Will You Marry Me?
Spectacle and Consumption in the Ritual of Marriage Proposals

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Abstract

This article examines the marriage proposal ritual in contemporary American society. A marriage proposal represents a critical shift in a romantic relationship; by formalizing one's engagement through the exchange of symbols and sharing of intentions couples exit the dating phase and project themselves toward married life. I analyze a set of narratives of marriage proposals posted on the World Wide Web and collected on various Web sites. By arguing that the marriage proposal is a symbolic ritual enacted by social agents following socially accepted prescriptions and roles, I discuss the relevance of the marriage proposal in the greater context of a post-industrial consumer culture. In particular, I discuss the process of construction of self-presentation strategies that abide by the logic of spectacle and sign value.

But certainly for the present age, which prefers the sign to the thing signified, the copy to the original, representation to reality, the appearance to the essence... *illusion* only is sacred, *truth* profane. Nay, sacredness is held to be enhanced in proportion as truth decreases and illusion increases, so that the highest degree of illusion comes to be the highest degree of sacredness.

Ludwig Feuerbach (1957), Preface to the second edition of *The Essence of Christianity*

Joel Fernghetti has been dating Annie Fredericks for over 4 years. Joel is a simple and honest man who shares a wonderful relationship with Annie. The two met on a summer night at a country fair in Southern Alberta, where they were both born and raised. Introduced by common high school friends they danced, talked, kissed the night away. Now Joel has held a regular job for quite some time and feels ready to 'pop' the question to Annie. Bedeviled by his insecurities, and motivated by the will to make a nice and lasting impression on his girlfriend Joel decides to log onto the Internet to search for some inspiration. At the storybehindtherock.com [1], one of the dozens of burgeoning websites specializing in engagement services, Joel finds:

You'll need a bag of Hershey kisses, and a lot of roses, some scented candles, etc. First set up the candles in the bathroom, low lighting helps. Then decorate the bathtub all over with the roses and its petals, especially the tub! Then leave a trail of Hershey kisses from the door of the bedroom (or wherever) to the bathroom. Leave a card to wherever you finally lead her that says: "Now that I have kissed the ground you walk on, and showered you with roses".....(you take it from there!!) [2]

This sure sounds like a nice shopping list to Joel, a good place to start. The shopping list, to be sure, also ought to include at least one of the scores of advice books on the subject, a book on engagement rings, perhaps the services of a professional photographer, a groom survival kit, a financial assessment by a private auditing firm that ought to give him an idea whether he is financially ready... You get the picture, romance, as every relationship in a capitalist society, has been permeated by the logic of exchange (Bell, 1976).

Love, as Eva Illouz (1997) writes in her book *Consuming the Romantic Utopia*, has been increasingly commodified with the advent and growth of capitalism and consumer culture. A host of novels, movies, paperbacks, DIY guides, songs, and ads have created the image of romance as a service to be offered and purchased for a price. Romantic love, as she suggests, reflects the democratic inclusion of all people into the ideology of romance, and the division of lovers in socioeconomic classes. If romance ceases to be an authentic expression of intimate sentiments then researchers must understand its impact at a macro level and analyze the cultural logic of romance production and reproduction. In this article I attempt to examine romantic love as a cultural, rather than an interpersonal phenomenon. In particular, I intend to focus on the ritual of marriage proposal as a reflection of the commodification of human feelings. Even though marriage and romantic relationships have been given much research attention, no academic work has yet explored marriage proposals. Marriage proposals represent an important step in an intimate relationship. Upon engagement, couples shift the nature of their rapport from casual or steady dating to projection toward marriage. Just as our hypothetical friend Joel would have done, I spent some time on the Internet researching stories of marriage proposals narrated by the individuals and couples who enacted them. I offer my analysis of such shared experiences by integrating the theoretical work of Guy Debord, Jean Baudrillard, and Erving Goffman into my own thinking. I offer a collection of themes and excerpts from proposal narratives in order to synthesize and exemplify such experiences. My reader may or may not agree that these proposals are representative. The very fact that they were posted on the World Wide Web, my detractor might argue, testifies for their originality. Personally, I do not believe

this to be the case. I have discussed the nature and form of marriage proposals with many people before embarking on this research project, and therefore I have attempted to select narratives that were at the same time representative and particularly illustrative. Of course my purely exploratory approach ought to be justifiable in light of the fact that no previous empirical research whatsoever exists.

