Pain, pleasure and bridal beauty: mapping postfeminist bridal perfection

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Abstract

Despite renewed media attention on the wedding, and the emphasis that this pays to bridal performance, feminist analysis of wedding culture has only made a few inroads. Accounts are needed that understand women's experience of the wedding day, the narrative of becoming the bride, and the way this takes place against a backdrop of postfeminist ambivalence, where traditional wedding practices are re-fashioned through discourses of (consumer) choice and empowerment. In this article, we draw on qualitative data collected with five married women from the Netherlands, who spoke to us about their wedding day and their experience of being/becoming brides. We show how retraditionalisation shapes a new romaticisation of wedding day storytelling, constructed through transformation and the experience of beauty. In analysing these narratives, we show how postfeminist bridal perfection comes to anchor the subjective and affective power of 'the wedding' in contemporary culture.

Keywords: postfeminism, retraditionalisation, beauty, wedding culture, brides

Wedding culture as postfeminist sentiment

Contemporary wedding culture is marked by an emphasis on consumer practices and a heightened visibility in popular culture. This visibility includes films like *Bride Wars* (2009), *Love, Wedding, Marriage* (2011), *27 Dresses* (2008), *The Vow* (2012) and *The Five-Year Engagement* (2012), and docu-soaps/reality TV including *Don't Tell the Bride* (2007) and *My Big Fat Gypsy Wedding* (2011). In the Netherlands, the film *Toscaanse Bruiloft* (Trans: Tuscan Wedding) premiered in 2014, and many UK-based docu-soaps/reality TV series are aired during primetime on Dutch television. In celebrity culture, representations of weddings have also been dominant. The most recent and culturally significant of these was the marriage of Kate Middleton and Prince William in 2011, which was broadcast globally and watched by an

estimated 24.5 million[i]. In 2005 the celebrity wedding of football player Rafeal van der Vaart and Sylvie Meis was broadcasted live on Dutch television and watched by 1.5 million[ii]. In 2010 the wedding preparation and the wedding ceremony between football player Wesley Sneijder and Yolanthe Cabeau van Kasbergen was also widely discussed by Dutch media. The visibility of these highly mediated weddings has complicated the boundaries between public and private ceremonies; during the weddings, both media outlets and members of the public gather to watch the bride and groom, and in the age of digital media, their wedding day can be photographed on new mobile media and transmitted around the world. Such weddings function as a globally marketed spectacle that puts the bridal bodily performance under high surveillance and scrutiny (Winch and Webster, 2012).

In this article we argue that the heightened visibility of wedding culture allows for an increase in brides' bodily scrutiny and beauty practices that could be defined as postfeminist. For gender researchers, 'postfeminism' has been a core analytic for understanding contemporary articulations of gender identity (Gill, 2007a). In this article we take 'postfeminist sentiment' to be defined through key characteristics. These include a strengthening of discourses of essential gender difference and an emphasis on notions of free choice in consumer practices (Gill, 2007a; McRobbie, 2009). A further component of 'postfeminist sentiment' has been a renewed cultural emphasis on the body. A mediated discourse of contemporary gender locates women's identity in her bodily appearance - in accordance with valued and homogenised constructs of slim, toned, white, appropriately middle-class, femininity. Combining neoliberal values and a re-articulation of older understandings of femininity, the wedding is placed firmly within the postfeminist rhetoric, with brides no longer understanding themselves as passive objects, waiting to get married, but as 'active agents using the white wedding as occasion to act out choice, autonomy and power' (Heise, 2012, n.p).

In previous research, wedding culture as a consumer practice has been identified as maintaining heterosexual and patriarchal relations between women and men (Brook, 2002; Boden, 2003;

Otnes and Pleck, 2003; Ingraham, 2008). However, with the restructuring of gender relations in late-modern, Westernized countries, we might expect this relationship to have changed. Shaped largely by the impacts of gay rights and feminist movements since the 1950s, wedding rates in Western countries have been falling (Brook, 2002). In the Netherlands weddings peaked in the 1970s at 9.5 per 1000 citizens. In 2012 this number dropped to 4.2 per 1000 citizens (CBS). The same trend is visible in England and Wales where the number of weddings peaked in 1972 at 480,285[iii] and declined to 247,890 in 2011. The decline of weddings has taken place in the context of high divorce rates, a decreased significance of the church, and women's increase in wage-earning capacity and delayed motherhood, signalling more independence. In this context, accounts assume that a democratization of sexual and erotic life would make available new familial structures outside heteronormative frameworks (e.g. Weeks, 1998; Bauman, 2003). However, in line with postfeminist sentiment, these new practices of freedom and choice come to be aligned with neoliberal consumer rhetoric that re-deploys obligation, institution and compulsion and repackages them as the part of the free market of marriage, which still orients to 'good' and economically productive citizenship (Illouz, 2012; Nash, 2013). With the decline of traditional wedding values, 'consumer-led culture has rushed to this gap to connect the pursuit of wedding perfection with the need to consume' (Winch and Webster, 2012, p.51).

