THE WICKED WITCH OF THE WEST:
AN ANALYSIS OF VERA WANG'S FALL 2012
BRIDAL COLLECTION

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Abstract

This thesis analyzes Vera Wang's Fall 2012 bridal collection, which features only nude and black colors. The sombre title of the collection, Witchcraft, is intensified by the themes of morbidity and decay, dangerous sexuality, ambiguity and haunting past found during the course of my analysis, and the aim of this thesis is to demonstrate how these dark motifs are a sign of modernity in bridal. My main argument is that the deathly connotations of the collection represent change in the tradition of bridal wear, and that the alternative collection by Vera Wang is a representation of fashion becoming more influential in the industry of conventional wedding dresses.
Introduction

This current thesis studies the Fall 2012 collection of the bridal designer Vera Wang. What made me interested in this particular collection is the color of the wedding gowns – it features dresses in shades of nude and black and not a single gown in the traditional hues of white or ivory. For a bride, nude is quite provocative in its sexuality: combined with the tight fit of the dresses, the reference to the unclothed body is clearly present in the collection, and as such, it is quite an unusual image for bridal wear. Black is an even more unsettling color choice for a wedding dress – a color that denotes mourning and loss, it is not only considered inappropriate for the bride to wear, but the etiquette even says it is not befitting the guests. The collection is called “Witchcraft” and the models' appearance on the runways and in the look-book correspond to the theme. Such a dark inspiration for a wedding collection seems at odds with the usual princess fantasy motif of the industry, and I wanted to investigate the possible reasons and meanings of such an atypical bridal collection.

The white wedding is ubiquitous in the western culture, and a white wedding dress is the epitome of this tradition. A bride that wants a different color for her wedding gown is faced with limited options, as the only alternatives to white are its nuances: eggshell, ivory, cream, etc. The white wedding dress seems to be deeply embedded in the western bridal culture; however, it is only a rather recently invented tradition. White was in fact considered a color of mourning as recently as in the nineteenth century, and before the trend-setting white wedding dress of Queen Victoria in 1840, wedding dresses used to be in color: bright shades as well as more practical browns, grays and even black were customary. In the course of history fashion has changed the meanings of black and white: white went from being a color of mourning to a color of celebration, while black went from signifying magnanimity and humility (Ribeiro 1986, 56) to being the color of grief. Now fashion attempts to once more swap the connotations of the semiotically opposed colors and make black an appropriate color for wedding dresses again. Thus, the collection of black wedding dresses offers a study about changes in meanings of fashion: the ability of fashion to strip objects off their meaning and create new meanings – in this instance, taking the mourning symbolism out of black and making it a fashion-forward, modern, edgy color choice for a wedding dress.

When talking about the development of new artificial fibers, Daniel Miller (2005) has said that “to be entirely new is in a sense to be entirely old,” meaning that fabric innovation was not only a product of fashion, but it was rooted in the custom of housewifery – it was a reflection of the “new propensity of women” and their emerging needs as consumers. The black color of Vera Wang's wedding dresses is also embedded in the old tradition that existed before the white wedding
phenomenon, and I want to argue that this new meaning of black as a color for wedding gowns is a reflection of the modern bride and her needs. Modernity teaches us about the present by thinking forwards and projecting backwards (Evans 2003, 296); the white wedding gown of the present no longer corresponds to the virginity of the bride, and I think than Vera Wang's black gowns are a sign of modernity because they re-examine meanings of the past wedding gowns and create a new type of bridal attire.

In my opinion this is a suitable topic for fashion studies because it deals with fashion as a representation of the social order. Social sciences in general are interested in understanding not only how a change occurs, but why it does, because this knowledge “allows researchers to predict how one pattern of behavior produces and reproduces another” (Kawamura 2011, 19), which, in turn, helps us forecast future changes (Ibid., 20). It is a relatively new collection, therefore it is current, and the “up-to-dateness” of fashion often predicts the future that is yet to happen (Evans 2003, 301), so the fact that this collection might bring about changes in wedding traditions would make this investigation an important contribution to fashion knowledge.

**Aims and Questions**

Kawamura suggests that instead of finding data to fit the theory, in fashion studies it is advisable (especially for new fashion scholars like me) to study empirical data and look for a theory that emerges from the analysis, using a “symbolic interactionist theoretical framework with an interpretive approach” (2011, 26). This perspective is suitable for my research, as it deals with acquired human behavior, social roles and norms (it is socially imposed to wear a white dress on your wedding day). During the process of my analysis, I have discovered rather dark themes that permeate the description of the collection written by the designer herself, the reviews of the collection by fashion critics, as well as in the mood and associations created by the images of the gowns. The topics of deathliness, dangerous sexuality, haunting nostalgia, and ambiguity pattern the narrative and the visuals, and I was wondering whether these sombre connotations were a representation of an alternative, gothic side of bridal wear that the designer experimented with or an expression of bigger underlying issues in the modern bridal culture.

The question of the thesis is therefore how the dark themes of the collection can be viewed as a symptom of the shifting moral codes in society and a sign of change in the modern wedding traditions. My aim is to analyze the collection in order to see how fashion reflects social changes and promotes new forms of identity. My hypothesis is that Vera Wang's black and nude wedding gowns are symptomatic of the emergence of a new, modern bride, a woman who does not fit the stereotype of the traditional bride in a virginally white wedding dress, and her collection is therefore
a sign of modernity.

**Delimitations**
The delimitations of this research project are firstly geographical – Vera Wang is an American designer, therefore I am discussing her collection in view of the color and other bridal traditions and meanings of the western wedding culture only. Also, the collection is not representative and in fact rather atypical of the general bridal fashion, so conclusions from this thesis are not applicable to the whole of the bridal fashion industry. Instead, they give insight to the conceptual approach of alternative bridal designers.

**Previous Research**
Weddings are widely researched in cultural studies, and the white wedding phenomenon has been questioned by recent scholars in terms of the authenticity of its practices. Katherine Jellison, in her book *It's Our Day: America's Love Affair with the White Wedding, 1945-2005*, examines the factors that have made the white wedding the main type of ceremony in America, despite the changes the country has experienced since the second world war. These factors include the role of celebrities, the movie industry, and media that all have contributed to keeping the white wedding a standard in American culture. Rebecca Mead's book *One Perfect Day: The Selling of the American Wedding* investigates the reasons behind the Bridezilla culture of the American wedding, noting how weddings have lost their significance in contemporary world and are now more a grand social event rather than a meaningful rite of passage: the wedding industry's drive to sell have turned this familial custom into a consumerist event. The commercialization of weddings began in the 20th century and has now become a hundred billion dollar industry. Economic scholars (Gite, Penner, Liyakasa, Feitelberg, Sweeney among many others) are interested in how various “traditions” of the wedding have been invented by the business in order to increase sales.

My analysis deals with traditions in weddings, particularly the tradition of the wedding dress color, and the loss of meaning behind these traditions, as well as questioning the prevalence of the white wedding dress in western weddings. The significance of the whiteness of the traditional wedding dress (chastity) is no longer the reason why brides opt for the color. If the meaning is not there, why should the bridal attire stay white? Vera Wang's collection challenges the norm in bridal and provides an alternative for the brides who do not want to look like virginal princesses on their wedding day. Vera Wang is one of the most prominent names in bridal, therefore there are many articles written about her career and business skills, a few of which I use in the first subchapter of my analysis where I briefly discuss Vera Wang's background. The Fall 2012 collection has been
reviewed by many newspapers and magazines, but not academically studied. My contribution to scholarly research lies in the in-depth study of the somber themes of the collection present in its visual representations and discourse about it, and the significance of these themes as a symbol of transformation of the modern bridal attire.

**Theoretical Framework**

My theoretical framework is based on Caroline Evan's discussion of morbid themes in fashion: she argues that the presence of death and dilapidation in the 1990s fashion imagery was more a sign of mutability than mortality (Evans 2003, 10). Apocalyptic fashion comes as a response to the rapid changes of the modern world, and expresses instability rather than death. The decay and deathliness that Vera Wang's collection evokes is also, in my opinion, a representation of change – a clash between the desire to be a modern woman and anxiety over breaking tradition causes a breakdown in values, which apocalyptic fashion represents. Rebecca Arnold's notion that fashion demonstrates the shifting moralities of modern society (2001, 125) is also used in relation to this argument.

Caroline Evans also studies marginal fashion that has a more conceptual approach to fashion, and while Vera Wang is commercially successful, her Fall 2012 collection is more an expression of her creativity and desire to push the limits of bridal and question its tradition. The conceptual approach of this collection was shown on the runway at New York bridal fashion week in October 2011, where gowns were in the original black and nude colors and the styling of the models reflected the Witchcraft theme. When the gowns became available to the public, they could be ordered in more traditional colors, but the statement of the runway show made an impact on the audience and helped get Vera Wang's message across.

My research is different from the analysis of the apocalyptic fashion of the 1990s because I apply it to a bridal designer, therefore I am looking at a more narrow spectrum of fashion. Also, it is in the teen years of the 21st century, but the fact that bridal fashion is not in agreement with fashion's desire for novelty and change has kept it from being in line with trends in fashion. Bridal wear has its own timings, and the theme of deathliness in Vera Wang's collection represents the crisis of the moment in modern bridal attire and the need for a more true representation of modern femininity in weddings.

In my arguments regarding the construction of identity through fashion I rely on ideas of Lury and Entwistle. Consumption is used to create a public identity and express individuality, yet this ability of fashion is crippled in wedding attire, where a white dress is supposed to represent every bride's personality. Vera Wang's dresses show a more individualistic approach to bridal wear and allow brides to choose from a bigger variety of color for their big day. Black is an extreme color
that creates controversy, but it used as a way of breaking tradition in order for other colors rather than white to become accepted as part of the bridal apparel business.

I also discuss the notion of the femme fatale and how she has been depicted as an ambiguous image of sexual desire and threat. I argue that Vera Wang's bride is a modern femme fatale and that the danger she evokes expresses the fears of non-productive sexuality and the loss of some of the procreational meaning in modern marriages.

Methodology
The discipline of cultural studies often relies on semiotics in order to define meanings of objects (Breward 1998, 303). Semiotics in fashion studies is used to decode meanings of garments, as well as images and texts, and I am using it to analyze the fashion imagery as well as the verbal images created in the rhetoric. I'm basing my visual analysis on the fact that visual culture is concerned with search for information or meaning in images and evaluating their cultural significance (Mirzoeff 2002, 3). The meanings of an object depend on the signifier – the physical form, and the signified – the associations that arise when viewing the object (Breward 1998, 306). In order to acquire these meanings from my empirical data, I have adapted the three-stage object analysis described by Valerie Steele in her article “A Museum Is More That a Clothes-Bag”, which constitutes the three steps of description, deduction, and speculation (1998, 329). In the description stage, the object's physical attributes are discussed, such as fabrics, textures, shapes. The next step – deduction – requires an interaction between the perceiver and the object in order to get a sensory experience of the object and establish any existing symbolism. Comparison of objects to others of its kind are an important step of this analysis in order to determine where this particular object fits in the fashion world – is it standard, unusual? What makes it different? Finally, the speculation stage involves posing hypotheses and questions that arise from the contextual interpretation of the object, which derive from the external to the object sources, such as cultural analysis, theoretical discourses of gender, sexuality, etc. My methodology is not directly following Steele's three-stage model, rather it is inspired by it in the depth and the angles of the analysis.

I like the metaphor of montage in contemporary qualitative research, used by Denzil and Lincoln (2008, 7). The implementation of different formats of text and analyzing various points of view on the same matter gives more depth to any research. Kawamura (2011, 110-11) and Alvesson and Sköldberg (2009, 86) agree that triangulation facilitates better understanding of the research matter by revealing different aspects of the same reality. Fashion requires methods that take into account multiple interpretations (Breward 1998, 304) and the methods I employ in my thesis are visual and discourse analysis: I am interpreting Vera Wang's gowns according to the designer's
intentions, reviewers’ reaction and my own impressions, all of which reflect on this modern, edgy collection in view of conventional rules in wedding culture. Based on Barthes' notion that the object of a semiotics analysis is rarely the garment itself, but rather the discourse produced about the garment as well as the significance attached to it by social convention (Kawamura 2011, 84-5), I am treating the images and discourse of the collection as the objects of my analysis.

**Empirical Materials**

I have chosen to use three types of materials for this thesis: one for the visual analysis and two for the discourse analysis.

For the visual analysis, I am using the images displaying Vera Wang's Fall 2012 collection – the fashion photos of the dresses from Vera Wang's website, where the dresses are available to be ordered (Fig. 1). The look-book that features the collection preserves the styling of the models from the runway show, therefore the concept Vera Wang wanted to get across remains intact in the images I analyze. Although the runway show featured 15 dresses, there are currently only 13 dresses from this collection available on her website. As it is difficult to get information about the dresses that were present in the runway show but are no longer featured on the website, I am analyzing only the 13 images I can gain information about. The dresses in Vera Wang's bridal collections are usually given names that start with the same letter. The letter of this collection is J, and the dresses are called as follows: 5 nude gowns – Jasmine, Juliet, Jade, Joy, Joanna, Jane; 3 black and nude combinations – Jaqueline, Joelle, Josephine; and four black gowns: Janice, Jessica, June, Jocelyn.

As for the discourse analysis, my first written source consists of Vera Wang's own descriptions of dresses, which is fully presented in Appendix 1. On her website, www.verawang.com, Vera is keeping a blog called Vera Unveiled, where she posts entries about her inspiration, sketches, wedding advice, etc. One section in the blog is called “Behind the Dress”, where she describes how a specific dress came about, the different techniques and fabrics used to make the dress and what the dress represents to her as the designer. I analyze the descriptions of each dress from the Fall 2012 bridal collection to try to decode the designer's message that these wedding dresses intend to emit. When analyzing my discourse materials, I am focused on the verbal images created by the narrative and how it is accomplished: the use of metaphors, the type of adjectives, words that denote a specific state – for example movement, which is usually expressed through verbs, is felt throughout Vera Wang's text and is communicated by nouns (such as “whirlpool”, “crescendo”) as well as adjectives (“frantic”, “free-flowing”, etc). The quotations from this source are referenced by the name of the dress, in whose description the quote appears in (e.g.
Jasmine 2012). The full reference is available in the List of References as well as in the Appendix 1.

