

Birth and Death in British Culture

Birth and Death in British Culture: Liminality, Power, and Performance

Edited by

Anette Pankratz, Claus-Ulrich Viol,
and Ariane de Waal

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P U B L I S H I N G

Birth and Death in British Culture:
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INTRODUCTION

LIMINALITY, POWER, AND PERFORMANCE

ANETTE PANKRATZ AND CLAUS-ULRICH VIOL

Why discuss birth and death when – as is frequently remarked (Jaspers 1979; Kitzinger 2003, 8) – they lie outside discourse, confronting us with experiences that cannot be put into words? And why look at them together when they are so much unlike each other, one the moment of fresh beginnings, joys, and the relative certainties of existence, the other the moment of life's end, grief, and the relative uncertainties of non-existence? Because it turns out that both events, while virtually unrepresentable as such, have spawned a host of representations, narratives, rites, attempts at making sense of them. And because they may have more similarities than appears at first sight. The 13 articles collected in this volume prove that looking at the two phenomena in tandem throws into sharp relief the distinct patterns and functions of each, while also highlighting some of the fundamental historical developments, cultural functions, and socio-political issues shared by both.

We suggest three broad and interconnected categories for approaching birth and death: liminality, power, and performance. Both birth and death are liminal experiences, transitional periods betwixt and between the state of being and the state of not-yet or no-longer being. While rites of passage, representations, and discourses are meant to stabilise and render meaningful the transitions, their structures are by no means fixed and universal. On the contrary, they are subject to cultural conventions, struggles, and change. This is why, as a second area of concern, a discussion of power constellations helps our understanding of birth and death practices: whose interests shape the dominant modes of giving birth and dying in a culture? Who decides who is to live and die? As rites involving bodies, enacting dominant (and sometimes also subordinate) norms and conventions, giving birth and dying may also be approached as performances. This adds to the anthropological concern with liminality ('what are the forms and functions of the transitional periods between life and non-life?') and the political

question of power ('who defines the forms and functions of the periods and why?') a clear sense of both the non-essential character of the phenomena and their openness to change, indicating, in the words of Judith Butler, an "open future of cultural possibilities" (2008, 127).

Liminality

As threshold experiences, precarious and simultaneously stabilising periods of human transformation, birth and death make sense. On tombstones or in lexicon entries, the dates of birth and death serve as a shorthand for a person's life, ordering a collection of random events and contingencies. 25 January 1882 – 28 March 1941. 14 December 1911 – 15 December 2001. Their positions as essential and existential anthropological givens, the supposedly definite and clear-cut points of entry into and departure from life lend importance to both birth and death. The two events are associated with unmitigated nature and the unchangeable facts of life: everyone is born and everyone has to die. Yet they are also closely connected to the "unknown that exists at the limit of [our] socio-symbolic universe" (Homer 2005, 81), which threatens to unmake sense. I know the date of my birth but not the day when I will be dead. No one asked me to be born, I have no recollection when and how I entered life, I do not know what happens after I leave. More generally, in the view of death, why bother? Does it matter whether I fulfil my civic or professional duties, whether I meet the deadline for this volume? Yes and no. Cultural discourses such as, say, religious myths or bio-political normalisations, tend to contain the contingencies of birth and death and offer a meaningful construction of (after)life. If we want to go to heaven after a long and fruitful academic career, we should acknowledge the cultural norms of life before death.

In ethnology, liminality marks a distinct stage within a rite of passage; it is the period of utter in-betweenness after separation from previous states and places and before social reintegration and/or the accomplished transformation of one's condition. It therefore involves spatial separation and social exclusion, if only temporarily. Often it is characterised by the loss of control and the total equality of those making the passage, with the site of the liminal experience lying outside and annulling all regular social hierarchies (van Gennep 1960, 21; Turner 1974, 57-59). Contemporary cultural constructions are rich in these myths of liminality: Maria Verena Siebert's analysis of the Channel 4 docusoap *One Born Every Minute* (2010-) in this volume traces how the televised representations of giving birth reinforce rather ambivalent notions of a rite of passage that defines

universal womanhood by experiencing pain and how they problematically offer a construction covertly informed by ideologies of class and gender; Elahe Haschemi Yekani's contribution shows how the docudrama *The Road to Guantánamo* (2006) represents internment as a liminal phase of social death that is followed by a reassuring return and rebirth of the victims into British society.

