

AUSTRALIAN FILM AND 'WHITE WEDDINGS'

ABSTRACT

This paper aims to identify how Australian films represent the "white wedding" ritual, especially in relation to gender identities, ideals of heterosexual romanticism, and the Australian national identity. Very few such films have been produced in Australia, hence the sample of five films analysed can be taken as representative of the field. A broad analysis of patterns is presented rather than close readings of filmic text to more clearly identify the broader filmic messages and the representations that such films have for viewers. A hybrid theoretical model is developed from cultural studies and film studies to integrate insights from both fields. Despite the scale of the white wedding industry and its impact on young lives, as well as the ideological conundrums and inherent contradictions within the normative culture surrounding weddings, there has been little serious study of white weddings in Australia.

INTRODUCTION

The link between weddings and marriage is a relatively modern phenomenon. From an anthropological viewpoint, marriage can be seen as a primordial communal arrangement in which men are afforded socially supported rights of access to women in the interests of group harmony and familial security. It has survived relatively intact because "the independent efforts of men to secure access to women often lead to social disruption and social instability" (Bell 1997, p237-9). By the Middle Ages, patriarchy-arranged marriage for "political and economic advantage was practically universal across the globe for many millennia", and only since the sixteenth century has the union been marked by some form of ritual known as a wedding (Coontz 2005 p7). In more modern times, weddings celebrate a variety of emotional values and types of unions, including traditional monogamous marriage, cultural and religious polygamy and, more recently, same-sex marriages. In modern Western cultures, they have become "the major ritual of the entire life span" that publicly signifies a change in the personal, social and economic standing of participants (Otnes, 2003 p4). Over its five centuries of evolution, from humble beginnings with modest celebratory accessories to its current often lavish manifestations, the "white wedding has become the standard for the ritual of marriage" (Engstrom 2012 p1). The term is now understood to mean the highly stylised public spectacle featuring a

bride in a white dress together with all the associated high-cost and conspicuous consumption relating to the occasion (Ingraham 2008b, p5).

Each culture imbues the wedding celebration with its own evolving values and ideologies, and these are reflected both in how weddings are performed and how they are represented in popular discourse. A cross-cultural analysis could identify these differences, but that is beyond the scope of the present study. The aim here is to examine a sample of five Australian films which feature a wedding as a central narrative device in order to identify the values and ideologies underpinning the filmic representation of the white wedding ritual, particularly in relation to gender identities, ideals of heterosexual romanticism, and aspects of the Australian national identity. The films analysed here are: *Dimboola* (1979); *Muriel's Wedding* (1994); *Thank God He Met Lizzie* (1997); *The Marriage of Figaro* (2009); and *A Few Best Men* (2011).

FRAMEWORK FOR ANALYSIS

Females are not born to be brides. Rather, their journey to the altar is via social and cultural constructions that present the traditional white wedding as the most desirable or even the only option available within the behavioural domain of heterosexual romanticism. While the advent of same-sex marriage may, in time, affect aspects of the traditional white wedding, it meanwhile remains overwhelmingly the dominant form of the ritual. There are many institutional, societal and cultural players involved in the transmission of white wedding ideology, but the aim here is to consider specifically the filmic representation of such weddings in this sample of Australian films. Thus a hybrid framework is needed, drawing from both film studies and cultural studies, to interrogate these wedding films in order to understand the wedding culture they represent and the filmic messages underlying such representations.

Approaches to analysing film

In asking how these films represent weddings, it is important to bear in mind that they do not form a coherent body of work, nor are they linked in any way other than centrally featuring a wedding around which different stories are told. There is only a

handful or so of Australian films made in recent times, based entirely on a wedding, hence the group is highly representative. This is in contrast with hundreds of such films in America, where feature-length wedding films continue to proliferate (Ingraham 2008b, p15). Often referred to derisively as 'chick-flicks', such films "play to women... and portray fluffy, happy worlds where life's woes are settled with a song or a martini" (Abramowitz 2009).

