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## Public Rites/Private Memories. Reconciling the Social and Individual in Wedding Photography

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## Public Rites/Private Memories

### Reconciling the Social and Individual in Wedding Photography

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JENS RUCHATZ

In a small book entitled *Family Secrets* film historian Annette Kuhn presents a number of unspectacular yet puzzling images. One of them shows a little girl standing in the shade and looking at the camera, obviously posed by the photographer, pressing her lips together as if to signal that she doesn't want to be photographed. An irritating detail might be the handkerchief tied to the child's wrist. From the fact that the print is in black and white, together with the old-fashioned look of the dress, one can conclude that this photograph was taken several decades ago. In the end there is hardly more to observe. Who the little girl is, where and why the picture was taken and what it may mean, remains open to speculation. The title of the book hints to secrets that are connected to this particular picture, these, however, are kept in the dark since they are not visible.

*Annette Kuhn reminiscing about a childhood photograph*



Kuhn (2002:70–71).

Kuhn devotes a whole chapter of her book to this single picture that she has culled from her own family album and starts off with her own description of the content:

“To mark the Coronation of the Queen, my mother made me a special frock; and on Coronation Day I was photographed wearing it. The picture shows a seven-year old girl posed in an outdoor setting, probably a garden. Standing in dappled shade, she wears a puff-sleeved party frock in a white muslin-like fabric, [...] a new handkerchief (bearing a crown and the motif EIIR on the corner) tucked into a wrist bangle. [...] Posed a little stiffly, she looks at the camera wearing a solemn expression, possibly a light frown.” (Kuhn 2002: 70)

By switching from first person to third person Kuhn, in her narration, distances herself from her past self that is visible in the photograph, trying to look at herself from the outside, with the eyes of a stranger (Kuhn 2002: 8)<sup>1</sup>.

1 Kuhn justifies this switch of perspective as first step of her method of picture analysis.

Still, a few ‘secrets’ are imminently disclosed: We learn the occasion of the photograph (the Coronation of Elizabeth II, which allows to date the picture exactly to June 6<sup>th</sup> 1953), the reason for the dress up as well as the significance of the strange handkerchief. The surface of the photograph begins to become part of a personal narration that transcends the visible in order to imbue the picture with meaning.

The scrutiny of what is visible on the surface of the picture leads Kuhn to relive more and more of the feelings of that very day. The photograph becomes the starting point for an imaginary return to her past. Kuhn recounts how her mother decided to celebrate the exceptional event by sewing a festive dress and by posing the girl for a photo, for this purpose adjusting her daughter to the eye of the father’s camera. Kuhn interprets her facial expression as a sign of resistance against the expectations and the pressure put upon the young girl by her mother (cf. Kuhn 2002: 76)<sup>2</sup>. If for the mother the picture might have stood for her attachment to her daughter, for the daughter it carries memories of the tension in the family:

“My mother’s investment in my appearance; her gift to me of this would-be uniform, a Coronation dress; her desire to commemorate a special day, a day of national significance, with a ceremonial costume and a photograph of her daughter wearing it: all these things are compressed into the layer upon layer of meaning in this image.” (Kuhn 2002: 78)

Kuhn goes on to show that this photo testifies to more than a family drama. Her being dressed up and photographed forms part of a celebration to which the whole nation was invited – particularly because the newly established mass medium television broadcast the event live into British homes so that everybody who had access to a television set could take part in the ceremony as it happened:<sup>3</sup>

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- 2 Cf. Kuhn (2002: 76): “Already at the age of seven, I knew how little girls were supposed to feel about new frocks and being dressed up; about how they are supposed to respond to being put in front of a camera, Daddy’s camera. It is equally clear that [...], I was refusing to wear it, almost literally.”
  - 3 For television’s capacity to produce national and even global participation in events cf. Dayan/Katz 1992. The Coronation was indeed a seminal media event of European scale because it was broadcast to all the countries that took part in

“[T]he dress in the photograph has been made to commemorate a ritual which, being an occasion for national celebration, goes beyond the dynamics of the mother-daughter dyad. On this day, by virtue of the nation’s participation in the Coronation, the ordinary, the everyday, will become imbued with the extraordinary, the special. Everyone will be touched by the aura of the event. My dress and the photograph are a tiny part of a grand ceremony of affirmation, of commitment to a larger identity: a sense of national belonging.” (Kuhn 2002: 79)

Kuhn’s associations of the personal to the national do not stop there, as when she looks at a photograph of the Royal Family taken on the same day and discovers that on it men look marginalized like in her own family. From the Royal Family she goes on to the metaphorical family of the then recently established Commonwealth as family of nations. Kuhn continuously oscillates between memories that connect the childhood photograph to her family history and her personal biography on the one hand and to her generation, class and nation on the other hand. In this respect it is apt for her to conclude with the fundamental question “What has all this have to do with a photograph of a little girl in white, a little girl in a dress made especially for the Coronation?”