This often means that 'the wedding day' is still understood as a route to happiness, despite – or because of – notions of freedom (Love, 2008; Ahmed, 2010). The re-alignment of the wedding as a 'happiness event' that one chooses to engage with goes hand in hand with its economic costs[iv], the proliferation of wedding goods and services, and demonstration of classy, appropriately middle-class bridal consumption, such that all aspects of the wedding become marketable (Winch and Webster, 2012). Alongside the consumer-oriented discourse of the wedding day, a resurgence of postfeminist romance and retraditionalism of gender roles pervade accounts of the image of the perfect bride, the perfect white wedding day, and the perfect (male) partner (Boden, 2003; Otnes and Pleck, 2003; Gill and Herdieckerhoff, 2006). This retraditionalisation of gender takes place in a variety of cultural spaces, for example in the

popularity of kitsch and retro household items, the return of home cooking and baking (e.g. *The Great British Bake Off*, see Hollows, 2003), and a nostalgia for 'chivalry' or 1950's 'glamour' (e.g. neo-burlesque). However, the cultural space of the wedding is arguably the ideal location from which discourses of retraditionalisation through romance play out (McRobbie, 2009; Negra, 2009). What makes these new notions of romance different from previous ones is that contemporary bridal perfection is understood as process of change, self-improvement and surveillance through the neoliberal rhetoric of consumer-empowerment and agency that turns everyone in the writers of their own life biography (Harris, 2004; Winch and Webster, 2012).

Market values have also inflected the bridal identity, who, in a range of media discourse and matrimonial advice literatures, is expected to understand herself through the language of consumption, competition and constant self-improvement (Gill, 2007a; Ringrose and Walkerdine, 2008; Phipps, 2014). For example, in *Bride Wars* (2009), Emma (Anne Hathaway) and Olivia's (Kate Hudson) life-long friendship is threatened when the two women chose the same wedding venue and wedding date. As the friendship between the women breaks down, acts of sabotage and competitive 'mean girl' aggression all focus on appearance related concerns (e.g. switching hair dye, mailing fattening foods). In such examples, the intense intimacies of female friendship are shot through with new forms of surveillance that replace old-fashioned traditionalism and emphasise appearance-related consumption (Ringrose, 2013; Winch, 2013).

This retraditionalisation is not just limited to media representations. A wealth of bridal forums, blogs, Pinterest boards and online discussion spaces have developed, allowing 'everyday' women to share their wedding, becoming the new experts, entrepreneurs and advisors on the practices required for the perfect wedding and bridal appearance. Concurrently, this context has provided the space for micro-celebrity brides, who are understood within these communities as having the right skills and expertise to produce a 'unique' and 'authentic' wedding day experience. For example, Dutch bride Lizzy is a well-regarded within the online community,

spending a year planning and hand-crafting her wedding day accessories (complete with wedding day logo, see Winch and Webster, 2012 for discussion of wedding branding). Featured on www.theperfectwedding.nl, Lizzy is commended for having crafted the whole wedding: 'invitations to thank-you-notes, decorations, carpet, corsages, bouquet and more: all invented and made by Lizzy herself. Truly a unique and personal wedding!' Emphasis is placed on 'doing it your way', so long as individualism is in keeping with cultural expectations (i.e. none of the items made by Lizzy are out-of-place at a wedding: the wedding dress was white, there was a homemade wedding cake etc.). As with Winch and Webster's (2012) analysis of celebrity and designer brands as a marker of exclusivity and uniqueness, bridal identity is positioned towards retraditionalisation through perfection, appearance, consumption and authenticity: and for the online micro-celebrity bride, the wedding day becomes a further mechanism for consumption through remaining highly visible, shared online between other brides, and demonstrative of one's ability to perform bridal identity.

