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The Unfolding of the Simulacrum

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In its current form of simulation, dominated by *techne* (τέχνη), the simulacrum is characterised by a standardisation process (Baudrillard, 1976); both in reality and, above all, in the imaginary, as a performing form the simulacrum forges the former from the latter (Secondulfo, 2007). This process has been underway for some time, and the removal of differences between the sexes is one of its most emphatic spheres of action. These differences and the different contributions to conception and birth made by the two sexes establish unavoidable diversity even in complementarity.

The simulacrum has been working at length to make all people interchangeable with identical copies, in accordance with the technological model that focuses on serialised production, whether imaginary or real. While the difference between the natural and the artificial lies in the differentiation that establishes individuality and makes individuals unique through death, the artificial modifies this essential characteristic of the natural: differences are eliminated and the copy kills off the original and thus, as a copy of copies, becomes immortal.

A good example can be found in architecture by comparing Gaudi's buildings with other nearby structures in Barcelona that were built at the same time. In the former, which were designed with nature in mind, no two elements are alike; like leaves on a tree, they look the same but each one is different and individual. Instead, in the latter (above all the Casa Batló), the serial element triumphs with a few always identical elements repeated incessantly and systematically. There is no individuality, or indeed death, and everything can be replaced by an identical copy. By contrast, there is no exact replica of a Gaudi

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tile and it can only be substituted, not replaced (as tiles were broken and then reassembled, the breakage made duplication impossible). The logic of the simulacrum envisages the implosion of differences, with τέχνη as a world of copies without originals. For some time, the male and female body have been converging with an implosion of sexual dimorphism, first and foremost in aesthetic terms, starting from clothing (unisex) and then aesthetics of the body. Through depilation, exercise, and diet, in aesthetic terms gender differences rely on the modelling of soft tissue, with skeletons all practically the same. Bodies are desexualised to eliminate the difference in the differences – the sexual realm.

Naturally, the final frontier of this implosion process is conception, the place in which sexual differences are rooted and assume a symbolic and mythical meaning. Technology is the artificial means of expression of the simulacrum. Initially, technology destroyed the symbolic substance of the male, the first aspect of difference to be struck by the wave of the simulacrum through assisted fecundation techniques, making the difference between bodies worthless for fecundation. The male has become no more than a sperm dispenser, worthless inasmuch as he can be substituted by a sperm bank with greater technical efficiency. This has irremediably undermined his symbolic sense, the element of meaning that was attributed by fecundation and birth. The simulacrum has demystified the male, and artificiality has dissolved his natural part along with the difference that established his meaning within the birth narrative with its great mythological value. Like all the strongholds of myth, such as religion, birth created a balance in its combination of male and female and synergized the diurnal and the nocturnal into a single narrative with a major symbolic impact in accordance with narratives found in the age-old imaginary of dozens of peoples. Think, for example, of the cycle of Isis and Osiris, the imaginary associated with the plough, the earth, the seasons and so on. In this dyad, which always generated the archetypal imaginary of the sexes, the male was the first aspect affected and overwhelmed. The symbolic depth of the male in the current imaginary has practically disappeared; it no longer even attracts criticism from feminism because you cannot attack what lacks substance.

Through artificiality, the secular dismantling (demystification) of the natural and its subsequent simulation using technology (a machine, a complex combination of machines etc.), the simulacrum has eroded the first part of the mythical substance of conception and birth (one of the two mythical poles of human life, as underlined by Paola Di Nicola in her article). It is currently working on the second aspect of the myth of conception: the female. In the dismantling and artificial reassembly of the birth process (conception, gestation, delivery), the female now only has the single foothold of pregnancy. However, its symbolic substance has already been strongly undermined by the incursion of the market into birth-related social practices such as surrogacy. Total

demystification is imminent with the invention of the artificial womb, thereby saturating the artificial nature of the birth process. The results are sperm and egg banks instead of male and female bodies, in vitro fertilisation, pregnancy in an artificial womb, and birth as a minor consequence rather than a founding event. At this point, the female will also dissipate in its symbolic guise as a container and transformation, and the founding event of many mythologies – as well as the first and most significant human difference – will lose its symbolic and mythical substance, as well as dissipating in terms of meaning.

With regard to the importance of uterine symbology in the establishment of the ‘high’ female imaginary, it might be useful to reflect on the state of the imaginary and the social and legal reactions triggered by the events surrounding surrogacy.

Let us consider the current situation.

Although the dissemination of one’s DNA is seen, for example by sociobiologists (Dawkins, 1976), as the essential lever of human reproductive behaviours and the fundamental characteristic of parenthood, the status of the real biological parents of a baby born by artificial insemination is wholly secondary; biological parents disappear behind the smokescreen of gamete banks and the market- or donation-based relationship. This clearly favours simulation, and from the outset eradicates the natural biological bond that might strip meaning and weight from the reproductive τέχνη.

