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[p. 479]

A Gendered Bun in the Oven. The Gender-reveal Party as a New Ritualization during Pregnancy

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Abstract
By appropriating both medical and communication technologies, the gender-reveal party has recently emerged as a ritual performance centered on a dramatically staged disclosure of the sex of a gestating fetus. The gender-reveal party is an example of the new forms of ritualization that take place during pregnancy in 21st-century North America. Typically, the focal point of the party is when the future parents cut a cake whose inside color (blue or pink) reveals the sex of the fetus. This article examines the ritual dynamics and creativity at work in the preparation, the performance and the mediated dissemination of this festive occasion. Key elements of the ritual will be described, as well as its conditions of emergence in a context where neither medical nor religious institutions offer ritual options deemed appropriate enough for celebrating joyfully and emotionally during pregnancy.

Résumé
À travers une appropriation combinée de technologies médicales et des technologies de communication, la gender-reveal party (« la fête où l'on révèle le genre ») a récemment émergé comme une performance rituelle centrée sur la révélation par une mise en scène dramatique du sexe du fœtus en gestation. La gender-reveal party est un exemple des nouvelles formes de ritualisation qui prennent place pendant la grossesse au 21ème siècle en Amérique du Nord. Son point culminant consiste généralement à découper un gâteau dont la couleur intérieure (bleue ou rose) révèle le sexe du fœtus. Cet article examine les dynamiques rituelles et la créativité à l'œuvre dans la préparation, la performance et la dissémination médiatisée de cette occasion festive. Les éléments

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[p. 480]clés de ce rituel seront soulignés, ainsi que ses conditions d'émergence dans un contexte où ni les institutions médicales ni les institutions religieuses n'offrent d'options rituelles considérées comme appropriées pour des célébrations joyeuses et émotionnelles pendant la grossesse.

Keywords
ritual, pregnancy, gender, motherhood, technology, ultrasound

Mots clés
rituel, grossesse, genre, maternité, technologie, échographie

Technological Annunciations

Filling the Ritual Gap with Cake

Nowadays, whether a child will be born a boy or a girl is no longer revealed through a divine messenger or an inspired dream, nor predicted through divination rituals or esoteric calculations. The two-dimensional ultrasound is the most commonly used technology1 for determining fetal sex, with almost absolute certainty. While, throughout most of human history, a guess would only be confirmed at birth, current technology can ascertain the sex of the future child several months before the end of a pregnancy. In spite of the wide accessibility of ultrasound technology wherever Western biomedicine is available, some parents nonetheless choose to delay this moment of confirmation. While some keep the surprise for the day of birth itself, others decide to stage it as the highlight of a gender-reveal party, an elaborate performance that takes place around mid-term of a pregnancy.

The gender-reveal party is an occasion during which the sex of a gestating fetus is revealed to the future parents among friends and family. When it does not replace its potential competitor, the baby shower, it is sometimes combined with it. Many elements of the gender-reveal party are indeed similar to those of the traditional baby shower2and to those of other alternative rituals that take place before birth. These usually are not considered as religious rites in the strict sense, as they are not sanctioned by religious institutions. From the perspective of the study of religions, scholars might nevertheless be interested in documenting and analyzing the forms this ritualization emerging outside of established religious institutions is taking. Contrasting these new forms with examples from various cultures where fertility, pregnancy or birth are occasions of private or public celebration might help uncover their specific ritual dynamics.

This question of ritual dynamics is only one among the many issues at stake with the development of ritual patterns around sexed, gendered and highly mediated fetuses. Building on recent scholarship about topics situated at the intersection of gender, body and technology, this article provides an analysis of one particular example of the ritual creativity and dynamics emerging from the current under-ritualization of pregnancy in the 21st-century North American context. It looks at how the gender-reveal party fills a gap left void by both medicine and religion. As Grimes points out, "[g]enerally, priests [p. 481] think they are engaged in ritual; generally physicians deny that they are" (Grimes, 2002: 26). Medical settings, often saturated with their own protocols, rarely provide a suitable context for a joyful ritualization of life events such as pregnancy and birth. Pregnancy care and prenatal medicine are characterized foremost by a culture of avoiding risk, and by a technocratic paradigm designed to keep fetal and maternal bodies under control (Lupton, 1999). Even if medical procedures can be read as ritual ones (Davis-Floyd, 2003), little room is left for a celebration that integrates the emotional and, perhaps, spiritual aspects of pregnancy and childbirth. Parents (and the medical staff, too) face a "paradoxical

spiritual emptiness" not only in the delivery room (Bélanger-Lévesque et al., 2012), but also during other prenatal medical appointments. They also face a "ritual gap" that traditional religious institutions do not fill. For example, in spite of their long-standing and normative discourses about fertility and motherhood, Christian churches lack significant pregnancy and prenatal rituals. My perspective, grounded in the study of religions and informed by ritual studies, shifts away from moral and ethical debates around fetuses and women's bodies and uncovers the festive and ritually creative dimensions of the gender-reveal party as a celebration articulated around a mediated fetus. While the gender-reveal party takes place *during* pregnancy, it does not necessarily celebrate pregnancy itself.

Religious discourses and practices contain many elements that participate in rigid and binary definitions of gender. Even if some gender fluidity is admitted in the contexts where the gender-reveal party has emerged, there still remains some anxiety about clear identification of gender for most people and, in particular, for babies and even fetuses. In the limited scope of this article, I do not directly address dualistic constructions of gender based on binary sex distinctions – along with their feminist critiques. It is important, however, to acknowledge that the very name "gender-reveal party" is in itself highly problematic. In a gender-reveal party, what is really disclosed is the sex ascribed to the shape of a fetus' genitalia, while discursive strategies and the manipulation of specific objects construct and perform gender. The gender-reveal party constitutes an example of how the categories of sex and gender can be defined and understood in different ways by scholars on the one hand, and, on the other hand, by the performers, who have no methodological issues at stake in substituting "sex" with "gender." Performers very seldom use the label "sex reveal party."[3] The rhetoric and dynamics at work in the gender-reveal party further destabilize the divide in traditional definitions of "sex" and "gender," already contested in feminist scholarship (see, for instance, Fausto-Sterling, 2000).