However, research on how women take up postfeminist sentiment and make it their own is only beginning to document the pleasures and pains of postfeminist sentiment (see Author B, 2010, 2013, 2014; Jackson, Vares and Gill, 2013; Ringrose, 2013). Further, little work explores women's sense making of postfeminist wedding culture; indeed, '[t]here is very little scholarship on women's experience of wearing a wedding dress' (Nash, 2013, p.596), or, we would argue, on the retelling of the wedding day itself. While marriage is constituted a site of important critique for early feminists, interest in the wedding and marriage seems to have waned (Brook, 2002). In this article, we draw on data collected with five brides in the Netherlands to build on previous research. Below we discuss the methods used to collect and make sense of the women's discussions of their wedding day. In the analysis we pay special attention to how the image of postfeminist bridal identity opens up affective ways of thinking about appearance, respectability, feminine capital, romanticism and the body in the stories of the brides.

Methods

This article draws on a sample of five in-depth interviews with white, heterosexual women: Ann (24), Gemma (28), Joyce (24), Naomi (36) and Rose (27), who could be defined as broadly middle-class on the basis of lifestyle and occupation (e.g. business owner, teacher, and health related careers). All women identified as Christian, and of Hervormd denomination. The data form part of a larger project on bridal experience in the Netherlands in the context of a postfeminist sentiment that reinforces traditional gender norms and at the same time presents these as the bride's individual 'choice'. Further data collected in this project includes online methods (e.g. Skype interviews), digital ethnographic techniques that map different online bridal practices (Hine, 2000), and the experiences of the first author (through fieldnotes and research diaries), who is currently engaged. The additional data is beyond the focus of this article, and we acknowledge that the sample is small; however, we are working within a qualitative framework that draws on social constructionist methodologies. We are less concerned with generalising our findings, or of proving them true or repeatable. Our quality criteria come from a methodological perspective where 'we know that the phenomena we study are messy, complicated, uncertain, and soft' (Bochner, 2000, p.267). What we are interested in is the meanings these women attached to their wedding, given the context described above.

These five women were recruited on the basis of their willingness to take part, and this was judged in the context of the wider research as more important than the time between the moment of the interview and their wedding. The interviews took place in the summer of 2012, were conducted with the women in their homes and lasted between 1.5 and 2.5 hours. There was no formal interview schedule. The women were instead asked to bring objects with them to the interview such as photographs, keep-sakes and items of clothing, which evoked memories of their wedding day. The objects that the women shared with us also had a prominent place in their everyday life: photos, dried wedding bouquets and wedding dresses were put on display in the living room or bedroom. Other objects that carried value included a pair of glasses,

fragrances and jewellery. This style of interviewing was chosen because of its ability to elicit memory and feeling, and because of our own recognition of the personal significance of wedding day objects, which meant that people were likely to be prompted more by their own objects than by the researcher's questions (Harper, 2002). Much work has been done on the ability of images and objects to trigger, elicit and evoke narratives, memories and storytelling (Harper, 2002; Harrison, 2002; Bell, 2013). For example, Mitchell (2011) cites her previous research (Weber and Mitchell, 2004) where the 'dress story' is provoked by the item of clothing that acts as an explicit prompt for storytelling and memory work. By drawing on these elicitation techniques, it meant that during the interviews the emphasis was taken off the researcher, and meant that we didn't enforce an agenda-led interview schedule. Instead the objects women had with them allowed discussion to emerge naturally between interviewee, interviewer and the photos/objects present, based on the women's own emotional investment, memories and feelings (Hollway and Jefferson, 2000).

During the interviews, these techniques proved highly successful. Interview data was heavily saturated in emotional rhetoric, and the first author's reflections on the interview context highlighted the deep emotional connection between the interviewee and interviewer. As Ezzy (2010) suggests, such embodied connections can be rewarding for both interviewee and interviewer – and indeed the interviewees spoke during and after the discussion of the pleasures of sharing their wedding experience with the first author, even when they had initially been concerned that they would not have enough to say.

All interviews took place in Dutch, which was the first language of both the participants and the first author. All the interviews were conducted, transcribed and translated by the first author. Attempts were made to maintain the meaning of Dutch words as closely as possible, and where necessary the original Dutch word was kept in the transcript alongside their English translation. The project received ethical approval from our University. Full details of the project were

provided to all participants, and consent was gain for each interview. All names used here are pseudonyms.

Once audio-recordings were transcribed and translated, our analysis involved a multi-modal approach. We immersed ourselves in the data through a close reading and re-reading of each transcript, paying attention to themes and repetitions, and exploring these for their relevance within individual interview data: for example, cross-referencing with the first author's research diary, fieldnotes and feelings during those points. As we read through the data, themes also began to emerge across the transcripts. Given the methods that we used to elicit the data and an explicit reference to a past event (the wedding day), it was unsurprising that there was an 'autobiographical impulse' in how the women spoke (Polkinghorne, 1991, 1995; Johnstone, 2001) in the same way that discussions of, for example, divorce or coming-out stories necessitate a temporal 'looking back' (see Plummer, 1995; Riessman, 2002). We therefore drew on narrative analytic methods to interpret the data: but note that the object of analysis was not in the storytelling per se. Instead we were interested how narratives were used to construct coherent stories about the self in the context of postfeminist contradiction, where postfeminism asks brides to make sense of traditional wedding practices as the outcome of individual choice and self-improvement (Heise, 2012; Nash, 2013).

