THE POLITICS OF ABORTION AND THE COMMODIFICATION OF THE FETUS

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Introduction  In the past few decades, the politics of abortion in North America have been steeped in arguments concerning fetal personhood. Anti-abortion activists argue that “life begins at conception” and, consequently, intentionally ending a pregnancy at any stage constitutes murder. Following this logic, they argue that abortion should be criminalized. Owing to rapid advances in medical visualizing technologies made since the mid-1960s, photographic and ultrasound images of prenatal life have become widely available and are now part of public consciousness. This imagery has figured centrally in the construction of the notion of fetal personhood. It is arguable that the resonance of this idea is dependent upon fetal imagery and that its inextricable connection to medical technologies lends it an aura of scientific authority.

Feminist scholars have argued that this array of fetal imagery in the public realm has created a new entity, the “public fetus.” The public fetus is that which is represented in images depicting the fetus and is used outside of a clinical setting for nonmedical purposes e.g., the iconic floating fetus of 2001: A Space Odyssey, the fetuses depicted in the anti-abortion film A Silent Scream, ultrasound fetal images shown in an advertisement or as part of a television program, or fetal images in a pregnancy advice book. The public fetus is understood to be distinct from the private or personal fetus i.e., that which resides in an individual woman’s body. Images of the personal fetus would be those which a woman might have had taken of her own fetus, at her own request and for her own purposes. This private and personal fetus would be, for instance, that captured in an ultrasound image for the personal
use and pleasure of the future mother/father/family of the fetus.¹

What, then, are the central traits of the public fetus?² It is an autonomous being. The public fetus exists as a being in its own right, floating independently in the cosmos. Further, the public fetus represents “life itself.” It stands for the origins of life. Its image, a product of medical/scientific technologies, “proves” beyond a doubt when life begins. Finally, the public fetus has a powerful presence and personality. It is a gentle, peaceful creature embodying innocence.³

These essential traits of the public fetus rely upon a double suppression. First, references to the maternal body are suppressed in its construction. Second, its embeddedness in complex technologies and artifice is masked. These two moments of suppression work in tandem; that is to say, the creation of the public fetus relies upon sophisticated and intrusive technologies which work precisely to present it as separate from the maternal body. Thus, the public fetus is founded upon concealment of its “real” origins—in technology and the body.⁴

The history and characteristics of the public fetus as well as the ways in which it has been mobilized by anti-abortion activists have been perceptively analyzed by numerous feminist scholars. Moreover, the relationship of the public fetus to commercial culture has been the focus of extensive critique. Feminist commentators have noted the presence of the public fetus in advertisements, movies, and magazines and have been deeply concerned that, without critical discussion, these images in popular culture reinforce anti-abortion rhetoric. The independence of this fetus from its maternal moorings appears to give credence to the view that the “real” private fetus does have a separate existence apart from a maternal body and so may be entitled to rights distinct from those of the pregnant woman. This suggests that it may be virtually impossible to extricate the public fetus from the political meanings which it has generated. In this sense, the public fetus is never politically neutral or innocent.⁵

In what follows, I wish to push this line of inquiry further. I argue that just as the public fetus is never politically neutral it is also never economically neutral or innocent; it is never outside of economic life. In addition, not only is the public fetus enmeshed in economic enterprises but, by its
very nature, the public fetus is a commodity. The construction of the public fetus is based upon its commercial potential—its production for and consumption by a mass audience. Its very mode of presentation announces that it is a commodity.

This interpretation of the public fetus may strike readers as counterintuitive since anti-abortion activists’ use of fetal imagery on placards, billboards and so on seems to have everything to do with ideology and propaganda and little to do with economic processes. In what follows, however, I show that these images are embedded in economic processes even as they function as political symbols. To do so, I draw on the early work of Jean Baudrillard for insights concerning the commodity form. I then refer in some detail to the work of the celebrated photographer Lennart Nilsson—whose work was pivotal in constructing the public fetus and is also widely used in anti-abortion propaganda—and attempt to decipher key aspects of the logics of signification which saturate fetal imagery. Finally, I examine these issues in relation to the advertising text and product presentation in the sales catalogue of Heritage House, an actively anti-abortion American company. Heritage House sells a remarkable range of products such as t-shirts, necklaces, lapel pins, key chains, bumper stickers, balloons, and videos replete with fetal images. This example emphasizes the extent to which, despite its evident preoccupation with the symbolism of the fetal image, the anti-abortion movement is also involved in overt commercial activity. Nonetheless, it is crucial to stress that its marketability resides in its sign value. Hence, production, consumption, culture, and science coalesce in a complex process of meaning creation.