The festive context of the gender-reveal party gives a more formal stance to the "gender-reveal action" or "gesture" which constitutes the highlight of what already appears to be, in spite of its novelty, a ritualized process. Its performance already follows discernible patterns, which this article will describe, reserving questions about its deeper meanings and conditions of emergence for another discussion. Following Snoek's purposely "fuzzy" and "polythetic" definition of "ritual behavior" (Snoek, 2006: 13), we consider the preparation, performance and dissemination of the gender-reveal party as a form of ritual behavior.

The most common way to perform the gender-reveal is to cut a cake whose inside color, usually blue or pink, indicates whether the expected child will be a boy or a girl. [p. 482] Yet, as will be detailed below, there already are many variations to the reveal gesture. The principal performers of this ritual are mostly heterosexual, married or partnered, white, middle-class parents, but gender-reveal parties are not restricted to this specific group. In some cases, the future mother is the only one who cuts the cake.[4] Other actors are actively involved before and during the gender-party: a sonographer manipulates the technology that provides the much desired piece of information, and a baker or a friend prepares the cake or the items necessary to the gender-reveal gesture itself. The complicity of these actors is crucial to the effective and successful performance of the gender-reveal. Finally, friends and relatives attend the party, await the reveal, and then comment on it.

Gender-reveal, Media and Digital Scholarship

Media play a crucial role in the emergence, the performance and the dissemination of the gender-reveal party among future parents who, for most of their adult lives, have been proficient users of digital technologies and the mediated forms of communication they allow. Besides the fact that such media, and in particular social networks, provide the necessary "script[s] for a ritual" (Snoek, 2006: 14; see below), the close interplay between mediation and such new forms of ritualization deserves a separate

discussion to be framed within a broader and complex conversation on "the study of mediatized rituals" (see Sumiala, 2014: 942ff., for a discussion of the most recent and most promising approaches in scholarship on contemporary media and ritual). Yet it is relevant to mention here the principal aspects of the mediation and mediatization of the gender-reveal party. "Mediation" refers to the processes through which different types of media express or symbolize ideas, such as gender distinctions (for example, a blue outfit indicates that the future baby will be a boy), and spread particular information (such as by advertising a gender-reveal party on one's blog). "Mediatization" is a more complex term, referring to the use of media as described above, to how media such as TV or newspapers report on gender-reveal parties, and ultimately, to how this influences or becomes part of the ritual performance itself and transforms it (for example, through people looking up uploaded videos of gender-reveal parties before organizing one). First appearing in the late 2000s, this dramatically staged disclosure of a specific piece of information (the sex of the fetus) has gained in popularity and visibility foremost after 2010, mostly through social networks. Though not fully mainstream, the trend has become so strong that even news media outside of the scope of specialized parenting magazines have reported on it (for instance, *The New York Times*, see Williams and Murphy, 2012, or the ABC News *Good Morning America* TV show, broadcast on 24 June 2011; see also the section "Media and Newspaper References" at the end of the References section of this article).

In most European and North American countries, the early 21st century saw the spheres of pregnancy and parenthood combining the technologies of the medical ultrasound and online social communication. Posting a sonogram of a fetus on a social network has become a new way for future parents to announce a pregnancy. Since August 2012, Facebook has offered a "new 'Life Event' for Timeline […], which lets you share when you are going to be a mother or father. With the new life event option, expectant [p. 483] parents can share their baby's due date and whether it's a boy or a girl" (Moscaritolo, 2012). A cartoon subsequently published in *The New Yorker* (on 17 December 2012) shows a pregnant woman undergoing an ultrasound, accompanied presumably by her male partner. The female sonographer, who manipulates the ultrasound transducer, and the future parents are staring at a screen that shows the distinct image of a fetus, along with the options, checked by default, to "share" on Facebook, Twitter and You Tube.5 Nowadays, within a few minutes, the sex of the fetus can go from being a secret *in* and *of* the womb to public information shared online with the entire connected world. It is communicated not only to future parents, but also to a vast circle of relatives, friends, employers, and strangers who access it through social media. Some of these announcements place emphasis on the sex of the fetus, as do annotations and comments on the ultrasound image itself, as already noted by Larkin in her study of online ultrasound galleries (Larkin, 2006: 281–282).

The gender-reveal party is a ritual expression corresponding to such developments in the mediatization of pregnancy announcements with their typical emphasis on gender. It is consistent with the current trend of disclosing an increasingly precise and growing amount of data about one's pregnancy to a larger number of people, and in a more instantaneous way than ever before. Not only is the pregnancy itself confirmed, but the due date, information about the (usually good) health and growth of the fetus, and, more importantly, its sex are also proclaimed. Likewise, information about how to set up gender-reveal parties is also available online. Images and videos work as visual examples of "script[s] for a ritual" (Snoek, 2006: 14), ready to be picked up by whoever is willing to invest time, money and energy in appropriate preparation and customization.

Because of this widespread mediation and mediatization of the gender-reveal party, there is a great deal of public material available to researchers. Sources such as video-sharing websites (such as YouTube), social networks (such as Facebook) or platforms for sharing images (such as Flickr or Pinterest) provide researchers with access to discourses of parents about their motivation for hosting a gender-reveal party, their anxieties and pleasure in performing the gender-reveal, and, sometimes, the ritual failures

that come along with it. Ritual patterns of gender-reveal parties as they are mediated and mediatized are at the center of this article, but equally relevant are the numerous comments left on such videos, pictures and blog posts, both by performers and attendants, and by onlookers who have not directly taken part in the ritual performance.

Rather than singling out specific cases, my descriptions of the various ways a gender-reveal party can take place are based on aggregated examples, such as those featured in the *Good Morning America* TV show (mentioned above), most of which also can be found on YouTube. In this article, social media are used not only as source material, but also as a means to foster scientific mediation in line with progressive scholarship in the digital humanities.6 As the sources found in the Notes and References sections of this article may become unavailable over time, I have prepared a collection of examples of images of gender-reveal parties through a public Pinterest board accessible athttps://www.pinterest.com/florencepg/gender-reveal-party/ (accessed 15 August 2015).

