

A black and white photograph showing the silhouette of a woman sitting on the floor against a white wooden wall. She is leaning back on her hands, with her legs crossed. The lighting is dramatic, highlighting the contours of her body against the bright background.

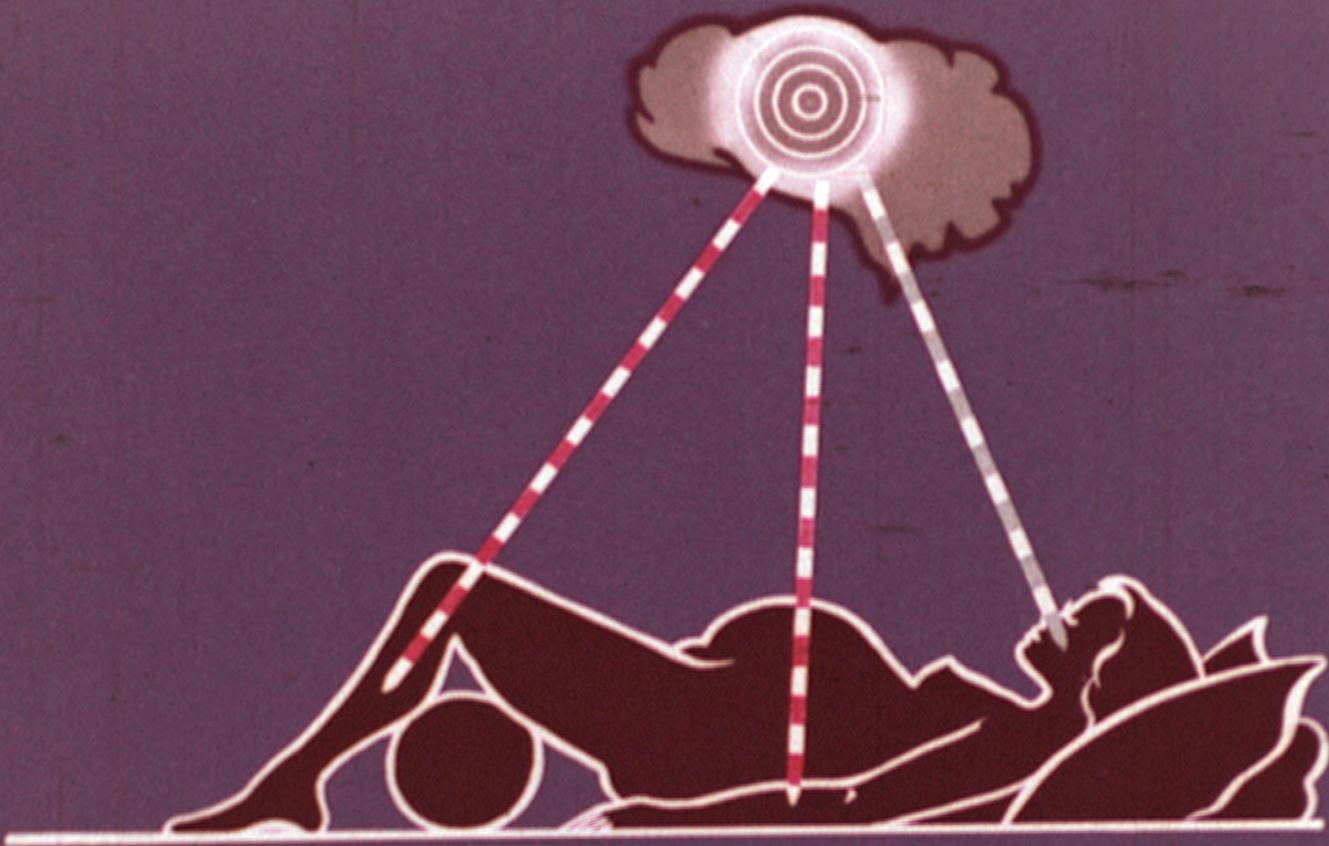
the **motherhood archives**

## PRESS KIT

a film by **irene luztig**

<http://www.motherhoodarchives.net>  
<https://www.facebook.com/themotherhoodarchives>  
[irene@komsomofilms.com](mailto:irene@komsomofilms.com)

91 minutes | 16mm film, HD Video, and archival materials |  
screening format HDCAM | English and French with English subtitles



## SYNOPSIS

Archival montage, science fiction, and an homage to 70s feminist filmmaking are woven together to form *THE MOTHERHOOD ARCHIVES*, a lyrical essay film excavating hidden histories of childbirth in the twentieth century that is by turns haunting, incisive, and wry. Assembling an extraordinary archive of over 100 educational, industrial, and medical training films (including newly rediscovered Soviet and French childbirth films) *THE MOTHERHOOD ARCHIVES* inventively untangles the complex, sometimes surprising genealogies of maternal education. From the first use of anesthetic ether in the 19th century to the postmodern 21st century hospital birthing suite, *THE MOTHERHOOD ARCHIVES* charts a fascinating course through the cultural history of pain, the history of obstetric anesthesia, and the little-known international history of the natural childbirth and Lamaze movements. Revealing a world of intensive training, rehearsal, and performative preparation for the unknown that is ultimately incommensurate with experience, *THE MOTHERHOOD ARCHIVES* is a meditation on the maternal body as a site of institutional control, ideological surveillance, medical knowledge, and nationalist state intervention. Finally, the film works as a feminist recuperation of obsolete maternal histories, as a visual analysis of the persistent disciplining of the pregnant / laboring body, and as a new, contemporary counter-archive of women's experiential narratives.

# the motherhood archives

## DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

When I learned I was pregnant with my son six years ago, one of the first things I did was to begin salvaging old, discarded educational films on ebay that had to do with pregnancy, childbirth, and motherhood. As a filmmaker who works intensively with archival materials, thinking historically, ideologically, and visually through found moving image materials is the way that comes most naturally for me to work through whatever it is that I'm thinking about in a given moment and to make sense of things that feel complex.

Over several years of buying on ebay and working in historical archives I've slowly amassed an unusual and fascinating collection of maternal training films - films that teach women how to be pregnant, give birth, and look after babies, as well as training films for obstetricians and health care professionals and a handful of home movies. The archival materials generate the questions that have shaped my project: how is a mother formed, and what are the societal expectations and norms that shape that formation process? When and how did we come to understand that mothering and childbirth are teachable skills? How are social, medical, and national notions of maternity, childbirth, and labor pain produced? Where does our discourse of the "natural" come from, and how does that discourse in turn generate our narratives of maternal success and failure? What are the values and ideologies of maternity? How are they historically determined and how have they changed? From my reflections on my private archive-collecting project *THE MOTHERHOOD ARCHIVES* emerged. By charting the histories embedded in my archive of over 100 training films, my film traces a thread through a tangled and complicated genealogy of institutionally mediated motherhood and childbirth.

I've now been working on this film for nearly six years, and in the process I've learned a lot about just how strongly and deeply these subjects - motherhood and childbirth - are fraught: a holy cow for many, many people. Some people (women especially) really like my film, but it also makes a lot of people (women especially) deeply uncomfortable. At first this surprised me very much - it's a small, quiet, reflective film about history and educational films - but I've now seen these reactions again and again and have come to expect them. When childbirth is presented in a way that is speculative, historical, open-ended, analytical, and sometimes clinical, it seems to unnerve or create an anxious viewing space. Viewers often seem unhappy that the film refuses reassuring platitudes about the miracle of childbirth... or reproachful that they don't understand what my "message" is about the "right" way to give birth / be a mother (which strikes me as ironic, since the whole project of the film is to make a space where we can ask questions about that kind of language and where it comes from). These reactions confirm and strengthen my belief that we desperately need to create new conversational spaces to address childbirth and maternity with more complexity. My hope is that my project might be the beginning of such a conversation.