The second source for my discourse analysis is represented by the reviews of her collection in fashion media: blogs, wedding-themed websites, newspapers, magazines, and fashion news sites. I have used the entries from the following media (the full reference is provided in the List of References, and in brackets the reference to the source is shown the way it appears in the text): Huffington Post (Wilson 2011), Daily Mail (Arthurs 2011), Wedding Style Magazine (Wedding Style Magazine 2013), People Magazine (two articles: “Vera Wang and Husband Separate: Did Her Black Gowns Foreshadow a Split?” 2012 and Ruderman 2012), Tie The Knot – a wedding blog by the industry specialists (Tie The Knot 2012), Brooklyn Bride – a bridal blog for the industry professionals, magazine editors and brides, with a focus on modern weddings (Brooklyn Bride 2011), Glamour magazine's weddings section (Unterberger 2011), Fashionista.com – one of the largest independent fashion news sites (Mau 2011), The Feminist Bride – a wedding blog that focuses on issues of the modern marriage (Majkut 2011), Brides – the world's largest bridal magazine (Alati, Crook and Davila 2011), InStyle magazine (Blalock 2013) and Maclean's – a current affairs magazine that covers social issues, business and culture, among other topics (Kingston 2012).

When selecting materials for this second source of the discourse analysis, I strived to find reviewers that represented different views on weddings (e.g., traditional magazine like Brides vs The Feminist Bride blog), that were available through different types of media (wedding websites, newspapers, blogs, etc.), that catered to the general public (e.g., Daily Mail) as well as exclusively to brides (e.g., Wedding Style Magazine). The reviews don't discuss the bride Vera Wang designs for as a collective figure, rather they treat the image of the bride as more of an individual – they speculate how real women (and reviewers themselves as they are mostly women) would feel about the dresses and whether they would wear the gowns. The reviews differ in their tone and predictions on the commercial success of the collection, as well as the interpretations of the meaning of the collection for the bridal apparel industry – whether it is a beginning of a new style of wedding dresses or an unlikely trendsetter. The quotes I have gathered from the sources were grouped by their messages and used in the discussions of themes where I thought them appropriate and useful for my analysis.

I performed my visual analysis before I had read up about the collection, in order not to be influenced by reviewers' opinions or Vera Wang's own views of her gowns. In my analysis, I want to see who the bride is that Vera Wang designs for, therefore I treat her as a collective persona (the Bride) rather than break the collection apart and talk about separate models and gowns. I analyzed with the help of questions used in visual analysis, such as what do the styling and the pose of the
model say about her, what is the image trying to convey, what mood is evoked by the visuals, what cultural connections arise – to history, pop culture, etc. The associations created by the images produced a narrative, which I then compared to the discourse of Vera Wang and the reviewers in order to evaluate whether the message emitted by the designer was consistent. I then analyzed my empirical data in view of afore-mentioned theories in order to try and answer my research question: do these themes reflect on social changes and do they represent a new, modern bride?

I came across distinct patterns that echoed throughout the analysis, which I then divided into five themes: deathliness, femme fatale, ambiguity, haunting memories of the past, and finally, modernity. The tropes I decided to focus on are the ones that were the most evident in my discourse and visual analysis, but by no means are the themes of the collection exhausted in this thesis. The majority of the subchapters have all three sources of the empirical materials represented in them, but some of the themes were only found in one or two of the sources, and I felt that the theme itself was too significant for my analysis to discard, therefore it might lack a coverage by one of the sources.

**Reflexivity**

Data are not just there, they are a product of interpretation, and this interpretation depends on the values and background of the researcher (Alvesson and Sköldberg 2009, 12). As a western woman who has worn a white wedding gown and has opinions on the topic, in my research I need to be aware of my pre-understanding and try to avoid the “initial, self-evident interpretations sometimes automatically produce[d]” by researchers (Alvesson and Sköldberg 2009, 276). Being aware of the influence of the researcher on the interpretation process is part of reflexive research. My academic background and interests determine my choice of theory, and my choice of methodologies and methods affect the research process and its outcome – what perspective I chose to look at the research question from and the specific paths for obtaining knowledge determine the kind of knowledge I receive and produce. My work aims to be objective but, naturally, the outcome and conclusions are influenced by my previous research and background.

In order to be reflexive with my empirical data, I need to acknowledge that as I am using Vera Wang's own description of dresses, this narrative is not impartial and has a goal of advertising. I wanted to use the designer's own discourse in order to help me decode the messages I perceived in my visual analysis – I wanted to see how Vera Wang herself describes the inspiration for this collection and what meanings might be interpreted from her description of each specific gown. I also need to be aware of the fact that the reviewers of the collection whose critiques I analyze are fashion editors, not general public, so they are more prone to like the fashion-forward, daring looks
and appreciate Vera Wang's conceptual approach. I do briefly mention how the collection was perceived by the public, which resonates with some of the reviewers' comments (regarding the bad luck of black and its morbid connotations), but I do not analyze whether the dresses were bought in black or if the majority of Vera Wang's customers preferred the traditional colors of ivory and white, because the focus of my paper was the message that the collection sent out and not how this message was perceived.

Outline of the Thesis
The analysis starts with a short background information regarding Vera Wang's career and the motivation for the Fall 2012 collection. With this I wanted to give a feel of what kind of a designer Vera Wang is and what type of woman her ideal customer is, so that I could later see whether the bride of the Fall 2012 collection is the same modern, fashionable woman Vera Wang strives to design for and why this collection is different from her previous designs. Then I discuss the meanings I discovered when analyzing my empirical data according to the division by themes I performed (Deathliness, Femme Fatale, Ambiguity, Memories of the Past Haunting Future Visions, and Modernity). The topics intertwine with each other and I refer back and forth to some of the main concepts I have found, therefore the separation into themes is not clearly defined, but rather states the focus of the specific subchapter.

In the discussion of the final theme I draw on the points analyzed throughout the thesis in order to establish the relationship between Vera Wang's collection and modernity, and show how the collection bridges the gap between fashion and bridal wear.
Analysis

Vera Wang's background and her motivation for the collection

In October 2011 at the New York's bridal fashion week, Vera Wang showed her Fall 2012 collection, which did not feature a single traditional white or ivory wedding gown (Fig. 1). Instead, the dresses varied from shades of nude to black/nude combinations to head-to-toe black. Known for her “innovative, fashion-forward” designs (Martha Stewart Weddings 2013), Wang has experimented with color in her previous collections: her Fall 2011 bridal collection (Fig. 2) was injected with gray fabrics and black sashes, her Spring 2012 bridal collection (Fig. 3) featured pastel colors of peach and mint. However, the Fall 2012 collection was quite a departure from the usual pasty frocks of the “queen of bridal couture”, and it was one of the most memorable shows in Vera Wang's bridal career.

Wang's journey in the fashion industry began when she failed to make the US Olympic figure skating team and got a job as a sales assistant at Yves Saint Laurent. The high-profile brand exposed her to the couture side of fashion. She then worked for Vogue, and her competitive nature lead her to become one of the youngest fashion editors in the history of the magazine – by the age of 23 she was a senior editor of the American edition and then she became the European editor for American Vogue in Paris: “I think I always had an eye and Vogue made that eye even sharper. An eye is a new way of viewing something old. Everything's been done in fashion. It's how you bring newness to the concept. I mean, a white shirt is a white shirt, but how do you wear it?” (Kantrowitz, Peterson and Wingert 2005). Her eye, sharpened by the aesthetics of the herald of fashion she worked for, has empowered her to experiment with her own designs in the future and modernize the classics, including the traditional wedding dress. After being turned down for the position of editor-in-chief in favor of Anna Wintour, Wang left Vogue to work as a design director for Ralph Lauren, who has said of Wang: “I've always admired Vera's strong sense of personal style, which is inspired by her own life as a busy, beautiful, modern woman” (Lipsky-Karasz 2011). At Ralph Lauren's, Wang was able to understand who she is as an aspiring designer and realize who her ideal customer was – a modern woman, just like herself.

Vera Wang's bridal brand happened as a result of her own wedding in 1989: after a fruitless search for a fashionable wedding gown, she decided to design her own dress, and the following year her own bridal collection (Mustafa 2005, 79). She felt the traditional “sweet and innocent” style of wedding dresses was meant for a younger bride: “I'm very modern and sophisticated, [...] and I
didn't want to look like the girl on top of the wedding cake’” (Coleman 1993). Wang saw a gap in the market for cutting-edge bridal attire that represented a 21st-century fashionable bride: “Frustrated with racks of the requisite meringues and sugary confections at shops everywhere, she wanted a modern antidote. ‘I saw it as a foundation for a business I could make a difference in’ ” (Lipsky-Karasz 2011). A true representation of “work hard, play hard” busy career woman and perhaps a historically untraditional bride: “Her drink of choice is vodka, and she's usually the first one on the dance floor. She's even got a luxe version of a party van that's her rolling home base between events,” (Lipsky-Karasz 2011), Wang modeled her ideal customer after herself and filled the niche for urban, sophisticated, fashionable wedding gowns. Wang's take on a modern wedding dress was innovative enough to cause excitement, yet befitting the industry standard, making it successful: “She has broken a few rules by designing dresses that were sensual and uncomplicated, yet appropriate for a wedding,” says Millie Bratton, editor-in-chief of Bride's magazine (as cited in Sharp 1998, 60). Her elegant designs with “body-skimming lines that skip the frou-frou but preserve the femininity” (Sharp 1998, 60) have transformed bridal attire.

Wang has designed dresses for the red carpet and knows what a successful modern woman wants to wear. She treats wedding gowns as fashion, coming up with exciting collections that follow seasonal changes of the industry, instead of being different variations of the same old white princess ball gown: “I'm trying to push them away [from traditional dresses] to get them to go forward', Wang said of her customers. 'Brides have to evolve from a fashion point of view – and why shouldn't they?'” (Feitelberg 2006). After establishing her signature body-hugging silhouette, which was a modern interpretation of the puffy princess ball gown of the traditional wedding dress, Wang continues to challenge the “norm” in bridal and create daring, fashion-forward looks, with an element of surprise that goes with the ever-changing fashion. In the early 2010s, she ventures into what might seem as unthinkable territory for a bridal designer and experiments with color in wedding dresses. Subtle pastels and inserts of colored accessories here and there are among her first experiments, and then came the Fall Black 2012 collection – far from a natural progression on the color wheel to a bit brighter options than pastels, or even one black showpiece dress in the white procession on the catwalk, Vera Wang went far and all the way with a collection of only black and nude creations, without a white wedding dress in sight. Why did she go that far down the color spectrum, to the direct opposite of white?

“I found black to be fresh and tongue in cheek,” Wang said. “With all the big weddings that happened this year, it was fun to step out of the box” (Fashionologie 2011). Indeed, 2011 was the year of widely publicized white-wedding-extravaganza: royal weddings of Prince William of England to Catherine Middleton and Prince Albert of Monaco to Charlene Wittstock, and the
infamous elaborate wedding of the American reality TV star Kim Kardashian (who was dressed by Vera Wang for the occasion), rumored to have cost 10 million dollars, to name a few. A great year for the wedding industry: “Throw in a photogenic boon for the industry – the Royal Wedding – and a paparazzi dream — Kim Kardashian's 72-day nuptials – and the stage is set for a yearning of all things lace, white and wonderful.” (Liyakasa 2011, 29). However for Vera Wang, who has been designing these “things lace, white and wonderful” for over two decades by 2011, it was time to depart from the white wedding standard and try something different:

“It was a big step on the wild side for me,” says V, during her March 28 segment on The View.

“This was the first time I could explore a long time fantasy of translating all the white and ivory dresses I have done for so many years.” (Black Is the New White 2012)

Black, will all its connotations, does seem to be a wild choice for a bridal designer, and even Vera Wang admits there is a dark side to her collection: “I did take it to a witchy kind of place. For me, it helped build a sense of mystery that I was hungry for. And it added this sensuality and sexuality, and a little bit of severity, too” (Fashionologie 2011). For her as a designer, colored wedding gowns represent “a freer, more creative, more inventive way” (Vera Wang on Color 2013), and for the bride – an opportunity to express her real self, her true colors on her wedding day.

Known for her modern approach in bridal, Vera Wang has aimed to design fashion-forward wedding dresses. Sexy silhouettes, fabrics and details that correspond to the current trends can without difficulty be seen as a modern statement in bridal. But is the unexpected choice of color for wedding dresses, and the total lack of white-related hues, only a publicity generating marketing ploy, or can it be also interpreted as a representation of modern femininity? I would like to argue that black, with all its connotations of morbidity, together with the dark and witchy themes of the collection, is, in fact, a sign of modernity in bridal. This leads me to the discussion of the themes I discovered when analyzing the collection and their interpretations in view of my theoretical framework.

Deathliness, Decay and Premonition

In this subchapter I focus on the tropes of decay and death, mainly represented in my visual analysis, but also supported by Vera Wang's narrative as well as the reviews. I perform a contextual interpretation of the discovered concepts and analyze them in view of theoretical concepts of the model as the human corpse, link it to the death of tradition and explain the premonition factor of the collection.
Vera Wang's Fall 2012 bridal collection created a stir because of its untraditionally sombre color palette for the wedding industry. The black and nude dresses, meant for a bride, evoked the morbidity of the 1996 Alexander McQueen's Dante collection (Fig. 4), with its “mourning palette” of black and “bone beige” (Evans 2003, 148), transparency of the fabrics and deathly references. McQueen utilized taxidermy, dissection techniques and death symbolism to depict fashion as an expression of darker meanings (Evans 2003, 145). In Wang's collection, references to death may not be as explicit as, for example, the bird claw earrings, masks with crucifixes or horn headpieces of McQueen's runway show, but they are nevertheless present. In Vera Wang's own description of the dresses, she refers to dark creatures of nature, bodily parts and taxidermy: organza layers of one dress are called “Eyelash flange”, and “from every angle these 'eyelashes' are waving—winking” (June 2012), “raw edges almost look like delicate feathers” (Juliet 2012), “the sheared organza flanges which make up the skirt are so dense, almost furry”, it's like “a column of dark flame”, “in black, I think of it as a raven taking flight”, ”it could almost be a blooming wild orchid” (Jessica 2012), “it’s almost like smoke, getting darker and denser as it gathers near the ground” (Janice 2012). The comparisons are very dark in their nature: the orchid a dress is compared to is black and wild; the flame and smoke are dark and dense, threatening to kill whoever comes close; a raven, with its black plumage, large beak and creepy croak, is a powerful symbol of omen and death; eyelashes, feathers and fur are the remains of their previous possessors, consumed for fashion.