[p. 484]

Preparation and Performance of the Gender-reveal Party

Ultrasounds and Expectations: Planning the Gender-reveal

Previous scholarship has demonstrated how the use of the ultrasound (as medical practice, social event, or performance), in both medical and non-medical settings, corresponds to or reinforces authoritative medical knowledge and the performance of gender roles (Larkin, 2006; Kroløkke, 2010 and 2011; Katz Rothman, 2004; Taylor, 2008; Taylor, 2004: 187–210). That the ultrasound is "a positive event during the pregnancy, a bright spot to look forward to and long for," and that future parents may feel "joy" because "something concrete [is] finally taking place, which [makes] the pregnancy seem a little shorter" (Molander, 2010: 20), is a widely shared view, at least amongst midwives, sonographers and medical practitioners. This view of the ultrasound, in consonance with the "technocratic model of childbirth" (Davis-Floyd, 2003), supposes that the woman *needs* technology to acknowledge the reality of the processes going on in her body and that she would otherwise be unable to "believe" in what has been taking place in her womb for several months (also see Katz Rothman, 1986).

Planning, preparing and bonding are given as the main reasons for wanting to know the sex of the fetus. Regarding bonding, parents who choose not to be told *immediately*whether they will have a boy or a girl delay the "meeting with the baby," or, more precisely, the encounter with the sexed fetus. For some parents, the ultrasound "encounter" with a fetus without any specific gender identity is only a partial one. Though the studies mentioned above are relevant for examining gender, embodiment and ritual, my discussion of the gender-reveal party deliberately moves the focus away from the ultrasound itself and concentrates instead on what is *ritually* staged afterwards. It is necessary, however, to first describe how the ultrasound examination factors in the preparation of the gender-reveal gesture, the distinctive feature of a gender-reveal party.

Future parents who host this type of event decide to do so before the pregnant woman undergoes the medical ultrasound during which the sonographer determines fetal sex. Future parents cannot improvise a gender-reveal party – they must carefully plan ahead for it. They send invitations or "e-vites" through social media or postal mail and determine a general "theme" for the party. While many traditional Christian rituals take place outside the home, in a church, the gender-reveal party brings the ritual process into the domestic sphere. The future parents decorate their home and make or order food for the guests. Moreover, they also often blog about their upcoming party and sometimes set up online "gender-reveal countdowns." However, in order to preserve the surprise effect, *someone else* is in

charge of preparing the gender-reveal items. Though guests may offer to bring food to the party, this designated co-organizer and complicit performer provides the gender-reveal cake, a main item for the reveal. The future parents will nonetheless be the main or sole performers of the gender-reveal gesture.

Given their upcoming ritual participation, do future mothers or parents experience the ultrasound examination differently? Just like someone who wishes to keep "the surprise" for the day of birth itself, future parents planning a gender-reveal party ensure that the sonographer does not tell them the sex of the fetus during the procedure. Once retrieved, the information about the sex of the fetus is reserved for semi-private disclosure in the chosen context of their gender-reveal party.

[p. 485] The sonographer performs the medical ultrasound at approximately the 20th week of amenorrhea (that is, at about the middle of a "normal" pregnancy).7 Typically, the sonographer examines not only the genitals, but the entire "fetal body" (Morgan, 2011)8in order to detect malformations and other medical conditions through precise measurements. In most cases, the sonographer is able to determine fetal sex without any particular effort or additional time (Van der Hof, 2007: 636). In medical settings, the technology through which information about the sex of the fetus is retrieved is thus not used primarily or solely for ritual purposes.

As a contrasting example, it is relevant to mention the "elective ultrasound" (studied byKroløkke, 2010 and 2011) and its corresponding "fetus party" or "sonogram party," a more complex (and less common) variation of the gender-reveal party that has also generated some media attention.9 During a "sonogram party," a (non-medical) sonographer is paid to come to the house of the future parents with her equipment. The parents and their guests then simultaneously discover the live images of the fetus, shared on a (large) screen.

In contrast with an "ultrasound party" or with the "biotourism" experiences of "elective ultrasounds" described by Kroløkke (2010 and 2011), the gender-reveal party does not imply a diverted use of the medical technology, but of *one* piece of *information* provided by this technology. The image itself of the fetus, the ultrasound "picture," is not necessary for a gender-reveal party. Furthermore, this information determines not *only*the organization of a gender-reveal party, but also a construction of gender that starts *in utero* and can take place even when future parents do not celebrate a gender-reveal party. Putting this specific information at the center of a celebration is likely to suggest that gender is at the center of certain social anxieties, which this ritual implicitly addresses, and that it has a great importance at least to those who plan and host such a festive event. A spectacular and ritual disclosure of fetal sex could be read as a means to ward off gender indeterminacy, or gender uncertainty, which might be perceived as threatening. However, as we will demonstrate below, what matters most to hosts and guests of gender-reveal parties is not the gender in itself, but rather its dramatically staged disclosure taken as a pretext for having fun. The very fact of knowing can itself be seen as worthy of a moment of celebration.

Blue and Pink: Performing the Reveal with Fun and Games

From the moment the sonographer determines fetal sex, two scenarios are possible for parents who wish to have a gender-reveal party. In the first (rarer) case, they are told the sex of the future baby and will host the party for the main purpose of entertaining friends and family. The second situation, at the center of my analysis, is the most frequent: the technician is asked "not to tell anything" and to write down "boy" or "girl" on the back of the printed image of the ultrasound or on a piece of paper, which is then placed in an envelope. For precaution's sake, some parents demand that the information be written down twice, so as to have a backup or a "control." A friend, a relative or a professional baker receives the sealed envelope and makes a cake whose inside color is a marker of gender. The colors invariably are

blue for a boy and pink (occasionally reddish) for a girl, [p. 486] a well-established and unmistakable symbolic code in North America (Koller, 2008; Lazar, 2009).

Guests may be expected to bring gifts to the house of the future parents on the day of the party, in particular if the gender-reveal is combined with a baby shower. Some hosts suggest that their guests bring two gifts, one for a boy and one for a girl, since the sex of the fetus is unknown to them at the time they make or, more probably, purchase their gift. The gender inappropriate gift will then be returned to the store or given to a charity. However, gifts can also consist of money or gift cards, or gender-neutral toys and clothes, even though these have become more difficult to find in retail. The insistence placed on gender difference, and on the conspicuous consumption of gender specific gifts, to some extent also serves commodity capitalism in the framework of a broader consumer culture (Taylor et al., 2004). As noted by Larkin (2006: 285), gender-neutral items may be "dismissed or interpreted as inadequate to proper mothering," while "gender-transgressive purchases are clearly unacceptable."