*THE MOTHERHOOD ARCHIVES* is the second in a series of interconnected audiovisual works exploring the social and historical construction of motherhood - both as a complex set of culturally specific historiographic ideologies and as an equally complex set of lived and embodied personal experiences. The first work in this series, a participatory web-based art project called *The Worry Box Project* was launched in 2011 and can be viewed online at <http://worryboxproject.net>

# BIOGRAPHY



IRENE LUSZTIG is a filmmaker, media archeologist, and amateur seamstress. Her film and video work mines old images and technologies for new meanings in order to reframe, recuperate, or reanimate forgotten and neglected histories. Using hybrid formal strategies and combining visual textures (including digital video, Super 8 and 16mm film, and found / archival materials) her work investigates the production of personal, collective, and national memories.

Born in England to Romanian parents, Irene grew up in Boston and has lived in France, Italy, Romania, China, and Russia. She received her BA in filmmaking and Chinese studies from Harvard and completed her MFA in film and video at Bard College. Her debut feature film, *Reconstruction* (2001) was recognized with a Boston Society of Film Critics Discovery award and won best documentary at the New England Film Festival. Her work has been screened around the world, including at MoMA, Museum of Fine Arts Boston, Anthology Film Archives, Pacific Film Archive, IDFA Amsterdam, and on television in the US, Europe, and Taiwan. She has received grants from the Massachusetts Foundation for the Humanities, Massachusetts Cultural Council, LEF Foundation, and New York State Council for the Arts and has been awarded fellowships at the MacDowell Colony, the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study, and Harvard's Film Study Center. She teaches filmmaking at UC Santa Cruz where she is Assistant Professor of Film and Digital Media; she lives in the Santa Cruz Mountains.

# the **motherhood archives**

## DIRECTOR FILMOGRAPHY

### *MATERNITY TEST (2014)*

Producer /director, writer, camera, editing  
(13 min, HD video, single channel loop)

2014            NM/Santiago (New Maternalisms III). Museum of  
Contemporary Art, Santiago, Chile; June-August 2014

### *THE MOTHERHOOD ARCHIVES (2013)*

Producer /director, writer, camera, editing  
(91 min, HD video, 16 mm, and archival film)

#### *Awards:*

Best Feature Film, Women Media Arts and Film Festival, Sydney, Australia  
(2013)

2014            RIDM Montréal International Documentary Festival, "Against  
The Grain" (November)  
Clinton Street Theater, Portland, Oregon, cinema screening  
(June)  
FemCine Muestra Magallanes, Puerto Natales, Chile (May)  
Cambridge University, Cambridge UK, (May)  
King's College, London (May)  
Athens International Film and Video Festival, Athens, OH  
(April)  
FemCine Festival Cine de Mujeres, Santiago, Chile (March)  
The Little Theater, Rochester, NY, cinema screening (March)  
Museum of Motherhood, New York, NY (March, conference  
presentation)  
University of Lisbon, Institute of Social Sciences (March)  
Other Cinema, San Francisco, CA, microcinema screening  
(March)  
Big Muddy Film Festival, Carbondale, IL (February)  
New Parkway Theater, Oakland, CA, cinema screening (Feb)  
MotherStrike!, Vilnius, Lithuania (January)

2013            Women Media Arts and Film Festival, Sydney, Australia (Dec.,  
festival opening)  
Porto Underground Film Festival, Porto, Portugal (November)  
London Underground Film Festival, London UK (November)

Santa Cruz Film Festival, Santa Cruz, CA, November 2013  
Antimatter Film Festival, Victoria, BC, (October, word festival premiere)  
The Photographers Gallery, London, UK; "Home Truths" show, (October)  
Capilano University, Women's Studies and Film Departments, Vancouver, Canada, (October)  
Schlesinger Library on the History of Women in America Film Series, September 2013  
San Francisco State University, Department of Women and Gender Studies  
Bowdoin College, Gender and Women's Studies Department  
Colby College, inaugural event in Women's, Gender and Sexuality Studies  
UCSC Center for Documentary Arts and Research and Anthropology Department co-sponsored screening of The Motherhood Archives  
Reimagining Birth Symposium, University College Dublin, Ireland, July 2013

#### **THE WORRY BOX PROJECT (2011)**

interactive / participatory web-based video  
project URL: <http://www.worryboxproject.net>

#### *Selected Exhibition History:*

- |      |  |
|------|--|
| 2014 | Complicated Labors; group show at UC Santa Cruz Sesnon Gallery, February 2014<br>Curated in MIT Docubase interactive documentary archive     |
| 2013 | Published in <i>Studies in the Maternal</i> Volume 5, Issue 2, 2013, <a href="http://www.mamsie.bbk.ac.uk/">http://www.mamsie.bbk.ac.uk/</a> |
| 2012 | Presented at iDocs interactive documentary conference, Bristol, UK   |
| 2011 | Curated in IDFA DocLab interactive documentary archive   |

#### **THE SAMANTHA SMITH PROJECT (2005)**

Producer /director, writer, camera, editing  
(51 min., digital video/Super 8)

#### *Selected Exhibition History:*

- |      |  |
|------|--|
| 2009 | reWIND 1989 film series, Romanian Cultural Institute, Stockholm, Sweden                                  |
| 2007 | Free Speech TV (Satellite Broadcast)<br>The Tank, New York, NYC<br>Bard College, Annandale-on-Hudson, NY |
| 2006 | Chicago Underground Film Festival  |

New European Film Festival, Vitoria, Spain  
 Pioneer Theater, New York City (repertory / theatrical  
 screening)  
 New Haven Women in Film Festival, New Haven, CT  
 Brooklyn Underground Film Festival  
 Maine Women and Girls Film Festival  
 New York Underground Film Festival  
 Boston Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, MA  
 2005 IDFA Amsterdam International Documentary Festival, Silver  
 Wolf Competition

### **RECONSTRUCTION (2001)**

Producer /director, writer, camera, editing  
 distributed by Women Make Movies  
 (90 min., digital video/Super 8 / 16 mm)

#### *Awards:*

Boston Society of Film Critics "Rediscoveries / Discoveries" Award (2001)  
 Best Documentary, New England Film Festival (April 2002)  
 Golden Gate Award, San Francisco International Film Festival (April 2002)

#### *Selected Exhibition History:*

2014 University of Oxford, Oxford, UK  
 2010 Pacific Film Archive, Berkeley, CA  
 Romanian Cultural Institute, Bucharest, Romania (national  
 premiere)  
 2009 Romanian Cultural Institute Film Festival, Stockholm, Sweden  
 2008 The Jewish Channel, cable TV broadcast  
 2006 Puffin Foundation Cultural Forum, Teaneck, NJ  
 2004 ARTE (France and Germany) public television international  
 broadcast  
 2003 Haifa International Film Festival  
 Berlin Jewish Film Festival  
 Toronto Jewish Film Festival  
 Independent Film Festival of Boston  
 Fribourg International Film Festival, Switzerland  
 Wisconsin Film Festival, Madison, WI  
 Cleveland International Film Festival  
 Boston University Non-fiction Film Festival  
 Director's View Film Festival, Norwalk, Connecticut  
 2002 Jerusalem Jewish Film Festival  
 MoMA Documentary Fortnight, New York  
 National Council of Jewish Women Jewish Women's Film  
 Festival  
 Vancouver International Film Festival  
 Atlanta Film Festival  
 Jerusalem Cinemateque Repertory Screening  
 Singapore International Film Festival