Deathly references also come through in the imagery: very pale, sickly styling of the models shows their pasty complexion (not one darker-skinned model is used), lack of color in their lips or cheeks, disheveled hair that is stuck together in some places and tangled in others, as if it has not been washed or combed in a while. All this makes the impression that Vera Wang's Fall 2012 Bride is battling a disease or a heavy injury. Her attire contributes to this perception – light gauze, evoking bandage, is wrapped around the Bride's body, which looks weak and delicate, just like the tulle of her dress, easily torn by an abrupt movement (Fig. 5). She resembles Tim Burton's Corpse Bride (Fig. 6), a dead girl who rises from the grave because a wedding ring is placed on her finger, mistaken for a tree root by a groom who practices his wedding vows in a forest.

The traditional bride's image on her wedding day is usually a product of months of thorough planning and impeccable execution – from the top of her head (tiaras, veils, hairdo) to the bottom of her feet (stockings, shoes, pedicure), every detail is thought through, sourced in specialist shops and taken care of by professionals. No bride wants something to go wrong on that special day, knowing there will be life-long reminders of it in photo albums. In contrast to the traditional image of perfection, Vera Wang's Bride seems unkempt, unpolished, messy, shaggy, just like her hair. She even looks a little crazy – a witch or a madwoman, who escaped from the asylum of her deadly
regimen, where she was trapped, like a rat in a cage, in a fruitless race to have it all. She has escaped, but the life-long captivity and the manhunt she was subject to have left her in a mental and physical mess. In addition to looking like she is not fully present in the moment, her attire also looks like it's been through a lot: the fabric of the wedding gowns is gathered asymmetrically in different places, like it's been tossed around and tangled on the Bride's journey. Seemingly undone hems and threads that stick out add to this look of dilapidation and dereliction, as does the top layer of see-through tulle, like a spider's web over old clothes (Fig. 7).

Another sombre representation of a bride that reminds me of Vera Wang's Bride is Miss Havisham of Charles Dickens' novel *Great Expectations* – an old spinster who lives in her decaying mansion, Satis House, and still wears her “withered bridal dress” (Dickens 1860, 83) that she wore the day her fiancé left her and broke her heart. Dickens describes her as “the witch of the place” (1860, 118), “corpse-like” (1860, 83), “waxwork and skeleton [that] seemed to have dark eyes that moved and looked” (1860, 80). She lives surrounded by dilapidation: “grave-clothes” that were “once white, now yellow” (Ibid., 83), her house a “heap of decay” with a “pile of cobwebs” (Ibid., 124). Visually, the portrayal of this character by Helena Bonham Carter in the yet-unreleased 2012 film adaptation of the novel (Fig. 8) bears a resemblance to Vera Wang's Bride: the nude tones of her aged wedding gown, the see-through tulle of her veil looks like spider's web, the messy, unkempt hair and the pale, waxy skin. The actress Helena Bonham Carter is incidentally the real-life partner of Tim Burton, the creator of the 2005 animation film *The Corpse Bride*, as well as the voice of the Corpse Bride herself in the animation movie. Miss Havisham is a symbolic connection between bride and death: her unfulfilled wedding was the cause of her demise, her wedding gown is an everyday reminder of everything that went wrong in her life, and ultimately it is the cause of her death as well – the gown caught on fire and brought about Miss Havisham's passing. Her wedding dress is a sign of demise, bad luck and death, and these connotations of the old bride who grows old in her conservation of marriage resonate with Vera Wang's Bride, who is also witchy and corpse-like and surrounded by decay.

The comparison of the model to the “human corpse” has been pinpointed by Caroline Evans (2003, 176) in a discussion of the deathly style of heroin chic and grunge models, as well as the robotic perfection of the supermodel. The 1990s unhealthy look of the models came as a response to the seeming perfection of the 1980s supermodel and represented the dark side of fashion and the reality of models who use drugs and starve themselves to appear slim and “healthy.” The decay in Vera Wang's collection might also be a protest against the ubiquitous perfection in bridal imagery. With different sizes and skin colors, modern western brides don't all look like fair-skinned Cinderellas that permeate bridal advertising (Fig. 10 and Fig. 12). Marriage itself is not a fairytale
ending, but often it is a result of settling for what is available because of peer pressure or a union that represents financial security rather than everlasting love. Instances of domestic violence, bride-buying are the darker side of the modern marriage, and the resistance to the conventional representation of weddings can be seen in the recent phenomenon of “trash the dress” photography, where brides are depicted tearing or staining their wedding gowns after the ceremony, often acting as zombies (White 2012). Vera Wang's collection and the image of her Bride are in my view also an expression of the opposition to the norm, with the unconventional color choices and the deathly, zombie-like appearance of the Bride. The perfection in bridal imagery is flawed and representation of reality rises from underneath the surface of this imagery, and like the grunge and heroin chic models of the 1990s, it is a counter-effect to the fake ideal, an exaggeration that balances the overly perfect imagery with the overly ugly, hence the deathly and scary look of Vera Wang's Bride.

The deathly appearance of models showcasing Vera Wang's Fall 2012 collection is also a possible metaphor for the death of the virginal bride in contemporary western societies – as many as 95% of Americans have premarital sex (Jayson 2006), so to wear white to the wedding ceremony is more of a nod to tradition, than a meaningful expression of the bride's innocence. Even though the majority of wedding dresses remain white, with changes in traditional wedding the bridal attire is also changing (Springen 2006): the average age of brides is on the rise (Gite 1992), as are divorce rates (Neal 2007, 238), the latter increasing the amount of weddings in one's lifetime – almost 75% of the divorcees remarry (Gite 1992). A “fantasy virgin princess” look does not appeal to second-time and older brides (Kingston 2012). Gay weddings are also gaining recognition, bringing with them new traditions in attire (Majkut 2011a). The wedding industry itself imposes changes on the traditional wedding dress: due to the high demand of evening and weekend times for wedding reception, the waiting list for sought-after venues / caterers can be very long, which promotes the popularity of day-time wedding, and with it a more casual dress-code (Feitelberg 2005). The trend for destination weddings has also contributed to the abandoning of the traditional white wedding attire (Springen 2006). Fashion is a reflector and creator of social change (O'Connor 2005), therefore a collection of black wedding gowns by a leading bridal designer is a sign of change in society – the death of tradition signals the lack of need for conventional virginally-white bridal attire and the emergence of new, alternative bridal wear. The traditional bride is dying, and Vera Wang's zombie bride is a reflection of the Old Bride's passing.

Despite the widely-known fact that the majority of brides are not virgins in today's society, the death of traditional attire represented by the collection caused a stir among fashion critics. It was hard to avoid the unconventionality of black wedding gowns, hence the main focus of the reviews was on the eccentricity of the collection: “decidedly non-traditional tones like nude and black” (S.
Wilson 2011), "this most celebrated of wedding gown designers has torn up the rule book for modern bridal style” (Arthurs 2011), “the entire collection is a pièce de résistance from traditional bridal culture” (Majkut 2011a), “this season, the cutting-edge designer threw the bridal world a curve ball when she sent a parade of nude and black dresses down the catwalk. This black bias-cut mermaid gown with a V-neck and open back is as daring as it gets” (Alati, Crook and Davila 2011), “designer Vera Wang, fairy godmother to the wedding industrial complex, lobbed a neutron bomb into that white-lace vortex when she showed black at New York's 2012 bridal fashion week. In an industry propelled by conformity and 'tradition', the display was shocking, even potentially seismic” (Kingston 2012, 64). The effect of nude and black for bridal was shocking even considering Wang's reputation as an innovator: “in the past, Wang has already proven herself a bit daring in the bridal market, creating dresses with avant-garde headpieces (spring 2012), and crafting the looks in colors (Blalock 2013), “widely considered to be one of the world's most influential bridal designers, Wang is certainly no stranger to subverting current tradition, regularly designing wedding gowns that run the gamut of the colour chart in dove greys, pale mint” (Arthurs 2011). The Fall 2012 collection is seen as Vera Wang's revolutionary vision in the tradition-oriented wedding industry: unexpected, shaking the core of the trade and subverting the established convention.

The untraditional colors of the wedding gowns raised a question among the reviewers – whether the runway looks would translate into real live weddings, and opinions ranged from hopeful to skeptical, the latter prevailing: “such a strong style statement from the most powerful name in bridal design will no doubt trickle down from the catwalk to the wedding plans of the everyday bride (Arthurs 2011), “Vera Wang's collection might appeal to brides who don't care to look like fantasy virgin princesses” (Kingston 2012, 64), “Could Kate Middleton have walked down the aisle in black?” (Rosenstein as cited in Kingston 2012, 64), “like the cut but not the color? Ask for it in white or ivory” (Alati, Crook and Davila 2011), “Brides are traditional [...]. Demand for colour – lavender, pistachio and blush – is limited [...]: it's gorgeous, but more of a red-carpet look" (Rosenstein as cited in Kingston 2012, 64), “it's not unique enough”, “everyone has a black dress”, “white is a mainstay” - “it's special”, “there's something really beautiful and pure about getting married in white”, “brides want to wear something that hints at a wedding dress and bridal tradition [...] Chances are your mom got married in white, and your grandmother” (Guy as cited in Kingston 2012, 64), “experts' belief that brides' traditional values will lead them to reject black dresses”, “retailers are skeptical brides will chuck the white uniform”, “Wang may have found it 'fun to step out of the box,' as she put it, but brides are happy to stay within it – which suggests the designer's walk on the dark side was even witchier than it seemed” (Kingston 2012, 64).

Fashion critics' inkling of the commercial “dead loss” of the collection resonated with its
deathly connotations, which came through to the public – gowns were described as “witchy-looking” (S. Wilson 2011), “moody” (Mau 2011) and “sombre” (Arthurs 2011). The dark themes of the collection lead to a new set of questions: how will the gloomy mood of the dress be perceived by the wedding attendees? What kind of message does a black wedding dress send out? How will it affect the etiquette? The reviewers consider this issue:

For the mother-of-the-groom to wear black at a wedding is perhaps the most taboo of all fashion statements. It is to say, tradition states, that the wearer deeply opposes the union they are present to witness. So just what does it say when a bride herself chooses the colour of mourning for her nuptials? [---] A modern bride wearing black lace to her wedding would today seem to be in mourning for the loss of her independent status. (Arthurs 2011)

Other reviewers echo this concern: “frocks [...] were perhaps more funeral than bridal” (S. Wilson 2011), “black at a wedding is supposed to denote the wearer’s opposition to the union” (Tie The Knot 2012), “fashion goers were a bit surprised and taken aback by Wang's black and beige boldness more befitting for a fancy funeral or Morticia Adams” (Majkut 2011a), “it [black] also means no veil – unless a bride wants to look like she's mourning the end of her independence” (Kingston 2012). The reviewers concerns reflect our society's view of weddings as a performance for the audience – first and foremost a social event where etiquette forms the foundation for the rules of conduct, which cannot be overturned.

For the reviewers, the premonition of the dark and witchy collection seemed to have transcended the fashion show and created a negative connotation, where Vera Wang’s black dresses begin to be associated with bad luck: “even before they hit the stores, there's a backlash against black wedding gowns” (Kingston 2012). The conflict of “black” and “bridal designer” is also traceable in the episode of the American television serial drama *The West Wing* titled “The Black Vera Wang.” Even though the episode aired in 2002 and it refers to a black Vera Wang couture gown, rather than a wedding gown, the sense of premonition is obvious in the title. The black dress by a bridal designer forebodes death, and the woman who tries it on in the series gets a death threat from a stalker, who complements her on the dress and says she should wear it in the next couple of days because she's going to be dead soon. A black Vera Wang dress is an omen in 2002, just as it is a sign of premonition in 2012.

One of the reviews – the article “Vera Wang and Husband Separate; Did Her Black Wedding Gowns Foreshadow a Split?” (2012) – connects Wang's black dresses with her own divorce: “Was there a hidden message inside? Wang and husband Arthur Becker announced that they were separating on Wednesday, after 23 years of marriage.” Designing a collection with black wedding dresses at the last stage of her own marriage, Vera Wang could indeed have wanted to express the
impending presence of divorce in modern weddings: with divorce rates at an unprecedented high, a large part of marriages are doomed to end in separation. The black gowns could be interpreted as a foreboding sign of the future death of the marriage that starts at today's wedding. Maybe a modern bride should not wear a white dress that denotes her optimistic expectations regarding the success of her marriage, but rather wear a black gown that represents her awareness of the fifty percent failure rate of the modern marriage. In fact, Vera Wang's latest bridal collection (Spring 2014) shown at bridal fashion week in April 2013 features gowns that are half-black and half-white (Fig. 9) – perhaps they can be viewed as a more realistic expression of the success rate of marriages today, rather than just the representation of the current black and white trend in fashion.

The idea of a black wedding gown evokes negative associations of bad luck, morbidity, funerals, mourning and other deathly manifestations in the view of the general public. Despite the fact that modern weddings are less about religion and more about party planning (Kelley 2007, Mead 2007, 3-4), there still seems to be an esoteric notion of superstition and fear when it comes to tradition. It's considered bad luck to break tradition, even in rational, industrialized modern societies where science has won the battle with religion. In contemporary culture, “being religious and being fashionable seem naturally opposed rather than naturally integral” (Miller 2005) – a white wedding dress is an expression of tradition and religious values, while black, the go-to color of the fashion industry, seems to be in opposition to the religious symbolism of the innocence of the white wedding gown. This opposition of values brings out the opposition of connotations, as a black wedding dress becomes an omen, an anti-christ compared to the purity and morality of its white counterpart, even if the white itself no longer represents innocence.

**Femme Fatale: Otherworldliness, Sexuality and Power**

The description of the Bride in Vera Wang's narrative lead me to view her as a representation of the modern femme fatale, and I apply the theoretical framework of this concept to the discourse analysis of Vera Wang's narrative as well as my visual analysis.

