For Ever and Ever the Perfect Wedding Picture: Converging Religious and Secular Norms and Values in Wedding Photography

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Abstract: The paper examines how stylistic norms of wedding photography express, affirm, adapt, and reshape religious and secular values by combining ethical considerations with qualitative ethnographic observations. The first part offers a critique of the distinction between civil secular and religious weddings in current scholarship. In the second part, the relation between norms and values in an ethics of wedding photos is elaborated. The discussion is illustrated with examples from a study with 27 married couples and their wedding photos. The study reveals two key aspects: In the production of wedding photos, the triangular relation between the couple, their guests, and the location, the so-called locationship, is staged through the lens of the camera. In this triangle, the blending of religious and secular norms and values could be observed. Another significant aspect is how norms and values originating from wedding photography of religious ceremonies continue to impact secular norms and values. It is particularly noteworthy that religion serves as an aesthetic matrix in wedding photography, contributing to a “visual enchantment”, irrespective of whether the ceremony is religious or secular in nature.

Keywords: wedding photography; ethics; norms; values; religious and secular; locationship; visual enchantment

1. Photos of Religious and Secular Weddings

During my conversations with 27 couples in Italy, Germany, and Switzerland the couples showed me their wedding photos. Although there were differences between each of these weddings, the photos have similarities due to their common genre, not only with regard to stylistic conventions but also with regard to how the photos were made and how they are received. Out of curiosity, I conducted a small experiment with my students in which I showed them photos of the couples during their wedding ceremonies. The question was whether the students were able to distinguish the traditional religious weddings from civil weddings in the registry office. Surprisingly, fewer portraits were matched correctly than I expected. Only a relatively small number were correctly assigned to the categories of religious or civil weddings. After a while the students gave up, saying that it is too difficult to know whether a wedding is religious or not.

The decision to marry in a religious rite is fundamental for the couples and for them the difference is obvious in the pictures. By contrast, from an outside perspective it is the similarities between the portraits which are conspicuous. It is not surprising that weddings resemble each other. Wedding rites take place in religious and in secular contexts (Schäffler 2012, pp. 37–40). As a rite of passage they follow a number of social, cultural, and religious norms as Gerard van Gennep expounded in his famous book (Van Gennep 2019). But wedding photos also follow norms that always make the ceremony identifiable as such. These representational norms make it even more challenging to distinguish between religious and non-religious civil weddings. Additionally, the ceremony location plays a central role in wedding photos. The couple and their guests are placed in the photo in...
relation to the location. However, it is not only the rites but also the religious and civil ceremony locations that are difficult to distinguish. Registry offices are often historical landmarks, churches have become registry offices, town-halls look like religious buildings, and religious and civil ceremonies are conducted in the same settings outdoors. The categories of religious and secular no longer appear to be sufficient for analyzing the stylistic conventions and norms of wedding photography. This paper thus demonstrates the implications of adopting a more fluid understanding of the interplay between religion and non-religion in the context of weddings with the following question: How do the stylistic norms of wedding photography express, affirm, adapt, and reshape religious and secular values?

This contribution is structured in two parts. The first part offers a critique of the distinction between civil secular and religious weddings in current scholarship. Subsequently, it scrutinizes conventions and norms in the production and representation of wedding photos on the basis of the existing literature on wedding photography. In the second part, the relation between norms and values in an ethics of wedding photos is defined. The discussion includes examples from my study with the 27 married couples. The conversations with the couples, each 50–90 min in duration, were conducted between April 2022 and January 2023 in Italy, Germany, and Switzerland. This larger study combines the qualitative method of semi-structured interviews with the ethnographic method of photo-elicitation (Lapenta 2011). The couples reconstructed their wedding day while viewing and showing their wedding photos or videos. The photos are photographed to analyze them afterwards by applying an analytical image interpretation (Astheimer 2016). The conversations are video-recorded to combine the photos with the statements and to also include the non-verbal communication in the analysis (Misoch 2014, pp. 65–71).

2. Religious and Secular Weddings

In the current academic discussion of weddings, the terms secular and religious are used as analytical categories that refer to the location and the rite. The secular wedding consists of the civil rite that is conducted by a civil servant, the registrar. The registrar’s office is often, but not always as we will see later, located in the town hall where the civil wedding is conducted. A religious wedding mostly takes place in the context of a religious tradition or in an alternative rite that includes a transcendent dimension. Religious symbols play a crucial role in such weddings to refer to the transcendent realm. Such an understanding combines a substantial and functional approach to religion, as Gergely Rosta and Detlef Pollack further state: “The distinction between immanence and transcendence and the symbolisation of transcendence in immanence form the indispensable core of the definition […]” (Pollack and Rosta 2015, p. 72). With regard to a religious wedding rite, this means that the social actors participating in the rite symbolically communicate with the transcendent realm during the wedding. But in some cases, the secular and religious dimensions of the wedding ritual are blended and blurred, as the following examples show.