Wedding films tend to be labelled generically as romantic comedies, evocative of the Shakespearean love story where a boy and a girl overcome dramatic, tragic or comic obstacles and have a 'happy ever-after' resolution that usually involves a wedding. However, none of the films here fit this genre description, as each features a wedding that is pre-ordained or known *a priori* to be central to the narrative, and the usual story build-up of heterosexual romance is patently absent. Thus relying on a genre-analysis approach alone is insufficient to meet the aims of this study.

As Corrigan (2010) explains, there are several well-established approaches to writing about film, none of which are mutually exclusive. He outlines six of these which are useful here: the historical approach locates film within its historical context; 'national cinema' discusses film in terms of national or cultural identity; genre analysis identifies film according to themes, narrative structures, settings and characters; auteur critiques focus on key roles like directors, screenwriters or stars; 'formalism' emphasises filmic patterns and structures; and ideology examines the ideas, beliefs and 'world view' expressed in film (p87-101). Apart from auteur critiques, these approaches are all helpful in analysing the filmic representation of gender identities, ideals of heterosexual romanticism, and the Australian national identity.

The first of the five films produced is *Dimboola* (1979) and the last is *A Few Best Men* (2011), thus they span three decades of Australian film industry development, from the post-sexual revolution of the 1970s to the international and global cultural focus of the last decade. Some of these films reflect the Australian Government's funding support for national culture film making (Ryan 2010, O'Regan 1995, Turner 1993, and others), which influenced to varying extents the emphasis given to representing the character and the comedic style known loosely as 'ocker'. This term

is a key part of understanding the filmic representation of Australian wedding culture and thus needs further discussion.

Ocker comedy has its roots in the self-deprecation and cynicism that has permeated much of Australian outback culture, and this has been incorporated into urban comedic cultural styles exemplified by characters like Barry Humphries. As O'Regan argues, while ocker films do not form a coherent body of work, they are based on masculine cynicism about establishment figures and values, as well as "socially valorised institutions (family, marriage, the church and police)" (1995, p3). In contrast to many Hollywood genre films "where characters win against the odds and achieve their goals" (p14), many Australian films are concerned with "representative characters who are marked by their ordinariness and who are confined to their immediate social environment which they negotiate, are affected by, but themselves rarely affect" (p12). Films with ocker comedic style reflect "the vulgarity, philistinism and energy of an urban contemporary Australia" (Rohdie, in O'Regan p2) and treat everything that is not Australian as "an object of spectacle, a mere exhibit to be ridiculed" (p2). The dominance of the masculine viewpoint in ocker comedy circumscribes the role of women via its "anti-glamour discourse" and its "entrenched misogyny" (O'Regan, p2).

White weddings: industry and ideology

The contemporary white wedding is also big business. In terms of scale, the industry was said to be worth approximately \$50 billion annually in the United States (Beeck & Horn 2011 p23), and \$5 billion in Australia with \$40,000 estimated as the average cost per wedding (Irvine 2012). Weddings have become rites of passage celebrated with unprecedented levels of conspicuous consumption (Engstrom 2012 p18), and most have become separated from their religious origins with 70 per cent of ceremonies now officiated by civil celebrants (ABS 2011). The wedding industry itself is so large and robust that it is often referred to as the 'recession-proof wedding-industrial complex' (Ingraham, 2008a p2), and the structural diffusion of the industry gives it a degree of invisibility that can make it difficult to identify its role in the transmission of wedding ideology. However, it is widely accepted that if a product or service is for a wedding, its price is adjusted to reflect the 'nothing but the best' mythology that underpins what Otnes (2003) calls "the allure of the lavish wedding".

The wedding industry uses a range of media to propagate lavish wedding ideology, with films, television, magazines, and more recently, internet and social media sites publishing endlessly about the 'perfect wedding'. There has been a "virtual explosion of web pages devoted to weddings" and so pervasive is the industry's reach that "it is practically impossible to walk through any grocery store or by any checkout counter without being inundated with romance novels, magazines, and tabloids on various celebrity or soap opera weddings, or wedding how-to and fashion magazines" (Ingraham, 2008b p13). The industry also builds upon wedding-related iconography in other forms of mass culture, like toy makers and storybook publishers that target females from very early ages. The Barbie Doll phenomenon, for example, exemplifies the complex ways in which toy dolls can act as a "Puberty Manual" that shapes gender identity towards the future bride. As Driscoll explains, "Even the baby girl, prior to any recognised place as a speaking subject, has practices of play and behavioural norms thought specific to her 'stage', although the gendering of those practices seems to be largely imposed on her" (2005 p225).

