‘A powerful, spiritual, win-win situation’: commercial authenticity in professional birth photography

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Abstract
Against a background of occlusion and medicalized portrayals, the emergent practice of birth photography allows women to see and to depict birth from their own perspective. Thus the delivery room, the digital camera, and the direct encounter between the artisan and her client enable exploring the possibility of alternative depictions in a neoliberal economy, and the significance of professionalism in a field dominated by expert amateurs. Drawing upon interviews with photographers and clients, our analysis highlights three tensions underlying birth photography as a documentary and entrepreneurial pursuit: the formulaic depiction of an extraordinary event; the exposure of an intimate experience; and the commercialization of the sacred. We find that in terms of content, birth photographs present restrained, conventional depictions, suitable for both the family album and the photographers’ social media portfolios. In terms of practice, although desired by their clients, birth photographers’ work is unstable and they must constantly invest in relational labor that balances intimacy and publicness, friending and advertising. We propose the notion of commercial authenticity to capture this contradictory amalgam of disciplined realism, edited documentation, and professional closeness that both clients and photographers expect, produce, and regard as appropriate in the context of artisanal photography.

Keywords
amateur photography, authenticity, professional birth photography, relational labor, women entrepreneurs

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This study focuses on professional birth photography as an emergent cultural practice. Research on cultural production has tended to presume media organizations, even when studying the individuals working in them. At the same time, research on women bloggers, micro-celebrities, and influencers has focused on the entrepreneurs and less so on their consumers. Birth photography, by contrast, is an artisanal relation: a one-on-one transaction between the professional photographer and the object of her digital camera, that is performed in a relative absence of iconographic traditions. Thus, birth photography allows us to explore how the interpersonal encounter between the professional photographer and her client on the one hand, and notions of self-branding and reputation economy on the other, shape the representation of an intimate life course event that seems to reside before and beyond the market.

Yet the very suggestions that birth photography is a representation of birth, or that birth lies outside the market, appear naïve. Birth images are produced and consumed within a neoliberal economy in which notions of authenticity and resistance have become blurred; as Banet-Weiser (2012) notes: ‘the authentic and commodity self are intertwined within brand culture, where authenticity is itself a brand’ (p. 14). Following this observation, we propose to define birth photography as a site of commercial authenticity, in which birth photographers and their clients co-produce a ‘win-win’ birth story that attends to – and compromises – the desires and the interests of both, being at once exceptional and standard, genuine and stylized, passionate and professional. Drawing upon interviews with nine birth photographers and nine women whose birth was documented, we study how birth photographers develop professional and aesthetic practices that distinguish them from others documenting the delivery room, and highlight the complicated ways in which authenticity is produced and sold in contemporary artisanal production.

Artisanal photography

Despite the ubiquity of cameras in mobile telephones, professional cameras are still being sold and professional photographers still make a living. The emergent niche expertise of birth photography allows us to explore how professional photographers distinguish themselves from amateurs, how they fare as artisans in a precarious labor market, and how the content they produce makes a unique contribution to the cultural imaginary.

In contrast to the wedding photograph, that ‘has been as much a part of the ceremony as the prescribed verbal formulas’ (Sontag, 1977: 8), birth is a life cycle event devoid of visual traditions and professional documenters (Shandler, 2009). When cameras did enter the delivery room, they were typically those of family members’ mobile phones and used for immediate information sharing (van Dijck, 2008). But gradually and hesitantly, with the normalization of ‘ubiquitous photography’ (Hand, 2012), professional photographers began documenting birth.

Life-course photographers may be defined as artisans (Frosh, 2020; Williams, 1980) in that their livelihood depends on direct sales to the market. Unlike others in the cultural industry, then, their livelihood has not been as impacted by the rise of the ‘self as business’ precariousness (Gershon, 2020; Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2010; Neff, 2012), with which they had been familiar. Rather, it was the integration of digital cameras and
software into smartphones (Gómez-Cruz and Meyer, 2012), that has allowed amateurs to
document events and share their images in real time, which has affected the livelihood of
life-course photographers: who needs a wedding photographer when every guest is
equipped with a camera?

Other professional photographers were negotiating the new technology as well.
Photojournalists with analog cameras were skilled at ‘capturing publishable frames
under pressure of uncertainty’ (Klein-Avraham and Reich, 2016: 440), but with the digi-
tal screen, this subtlety was no longer required. Solaroli shows how the players in this
field redrew the lines between professional-authorial and amateur-citizen photographers
by consecrating a group of photojournalists who have developed a more subjective, artis-
tic style for visually interpreting global events (Solaroli, 2016). His analysis suggests
that by fashioning a new aesthetic and through careful curatorial gatekeeping, photojour-
nalists have managed to prevent amateurs from short-circuiting the distinction of their
field (Bourdieu and Whiteside, 1996).