The modern Western medico-technological episteme, however, strives for a clear-cut separation of life from non-life (Bergmann 2004, 275). Still, despite increasingly complex medical equipment to measure and monitor vital functions, and despite more precise definitions of the beginning of life and the exact moment of death, the boundaries remain blurry (Feldmann 2010, 170). An embryo's cells are formed of dead matter; corpses temporarily retain some vital functions (Bergmann 2004, 284). Discussions about stem cells, abortion, euthanasia, or brain death highlight the fact that "beginnings and ends are contingent local concepts, the meanings of which are neither stable nor self-evident" (Kaufman and Morgan 2005, 320). Mechanisms of inclusion and "social recognition" (ibid., 319) shape the becoming of a person at the beginning of life. Marie Hologa's and Anja Hänsch's contributions point out the historical changes in the constructions of life before birth. Whereas in the early modern period the 'quicken'ing of a foetus was first felt and announced by the pregnant woman, contemporary culture relies on the medical apparatus and its techniques of visualisation and monitoring. Normalisation and normalisation run parallel to embuing the unborn with a personality of its own: "looking wonderful, just how he needs to look for his age", with "a lovely eyeball" (BBC News 2009), says Professor Mary Rutherford, an expert in MRI diagnosis. At the end of life this culturally constructed personality is depersonalised. Leaving the system of capitalist production often leads to social death, the marginalisation of a person, the loss of prestige, agency, social contacts; in short: forms of gradual exclusion from life which anticipate its biological end (Feldmann 2010, 132-136; Brandes 2011, 75-76). The borders between social death, moving to an old people's home, for instance, and genuine moribundity are as fluid as the borders between a living, dying, and dead person. Contemporary thanatopraxis vacillates between keeping the dying alive with the help of medical equipment and alleviating the process of dying. After death the materiality of the corpse, as "the living image of a dead thing" (Barthes 1984, 78), intersects with the memories those left behind have of the dead person and/or the religiously founded ascriptions of his or her spirit or soul (Kaufman and Morgan 2005, 323).

Officially, Western culture constructs birth and death as “discrete, linear” and “teleological” (ibid., 320), defining, cultivating, and colonising liminal phases. And there is a clear sense in which these transitional periods are curtailed and reduced to discrete points: pregnancy and birth, today, are seen as a dramatic and problematic rupture in a woman’s life. About 45 per cent of all births in Britain today are either induced or by caesarean (Birth Choice UK 2012). Similarly, Allan Kellehear’s analysis of today’s thanatopraxis in the present volume reveals that Western societies marginalise the dying, excluding them spatially and reducing the attention and time devoted to the process of dying.

Nevertheless, religion and philosophy replace linearity by circularity and a deliberate incorporation of death into life, whose aim is its ultimate transcendence (Assmann 2000, 15). Religious teachings about rebirth and afterlife maintain the idea that ‘death is not the end’ and that life continues in another dimension or in another state of being. Although mainly relegated to the private sphere, these ideas about a religious afterlife or rebirth do have political ramifications, as Stefan Schlensag’s analysis of non-Christian burial rites demonstrates. Popular and not-so popular philosophy transfers the religious negation of absolute and discrete endings into a secular here and now. According to Martin Heidegger’s existential philosophy, formulated in *Being and Time* (1927), death has to be approached and embraced as personal, ‘being one’s ownmost’. For Heidegger, perceiving life as shaped by a ‘being towards death’ serves as the only means to realise the potential for a fully human existence (Gehring 2010, 150-151). This stance was to influence existentialist philosophers like Jean-Paul Sartre or Albert Camus; traces of it can also be found in the poststructuralist hypotheses of Jean Baudrillard. Trying to separate life from death is described as part of the late-capitalist system of hyperreality. The rapid exchange of empty signs correlates with the marginalisation of death and installs a death-like life (Baudrillard 1982, 69).

Bonnie Ware’s *The Top Five Regrets of the Dying* (2011) provides a more upbeat, practical, and popular reflex of Heidegger’s philosophy: Ware worked as a nurse in palliative care and noted what people regret when they are dying – prodding the survivors not to make the same mistakes and to live life to the full: not to work so hard, spending more time with one’s family, and staying in touch with one’s friends (Steiner 2012). And then there are DEATH and the Nac Mac Feegle. The personification of the grim reaper from Terry Pratchett’s Discworld® novels points towards the circularity of life and death, as do the tribe of the “wee free men” with their very special myth of origins. They

believe that the world is such a wonderful place that in order to have got into it they must have been very good in another existence and had arrived in, as it were, heaven. Of course, they appeared to die sometimes, even here, but they like to think of it as going off to be born again. Numerous theologians had speculated that this was a stupid idea, but it was certainly more enjoyable than many other beliefs. (Pratchett 2011, 195)

The postmodern imaginary teems with more or less sustained portraits of (hyperreal) lives, fused with a pastiche of traditional images of death and secularised notions of transcendence. It is probably not a coincidence that the new strategies of representing death started in the 1990s. It seems that with the disappearance of the Iron Curtain and the dissolution of the fixed ideological positions of right and left, West and East, Western cultures have begun to appropriate traditional images of death to both stabilise and deconstruct fixed meanings. Ghosts, vampires, zombies, personifications of death, or characters telling their stories from a post-mortem perspective indicate that death might not be the end after all. Employing Gothic and fantasy, however, highlights that these representations are fictions, “collective wishful fantasies” (Elias 2001, 35) or utopias (Thompson 2006), acknowledging that heaven does not really exist and what actually matters is the ‘good life’ in the here and now.

