopping for your bridal gown you find out an awful lot of information about yourself and about your family.’ (S1E9). This is framed within notably luxurious mise-en-scène (curtains, chandeliers, cream flowers and carpets) and the presence of a particularly large ornate gold mirror.



*SY: Ireland* (S1E3)

The potential married couple are completely de-centred in this version of the show and a female world of love, laughter and ritual is prioritised. Carroll Smith-Rosenberg (1975) reminds us of the nineteenth century history of deep female friendships that existed alongside and were compatible with marriage and often included female friends and relatives being closely bound up within wedding rituals and even attending honeymoons. These close female ties and bonds are still very much encouraged within wedding culture and they are carried into the contemporary obsession with the wedding spectacle. In *SY: Ireland* this distinctive affective register is established from the very first episode. Episode 1 begins with footage of the back of an out-of-focus bride looking in a mirror. The voice-over then states, ‘Choosing a wedding dress comes with many emotions, whether its cheers [cut to shot of an entourage clapping excitedly] or tears [footage foreshadows what is to come, showing a mother of the bride shaking her head gently and saying ‘I’m not crying’, provoking offscreen laughter]. Finding the perfect gown is always an emotional celebration.’

The first episode includes an appointment with Cora-Anne who is still mourning the loss of her father. This loss is framed early on when the bride talks about her fiancé – photographs of the happy couple are replaced by an image of an older smiling man in a suit: the voice-over proclaiming: “But there’s another man in Cora-Anne’s life who can’t be there for the wedding, her beloved dad.” Separate

emotional pieces to camera follow this juxtaposition of fiancé/father, with an image of younger Cora-Anne and her father dancing together shown on-screen (“we were best friends”) and her mother noting, “She’s going to miss him, but um, we’re not going to, we’re just, we will be thinking, we are thinking of him [choking up] but we’ll soldier on as we have done.” (Cut to Cora-Anne’s feet stepping into her first dress.) Cora-Anne tries on two unsuccessful dresses, one of which inspires the remark “Have you put it on back to front?” from her mother. The third dress is, however, perfect: “That’s it, that’s the dress.” Looking at herself in the mirror – with the entourage looking on approvingly, she turns to them and at this point emotion increases and we have the mother’s “I’m not crying”/laughter response from the opening sequence – the ‘money shot’ of SY.

When Franc asks what the budget is, we get the emotional climax, as sad but uplifting piano/violin music in the background gradually builds:

Mother: “You know Cora Anne, you won’t be paying for your dress, your dad’ll be paying”

Cora-Anne, shaking her head: “No mam”

Mother: “Dad will be paying”

Cora-Anne raises her hands to her face, her entourage apparently now standing beside her

Mother: “For this dress today [apparently holding back tears] he would, he’d love to be here and be able to say, “Christ she’s Beautiful””

Cora-Anne, hands in face, crying, entourage moves closer, hugs her.

Franc to camera: “It took everyone by surprise, including Cora-Anne, she felt her dad was there, and he just gave her [pauses and breathes deeply as if getting emotional] another gift.” Smiles and nods, apparently misty-eyed.

In a direct-to-camera piece (presumably post-appointment) Cora-Anne rubs away tears: “I’m never going to see him again, or have him to be part of anything, but for him to be a part of that on my big day is very special to me.” [nods, wipes away a tear]

Cut to Cora-Anne standing in her dress, red faced and crying, mother standing in front of her “Its beautiful, and don’t dirty it now!” [wags finger] Laughter from all present.

Such examples of familial and friendship love and care - here specifically framed by grief - cannot be entirely contained by the reading of the mirror as an entirely regulatory device. The show opens out a myriad of emotional attachments and possibilities which emanate from bodies looking at bodies, *around* but not entirely directed *at* the bride to be – in another emotional overflow. These scenes foreground *relationality* over individuality and bring forth varying degrees of interdependencies which evoke alternative feminine values of empathy, sympathy and care, foregrounded as the very opposite of the

values of rationality that are at the core of liberal individualism (Held, 2006). We might argue that these values only work in the service of a neoliberal ‘body-project,’ but their affective reach seems to leak past ideas of surveillant culture and are nevertheless palpably *felt*, not least by us as viewers. If the postfeminist bride brand draws its direction from ideas of rational individualism, then *SY: Ireland*, in particular, demonstrates its limitations. The expressions of love and care that are found in *SY* demonstrate how the bridal shopping moment is potent *also* because of how it brings forth our other intimate relationships and enables demonstrations of caring *for* not just caring *about* the other as an *investment*.

## Conclusion

We have drawn attention to way that repetition draws *out* and draws our attention *to* the other drives of *SY* through its banal overflow and shifting between different affective rhythms. The bringing forth of so many emotional investments around the bride-to-be also tells us something about why it is that weddings still carry such a strong emotional pull, despite the changes in the sexual contract and the necessity for weddings at all, as outlined in this book’s introduction. Perhaps a programme like *SY* demonstrates such longevity precisely because it also represents our desire to look for and preserve spaces for care and emotion outside of the workings of capital – that it is precisely *within* the rhythmic, repetitive, cumulative that other affects find life. The competing drives here set up a feeling of immanence which is reflected and refracted throughout the series. Even the self-surveillant apparatus of the mirror also works in the opposite direction, in generating other relational affects and intensities. In doing so *SY* often emphasizes the very depth and value of these relationships, whilst obscuring the visibility of heterosexual couple. This is not to imply that *SY* is *not at all* bound up within the ‘wedding industrial complex’ but it *is* to say that perhaps its popularity is because of the way it reaches beyond and occasionally pulls against it. So much of *SY* is not about heteropatriarchal relations at all, but it is about friendship, familial attachments, resentments as well as care. We therefore want to argue that it is *also* important to understand these relational and emotional drives, if we are at all to unlock the some of the enduring paradoxes of our investments in the wedding spectacle itself.

