Consuming the Romantic Utopia in Africa Through Reality Television: Our Perfect Wedding

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PUBLISHED ONLINE
Volume 44 (3) December 2025
Pages 91-102
Submitted November 2024
Accepted November 2025

DOI
10.36615/nwvp4140

ISSN
Online 2957-7950
Print 0259-0069

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Abstract

Reality television has challenged our understanding of modern life since its rapid rise in the early 2000s. Reality wedding shows, in particular, claim to portray the authentic expression of love shared by the participants. Research within this genre of reality television has mainly focused on audience reception as well as engagement with the content. However, the steady proliferation of reality wedding shows in Africa has gone largely uncritically celebrated as a sign of romantic love in the continent. Through a multimodal critical discourse analysis of episodes from the South African, Kenyan and Nigerian wedding show *Our Perfect Wedding*, we argue that the production choices of wedding reality shows are not value free but represent a profit logic co-opting of love by consumerist capitalism in order to perpetuate its existence even within non-Western contexts. We borrow from the concepts of conspicuous consumption and utopia to argue that audiences of reality television wedding shows in Africa are invited to consume displays of opulent consumption under the guise of celebrating utopian love.

Keywords

Consumption, leisure class, love, multimodal critical discourse analysis, wedding reality TV

INTRODUCTION

Weddings have undoubtedly entered the sphere of popular culture (Mupotsa, 2014). The fact that wedding ceremonies are a multi-billion-dollar industry the world over, offers a good opportunity for leveraging weddings as reality television content within a modern capitalist society. The popularity of wedding reality television (WRTV) shows such as *Say Yes to the Dress* and *Married at First Sight* (*New York Times*, 2015) affirms this argument. In South Africa alone, at the time of writing, three popular locally produced reality television shows on weddings were airing simultaneously on different television channels, namely *Traditional Wedding, Wedding Insider* and *Our Perfect Wedding* (OPW). The latter, which airs on Sunday evenings with a viewership exceeding 1.4 million, is the fourth most-watched television programme on MultiChoice's DSTV. This makes it the ideal focus of this article. This show's success has led to localised adaptations in Kenya and Nigeria, thus making OPW a rich site for comparative analysis across the continent. The most notable feature across these WRTV shows is the conspicuous display of consumerism. The significance of this stems from the fact that weddings in Africa have historically been ceremonies that placed great emphasis on cultural values as opposed to consumerism (Mbunyuza-Memani, 2018). These ceremonies typically involved the families exchanging gifts through a colourful festive celebration

of traditional music and dance. The ceremonies mainly focused on the festive as well as jovial mood of the two families coming together (Mupotsa, 2014). At this stage, the bridewealth would have been exchanged in the form of cattle or other livestock. The ceremony would take place in the homes of the bride and groom, consisting of simple decorations and traditional attire. The introduction of Western culture in the African context transformed traditional weddings to include "white weddings". Indeed, the notion of white weddings comes from the fact that the wedding dress is a white colour, symbolising Western notions of Christian purity (Ingraham, 2008). The presence of white weddings in South Africa is linked to colonialism and the rise in "church weddings" from the late 1800s onwards. By the 1930s, white weddings had become even more commonplace (Erlank, 2014). The inclusion of these white weddings created cost implications that were historically foreign. Therefore, it has become a norm to see on television the depiction of both white weddings and, on a small scale, traditional African weddings.

This article argues that the production practices of WRTV are not neutral or value free. Instead, they are embedded within a media economy that commodifies intimacy and romance, aligning the planning and performance of weddings with broader capitalist logics (Dunak, 2013; Ingraham, 2008). While previous studies have pointed to the commercialisation of weddings and romance in global contexts (Dubrofsky & Hardy, 2008; Vertoont, 2017), we contend that more focused analysis is needed in the African context, where the spectacularisation of consumption intersects with local cultural expectations and economic aspirations (Deery, 2015; Hill, 2020).

In particular, the hybridisation of traditional African and Western wedding aesthetics in OPW raises important questions about class, taste and cultural performance in emerging African middle classes. This article explores how reality television serves as a vehicle through which capitalism co-opts love, reproducing consumer desires and social aspirations. We adopt multimodal critical discourse analysis (MCDA) to investigate these dynamics and to make sense of how weddings are both performed and judged on screen. In doing so, we critically examine the formatting of WRTV as a genre, paying close attention to its narrative structures and visual strategies that align with romance literature and romantic film conventions.