Consuming Romance

Feeling is a social act. Linguistic conventions and cultural habits allow us to make sense of social contexts and interaction and respond in socially appropriate ways (Schweder, 1991). When someone asks us to marry them, for example, we may respond with shame, surprise, joy, anxiety or mixtures of similar emotions, but it is very doubtful that we will react with envy and respond by asking for a basket of fried chicken breasts to go. By learning to express ourselves emotionally as well as to perceive emotions in a socially appropriate way we become integral members of our society.

Romantic love is one of the defining sentiments of our culture. The ideology of romance has undergone tremendous changes over time. It has moved, for example, from a courtly idea of love as painful longing and idolization to the expression of spiritual purity typical of the Victorian era, and on to the hedonistic quest for self-fulfillment of our days (Branden, 1980). While many remark the rampant individualism of contemporary love, some suggest that love is moving away from self-fulfillment on toward the idea of androgynous interdependence (Cancian, 1987). Illouz (1997) instead sees romance undergoing a different set of changes. Two interconnected processes are at work: the romanticization of commodities, and the commodification of romance. As production and consumption have expanded, mass communication has been transmitting to the public a visual idea of love as spectacle. The romanticization of commodities occurs when media portray certain products and services as romantic. A cheap fast-food meal is not romantic, but the consumption of a candle-lit three-course meal at a French restaurant is. As Illouz points out, this 'oblique consumption' [3] is invested of typically postmodern values such as leisure, intensity, glamour, elegance, and beauty. When leisure and romance become intertwined love turns into conspicuous consumption and entertainment. Beside self-expression, romance allowed those who have learned how to consume it properly to feel liberated from the drudgery of work.

This is the image of the ‘date’ as outing to a restaurant, a movie theater, a romantic getaway at the seaside or at luxurious (and romantic) hotel. These consumption practices commodify romance by incorporating it into the public econoscape of consumer logic. Because of its important role in the new democratic ethic of consumption of leisure romance is also used to market commodities; this process is known as the commodification of romance.

In *Motivation and Personality* Abraham Maslow (1954) identifies love as a third-order need, preceded in the hierarchy by physiological and safety needs. What Maslow did not foresee, according to Baudrillard’s critique, is that in the contemporary phase of late capitalism he calls affluent society (Baudrillard, 1975) needs cease to be merely psychologically motivated. In an affluent society consumers can never become satisfied or saturated. Needs are no longer rooted in instinct but rather embedded in the relations among consumer goods and manipulated by the arrangement of commodities. Whereas in the past humans were surrounded by other humans, Baudrillard argues, now we are surrounded by objects. This new morality of consumption restructures contemporary life and organizes our social identity as our place in the relation among objects and people. Leisure and work, nature and culture, once dichotomous entities now become intermixed and user-friendly for our shopping comfort. Following Barthes (1983) Baudrillard understands fashion to pervade lifestyle. Fashion is first and foremost a system of signs that dictates an abstract code of distinction and consumption. In this sense objects lose their original functionality, and as signs, become invested with sign exchange. In other words, objects no longer are privately consumed and exchanged to satisfy needs or pleasure, but rather consumed (often conspicuously) for they allow us to satisfy ‘needs’ of social differentiation. Baudrillard identifies this new ethic order, the ‘fun morality’, to be responsible for the consumer’s sense of duty to strive after happiness and pleasure. Romance, as we shall see, is far from being exempt from such logic. Marriage proposals reflect this ethic of entertainment of consumption very clearly.

How to ‘Pop the Question’

I invite the reader to pay a brief visit to some of websites that discuss marriage proposals [4, 5, 6, 7, 8]. Some of these are personal web pages designed by individuals and couples, whereas others

specialize in offering a host of services and advice on the dating, engagement, and wedding process. I collected approximately 300 narratives of marriage proposals, consulted the extent and nature of the services offered as well as pieces of advice posted online. Instead of offering a taxonomy of the various proposals, I chose to identify the components constituting each narrative. While I am aware of the limitations of a discourse analysis of narratives based on short and often decontextualized text, I still believe that I may offer the reader an idea of the main characteristics of these marriage proposals. The reader also ought to keep in mind that by no means am I trying to generalize my observations to the greater population of engaged couples. Individuals and couples' paths toward married life differ considerably. Yet, the presence of agreement, or even consensus, on what makes a marriage proposal romantic and successful is a phenomenon worthy of sociological attention. Notwithstanding my unawareness of the life trajectories and individual idiosyncrasies of these romantic partners, I believe I may interpret the significance of these rituals in light of the greater socio-cultural and historical contexts in which they are embedded.