Manufacturing the Public Fetus The specific understanding of the commodity form informing my discussion is based on insights found in Jean Baudrillard’s early work *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign.* Baudrillard’s sustained analysis of the centrality of sign value and exchange value in this text is crucial to an adequate appreciation of the workings of advanced capitalist economies in which the signifying power of objects is now inescapably enmeshed with their very status as objects, as products. Baudrillard’s analysis goes beyond traditional Marxist categories of use value
and exchange value to theorize the commodity form. Baudrillard posits the inescapable intertwining of signification with exchange value as constitutive of the commodity in advanced capitalism. Of the commodity, he comments, “this object is perhaps quite simply the object, the object form on which use value, exchange value and sign value converge in a complex mode that describes the most general form of political economy.”

Baudrillard thus envisages an implosion and integration of needs, production, and consumption and, further, demonstrates that all these elements in capitalist production processes are driven by the logic of signification. Therefore, the “determining logic of exchange value” entails that “everything, even artistic, intellectual, and scientific production, even innovation and transgression, is immediately produced as sign and exchange value (relational value of the sign).” Hence Baudrillard states that consumption today “defines precisely the stage where the commodity is immediately produced as a sign, as sign value, and where signs (culture) are produced as commodities.” This conception of the commodity is particularly salient when examining a product such as the public fetus which conjoins “artistic, intellectual, and scientific production” (at minimum) and meanings in its object form.

The photographic work of Lennart Nilsson has been pivotal in the creation of the public fetus and it has been carefully analyzed by many scholars. Nilsson’s photos of zygotes, embryos and fetuses first appeared in 1965 in a famous photo essay in Life magazine, entitled “Drama of Life Before Birth.” The images were reproduced from his book A Child is Born which was published in the same year. The photos were seen as a stunning scientific and technical breakthrough in which Nilsson penetrated secrets hitherto hidden within the womb. This marked the beginning of Nilsson’s tremendously successful career specializing in photographing the human reproductive system. His original photographs from 1965, as well as more recent photographs such as those in another photo-essay in Life in 1990, have been reproduced in innumerable publications from medical texts to pregnancy advice books. Nilsson has worked on television programs, films, and pregnancy advice books. In this sense, Nilsson’s photos have simultaneously promoted both his worth as a photographer as well as the legitimacy of the modern scientific enterprise itself. His project affirms his skills as
an artist/technician and visually verifies the achievements of modern science. Nilsson’s work cannot be extricated from the promotion of medical technologies themselves. The construction of the public fetus, then, must be seen as implicated in the promotion of the medical technologies which bring it to life and into view.

Moreover, Nilsson’s photographs promote (whether intentionally or not) a particular ontological and, in the context of current abortion debates, political argument. In fact, these photographic images contain an argument which may be summarized as “life begins at conception and we have the pictures to prove it.” Commentators have stressed the extent to which the written text (working with the visual text) which accompanied Nilsson’s Life essays persistently put forward the notion that the zygote, embryo or fetus is a human being. Further, this political argument is couched in scientific terms which, once again, appear to be visually (i.e., indisputably) confirmed with the photographic image.\(^{14}\)

Indeed it must be stressed that these images are so potent (emotionally, politically, and economically) precisely because they are photographs. In Barthes’s renowned formulation, the photograph can be understood to gain its power because “it is a message without a code.” Thus, “the image is not the reality but at least it is its perfect analogon and it is exactly this analogical perfection which, to common sense, defines the photograph.”\(^ {15}\) The camera was really there. It has the effect of transparency.

Each photograph, however, is an artefact which must be framed; it is defined as much by what it presents as by that which it leaves out. Nilsson’s photographs provide a particularly intriguing example of the tension between the being there/really there quality of the photograph and what is not there, what is left out. Of particular importance is the fact that the woman’s body quite literally fades out of view. As E. Ann Kaplan notes, “Nilsson stresses the little shapes that will become eyes, or ears, or other organs. The emphasis is all on the baby-to-be read back into the zygote. Further, the fact that this is all taking place in the mother’s body is ignored. The photos have no boundary to them that might represent the limit of the mother’s womb or fallopian tubes; that body is nowhere in sight, but is rather the repressed, nonrepresented, vessel for the growing ‘baby.’ ”\(^ {16}\)
Nilsson’s pictures are rife with further complexity, ambiguity and paradox. Most notably, despite Nilsson’s claims to be depicting the human embryo and fetus in its “natural habitat,” with all but one exception his photos in the 1965 photo-essay are of dead fetuses acquired both through spontaneous and surgical abortion. Needless to say, this presents challenges in the presentation of the written and visual texts as the drama of the enterprise depends upon capturing the living embryo/fetus in its “natural habitat.” In one stark example of the subterfuge employed to sidestep this “problem,” the image which appears on the front cover of Life is referred to as a “living 18-week-old fetus,” but in the essay it is noted that this “embryo was photographed just after it had to be surgically removed ... [and] did not survive.”