Professional climbing photographers manage this distinction by working harder
(Dumont, 2015). Since climbing magazines and commercial brands’ websites began
relaying on (or exploiting) amateurs as ‘co-creators’ of content, professional photogra-
phers have learned to offer hybrid services that encompass ‘photographing, video mak-
ing, reputation building, social networking and writing articles and stories’ (p. 34).
Nightlife photographers who promote venues and brands by documenting clubbing on
social networks (Carah, 2014) may find their distinction even harder to maintain, since
their work is inseparable from their identity and social life. But Carah’s interviews sug-
gest that the clubbers themselves do not regard professional photographers as expenda-
ble. To the contrary, their amateur peers value the photographers’ equipment (‘having a
camera, people just flock to you. It’s like you’re their new best friend’ p. 256) and appreci-
cate their work (‘people go crazy for the idea of being tagged by professional photogra-
phers’ p. 260). In this reputation economy, the ‘will to image’ (Hearn, 2008) seems to be
a will to image by a professional photographer.

At the same time, viewing the self as a business means that photographers are required
to discover and articulate their essential edge (Gershon, 2020). Workers in project-based
jobs are incessantly engaged in the unending project of self-branding (Banet-Weiser,
2012; Neff et al., 2005; Whitmer, 2019) in which they curate their online persona, strate-
gically manage social relationships, and acquire reputational capital (Hearn, 2008). As
reputation becomes instrumental in securing employment (Gandini, 2016), social media
provide tools for managing sociality, and transform interpersonal relationships into value
(Bucher and Helmond, 2018). A dominant form of this mediated sociality is relational
labor, the ‘ongoing, interactive, affective, material and cognitive work of communicating
with people over time to create structures that can support continued work’ (Baym, 2018:
19) – including the literacy invested in developing and maintaining connections and
boundaries.

In contrast to the ephemeral nature of emotional labor (Hochschild, 1983), relational
labor is an ongoing imperative. The musicians Baym (2015) studied must cultivate long-
term intimate relationships with their fans ‘all the while appearing to be socializing
rather than brazenly self-promoting’ (p. 19). In this economy of intimacy, relationships
can be genuine and alienating, empowering and oppressive – ‘all of these and more’
simultaneously (p. 20). Further, while these emotional and professional demands are prevalent in contemporary cultural production, they are not evenly distributed. Thus women internet entrepreneurs are caught in a ‘digital double bind’ (Duffy and Pruchniewska, 2017: 848) in which to be effective they must act feminine – for example, soft sell over hard pitch – but by acting feminine they are perceived as less successful entrepreneurs. By studying birth photographers, we explore how they navigate these conflicting professional demands; and how the particular combination of unmediated and online communication shapes their relational labor in the economy of intimacy.

**Birth imagery**

Birth ‘is rarely talked about or seen in the public sphere’, notes artist Carmen Winant in reference to her MoMA exhibition, *My Birth*¹ (Winant, 2018):

> Anything in this category – menstruation, abortion, breastfeeding, even rape – are generally considered less intellectually serious, less rigorous. Art history (and its standards) is a reflection of culture; if we live within societies that do not deem birth a worthy subject, we won’t see it in art either.

In this spirit, even Nativity iconography depicting the birth of Christ, though rich, typically foregrounds post-postpartum moments. Rare potential exceptions such as The Birth of Benjamin (e.g. Furini, 17th century), tend to depict after-the-fact scenes – the mother’s death, in this case.

Feminist critics relate this occlusion to the Judeo-Christian construction of birth as a private, morally uncomfortable event that is repulsive to civilized men, and deservedly painful to women (Tyler, 2011; Tyler and Baraitser, 2013). Until taken over by doctors (Michaels, 2018; Rutherford and Gallo-Cruz, 2008), labor, birth, and postpartum moments were invisible to men – and culture – as they were handled by midwives behind the scenes. Yet the medicalization of birth from the 18th century onward – namely, the introduction of men into the delivery process – did not render birth visible either. Both birthing women and midwives became passive participants in this event, which had formerly revolved around women’s action and knowhow. Doctors were now allowed inside the room, but the construction of birth as private, of pain as embarrassing, and of women’s perspectives as inferior and uninformed, served to perpetuate the cultural occlusion of birth. Wayne Miller’s photograph *Birth* (1946) captures this regime, foregrounding a masked and gloved male doctor holding a newborn by his leg while the baby, still with intact umbilical cord, recoils from the stark light. The mother’s covered legs and a midwife’s gloved hands form the background of this powerful scene, in which a magician-like doctor performs the miracle of birth.