Power

While some of the articles collected here analyse the constraining aspects of hegemonic power – for instance Haschemi Yekani’s discussion of post-9/11 US torture practices, Schlensag’s reading of British society’s attempts to prevent or contain the practice of Hindu funeral pyres, and Cyprian Piskurek’s interpretation of how, in Britain, teenage pregnancies are controlled by a middle-class consensus – many also foreground the intricate and multi-directional mechanisms of power that envelop individuals at all social levels. Thus, some contributors focus on how the medical apparatus governing contemporary birth culture produces knowledge and shapes the dominant discourse about birth both by framing the event scientifically and by activating and reacting to the wishes and demands of the parents, patients, and consumers. Hologa’s study of scanning practices makes use of the Foucauldian notion of governmentality; Claus-Ulrich Viol and Ariane de Waal’s analysis of pregnancy and birth guides brings to bear the Deleuzian concept of the societies of control. Both locate power not over and above the individual but trace how it operates through and frequently also in the interests of the individual. Others stress the influence non-dominant social formations (could) exert over the social order and accept-

ed notions of how to die and how to deal with birth: Kellehear argues that contemporary forms of dying need to be revised and reformed not by a reliance on further services provided by the state but through active, grassroots work of what he calls ‘compassionate communities’; Ingrid von Rosenberg, in her article on approaches to family planning in the 19th and 20th centuries, shows how activism was in the past able to radically change society’s and the state’s attitudes towards birth control, abortion, and maternity care.

The distinction between life and non-life not only fuels the cultural imaginary, it also underlies very concrete power structures. Most clearly so in the case of death, which stands at the intersection of bio- and thanato-power. It can serve as either “the opposite of power” (Bamyeh 2007, 3) and systems of governance or as “manifestation of power” (Mbembe 2003, 12), the ultimate means of control. Extinction in concentration camps serves as a starting point for the theories of Theodor W. Adorno and recently Giorgio Agamben. Both emphasise the special status of the interned, as anonymised, de-individuated inmates, already dead while still living (Gehring 2010, 156-157; Mbembe 2003, 12-13). Mass extinction, in camps or by nuclear catastrophes, undermines the grand narrative of technical progress. Moreover, the possibility of the end of human life as we know it by nuclear extinction has fuelled protest movements since the 1950s, admonishing “Madmen, peace!”, as the dead soldier in Edward Bond’s *Passion* (1971) puts it succinctly (1999, 52), thereby challenging dominant power structures.

Violent, exceptional, ‘evil’ deaths seem to stand in clear opposition to the more complex processes of bio-power associated with giving birth. And yet they are merely two sides of the same coin. The bio-political imperative to make live and to regulate life is dialectically related to the possibility of letting die (Mbembe 2003, 11). The workings of bio-politics become especially obvious at the borderlines between life and death: the discourses around stem cells or brain death indicate “the workings of biomedical regimes of power” (Kaufman and Morgan 2005, 329). Comatose or demented patients trigger discussions about the borders between life and non-life, keeping people alive or letting them die, and the economic, political, and ethical consequences. Questions of a ‘good life’ worth living and a ‘good death’ also incite debates about prenatal medicine, especially about the decisions to abort potentially handicapped children. The bio-political regimes surrounding the imaging and imagining of foetuses, as analysed by Hologa, are controlled by giving and refusing access to health services according to economic criteria (Kaufman and Morgan 2005, 332). Von Rosenberg’s contribution deals with the early discourses of eugenics

and its bio-political ramifications, looking at a theory and practice that tried to exclude members of the working class and ethnic minorities from the groups allowed to procreate. Strategies of awarding or denying the means to prolong one's life, or establishing regimes to prevent "slow death" by obesity or substance abuse, similarly implicitly focus on notions of the quality and value of life organised along the lines of gender, ethnicity, and class (Berlant 2007; see Kaufman and Morgan 2005, 330-331). This always happens with the ultimate aim to keep people healthy, which in contemporary Western culture means: to keep them working and consuming.

Performance

It seems rather flippant and irreverent to employ the concept of performativity in connection with such highly charged events as birth and death. Experiences of existential liminality surely have nothing in common with a theatrical performance or a show? Not in the conventional sense, at least: a woman giving birth or dying does not perform something for the benefit of an audience that expects her to skilfully play a role, to entertain and/or enlighten them. Still, there is a lot to be gained by looking at the events in terms of performativity, that is, "the simultaneous production of the discursive, the body and a set of [more or less rigidly defined] practices" (Barker 2003, 118). Performance involves reiteration, through which it enacts or produces that which it names, usually that which is laid down as a script, law, or convention. But it is important to note that performance leaves room for improvisation; neither is it tied to intention, but can happen unconsciously.

Giving birth evidently is such a performative act (Wulf, Hänsch, and Brumlik 2008, 14-15; Reiger and Dempsey 2006, 364-369). The women in Siebert's analysis of *One Born Every Minute* follow a cultural script, and their performance is assessed in terms of how successfully they play up to it. The need to conform to an existing birthing script also recurs in the incident mentioned in Hänsch's article in which a doctor demands getting a woman in labour pain into a 'decent position'. Clearly, the dominant medical culture through its professional practitioners, be they doctors or midwives, their advice, exhortations, and praise ('push!'), and the 'stage' they set for labour, shapes the performances of birth. The dying likewise are expected to go 'gentle into that good night'. Elisabeth Kübler-Ross's *On Death and Dying* (1969) proposes five stages of dying: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance (Ariès 2008, 589), offering a blueprint for a dignified human death. Although Kübler-Ross's erstwhile

popularity has subsided, the ideal of people quietly or even philosophically accepting death still persists (Brandes 2011, 102-104). In this vein, Kellehear's contribution provides a sustained discussion of 'good deaths', which emphasise community and communalities, which need the active participation of the dying and their care for a human death. It is not difficult to see how more conventional pieces of social interaction, like the 'dance of deception' between terminally ill people and doctors in the 1960s and funeral rites, can also be read as performances.