I speak of marriage proposals as social and symbolic rituals for such acts are staged and scripted in relation to greater social environments that influence the couple's rapport, their connection with a larger community, their social identity, and their meaningful interaction. My viewing of marriage proposal as ritual and performance is not incidental. Consider the following proposal:

We arrived (in New York City) on a Saturday and I had told my husband I always wanted to skate in Rockefeller Center. So our first mission was to go skating. [...] After 20 minutes or so, my husband skated around me, got down on one knee and proposed. With the lights glimmering gloriously around us, I said yes and he slipped the ring on my finger. Everyone standing above us started clapping and cheering. Christmas of that year, I opened a beautifully wrapped box. It turned out my husband hired a photographer to take pictures of us and of him asking for my hand in marriage [9].

People's narratives of their marriage proposals invoke a dramaturgical *telos* of a common resolution: the 'popping' of the question. The word 'popping', often used in this context, evokes the idea of a sharp sound, a blast, a loud surprise. Such surprise is far from being limited to the members of the couple. The loud surprise is often a show, a spectacle staged for the amusement of an audience. Members of such audience may include uninvolved bystanders such as those who walked by a gigantic

city square billboard featuring the image of a man asking for his girlfriend's hand, and audience members that may play a confederate role or may be acquaintances of the couple:

As Yuhasz's brother, Michael, videotaped the couple [...] Pinto had just received a larger-than-life billboard marriage proposal from Yuhasz. He had escorted a blindfolded Pinto from his truck, leading her to a 12-by 25-foot billboard on Northampton Street next to the Taco Bell in Wilson. The billboard has a green background (her favorite color), two rings intertwined and, printed in gold lettering, "Gemella, will you marry me? Forever, James". "I think it's romantic, to see your name bigger than life on a 12-foot by 25-foot structure. It's a private moment, but he wants everybody to know this is the woman I love, and I'm asking her to marry me," DeNardo said [10].

The work of Erving Goffman is helpful here. In *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*

Goffman (1959) discusses his dramaturgical approach to interaction. Goffman argues that individuals are social actors concerned with the modes of self-presentation they choose to employ and their meaning in the broader social context. Goffman sees interaction as a performance that is inevitably shaped by the greater socio-cultural environment in which it is enmeshed and by the audience present. Social actors enact their performances to manage and provide their audiences with impressions that meet the desired goals of the actor. An important concept in Goffman's dramaturgical approach is that of the "front". An actor's social identity is established and maintained through the presentation of the "front", "that part of the individual's performance which regularly functions in a general and fixed fashion to define the situation for those who observe the performance" (Goffman, 1959:22). The front is a "collective representation", that establishes a proper "setting," "appearance," and "manner" for the role staged by the social actor (Goffman, 1959: 27). Goffman calls this process dramatic realization, a set of activities focused on strategies of "impression management," or the control of information through the social performance (Goffman, 1959: 208). Actors attempt to be believable and acceptable by staging ideal versions of their front, consistent with the norms, mores, and laws of society.

Even though Goffman's approach is clearly microsociological, he argues that greater social and cultural processes are created, enacted, and negotiated in group interaction. Goffman's ideas are clearly important if we wish to understand the interactive dynamics of the ritual of marriage proposal, yet we need a critical approach to the concept of culture to understand why it is that late modern proposal rituals take the form they do. The idea that a late capitalist and consumer society and culture has assumed the

logic of spectacle can be found in the work of Guy Debord. Debord emerged as the prominent figure of the Situationist movement during the times of political unrest of the late 1960's in France and Europe.