It's All True Documentary Film Festival, Sao Paolo and Rio de Janeiro  
Docaviv Documentary Festival, Tel Aviv  
2001 IDFA Amsterdam International Documentary Festival, FIPRESCI nomination  
Boston Museum of Fine Arts

**FOR BEIJING WITH LOVE AND SQUALOR (1997)**

Producer /director, writer, camera, editing  
(58 min., hi8 video)

*Selected Exhibition History:*

2002 Vancouver International Film Festival  
1999 WYBE Philadelphia broadcast on "Through the Lens" documentary series  
Berlin Ethno Filmfest  
1998 PTS Taiwan Public Television broadcast  
Boston Museum of Fine Arts  
Ovarvideo, Portugal  
Taiwan International Documentary Festival  
Singapore International Film Festival

**CREMA ROZ (1996)**

Producer /director, writer, camera, editing  
(18 min., 16 mm film)

1997 Merit Certificate, Chicago International Film Festival

the **motherhood archives**

FILM CREDITS

Producer / director / researcher / writer /  
editor

**IRENE LUSZTIG**

Sound Design and Composition

**MAILE COLBERT**

Research Assistant

**JENNY LIM**

Associate Producer, Cambridge

**MINHAE SHIM**

Postproduction Assistant

**EMILY CHAO**

Camera / Sound

**IRENE LUSZTIG**

Additional Sound

**MINHAE SHIM / EMILY CHAO**

Field Producer, Berkeley

**KARA HEROLD**

French Translation and Subtitles

**IRENE LUSZTIG**

Archives Consulting

**REGINA LONGO**

Voiceover Recording Engineer

**WILL KAHN / PARADISE RECORDING**

Sound Mix

**MARK WHEATON, CATASONIC STUDIOS**

Color Correction

**JAMES HONAKER**

Tape Mastering  
**DIFFERENT BY DESIGN**

### **ARCHIVAL SOURCES**

National Library of Medicine Historical  
Audiovisuals Collection, Washington, D.C.  
Wellcome Library Moving Image and  
Sound Collection, London, UK  
Schlesinger Library on the History of  
Women in America, Cambridge, MA  
National Archives and Record  
Administration, Washington, D.C.  
ebay.com

### **ARCHIVAL TO DIGITAL TRANSFERS**

Colorlab, Rockville, MD  
Movette, San Francisco, CA  
Cinelab, New Bedford, MA  
TKone, London, UK

Footage from THE BIOLOGY OF  
CONCEPTION AND THE MECHANISM  
OF CONTRACEPTION (1942) used with  
permission  
from Planned Parenthood® Federation of  
America, Inc. ©PPFA. All rights reserved.

Footage from NURSERY TECHNIC AS  
USED AT THE CRADLE (1947) used with  
permission from The Cradle.

Still images courtesy of Wellcome Library  
and the Grantly Dick Read Estate

### **MUSIC**

"Her Light Dappled Upon"

Maile Colbert, from a score by Jez Riley  
French  
for THE ISOLDE SCORES  
Engraved Glass, 2010

"Mass Observation Theme (Variation)"  
Maile Colbert, original score for Rebecca  
Baron's HOW LITTLE WE KNOW OF OUR  
NEIGHBORS  
released on MOBOROSI  
Twenty Hertz, 2007

"Enveloped Petals"  
Maile Colbert and Chubby Wolf, from  
ENVELOPE PETALS  
Two Acorns, 2013

"Overture for That Day"  
Maile Colbert, from COME KINGDOM  
COME  
Two Acorns, 2013

"Benfica Water Window Moving"  
Maile Colbert, from FOR  
Intransitive Recordings, 2011

"Sari Waltz"  
Performed by Imperial Marimba Band  
Edison Blue Amberol  
Edison Record, 1917

"A Garden Dance"  
Performed by Imperial Marimba Band  
Edison Blue Amberol  
Edison Record, 1917

"Blue Rose Waltz"  
Performed by Jaudas' Society Orchestra  
Edison Blue Amberol  
Edison Record, 1918

Chopin Nocturne No. 2 in E Flat, Op. 9,  
No. 2  
Performed by Hans Kronold  
Edison Gold Moulded Record, 1907

wax cylinder transfers reused courtesy  
University of California, Santa Barbara  
Library

This film is indebted to writings and  
research on the histories of obstetrical  
anesthesia and childbirth  
by John D. Bell , Donald Caton, Paula  
Michaels, and Jacqueline Wolf

**PROJECT FUNDING**

Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study /  
Harvard Film Study Center  
Hellman Fellowship  
Arts Research Institute, UC Santa Cruz  
UC Santa Cruz Committee on Research  
Dean's Research Grant, UC Santa Cruz

☰

triplecanopy

---



19

THE MOTHERHOOD  
ARCHIVES  
IRENE LUSZTIG

>

Home movies, training films, government propaganda: a meditation on birth and motherhood in twentieth-century America, as told through maternal ephemera now buried in archives and sold on eBay.

Published on July 24, 2014

*The Motherhood Archives in Triple Canopy* - a companion audiovisual and written essay, published July 2014 [CLICK TO VIEW DIGITAL ESSAY](#)

  **All Things Considered** ☆  
Hosted by: Robert Siegel, Melissa Block, Audie Cornish  
00:09:01 | 03:00:00 ☆ ↓ ↻ HIDE ✕ [SUPPORT KCRW!](#)



## Episode 22: Breathing Exercises

This week the Organist explores sound design in two new documentaries, Irene Lusztig's *The Motherhood Archives* and Matt Wolf's *Teenage*.

LISTEN TO THIS EPISODE  
JUL 01, 2014

☆ ↓ ↻ [PLAY](#) 

### FROM THIS EPISODE

This week the Organist explores sound design in two new documentaries, Irene Lusztig's *The Motherhood Archives* and Matt Wolf's *Teenage*. The films each use a combination of archival footage and original music to convey the cultural constructions of two very separate stages of human development--birth and adolescence.