“Both scenes – the larger one of popular memory of the Coronation and its social and cultural significance; the smaller one of my own memories, the Coronation frock, and the photograph – are packed with layer upon layer of cultural and psychological meaning. [...] In the smaller story, the little girl’s frock and its commemoration in a photograph can be read both as a statement of attachment – to a community, a nation – through participation in a ritual; and also a visible expression of an Oedipal drama that is both personal (its cast of very ordinary characters consisting of myself and my immediate family) and collective (the feeling tone, if not the detail, of the story will undoubtedly strike a chord of recognition in others).” (Kuhn 2002: 97–98)

Kuhn charges the photograph with meanings that are not only invisible, but not even signified in the picture itself. “Cultural and psychological meaning” alike stem from the contextual knowledge that Kuhn brings to the picture. Her associations are triggered by the occasion that, as she ‘knows’, initiated

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the Eurovision program exchange. Kuhn herself mentions the fact that the event was broadcast live (Kuhn 2002: 80, 86–89).

taking the photograph in the first place but that is still not depicted in it. Family photographs do, as Kuhn points out, “evoke memories that might have little or nothing to do with what is actually in the picture”, it merely serving as “a prop, a prompt, a pre-text” that “sets the scene for recollection” (Kuhn 2002: 13). Kuhn does not restrict herself to stating this fact, but tries to prove her point by an introspective recording of her own process of association. She thus demonstrates how acts of remembering can be initiated by photographic pictures.

The strategy of Kuhn’s book consists of reflecting on the relation of memory and pictures by following her personal associations brought about by a comparatively small number of pictures. By stating what these particular pictures mean to her she tries to work out how photographs relate to memory in general. This approach to a theory of photography likens her project to the more prominent one Roland Barthes pursued in *La Chambre Claire* (1981). When trying to tie down the essence of photography, Barthes likewise starts out from specific pictures and tries to figure out how and what they mean to him. He records the idiosyncratic associations that spring to his mind when he looks at certain photographs – yet, he chooses journalistic and art photographs by renowned photographers, not photographs from his own past culled from his private family album. Still, in stark contrast to Kuhn, Barthes insists on the absolute individuality of his associations. He cherishes photography precisely because it permits him to leave his cultural background behind, since the photographic image itself refers to reality without any intervention of psychology or culture. Exempt from the generalizations of cultural coding, photography, he contends, may lay the foundations for a science of the absolutely singular (cf. Barthes 1981: 6–9). This appears in particular in the second part of *Camera Lucida* which is haunted by a photograph of the author’s recently deceased mother as a little girl. Strangely enough it is this picture that in Barthes’ eyes captures his mother’s essence, her complete personality, finally showing “the truth of the face I had loved” (Barthes 1981: 67).<sup>4</sup> To signal that this recognition is purely personal the photo itself is expressly omitted from the book: “It exists only for me. For you it would be nothing but an indifferent picture, one of the thousand manifestations of the

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4 A startling parallel is that Kuhn also decides to take up the project of reflecting on the relation of images and (family) memory after the death of her mother. Moreover she quotes Barthes’ book (Kuhn 2002: vii, 18).

‘ordinary’.” (Barthes 1981: 73) The ordinariness arises for those who are thrown back on cultural codes because they don’t have access to the individuality of the pictured subject. Still, only photographic representation (as long as it is regarded as emanating from the pictured situation itself) can potentially bypass the cultural intervention of codes and refer immediately to a specific reality instead of to culture as the institution governing the representation. Whereas for Barthes the specific quality of photography thus resides in the capacity to evoke the absolutely singular and individual, Kuhn insists on the “collective nature of the activity of remembering”. Even “if the memories are one individual’s,” Kuhn qualifies, “their associations extend far beyond the personal” (Kuhn 2002: 5–6).<sup>5</sup> Acts of memory cannot but align to the directions and habits established by the social groups one belongs to, from the family to the nation. From this point of view, the cultural and semiotic void that is suspected to be at the core of photographic representation could even strengthen the hold of culture since it is culture that offers the remedy to the threat of meaninglessness: “memories evoked by a photo do not simply spring out of the image itself, but are generated in a network, an intertext of discourses that shift between past and present, spectator and image, and between all these and cultural contexts, historical moments” (Kuhn 2002: 14). Making sense of a photographic image would, in this respect, always require the work of ‘enculturating’ the technologically produced picture.

Even though Kuhn never refers explicitly to Maurice Halbwachs’ concept of collective memory her approach does concur with his fundamental and highly influential insight that remembering is a social activity through and through. As is generally known, Halbwachs argues that even the seemingly most personal memories can only be retained if they have been fitted into a socially established frame of reference that invests fleeting impressions with a lasting meaning (cf. Halbwachs 1994: particularly p. 79, for a brief introduction on the “social construction of individual memory” cf. also Marcel/Mucchielli 2008: 141–149). Therefore, acts of remembering are always highly selective reconstructions of the past which are undertaken on the ground of the respective present and from the vantage point of the social

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5 Cf. also Kuhn (2002: 6): “Clearly, if in a way my memories belong to me, I am not their sole owner.”

groups which furnish their members with the frames that they need to make sense of the past.

If Halbwachs has shaped memory theory up to this day, his theory of collective memory has always been at odds with media studies because he was considered to exclude any objectifications of the past from collective *memory* and relegate them to the realm of *history* (Assmann 2001: 247–249). His distinction between history and memory is defined as the opposition of *lived* memory, which forms at the intersection of personal experience and – oral – group interaction, and *written* history, which comprises any accounts of the past that are laid down and fixed with the aid of storage media. Halbwachs insisted that the notion of memory should only pertain to personal experiences which are reconstructed from the group’s point of view, supplemented by memories that are narrated by group members with which one interacts, typically parents and grand-parents. History, by contrast, is based on non-personal, materialized forms of storage that enable the invariant presentation of the same account of the past to a diffuse public. Even the most popular media productions – Halbwachs gave films and theatre pieces on Jeanne d’Arc as examples – remain abstract and foreign to collective memory, because they do not connect to lived experience, because “I cannot go beyond these word heard or read by me”, because “these symbols passed down through time are all that comes to me from that past” (Halbwachs 1980: 52). Whereas memory presupposes the continuity of past and present, history marks a rupture. This point is stretched to the extreme when the simple fact of putting the past into writing is taken to indicate that it has lost its value for group memories: “General history starts only when tradition ends and the social memory is fading or breaking up. So long as a remembrance continues to exist, it is useless to set it down in writing or otherwise fix it in memory.” (Halbwachs 1980: 78) Accordingly the society addressed by historiography will never be the group that experienced the events in the past.