Gaming is one of the key features of the gender-reveal party, marked by the "very American cultural imperative of fun" (Bado-Fralick and Sachs Norris, 2010: xiv). Parents-to-be and guests should have fun and be entertained while attending the party and sharing in the joyous announcement. Guests may be required to dress in the color (blue or pink) "matching their guess." Alternatively, they may wear a blue or pink badge or laundry pin, corresponding to their guess. They can also put a mark on a "guess board" or "cast their vote" in a ballot. As a variation on the blue/pink dichotomy, parents may use other symbols, such as a moustache, a typical marker of male facial hair, symbolizing the potential masculinity of the future child, or a ribbon or a pair of red lips, symbolizing a femininity performed through ornaments and cosmetics. In the invitation cards to a gender-reveal party that are illustrated in Figure 1, "boy" is symbolized by a "gun," with blue or camouflage motif, while a pink "glitter" chandelier stands for "girl."

In addition to enhancing the excitement and fun of the participants, involvement in playing the guessing games transforms their status: from passive attendants and observers of a ritual action performed in front of them by the future parents to active soothsayers whose predictions will soon be invalidated or verified.

Highlight of the Ritual: The Reveal Gesture

The moment of the reveal is the one most focused on and most commonly filmed, photographed and shared by participants. When the performance goes well, videos and images show excited parents celebrating among friends and relatives, receiving congratulations and enthusiastic comments.

All participants, including those who attend through computer-mediated communication, should have an unobstructed view of the cake (or other objects used for the reveal). The parents cut the cake and discover what is inside. Instantly, the color of the cake (or, as a variation, the object inside the gender-reveal box) divulges the information. Surprise is the element that makes this ritual different from, for instance, a wedding ceremony. Except in the case of a ritual failure, among the highlights of a wedding celebration are the expected words "Yes, I do!" In contrast, during the gender-reveal party, one can still [p. 487]

(Figure 1: Customizable and printable templates for invitation cards sold on Etsy. https://www.etsy.com/ca-fr/listing/180426193/armes-a-feu-ou-des-paillettes-avec?ref=sr_gallery_32&ga_search_query=gender+reveal&ga_ship_to=US&ga_search_type=all&ga_view_type=gallery (retrieved July 30, 2014).

be (relatively) "surprised" because the outcome of the gender-reveal gesture can be "boy" or "girl." Performers and participants do not expect a confirmation of pregnancy, which is, at this stage, visible in most women, but precise information about the sex of the future child. This element of surprise, however, is limited in its binary outcome.

Since sharing food plays a significant role in many rituals, it is no coincidence that the cake is the item most commonly used for the gender-reveal gesture. In parties where individual cupcakes are used as an alternative to the cake, the future mother may want to have the privilege to "bite in first." As one participant to an online discussion remarks: "[…] we are finding out with everyone else at the same time but I'm probably gonna tell everyone to let me bite into mine first!" In this case, the future mother is trying to retain the privilege of performing the reveal or of deciding exactly when it should be performed. A future mother who shared pictures of her gender-reveal party on her publicly accessible blog wrote the following lines about the moment when all the guests bit into their cupcake: "So we had all guests wait until I counted to three to take a bite out of the cupcake and see if we found a blue m&m, or a pink. I found a blue m&m inside. IT'S A BOY!!!!!!! This was so much fun!!! Everyone was excited and

had so much fun! We [p. 488] can't wait to meet our baby, Isaac" (corrected spelling).10 In this and other instances, food is shared and distributed before the information is. Typical discourses of performers stress the importance of having fun and finding out at the same time.

Once the pregnant woman eats the cake, the food coloring signifying gender reaches the fetus, through the umbilical cord. Does the future mother somehow "share" her piece of cake and her knowledge with her fetus, thus instilling or reinforcing a gender identity to the unborn? She is not only feeding herself, but also sharing a first social "meal" with her future baby girl or boy. Sharing cake in the presence of friends and family is reminiscent of a newly-married couple cutting their wedding cake together. Yet at the same time, it is a form of a preliminary birthday party in a context where children's birthday parties are recognized as a cultural ritual (Lee et al., 2009) and have a great importance in the performance of "intensive mothering" (Bareiss et al., 2009; Hays, 1996). In the gender-reveal party, however, the gesture of *cutting* the cake is more important than serving it to the guests or eating it. In other words, the *color* inside the cake is more important than its flavor.

More than Just Cutting a Cake: Ritual Creativity

Innovative alternatives to the already traditional cake cutting have rapidly emerged. All variations of the enactment of the gender-reveal work on the same principle: the information is dramatically disclosed through the use of symbols carefully prepared by an accomplice. Generally, a gender-reveal does not just consist in opening a sealed envelope, as a high degree of creativity is at play around this principle of dramatic disclosure. The long series of symbolic mediations through which knowledge is obtained and communicated uses body parts (the uterus-container and the genitalia of the fetus), persons (pregnant woman, sonographer, co-organizers of and participants in the ritual), objects (ultrasound probe, paper, box, cake, material items) and symbols (blue/pink or other male/female dichotomies).

The reveal itself can be included in the gaming element of the party, such as in a scavenger hunt, a word search, a puzzle, a riddle or a scratch card. Different types of sweets and foods can also be used as long they adequately disclose the relevant information: in the above example, the colored cupcakes and M&Ms served as an alternative to the cake. Similarly, coloring-foods (such as Fizzies) or foods containing the words "boy" or "girl" (for example, fortune cookies) can be used. Finally, an object which is unambiguously linked to one or the other gender in the widely shared binary system of gender representations is also a suitable alternative. Other options include using a neutral-colored box in which an object is placed (balloons, confetti, baby clothes, shoes or hat). Guests may also cover future parents in colored string sprays. Two inflated balloons, blue and pink, can be pierced to reveal a "yes" or a "no" inside. Alternatively, the future mother and father each choose one pink or one blue not yet inflated balloon: only one is intact and will inflate, thus revealing the "correct" guess. The pregnant woman may also dress in a maternity shirt given to her for this occasion, on which is written, "It's a boy," or "It's a girl." Sometimes, the sonogram of a generic fetus is even printed on such shirts.11 The expectant mother will then be literally wearing the gender announcement on her body.