Yet, taken in their wider sense, performativity and performance go beyond the reproduction of cultural scripts. On the contrary, they sometimes serve as terms signifying the Other of mimesis, providing traces of authenticity and sheer physical presence (Iser 2002, 256). Pope John Paul II's public displays of moribundity – most explicitly in the celebrations of Easter shortly before his death in 2005 – authenticated Christian narratives but also triggered respect and compassion for this performance of human frailty. In the case of birth, Hänsch argues for interpreting giving birth as an intense Heideggerian moment, experiencing it as 'one's ownmost' and as a communal performance. Looking at birth and death as performances thus acknowledges people's potential for improvisation, change, or expressing more than can ever be scripted by cultural norms and regulations.

Lastly, fictional representations of death and birth are also performed – in the narrower sense of the term – live or on screen. Here, pain, liminality, and the unmitigated existential force of the events seem to evoke 'authenticity'. Docusoaps on pregnancy and childbirth appear particularly real because the protagonists are pregnant and on the brink of that dramatic event of birth, not – as Dorothea Tegethoff puts it – "actresses with cushions underneath their clothes" (2011, 151). Staging birth as the ultimate universal and natural event which remains rooted outside our symbolic order and understanding – expressed for instance by the prominent role of the scream in *One Born Every Minute* – lends a special reality effect to the format. The heightened affective powers of performances of birth and death can also be found in the exhibitions of Young British Artists such as Damien Hirst or Tracey Emin who fuse sediments of the *memento mori* tradition with animal corpses or human skulls, as argued by Monika Seidl in her contribution to this volume, and the work of artist-anatomist Gunther von Hagens, as discussed by Christoph Singer. Similar effects are achieved by 'In-Yer-Face' dramas by, amongst others, Jez Butterworth, Anthony Neilson, Mark Ravenhill, or Sarah Kane. The unmitigated representation of death and violence "jolts both actors and spectators out of conventional responses, touching nerves and provoking alarm" (Sierz 2001, 4). Even more so when the boundaries between reality

and representation are deliberately blurred, as Johanna Dangel's article on performative approaches towards death shows. Marina Abramović's performances rely on her suffering extreme physical pain, thereby toying with her potential mortality. Christoph Schlingensief's *Mea Culpa: Eine ReadyMadeOper* (2009) stages the author, director, and performer's dying of lung cancer. The theatrical events thus oscillate between being perceived as art and as 'authentic' dying. This crucial and fascinating oscillation can also be found, as Seidl and Singer show, in the artistic/commercial use of corpses, which evokes a rich tension between presence/absence, materiality/immateriality. Tina Weber's contribution tells us that this fascination also underlies the many (aestheticised) corpses on autopsy tables in popular TV crime shows.

Birth and death may lie outside discourse, but their faultlines and blindspots have produced rites, artefacts, narratives, and practices which try to fill the void. Processes of cultural sense-making construct them as liminal periods of human existence, whose exact boundaries, functions, accepted performative scripts (and possibilities for winging it) are constantly negotiated and renegotiated, stabilised and changed, imposed and subverted by the different groups in a society and their social, ideological, and economic interests (and it is certainly no coincidence that many contributions to this volume identify dominant economic interests as the most powerful in defining the meanings and practices related to birth and death). Both existential phenomena can thus be seen as nodal points in the formation of a culture. Due to their contingencies, they keep cultural processes going. By trying to make sense of birth and death, the present volume is part of these attempts to stabilise the unknowable and unsayable. The contributions, however, do more than this. By analysing how British (and Western) culture tries to control and normalise birth and death, we gain insight into their deep structures, ways of producing knowledge, mechanisms of exclusion and inclusion, values and belief systems. In this ongoing, ultimately futile process of containing birth and death and interpreting attempts at doing so, the articles provide snapshots and short stories, pieces in a fragmented mosaic which has to be added to by the readers.

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PART ONE:
LIMINALITY

CHAPTER ONE

BARBARA DUDEN, JUDITH BUTLER, AND BIRTH: CONTENTIONS ABOUT BODY THEORY REVISITED

ANJA HÄNSCH

Judith Butler and Barbara Duden are two prominent representatives of body theory, who both, implicitly or explicitly, express a distinct attitude towards childbirth. They both contest power structures and question the conception of a natural female body, one from a historical, the other from a poststructuralist perspective. However, it is in this political field that Duden and Butler take on rather different positions. When it comes to birth, Duden basically advocates a reappropriation of childbirth by women. She is against the public control currently exercised over women's bodies and experiences by the medical, technological management and administration of childbirth. Butler challenges power structures in a different way. She points to the repressing mechanisms of heteronormativity, and she places childbirth as 'reproduction' in this context. Her political proposal is the subversion of gender stereotypes. Moreover, Duden and Butler substantially differ with regard to their understanding of 'truth'. Whereas Butler claims that "the inner truth of gender is a fabrication" (2008, 186), Duden links the issue back to the individual and to history. In her analysis of the experiences of 18th-century women, she emphasises that every woman had her own truth, which could not be generalised (2002, 62, 64).

