

This is an Accepted Manuscript of a book chapter published by Routledge on 10 November 2016, available online: <https://www.routledge.com/Television-for-Women-New-Directions/Moseley-Wheatley-Wood/p/book/9781138914292>.

De Benedictis, S. (2016) *Watching One Born Every Minute: Negotiating the terms of the ‘good birth’ in R. Mosely, H. Wheatley and H. Wood (eds) *Television for Women*. London: Routledge, 110-127.*

Introduction

Birth has been firmly placed in the cultural spotlight. Amongst a broader contemporary interest in maternity, in the UK Channel 4's BAFTA award-winning television programme, *One Born Every Minute (One Born)* (Channel 4, 2010-), underscores that women's birthing experiences are receiving an unprecedented amount of airtime. The show presents itself as a documentary, purporting to reflect birthing experiences to entertain and educate viewers. Yet, despite claims of neutrality and education, these representations are highly contradictory and constructed, offering 'good'/'bad' birthing processes and bodies, which contribute to power relations and social inequalities.

Within a broader interest in the new visibility of 'public' birth, Tyler and Baraitser (2013) argue that what is peculiar about representations of televisual birth like *One Born* is that this signifies a distinct break with cultural and psychosocial traditions of Western birth representations. Tyler and Baraitser note that historically in Western religious and philosophical traditions birth has been depicted through a masculine lens, which obscures women's role in birth. The concealment of women's role in creation in cultural sites is part of the 'foundational "matricide" that inaugurates Western culture' (Tyler & Baraitser, 2013: 4). This 'matricide' underscores the constructed notion that the cultural and psychic repudiation of the maternal body (the primary object) is necessary for individuation, which a number of feminists have critiqued (ibid). Tyler and Baraitser argue, however, that televisual birth goes against this history, as women's role in birth is fundamental to these recent depictions of birth. And despite the inconsistencies and commercialisation of televisual birth, the significance of women's roles in this still needs further exploration as it 'poses a challenge to the abjection of maternal subjectivity from cultural space, by symbolically "returning birth to women"' (ibid: 10).

Taking my cue from Tyler and Baraitser, I want to interrogate their argument by considering the implications of televisual birth through an exploration of the audience of *One Born*. This chapter explores themes that emerged from an audience reception study of *One Born* with 18 women to argue that to further understand the significance of televisual birth, it is important to explore televisual birth alongside viewers' reactions to it. This chapter looks to ask questions such as how is birth constructed in *One Born*? How is this construction framed by broader sociocultural structures and power? And how is the 'returning birth to women' that *One Born* underscores experienced and reacted to by female viewers? This chapter traces my participants' negotiation and resistance to three themes that emerged through the study; birth as unknown, birth as abject and awesome, and birth as a vehicle for moral judgements.

Neoliberal maternity, 'childbirth TV' and *One Born*

One Born is surrounded by an array of broader maternal representations that have surfaced since the 1990s (Tyler, 2011b). In the British context, one only has to consider the cultural obsession with soon-to-be celebrity mothers ('bump watch'), the tweeting and instagramming of celebrity and 'ordinary' women's births or the policy debates on the benefits or drawbacks of breastfeeding, homebirths or parenting classes, amongst many other examples, to see this recent 'maternal publicity' (Tyler, 2011a). A growing body of scholarship explores the cultural politics of these maternal representations, evidenced by, for example, investigations into the sexualisation of pregnancy (Tyler, 2011b) or the consumer orientated 'yummy mummy' (Littler, 2013). As Orgad and I (2015) note elsewhere, this body of literature emphasises that maternal femininities are increasingly created through neoliberal mentalities of consumerism, individualisation and self-responsibilisation. The literature also highlights deep social distinctions as those who are upheld as successful maternal subjects are predominately white, heterosexual, able-bodied and middle-class, pitted against working-class mothers who are constructed as failing and abject which serves only to highlight broader sociocultural inequalities.

Tyler (2011a) argues that British reality television occupies a crucial role in this foregrounding of maternal representations. She notes that 'maternal TV' is 'a

proliferating reality subgenre', which includes "correctional" parenting shows', such as *Supernanny* (Channel 4, 2004-2012), "teen" parenting', such as *16 and Pregnant* (MTV, 2009-), and 'hospital-based childbirth reality shows', such as *One Born* (Tyler, 2011a: 214). Elsewhere, Tyler and Baraitser (2013) explore televisual birth in 'maternal TV' arguing 'birth as entertainment' proliferates (Tyler & Baraitser, 2013: 9), terming this 'childbirth TV'. Childbirth depictions are now evident in various British television genres, such as reality television, celebrity reality television, docusoaps, soaps and period dramas. Shows such as *One Born*, *Call the Midwife* (BBC 1, 2012-) and *Extraordinary Births* (Channel 4, 2015) have commanded large primetime audience shares over the past decade. Arguably, the most commercially successful programme that places birth in the spotlight is *One Born*. At the time of writing, the ninth series of *One Born* is airing in the UK. The show's visualisation of birth, showcasing of intimacy and glamorisation of midwifery has seen it retain its popularity. As such, *One Born* is a rich site to explore neoliberal maternity and televisual birth, and how viewers engage with and negotiate this new maternal visibility.

The Study

This chapter emerges from my doctoral research, an audience reception study of *One Born*. I was interested in exploring what the increase in televisual birth through *One Born* tells us about current understandings of birth, the maternalⁱ, gender and class, and how this is entangled within neoliberal notions of the self. At the heart of this research was a commitment to listening to women and taking their media experiences seriously. As such, I drew upon Skeggs and Wood's (2012) methodological framework of exploring reality television through interviews, focus groups, text-in-action sessionsⁱⁱ as well as textual analysis.