After conception, we are left with gestation, for which there is not (yet) an artificial solution. The market and the commodity form come into play here, enabling a woman’s womb to be used only as a uterus in accordance with the mechanism of alienation typical of salaried work, removing the job from the person who carries it out.

Interestingly, the problem of the identity of the baby’s “real” mother does not arise for biological parents but for “gestational mothers”. There have not only been changes in opinion but also in legislation in order to maintain a relationship between the biological parents, the baby, and the family that hired the womb for the pregnancy.

All this suggests that the womb-container and its “digestive-transformative” process is the essential and substantive root of everything in the imaginary and the mythological foundations of the female. It is therefore this archetype which establishes the female as maternal; if the archetype weakens, it could dissipate in a similar manner to its male counterpart.

It should be noted that the couple purchasing the process on the market becomes the baby’s “real” parents by virtue of the commodity form and the related concept of ownership, even though they do not have any biological ties with the baby.

I do not believe that rituals such as baptism will be able to maintain the same air of mystery with regard to a wholly artificial event. With the male and female both dissipated, the simulacrum will have achieved one of its greatest results, eliminating one of the substantial differences in individuality by transforming human beings into undifferentiated, replaceable copies, drones and workers. How can the imaginaries related to the differences between the sexes survive if the last basic difference in the process of the birth of new lives disappears? We might look to the organisation of production in cognitive capitalism, in which differences are eliminated in an imaginary with equality between the sexes and undifferentiated meaning. If sperm and eggs are frozen, everything becomes interchangeable and equal, but in a negative way due to loss of meaning. This is the utopia of the Enlightenment in its depersonalised bureaucratic version with undifferentiated individuals. New imaginaries and new lines of meaning will probably emerge over time, but for the moment the overriding sense is one of loss. A mythical narrative of the process of birth will have to be reinvented, otherwise it will disappear from the symbolic narrative both at a collective and an individual level; this has already happened with death, which was removed from the narrative by the artificial, making even the moment itself uncertain. It will not be simple to reconstruct the mythical foundation that ancient narratives of rites of passage – related to nature – had consolidated over time. And without rites of passage, we know neither who nor where we are.

The symbology associated with the cycle of birth is already changing like the imaginaries. Instead of the plough and the soil in the narrative of the phallus and uterus, we now find the scalpel and (for now) the womb, and sperm and eggs in a pipette. The diurnal side of the process of birth has now become artificial. This has yet to happen to the nocturnal side, but it is easy to imagine an artificial womb-container substituting its natural counterpart. Birth will then no longer occur as a symbolic act, a dramatic rite of passage; it will be sufficient to remove the lid from the artificial uterus of the mother-machine.

Naturally, there will no longer be fathers and mothers. Indeed, this is already possible thanks to the current level of artificialisation in the birth cycle. Similarly, males and females will no longer exist except in terms of consumerism and, perhaps, eroticism. In any case, these will be subjective sexual orientations rather than stable elements of a narrative linked to the myth of birth. Above all, they will be removed from the sexual dimorphism associated with reproduction¹. As pregnancy can be outsourced thanks to its commodity form

¹ Uncoupled from artificial reproduction and therefore no longer connected to the union of male and female bodies, sexual dimorphism becomes not only useless but initially old and hostile, connected to the legacy of stereotypes and differences in

(Secondulfo, 2012), it is already possible to have a paid individual not involved in the relationship of the couple that will raise the baby: two parents, not a male and a female, who are entirely social and artificial in nature (eggs and sperm purchased from a bank in the northern hemisphere, fecundation in a clinic, again in the north, gestation – for the moment – in a womb in the southern hemisphere, and birth back in the north). With the element of mystery gone, the simulacrum of technology steps in, controlled by the commodity form. Naturally, the final product is expected to be perfect; in a technological process, everything is controlled and controllable with no spare room. In this way, mysteries become surprises, and any bad elements are eliminated as they are perceived as errors. With the mythical imaginary dissipated, parenthood becomes a social commitment supported only by the market (for the moment) or in the future by imaginaries and symbologies that are yet to come. In any case, there is an unstable relationship with the nature of birth, with the risk of an uncertain identity and hyper-investment in babies. As a product, the latter must be perfect as proof of the justness of the procedures and the legitimate entitlement of the parents. This is similar to proof of the grace of God, which for some Protestant sects can be inferred from the success of (blessed) earthly works, as Weber highlighted.

With the entire birth process now artificial and the air of mystery removed from its deep symbolic meaning, any difference between the sexes will also disappear, along with their complementary nature. Something needs to be invented that will save us from a world of drones and workers that are identical copies – also in aesthetic terms – of originals that have been lost, wishful machines facing the plethora of mirrors offered by consumerism.

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historically related models of behaviour in different societies. There are no longer ploughs and wombs, and the speed of the recursive change between social practice and imaginary is demonstrated by the media depiction of the sexual act: the traditional – at least in the West – “missionary position” is inverted for the moment in homage to feminist pressure, along with (symbolic) passivity, and will probably be transformed into undifferentiated horizontality.