In 1993 Barbara Duden wrote an essay on Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* (1990), polemically entitled "The Woman without a Womb: On Judith Butler's Disembodiment",¹ claiming that "it is time to accept the possibility that in the so-called scholarly discourse about women in history

¹ The original title of the essay is: "Die Frau ohne Unterleib: Zu Judith Butlers Entkörperung". All translations of quotations, unless taken from works that have been published in English, are my own.

there are heterogeneous positions whose advocates cannot talk to each other anymore" (1993b, 28-29). Duden states that although Butler is her contemporary, she feels closer to the "horizon of experience" (*Erlebnispotential*; *ibid.*, 27) of the 18th-century women she has studied than to Butler's. In 2002 Duden republished her article on Butler in a volume of her collected works, which includes short introductions and comments in cases where her thinking had changed over the years. However, although Butler's *Bodies That Matter* (1993) had been published in the meantime, Duden's introduction to her article remains along the lines of the first version. Only the polemical nature of the title was slightly mitigated.²

Despite the rather hostile attitude Duden displays towards Butler's ideas, I wish to bring their thinking into a dialogue. First, it will be shown that their approaches have some important points in common. As Andrea Maihofer (1995) has rightly argued, the idea of the history of the body comes indeed quite close to the idea of the discursive construction of the body. In different ways, both approaches show that the female body is nothing permanent but rather depends on historical circumstances (Duden) or on performative enactments of discourses (Butler). Second, it seems that Barbara Duden's unease with Judith Butler's theories may have a lot to do with the special focus on giving birth and pregnancy in her research. Thus, both Duden's and Butler's works have to be investigated in general and with regard to their specific attitudes towards birth in order to fruitfully compare their positions.

Barbara Duden on History, Gender, and Experience

Barbara Duden has made major contributions to the history of childbirth and pregnancy. Her focus is the reconstruction and historicisation of bodily experiences. In her study *The Woman beneath the Skin* (1987), she analyses the reports of German physician Johann Storch on his female patients in the Thuringian town of Eisenach around 1730. Storch wrote down his patients' complaints concerning pregnancy, menstruation, and childbirth, filling eight volumes with what he calls "*Weiberkrankheiten* (Diseases of Women)" (Duden 1991, v). Duden shows that the bodily perception of pregnancy, childbirth, and menstruation depends on historical circumstances. There is no such thing as a timeless relationship between a 'natural' female body and the experience of such a body. In fact, the very notion of attributing gendered bodily characteristics to women and men is unknown in the world of Storch and his patients. It was

² It changed to "Die akademische Dekonstruktion der Frau: Judith Butler" ("The Academic Deconstruction of Woman: Judith Butler").

assumed, for instance, that men could also have their menstruation, periodically bleeding from the nose, the fingertips, or the penis (ibid., 116-117). Not even milk streaming from breasts was exclusively related to women. Storch writes about men from the region of Eisenach having milk in their “breasts”, one man even making cheese from it (ibid., 117). It was only from the end of the 17th century onwards that menstruation and milk began to be defined as exclusively belonging to women and motherhood (ibid.), and at the time Storch was writing, Eisenach had not yet been affected by this development. Duden concludes that gender and the body are related to each other by cultural processes:

[t]here is an extraordinary range of possible ways in which culture can link sexual identity to corporeality, and interpret corporeality as a sign for the difference between man and woman. [...] Gender is in the eye of the observer. (Ibid.)

Duden’s meticulous historical research enables us to gain insights into women’s experiences of pregnancy and childbirth in the 18th century. These were embedded in a culture assuming that a body (and its body fluids) had to be in constant flux to stay healthy (ibid., 17). The stopping of women’s menstruation would not necessarily be associated with pregnancy but could also raise doubts about whether there was an unhealthy interruption of the flow (ibid., 160).

In her studies, Duden puts a lot of emphasis on the fact that the right to define their status as being pregnant lay exclusively with women. They considered themselves and were considered by others to be pregnant when they had felt the child moving and had declared so. The physician would follow the judgement of the woman (ibid.). The importance of feeling is embedded in a specific system of perception Duden deducts from Storch’s record of women’s complaints:

[t]hey conceive of themselves as *kinaesthetic* (as perceived *kinesis* = movement) [...]. They feel what is happening to them by their tactile sense. It is a *haptic* and not a visualised mode of perception [...]. The statements emphasise *synaesthesia* (cross-sensory perception): taste and smell, gall, putrefaction, refreshment, but also heat and cold merge [...]. And most importantly, all these components of perception are *orientated* by their nature; ‘above’ and ‘below’ being as much qualitatively different as ‘right’ and ‘left’, ‘in front’ and ‘behind’, ‘inside’ and ‘outside’, ‘close’ and ‘far away’. (Duden 2002, 211; emphasis in the text)

Duden vividly feels the gap between her own experiences and those of the 18th-century women she is investigating: “I ‘have’ a body. None of

Storch's female patients 'had' a body in the same sense" (1991, 2). Hereby she points to the contrast between a body managed by modern medicine and a modern 'I' on the one hand and a close link between body and subjectivity, through which the body is intrinsically connected to the 'I', on the other hand. This contrast constitutes the background from which Duden develops her analysis of 20th-century attitudes towards childbirth.