In Italy, for example, the priest can act as official registrar. For two couples in this study, only one of the pairs—in each case the bride—married religiously and received the sacrament of marriage. The husbands decided to marry civilly because they do not define themselves as Roman Catholic. One might assume that the location in which the wedding takes place can be easily assigned to a religious or secular context for the rite.

This may indeed be the case during the actual wedding, as guests present in person can typically attribute the location to either the religious or secular sphere. But when looking at wedding photos the stylistic similarities still persist and blur the boundaries between the religious and the secular on a representational level, which is less the case during the rite itself. Additionally, as already mentioned, religious weddings take place not only in churches, synagogues, and mosques, but also in gardens, public parks, or even former wine cellars. Nevertheless, in this study most of the religious couples chose to marry in a religious building to which they often felt personally attached.
These cases show that the seemingly opposed categories of religious and secular are discursively formed during the wedding rite and its photographic representation rather than representing fixed analytic categories (Knott 2014, p. 81). The representational norms and conventions of wedding photography further blend the religious and secular spheres of wedding rites because “a wedding consists of a standard sequence of essential stages—and photo opportunities.” (Ruchatz 2018, p. 196). The many predetermined motifs in wedding photography are followed in both secular and religious contexts, as the following examples illustrate.

The different motifs allow the receivers to allocate images to an event and its ritual structure, which in the current case is a wedding. These motifs are conspicuously stable (Fritz 2018, pp. 45–91) and can be structured into before, during, and after the ceremony (Bezner 2002). Before the ceremony, pictures of the bride and the groom show them often separated, serious, and nervous. For example, a couple who conducted their third wedding ceremony, after a Muslim wedding in Ghana and a civil wedding in Switzerland, a Roman Catholic wedding in Togo, arrived at the church in separate cars (Figure 1).

![Figure 1. Roman Catholic wedding in Togo in 2022 (photo: M.-T. Mäder).](image)

The bride and the groom “performed” according to the norms, they seemed serious and nervous. The photographer captured the separate arrival of the bridal couple. In the wedding album, the photos are placed on the same page, complementing each other (Figure 1). Often, these pre-wedding photos additionally include detail shots of the bride’s hair, wedding dress, and flowers. During the ceremony, the exchange of rings or the signing of the marriage contract are photographed (Figures 2 and 3).

The photo mostly frames the couple, testimonies (Figure 2), and the institution’s representative, as in the example in Figure 3, the Spyridon, the Greek Orthodox priest. After-the-ceremony moments are captured, such as exiting the place of the ceremony (Figure 4) or the first kiss of the newlyweds.

These wedding photo motifs can be observed in various cultural and religious contexts, as the current study shows. The following section will discuss the existing literature that examines how these photos are based on and influence the norms and conventions of the motifs.
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Figure 2. Civil wedding at the registry office in Rome 2017.

Figure 3. Greek Orthodox wedding in Venetia in 1993 (photo: M.-T. Mäder).

Figure 4. Civil wedding in central Switzerland in 2022 (photo: M.-T. Mäder).

3. Norms and Conventions of Wedding Photography in Recent Literature

The literature on wedding photography can be divided in two categories: practical guides for successful wedding photography on one side and on the other side research publications about wedding photo- and videography. The following literature review focuses on how norms and values are discussed. To clarify from the outset, religious dimensions are mentioned only in passing, if at all. Therefore, this paper aims to address this gap.

The first category contains an endless number of guides about wedding photography, explaining to photographers how to take the perfect wedding photo. Titles such as "Master's Guide to Wedding Photography: Capturing Unforgettable Moments and Lasting Impressions" (Bell 2007), "The Bride's Guide to Wedding Photography: How to Get the Wedding Photography of Your Dreams" (Hawkins 2003), "The New Art of Capturing Love. The Essential Guide to Lesbian and Gay Wedding Photography" (Hamm 2014), and "Stylish Weddings: Create Dramatic Wedding Photography in Any Setting" (Jairaj 2016) suggest that wedding photography asks for a specific photographic technique that follows representational norms to express certain values. The guides set high expectations for non-professional as well as professional photographers and advise them how not to mess up their task because a wedding happens on a single day as a unique and unreproducible event. This is also one of the reasons why many couples decide to hire a professional photographer for the wedding that ensures the "best" pictures in the eyes of their customers. According to Jens Ruchatz "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." (Ruchatz 2018, p. 198). The representational norm of wedding photography manuals mainly emphasizes the singularity of the couple as well as that they and their guests look good on the images. Likewise, all the important moments, even the unexpected, are expected to be documented.