The distinction between history and memory is conceived as the difference between the mediated and the – seemingly – immediate retrieval of the past. This opposition has been criticized as being too rigid. The concept of cultural memory has been developed by Aleida and Jan Assmann in order to account for the importance the distant past may have for the social construction of identities (cf. e.g. Assmann 2008). Joanne Garde-Hansen’s recent introductory book *Media and Memory* argues that in order to appraise the sig-



nificance of mediation for memory Halbwachs' momentous concept of collective memory needs to "divorce itself from personal remembering in the context of a face-to-face group encounter" (Garde-Hansen 2011: 38).<sup>6</sup> With regard to the memorial function of media it seems, however, more important to reconsider how Halbwachs conceives of the relation of storage to remembrance. He declined to see history as a practice of memory because it delivers closed and static narrative representations of the past that replace memory's infinite processes of meaning construction. In this perspective written records may be judged as curtailing the dynamics of ongoing *re*-construction which may successively integrate the same remembered event into changing frames. Still, the concept of collective memory does not rule out mediated storage per se. As long as records of the past have not lost connection to lived experience they can play a crucial part in the social construction of memory and personal identity.

If Halbwachs had considered the private usage of photography worthy of interest (which he apparently did not), he might have been stimulated to qualify his observations on the merits of material testimonies of the past.<sup>7</sup> On the one hand photography is instrumental to the social fashioning of family memory because the family is the object as well as the subject of the pictures.

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6 Halbwachs largely underestimated the role that media would play in 20<sup>th</sup> century everyday experience. As an element of the everyday they themselves form relevant social frames or at least contribute to the frames of groups. Beginning with the symbiosis of telegraphy and the newspaper, even more so with the advent of television a media environment has been created that has been aptly termed 'global village' by Marshall McLuhan. Mediated events like the moon landing, the terror acts on 9–11, major sports events or the Coronation have – even on a global scale – become part of actual, personal and lived experience.

7 The chapter on 'family memories' in Halbwachs (1994) lacks any reference to the function of material objects and storage media. If he does refer to 'images', he always means imaginary, never materialized ones. To be correct one should note that in Halbwachs' theory books, newspapers or diaries do not solely appear as antagonists of memory but are frequently cited as elements that can – under certain circumstances – contribute to the social framing and even complement a group's memory – as long as the link to lived memory has not been cut off (cf. e.g. Halbwachs 1980: 22–23, 44, 56–57, 64–66).

Family and personal photographs are produced expressly as future invitations to revive past events and thus support *living* memory. The chronological collection of photographs in an album offers a sequentially ordered choice of pictures that can serve as a material basis to retell one's own experiences or the story of one's family. "In the process of using – producing, selecting, ordering, displaying – photographs, the family is actually in the process of making itself", Kuhn says (2002: 19).<sup>8</sup> On the other hand the family's usage of photography shows that, if mediated records of the past do structure what and how we remember, they do not substitute for lived memory but rather figure as starting points that put memory in motion.<sup>9</sup> Photographs in general and personal photographs in particular do not appear as self-sufficient memory content but as fragments in dire need of contextualization. So they initiate active memory work instead of replacing it. Kuhn's interest in this particular branch of photographic practice (...in this aspect of photography?) resides not the least in the constant remaking of the meaning of the pictures: "Family photography may affect to show us our past, but what we do with them – how we use them – is really about today, not yesterday. These traces of our former lives are pressed into service in a never-ending process of making, re-making, making sense of, our selves – now." (Kuhn 2002: 19) It must be conceded that any historical record – like any text, by the way – may give rise to an ongoing re-negotiation of meaning. Because photographs connect to the past primarily as traces, as sign fragments, that are quite often only marginally, if at all integrated into a textual frames that could secure a standard 'reading', they present a particular challenge to interpretation and thus stimulate evolving meanings (Kuhn 2002: 14)<sup>10</sup>. In general, a photograph does not function as a self-sufficient and closed memory but rather as an incomplete aide-mémoire.

How personal photographs function as signs can be cast theoretically by applying the useful distinction of users and readers that Patricia Holland has

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8 Kuhn (2002: 166–168) even takes the family and its treatment of 'memory texts' as "perhaps [...] the model for every other memory-community".

9 When browsing a photo album together or watching a slide show the remembering can be even performed as a collective and communicative practice in the strictest sense.

10 Also see Kuhn (2002: 14): "the image itself figures largely as a trace, a clue: necessary, but not sufficient, to the activity of meaning making".