Barbara Duden and Birth

Duden refrains from any normative judgement on her historical sources and takes the position of the intense listener. However, when it comes to the 20th century, she assumes a clear and critical stance. In her book *Disembodiment Women* (1991) and in a number of essays, she deals with the changing symbolic values of pregnancy and childbirth in the 1980s and 1990s. Her research mainly moves along two lines: one of her main questions is how the transformation of the child into the foetus, coming into existence by pregnancy tests and made visible by ultrasound, has affected women's experience of childbirth; Duden's second focus is on the socio-political and experiential consequences of the very creation of the foetus as a public object.

Regarding the perception of pregnant women in the last two decades of the 20th century, Duden attests a change from an experience of childbirth and pregnancy informed by touch (*haptis*) to one informed mainly by the visual.³ Her main points of criticism are the institutionalisation and medicalisation of childbirth, heavily affecting both the experiences of women and the social meaning of pregnancy and birth. Thus, in her preface to the new German edition of *Disembodiment Women*, she speaks of a "disorientation of the sensual-somatic perception of the pregnant woman" (2007, 3). According to Duden, it is the modern institutions dealing with pregnant women that produce such a disorientation along with an increasing dependence of pregnant women on professional interpretations of their state. In this context, she also deplores the loss of "somatic knowledge" and its replacement by experts' views (ibid., 3-4). She writes that "increasing 'expert' advice [...] both at the beginning of and during pregnancy leads to a disembodied style of perception overshadowing what the woman thinks, wants, does, or does not do" (ibid., 4).

Based on her historical research, Duden develops a critique of ultrasound as affecting women's experiences and enabling the social construction of the foetus. As shown above, in the 18th century women

³ For Duden's critique of the visualisation of pregnancy and the foetus, see also article by Marie Holga in the present volume.

considered themselves pregnant when they felt the first movements of the unborn. At the same time, women's public announcement of the fact that they were 'quick with child' also defined their public status. Duden emphasises that this 'quicken' is an experience exclusive to women:

[t]he first stirring of the unborn is part of a whole set of experiences that lie outside the blinders of historiographers [...]. It is difficult to describe and leaves only indirect traces. No wonder that an inner touch experienced by only women has gone unobserved and unnoted. When historians have described the joys, pleasures, and ecstasies of the flesh, they have always implied that women experience something analogous. (1993a, 80-81)

This idea of a specifically female perception disappears due to the intervention of (male) obstetricians, stethoscopes, X-rays, and ultrasound, which "have invaded woman's gendered interior and opened it to nongendered public gaze" (ibid., 81).

Duden does not only investigate the experiential level of the public gaze, she also raises the issue of the creation of the foetus, more precisely the "public foetus" (ibid., 50). She highlights the phantasmagorical character of this creation, as ultrasound pictures are highly fictitious, depending on the transformation of sounds which cannot be heard into images (ibid., 32). Furthermore, she questions the social status which the foetus, detached from the pregnant woman, has acquired, ranging from its images used on balloons during anti-abortion campaigns in the USA to the foetus as a patient:

technology along with a new discourse has transformed pregnancy into a process to be managed, the expected child into a fetus, the mother into an ecosystem, the unborn into a life, and life into a supreme value. (Ibid., 2)

She harshly criticises the effects on the symbolic order of childbirth concomitant with the use of ultrasound:

[t]he screen was so arranged that the pregnant woman could join her physician in real time to view the inside of her belly. She no longer had to rely on word of mouth or medical judgment to interiorize the emblem from the screen. With her own eyes, she could now pretend to see reality in the cloudy image derived from her insides. And in this luminescence, her exposed innards throw a shadow over the future. She takes a further step – a giant leap – toward becoming a participant in her own skinning, in the dissolution of the historical frontier between inside and outside. [...] Her pregnancy is overshadowed by the public fetus. The abstraction of the fetus as a 'new life' takes on the consistency of a neoplasm. (Ibid., 77-78)

In the passage quoted above, the following points of conflict can be discerned: first, the borders between inside and outside are blurred by ultrasound, which Duden reads as a violent act of intrusion, using the image of the pregnant woman's skin being peeled off. Second, Duden points to the alienating procedure of first opening the pregnant woman's inside to the public gaze and then inviting the woman to reappropriate this and the foetus produced by it. Third, Duden deplores that the perception of the pregnant woman is substituted by 'objective biology'. This point becomes clearer by taking Duden's historical studies into consideration. Elsewhere, she emphasises that in the 18th century a general conception of pregnancy as a linear development of an embryo that applies to every woman was still unthinkable (2002, 62, 64). Instead, a woman could feel pregnant, and every woman would have her own 'truth' in the flesh, as Duden puts it (*ibid.*, 62). This truth could not be generalised.