Because of the opposition of religion and fashion, the fashionable woman has been considered deathly in her immorality (Walter Benjamin cited in Evans 2003, 136). The elements of pride and narcissism link fashion to sin, and the woman who falls into its temptation becomes part devil: “If [...] woman evades the rules of society, she returns to nature and to the demon” (Beauvoir cited in Evans 2003, 127). A bride who chooses to wear a black wedding dress puts fashion above the rules of tradition established by church and society, which opposes her to those institutions and
likens her to wickedness. Vera Wang's description of the collection mirrored that reference to the
dark world, resulting in a very dramatic mood, with a sense of witchcraft, other-worldliness, and
mystery: “I wanted to invite my audience to experience the mysteries that lie beneath the surface”
(Joanna 2012); “you can feel the sense of wonder, and beguilement, and the tug of that other
world”, “that sense that the rational world is coming apart at its seams. It’s a peek into the
something we don’t understand” (Joelle 2012); “it’s compelling, even delirious”, a “little bit of
sorcery” (June 2012); “mysterious allure”, “haunting, convoluted [...] like a witch’s candle. It’s
otherworldly”, “spellbinding, and a bit unreal”, “there’s absolutely something supernatural [...] 
tapping into something deep and uncontrollable” (Janice 2012).

The Bride in Vera Wang's narrative is referred to as an otherworldly creature: “a little of the
sea witch” (Juliet 2012), “this is the confident sorceress, the siren, who seems to have some element
of her own private fairy world still attached to her, as she moves through our world” (Joelle 2012),
“so moody, there’s an effect almost like [...] a dramatic sorceress” (Josephine 2012), “the good
witch” (Joy 2012), “like a sorceress appearing in a column of dark flame” (Jessica 2012). The Bride
is not part of our human planet, she comes from the world sorcery, witchcraft, and mythology. She
is magical and dreamy: “totally dream-like” (Joy 2012), “it’s almost like something you might see
just before falling asleep, into a very beautiful dream – a dream that carries you away before you
can make sense of it.” (Joelle 2012). The Bride might even appear angelic, with fabrics of her dress
forming “almost a ruff, or a halo—very gorgeous and dreamy” (Josephine 2012). But beware,
because she is “far from innocent” (Joelle 2012), and her charm is “dangerous magic” (June 2012).
She will enchant you with her “seductive siren song” (Joy 2012) and the temptation will lead you to
death; if you are not on your guard, “she’ll bewitch you before you even know how she’s cast her
spell” (Juliet 2012). Her danger lies in her sexuality: she is “tremendously magnetic” (Josephine
with “much 'va-voom’” and “curves [that] make quite a bold statement” (Jane 2012). She is “our
seductress” (Juliet 2012), “the enchantress” (Janice 2012), “the Exhibitionist bride” and “the center
of attention” (Jade 2012). With a promise of “sensual pleasure,” (Jessica 2012), she epitomizes
“allure and seduction, while drifting in a very ethereal, romantic world” (Josephine 2012). The
beautiful, mysterious Bride, that lures to danger with her sexuality, is a femme fatale.

The connection between sex and threat lies at the core of femme fatale's definition: a
potential carrier of life-threatening sexually transmitted disease, she is a fatal temptation to men
(Evans 2003, 145, 156). Evans indicates (2003, 148) that the dangerous sexuality of the nineteenth-
century femme fatale was a possible reflection of men's anxiety about women's emancipation
socially, economically and sexually, “a symptom of male fears about feminism” (Doane cited in
Evans 2003, 124). Sexually liberal women represent non-productive, sinful sexuality, a promise of guilty pleasure that one pays for with his health or even life. The image of the unproductive woman (a lesbian, vampire or other representations of the sexually deviant femme fatale) is an antithesis of the traditional femininity that features procreative sexuality, marriage and motherhood (Evans 2003, 128-9). The sickly appearance of Vera Wang's Bride detected in my visual analysis is a contrast to the traditional look of a healthy, happy young woman about to be married (Fig. 10). Her weary body seems unable to maintain the Bride's own life, and is even less likely to carry another life in it. A young woman seems to be almost antonymous with infertility, and this Bride is a puzzling phenomenon. She is not a mother-figure, and wearing a wedding dress only seems to underline this contradiction. She is a woman, but not a prospective bride for a conventional marriage. She's barren, dead on the inside, there is no blood running through her veins.

The sickly, infertile Bride in the imagery of the collection can be a representation of fears over the loss of some aspects of reproductive meaning in modern marriage. With professional opportunities available for a woman as never before, it is not seldom that she chooses career over motherhood. Even if motherhood is her choice, present-day health concerns (processed foods, overuse of medications, etc.), environmental threats (poisonous fertilizers on food, acid rains) and the higher average age of brides lead to problems with fertility in contemporary societies. Before, the wedding was a rite of passage closely linked to procreation: “For most men and women from the colonial period through the nineteenth century, weddings were not consumer rites, but rather were communal celebrations of the creation of a new household” (Howard 2010, 52). Nowadays, weddings are no longer the sacred, once-in-a-lifetime ritual of creating a new family they used to be – the possibility and profuseness of divorce, as well as the new opportunities offered by the profit-driven wedding industry that is “encouraging divorced brides and grooms to go all out for their second weddings, and catering to same-sex weddings” (Feitelberg 2005, 8) has turned weddings into a consumer experience: a party, a cause for celebration that can be repeated as often as every year when couples celebrate their vow-renewals. A modern marriage does not necessarily lead to reproduction (for example in the case of older couples that get married, some gay couples, people who cannot or simply do not want to conceive a child) and a femme fatale represents this non-procreational sexuality, which for centuries has been a source of dread for men.

In contrast to the nineteenth century femme fatale, her modern counterpart is not just a terrifying object in her associations with fatal desire, but is herself a subject of terror (Evans 2003, 127) – she is not a passive danger, but strong and attacking (Evans 2003, 148). The white purity of a wedding dress hints at virginity, and “unlike innocence, its core is sexuality” (Vänskä 2011a, 61). The allusion to sex in the wedding dress is a pointer of the presence of the old patriarchal order in
the modern wedding: because sex is used as “a means for implementing repression and creating
dominance in Western societies” (Rubin as cited in Väskä 2011b, 84), virginity is a symbol of
possession of a woman – who owns her virginity, owns her. And a white wedding dress, despite the
fact that modern brides are rarely virgins, can be seen a sign of patriarchal dominance and
possession. While white is a sigh of purity, color evokes sexual allure: white linen lingerie indicates
 chastity (Ribeiro 1986, 56) but it becomes erotic when it is made of colorful lace (E. Wilson 1985,
103). The choice of a black wedding dress emphasizes the bride's sexuality, not her virginity – she
herself owns it, she holds its power. Vera Wang's bride is a modern femme fatale – unlike the
nineteenth-century one, she is an active source of danger, similar to Alexander McQueen's version
of the modern femme fatale: “predatory, scary, powerful and only half human” (Evans 2003, 153).
Her otherworldly, demonic half has become not only an object of terror but a source of power.

The femme fatale motif can also be traced in the inspiration for the collection as Vera Vang
often cites it in her discourse: “trying to achieve a tangible lingerie idea—sexy, barely-there
structure” (Juliet 2012). Lingerie, one of the seductress' powerful weapons, constitutes part of the
gowns: “there’s a very rigid, strapless corset bodice with visible boning” (Joy 2012), “a very
structured, defined corset” (Jacqueline 2012), “a soft lingerie corset underneath” (Janice 2012),
“gown – softly corseted that hugs and flatters the bride” (Joanna 2012), “a lingerie bustier with a
soft stretch construction” (Jane 2012). Every small detail in the Bride's appearance is used for
seduction: “from the nude laces, to the tulle, to the corset boning”, to the “slit in the front skirt, ever
so slightly hidden behind layers of tulle.” (Joy 2012). The mysterious enchantress does not reveal
too much: “you can see just a hint of leg — [...] the slit doesn’t go all the way up” (Joy 2012). It's a
hidden, suggestive sexuality – it is only in your imagination. But it is as wild as your imagination
can get: “a provocative inspiration: it brings to life what’s out of sight, but only through fantasy and
suggestion and playfulness. And that’s so stirring to the imagination.” (Joy 2012). The Bride is
aware that the “ultimate seduction is in what you conceal, not reveal” (Joy 2012) and she is the best
at this game, therefore she is the one in control: “that’s just why lingerie is so powerful, and why I
drew on that vocabulary – because it’s powerful, it’s mysterious” (Joelle 2012).

The Bride has so much power in fact, Vera Wang compares her to a monarch: “an empress”
(Josephine 2012), “romantic princess” with her “iconic stately” appearance, she is “majestic” - a
“true royal splendor” (Jacqueline 2012). The monarchs have always been at the top of Simmel's
trickle-down chain, but they have a special effect when it comes to weddings: a royal marriage
ceremony being an event of stately importance, it has been responsible for creating many trends in
the history of weddings. In fact, it is not only religion and tradition that have shaped the rituals of
getting married – culture and consumerism have also influenced their development (Majkut 2011b):
the invention of “traditions” is a common occurrence in the industry, one famous example being the rules about the engagement ring (Neal 2007, 238), which advertisements proclaimed should be worth 2 months of the groom's salary. In fact, the double-ring tradition for the bride and the wedding band for the groom did not exist in the United States before the WW II (Howard 2010, 52). The “invented traditions”, which are customary today and seem to constitute the pillar of the wedding day, include “wedding rings, cakes, gowns, flowers, honeymoons, and gift giving” (Penner 2004, 1). In addition to the jewelers, department stores also contributed to the creation of “new traditions”, such as the bridal salon, gift registry and fashion shows for wedding apparel (Howard 2010, 52), making the wedding a mass-market product. “Age-old traditions” of the modern wedding are often recent inventions by the industry, with no significant meaning behind them apart from extracting more money from the bride and groom.

The tradition of the white wedding dress is also a rather recent one – the 1840 wedding of Queen Victoria started the rise of the white wedding’s status from the fashionable to the dominant (Penner 2004, 2). Before becoming the universal color for wedding dresses, white was a common mourning color – a portrait of Mary, Queen of Scotland, shows her in deuil blanc (white mourning) wearing a white veil and hood grieving the loss of three members of her family (Fig. 11). White, due to its high risk of soiling, was an uncommon color for outer garments, and women did not have a special gown for their wedding, therefore the colors of wedding gowns tended to be the more practical dark ones, often black. In modern-day western world, these colors have swapped their meaning, black signifying mourning and white being the common choice for wedding dresses. But due to the constant change factor of fashion and its cyclical nature, no meanings are stable and the two colors might oscillate back to their previous connotations. Just like a white wedding dress was at first a thing of fashion, Vera Wang's black dresses represent today's vogue – and as it is worn by a Bride whose power is compared to a royal, the status of the black wedding gown might also shift from the fashionable to the prevailing, creating a “new” tradition.

The princess bride, a source of inspiration for brides throughout centuries, is widely used as a marketing tool – childhood fantasies, and the desire to be pampered and treated like royalty all contribute to women's universal dream of being a princess bride (Blakely 2008, 659). Companies use royal imagery and connotations to sell every constituent of the “fairytale” wedding dream – best exemplified by the immense success of the Disney Fairytale Weddings conglomerate. In princess bride marketing, the bride is usually depicted as a typical fairytale character (Cinderella, Sleeping Beauty, Snow White) – a beautiful woman who has found her life's happiness, her one true love (Fig. 12). Again, it is a reference to the old patriarchal regime, when the most important role of women in society was being a wife and a mother, and marriage was the only validation women
could achieve. Vera Wang's Bride is an untraditional representation of a princess bride – she is compared to royalty because of her power, not because of her need to be rescued by a Prince Charming. A modern-day femme fatale, she is not a submissive, innocent, relieved-to-have-found-her-man representation of women – she is strong and powerful, and marriage is only one of her many achievements. Unsurprisingly, the fear and anxiety she instills transforms her into an image of witchcraft, otherworldliness, and dread.

Ambiguity

Ambivalence is found in Vera Wang's discourse, my visual analysis and the reviews, and I focus on the ambiguity of the lingerie motif visible in the gowns, the vagueness of the hidden and exposed, which hints at the bride's individuality, and then connect it to Simmel's notion of fashion as a source of differentiation and imitation. My visual analysis causes the rise of another ambiguity in the image of the Bride, which I discuss at the end of the subchapter.

Vera Wang's description of the collection is permeated with antithesis: “simultaneous sense of *sculpture* and *swirl*”, “very *simple* and sleek in order to contrast it with the more *elaborate*”, “clean *architectural* lines, and yet still feel *soft* and organic”, “it’s *edgy*, but in a very *romantic* way”, “*controlled-yet-chaotic*”, “a very *classic* silhouette [...] combined with this *modern* fabric technique” (Jasmine 2012), “*raw* edges almost look like *delicate* feathers” (Juliet 2012), “*contrast-color* Chantilly appliqué over the top” (June 2012), “so much richness in the play of textures and layers and *densities* here, it’s almost too much [...]. And yet, it’s suffused with *airiness*” (Jade 2012), “it *sculpts*, without *being* *rigid*” (Jane 2012), “*organic*, yet *precise*” (Jessica 2012), “with a *structure* to all that *lightness* (Joy 2012), “*subtle* but *rapturous*” (Joanna 2012), “a *seductive* counterpoint to the *softness* of the skirt” (Joelle 2012), “although it’s frothy and *never feels heavy*, has quite a bit of *baroque* splendor to it” (Jacqueline 2012), “there’s a *sleek*, smooth line [...] balancing the *chaos* in the skirt” (Janice 2012). The rhetoric of juxtapositions contributes to the bewildering, bewitching and confusing world created by the images of her gowns. Who is the Bride – a woman or an otherworldly creature? A good witch or a deathly siren? Will falling under her spell bring pleasure or demise? It's a complex, multidimensional collection that is as multi-layered as the dresses themselves. It's full of meanings and full of contrasts: between allure and danger, art and living, alive and dead, classic and modern. When dialectical images are juxtaposed, they acquire new interpretations (Evans 2003, 294), and in the antitheses of the collection opposing concepts are merged, shedding a new light on both of them, reinventing their meaning – just like the
meanings of black and white, which have already swapped their polar opposite connotations once in the past, and are now pushed to each other's proximity in Vera Wang's collection.

The reviews were also ambiguous in their perceptions of the collection: “the dresses look unmistakably witchy and moody, but also so gorgeous,” “simultaneously zombie-like and romantic” (Mau 2011), dark and gothic but at the same time stunning (Tie The Knot 2012). They oscillated between whether the gowns were suitable for a wedding or a funeral (Wilson 2011), and the dresses' morbidity was juxtaposed with their beauty (Majkut 2011a).