suggested. *Users* are the intended addressees – and thus generally as well the ‘authors’ – of private photographs: They know to what – to which person, to which place, to which occasion – a photograph is meant to refer because they know when, why and under which circumstances it was taken. Quality and even the visible content of the print become secondary to this context that users anchor in the picture: “Users bring to the images a wealth of surrounding knowledge. Their own private pictures are part of the complex network of memories and meanings with which they make sense of their daily lives.” (Holland 1997: 107) By contrast, *readers* cannot penetrate the surface of the private photograph, because they lack access to this contextual knowledge and therefore try to make up for it by identifying the social codes that are present. As Holland puts it, readers must “tease out” the meaning of personal photographs “in an act of decoding or historical detective work”, they “must translate those private meanings into a more public realm” (Holland 1997: 107)<sup>11</sup>. I would rather put it differently. Readers can see more than users when they point to ideological subtexts or cultural conventions and access strata of meaning that users generally are not aware of, whereas they see less because they are completely excluded from the personal significance of photographs. Readers can only access the social aspects, i.e. those traits, that are common among different sets of personal photographs, but they are usually incapable of grasping how the users’ memories set their own personal photographs apart from those of others. The Austrian historian of photography Timm Starl may take things a bit far, when he argues that only the snapshotter, whose decision to release the shutter lies at the origin of the pictures, has full access to the relevant contexts and meanings (Starl 1995: 23). Nonetheless it must be granted that the position of the knowing user will remain inaccessible to others, unless there is a personal communicative exchange.<sup>12</sup>

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11 Reading is an awkward term when it refers to pictures, still it suitably denotes the activity of breaking down the complex and continuous information of the image into a set of cultural, decodable signs.

12 Also see Chalfen (1987): “Snapshot collections [...] reveal most photographer’s reluctance to create visual stories or visual narratives. The narrative remains in the head of the picturemakers and on-camera participants for verbal telling and re-telling during exhibition events. [...] Home mode imagery provides an example of how pictures don’t literally ‘say’ anything – people do the talking.”

These two positions regarding personal photographs can be related to two different modes of treating signs: associating and contextualizing for the user and, of course, reading for the reader.<sup>13</sup> One and the same photograph will not only mean different things to different people, but it takes on various meanings in semiotically differing ways. Users, on the one hand, regard a photograph as an index – as a trace, that has been brought into being by the very event it refers to.<sup>14</sup> When a trace refers to the past not as its representation but as its product, it functions more as a reminder, a memento, that triggers or guides remembering than as memory in itself. Knowing the ‘context of production’ (Ruchatz 2012: 19–28), i.e. the circumstances that brought the picture into being, is therefore vital to probing the meaning of a private photograph. This knowledge restricts its use to those who were present at the event depicted, including at the most those, who know about it from conversation. Readers, on the other hand, look out for symbols. Since private photographs taken by snapshooters<sup>15</sup> seem to lack an aesthetic or even a vocabulary of forms that would be capable of generating symbols, they could be called semantically deficient. If a picture is not accompanied by a caption, readers are usually set back to demarcating symbols in the pictures displayed content, may it be poses, clothing, landmarks, any signs of the times that lend themselves to identifying occasion, time and place.<sup>16</sup> Both users and readers

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13 To be correct, reading does naturally rely on practices of contextualization and the relation of signifiers to meaning can be regarded as a form of association. In the context of my argument these concepts are used in a specific sense which should become clear subsequently.

14 For a thorough application of Charles Sanders Peirce’s typology of index, icon, symbol to photography cf. Dubois (1990). With regard to photography’s mnemonic function I have suggested the distinction of externalization and trace which draws on this terminology (cf. Ruchatz 2008: 367–378).

15 With regard to signification it is important to tell the snapshots taken by the users themselves apart from those photographs taken by professionals for private purposes which often show a highly conventionalized aesthetics and the snapshots taken by private photographers; (cf. Starl 1991: 49–80).

16 Seen as an index a photograph picture, produced automatically all at once and without recourse to symbolic codes, is a continuous sign. Consequently it cannot be read, that means broken down into discrete signs that combine to form a meaning. The choice of the object, frame or the moment of exposure can be taken as

profit from the iconic quality of the photographic images that refers to objects by way of similarity. It is similarity that makes it easier for the user to go back to events and places, but it is by no means the precondition. Even photographs that are failed by standards of sharpness or similarity may be kept because they are the only indexical links to the ‘desired’ event (cf. Starl 1995: 23, 150–151). For the reader similarity is a prerequisite for identifying objects that can then be transformed into symbols.

For Barthes the indexical aspect of photography guarantees absolute singularity because any photograph refers to an event that is not repeatable. The particular potential of photography to evoke the singular – instead of signifying it symbolically – prompts Barthes to believe that photographic pictures render possible a purely individual access to reality. Even if Kuhn grants that there is an element in her childhood pictures that goes beyond coding (Kuhn 2002: 18), on the whole she prefers to downplay the privacy and individuality of her associations and to stress the social foundations of her seemingly personal emotions. When Kuhn insists, as I have quoted before, that her family drama is also “collective”, that “the feeling tone” would “undoubtedly strike a chord of recognition in others”, this sounds a bit like a conjuring-up which is grounded in a theoretical preference (cf. Kuhn 2002: 14)<sup>17</sup>.

I want to follow Kuhn in her conviction that private photographs like the one she uses to adorn her book are a locus where individual and collective memory intersect and interact. That sets of private photographs generally look very similar, that they tend to be taken on comparable occasions, that they often picture the same sort of subjects in a similar manner, testifies to photography as a social practice that is structured by collective conventions. When we regard a photograph showing a tourist in front of the Eiffel Tower we can perceive the repetition of the social rite of producing proofs of where one has travelled. Yet, only hardcore cultural critics will deny, that the experiences will differ in many ways for any tourist, depending on their age, their

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meaningful selections – even if there are barely any codes a photographer can make use of; cf. Barthes (1977: 15–31).

17 Cf. Kuhn (2002: 14): “Cultural theory tells us there is little that is really personal or private about either family photographs or the memories they evoke: they can mean only culturally.” In Barthes’ terminology she sides with the *studium*, neglecting the *punctum*, even if she alludes to it (18). For this distinction cf. Barthes (1981: 25–28).

co-travellers, their knowledge of French, whether it's a repeat visit etc. For the users themselves the personal character of the experience is linked to the photograph, even if it is not visibly inscribed into the picture. As Starl has put it perfectly, a personal photograph can remind one of things that are visible on it as well as of things that are not, and finally of the photograph itself (it's taking and viewing) (Starl 1995: 149).