[p. 489] The color reflecting the gender prediction is more important than the type of item used, although most of these relate to babies, to the parents' specific hobby or passion (like sports, gardening, etc.), or to seasonal holidays, with which the gender-reveal party can be combined. An Easter egg or a Halloween pumpkin can be used as a container for the gender-reveal object. One future mother held her gender-reveal party on New Year's Eve and integrated the "gender-countdown" element just before midnight, including (blue) fireworks, in her preparation.

An Analysis of the Gender-reveal Party

Contrasts and Paradoxes in the Ritual Process

Whereas only professional sonographers can directly read the result of the medical two-dimensional ultrasound technology, the gender-reveal party instantly transmits and transforms it into an unmistakable piece of information, accessible to all. Several elements recurring through the ritual process of the gender-reveal party present a series of contrasts and paradoxes revolving around information (about the sex the fetus) that is, in fact, a form of knowledge, of timing, of technology, and of performance. Though their articulations are particularly intricate during the ritual, these elements will be examined here separately.

(a) Knowledge and Secrets

The key element of the gender-reveal party is a specific piece of information. Its status and the ways in which it is accessed and transmitted vary through the different phases of the ritual process: this knowledge is first (1) unknown to all, then (2) known to some (sonographer, helper in the organization of the party), but secret for a while, then (3) revealed and thus known to all participants in the ritual, then (4) publicized through social media, and then finally (5) confirmed at the birth, and (6) re-publicized through the birth announcement. All the tension of this ritual plays on a combination of disclosure and secrecy with the eagerness to know, as well as on the subsequent confirmation of the guess taken by the future parents and their guests. Knowledge moves from a semi-private and medical setting to a private family event, which is often also publicized in a variety of online contexts.

The information is first visual (ultrasound imagery on a screen), then written (by the sonographer), then visual again to the persons who prepare the gender-reveal items or cake, and again, at the moment the cake is cut or the items are displayed. It is then confirmed orally. Finally, it oscillates fluidly in the written, visual and oral forms when it is shared, as a video, as pictures attached to an email, as a tweet or through audio-visual communication (such as Skype), with distant relatives who may not have "seen" the color or symbol revealed.

Despite some evident connections with the idea of viewing the fetus as a "person," the use of ultrasound imagery by future parents hosting a gender-reveal party is different in scope from the one made by groups opposing abortion rights.12 During the gender-reveal, the ultrasound image is rarely displayed and, in fact, is not even necessary. Rather, hosts manipulate various objects to broadcast the information. Some of these [p. 490] gender-reveal items, for instance baby clothes, are for the future child, who cannot yet touch or use them.

(b) "All at the Same Time": Simultaneity

Time is a crucial element in understanding the cultural constructions of pregnancy, labor and birth (McCourt, 2010): the time passing by from the moment the woman knows she is pregnant, and the time elapsed between medical examinations, in particular those that may include an ultrasound. The limited time that the sonographer spends with each patient in the time-managed medical setting contrasts with the longer duration set apart for the gender-reveal party, which usually lasts a few hours or a whole afternoon or evening. A gender-reveal party does not just happen, but is carefully planned by the parents, who set a specific date for the celebration. In contrast, except in the case of elective or planned inductions or C-sections, the exact date of birth cannot be known with as much accuracy as sex can be determined. The "due date" is a *probable* date for the normal term of pregnancy, not a guaranteed delivery date.

Before, during and after the ritual itself, time takes on different textures. During the ritual, "time" and "knowledge" interplay with each other in ways that create several time lapses: when the information is

known, when it is revealed publicly, and when confirmed at birth. Performers and participants also vary in how they perceive time, from a period of latency to one of acceleration. While discussing online their experience in planning a gender-reveal party, several mothers-to-be mentioned that excitement and curiosity were getting hard to contain after the ultrasound. The party itself thus had to take place "not too long" afterwards. One blogger describes this short waiting period as "torture." Moreover, the longer the delay, the greater the chance of an untimely disclosure of the secret information.

Among the main reasons for organizing a gender-reveal party, future mothers frequently mention the fact that they are limited to having only *one* person accompany them to their medical appointment. The gender-reveal party allows *simultaneous* sharing of crucial information with important friends and family. Though private clinics that offer elective ultrasounds feature them as part of a "family experience," encouraging women to bring relatives and friends to their appointment (Chisholm, 2011), even these specialized venues could technically not accommodate the many guests of a formal gender-reveal party. Furthermore, as noted above, in the case of a medical ultrasound, neither pregnant women nor their doctors consider the examination context as adequate for ritual "fun."

Though there is much pressure for the future father13 to attend the special ultrasound appointment, he may not always be able to do so. In those cases, the absence of the father at the appointment justifies the need for a gender-reveal party at which both parents find out the sex of their fetus at the same time. In the realm of practical reasons, future parents save time by avoiding making a dozen or more phone calls or sending emails or text messages to their entire contacts list. By "pull[ing] everyone together to make the announcement all at once," as a future mother expresses it, they avoid making some feel more privileged and others resentful for "not being told at the same time." In this regard, communication software programs such as Skype are useful because they allow for simultaneous but remote participation.

(c) Technology

Depending on the pregnant woman's health care coverage, some gynecologists or obstetricians will *systematically* use the ultrasound at each prenatal [p. 491] appointment. While medical experts routinely use ultrasound technology, a few of them have voiced a concern about the recent rise of non-medical "elective ultrasound" or "affective," "emotional echography" services. Though they rarely call into question the long-term innocuousness of ultrasounds, experts insist that this technology should not be used indiscriminately or excessively, in particular outside of medical settings.14 Their discourses frame the ultrasound as a technology whose use should remain in the hands of "experts," restricted to trained persons in adequate settings and for suitable purposes, such as detecting medical conditions before birth and checking the normative health and growth of the fetus–patient and its container, the pregnant body. Just because ultrasound technology is relatively safe, this does not mean that it is suitable for use for entertainment. Using the results of ultrasound imagery obtained through "serious" medical technology in order to have a gender-reveal party might be an expression of the future parents' desire to be more involved with the pregnancy and to incorporate more "fun" into pregnancy, which may be a rare or even a unique experience for many women. Such a longing for involvement and fun stands in contrast with a medical environment frequently ridden with anxiety.