Femme fatale herself is an embodiment of ambiguity (Evans 2003, 127) and the Bride's image mirrors this characteristic: the lingerie inspiration for the gowns is visibly present in the collection (e.g. in Joelle dress shown on p.64, the boning of the corset is exposed), and this use of underwear as outerwear, “dressing up in undress,” is a style full of ambiguity (Arnold 2001, 66). Wearing underwear as outerwear represents the blurring of boundaries between public and private, which breaks down values and causes unease, and fear of the uncertain through the ambivalence of sexual attraction and shame caused by the immoral exposure of the sinful naked body (Arnold 2001, 67). The sexual connotations of the exposed lingerie clash with the traditional values of the bride – purity, virginity, innocence, and a juxtaposition, known as the “madonna-whore” syndrome, arises: virginal vs. sexy, innocent vs. experienced, spiritual vs. corporeal, (Davis 1992, 87-8). The “dialectic of the erotic and the chaste”, as Davis calls it, contributes to other ambivalences the wedding dress represents: the importance of the tradition of the white color and the loss of meaning behind this tradition, the desire to be yourself and the desire to be part of the customary ritual: “we can use dress to articulate our sense of 'uniqueness', to express our difference from others, although as members of particular classes and cultures, we are equally likely to find styles of dress that connect us to others as well” (Entwistle 2000, 138).

Simmel's (1901, 290-1) view of fashion as a way to separate ourselves from others (differentiation) and at the same time to blend in with others (imitation) is applicable to the choice of a wedding dress: we show our belonging to traditional western society by opting for a long, white wedding gown, yet we aspire to show our individual style through personal choice of accessories, fabrics, and details. But what if those details are not enough to show your personality – what if white does not truly represent who you are? Then the “compromise between the demands of the social world [...] and our own individual desires” (Entwistle 2000, 114) our clothes should be is not really a compromise. Expressing identity through clothes is an important part of today's fragmented society: people define themselves in terms of what they have (Lury 2011, 26) and consumption helps brides create the self they want others to perceive. As a well-planned event that presents you and your spouse to your friends and family, a wedding should tell a lot about one's
personality and values. You want it to send the right message, and even the industry specialists advise that a wedding should be an expression of your lifestyle: “Your wedding [...] is your opportunity to make a statement of style [...]. So everything you do should be an expression of self” (Mead 2007, 119).

For many women, a wedding dress is the most important element of a wedding, it sets the tone for the formality and theme of the whole event. Since clothes become more than material commodities – they represent the extended self of the person (Ahuvia 2005) – a wedding dress is one of the most significant expressions of a woman's identity in the course of her life – wearing it, she is the centre of attention of everybody she knows, and her identity will be on display for the rest of her life in wedding photographs. Her freedom to express her personality through clothes is compromised by the socially dictated norm of wearing a white dress for one's wedding. This convention does not provide many options for constructing identity: “The industry sets up this template and you have to fit yourself into it, and they trick you by giving you different sleeve lengths or white and ecru. But it's a narrow range of choices” (Shechter as cited in Kingston 2012, 64). Based on Freud's idea that repetition is always a form of disguise, whether it is an idea or an image that is copied, De La Haye and Clark state that a uniformed look is “denial of difference through sameness” (2008, 161). A woman wearing the standard white wedding dress with unnoticeable alterations loses her own identity and instead becomes part of a group identity – a “bride.”

Another ambiguity – hidden vs exposed – is present in the mood of Vera Wang's collection and reflected in her narrative: “there are wild, mysterious forces, constantly appearing and disappearing” (Janice 2012). It's a secretive, enigmatic world – “always whispering to you” (Josephine 2012) – where nothing is certain: “now you see her, now you don’t” (Janice 2012), “pieces that hide, that reveal, that stir our senses and our imaginations (Joanna 2012), “a hide-and-seek intrigue that's almost too gorgeous to believe”, “it’s really a study in saturation, and decadence, [...] the hide-and-veil, high-contrast effect” (June 2012). The gowns themselves participate in this game of almost-unveiling: translucent gauze is wrapped around the Bride's fragile body and exposes fabrics and patterns underneath, like her organs or scars (Fig. 13). The tulle allows a peek inside – its transparency invites us to look inside the dress and maybe even the Bride. The garments themselves, deconstructed, with torn pieces of fabric, through which other textiles can be seen, leave an impression of being worn out, eaten away by time and moth, so that the undergarments become visible (Fig. 14): in black and nude combinations, the outer black seems to represent the exterior (clothing), torn so that the nude (flesh) is exposed. We see the inner bride, her true self.

The metaphorical peek inside the bride's identity, and its literal counterpart of the peekaboo
effect of the materials and construction of Vera Wang's gowns, hint at the individuality of the Bride. The transparency of the fabrics and the layered structure invite us in to see what's underneath the surface, and an unusual choice of color shows the Bride's personality. Stepping outside of tradition and opting for a fashion-forward black wedding dress exhibits uniqueness and unconformity (Fig. 15) – one bride's comment on wearing a black gown with pink accents is that it matches a special necklace from her great-grandmother (Springen 2006) – and is in tune with the individualistic era we live in, where fashion is kind of a catalyst: “Fashion ... appears above all as the primary agent of the spiraling movement toward individualism” (Lipovetsky 1994, 4). Brides who constantly use fashion to construct and convey their identities, might want a wedding dress that represents them in a much more profound way than a traditional white princess gown ever could.

Search for new identities through consumption is “a means of resistance to passive ideals of femininity” (Arnold 2001, 76). The bride who herself chooses how she wants to be represented through her unique wedding dress is not a passive, traditional bride who wears a dress that is chosen for her by the rules of society. In the 1980s, women realized that fashionable dress is empowering (Arnold 2001, 67), just as wearing underwear as outerwear offered empowerment for women who reclaimed their sexuality in the last decades of the twentieth century (Arnold 2001, 66-7). Vera Wang's black wedding gowns, with their exposed lingerie motif and the sexual connotations of black, are the source of empowerment for the modern bride who chooses fashion over tradition and morality, and who owns her sexuality, therefore thinking that being sexy is a sign of strength. By revealing her under-garments, she invites the viewer inside her most intimate world, yet her strength and power protect its entrance. It's a “look but don't touch” (Arnold 2001, 70) game of ambiguity. Ambivalence lies at the foundation of fashion (Kawamura 2005, 5-6) and Vera Wang's collection represents the modern, fashionable bride, who is not a simplified image of innocence and morality, but an ambiguous character, full of contrasts and depth.

From my visual analysis, the main ambiguity came from the deathly appearance of the Bride discussed earlier. Like the Corpse Bride or Charles Dickens' Miss Havisham, Vera Wang's pale and sickly Bride appears lifeless, yet she is standing and looking at the viewer – she is a zombie, a robot. She just acts like a living person, with a body that goes through the motions but is emotionless; she lacks passion – a beating heart. The models' posture supports the robot/zombie comparison: their bodies are stiffly straight, their hands hang lifelessly on the sides of the body, their faces show no sign of passion – not a self-centered pout, a suggestive smile, or a fierce look-at-me expression models usually sport. They stand there, with lethargic bodies and emotionless gazes. To me this seemed to be in opposition to the rest of the depiction of the Bride as a powerful, sexy woman. Perhaps the modern Bride is juggling too many balls in the air, trying to prove that
having it all – a career, a family, an education, a social life – is possible, and ending up with no energy left to feel the satisfaction of her achievements. On the surface, she is beautiful and successful, but on the inside she seems dead. Maybe she can't have it all. The modern woman is an ambivalent figure, and this collection with its many ambiguities corresponds to her complex nature.

**Memories of the Past Haunting Future Visions**

In this subchapter I discuss the trope of nostalgia found in both sources of the discourse analysis and analyze it as a symptom of loss caused by modernity. Then I connect the movement present in Vera Wang's discourse to the idea of fashion as an agent of change.

The comparison of Vera Wang's Bride to an empress or other representations of royalty is not only a reference to the influence of royal families on wedding traditions in the course of history. The allusion to monarchy is also Vera Wang's nostalgic look at the past: “an effect that’s impossibly luxurious, reminiscent of one of the grand regal gowns”, “the volume and fullness of the skirt [is] enhancing that royal fantasy” (Jacqueline 2012). Nostalgia is felt throughout Vera Wang's rhetoric: one gown is described as “extremely evocative” (Jade 2012), some details of a dress “are very reminiscent of the seductive beauty of fine lingerie” (Joy 2012). The reviewers felt Vera Wang's inspiration by the fashion's past by referring to the influence of gothic style on the collection (Arthurs 2011, Tie The Knot 2012).

In fashion, memory and melancholy happen as a response to change – a modernist desire to break tradition and start anew denies past, which means repressing it, causing it to come back as a haunting sense of loss (Evans 2003, 257-8, 298-9). Given the tradition-breaking nature of Vera Wang's collection, this feeling of loss could be a representation of sentimentality for the past: novelty and change are full of uncertainties, and fear of the unknown stands in contrast to the familiar, traditional past, which becomes idealized in the process of comparison. However, nostalgic feelings about the idyllic past are accompanied by a “disquieting feeling of anxiety” (Arnold 2001, xiii), because the modernity of today is “haunted by a past to which it no longer corresponds, which is not the same and does not quite fit, for all its similarities. The time is out of joint” (Evans 2003, 300). The nostalgic memories of the traditional bride do not correspond to the reality of the modern woman today. The meaning of the white wedding dress is lost, and the tradition of wearing it does not fit the present. And still, the memory of the past, laden with nostalgia and sentimentality, is haunting the representation of the modern Bride in untraditional bridal attire.

The bride herself is a memory of a woman of the past, alive today only in art: “a
Renaissance portrait of a queen” (Jacqueline 2012), “a piece of Degas ballerina” (Josephine 2012). The virginal Queen Victoria in a white dress and all the traditional brides that married as virgins are women of the past, and the modern bride wearing white is only a portrayal of her, an imitation. The Old Bride is not alive in the modern world, she is only a memory represented in the art of the designer. Connection to art in its many ways permeates Vera Wang's discussion of her collection: “a beautiful sense of movement, almost like a brushstroke” (Joy 2012), “rich layers of blushes and nudes inside the skirt creating so much dimension, like a series of transparent glazes on a canvas. I wanted everything about this dress to feel like a painting” (Juliet 2012), “it’s a total work of art” (Jade 2012), “tapestry of perfect shapes and details” (Jacqueline 2012), “it creates the illusion of something like a brushstroke in enamel” (Jessica 2012), “this is my rhapsody in black”, “it’s hard to avoid getting carried away by the poetry” (Jocelyn 2012), “it’s like bold strokes with a paintbrush” (Jane 2012), “with all of the different tones and shadows in the tulle it’s so natural-looking and organic that it’s almost a watercolor” (Josephine 2012), “every single drape and pass is a brushstroke, it’s like doing a Japanese ink painting over the statue of a goddess” (June 2012).

The Bride is a painting, a statue, a work of art – she is beautiful but inanimate. She is an image of the past instead of flesh and blood. This resonates with the earlier theme of deathliness; however, in contrast to the lifeless Bride there is also fashion, which seems to come alive in Vera Wang's discourse, due to her use of personification: the dress “hugs” the Bride (Joanna 2012), it “breathes” (Jocelyn 2012), “a gown that just floats” (Joy 2012), “I love how much of a presence it has to it.” (Jane 2012). A still, statuesque, emotionless Bride is dressed in alive, moving gowns. The dresses are even possessors of feelings: “it’s full of frivolity and fun” (Jasmine 2012), “it’s brazen” (June 2012), it “has a very flirty, fun, whimsical feel to it” (Joy 2012), “so beguiling” (Jessica 2012), it's a “wink, in a dress” (Juliet 2012), full of “wild, passionate forms” (Jocelyn 2012). Even the fabrics seem to be full of life and movement: organza layers of one dress are called “Eyelash flange,” and “from every angle these 'eyelashes' are waving—winking” (June 2012). The otherworldly, haunting ghost of a bride past is juxtaposed to modern fashion, which is likened to living creatures of the human world: a raven taking flight, a blooming orchid, winking eyes. The ambiguity of alive and dead, organic and inorganic resembles Martin Margiela's installation from 1997, where he displayed inanimate mannequins dressed in garments, the fabrics of which had been impregnated with bacteria. This unusual concept reversed the standard order of things, by which alive, fecund human beings wear “deathly and unproductive fashion” (Walter Benjamin cited in Evans 2003, 186-7); here, the garments were living and reproducing, contrasted by their deathly and infertile wearers.

Margiela's clothes were “alive while simultaneously rotting” (Arnold 2001, 60), but through
this rotting the garments were gradually transformed, the growing mould and bacteria changing their shape and look. The personification of Vera Wang's gowns also expresses this notion of fashion as a living, active agent of change. The Old Bride is no longer alive, but fashion brings the transformation of her attire, modernizing it and making it correspond to the reality of today. Movement, symptomatic and symbolic of change, is perceived throughout Vera Wang's description of the gowns: “full of wildly unpredictable movement”, the “volume [...] collapses”, “flyaway quality”, “fluid, swirling”, “a whirlpool of organza and tulle”, “spiraling ladder”, “it gradually unfurls” in a “chaotic race” (Jasmine 2012); “cascading eyelash flange”, “constant movement in the fabrics”, “tulle that floats up at the neckline”, “swirling, cascading flange”, “it glides through the air as though it’s underwater, like a delicate stretch of coral that ebbs and flows with the ocean’s currents” (Juliet 2012); “it twists and transforms and enthralls as it weaves around, a “work of art, in motion”, “like billowing vapor, drifting through light and darkness”, “draws the eye in, really grabs you”, “so many blushes, golds and ivories, and dusty pinks cascading”, “there’s so much motion”, “it just swallows up all your senses”, “light almost seems to pour through this gown” (Jade 2012); “much “va-voom”” (Jane 2012); “collapsed A-line gown”, “just floats, airily”, “beautiful sense of movement”, “floating organza scallops” (Joy 2012); “tumbled skirt”, “stir our senses”, “I wanted the skirt to be in constant motion”, “enfolded with laddered fabric”, “pattern that swirls around and around the dress and then opens out as it descends”, “tones playing together”, “full of free-flowing energies and just lots of frantic detail, racing away in every direction” (Joanna 2012); “when the bride is moving, the skirt is billowing, roiling, drifting”, “the distressed tulle bounces and folds and sweeps” (Joelle 2012); “growing more and more complex and layered as you move” (Jacqueline 2012); “a fabric that wavers perfectly between crispness and organic flow. The layers are folded in and tumbled so they seem to fly away when the bride’s in motion, and they almost open up”, “blend of texture and movement”, “getting swept away” (Josephine 2012); “fabric slowly unraveling”, “the warp of the material flies off in a delicate fringe” (June 2012); “in motion, it moves and tumbles and breathes, billowing and frothing”, “the engineered cascades build to a crescendo” (Jocelyn 2012).