Debord, Lefebvre, and the Situationists argued that the increasing division of labor and mindless work specialization had transformed work into meaningless drudgery. By transcending Marx, they theorized that the expansionary logic of capitalism had created pseudo-needs to increase consumption. In this system, identity and consciousness were created at the point of consumption, not production. What matters most here is that such consumption need be spectacular in order to court and seduce the consumer. In *The Society of the Spectacle* Debord (1977) affirmed that the consumer economy had transcended the idea of the degradation of being into having and shifted from having into merely appearing. This criticism is, I believe, important for understanding the spectacular logic of some contemporary marriage proposals:

I sat down and ordered a drink, just relieved to be inside and sitting down. Out of the corner of my eye I see this guy dressed in armor coming towards me. I think, "weird, what is it? Send in the Clowns day at T.J. Baxter's?" and turn back to the people at my table. That's when he stops in front of me and lifts the visor. Recognizing him yet confused, I say calmly "Hi honey". He then gets down on one knee and it hits me: HE'S GOING TO PROPOSE!! He says: "If you'll be my princess, I'll be your knight in shining armor and will love you forever. Will you marry me?" I was in SHOCK.... I kept saying "oh my god" over and over... for about three minutes. He then nudges me and whispers: "You haven't answered yet" OH NO! So.... I decide to be emphatic, and in front of the whole restaurant staff and patrons who have crowded around us.... I yelled: "Hell, yes!" [11]

If we understand these marriage proposals to be spectacular illusionary displays of signification of love through representation and consumption, then we may arrive at a description of the logic of such rituals. Following Goffman I argue that these marriage proposals ought to be analyzed by looking at five aspects: the collective representation (the drama), the front, the setting, the appearance, and the manner.

The Drama

Through drama social actors assign meaning to the situation, their audience, and themselves. For a performance to be impressive, actors need to manage their impressions in accordance with the demands and restrictions of the situation, as well as the possibilities it offers. The marriage proposal drama revolves around its resolution, when the question is 'popped'. There are mainly two types of resolutions,

the climax and the shock. A climatic resolution occurs when a build-up of clues is constructed by the performer (usually the man) and/or his confederates.

The night Rob proposed was absolutely perfect. We had a romantic dinner at a favorite restaurant, Mom Chaffee's. We had been planning dinner so it didn't seem out of the ordinary. I was diverted to the Reading Sheraton to seemingly pick up a friend of Rob's, who was in town (he wasn't really). We went up to 'his' room, which was in the tower penthouse suite in the front of the hotel. The room had a breathtaking view overlooking the city. When we entered the room it was like walking into a magical fairy tale. The room was lit by candlelight and covered in rose petals. There were roses, champagne, wine, chocolate covered strawberries, and a beautiful view of the city lights. Our song, Valentine by Martina McBride, was playing softly in the background. Rob then asked me to dance. He guided me to the window, and then asked me, on bended knee, to spend my life with him and for my hand in marriage. I said Yes! We danced, kissed, laughed, and cried. We visited my parents, his parents, called family and then visited with some special friends. It was truly a magical night [12].

These clues, as I will also remark later are essential components of the setting, yet they play a crucial part in structuring the drama itself. Clues are of course signifiers signifying the 'special-ness' of the event. I speak of 'special-ness' and not uniqueness for there is little that is unique about both the signifiers themselves and the signified to which they refer. Commodities such as chocolate, meals, hotel bedrooms offering scenic views have been romanticized, as Illouz suggests, and are mass marketed and mass produced, and still consumed as endowed with an aura of uniqueness. As Baudrillard (1981) suggests, consumption is always consumption of signs; objects are parts of a greater system of categories of objects inducing categories of persons. It is this system of objects that organizes social difference. Hence, the construction of a marriage proposal drama need depend on particular relations among objects as signs and that to which they refer. The rose petal becomes a functional component of the drama, of the special-ness of the story and the situation because, as Baudrillard would suggest, as a sign it connotes prestige, romance, distinction (from the drudgery of a flower-less routine). When the commodity is invested of such significance it allows its consumers to operate a Gestalt-like switch and interpret the story of an evening as "a magical fairy tale" (see above quotation). The drama then becomes a playful performance of commodities, consumer products invested of particular significance.

The second type of resolution is the shock. Men sometimes 'pop the question' 'out of the blue' without first setting up the necessary elements of a performance. This is often a risky behavior that may appear as kitsch and clumsy as in the following:

I took my soon to be fiancée on my boat to go fishing. We found a secluded spot in the Raritan Bay in NJ to begin our fishing trip. I proceeded to rig her fishing pole. I was a little nervous because I had the ring in the tackle box and she kept coming over by me. I told her to go to the front of the boat and begin fishing while I rig my pole. So with my shaking hands, I put the ring on my fishhook and walked up behind her. I said, "Kendra, I don't want to fish anymore." She replied, "We just started!" and I said, "But I already caught the BEST fish in the sea!" She turned around and the ring was dangling in front of her face [13].