“Breathing Exercises” - *The Motherhood Archives* is featured on KCRW / The Organist's weekly podcast, July 2014: [CLICK TO LISTEN](#)

# **THE NEW INQUIRY FAMILY PLANNING**



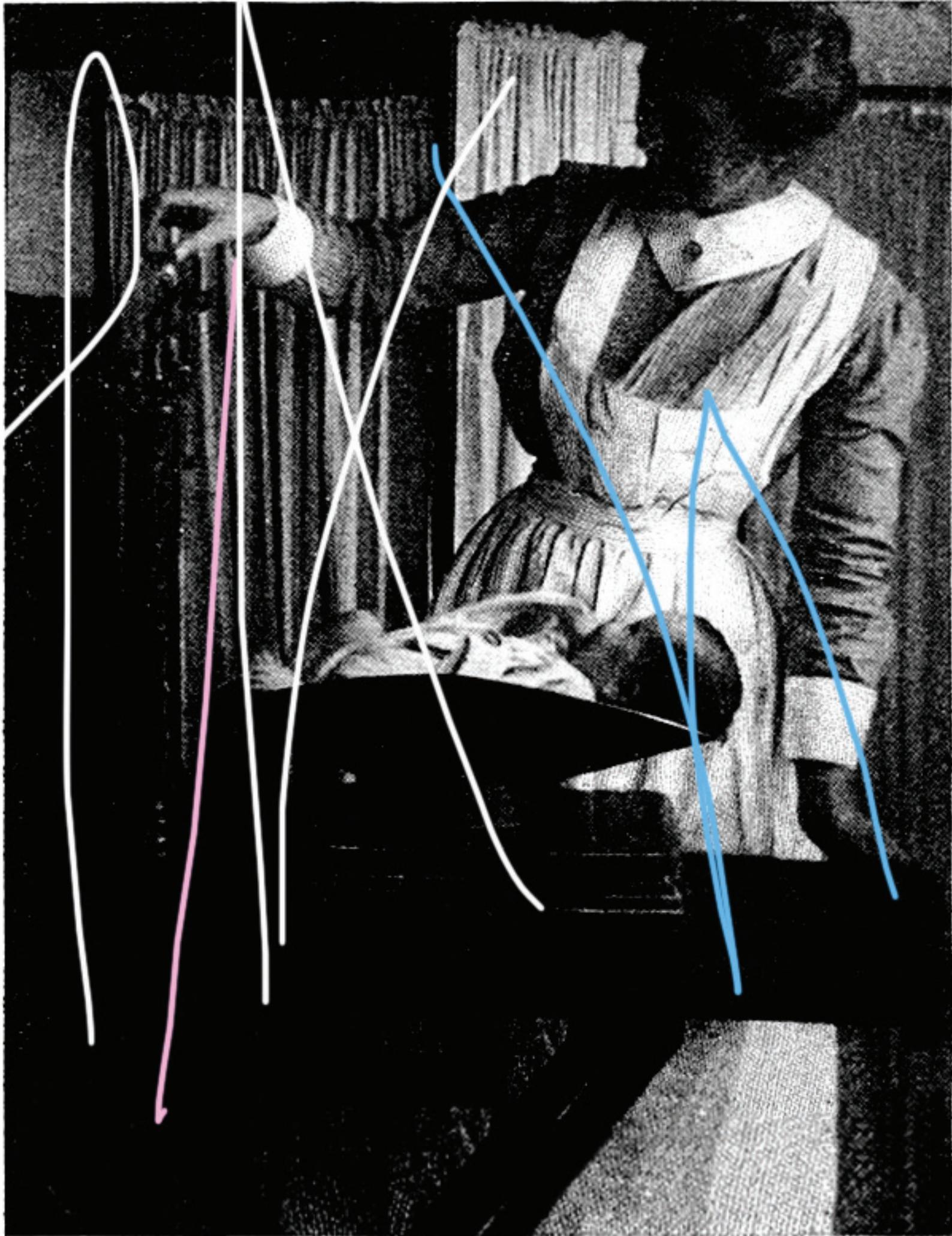


**THE NEW INQUIRY MAGAZINE**  
**FAMILY PLANNING**  
JULY, 2013 • ISSUE 18

**[THENEWINQUIRY.COM](http://THENEWINQUIRY.COM)**

**THE NEW INQUIRY MAGAZINE**  
**IS LICENSED UNDER A**  
**CREATIVE COMMONS LICENSE**  
**ICC-BY-NC-ND 3.01**

**NORMAN ROCKWELL, *DUMONT NETWORK*, 1950**  
**ALBERTO GIACOMETTI, *CUBIST HEAD*, 1933**



# The Birth of Motherhood

IRENE LUSZTIG *interviewed by* MAYA GONZALEZ

---

*It takes a lot of propaganda to make mothering seem natural*

**MAYA GONZALEZ:** *What is your project exactly—The Motherhood Archives?*

IRENE LUSZTIG: *The Motherhood Archives* is a history of childbirth. I would call it an ideological or institutional history of childbirth that repurposes a giant archive of maternal education, maternal-training films, industrial films, and medical-training films. These films are spaces of training and education for forming women as they become mothers, and I try to look historically at these films. Who's telling women how to give birth and how to be mothers and why? For me, it's been a way to think about childbirth and maternity using this deep history, to see it in a much bigger context and trace the history of the language and the ideas that we use to talk about these things.

The film project is almost all found

footage. It comes out of an archive of about a hundred and something training films that I've found in different places. Some are from eBay; some are from real archives. And out of that material I built a film that episodically looks at certain moments in time where childbirth is discussed in a new way, or the pain of childbirth is discussed in a new way.

***What was the reason you started this project? What's your background and how did it lead you to work on this archive?***

I got pregnant. I'm a filmmaker; I've worked a lot with propaganda and archives—my background is in communist, postcommunist stuff, and my previous work is a trilogy of films in China, Romania, and Russia that thinks through that set of historical questions and engagements, a lot of it through

propaganda material. I'm very attuned to propaganda. So when I was pregnant it became immediately, abundantly obvious to me that almost everything I was reading or seeing or being exposed to was telling me how to give birth or how to be pregnant or how to mother or look after my child. It was clear to me immediately that all of this is an intense space of propaganda.

I have a very archival and historical turn of mind. I wanted to know, What's the history of these conversations? Where is this coming from? Why is it such an intense space of ideology? So I started buying films on eBay. There's a lot of weird stuff kicking around on eBay. A lot of libraries now sell off their 16mm educational collections. After a year or so of doing that, I started going into the archives, and it started feeling like it could be a real project rather than a strange hobby. But it came out of an attempt to think through that experience of being pregnant and encountering spaces of maternal training.

*Did it change the way you perceived your own experience over those nine months? You were looking at things that are supposed to educate you, often in an autodidactic way, but ...*

I guess I was sort of self-educating in a weird way. I just found it helpful and reassuring to think through the intense ideological space of "the right way to give birth," "the right way to mother," "the right way to do this or that with your child." There's a constant idea that you're failing, you're doing it wrong—

so for me I just found it hugely reassuring to understand that these things are completely culturally bound, historically bound. There is no wrong way to give birth.

It both is and isn't a personal film in the end. The question of voice came up a lot in conversations. As I was showing the film as a work in progress, at different points it was more explicitly personal, in the first person, and people would disengage from the film by saying, "You must have had a really hard time with your pregnancy or your birth" or "You must be trying to work through some problem that you're having." I was really troubled by the "you, you, you" of that conversation, because this isn't about me.

*They don't even know you have a child.*

Right. Sure, I have a child, I'm part of this conversation, perhaps. But this isn't a piece of work about me. So I spent a lot of time struggling and puzzling through what kind of voice the film has, and I ended up with a sort of weird, transhistorical voice that the voice-over uses in the film.

*Can you tell me about that? There are times when you use the word "you," and then there are times that you use "we." I felt like the "we" pertained to a "we who are being educated." At the same time, the "we" was speaking to a community of women potentially "out there somewhere." Yet "you" would be used to address an individual consumer—someone who might purchase a series of related commodities. The contrast is striking: It's like the individual "you" is*

*separating “us” from being a “we.” And still “we” is always problematic.*

Yeah, yes. The “you” and the “we”—those films, the didactic films are constantly in the “you”: “You” will experience this, “you” will experience that. “You” will do this, “you” will be in the hospital, “you” will meet “your” doctor, “your” body can do this. So there are a couple of points in the film where it redeploys the “you” voice, but most of the time it’s this “we.” I did think of the “we” as like the woman who is being educated. It’s the voice that responds to the “you” voice.