Duden's attitude towards birth with regard to current times culminates in her clear advocacy of a reappropriation of pregnancy and childbirth by women themselves. At the same time, she would like to recuperate the child from a medical apparatus which, also on the level of language, reduces it to a manageable quality product and transforms the pregnant woman into a manager (2007, 5).⁴ In the preface to the new German edition of *Disembodiment Women*, she writes:

if I look back at history since I wrote this, I feel scared. At the time we understood that the talk about 'a life' produces an object which could be used as a resource for control, intervention, and management, and that this bears the danger of betraying the most beloved: the coming child. (*Ibid.*, 3)

Judith Butler on Sex, Gender, Subversion, and Disidentification

Before *Gender Trouble*, feminist theory mainly worked with the idea of sex and gender modelled on Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949). De Beauvoir assumes that the division into sexes is a natural given. She describes the mechanisms of translating sex into gender by assigning a set of different attributes to men and women, which goes along with a subordination of women to men. In *Gender Trouble*, Butler sides with Monique Wittig, declaring also 'sex', the so-called natural body, to be socially invented in its binary opposition of male and female. For Butler, there never is an objective reality, but only our discursively produced

⁴ She argues that women perceive their pregnancy through the terminology of the "bio-quack": "nidation, the foetus, genome, risk, and so forth" (2002, 101).

relationship to reality. Thus, identity, gender, the subject are all dependent on discourse:

[t]he inner truth of gender is a fabrication and if a true gender is a fantasy instituted and inscribed on the surface of bodies, then it seems that genders can be neither true nor false, but are only produced as the truth effects of a discourse of primary and stable identity. (Butler 2008, 186)

Butler sees the construction of gender and sex as belonging to a discursive system of sexuality that both creates and represses women, gays, and lesbians. However, sex and gender are constituted and continuously reconstituted by performative acts:

[s]uch acts, gestures, enactments, generally construed, are *performative* in the sense that the essence or identity they otherwise purport to express are *fabrocations* manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means. [...] If [the gendered body's] reality is fabricated as an interior essence, that very interiority is an effect and function of a decidedly public and social discourse, the public relation of fantasy through the surface politics of the body. (Ibid., 185; emphasis in the text)

It is this performative character of gender that permits its continuous re-enactment. However, performance also harbours in it the political key to destabilising the gender system by subversion. In this context, Butler assigns a crucial function to parody. A “parodic repetition of gender” can unmask the “illusion of gender identity as an intractable depth and inner substance” (ibid., 200). Subversion, “to cure ourselves of the illusion of a true body beyond the law” (ibid., 127), becomes a political project. In the same vein, in *Bodies That Matter*, Butler also uses the term “(collective) disidentification” as a means to “facilitate a reconceptualisation of which bodies matter, and which bodies are yet to emerge as critical matters of concern” (2011, xiv). *Disidentification* and parodic subversion working with and reorganising the elements of gender construction may ultimately lead to the collapse of the binary system of gender and to a democratic opening of possibilities:

[i]f subversion is possible, it will be a subversion from within the terms of the law, through the possibilities that emerge when the law turns against itself and spawns unexpected permutations of itself. The culturally constructed body will then be liberated, neither to its ‘natural’ past, nor to its original pleasures, but to an open future of cultural possibilities. (Ibid.)

Judith Butler and Birth

It is actually not an easy enterprise to discern Butler's attitude to birth. This is mainly because pregnancy and birth as experiences lived by women do not appear at all in her work. However, Kerreen Reiger and Rhea Dempsey have shown that performance can be a fruitful concept to understand childbirth in contemporary Western societies. They see "women as 'performers' of birth" (2006, 365) and also emphasise that this performance can be collective (*ibid.*, 364, 369). With this idea in mind, the authors analyse the dominant performance of childbirth in Western societies as informed by a culture of fear. Focussing on the "interplay between the physiological processes and the internalisation of cultural norms" (*ibid.*, 364), they point out that the degree of support and encouragement women receive while giving birth has direct repercussions on their capacities. Thus, the collective performance of birth gets inscribed into women's bodies.

It is possible to speculate on how subversion could actually come into play with regard to pregnancy and childbirth. The by now famous photos of pregnant transsexual Thomas Beatie with no breasts, bearded, with a serene contemplative face, putting a hand on his bump, clearly cite normative images of pregnant women and at the same time cut subversively through them (Weiß 2008). Depending on local cultural traditions, certain types of performances of childbirth may also have subversive potential. For instance, the refusal to give birth in the supine position, which is often imposed on women in European hospitals, may well be read as an act of resistance, as in the following example from a Florentine hospital in 1993: a woman in labour who had actually planned a home birth had been transferred to hospital. There she continued to confront labour pain as she had done at home: on hands and knees with her legs spread wide. When the gynaecologist arrived, he looked at the woman and, pointing to her, told the medical staff: "put that woman in a decent position!"⁵ Apparently, this woman had violated and subverted cultural codes of 'decency' for women in labour, decency in this case meaning a supine position, turning them into an easy object for medical intervention. As Reiger and Dempsey suggest, 19th-century conceptions of women as ideally having to be passive may continue to inform current medical practices (2006, 371). This may also account for the fact that the supine position is often still the norm in Western hospitals.