We focus specifically on OPW as it appears in three African countries: South Africa, Kenya and Nigeria. While OPW began as a South African production aired on Mzansi Magic (a Multichoice-owned channel), its franchising to other African countries, including Zambia, Uganda, Kenya and Nigeria, underscores the regional spread of consumerist wedding ideals and the format's adaptability to diverse cultural contexts. Yet, the selection of these three countries is not only based on availability but also reflects differing socio-economic and cultural positions within the continent. We aim to offer a comparative lens on how love, class and consumption are mediated and visualised in these different national contexts.

To this end, the article asks the following research questions:

Q1: How does capitalism co-opt love through reality television as depicted on *Our Perfect Wedding*?

Q2: What are the links between utopia, mass self-communication and consumption on reality television as depicted on *Our Perfect Wedding*?

THE CONSPICUOUS KIND OF LOVE

Contemporary society seems to have produced an often uninterrogated association between love and spending. For instance, February, dubbed the month of love, offers a key example of conspicuous commercial gift-giving rituals in the form of roses, chocolates, jewellery and the like, which are sold as symbols of romance (Zayas et al., 2017). The concept of conspicuous consumption captures this interplay.

The concept of conspicuous consumption was coined by Thorstein Veblen (1899) in his seminal work, *The theory of the leisure class*. Veblen (1899) offers a critique of the nineteenth-century American consumer society. He looks at the extent to which the need for personal recognition, which to him translated to honour, rested on public displays of material acquisition. The book was written amid precarious economic conditions and social upheavals in the United States of America as a result of rapid industrialisation that saw the growth of industries such as coal mining and steel production. This resulted in the creation of gargantuan fortunes for the owners who founded these industries (Posel & Van Wyk, 2019:5).

Veblen (1899) particularly focused on the class distinctions that were evident during this time. The super-rich founded their own elite schools and private clubs, lived in mansions decorated with rare artworks and had well-dressed servants in their homes (Posel & Van Wyk, 2019:5). The phrase "conspicuous consumption" was coined to explain the use of certain goods by the wealthy to distinguish them from the poor, by drawing attention to their wealth and thereby elevating their social status. Conspicuous consumption – also known as the "Veblen effect" – referred to the purchase of expensive "luxurious" goods that had equivalent functional capabilities when compared to their less costly option (Charoenrook & Thakor, 2008). A conspicuous item is thus an item that is consumed or owned primarily for its ability to bestow a high social status on an individual (Charoenrook & Thakor, 2008).

Such goods served a social signalling purpose: not merely to demonstrate wealth, but to affirm social belonging and elevate one's position relative to others. Over time, this logic has expanded beyond wealth to encompass performances of gender, partner selection and even notions of personal freedom (Banerjee & Duflo, 2007; Moav & Neeman, 2010; Smit, 2016). Today, even people with limited means may engage in conspicuous consumption, revealing its broader role in shaping identity and desire within capitalist society.

Importantly, love has not escaped this commodification. Wang (2014) notes that in modern relationships, conspicuous consumption is often used to signal romantic commitment. Eva Illouz (1997) identifies several strategies through which capitalist culture fused romance with consumption during the twentieth century. Among these strategies was the rise of advertising photography in the 1930s, which embedded romantic love into the realism of mass culture (Dunak, 2013). The photographic close-up became a visual device that enhanced emotional identification with characters, narrowing the distance between subject and audience (Boden, 2024). Simultaneously, the use of famous movie star couples in advertisements helped elevate romantic love to a glamorous ideal, associating it with status and aspiration (Ingraham, 2008). These representations often circulated through a small but influential set of highly respected "icons" that produced widely recognised romantic stereotypes, which permeated people's imaginations and expectations (Illouz, 1997).

According to Illouz (1997:2), "in the modern capitalist world, romantic love has become an intimate, indispensable part of the democratic ideal of affluence that has accompanied the emergence of the mass market, thereby offering a collective utopia cutting across and transcending social divisions". Love has not merely been shaped by capitalism; it has been actively restructured by it. Commodities have taken on emotional significance and are central to romantic experiences. Illouz (1997:37) explains that the association of romance and consumption relies on a two-level romanticisation of commodities. The first level is candid consumption, where individuals consume products directly associated with romance (Illouz, 1997). The second level is oblique consumption, where couples engage in shared experiences such as leisure and entertainment that are structured around consumption (Illouz, 1997). Wedding ceremonies, especially in Western societies, exemplify this dual commodification of love.

THE WEDDING DAY

While weddings are widely viewed as beautiful celebrations of love, they have also become stages for capitalist spectacles. The idea of big fat South African weddings, for example, captures this interest in mediated representations of elaborate weddings that reflect conspicuous consumption (Mupotsa, 2014). Similarly, Smit (2016:63) argues that the wedding has become a "site for the demonstration of taste, social mobility, and success through conspicuous consumption for black middle-class South Africans". Thus, social-class positioning and weddings have become linked.