The question of who’s included haunts every conversation about feminism. It was very deliberate to not use “I.” It’s not a film about me. I’m certain it’s about me on some level, or made for personal reasons, but the voice of the film is not “my” voice.

*What has making the film revealed, and what are the things that surprised you?*

The history of Lamaze surprised me. Lamaze is a very clear case study of how childbirth is propagandized. It exposes how it’s so clearly spoken about in a completely different way as it moves from Soviet Russia to France to the U.S. I was amazed to learn that there was this whole Marxist discourse of labor pain, which I hadn’t known about. And as Lamaze leaves this kind of Socialist-Marxist labor system and moves to the U.S., that language is completely erased—but it’s still the same techniques. It lays bare the way that these things are undergirded by nationalist ideologies, state ideologies.

I guess the most important discover-

ies I found were histories of obstetrics and obstetrical anesthesia. I was trying to think through how we’ve thought about pain at different points in time because that’s a really fraught space.

And twilight sleep was probably the most interesting discovery of the project. Twilight sleep is a moment in the teens where internationally, wealthy women began traveling to Germany to a clinic where there’s a drug protocol given to laboring women, an almost homeopathic dose of morphine that doesn’t really take the pain away in any significant way, coupled with scopolamine which induces amnesia. So the experience of laboring in twilight sleep may be intensely painful, but the women forget it as they’re experiencing it. The interesting thing historically about twilight sleep is that it became a real activist cause in the U.S., and the activists who were supporting and trying to bring it to the U.S. were all feminists and suffragettes. So the early 20th century history of women being really strong advocates for medicalized childbirth, for hospital birth, for drugs, for anesthesia, is an interesting forgotten history.

*What was the position for advocating twilight sleep? Was it for equality, mainly?*

That the pain of labor is an abject experience of very intense pain. The language that’s used in these books and articles that feminists wrote advocating twilight sleep is basically human-rights discourse: Society has the obligation to give us women this thing that will take away this devastating pain that we

experience. It's a human-rights discourse of equality for women in the form of pain relief. Which is incredibly interesting set next to today's feminist conversation which is all about natural unmedicated childbirth being the correct, feminist way of giving birth. For me that was a discovery.

*It seems like feminists had to deal with this antinomy between "we" as equals to men in order to obtain equal rights, and at the same time "we" must also advocate for difference. Childbirth is something that would clearly be a "difference" in this regard and yet is a socially constructed difference in relation to rights. I guess what I'm trying to say is that your film is really good at demonstrating that the seemingly natural is historical.*

And even that word is so problematic—that there is a natural and therefore also an unnatural way of giving birth. That medication is unnatural, that pain is natural. It creates a whole structure of thinking.

*But also, that pain is unnatural—that if one were to accept a natural childbirth, one would not experience pain.*

It's very complicated.

*But there's a number of different ways of opting out of pain or trauma, neutralizing it or through hypno-*

*sis, not experiencing it. In a social-historical way, this sort of loss can be re-experienced as repression that comes back. There seems to be somewhat of a theme within the archive of an attempt to repress that.*

I think the opposite of that is the discourse of natural childbirth. That it's empowering and self-actualizing for a woman to be fully present in that experience of pain, that that's a really desirable state. To me that's really problematic.

*Well, it's punishing.*

We're talking about incredibly intense pain! So I guess for me, one of the animating questions going into this project was, Is natural childbirth really that great? Is it empowering? Is it self-actualizing? I don't think women were always speaking that way about pain.

*The film makes clear that it is not at all natural, the experience of pain.*

What pain is is also very mysterious. The film starts where the history starts, and it could've gone back much further in history. But I chose to start the film in the late 19th century when anesthesia was discovered. Anesthesia comes into fashion, and that's the first moment where there's a conversation about pain because suddenly pain can be taken away. Pain is no longer inevitable but something you can choose to experience or choose not to experience.



That brings up all these really big questions about pain: Where does it come from? What does it mean? Is it wrong to take it away? There's an argument in 19th century medical discourse against anesthesia that says if you amputate a limb without anesthesia and a patient screams, that's really valuable information for a surgeon. Intense pain is important information for a doctor, and getting rid of it is a huge problem for medical practice.

We've all moved very far away from that moment, but it's the first moment where there can be this conversation. If you can take pain away, what is the point of it?

The film doesn't go into this that much, but this early conversation about pain is a very Christian conversation. There's centuries and centuries of thinking and writing about labor pain, which is that it originates with God's punishment of Eve. Grantly Dick-Read is the British obstetrician who coined the term *natural childbirth* and wrote the first books about it. His writing is a very explicitly Christian appeal to the experience of being inside the pain as a form of spirituality. It's a Christian thing to do. That history has also been erased. It's kind of ironic that the space feminists occupy now is a redeployment of this

incredibly Christian and misogynist argument about women's bodies.

*The film also tells a narrative about the commodification and marketization of of childbirth, culminating in these birthing centers. You say that in these centers "the messiness of birth is excised from this perfectly appointed home away from home. The image of the cache of medical supplies behind the domestic facade is the image of an era in conflict; an unresolved historical moment suspended between two ideas." What is that unresolved historical moment?*

The birth center is this phenomenon that's on the rise where hospitals are building this kind of—it looks like a Super 8 Motel or something. I first saw a birth center when I was on a hospital tour. I was pregnant and it immediately struck me as this incredibly weird unresolved, compromised space that's trying to be home, but it's not home. It's homey, and homey is signified

by chintz bedspread and floral art. So it's not a home birth, it's a home-like birth. They have all this furniture where they've hidden equipment behind mirrors and picture frames.

The effort to erase the trace of the medical, erase the idea of pain ... it's

**The space feminists  
now occupy is a  
redeployment of this  
Christian and misogynist  
argument about  
women's bodies**

this kind of neutral hotel-like space, but the whole thing is that it's in a hospital, or it's next to the hospital, so you can go to the hospital if you have an emergency. It's a very uneasy space of negotiating these two different ideologies or discourses around childbirth. It does feel like a space that's very uncomfortable, where all the emergency equipment is there, but it's behind a picture of Monet's water lilies.

*There was something so right about that image as saying something in particular about the way in which the home is brought within this unnatural sterilized space and then renaturalized.*

It's such an unnatural home, right? Nobody's home actually looks like that.

*You continue in that passage, "The archive tells us that childbirth is both natural and pathological: two opposite things inside of one that intertwine through history."*

People have asked me about the word *pathological*. People think of that as a very bad word, but it comes directly out of earlier writings about childbirth. There's a huge body of writing from the mid-20th century that precisely describes childbirth as pathological or a pathological process, a destructive process. It comes out of doctors struggling with incredibly high maternal mortality rates and high infant-mortality rates, incredibly high rates of vaginal tearing and bad maternal side-effects from birth, prolapse and all these things that still happen, actually.

Joseph DeLee, who was a big obstetrician in Chicago in the 1920s and '30s—he uses the word. His basic position is that childbirth is pathological, it's a medical situation, it's one that requires intervention, it's one that requires doctors. That position is really rejected now, especially in this pro-natural childbirth space, but it's complicated. There are still women who die in childbirth, there are still things that happen that require medical intervention; the birth center is straddling the precise intersection of that really uneasy in-between space of not wanting to be aware of the medical, but it's still there hidden. It's true that there are also a lot of unnecessary C-sections. I don't know what the statistics are, but there's probably equal numbers of medical C-sections that save babies and save mothers, so I think disavowing this completely in a conversation about childbirth is problematic.