The level of technical intervention and skill required to capture the images in order to simulate “life” is also astonishing but persistently suppressed in the visual and written text. As Karen Newman points out, “The entire Life essay is a tangle of contradictions as it negotiates between its claim to represent ‘life’ and the various qualifications produced by the medico-technological processes, including backlighting, instrumental miniaturization and photographic enlargement, chemical and surgical preparation, and medical intervention, which are relegated to a series of parentheses and which continually admit of a quite different drama.”

The “different drama” to which Newman refers is that of aesthetic artifice. It is crucial to my argument to stress the extent to which Nilsson’s photos (and all fetal images of their ilk) are the product of considered and careful presentation. In the case of Nilsson’s photos, E. Ann Kaplan notes the following about the 1990 Life photos: “It is the quality of the photos that is significant; these are not ‘scientific’ images, untouched, but rather highly produced images. The actual photos, I am assured by professors of microscopy, would have been a bland greyish, blueish color, unlikely to attract buyers of Life magazine. Nilsson’s photos have been elaborately and dramatically colorized—the reds, deep blues, orange, purple—all are added to make the photos attractive and appealing in a way that ‘nature’ (the real inside of a woman) would not be.”
In a fundamental sense, then, the creation of the public fetus and the aesthetic skill and choices involved in its production cannot be extricated from a commercial purpose. The talents of a figure like Nilsson are mobilized to present beautiful and compelling images in order to sell the images, promote the photographer and sell the product to which the images are attached (magazines, books, etc.), as well as promoting the idea of medical technology and modern science itself. This confluence exemplifies Baudrillard’s statement that in late capitalism “everything, even artistic, intellectual, and scientific production ... is immediately produced as sign and exchange value (relational value of the sign).” Not only does Nilsson show us what has hitherto been invisible, he also (of necessity for his commercial purposes) makes it an aesthetic object. By definition, then, the fetus as constructed by Nilsson (and other manufacturers and purveyors of these images) is a commodity, a commercial product.

This becomes clearer if one considers the types of fetal images available prior to those produced by Nilsson. Most photographs of dead fetuses did not attempt to represent them as living beings. Rather, they were depicted as medical specimens, photographed in jars or with harsh, clinical lighting, with no attempt to imbue the fetus with beauty and thereby inspire an emotional connection with the viewer. The following statement from the “Life Library of Photography” volume *The Camera* refers to Nilsson’s photographs and makes this point clearly: “Whereas a similar fetus preserved as a specimen in a laboratory bottle would repel most beholders, Nilsson’s painstaking technique has lent an awesome beauty to this view of life at its beginning.”20 As Karen Newman comments, “The ‘awesome beauty’ of ‘life at its beginning’ depends on a distinction between the grotesque medical specimen and an aesthetic of distance or voyeurism produced through instrumentation.”21

Thus, careful attention to the aesthetic presentation of the public fetus has been an essential component in its commodification. That the fetus is presented as baby-like and gorgeously lit is the prerequisite for its emergence as a commercial product. Indeed, it is virtually unthinkable that the image of the fetus as “grotesque medical specimen” would be viable in a mass market, used in advertisements or to fill the pages of pregnancy advice books and featured in documentaries about the wonders of human reproduction.
The beautiful images are calm and comforting, not distressing or aesthetically repellent.

