



## Frozen in anticipation: Eggs for later

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### SYNOPSIS

With the introduction of the reproductive technology of egg freezing (oocyte cryopreservation), new cultural and clinical practices of anticipating bodily futurity emerge. The documentary *Eggs for Later* (Schellart, 2010), which features diverse medical, political and personal discourses on egg freezing, gives insight into the anticipatory terms and affective states through which women's future age-related infertility is conceptualised in relation to the medical possibility of cryopreserving eggs. My analysis of the documentary draws attention to the contesting interpretations of egg freezing as postponement of motherhood, extension of fertility and biopreparedness for future infertility. What is at stake is the potential of various modes of anticipating bodily futurity to reconfigure ideas and practices of what constitutes healthy embodiment, the reproductive process and responsible ageing. From the analysis follows that egg freezing may function not only to potentially achieve future reproduction, but to resolve anticipatory anxiety by maintaining the futurity of potential motherhood.

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### Introduction

I've been feeling pretty alone lately. Because everybody around me is having children. And I don't even have a relationship. Haven't had one for five years. I just feel that I, that soon it won't be possible anymore because I am now thirty-five. That perhaps I will never have children (Schellart 2010).

Facing the camera with teary eyes in a close-up shot, Dutch documentary-maker Marieke Schellart gives an affectively charged account of the key concerns of *Eggs for Later* (2010) in its opening minutes. The documentary's confessional opening statement is preceded by a more light-hearted introduction to her life. "This is me," she says in voice-over as home videos of Schellart as a baby and toddler appear and then cut to footage of her adult self. She bikes around Amsterdam, enjoys wine with her friends and shops at quaint markets. These images depict what she describes in voice-over as a "pretty good life." Yet when "a woeful mood takes hold of [her]," the quick cuts are replaced by a long zoomed-in shot framing her face and she addresses the viewer directly, as if confiding to a friend. Creating intimacy with the viewer and

stressing the importance of the issue at hand, this opening statement establishes the motivating starting points for Schellart's quest to freeze her eggs. Rather than simply wanting to have a child, Schellart conveys a complex set of concerns about the future loss of fertility, the finality of "never" having children and the pressure of time running out because "soon it won't be possible anymore."

Through a cultural analysis of *Eggs for Later*, I will argue that the notion of anticipation constitutes a key component of egg freezing (oocyte cryopreservation) as a cultural and clinical practice. After earlier reproductive technologies like IVF turned diagnosed infertility into a public concern that could be mitigated by medical innovations, egg freezing can be viewed as the first ART to co-determine the biomedicalisation of anticipated potential infertility (Martin, 2010, 528; Van Dijk, 1995).<sup>1</sup> Motivations for undergoing the procedure are characterised by a specific "anticipatory logic" in which bodily futurity becomes a medical concern over which agency may be exerted in the present (Adams et al., 2009, 252).

Signalling a broader biomedical and cultural preoccupation with bodily futurity, Adams et al. contend that "one defining quality of our current moment is its characteristic state of anticipation" that "pervades the ways we think about, feel and

address our contemporary problems” (2009, 246–8). They offer an analysis of contemporary modes of anticipation in which “the future becomes knowable in new ways” and the present is lived through “proliferating modes of prediction” (2009, 246–7). What is at stake for them is the production of “regimes of anticipation” organised by “a particular self-evident ‘futurism’ in which our ‘presents’ are necessarily understood as contingent upon an ever-changing astral future that may or may not be known for certain, but still must be acted on nonetheless.” In a neoliberal context, a heightened awareness of predictable but nevertheless uncertain futures gives rise to a “politics of temporality,” which is characterised by an individualised moral injunction to anticipate individualised future perils and decline as sign of responsible citizenship (2009, 246–7).

In this article I zoom in on the highly specific ways in which the anticipation of bodily futurity functions in relation to egg freezing through an analysis of *Eggs for Later*. I discuss what futures of (in-)fertility and (non-)parenthood the film invokes in relation to oocyte cryopreservation (OC) and what their discursive and embodied effects are on the documentary's lived present. In other words, my concern lies not with the efficacy or morality of the procedure, but with the construction of the promise of OC, consisting of both the reproductive futures that are invoked in its name and the particular understanding of egg freezing as an agentic anticipatory strategy to achieve them. What is at stake in this analysis is the potential of various modes of anticipating bodily futurity that co-emerge with OC to reconfigure ideas and practices of what constitutes healthy embodiment, the reproductive act and responsible ageing.<sup>2</sup>

