

How Many People Have to Die Before We're Done With Gender Reveals?

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At least one human life has already been lost as a direct result of the widespread obsession with turning the sex of one's unborn child into an explosive (often literally) spectacle. In October, an Iowa woman was killed when her family inadvertently built a pipe bomb as part of their gender-reveal party—a gathering at which expectant parents dramatically and colorfully announce the sex of their baby.

The methods for doing so seem to have started out as benign, if stereotypical—cutting into a cake to reveal either blue or pink frosting, say. But in the past couple of years, some kind of communal madness has taken hold, and many of these feats of gender performance have gotten more elaborate, more public, and more dangerous—putting lives and entire ecosystems at risk. Last year, a father-to-be started a 47,000-acre wildfire in Arizona when he shot a rifle at an explosive target full of blue powder (*It's a boy!*), causing \$8.2 million of damage, according to the *Arizona Daily Star*. The latest instance of a gender reveal gone wildly wrong, as *The New York Times* reported on Friday, involved a plane that stalled and crashed while crop-dusting a Texas field with 350 gallons of pink water in honor of an unborn female child. No one was killed in either incident, but someone easily could have been. Other gender-reveal-related explosions, and one reveal involving an alligator, have also placed people in harm's way.

Blame it on Instagram one-upsmanship; blame it on a new "over-celebration of life events" in general, as my colleague Alia Wong did; or blame it on the timeless human impulse to see what happens when you try something stupid, but gender-reveal disasters are now happening somewhat regularly.

Many people have calm gender reveals that don't involve any explosives or wild animals, but even these come with baggage and controversy. Not only does the very idea of gender-reveal conflate gender with biological sex, but many parties reinforce masculine and feminine stereotypes with themes like "touchdowns or tutus?" and "guns or glitter?" (These regressive overtones have made hating on gender reveals just as commonplace as the parties themselves.) Trouble can also ensue if a parent was hoping for one sex and their disappointment ends up immortalized online. Gender reveals are loud, bright, public affirmations of the gender binary in a time when people are becoming skeptical of that concept. One scholar wrote of the events: "Perhaps those unsettled by an era more accepting of gender fluidity become motivated to mark their unborn children's sex." The woman who is often credited with "inventing" gender reveals a decade or so ago has now distanced herself from them, saying her view of gender has changed.

Of course, most parents are likely not thinking about the social construction of gender when they're planning these parties—they're probably just really excited about their baby and want to celebrate with their loved ones. Pregnancy is a time of great stress, and the ritual of a gender reveal could help relieve some of it: The festivities “lend structure and order to the chaos” of pregnancy, as my colleague Olga Khazan has written.

But these rituals are often scripted and set-designed to produce just the kind of dramatic visuals that play well on social media, and are shared not just with those who will be part of the child's life but also strangers online, or with everyone at National Harbor, outside Washington, D.C., where couples can pay to have the LED lights of a huge Ferris wheel blink pink or blue. Bigger, more outlandish spectacles could be a way of projecting the hugeness of the moment in a couple's life out into the world, but they also start to seem less like celebrations and more like stunts—some of which, again, have had tragic outcomes.

A new life is a joyful thing, worthy of celebration. But there is something to be said for an unscripted joy that doesn't kill anyone.