The inter-relationship of weddings and fairy tales is also well established. Typically, the fairy tale male protagonist is rewarded for his bravery by being given "a bride, a kingdom, or both", but a female protagonist "waits for a daring prince to rescue her from oppression or a disenfranchised status in which she is the victim" (Engstrom, 2012 p13). Although the 'modern girl' navigates a much wider range of non or multi-gendered developmental stimuli, by the time she reaches adolescence, she has already been introduced to a wedding culture that presumes teenage females are brides-to-be and marriage is "the desirable end-point of becoming a woman" (Driscoll, 1998 p139). Thus weddings are "constructed as one of the defining moments of a girl's life in her progression toward womanhood" (Bambacas, 2002, p192), and they embody complex and powerful ideologies that shape gender identities and behaviours, particularly the "heterosexual imaginary" and related notions of heterosexual romance (Ingraham 2008). As an institution, it continues to confer legal and economic privileges, bestowing social prestige on those who uphold heterosexual values and forming a "marital hegemony" that favours the married over the un-married population (Heise, 2012). In political discourse, weddings are often taken to be a barometer of social conservatism, moral or economic reactivity, or an

indicator of other aspects of societal health or decay, thus reflecting the significance of the institution of marriage to the very fabric of society.

These ideological considerations collectively inform the broader framework for analysing the five films considered below.

FILM SYNOPSES: SETTING, PLOT AND THEMES

***Dimboola* (1979)**

Dimboola is set in a small Victorian country town in the 1970s, where hard drinking, Aussie mateship and picturesque rural landscapes form the setting for the wedding and reception of popular locals, Morrie and Maureen. Before the wedding, Maureen has an innocent 'girls night' with cake and gifts, while Morrie gets rotten-drunk at a 'bucks night' where a hired stripper is photographed in bed with Morrie. The whole town sees the photo and the wedding is cancelled, but the prospect of being left behind in Dimboola is frightening enough for Maureen to forgive the transgression and the ceremony proceeds. A cross-cultural perspective is built into the narrative via a visiting British journalist who is writing about the Australian way of life. This amplifies the polarity between the good breeding of English cultural mores and the coarse behaviour of Dimboola's residents, and also offers an anthropological view of ocker wedding and gender customs.

Through parody and ocker comedic clichés, *Dimboola* represents a range of Australian cultural values relating to gender, weddings and marriage, many of which reflect the primacy of mateship for the Aussie male. For example, the bucks night is the final male tribal gathering to mourn the passing of a member into the alien adult world of marital responsibility and domestic restriction, and the excesses of alcohol and sexual behaviour are rituals of disrespect for the monogamous values of married life. Maureen's forgiveness of Morrie is symptomatic of her low self-esteem and powerlessness in the male-dominated rural society of the time. The reception rituals descend into an alcohol-induced fiasco, that includes the unexpected arrival of embarrassing relatives, Morrie falling face-first into the wedding cake, a publicly humiliating best-man's speech, but still the couple happily depart on their honeymoon as if nothing untoward happened. This use of farce shows that the Australian readiness to mock both weddings and the institution of marriage has a long history and is still present in contemporary film.