Second wave feminist activists have enhanced the cultural visibility of labor and childbirth as means to empower women. Drawing from their personal and professional experiences, activists² sought to reclaim birth, publishing books and producing documentaries designed to challenge the reasoning behind the passivity imposed on women in birth decisions and practices (Michaels, 2018). Through interviews with midwives, doctors, and birthing women, these grassroots efforts outlined an alternative to the
discourse of precautionary obstetrics (Arms, 1975) by rendering birth visible – and presenting it from women’s perspectives.

These pioneering, sporadic initiatives are joined in recent years by a host of popular representations of birth, both in women’s blogs, social media, and YouTube accounts (Longhurst, 2009; Tiidenberg and Baym, 2017; Tyler and Baraitser, 2013) and in birthing advertising and reality programs (Morris and McInerney, 2010; Rutherford and Gallo-Cruz, 2008; VandeVusse and VandeVusse, 2008). Analyses of these images suggest that despite their unprecedented proliferation, they do not challenge the hegemony of the medical perspective on birth (De Benedictis et al., 2019). The representation adopts the medical point of view and evades the crowning moments (when the baby’s head becomes visible through the opening of the vagina) and delivery phases; it foregrounds white, able-bodied, heterosexual women lying on their backs in hospital beds; and it does not provide an alternative to the patriarchal division of labor in the delivery room. Sears and Godderis (2011) examine reality show images for indications of resistance, namely ‘did it appear that the woman meant to consciously exert her agency/power to influence the situation?’ (p. 188). Even with this minimal threshold, they confess that: ‘it was difficult to identify examples of women’s agency and engagement in the birthing process’ in their sample. With the exception of one woman who walked during labor and another who made loud roaring sounds (hence the title of their paper, ‘Roar like a tiger on TV’), birthing women were depicted as ‘inactive and passive individuals’ (p. 190).

Collections of professional birth photography provide a more diverse representation. The International Association of Professional Birth Photographers’ 2019 competition winner is the black and white photo Our rainbow baby is finally here by Belle Verdiglione. It features a water birth in which the mother, facing the camera and crying inside a birth pool, is embracing her newborn who is still connected to her; while her spouse, toddler, and another woman are stooping to hug her from outside the pool. Of the 376 competition entries, 85 (22.6%) depict water births; 129 (34%) document home births; and 96 (25.5%) focus on the delivery process. These photos seem to present an alternative not only the traditional occlusion of birth but to the medicalized, postpartum predilections of its more recent representations as well. By the very act of hiring a birth photographer, the photographed birthing women ‘exerted agency/power’ that may qualify as resistance. Birth photography may thus be contrasted with birth reality programs, which are located in – and promote – hospitals: it allows women to see birth and learn about it; to share this personally significant event in public; and to document birth and present it from their own perspective.

However, these images are produced and consumed within a neoliberal market economy in which such notions of resistance – and compliance – appear naïve. Analyses of women’s engagement with consumer activism campaigns (e.g. Dove’s ‘Real Beauty’) and online self-disclosure of ‘lifecasters’ and ‘microcelebrities’ invite us to critically consider the nexus of consumption, authenticity, and empowerment, emphasizing ambivalence, and contradiction instead of hypocrisy or cooptation (Banet-Weiser, 2012: 48; see also Barak-Brandes and Lachover, 2016; Marwick, 2015; Senft, 2008). Thus, we propose that rather than medicalized as opposed to natural, and rather than passive as opposed to resistant, birth photography is a site of what we regard as commercial authenticity, in which birthing women and birth photographers co-produce a birth story that is
at once liberating and cynical. This hybrid notion of creativity and capitalism, of affect and profit, notes Banet-Weiser, ‘requires that we understand what exactly is being compromised, and what consumers gain as well as lose through such transactions’ (p. 49). In what follows we draw on this understanding to explore how these tensions find expression in birth photography practices and in negotiations over birth images’ content and display.

The study

During the years 2016–2020, we conducted interviews with nine birth photographers and nine clients whose birth has been documented by a professional photographer (one of the photographers had her own births professionally photographed). The interviewees were women in their mid-30s to late 40s who all gave birth in hospitals. We contacted the photographers through their websites and recruited the clients through Facebook posts in relevant groups. The interviews, lasting between 90 and 120 minutes, were conducted in Hebrew and took place in the interviewees’ homes (the last six photographers were interviewed via Zoom during the pandemic). We transcribed the interviews (using pseudonyms and additional de-identification procedures) and through multiple re-readings (Potter and Wetherell, 1987), inductively identified three tensions in the artisanal photographer-client encounter.