The objective for photographic memory studies should be, in my opinion, to analyse the collective modes that set the stage for the affirmation of individuality. The concept of the collective memory will serve as a theoretical point of reference since it insists that the social framing is inscribed into the individual memories. Private photographs are the prime examples to elaborate on the function of media for the building and disseminating of collective memories. My approach will differ from Barthes' and Kuhn's since I will neither focus on individual pictures and their significance for me nor particularly on the use of private photographs. In taking an exemplary look at the practice of wedding photography I want to work with a particular genre and find out how the social framing is embodied in specific forms and practices.

## PRIVATE LOVES/PUBLIC VOWS

"Love and marriage, go together like a horse and carriage," goes the chorus of a song first recorded by Frank Sinatra in 1955 and more recently popularized as title song of the television series *Married... with children*. "This I tell you, brother," the lyrics continue, "you can't have one without the other". If this popular wisdom may already sound rather dated today,<sup>18</sup> put in a historical perspective this idea still is comparatively fresh. For the longest time in cultural history love and marriage had little common ground to share. As late as the 18<sup>th</sup> century the emotion of love and the institution of marriage were even considered a contradiction (cf. Luhmann 1982: 89). Whereas love was associated with passion and transience, marriage was bound by duty, a stable union based mainly on legal and economic considerations with the aim of creating offspring. If things turned out well marriage could lead to compani-

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18 The 1950s can be considered as a decade where the typically modern crisis of marriage is temporarily interrupted; cf. Shumway (2003: 134–135).

onship, but love was never a precondition or the logical outcome of this union. It took a lot of changes in social semantics to reconcile love and marriage into the modern concept of romantic love that encompasses passion and duration, the devotion to the loved other with the perfection of the loving individual. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century love finally became the exclusive and only socially accepted basis for the choice of the life partner. Romantic love itself does not allow for rational consideration nor can it be justified by commonly accessible features like beauty. Love is to be grounded – self-referentially – in love and nothing else (Luhmann 1982: 163–196, also cf. Coontz 2005: 4f). Based on romantic love marriage becomes something personal and imminently private.

To merge love and marriage is a risky move, though, because an irrationally grounded emotion is now supposed to stand the test of time. The demand to stabilize passionate love puts all the pressure on the affective fundament of the relationship and in the end leads to the destabilization of the institution of marriage itself. The massive increase in divorces led to the talk of a ‘marriage crisis’ from the 1920s on (cf. Shumway 2003: 22–23, 68). Another tension in the concept of love-based marriage stems from the paradoxical combination of the intimate seclusion of romantic love on the one hand and the institutional, legal as well as social, status of marriage on the other. As the main source of the modern semantics of romantic love the novels of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century prefer to locate the mingling of the loving souls apart from society (cf. Reinhardt-Becker 2005: 60–73). Social conventions are frequently represented as barriers that have to be overcome to realize the union of the souls. However, society as well as the state insist on their right to sanctify and control these individual love relations. In her study *Public vows* Nancy F. Cott points out:

“At the same time that any marriage represents personal love and commitment, it participates in the public order. Marital status is just as important to one’s standing in the community and state as it is to self-understanding. [...] To be marriage, the institution requires public affirmation. It requires public knowledge – at least some publicity beyond the couple themselves; that is why witnesses are required for the ceremony and why wedding bells ring.” (Cott 2000: 1–2)

To be sanctified love needs to become public and the wedding ceremony is the ritual site where the intimate, private love relationship is confronted with

an observing public. Therefore, the ceremony addresses not only the couple but is designed to demonstrate its commitment at least to family and friends, if not the community at large. “The wedding ceremony was probably the most public of private rites,” Antoine Prost points out in *The History of Private Life*. “Everything in it was codified: the composition and the order of the procession, the number and the selection of bridal attendants, the costumes of bride and groom [...], and the gestures of consent.” (in Perrot 1990: 317) Private photography and weddings have in common the encompassing of private as well as public, highly individual as well as collective aspects. It should therefore be only logical that wedding pictures are visibly more conventionalized than other branches of personal photography. This can be at least partly attributed to the fact that it is very often professional photographers who carry out the task of producing the photographic testimonies. The importance of the event seems to call for a professional even as camera ownership tended to become universal in the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In one of the very few scientific pieces published on the subject Robin Lenman calls it paradoxical “that wedding photography developed into a lucrative and heavily marketed industry” at the same time that every household owned their own camera (cf. Lenman 2005: 674). This remark holds true even more for the contemporary practices of digital image production. Today more than ever, the professionally photographed wedding album is meant to stand out against a steady flow of generally unremarkable photographic images of the everyday.<sup>19</sup> Whereas mobile phone cameras have stimulated the urge to document individual lives more and more continuously as they happen – and more for the sake of short-term sharing than for the sake of future remembering – introductory manuals to wedding photography as a professional practice abound. “From being the record of an event,” Lenman contends, wedding photography “became a major lifestyle statement, at a cost to match: in early 21st century, photography may absorb 10 to 15 per cent of an American wedding budget.” (Lenman 2005: 674) Even fees that may exceed 10,000 \$ do not seem to deter customers (Johnson 2011: 27).

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19 In general the professional pictures will not replace but only complement photos taken by the guests – many of the manuals for professional photography address the problem how to deal with the presence of the snapshotters.