Muriel's Wedding (1994)

Suburbia, fibro homes and small gardens are the setting for the gawky and low self-esteem Muriel, her dysfunctional family and her quest for fulfilment symbolised by white wedding dresses. Shunned by her friends and described as useless by her philandering and corrupt would-be politician father, she steals a cheque to pay for a resort holiday, and meets the full-of-life Rhonda who shows her how to have fun. They become close friends, move to Sydney and share a flat, but Rhonda is soon diagnosed with spinal cancer. Muriel continues to search for acceptance by serially impersonating a bride-to-be and being fitted for wedding dresses at different bridal wear shops. Under pressure to return the stolen money, she agrees to an arranged marriage to a South African Olympic swimming medallist who needs Australian residency. The wedding is her dream come true and she basks in the attention of those who previously rejected her. Rhonda's illness worsens, Muriel leaves the swimmer, her mother suicides, and she finds fulfilment by returning to care for Rhonda.

Muriel's Wedding met with wide critical acclaim for its thematic interweaving of comedy, the complexities of family life, and the painful path to self-discovery within a working-class Australian cultural milieu. Her father's callous patriarchal oppression creates the emotional vacuum that Muriel tries to fill through her bridal fantasies. Her father's manipulation of other people to hide his own lack of success reeks of hypocrisy and shallowness, and fuels Muriel's quest to find the meaning and self-worth that she believes is only possible with marriage. Her obsession with white wedding imagery, in isolation from the relationships that lead to weddings, represents the search for self-actualisation and social acceptance via the romanticised heterosexual imaginary. Muriel's moment of self-awakening comes when she recognises the shallowness of what she previously wanted and discovers that she will find her true self and fulfilment in caring for her disabled friend Rhonda. In this way, she frees herself from the victimhood of white wedding culture.

Thank God He Met Lizzie (1997)

The film's opening scenes portray a low baseline in relations between the sexes by dwelling on the shallowness of pickup parties and dating rituals. By chance,

merchant banker Guy meets glamorous doctor Lizzie while searching for the owner of a stray pregnant cat. It is love at first sight, and he is quickly introduced to her privileged family who immediately start planning a full traditional white wedding. Fast-track planning by Lizzie and her mum lead straight to the altar, and the rest of the film is set in the wedding reception timeframe interspersed with flashbacks of Guy's memories of his earlier girlfriend, Jenny. As the reception formalities unfold, Guy is increasingly disturbed by contrasts between his memory of the spontaneous, messy and emotional Jenny, and the controlled and controlling Lizzie who openly admits she cheated her medical exams and fabricates a letter from Guy's sponsored overseas orphan just so it could be read to wedding guests. In their honeymoon suite after the reception, Lizzie tells Guy they need to give each other space and independence, and Guy confronts the reality that his search for the perfect mate has resulted in a far less than perfect outcome.

The thematic binary driving the narrative is the contrast between emotional authenticity in relationships and mere appearances. Jenny is a natural, funny person with whom Guy had a passionate relationship until his quest for the perfect partner made him intolerant of her messy and chatty habits. On the other hand, the calculating Lizzie is appearance-conscious and intent on being married by 30. The cultural difference between Jenny's idiosyncratic working-class family, and Lizzie's conservative middle-class family heightens the contrasts and accentuates Guy's realisation that appearances can be deceptive. The wedding itself becomes an overarching symbol of artificiality and comedic clichés, with an obligatory token dark-skinned guest, a stifling wedding coordinator, and clichéd bridal music and rituals. The wedding is represented as the end of Guy's quest for true romance, and his resignation to a future in a marriage that is based more on appearances than on emotional and moral substance.

The Marriage of Figaro (2009)

Suburban domesticity is the setting where bearded bikie, talented piano-tuner and all-round good bloke Fig and his girlfriend Sheree have two children and have lived together for eight years. The issue of marriage is broached by Sheree in the feminine domain of their home and ridiculed in the masculine domain of Fig's shed, over a pool table and during constant beer drinking with his mates. After failing to meet

Sheree's standards for a proper wedding proposal, Fig's luck changes when he finds a valuable engagement ring, only for Sheree to learn that this symbol of devotion was not bought by Fig and the wedding is called off. More luck brings Fig back into favour, but the path to the altar is strewn with farcical twists and turns caused by the inability of the ocker male to behave responsibly and according to female expectations. Interwoven story layers include Sheree's initial promise to have a small wedding that grows to plans for 'the full meringue'; Fig agreeing to 'the snip' as a sign of his devotion; snobbery encountered at a jeweller's shop; and the usual buck's night excesses. Finally, despite the wedding going disastrously awry, the couple are resigned in their commitment to each other, and enjoy a 'happy ever after' resolution.