From March 2013 to May 2014, I obtained data by recruiting eighteen participants who lived in Greater London. Once I had recruited key participants, I used the snowballing technique to form groups for the text-in-action sessions and nine participant streamsⁱⁱⁱ surfaced. Participants were from various class backgrounds with different maternal identities and subjectivities, but were mainly white, middle-class

and heterosexual. 12 self-defined as middle-class, one self-defined as working-class, one self-defined as working-class and middle-class, two self-defined as working-class in the UK but middle-class in their birth country and two did not answer. All participants self-defined as heterosexual and white (either British, Slovakian, Italian or Argentinian), bar one participant who self-defined as British Pakistani. Recruiting participants for the study was challenging, especially regarding working-class participants. I attempted to recruit participants multiple times through various means, such as through acquaintances, friends, family, colleagues or social media forums, but either people were unresponsive or withdrew. This mirrors difficulties that other reality television audience reception studies, such as Jensen (2013) and Skeggs and Wood (2012), have encountered when recruiting participants, which both studies relate to the increasing observation of the working-classes in the U.K from government institutions and agendas. Furthermore, there was an overall whiteness of the participants in this study related to these recruitment difficulties and retrospectively how I recruited. This speaks to a broader power structure of whiteness as an 'unmarked norm' of audience reception studies (see Mayer, 2005). In Jensen's (2013) study of parenting reality television, she sees the issues she faced in recruitment and the overall whiteness of her participants as bound up in the implicitness of whiteness in parenting culture, which could be applied to birthing reality television shows too. The racialised components of televisual birth and audience reception are essential to explore, however there is not space to discuss this here.

The participants' engagement with *One Born* varied; some had watched every series, others dipped in and out of episodes and others had only watched a few episodes. The research process did not require the participants to be 'fanatics', which much audience research leans towards; rather it looked to exploring different types of viewers, such as the 'non-fan' (see Gray, 2003). Whilst the research aims lay in exploring women's engagement with televisual birth, men's engagement still featured in the participants' narratives, especially those in heterosexual relationships. *One Born* is presented as 'women's TV' due to the content of birth and intimacy, but male control was still evident in some participants' engagement with the programme. Many of the participants' partners' opinions of *One Born* would often stop them watching, even though the women usually regularly watched and enjoyed the programme. For

example, Alina, had watched every episode of *One Born* and she stopped watching the show when she met her boyfriend. She stated that this was because ‘he doesn’t like watching it’ as he ‘finds it disturbing’ and ‘scary’ (Alina, Interview). This emphasised how a male presence in the private sphere still exerted control over women’s cultural engagement, preferences and practices in explicit and implicit ways, perhaps surprisingly corroborating findings in older studies on gender and audiences (e.g. Gray, 1992). But this also underscores how gendered and classed cultural hierarchies around ‘television for women’, ‘reality television’ and value (see Biressi & Nunn, 2005, Skeggs & Wood, 2012) come into practice through intimate relations, signalling broader inequalities and power structures.

***One Born* as revealing the ‘reality’ of birth?**

One Born heavily capitalises on revealing the ‘insights into the reality of birth’ (Channel 4, 2013). Although the show follows the conventions of the modern docusoap, aligned with public broadcasting remits *One Born* is a self-professed documentary^{iv}. This documentary claim is offered through a modern twist of heightened surveillance due to the show’s ‘fixed-rig’ production^v. This enables the presentation of *One Born* as a ‘neutral’, and implicitly educational, authority about birth experiences and processes. The show establishes itself as a higher form of ‘truth’ from the outset through the combination of this surveillant shooting style and the generic documentary convention of the ‘voice of God’ commentary (see Nichols, 1983). In the opening sequence the voiceover states:

Every minute, of every hour, of everyday, a baby is born in Britain. To find out what it feels like to bring new life into the world we put 40 cameras into a bustling maternity hospital. To the front desk, to the operating theatre, from the birthing pool, to neonatal, capturing new lives beginning and others ... changing ... forever. (*One Born*, 2010)

This voiceover links a montage of mothers in the throes of childbirth, fathers nervously watching, medics chaotically ensuring birth occurs smoothly and a brief moving CCTV camera, overlaid with women screaming, stating baffled wonderment

over impending motherhood, eerie repetitive sounds of medical equipment, until 'forever' where the soothing, non-diegetic music commences with faces of newborns and parents cooing. Humdrum hospital life is juxtaposed with intense birth experiences. Low quality shots and cameras focusing and zooming, allows surveillance to become a ghostly, yet unquestioned omnipresence in *One Born*. This establishes surveillance to show the 'happenstance' of the hospital (Dovey, 2000); creating the 'illusion of transparency: the attempt to capture life "as it happens", unedited and unmediated' (Clissold, 2004: 49). Moreover, the voiceover's use of 'every' tautologically establishes *One Born* temporally to real events, creating a sense of 'liveness' (Couldry, 2003). The show's format furthers this claim to represent the 'reality' of childbirth and women's experiences. Fixed-cameras are placed in National Health Service hospitals, intermingled with 'confessional' camera shots, as each episode follows the narratives of mothers entering the hospital to give birth, their families and the midwives who assist them. Kavka (2008) notes that truth claims in reality television are made through actuality, which 'strengthens the effect of immediacy; immediacy strengthens the effect of social community' (Kavka, 2008: 19). This 'truth' claim through actuality states that births are occurring *now* in Britain and those broadcasted on *One Born* could represent any of these.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, across all of my audience participants *One Born* was considered a site to discover the unknown elements, overcome the mystique and increase their knowledge of birth. For example:

I'm just always searching for a- a fuller picture and [...] I think birth is one of those really unique cases where you're never going to really have one. 'Cos you'll never know what's it's like for every person. [...] So I think that's what like *One Born* keeps you hooked on. (Alina, Interview)

Underlying this quote is the sense that birth is unknowable and uncertain, which makes it 'unique'. Others described how *One Born* can 'prepare you to not be so scared' as you cannot 'imagine the whole situation' (Sandra, Interview). The broader sociocultural attitude that birth is an experience that can never be *fully* understood unless it is experienced was reiterated in participants' accounts. Alina and Sandra had not given birth, but the benefits of watching *One Born* to get the 'fuller picture' of

birth was also stressed by those who had. For example, Rose described a 'vested interest' (Rose, Interview) in watching *One Born* as she was considering having another child. What these extracts highlight is the gendered contradiction of being positioned as a subject who is perceived to have the capacity to birth, but who is unable to ever fully 'know' about birth, even for those who have experience. Birth as the 'great unknown' was a discursive trope in the construction of birth and accounts were peppered with anxiety, trepidation and fear. *One Born* was seen to alleviate this fear by offering the 'fuller picture' of birth. These discussions of *One Born* uncovering the unknown fell alongside many participants stressing that the show was an educational documentary. Watching *One Born* was presented as a tool to demystify birth, allowing participants to be responsible, prepared citizens learning about birth through reality television, arming themselves with the knowledge required to give birth in the future.

However, simultaneously, many participants considered *One Born* to be an unverifiable source of birth knowledge. For example:

It's not particularly...well it's a little bit educational I guess you know but that's not why you watch it, you don't watch it to be educated, you'd go to NCT [National Childbirth Trust] classes if you wanted to be educated on having a baby. And I think it's very realistic. (Rose, Interview)

Rose, a middle-class mother, positioned herself here as a 'knowing' audience member (i.e. she sees through the guise that *One Born* is educational), rather pointing to the intrigue lying in the realism of the show. This quote also highlights that she validated her own maternal experiences over *One Born* by drawing on middle-class values of increasing knowledge about birth through control, preparation and classes (see O'Brien Hill, 2014: 189). This rejection of the educational merits of *One Born* and the validation of one's own maternal experiences also featured with some working-class participants. For example, Tracey stressed that she gained knowledge about birth from her family members. This difference in how some participants validated their experiences over *One Born* in the research encounter corroborates Skeggs and Wood's (2012) argument that participants in their research used their own social position to assert their value in relation to television texts. Stressing that one gained birth knowledge through family, rather than through NCT, in rejecting *One Born's* birth

knowledge could point to how alternative value-systems shaped by class sees these women acquire and validate maternal knowledge.

In addition to this rejection of *One Born* as educational, the text-in-action sessions with some participants highlighted a further contradiction to the assertion that *One Born* increased birth knowledge. Clarification of medical terms and processes that episodes raised, but did not adequately explain, prompted questions like ‘what’s normal gestation?’ (Jess, Text-in-action) or ‘what exactly is a contraction?’ (Carole, Text-in-action). These types of questions were common from the middle-class participants who had not given birth. Therefore, despite *One Born*’s claim to demystify birth and indirectly educate viewers, for some the show engendered more questions than answers. Despite the participants’ reflexive statements in interviews about how *One Born* increased knowledge and education of the birthing process, this was contradicted within interviews and the text-in-action sessions.

Thus, there were ambiguities between what the participants initially were communicating about why they liked *One Born* (educational, increases knowledge, demystifies birth) versus the rejection of *One Born* as birth knowledge and the ambiguity of gaining birth knowledge in the text-in-action sessions. Skeggs and Wood (2012) note that ‘[t]alking about television was connected to how [their participants] told us as researchers about their value’ (Skeggs & Wood, 2012: 119). However, the immediacy of reality television in the text-in-action sessions ‘positions viewers to locate themselves and their experiences within the drama/narrative’ (ibid: 107). Thus, the different methods highlighted the different subject positions the participants took up through *One Born*. Reflexively stressing in interviews that *One Born* was an educational documentary and a source of birth knowledge in the research encounter enabled the participants to elevate their cultural habits and justify watching the show as increasing educational capital. Simultaneously, the participants were aware of *One Born*’s low cultural status more generally and rejecting the way that birth was represented enabled a validation of their own maternal knowledge through derision of *One Born* as the ‘bad’ object. However, birth itself was still seen as unknowable and constructed through fear and these complex negotiations and struggles over the validation of different forms of knowledge and value worked as attempts to quell this uncertainty and resolve ambivalences.

The rollercoaster ride of birth: from abject to awesome

A baby's head crowning was an emotionally powerful moment and met with reluctant fascination by the participants in the text-in-action sessions. Participants described feeling simultaneously transfixed and horrified. Some discussed watching with 'morbid fascination' (Alina, Interview) and others described crowning as 'not necessarily something I want to see but it's the kind of thing where I'm [...] half looking away but actually I can't stop looking' (Amelia, Interview). In the text-in-action sessions participants communicated these reactions paralinguistically (e.g. cringing or gasping), through phrases like 'oh my god', 'oh fuck' and peering through half-closed fingers. Skeggs et al. (2008) note that from their text-in-action sessions such responses represent when 'affective noise was translated into judgement through mediating statements such as "oh my God", which were then converted into moral judgements' (Skeggs et al., 2008: 17). The participants' judgments were marked by disgust. As Ahmed (2004) notes, through disgust reactions the 'process of both casting out and pulling away means that disgust works to align the individual with the collective at the very moment both are generated' (Ahmed, 2004: 95). The participants were reacting to the moment of crowning when the birthing body is discursively constructed at its most 'taboo' (Tyler & Clements, 2009: 134).

