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## THE SYMBOLISM OF MARRIAGE – A SERIES OF PHOTOGRAPHS INSPIRED BY RITES AND RITUALS CONCERNING MARRIAGE AND CUSTOMS CENTERED AROUND WEDDING CEREMONIES

A wedding is an extremely complex phenomenon, described from many angles, especially anthropological, social, religious, legal, ethnological, historical, or sociological perspectives. There has been no doctoral thesis, however, which would be an attempt at recording current trends, confronting the knowledge of symbolism and customs, and interpreting their perception. That fact has become an assumption for an undertaking to make an expression in the visual area of perceived relations.

An idea was born in September 2017 during the national reading of Wyspiański's play to treat the wedding (and marriage) as a broad spectrum of various practices, compilations of symbols and a visual performance with a potential for a creative interpretation. Two works have played a significant role in the author's understanding of wedding themes. The first is *Sentimental Journey* by Nobuyoshi Araki, a book with a series of photographs taken during the author's honeymoon trip with his wife Yōko Arak. It is a photography book with a great emotional load, so much fitting into the perception of the wedding as an act of relationship between two people, and photographing itself as a symbolic gesture completing the entire visual context. Another significant work is *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even* (also known as *The Large Glass*, 1915-1923) by Marcel Duchamp. A figurative work shows two worlds: feminine and masculine that unite and complement each other, though being completely different. In 1921 *The Large Glass* cracked. Duchamp recognised that thus a non-material unity of a woman and man was created, an ethereal bond between them.

In general, a photograph is perceived as evidence of something that has been photographed. The doctoral thesis' objective involves a reflection on how modern wedding customs and those centred on wedding ceremonies are perceived, but it also is a study of those images and a relation of how they are interpreted today. An objective of the doctoral thesis is to streamline an observed world, where a photographer acts as a

researcher, an observer, and the one who uses their own means of expression for the purpose of a deeper insight into an image of the symbolic reality and man that is entangled in it.

A specific feature of this thesis is a visual expression of thoughts on a modern interpretation of wedding symbolism by means of analysing photography as a medium, its capabilities of conceptually challenging an image of the reality, self-reflection, and a need for intellectual and research development of issues concerning artistic creation.

Photography occupies a significant place in modern arts. Not only as an image reduced to a flat frame recording the reality, but also as a language of an artistic statement. Since its very origins, photography has been penetrating issues of human visibility by means of light that records the existence of the world in its various aspects. At present, the world has been dominated by digital photography. Photography of this type combines few traditions, including aesthetics and the way of imaging in analogue photography with a tradition of graphic works, including editing used to express a post-modern world. Photography never loses its topicality, and a response to its mission will dynamically change. Visual works are born out of the spirit, imagination, and conceptual idea of the artist. A work establishes a dialogue with the real world, asks a question that refers to experiences and impressions stemming from the surrounding space. A photographic work does so twice. At the beginning as a medium associated with authentic mapping of the reality, and then at the time of comparing the real image with the one that has been mediated.

Photography *a priori* assumes the existence of a mystery concerning the existence of man. Photography aesthetically searches for intriguing manifestations in everydayness and the reality.

The main assumptions of this doctoral thesis include systematisation of the wedding symbolism, changes observed in modern culture, the presentation of wedding and marriage rituals on the basis of the collected data.



The primary objective of carrying out an artistic and research project is to find an answer to the following question: what is the representation of the wedding compared to the reality with which those interested appear to be dealing with.

Further to the undertaken project the coverage of 30 weddings was done in the territory of the Silesian and Opole Voivodeships. Photographs made for artistic works are a commentary on the stories pursued.

In order to present changes in the process of deciding on and entering into a marriage, works in sociology, ethnography, social history, anthropology of culture, and own field research have been employed. Selected elements of a traditional wedding ritual have been discussed in confrontation with weddings that currently happen.

An analysis of wedding topics as perceived by persons engaged in the preparation and execution of elements relating to wedding and marriage ceremonies has been performed. In the artistic area a set of works has been presented illustrating the author's own attitude to the discussed terms and symbols, related emotions, thoughts, and the creative activity.

