

visualizing the fetus

today's articles address the relationship between a pregnant woman and her fetus. how that relationship is experienced by pregnant women *and represented by others* is obviously fraught in this country because it's become so tied up in **abortion politics**

HANDOUT (encyclopedia entry)

today I don't want to hash out the abortion debate itself; rather, want to see if we can ferret out some of the assumptions that underlie *how* abortion is debated in this country — as a debate over relative rights

with *Roe*, legal status of abortion is framed in terms of individual rights: legally, right to privacy b/w woman and her doctor. more popularly, “right to choose” whether to carry a pregnancy to term — but this is misleading, b/c in legal terms it's a “negative” right — free of government interference, not a “positive” right of access

3 states have only 1 abortion provider (including S.D.)

criminalizing abortion has NEVER ended its practice – legal abortion doesn't mean abortion v. no abortion, it means safe, medically regulated abortion v. unsafe, unregulated abortion

but to argue against the “right to choose”, anti-abortionists have championed “right-to-life”: pitting one set of rights against the other and reframing issue of “life”

more, the language of individual rights pits mother *against* fetus — makes abortion seem obviously antithetical to motherhood, a sign of the rejection of maternal values and nurturance [see Faye Ginsburg's *Contested Lives*]

abortion is far more common than many Americans might believe  
roughly 20% of all pregnancies in US end in abortion (13% in miscarriage)  
abortion rate dropped in the 1990s (under Clinton) — reasons? (*not* stronger maternal values)

- better contraceptives available

- morning-after pill available

- stronger economy (21% women having abortion give reason of insufficient resources)

abortion rate has gone up under Bush for inverse reasons  
[stats from Guttmacher Institute]

framing abortion question as matter of rights of woman *against* rights of fetus is not inevitable; this is makes sense only within a particular cultural logic

right to life movement *and* commercialized ultrasound emerge from (and reinforce) same shift: referring to fetus as separate and distinct from woman

this is *not* to say that women shouldn't do ultrasounds — or enjoy them!  
but it's important to recognize unintended conceptual implications of what we do

it's *not evil* that people buy all pink for girls/all blue for boys, but it can  
contribute to enduring belief in fundamental differences — including capacities  
— between boys/girls

next Monday we'll discuss a counter example for thinking about abortion — what it *is*  
and what it *means* — from my research in Greece

FIRST, let's talk about what Rosalind Petchesky has to say about the power of **fetal  
images** and their relevance to abortion in the US. This important article was published 20  
years ago, before the technology was so routinized

she's *not* arguing that ultrasound, or other repro technologies, absolutely 'bad' — rather,  
she's interested in the cultural assumptions that make them *thinkable*, and the social  
factors that inform their use, interpretation, meaning

e.g., fetal images have become ubiquitous in pro-life campaigns. So ubiquitous that it  
might seem obvious to you, but it's not [again, contrast with Greece next week]

how did this campaign begin? where did the idea come from?

*NE Journal of Medicine* article in early 80s suggesting that early fetal ultrasounds  
resulted in "maternal bonding" and possibly "fewer abortions" — based on 2 isolated  
cases, not scientifically controlled for — basically, the article simply forwarded the  
hypothesis

but the National Right to Life Committee jumped on this, made *The Silent Scream*  
featuring a 12 week-old fetus being aborted "from the victim's point of view" — but is  
it?

what does Petchesky say in her analysis of the film?

it's the view from the camera, from an outside observer — neither from the perspective  
of a fetus or pregnant woman

fetuses can't speak or scream.

this is obvious

what's *less* obvious is the more subtle transfer of meaning — of what it means to be a  
person who can scream or speak or has a name or has rights — a social person — to a  
fetus, a potential person. Anticipating personhood.

anticipated personhood seems to go hand and hand with anticipated *motherhood*:

if self-sacrifice is expected of mothers, then shouldn't it be expected of pregnant women? nurturance now begins at conception — producing the “perfect baby” (blaming self for ‘defect’ in fetus/baby, as we saw in Landsman’s article)

in pro-life rhetoric, fetus portrayed as both helpless victim *and* autonomous, heroic individual

fetal images are the perfect symbol for this duality — HOW? what meanings are read from this? what analogy does Petchesky make?

fetus as free-floating — no pregnant woman in sight, just hanging on cord  
abstract individualism (homunculus)  
spaceman fetus — floating in space, daring, brave, but fragile

it’s powerful in pro-life rhetoric — making fetal personhood, after all, is requisite for fetal rights — more, makes it seem self-evident — but only because we read visual images *literally*, as reality — objective representations, as if the camera extended our own subject position, access to object — brings viewers and object into same reality

BUT, *pro-life* use of fetal imagery is selective, somewhat misleading

90% of abortions happen w/in first trimester (up to 12-14 weeks), only 1% after 20 weeks (Massachusetts has a 23 week limit)

but the most common “public fetuses” are late term  
at 12 weeks (limit for “on demand” abortion), the fetus is just over 2 inches long — the head is the same size as rest of the body

also, picturing an *intact* fetus is misleading

even when late-term abortions are performed they’re generally therapeutic, when fetus had, say, a skull that wasn’t fully formed or other massive defect OR when there’s some medical emergency regarding the woman — it’s NOT elective; very late abortions are nearly always performed on women who *want* that child

amniocentesis can only be done between 18-20 weeks, some as early as 16 weeks (though with increased risk of miscarriage)

level-2 diagnostic ultrasound (to screen for ancephaly, spina bifida) at 20 weeks

we can think about how this context of cultural representations of fetuses and their relationship to pregnant women might help us understand **Linda Layne**’s ethnography of **pregnancy loss** (which she prefers to ‘miscarriage’, which suggests women mis-carried, did something wrong — like in Landsman’s article)

Layne’s article **puts ultrasound in context** of *social* aspect of pregnancy, other things

done, consumed, made to “make real” not the pregnancy, but the coming of a *child* — buying stuff, choosing a name, having a shower, etc.

when childbirth is a rite of passage, pregnancy is a liminal stage when preparations are made for new statuses; ritual is important

ultrasound is becoming a ritual of pregnancy

“being prepared” is a mark of “good mothering” — contrast w/ N S-H

the technology is experienced by women as part of other practices, not a thing in itself

“personhood is actively constructed during the course of a pregnancy” (199)

parts of **body** that are used indexically — hair, handprints/footprints — indicating babies, not fetuses

different/similar to citation of fingerprints in pro-life poster?  
symbols of humanness, uniqueness — INDIVIDUALISM

physical tangibility of ultrasound images — not necessarily of own fetus, even from book to mark something measurable — measurability and realness (if easily misleading)

Q: What do you make of commodification of ultrasound imaging? (Fetal Fotos, Inc.)

Fetal Fotos was founded almost a decade ago by a board-certified obstetrician. Our exclusive, unsurpassed prenatal imaging techniques *help you bond* with your baby using the best systems technology has to offer. The limited medical study we conduct offers extra reassurance. It is truly an experience to treasure for a lifetime.

BUT people are using it differently, too — facilitating the bonding not of mother and child, but older kids and child, deployed father, etc.

Q: does routine ultrasound challenge cultural support for the legal status of abortion, other reproductive politics?

Q: does legal status of abortion based on woman’s right to privacy/choice complicate the experience of pregnancy loss?

next week, different cultural context in which abortion is not black/white issue either politically or personally; where abortion is consistent with “real” motherhood

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