The consequence of this link inherent in the association of values of performance is that some may decide to put off wedding ceremonies or never even get married, due to being financially unstable. This trend has also been observed by Pauli (2011:153), who notes that wedding ceremonies that have become, in part, costly celebrations of class distinction, are making it difficult for most people in Africa to get married, resulting in a drastic decline in wedding rates. A similar observation has been made by Masquelier (2005) regarding young men of Dogondoutchi, a rural town of Niger, who tend to delay marriage due to

the financial implications of what can be considered predominantly extravagant ceremonies. While the reasons for the decline in marriages are multiple and complex, it appears that finances play a significantly unique role in enabling or inhibiting marriage. To this end, Hunter (2010:695) decries African marriage as being a middle-class institution in many respects.

Reality television shows offer a platform necessary for the display and performance of such class distinctions. Mupotsa (2014), in reading the black consumer in contemporary South Africa, argues that the mediation of weddings is a site of liminality that offers those who are getting married the "opportunity to be on stage and perform an aspired self". Since audiences are invited to watch such displays, there is then a simultaneous consumption that takes place. The couple displays acts of consumption to perform love, while the audiences consume these displays through spectatorship. Therefore, the site of WRTV offers an opportunity to promote both the displays and consumption of the "marketised utopia" (Ingraham, 2008).

SHOWING REALITY? THE FORMAT AND APPEAL OF WEDDING REALITY TELEVISION

In its simplest form, WRTV refers to reality television shows that are focused on real-life weddings. The world over, WRTV has gained popularity among television viewers. In South Africa, in 2021 there were three locally produced WRTV shows simultaneously airing on different channels (Mzansi Magic, Showmax and Moja Love). Nigeria has four wedding/love-related television shows, while Kenya currently has two. This suggests a growing popularity of these shows in Africa. Although reasons for people's media consumption patterns are varied and too many to consider in this article, Hefner (2015) suggests two useful possibilities. Firstly, the motivations of some audiences are linked to their beliefs about romance and love. As such, there is an element of identification with the characters in WRTV. The second motivation is entertainment, which means that audiences find some affective fulfilment in watching WRTV (Hefner, 2015).

The entertainment element that is attached to WRTV viewership conjures up emotions of "enrapturement" by portraying a fairy tale with a perfect ending (Giorgio in Hefner, 2015). The idea of a fairy tale is also captured by other scholars who present the wedding ceremony as a site of perfection and celebration (Mupotsa, 2014; Sgroi, 2006). An interesting perspective on the consumption of WRTV is brought forth by Engstrom and Baldrige (2006) who argue that WRTV, which portrays the idea of a perfect wedding, may reinforce ideals of femininity and consumerism for female audiences. A view similar to this is advanced by Brown (1994) who claims that weddings serve capitalism by helping create an industry based on women's fantasies of status and security built around marriage, symbolised in the wedding as a consumption practice. With this being the case, "weddings provide ample room to manufacture consumer desires" (Walsh, 2005). Given the nature of weddings, WRTV comes into fertile ground within the sphere of wedding imaginary (Sgroi, 2006).

According to Sgroi (2006), reality television naturalises consumption practices that are linked to the idea of the wedding imaginary. For Sgroi (2006), a show such as *Trista and Ryan's Wedding* places a lot of emphasis and glorification on consumption and shopping, to an extent that the wedding as an event idealises consumption. Sgroi (2006) discusses how the narrative of reality shows influences the structure of the shots and the episodes of each programme. Therefore, the meaning of these shows could be better understood by examining their underlying narrative.

While a narrative is, in essence, a story holistically told, it also includes how the story is communicated to an audience (Sgroi , 2006). Given the supposed reality of reality television, it therefore follows that such programmes have embedded in them the potential to influence their audiences through its underlying narratives (Deery, 2016).

CONSPICUOUS CONSUMPTION AND CULTURAL EXPRESSIONS

Ouellette and Hay (2008) observe that reality television has increasingly become the platform for reinforcing the ideals of capitalism around consumption and social status. In being exposed to reality shows such as OPW, the audience may experience the intersection of love expressed as a romantic utopia through consumption. This idea is espoused by Illouz (1997), who argues that romantic relationships are

commodified through structures of capitalism and hidden behind the banner of a consumer culture. In this sense, the expression of love is linked to notions of excess and consumption.