On the one hand, professional wedding photographers are employed to display economic status by conspicuous consumption, actually an important aspect of the consumerist model of the lavish wedding that started to become the norm – at least in the US – from the 1950s on (Jellison 2008: 3; Otteness/Pleck 2003: 25–54). Moreover, the lavishness may be considered an investment in the future of the relationship insofar it underlines that the spending is not meant to be repeated. On the other hand, as an outside observer the wedding photographer is ideally suited to generate a public image of the loving married couple. The professional is invited as expert for wedding imagery, for the conventional and cultural aspect of the wedding, as specialist in turning photograph traces into symbolic messages. Even if wedding pictures do in fact form a sub‘genre’ of personal photography (because they are produced for the sake of personal or familial remembrance), they at the same time make a prime example of the overlapping of individual and social memory. Wedding photographs have always included pictures that were meant to either share memories of the celebration (for those who were present) or to communicate that the wedding had in fact taken place and the loving couple was now bound in marriage (for those who were not) (Mary 1993: 150). The pictures are meant to carry a clear and univocal message – the confirmation: We love each other and will – or at least intend to – stay together for all time. Even if the couple may *use* their wedding photographs as traces of a very personal event, the pictures must, at the same time, be readable.

Fig. 2: A compilation of photos of 'dipping the bride'



Taken from Aarsman/de Cleen/Germain et al (2011: n.p.).

This social function is apparently the main reason why wedding photographs look largely alike and are so easily identifiable as such. The artistic project *Useful Photography* by which the Dutch communications agency Kesselscramer attempts to explore neglected fields of photographic practice recently produced a stunning collection of wedding photographs that was sorted according to thematically and formally identifiable picture types: "As always, we collect overlooked and underwhelming images created for practical purposes. This time, the usefulness of an age-old ritual is explored: marriage. Inside, it becomes evident, that everyone documents their big day in the same way. Same dresses, same locations, same post-wedding kiss." (Aarsman/de Cleen/Germain et al 2011) In these strings of photographs of 'first' kisses, lined-up bridesmaids, bouquet tosses, dipped brides or cake cuttings, that are culled from international sources, the conventionality of wedding photography – and probably weddings themselves – become apparent. Along with this standardization goes an effort to create a symbolic message by capturing telling poses and including meaningful artifacts. According to guidebooks to wedding photography the putting on of the wedding gown, for example, is to be 'read' as the decisive moment that transforms the

bride from “the woman she is every day to a bride” (Morgan 2010: 43)<sup>20</sup>, thus foreshadowing the metamorphosis that is implied by entering into a marriage.<sup>21</sup>

From this point of view the wedding ceremony and the ensuing celebrations appear as a string of stereotypical picture occasions. The only existing historical survey of wedding photography – in America – shows that this has not always been the case. If wedding pictures were scarce in the early days of photography, from the 1870s on it became a standard procedure to go to a photographer’s studio sometime after the ceremony in order to produce a formal wedding portrait.<sup>22</sup> In line with the conventions of the studio portrait the couple, sometimes accompanied by family, dressed in their wedding habit and posed in the studio setting looking frontally at the camera. In most cases it was just the dress of the bride along with the bouquet that made the difference to a customary portrait photograph.

The relation of photography and the ritual of the wedding got closer when light press cameras were introduced into wedding photography around 1940. These made it possible to take so-called ‘candids’ that were shot on location as the wedding progressed and not arranged *ex post* in the studio: “The photographer captured the fragmented acts of the wedding day: he moved, camera in hand, from bedroom to church to reception to departure. There were always a few stock shots, but the best photographers developed a great ability to recognize an opportunity for an original view of the wedding scene.” (Norfleet 1979: n.p.) Posed photographs that were taken to idealize and eternalize

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20 For readings of the presupposed symbolism of certain motifs of wedding photography like the bride in front of a mirror cf. Otness/Pleck (2003: 115–116) and Glasenapp (2002: 136).

21 Today this transformation is generally curtailed to mere symbolism as the wedding has generally lost its significance as the crucial ‘rite of passage’ that leads from adolescence to adulthood. Instead in most cases it does ‘only’ confirm a relationship that is already practically lived. Glasenapp (2002: 123) strikingly calls wedding “a rite without passage”. Otness/Pleck (2003: 15) insist, however, that the couples themselves usually consider the wedding as an “originating event”.

22 Norfleet (1979: n.p.) notes that wealthier customers could afford to hire photographers to come to their home.

the married couple or the beautifully dressed bride were, of course, still included, even if they were now arranged more casually on the spot. But the wedding became visible as an extended ritual and was no longer photographically reduced to its result: the married couple.

During the last two decades the label of a ‘photojournalistic’ or ‘documentary’ approach to wedding photography has come to the fore. Whereas the look and the content of the photographs have remained largely in the vein of the established candid photography, the approach to the ceremony is supposed to have changed fundamentally. Despite the designation ‘candid’ the production of the photographs had notoriously come to play an important part in the course of the wedding day. In some way the photographers acted as directors that controlled the sequence of the events, claiming a lot of time and advising the wedding party when and how to pose for the camera (cf. Lewis 1998). In contrast, the photojournalistic practitioners pride themselves not to interfere with the celebration: “Documentary wedding photography is about capturing the day, as the events unfold with minimal interference or instruction from the photographer.” (Morgan 2010: 6)<sup>23</sup> The photojournalistic wedding photographers claim to behave like the proverbial ‘fly on the wall’ which confines itself to passively registering what is happening.<sup>24</sup> This renunciation of intervention from the part of the photographer is supposed to

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23 This mode is set explicitly against a presumed traditional practice which had the photographer “shouting orders at the couple and their guests” while missing out on the moments of the wedding itself (Morgan 2010: 7). Otness and Pleck (2003:117–118) trace this new mode back to Denis Reggie’s coverage of JFK Jr.’s wedding in 1996 in order to give yet another example how the form of the contemporary wedding ritual has been shaped by mass media and commercially motivated patterns. The stark contrast of the candid to the documentary approach seems exaggerated, though. This shows when Lenman (2005: 675) understands the photojournalistic approach differently: “since the 1970s, young, affluent, and socially competitive couples have favoured a more fluid, ‘photojournalistic’ approach, in which the photographer’s task is less to record an event than to direct – or observe – a narrative”.