The shifting nature of fashion captures and exposes the fluid definitions of gender and sexuality, among others, by experimenting with the norm (Arnold 2001, 125). In the overwhelming sense of movement of the collection, the definition and meaning of “bride” is displaced, challenging tradition and convention. The theme of sorcery and magic is used to articulate the transformation that occurs when the death of tradition in weddings causes fashion to produce new image and meaning of the bride. “Recycling” old memories into a new narrative, the designer is a part of this magical world, where “fashion becomes a space of fiction to create new stories” (Evans 2003, 258).
Building new from the fabrics of the past, Vera Wang applies her “eye” to the traditional and reinvents it; her description shows this transformation: “the strapless ballgown is a very *classic* silhouette, but when it’s *combined with this modern fabric technique* — pleated layers of tissue organza with raw edges — it feels more spontaneous and *fashion-forward*” (Jasmine 2012); “I chose a very full A-line skirt for this gown, which fancifully *deconstructs the classic* formal skirt you’d have in a traditional ballgown. (Josephine 2012); “a *new technique* we call sheared flange, in which strips of cut-edge organza are spaced together so minutely that the effect looks almost like fur” (Jade 2012); “this bustier in this dress is a *new design we’re introducing*. It’s a lingerie bustier with a soft stretch construction, so that although you have boning and support in the corset, it’s mobile and it hugs the body, it’s flexible. So it sculpts, without being rigid” (Jane 2012); “it *combines* the best aspects of *two classic bridal* silhouettes, the mermaid and the A-line gown” (Joy 2012); “a chance to *marry* the elegance of my more *fashion-forward* textures and patterns – like this laddered chiffon—*with the lightness and whimsy of traditional* bridal (Joanna 2012); “the bodice is done in *micro-pleating*, which is a *technique* that combines many tiny, geometrically precise pleats” (Jessica 2012); “it *updates a classic* silhouette with a very seductive shape.” (June 2012). She manipulates fabric to make it look texturally different, transforms a classic silhouette into an edgy, modern look by adding trendy details and sensuality, reinterprets classic silhouettes by combining them, updates old structures and makes them wearable for the comfort-uncompromising women of today.

Vera Wang's inventiveness can be seen in many aspects in this collection: layering of materials and textures, mixing various fabrics in any given piece (organza, tulle, lace, chiffon), manipulation of textiles (pleating, raw edges, flanging that makes it look like feathers), color shading (blushes, nudes, blacks – all look different in various combinations), the use of different silhouettes (trumpets, sheaths, ball gowns, A-lines, mermaid) and techniques (ladder technique, appliqué, embroidery). This is a creative, modern, conceptual collection. Rather than only focusing on the commercial side of fashion, it also sends a strong message – it is designed to shock and make think. Vera Wang's creativity and her conceptual approach, together with allusion to her own work as art, highlights the role of the designer in the process where fashion challenges and subverts the norm. The designer is an artist, using fashion as a place to change the established rules of society and invent new definitions. Due to the decline of religious beliefs, the creation of identity is believed to be the undertaking of the individual himself (Arnold 2001, 57). Bridal fashion is one of the few branches of the industry where the majority of customers buy made-to-order garments, and these custom-made creations contribute to the individualistic era of the modern times. Designers help create the true you, distinct and unique just like artwork, by using the ghosts of past to produce
new concepts that fit today's world. Vera Wang's collection endeavors to create a new definition of the bride that reflects the needs, wants and truths of a modern woman.

**Modernity: The Opposition of Fashion and Bridal Attire**

In this subchapter I show how bridal is not a part of fashion and modernity's quest for novelty and change, and how Vera Wang's collection differs from the rest of bridal attire. In my discussion I rely on the presence of modernity and innovation in all three sources of my analysis.

Fashion and modernity are all about change and novelty (Kawamura 2005, 6), and “the emergence of fashion as a cultural mode of modernity has been linked with the emergence of the modern individual, progress and a break from traditions” (Sandikci and Ger 2005). The white wedding dress, however, keeps in line with tradition and does not embrace fashion's thrill for change and “neophilia” (Koenig as cited in Kawamura 2005, 6). “Bridal” is a dreaded label for aspiring fashion designers (exemplified by many incidents on the reality TV-search for up-and-coming designers, *Project Runway*): it means generic and cutesy - nothing new, innovative or edgy.

Despite the fact that a traditional wedding dress eludes the western civilized phenomenon of rapid fashion changes, being modern is very important to Wang, who treats bridal just like any other branch of fashion. Her approach is to keep her collection in tune with the current trends and she stresses the modernity of her designs in her narrative: “the delicacy of the Chantilly detail keeps it exquisitely modern” (Jacqueline 2012); “three big deconstructed rosettes right at her neck, done in distressed organza, a material which was very important for this season’s textures. [---] they take up some of that classic floral element of traditional wedding vocabulary, and refresh it. It’s quite a contemporary decision” (Josephine 2012); “that balance and symmetry, as well as the architectural sensibility throughout the construction of this gown, mark it as one of my signature modernist creations. It’s the perfect dress for a bride who appreciates the thrill of a truly modern look” (Jessica 2012).

The styling of the models as seen in the images is also a representation of modern, edgy, conceptual approach of Vera Wang's vision. But of course, the most striking element of her modernist approach is the color of the gowns: she says she wanted “something strong and surprising”, but it needed to be not just attention-grabbing maximalism, but to actually come from a fashion place: “wedding culture has come a long way, and now you’re starting to see black as a recurring accent element in the modern ceremony” (Jocelyn 2012). Incorporating black as an accent color in the wedding ceremony and reception might indeed be modern and trendy, but Wang took it
to a whole new level by designing black dresses for the bride.

Modernity is “theatricality which is constantly eroticising the new” (Buci-Glucksmann cited in Evans 2003, 293), and Vera Wang states in her narrative that she is “at home in modern. I like to work in subtle, unexpected shapes that surprise and delight. I’m always looking for new perspectives on the traditionally beautiful gown” (Janice 2012). Her collection, which she herself refers to as “theatricality” and “the drama of black” (Jocelyn 2012), provokes the established unspoken rule of the wedding etiquette, which considers black a sign of mourning and therefore inappropriate for a marriage ceremony. In search for new and unexpected, fashion challenges the norm and breaks the existing conventions: it is characterized by “the negation of the age-old power of the traditional past, the frenzied modern passion for novelty, the celebration of the social present” (Lipovetsky 1994, 4). Vera Wang's fashion-forward collection reflects the social changes of the present, where premarital sex and cohabiting with one's future spouse is not only morally accepted, but even encouraged in order to test the compatibility of the partners and ensure the longevity of the future marriage.

Despite these changes, tradition is still the foundation on which weddings are conducted (Knox et al. 2003). Could this longing for tradition in weddings be explained by the desire for stability in our uncertain world? Science and modernity often have negative associations in the public eye: for example, lycra was first unpopular because in reaction to scientific progress people favored natural fabrics (O'Connor 2005). Modernity relies on instability (Baudelaire cited in Evans 2003, 295) and disruption, because these factors derive change (Berman cited in Evans 2003, 243). The return to and holding on to traditions in weddings might be a romantic reaction to “the modern world, characterized by increasing fragmentation and a sense of chaos” (Entwistle 2000, 139). In our cosmopolitan society, traditions are fewer and fewer, as the old way of life is modified by new possibilities – urbanization and globalization cause people to move away from their families in search for better financial opportunities. Special occasions, such as weddings and other rites of passage, are a cause for familial reunions and are treasured in family photos and memories, as if to make belief that tradition permeates modern family life and that nothing really changes.

In the chaotic modern world the only certain thing in life seems to be death, and modernity often links fashion and deathliness (Evans 2003, 132). “Apocalyptic fashion,” typical of modernism, represents the stage of transition, where the familiar old world is dying and change is inevitable (Evans 2003, 308). The demise of tradition, epitomized by Vera Wang's radical black wedding dresses, causes anxiety in the always-changing world, and the deathly connotations of black provoked negative reviews from the public and the critics. However somber some of the comments might have been, they still expressed pure astonishment with Vera Wang's genius and the modern,
fashionable feel of her collection: “trust us that her unusual show was one of the most stunning we’ve ever seen, whether in the bridal couture world or beyond” (Wilson 2011), one of “this season’s highlights” (Alati, Crook and Davila 2011), “Vera Wang’s most celebrated bridal gown collection yet” (Wedding Style Magazine 2013), “Vera Wang’s Fall 2012 bridal collection was heralded by critics for its beauty, elegance and unique color palette” (Vera Wang and Husband Separate 2012), “Not a white dress to be seen, but Vera Wang still manages to show some frothy and sexy silhouettes with details to die for” (Brooklyn Bride 2011), “It is 100-percent A-M-A-Z-I-N-G. [---] So modern, so unexpected, so so so pretty” (Unterberger 2011), “We’d never considered black for our big day, but after seeing these beauties, we just might” (Mau 2011), “as the collection rolled out on the runway it became clear that Wang's genius as a designer had not been abandoned. [...] the audience became enamored with their show-stopping beauty. Vera Wang proved that even if a bride walked down the aisle in black or nude she could still steal the show” (Majkut 2011).

The dark, foreboding feeling of the “Witchcraft” collection came across to the critics, but so did Vera Wang's genius, modernity and fashion-forwardness. Such is the ability of fashion to turn one concept into its direct opposite (Evans 2003, 296); the ambiguous nature of modernity and fashion brings antitheses together in a chaos that transforms decay into growth, death into beauty. And if this change is beautiful, why resist it? In a postmodernist notion to question authority, a query arises: does the bridal industry play on the sentimentality of the population and its love of tradition? Is it in the interest of the business to keep wedding dresses white? A change in this tradition would enable brides to go to any store and buy any other dress to get married in and thus erase the need for specialized bridal boutiques, therefore it is profitable for the wedding industry to keep wedding dresses a separate branch of fashion. White for the wedding business is what black was for Henry Ford: having just one color made production more efficient, and he famously said that “any customer can have a car painted in any colour he wants so long as it is black” (cited in Lury 2011, 27). The wedding industry offers variety in color so long as it is in a shade of white.

If the meanings of the traditional wedding are gone, why should traditions themselves be kept? A Hausa proverb says that when the music changes, so does the dance – the definition of wedding has changed from a meaningful rite of passage to a consumption experience: “As a culture, we're losing sight of what a wedding is really about. Matching your chair tie-backs to the lining of your Save the Date envelopes is not going to prepare you for marriage” (Mead cited in Kelley 2007). A modern wedding is more a social gathering than creation of a new household – the majority of couples that get married already live together prior to the wedding (Mead 2007, 112). As the “social principles and structures of modernity – the nation, the family – are emptying out, losing some of the meaning and relevance they once had,” they are being replaced by consumer
A wedding is only an image of a familial reunion, of a ritual surrounding the beginning of a new chapter in life, and consumption fills the void of “alienation, estrangement and disorientation” associated with modernity: it provides “magical solutions” and releases “unknown desires” (Lury 2011, 59).

The commercialization of the wedding is apparent: “The bridal industry has turned the wedding into a shopping expedition” (Kelley 2007). Veblen's “conspicuous consumption” has always been part of celebrations (Penner 2004, 2) and weddings are a perfect opportunity to present yourself as more attractive, better dressed and wealthier: “In a celebrity-saturated culture, this is your opportunity to be a movie star for a day” (Mead cited in Kelley 2007). The ceremony of marriage has been transformed into a spectacle for the consumption-driven society, and couples are spending as much as a down-payment for a house on one day (Frischknecht 2004). More couples today pay for their wedding themselves instead of their parents, and as likely children of divorce, they think that a bigger ceremony represents a bigger commitment (Mead 2007, 36). Taking into account the 1000-dollar average price of a wedding dress (Springen 2006), it would make sense for a modern bride to spend her hard-earned money on a gown she would wear again.

Patriarchal tradition is traced in the white color of the traditional wedding dress, which seems to be “advertising some kind of sexual status that [the] groom didn't have to do” (Shechter as cited in Kingston 2012, 64). “Re-virginizing” for a day is hypocritical for a woman who is comfortable with her sexuality: “My sexual history is one of the good things I bring to this marriage” (Shechter as cited in Kingston 2012, 64). Does the fact that the traditional bride herself chooses to wear this symbol of patriarchal dominance and is excited about it mean that deep down she is still a woman of the old regime, not truly free from the shackles of domesticity and subordination? Is it a conscious choice? Mead argues (2007, 41-2) that the bride believes that her choice to be traditional is an indication of her modernity – she wears the style of “prefeminist femininity” because she wants to, not because somebody else tells her she has to. But is she truly wearing a white dress for herself or is it a demonstration of her belonging to the man she is marrying? She might not be giving over her virginity (and with it her submission) anymore, but the symbolism of the white dress is still present in her gown. To use color for the modern bride would be to claim her own sexuality, and Mead questions whether her choice to be traditional is really a choice or rather a conformity to social rules, seeing as the industry does not offer many alternatives to a white dress (2007, 42).

If fashion is part of modernity, why does it elude such an important part of a modern woman's life as her own wedding? Why does she have so little say in what she should wear on her wedding day? The second-wave feminism of the 1970s identified fashion with patriarchal
oppression (Breward 1998, 308) and saw it as a trap for women – being fashionable meant being vain, superficial, unintelligent (Arnold 2001, 104). However, in the 1980s fashion began to be viewed as a source of empowerment, as career women reclaimed stereotypes of sexuality by using sexy dress as a sign of power and strength as opposed to submission (Arnold 2001, 67, 75, 106). Modern women, with equal to men rights to education, employment opportunities, political and sexual freedom, and economical independence should be free to express their sexuality and fashionability: a sexy woman does not need to simulate a virgin on her wedding day, and a stylish bride does not need to wear a look that was fashionable in the 1840 because of a social convention.

The individuality of a woman does not come through in a traditional wedding gown: white is “the colour of ghosts, a symbol for invisibility” (Azzellini cited in Evans 2003, 303). A ghost of the bride of the past, it does not represent the strong independent woman of the 21st century, despite the achievements of the other aspects of her life, such as career and equality. In her choice of a wedding dress, she is restricted to the traditional length, silhouette and color variations, which might differ greatly from her own personal preferences. Having reclaimed her sexuality and freedom to express her individuality in her everyday life as far back in time as the 1980s, she is still hesitating about breaking the stereotype of the bride. Wedding is considered of the most important days of a woman's life, so why should it be the day to restrict her freedom? A bride should take advantage of all the liberties modernity has to offer and be the truest representation of herself.