Consequently, grotesque fetal images have faded almost entirely from public view and have been decisively superseded by the “beautiful” (i.e., commercially viable) public fetus. It is only in political contexts with their use by the anti-abortion activists that grotesque fetal images are seen to any noticeable extent. Indeed, these types of photos are known in this movement as “war pictures” and the harshly lit, monstrously organized images of dead fetuses function to generate disgust and opposition to abortion.²²

**Sign Value, the Public Fetus and Anti-Abortion Politics** The public fetus comes into being, then, as an aesthetic and commercially viable object. It is an object saturated and seeped in complex meanings, aggressively mobilized by anti-abortion activists for their own political ends. Centrally, the public fetal image visually summarizes in an appealing way the argument that “life begins at conception,” the cornerstone of the anti-abortion case. As Meredith W. Michaels comments about the availability of Nilsson’s photos, “This was just the moment that the anti-abortion forces were waiting for. Since they could now marshal a visual referent for Life Itself other than the grizzly, mutilated resort to death (itself), they scored big in the reality wars.”²³ And Michelle Celeste Condit states that “Without these pictures, pro-Life advocates would have only an abstract argument about the importance of chromosomes in determining human life or a religious argument about the ‘soul’ and neither of those options could sustain the righteous fire of the public movement.”²⁴

Thus, for the anti-abortion movement, the public fetus represents “Life Itself.” As emphasized above, the manufacture of images of “Life Itself” requires the use of sophisticated medical technologies. Not surprisingly, then, abortion opponents have increasingly come to foreground biomedical and scientific rhetoric in their propaganda, a departure from their past reliance on religious arguments about ensoulment and the sanctity of life. Indeed, Rosalind Petchesky considers this to have been an entirely self-conscious decision on the part of a politically astute movement. She points out “Aware of cultural trends, the current leadership of the anti-abortion movement has
made a conscious strategic shift from religious discourses and authorities to medico-technical ones, in its effort to win over the courts, the legislatures and popular ‘hearts and minds.”

Of course the notion that “life begins at conception” is replete with assumptions about the development of human beings and is riddled with problems. Commentator Sarah Franklin has accurately unpacked this crucial formulation in anti-abortion rhetoric. She writes:

The ‘miracle’ of fetal development as a biological process, and the stamp of biogenetic uniqueness which is replicated throughout its development, are drawn upon again and again in the current public debate about abortion. The emphasis upon what the fetus is going to become, upon its genetically determined development, inevitably leads to a focus upon its developmental potential as a person, as an individual human being with an entire life course mapped out for it from the moment of conception. There is thus not only a focus upon the fact that it is constitutionally (ontologically) an individual person, but on the fact that it is developmentally a potential human adult. There is thus a sense in which the conceptus is provided with an entire life cycle through the construction of its developmental potential, which is simultaneously naturalized and authorized through its representation as biological fact. This teleological construction of the ‘natural facts’ of pregnancy has become a major component of the anti-abortion argument that ‘life begins at conception.’

However, the visual terrain of meaning creation wherein the fetal image is equated with “Life Itself” seems to circumvent complex, deconstructive analyses such as Franklin’s. It has given anti-abortion forces a huge ideological bonus which they have eagerly embraced.

Heritage House: Selling the Public Fetus As noted above, the specific sign value “Life Itself” of the fetal image, seized upon by the anti-abortion movement, has been carefully analyzed by numerous feminist theorists. The fact that abortion opponents overtly utilize the market to a significant degree to circulate these fetal images has, however, received less attention. The Heritage House example is extremely instructive in this regard. Heritage House is an avowedly anti-abortion firm that promotes this cause through
the sale of its products. Heritage House offers an amazing array of products such as key chains, rubber stamps, tote bags, bumper stickers, videotapes, books, lapel pins, plastic fetal models, balloons, and t-shirts, most of which feature fetal imagery.

The sales catalogue offers a narrative about the origins of Heritage House. It recounts the company’s founders’, Virginia and Ellis Evers, encounter with a fetal image in 1974 which stirred them to action. They saw a newspaper ad depicting a “picture of the tiny feet of a ten week old unborn baby held between a man’s finger and thumb. Inspired by the remarkable photo, Virginia Evers felt these little feet would be the ideal Pro-Life symbol. With love and dedication for the unborn, Virginia designed the ‘Precious Feet’ lapel pin.”