The second analytic method that informed our interpretation of the data was discourse analysis, as a way of understanding the historical and contingent nature of the women's narratives, and where, in the formation of the self, '[a]uto/biographical narratives are…theorized as a discursive regime wherein the female self is being constituted through procedures of objectification – wherein she is categorized, distributed and manipulated – and procedures of subjectification – ways she actively turns herself into a subject' (Tamboukou, 2013, p.93). Below we treat the data as discourse, in the sense that we identified coherent sets of meaning that were analyse as culturally and historically contingent on marital discourses, and that bridal identity became a technology of the self that created subject and objects in the women's talk

(see Author B, 2010, 2014). Alongside this, we also drew on methods of analysis emerging in beauty research that pays attention to the way that such discursive self-formation troubles top-down theories of power evident in beauty practices, and which instead focuses its interpretative lenses at the feeling and temporality of beauty, and its related emotive constructs of, for example, happiness, contentedness, and love (e.g. Colebrook, 2006; Moreno Figueroa, 2013).

In the analysis below, we draw on these methods to interpret narratives of bridal becomings. We begin with filmic accounts of the 'perfect day', where women drew on mediated storytelling to define wedding success. We show how this narrative was carefully managed through the bride's relationship to her wedding dress, where excess (in either taste or embodiment) needed to be managed to achieve 'normal' bridal beauty. We also draw attention to the physically painful wedding dress story, as an example where appropriately postfeminist excess was normalised so long as bridal beauty was achieved. We conclude this article by suggesting bridal identity is mediated through emotive discourses of postfeminist sentiment that retraditionalise gender power.

"I will just start with a nice story, immediately"

The women who were interviewed for this study were keen to tell their story of their wedding – as indicated by Naomi (36) who began her interview with the promise of "a nice story". Within the retelling the women deeply engaged with the allure of bridal perfection that is evident within representations of weddings in popular media (Heise, 2012). In the following extract, for example, it becomes evident how Joyce engages with the construct of bridal perfection:

Extract 1

Joyce: Yes, I had it [the wedding dress] on, I thought. Yes, and then your makeup your
             hair. I already tried my hair-style for the day, and that was fine. And then, after a
             little while you become like, well now it's time I think. And then, I wasn't finished

completely, because I didn't wear my jacket yet and then I saw the car [with her fiancée] coming already. And then you go to the door, you know, and then you wait till the doorbell rings. (laughs a bit) And then you open the door. And then, and, you know, that's a bit funny, you can see it on the DVD as well, you open the door and then you think, oooh!(…)And then for a little while you're overwhelmed by all those beautiful things. And then you think, oh yes.(…)And suddenly, you're in the centre, because the photo camera and and video and and the neighbours are standing there and saying like 'oh you're so beautiful and nice'. And then for a little while it goes like 'ohw'. It makes you a bit shy.

Int.:   (laughs). But you got used to it?

Joyce: Yes, after a while you, yes, because alongside the road everyone waves to you and oh yes, actually it's, everyone is nice to you. You're really the bride you know.

(Joyce, aged 24, married in 2009)

In the extract above Joyce described the process of becoming the bride in a cinematic narrative of happiness, through which her self-concept transforms alongside the acquisition of objects and beautifying practices (the make-up, the hair, the jacket, the car) (Coleman and Moreno Figueroa, 2010). This bridal becoming was deeply rooted within overarching political and social structures of postfeminist sentiment and the female (or bridal) body, understood as in need of constant change and improvement through the right consumer practices (e.g. Ringrose and Walkerdine 2008). Joyce's beauty work was also rooted within romantic discourses that inform the allure of the perfect bride and wedding day (until you really become the bride) (Boden, 2003; Otnes and Pleck, 2003). Self-transformation and retraditionalisation, as two components at the heart of postfeminist sensibility, re-asserts the normative expectations of heterosexual feminine wedding fantasy. By Joyce's retelling of her wedding day in this highly romanticised way, Joyce engages in what Heise (2012) terms 'bridal fictions', where 'the postfeminist bride unapologetically embraces romance as central part of her life and relationship' (n.p.), even while the groom is absented from the story (Winch, 2013).

