

Suzanne Moore



The public and private gulf **Birth And Death**

I am not really in a position to write this column. Or maybe I am in the perfect position to write it, as I have spent the last week slumped on the sofa, watching the war. And waiting. Waiting for something to happen. And waiting to go into labour.

Like most women in the last week of pregnancy I am not blooming. I am big, bored and uncomfortable. The baby has gone past the sell-by date given by the hospital, but there is not a lot I can do except dig in on the front-line. If it wasn't for the Great Video Game in the sky, I'd probably be reduced to watching *The Young Doctors*.

In between Dimpleby and Paxman, I avidly follow Miriam Stoppard's advice: 'Start to neglect parts of your domestic life. Allow the non-essentials to slide and don't worry about them'. Then I worry about that. After all this is the woman whose husband has just run off with Felicity Kendal. I read reports that convoys of 'our boys' are hopelessly blundering about in the desert, completely lost within 30

miles of the Kuwaiti frontier.

They don't even have basic maps. Mass graves are already being dug. There is nothing that destroys morale more than seeing bodies lying around. This is not tasteless. This is war. Lulu's record *Boom Bang-A-Bang*; now that is tasteless, according to the BBC, who have banned it, alongside *Give Peace A Chance*.

A psychologist is brought into the studio to comment on 'stress'. At least it interrupts the flow of retired vice-marshalls. He informs us that 'even soldiers have nervous systems and respond to life-threatening signals'. Some even resort in the middle of a battle to lying motionless in a foetal position.

Well, this is certainly what the war is doing to me. I scan the papers daily but there is less and less information and more and more detail. My six-year old daughter has ominously started making paper aeroplanes and dividing them into teams. Yellow, blue, green, pink. Is she playing war? No, she is 'playing airports'. Am I getting

paranoid?

A neighbour asks when the baby is due. 'All battle-stations at the ready', he comments, and then is totally embarrassed at his choice of phrase. I don't mind. Maybe it's my hormones, but there seems something increasingly similar about the language of war and the language of childbirth. All is euphemistic denial of the one fact of both. Pain.

Sheila Kitzinger, childbirth guru, talks about the 'functional' pain of labour as though somehow it reduced its intensity. I wonder how long it takes to be burnt alive in a blazing Tornado? Is that 'functional' pain too? At least in the post-Gazza era in which we now find ourselves, several soldiers have admitted to a level of fear that makes them cry their eyes out. Officers' stiff upper lips have trembled as they resort to psychobabble about teaching their boys to 'confront their feelings'. You can see it's a damn sight more difficult than getting them to confront the Iraqis.

But as the men in suits - the politicians - give way to the men in the studios - the experts - it seems too obvious even to mention the fact that these days there is hardly a woman's face to be seen on television. But then, how many ex-air commanders did I really expect to be female? And there are not even that many men's faces. The same old commentators are wheeled from channel to channel to comment on the same snippets of film. It's a lucrative business. One American general who was fired for revealing that the US would bomb 'downtown Baghdad' is now working for CBS. In two months he will earn what he earned in a year working for the Pentagon.

The other morning, two tv channels were reduced to discussion of whether there had been too much war coverage. Whatever else, the media is scoring a direct hit on itself. CNN may have already won the war, but media dissent or even scepticism has been severely carpet-bombed. Misinformation, disinformation or plain bloody lies have

been delivered right on target. Whatever happened to post-modern cynicism? How come we have believed what we have seen and seen what we have believed?

John Pilger may point us back to the lessons of Vietnam or even the Falklands, but we also live day-to-day with distorted coverage of Ireland and it doesn't seem to bother us too much. In fact over the last week I have had more sympathy with the likes of Max Hastings who say quite simply that it is the job of the press to reflect the government position. At least you know where you stand.

A few days ago when I was hooked up to a foetal monitor, a midwife rushed in, not to ask how I was, but to see if I knew the latest on the war. 'No, nothing much has happened, except they've bombed Tel Aviv'. Yet already the urgent need to know what is happening is fading. Because we are realising what television cannot admit; that nothing much happens for long periods of time. How long before we lose interest? Who really understands the politics of the Middle East anyway? Isn't a game of Scuds versus Patriots a lot easier to play?

Tony Benn is right to be dismayed at the talk of 'fire-work displays bigger than the Fourth of July', but he's wrong to deny that on some level this is what war has become. I can say this because I am lucky enough to live in the other gulf - the gulf between the personal and the political - that such events open up. And because death is still as difficult to imagine as birth; both are hidden away. So we all resort to cliches like, 'Even in war, life goes on'. And so it does.

I flick through *Name Your Baby* with its 'Special Baby Personality Horoscope'. I wonder what sign Saddam is. The baby will be an Aquarius, just like those famous peace-lovers, Ronald Reagan and John McEnroe. Thinking of a boy's name is harder than thinking of a girl's. The only one I can come up with is Scud. Scud Moore. I quite like it. Sounds like an American novelist.