We asked the photographers about their professional development as individuals and in relation to the emergent practice of birth photography; the practical, aesthetic, and ethical aspects of birth photography; and their relationship with their clients. Throughout the interviews, the photographers shared related materials such as online and print albums, videos they had created for clients, their website and Facebook page, promotional materials, articles they had appeared in, and photographer contracts.

We asked the clients about their relationships with the photographers, the reasons behind documenting the birth, the meaning of having a professional camera present in the delivery room, and their birth photo-sharing practices. During the interviews, the clients shared related materials such as their printed and digital birth photography albums (and sometimes family and newborn photographs as well), Facebook profiles, and music videos featuring still images that the photographer curated. Four clients were unable to share their photo albums with us despite their attempts to do so (the USB did not work, they forgot the password, or they could not locate the images on the computer). While arguably an interview failure, the good rapport leads us to interpret this frustration as a comment on the ironies of using technology to support human memory (Garde-Hansen, 2009).

Birth photography aesthetics and practices

The interviews pointed to three tensions that underlie the emergence of birth photography as an act of reclaiming and as an entrepreneurial pursuit. First, as a narrative form, whereas birth is experienced as an extraordinary event, its depiction is formulaic and conventionalized. Second, as a digital object, whereas birth is intimate and ephemeral, photography involves exposure and leaves a permanent trace. Lastly, as work, birth
photography is both a profession and a vocation, a passion that requires business skills. In what follows we analyze how the photographers and their clients negotiate these core tensions – and others that derive from them – before, throughout, and following their encounter in the delivery room.

**Extraordinary birth, conventional depiction:** Through the very act of documenting it, birth is constructed as extraordinary, a once in a lifetime experience of self-sufficiency and worth. The uniqueness of birth is derived from its reification as a moment of creation: ‘You are creating life, it’s godly, it’s a pure moment of godliness, these seconds of forming into life’ (Miriam, photographer). Birth is special also in more mundane terms, being the first or the last or the healing one, or a well-rehearsed opportunity to excel, as Orit, a client, explains: ‘I know how I am with births. I know I could perform a natural birth, that I am capable. . . and I really wanted to see what it looks like from the other side’. However, despite the rarity and significance of birth, the interviewees felt they lost its trace: ‘You don’t remember it. You remember it like a dream, because it is chaos and madness, and you’re a hormone explosion. . . it’s the most amazing moment in the entire world, and you don’t remember it’ (Michaela, client). It is birth photographers’ task, therefore, to correct the memory failure, to document birth, and to provide the desired perspective on this transformative event.

This sense of uniqueness is undermined by the prevalence of birth. Israel has the highest fertility rate in the OECD, and all of our interviewees have already given birth at least once. Thus, the photographers interweave awe and cliché. They relate to each birth as a story narrated specifically for those parents: ‘This client was a dancer so it was important for me to include a photo of them dancing salsa’ (Dafna). Similarly, Miriam explains that she interweaves her ‘own language’ and ‘what the client wants’: ‘When I talk to the client I say, let’s do something special. . . so it would be something that’s yours, that won’t look like everybody else’s pregnancy photos, that’s personal’. Miriam prefers personal gestures to the physiological process: ‘shooting the handholding, the umbilical cutting, laying the baby on the mother for the first time. . . the more intimate moments, grandma’s excitement, these things’. The clients embrace this preference when they interpret visual clichés as emblems of lost moments – for instance, Dina discusses a photo of her hand clutching the mattress as a memento of her labor, and Rina interprets her spouse’s sandwich as testament to his care and involvement: ‘you can see that Gil was eating. Gil released his stress by eating [a sandwich from] Aroma [café]. You can really see all the love and the stress and the transformation and the pressure. . . This is the first time that I saw what was happening around me and Gil’s sandwich, and now we [look at the pictures and] laugh because, like, “what kind of a husband eats a sandwich while his wife’s in labor?”’

Like other life-course ritual photographers (Bezner, 1996), birth photographers ‘routinize the unexpected’ (Tuchman, 1973) by shaping the unique stories through conventional tropes. Some of the photographers we interviewed participated in a birth photography workshop, and many had told us they follow international birth photographers on social media. They are thus familiar with relevant narrative and structural conventions – for instance, Dafna insists on continuity, as she explains: ‘I can’t shoot someone lying in bed and then standing up without [showing] the transition, that she got out of bed; or if the father changes his shirt I need to shoot him changing so that it is clear
why he’s suddenly wearing a red shirt’. Similarly, Ariel insists on shooting the epidural since the client becomes static and relaxed, and without it the sequence ‘makes no sense’. Narratively, the conventions include detailed checklists of ‘musts’—for instance: ‘I shoot the name of the hospital, the ward, the room, the clock, the form if possible. . . the folded clothes, the blanket that covers the baby. . . ’ (Hila). Looking back, Dafna laughs at her inexperienced self, capturing the ‘musts’ along the way to the delivery room:

It’s important to have a photograph of the sign of the delivery room, which is ‘a must’, and the hour of birth which is ‘a must’, and the scale [showing the baby’s weight] which is also ‘a must’, and there’s always that scene with the mother and grandmother with the baby. Other than that, it’s documenting what was really there, but I also already know the story in advance. So there are these ‘musts’ and then there are things that depend on the specific birth. . . There are also things that you can shoot afterwards, like things that I didn’t manage to shoot while I was there but you can get away with that. . . As long as there is a birth photo in the end. Today I already have a file with photos of the exterior of the building and the signs on the way there and they are all filed under each hospital. I also have a clock that I always use [to mark the time of birth].

Dafna’s account distinguishes the ‘musts’ from the ‘things that depend on the specific birth’; knowing ‘the story in advance’ from ‘what was really there’; and the things she can shoot afterward or has already filed on her computer from those she must capture ‘while there’. These distinctions underscore the construction of birth as at once exceptional and routine: ‘as long as there is a birth photo in the end’, the place and time of shooting matter only inasmuch as they help create a satisfying and plausible background. Both the photographers and the clients accept the imperative to produce the extraordinary-conventional birth photo; thus Ruth, whose baby was already at the ward when her mother and brother arrived, ‘rolled the blanket as though [baby] Boaz was there, and the photographer took the picture’.

Intimate birth, public exposure: Photography in the delivery room forces both clients and photographers to imagine their audiences. The bed and the bodily exposure are not a part of respectable iconography and the interviewees discuss the reluctance of partners (‘that his wife would be seen in bed’, Miriam, photographer) and family members (‘even my sisters’, Orit, client) to accommodate strangers, let alone photographers, in the delivery room. The camera indeed makes a difference, and the clients make sure they are camera-ready in more ways than one: Ruth wore makeup to her previous births but this time she was also preoccupied with what she was going to wear; and Rina decided to go to the hospital as late as possible so she could blow-dry her hair ‘as though I was going to a photo session’. More striking is Dina’s self-consciousness about her display of pain: dismayed at seeing that she ‘made weird faces’ in pictures from her first delivery, ‘during the second birth, while I was pushing, I was like “I have to stop making these ugly faces”’. Compromising the presumed intimacy of birth, then, the camera disciplined the clients’ looks and behavior.

The nature of this compromise is shaped by the imagined audience. Both photographers and clients insist that the photos are intended for the mother or the parents. At the same time, the clients print newborn albums, hang enlarged photos in their homes, and
share pictures on Facebook. We suggest that what counts as ‘intimate’ involves two considerations: The point of view criterion asks whether the camera adopts the client’s perspective and validates her memory – ‘so that he would be seen in the same way that I saw him’ (Dina, client); or whether the camera is positioned in an angle that reveals to the client what she cannot see for herself (in fact adopting the staff’s POV). For instance, while Orit’s photographer was interested in modest birth pictures that she could repurpose as self-promotion in conservative groups, Orit wanted to see the unspeakable: ‘she doesn’t care so much about the birth itself but the initial attachment to the baby, she calls it “creation”. . . she was less interested in the moment of birth. I, on the other hand, was very interested in the birth itself. Like, the first pictures with him are super moving, but I wanted for myself, to see the. . . the thing’. Rina’s exchange with her photographer echoes this tension:

She told me, ‘do you want me to put a camera in front of’ – choose a word you are comfortable with, I call it Manush [Hebrew slang for vagina] – so she said, ‘do you want me to place a camera here, where it happens?’ It took me a second and I said: ‘yes, yes!’ Why should everyone be able to see it but me? I also want to see it! She said, ‘are you aware that it will be. . .’ I said, ‘fine’. So she said, ‘just don’t sit with your husband afterwards and show him. . .’ I said ‘fine, leave the National Geographic to me’.

By contrast, Ariel (photographer) is reluctant to adopt this point of view: ‘I find it strange, to see a head of a child coming out of you! Something about that angle, with the legs wide open, I can’t look at it, it is strange, it doesn’t make sense, it’s disgusting. Not disgusting, I don’t know, I never thought about it. But that’s why I never shoot from this angle’. Together, however, these excerpts suggest that photographs from the staff’s POV are considered too intimate to be exposed. When Rina shared to Facebook a digital folder that her photographer deemed ‘private’, she was soon reprimanded: ‘it was not well received and I took some off after my mom and some other “nice” people decided to “correct” me’.

