

Watching the results of choice

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I decided to include images of aborted fetuses in my film because, however shocking, repulsive and confrontational they are, they represent the reality. [UK film maker Julia Black.]

[Black's documentary is] voyeurism at its worst ... If you're sitting back in your lounge room, what is the need to see a foetus being sucked out of a uterus?

[Australian Medical Association president, Bill Glasson.]

Is it right that something apparently too awful to be shown on television should be legal?

[NSW Right to Life spokeswoman, Catherine Cotton]

My baby had fingernails. ['Ginger', upon seeing a picture of a foetus at the age hers was when aborted.]

The decision by the ABC to screen a controversial documentary, *My Foetus*, on August 8 has met with a barrage of opinion, and has unveiled a surprising shift in feminist thinking about abortion.

Documentary film-maker Julia Black, while still pro-choice in her stance on the debate, traces the change in her thinking about the abortion of late-term fetuses. The documentary shows 3-D ultrasound images of fetuses in wombs at nine, twelve, eighteen and twenty-three weeks, sucking their thumbs, jumping, and tumbling. It also shows the abortion of a four-week foetus taking place, foetal remains being rinsed through a sieve, and pictures of ten, eleven and twenty-one week-old aborted fetuses. The images in the documentary make it impossible to avoid the truth about these deliberate baby-killings.

Founding members of the Women's Electoral Lobby Eva Cox and Wendy McCarthy said that the abortion debate has moved on in the past thirty years. Hence in response, these pro-choice feminists have called for a reappraisal of late-term abortions. Citing medical advances that allow doctors to keep babies alive at younger ages, Cox and McCarthy think there is reason to revisit the abortion debate.

(Australian States vary in their late term abortion legislation and practise. Northern Territory law permits abortion up to 14 weeks (although in at least one case, abortion was permitted at 22 weeks); and South Australian law focuses on gestation and restricts abortion beyond 22-28 weeks. No other state or territory has laws which restrict abortion on the basis of gestational age of the baby. There appears to be less than 100 abortions per year at 20 weeks or more, though accurate statistics are not available.)

In this briefing, we will consider two facets of these developments. Firstly, should the documentary be shown? What might be the effects of showing it? Secondly, how might we respond to this interesting feminist call for a reappraisal of abortion?

The documentary. Up to 100,000 abortions occur per-annum in Australia, but this common procedure has not yet been depicted on screen. In contrast, heart transplant surgery (for example) is equally bloody and far less common, yet has often been screened. Why this disparity? It is easy to suspect that we haven't seen abortions for the same reason that a developing baby is called a 'foetus', a 'product of conception', and even 'the embryonic implant'. These terms are a system of euphemisms designed to distance us from reality. Likewise, not *watching* encourages no *thinking*; but as with images of prisoners at Abu Ghraib (Social Issues briefing #9), seeing something usually forces us to do business with it. It is intriguing to notice Dr Bill Glasson's revulsion at the thought of such Sunday night viewing. He is in a better position than most to know what we will see. Seeing something forces us to think about it differently.

Babies look like babies very early in their development, and on viewing the deliberate dismemberment of one, Britain's Daily Telegraph journalist Lauren Booth—a 'pro-choicer' who has also had an abortion—recoiled. "My hand flew to my mouth in shock. I swallowed. I didn't want to say it, but the word 'murder' came to my lips." But Ginger's shock (above) suggests that prior to an abortion, many women are under the impression that only an unidentifiable blob of tissue is being dealt with.

To show, then, what actually happens, is at least a moment of honesty. But moments of honesty can go one of two ways. As we have noted, one response is the very welcome call for a reappraisal of abortion. But equally, to see an abortion up close may simply enable people to swallow their feelings and think up new arguments as to why the deliberate dismemberment of a developing baby is not murder. After all, the many doctors who regularly perform the procedure have already trodden this road. In biblical terms, our ‘conscience’ is a very easy thing to ‘sear’ [cf. 1 Tim. 4:2].

The screening should go ahead, then, as an honest portrayal of what this society does. But we should not overestimate the effect of the documentary in changing people’s attitudes. Such change will rely heavily on the arguments we then make.

Responding. What should we make of the feminist call for a reappraisal? The Christian community’s response is often ‘We’ve been condemning this Bad Thing for years. Why didn’t you listen!?’ But such a response can be unkind and self-righteous. Rather than affirming the value of a feminist rethink, we can sound as if we only want to show off how wise and correct we’ve always been. We risk the resentful cry of ‘I told you so’.

We might also fail to understand what is actually being said. Access to abortion itself remains non-negotiable for feminist thinkers. The current debate mainly surrounds the propriety of late-term abortions. We are still playing on the same field; only the goalposts have moved. Science and technology is still being used to determine what is ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ in this situation. ‘Truth’, as defined by the dictates of medicine or science, still only pivots on the technical possibility of keeping alive, say, a nineteen- or twenty-week foetus. But to make a moral judgment only on the basis of a medical advance, misses a deeper question. Why has our culture, even with its 3D-ultrasound, lost King David’s awareness that God creates our inmost being, and knits us together in our mother’s womb? [Psalm 139:13]

Unlike King David, we now think ‘uncontrolled’ fertility is a curse. The basic presumption of the pro-choice position is that “if we can’t control our fertility, we can’t control any other aspect of our lives,” as Sarah Maddison (UNSW academic and spokeswoman for the Women’s Electoral Lobby) puts it. Fertility control, she says, is “the most fundamental aspect of women’s equality and freedom”. *Control* is offered here as the path to freedom and equality. Feminists value control because so many women have been subject to horrible conditions not of their own making, in which childbirth and childrearing seem impossible and unbearable. (Now, sadly, to have a less-than-ideal baby is increasingly considered ‘unbearable’, so the number of abortions rises, and abortion is used as a form of eugenics, to control the disabled population.)

In discussions with feminism, it can of course be terribly difficult to mention the Father God of the Bible. Even so, Christian theology longs to point women to God’s deep desire for societies where pregnancy may always be rejoiced in as an unmixed blessing. God’s most lethal wrath is in store for tyrannical men who destroy motherhood and developing little ones [e.g. Amos 1:13-14]. In a most poignant outburst on the way to his cross, Jesus exclaims:

Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me; weep for yourselves and for your children. For the time will come when you will say, ‘Blessed are the barren women, the wombs that never bore and the breasts that never nursed!’ Then ‘they will say to the mountains, “Fall on us!” and to the hills, “Cover us!”’ For if men do these things when the tree is green, what will happen when it is dry?
[Lk 23:28-31]

In other words, the same world that can kill the Christ, makes infertility seem necessary and good. Only in such a world does ‘fertility control’ turn into something good.

What might it be like for women and their babies if communities were full of committed, faithful, loving men; and neighbours who support and care for young people with disabilities; with economic conditions where no child need starve or want for clothing; and where motherhood is honoured and considered to be easily as impressive as any other career? Perhaps our response to feminists might look something like this:

“Thank you for your willingness to think again about abortion. We realise your view remains