Veblen's (1899) theory of conspicuous consumption is central to understanding the dynamics at play in OPW. Weddings on the show are framed as opportunities for couples to engage in public displays of wealth, using material goods to signal social status and success. However, the ways in which conspicuous consumption is expressed vary across cultural contexts. In South Africa, Kenya and Nigeria, weddings reflect not only global capitalist ideals but also local cultural traditions, creating hybrid forms of consumption that blend tradition with modern consumerism (Featherstone, 1991).

In all three countries mentioned above, OPW illustrates how love is commodified through the spectacle of weddings. The show presents weddings as public performances where material wealth and social status are central to the narrative. However, the commodification of love takes on different forms in each cultural context. In South Africa, weddings predominantly reflect the country's socio-economic inequalities, where weddings become symbolic of upward mobility and social status (Smit, 2016). As a result, significant emphasis in planning a wedding is placed on the extravagance of the event, from designer gowns to luxury venues, framing love as something that can be achieved through consumption (Illouz, 1997).

While Nigeria is known for elaborate weddings with long guest lists, the WRTV show portrays more of this aspect through packaging the content in a much more flamboyant and excess-emphasising manner in line with the country's reputation for public celebrations (Nnagbo, 2020). Nigerian weddings are known for being affairs of opulence. As such, the framing of love in this instance, as in South Africa, is a public performance of wealth, success and upward mobility, symbolised through Veblen's notion of conspicuous consumption. Essentially, in this context, love becomes measurable through grandiose gestures of conspicuous consumption: the garments, the venue, the décor, the procession, the rings, and just about anything that evidences wealth. As such, a suggestive link between love and material abundance is created.

Kenyan weddings are also known for splendour (Olanga et al., 2015). However, they normally present a more hybrid approach, blending modern consumerism and traditional practices without an overemphasis on either of the ceremonies and being equally conspicuous. Weddings often feature elements of local customs, such as traditional attire and rituals, alongside Western symbols of luxury while celebrating the notion of luxury in the African context (Iqani & Dosekun, 2019; Iqani, 2023). This creates a hybrid form of commodification, where both love and tradition are reimagined as consumable media content. Ewen (1988) highlights how capitalism often rebrands cultural traditions into products that can be displayed and consumed, a dynamic that is evident in Kenyan weddings.

METHODOLOGY

To effectively explore the underlying consumerist representations on OPW, the study adapted a MCDA toolkit as advanced by Machin and Mayir (2012). MCDA not only results in a better understanding of media texts (Coskun, 2015), but also has been shown to be particularly productive for analysis of reality television (Monson et al., 2016; Mbunyuza-Memani, 2018). This is because MCDA attempts to analyse how both the linguistic and the visual choices in a given text may convey a particular ideological meaning to audiences (O'Halloran, 2004; Van Leeuwen & Jewitt, 2008). In other words, there are taken-for-granted underlying meanings in any given text that are denaturalised through MCDA (Coskun, 2015). The single focus on language that characterises critical discourse analysis is thus counterbalanced by incorporating the visual semiotic choices in communicative texts.

The toolkit by Machin and Mayir (2012) that the study adopted consists of focusing on the visual choices in the placing of objects and depiction of settings as well as how participants are represented both visually and linguistically. This left three elements to focus on in the analysis of a text: objects, settings and participants. The study then distilled the elements into fine-grained characteristics to create a coding scheme for the data. Objects and settings were grouped into seven visual choices and the representations of participants into 10 linguistic choices as well as seven visual choices.

The study sampled one typical episode from each of the recent seasons of OPW South Africa, Kenya and Nigeria as this has been shown to be a good approach for making qualitative sense out of a large set of reality television data (Smit & Monson, 2016). South Africa, Kenya and Nigeria form the sampled countries as this gives us a spread of the African continent geographically, allowing for a glimpse at the multifaceted approach to weddings across the African continent. Therefore, the countries possibly give us a spread of west, east and southern African cultural permutations of the symbolic manifestations of weddings. Episode one from Season 14 of OPW South Africa, episode one from Season 16 of OPW Kenya and episode four of Season 2 of OPW Nigeria were purposively sampled. These three episodes featured participants who were characteristically chosen for many of the OPW episodes: middle-class heterosexual couples. This choice was made in order to give a thick descriptive account within this context. The show does, however, feature participants that are both interracial and self-identifying with the LGBTQI+ community. These nuances deserve specific attention in which to explore the discourses around intersectionality that are beyond the scope of this article. These were also the most recent, publicly available seasons and episodes from the three countries chosen.