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Research studies on wedding photography, the second category, critically reflect on these wedding photo practices and their normative impact. They ask, among other questions, how norms and values are communicated, transformed, and challenged in the context of wedding photography. The studies have mainly taken place in the United States and most of them focus on heterosexual weddings, with a few exceptions (Kimport 2012), because they date from the time before same-sex marriage was legalized in 2004 in Massachusetts/US and 2015 as a federal law of the United States. The literature highlights the communication spaces of wedding photography, namely, the production, the representation, distribution, and the reception in different ways (Fritz et al. 2022, p. 17). Additionally, the studies focus on the wedding as a ritual, on material aspects of the wedding as defined by capitalistic consumer culture, on the staging of gender, sex, and sexuality, and on questions of race, ethnic background, and class as well as technological premises of wedding photography. In the following, a selection of relevant approaches is considered to scrutinize and provide an overview of how norms and values are addressed in the context of wedding photography.

The premise of wedding photography and its development is the technological invention of photography and its potential to create wedding norms and develop conventions. In a historical account on wedding photography, Charles Lewis outlines how the development of photography from the studio in its early days to shots on location, the so-called “candids”, formed and transformed wedding photography (Lewis 1998). As Lewis states: “For the twentieth-century American bride and groom, the story of the wedding has been one told largely through photographic images; and these images have been constructed according to conventions evolving mostly out of business and technical concerns.” (Lewis 1998, p. 42). The photographer becomes the designer of the wedding. With the couple consenting, he or she (but mostly he) possesses a central authority over the rite of passage. “The norm is for couples to accept the photographer as an expert and to relish the photographic experience and its products because photography is another rite of the wedding spectacle.” (Lewis 1997, p. 174). Lewis understands wedding photography, and specifically taking the wedding photos, as another rite of the wedding, with a shaping...
power of the ritual itself. Photography and its producers, the photographers, influence the representational norms of the wedding photos. They master the technology efficiently to the satisfaction of their customers. The power of creative means is equally conspicuous in wedding videography. By including a soundtrack, emotions are steered in the reception (Walsh and Wade 2020; Corpuz 2019; Wade and Walsh 2019). “These videos thus serve as potent tools of socialisation through what is valorised for posterity and what is otherwise excluded.” (Wade and Walsh 2019, p. 28). The editing of a wedding video in combination with the sound score mostly follows the conventions of a romantic atmosphere valorizing the institution of marriage.

The wedding album plays another important role in displaying norms and values in the reception space. With reference to Victor Turner and the three stages of the ritual, Bezner analyzes the wedding album: “While no wedding holds fast and hard to any strict categorization, most wedding albums may be delineated quite neatly into these three stages.” (Bezner 2002, p. 5). Through the wedding album, in which the religious and cultural norms are visually expressed like a “shining language”, the ritual is handed down. Viewing the album with relatives and friends reenacts the ritual and encourages cultural continuity. The photos often depict material aspects of the wedding like gift tables, expensive wedding rings, and decorations. These material aspects are combined with more idealized representations of the bride, for example, as fertile, holding a lush wedding bouquet, or as a symbolic object in a patriarchal system by staging the bride as an innocent virgin. According to Bezner, viewing the wedding album reaffirms such values of marriage and family (Bezner 2002, p. 6). Marc A. Ouellette also scrutinizes the material aspects of a wedding by staging his own wedding in an auto-ethnographic experiment in which he and his wife stage a wedding photo session with dresses and props from the thrift shop. Ouellette understands the wedding photos as indexical of the wedding, in turn promoting the wedding and its values (Ouellette 2018). Additionally, he critically reflects on the relation between the individualized features of a wedding that “paradoxically produces conventionalized and generic results through the ritualized performance of the day.” (Ouellette 2018). According to Ouellette, the value of the props and dresses for a wedding lies more in how they appear in the photos than in their purchase price, as they quickly lose value after the wedding. Specifically, the bride is central to the performance for the photos as “the pictures produce and package the bride” (Ouellette 2018). Ouellette’s emphasis on the role of the bride is part of further approaches to wedding photography that critically reflect on how wedding photos confirm existing norms of the bride in white (Glapka 2014; Ingraham 2008; Otnes and Pleck 2003).