More subtle, the time-place measure of intimacy indicates how close the photos are, temporally and spatially, to the crowning. The closer they are, the more sensitive – but at the same time generic – they become for the purpose of publication. Throughout the interviews, the photographers described how they prepare a folder for their clients with pictures which ‘you don’t want the world to see. Of the intimate parts’ (Dafna, photographer). Paradoxically these photographs, which do not reveal the identity of the client, can be used for promoting the commercial interests and artistic aspirations of the photographer, as Sarah contemplates: ‘maybe you won’t send the photo of the incision to the client, you’ll keep it to yourself, maybe one day you’ll have an exhibition and you would be able to do something with it. . .’

Despite this sensitivity to the framing and the angles of the photographs, both the photographers and their clients regard them as true witnesses of what takes place in the delivery room. Thus Rina explains: ‘you can see the process, the labor, what Gil did. Did Ella come out because I pushed? Because someone else assisted her?. . . the pictures are a proof of what happened there. . . the first time that I actually saw how she came out. It was really amazing’. The photographers emphatically echo this view: ‘this
is real, totally documentary. This is not studio photography, you have no control, you
need to use what’s available at the set and make the best out of it’ (Dafna). The key word
is ‘true’: no manipulations, no directing, taking a step back and documenting like ‘a fly
on the wall’.

In this spirit, photographers insist that they do not edit the photographs; for instance,
according to Dafna: ‘I show what was there, and I don’t use Photoshop’. But it seems that
both the photographers and the clients tolerate – or expect – some measure of editing and
do not regard it as violation of the photograph’s integrity. This allows Dafna to qualify:
‘if there is a lot of blood when the head comes out, I just make the picture black-and-
white. So that it looks more aesthetic. I think about the child’. B&W is a common prac-
tice that appears to lie beyond ‘editing’, as in Orly’s comments on her photographer: ‘she
doesn’t use Photoshop. For example, during my second birth I wore colorful socks so
many of the pictures were black and white but just the socks she left in color’. Modesty
plays a similar role, pushing the photographers both to direct and edit:

I arrived [late, to the client’s car] and shot the first breastfeeding session but her tits were all
showing. She nursed the baby only on one side so I covered her, I told her, ‘is seeing the second
tit really necessary?’ It’s not necessary. . . I remember she pulled her dress down so I used
Photoshop to add some dress. . . so that it would be more pleasant to look at later. (Ariel)

The photographers and their clients strive for photos that are acceptable to middle
class sensibilities, and do not regard filtering and cropping as impinging on the veracity
of the documentation; as Ruth reflects on the crowning photo: ‘yes, it is blurred. I don’t
know how it would look in color. I didn’t ask to see it in color. But it is not a picture that
is, say, repugnant. . . it is a picture that I can imagine hanging in some gallery: there is a
beautiful moment of a baby coming out. And I think she captured it in a very, very aes-
thetıc manner’.

Being passionate, being professional: Birth photographers struggle to secure their
place in the delivery room. Satisfying what is deemed a caprice, they are the first to be
ousted in and between emergencies, constantly requiring their own family’s cooperation
in the face of unpredictable schedules – ‘we wanted to go to the beach but I told Arik,
“impossible, what if they suddenly call?”’ (Ariel); confronting intractable challenges –
rain, navigation, traffic, parking, culminating in ‘don’t bother, she already gave birth,
you don’t need to come’ (Limor); and minimizing and apologizing for their presence
near their clients – ‘usually in vacuum deliveries they get everyone out of the room. I was
sitting in the corner and the doctor looks at me, sees I am harmless, and leaves me in the
room’ (Sarah). Thus, the service they provide – although desired by the clients – rever-
berates and accentuates their inferiority in the labor market (Duffy and Pruchniewska,
2017): a superfluous luxury, compliant with medical priorities and hierarchies, in unsta-
ble freelance work conditions.

It is through this lens that we can understand the ‘amazing canvas of the 25 midwives
delivering a baby’, which Dafna created and is now hanging in the hospital ward – a
token of her appreciation, as well as an assertion of her own contribution to the joint
effort. Dafna explains:
Once, no one would have dared to shoot these things and today they have a picture of what they do, their facial expressions, it is the most amazing thing there is. I took all of the midwives’ [social media] profile pictures in [hospital name]. They see me and ask, ‘Dafna, take my picture’. And I love doing this and sending them the pictures. I love the crews and they know I don’t disturb them and there’s trust between us.

