

# Re-Embodying the Sonographic Experience

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*Shane Denson*

Meredith Nash's "From 'Bump' to 'Baby': Gazing at the Foetus in 4D" offers an intriguing and much-needed problematization of ultrasound technologies and their complicity in the domination of women's bodies by corporate capitalism, medical science, and state institutions.<sup>1</sup> By visualizing the previously invisible, according to Nash, ultrasonography powerfully extends the male medical 'gaze,' not only increasing the power of medical practitioners and the objectifying discourses they embody but also inviting the pregnant woman to share this privileged perspective. While often experienced as empowering, the pregnant woman is subtly implicated in a system of panoptic surveillance that reinforces her subjective internalization of ideology and enlists her in an act of 'voluntary' self-regulation whereby she inscribes ultimately disempowering discourses upon her own body. Presented as a transparent, disinterested means of ascertaining an otherwise hidden 'truth,' ultrasonography promises to let women see with their own eyes, apparently displacing the interpretive authority of the doctor, but its images in fact *distribute* that authority and *structure* vision accordingly. Far from neutral, the medium transforms reality itself, producing the foetus "as a newly forged technological being"<sup>2</sup> whose newfound "life" disrupts "the cultural construction of the moral primacy of birth."<sup>3</sup> Rather than celebrating a cyborgian deconstruction of ideological binaries, Nash contends that the visualized foetus is granted an agency that is at odds with and displaces the woman's own. Embedded in discourses of power, the sonographic image creates an antagonistic opposition between pregnant mother and the 'baby' in her womb—a linguistic opposition "brought to life by visualising technology" and necessarily foreign to "pregnancy as a truly embodied experience."<sup>4</sup> To combat the technological-discursive erasure of the pregnant woman, Nash advocates the placenta as a site of resistance that would "re-unite mother and foetus as an embodied, dynamic unit."<sup>5</sup>

While I find Nash's diagnosis coherent on the whole, and though I am quite sympathetic to her call to rediscover embodiment, I suggest that her reliance on Foucault stands in the way both of recognizing the true extent of the problem and of realizing a solution. The body, for Foucault, is a site of discursive inscriptions of

power, never authentic or free of regulatory control. Seeking “a truly embodied experience,” yet apparently leery of naturalizing feminine embodiment, Nash’s strategic re-framing of sonographic images to include the placenta confronts discursive technologies on their own ground and aims to disrupt dualistic subject formations and disembodiment from within the system of discourse. Without questioning the usefulness of such local interventions, I suggest that a more radically material conception of lived embodiment is called for: something along the lines of Merleau-Ponty’s “lived body.”<sup>6</sup> As the concrete material ground of experience and discourse, the lived body does not essentialize an autonomous subjectivity and make it immune to discursive appropriation; phenomenally unthematized, and thus prior to subjective and socially situated identities, it nevertheless offers a basis for understanding embodied difference as resistant to discursive imprisonment and for recognizing a greater complexity in human-technological interactions that may be less compliant with discursive aims than they at first appear.

Nash cites an ad for 4D ultrasonography that laments “the traditional grainy, black and white images of the 2D machines that needed the operator to explain to us what we were seeing” and promises a revolution: “To actually see your baby,” directly and without unnecessary mediation.<sup>7</sup> The technology promised is perfectly transparent—a neutral, prosthetic extension of vision as unobtrusive as eyeglasses. The medium, accordingly, is not the object of our vision, just a means that disappears in the act of looking *through* it. It instantiates, in Don Ihde’s term, an “embodiment relation”: it is phenomenally absorbed or *incorporated* into our perceiving bodies.<sup>8</sup> 2D technologies, on the other hand, stand out as objects themselves, and have to be interpreted in order to reveal the true object of our interest; like a radio telescope as opposed to an optical one, the old-fashioned sonogram instantiates a “hermeneutic relation” and situates itself, semi-opaque, on the objective side of intentionality.<sup>9</sup> Obviously, the promise of transparency is designed to generate interest in the new technology and thus income for the corporation. But precisely because it exploits novelty as a selling point, it also invites the spectator to look (in awe) *at the technology itself*. The apparatus becomes opaque again, precisely because it is so startlingly transparent; phenomenally, it vacillates between radically incompatible positions. In the process, the materially embodied spectator herself is destabilized, standing now on one side of the gaze and now on the other, simultaneously incorporating and observing the technology

that resists being reduced to a mere medium. Though the corporation behind the technology benefits from both phases of its being—as instantiating both hermeneutic and embodiment relations, novelty and transparency—the device’s phenomenal instability makes it unpredictable and thus to some extent recalcitrant to its instrumentalization as “a tool of power and surveillance.”<sup>10</sup>

This instability does not, of course, translate directly into active resistance. Every technology is subject to discursive overlays that take up and insert technologies into scientific and cultural contexts. If stabilized as expressions of scientific or commercial aims or gazes, they thus implant ideology all the more insistently, for technologies, themselves material, impinge directly on our lived bodies in our phenomenal interactions with them. Far from offering a safe haven beyond the reach of discourse, our material embodiment compounds the problem of discursive inscription and ups the ante of resistance; we radically underestimate the problem if we view the body as a discursive construction only. On the other hand, the discursive-experiential stabilization of technological materiality is not guaranteed, thus offering hope that even in the most obviously ideological uses of technology for commercial profit and social control, intentions and discourses may fail to materialize and instead give way to an unruly experience of embodied materiality. As for active intervention, this perspective shows that it will not suffice to alter the content of mediated perception and discourse (e.g. by visualizing the placenta); more importantly, we must confront its material form.

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<sup>1</sup> Meredith Nash, "From 'Bump' to 'Baby': Gazing at the Foetus in 4D," *Philament* 10 (June 2007): 1-25.

<sup>2</sup> Nash, 2-3.

<sup>3</sup> Nash, 2.

<sup>4</sup> Nash, 20-21.

<sup>5</sup> Nash, 19.

<sup>6</sup> See Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, Colin Smith, trans. (London: Routledge, 1962).

<sup>7</sup> Nash, 2.

<sup>8</sup> See, for example, Don Ihde, *Technics and Praxis: A Philosophy of Technology* (Dordrecht: D. Reidel, 1979) and Ihde, *Technology and the Lifeworld: From Garden to Earth* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990).

<sup>9</sup> The term "hermeneutic relation" is also Ihde's, developed in the works listed above.

<sup>10</sup> Nash, 19.