

Book Review: Trashing Wedding Magazines, One Gown at a Time

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Reading Bridal Magazines from a Critical Discursive Perspective. Ewa Glapka. Palgrave Macmillan, 2014. 245 pp. \$95.00 paperback.

I planned my three weddings without ever flipping through the pages of a bridal magazine. Sure, I knew they existed. But for a broke first-generation immigrant, with penniless parents in a faraway country, it seemed pointless to daydream of fairytales.

This means I failed to be what Ewa Glapka, author of *Reading Bridal Magazines from a Critical Discursive Perspective*, calls a “superbride”—an agentic manager of her own commodified “big day” (p. 65). Glapka, like me, hails from Eastern Europe, where weddings are relatively cheap and mostly public, held in churches and state-owned “ritual halls,” with brides and grooms in mass-produced (often rented) wedding attire entering and exiting before gawking passersby. The ensuing parties are usually small, by Western standards, but jovial and heartfelt. There are no bridesmaids in matching dresses, no color schemes, no rehearsal dinners, no wedding favors, and definitely no anxiety-ridden yearlong planning.

Having this perspective as an outsider serves Glapka well as she takes on dissecting British wedding magazines. Though she never discusses her own “comparison” reading, she chafes at the idealization and fetishization of consumption as a means of self-actualization, and notes that bridal magazines’ existence depends on convincing “readers that a modern woman getting married expresses herself through her transformation into a princess, in a process that necessitates a series of informed consumer choices” (p. 96). Glapka is also critical of wedding magazines’ heteronormative and inherently conservative construction of gender and of their blatant promotion of individualism that “does not emanate from the inside, it is a result of externally provided inspiration” (p. 101-102)

But the book goes further than critiquing the “wedding-ideological complex” (p. 55). Glapka is not exactly surprised that bridal magazines are full of gendered and traditional discourses. Rather, in a Radway-esque fashion, she is more interested in the readers’ perception and interpretation of the magazines’ content. The book contains an in-depth analysis of four interviews with recent or soon-to-be brides, out of a total of 11 interviews Glapka conducted. What she discovers in these conversations is that “exposing the trashiness and superficiality of the world recreated on the pages of the magazine gave the women subversive pleasure” (p. 188), but it did not make them rethink their worldview.

To elicit interviewees’ reactions without explicitly asking their thoughts on gender, Glapka relies on prompts: a magazine editor’s letter about the importance of personalizing one’s wedding; a discussion about the practice of “trashing” wedding gowns; an ad for high-heel-walking courses in a blurb highlighting women’s insecurities about walking in heels; and the use of beauty “countdowns” encouraging brides to invest time and effort into looking their best when they walk down the aisle. Although the interviewed readers claim to ignore

or resist the magazines' discourse of femininity, Glapka perceives that they simultaneously embrace a lot of its practices, such as expressing insecurities about their bodies and positioning themselves as the objects of the male gaze. Her conclusion is that "women remain anchored in the dominant gender paradigm in spite of their insubordination to its underlying discourse" (p. 198).

A shortcoming of the book is that, like many other critical/cultural scholars, Glapka sees magazines only as media texts rather than as complex cultural artifacts at the center of their reader communities. She argues that bridal magazines manipulate readers into feeling a part of "a community of shared knowledge" (p. 77) through practices such as "simulated intimacy" (p. 108) and "synthetic personalization" (p. 109). But even though magazines' reader interaction is guided by pragmatic interests, Glapka's theoretical choices fail to fully explain or predict social realities. A cursory perusal of social media platforms suggests wedding magazines do, in fact, have reader communities that are anything but illusory. For example, on Facebook, Malaysia's *Shaadi Wedding* magazine has 2.7 million followers, the British *Brides* magazine has 2.6 million followers, and the Australian *Modern Wedding* magazine has 1.5 million followers.

Another shortcoming of the book is that although in the first half Glapka claims her determination to give magazine readers a voice, she ends on a mostly judgmental note by critiquing interviewees' allegedly unprogressive thoughts. A bride who proposed to her fiancé and elected to get married in a green (her favorite color) dress is viewed as choosing to be masculine and thus unable to "index her subjectivity other than along the lines of dichotomous gender" (p. 168). A remark by one interviewee that women seem more interested in weddings is categorized as "essentializing"—even though nobody is claiming that such interest is inborn and even though wedding magazines' audiences are, without a doubt, predominantly female. In the context of this critique, it is unclear why Glapka herself appears to "essentialize" women by not seeking to interview any grooms.

The book seems to target critical/cultural scholars and students in fields such as linguistics, English, and women and gender studies. Although its use in magazine courses and magazine scholarship is likely minimal, some chapters could inform future research on the digital presence of bridal magazines or complement ethics discussions in journalism courses, on topics such as the blurring lines between editorial and advertising content.