The “precious feet” lapel pin was the first commodity sold by Heritage House. This commodity has clearly been crucial to this company but also to the anti-abortion movement more generally. The mission statement boasts that since the 1970s over nine million have been “distributed” (presumably, a code word for “sold”). The catalogue text announces that it is “the International Pro-Life Symbol.” Representations of the “precious hands” of the fetus are now also available. [See Figure 1]

How do the “precious feet” and “precious hands” artefacts gain their meaning? In her book *Decoding Abortion Rhetoric*, Michelle Celeste Condit examines the ways in which figures of speech are mobilized to give meaning to the images used in the anti-abortion movement. She cites instances of the use of metaphor, hyperbole, and metonymy in anti-abortion rhetoric which lend force to the meaning of the images. Of relevance here is her analysis of synecdoche, or how an image of a part of an item is used to represent its entirety. She refers specifically to the image of “precious feet” in the anti-abortion movement and comments:

An accurate, full picture of a young fetus includes features not associated with adult human beings—the placenta and the umbilical cord and, in a six-week fetus, even a ‘tail.’ With these and its ungainly face and head, off-balance and poorly formed, a young fetus looks like a wretched creature, bloody and undernourished ... Fetal feet, however, are very close to baby feet in shape. The identity of the part is crucial. Our visual logic ‘recognizes’ such feet as
**Figure 1**

**Precious Feet/Hands**

**Precious Feet**

These Precious Feet represent the exact size of an unborn baby’s feet at 10 weeks after conception. A proven fundraiser for your organization. The International Pro-Life Symbol breaks the ice and helps you to speak for those who cannot speak for themselves. Available in 3 finishes.

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**Precious Hands**

The newest of our Pro-Life symbols, the Precious Hands are taking their place along side the Precious Feet to educate and stimulate conversations. The exact size and shape of an unborn baby’s hands at 10 - 12 weeks. Designed exclusively for the Heritage House by Maria O’Gden and completed with the encouragement of Synda Masse formerly of Focus on the Family. Available in 3 finishes.

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**Mix and Match Saves You Money**

You can mix and match gilt and silver Precious Feet (100 GIL and 100 SIL) or Precious Hands (101 GIL and 101 SIL) to reach your quantity discounts. For instance, 500 of 100 GIL plus 500 of 100 SIL qualifies for the 1000+ price of $.50 each. Or, 10 of 101 GIL plus 40 of 101 SIL qualifies for the 50+ price of 1.25 each.
'small human feet' and we synecdochically expand the unseen picture to see a full 'small human.' Thus, the synecdoche tightened the identity between fetus and adult by eliminating all those components that reveal the differences between the two, focusing on one single, stunning similarity.30

The written text advertising the “precious feet” lapel pins clearly works imaginatively to extend its meaning. The text, seen in Figure 1, declares that the feet “represent the exact size of an unborn baby’s feet at 10 weeks after conception.” The “exact size” alludes to the scientific accuracy of the representation of the feet which are, as Condit points out, then connected to the whole fetus and, finally, the unborn baby. Further, the text evokes the innocence of the fetus as a voiceless victim on whose behalf the activist is called upon to speak: “The International Pro-Life Symbol breaks the ice and helps you to speak for those who cannot speak for themselves.” Thus, the feet ultimately serve to reveal the humanity of the fetus and so “gets its message” across clearly.

**Product Excellence and the Competitive Market** While the sign value of the products is highlighted in the sales catalogue, their materiality as things is not neglected nor is their connection to the competitive market. Thus the catalogue offers the customers cut-rate deals. For example, the “precious feet” are “available in 3 finishes” and the prospective consumer is advised to “mix and match saves you money ... you can mix and match gilt and silver Precious Feet or Precious Hands to reach your quantity discounts.”31

The products are presented with catalogue numbers, bulk sales and specials are promoted, and product excellence touted. In one stark example, the ad copy for balloons (which feature different combinations of fetal images, graphics, and anti-abortion slogans) focuses on product quality. The text reads:

The great Heritage House helium quality 11 inch balloons just got better—much better. We’ve switched to ‘metallic’ balloons in assorted colors to give your balloons a beautiful sheen as well as eye-popping color. The ink color has been changed to white for greater visibility. And the ink is more dense
so it doesn’t fade away and become hardly visible like other balloons. The designs have been increased in size—what good is a message if it can’t be seen? And for all this, the price is now lower! In fact, these are the lowest priced balloons available to the pro-life movement. What more could you ask for?32

Here the sales pitch for the product and the political cause reside in uneasy confusion, culminating with a jibe at other balloon manufacturers in the anti-abortion movement. Common cause in the movement appears to cease at the marketplace.