Each of the photographs shown in the project asks a different question and offers the author's own thoughts on her own interpretation of the known symbols. The symbolism of works is born in a strict relation between sensual and that is non-sensual, out of the mutual dependency of the visual and the idea.

Photography that the author uses to express herself becomes both a metaphor of the modern world and her place in it. A relation between the image – being a representation of the reality and a means of its transferring has been analysed by Hans Belting, whose words have accompanied the author during her own reflections on the issues presented in the thesis' title: "The mystery of an image consists in inseparable assemblage of presence and absence in it. (...) The image only becomes an image if it is animated by its spectator." (H. Belting, *Anthropology of Images...*, 2007, p. 39).



The doctoral thesis begins with a chapter on theoretical issues, containing an introduction to the world of symbols, explanations of terms and a thought on the meaning and importance of symbols in the modern world.

The first chapter entitled *In the World of Symbols* systematises the terminology employed in the context of the examined issues. References are made to various definitions and indications relating to individual phrases, together with an indication of those that are appropriate for the purposes of this thesis. Mention is made of such terms as: a sign, a symbol, a rite, and a custom.

The second chapter presents methodological assumptions – the objective and scope of the undertaken research. The results of the completed field research have been subjected to analysis. Attention is also focused on the notion of a wedding, comparing it to a play with the defined roles of man pursuant to an idea of Goffman's *theatre of everyday life*.

Considerations presented in the third chapter on the *most beautiful day in life* (being a reappearing term describing a wedding according to those surveyed), and which refers to an artistic work will be an outcome of the completed research, reflections, and the author's own observations about the symbolism of wedding.

The theoretical part that is an introduction to the issues presented in the thesis' title will be devoted to an analysis of the form and content of ritual messages in relation to the collected literature references, paintings that are referred to, and other aspects of folklore art, documentary art, and, in particular, artistic art. The theoretical part also comprises the results of the completed research which are a formal foundation for artistic considerations.

Short films have been made, or video art movies the purpose of which is to expand a perspective of the issues concerning the usage of symbols.

The artistic part presents the topic under a convention of subjective photography. It is a response to a modern context of the presented values in relation to a changing reality and symbolism of wedding traditions.

The doctoral thesis preparation offers a possibility of collecting documentation of the occurring changes.

The objective of this thesis is to present a fluid border among changing trends to show that a wedding is a culmination point of today's perception of traditions.

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In post-modern society that is characterised by temporariness, risks, excess, and superficiality of intimate relations, uncertainties and the fluidity of rules, today a close relation is formalised by persons, who treat that act as a type of adaptation to such reality. The marriage is entered into by those, who define it as stabilisation, although they do not perceive an act of marriage as an anti-chamber to a traditional division of family roles, a loss of autonomy, and a change in their previous way of life. Nonetheless, for many young people a wedding is still the "natural course of things," a life project that was instilled in them during their socialisation process. It is especially women who perceive the marriage as access to social normality, enhancement of their social status. The marriage still remains a kind of special "certification". Modern trajectories of unions and customary practices concerning the marriage not only reveal aspirations of young people or reflect their way of living, but primarily make evident processes so characteristic for post-modern society. Małgorzata Jacyno (Jacyno 2007: p. 23) emphasises that "under conditions of being reflexive, the sense of subjectivity of persons is realised in freedom understood as making choices", unlike the experience of "being sentenced." Therefore, it may not be excluded that an attempt at *deroutinising* the marriage and the wedding (since it has been unable to *deroutinise* a biographical note itself that may be perceived by spectators as conventional) provides young persons with a sense of experiencing their own subjectivity. As M. Jacyno writes "the agency of authenticity, the sense of dignity and freedom - being the main values of the culture of individualism - is realised just in a possibility of making choices or through a possibility of such interpretation of biographical experience that allows experiencing it as an effect of choices made. It is also worth noting that modern acceptance of a wedding ritual

expressed by active participation in it, and even individually “constructing” its certain elements to make it personalised serves the purpose of making dreams come true about a fairytale, magical world, about a legend starring a princess and a prince, and thus the uniqueness and unusualness of the event.