The fact that five of the nine clients we interviewed were photographed free of charge in order to establish their aspiring photographers’ portfolios is another indication of birth photographer’s precarious position. As Gandini (2016) notes, self-employed entrepreneurs have come to regard unpaid labor not (only) as an inevitable element of the freelance scene but also as a positive economic investment with expected returns. Nonetheless, even those photographers who use a legal contract are reluctant to have their clients formalize the barter, as Sarah explains: ‘people are intimidated by a contract with a clause in which they agree that I use their pictures. I would be anxious too, if I were being photographed. That’s why I took that clause out of my contracts. Though I do always-always-always ask, perhaps not specifically, if she would be comfortable being part of my portfolio’. And so, with the notable exception of one photographer who became a permanent hospital employee and shoots about three births a month, none of the photographers we interviewed makes a living of birth photography, having photographed 2–10 births (avg. 6.5), each, to date.

The photographers manage this predicament by insisting that birth photography is a vocation more than it is a profession. They relate their professional choice to a desire to return to the delivery room – some, after caesarian sections, see birth photography as an opportunity to experience and even metaphorically ‘give’ birth. Ronit felt that when she gave birth to her son ‘something was missing, emotionally’ and Limor, a mother of four, wondered whether she was attracted to the delivery room because her biological parents had left her in the hospital after she was born. The photographers, then, describe emotional and even physical ties to their clients and identify with them. Dafna remembers that during the first birth she shot, she was crying and felt ecstasy. To substantiate the ‘total synchronicity’ with her client, Sarah refers to a session that took place while she was still nursing her own child, from which she came out ‘with a shirt wet with milk. . . as though my body reacted in a hormonal way to her experience. You can never explain why a woman actually feels her womb contracting in someone else’s birth, not yours’. Such surrogate accounts rationalize the photographers’ commitment to a demanding, low-paying profession by emphasizing its emotional rewards.

On a social level, the photographers feel that they provide their clients with more than just pictures; they talk about comradery and companionship, as Ayala explains: ‘I enjoy being there with her, caressing her and helping her, everything you can from woman to woman. I know what she needs, I was there. . . it’s a sisterhood’. The photographers typically meet their clients before the due date in order to get to know them, to sign a contract, for a pregnancy photo session, or because they already shot their previous births. As such, much like the wedding photographer (Ribak and Fridman-Naot, 2017), the birth photographer also serves her clients as an experienced mediator who is familiar with the hospital’s staff and routines, and who is, as Orit comments, ‘on my side’.
Lastly, the photographers see their work as a contribution to a greater endeavor to document and to create an aesthetic representation of birth. This involves simple visibility, as Sarah observes: ‘the representation of women is lacking. There are parts of birth that are not . . . sexy . . . but this is what birth is, and it’s alright. And this memory is also important and it is probably more important than shooting the [Wailing] Wall or the Bar Mitzvah’. But photographers’ interest in enhancing the visibility of birth seems deliberate and calculated, intertwining exposure and occlusion, as Dafna implies: ‘I have to be very intelligent about how I shoot the mother because if she saw what she’s doing over there, she might not want to do this again. So in many ways there is also a future mission here’ – to make sure women continue to reproduce.

The clients’ partners cannot be expected to demonstrate such sophistication and expertise. The interviews conjure up a wide gap between the practical, emotional, and ideological support that professional birth photographers provide, and the amateur photographers in the room, as this exchange with Ayala illustrates:

Int.: Are there fathers who shoot with the smartphone?
Ayala: Yes, they don’t always totally rely on me.
Int.: And is there tension . . .?
Ayala: Naaa, I shoot him shooting. I even bring for him – I carry a video camera in my bag so that he’ll have something to shoot with. I tell him, ‘come, make a video’.
Int.: And you use the pictures he takes with his smartphone?
Ayala: No, it’s out of the . . . it’s not the same quality.

The photographers establish their professional authority by positioning themselves as the meta-documenters of the event. In this role, they manage to show sensitivity to family members who want to be involved, and at the same time frame the amateurs’ images as an inferior layman partial contribution to the professional documentation produced by the birth photographer.

**Conclusion: commercial authenticity**

The study of birth photography allowed us to explore the intersection of content and practice in cultural production. Specifically, we wanted to learn about the images that are produced when women hire women to document their birth; and about this emergent artisanal encounter between producers and consumers, which is both enabled and threatened by the ubiquity of cameras and camera users. Drawing on interviews we conducted, our analysis suggests that birth photographers provide their clients with a personally meaningful – though conventional – birth story, an aesthetic – or aestheticized – memory object, and an experienced – albeit temporary – intimacy. We propose the notion of *commercial authenticity* to capture this contradictory amalgam of disciplined realism, edited documentation, and professional friendship that both the clients and the photographers expect, produce, and regard as appropriate in the context of birth photography.