In the context of the legalization of gay marriage in Massachusetts/US, Katrina Kimport shows that wedding photos of lesbian couples can dissolve the link between sex, gender, and sexuality, and challenge heteronormativity. But at the same time the photos reaffirmed the heteronormative narrative (Kimport 2012, pp. 894–95) as most of the lesbian couples were traditionally dressed: one woman as the bride in white and the other woman as the groom in a tuxedo. Lesbian couples, compared to gay couples, are more flexible in playing with gender roles in their clothing. However, as Kimport states, their challenge to the heteronormative wedding script is still moderate: “These performed identities remain constrained by normative expectations of what—and who—constitutes a wedding.” (Kimport 2012, p. 894). This approach demonstrates that existing wedding norms form a strong model that is challenging, if not impossible, to transgress.

This balancing act of confirming existing, questioning, and transforming norms in wedding photography is also discussed in Nhi T. Lieu’s study, which looks at the performances and bodily transformations of American/Asian brides and grooms in bridal photography. The conventions of wedding photos even de-emphasize ethnic markers to a US American life style: “[T]he visual productions made from cultural practices surrounding matrimony—through codes of class, discourses of respectability and multiculturalism, and performances of heteronormative romantic love are meant to normalize and position Asian immigrants as part of American society.” (Lieu 2014, p. 155) But instead of becoming
part of the US American society, Lieu considers these photos of Asian American wedding couples as threatening. Lieu shows how representational norms are applied in processes of inclusion and exclusion. In this case, the bridal photos express the belonging to a group that shares certain social norms and values that at the same time, when over-adapted or even exaggerated as in the case of wedding photography, jeopardize the endeavor.

This interaction between adapting to norms and questioning them captures Michele M. Strano in “Ritualized Transmission of Social Norms Through Wedding Photography” (Strano 2006). Strano introduces the distinction between descriptive and injunctive norms in wedding photography. Descriptive norms refer to what is actually done based on certain values and observed by others compared to what should be done, which refers to injunctive norms that, if not respected, are followed by social sanctions. The author explores how the visual representations and rituals captured in wedding photographs serve as powerful mechanisms for reinforcing cultural values, norms, and expectations and at the same time questioning them. For example, the virgin bride dressed in white represents the injunctive norm of virginity (how it should be) in wedding photography (and in the historical world). Instead, the widespread descriptive norm in mass media says that most brides are not virgins. The white bridal dress and the innocent posing for the picture is rather symbolic. Again, the bride dressed in white has to oscillate and express herself between these two norms in the photos, they “perform according to injunctive norms about chaste behavior, although the descriptive norm may be closer to their everyday behavior.” (Strano 2006, p. 39). The author shows that even though wedding photography and its ritualized communication performance follows many conventions it still contests social norms. The approach captures wedding photography as a communicative ritual practice; a similar focus is chosen by (Bezner 2002).

The discussed literature, primarily focused on weddings in the United States, highlights the pivotal role photographers play in not only reproducing and affirming the norms of wedding photography but also the conventions of the wedding rite itself. Photography and videography are communicative practices that shape these norms and conventions through their stylistic choices. Additionally, the photos serve as an index of the material aspects of the wedding, particularly the presentation of the bride, who is depicted according to these norms. Questioning and transgressing heteronormativity and the American lifestyle is challenging, as evidenced by photos of lesbian couples and Asian American couples. Overadaptation can be perceived as threatening. However, there is still some room to play with these norms, as shown by the contrast between the injunctive norm of virginity and the descriptive norm in mass media that most brides are not virgins. Ultimately, the norms and conventions that couples adhere to in a predefined part of the setting are perpetuated through the wedding album, which reproduces the rite of passage.

To summarize, wedding festivities offer a rich pool of actors, ritual practices, and locations, the latter only marginally dealt with in the existing literature, that become part of the setting of wedding photography. On both levels, norms play a central role. On one hand, there are norms and conventions regarding how wedding photos should look. On the other hand, the organization of the wedding ceremony and reception is also reflected in the photos and influenced by the photographer in the production process. Focusing on the relationship between the production and representation of wedding photos is crucial to understanding how representational norms and conventions are implemented and the values they are based on. Similarly, norms and conventions play an equally important role when viewing the wedding photos. This complex relationship between norms, values, and conventions will be further clarified through an applied ethics approach to wedding photography, incorporating the mostly missing religious dimension of weddings.

4. The Applied Ethics of Wedding Photography

In the ethics of wedding photography, human actions during production, reception, and distribution, but also in the representation—the photos themselves—are central to the discussion, as they can be judged as morally right or wrong. This discussion is situ-
ated within the field of media ethics, a branch of applied ethics. Media ethics addresses questions that refer to the political, cultural, economic, and technical dimensions of the media (Filipović 2016, p. 207). In the current approach, the media ethical question of what constitutes a good and successful wedding photo is central. This question pertains to norms, conventions, and values that encompass both religious and secular contexts.