The location of the wedding within romanticism was also mirrored in the way Joyce narrated her experience through the temporal and anticipatory aspects of emotive and romantic storytelling (Polkinghorne, 1991; Illouz, 2012). In the beginning of the extract she articulated her beautifying practices in a procedural way (the dress on, then the makeup, then the hair). One significant moment of transformation came through opening the door: an act that within the story transforms the world - "for a little while you're overwhelmed by all those beautiful things". This moment not only transformed the way Joyce experienced her bridal becoming, but also the form of the story. The story gradually builds emotion, figuratively captured by Joyce inability to express herself in words: when Joyce spoke of the opening the door, the experience is presented through vocalisations, "oooh!".

Postfeminism and the wedding dress

Within postfeminist media representation, the 'good' wedding is understood as a site of women's ultimate success (Negra, 2009). In becoming this successful bridal self, the wedding dress is a key element: in particular the practice of finding and wearing the 'perfect' wedding dress. For example, in Friese's (2001) interviews with brides-to-be in bridal stores, trying and choosing the dress represented the first step to becoming the bride and recognising one's changed social status as future bride. The value of the dress and the story of finding the dress were also important in our interviews. This included evaluating other dresses, for example:

Extract 2

Ann: I wanted a tranquil, stylish dress, with nice details. I didn't want a busy one, with here a flower, there other things, that simply doesn't suit me.(…)I know that some people. You know a little while ago there was someone and I heard she had a wedding dress of Meri Borsato. I was like, she was a bit robust and uhm, her bodice, and she had all sort of things on it and she had frills on it and she, then she

had such a dress, uhm skirt and then I thought it's quite nice to have a bit of a wider skirt, a little bit wider then I had, but man, I thought this was a whorish dress. Yeah, and her (boobs) came half out of the dress and it was like, boy oh boy, "I'm going to marry once so I'm going to pull out all the stops", you could say. I thought it was really too much and usually she never wear those kind of things. This was what I would call pulling on a funfair attraction. No, I really thought it was inappropriate. I think you should wear a dress that fits who you are. Like people who never wear 'nude' and then they suddenly go totally 'nude' than I think like, yeah, why now?(…)Later I heard that is was a very expensive dress of Meri Borsato. Well, I said, I cannot see that it was so. Is that what they call expensive?

(Ann, aged 24, married in 2010)

In the extract above, Ann discussed what she wanted – the "tranquil, stylish dress with nice details" by marking it through difference. The 'right' wedding dress was neither the excessive dress, nor one that did not reflect "who you are". The 'right' wedding dress therefore served to demarcate the boarders of acceptable, respectable bridal beauty. The 'bad' bride, was deemed to have engaged in appropriate consumption, by choosing the designer dress made by Meri Borsato, and therefore had financial capital, but did not have the right cultural or body capital to wear the dress appropriately (Skeggs, 1997; Rafferty, 2011). In the above extract, the other bride's visibility was thus hyper-visible because of its failure to fit these categories. Her "robust" body was discursively placed against a bodice with too many frills, and the dress is marked as excessive: the 'bad' bride's body was retold as spilling out of her dress, and "whorish", and so sat in contrast to both historic and contemporary expectations of bridal perfection (see Jensen and Ringrose, 2014 for an analysis of bridal excess in relation to class). This means that even the 'appropriate' designer dress was dismissed: Ann calls into question the financial capital contained in the symbol of the designer dress - "Is that what they call expensive?" - implying that the dress looked cheap, regardless of its actual cost.

The powerful construct of the "inappropriate" dress makes sense when considering the historical discourses of brides and weddings: the bride symbolised virginity, purity, modesty and morality (Ingraham, 2008). Equally, the notion that body reflects inner self is not new: since Victorian times, feminine bodily appearance has mattered. For example, respectable womanhood was located within upper and middle-classes who were represented through appearance in terms of luxurious display, glamour and desirability, while their working class counter parts were seen as aggressive, excessively sexual and masculine (Poovey, 1984; Illouz, 2012). In Ann's talk, she drew on this discourse of body and self in stating that the dress should not only 'fit', but also be one that "fits who you are". What was different in the above was that the bad dress was made sense of as a deliberate choice of the bride: Ann imagined the bride thinking, ""I'm going to marry once so I'm going to pull out all the stops"". This meant that feminine body and cultural capital throughout Ann's talk was constructed as a choice, achievable through the right application of the right consumer goods – hiding the privileged categories of class, race, gender and sexuality (Gill, 2007a; Jensen and Ringrose, 2014)

Alongside this demarcation of the bad wedding dress, other women discussed the promise of the 'good' dress. The following two extracts come from the interview with Naomi whose story was rooted in an understanding of her own body as positioned away from normative notions of feminine beauty. She was therefore required to carefully negotiate bridal beauty and identity, which produced a lot of anxiety in her talk.