A pregnant woman may indeed feel ambivalent towards the technological medical context in which she undergoes one or several ultrasounds. Having her body touched, manipulated, or even penetrated (in the case of a vaginal probe) may not be experienced as pleasant and can even be painful for her. Nevertheless, such concerns as well as the fear of detecting an anomaly are outweighed by feelings of excitement and happiness at the thought of "seeing the baby." In contrast, the gender-reveal party is devoid of negative anxiety and the gaming and partying processes create an atmosphere of joy and relaxed fun. The only thing that matters at the time of the reveal is not that the fetus is healthy (this has

already been confirmed), but whether it is male or female. The gender-reveal party is consistent with the hope (and fact) that the rest of the pregnancy and childbirth are likely to be safe since maternal and infant mortality rates are indeed comparatively low in this particular North American context, at least for parents who can afford access to competent pregnancy care providers. Along with an adequate training of birth attendants and improved hygiene, the appropriate use of medical technology has resulted in the relative safety of pregnancy and birth in this context. This safety gives parents the luxury of not worrying so much about the health of the future child and his/her mother, and the possibility to focus on other characteristics of their offspring, such as gender.

(d) Performers and Participants

Even though the ritual performance involves many actors and attendants, the future mother or parents remain its central organizers and performers. A gender-reveal party would not be as meaningful and visible without the necessary audience involved in witnessing the gender-reveal action and, subsequently, in commenting on it through social media. What exactly are the roles of the performers and participants before, during and even after the gender-reveal party?

The sonographer is the person who first receives and provides the information, but s/he won't be actively involved in the performance of the ritual. As mentioned earlier, the sonographer and some of the persons (cake maker, sales clerk) who are complicit in the preparation are not necessarily active, nor even present, at the party. The future [p. 491] parents and the sonographer, for instance, are careful to avoid any oral communication about this particular information. As Katz Rothman notices, the technician generally strives to stay "professional," even though she mediates the experience of the pregnant woman during the examination by "placing herself between the woman and her own body" (2004: 284). While the sonographer shares information with the parents, s/he is generally not invited to "share the fun" (and the cake) at the party.

The future mother is an active co-performer of the rite and, often, the main organizer of the party even though she does not necessarily stand at the center of the celebration. Even though she cuts the cake, she is not celebrated as a future mother, since the focus is placed on what her uterus contains, the gendered fetus. Katz Rothman remarks that "[o]ur bodies may be ours, but given the ideology of patriarchy, the bodies of mothers are not highly valued. The bodies are just the space in which genetic material matures into babies" (2004: 24). Some religious traditions, as embedded as they may be in patriarchal contexts, give some value to pregnant women for their status as containers of a precious offspring (preferably male and legitimate). With the gender-reveal party, even this "woman as vessel" is replaced by a symbolic gender-reveal cake or box. Similar to cakes served at baby showers, some gender-reveal cakes have the shape of truncated pregnant bodies, with two breasts and a round belly. By symbolically transferring the fetus into a cake or a box, the gender-reveal party thus further dissociates the fetus from the pregnant body in which it develops, and reinforces the construction of the fetus as a distinct individual. The gender-reveal party thus participates in the increasing erasure of the pregnant body of the future mother that has already begun during the medical ultrasound (Nash, 2008).

Both men and women usually are invited to attend a gender-reveal party. While the first audience of the ritual is constituted by the family and friends playing the "guessing games" at the future parents' home or attending the party online, a second circle of persons also takes part in a deferred way. This second circle is comprised of the wide untargeted audience that watches and comments on the videos and images of gender-reveal actions posted and accessible, without any privacy restrictions, on video sharing websites and other social media. Just like the researcher gathering information about the performance, representation and motivations for the gender-reveal party as a new ritual, most of these viewers have no direct ties to the future parents. Comments on videos posted on YouTube, for instance, show that these anonymous and unrelated viewers feel authorized (and technically are able) to comment on the

videos. Though many write positive congratulations, there also are a few "haters." The performers of the ritual would probably not have been directly and personally confronted with criticisms of this new ritual practice had they not made their video available online. The audience for what appears to be, at first sight, a very private celebration within a family ends up (potentially) including the whole connected world, thus blurring even more the distinction between private and public performance and sharing of ritual.15

Gender-reveal Gone Wrong

Just like other ritual performances, a gender-reveal party can "go wrong" and turn into a "ritual failure." Hüsken suggests that taking "a close look at failed or flawed rituals" [p. 493] (2007: ix) can help determine more precisely which ritual dynamic is at work. Specific situations of ambiguity during gender-reveal parties have been reported in blogs and they sometimes also are featured in the videos posted online. The inside of the gender-reveal cake may fail to display a distinct blue or pink color or simply lack any characteristic color. A gender-reveal box can be empty.16 This makes it impossible to*read* the result of the reveal action. Ritual failures are often met with humor and cheerfulness, as many videos suggest.

From the perspective of ritual studies, it is interesting to ask whether or not someone (the sonographer, the person who baked the cake, or any intermediary person handling the information) will be blamed for a failure, and if the ritual should be repeated or "repaired." Parents can still reveal the sex of the future child simply by reading it aloud, using the control envelope at hand. The only consequence is disappointment that the fun and the performance have been spoiled. Must then another party be organized? Probably not. Though the whole process is built around the dramatic ritual gesture of the reveal, the most important element of the party is in fact the disclosure of information and the fun associated with it, and not the performance itself. The gestures, words and objects of the rite may bear ritual failure, but unexpected or inappropriate attitudes or reactions to the reveal from the participants could be considered as far more significant "failures." Overall, what bears importance for the participants and performers is the occasion of the party, the fun and the emotion, the shared excitement and the rejoicing around the future child that no other context, medical or religious, can provide.

Comparative Perspectives: Are Pregnancy Rituals Missing?

Historically, traditional religious institutions have proposed to new mothers (or forced onto them) rituals of purification after birth, or of thanksgiving for a safe delivery. "Churching," for instance, marked the first time the mother went back to church after childbirth in some Christian contexts (Cressy, 2002: 197–232). In mainstream religious communities, the space for ritualization between the wedding (or other forms of ritual for celebrating a union) and baptism (or other celebrations for a newborn human) is empty. Scholars who study religions ought to ask what – if anything – is taking place during this intermediary period and why established religions are not providing a ritual to fill the gap.