The art historian Hans Belting distinguishes between two visual actions in photography: capturing images is the first visual action, and visually assessing them is the second. The gaze is central in these practices. The making of the photos is an exchange of the photographer’s gaze with the world. This gaze becomes the gaze of the past that is received in the present and thereby becomes permanent (Belting 2011, p. 154). Both dimensions, the photographer’s gaze and the world of the wedding, ideally complement each and result in a successful wedding picture. This means that the photographer and the couple are pleased about the result in the present that becomes permanent (Tappe 2016, p. 306). For example, the exchange of rings must be performed in a way that the photographer is able to catch this moment, namely, not too quick but at the same time naturally. The photographer needs to know about the best angle and how to include the light conditions in the best possible way. A couple mentioned that the photographer even asked them to sign the wedding contract slowly so that the photographer would be able to take the picture. A Jewish Orthodox couple chose a photographer who is familiar with their wedding ritual in order to know at which moment the picture needed to be taken.

Posing for a wedding picture and taking the photos that are evaluated as good and well made in the reception follows specific norms that exceed mere conventions. In the current case, conventions are understood as rules to be followed, “individuals must generally act in accordance with them” (Southwood and Eriksson 2011, p. 202) because they depend on correct behavior. Nonetheless, conventions might also be accompanied by normative principles. “But the existence of a convention does not entail the existence of a generally accepted normative principle. Therefore, conventions are not, nor do they entail, corresponding norms.” (Southwood and Eriksson 2011, p. 200). The photographer, the bridal couple, and their guests pose for the photos according to certain conventions, in the sense that this is how wedding photos are made and everybody agrees on that.

But wedding photos go beyond the mere convenience of the good mood of all participants. The posing is socially and morally anticipated and judged, and the photos express social and representational norms. Some wedding photos, for example, are compulsory, such as the photo when signing the contract, as shown above, or the group photo with the parents or siblings. The photographer is judged as to whether they manage to take all the “important” pictures. Maybe not all the guests are equally invested in achieving this goal but they at least comply with the convention. Yet most of the guests observe the norms, accept the normative principles of wedding photos, and follow as a matter of course the instructions of the photographer. They not only do it for the bridal couple but also because they think it is the socially and morally appropriate behavior in the moment. Likewise, these pictures will become permanent in the wedding album, which is another reason to respect the norms. In the study, only one couple did not take any group pictures with family and friends because the couple explicitly rejected posed photos. This demonstrates the widespread acceptance of posing for wedding photos.

The representational norms of wedding photos express certain values of how a good and successful wedding picture should look. The relation between norms and values is mutual, they interact with each other. One can say that norms are expressed in actions that are justified with values (Kettner 2011, p. 223). Norms can be seen as former values that have become binding for actions (Staake 2018). The reverse is also true: values are operationalized in actions, in which case they become binding norms. Specifically, social norms have a bridging function for communities because they “are instruments to realize certain values” (Tranow 2018, p. 343; Baumann et al. 2010, pp. 7–8). Values are the result of an individual’s experiences and education on the one hand and on the other hand include a collective dimension. For individuals and for groups values play
an important part in identity processes (Beckers 2018, p. 508). In the context of wedding photography, representational norms, expressed in the photographer’s gaze and the actions of the depicted social actors, operationalize certain values in the context of weddings (Mäder 2020, pp. 257–58).

The photographer visually stages the place of the ceremony, which the couple has carefully chosen. The depiction of the ceremony location follows certain norms that are based on values. How defining such photographic norms and values can be specifically in religious contexts shows up in the sometimes tense relations between clergy and photographers. In some areas, the conflict of interest between the two parties resulted in banning photographers from churches and synagogues between 1950 and 1970 in the United States (Lewis 1998, pp. 33–34). The relationship between religious specialists and wedding photographers can be conflictual even today, as a BBC report shows (Wedding Photographer Caused Mayhem—I Told Him to Leave 2024).

It is not only the act of taking the expected photos on location during the ceremony that follows certain norms and influences the ritual. But the photos are also edited in post-production according to certain norms. For example, some photographers add a “transcendental style” (Schrader 1972) to the pictures of religious ceremony locations according to Bezner. With reference to Victor Turner’s liminal stage of the ritual, she describes the visual interpretation of a religious experience expressed in photos. “These photographic simulacra of religiosity signify the visual language of the sacred in an aesthetic mcanidiets cannot achieve. Wedding photographers understand such visual metalanguage as presiders over the creation of an ideal.” (Bezner 2002, p. 8). The religious dimension is attributed to the photo with creative representational means and is connected with “beauty and visual perfection”. The place of the ceremony and the involved social actors, Beltings “world” (Belting 2011, p. 154), are not further discussed by Bezner, although they play a crucial part in the photographic reproduction of the ceremony. They are the material of the historical world (Nichols 2010, p. 45) that is formed and normed in the editing phase of the photos. The location, almost omitted from the existing literature, and the social actors constitute the base for the successful, correct, and valued wedding photo. Norms and values in the photographic representation of the ceremony location, religious and secular, take place on two levels: Norms and values of the ceremony location are expressed on the one hand in the photos and on the other hand attributed by the social actors when viewing the photos.