Watching crowning emphasised an ambivalent relationship between birth and femininity. Alina highlighted this powerfully immediately after her text-in-action session:

I just like kind of empathise with the woman [in *One Born*]. I think it just reminds me when my mum talks about being a mother a lot and I remember her saying something about like your mum like will [...] never have any shame in [...] defending you or being a mother or protecting you because from the moment that she becomes your mother it's like the most shame that you could ever feel. Like she's given up all kind of like modesty or whatever in that moment because you've literally just like pooped and bled and stuff in front of loads of people, you're in an awkward position, you're sweaty and disgusting and like it- that's the moment when you become a mother. I dunno. I I think I

empathise with them because it's kind of their- it's kind of like part of them is- is died. But then at the same time it's like a whole new start. (Alina, Interview)

In this extract, Alina adopted an intergenerational notion of maternal intersubjectivity through considering how her mother discussed giving birth to relate this back to *One Born*. This extract highlighted a subject who has been exposed through giving birth. Alina described a number of maternal abject bodily processes – excretion, bleeding, sweating – that are immodest and shameful as the maternal body is exposed to many people. Importantly, she described this process through death: part of a woman dies during birth but simultaneously a new chapter starts. What this extract highlights is how giving birth is constructed as a necessarily shameful, sacrificial act of femininity, which is a digression from constrained, restrained (middle-class) femininity. Birth is discursively seen as an abject experience that, whilst necessary to retain life, offers a complex scenario whereby the maternal figure is disavowed and lost for this to occur. But also Alina attempted to discursively evaluate crowning to value her mother's experience and constructed sacrifice. More generally, there was something quite poignant about how the participants, including Alina, described the loss of self through the birthing process; it was a great source of anxiety for all the participants. In the context of postfeminist, neoliberal requirements of the pregnant body to be contained, controlled and sexual (Tyler, 2011b), crowning is a significant moment that challenges ideals of the sexual female body. I will return to this important point later in the chapter. However, it is important to note that crowning is seen to represent the peak of birth, the reactions to this in the text-in-action sessions carried great normative weight, marked by intensities and competing values around femininity.

In *One Born*, however, a baby being placed on a mother's chest is often swiftly represented as juxtaposition to crowning. This moment was the emotional reward following crowning; the show takes the viewers on a rollercoaster from pain to relief to sentimentality. In the text-in-action sessions this moment of narrative closure was imbued with affective charge; the 'awwws' and 'how cute'. In the text-in-action sessions (and many of the other episodes in *One Born*) after all the pain, sweat and labour, mothers are left in, by and large, heterosexual two-parent situations with newborn babies. The pay-off to the anxiety and fear around birth that the participants

felt through *One Born* was soothed, and naturalised, by 'traditional' family units; 'order' is restored through (largely) nuclear families.

A striking angle when discussing this climatic scene with the participants was the significance of taking this journey with the women on the episodes. For example, Tracey described that it felt like 'you're there living it with them, and you're going through the whole, like, wars. And I think when you've had a child you're thinking, "oh, I remember how that felt, oh, I remember that"' (Tracey, Interview). Other participants described visceral responses, as Elena eloquently explained:

[I]t's tense and they're just like, 'oh my god, it's coming, it's coming now, it must be'. Oh, the first thing, like the head pops out it's like 'oh my god, oh my god', it's like tense, like, your muscles are like, yes, you feel like, 'my god, my god, my god', and then when you see the baby's completely out you say, 'ahh, how cute' and you really [...] feel the whole thing with her. (Elena, Interview)

These examples emphasise how the participants placed themselves into the drama, and for some participants this shifted them back to giving birth. Skeggs and Wood (2012) argue that the 'affect-producing technology' (Skeggs & Wood, 2012: 68) of television entices audiences to position themselves into moments of drama, the positioning of oneself into the proceedings of reality television, or refusing to do so, the 'as if' or 'as not', saw their participants '*perform* the increasing mediation of experiences whereby public understandings of distinction, disgust and social in/difference are repeatedly produced' (ibid: 160, original emphasis). Inherent to this was that the 'performance of labour (work, emotion and domestic) became immanently subject to performance review, as if our respondents were under the same demands as the television participants' (ibid: 41). Similarly, the participants in this research emotionally (and sometimes physically) laboured with the women on their birth journeys, which saw them perform labour and align themselves with notions of the 'good' heteronormative subject.

'Good' and 'bad' birthing subjects and births

Birth as potentially threatening to norms of femininity was a notion that was (re)produced in *One Born* and the fieldwork. The attempt to control birth was ever present. O'Brien Hill (2014) argues that 'it is the issue of control during labour within the hospital setting that is at the heart of each episode of [*One Born*]' (O'Brien Hill, 2014: 189). Remaining stoic and modest when giving birth was important to the participants and made evident through imparting moral judgements as they watched women give birth. If the women giving birth delineated from maternal stoicism or a family member glimpsed during crowning these moments were met with great disapproval and shock. Transgressing stoicism was often shown through excess. For example:

<[Insert Figure 1]>

In this episode Sam is depicted as not only being too loud and flouting notions of femininity, but also as attention-seeking, weak-willed and a nuisance to medical staff. Sam is also depicted as irresponsible, spoilt and unwise to the reality of bringing up children, largely because she is unemployed and became pregnant. Sam is implicitly positioned as the young, working-class 'chav mum' who is created as irresponsibly 'leeching' off the state, rather than delaying motherhood and contributing to the labour market unlike her middle-class counterpart, creating class distinctions through disgust and humour (Tyler, 2008). As my research participant, Leah, uttered in watching the above, the participants saw Sam as uncontrolled: 'she will pan the property'. Sam's birth ends in an emergency caesarean, an unspoken link is made that this occurred because she did not 'try' hard enough in the show. The participants in this text-in-action session are disparaging of her behaviour for not having remained 'calm' during birth. As another participant, Katy, stated about *One Born*:

[T]here's almost something philosophical about like women who seem to be like 'this is the most pain I've ever gone through but I'm just, you know, that's just the process and you have to'. Whereas you know the younger one that we saw in that programme, it was like 'why?!' you know just like fighting it and you know, blaming other people or just not facing up to the fact that she had to just go through with it. [I]t seems like, you know, [a] character divide sometimes. (Katy, Interview)

Underlying this extract are notions of individual mastery and conquering pain through birth. Labouring of the body, and the mind, was fundamental to give birth. The marker of the 'good' birthing subject is someone who can 'handle' this labour, which proves a woman's character. Or, as Katy further elaborated, giving birth vaginally separates 'the wheat from the chaff' and, ironically, 'the men from the boys' (Katy, Interview). This highlights that in birth discourses women must be *physically* strong, and *subjectively* strong (the 'right' frame of mind and 'character'), which echoes the controlled and restrained postfeminist, neoliberal subject. O'Brien Hill (2014) notes that discourses around birth in *One Born* are linked to control, the 'good mother' myth and neoliberal notions of self-discipline over pain relief; 'working with pain' is necessary in the transition to motherhood as 'being prepared to suffer for your child during labour is regarded as a necessary rite of passage into motherhood' (O'Brien Hill, 2014: 190). Thus, this 'good mother' discourse is entwined with discourses around the 'good birth'.

O'Brien Hill further notes that *One Born* 'makes a spectacle of the female body in pain, and part of that spectacle stems from focussing on how the expectant mother is perceived to be coping (or failing to cope) with that pain' (ibid: 192). Through ridicule of certain mothers featured, the show puts forth 'right' ways to give birth. Any transgression from the restrained, stoic birthing body is policed, as is the case of Sam in the text-in-action session above. More generally, the women on *One Born* are shown feeling shame and remorse for their behaviour during birth. Being unrestrained and uncontrolled, and apologising for this, highlights that birth does not enable women to behave without judgement, rather birthing bodies are self/policed and expected to maintain, or show remorse for any transgressions of, middle-class notions of femininity. Apologising to – or being ridiculed by – partners and midwives for being too loud, too foul-mouthed or too self-centred during the birthing process was par for the course in *One Born*. Skeggs (2004) notes that excessive dispositions and conduct have historically been created as the domain of working-class femininity to define middle-class feminine notions of restraint (Skeggs, 2004: 104). Furthermore, Gill (2007) notes self-control and bodily discipline (usually attained through consumption) is one feature of the postfeminist subject. As the working-class woman is often figured as excessive and uncontrolled, this postfeminist requirement is out of

reach. Although there is a mixture of mothers featured, the show more often represents working-class mothers. The show leans on this class history that is re-enacted through postfeminist corporeal norms, thus, behaving ‘badly’ during birth becomes classed. Or as one participant commented when watching a screaming birthing woman the day after Kate Middleton^{vi} gave birth: ‘Bet Kate didn’t do that!’ (Carole, Text-in-action).

However, participants also saw birth norms broken if the women giving birth were, paradoxically, too quiet and calm. For example:

<[Figure 2]>

This group felt that the birthing woman in this episode (Series 5 Episode 6), Cody, was inauthentic and ‘weird’; she was not giving birth ‘right’ as she acted like she ‘stubbed a toe’. With other groups, judgement was passed on ‘too’ quiet women who cared too much about their presentation during birth. The importance of authenticity in reality television has been explored elsewhere (e.g. Allen & Mendick, 2013; Hill, 2005). As Allen and Mendick (2013) stress notions of authenticity are integral to ideas of the ‘inner self’ as ‘the ability to overcome obstacles to “knowing oneself” is central to the neoliberal project of self-actualisation’ (Allen & Mendick, 2013: 2). Thus, even though the show goes to great lengths to enforce ‘good’ controlled birthing subjects, the judgement from the participants highlighted that there was an impossibility of getting birth ‘right’; if the woman was ‘too’ loud she was unruly, if the woman was ‘too’ quiet she was inauthentic. Furthermore, in reality television authenticity is linked to a wider imperative to showcase emotion (Aslama & Pantti, 2006). Thus, the participants were also reacting to a visual lack of emotion as a lack of authenticity and emotional labour.

The extract above illustrates another birth digression in Alex’s utterance of ‘why you looking? Don’t look down there!’ Across the fieldwork all participants objected to a ‘humorous’ trope of *One Born* whereby a partner or family member glimpses during crowning. This shot was always met with intense apprehension and rejection; it was a moment filled with shock and laughter. Statements like ‘Oh, why’s he looking!’, ‘[laughs] They looked!’ or ‘He’s not looking down?!’ were common. Some

participants attempted to stop the men looking at the women by demand. As Nicole urged: 'Don't you look, don't you look!' (Nicole, Text-in-action).