A surprise resolution is not necessarily bad, however. Among the numerous suggestions offered by supposed experts shock resolutions some include:

Put an ad in a newspaper; Via email or on the Web; Ask a DJ on the radio to ask for you; At a sports event; Top of the Empire State Building or other tall building; At Disneyworld or Disneyland; In a restaurant [14].

Whether the plot is intricate or not the logic of the drama is that it be a spectacle. Not all marriage proposals are made in public, of course, but both public and private proposals must be performed as a special event. As I remarked, its special-ness is guaranteed by the consumption of romanticized commodities.

The Setting

As Goffman (1959) suggested the front is always presented in a particular setting whose structure must be taken into careful consideration by the actor if a credible and acceptable impression is to be managed. The setting may include props, beautiful scenery, a particular location, etc. As Illouz (1997) argued, the romanticization of nature and travel originated with the growth of the leisure ethic. Because people associate the home and the workplace with routine and dullness, evasion or escape to the 'great outdoors' has been invested with the aura of special-ness I discussed above. Very few of the proposals I surveyed occurred within the confines of the familiar. The logic of the spectacle demands the setting be 'romantic':

He planned a weekend snowboarding trip at Mammoth, where we stayed at a cute B & B. On the first night, a snow storm hit, but it was beautiful! He took me for a walk in the knee-high snow, brought a blanket and camera. He had me sit on the blanket for a picture, and then pulled out the ring. After I said yes, he pulled out two wine glasses and a bottle of our favorite wine. Beautiful! [15]

Often the setting is public:

For my 20th birthday, my mom and dad took me and my fiancé to New York City. The first night we were there, we went to the Empire State Building. When we got to the top I put a quarter into the telescope machine to take a look at the Statue of Liberty. When the quarter dropped into the machine, my fiancé grabbed my left hand, got down on one knee, and proposed to me in front of hundreds of people!!!! It was so romantic.....Just like in the movies [16].

The last sentence is very important. Movies, along with TV, ads, magazines, and novels have provided us with clear visual ideas of romance (Illouz, 1997). Movie stars epitomize beauty, love, passion, “youth, glamour, wealth, conspicuous consumption, and relentless excitement”, in other words, the perfect romance (Illouz, 1997: 33). A billboard ‘larger than life’, a ‘tall building’, or a big ‘rock’ render the marriage proposal somewhat of a quantifiable entity. As Baudrillard argues (1981), outside the denotative function of objects (their function), objects can be substituted with one another because as signs they are free to circulate and be interchangeable. We play with these signs by consuming them as props for performances such as a marriage proposal. The very idea that the building on top of which (not somewhere in the middle) a proposal is made reminds us of the consumer desire for distinctive accumulation for what social actors lack is always invested in the object (Baudrillard, 1981).

Actors are aware of not ‘being’ in the movies, yet the distinction from reality is blurred by the illusory convention that the simulated can replace the real. An example ought to clarify this point.

Consider the following message:

I think it's acceptable to have a faux diamond IF the girl knows and is ok with it. He certainly shouldn't try to 'fool' her because that is no way to start out a marriage! And she WILL find out, I guarantee it! I'd suggest that they choose an emerald, sapphire or ruby center stone surrounded by accent diamonds. Also, many places offer payment plans... [17]

This way they are both fooled. In the past, Baudrillard (1981) argues, class chasms separated consumers from commodities. A Chippendale farm table could only be purchased by a noble, whereas today a Chippendale table imitation can be purchased by any consumer at a moderate price. What the consumer is purchasing is the ‘faux’, the simulation, or in other words the sign. It is lack of resources, not structural class restrictions that limit lovers and consumers. The meaning of the faux is generated from the differential relation of it, as a sign, with other signs. Therefore in a sense we may say that the setting is staged through the use of props as signs. These signs signify social distinction from others. This is perhaps why the declaration of love implied or explicitly contained in a marriage proposal is often

public. On one hand the man, by declaring, claims the woman as property, on the other hand (upon the utterance of the fatal 'YES!') both man and woman claim their 'possession' of romance, a commodity that is highly priced in our society. In sum, it matters little that one feel real or like 'in the movies' or in 'a fairy tale', for what matters is that the impression of the spectacle be carefully staged [18].