5. “Locationships” in Religious and Civil Ceremonies

The ceremony location is understood as a place that is “a marked space, a space that is qualitatively defined, that possesses an imprint, a character, a limit, and a history.” (Danani 2014, p. 47). Wedding locations often have a history but not always. They are places in which something happens dynamically, as Kim Knott explains. She outlines “location as the outworking—but not the end-point of a process of considering things, people, and events in relation to each other, both geographically and socially.” (Knott 2014, p. 33). This understanding aligns how wedding locations are grasped in the current approach, namely, in the tension between the bridal couple, the community, the ceremony, and its photographic representation.

The photographic representation highlights the relationship between the bridal couple and the location. A typical wedding photo motif shows the couple during the wedding ceremony in the vanishing point of the image (Figures 5–7). The photo suggests that the couple and the celebrating community are taking part in something bigger, which in some cases the couples themselves mentioned. Like the woman who describes her civil wedding as a “movie wedding” that included more than only her and her husband:

The only thing I cared so much about—yeah, no but it wasn’t even, I mean it was a fake movie wedding, it wasn’t a real wedding, it wasn’t you and me, it was a thing—the only thing I cared so much about was for them to play Pachelbel’s
Canon at the entrance of my arrival in the nave. That was one thing I had that I really cared about and it was very important to me [. . .].

Figure 5. Roman Catholic wedding in central Italy in 1991 (photo: M.-T. Mäder).

Figure 6. Civil wedding near Rome in 2022 (photo: M.-T. Mäder).

The woman struggles to find the words to describe the wedding experience properly, which obviously transcends the marriage act. The music added an extra quality to the location that intensified the experience outside of the everyday. This representational norm is not only independent of the religious or civil secular context of the ceremony but also between different religious contexts no significant difference could be observed apart from explicit religious symbols that clearly belong to a religious tradition. Such a symbol, for example, is the Chuppa, meaning “a roof over their head”, under which a Jewish wedding takes place. The Chuppa is located in the front part of a Synagogue, open to all sides, and symbolizes Abraham’s house.
Likewise, the participants of the current study expressed a close connection with the wedding location not only during the ritual but also when they selected the place for the ceremony, and when they remember it.

A couple who married in a Greek Orthodox church in Venetia introduced their guests to the traditional Greek Orthodox wedding ritual of which they are fond. The wife described the atmosphere of the church in detail and highlighted the advantage of such a wedding rite for the community:

[…] also the atmosphere that is created is very strong, or at least that which was created at our wedding, because other Greek weddings, in short, the Greeks don’t sit in the pews like this, we had all our friends around us, we were there. The Church of the Greeks also, I mean, it’s an important church, it’s a masterpiece of the 16th century. The Spiridion, who is also an authority, is an authority of the Orthodox Church internationally, just. Everything created, yes, I don’t know, on the one hand I was tense, on the other hand I was—I felt I was participating in something, yes, important, but important from the point of view not of feeling, spiritually important. That was it.

Having their friends around them during the wedding in the “masterpiece of the 16th century” created a special atmosphere for the community. The wife, who was raised Roman Catholic, additionally described the spiritual experience which was created by the church that gave her a feeling of belonging to something “spiritually important.” With the reference to the aesthetics and the religious significance of the church the woman connects her wedding with a larger history and constructs a line of tradition in which her wedding participates. The significance and the age of the church should hopefully be transferred to the marriage, that is important and should last a lifetime.

Some couples chose a religious place because the bride or the groom had performed other rites of passage in the same location, such as baptism, first communion, confirmation, or all of these. These typical Roman Catholic rituals imbue the venue with a unique significance, fostering an additional emotional connection and memory. Some of the couples even knew the priest since their childhood because he conducted all the rites. But besides these personal religious experiences, the building, the church itself, is often connoted with positive values, as another wife mentions: “[…] it is Romanesque, Romanesque because it was the style of the Cistercians, that is to say, these people here in [place] founded the Church in [place], so I am very fond of it.” In the current case the husband adds that his wife has been baptized by the same priest that married them. Both agree on the church’s remarkable beauty that according to the husband also impressed the wedding party attending the service.
Similarly, a personal connection to the location holds significant importance in civil ceremonies, where lines of tradition are constructed. Additionally, the civil ceremony may often carry more significance than the couple initially anticipated. A German couple, for example, married in the registrar’s office of the husband’s hometown in 2022. Initially, they planned a simple wedding and ended up with a surprise reception in front of the registrar’s office before they celebrated in a garden restaurant. Commenting on the photo taken right after they exited the registrar’s office: they felt like “king and queen”\textsuperscript{10}, with their heads and the bride’s flower bouquet. The friends’ and family’s surprise to the newlyweds outside the town hall with a sparkling wine toast even turned this moment into something extraordinary.\textsuperscript{11} The husband highlights his personal connection to the place and the wife mentions that the registrar’s office is beautiful and symbolically meaningful:

\textbf{Husband}: Yes, because I know that the registry office is also very nice.

\textbf{Wife}: It’s very nice!

\textbf{mtm}: Yes.

\textbf{Woman}: And also the fact that in the end it had this classic touch, that you say you were at the Freising registry office, I thought that was somehow really nice.\textsuperscript{12}

The location becomes meaningful because it is connected to a tradition. The building is in the historical old town of Freising in Bavaria and one of the most important Rococo buildings in Upper Bavaria. To marry in this building was important for the couple, because it made their wedding more valuable. The office is located next to the city church in the same block and represents, together with the town hall, a landmark in Freising. The importance of the place is also reflected in the couple’s portrait in front of the town hall (Figure 8).

\textbf{Figure 8.} Civil wedding in Bavaria in 2022 (photo: M.-T. Mäder).

The ritual and the location of civil weddings are often captured as transcending the everyday, as was the case with the lesbian couple who married in Rome in 2016. They registered their life partnership in the registrar’s office in Campidoglio (capitol) in the “sala rossa”. The “sala rossa” is where many couples in Rome conduct their civil weddings and it is only since 2016 that homosexual couples have been legally admitted to register their life partnership in a civil act. To be registered at such a symbolic place was crucial for them, as the wife commented:

But I think for me perhaps the moment that has stayed with me the most is the embrace afterwards in the “sala rossa”, after the exchange of the rings, because it was us, but around us we had everyone. So it was our world that somehow recognized our union. That was it for me, I would say.\textsuperscript{13}
In this case, the community, “our world”, who gathered in this traditional place to testify to the couple’s union is important. To see their community in a locationship with the “sala rossa” testifying to their union became the most precious moment during the whole day.

From the perspective of the couple’s comments about the rite, the difference between secular civil and religious weddings is often bigger. The couples who married in religious rites tended to be more self-confident that their wedding was meaningful and authentic. Nevertheless, the wedding location is a “special” place and the social actors often express a personal relationship with the place, highlighting extraordinary features or praising the unique atmosphere. This “locationship” is therefore understood as a feature of the ceremony location. It consists of the couple’s relation to the place and how they experienced it during the ceremony and remember it afterwards. The representational norms and the values of civil and religious wedding locations conspicuously converge in the individual accounts combined with the photos of the ceremony location, as discussion showed.

6. Secular and Religious Norms and Values of Enchanted Locationships in Wedding Photography

This paper combined media ethical considerations with qualitative ethnographic data to consider stylistic norms of wedding photography. The aim was to understand how these norms express, affirm, adapt, and reshape religious and secular values. Two key aspects are revealed. The first aspect concerns the choice of location and the importance of participating in a shared tradition. The focus on the ceremony location proved to be productive when considering the merging and blurring of religious and secular norms and values in wedding photography. In the production of wedding photos, the triangular relation between the couple, their guests, and the location, the so-called locationship, is staged through the lens of the camera. In this triangle, the blending of religious and secular norms and values could be observed. (1) The spatial design of wedding photos sets the bridal couples in relation to the ceremony location in similar ways by applying comparable motifs independently of a religious or a secular wedding. (2) In the photographic reproduction of the locationship, traditions are formed or reconstructed. Some ceremonies are connected to a religious tradition and others use religious rites as a matrix for a civil secular wedding. This matrix is expressed in the photographic practice of taking pictures of before, during, and after motifs. The three-part structure depicted in the photos is once again associated with various locations and their thresholds, providing a religious dimension also for secular weddings.

The second key aspect pertains to how norms and values originating from wedding photography of religious ceremonies continue to influence secular norms and values. Thus, they become integral to the “visual enchantment” of the wedding photo genre, irrespective of whether the ceremonies are religious or secular. It is particularly striking that religion is used in wedding photos as an aesthetic norm independently of whether it concerns a religious or a secular wedding (Illouz 2008, p. 113). For example, when the couple is photographed at the vanishing point with the community at their backs. The representational norm stages the couple enchanted as part of something bigger. Another norm shows the couple related to each other as one unit fading out of their surroundings. Also, in this case the wedding couple seems visually enchanted, taking part in something bigger that transgresses the material world.