This rejection of 'peeping' by the participants could indicate conflating issues surrounding the construction of mother's bodies. Littler (2013) argues that mothers no longer are expected to subscribe to asexual ideals of Christian maternity, rather in neoliberal times, driven by consumerism and a 'fetishization of the maternal' (Littler, 2013: 233), the white, middle-class, heterosexual figure of the 'yummy mummy' sees mothers constructed as a 'desired object rather than desiring subject' (ibid: 231). Discourses around the sexualisation of mothers shifts how mothers' bodies are policed and, as such, the peeping birth partner, largely a birthing woman's boyfriend or husband, in *One Born* sees the woman at her most vulnerable – and, importantly, abject – moment, which contradicts this new imperative of a mother's body being solely for sexual pleasure as crowning is marked through disgust. The cultural mentality that 'if your husband sees *that*, he will never look at you the same way again' signals that birth, and especially crowning, is threatening not only to contemporary notions of maternal sexuality, but also (heterosexual) intimate relationships. However, this rejection could be seen slightly differently. These rejections could be a form of resistance to an extreme 'male gaze', personified through the man that 'peeps'. The female participants placed themselves in the women's shoes and are rejecting the (patriarchal) voyeurism, surveillance, objectification and control of the birthing process, and of birthing bodies, if momentarily.

'Natural' versus Caesarean

Considering lack of control was a prevalent feature of the participants' accounts, one might expect that attempts to gain control of the birthing process (i.e. by caesarean-section) might be preferential. However, this was not the case for the majority of the participants or in *One Born*. Tyler and Baraitser (2013) emphasise that televisual birth is 'limited in terms of the absence of possibilities they encode for imagining, experiencing or understanding birth outside of dominant systems of control and surveillance that characterise obstetric practices in the Global North' (Tyler & Baraitser, 2013: 9). In the show, there is a distinct favouring of 'natural' birth with as

little intervention as possible (O'Brien Hill, 2014). Within wider spread cultural discourses of the benefits of the 'natural childbirth movement' (Johnson, 2008) and the derision associated with caesareans (e.g. 'too posh to push'^{vii}), the show establishes interventions as morally questionable; interventions into birth (bar gas and air) are constructed as unnecessary, risky or as a last resort. For example, within the text-in-action episodes, caesarean-sections were always portrayed as an emergency procedure that was intensely dramatic and dangerous due to medical complications. As the soon-to-be mothers are rushed for a caesarean-section the filmic cues signal danger and crisis. The sound of blaring hospital alarms, close-ups of flashing red hospital lights, midwives and doctors frantically running through corridors and anxious looking relatives are staple visual cues to signal crisis. Caesarean-section is often represented as a last resort to stem the threat of death and failure.

Caesareans are not only constructed as a last resort, but any deviation from a 'natural' birth was seen as a 'bad', unnecessary choice. In one episode watched in a text-in-action session (Series 4 Episode 12) a woman wants an epidural to the dismay of the midwives. The midwife has a disapproving conversation with the mother-to-be and subsequently discusses how unnecessary her choice for an epidural was in the staffroom. Moral value is imparted on how a woman 'should' give birth. From one perspective, the emphasis upon decreasing medical intervention could be seen as a positive way forward in ceasing patriarchal control of the maternal body. However, Johnson (2008) and O'Brien Hill (2014) argue that 'natural' childbirth discourses are situated within specific white, Western, middle-class concepts of the self. They argue that these discourses are imbued in power relations that privilege middle-class experience and advocating a uniform approach to childbirth may not benefit all women.

Overall, the participants viewed giving birth 'naturally' as preferential. Reasons surrounding this were not linked to a direct rejection of medical norms. Rather for some participants giving birth 'naturally' was linked to morality and motherhood, for example, as essential for 'bonding' (Paula, Focus Group) and a 'connection' (Nicole, Focus Group), emphasising the link of 'natural' birth with the 'good mother' myth (see O'Brien Hill, 2014; also evident in linking 'good' pregnancy practices to the 'good' mother present through pregnancy 'apps' (Johnson, 2014) and antenatal care (Papen,

2008)). Subsequent to their text-in-action session, Lucy and Carole similarly stressed the importance of getting a 'connection', but also that 'natural' birth 'seems loads easier' (Carole, Focus Group) and 'seems like the obvious choice' (Lucy, Focus Group). 'Choice' largely emerged in accounts with middle-class women who had not given birth. This highlights how choice is mobilised in discussions around birth with a neoliberal inflection, and how this choice is naturalised as the 'right' one (O'Brien Hill, 2014). However, considering the preference for 'natural' birth in *One Born*, and broader sociocultural birth norms (see Johnson, 2008), the question around how much choice there is around this is brought into question.

However, one middle-class participant, Lisa, was an exception and consistently rejected the notion that 'natural' was the 'right' way to birth. Lisa had not given birth but throughout the fieldwork she drew on her mother's birth experiences. These experiences were upsetting for Lisa as Lisa was premature and her mother had an emergency caesarean, resulting in a hysterectomy. She had an investment in refuting *One Born's* claim about the 'right' birth. For example, when discussing *One Born*:

I think something that irritates me is when the woman is just like 'I want an epidural' or 'I want pain relief'. And the midwives do seem quite like resistant to it. And I think [...] is that kind of their training of just like trying to get out the baby as naturally as possible. If a woman's sitting there like 'I want an epidural', in my mind it's like 'well fucking give her one' [...] [T]hat kind of annoys me because I think that's where kind of there's a professional opinion and a personal opinion and, you know, are they dithering because they think professionally it's not a good idea [and] if so they should be saying 'well I don't think you should have that for x, y and z reasons', which is why I think it's more of a personal reason of just, you know, try and have it as naturally as possible, which I think, you know, it shouldn't be that kind of the midwives' personal choice over the patient's. (Lisa, Interview)