**Target Customer**  The target customer is the anti-abortion individual and organizations such as church groups and “crisis pregnancy centres “(CPCs) in Canada and the US that promote the criminalization of abortion. These CPCs present themselves rather innocuously as information centres for pregnant women. Once women have entered, however, they are confronted with an array of anti-abortion propaganda. Anti-abortion organizers claim that over 4000 such centres operate in the United States.33 This makes them a superb focus for sales for Heritage House since the CPCs could use their products (literature, videos, pins, fetal models, etc.) to dissuade women from abortion. It also makes CPCs a persistent target for bulk sales. For instance, the catalogue promotes the idea of selling particular pins to raise funds for the CPCs and offering lapel pins to volunteers in CPCs or attendees to workshops.34

When “consumed” by the individual, these products function to display a series of social meanings embedded in the objects. When “used,” the t-shirt, bumper sticker, balloon or necklace publicly presents the consumer’s attitudes, views, and dispositions to the world. Whether intentionally or not (given the insertion of these commodities into a logic of signification), the consumer necessarily embraces some combination of the following attitudes:

- Their partisanship for a specific ontology (“life begins at conception”);
- Religious views (“all life is sacred”; “Jesus Christ is humanity’s saviour”);
- Policy stances (“abortion is murder and should be criminalized”);
- Political dispositions (“I am an active citizen”), and
- Attitude to science (“technological advances reveal hidden truths”).
Political Self-Consciousness  Heritage House tries to position itself in relation to other social movements. The intent appears to be to equate the anti-abortion cause to movements for progressive social change. Indeed, the marketing strategy of Heritage House is to present itself as engaged in a dialogue with, for example, the women's, environmental or gay movements. What is notable here is the way in which it is sign values, which encode political meanings, which are presented as being in dialogue with one another.

Thus, in the promotional text for a “ribbon lapel pin” which depicts the “precious feet” or the “precious hands” logo on a blue and pink ribbon, the text reads “Every group these days has a ribbon signifying their cause. These pins cause the natural question—’What does your pin stand for?’ And your chance to answer, ‘The pink and the blue stand for all the girls and boys who have died from abortion in this country.’”35 In another instance, a connection is made between the environmental movement and the anti-abortion cause, as evident with the key chain that depicts a baby seal, a tear running down its cheek and the slogan “Save the baby human; stop abortion.”36

However, this strategy entirely elides the dramatic political differences between Heritage House and the movement it represents and the women’s, gay or environmental movements. Indeed, New Right politics (consonant with those of Heritage House) implacably oppose the aims of these progressive movements. Indeed, one need only review the list of Heritage House’s videotape and book selections to get a sense of its broader political agenda and its incompatibility with these social movements. Its video and book titles are dominated by anti-abortion materials but also include “The Myth of Safe Sex,” “Hollywood, Sex and Seduction,” “Pornography: Addictive, Progressive and Deadly,” “Teen Sex, It Can Kill You,” “Let’s Talk to Teens About Chastity,” “Raising Kids God’s Way,” and “What Would Jesus Do?” These titles give an indication of the broader agenda of the anti-abortion movement which is a cultural and moral revival of Christian faith to correct all social ills. This specific vision of Christianity rests upon a decisive rejection of the essential perspectives of, for example, the women’s, gay and lesbian movements. There is an important and substantial critical literature on the broader context of anti-abortion politics (beyond the scope of this paper) that stresses the link between organized opposition
to abortion in industrialized Western nations and neoliberal approaches to economic and political issues.  

**Living Dolls** Heritage House sells a variety of fetal models, individually or in sets. These are plastic representations of a fetus at various stages of prenatal development. They are important items because the plastic fetal models evoke the “realness” and autonomy of the public fetus; indeed the text in the catalogue works precisely with this strategy. For instance, in the promotional text for one fetal model, “Baby Hope” (representing a 12-week fetus), it is noted that it was designed by a renowned doll maker. The rhetorical strategy immediately shifts, however, as the plastic doll is next referred to as the “unborn baby model” and a “resin fetus.” Moreover, the scientific/medical accuracy of the model is stressed: “Baby Hope” is “the identical size of a baby inside the womb at just 12 weeks and is of similar weight.” Arguably, this connection is already established given that fetal models have their original use in medical training. Bolstered by the authority of science, then, the “resin fetus” is equated with a human fetus. The conceptual differences between a doll and a human fetus, or a fetus and a baby, thereby collapse.

The textual material promoting the sale of the “Touch of Life 4” model set further underscores this rhetorical strategy. The text reads “No photo can show you the reaction of people when they hold these models. The baby's weight and the natural feeling of the skin is so real that people want to cuddle and protect them. They are easy to clean—a great feature—because they will be handled! Their care even includes an occasional powdering, just like real babies. Everyone responds positively to these models, especially children.” The “Touch of Life 4” model set sells for $149.95 (1); $129.95 (3+); $109.50 (6+).