## REFERENCES

- Carter, J and Duncan, S (2016) ‘Wedding paradoxes: individualized conformity and the ‘perfect day’’ *Sociological Review* Volume: 65 issue: 1, page(s): 3-20
- Coleman, R (2013) ‘Sociology and the virtual: interactive mirrors, representational thinking and intensive power’ *The Sociological Review*, Vol 61, 1-20.
- Diedrich, L. (2018) ‘Being-becoming-monster: Mirrors and Mirroring in Graphic *Frankenstein* Narratives.’ *Literature and Medicine*, 36(2), 388-411.
- Goscilo, H (2010) The Mirror in Art: Vanitas, Veritas, and Vision. *Studies in 20th & 21st Century Literature*, 34(2), 282-319
- Grossberg, L (1987) ‘The In-Difference of Television.’ *Screen*, 28(2), 28–46.
- Held, V (2006) *The Ethics of Care. Personal, Political, and Global*. Oxford, New York, Oxford University Press 2006,
- Ingraham, C (1999) *White Wedding: Romancing Heterosexuality in Popular Culture* London and New York, Routledge.
- Karlyn, K (2011) *Unruly Girls, Unrepentant Mothers: Redefining Feminism on Screen*, University of Texas Press.
- Kennedy, M. (2018) *Tweenhood: Femininity and Celebrity in Tween Popular Culture* London: IB Tauris.
- Kompare, D. (2004) *Rerun Nation: How repeats invented American television*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Lebevre, H (1971 [1968]) *Everyday Life in the Modern World*, Trans. S. Rabinowitch, New York: Harper and Row.
- Leonard, S (2018) *Wife Inc: The Business of Marriage in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* New York University Press.
- McRobbie, A (2009) *The Aftermath of Feminism: Gender, culture and social change* Los Angeles, London, Sage.
- Melchoit-Bonnet, S (2001) *The Mirror: A History* London Routledge.
- Rappaport, M (2011) ‘Madame Bovary, C'est Moi’ – Signed, Vincente Minnelli’ in *Movie: A Journal of Film Criticism*, pp1-5.

Seigworth, G (2000) 'Banality for Cultural Studies' *Cultural Studies* 14 (2): 227-268.

Schaschek, S (2014) *Pornography and Seriality: The Culture of Producing Pleasure*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Shimpach, S (2012) Realty reality: HGTV and the subprime crisis. *American Quarterly* 64 (3): 515 – 542.

Smith-Rosenberg, C (1975) 'The female world of love and ritual: Relations between women in nineteenth century America' *Signs: Journal of women in culture and society* 1 (1): 1-29.

Weber, B. (2009) *Makeover TV: Selfhood, Citizenship and Celebrity* Duke University Press.

White, M (2017) 'A house divided' *European Journal of Cultural Studies* Vol 20 (5) – 575-591.

Winch, A and Webster, A (2012) 'Here comes the brand: Wedding media and the management of transformation' *Continuum: Journal of Media & Cultural Studies*, Volume 26, Number 1, 1 February 2012, pp. 51-59(9).

---

<sup>i</sup> SY: Canada (2015), Australia (2016), UK (2016), Benelux (2016), Ireland (2017), Las Vegas (2017), and Asia (2017). Additional spin-offs have included *SY Bridesmaids* (2011); *SY: Big Bliss* (2010); *SY: Randy Knows Best* (2011); *SY: Monte's Take* (2011); *SY: Randy to the Rescue* (2012), *SY: Wedding SOS* (2018) and the 'what happened next' series *SY: The Big Day* (2011). As we write, the most recent incarnation of the series, *SY: Lancashire* (2019), has just launched.

<sup>ii</sup> Alongside Kleinfeld's and Brides By Lori, SY is set in: Amanda-Lina's Sposa Boutique, Ontario (SY: Canada); Brides of Sydney (SY: Australia); Confetti and Lace Bridal Boutique, Essex (SY: UK); Celebrations boutique (SY: Las Vegas); Vows in Dublin (SY: Ireland); Koonings: The Wedding Palace in the Netherlands (SY: Benelux) and Ava Rose bridal boutique (SY: Lancashire). SY: Asia is set in a pop-up bridal boutique in Malaysia.

<sup>iii</sup> In SY: Wedding SOS this requirement is extended to include the groom who must also engage in making himself over in order to be ready for the wedding day. A similar emphasis was seen in the short-lived US series *Shedding for the Wedding* (CW network, 2011).

<sup>iv</sup> Indeed, it is notable that – beyond the SY franchise - the search for the perfect dress is the primary focus of other wedding-related series on TLC including *Curvy Brides Boutique*; *Something Borrowed, Something New*; *I Found the Gown* and *Second Chance Dresses*.

<sup>v</sup> Many thanks to Jilly Kay for pointing this out.

<sup>vi</sup> In Season 12 of SY, for instance, Autumn, a bride with 'extravagant' tastes, spends \$50,111.62 at Kleinfelds on two dresses including a reception dress costing \$24,000 and a \$9,000 veil (her wedding later being covered in an episode of *SY: The Big Day*).

<sup>vii</sup> Such moments then become the focus of popular YouTube clips (Mums and the Evil Aunt has over 1.8 million views on YouTube).

<sup>viii</sup> SY: *Randy to the Rescue* deploys the revelation climax of programmes like *Ten Years Younger* by making over brides (through dress, hairstyling, makeup) who are not allowed to see themselves in the mirror before their friends and families (and the viewing audience at home) have done so.