Lisa was frustrated and adamant that 'natural' birth is not always the choice of the women on *One Born*. She felt that the midwives had another agenda to women 'naturally' birthing, which she felt was not always medically justified. Lisa values her own and her mother's experiences of birth to challenge the dominant reading of the

text. O'Brien Hill (2014) argues that in *One Born* the 'natural' birth' discourse 'encapsulates the neoliberal free agent', but 'investment in the illusion of choice [is] hugely problematic within the hospital setting' (O'Brien Hill, 2014: 190). This discourse 'positions the midwife as the expert' (ibid: 191). Lisa mobilised choice here in contrarily to how Lucy does in the above quote in noting that 'natural' birth is the 'obvious choice'. Lucy utilises choice to stress that giving birth 'naturally' is the 'real' choice, whereas Lisa uses choice to argue that there is only freedom to make the 'right' (neoliberal) choice and give birth 'naturally'. Thus, through the birth norms established in *One Born* by the midwives for 'natural' birth, and in broader sociocultural ideologies of birth, in Lisa's insubordination of the midwives and their preference for 'natural' birth she momentarily rejects these dominant ideologies.

Conclusion

This chapter has explored televisual birth via *One Born* to see how 'returning birth to women' (Tyler & Baraitser, 2013: 10) was understood by a group of women. The exploration of these participants' opinions and reactions to *One Born* highlighted that despite the show's efforts to inculcate dominant ideologies around birth – as unknown, abject/awesome and marked by morality – the participants' reactions were complex and unpredictable. *One Born* offers birth as a vehicle to communicate ideas around neoliberal ideals. It was clear that the participants validated their own experiences and social positions to align themselves with, or reject these positions offered by the text. When participants were discussing or reacting to *One Born* often they would do so either through their own maternal experiences or intergenerationally through their mother's experiences. Whilst fear, anxiety and disgust of birth, as well as circulating value of birth and birthing bodies through distinctions, was prevalent in the fieldwork, the participants' reactions also highlighted momentary resistance. Some participants questioned the expertise of the midwives, the discourse of 'choice' within birth representations, and attempted to redefine the moment of crowning. There were moments whereby the participants reiterated the maternal abjection that *One Born* offers, for example with reactions of disgust to crowning, but the responses were not always straightforward. At points, the constructed visceral nature of birthing bodies, the immediacy of television and the proximity to the participants' own experiences

saw some participants redefine those moments. For example, through Alina's intergenerational discussion of crowning that attempted to re-value the maternal body through personal experience. These types of momentary resistances to the 'normative performative' (Skeggs & Wood, 2012: 49) of maternal abjection are politically significant gendered acts which rupture the normative codes of the 'good birth' and by extension the 'good mother'.

References

- Ahmed, S., 2004. *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Allen, K. & Mendick, H., 2013. Keeping It Real? Social Class, Young People and 'Authenticity' in Reality TV. *Sociology*, 47 (3), 460-476.
- Allen, K., et al., 2014. Thinking with 'White Dee': The Gender Politics of 'Austerity Porn'. *Sociological Research Online*, 19 (3).
- Aslama, M. & Pantti, M., 2006. Talking Alone: Reality TV, Emotions and Authenticity. *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 9 (2), 167-184.
- Biressi, A. & Nunn, H., 2005. *Reality TV: Realism and Revelation*. New York/Chichester: Wallflower Press.
- Clissold, B.D., 2004. Candid Camera and the Origins of Reality TV. In S. Holmes & D. Jermyn (eds.) *Understanding Reality Television*. London: Routledge, 33-53.
- Couldry, N., 2003. *Media Rituals: A Critical Approach*. London: Routledge.
- Dovey, J., 2000. *Freakshow: First Person Media and Factual Television*. London: Pluto Press.
- Ellis, J., 2015. Fixed Rig Documentaries: How They Do It [online]. *csonline.tv*. Available from: <http://csonline.tv/fixed-rig-documentaries-how-they-do-it> [Accessed 1 November 2015].
- Gill, R., 2007. Postfeminist Media Culture: Elements of a Sensibility. *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 10 (2), 147-166.
- Gray, A., 1992. *Video Playtime: The Gendering of a Leisure Technology*. London/New York: Routledge.
- Gray, J., 2003. New Audiences, New Textualities: Anti-Fans and Non-Fans. *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, 6 (1), 64-81.
- Hill, A., 2005. *Reality TV: Audiences and Popular Factual Television*. Abingdon/New York: Routledge.
- Jensen, T., 2013. Creating Distinction: Middle-Class Viewers of *Supernanny*. In C. Fairclough, D. Hoffman & L. Layne (eds.) *Parenting in Global Perspective: Negotiating Ideologies of Kinship, Self and Politics*. Abingdon: Routledge, 51-68.

