

Fantasy versus Reality – The Birth Experience

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'One of the powers of the human mind is its ability to dream, to imagine and to plan for the future' (Norman)

Imagining childbirth for a woman could be conventionally described as joy about the creation of a child.

Every variation of culture, thought and concept impacts upon what the word 'imagining' can encompass. As a group of maternity-care professionals you are constantly confronted with the variations. However, childbirth usually involves fulfillment after forty weeks of anticipation and dreams.

We can share in this joy even if we do so in a professional capacity. I am not a Pollyanna, I have seen the pain, sadness and anger involved, but before discussing the ways Western media represents childbirth I want you to know my position.

I think of childbirth as the exalting body, the body doing its best.

Representing childbirth to others has to involve a creative process even for those with educational objectives, because childbirth is not a uniform and predictable process for individuals. We have to choose words, posters, images, videos and models to express our ideas of how pregnant women might imagine themselves at delivery.

'Whether the woman's response to pregnancy is to adopt illness or health behaviour will depend upon the way pregnancy and childbirth are viewed within the culture' (Jorm). Noble educational objectives can appear quite impotent when compared to the way creative energy is employed for the mass market.

Many of the ideas channeled into a vision of childbirth for popular consumption are at odds with what we know and appreciate as health professionals, but we cannot ignore them because they are part of our cultural environment and understanding. Birth depicted by the program *ER* [1994-] and viewed by millions is exciting, dangerous and compelling television. It is obviously a fantasy. Everything happens fast with a crowd all dressed in blue.

Educational videos of normal childbirth regularly shown to couples in classes are now judged, (by couples) as too noisy, too bloody, and too fleshy. The visceral reality is confronting and if given a choice many class members will choose not to see what happens 'down there'. Recently a colleague was asked to replace these videos with computer-generated animations. As an educationalist, I find this ridiculous and worrisome. As a health professional caring for an individual with very real fears, I know that a woman can give birth without ever seeing a normal birth or understanding the physiological process. There is no clinical imperative to impose acceptable educative images.

My vision of a body in exaltation may never match yours let alone a woman who is contemplating her first experience of childbirth. Instead of saying "Why don't people see birth as I do?" I believe we need to understand the view from the outside, the person who sees birth as a body pushed to its limits, the abject body. It is not simply fantasy versus reality.

The fears and apprehension involved in imagining childbirth are depicted by popular television comedy and film in a most consistent manner. Some of the quotes:

“A bald screaming thing is going to crawl out of my genitals.” *Couples* [2002-]

“Wow - that’s NOT pretty, it’s yelling, bleeding, dilating. Oh... the dilating!”

“It’s ironic, that seeing footage of someone being born can make you want to kill yourself.” *Friends* [1994-2005]

“Daphne, I have just two words for you C-SECTION! My sister did it the other way and blew herself apart.” *Frazier* [1993-2005]

The first televised pregnancy and childbirth included in a situation comedy was *I Love Lucy* (1953) The episode ‘Lucy Goes To Hospital’ was watched by more viewers than any other television show in America at that time. Many of the jokes and humour of that show have endured. There is always a panic and rush to get to hospital. The end result is always a healthy baby and happy family but this is preceded by events such as car crashes and exhausted males often brought to the maternity ward in a wheel chair pushed by the labouring woman.

Television comedy, drama and film reflect the history of childbirth and the way the event is organised. The creative construction of birth fashions and rituals naturally lags behind the actual changes. The first type of childbirth education classes were formal and didactic and for women alone. Childbirth was also strictly women’s business with the father waiting outside. The popular representation of this was men pacing the corridors, then proudly dispensing cigars or getting joyously drunk.

In the mid 1960’s women were rejecting the way childbirth was managed in hospitals because anaesthesia and analgesia were systemically administered. The natural methods of childbirth promoted ‘psychoprophylaxis breathing’, that was learnt as a strict drill. The popular representation, was all about the ‘breathing’, a rush and the final images of a proud serene mother holding her newborn.

In the 1970’s women were demanding the right to choose how birth was conducted and rejecting the routine separation from the baby. Women wanted men to stay and witness their child’s delivery. Classes at this time were always informal. Earnest educators and couples sat on beanbags to watch childbirth films and to discuss the issues. Comedy shows still use this scenario to lampoon a cloying childbirth educator and dissonance between the dream of natural birth and the reality of pain.

In the 1980’s homebirth, water birth, lotus birth, active birth and other alternatives to the medical model of childbirth were promoted. *Monty Python’s The Meaning of Life* (1983) satirized the ‘Miracle of Birth’ situation brilliantly. The simple, poor woman from Yorkshire just delivers a baby while she washes the dishes, hardly noticing the physical experience, while the angst ridden rich woman was subjected to the hospital’s economic imperative to use a lot of equipment and the ‘machine that goes ping’. Amongst professional strangers, the woman is in stirrups and the delivery proceeds like a production line.

