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... And Baby Makes Reality TV



MTV

Leah and her ex-boyfriend Corey with their twins in "Teen Mom 2" on MTV. The show is one of many dispensing cautionary tales. More Photos »

By ALESSANDRA STANLEY
Published: January 21, 2011

DEATH is scary, but it's not nearly as frightening as birth.

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Motherhood, at least the way it is depicted on cable networks like MTV, TLC and even FitTV, is a menacing, grotesque fate that is mostly ill-timed. Procreation comes either way too soon, ruining the prom and summer beach plans of teenage girls on MTV shows like "16 and Pregnant" or "Teen Mom 2," or way too late. Women who postpone pregnancy often pay a price on these shows with childlessness or costly, emotionally fraught procedures like in vitro fertilization or surrogacy.

And then comes the still more alarming prospect of multiple births, including the six 2-year-olds racing across their parents' living room on the WeTV reality show "Raising Sextuplets." Or infanticide. "I was so in the mindset to say O.K., kill the baby, it will get rid of the

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Joshua Prezant/WeTV
Jenny and Bryan Masche and family in "Raising Sextuplets" on WeTV. [More Photos](#) »

problem," a mother who fantasized about dropping her newborn from the roof said on "Postpartum Nightmares," on FitTV. (The channel will be renamed Discovery Fit & Health in February, but much of the programming will still be spooky.)

Even the Style network has cautionary tales: The first season of "Giuliana & Bill" began as a cheery reality show about celebrity newlyweds but turned into a harrowing docu-soap opera about miscarriage after in vitro fertilization.

Horror makes for easy entertainment, of course, so it's hardly surprising that the maternity ward would be milked for bloodcurdling thrills in the way of weddings ("Bridezillas" and "The Best of Bridezillas 2"), weather ("Storm Stories") or travel ("Locked Up Abroad").

But the growing number and lasting appeal of reality shows about fertility and babies reflect a particularly contemporary obsession. Focusing on the darker side of giving birth might seem at odds with the giddy cult of motherhood in popular culture. Tales of conception — especially with the help of medical intervention, surrogates or adoption — fills blogs; fashion magazines; reality shows like the latest Gosselin family series, "Kate Plus Eight"; and daytime talk shows like "The Talk," in which the conversation never veers far from the nursery.

Red-carpet reporters and tabloids stalk celebrity breeding as much as divorce or career misconduct; a "bump" in Us Weekly or on [TMZ](#) refers to a pregnant starlet's belly, not a professional roadblock. At awards shows like the Golden Globes the most common question to actresses after "Who are you wearing?" is "When are you expecting?" (And sometimes "Who's the daddy?")

But beneath all those balloons, baby showers and HappyBaby organic food pouches lies a lurking dread, the anxiety that comes with cheating biological destiny.

[Mary Shelley's](#) 19th-century novel "Frankenstein" is often seen as a metaphor for a woman's fear of childbirth and motherhood. Cable television cuts through the metaphor and channels deeper fears about tampering with nature.

Multiple pregnancies, along with cosmetic surgery, are arguably among the most visible — and startling — displays of scientific daring, be it artificially enhanced mothers like the 70-year-old Indian woman who in 2008 had twins after in vitro fertilization, or the drastic surgical makeover that turned Heidi Montag of "The Hills" into a horror movie of her own making — "The Hills Have Eyelifts."

Modern medicine has achieved more remarkable advances, but procedures like hip replacements or [Dick Cheney's](#) mechanical heart pump aren't as visible. There's a pretty direct line in many people's minds between double and triple strollers clogging the sidewalks of Park Slope, Brooklyn, and the Octomom.

Viewers who naïvely thought that baby stories would provide a cuddly cushion of relief in between fright fests like "Hoarders" or "Intervention" are in for a shock. On cable any show with the word "baby" or "pregnant" in the title should probably carry a warning. Real births and re-enactments of labors gone awry on "Born on a Bad Day," or the "I'm Pregnant and ..." series (with episodes actually titled "I'm Pregnant and ... a Hoarder" or "I'm Pregnant and ... May Be Having a Dwarf") are no less disturbing than any of the gruesome unsolved murders or incurable diseases that crowd the cable schedule.

Fear works. It's hard not to believe in a correlation between the recent decline in teenage pregnancies — a record low according to studies by the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#) — and the rise in ratings for reality shows about pregnant teenagers, which are among MTV's most popular programs. The premiere of "Teen Mom 2" this month

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drew 3.6 million viewers. The 90 students who are pregnant or new mothers at Frayser High School in Memphis and not in a reality show are probably not watching enough television. No pamphlet or public service ad is more likely to encourage birth control than these MTV tableaux of maternal boredom, fatigue and loneliness.

Anyone would think twice about a high school pregnancy after watching Kailyn's face in "Teen Mom 2" when Jo, the father of her baby son, tells her she should leave his house, or actually his bedroom in his parents' house. Jo was fed up with her nagging him, including the time she threatened to tell Jo's mother that he once again left milk out of the fridge. Like many of these baby-faced baby daddies, Jo mumbles his responses so much that MTV sometimes supplies subtitles. In the milk argument Jo's response is, "Like you pay for anything anyway."

Kailyn has nowhere else to go — her mother lives in a hotel room with her latest boyfriend — and so moves with the baby into Jo's parents' basement.

Jenelle, who came to blows — and a custody battle — with her mother when she cut off Internet service and tried to prevent Jenelle from going out clubbing at night, had the best explanation of why it's hard to be a single teenage mother.

"I thought being a mother would be fairly easy, but I didn't look at the part where you constantly have to get up in the middle of the night," Jenelle says. "Its like you're taking care of two of you."

If she thinks that's bad, Jenelle isn't watching enough "I Didn't Know I Was Pregnant" or "Pregnant and in Peril," both on TLC. "Born on a Bad Day," a FitTV show, recounts the ordeals of women who go into labor during blackouts, tornadoes or, in the case of one 22-year-old Salt Lake City woman, while being held hostage by a deranged gunman. She was one of the victims in 1991, when Richard L. Worthington killed a nurse and held nine people hostage in a Utah hospital (including her baby born during the siege). The gunman was searching for the doctor, who had defied his wishes and performed a tubal ligation on his wife, who had already delivered eight children.

It's often said that it takes a village to raise a child. On cable television it takes a child to raise a child and women sometimes give birth to a village.

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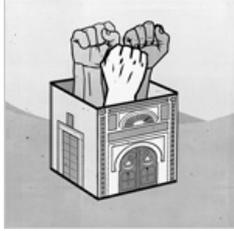


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