The Front, the Appearance, and the Manner

By now the reader ought to be able to easily interpret the logic and the characteristics of impression management of the front, its appearance in front of an audience, and the manner in which the role ought to be played. For clarity let us further define these elements of dramaturgical performance. Goffman argues that expectations about appearance are regulated by cultural and social norms and mores. Appearance of course works ritualistically to signify the performer's status. In private performance the question is popped by the man in front of the woman alone. The appearance of the man, in a consumer society, ought to reflect his socio-economic status and his gender-specific potential. By gender-specific potential I intend to suggest that the man ought to present a 'sensitive' front, a front that reveals his romantic and emotionally expressive side. An example will clarify:

On Valentine's Day I surprised Kathleen by sending her a dozen red roses. That night we planned to go out for a nice romantic dinner at Potowmack Landing. I walked Kathleen outside and she asked me where my car was. I then pointed to the white stretch limo I rented and told her that was our ride for tonight. Kathleen loved the limo. We had champagne and enjoyed the ride. The dinner at Potowmack Landing was great. We both love seafood and we ate plenty of it. The atmosphere was very romantic. We had a candlelit dinner, a strolling violinist and a great view of the Potomac River [...] [19]

It is through the conspicuous consumption of romanticized commodities that the man shows the woman his sensitive side as well as his distinctive economic means. This points to the idea of the manner, how we play our role, the personal touch we give our performance (Goffman, 1959). The idea of manner is also synonymous with the value of spontaneity and originality. It is however notably difficult to be spontaneous in a society that offers (and imposes) all sorts of mass-market romantic commodities and teaches how by offering advice books on how to propose. *The Story Behind the Rock: The World's Most Creative Directory of Romantic and Surprising Engagement Ideas*, by John Anthony Pagliaro Jr.

(1999) along with its corresponding website, offers all a groom-to-be needs to know before and after popping the question, including honeymoon services, engagement ring information, gifts for both him and her, as well as the Groom Survival kit “the only computer-based, groom wedding planning stress relief” computer game [20]. This is so that consumer and performer’s risk is minimized and the front is presented appropriately and ideally, in conformity to conventions and stage demands. Consider these Do’s and Don’t’s offered to grooms:

Do smile during your Jack and Jill party, rehearsal dinner, wedding ceremony, and especially at the reception. If your guests see that your having a good time then so will they!

Don't get drunk before or at the wedding reception [21].

The contemporary idea of romantic manner or manners can be tied to the normative aspects of the contemporary “political economy of romance”:

The class relationships that made possible and sustained the incorporation of romance within the economic practices of the sphere of consumption (Illouz, 1997: 66).

Manner therefore is now the proper consumption style. Given the association of the idea of romance with leisure and entertainment and therefore with conspicuous consumption, aesthetically ‘poor’ romance is now economically poor romance as well:

I dated my then boyfriend for 7 years patiently waiting for the day he would finally propose. One day after making a trip to what I thought was the grocery store, Steve walked through the door empty handed and announced "Hey, there's something for you on the backset of the car". Thinking this was his sly way of getting me to bring in the groceries I went out to the car to retrieve the bags. To my surprise there was just this one very small paper bag, sitting on the seat. Well, I'm sure by now you have figured out that the bag contained the long awaited engagement ring! Hey, they say it's the thought that counts, right? LOL [22].

Surely the thought is what counts but few would agree this proposal is romantic by any means.

Lack of manners in a marriage proposal can therefore be identified with lack of financial means.

Appearance therefore reflects one’s distinctive status (or illusion thereof) within the stratified structure of the political economy of romance.

A few more words need be added to the Goffmanian idea of the front. Goffman’s main contention was that the front be credible (Goffman, 1959). Credibility, Goffman argued, was established through both verbal and non-verbal signifiers that satisfied the duties of a particular role and remained

consistent with audience's expectations and performer's traits. Credibility plays of course a tremendous importance in the ritual of a marriage proposal. Throughout their relationship partners may speak of marriage at several points prior to the formal engagement. Occasionally the man may even utter semi-serious requests or demands such as: "Are you going to marry me one day?" or "Do you think we will get married?" Yet these preliminary explorations are far from constituting the actual marriage proposal ritual. These 'performances' lack credibility because the front presented in these circumstances lacks the romantic signifiers required for the enactment of a believable ritual.