“Oh yes, here’s the head, four centimeters, five centimeters, six centimeters. Lights! Amplify the ping machine! Masks up! Suction! Here it comes... and frighten it!”

A meat cleaver is used to cut the cord. The baby is lifted up and dried roughly. When the woman plaintively asks “Is it a girl or a boy?”, she is brusquely told “It’s a little early to start imposing roles on it... Now, a word of advice, you may find you suffer, for some time, from a totally irrational depression, PND, as we doctors call it.”

Comedy about birth and pregnancy during the 1990’s emphasized the need for men to attend the birth above all else. Families all waited in hospital waiting rooms, with short forays into the delivery suite. The men or fathers searched for any special accoutrements and were always late or lost. The narrative is constructed around the

issues of being witnessed and the heroics of male companions in the face of such horror. *Mad About You* [1992-99], *Murphy Brown* [1988-98], *Men Behaving Badly* [1992-98], *Braithwaites* [2000-], *Simpsons*[1989-], *Rosanne* [1988-97], *7th Heaven* [1996-], *Cold Feet* [1998-2003], *Malcolm in the Middle* [2000-].

Maternity health professionals are usually portrayed as, curt, bossy or incompetent and an obstetrician's skills are seemingly comparable to a vet. Both *The Brittas Empire* [1991-97] and *Frazier* used vets to deliver a baby. The film *Maybe Baby* (2004) with the actor Rowan Atkinson as an Obstetrician flashing large gynaecological instruments to his fully exposed patient clearly draws the analogy of sexual penetration and violation. He handles his moped helmet with the instruments and comments that he saves time because "I ride her damned hard." He has a student present for the examination and displays the speculum with copious lubricant. He adjusts lights with mutters and grimaces as they stare at her genitals only pausing to cheerfully call "Try to relax."

In the *Gilmore Girls* [2000-] the midwife employed was described as the 'best' in town with two years experience in China. She is an imposing and intimidating woman called Bruce. She ordered the labouring woman's girlfriend to "Leave your negativity at home." She then sent all men away and told them they were "Here to serve the baby and nothing else!"

The fear induced by stainless steel equipment, blatant exposure and lack of sensitivity towards the woman is the source of the best jokes. In *Murphy Brown* an uncouth midwife strolls in and says "Okay, let's see how you're coming along. Feet up in the stirrups, let's go! Come on, Giddy up!" At the end of the examination, she again cheerily calls "Okay, Okay you can close up shop!"

The more recent jokes are about how a woman copes with inappropriate support by hitting the male partner or being abusive. The woman usually reminds the partner that he is responsible for the pregnancy and will not be forgiven. *Murphy Brown* used the physical comedy element most effectively and it has been copied often. Murphy grabbed her two male friends by the neck-tie strangling them with vigorous shakes. When gently told by one of her male companions that the birth would not be much longer she shouts "How would you know, sperm for brains? How many times have you ever passed a live turkey?"

She then implores another friend "Cut me open, Jim, use a scalpel, use a pen knife, use a rotten stinking melon-baller, just do it now!"

One of the most interesting developments for prime time shows had the policeman-brother-in law *Everybody Loves Raymond* [1996 -2005] actually looking at the perineum and the subsequent intense discomfort when it is realised that the birth is not imminent. This was a significant change in the comedy representation because there was no ambiguity about what birth entails, her bare legs were parted and two men, not doctors, were looking. This could be described as a sanitised version of the 'Female Grotesque' because all the humour is focussed on the men's discomfort about the woman's exposure.

The Female Grotesque describes the most potent and enduring imagery of women identified as grotto-esque predating classical Rome. The category described as grotesque is linked to the unnatural, frivolous, pagan imagination without morals acting against all expectations of female behaviour. This aesthetic phenomenon (in contrast to beauty) has been associated with misogyny, the strange and the monstrous. (Schors. 1987, Krista 1982) The woman enacts her pantomime of anguish and rebellion, she is seen in full glory as the archaic and maternal. The comic image of an angry screaming woman with legs apart in labour on contemporary television has obvious links to the female grotesque. The danger of

exposure and the consistent cultural admonition of 'any woman making a spectacle of herself' is reinforced.

Comedies *Rosanne*, *Bette* [2000-] and the Australian *Kath and Kim* [2002-] hold back from the full expression of this form of spectacular and transgressive performance. There is a lot of screaming and abuse as unruly women but they then play within the bounds of traditional and contemporary notions of a good mother, which fit the sitcom genre.