The three different episodes were watched several times while making descriptive notes through the toolkit above. This was done within the context of having a sense of the seasons of OPW thus far. The show, like many other reality shows, is very formulaic, consisting of introducing the couple, following them while they prepare for their wedding and finally culminating in the wedding day. Therefore, the episodes were separated into three broad sequences for the purposes of analysis.

The first scene opens with the host of the show in a medium shot (except OPW Nigeria, where it is just narration and no host is shown), greeting the viewers and giving them an idea of who the couple is for the episode they are about see. Scene two opens with the host inviting the viewers to come along as she follows the couple for the day as they secure the items on their wish list. The viewer, by implication, gets to join in this behind-the-scenes moment of the wedding as the couple finalises their preparations for the "big day". The third and final act is the day of the wedding itself. Typically, on OPW, this would consist of two ceremonies: the white wedding followed by a traditional African wedding ceremony depending on the country franchise. The couple would change from Western attire to their chosen traditional garb based on their chosen ethnic identification. Finally, the camera shows very brief snippets of the traditional wedding before the couple stands in front of the host to declare "Yes this was our perfect wedding".

FINDINGS, ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis of the selected OPW episodes from South Africa, Kenya and Nigeria reveals that the show operates as a spectacle of commodified romantic utopia. Across the three country editions, the representation of weddings consistently reinforces the values of conspicuous consumption, capitalist ideology and middle-class aspiration. Drawing from Veblen's (1899) concept of conspicuous consumption and Marxist critiques of commodification, we argue that love is not only performed but also purchased, displayed and consumed within the show. In this context, romantic love is presented not as an emotional or spiritual bond but as a consumable ideal, realised through opulence and material display.

Veblen's theory of the leisure class helps explain how wedding ceremonies become stages for social distinction. The symbolic use of luxury goods, such as designer dresses, elaborate cakes, high-end décor and upscale venues, serves to signal the social status of the couples, aligning their identity with the aspirations of the middle class. As Veblen (1899) notes, the acquisition and public display of non-essential goods is central to achieving honour and prestige. In OPW, the public spectacle of the wedding functions similarly: the more luxurious the celebration, the more successfully love is validated and social standing affirmed. The repeated framing of weddings through close-ups of commodities and through celebrity hosts further accentuates the commodification of the scene.

From a Marxist perspective, the show contributes to the reification of social relationships through commodity fetishism. Love becomes abstracted from the people involved and instead becomes synonymous with objects (Illouz, 1997). The wedding becomes a site for labour and production of fantasy, where the couple, vendors, producers and audiences are all engaged in producing and consuming

the spectacle of love. This aligns with Marx's assertion that in capitalist societies, social relationships between people assume the form of relations between things (Marx, 1867). As such, love is less about the interpersonal journey between the couple and more about the acquisition of the visual and material symbols of a "perfect" wedding. We discuss this position by segmenting the findings into three acts of the show: Act One; Act Two; and Act Three.

ACT ONE: INTRODUCTION OF THE COUPLE AND THE COMMODIFICATION OF ROMANCE

The scene opens with the host, Khaya Dladla, for OPW South Africa and Angi Mlay in OPW Kenya introducing themselves to the viewers. As they do so, the camera moves from a medium to a close shot of the host. In OPW Nigeria, there is only a voice over of the host but no visuals. This style between close and medium shots is maintained, while the host presents an open posture, looking directly into the camera. The setting is outside, while the host describes the city they are in to meet the participants for the episode. There is subtle lively music as they explain how the couple, Sibongile, the bride, and Raymond, the groom in OPW South Africa, have overcome great obstacles through love that will culminate in the wedding the viewers are about to witness. This opening is similar for Steve and Zeeh in OPW Kenya, as well as for Collins and Tracy in OPW Nigeria. From the onset, the presentation of the setting and the participants suggests a relaxed, personal and inviting atmosphere for the viewer. The audience is invited to enter into a close, albeit transient, relationship with the participants they are about to meet.

Before the couples appear on screen for the first time, the audience has a brief montage of what is about to come in the episode from key moments in each scene. The audience is then introduced to the couples, who are interviewed separately in different indoor locations in OPW Kenya. The setting is thus uncluttered as the focus is now on the couple and the intimate information that they are about to provide to the viewers about their love story. Tracy sums up her love story with Collins in the following manner on OPW Nigeria: "The journey has been smooth, crazy, good and enjoyable". The slight side angle of the camera as it moves between medium and close shots suggests a sense that the audience is equal with the couple and should assume oneness with them.