*It was interesting to me also as a luxury experience.*

Well, class is the other thing that we haven't talked about, but all of this is incredibly class-bound.

*I think it's class-bound, and it's to give this middle-class experience. You bring out the normative fantasy: It's not exactly just for the middle class, and at the same time it's—It's an aspirational experience.*

*Yeah, or like a honeymoon experience.*

You give birth, and you have the celebration meal afterward! ■



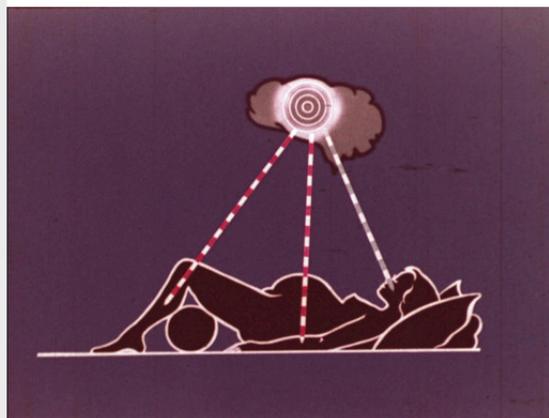
March 17, 2014

by Maile Colbert

In Acoustic Ecology, Aesthetics, Archival, Digital Media, Documentary, Field Recording, Gender, Interview, Listening, methodology, Movies/Film, Sound Studies, Technology, The Body

2 Comments

## Sound Designing Motherhood: Irene Lusztig & Maile Colbert Open The Motherhood Archives



A Conversation Article in Chat with Irene Lusztig, Director of *The Motherhood Archives* and Sound Designer Maile Colbert

ISSN 2333-0309

\*Indexed by the Modern Language Association Bibliography



### RECENT POSTS

Brasil Ao Vivo: The Sonic Pleasures of Liveness in Brazilian Popular Culture

Sounding Out! Podcast #33: Flawless

Blog-O-Versary #Flawless 5.0!

The Musical Flow of Shane Carruth's *Upstream Color*

Learning to Listen Beyond Our Ears:

**“Sound Designing Motherhood” - Irene Lusztig and Sound Designer Maile Colbert in conversation in sound studies blog *Sounding Out!* (March 2014)**

**[CLICK FOR DIGITAL VERSION WITH AUDIO / VIDEO](#)**

In 2011 filmmaker Irene Lusztig contacted me about designing sound and composing for her film project, *The Motherhood Archives*. Irene had spent several years buying discarded educational films on eBay and working in historical archives to amass an unusual and fascinating collection of archival films aimed at teaching women how to be pregnant, give birth, and look after babies. *The Motherhood Archives* uses this extraordinary archival treasure trove to form a lyrical essay film excavating hidden histories of childbirth in the twentieth century, illuminating our changing narratives of maternal success and failure, and raising questions about our social and historical constructions of motherhood.

I was immediately intrigued by her concept and construction process as well as her desire to work with sound design in a very collaborative manner at an earlier stage in the project than most filmmakers would. Geographically distant, Irene and I mostly worked by “satellite,” using email, chat, Skype, phone, and file sharing software to communicate and send files. We did manage to have a few production weeks in New York and Santa Cruz, but the majority of the work was woven back and forth across an ocean and continent...California to Lisbon, Portugal, West Coast to West Coast. Rather than hindering, this method lent itself to an exquisite corpse nature to the work. In the creation of this article we followed much the same process, using an initial Gmail chat.

**Maile Colbert (MC):** So, I’m both shy and excited about asking this... why me, Irene?

**Irene Lusztig (IL):** I had heard your work in both Adele Horne’s film [*The Tailenders*, 2005] and Rebecca Baron’s [*How Little We Know of Our Neighbors*, 2005], both films with beautiful sound. The sound in *How Little We Know of Our Neighbors* in particular does something with natural / unnatural that I was really interested in – field recordings that somehow become other kinds of things as they are layered, transformed, and processed. I think of myself as a documentary maker / artist who is invested in actuality, but not very invested in traditional documentary form, and I think your sound has similar investments and disinvestments. It begins with the sounds of the real world but takes those sounds to very unexpected places that are often quite far from their original context.

**MC:** I love that you brought up the “natural/unnatural.” It not only really describes well my work and approach in general, but also the experience we get in your film with mediated motherhood. We would often talk about certain sections being very science fiction...then you think, wow, this really happened, this is part of a history that led up to our experience now, and one I’m currently having, having recently become pregnant for the first time!

**IL:** I think there is a lot to say about science fiction and sound! First, there is a great tradition of feminist science fiction that I feel like our work is very connected to: Margaret Atwood, Ursula Le Guin, and even stuff like Shulamith Firestone’s futuristic vision of external uteruses. A lot of that work has in common a willingness to “make strange” or denaturalize aspects of female reproduction and mothering in ways that feel radical.

**MC:** I'm not sure if I was able to contain my excitement when you first mentioned a section felt sci-fi to you. This is something that I think has a root back in my childhood. My father was and is an obsessive science fiction film watcher: I grew up with a soundtrack of *The Day the Earth Stood Still* and *Lost in Space*. These soundscapes that "weren't" became such a part of what I wanted to listen to.

**IL:** I always thought I had no interest in science fiction when I was younger, but I think growing a human inside my own body probably shifted my relationship to that! I think science fiction is almost always expressing our anxieties about the future, about our technologies, about things that we struggle to control. And of course questions and anxieties about trying and failing to control things are completely at the heart of our experiences with pregnancy, birth, and learning to be new mothers in the 21st century. As are questions around technological mediations that we feel ambivalent about, whether it's fertility technologies, medicalized birth technologies, or things like baby monitors or worrying about whether the iPad is rewiring your baby's brain. So science fiction feels like a sonic space that totally makes sense for negotiating these maternal anxieties.

**MC:** One of our biggest struggles was trying to make sure things weren't too dark for the audience.

**IL:** People often respond with anxiety to the film and its sound design. I've never before made a film where the sound comes up so often in post-screening discussions, and generally the question is something like "why is the sound so dark / scary / anxiety-provoking?" It seems very specific to the subject of *The Motherhood Archives* – how anxious we are societally about the whole topic, and also how uncomfortable we are being open about these anxieties.

**MC:** I'm still shocked at how shocked I am when I realize how some people react to this film, how uncomfortable they are. U.S. society seems just as afraid of birth as death in this manner! We speak of each in such a similar way and we're not allowed the complexity of, for example, being simultaneously anxious about how this will affect our careers and identity, and how in love we are when we hear that heartbeat!

**IL:** Do you think of yourself as a feminist artist? I ask because becoming a mother (and making art about motherhood) has made me much more aware of myself as a feminist artist.

**MC:** I absolutely consider myself a feminist– it’s woven into every part of my life and my work. I’m also beginning to feel this in a new way with the pregnancy: I recently lost a gig I was really looking forward to because there was an assumption that I couldn’t do it somehow because I was pregnant. A recent interviewer asked me about how I navigate motherhood and my work, and I couldn’t help consider that this question would never come up with a male artist.