A testimonial letter from the Arizona chapter of the Right to Life (an anti-abortion organization) comments on the effectiveness of the fetal models: “People couldn't believe how beautifully formed an unborn child is at two months (when most abortions occur). They had no idea that the unborn child was such an intricate work of art. These models silenced arguments about “choice” as they communicated the sanctity of human life ...”
emphasis in bold]40

Note the formulation: the fetal model communicates that it is the “unborn child” that is a work of art. Thus the text works to suppress the artificiality of the plastic model by positing the human fetus as manufactured, a work of art. Moreover, it aims to arouse an emotional bond between the consumer and the doll and thus inspire hostility towards abortion. The doll becomes a real being and abortion is a threat to its existence. The fantasy of the autonomous fetus, thus, is given full rein with the fetal models. This fetus can freely move about in the world, and be handled, cuddled, washed, and powdered. What is truly miraculous here is that it is represented as a fetus without a mother, an oxymoron.

**Conclusion** I have argued that the public fetus is, by definition, a commodified fetus and have indicated ways in which Heritage House sells this commodity to promote the anti-abortion cause. Furthermore, inspecting the public fetus illuminates the vertiginous explosion of visual symbols and meanings in our culture. Consequently, Baudrillard’s conception of contemporary consumer capitalism as founded on the inescapable presence of sign value at every moment of production/consumption is apposite.

This discussion is intended to advance understanding of a vital component of contemporary abortion politics—the use of fetal imagery. It is crucial that we consciously contend with arguments against abortion, particularly those which appeal to the “truth” of fetal images. Given the increasing prominence of visual imagery in consumer culture, it is crucial that the symbols and signs with which we are bombarded are subject to critical reflection. As I have attempted to show here, the fetal image is at once technological, ideological, and commercial. It cannot be understood as initially technological, then ideological and finally commercial. Separating out these aspects obscures a full understanding of how the public fetus operates on all of these levels simultaneously. Nor does it capture some transparent image of “the real” which is divorced from technical or social construction. This is an essential argument in an era in which technological advances will increasingly be used by the anti-abortion movement to “prove” that a fetus has a separate claim to social and civil rights from the individual woman car-
rlying that fetus. The positing of distinct fetal and maternal interests is at the core of the anti-abortion movement’s strategy to recriminalize abortion in North America. In this context, it is vital to continue to insist that women’s right to the broadest range of reproductive choices possible is integral to women’s ability to exist as full citizens.

Notes

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3. The notion of a distinct fetal personality has been a constant component of the rhetoric of obstetric visualizing techniques. Indeed, medical practitioners who have pioneered and worked with these technologies have promoted this conception of fetal personhood and personality in their work. Monica J. Casper documents the extent to which William Liley, an early pioneer of fetal surgery, promoted this idea. See Monica J. Casper, *The Making of the Unborn Patient: A Social Anatomy of Fetal Surgery* (New Brunswick, NJ and London: Rutgers University Press, 1998). Liley advanced the view of the agency of the fetus *in utero*. For instance, Casper cites Liley commenting on the capacities of the fetus: “The fetus is a young human, dynamic, plastic, resilient, in command of his own environment and destiny with a tenacious purpose” and “at no stage can we subscribe to the view that the fetus is a mere appendage to the mother... The early embryo stops mother’s periods and induces all manner of changes in maternal physiology to make of his mother a suitable host... It is argued that the fetus is incapable of independent existence. However, the fetus can outlive his mother, and dead women have been delivered of live babies. Independent existence is a relative concept.” Quoted in Casper, *The Making of the Unborn Patient*, p. 61.


5. See n. 2 for examples of such treatments.

6. Jean Baudrillard, *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign* (St. Louis, Missouri: Telos Press, 1981). In the early stages of his career, Baudrillard was engaged in a fruitful dialogue with Marxism. His contribution to an understanding of mass consumer capitalism cannot be underestimated. However, the trajectory of his career has moved decisively away from the insights of a political economy perspective to an exclusive focus on the realm of signification. For critiques of the later phases in Baudrillard’s career see, for example, Steven Best and Douglas Kellner, *Postmodern Theory: Critical Interrogations* (New York: Guilford Press, 1991), pp. 111-145; and as a representative of postmodernism: Alex Callinicos, *Against Postmodernism: A Marxist Critique* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1990), pp. 86-87 and pp.145-154. For an excellent discussion of some of the political implications of debates concerning the nature of postmodernism, consumerism and capitalism see Martin Morris, “Contradictions of Postmodern Consumerism and Resistance,” *Studies in Political Economy* 64, pp. 7-32.