Most contemporary mainstream North American religious institutions do not have rituals for the time preceding birth. At best, prayers and blessings for a safe pregnancy and delivery can be considered as ritual behavior, but no officially recognized sacrament is offered and no specific liturgy is followed within the community. Despite their reiterated normative moral discourse about fertility management, about the sanctity of human life and about what anti-abortion activists have coined the "personhood of the fetus," religious institutions do not ritually celebrate individual fetuses as embodying the hoped for outcome of a pregnancy. Whereas deceased persons or babies are at the center of liturgical acts such as funerals and infant baptism, fetuses are not seen as deserving special ritual attention. The pregnant

women who carry them are even less celebrated ritually as future mothers, and their pregnancy is not sanctified or blessed as a process.17

[p. 494] Medicine does not fill this ritual gap either, unless we consider medical procedures around fertility, pregnancy and childbirth as rituals (as did Davis-Floyd in *Birth as an American Rite of Passage*, as early as 1992). Gender-reveal parties exist because, for some parents, "it is no fun just being told" the sex of the fetus as part of the medical ultrasound, as a participant in an online discussion puts it. The sonographer is not considered as a suitable ritual performer. In his analysis of birth rituals, Grimes rightly points out that:

> technologically driven hospital birth is so thick with required medical procedures that there is little time for ritual ones. Wherever Western biomedicine is imported, it displaces nonmedical birth practices, including ritual ones. The issue is not the practical one of insufficient time but that ritual occupies only a tenuous place in our worldview, and when it appears to be in conflict with supposedly scientific procedures, ritual must yield to science. (Grimes, 2002: 18)

His observation about birth can be extended to pregnancy too. Rituals, in particular those that concern female bodies, are sometimes forced on women, but the opposite is also worth considering: there may be a demand for rituals, preferably rituals pleasant for those involved.

This unmet demand for ritual combined with the absence of an institutional ritualization*of* pregnancy, might partially account for the emergence of the gender-reveal party in 21st-century North America. In other contexts, having a pregnancy or prenatal ritual is the norm, though the contents and formats of these rituals vary. There, future parents follow ritual scripts that are rooted in traditions, passed on, or forced on them. Without suggesting that such traditions have remained unchanged, a contrastive comparison with ritual procedures that are still carried on in contemporary India might be relevant to highlight some particularities of gender-reveal parties in North America. For instance,*sīmantonnayana*, "the ritual parting of the hair of the pregnant wife," is performed in the fourth or fifth month of pregnancy, with an expiatory and purifying purpose. It is "designed to confer prosperity on the wife" and protect the pregnant woman and the fetus against harm that could be caused by certain possessing demonesses (Smith, 2008). Other rituals serve more specific purposes and also focus more on the fetus than on the one who bears the fetus. For instance, among the Vaikhānasa Brahmin community of South India (see Hüsken, 2009), the *viṣṇubali* (literally the offering, *bali*, to god Viṣṇu) is performed in order to mark the child as a devotee of Viṣṇu while still *in utero*, in a context where eligibility to the priesthood is hereditary. In this ritual, heated metal emblems of the god are applied to two dabs of rice porridge to imprint the marks of Viṣṇu on the surface. The pregnant woman then eats these two small portions of food. Though there is ample space and flexibility for adaptation, with unavoidable variations in both performance and interpretation, a strong demand for "re-inventing rites of passage" (Grimes, 2002) around pregnancy and childbirth is unlikely to emerge where suitable ones already are available or even compulsory.

This succinct comparison with contemporary India can further point to another condition which is relevant to why and how the gender-reveal party has emerged. In spite of the wide accessibility of ultrasound technology in India, a ritual centered on disclosing [p. 495] fetal sex during pregnancy probably could not take place there as it does in North America, in part because this would be proof of an illegal retrieval and disclosure of information. In 1994, the Indian government passed the Prenatal Diagnostic Techniques Act to make sex-determination and sex-selective abortion illegal. In spite of this, the imbalance of the sex ratio persists in India, where cultural, religious, and economic factors motivate the preference for sons. Such pressures are at work even within specific sections of South Asian

communities in the diaspora (see Puri et al., 2011, for a study of this national and international demographic sex ratio imbalance). This phenomenon is documented in other contexts as well.[18]

That the parents restrain themselves from *showing* gender preference, before and after the birth, indicates their participation in the performance of good parenthood in 21st-century North American society: a child must be loved unconditionally. The sex of the fetus is not a medically, morally or socially valid motive for terminating a pregnancy (except in some rare cases of genetic diseases). Where gender-reveal parties take place, parents are expected to rejoice for a child of whichever sex it will be. In other words, only parents who are ready to celebrate the gender-reveal, regardless of the outcome, will organize a gender-reveal party. This, of course, does not suppress potential feelings of gender preference, but only hinders their public expression. While access to information provided by the ultrasound constitutes the first technical and legal condition for the emergence of a ritual centered on the disclosing of fetal sex, the second condition is that of an unconditional acceptance of the gendered outcome of the pregnancy.

Concluding Remarks

The gender-reveal party has emerged in a North American context where it does not compete with other pregnancy rituals deeply rooted in religious tradition. This absence of a well-established liturgy allows for future parents to be creative when they take it upon themselves to organize a festive event centered around the disclosure of the sex of a gestating fetus. Planning a ritual through online resources that serve as a potential ritual script is the first option available to parents in our participative, media-saturated age. In the space left void both by medical and by religious institutions, future parents reclaim, divert and creatively combine two technologies, or at least, their results and uses, for ritual purposes: ultrasound imagery on the one hand, and online communication technology on the other.

Though established – but still flexible – patterns are already emerging, variations and ritual creativity are at play to make each gender-reveal party different and uniquely customized. The varied but coherent scripts of the gender-reveal party reveal a shift towards the individual and the personal, in contrast with the technocratic medical protocols of routine prenatal examinations done in standardized settings. The party's fun atmosphere is in sharp contrast to the medical environment that provides parents with the information necessary for the gender-reveal: an accurate prediction, easily accessible through the ultrasound. The combination of certified knowledge with the tension between secrecy and disclosure, which produces an effect of surprise, makes the gender-reveal party an increasingly popular ritual in contemporary North America.