Women can always tell when the guy is going to propose," she bragged. "They have a limo arrive or they take you to a restaurant that is incredibly expensive or they just plan something that is way out of the ordinary and get real nervous just before they pop the question." [...] One Saturday in April we dimmed the lights and snuggled up on the couch for what she thought was going to be an ordinary evening of watching television. Yeah...right! We began watching one of the two movies I had rented. [...] We had gotten quite comfortable with each other and the movie when all of sudden my face is on the TV screen – SURPRISE! My image on the screen told her that this was the evening I was going to ask her to marry me and how much I love her. Through the screen I asked her to sit back and enjoy the next few moments I had put together for her on the video. The tape then went into several minutes of romantic clips from her favorite movies such as "It's A Wonderful Life," "When Harry Met Sally," "Music From Another Room," "Jerry McGuire" and "You've Got Mail." When the clips were finished I opened up the lid to my coffee table in front of us to pull out a vase of her favorite flowers, tulips, and two candlesticks to set the mood even more. In the candle light I then proceeded to get on one knee not merely to ask her to marry me, but to ask her to marry me in a song I wrote for her and sang to her while playing my acoustic guitar. The last line of the last verse quietly asked, "Will you marry me?" I set the guitar on the floor and pulled the ring out from a nearby cabinet and held it between the two of us now close together. She said "yes" with tears in her eyes and a smile on her face! [23].

Romance, as I argued, need follow the logic of both spectacle and consumption because the ethos of interpersonal relationships has been increasingly intermixed with the ethic of consumer culture. Aware that a specific setting need be in place, the aforementioned performer becomes an entertainer, a representation of himself, and proposes to his girlfriend while playing the role of a Hollywood actor and that of a singer. The front becomes credible and real when the setting is magic, the appearance and manner illusory, and the drama 'movie-like'.

Conclusion

In this brief article I have attempted to provide the reader with an introductory understanding of the dynamics of the ritual of marriage proposal. Due to the absolute lack of previous studies on the matter

I believe my observation represents an important, yet exploratory contribution to the sociological understanding of this phenomenon. Future studies could investigate marriage proposals in a dual fashion. At the micro level there is a strong need to investigate the phenomenological significance of a marriage proposal for both the individuals involved in it and the life course of the couple. At the macro level, perhaps through in-depth studies of engagement narratives based on probability samples, social researchers ought to arrive at a taxonomic description of marriage proposals as to understand better the links between individual choices for the characteristics of certain rituals, personal and social identity, and cultural and structural norms.

Hitherto I have argued that our culture, and in particular our late modern consumer culture, plays an important part in defining the modalities of the marriage proposal ritual. Without pretending to offer sweeping generalizations to all marriage proposals, I have described this ritual by referring to Goffman's work on the presentation of the self, and provided a link to the macro level by utilizing the work of Baudrillard on representation and signification, the idea of the Spectacle as presented by Guy Debord, and the influential and empirically-based reflections on Romance proposed by Illouz. The idea that the micro level, dyadic or group, of the ritual of marriage proposals can be linked to greater cultural and semiotic processes operating at the macro level is, I believe, an important one for our understanding of symbolic interaction, and definitely for our future understanding of family and relationship processes.

Notes

[1] "The Story Behind the Rock." Michael Webb. 1995. TheRomantic.com. 15 Nov. 2001
<<http://www.thestorybehindtherock.com>>.

[2] "The Story Behind the Rock: Proposals." Michael Webb. 1995. TheRomantic.com. 15 Nov. 2001
<<http://www.thestorybehindtherock.com/proposals.html>>.

[3] By oblique consumption Illouz means the consumption of what the product signifies, rather than the product in itself.

[4] "Yahoo! Directory Relationships > Marriage Proposals." Unknown Author. 2004. Yahoo! 8 Jan. 2004. <http://dir.yahoo.com/Society_and_Culture/Relationships/Marriage_Proposals/>

[5] "Proposing Marriage." Sheri Stritof and Bob Stritof. 2004. About Inc. 8 Jan. 2004
<<http://marriage.about.com/cs/proposals/a/proposing.htm>>

- [6] "The Story Behind the Rock." Michael Webb. 1995. TheRomantic.com. 15 Nov. 2001
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