In terms of content, the interviews shed light on the ways in which birth photographers narrate a birth story – how they intertwine awe and cliché, raw and stylized depictions that fit both their clients’ family albums and their own artisanal practices and aspirations. Their cameras satisfy the clients but discipline them on several levels; the photographers are
prevented from and willingly avoid shooting certain procedures from certain angles, they digitally retouch and filter photographs they consider potentially offensive, and they invite self-censoring by designating some of the photographs they shoot as ‘private’, as opposed to the ‘public’ file they provide. And the clients comply – they are aware of the camera’s presence and look and behave as expected. Thus, it seems that commercial birth photography does not offer a radical view of the delivery room or a technological enhancement of the client’s eyes (were we to expect this of cameras, see Haraway, 1988). Instead, the photographers and their clients are involved in a commercial, mutually-restraining negotiation over memory, exposure, and identity in which they perform the hyper, delivery room version of neoliberal feminism (Banet-Weiser et al., 2020).

Discussing the conventionality of commercial (and family) photography, Frosh (2020) explains that generic images adopt the industrial logic of standardization and formula, which threaten ‘the very specificity (and sanctity) of photography as a medium’ (p. 265). Paradoxically, it is the erasure of specificity which allows birth photographers (and their clients!) to regard the photographs as artistic and emblematic, while the particular and identifiable relegates them to the family album. To illustrate: On his birthday, photographer Wayne Miller photographed his obstetrician-gynecologist father delivering his grandson, David, 5 days after the grandfather failed to induce labor so that the birth would coincide with his own birthday; but the photograph reduces these Oedipal minutiae into the abstraction that was presented in the *Family of Man* exhibition (1955) and included in the Voyagers’ interstellar messages as an icon of birth (Edwards, 2009). More prosaically, by applying techniques of photography, editing, and selection, birth photographers produce the iconicity and abstract authenticity which allow them to repurpose their clients’ intimate birth photographs as their social media promotional portfolio.

In terms of practice, the interviews suggest that birth photographers suffer from the precariousness of artisans in general (Frosh, 2020), and women entrepreneurs in particular (Duffy and Pruchniewska, 2017). Birth photographers are under constant pressure to excuse and justify their profession both as a practice that requires investment (equipment, etc.) and as a production of a valuable object. Insofar as capturing the ephemerality of birth is seen as a privileged caprice, birth photographers depend on the income, open mindedness, and curiosity of their own family and those of their clients; and they must constantly engage in relational labor and maintain an online presence that balances intimacy and publicness, friending and advertising. These challenges may be met through cost, as detailed in the post ‘why is birth photography so expensive’, featured on birth-photographers.com. But the discourse of commercial authenticity allows the photographers we interviewed to construct birth photography as an artisanal commodity and as a site of an invaluable human bond, a win-win spiritual experience located both within and beyond the market, as these words of Sarah suggest:

I sometimes do pro-bono jobs, if there is someone I believe would make amazing photos and I want to shoot her, because it is important for me. So I can offer ahead of time to shoot, for me. Or there are births that I want to be a part of. If there is a midwife who is very strong, very interesting, very spiritual, that it would be an experience... that would be interesting to document or look at or participate in, and then it’s a kind of a win-win situation, they get photos and I had the opportunity to be in this kind of a thing.
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Notes

1. https://www.moma.org/collection/works/222741; My Birth is the title of a Frida Kahlo 1932 painting. See also Heji Shin, Baby series: ‘the procedure of birth. . . is very excluded from public life, from social life, even in general, just out of the minds of people’. Whitney Museum of American Art 2019 Biennial https://whitney.org/exhibitions/2019-Biennial?section=70#exhibition-artworks.
2. For example, Lang (1972), Arms (1975), Gaskin (1975).
3. http://birthphotographyimagecompetition.com/.
4. Whereas 149 (39.6%) of the competition entries were listed as ‘delivery’ photos, the formal category includes postpartum scenes as well. The 96 photos counted here only depict babies who are visible but are not completely out yet (including 27 C-sections, four crowning close-ups, and four breech births). Competition entries in 2018 explored similar themes; see: http://birthphotographyimagecompetition.com/2018-iapbp-image-competition/ and https://www.birthbecomesher.com/blog/winners-of-the-2018-bbh-birth-photography-contest.
5. https://data.oecd.org/pop/fertility-rates.htm, 3.1 child/woman in 2018 (compare with 1.7 in the UK and US and 1.6 OECD average).
6. https://birthphotographers.com/why-is-birth-photography-so-expensive/.

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