Although this film offers a comedic view of the Aussie male's relationship to marriage and the traditional wedding, one can also read several serious themes about gender relations and the complex negotiations that are associated with Australian weddings. Fig sees no need to change his live-in family lifestyle, yet he is ensnared by expectations that he "do the right thing", which means proposing in a suitable manner to allow Sheree to have the dream wedding she always wanted. The leveraging of sex in these negotiations, the neutering of Fig prior to marriage to prove his love, and the relegation of Fig to a bystander as Sheree plans a full traditional wedding, represent the ocker male as totally subject to feminine control in the wedding domain. Fig's willingness to marry is to meet Sheree's needs and reflects the widespread male view that marriage is a no-win outcome: to not marry can lose the girl but to marry will end your sex life.

A Few Best Men (2011)

A whirlwind tropical island romance between tourists David from England and Mia from Australia is followed by plans to wed as soon as they reunite in Australia. The bulk of the story is then set on a luxury mountain estate owned by Mia's wealthy family, where they are to marry against a sweeping Blue Mountains backdrop. With only one day to meet the parents before the wedding, David's boorish friends join him as groomsmen, only to create chaos in the midst of Mia's upper-middle class family. Where most filmic portrayals have 'the English' look down upon Australians, here we see the most appalling manners, behaviours, and obstacles placed in the couple's path by English 'lads', the equivalent of 'ocker mates'. The ceremony and

reception proceed, but with major disasters and embarrassment to the family, as well as moments of doubt between the couple who begin to realise that they know very little about each other. Their future together appears doomed until David is able to convince Mia that he is not like his friends and is totally devoted to her. Romantic love has survived an unimaginable test, and the couple escape the family and friends to their 'happy ever after' future.

Several interconnected themes hold the story together, assisted by outrageous slapstick and sophomoric humour. The overarching theme is the baseness of male behaviour in comparison with the idealised female on the 'most important day of her life'. The male preoccupation with drunken pre-nuptial behaviours is universal in such films, as is the sense of the groom being disconnected from wedding ceremony formalities and simply 'turning up' to play their part. Although the well-meaning David is a victim of his own friends, it is their lack of respect for his decision to grow up and get married that drives the plot complications. Class-based tensions come to the fore when Mia's father derides David as merely a backpacker wanting to marry into a Senator's family, yet we see the Senator's own shallow efforts to manipulate the wedding into a political opportunity. The blend of English lad slapstick, the Senator's pretensions, the riotous behaviour of an inebriated mother-of-the-bride, and David's hapless efforts to keep the event on track, uses farce to illustrate the complicated roles that converge in the social ritual of weddings.

ANALYSIS: THEMES AND ISSUES

Each film was produced for consumption as comedy, not as serious commentary on wedding rituals or gender relations. However, when considered as a group and analysed within the framework used here, there are clear patterns of filmic representation relating to gendered behavioural norms, heterosexual romance, and the use of farce and parody, which collectively represents traditional Australian weddings as comedic social theatre.

Gendered behavioural norms

All five films portray stereotypical and gendered behaviour that is widely regarded as the norm in Australian weddings. The grooms, for example, are represented as disconnected or reluctant bystanders in the planning of the actual wedding. This is

an accepted reality for many Australian grooms and a corollary of the cultural expectation that planning the wedding is the bride's prerogative. Male-oriented customs like buck's nights and men's sheds represent Australian masculinity as laden with excesses of alcohol, sexual infidelity, larrikinism, and cynicism towards weddings and marriage. Perhaps most importantly, the filmic representation of each wedding reflects a binary between appearances and substance that is aligned with gender. In each film, the female protagonist is represented as focused primarily on appearances and on the public spectacle in which she, as a bride, plays the central performative role. Paradoxically, while females are represented as focused on the ritualistic, they also represent the feminine and domestic domain that offers the fulfilment that comes with emotional commitment.