Extract 3

Naomi: … But despite that I never had a dream like that, about what my wedding dress had to look like for example, that's something women seem to have, I didn't have that at all. But I thought, if I ever marry I want something, something which I think is very beautiful, something I really like. So anyway, so when we, when I really had to go shopping for a wedding dress, I thought it was terrible already(…)I'm just

big and I always think people with, with, people who are and big and wearing a wedding dress, they are like, like balloons or something and *making a noise* and fat and even fatter and. And of course Marc [her husband] is quite, yeah, how shall I put it, uhm, slender(…)I thought that would look terrible, he's so slender and then I'm such a big elephant and then we will be standing next to each other and I thought, that won't work at all. (…) Eventually it was about nine month before the wedding and I thought well, I need to go [to the bridal shop]… But when we came there I acted very stupid to that saleswoman, like. Then she says, what do you like? I said to her, I don't like anything. I just said that. I really like nothing. Yes, I like things for size 34 [UK 6]. I think that's quite beautiful.

(Naomi, aged 36, married 2009)

Throughout Naomi's narrative, she centred on the search for her wedding dress and the expectation to become the successful bride (what she called the 'real bride'). Naomi's talk about her body included a disclaimer: that she did not have 'a dream' about bridal beauty, but this is followed by the suggestion that she wanted something beautiful, and that her own body marked her out as not fitting cultural expectations of such beauty. But more than this, it was Naomi's body next to her husband's that she identified retrospectively as having caused her body anxiety, who was defined, cautiously, as "slender" while Naomi described herself as a "balloon" and a "big elephant". The experience of the embodied self was shaped in comparison to others (Skeggs, 1997). We read this talk then as a desire for normalcy: for a wedding that didn't stand out as excessive, but as 'a desire to feel normal and to feel normalcy as a ground for a dependable life that does not have to keep being reinvented' (Berlant, 2007, p. 281). Naomi's 'real bride' and lack of 'a dream' in this context was thus suggestive of a 'normal bride': an expectation, as Coleman and Moreno Figueroa (2010, p.369) note, that is also evident in research on cosmetic surgery and other beauty practices. We explore this further in Naomi's relationship to her wedding dress below.

Extract 4

Naomi: …I really feel like, yeah, that was my dress, yeah, it's really my dress(...)Yeah, and it was like, yeah, fortunately it [the wedding dress] existed, or something.(…)But it really is a part of my story, you could say, a bit, a bit, it had to be, no, it must be the right one. And right doesn't mean it had to be the most beautiful dress that is ever been made, no it had to be right so that I felt comfortable in it: then it was the right one. Do you know what I mean?

Int.: Yes, I understand you completely.

Naomi: So, it wasn't that I thought like oh, and now everyone will faint because it's so beautiful, that was not the intention, I just wanted to have a beautiful fabric, I wanted a beautiful, you know, I really wanted a beautiful dress but I had to feel comfortable about it. And of course Marc had to think it was a beautiful dress.

(Naomi, aged 36, married 2009)

Naomi concluded her wedding story, where her having found 'the one' completed the stability of successful bridal narrative: the right wedding dress that, as she constructed throughout her interview, allowed her to become the 'real bride'. Naomi's description of the dress used traditional romantic repertoires that are usually preserved for constructs of the ideal partner, or in postfeminist chick lit, 'Mr. Right': for example "fortunately it [the wedding dress] existed" and "it had to be the right one" (see Gill and Herdieckerhoff, 2006; Negra, 2009). In the context of individualistic 'liquid love', where traditional notions of heterosexual romance have been challenged by changes in gender relations, Naomi's talk made consumerism a romantic relationship to the self, blurring the boundaries between self, wedding story and the dress (Weeks, 1998; Bauman, 2003; Boden, 2003; Illouz, 2012). Moreover, this complex relationship to the dress had to be carefully negotiated given Naomi's constructs of bodily anxiety relative to her groom. Postfeminist bridal becoming in Naomi's story was represented as a desire to be normatively beautiful, so that it's not "the most beautiful dress that is ever been made".