24 The digital mode of image production does contribute to this project insofar the number of photographs taken can be significantly increased – at no further cost. The shots that are used for the final album can be chosen from a vast selection of pictures that easily cover the whole course of events.

liberate the wedding proceedings not only from interventions, but also from conventions and thus produce more varied pictures.

Still, the numerous manuals on this presumably new practice betray that standardization remains its stable foundation. The advice given confirms that – like any other rite and ritual – a wedding consists of a standard sequence of essential stages – and photo opportunities. One manual criticizes that earlier on “the pictures generally followed the same sequence”, that “the results from one event looked much like another” producing a “predictable collection of matted prints”, in order to contrast that with “the photojournalistic style of wedding coverage [...] the old list is being augmented by new ‘standard images.’” (Karney 2007: 6, 177) Still, one principal object of most introductions to wedding photography remains enumerating the ‘must haves’ or ‘standard pictures’, not to be missed in any case (cf. Sammon 2009: 9)<sup>25</sup>. The signing of the register, for example, is considered to be a motif which “has been taken so many times by wedding photographers that it’s become as ingrained into the fabric of wedding tradition as the cake cutting or first dance, and is not something you can leave out.” (Morgan 2010: 80)<sup>26</sup> According to wedding photographer James Karney all that has recently changed is that if the “list has still a place”, it is merely “a starting point – and open to creative interpretation. [...] There’s still a list, it’s just more fluid and has room for lots of personal additions.” (Karney 2007: 172)

It is only natural for manuals to promote conventions, as they are meant to give general guidelines for a successful practice: On the other hand ‘photojournalism’ allows if not calls for an approach that acknowledges the singularity of any wedding. As Kerry Morgan’s *Guide to Photojournalism* reminds: “All weddings follow a similar formula by and large – there are preparations, a ceremony and a party – but the moments at each and every wedding

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25 Cf. Sammon (2009: 9): “Don’t miss the key ceremony shots. Sure, be creative and take photographs that perhaps not every wedding photographer on the planet would take. But don’t miss those all-important shots, especially the first kiss. Make a shot list with the bride and groom before the big day, so that no one is disappointed during the photo-review session.” For extensive “shot lists” cf. eg. Kim (2010, 256–262); idem (2011, 181–190); Ziser (2010).

26 Cf. in the same vein Johnson (2011: 22): “a small number of group shots are usually still included because they are so ingrained in the tradition in wedding tradition that it’s almost impossible to bypass them.”

are unique.” (Morgan 2010: 10) The general and socially endorsed plan for the wedding has therefore to be merged with the preferences of the individual couple. That’s why manuals present it as a rule, that “[n]o two weddings are alike” (cf. Johnson 2011: 4; cf. as well Karney 2007: 195<sup>27</sup>) or that “[d]epicting a wedding in an authentic way means you can’t predict or repeat things that happen. Every wedding day is unique, with different personalities...” (Morgan 2010: 6)

The photojournalistic observer is given the task of extracting the essence of the event, which may have evaded even the married couple themselves: The wedding album should “give the viewer an overall feel of what the ceremony was like and show the bride and groom what they may have missed” (ibidem: 75; cf. also ibidem: 65<sup>28</sup>). If this is granted, the photographer becomes more than a simple chronicler of the wedding. He acts as a privileged observer whose task it is to record the events in such a way that they not only revive memories but present the course of events with the addition of a story line. The photojournalistic wedding album deviates from merely fixing traces that are prone to trigger memories and aims to transform the wedding into a meaningful text.

In order to personalise the representation Morgan advises the photographer to look for “personal detail”, for “finer detail”, that will “add to the story and act as a reminder of those little touches that might otherwise fade in the memory”, for “small glances that tell the story”, for “subtle glances that will tell so much of what they are feeling” etc. etc. (Morgan 2010: 32, 129, 43, 68)<sup>29</sup>. The individuality does not reside in the overall ritual that carries the cultural meaning but in the marginalia that refer to the actual history

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27 Cf. Karney (2007: 195): “In the early days of ‘candid wedding photograph’, it was easy to work wedding coverage. There were few variations in the ceremony within a given religious tradition. Today there are many variations in the way the couple exchanges vows and in the order of service. Many couples write their own ceremonies.”

28 Cf. Morgan (2010: 65): “Be aware of what the groom is doing as you shoot – he will often turn back around to face the front if his emotions get the better of him. If he does, this is a great moment to capture as it gives the bride an insight into the groom’s feelings she would otherwise have missed.”