Absolutely Fabulous [1992-] is pure female grotesque. Patsy openly advocates abortion with a knitting needle and contemptuously blows smoke over Saffy (the pregnant mother). The rejection of all maternal feelings is flagrant and open. The only interest shown in the baby is when Eddy and Patsy discover that it will be of mixed race, so therefore a valuable fashion accessory. As with most carnivalesque humour it is relentless, the placenta is mistaken as the baby and kidnapped by Saffy's father who is only interested in an arranged adoption for money.

Several years ago there was a public uproar when Benetton displayed a 'scandalous' advertisement of a newborn still with an umbilical cord, covered in vernix and amniotic fluid.

"The spontaneous recoiling in disgust was sincere... because the (secretions) are inscribed in a borderline area; between the outside and the inside of the body, between the undefined self, and the other of the pre-natal dyad... a secret everybody knows, the secret of an event everybody has experienced....and should have remained buried in the unconscious." (Bono.)

The film *Junior* (1994) starring Arnold Schwarzenegger and Danny De Vito pushed the ideas of monstrous and parodies Schwarzenegger's macho image by making him pregnant. The outrageous image of a man with a pregnant belly having a caesarean delivery ends with the sentimental scene of father cradling the newborn with all the sentimental rules of motherhood, soft conversation, music and lighting, yet it was horrible.

The changes in family dynamics and birth rituals evident from the 1990's until the twenty-first century have been depicted by television sitcoms such as *Friends*, *My Wife and the Kids* [2001-], and *Couples*.

Couples is based on the mix ups caused by differing relationship agendas of males and females. Considerable time is devoted to the subject of childbirth. Males are represented as considering the 'viewing' of birth as more difficult than actually 'giving' birth. The phrase, 'a John Hurt moment' has entered popular discourse to convey the horror of seeing an alien burst from a body before it runs away as first seen in the film *'Alien'* (1979). However, this is a mixed metaphor because it is a male actor, John Hurt who has gestated the alien within his body. The birth is depicted as a horrific bursting chest. This moment is compared to the bravery men need to be present at childbirth.

Sex and the City [1998-2005] became an instant hit when it was first aired on American premium cable channel HBO in 1998. Promoting *Sex and the City* as a literary product means the series can navigate the difficult adult content - sex and profanity by putting it into a context where smart comedy writing sets this product apart from its competition.

In the first season motherhood was described as a 'cult' and Miranda warns her friends that they will convert them by 'forcing them to separate from the herd and pick them off one by one' (*The Baby Shower 1:10*) However by the last season difficult decisions are made about age, health, fertility and long term relationships.

Charlotte, the most conservative and romantic protagonist, experiences fertility problems and she experiments with herbalism and IVF. She then has an emotionally difficult miscarriage. This is conveyed in a much more individualistic, even lonely manner than previous episodes. She then agrees to adopt a Chinese baby. Miranda, the cynical business woman, has a child but declares "I have no maternal instincts. I dropped my niece on her head." She asks Carrie to be her birth support person because Steve (the child's father) is too emotional. During the birth Steve is asked not to cry and the gushing midwife is asked to stop talking. In the last series, despite the previous denial of emotional attachment Miranda shows enormous humanity towards Steve's demented and wandering mother and has reconciled to living with Steve outside Manhattan.

Childbirth Commentary

In Australia public debate about childbirth is skewed and undernourished. As the circumstances of conception and the definition of family have changed there is an almost obsessive interest in celebrity pregnancy, birth and weight loss after postnatal recovery.

'Where once Australian celebrities were virtually non-existent, now they are the subject of between a quarter and a third of all celebrity stories in the media.'(Turner)

Surrogacy, adoption, single parenthood and assisted reproduction are all talked about but the strict time restrictions of 'entertaining' current affairs programs leaves little opportunity for more than anecdotes. The questions are never debated: How can a caesarean section be described as a choice? How do glib words like 'protecting my pelvic floor' go unchallenged? Why is there no emphasis upon the biological bond between mother and child? Are women more afraid of the 'spectacle' of vaginal birth than pain? How do educators propose tackling website information for childbirth?

Conclusion

Fantasy is involved in almost all television and television is involved in almost all our lives. Reality shows are not real. All good art has an intrinsic honesty. The visceral catches our attention and it is only after that first response that we become intellectually involved. The interpretation of these texts by this specialised audience (Maternity Health Professionals) is not going to change the world. Understanding a feminist interpretation of advertisements and female images in the media has not stopped women from buying magazines, high heels, lipstick and push up bras. This collection of media images is a small slice of history.

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