The audience is also provided with cutaways to the friends of the couple who confirm different parts of the couple's story and give their impressions about the couple through talking heads. This serves both a function of specification and personalisation of the couple's story by choosing to provide these testimonials from the couples' mutual friends. The audience is invited to consume the romantic recollections of all the couples' love experiences that are about to be celebrated through the wedding. Here, the show also links the couples' love stories with the preparations for the wedding (Ingraham, 2008). However, the couple provides the audience with a retrospective account of the love journey without the producers asking them about what they expect of future married life. By separating the wedding from marriage, the show is able to allow the audience to fully immerse themselves in the consumption of romance (Boden, 2003), without entering in the specific risks and difficulties associated with married life. In this manner, wedding industries, such as reality dating media, play into the narrative that marriage life is divorced from the wedding itself (Illouz, 1997).

The introductory act closes with the couples announcing that their wish list consists of décor, the cake and wedding attire, thus setting the viewer up in anticipation for scene two where the camera follows the couple as they "acquire" these three items. This marks a break in the consumption of romantic emotion, shifting focus to the commodities and consumption habits of the couple that the audience is about to consume. The show clearly focuses on the symbols that make up white modern weddings (Boden, 2024) to punctuate its selling point.

The use of personalisation in Act One also points to both the shared middle-class identity of the couples with the audience as well as their simultaneous uniqueness through the choice of how their narrative is presented (Engstrom & Baldrige, 2006). The middle-class identity of the couple provides them access to the affordances of the opulent white wedding that follows in the show, while their narrated love story presumably humanises them so that they are relatable to the audience. Ultimately, as the stars of the show, their stardom finds culmination in their performance of middle-class identity through the editing choices in the show (Deery, 2015).

ACT TWO: THE CONSTRUCTION OF UTOPIA THROUGH CONSUMPTION

From here on, the camera shows the couple engaged in action as they attempt to pull off the perfect wedding. The act opens with the host giving viewers an introduction of what is about to happen and that this is the day before the wedding. This is also emphasised with iconography (Illouz, 1997) on the bottom of the screen "one day before the wedding" or "two days to go" in the case of OPW Kenya. The host enters the room where the first item on the couples' wish list is about to be discussed with the expert. This is the cake tasting for OPW SA and deciding on décor in OPW Kenya. After pleasantries are exchanged, the host asks about the choice and thinking behind the design. This all helps to create a particular ambience as the moment is enjoyed by both viewers and participants alike. The camera gives us close-ups during these moments while upbeat music is playing softly in the background. Individualisation is emphasised throughout this process and the costs to achieve this beauty are not mentioned (Machin & Mayir, 2012). Again, a slight side angle is used when the camera shows the couple, except where close shots are used. The moment closes off with the host complimenting the expert on having accomplished "wonderful work". The act closes with the host inviting the viewers to come along to the next destination on the wish list with an exuberant "let's go". As they walk out, a checklist is shown on the side of the screen and the item the couple has just completed is ticked off. This primes the audience and helps them to remember that there are more items on the wish list that have yet to be completed, creating anticipation (Deery, 2015). The camera cuts away to the next part of the item on the wish list that the couple needs to check off.

Next, the camera focuses the couple and the host walking into the final location to meet the expert who will be helping them. The host asks the expert what brief was given to her by the couple, followed by an explanation of the decoration theme. In OPW Nigeria, we are told the names of the events planner, cake designer and the decorator. The audience thus gets to hear from them through interviews about their thought processes for the event. The cake designer even comments "I had sleepless nights" about preparing the cake. The camera provides the audience with close-up shots as the explanation by the expert is given. Lastly, the host asks if the couple is happy. Once more, the costs are suppressed in this segment of the scene. The host closes the moment off by assuring the viewers that all items in the wish list are complete and all is ready for the wedding. Thus, throughout the entire Act Two, the couple is depicted as agentic actors (Machin & Mayir, 2012) who are engaged in the process of working to create their own perfection through procuring the items they set out to secure for the wedding. In other words, the act of consumption is directly linked to the couple working to create their own beautiful celebration of love through acts of commodification (Boden, 2024).

The use of visual settings and object choices in the show are ideologically loaded (Machin & Mayir, 2012). The repeated emphasis on aesthetic value and emotional gratification, without any mention of cost, reflects a disarticulation of economic reality from consumption. This aesthetic abstraction is a form of what Marx called commodity fetishism: the elevation of goods to sacred status, divorced from the labour and value systems that produce them (Kopytoff, 1986).

