

Laboring Under an Illusion: Mass Media Childbirth vs. The Real Thing

Producer: Vicki Elson
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For 15 years Vicki Elson, a childbirth educator, has studied the depiction of childbirth in newspapers, magazines, Hollywood films and television programs, and on the Internet. *Laboring Under an Illusion: Mass Media Childbirth vs. The Real Thing*, an intelligent and well-executed film, is the result of this study.

At the outset, Elson states the strong influence of culture on women's decision-making, including its rituals, symbols, habits, opinions, pervading morality, and commercialism. Her goal is to make the media aspect of our culture more "transparent." She encourages viewers to achieve media literacy in the sphere of childbearing. Pulling no punches, she points out that the media exaggerates fears and dangers related to childbirth mainly to sell advertising space, theater tickets, and magazine subscriptions. Broadcasting birth scenes is good for ratings. Widely distributed films, "reality" TV programs, and sitcoms stress the time-worn, predictable pattern—the laboring woman's mad rush to the hospital, her fear, screams and hysteria, the unbearable pain, the desirability, indeed necessity, of epidural anesthesia, and the inevitability of a cesarean section. Commercial

magazines highlight celebrity births and idealize motherhood.

But women can learn to evaluate what they see and hear all around them, and thus learn the skills that will enable them to make informed decisions about their bodies and their childbearing experiences—as long as they know that alternatives exist so that they can distinguish one point of view from another.

Elson has organized the film's content by introducing each salient issue—fear, pain, danger, emphasis on the man's distress rather than the woman's experience, the outrageousness of some scenes—and then by alternating one or more "mass-media" birth film clips with clips from the films most often shown these days by educators and activists (*Birth As We Know It; The Business of Being Born; Home Birth: The Spirit, the Science and the Mother; It's My Body, My Baby, My Birth; I Watched My Brother Being Born; Orgasmic Birth; Sacred Birth; Understanding Birth; and Birth Day*). These woman-oriented films offer natural births that provide the grounding, warmth, and calm missing from mass media fare. In fact, both "poles" represent very different cultural attitudes toward birth; Elson oscillates between them, creating a lively dialogue.

But no description of her film can replace an actual viewing! It contains many clips, some wildly zany, from well-known and widely watched sitcoms and "reality" shows—of waters breaking suddenly, desperate drives to the hospital, birthing women thrashing and screaming, friends and relatives crazily frantic at hospital bedsides, and nurses and physicians hastening at record speed to provide pain relief.

Many commonly viewed films or programs about childbirth are really about the male partner's fright or hurt. A husband screams "She's going to blow!" Some of them faint. Dr. Quinn, Medicine Woman, pinches her partner's cheeks painfully; another woman swears violently at her husband. Some movie births take place in exotic places: A woman hides in a cave during a raging flood; a Betazoid alien feels no pain as her baby is transported mechanically from her womb into its cradle, horns on its forehead. On television's Discovery Channel, a woman gives birth in an inaccessible ancient rock quarry, having flown in a doctor to attend her. Six women travel to Israel to swim with dolphins to labor and give birth. Tabloid magazines present a vision of celebrity motherhood, omitting mention of the backstage nannies, personal trainers, and chefs, and the photo-shop technicians who make these women look "perfect" soon after giving birth.

Such extreme situations sell well. The strenuous reality they create then becomes the cultural norm with debatable benefits for women. These films and periodicals, taken one by one, may seem innocuous, but seen in the aggregate, have a great deal of negative power. In

contrast, the collection of clips from birthing films, particularly moving and empowering, show birth to be “astonishing and dramatic all by itself.”

Elson’s film merits a number of viewings, as it unfolds vividly and almost too quickly. Although it is funny in places (the Monty Python obstetrics scene is marvelous!), its occasional lightness should not prevent viewers from taking it seriously. It is a useful and accessible vehicle for young women and men, educators, and

health professionals to use as a springboard to question the images that barrage us daily, to evaluate their effects, and to seek to understand their origins, functions, and goals.

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