'Normalcy' is not to suggest that there was little emotional or financial investment in the dress (Boden, 2003): indeed, as has been noted of 'natural' beauty regimes or the 'girl next door' look, these involve as much work and investment as others, so that all beauty practices are understood as involving work (Author B, 2013; Riley and Scharff, 2013). But as we suggest above, postfeminist bridal beauty cannot become excessive: to do so would risk slipping over into inappropriate, overly sexual and hyper-visible femininity (McRobbie, 2009; Jensen and Ringrose, 2014). Instead 'normalcy' becomes, in Naomi's story, difficult to achieve, transformative, unique ('the one') and full of anxiety (see Bauman, 2003; Berlant, 2012). And as we show in the final part of our analysis, the desire to be normatively beautiful can also be 'appropriately excessive' in other ways: namely, through a physical investment.

Pain, humour, and fun

Much contemporary feminist literature around beauty and beautifying practices focus on understanding beauty as part of a patriarchal society that makes women weaker and more vulnerable (e.g. Wolf, 1991; Jeffreys, 2005). It is important to keep these overarching structures in mind. However, rather than focusing upon the moralising question of whether a woman's (or bride's) engagement with beauty is 'good' or 'bad', we would like to focus on the meanings of engaging with the sometimes physically painful bridal beauty practices. For example:

Extract 5

Rose: …On the day I had, when we came home in the morning, and I took off my corset and I had just exactly on the bones of my hips and at the back on, on my buttocks, there really were grazes and here (pointing to her hips) it were really two little wounds, as your whole corset, and yeah, the dress just weights 22 kilos.

Int.: <u>22 kilos?</u>

Rose: With your skirt and your hoops and the corset, when you are wearing everything.

Int.: Blimey, I didn't think that would be that heavy.

Rose: Yeah, and that, that's really not just, when I lifted it up the hanger, and that was okay, but then I had to go outside too, then I had put it over my arm and that, that you won't hold that for metres. No, it's really very heavy.

Int.:   Wow, I didn't think about that, that it would be that heavy.

Rose: But this, this body is completely hard. There are stiffeners in that whole thing, well and there is so much weight and fabric in and uhm metal and uhm plastic. That it's just, my dress, the body, you can just put it down and it will stand(…)It won't collapse or something. And it doesn't fit nice at all, so that's no reason for doing it. (Laughs a bit) And then they say, then they say, yeah, during the whole I have to be able to do uhn, yeah, did you want to say move, as that's just impossible. (Laughs a bit) But you really don't care about it.

Int.:   As you just wanted to have such a dress?

Rose: Yes, you just want, you just want to be beautiful.

(Rose, aged 27, married 2010).

Fun, humour and irony have become part of postfeminist sentiment, and have been cited as the main technique of media representations in positing feminism as outmoded – the knowing wink making it difficult for feminist analysts to adequately critique sexism and misogyny (Gill, 2007a; McRobbie, 2009). Equally, practices associated with weddings have been noted for sculpting, shaping and regulating the female body, for example through extreme dieting (Prichard and Tiggermann, 2008, 2014; Winch and Websert, 2012; Nash, 2013, although we would point out that only Gemma spoke of dieting). However, as we have argued, these critiques are valuable, but they miss the pleasures that make this humour and irony possible.

In the context of retraditionalisation, the pain and discomfort of the wedding dress are re-written as something that Rose frames as agentically allowing her to achieve bridal beauty. Rose and the interviewer (first author) *enjoyed* sharing the story of Rose's painful dress. And like battle scars, the bruises and grazes that Rose reconstructed, by pointing to parts of her

body, demonstrate the pride that become associated with wearing the painful dress, and of her commitment to becoming the perfect bride. As other feminist analysts of beauty culture have pointed out, power works in ways that do not simply orient to domination, as there are feelings of power associated with acquiring the skills and practices, and withstanding the pain, of beauty (Bartky, 1990; Felksi, 2006). The dress became Rose's way of achieving an attachment to beauty – so that her choice and the "just want[ing] to be beautiful", coupled with the pleasures of recounting her ordeal, becomes both self-evident, obligatory, and a matter of achievement.

Discussion

Postfeminist sentiment, understood broadly as a set of discourses that shapes contemporary femininity through notions of consumer choice and freedom, have come to inflect cultural constructs of the wedding day. This postfeminist sentiment redeploys gender essentialism, binds feminine success to the body, and, in the context of dramatic shifts in gender relations, acts to retraditionalise historically gendered practices as a matter of free will (Gill, 2007a). This retraditionalisation is evident in romance novels (Gill and Herdieckerhoff, 2006), home bakery (Hollows, 2003) and the wedding (Negra, 2009; Heise, 2012; Nash, 2013). In this context, the wedding may be an important site to explore postfeminist sentiment, given the financial expense and expanding consumer culture surrounding a practice that is traditionally a ritualised ceremony and religious passage (Ingraham, 2008), and that has in the past been the focus of heavy critiqued by feminist analysts for maintaining gender power asymmetries (Brook, 2002).