- Johnson, C., 2008. The Political "Nature" of Pregnancy and Childbirth. *Paper prepared for presentation at the annual meeting of the Canadian Political Science Association*. Vancouver BC: University of British Columbia.
- Johnson, S., 2014. "Maternal Devices" , Social Media and the Self- Management of Pregnancy, Mothering and Child Health. *Societies*, 4 (2), 330.
- Kavka, M., 2008. *Reality Television, Affect and Intimacy: Reality Matters*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Littler, J., 2013. The Rise of the "Yummy Mummy" : Popular Conservatism and the Neoliberal Maternal in Contemporary British Culture. *Communication, Culture & Critique*, 6 (2), 227-243.
- Mayer, V., 2005. Research Beyond the Pale: Whiteness in Audience Studies and Media Ethnography. *Communication Theory*, 15 (2), 148-167.
- Nichols, B., 1983. The Voice of Documentary. *Film Quarterly*, 36 (3), 17- 30.
- O'Brien Hill, G.E., 2014. The Older Mother in One Born Every Minute. In I. Whelehan & J. Gwynne (eds.) *Ageing, Popular Culture and Contemporary Feminism*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 187- 202.
- Orgad, S. & De Benedictis, S., 2015. The 'Stay-at-Home' Mother, Postfeminism and Neoliberalism: Content Analysis of UK News Coverage. *European Journal of Communication*, 30 (4), 418-436.
- Papen, U., 2008. Pregnancy Starts with a Literacy Event: Pregnancy and Antenatal Care as Textually Mediated Experiences. *Ethnography*, 9 (3), 377-402.
- Skeggs, B., 2004. *Class, Self, Culture*. London/ New York: Routledge.
- Skeggs, B., et al., 2008. 'Oh Goodness, I Am Watching Reality TV'. *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 11 (1), 5-24.
- Skeggs, B. & Wood, H., 2012. *Reacting to Reality Television: Performance, Audience and Value*. Abingdon/New York: Routledge.
- Tyler, I., 2008a. "Chav Mum Chav Scum" : Class Disgust in Contemporary Britain. *Feminist Media Studies*, 8 (1), 17-34.
- Tyler, I., 2011a. Pramface Girls: The Class Politics of 'Maternal TV'. In B. Skeggs & H. Wood (eds.) *Reality Television and Class*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 210-224.

- Tyler, I., 2011b. Pregnant Beauties: Maternal Femininities under Neoliberalism. In R. Gill & C. Scharff (eds.) *New Femininities: Postfeminism, Neoliberalism and Subjectivity*. Hampshire/New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 21-36.
- Tyler, I. & Baraitser, L., 2013. Private View, Public Birth: Making Feminist Sense of the New Visual Culture of Childbirth. *Studies in the Maternal*, 5 (2), 1-27.
- Tyler, I. & Clements, J., 2009. The Taboo Aesthetics of the Birth Scene. *Feminist Review*, 93 (1), 134-137.

Figure 1

Visual	Audio	Participants
Close-up of the face of the birthing woman, Sam, as she cries. Close-up of the father, Ed, looking nervous.	Joyce: There. You take it. You know where it is. You hold it. Slow down with it. Sam's mum: Steady.	Leah: [inaudible] Charlotte: She's panicking. Yeah.
Close-up of Sam breathing in gas and air rapidly.	Joyce: Right, come on. You're really not helping now.	
Medium close-up of midwife, Kay, as she takes a long sip of tea standing in the staffroom.	Midwife in the background: Yes. Yeah, very irregular.	Leah: Mmmm. She'll pan the property.
Long shot of the hospital corridor as Kay walks out of the staffroom.	Kay: Lovely.	Orla: Yeah. Leah: I guess that's the thing with staying calm. If you calmly have contact with people around you, I guess. Charlotte: Mmm. Orla: Yeah.

Figure 2

Visual	Audio	Participants
Medium close-up of the father, Daniel, smiling and looking off shot.	Midwife: That's it. Ah look!	Sarah: She's not even screaming. Alex: Why you looking? Don't look down there!
Close-up of crowning.	Midwife 2: Oh, there she is.	Sarah: She's not even screaming. Alex: She's in water.
Medium shot of the birthing women, Cody, pushing lying on her back with everyone around her.		Kristy: I mean this is what's so weird.
Close-up of the baby being lifted out by the midwife.	Cody: Ow! Midwife: Look. Look. There she is.	Sarah: She just went ow as if she'd stubbed a toe. Kristy: Yeah. Yeah it was exactly like that. That's what I thought. Sarah: Yeah.
Medium shot of the midwife handing Cody the baby.		Alex: But why's the mum still there?!

ⁱ By using the term 'the maternal', I align myself with feminist scholarship that is concerned with exploring the subjective, psychosocial and political significance of maternal subjects, identities and practices. See the inaugural issue of *Studies in the Maternal* and www.mamsie.org.

ⁱⁱ The text-in-action method maps linguistic and paralinguistic reactions alongside moments of televisual drama (see Skeggs & Wood, 2012).

ⁱⁱⁱ I term these 'streams' not 'groups' as some sessions only had one participant.

^{iv} This follows a history of docusoaps leaning on the conventions of realism to present themselves as unmediated to 'justify exploitation (of unpaid participants) and voyeurism through an implied association with "documentary realism"' (Allen et al. 2014; unpaginated).

^v Ellis (2015) argues that in 'fixed-rig' productions over roughly two weeks cameras are placed within a set location and crew are placed in onsite monitoring rooms to watch the multiple video feeds that result. He observes that the crew who watch these digital feeds also control the direction of the cameras as the action occurs on site (See Ellis, 2015 for an explanation of 'fixed-rig' productions).

^{vi} Kate Middleton, Duchess of Cambridge, is married to Prince William. The birth of their first child, Prince George, was covered extensively in the global press, especially when the couple brought the baby home from the hospital with paparazzi, media commentators and an adoring public crowd present the day before this text-in-action session.

^{vii} This term refers to a woman who is perceived to have an elective caesarean to avoid the pain (and labour) of childbirth. It is often used to deride working-class celebrities, such as Victoria Beckham.