Illouz's (1997) concept of romantic utopia is pertinent here. The material objects (cake, attire, décor) are not merely practical requirements; they are imbued with emotional meaning and symbolic power through performance of ritualised dialogues (Ingraham, 2008). These are what Illouz (1997) terms "emotional commodities" that are objects that have value not in their utility, but in their capacity to signify and evoke sentiments of romance. This is purely because there is a subtle assumption that the wedding ceremony cannot be complete without these icons, which serve the role of utopia. According to Illouz (1997:48):

> Utopia uses powerful emotional symbols, metaphors, and stories that infuse both the group and the individual imagination; it has binding power in that it orients individual and collective action. But for utopian symbols to have binding power, they must rest on a configuration of social relations that makes them relevant to the social order.

Veblen's theory (1899) also offers a useful lens. The procurement of lavish wedding items demonstrates the performative nature of class. The couple, as members of the black middle class, engages in what

Veblen termed "pecuniary emulation", adopting the consumption patterns of the leisure class to signal their social standing. In doing so, they conform to the aspirational ideals of a post-apartheid society that links freedom with economic participation and consumption (Smit, 2016).

ACT THREE: THE WEDDING DAY AND THE FINAL PERFORMANCE OF ROMANTIC UTOPIA

The third act opens with lively music and the establishing shots of the exterior of the wedding venue and a reminder on the left of the screen that this is the wedding day. The host greets the viewers and confirms that they are indeed at the wedding venue. This is overlaid with long frames of the wedding venue entrance clearly visible. The host first visits the bride-to-be. The bride is alone with the stylist, and explains the inspiration behind the wedding dress she chose. This is overlaid with close-up shots of the dress and shoes that are hung ceremoniously next to the bride-to-be. These visuals play a crucial role in producing what Deery (2015) calls "consumption spectacle".

In contrast, the host then visits the groom and his groomsmen who are already dressed and ready for the ceremony. Here, the groomsmen and the groom are presented as a group and not individualised because their function is currently to show us the attire as it relates to the importance of the day itself. Both close and medium angles are used with a slight side angle to create closeness and intimacy with the viewer while foregrounding the attire itself.

The audience is then shown the bridal party entering the venue for the matrimonial ceremony, shot using bright lighting, an emphasis on the setting through medium shots and cutaways as well as the creation of closeness with the use of close shots. The audience is given a snapshot of the ceremony but from an intimate vantage point. At the conclusion of the ceremony, the camera cuts to the host facing the audience and declaring that the couple is now officially married. The viewers then experience the transition to the reception hall with its décor. Since the audience has been primed with a bit of the décor during Act Two, this is an opportunity for the audience to see it first and to evaluate its standards of perfection. The décor, mainly the table settings and the draping, in all the episodes gives a sense of glamour and splendour.

In the third and final scene of the episodes, the emphasis on objects and settings that are related to the wedding become more pronounced (Machin & Mayir, 2012). Conspicuous consumption here is undoubtedly evident (Veblen, 1899). The conspicuous display of extravagance amid the expression of love suggests the "marketising" of romantic love (Ingraham, 2008). This marketisation links to the idea of capitalism that presents a romantic utopia that is associated with consumption (Illouz, 1997). The emphasis on consumption and, by extension, opulence is made possible through the settings within the wedding venue as well as the chosen camera angles. The emphasis on close-ups creates a sense of closeness and familiarity for the audience. This is important for encouraging the audience to both consume the content and aspire to realise in their own lives the consumption spectacle of the romantic utopia that the couple is enacting (Dunak, 2013).

Consequently, another aspect of conspicuous consumption that is evident in the episodes is leisure activity (Veblen, 1899) itself. This is what is known as oblique consumption, which involves the couple engaging in the consumption of leisure (Illouz, 1997). The ability to waste time, not necessarily habitual idleness, but to engage in conspicuous leisure through a wedding banquet with guests is synonymous with the idea of leisure. While such matrimonial gatherings seek to celebrate love, "big fat weddings" also do the work of performing the expression of social status, in this case, the black middle class (Mupotsa, 2014). As Smit (2016) argues, the wedding ceremony in its opulence also provides the couple with the opportunity to enact their sense of freedom in post-apartheid South Africa. The audience is then shown the wedding party entering the reception hall with song and dance. This gives a sense of movement and being engaged in activity. The ability to change attire for the sake of changing is not missed on the audience; as the host never questions this, it is assumed to be a normal part of the process. The focus on the wedding seems to be more on the Western wedding than on the traditional wedding. This is evident in the fact that the couple chose to wear their traditional attire and danced back into the hall, a scene that was briefly featured in the OPW South Africa episode. It must be clarified that the change

from Western attire to traditional clothes is indeed not a traditional wedding in the true sense, but just a change of clothes to go back into the white wedding reception with different attire. This means that there is a deliberate choice to favour the depiction of white weddings rather than traditional weddings. White weddings typically have more consumerist iconography (Illouz, 1997), and this choice makes more sense from a particularisation point. For instance, the Nguni traditional wedding (called Umembeso) is very simple in that blankets and small gifts are exchanged by the two families in the yard, while accompanied by singing and traditional dance (Mupotsa, 2014). There is therefore no decoration, lavish venue and costly attire that are typical in a white wedding.