Modernity, for all the chaos and instability it causes, provides an opportunity to constantly reinvent the self (Evans 2003, 309) – fashion and consumption present a way to deal with the fragmented world by creating an identity (Entwistle 2000, 139). In a nihilistic trend to break convention, modernity offers the freedom to be yourself: traditional dress norms are no longer abided, and women have more freedom than ever before to wear masculine, androgynous, sexy, revealing, fashionable or any other type of clothing they want. Brides are the same educated, independent professional modern women, so they should be as little constrained in their choice of a wedding dress as they are in their everyday clothing.

Vera Wang's alternative collection of wedding gowns is for the fashionable, edgy, sexy bride of today, who is not a fantasy of a virginal princess, but a powerful, confident woman. It does not portray women as “chattel” handed over from one man to the other, but as modern women, equal to men and using their fashionability and sexuality as a source of power and strength. This collection symbolizes a new tradition in bridal attire, and hopefully it inspires a new expression of femininity in weddings, one that is a genuine representation of the modern bride.
Conclusion

In this thesis, I have attempted to argue that Vera Wang's Fall 2012 bridal collection is a symptom of the social change concerning brides of today: modern women no longer marry as virgins, and because there is a shift in attitudes towards this phenomenon – it is widely spread and socially accepted – there is also a shift in bridal attire. Weddings themselves are less traditional (gay marriages, older brides and grooms, second-time marriages, etc.), and the modern bride is not the same woman as the bride of the previous centuries, therefore the wedding dress of the 21st century should reflect these changes and provide more options for brides rather than the ivory princess ball gowns. Vera Wang's dramatic collection is a sign of break from traditions and a herald of modernity in wedding attire: it represents modern femininity – a bride that is confident and whose sexuality is a source of power instead of submission, who uses fashion to construct her identity and does not think that being fashionable is a sign of frivolity. She is an independent, professional, educated woman, who is not given over as chattel from one man to the other in the process of her wedding, in the way that she used to in the patriarchal times. She has achieved other things in her life apart from being married and she constitutes different identities – she is not just a “bride,” a happy, innocent-looking young woman in a white uniformed dress. The wedding dress of a modern woman should represent all these nuances of her femininity.

The themes I found in the visual and discourse analysis raised issues concerning the modern bride and whether the traditional image is a reflection of the modern woman. The theme of deathliness represents the death of the old tradition and a time of transition. Like in the deathly themes of the 1990s fashion, the morbidity represents change and not just a grim reality. My visual analysis lead me to connect Vera Wang's Bride with two other morbid images of brides: the Corpse Bride and Miss Havisham, which reinforced the collection's connection to death, demise and decay. I also connected the deathly look of the models to the grunge and heroin chic models of the 90s that came as a response to the perfection of the 80s models and argued that the sickly look of Vera Wang's Bride is a possible resistance to the omnipresent imagery of perfection in bridal. I linked it to the recent “trash the dress” trend, which also aims to oppose the “norm” in bridal that does not represent the full extent of modern marriages and brides.

Vera Wang's discourse depicted the Bride as a sexy but dangerous creature, and I thought it was appropriate to discuss the Bride in view of the theories regarding the femme fatale. This analysis showed that the Bride is a source of inquietude – fears of the loss of some of the reproductive meaning of marriage in the modern world cause her to be depicted as a symbol of the
deviant non-procreational sexuality. A femme fatale's sexuality is alluring as it is threatening, and a 21st-century femme fatale is not just a symbol of a passive sexual danger, but a powerful, strong woman who has reclaimed her sexuality and uses it to her advantage.

The power of the Bride was enforced by Vera Wang's comparisons of the Bride to royalty, and I saw her as a new representation of the Princess Bride, whose royal connections express her power and not her need to be saved by the prince. My visual analysis, however, contradicted with Vera Wang's depiction of the Bride as an image of power: I saw her as a zombie, sickly, tired and uninspired. The ambiguity of the modern women is shown by this contradiction: she is not only a powerful, successful woman, but also lifeless and exhausted from trying to have it all. Other ambivalences were present in Vera Wang's narrative as well as in the reviews: perfection – decay, funeral – bridal, etc. In the dresses themselves I noticed the transparency and the hidden – exposed effect of the visible lingerie, which I connected to the ambivalent trend of wearing underwear as outerwear that represents the blurring of boundaries and the exposure of the Bride's identity.

Nostalgia felt in Vera Wang's narrative as well as in the reviewer's reference to the gothic influence on the collection was interpreted by me as a response to change in bridal traditions. Modernity brings chaos and uncertainty, and the break from traditions causes anxiety in the fragmented modern world. Nostalgic thoughts idealize the familiar past in the face of the unstable future, and the ghosts of the past haunt the present and cause unease, because the present no longer corresponds to the past. This anxiety is represented by the morbid themes of the collection: the change in society is made obvious by the radical new bridal fashion, and it causes fears of the uncertain future. In Vera Wang's discourse, the Bride was often referred to as art, while the dress was in constant motion, and I linked this with Margiela's installation of productive fashion on an inanimate mannequin: as the old stereotype of the bride is dying, fashion acts as a vehicle of change that brings modernity into bridal. While modern brides might be stuck in tradition, thinking that their preference of “prefeminist femininity” in dress is a sign of modernity as it is their choice to wear it, fashion challenges this convention and reinvents the notion of “bride” in the modern time. Modernity allows for reinterpretations of the fluid notions of self in its constant flux of change.

Modernity and fashion are closely linked with change and breaking from traditions, while the bridal branch of fashion is not in line with this obsession for novelty. Instead, it reveres tradition and encourages modern women to go back in time for fashion aspirations for their wedding day, whereas their everyday fashion is a constant search for the new, future trend. Since fashion permeates the everyday experiences of the majority of women today, it is strange that bridal fashion does not concur with this aspect of their lives. Vera Wang's collection is edgy and fashion-forward in its unexpectedness and desire to push boundaries of what is acceptable, and reviews confirmed the
inventiveness and genius of the collection. I stressed the role of the designer as an artist that leads consumers to individualism, and my finding is that Vera Wang's collection is a representation of fashion, rather than traditional bridal wear. In the Fall 2012 collection, her revolutionary approach brings fashion into bridal wear on a larger scale than just trendy and innovative fabrics and silhouettes of her previous collections: her color choice shocked the core of the industry. The fact that the collection featured dresses in black and not just in any non-white color shows that it has a conceptual foundation: in order to make an impact and create a change, it needs to be radical. It is like art that inspires a new tradition, instead of only being commercial: it starts as a strong idea emanated from the designer and then trickles down to real weddings in diluted versions, but that way the change in bridal attire still happens. In the master's thesis I would like to research how this trickle-down effect happens in terms of the colored wedding dress trend.

The reviews reflected that her unconventional approach was unsettling for the critics – they connected black dresses with morbidity and funerals, and saw the collection as a sign of premonition as they connected it with Vera Wang's own divorce. This lead me to a conclusion that the esoteric notion of bad luck is still present in our modern society, and black, which stands in opposition to the tradition represented by church and society, is viewed negatively by comparison. This also lead me to believe that weddings are first and foremost social events where etiquette is of most importance, which confirms that the original significance of the familiar ritual as a rite of passage dedicated to a creation of a new household is no longer there in modern marriages: a wedding today is about social gathering, etiquette and consumption. When linking the collection with Vera Wang's divorce, I considered it a possible factor in the creation of the collection: I saw it as a message about the high rate of failure in modern marriages and that the impending divorce is present in the wedding, represented by the black.

Having applied the theoretical framework of fashion studies to a discussion of a bridal designer, I have demonstrated that bridal wear has become immersed in fashion and can be studied as a fashion-product group. Fashion permeates every aspect of the life of the person living in today's world, and bridal wear also starts being effected by its need for novelty and experimenting with the norm. Bridal attire can be studied as a representation of identity, as well as the capture of fluid definitions of gender and sexuality as it reflects the changes in their meanings. Fashion reflects social changes, and bridal wear, despite being crippled by tradition far longer than any other branch of fashion, has also become an expression of modernity and a sign of change. Now that fashion is seen as a sign of strength rather than weakness and unintelligence, it is being used in all aspects of human life. And modern bridal wear, being more in tune with fashion trends, also becomes a broader representation of individuality.
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Every princess needs her prince charming

Which princess are you? Find out at www.alfredangelo.com
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Appendix 1

Description of dresses from Vera Wang's Fall 2012 bridal collection on Vera Wang's blog, Vera Unveiled
Jasmine; Strapless ballgown with organza laddering:

With each bridal collection, I’m always trying to think about articulating the underlying structure of a dress in a new way. Can a dress have clean architectural lines, and yet still feel soft and organic, full of wildly unpredictable movement? Absolutely!

My ladder technique, like I’ve used in Jasmine, is one way I’ve found to express that simultaneous sense of sculpture and swirl. It commands attention, and yet it’s full of frivolity and fun at the same time.

The strapless ballgown is a very classic silhouette, but when it’s combined with this modern fabric technique—pleated layers of tissue organza with raw edges—it feels more spontaneous and fashion-forward. The gown itself is very softly constructed. Even though there’s a lot of volume in the skirt, it collapses. And the cut edges of the organza are meant to look more deconstructed as well, so that the whole dress has a soft, flyaway quality. It’s edgy, but in a very romantic way.

The sculpted, slightly dropped-waist organza bodice on this dress also has that fluid, swirling sense of movement. I deliberately wanted the back to be very simple and sleek in order to contrast it with the more elaborate piecing on the front – it’s clean and classic. The front of the bodice, heart-shaped and so feminine, has a very tightly pleated version of that spiraling ladder technique. It gradually unfurls in a controlled-yet-chaotic race to the base of the skirt: a whirlpool of organza and tulle. This dress is all about that movement, and above all, playfulness!

(Taken from http://www.verawang.com/veraunveiled/2012/06/behind-the-dress-jasmine/)
Juliet; Strapless veiled mermaid gown with Chantilly lace appliqué and cascading eyelash flange on train:

One of the most seductive things a woman can do is bat her eyelashes and give a knowing wink from across the room; Juliet is that wink, in a dress.

Because so much of my fall collection was about trying to achieve a tangible lingerie idea—sexy, barely-there structure—I didn’t want to incorporate any heavy or cumbersome elements. So this softly constructed mermaid gown is rendered in delicate, light fabrics from top to bottom: tulle, chiffon, Chantilly lace. There’s constant movement in the fabrics, from the little piece of tulle that floats up at the neckline, to the lace appliqué wrapped with a layer of tulle. And then you have all these rich layers of blushes and nudes inside the skirt creating so much dimension, like a series of transparent glazes on a canvas. I wanted everything about this dress to feel like a painting, the bride enveloped in a flutter of tulle brushstrokes.

The back of the dress is just as dynamic and multidimensional: there’s a swirling, cascading flange made from big pieces of tissue organza. Their raw edges almost look like delicate feathers—or even eyelashes! It has that same unabashedly flirtatious quality. And the movement of those flanges is truly something to behold in person: it glides through the air as though it’s underwater, like a delicate stretch of coral that ebbs and flows with the ocean’s currents. A little of the sea witch.

The froth in this dress is never too overpowering. It’s like that subtle wink from our seductress. She’ll bewitch you before you even know how she’s cast her spell.

(Taken from http://www.verawang.com/veraunveiled/2012/08/behind-the-dress-juliet/)
I’ve mentioned the Exhibitionist bride before. There’s probably just a little of her in every bride-to-be: we all want to shine on our big day, and to be the center of attention. For some brides, that means a show-stopping, luxurious, absolutely extravagant gown. And I do love it when a bride is honest about what she wants! Jade more than fits the bill. It’s strapless, it’s hip-defining, and it’s a spectacularly flattering fit.

Just about every technique I’ve developed for the collection this season is on view in Jade. I’ve put texture upon texture into this A-line skirt, until it’s beyond decoration—it’s a total work of art, in motion. In the bodice, you can see a new technique we call sheared flange, in which strips of cut-edge organza are spaced together so minutely that the effect looks almost like fur. It twists and transforms and enthralls as it weaves around, and down the skirt, adding dimension and elegance.

The skirt is built up from pleated tulle, and against that you have a delicate arrangement of ruffled tulle, which almost looks like billowing vapor, drifting through light and darkness. It’s ethereal, and extremely evocative. And then there’s a swath of stiff gathered tulle which brings even richer, deeper tones, and draws the eye in, really grabs you. It was such a pleasure to draw all of that color out of so many levels of pleating and gathering: every pinch and gather transforms the shade. There’s so many blushes, golds and ivories, and dusty pinks cascading. This starbust pleat I’ve put at the hip is a bold way to accentuate not only our lovely bride’s silhouette, but also the sheer depth of the tones and play of light here. There’s so much motion, and so much richness in the play of textures and layers and densities here, it’s almost too much—it just swallows up all your senses. And yet, it’s suffused with airiness. Light almost seems to pour through this gown.

(Taken from http://www.verawang.com/veraunveiled/2012/08/behind-the-dress-jade/)
Jane; One shoulder soft mermaid gown with asymmetrical gathers and ruffled train:

This mermaid gown is at the core of our Fall 2012 Collection: here you can see just how flirty a blushing bride might become with the right gown. I love this dress, not just because it’s got a very smart, streamlined construction, but also because it’s so sexy! The stretch crepe hugs the figure and accentuates the curves – you have as much “va-voom” in the front as you do in the back. And in motion, it’s just delightful. It’s a seductive siren song. With just that little bit of ruffled tulle in the train, it’s like a grace note, a little bit of bubbly, flirtatious energy in the final glimpse of this bombshell bride.

This bustier in this dress is a new design we’re introducing. It’s a lingerie bustier with a soft stretch construction, so that although you have boning and support in the corset, it’s mobile and it hugs the body, it’s flexible. So it sculpts, without being rigid. As you can see, those curves make quite a bold statement.

Meanwhile, the asymmetrical draping, which you see gathered across the curves of the body, and over one shoulder, gives the gown an iconic, classic glamour. The way the draping contrasts against the rest of the gown, it’s like bold strokes with a paintbrush. This is a gown that’s definitely red-carpet ready, and I love how much of a presence it has to it. This dress an absolute celebration of the feminine figure.

