

Social Ontology and the Rituals of Birth [†]

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Abstract: This paper investigates how new social ontologies emerge when individuals and social groups from around the world utilize technology to promote the use of religious, secular, and re-sacralized imagery in preparation for birth as a rite of passage. In particular, the paper looks at how these participants share religious and nonreligious imagery related to birth through websites, social media, multimedia exhibitions, and other formats, examining how the imagery is used to construct meaning around the topics of birth and ritual. This social ontology of birth shows how humans utilize technology to create new meaning related to the birthing body.

Keywords: ritual; birth; social ontology; imagery; artwork; meaning; technology; religion; nonreligion; sacred

1. Introduction

Investigating how individuals and social groups from different locations around the globe are actively using technology to share and transmit religious, secular, and re-sacralized imagery to each other in relation to birth as a contemporary rite of passage, this paper utilizes a philosophical theory of social ontology to describe three stages of ontological transformation that the imagery undergoes during the rite, as well as a separate fourth ontological category that encompasses images of birth in contemporary art.

2. Social Ontology and the Transformation of Meaning through Technology

Ontology, a branch of metaphysics, refers to the philosophical study of “being.” This paper is primarily concerned with the *social ontology* of the imagery, especially imagery in the forms of artwork and other material objects, that is used within a trans-religious and transnational community of people who are connected through technology and are specifically interested in preparing for birth as a rite of passage [1–5]. Social ontology in this case pertains to how people collectively understand this imagery as having a particular meaning, especially in relation to meanings of religiousness, sacredness, and secularity. This social ontology of birth shows how the meaning of physical objects and other imagery (i.e., poetry) used during rituals have the capacity to shift drastically in the context of our social world, even while their materiality and forms remain the same.

3. The Meaning of Imagery and Four Stages of Its Social Ontological Transformation

In the *first stage* of the social ontological transformation described, objects are understood as religious artifacts. Examples of these objects include religious figurines and other items representative of pregnancy, crowning, or giving birth that have a historical or original meaning connected to religion [6,7]. When used in the contemporary context of birth, however, the ontology of these items shifts and in the *second stage*, the object is understood as a secular and practical tool [8]. During this stage, women utilize the objects for the practical purposes of visualizing pregnancy and the physiological transformations that the body will undergo during the process of birth. This secular

usage of the object is encouraged in midwifery manuals and elsewhere. Examining a number of artifacts, the study shows how the social ontological transformation from religious to secular meaning occurs when the original status function of the object, which is associated with religion, alters and becomes secularized, associated no longer with religion but with the physiological processes of labor and birth. In the cases of all objects studied, speakers from various institutional contexts related to birth convey information to any of a wide number of hearers such that these hearers collectively understand the new status function of the object to be of a nature unrelated to religion.

In the second stage of the ontological transformation, participants in birth (men, women and gender nonconforming individuals) also often re-sacralize these same objects before, during, and after birth [9–11]. The objects are found in homemade birth altars, for example, and some are recreated and sold on the marketplace, purchased as devotional items to remind those involved of the birth experience. The ontology of the object therefore shifts again to a *third stage* in which it goes through a process of re-sacralization, made sacred again primarily in its ritualistic function connected to birth [12,13].

Contemporary artists are also creating brand new art about birth and mothering in which they represent these secular events as divine or sacred acts in themselves. In these cases, the art object is resident to a *fourth ontological stage* devoted exclusively to *the sacred*, which is entirely removed from any original religious meaning or process of re-sacralization.

3.1. Community Studied and Methods Used to Cull Data

A rapidly growing interest in imagery related to birth and childbirth has developed in the United States and abroad over the past two decades. It has gained international presence through online image sharing and networking and through small exhibitions, including a permanent collection, the Birth Rites Collection, which opened in 2008 at Goldsmiths University in London. Some of the people who form a broad community and share this interest include artists who create artwork about birth, as well as others interested in using the artwork for personal or professional reasons, including pregnant women, fathers, partners, doulas, midwives, doctors, writers, childbirth educators, yoga instructors, and acupuncturists, among others. Many of those involved are interested in ways to facilitate labor and birth, often with a focus on natural or alternative methods. However, this community of people interested in these objects cannot be defined as a natural birth movement since its focus is not on natural birth but on how objects and representations of birth are associated more broadly with birth as an important rite of passage.

The methods used to cull data describing the social ontological transformation of the study show a widespread interest in the imagery and objects at the heart of the research. To give one example, the tantric figure identified in the paper as a “wood carving of a divine figure giving birth” is a wood carving from India, likely dating to eighteenth-century Southern India. Currently part of the Mookerjee Collection begun by the late Bengalese art curator and collector, Ajit Mookerjee (1915–1990), this study tracked viewers of the image on the visualizingbirth.org website as coming from fifty-six different countries from around the world (six continents: North America, South America, Europe, Asia, Africa, Australia) [14,15]. Furthermore, the study noted a diverse range of cultures using the same image for birth-related purposes through other websites, a fact represented well in the many different languages used to discuss the image. These languages included Chinese, Danish, Dutch, English, German, Indonesian, Italian, Portuguese, Russian and Spanish; with one site devoted to nude figures found in Telugu. When appropriated in the context of birth in the twenty-first century, however, the image is stripped of its religious signification and propagated as a simple secular tool used in labor and birth.

The findings are based on research conducted in February 2013, and May 2015. In 2013, the author used Google’s reverse image lookup and found twelve websites that displayed the tantric image described above. The content of every website pertained to natural birth and was of a non-religious nature. The author also used Posterous, a data tracking program connected to my website, visualizingbirth.org. During a two-year period (2/6/2011–2/6/2013), Posterous tracked 10,621 visits to

the webpage devoted to this figure (visualizingbirth.org/feminine-divinity-and-a-posture-for-birth) [15]. Using Google's reverse image lookup again in 2015, the program returned 159 results, many of which were multiple listings from the same page. Broken down, the total listings amounted to 83 individual sites, showing a large increase in usage of the image from 2013; however, the findings were similar in that most of the websites related to birth. The birth-related websites included: 45 individual websites, 26 Pinterest pages, and one Facebook page. The other 11 sites related either to sacred art, the goddess Kali, or goddesses in general, although none of these sites provided a history of the object. Google Translate was used to determine the content of the sites for which the author did not know the language.

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