Episode four in Season 2 of OPW Nigeria also features a traditional wedding between Collins and Tracy. This comes before the white wedding and is only given four minutes of screen time, including the bride's preparation. The ceremony happens at Collins' house with his family welcoming Tracy. There is no wish list on details about the choice of attire provided in this short segment. In this way, the traditional wedding is made less prominent to the audience. Mbunyuza-Memani (2018:26) argues that this "displaces cultural diversity and stays within the strategy of reproducing sameness by dominantly focusing on white weddings". This article, therefore, extends this argument by proposing that this may reproduce homogeneity in the perception of Western romantic love by associating it with consumption-laden Western ideals of capitalism. As such, OPW demonstrates the notion of the romantic utopia in which love is co-opted by capitalism (Ingraham, 2008).

The last moments of the white wedding reception in the reception hall shows everyone dancing while there is music in the background. The communal nature of these activities is emphasised, while the angles used do not give the audience an intimate sense of the action but an impersonal and necessary part of enjoying perfection in a grand finale section. The scene closes off with the newlyweds standing, or sitting in the case of OPW Nigeria, facing the host as she asks how they evaluate the entire experience. The couples then face the camera for the first time to address the viewers and confirm that this "was our perfect wedding".

This article argues that OPW franchises in Africa have become part of the wedding industry that makes money from promoting consumerist ideals of weddings depicting the rising middle class (Smit, 2016). The entertainment element that is attached to WRTV viewership conjures up emotions of "enrapturement" by portraying a fairy tale with a perfect ending (Giorgio in Hefner, 2015). The idea of a fairy tale is also captured by other scholars who present the wedding ceremony as a site of perfection and celebration (Mupotsa, 2014; Sgroi, 2006). The show makes financial gain from a larger viewership through advertising revenue, while promoting utopian ideals of weddings and focusing deliberately on its consumption choices of the couples on the show (Illouz, 1997).

CROSS-CULTURAL COMPARISONS AND BROADER IMPLICATIONS

Although the OPW format of the three sampled episodes is consistent across three countries, the representation of weddings varies slightly. In South Africa, the wedding is positioned against a backdrop of socio-economic inequality, with extravagance used as a tool for asserting upward mobility. In Kenya, the wedding incorporates both modern and traditional elements but still conforms to Western aesthetic norms. The Nigerian episodes are the most flamboyant, emphasising spectacle and scale in ways that accentuate wealth.

What binds all three franchises is a deep-seated alignment with capitalist ideals. The cultural specificity of African weddings is underplayed in favour of a homogenised, consumption-driven narrative. This reveals the transnational nature of romantic capitalism, where wedding ceremonies become global commodities, mediated through television and anchored in visual spectacle.

Ultimately, the sampled episodes of OPW serve as a microcosm of capitalist ideology in African settings that does not merely reflect wedding culture, but shapes and produces it for the audience. Through the lens of MCDA, and drawing on Veblen and Marx, the article argues that the show enacts a discursive regime in which love is equated with consumption, emotion is commodified and cultural specificity is subordinated to capitalist homogeneity. It is in this entanglement of love and capital that the romantic utopia of OPW finds its most enduring and problematic expression.

CONCLUSION

In this article, we set out to discuss the depiction of love in wedding celebrations and its subsequent co-option by capitalism in the reality wedding shows OPW South Africa, Kenya and Nigeria. To this end, the article utilised MCDA to dissect a typical episode from each show's current season. The analysis revealed three distinct scenes that the producers chose to show the audiences. The first is the attempt to cause the audiences to identify with the couple through personalisation. The second theme is an emphasis on the symbols of utopia around which romance and marketisation meet. The final theme is an emphasis on leisure through the enjoyment of the symbols highlighted in the second theme. Therefore, the article argues that the show's production decisions and logic co-opt the themes of love to promot e consumption and to display the consumption of symbols of Western utopia. The perpetual insistence on love being displayed through the buying and selling of goods ultimately serves to unwittingly limit access to love to those who cannot summit the financial barriers to its entry. Bringing this point to light may help to highlight a much-needed debate about how media may reify social exclusion in the context of romance and help to entrench love as an exclusive privilege of the affluent few.

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