7. For Marx’s classic exposition of these categories, see Karl Marx, *CapitalVolume I*, Ben Fowkes, (trans), (Harmondsworth, 1990), pp. 125-177.


9. As Baudrillard writes, needs “can no longer be defined adequately in terms of the naturalist-idealistic thesis—as innate, instinctive power, spontaneous craving, anthropological potentiality. Rather, they are better defined as a ‘function’ induced (in the individual) by the internal logic of the system: more precisely ‘not as a consummative force liberated by the affluent society, but ‘as a productive force’ required by the functioning of the system itself, by its process of reproduction and survival,” *Ibid.*, p. 82.


12. As Baudrillard writes, “Through objects, each individual and each group searches out his-her place in an order, all the while trying to jostle this order according to a personal trajectory,” *Ibid.*, p. 38.

13. For full discussions of Lennart Nilsson’s photographs see Franklin, “Fetal Fascinations;” Newman, *Fetal Positions;* Michaels, *Fetal Galaxies;* and Duden, *Disembodying Women*. It should be noted here that Karen Newman’s *Fetal Positions* provides a compelling history of fetal images. Indeed, one of her aims is to redress what she considers an ahistorical approach to fetal imagery on the part of contemporary feminist scholars. Newman thus presents and critically analyzes images of the fetus in, for instance, anatomical illustrations and sculpture from the medieval period to the present.
14. See Franklin, "Fetal Fascinations"; Newman, Fetal Positions; Michaels, "Fetal Galaxies"; and Duden, Disembodying Women.
22. Janelle Taylor has remarked that these “war pictures” are intended to create the effect of a “trauma”—a horror beyond speech—whereas the Nilsson-esque photos are intended to create an “aura” around each fetus. Taylor develops the concepts ‘trauma’ from Barthes and ‘aura’ from Walter Benjamin. Taylor, “The Public Fetus,” pp. 70-74.
26. Franklin et al., Off-Centre..., pp. 197-198.
27. One notable contribution to this focus on commodification is found in Janelle S. Taylor's article "Of Sonograms and Baby Prams: Prenatal Diagnosis, Pregnancy, and Consumption," Feminist Studies 26/2 (Summer 2000), pp. 391-418. Taylor carefully analyzes the ways in which the various moments of use of obstetric ultrasound technology construct pregnant women, medical personnel and fetuses as consumers and objects of consumption. For instance, obstetric technology encourages pregnant women to envisage the fetus as a distinct person requiring particular practices of consumption as women change their eating habits, purchase products for the fetus, and choose various medical technologies to ensure the health of the fetus. Taylor thus demonstrates the ways in which “the fetus is commoditized ‘and’ personified, ‘produced’ as an object for exchange ‘and’ for consumption,” p. 410. These issues are also explored in Linda L. Layne, (ed.), Transformative Motherhood: On Giving and Getting in a Consumer Culture (New York: New York University Press, 1999).
30. Ibid., pp. 88-89.
31. Heritage House, p. 4.
32. Ibid., p. 21.
34. Heritage House, p. 43. Heritage House's sales strategy targeting CPC’s is typical of entrepreneurs in the anti-abortion movement. For instance, I have analyzed aspects of the company Sound Wave Images Inc. This company is dedicated to the proliferation of ultrasound images in order to prevent women from obtaining abortions and it directly orients its sales to CPCs. The company's founder, Shari Richard, an ultrasound technician, offers her services as a lecturer, provides ultrasound demonstrations, sells videos such as Ultrasound: A Window to the Womb, trains ultrasound technicians to work in CPCs, and even sells ultrasound machines.
For an analysis of one of Richard’s videos see Joanne Boucher, “Ultrasound: A Window to the Womb?: Obstetric Ultrasound and the Abortion Rights Debate,” *Journal of Medical Humanities* 25/1 (Spring 2004), pp. 7-19. The entrenchment of this trend is clear from a recent newspaper report concerning the development of so-called 4-D ultrasound technology which notes that a CPC in North Carolina has already purchased one of these new and expensive ($120,000 US) machines to offer ultrasound scans to “abortion vulnerable” women. Moreover, the article relates that private obstetricians in some US cities are advertising the 4-D scans under the slogan: “Come See Your Baby for $150.” See Carolyn Abraham, “First Peek at Fetus is no Long a Blur,” *The Globe and Mail* (13 August 2002), pp. A1, A7.