(Taken from http://www.verawang.com/veraunveiled/2012/05/behind-the-dress-jane/)
Joy: Strapless collapsed A-line gown with veiled Chantilly lace bodice and organza scallop skirt:

I like to think of this dress as the good witch of my collection. It’s a gown that just floats, airily and totally dream-like, but with a structure to all that lightness that defines the shape in a way that every bride dreams about.

What I love about this dress is that it combines the best aspects of two classic bridal silhouettes, the mermaid and the A-line gown. It’s cut very close to the body, just like a column, grabbing the body very tightly around the waist and hip and cinching in at the back. Then there’s a very rigid, strapless corset bodice with visible boning that is covered with a Chantilly lace appliqué and veiled with asymmetrically-draped tulle. That gives it a beautiful sense of movement, almost like a brushstroke.

But for all that figure-hugging structure in the top half of the gown, the skirt itself is quite soft. It’s made entirely of floating organza scallops, all veiled with tulle as well. What is especially seductive about this dress is a slit in the front skirt, ever so slightly hidden behind layers of tulle. You can see just a hint of leg—not too much, because the slit doesn’t go all the way up—but it still has a very flirty, fun, whimsical feel to it. After all, my philosophy has always been that ultimate seduction is in what you conceal, not reveal.

From the nude laces, to the tulle, to the corset boning: all of these elements are very reminiscent of the seductive beauty of fine lingerie. You can see why I find it such a provocative inspiration: it brings to life what’s out of sight, but only through fantasy and suggestion and playfulness. And that’s so stirring to the imagination.

(Taken from http://www.verawang.com/veraunveiled/2012/07/behind-the-dress-joy/)
Joanna; Strapless mermaid gown with chiffon laddering and tumbled skirt:

One of the themes of my collection this season is mystery: it’s always there for me when I’m working, because beauty itself is so mysterious. I love to design pieces that hide, that reveal, that stir our senses and our imaginations. With this collection, I wanted to invite my audience to experience the mysteries that lie beneath the surface. And of course, sometimes the best way to celebrate mystery is by reveling in lightness and frivolousness.

In this strapless mermaid gown – softly corseted that hugs and flatters the bride – you see this sense of movement and lightness most in the tumbled skirt. I wanted the skirt to be in constant motion. It’s airy and ethereal, and it sets off the classic silhouette of the mermaid gown very nicely: it’s quite a signature silhouette for me. The whole gown is enfolded with laddered fabric, which is a technique I love. It’s done in a pattern that swirls around and around the dress and then opens out as it descends – subtle but rapturous.

The skirt is a real confection. It’s got so many different tones playing together and shading in and out, and the textures are gorgeous. The crinkle tulle is also pleated in a leaf pattern, so it’s very textural. There’s something so delicate about it, that it almost takes your breath away. And at the same time it’s so full of free-flowing energies and just lots of frantic detail, racing away in every direction.

I love a frothy skirt paired with a more statuesque, classic bodice, because it’s a chance to marry the elegance of my more fashion-forward textures and patterns – like this laddered chiffon—with the lightness and whimsy of traditional bridal.

(Taken from http://www.verawang.com/veraunveiled/2012/06/behind-the-dress-joanna/)
Joelle; Strapless sheer boned bodice ballgown with organic texture pleating and organza scallops:

One of my inspirations for this collection was witchcraft and enchantment. I think that’s exactly what comes through in this wild A-line skirt: you can feel the sense of wonder, and beguilement, and the tug of that other world! The two tones together in this split skirt, especially with the black against nude, gives just a bit of that sense that the rational world is coming apart at its seams. It’s a peek into the something we don’t understand. That’s just why lingerie is so powerful, and why I drew on that vocabulary – because it’s powerful, it’s mysterious, but in such a fun, frothy way. It’s an irresistible flourish. When the bride is moving, the skirt is billowing, roiling, drifting, and conjuring up all kinds of associations. The distressed tulle bounces and folds and sweeps. It’s almost like something you might see just before falling asleep, into a very beautiful dream – a dream that carries you away before you can make sense of it.

With the bodice, I’ve chosen to create a study in restraint. From the back, when you’re not looking full-on at the full frothiness of the skirt, this is almost a simple, classic gown. The bodice is one piece, with a defined waist that’s a seductive counterpoint to the softness of the skirt. It shows off our bride in such a bare, beguiling manner. It’s racy, but simple: effortlessly sensual. The boning of the corset is exposed: again, simple, refined. But far from innocent. This is the confident sorceress, the siren, who seems to have some element of her own private fairy world still attached to her, as she moves through our world. Beauty will always be mysterious, and that’s why its call is so irresistible.

(Taken from http://www.verawang.com/veraunveiled/2012/06/behind-the-dress-joelle/)
Jacqueline; Strapless Chantilly lace ballgown with veiled tulle overlay:

Who hasn’t dreamt of being the perfect princess on their wedding day? A wedding is a celebration of our lives as women, and the princess fantasy has been a natural part of that since we were little girls. I’ve always responded to this desire in brides, and it continues to be an inspiration for me in my collections. Jacqueline is for the bride who absolutely wants that romantic princess celebration, in true royal splendor.

For the bodice I created a very structured, defined corset, which leads into the rest of the dress through a couple of elements: a full, gathered waist, and through the floral motif in Chantilly lace appliqué. In the bodice there are actually two layers of tulle which drape over the waist, beneath the veil of Chantilly, and so you get an effect that’s impossibly luxurious, reminiscent of one of the grand regal gowns you’d see in a Renaissance portrait of a queen. It puts a huge amount of emphasis on the volume and fullness of the skirt, enhancing that royal fantasy once again.

And then there’s a great decorative touch, that is just as majestic: a floral motif which covers the entire length of the dress, from the bodice down, growing more and more complex and layered as you move. This is the kind of presentation I simply love making: showing off this tapestry of perfect shapes and details which practically overwhelms the eye, on any level you take it in. It’s so stately and splendid, and yet the delicacy of the Chantilly detail keeps it exquisitely modern.

There is a cathedral-length train to this gown, which is completely in keeping with the philosophy of Jacqueline. The train is fantastically textured and rich. Typically a train is delicate and wispy: what you get here is a big, defined sculptural work, which, although it’s frothy and never feels heavy, has quite a bit of baroque splendor to it. It’s just layer upon layer of tulle, with Chantilly lace overlaid very precisely. It’s all for making that iconic stately entrance.

(Taken from )http://www.verawang.com/veraunveiled/2012/08/behind-the-dress-jacqueline/
Josephine; V-neck halter ballgown with Chantilly lace bodice and distressed organza and shadow lace flowers at neck and multi-layered crinkle tulle skirt:

I don’t usually do a completely exposed back, but in the right setting, a woman’s back can be a tremendously magnetic display. In this halter ball gown, the bride’s back really contrasts with the collection of three big deconstructed rosettes right at her neck, done in distressed organza, a material which was very important for this season’s textures, and in shadow lace. The rosettes form almost a ruff, or a halo—very gorgeous and dreamy. In the black gown, which is so moody, there’s an effect almost like an empress, or a dramatic sorceress.

The deconstructed rosette is another motif I’ve used throughout the collection. They’re bold and also playful, they take up some of that classic floral element of traditional wedding vocabulary, and refresh it. It’s quite a contemporary decision: you have these pretty, abstracted flower forms, and then you set them off against her bare back. It’s deliciously sexy.

I chose a very full A-line skirt for this gown, which fancifully deconstructs the classic formal skirt you’d have in a traditional ballgown. I built the whole thing up from crinkled tulle, layer after layer. It’s carefully arranged so you have layers of a leaf-pleated tulle, which is so fantastic to me: it’s a fabric that wavers perfectly between crispness and organic flow. The layers are folded in and tumbled so they seem to fly away when the bride’s in motion, and they almost open up. There’s no stiffness or structure in the skirt at all: it’s a piece of Degas ballerina here, and with all of the different tones and shadows in the tulle it’s so natural-looking and organic that it’s almost a watercolor. I think this blend of texture and movement came together very well: you almost can’t look at it without getting swept away. It’s always whispering to you!

This dress is for the Romanticist bride, who wants to embody that allure and seduction, while drifting in a very ethereal, romantic world.

(Taken from http://www.verawang.com/veraunveiled/2012/06/behind-the-dress-josephine/)
Janice; V-neck soft mermaid gown with washed multi layered flanges, organza scallops and pleated ruffled tulle skirt:

Balance is key to this dress, as in all my gowns: I find that before you can really do anything radical with a dress, you need to have a thorough sense of all the different weights and volumes in your layers. It’s a bit like designing a building: that’s why the phrase “architectural” is so often used to describe, for instance, a skirt like this one. Here, the ruffled tulle has been gathered and the organza has been layered in such a way as to create a sense of volume completely without heaviness. It’s almost like smoke, getting darker and denser as it gathers near the ground. Now you see her, now you don’t: the enchantress trails her mysterious allure behind her, in a cloud!

The V-neck bodice is so streamlined and sculpted—an effect achieved by a soft lingerie corset underneath. The sleekness gives way to the real show-stopper: a haunting, convoluted tier of scalloped organza, which winds its way from hip to calf, like a witch’s candle. It’s otherworldly. Particularly in black, which I did for my runway show, the look is spellbinding, and a bit unreal.

The back view is also lovely. There’s a sleek, smooth line, and lots of light and tone, balancing the chaos in the skirt. And then there’s the washed organza train, with so many beautiful tonalities and surprising asymmetries. The entire piece wavers between elegant and excessive, and there’s absolutely something supernatural in all of that grandeur, and all of that surprising sensuousness. I think it’s all tapping into something deep and uncontrollable. In the delicate balance between skirt and bodice, there are wild, mysterious forces, constantly appearing and disappearing.

(Taken from )http://www.verawang.com/veraunveiled/2012/07/behind-the-dress-janice/
Jessica; Strapless mermaid gown with micro pleated bodice and sheared organza full skirt:

This dress exemplifies a very modernist sensibility. I’m at home in modern: I like to work in subtle, unexpected shapes that surprise and delight. I’m always looking for new perspectives on the traditionally beautiful gown. With this gown, you immediately see the voluptuous textures in the front and back of the dress, which play off of and highlight the equally voluptuous line of this mermaid silhouette. I’ve tried to combine the sensual pleasure of this visual pattern with the sensuality of the bride’s shape, and I think it’s quite striking. Especially in the version in black, which we showed on the runway, the sheared organza flanges which make up the skirt are so dense, almost furry, and so beguiling—like a sorceress appearing in a column of dark flame. I love the way this skirt looks in motion. In black, I think of it as a raven taking flight.

I wanted the back of the gown to look organic, yet precise, and, of course, feminine. The densely layered fabric is manipulated in such a way so that it could almost be a blooming wild orchid. The bodice is done in micro-pleating, which is a technique that combines many tiny, geometrically precise pleats, so it creates the illusion of something like a brushstroke in enamel. It’s so crisp and gorgeous, and it balances the skirt beautifully. That balance and symmetry, as well as the architectural sensibility throughout the construction of this gown, mark it as one of my signature modernist creations. It’s the perfect dress for a bride who appreciates the thrill of a truly modern look.

(Taken from http://www.verawang.com/veraunveiled/2012/07/behind-the-dress-jessica/)
**June:** Strapless mermaid gown with Chantilly lace illusion neckline, gathered tulle bodice and degrade ruffle seam with eyelash organza flange skirt:

![Image of June's dress](http://www.verawang.com/veraunveiled/2012/07/behind-the-dress-june/)

This is a soft, pliant mermaid gown, very bold and body-conscious. You’ll usually find that more rigid gowns in the mermaid shape can make it difficult to move, but I wanted a bodice that would hold, without being constricting. It updates a classic silhouette with a very seductive shape. This is for the bride who wants to stop the show at her ceremony.

In the bodice, I started with a foundation layer, and then worked in this contrast-color Chantilly appliqué over the top—you get a hide-and-seek intrigue that’s almost too gorgeous to believe. I really love this effect: I think it’s compelling, even delirious, and it would be understatement to say it enhances the back view. This is dangerous magic! Every single drape and pass is a brushstroke, it’s like doing a Japanese ink painting over the statue of a goddess. It’s brazen, for a bride who’s well-versed in the art of feminine presence.

“Eyelash flange” is how we describe these organza layers in the skirt. It’s another little bit of sorcery. Picture a square of fabric slowly unraveling in a perfect line, so that the warp of the material flies off in a delicate fringe—that’s how I wanted these built-up flanges to look. From every angle these “eyelashes” are waving—winking—and the light touches every edge so finely, and then plunges and gets lost in this dramatic accumulation of textures in the depths of the skirt. It’s really a study in saturation, and decadence, and it perfectly accentuates the hide-and-veil, high-contrast effect in the bodice.

**Jocelyn;** Strapless collapsed ballgown with peplum and sheer skirt with distressed organza, tulle and shadow lace tiers and washed flange detail:

When I asked myself what I wanted to accomplish with this collection, I decided to trust my instincts. I’ve always been a believer in beauty. For me it’s a transcendent experience. It can be hard to describe, but I know it when I see it.

For this fall collection I wanted to come up with something strong and surprising. Wedding culture has come a long way, and now you’re starting to see black as a recurring accent element in the modern ceremony. You saw the same kind of evolution in the runway show for this collection: We went from a classic nude, to nude paired with black, to a perfect, astonishing black. I love it: it certainly got people talking.

Black is wonderful and totally sexy as an accent color. But can really be breathtaking when you pull out all the stops. With this dress, we’ve gone all the way, and not only in color terms, but in every aspect of the design and materials used. The bodice is made of silk faille, which is a stiff fabric, and it gives the upper part of the dress a classic elegance. The rosette draped near her collarbone makes the perfect feminine touch.

The skirt of the ballgown takes the drama of black even further: I’ve used quite a number of grand, elaborate tiers of washed organza and sculpted them into these wild, passionate forms. And then there’s layer after layer of asymmetrical tulle, and very fine Chantilly lace. There’s so much theatricality in the skirt, especially when you get to the back, where the ruffling and the engineered cascades build to a crescendo.

This is my rhapsody in black: it’s chaotic, it’s disordered, and at the same time it’s just magnificently light and ethereal. In motion, it moves and tumbles and breathes, billowing and frothing. It’s so thrilling and dynamic, it’s hard to avoid getting carried away by the poetry.