In this manner, photos of civil or secular weddings can convey similar values as those of religious weddings. This is achieved through the utilization of photographic conventions and norms originally derived from religious wedding rites but now applied to secular wedding ceremonies. Such motifs merge and blend the religious sphere with the secular and can result in the “visual enchantment” of the wedding photographs in their production and reception. The couples connect their wedding to something “bigger”, transcending the everyday. When looking at the photos, they evaluate and remember these photographic representations of locationships meaningfully. They mention the beauty and singularity of the location regardless of whether they married in a civil or religious rite. This gives
the wedding event an “extraordinary” (or transcendent) charge. It is therefore the visual staging that strongly constructs this moment of something special. In this context, religion provides a matrix for the extraordinary.

In cases in which the couples married religiously, the civil rite was surprisingly unimportant in the photos. Often the couple did not even have photos of the civil wedding. In cases where there was simply a civil wedding, the rite adapted traditional elements. Therefore, it can be said that wedding photography favors tradition over innovation. It fosters the traditional normative principles of marriage and elevates them to an eternal norm of the best possible lifestyle. This aligns with Belting’s conception of photography, which categorizes the world and its places while preserving the past within its frames.

Photography geometricizes, ranks, and classifies the world. Places become photographic places and as such are captured in the square of the print with no way out; what was observed by the camera at that moment is locked within a past time, [. . .]. (Belting 2011, p. 147)

Photos represent and realize norms and values through the viewers’ engagement with them. They evoke memories that are categorized within cultural thought patterns and contexts. However, these memories are idealized, creating an invented past. This invented past exists within a relational dynamic involving the couple, their guests, the location, and the wedding photographer, who preserves the traditional values of weddings. In this process, religious and civil elements of the wedding are merged and blended. Therefore, the norms and values originating from religious wedding ceremonies continue to influence all wedding photos, whether religious or secular, resulting in the “visual enchantment” of wedding photos as a genre.

The active and passive merging and blending of the secular with the religious sphere in wedding photography additionally shows how religion is transformed and adapted in mediatization processes. “Generally speaking, mediatization is a concept used to analyze critically the interrelation between changes in media and communications on the one hand, and changes in culture and society on the other.” (Couldry and Hepp 2013, p. 197). How individuals and groups interact with media varies but in the case of weddings the adaptation of the historical world (Nichols 2016, p. 155) to stylistic norms of the media, the so-called mediation, is conspicuous as Mark Deuze accurately states (Deuze 2022, p. 33). He mentions the influence of existent wedding representation on the staging and photographing of the couples. With regard to religion, one could argue that the photographic stylistic conventions level out the cultural religious differences between the ceremonies. In the current study, it is conspicuous how the secular adapts to the religious and not the other way around. The values connected with marriage and expressed in the photos often surprisingly relate to religious values. In such cases, the photographic depiction of the secular sphere of civil weddings alludes to a religious dimension.

By reproducing wedding photo norms photographers, couples, guests, and locations are handing down traditional values about marriage. They become the bearer of the religious dimension of a rite of passage. Every wedding takes part in this process of handing down certain norms and values, as the case of homosexual couples show. They easily adapt to the norms and values of wedding photography. It can only be speculated that should wedding photography be radically transformed then wedding norms and values will also be radically transformed. Or maybe the couples actually enjoy the (additional) religious enchantment in their wedding photos because it reminds them of a time far back in the past, and connects them with such traditions.

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Informed Consent Statement: Written informed consent for publication of the participants’ details was obtained from the participants.

Data Availability Statement: Due to protection of privacy and the sensitivity of interview footage, the data can only be shared based on the explicit consent of the participants. The data include wedding videos and photos in which religious affiliation, sexual orientation, and personal details are discussed. It is stated in the written consent form that the data will not be made open unless the participants agree. The transcriptions of the interviews can be accessed by submitting a request to the author via email, which should detail for what purposes the transcriptions would be used.

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Notes
1 For more information about the research project see www.promising-images.eu (accessed on 5 June 2024).
2 The ethical statement of the study (https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.8250222, accessed on 5 June 2024) and the questionnaires in English, German, and Italian (https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.8249440, accessed on 5 June 2024) are stored on zenodo. The participants’ consent to publish their photos and to participate in the study has already been obtained and is available to the publisher.
8 Translation from Italian by the author. Interview 7 April 2022 in Central Italy (61:12 ¶ 526 in VIW_02_IT_070422_I.docx), https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.8178945, accessed on 5 June 2024.

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