From a perspective of the field of relations between photography and materiality, or a process of changing what is alive into motionless images, has ambivalent results, among which mention may be made of: immortalising of what is photographed, and which becomes a simultaneous reminder that what has been thus recorded does not exist any longer and that owing to pictures we stop the time, freeze what is elusive, protecting it against passing away, but also reminding about passing away, the impermanence of existence, portraying what no longer exists [Drozdowski, Krajewski, 2009: p. 178]. A basic difficulty while experiencing an image is a decision about what we see: a material object, or thus a two-dimension plane covered with content (images, landscapes, interiors, etc.), as John Berger defined it – “a sight which has been recorded by a camera and is treated as a message, or the reality itself, which has not only been presented, but reproduced by a technical device” [Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, 2009].

Treating photography as the reproduction of the reality brings about yet other ambivalences. Having a copy we see the detailed reality, although being transformed: rectangular, flat, motionless, framed, reduced, and separated from a larger whole by a frame. Furthermore, photographs as copies of the reality provide quite new experiences of space, since they simultaneously make an impression that an object is both close and distant. Images impose strong moral obligations on their spectators, making them a witness of events presented in photographs, at the same time, however, releasing them from such function, leaving them in the sphere of spectators. A photograph is primarily a message, an intentionally created object the purpose of which is to transfer meanings. A photograph may be treated as a trace of what has been presented in it, but at the same time leaving a fact in our consciousness that such traces have been created to prove something. Pictures have a role of documenting, conveying information, recording emotions, thus also become a possibility of freely creating the reality in images. That latter element just seems to be most interesting, or in what way it is possible to direct memories shown in photographs. Photography that the author uses to express herself

becomes both a metaphor of the modern world and her place in it. A feature dominating in the presented photographs is the simplicity of means used in monochromatically composed images, offering a possibility of multiple interpretations. Interpreting images within many layers is a common feature, relating also to the symbols included in this thesis.

“Wedding rites share the fate of modern culture. They are not, however, only a fossil full of magic and sacral senses, but its integral, functional element that sanctions a breakthrough in the life of individuals and families. Changes in culture, including the organisation of a family life, must be directly translated into forms of celebrations” [Łeńska-Bąk, 1999: p. 39]. Together with their original interpretations, wedding symbols and rites being isolated from their native system, but remaining in the consciousness of modern man, enter into new relations in a different cultural situation. A change of a religious mentality is related to the disappearance of the existing symbols or the transformation of their meaning, senses motivated by finding ourselves in a rationalised culture. Self-awareness driven by stimuli of a traditional culture and images of an ideal ceremony, as perceived by would-be-married couples, leaves an ample space for implementing authentic values for which the act of marriage is to be performed. Photographs contain an empty space which in time will be filled in with nostalgic memories from the most beautiful moments in life, which are different ones for everyone. And it is the decisive moment that is the most important one in photographs. Expressed here in black and white a symbolic code is of importance here. Each time such a comparison is a reminder of the presence of feminine and masculine elements, the sphere of sacrum and profanum. The prepared photographs become unpredictable objects, gaining another symbolic and magical dimension, which is assigned in a changing order of their recording, as a peculiar consequence of the previously analysed topic of symbolism, existence, time, elusiveness, and continuance of both man, and images (objects).

The collected and presented material both of a theoretical and empirical nature does not exhaust the issue of how wedding ceremonies are performed across Europe and in the world, nor does it pretend to be a quantitative description of a direction of cultural changes, but it explicitly points out to such changes in the context of changes in

priorities and a hierarchy of values among persons who declare their willingness to formalise their relations. By presenting past and future practices this doctoral thesis by its very nature is a voice in discussion about the strength and endurance of social rules that reflect a collective order and the meaning of symbols in man's life. Further scientific research of the issue could comprise confronting experiences of couples from different countries, ways of perceiving and valuing ceremonies and rites of passage on an international scale.

Katowice, 2021.

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Anna Wójcik', written in a cursive style.