Instrumental heterosexual romance

As argued earlier, the five films do not fit the genre of romantic comedies because the dynamics of heterosexual romance are absent, and because each wedding is pre-ordained and represented as the means of achieving outcomes not directly related to the ideals of love and romance. The classic romantic comedy genre is one in which "would-be lovers must overcome obstacles and misunderstandings before being united in harmonious union" (Schwartz, 2002). None of the films represent such ideals and instead, each bride is shown to have instrumental motives that either dominate or strongly influence their decision to marry. Rather than portray genuine courtship behaviours and emotions, 'romance' is shown as the social scaffold or pretext that frames the wedding ritual. Thus in all cases, the filmic representation of the emotional relationship between the boy and girl is secondary to the processes of staging the wedding, thus diminishing the role of love. Maureen wants to marry because that's the main life event for a girl in a small country town, and Muriel has always wanted to be a bride yet marries for money. Mia and David's holiday romance is glossed over briefly; Sheree wants a wedding because living-in-sin lacks the social status of being married; and Lizzie is a middle-class professional looking for another middle-class professional to marry for social rather than emotional reasons. Hardly Shakespeare.

Farce and parody in Australian weddings

The one feature common to all five films is the way that farce and parody are primary narrative styles in the representation of the wedding and its associated behaviours. Each wedding is liberally coloured with textual, visual and musical clichés that portray the event as one to be laughed at, rather than respected or revered, especially by Australian males. Marriage historically exists to protect access to women and weddings have evolved as femo-centric social theatre. Both have evolved to become feminine domains into which men are admitted under conditions controlled by women. The ocker comedic filmic styles reflect the cynically anti-institutional and male-centred perspective that dominates four of the five films analysed. A possible exception is *Muriel's Wedding* whose narrative is from a female perspective. However, Muriel marries for money and to fulfil her bridal fantasies, which is a plot twist that also cynically undermines both the wedding ritual and the institution of marriage.

Without a comparative or cross-cultural framework, there are limitations to what may be inferred about the use of farce and parody in the filmic representation of Australian weddings. A feminist view may infer that Australian male cynicism towards weddings and marriage is a signifier of emotional immaturity, difficulty in making long-term commitments, or self-perceived victimhood of women's needs. Thus the use of such comedic styles allows women to laugh at men, who are laughing at aspects of a women's world without understanding women's needs. For whatever reason, it is clear that the films under study represent Australian males as emotionally ambivalent, even to the point of being comically immature or reluctant conscripts, in both weddings and marriage.

CONCLUSIONS

Films reflect their socio-cultural context. However, the reflection may be a perfect mirror, a distorted mirror, or anything in between. The five films offer reflections or representations of weddings with several features in common: they all portray stereotypical gendered behaviour with females the emotional and instrumental drivers of weddings and marriage, and males cynical towards both. Each narrative employs motifs of heterosexual romanticism, but more as pretext than reality, thus a binary tension exists between appearance and substance. Finally, farce and parody,

rather than respect or reverence, dominate the comedic styles with which Australian weddings and marriage are represented.

In terms of ideology, these films reflect the continuing centrality that the white wedding has as a rite of passage for female self-identity and social standing, despite decades of critical feminism and the challenges to conservatism that has not abated since the post 1960s sexual revolution. Across the rural and urban, middle and working-class divides, today's weddings ritualise conspicuous consumption and the pursuit of social standing. Bridal iconography of white gowns and lavish ceremonies continue to be beacons of romance and signifiers of success. Despite the ideological conundrums and inherent contradictions within the normative culture surrounding weddings, there has been little serious study of white weddings in Australia. This leaves dormant and problematic such issues as how wedding culture limits the scope of females' "self-definition outside of the single/married binary", the "ways bridal fictions stigmatise those who are not able to or do not want to get married" (Heise 2012 p4), and the financial and emotional burdens associated with this competitive and conspicuous ritual. In this context, wedding films invite interrogation, and their filmic message is more accessible when viewed through the ideological lens of 'white wedding' culture.

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