However, much research on postfeminist sentiment has focused on the way this discourse of contemporary gender relations is mediated, while a smaller body of work has attempted to unpack what sense making are enabled by these constructs in people's negotiations of gender identity (e.g. Author B, 2010, 2013; Jackson, Vares and Gill, 2013; Ringrose, 2013). In this article, we have attempted to add to the literature on wedding culture by exploring the narratives of five women from the Netherlands, who spoke to us about their wedding day and their

experiences of being brides. In our discussion, we want to develop two themes within our analysis that we feel are important for understanding retraditionalisation, and which could be useful in future research on understanding the pleasures (above simply providing critique) of the wedding and its retraditionalisation (see Gill, 2007b for an account of 'critical respect'). These themes are: successful 'perfect' bridal storytelling, alongside a bodily regulation that oriented to normalcy.

Throughout our interviews, the women reflected back on their wedding day as a success story, according to narratives that explored their embodiment of a particular bridal beauty: a graceful, easy-going beauty that, as Naomi's extracts suggest, can actually be difficult to achieve, and as Rose demonstrates, can be painful. The contradictions contained in the story where easy-going, natural, 'normative' expectations for bridal beauty require work are made sense of through the narrative retelling: as something overcome, which then orients towards success. Stories are retold through the tropes of media narratives of the wedding (fairytales, romance novels, wedding genre movies). Drawing on these tropes made the bridal experience central, which was itself reconfirmed through the mediation of the wedding: Joyce, for example, suggests that the 'magic' moment of her wedding could be seen in the DVD (through which she can lay claim to witnessing the moment of her transformation) and the cameras and videos that act as props that confirm her place at the centre of the story.

Along with Heise (2012), we see such storytelling as 'bridal fictions': techniques to tell the successful bridal story, in ways that mark it as knowing, self-determined and agentic. In a postfeminist context, the successful feminine subject achieves bridal beauty through agentically working on the self. Combined with a broader cultural notion of marriage as the endpoint of love and romance - a discourse only becoming dominant in the recent history of the 19th century, but one that still greatly structures self-worth (Ingraham, 2008; Illouz, 2012) - these bridal fictions represent a means to understanding the self as successful, and in doing so represent one of the few moments where women can narrate a 'self-made' happiness.

Of course, 'postfeminist promises' of freedom, choice and agency are tempered by the heterosexual expectations of wedding day bliss and a cultural obligation to get married, which is ideologically supported by a burgeoning consumer culture (Winch and Webster, 2012). The wedding day may be understood as the bride's 'special day', but this special day is still tightly structured through the attendant limits placed on agency through consumerism (e.g. the tiered wedding cake, the white dress, the wedding gifts, no matter how 'unique', are still anticipated consumer practices). What is pleasurable in this? We see the pleasures that bind women to bridal identity as siting alongside the broader obligations of wedding culture, where becoming the 'successful' bridal self in our data cumulated in a narrative that carefully regulated appearance, respectability, feminine capital and romanticism. Collectively the bride's narratives spoke of a tightrope of 'excess' that managed the normative expectation of the slim, middle class successful bride, and normalised, even make pleasurable, bridal beauty practices that were retold as causing pain. This regulation of the body, however, was understood by the brides as a means to transform the self into the 'good' bride: a productive identity discourse in the wider context of a postfeminist sentiment that emphasises successful bodily performance as a way to become a 'good' feminine subject. Wedding culture's retraditionalisation is thus located in the way it made our past-brides feel: a powerful postfeminist dream of success, achievement and happiness, which aligned female identity back to feminine beauty and historically patriarchal practices (i.e. weddings) as a testament of self-worth and the future 'good life'.

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[i] http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-13248642

[ii] http://www.assepoesterfeestkleding.nl/trouwen-en-feesten/trouwen/celebrities/sylvie-meis-en-rafael-van-der-vaart.php

[iii] http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/rel/vsob1/marriages-in-england-and-wales--provisional-/2009/marriages-summary.html

[iv] According to the market research agency 'The Wedding Report', the costs of weddings in the USA dropped from $18,231 in 2008 to $16,903 in 2009, but was largely compensated when the average spending rose to more than $20,000 in 2010 up to $27,000 in 2012. The average spending in the UK in 2013 was just over £20,000. In the Netherlands a wedding ceremony costs between the €15,000 to €16,000 and ceremonies of more than €25,000 are not uncommon. The average costs in Belgium are a little higher, at €17,534.