[p. 496] In the same measure in which "the ultrasound session is both a private experience […] and a semipublic out-ing of the inner body" (Kroløkke, 2011: 18), the gender-reveal party contributes to blurring distinctions between private/public and individual/collective continuums. The gender-reveal party makes public and visible what is usually considered a very private business: making and having a baby, experiencing pregnancy, becoming a parent. It reminds us that while some aspects of pregnancy are still hidden or confined to the sphere of the medical examinations, other aspects have moved from being individually private to being collectively shared, mediatized, and ritualized.

Though they may remain illegal or inaccessible for a while, technological possibilities for earlier prediction or selection of fetal sex are being developed. Similarly, social media and other online platforms are likely to innovate and offer new possibilities for online communication and for display of one's identity online, including a maternal one. While such options will sooner or later become available to a greater number of future parents, it is difficult to guess which precise forms, if any, new ritualization during pregnancy might take. Desired and visible fetuses will probably still be the objects of celebration if

the demand for new ritualization persists. It is safe to assume that new rituals taking place during pregnancy will also follow precise but flexible patterns, just like the gender-reveal party, and that they will take place outside of the realm of medical technology, not *in* it, but *thanks to* it, while their performance and dissemination will inevitably be mediatized.

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Notes

1. Within a decade, the error rate of ultrasound prediction fell from 3 to 0.3 per cent (see Harrington et al., 1996; and Van der Hof et al., 2007: 637–638). The accuracy of prediction mostly depends on the ability and experience of the sonographer to retrieve and read the images. Sampling cell-free fetal DNA obtained from the mother's blood as early as seven weeks of gestation is another noninvasive method for determining fetal sex that has recently been made (selectively) available.

2. The scope of this article focuses on a predominantly North American phenomenon. Baby showers and, increasingly, mother blessings are common in the US, in Canada and in the [p. 497] UK, whereas in continental Europe gifts for the baby usually are offered *after* birth and there is no widespread equivalent to the baby shower.

3. Generally, there is a reluctance to associate children and pregnancy with any allusion to sexuality (even if most pregnancies result from sexual intercourse). I found only one example of an invitation to a "sex reveal party," featuring the image of a pair of underwear with the caption "Not that kind of party! Don't be gross!" The pun is intended. In their blog, the parents who hosted the party specify: "Don't get worried folks, it's not that kind of party! We thought it would be fun to make a surprise out of the revealing of our baby's sex." See: http://gluedtoglory.blogspot.ca/2011/09/sex-party-aka-gender-reveal-party.html (retrieved 15 July 2014).

4. Though technically possible, I could not find one case of a future father hosting a gender-reveal party alone, in the absence of the pregnant partner. In most cases, the couple is performing the rite (with their child/ren, if they already are parents).

5. *The New Yorker* 88(40): 79.

6. I follow the example of sociologist Deborah Lupton whose Pinterest boards on topics such as "sociology of the unborn" or "medicine as culture," etc., can be viewed at: http://www.pinterest.com/dalupton/ (accessed 30 July 2014).

7. Although each country has its own norms, medical specialists consider anywhere between 37 and 40 weeks of amenorrhea to be the normal length of a pregnancy. Norms concerning the number and the dates of ultrasound examinations undergone during a "normal pregnancy" vary by country. The ultrasound is part of a routine pregnancy examination in North America (at least for those who can access this type of prenatal care).

8. As Morgan contends, "the category of 'fetal bodies' is problematic in part because the collective capacity to see them critically is being worn down under pressure from onslaught of (often) gorgeous and glamorized imagery" (Morgan, 2011: 333).

9. On 4 January 2013, ABC News also reported on "sonogram parties," relaying not only the future parents' point of view, but also the perspective of medical specialists concerned about this new phenomenon. (See Donaldson, 2013, "Sonogram Parties are Popular, but Doctors Frown on Practice," in the References section.)

10. See: http://solovelycreations.blogspot.ca/2010/08/baby-gender-reveal-party.html (accessed 30 July 2014).

11. Ultrasound images are often kept as keepsakes and can be turned into objects that are not only seen and shown, but also worn (as in the case of the maternity shirt customized with the ultrasound picture), touched and manipulated (such as a real-size sculpture of the fetus, a framed picture, a key ring). Images and objects used as items for the gender-reveal gesture present many similarities with the "fetish baby things" that are kept by parents in cases of pregnancy loss (Llayne, 2000).

12. See the "reflections on fetal life" by philosopher Bertha Alvarez Manninen (2010: 41–51), who discusses the "challenge facing pro-choice advocates […] to simultaneously defend the abortion right and […] display adequate respect of fetal life, acknowledging in the process the serious and sad occasion that a procured abortion can be" (p. 48). In discourses by anti-abortion activists and in those by pro-abortion rights advocates, and in certain feminist discourses, a common argument is that perinatal loss, through abortion or otherwise, seems to be more difficult to overcome nowadays because of the pervasiveness of ultrasound imagery.

13. In this heteronormative context, the current insistence that future fathers could and should attend their partner's ultrasound is informed by the theory of ultrasound bonding. According [p. 498] to Janelle Taylor, "the theory of ultrasound bonding […] links the pleasure that many women take in the sight of ultrasound imagery to the social and emotional emotions that take place in the course of pregnancy, thereby suggesting that ultrasound technology accelerates and improves upon the natural process by which pregnant women enter into a specifically maternal relationship to the fetus" (Taylor, 2008: 77). Taylor's observations about maternal bonding may certainly also be valid for paternal bonding to a desired and legitimate child. For both future parents, it is easier to imagine the future child, and one's role as mother or father if this child can be visualized not only as a genderless and generic baby, but also as a son or a daughter.

14. See above, note 9.

15. About the issues that may arise when filmed rituals that are meant to be "private" go "public" online, see Pasche Guignard (2011: 343–344).

16. See: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_nLD2QcQ_1M (accessed 30 July 2014).

17. Reinterpretations and appropriations by some (mostly evangelical) Christian groups of the (supposedly neo-pagan) blessing-way type of ritual might constitute an exception. These remain largely undocumented.

18. China is another contemporary example of demographic imbalance due to fetal selection on the basis of sex. For a study of the consequences of finding out the sex of the fetus before birth in Jordan, where gender preference (usually for male offspring) also is marked, see Al-Akour (2008).

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Collection of examples

See: https://www.pinterest.com/florencepg/gender-reveal-party (accessed 15 August 2015).