My recent recordings of my future daughter growing and moving have been wonderful to listen to: watery and subdued, you still feel like you’re only getting a little of her sonic world, so mysterious. But it reminds me of when I was a child – in any body of water I loved to dive down to the bottom, let go of my breath and just rest there as long as I could...it was an ultimate peace. I loved the visual perspective of the world above me, but most loved the deep gentle filter of everything aural coming through this watery world. Some might argue that peace refers to our first soundscape experienced...and listening to my own active womb, it doesn’t seem far-fetched.

**IL:** There are a lot of watery sounds in the film! My friend Irene Gustafson made this great connection between all the water in the soundtrack and the voiceover passage in the twilight sleep section about how the “soothing sound of running water muffles newborn cries to prevent the formation of what are called islands of memory.” That description of water literally being used to erase memory allows all the water sounds throughout the film to become a metaphor for the erasure of historical memory... the fact that we no longer remember the historical moment where feminists were advocates for anesthetic drugs and medicalized childbirth, for instance...the many ways that the histories in the film are now forgotten.

**MC:** I think sounds are like cells in a way...they carry a memory, even though abstracted.

That’s why I love working with natural sources initially, something comes through from that palette, a shadow is carried from its initial source. As animals, we use sound for information, much processing and translation happens that we aren’t even aware of. So I do feel like when a sound is removed by processing, it still carries its source information with it, and we pick up on some of that.

**IL:** Talking about cellular memory makes me think about the section of the film that a friend described as “crispy cells:” the image is from a very early 20th century educational film about reproduction –

sheep cells that are dividing and reproducing – and the sound is the sound of the magnetosphere, which I love!

**MC:** I find listening to the magnetosphere sort of grounds me. I use a VLF recorder very often when I travel. If there are lightening storms or space weather, like solar storms, you get these very beautiful and strange soundscapes. I often use the recordings in my work, but your film is the first that seemed to demand them as a sound source! That section just called out for them, in their “pure” form. When you placed them there and sent it to me, I was blown away...it seemed like that was the sound of the video itself somehow.

I’ve been collecting and working on my sound library for over a decade now, and I’ve never been in a situation where a client or collaborator was interested in it in such a hands-on way. It seemed so right to share it with you and build upon it together for this project. For each sound – some of them going way back – I still remember the source, recording conditions, what was surrounding it (or rather what it was surrounding usually!). They become symbols, but also memory triggers. Now some of them have changed and were saved with this project, so there are generations as well. And the historic archival sounds you added to it...they come with their own history and memory; your film and their use is then added to that.

**IL:** Speaking of archival sound, one of the most amazing (to me) moments in our collaboration was really close to the end when you sent me the end credit sound. We’ve actually never talked about this because as soon as you sent it I totally intuitively and immediately knew that it was perfect. The sound is a backwards transformation of the wax cylinder Chopin Waltz recording that is used earlier in the film during the pregnant ballet sequence. There’s something so brilliant about your instinct to bring back that very polite, restrained music at the end, but have it reversed – both because it turns something familiar and half-remembered on its head, but also because I think it says something about history that is so attuned to the way the film works. The film thinks about histories of childbirth, but the chronological structure is circular, not linear – which I think of as a kind of challenge to the conventional forward-marching progress narrative. History is always haunting the present, and history is always circular. It makes amazing and beautiful sense that this music that we’ve heard before returns at the end in this uncanny backwards form.

## The Opinion Pages

# Why Our Expectations of Childbirth Are Changing

By ANNA ALTMAN

August 3, 2014 11:02 am

When the filmmaker Irene Lusztig got pregnant, she prepared for the arrival of her child by collecting instructions about motherhood. She ordered home videos and used baby scrapbooks from eBay and unearthed medical and instructional videos.

But while parenthood is fraught with expectations — breast milk or bottle? Tiger Mom or parent en français? — what are our expectations of childbirth itself?

“The history of childbirth is a history of our evolving relationship with technologies ... and our shifting notions of the natural,” Ms. Lusztig writes in a presentation of her collected materials for the digital magazine Triple Canopy. (She also combined these to create a film called “The Motherhood Archives.”)

It used to be that childbirth threatened illness and death, but as Ms. Lusztig reveals, it is also fertile ground for ideals of femininity and health.

Through a series of videos, photographs and archival materials, Ms. Lusztig charts changing mores of birth, pregnancy and motherhood. A silent instructional video from 1931 — which shows a doctor’s hands palpating a pregnant woman’s abdomen — was made by a doctor who believed that birth was a pathology, an event whose damage a doctor sought to minimize.

In much of the past century, until the ’70s, most mothers — not to mention fathers — were passive participants in childbirth. A video from 1967 shows a couple arrive at the hospital: The wife kisses her husband goodbye and allows herself to be “put to bed” by a nurse.

With the introduction of Lamaze to the United States in 1959, women slowly began to take a more active role. In “The Story of Eric,” a 1970 film that recounts one woman’s pregnancy in her own words, the narrator explains that “the Lamaze mother goes into

childbirth with an intimate knowledge of her own body” and “the pregnant woman feels more like an assistant to her doctor than a patient.”

Ms. Lusztiġ’s history of childbirth also reflects the history of pain treatment. As anesthesia came into use in the 19th century, Ms. Lusztiġ explains in an interview with *The New Inquiry*, discussions of childbirth pivoted toward pain. “Pain is no longer inevitable but something you can choose to experience,” she says.

In *Triple Canopy*, she writes about “twilight sleep,” a technique for “painless childbirth” that was popular among wealthy families in the early 20th century. When labor began, doctors would administer morphine and scopolamine, a drug that induced amnesia. “Women labored and gave birth in isolation and darkness,” writes Ms. Lusztiġ. Hours later, they would wake, “amazed to meet the babies they had no recollection of birthing.”

Caesarean sections may be a modern version of twilight sleep. A *New Yorker* video produced by Sky Dylan-Robbins about the growing incidence of C-sections in the United States says that many women are pressured to undergo surgery so the child can be delivered quickly. Since the 1970s, the number of C-sections has increased sixfold, to almost one-third of deliveries. For women who have previously given birth by C-section, vaginal birth is particularly discouraged.

In the context of Ms. Lusztiġ’s history, C-sections appear to be the contemporary version of “safe” and “normal” childbirth. But C-sections present plenty of risks, and Dr. Neel Shah, an assistant professor of obstetrics at Harvard Medical School, finds the trend toward C-sections troubling. “It’s hard to believe at a gut level that one in three human beings need major surgery to have a baby,” he says. In fact, Dr. Shah adds, the risk of major morbidity — serious complications including hemorrhage, systemic infection and injury to major organs — from a C-section is three times higher than it is for a vaginal delivery. The high incidence of C-sections “might be why the U.S. is one of the only places on earth with a rising maternal mortality rate.”

C-sections don’t save any money — hospitals in the United States spend up to \$5 billion a year on unnecessary C-sections, and C-section deliveries cost 50 percent more than vaginal deliveries. What the operation saves is time: C-sections are usually preferred not for the patient’s benefit but because they free up the doctor to attend to more patients. “What’s changed between 1965 and 2010,” Dr. Shah explains, “is the cost of time.”

Ms. Dylan-Robbins's video introduces a cardiologist named Chileshe Nkonde-Price, in the final week of her second pregnancy, who explains her "unusual" choice to give birth vaginally after having a C-section to deliver her first child. Dr. Nkonde-Price doesn't want to undergo unnecessary surgery and, furthermore, she can't afford the recovery time: Her husband learned he had cancer early in her pregnancy, and they have a toddler running around. As her husband explains, "We can't really have both of us off of our feet at one time."