The documentary *Eggs for Later*, at once a highly-mediated account of one woman freezing her eggs and a widely circulated cultural object, provides the case study for an in-depth analysis of various modes of anticipating bodily futurity in the context of OC. My reading follows the approach of cultural analysis, which is characterised by critical reflections on a visual or textual object in view of the cultural framing from which it emerges.<sup>3</sup> The visual object under scrutiny in this analysis presents Schellart's 18-month journey towards freezing her eggs, moving from a general concern with future fertility to the consideration of OC as a solution and from the self-administered hormonal stimulation of her ovaries to the surgical extraction of her eggs. Her story is particularly significant in the Dutch context because, according to the AMC hospital, Schellart was the first woman in the Netherlands known to opt for elective egg freezing (Luijt, 2010). In her documentary she was thus able to capture the early public and personal resistances to the novel technology prior to OC's legalisation in 2011 and its subsequent wider acceptance. *Eggs for Later* stages both North-American news and medical discourses promoting egg freezing and the disapproval of OC she encounters among her friends, family and members of parliament in the Netherlands. Because OC was not yet allowed in the Dutch context at the time of shooting, she travelled to Belgium to undergo the procedure. Impacting audiences in the Netherlands and beyond, *Eggs for Later* was broadcast on television in 9 countries and screened at 25 international film festivals (Trueworks/ NCRV 2010).

Making this documentary a case study on the basis of its subject matter, dissemination and documentation of a specific

historical moment is, as Lauren Berlant has argued, itself an event that makes a claim to the object's significance beyond itself. However, rather than “folding the singular into the general” in an over-inductive move, Schellart's case offers an opportunity to unfold the particular complexities of anticipating bodily futurity with the aid of OC technology (2007, 663). In turn, given Berlant's assertion that the case study “took aesthetic form in documentary,” Schellart's film is itself a montage of cases with rhetorical and political effects (2007, 664). As both director and protagonist of the film, Schellart's vision on egg freezing may be expressed as much through editing decisions and the film's narrative as through the utterances and actions of Schellart as an on-screen character. In the context of the political debate on the legalisation of OC in the Netherlands, *Eggs for Later*'s visual and textual rhetoric positions egg freezing as a valuable solution to concerns about age-related infertility that ought to be made accessible to women like the documentary maker.

Schellart's autobiographical documentary offers an opportunity for analysing the discursive production of (in-)fertile futures, their indebtedness to existing cultural norms and narratives, and women's agency in anticipating these futures. Rather than taking age-related reproductive limits as a biological given, I read *Eggs for Later* to understand how featured medical, political and personal discourses shape the affective states and anticipatory terms through which women's age-related infertility is conceptualised. These conceptualisations of infertility, in turn, are productive in shaping a particular embodiment of anticipation in what I call ‘bodies of futurity.’ Subsequently, I discuss how the choice for OC is accounted for by analysing contesting interpretations of egg freezing as, on the one hand, a postponement of motherhood and, on the other, an extension of fertility. I propose that the documentary also suggests a third reading of OC as biopreparedness for the future. By distinguishing these alternatives, I make the case that egg freezing can function as an end-point in its own right, irrespective of future live births, by resolving anticipatory anxieties that are expressed in public discourses of OC.

### Futures of anticipated infertility

I start from the premise that OC's introduction presents a new kind of negotiation with reproductive finitude. With the possibility of egg freezing, reproductive ageing becomes refigured as a variable over which agency can be exerted, rather than exclusively a given “fact of life.”<sup>4</sup> Co-emerging with this proposed agency is a medicalisation of the condition egg freezing seeks to anticipate and treat: potential future infertility. Lauren Martin has argued that this process of medicalisation erases the “normal” fertile life stage, leaving us with two pathologies: “anticipated infertility and infertility” (2010, 530).<sup>5</sup> Indeed, websites like *Extend Fertility* rather unselectively propose women “aged 18–40 in good reproductive health” as “qualified candidate[s]” for the treatment of anticipated infertility (2014).<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, it is useful to recognise that a stage of what may be termed ‘assumed fertility’ continues to exist. In fact, I would argue that the transition from ‘assumed fertility’ to ‘anticipated infertility’ is a highly significant moment in existing gendered cultures of ageing.

In this section, I discuss the intersection of normative constructions of ageing and the discursive positioning of

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