29 For another example see Karney (2007: 180): “Keep an eye out for interactions and activities that are unique and that show the relationships between the people.”

of the couple. This sort of detail does not come unpredicted, though, but is presumed to be found regularly at certain stages of the wedding. “When the bride and groom hop inside their carriage,” Morgan advises, “it will be another moment to themselves to enjoy the feeling of having just been married, and their interactions with each other and with those waving goodbye on the pavement are all things to look out for.” (Morgan 2010: 89) And another manual points out that “as the last note is played, the father and the bride will hug each other tightly, maybe kiss, or maybe he’ll dip his daughter, and they hold each other for a moment or two. Don’t miss this – it’s a wonderful opportunity to capture some treasured moments.” (Ziser 2010: 223) Wedding photographers are hence taught to expect the unexpected, to pay attention to particular events or certain kinds of mementos that appear in the course of the wedding. At the same time that the need to respect and reflect the singularity of the particular wedding is underlined, there is a tendency to normalize what can figure as individual in the first place. Photo manuals tend to paradoxically forge singularity into a new norm.

The practice of wedding photography that relates individual memories and typical, socially generalized elements may be perfectly understood with Halbwachs. The frames that shape the selection and construction of the photographic records are apt to structure the individual memories of the couple. If wedding photographs follow conventions that make them instantly recognisable and readable as such, they relate indexically to the past as well. They remind their users, who were present at the wedding, of events and emotions that may or may not be visibly represented in the picture. Today’s professional wedding photography, however, strives increasingly not to leave the individual meanings to the imagination of the users, but to express and even highlight the singularity of the wedding in the photo album that is created as the final result of the effort.

The professional wedding pictures are supposed to capture more than random instants that evoke the observers’ memories. In the spirit of Henry Cartier-Bresson’s credo that journalistic photography should quest for the perfect, the ‘decisive’ moment (Cartier-Bresson 1952), that captures the essence of an event. Morgan states as the “ultimate goal for any documentary photographer [...] to strive for an image that tells a story on its own” (Morgan 2010: 114)<sup>30</sup>. One could say that the wedded couple is not simply addressed

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30 For literal references to Cartier-Bresson cf. Morgan (2010: 50, 166–167).

as users but as readers at the same time. There's not just a story that can be freely associated to a string of photographic traces of the past, but there is a story to be 'read'. In the 1970s, Bradford Bachrach, the owner of several prestigious photo studios, put the basic difference of the traditional wedding portrait to the more recent candid photography nicely: "Candid photos are for the moment but portraits are for all the time." (Bradford Bachrach, quoted in Norfleet 1979: n.p.) To Bachrach the picture that will remain in memory is the photograph that is posed and composed with regard to a reading, an idealized representation that "is not just a map of the face", but "goes beyond a flat record" in order to give "a person at his best – an exaltation" (ibidem). The photojournalistic approach promises to bridge the gap by scanning the course of events for moments that can be symbolically framed, thus blurring the distinction of using and reading. The poses are now made available by 'reality itself' and the only way the photographer intervenes is by cutting into the flow at the appropriate moment.<sup>31</sup>

One could say that photography is so deeply ingrained in the wedding day that the photographer no longer needs to step up as the director of the ceremony. It is hard to tell to what extent photography follows the ritual and to what extent photographic practice regulates the ritual. At least the ritual seems to be arranged in a photographer friendly manner: The modification that "[b]y the 1960s, brides were turning their backs and tossing their bouquets over their shoulders" may render "a more interesting picture" (Otness/Pleck 2003: 130). If weddings are now from the beginning organised with respect to their photographic recording, the impulse to interfere is rightly reduced. The interdependence of photography and the wedding celebrations becomes obvious in a statement from the jacket of a photography manual: "for future brides, the book's lush pages will provide visual inspiration on the must-have photography they want for their big day." (Cantrell/Cohen 2000: jacket) It must be assumed that the production of photographic records of the wedding is not necessarily secondary to the ritual. The production of memories is a vital function of the wedding celebration and photography figures as the technological agent that is capable of ensuring that the memories endure. Photography renders the investment in the

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31 For a theoretical discussion of photography's two diverging time regimes cf. de Duve (2007).



fleeting once-in-a-lifetime event worthwhile because it presupposes imaginary repetitions in the future.<sup>32</sup>

Photography has come to not only document but to form an integral element of many social rites (cf. Köstlin 1995: 399). To state, that “[t]he presence of a photographer is accepted as the presence of a minister, priest, or rabbi” (Chalfen 1987: 86), sounds like understatement, today. Indeed, the presence of a professional or semi-professional photographer, even if he is not perceivably interrupting the proceedings, has become an essential part of the ceremony without which a contemporary wedding would hardly be complete. Without a photographer a wedding might just as well not have taken place. The visible taking of photographs stands for the will to remember the wedding and hence implies the lasting commitment of the couple. In the face of the undeniable danger of divorce rates photography comes to function as a “pledge of permanence” (Lenman 2005: 674). Photographic testimony acts as an impersonal and positively biased witness of the ceremony, in some respect as technological equivalent to the best man. This pictorial witness was not enclosed in an album only to be taken out on special occasions but it was – and still often is – hung openly on the walls of the home, either in the couple’s living room or more often in the bedroom (cf. Mary 1993: 150–151).<sup>33</sup> The pictorial reminder of the marriage promise was thus integrated into everyday life. By way of the photographic picture, the public manifestation of a privately connoted romantic love re-enters the private realm, again, in order to stabilize the love relationship. Formally as well functionally photographic memory pictures belongs to both spheres: the individual as well as the collective, the private as well as the public.

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32 For the relation of the lavish wedding to the production of memories cf. Glasenapp (2002:121); Otness/Pleck (2003: 15–18).

33 A more recent survey of American homes proves that nowadays the prevalence of wedding photographs also depends on class. Whereas upper class households now shun wedding portraits on their walls, they are still common in working class households; cf. Halle (1993: 97).

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