Many pregnant women have been conditioned to expect major surgery as a part of childbirth. "A lot of women don't have anything to compare their prior experience to," Dr. Shah explains. And pain is also hard to quantify.

"There's a lot that I've forgotten about just how difficult that was to rehabilitate from," Dr. Nkonde-Price says about her C-section. "I was out for six weeks. It was really painful." The worst pain of childbirth can evaporate after 18 hours of labor. Dr. Nkonde-Price recounts her daughter's birth: "Instantly I forgot about all the pain. It was like something was slipping away from me." She was preoccupied, instead, with relief and happiness. "The joy of having had Zara naturally was completely overwhelming."

*This article is part of Op-Talk, a new feature of NYT Opinion. Get unlimited access to our expanded Opinion section and try our new NYT Opinion iPhone app for free.*

# Irene Lusztig '96, RI '11

How is motherhood—as an identity and an ideology—manufactured?

Irene Lusztig, 2010–2011 David and Roberta Logie Fellow and Radcliffe-Harvard Film Study Center Fellow, is using how-to manuals and educational films on childbirth and child care to explore our changing values around ideal motherhood and birth practices.

With her fellowship project—*The Motherhood Archives*, an experimental documentary film paired with a participatory Web project—Lusztig simultaneously examines motherhood in the 20th century and creates an onscreen space where women describe their experiences learning to be mothers.

Working across old and new moving-image technologies, Lusztig is on her way to deconstructing modern motherhood.

“In my work, I’m interested in mining old images for new meanings as a way to explore how private experience is shaped by—and resists—official ideologies,” she says. “I hope my project can offer a unique space for thinking about motherhood in a way that is complicated, open-ended, and historically grounded.”

## Fellows in Their Fields

With precious time to explore new intellectual paths, to finish or start a book or painting or scholarly article, and to engage in conversation with colleagues from other disciplines, Radcliffe Institute fellows advance their fields of study and our understanding of the world. Since the Institute's founding in 1999, more than 500 scholars have been in residence at Radcliffe, bringing a dazzling array of experiences and achievements to the Harvard community and returning to their home institutions enriched and strengthened.

For more information about the Radcliffe Institute, please visit [www.radcliffe.edu](http://www.radcliffe.edu).



[www.facebook.com/RadcliffeInstitute](https://www.facebook.com/RadcliffeInstitute)



[twitter.com/RadInstitute](https://twitter.com/RadInstitute)

PHOTO BY WESS CHAPPELL



RADCLIFFE INSTITUTE  
FOR ADVANCED STUDY  
HARVARD UNIVERSITY

HOW IS MOTHERHOOD—as an identity and an ideology—manufactured?

Irene Lusztig, 2010–2011 David and Roberta Logie Fellow and Radcliffe-Harvard Film Study Center Fellow, is using how-to manuals and educational films on childbirth and child care to explore our changing values around ideal motherhood and birth practices.

With her fellowship project—*The Motherhood Archives*, an experimental documentary film paired with a participatory Web project—Lusztig simultaneously examines motherhood

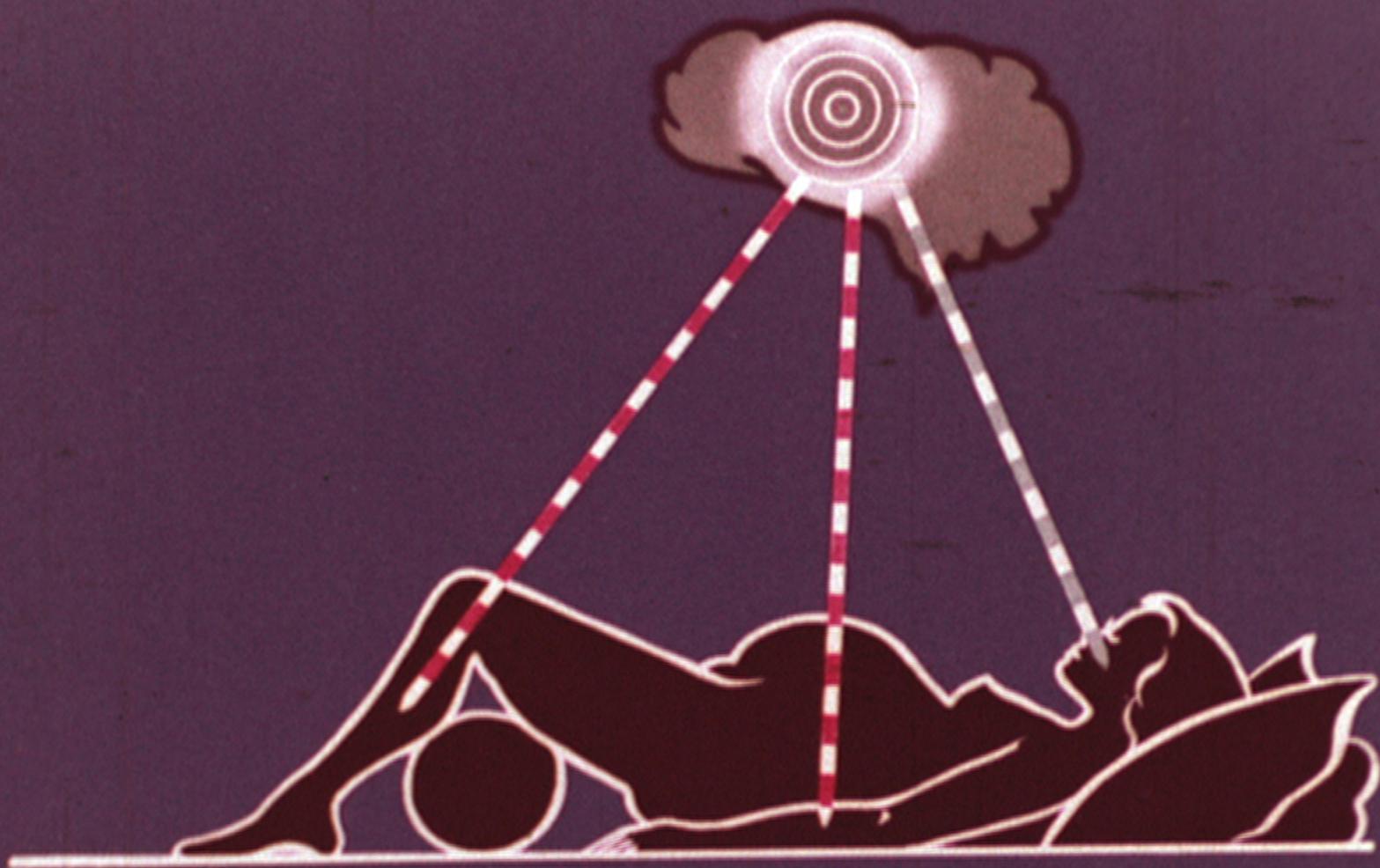
in the 20th century and creates an onscreen space where women describe their experiences learning to be mothers.

Working across old and new moving-image technologies, Lusztig is on her way to deconstructing modern motherhood.

“In my work, I’m interested in mining old images for new meanings as a way to explore how private experience is shaped by—and resists—official ideologies,” she says. “I hope my project can offer a unique space for thinking about motherhood in a way that is complicated, open-ended, and historically grounded.”



Photograph by WEBB CHAPPELL





Boy  
9/4