⁵ Florentine midwife Paola Iop told me about this incident. The original utterance was: "mettetemi questa donna in una posizione decente!"

Apart from applying performance and subversion to childbirth, there may be another way of linking Butler's work to birth. Actually, childbirth is not altogether absent but rather hidden in the theories she analyses. It appears in different guises, in the form of 'sexual reproduction' linked to 'compulsory heterosexuality', maternity, or kinship. Most hints pointing in the direction of Butler's conception of birth can be found in *Antigone's Claim* (2000) and in her critical discussions of the theories of Julia Kristeva and Monique Wittig in *Gender Trouble*. Kristeva proposes a model of kinship based on Claude Lévi-Strauss. In *The Elementary Structures of Kinship* (1949), Lévi-Strauss argues that kinship bonds mainly rely on the exchange of brides among patrilineal clans, which he reads as a form of gift exchange (1969, 63-68). Kristeva links this idea to her conception of the 'maternal body', to which she assigns a twofold meaning: on the one hand, she sees the maternal body as being repressed in the moment of the exchange of women; on the other hand, for her, the maternal body plays an important role for the disruption of the symbolic order of language conceived of as belonging to the paternal law. Drawing on Lacan, she argues that the paternal law is foundational for culture by repressing primary drives, including the ones resulting from the mother-child relationship. For Kristeva, the maternal body is invested with a *jouissance* preceding desire. This original *jouissance* can be retrieved by reverting to the semiotic dimension of language expressed in poetry or by giving birth as opposed to the symbolic order of language belonging to the paternal law (Butler 2008, 116). Thus, as Butler summarises Kristeva, "poetry and maternity represent privileged practices within paternally sanctioned culture which permit a nonpsychotic experience of that heterogeneity and dependency characteristic of the maternal terrain" (ibid.). However, Kristeva maintains with Lacan that the subject is constituted by the prohibition of the incestuous relationship with the mother. Reverting to the maternal body and the semiotic does thus not only subvert the paternal law – which nevertheless retains its hegemony – but also borders on psychosis.

Butler doubts whether Lacan's and Kristeva's assumption of a "primary relationship to the maternal body [...] is a viable construct" (ibid., 108). She criticises Kristeva for assigning a given meaning to the maternal body, advocates the openness of a cultural construction of birth, and in the same breath argues against any type of "precultural reality":

Kristeva describes the maternal body as bearing a set of meanings that are prior to culture itself. She thereby safeguards the notion of culture as a paternal structure and delimits maternity as an essentially precultural reality. Her naturalistic descriptions of the maternal body effectively reify

motherhood and preclude an analysis of its cultural construction and variability. (Ibid., 109)

Furthermore, Butler questions Kristeva's concept of giving birth as a female libidinal drive and the notion that the maternal body is repressed during the Lévi-Straussian exchange of women. Rather than as primordial, she sees Kristeva's desire for giving birth as already partaking of the paternal law. According to Butler, it is a "culturally constructed desire which is interpreted through a naturalistic vocabulary" (ibid., 123). Moreover, she suggests that the construction of a desire to give birth can be read in the frame of the kinship theory of Lévi-Strauss. However, contrary to Kristeva, she proposes the exchange of women

as a mechanism for the compulsory cultural construction of the female body *as* a maternal body. Indeed we might understand the exchange of women as imposing a compulsory obligation on women's bodies to reproduce. According to Gayle Rubin's reading of Lévi-Strauss, kinship effects a 'sculpting of [...] sexuality' such that the desire to give birth is the result of social practices which require and produce such desires in order to effect their reproductive ends. (Ibid.; emphasis in the text)

In this context, Butler evokes the Foucauldian argument that "the body is not 'sexed' in any significant sense prior to its determination within a discourse through which it becomes invested with an 'idea' of natural or essential sex" (ibid., 124-125). She extends this to the maternal body. The paternal law is thus informed by "a system of sexuality in which the female body is required to assume maternity as the essence of its self and the law of its desire" (ibid., 125). Butler highlights the mechanisms of power and violence operating in such a system. Defining the female body primarily by its "reproductive function" constructs "the institution of motherhood as compulsory for women" (ibid., 126).

However, there is one point relating to birth in Kristeva's theory that Butler apparently refuses to deal with. Kristeva does not only attribute meaning to the maternal body but also assumes the reality of an act of giving birth by women which is different from maternity. Butler, instead, tends to conflate giving birth with maternity. Significantly, she once refers to a passage in which Kristeva writes on giving birth using the term "maternity" (ibid., 116). By this rhetorical move, the act of giving birth is silenced. Furthermore, although Butler in her critique of Kristeva argues against attributing a definite meaning to birth, it seems to assume the characteristics of a fixed point in her theory. This is all the more surprising taking into consideration her general contestation of fixed points, be it